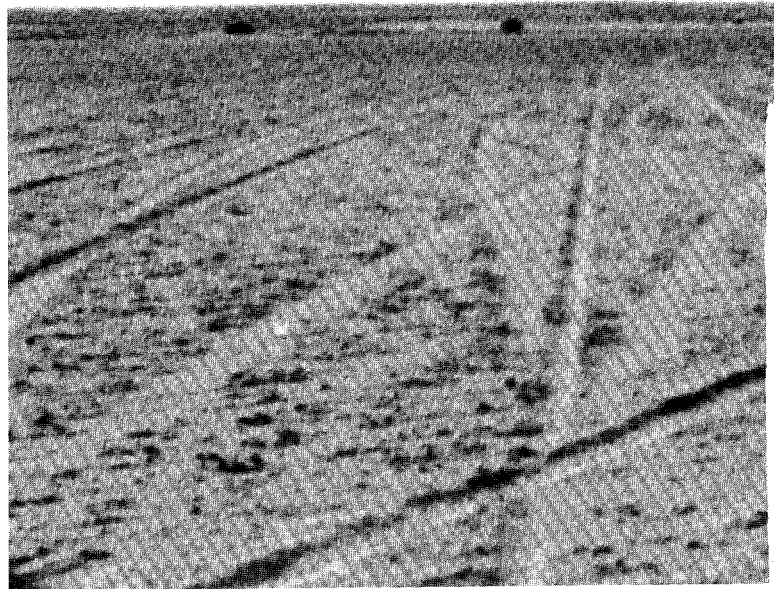


To TIMBUKTU— The Hard Way

The Clausers take a quick trip
to the ends of the earth.



The Clausers and their Renault make a triumphal entry into Timbuktu.

Last December, Francis Clauser took time out from his chairman's duties in Caltech's division of engineering and applied science, and with his wife, Catharine, started out to spend Christmas vacation in, of all places, Timbuktu.

This was no sudden impulse. The Clausers may be adventuresome (twelve years ago they toured happily through Turkey, Iran, and Iraq in a VW) but they are not impulsive. From childhood they had both been fascinated with Timbuktu, as with all legendary far-off corners of the world. And the possibility of driving to the ancient outpost deep in the Sahara desert crystallized about a year ago when they read a travel story about the three motor routes over the desert. At least two of the routes, the story said, were "tracks of a sufficient quality that it is possible to drive across the Sahara with a sturdy vehicle." Daring travelers, it went on to say, could make the journey in Land Rovers traveling in pairs.

That was the kind of challenge that appealed to the Clausers. If it was possible to drive to Timbuktu *at all*, then they would do it on their own. Not in any convoy, and not in any Land Rover, but in a small car that would be easy to shove out of the sand if they should happen to get stuck.

The first omen of what their trip might be like came after their plane arrived in Tunis. The car rental people there, to whom they had written, were surprised to see them; in fact, they had considered their request for a car to drive to Timbuktu as a crazy American joke. It took a day, but the Clausers convinced the agency they were serious and drove off in a little Renault R4.



Over the last miles to Timbuktu the Clausers found the road wide open to them—except that they had to keep guessing where the road was.

It is 3,720 miles from Tunis to Timbuktu, and some of the stopping places are more than 700 miles apart, with *no* accommodations in between. The Clausers carried 25 extra gallons of gasoline, a plastic barrel of water, and simple food—mostly canned chicken, French bread, and bags of oranges. On six nights, when they were unable to reach one of the old French colonial hotels in desert oases, they slept, more or less, in the cramped quarters of the Renault. And they were never tempted to sleep late; by five o'clock in the morning they were usually so cold that they had to get up and move around to keep warm. One memorable night they heard a padding sound along the road and looked out to see, silhouetted against a rising moon, a great camel caravan as it passed within a few feet of them.

At the start of the trip, traveling south through Algeria to Tamanrasset, the road was well marked, and the traffic was fairly brisk—5 to 10 cars a day. On arriving at Tamanrasset, a typical sun-baked desert cluster of mud brick buildings, the Clausers found the place swarming with tourists. The reason was gasoline. The whole town had run out of it the week before, and everybody was waiting for the next tank truck to arrive. The Clausers' timing was exquisite; the truck showed up that day.

Another piece of luck—and foresight—was spotting a set of wooden planks on General De Gaulle's old atomic test site and taking them aboard. This was a precaution in case they got into deep sand somewhere up ahead. Sure enough, shortly after leaving Tamanrasset and heading south into Niger, the track became less and less distinct,

traffic dropped off to about one or two cars a day, and they began running into long stretches of sand interspersed with stretches of harder material. They had to quickly work out a new driving technique.

"The trick," Clauser explains to anyone else who may ever need to know, "is to get up enough speed on the hard surfaces of the road to carry you through the alternating sandy parts."

Somewhere between 80 and 90 miles outside the town of Tahoua, the Renault's clutch began to slip. Francis went down one gear after another until finally he could make only five miles an hour full speed ahead. By 2 p.m. they had come to a dead halt.

Gasoline truck drivers are angels of mercy in this part of the world, and the Clausers hitched a ride into Tahoua with one of them. There were no new Renault clutches to be had in Tahoua, but the Clausers poked around until they found, in Francis' words, "a 52nd-hand car dealer who let us have an ancient clutch for \$24. Then we rented a set of tools for \$10 from a German mechanic and went out and sat by the road for two hours before we caught a 70-mile ride back to our car." Incidentally, the purchase of the clutch, along with other unforeseen expenses, had to be financed in local currency; and there turned out to be no banks or money changers in Tahoua. The Clausers were deeply touched by the trust of the local American Peace Corps young people who simply *gave* them \$80 worth of CFA francs, to be returned later to the Peace Corps director when they arrived in Niamey.

They had been on the road 11 days at this point, and



Planking their way out of the sand was a routine occurrence, but on Christmas Day the Clausers had a special treat—taking the car engine apart.

it was Christmas Eve. On Christmas Day, while friends back home were gathering around their trees, the Clausers gathered around the Renault and took the engine apart, arranging the pieces in careful order on the sand. They did not work in solitude. From over the dunes appeared nomad Africans of all sizes to observe the process. For two days they sat and watched every nut and bolt come out and go back in.

The low point of the procedure came when Francis and Catharine were ready to try the new old clutch. They put it in. As they had half feared, it didn't fit.

The only salvation then lay in the *old* old clutch. Francis examined it and found that it was simply packed with sand which it had been scooping up through a hole in the clutch housing as they tobogganed over the desert. The clutch was so full of sand it wouldn't have held another grain.

They operated on it with a paring knife and a safety pin, laboriously working all of the sand out, and covered the hole with a boot made from one of the fender mud guards. Then they replaced all the engine parts and—

vive la Renault!—it lurched forward, and ran all 70 miles into Tahoua. There they sold the ancient clutch back to the 52nd-hand car dealer for \$20.

From Niamey north into Mali the track became sandier and more lonely. Over the last lap of the trip, from Goa into Timbuktu, the traffic thins out to about one car a month. Nearly all of the traffic in this area goes by boat along the Niger River or by air—all except the Clausers. So they found the road wide open to them—except that they had to keep guessing where the road *was*. Often it had been obliterated by the milling feet of goats and cattle, and much of the time it was too deep in sand for the small Renault, so that the Clausers had to follow alongside over the desert, dodging between thorn trees whose fallen branches punctured the tires until they began to look like eyelet embroidery.

Just as the last of the patches was used up, the Clausers planked their way up one last sand dune, and there, about a mile ahead, shimmering like an imaginary city in the noonday sun, lay Timbuktu.

Catching sight of their goal, the Clausers agree, was a highly emotional experience—"not only because of all our hardships," adds Clouser the realist, "but also because the two front tires were flat again."

So, they walked the last mile into Timbuktu.

Word of their arrival spread quickly, and a poignant image of the valiant Renault waiting for them outside the town stirred the hearts of a segment of the citizenry. Led by the official driver for the town's only hotel, approximately 20 people pushed the little car into Timbuktu in what the Clausers refer to as their triumphal entry.

The Clausers' pilgrimage had consumed 21 days of their allotted 30, so they were running out of time. The five days they were able to spend in Timbuktu were largely devoted to trying to find a way to get the Renault back to Tunis and themselves back to Pasadena. In photo-finish style, two Peace Corps volunteers turned up—desperate for transportation to Tunis and in the nick of time for the Clausers.

To those who say, "What a terrible experience!" the Clausers only smile. And Catharine adds: "We found it all intensely exciting. Everybody has different ideas of how he likes to travel and where he wants to go. We happen to like this kind of thing."

Now that the drive to Timbuktu is behind them, they are beginning to think about the next trip. So if a travel story about Outer Mongolia turns up soon, two people in the Pasadena area will probably clip it out joyfully.