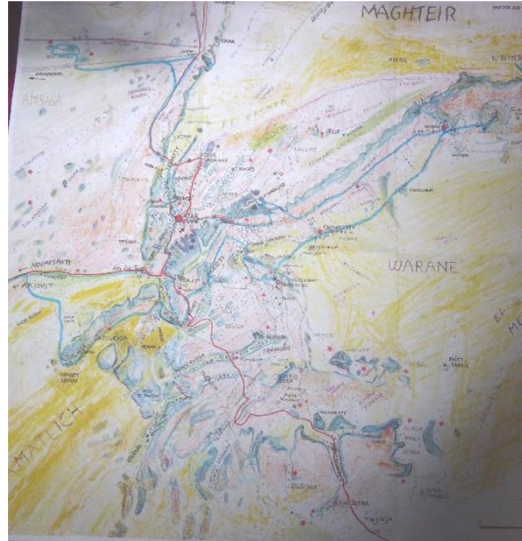


After all recent travel having been in Europe, and the upcoming trip to intense India, it was a great treat to spend a week in the wide-open spaces of the Adrar region of Mauritania (see map). Seven nights, only two of which with a roof over our heads, the rest just the intense stars you only see when there are no urban areas.

Mauritania is twice the size of France with a population just under 4 million people, 1 million of whom live in the Nouakchott capital urban area, so the population density is 10 people per square mile. Think Mongolia but without the same density of animals or the wonderful visitor yurt compounds.

The population is ethnically about 60% Moors, either Arab or Arab/Berber, and 40% Soudanians, i.e. those descended from Sub-Saharan Africans who live mostly along the southern border with Senegal. The every-day language is Hassaniya, an Arab/Berber dialect while Arabic is the official language and French is often used for business. The men wear a voluminous boubou and turban, the women a melhaf similar to that worn by women in southern Morocco. The Soudanians, however, are dressed in typical west African lost wax cloth outfits.



Our first night after arrival by Air Mauritania from Casablanca was spent in a nice, new, small hotel in Nouakchott. We went to the fishing port where Senegalese fishermen in hundreds of highly decorated piroques brave the open ocean (there is no “port” or breakwater) to bring in a bounty of fish varieties. There is almost no domestic market for fish (nomads are not fish eaters) so the vast majority of the catch is flash frozen and shipped to Europe and China. This aerial photo is courtesy of George Steinmetz.



As it was Friday afternoon, the beach was also full of families.





I also quickly learned that most Mauritians, both men and women, don't like their pictures taken.



After the French, the second largest group of tourists are Italians. Once I realized that they had a history of desert tourism in Libya it made total sense. Our guide, Alioune, is one of the few English-speaking tour guides (French and Italian also) and we also had a cook/backup driver/off-road navigator, Elbou, to complete our foursome.



The terrain was either deep Sahara sand or rocky black steppe with the occasional oasis village. The country is still primarily nomads, herding camels and goats. Oasis towns are inhabited during the school year by nomad families with young children to get their education up to 4<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade. The literacy level is well below that of the rest of west Africa.



Although there has been tourism here (primarily French) for more than 20 years, the infrastructure is in its infancy and self-contained bivouacking (self-catering, tents, 4x4 2+2 pick-up trucks) is the most reliable form of travel. The first day's travel east towards the Adrar region we pass lots of trucks hauling gold ore in marine-size containers two to a truck, to Nouakchott where it will be processed, plus trucks hauling produce from Algeria whose land border was opened about a year ago. Mauritania is very expensive, as almost everything has to be imported. We are on the only paved road in the country (the red line on the map above).



The first night camping at the foot of Azoueiga dune was beautiful and peaceful and we had it to ourselves. It did not get the multi-colors at sunset and sunrise like the dunes at Merzouga, Morocco. I'm not sure why. But the silence of the desert was fantastic. Our guide had bought individual mosquito-net pup tents so that we could sleep under the stars since the daytime highs of >110F did not move down much below 90F overnight. Which was why we were ahead of the start of the tourism "season" but also why there were not 100 people camped there which would have been a totally different experience. Other than a bird and a butterfly there did not seem to be any other wildlife. I saw no tracks in the sand in the morning, and no birds of



prey.

Tea is very important in Mauritania, as in Morocco, but it is different. They use way less sugar, hardly any mint if at all, and the base tea is Achoui the vert instead of Chinese gunpowder. It is served in tiny glasses a third full (also aerated by pouring back and forth multiple times creating a foamy head) and etiquette says you drink three cups, each “round” prepared fresh.



The process of saying hello is also similar to Morocco, but goes on even longer!

We tended to be up at first light (5:30 to 6:00 am) and broke camp and were on the road by 8 am. Our cook baked bread the night before over an open fire reduced to coals, and served it with Vache Qui Rit, Nutella, tea or coffee and omelet or hard-boiled egg for breakfast. Our two auberge nights served the same breakfast. Lunch was always a salad of canned tuna with either canned or fresh vegetables and a starch - macaroni, rice or couscous. This was served with cold hibiscus tea which he kept cool by

the evaporation process of a wet cloth wrapped around the jug of tea. We always stopped where there was shade and the men took a siesta after we ate.

Elbou made a soup every night for our first course, a tasty stew and fresh or canned fruit for dessert. He was also the expert at navigating us cross country, even where there were no tracks, to obtain the shortest distance between two points. He has been driving all of Mauritania for over 30 years.

Our second night was supposed to be camping at Mt Zarga but our clutch gave out, fortunately when we were next to the Mhaireth oasis where there was an “auberge” (a few thatched rondavels) and a manager who could provide dinner and breakfast. Luckily, there was phone service here so Alioune could call a mechanic in Atar to stand by (it is Sunday) and to get the parts store to open up. We had stopped for a view over the oasis town before descending. Lunch had been at a nearby beautiful oasis with a water



hole, the first we had seen. Other than when passing the occasional town, or our in-town overnights, we are off grid.



When going for a walk in the village that evening, we are surrounded by ten little boys and girls who show us the date “farm” where each tree is carefully irrigated. There is a water tank from the well which some of the boys jump into to “swim”. The oldest girl (~12?) asks our names in Italian and then asks us if we pray. We are right next to a small mosque with large loud speakers and there is a lengthy Sunday afternoon session going on followed again about an hour later by sunset prayer including another Imam monologue.

About 20% of the residents are year around and the rest come for summer (much cooler in the oasis) until the dates are harvested and then return to city homes. This is a pattern we saw repeated in all the oasis villages, some even with European-type small houses where the nomads had gone to Europe to work and come back preferring this type of house to thatch or mud brick.



Elbou has made the 120km trip to Atar, third largest city in the country, using 4-wheel drive mode and returned early the next morning with a new clutch and in time to make breakfast.

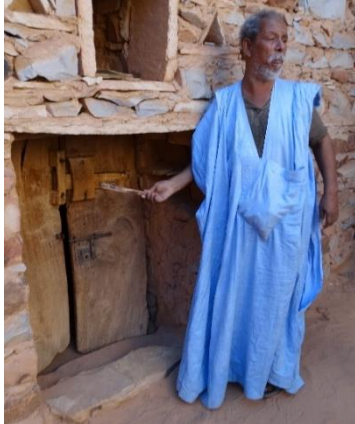
We spend 2-3 hours driving on the moon – no, it is just black rock, followed by deep sand with occasional bushes. We are now catching glimpses of the plateaus (steppes, or tablelands) that will be our primary



home.

Chinguetti is one of our planned auberge nights and Alioune has selected a newly-opened one a bit out of town so we could still have the silence of the desert. We do have running water and a couple of electric lights, but the outlets don't work for charging our devices so we impose on a friend's auberge for wifi and charging.

Chinguetti was first settled in 744, gradually enveloped in sand, and then built anew in 1264 on top of the nearby mountain. It was a home for scholars and is considered the 7<sup>th</sup> holiest city in



Sunni Islam. The library of manuscripts which we toured is incredible. At its peak there were 12 mosques, 25 madrasas (schools) and a population of 20,000. Caravans of up to 30,000 camels traveled to Morocco, Senegal and Mali and it was the assembly point for Muslims making the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The sand claimed the city again and it was abandoned only to be re-established with the arrival of the French in the early 1900's. We will see this pattern repeated in a couple other historic cities. Parts of the 13<sup>th</sup> C city have been excavated and a mosque and several other buildings are in use. The current pathway is about at the elevation of the top of



the 13<sup>th</sup> C buildings.



We realized we had not seen any women driving when a local business lady pulled up in her truck to say hello. We saw a handful driving in Nouakchott. We slept in our pup tents outside our auberge “cabin” as the interior was way too hot and there was no air conditioning (although it had been promised).

The next night’s camping is in a unique spot on the planet, the center of the 50km diameter Guelbe de Richat (or Eye of Africa, or Richat Structure) crater which can be seen from outer space. It has extremely complex geology, but was neither a volcano nor caused by an extra-terrestrial impact,



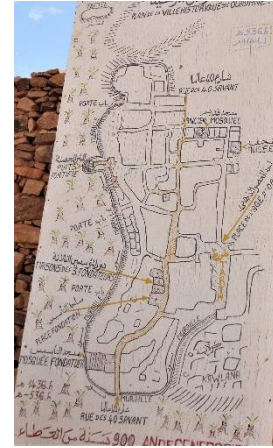
although there are many such sites of meteor impacts in Mauritania. Here a traveling small world experience occurs. While we are setting up camp in the center of the “crater” a truck pulls up just down the hill and guide plus driver spread a tarp for their solo client. Of course our team knows them and invites them to join us which turns out to be a good thing as the client assumes he is staying overnight in the crater so he can photograph the rim at sunset with his drone, but the guide has brought NO

supplies and has assumed that they will spend the night outside the crater in an auberge in another historic town, Oudane, 30 kms away.

So, of course, we feed them dinner and they spend the night using our equipment and the client accomplishes his photographic mission. The evening colors are especially nice. The small world fact – he is a friend of our mutual friend whose visit prompted us to come to Mauritania, and to hire Alioune. The visitor is up to 149 countries in his quest to visit them all and was headed onwards to Saudi Arabia which had just opened up to tourist visas 10 days previously.



We have been wondering how he was appreciated in Saudi Arabia with a drone!



The next day we visit historic Oudane, founded in 1147 by three men returning from their pilgrimage to Mecca. It, too, was established as a center for scholars and the main street is called Rue des 40 Savants. It was also a prosperous commercial route for salt, gold and dates. Its decline began in the late 16<sup>th</sup> C when a powerful Moroccan prince Ahmed el Mansour gained control of the route and diminished Oudane's commercial role. It was briefly occupied by the Portuguese who built a fort nearby, the ruins of which still remain. Partial restoration, including the lower wall and mosque, was accomplished from 2000-2002 with Portuguese funding.

Our route to Atar is totally off-road, including a black Grand Canyon with a fort built for the 1984 French film Fort Saganne, 6000-year-old petroglyphs of elephants and giraffes (vegetation obviously existed then to support them) and a wide river valley. We descend the Amoghar pass (off road/track of course), which is at 815m elevation.





Our second auberge night, in Atar, started somewhat inauspiciously, as the town's electricity was temporarily out which meant no wifi, no shower (well pump is electric), no air conditioning. Fortunately, they had very nice battery-operated lanterns and Alioune's wifi hotspot allowed us to do our most important communications. Cold soft drinks and Lays potato chips were a much-appreciated variation to our diet before a good dinner, much the same as on the road. The electricity came back on long enough to shower and cool down the room.

Although Atar is the third largest city in the country with a population of over 25,000, its central square, main souk and general store are quite modest in size.



The next day we had our least scenic lunch stop in an abandoned nomad camp which did, at least, protect us from the increasingly strong wind.



We are headed to a monolith, which we assume is a manmade stella-type structure such as we saw in Ethiopia and Portugal. But, no, this is a 600m tall rock called Ben Amira and its sister Ben Aisha, 15 km further along where we plan to camp. Ben Amira is the third largest monolith in the world after two in Australia.

At the foot of Aisha are some very nice modern petroglyphs. The International Sculpture Symposium at Ben Aisha monolith took place from December 5, 1999 to January 9, 2000 when 16 international artists got together to promote peace in the world. The event



gathered African artists from Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast, as well as from Italy, Belgium, France, Ireland, Canada, USA, Poland, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and China. The whole event was headed by the famous Burkina Faso sculptor Siriki Ky, who also selected the rest of the artists to

join him in this once in a lifetime sculpture symposium in the Sahara Desert. Here are my favorites of the collection.



Just as the American traveler got lucky to happen upon us two nights earlier, so we get lucky to happen upon a French tour company's tent camp at Ben Amira with two caretakers. The wind is too strong for us to set up even our cook tent, and with their help abandoned steel railroad ties (from the iron ore train nearby) are moved to serve as tent stakes, and they shovel sand around the base of the tent flaps as ballast. And, wonder of wonders, we have spatters of rain off and on! We of course share our meal with them and we sleep under the tent, as our pups would have blown away.

The next morning the air is clear and fresh (as if there had really been a rain storm), much appreciated after the two prior very dusty days. We don't get to see the famous 2-mile-long iron-ore train, but a shorter one is passing when we are crossing the tracks. The mines are about 300 km further north on the paved road towards Algeria. We, however had turned west at Choum, paralleling the railroad tracks and the nearby border with the Western Sahara.



We passed a well with a watering station for camels adjacent to the tracks.



Otherwise, another day off road (sometimes too steep for my comfort) brings us to the Terjit Oasis, totally owned by one family. A ½ hour visit is 5 euros per person and a tent site is 25 euros per night. But at a temperature 20 C

cooler than the surrounding desert in the summer, and 200 tourist visits per week during the season, the family smiles all the way to the bank.



We stopped for lunch in Azougi (a “suburb” of Atar) at Alioune’s grandmother and uncle’s family compound. One nephew prepares the tea, the niece has drawn the water from the well, and the other nephew is enjoying playing with his marbles. They obviously enjoy their uncle (and his electronics!). It is Friday so they have finished school mid-day.



Our final night we were happily back into our mosquito net pup tents in part of the white valley between two dramatic rock outcroppings, going to sleep beneath an almost-full moon and awakening to a colorful sunrise.



We have to convince Elbou that we really want to take the paved road back to Nouakchott on our final day so that we will have time to shower and go out to dinner.

When passing through the supply town of Akjoujt we see several of the 15-passenger vans which are the alternative way to get from town to town.

In Nouakchott Alioune selects a nice restaurant (looks like an expat bar but only juice is served) and we dine on excellent fresh fish brochettes.



He has volunteered



to take us back to the beach the next day before our flight so that we can again sample fresh fish.

It's Sunday. This part of the beach has many expats enjoying the sun, some boys horseback riding, and my traveling companion takes a dip in the ocean. The dog has the right solution against the heat, and I again have a butterfly as my bit of nature. I have grilled calamari and she



has a whole grilled capitaine.

As our flight departs Nouakchott headed north to Casablanca we have the full, orange, harvest moon out our right side window and a colorful sunset out the left side window. A fitting end to a sky-filled visit.

This was not a trip for getting to know local people, although we gained a pretty good understanding of daily life in Mauritania. But for me it was a restorative, up-close-and-personal-with-nature trip, hosted by two fine and knowledgeable gentlemen.