

## The Tranquilizing Desert of Mauritania

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Well over 50 percent of the people of Mauritania are nomadic and more than that are from nomadic background. But what is most striking is their longing for the desert. Many people who have the money to live in big houses in town prefer to live out in the desert in a tent. And on the weekends, they all sort of migrate out there. I decided to find out for myself what sort of mysteries the desert had to offer, and in any case what there was to experience. I have a backpack and a small tent so I loaded up with some food and water and decided to go for a walk out to the desert and camp for three days. I walked along a road they are building, so it was not too dangerous.

It was an interesting experience. I went out about ten kilometers and then went inland for a ways and made my camp right beside a nice sand dune. I only took about a gallon of water because I was told that there was a water stop for the trucks at 8 km's out. By the time I got to 10 I realized there was no water to be found out there. Then as I unloaded my pack I noticed that one of the water bottles decided to irrigate the interior of my pack, thus losing another quart. I began to get a little worried as to how I could last three days out there with less than three quarts of water. True it is winter, but that only cuts a little of the edge off the heat during the day, and makes it cooler in the night. Still one sweats a great deal even if not doing anything active.

The second day was the most exciting. I had many visitors. In the mid-morning a goat herder and his charges wandered past my camp looking at me as if I was crazy. They sort of floated over one dune, and as quickly as they had arrived they were gone over the next. Sometime later there was a herd of camels that decided that the scrubby bushes around my tent were the choicest of the whole desert for that day. I took my walking stick and my camera and went out to walk among them.

They were all female with some young so I didn't know how they would react to this strange white guy in their midst. So I just stood there unassumingly. Another guy happened by and probably still is wondering about the white camel-herder. I couldn't have been more mistaken about the camels' reaction towards me. As I approached they raised their heads in resignation to the fact that there was something moving. Then, chewing only because there was no other way to get the food down they would sort of purse their lips at me in mock scrutiny, and blink their eyes in total boredom, and let their heads drop to the ground to get another bite. I have never seen such disinterested creatures in all my life. Occasionally one would get excited and let out a cacophonous roar, then blink from the exertion and consign herself to the task of eating again.

I saw many things, and had an interesting experience. At one point I had finally decided that with very careful rationing I could last the time on what water I had, when shortly after I had several local visitors who came by to see this strange tent, and they gave me all the water I had containers for. The most intense feeling I had wasn't until I had returned, though. I still didn't see what the fascination was with the desert.

Sure it was real peaceful, and many nice things to see, but still it was a desert. I almost found it boring. But then as I was coming back into the town, and after I had been back an hour or so it really began to hit me. The desert has some kind of a tranquilizing effect. While I was out there it was as if the earth had stopped turning. When I came back all of the things of daily life hit me like a slap in the face. Even in this tiny town which is quiet by normal standards, it was a real shock. It is no wonder why the people here are so lethargic. When they spend all of their time in the desert there is no need to hurry or to get concerned over anything. They have that attitude more ingrained into them than any other trait.

I never understood it until now. They have watched people march through their land for centuries. They couldn't care less. If it is the French, or before them the Arabs, in different styles at different times, who cares, they come and go. What's that you say, the 20th century has come this time. It will pass like the others. I am serious, that is real.

Nouakchott is such an exception to the rule of the way of life here, it shocks me with every new realization of it. There are just a few who have decided to become ambitious and come into government and active commerce, but on the whole most of the population spends their time in the desert drinking tea and occasionally watching their camels. I don't know who has made who like they are, the camels, or their masters.

It's that whole resignation to fate that makes the job of the Chinese, and to a lesser extent the North Koreans and the Russians, so easy. A few get busy and lead the pack as effortlessly as the camel-herder leads 50 camels by leading one. Indeed it is a sobering thought here.