



# THE CARWASHES OF TIMBUKTU

Words & Photography: Rose Skelton

*Young Malians have a new business opportunity in their ancient city*

**DEEP IN THE BACK STREETS OF MALI'S ANCIENT** mud city, Mohammed Aguisa sits with his back against a wooden lean-to, waiting for a storm to pass. The air is thick with orange dust, which clogs the eyes and throat. The sand blows in from the Saharan dunes, which lie heaped on the outskirts of town.

Mohammed can't work today – he runs an open-air carwash – so he sits, drinking tea with his friends who come to pass the afternoon with him. There's not much else to do but wait for the storm to pass and for the customers to come back.

Mohammed is used to waiting things out. When Islamists attacked Timbuktu in 2012 and began their nine-month occupation of the city, many people fled. The Islamists imposed Sharia law on the city, arresting women who wore tight clothes and cutting off the hands of people who stole. The schools were closed – the invaders wanted only Koranic schools to stay open – and a darkness fell on the city, both literally, because those working at the municipal energy plant also fled, and figuratively.

It was a time that Timbuktu residents now recount with pride, for having survived it, and with sadness, because the bad times are not yet over.

During the occupation Mohammed closed his

carwash, work he has done since he was 10 years old, and waited.

"We suffered here," he says. "We couldn't flee like the others – we didn't have money for transport and my family is large. But we lived through it."

In 2013, French and African forces chased the Islamists from the city and a United Nations force took control, imposing a fragile kind of peace.

Nowadays, the sandy streets rumble with armoured vehicles and 4x4s, and young Timbuktu residents like Mohammed have seen a new business opportunity. Dozens of carwashes have opened since the city regained stability.

"There has been a lot of change since the crisis," Mohammed says. "Things are getting better now, the refugees have come back, and some of them come to wash their motorbikes here." With UN and NGO vehicles flooding the town, business in the car-washing industry is booming.

On the other side of town, Ibrahim Ag Mouhammed runs the Auto Lavage Kokadje, which means 'clean' in his language, Bamana. He is cleaning the dust-caked wheel hub of a UN truck. "I do all the UN vehicles," he says, soap suds flying as he rushes to get through the workload. "Before, there weren't many vehicles on the

