

Mission to Mauritania: Unbroken Horizons of Sand

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Since I am to start work soon and would not be able to leave Nouakchott for some time it was decided that I travel north to the city of Nouadhibou, the second largest city. Getting there is not so easy. There are no roads which go up the coast but you must travel inland north to Akjoujt, Atar and Choum, which is nothing but a railroad stop at the very southeast corner of Spanish Sahara. There to Nouadhibou is traveled by train.

I'll briefly describe the trip. There is paved road as far as Akjoujt so I decided to hitchhike in hopes of getting someone going at least as far as Akjoujt and hopefully Atar and Choum. I left Saturday morning about 5:15 a.m. At about 5:20 a.m. a car stopped and asked me where I was going. I wasn't even halfway through town yet and hadn't begun to hitchhike, but my backpack gave me away. I said north and he said get in. He took me to his house in Akjoujt, gave me two nice meals, a shower and a place to rest during the heat of the afternoon which I didn't want to do but he insisted.



By four I continued, but there are only about two cars a week which go the road north so I took what is called a bush taxi. It was like a square-back Volkswagen with the back roof cut off so it looked like a small pickup truck. This one, when I saw it, was empty and I thought I would ride in the cab and put my backpack in the back and that was it. He told me to wait and he would return in 15 minutes. When he returned the truck had 14 people and all of their luggage crammed in the back. There was a little room for my backpack but I had to hang on to the railing and sort of dangle

half out of the back of the truck for three hours across the middle of the desert on a "road" which is more a series of bumps and potholes from Akjoujt to Atar. We had a flat once which made me very happy because I was not too sure how much longer I could hold on.

We finally made it there that evening and I spent the night on the ground in a little courtyard near a restaurant. We began the trip to Choum the next morning. I had a seat this time and was able to sit and even take some pictures. I could not help but be moved by the awesome expanse • •' nothing we traveled through-nothing but sand, some mountains which resembled huge piles of rocks, vast valleys of sand as far as you can see. I couldn't believe it. That's all this country is made up of-all over it's the same: sand, rocks. There may be minerals but it's economically not possible to get them out because of the severity of the Sahara. Water is scarce.

As we would drive along, every now and then we would see someone, hundreds of miles from anywhere, on a donkey or a camel or just standing there watching us pass. The noonday heat was incredible. The breeze from traveling did not cool me off; quite the opposite, it was like a blast furnace. It bit at my eyes and skin and it hurt. Finally we reached Choum where I caught the iron train to Nouadhibou. It is a train 200 cars long which goes back and forth between Nouadhibou, where the port is, and Zouerat where the iron mines are. It is Mauritania's only real source of income.

Many Mauritians ride this train, very few foreigners. There are no passenger cars. The only way to ride is to climb into one of the ore cars onto a pile of iron ore. It is a 12-hour ride up there. It's a bit

uncomfortable, but not so much that one can't sleep. The train moved fairly slowly at first then the pace picked up. It was evening so the wind was cooler.

Since there were no lights, the desert was quite clear by moonlight.

This was even more bleak-no rocks, no vegetation of any kind, only sand, vast dunes and unending unbroken horizons. I kept wondering what had been here before, if this was once fertile and because of man's failure it was never used as it was intended and thus went to waste, or possibly it was intentional and we just don't know its purpose. Anyway, the night drew on. The later it got, the colder it seemed to get. As we approached the coast it became very cold. I was wrapped up in my sleeping bag with all my clothes on, but the wind was biting cold and moist as we approached the ocean.

Finally we arrived. I was beginning to have stomach cramps and was glad to be there. A bush taxi took me into town where I went to the Catholic mission, where I had heard I could stay for free. I couldn't understand why everyone was looking at me strangely. I figured I might look a bit bedraggled, not having shaved the day before and my clothing quite soiled from the iron ore. I went to the mission; the priest showed me a room that was furnished with a bed, shower, desk and a real American-style toilet. I felt this must be some realm of Paradise.



Then I looked into the mirror; immediately I realized why everyone was laughing. My face was completely black. My two-day-old beard was full of iron. My whole face was covered. I was quite ridiculous-looking. The priest is apparently used to it because he didn't even bat an eye. I cleaned up and toured the town and the port.

Well, to make a long story shorter, I came back on the train. I rode in the empty car, which is somewhat akin to a torture chamber. Iron dust is swirling about so you

can't see or breathe, when you try to sleep the empty car rolls back and forth throwing you around the car while it hops up and down, bouncing you about an inch off the floor. It was really hell for 12 hours. We arrived at Choum and it took two days to get back.

The result of this trip is that I learned in a very real way, one which can't be learned here in Nouakchott because of the way it caters to Europeans, the way these people really live, why they are so calloused. Up there you either fight hard or die. There are no other choices. Those who haven't fought hard to gain everything they have are dead. So they are tough, they are greedy, they try to squeeze water from the rocks, so to speak. Their crops won't grow and herds of goats are dead because of the drought so it's very different. Life here in Nouakchott is simple compared to there. This is why there is a tent city of 15-20,000 who want in.

Anyway, the situation is past the reverie and excitement of the send-off and becomes a real life struggle to understand Principle and its applications in more than the usual ways we are accustomed to. I don't know if I should laugh or cry sometimes-it is awesome, truly awesome, the culture and its struggle for identity, the strange effect of the white influence, the racial problems between blacks and Maurs, the poverty, the hunger, so many things, so many experiences and impressions.

I can only say that it is training, the greatest training, in strength, confidence, faith. To wake up in the morning and think-how in the world will I ever make this country respond? About that time a baby will cry or someone will hit his wife or a malnourished dirty child will stick his head in the door-the question is immediately gone.

There are people here; no matter how stupid or backward they may sometimes appear, they are still people. People who live extremely difficult lives, who are pious to Allah and always trying to convert me, people who know how to laugh as well as cry, to love as well as hate, people like those in Iowa or Tokyo or Berlin. Waiting.

Yes, they wait, in the midst of confusion yet wait nonetheless, for liberation. From what they are now to what they can be, liberation into themselves, liberation to God, even though they don't seem to know it yet.