

AFRICAN ADVENTURE Series

PART ONE

Sahara desert, Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal

Words & photos: Stephen Cunliffe

I was pinned to the ground by a dark-skinned Moroccan who did not speak a word of English. A second later he had flipped me over into a very compromising looking position as he continued to contort my body into shapes that even a yoga expert would have been exceedingly proud of. I was crying out in a mixture of pain, surprise and undisguised fear for what might come next. We were "enjoying" an authentic Moroccan 'hamam' (local steam bath) experience to ease the stiffness in our joints after some long days in the Land Cruisers. As my friends looked on and shrieked with laughter at my misfortune of agreeing to try a Moroccan massage, I had a brief moment to recollect how I came to find myself in this situation.

AFRICA: THE ROUTE

As a youth I had often spoken longingly of wanting to explore the wildest and remotest corners of Africa. So when I received a message from my good friend, Tim, saying that he had resigned from his engineering firm and was finally putting the long-awaited adventure together, my decision to join the team was already made. In April, three couples departed England in two second-hand HJ60 Toyota Land Cruisers on a nine-month quest that would prove to be the adventure of a lifetime. The group consisted of Steve Cunliffe, Katherine Westphal, Tim Korving, Ciara Korving, Justin Marshal and Rebecca Marshal.

Our proposed route from London to Cape Town was going to traverse some of the

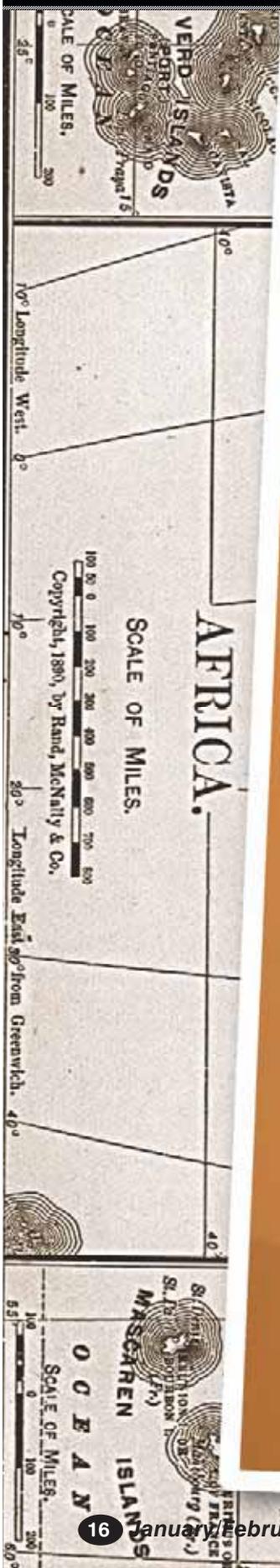
harshes terrain, most formidable landscapes and war-ravaged countries in Africa. We opted to shun the more frequently used Cape-to-Cairo route along Africa's east coast and instead opted for the challenges of following Africa's seldom-visited west coast all the way down to South Africa. We wanted the rewards of taking the road less traveled.

Yet this was no holiday trip, but rather a journey of great discovery, rapid learning curves and at times inconceivable challenges. Friendships were tested and relationships were strained to breaking point, but I can honestly say that this was the greatest experience of my 32 years to date. If I received another call tomorrow saying, "I'm organizing an African

off-road expedition, are you interested?" Forget the sales pitch; I would quit my job in a heartbeat and happily sign on for round two of African adventuring.

CRUISING ON SEAS OF SAND

We had departed England in early April and spent a month exploring western Europe. It had been relatively civilized travel and also proved to be a great opportunity to test the vehicles and fix some niggling suspension problems we discovered. Crossing France and Spain in early spring frequently necessitated that we camp in the rain or snow. After an especially cold night that froze the zippers shut on our tents, we unanimously voted to



Flocks of flamingoes provide a welcome splash of vibrant color in the Banc D'Arguin National Park, Mauritania.

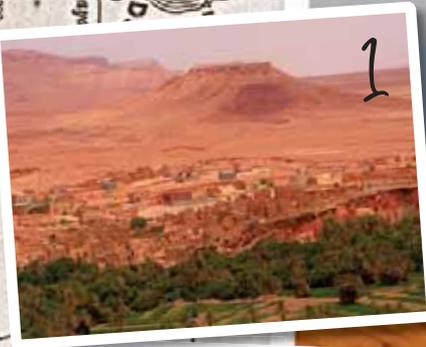


A dust storm obscures the road, which is a frequent occurrence in the Sahara desert.



Morocco's Erg Chebbi, where we honed our soft-sand driving skills and put the HJ60 Land Cruisers through their paces. The vastness of the Sahara must be experienced first-hand to be understood.

1. Irrigated land contrasts bright green agricultural areas against a harsh desert backdrop in this small desert town.



2. A typical overnight campsite in Morocco. Note the Hannibal roof racks and tents, although it looks like someone had to sleep on the ground—scary! Whether it was for winching out a deeply bogged-down vehicle or simply to lend some good old-fashioned manpower, traveling in a two-vehicle convoy was essential for safety reasons.



head without delay for the dry heat of Morocco and our first taste of the Sahara desert.

Crossing the Atlas Mountains of north Africa, with a side-trip to climb Jbel Toubkal (north Africa's highest mountain peak at 4167m), proved to be the final



3. Weary explorers outside the Chinguetti mosque, Mauritania.

hurdle that remained before we could enter the much-anticipated desert. At Merzouga we drove into Morocco's Erg Chebbi for our first taste of driving in a sea of sand. It was a bright orange ocean with endless waves of sand dunes that stretched out across the Algerian border and vanished into a distant watery mirage. The heat was relentless and you could literally feel the moisture being constantly sucked from your body. It was the perfect place to test our driving skills and put the Toyotas through their paces before reaching the massive ergs of Mauritania that lay in wait ahead.

The drivers quickly got the hang of it and we only suffered a single mishap when a particularly steep dune dislodged one Toyota's roof rack and deposited its contents in the fine desert sand. The term 'erg' actually refers specifically to these ever-shifting sand dune seas and many people, not familiar with the Sarah, are surprised to find out that much of the great desert is actually characterized by rocky gravel.

INTO MOROCCO

Our next adventure took us on a GPS-navigated off-piste route through a world of rock and stone. The coordinates for the adventure came from a chance encounter with a friendly German, Hans, who regularly visits Morocco to explore its remoter desert areas. "If you guys aren't in a rush, then you should join me; we will explore, ja?" he suggested in heavily accented English. With over seven months still at our disposal and brimming with energy, we had an insatiable lust for this type of an adventure. He did neglect to mention that his route exploring the remote eastern side of the country actually criss-crossed the Algerian border and we were often unofficial visitors to Morocco's neighbor. Hans was, however, completely correct when telling us that this was the definition of the road-less-traveled with some spectacular wild desert scenery. It was this five-day, bone-crunching and spine-shattering pounding that led us to the infamous Moroccan steam baths and a never-to-be-repeated hamam massage.

Morocco, with its Mediterranean-influence and relatively well-developed tourism infrastructure, had entertained us for five weeks when itchy feet prompted us to start heading south. The instant that we crossed into the Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara we encountered the first of over 500 military checkpoints that we would have to endure on our quest to reach South Africa.

They invariably used the same format of checking our passport, vehicle's carnet de passage (temporary import permit), reason for being here and finally our occupations. We quickly learned that our genuine professions were actually irrelevant and often caused us unnecessary complications due to communication barriers. One of the girls, Ciara, was a scuba magazine journalist, but when the soldiers heard the word 'journalist', they went berserk and proceeded to detain us at their control point for the next five hours. These lessons were quickly absorbed and by the time we reached the Mauritanian border our group was dominated by non-threatening schoolteachers, engineers and artists.

The Mauritanian border post was a wooden shack in the middle of an enormous minefield. An old rusted signboard bearing a skull-and-crossbones cautioned us (in French) not to leave the sandy ruts for any reason until we rejoined the road to the coastal town of Nouadhibou. From here we detoured inland to Atar and the famous Islamic libraries at Chinguetti. Deep in the desert and hundreds of miles from the nearest light pollution, we camped under a night sky of indescribable brilliance. We were exploring the great ergs of Mauritania; a never ending sea of sand stretching off to the east for thousands of miles. The extreme inland heat combined with a subsistence diet of camel-meat sandwiches, meant that we could only survive five days before we headed back to the coast.

THE CAPITOL OF MAURITANIA

We resumed our course south with a four-day traverse across the coastal desert of the Banc D'Arguin National Park. We camped each night on deserted beaches where small sand foxes visited our barbeque fires late in the evening. During the



day we witnessed flocks of thousands of pelicans and flamingoes feeding in the shallow nutrient-rich waters off the coast. These huge concentrations of pink were the only splash of color against the continual white glare of the desert. The vehicles were both equipped with 100-liter drinking water tanks but with no settlements allowed in the park, there was nowhere to recharge our most precious resource. Having two vehicles in this harsh wasteland was imperative for piece of mind and our survival. Keeping the sea on our left, we eventually

exited the park at the fishing village of Nouamgahar where we negotiated, for an insignificant fee, to fill two jerry cans of water from the local well.

The trip to the Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott, would involve a seven-hour drive and we had been repeatedly warned that it could only be accomplished by following a route along the beach at low tide. Perfect timing would be required to ensure that we set off while the tide was receding and at least three hours before it turned. The ocean waves were known to have preyed

upon unknowing or hapless vehicles in the past and there would be no escape even for a 4WD Toyota that found itself stranded mid-way by the incoming tide. The GPS confirmed low tide to be at four o'clock in the morning so, after a few hours sleep, we set off shortly after midnight, making use of a full moon.

It would prove to be a memorable driving experience that would become one of the highlights of our nine-month overland odyssey. Constant attention was essential as waves, fishing boats, anchors and

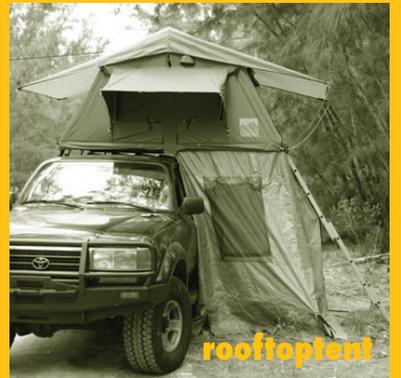


Camping wild on the lee-side of a dazzling orange sand dune on the Algerian border. We named our HJ60s "Rattle" and "Hum" in honor of both the Irish rockers U2 and the constant noise they made.

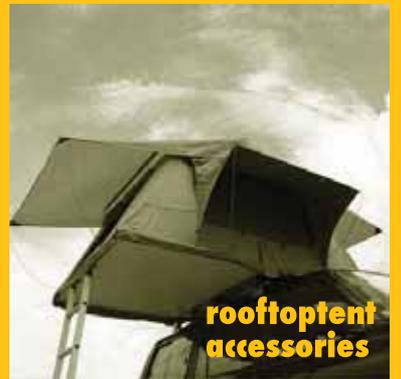
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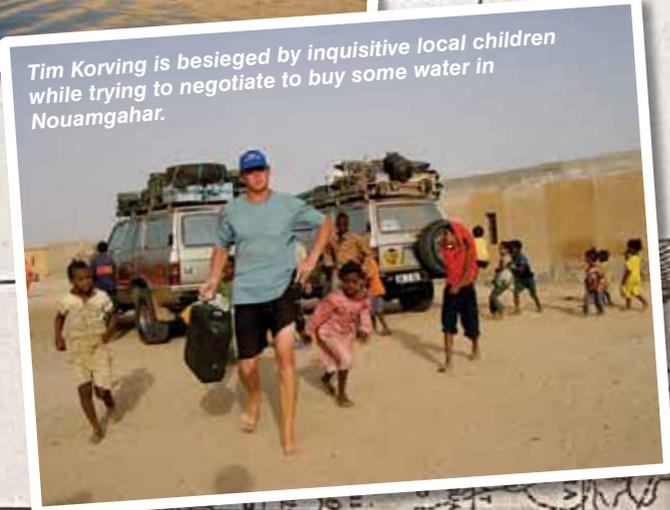
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FEATURE >>> Expedition



A genuine desert oasis at Maherit was the perfect place to strip off and cool down with a rejuvenating swim.



Tim Korving is besieged by inquisitive local children while trying to negotiate to buy some water in Nouamgahar.

(most-challengingly) anchor lines would periodically materialize out of the night and necessitate immediate evasive action. It was a beautiful and surreal experience to be zigzagging along a beach bathed in silver moonlight, but every so often we would pass the rusting shell of some old truck, half buried under sea and sand, and our attention would again be sharply focused on the task at hand.

We reached Nouakchott safely and had an easy drive across the Diama border to find the legendary Zebra Bar, an overlander's paradise on the Senegal River. After months in the parched desert, ice-cold beer had never tasted quite so fine!

NEXT ISSUE

Follow our progress in the bulge of west Africa from Senegal through Gambia, Mali, Burkina Faso, and into Ghana. Stay tuned! ✓



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