

Mauritania



seas of sand

"Is that a bus in the sea?" Tim asked incredulously. The waves retreated and the moonlight briefly illuminated the unmistakable rusting hulk of an old bus half buried under beach sand and an outgoing tide.

Article and photography by Stephen Cunliffe





We slowed the vehicle and took in the bizarre spectacle but did not dare to stop and investigate. The eerie sight of the bus at the mercy of the ocean and bathed in the light of a full moon was a stark reminder that one wrong turn could spell disaster for our own Toyota Land Cruisers and end our quest to reach Nouakchott. Our race against the tide was the final hurdle to overcome in completing an overland odyssey across seldom-visited Mauritania.

It was a journey that had begun three weeks earlier, when we traded the hot and dry Western Sahara for a very hot and dusty Mauritania. The Mauritanian border post was a wooden shack in the middle of an enormous minefield. An old rusted signboard bearing the 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. Driving into the Bay of Nouadhibou was like entering an abandoned area where shipwrecks littered the coastline as far as the eye could see. A relentless wind buffeted the town and whipped the sea into a boiling cauldron of angry whitecaps. This is the sight of one of the world's largest ship cemeteries with over 300 skeletons of corroding vessels tarnished by the salty ocean spray. The massive ship graveyard is the legacy of corrupt harbour officials allowing companies to discard their unwanted ships along Cap Blanc in return for cash backhanders. It is a scene of squalid abandonment, but, at sunset as a Mediterranean monk seal flops off a rusting deck and splashes into the sea, it is a scene of unexpectedly bizarre beauty.

Thirst for adventure lead us to temporarily abandon our vehicles in Nouadhibou and search out passage on what is reputedly the world's

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Just another day at the gym

longest train. The mining companies in Zouérat wage a relentless war against the shifting desert to maintain the tracks and ensure that the railway deep into the Sahara remains open. Our three-kilometre long iron ore train crawled through the wasteland of sand. As the sun climbed towards its zenith, the temperature obstinately pushed fifty degrees. We were well-cooked by the time we jumped off the train at the Choum junction and negotiated seats on an overcrowded 4X4 taxi. The vehicle would periodically grind to a halt and spew forth its occupants to fulfil their religious obligations and this would offer us the briefest respite from the heat and aroma of what felt like an over-stuffed oven.

It was a long and slow journey from the depths of hell as we pushed inland towards Atar, but the spectacular desert scenery and the famous Islamic libraries at Chinguetti made it well worth the torturous ordeal of getting there. Deep in the desert, hundreds of miles from the nearest light pollution, we sipped fresh mint tea with the locals and camped under a spectacular 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 combination of extreme inland heat and a subsistence diet of minced camel-meat sandwiches meant that we could only survive five days deep in



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the Sahara before we retreated back to the coast.

We were ecstatic to be reunited with our Land Cruisers and immediately resumed our course south with a four-day adventure crossing the coastal desert of the Banc D'Arguin National Park. This 1.2 million hectare reserve has World Heritage Site status to ensure the security of a valuable marine zone with its unique biodiversity and the sustainable use of West Africa's richest coastal fishery. Marine life is prolific with prodigious populations and multiple species of dolphins, porpoises, turtles and seals. Numerous migrating bird species spend the winter in the shallow waters and coastal swamps of the park and for this reason it was proclaimed a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance. This convention offers protection to the most important breeding area for birds on the Atlantic seaboard, which is known to

have the largest winter concentration of wading birds in the world.

Banc D'Arguin is not a desert of rolling orange sand dunes; it is a flat and shimmering white expanse of sand that bears a staggering resemblance to a gigantic salt flat. Each night we camped on deserted beaches where small sand foxes visited our driftwood cooking fires late in the evening. During the day, pelicans and flamingos carpeted the ocean as they fed in the shallow, nutrient-rich waters off the coast. These huge concentrations of pink were the only splash of colour against the continual white glare of the desert.

The vehicles were both equipped with 100-litre 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 peace of mind and our survival. Keeping the sea on our right, we eventually exited the park at the fishing village of Nouamgahar. Here we negotiated, for an insignificant fee, to fill two jerry cans with brackish water from the local well. We hoped that these 40-liters of liquid gold would assure our safe passage southwards and onto civilization.

The trip on 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 4X4 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.

Periodically, the pungent odour of drying fish and the smells of wood smoke came wafting through the window and served to inform us that a fishing village was hidden in the darkness away to our left. The presence of villages warned of the increased likelihood of encountering obstructions. Constant attention was essential as waves, fishing boats, anchors and (most-challengingly) anchor lines would intermittently materialise out of the night and necessitate immediate evasive action. It was a beautiful and surreal experience to be zig-zagging along a beach bathed in silver moonlight but every so often, as we passed the rusting shell of some old bus half buried under sea and sand, our attention would again be sharply focused on the task at hand.

A wave of crimson emerged on the horizon and rapidly engulfed the starry night sky, which faded into a spectacular red desert sunrise as we closed in on the Mauritanian capital. After a brief stop to refuel the vehicles and replenish our exhausted water supplies, we were pleasantly surprised to find a good road south that took us away from the desert and prepared us for the lush conditions that lay ahead in Senegal. As we crossed the old bridge over the Senegal River and bade farewell to Mauritania, I was surprisingly sad to be leaving the desert behind. The desert might be capable of searing heat and dry enough to crack your lips until they bleed. It might feel as if it could sap every millilitre of moisture from your parched body, but it is also a place of astonishing beauty that absorbs and enthralls you. It seems bizarre, but the Mauritanian Sahara is a strangely addictive place that unexpectedly overcomes you and gradually captivates your soul without you even realising it.



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MauritaniaFact File:

Official name: Islamic Republic of Mauritania (named after the ancient Berber kingdom of Mauretania)
Capital: Nouakchott (means "place of the winds")
Size of country: 1,031,000 sq km
Situation: Mauritania lies on the Atlantic coast of West Africa and is bordered by the Western Sahara (Morocco), Algeria, Mali and Senegal
Population: 3,364,940 (2008 estimate)
Life expectancy: 53.9 years (2008 estimate)
Literacy rate: 42.6 percent (2005 estimate)
Languages: Arabic (official language), Wolof, Pulaar, Soninke and French
Religion: Islam (Muslim)
Highest point: Kediet Ijill (915 metres)
Climate: Hot and dry although the southern regions do experience a rainy season
Monetary unit: 1 ouguiya (UM) consists of 5 khoums
Interesting fact: Two-thirds of Mauritania is desert, which continues to expand southwards every year
Safety concerns: A largely safe country where incidents of violent crime are infrequent (although Tuareg nomads have been known to occasionally target overland travellers in desert areas) but be aware of petty crime on the beaches.
Travel tips: When travelling outside of the major cities or towns always carry plenty of water and ideally travel in convoy in case of breakdowns or getting stuck in the soft sand
Further information and tourist attractions: http://mauritania.embassyhomepage.com/mauritania_holiday_activities_water_sports_mauritania_hiking_nouakchott_touring_kaedi_walking_nouakchott_mauritanian_embassy_london.htm