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EXPEDITION TO MAURITANIA... AND A HASTY EXIT

A photographer's desert dash from a hostile desert republic

Part one ~ DESERT JOURNEY

Mauritania is not a holiday destination - I never thought it was, but lured by curiosity I set out on the long overland trail. The journey is marked by climatic and cultural changes. I traversed the broad green acres of France, the sparse plains of Southern Spain, Morocco's fertile coastal strip, the spectacular Southern Atlas range, the windswept wastes of Western Sahara. I encountered rocky outcrops, grazing sheep, veiled shepherd girls, goat herds, pie dogs, storks and white egrets. After 2500 miles I reached Agadir, a small coastal town backed by the Atlas foothills. A glance at the map shows there's still a long way to go. I rest up for two days and then drive on towards the warm, sandy expanse of Western Sahara.

Spectacular coastal scenery accompanies miles of soft sand. Rippled ridges are honed to perfection by the wind, haughty camels stalk across desert scrub, rocky wadis and sweeping dunes. It's windy, but it's warm. I reach Tan Tan, an unmemorable coastal town, and dwell awhile on the shore before pressing on.

ENGLISH...

Long featureless miles distinguish Western Sahara, a vast tract of very little, with poor grazing, infrequent water and drifting sand. The area has been closed for the last 17 years of hostilities and is now a military zone controlled by the Moroccan militia. At every turn there is a road block complete with viciously spiked tyre wreckers across the road. Driver's details would be entered in a ledger:

Name: Mr London
Born at: Maxwell
First Name: UK
Nationality: Britch
Destination: Mauritania

"Mauritania" they cry in surprise. A small conference ensues and I am waved on with a forgiving shrug. I heard one lieutenant saying to his juniors...

"No, no, he's English, you can always tell...."

I wonder what the give away was?

CONVOY

I arrived at Dakhla, southernmost town in Western Sahara, and began the laborious bureaucratic circuit required for the desert crossing into Mauritania. Customs declarations, visas, permits from Security Nationale, authorisation from the Military, all from different offices in the town. The arrangements take three days. Finally the Army assemble a small convoy for the 200 mile escorted run to the border and we set off on a good military supply road. We arrived at dusk and camped in a desert compound under the observation of border guards in a hilltop fort. We were constrained on three sides by open desert and a minefield on the fourth.

In the morning the convoy was handed over to the Mauritians and our guards returned to Dakhla. The border chains were dropped and we were waved through

one by one in the general direction of a nearby rock. In between lay two sand dunes, both deep and soft. All the cars and some of the jeeps got stuck and had to resort to pushing, shoving and digging to extricate themselves. The guards waited dispassionately before waving another vehicle on into the same sandy ambush.

MINEFIELD

The twisted remains of a newly mined Land Rover, blown up only last week, reminded us we were still in a minefield. We were warned not to stray from the piste - no one did.... Once through the minefield we were ordered to follow the guards' jeep; but they rattled off so quickly we were left standing. The convoy broke up - someone headed his truck into a sand dune, another did a U turn and headed back towards the minefield. I followed a French 4x4 until it was clear he didn't know where he was going either. So I stopped to read my own map.

There were no signs, no balises, no stone cairns and no marked piste. I consulted my GPS navigator which accurately pinpointed my position. The Zouerat railway lay some way to the East - I couldn't miss that - and the sea lay to the West. Due South was Nouadhibou, a small fishing port with police, immigration and customs control.

The route was frightful - on or off the disappearing piste lay rocks, ruts and soft sand punctuated with low dunes and sudden lava outcrops. After one bone shaking lurch I slithered sideways into a soft dune and was suddenly stuck, bellied down and stationary, all four wheels churning in deep, powder-soft sand. I took out the sand ladders and shovel, did some energetic digging and tried again. The Land Rover rose quickly to the surface, supported by the sand ladders. With lots of revs and scattered sand I scrambled onto a rocky area where I deflated the tyres to about half road pressure to improve sand traction.

BOY SOLDIER

I reached the railway which I now used as a route marker. Jolting, lurching and bouncing, the Land Rover stumbled on and over some intolerable terrain. At last I arrived at the main control point, a ragged stone wall with spikes drawn across the gap. A boy soldier wandered up with a loaded assault rifle on his shoulder - he looked around the car authoritatively. Later, when no one was looking, he sidled up and asked for some bon bons! I gave him a stylo pen which delighted him.

Nouadhibou is a wretched place - Wasting sheep languish on barren strips outside tin-can shanties. Snotty kids drift on and off the track, asking for cadeaux. The centre was both unsightly and untidy, neglected concrete buildings connected by potholed roads, bordered by broken pavements decorated with rubbish.

A mob of eager, jostling youths rushed up to offer their services; money changing, camping sites, hotels, route guides to the far off capital, Nouakchott. They clustered around every car window at every cross roads, thrusting forward written testimonials, all addressed to 'Mohammed' and all extolling their unparalleled desert skills.

QUICKSANDS

I drove on through the town and camped at the Southern lighthouse - much exhausted after this laborious border crossing, which had taken almost 7 days of continuous hassle. Next day I would find myself a guide and tackle the 400 desert miles to Nouakchott. Some travellers take the train to Choum and drive the easier 250 miles from there. The train is reputedly the longest and heaviest in the world.

Four giant engines pull almost a kilometre of trucks from the ore mines at Zouerat, via Choum to the port at Nouadhibou. The journey takes about 20 hours.

Next day I met up with a fellow traveller, a Frenchman heading for Senegal, and we hired an experienced guide called Ahmed who would take us through the Banc D'Arguin bird sanctuary to Nouakchott. A guide is essential for this difficult route to Nouakchott; the shallow coastline and sandy shore conceal treacherous quick sands. Big shifting dunes stretch across the route forcing lengthy detours. If you go one side you risk sinking in soft sand; on the other lies the beach, impassable at high tide. In between lie areas of quicksand.

We set off late that day, armed with permits, travel documents and passes. Back through the spiked gate with the boy soldier, and a long way North - Nouadhibou is on a curiously elongated isthmus - before turning South East for Cap Tafarit, a small rocky outcrop on the edge of the bird sanctuary.

At Cap Tafarit we were greeted by a small encampment of fishermen who hadn't seen a visitor for weeks. They were housed in a picturesque enclave of driftwood huts, thatched with seaweed and bound with fish netting - a delightful mis-match of salvaged materials. The huts had a beauty of their own, alone on the shore and surrounded by mile after mile of flat, soft sand. Outside the huts lay some savage dogs, anchored by collar and chain; they were there to keep jackals from thieving the dried catch.

BIRD SANCTUARY

The Parc National de Banc d'Arguin hosts one of the largest bird colonies in Africa. It is a site of world scientific interest. Over a million flamingos come here annually to the shallow lagoons and low islands to feed, nest and rear their young. I saw pelicans, their food pouches full, flapping their great white wings for the take off. And gulls, herons, storks, egrets and fish eagles all abound in great numbers. The shoreline revealed sharks, dolphins, whales, rays and turtles, all variously beached by the receding tide, most being natural casualties after having become stranded in the shallow lagoons. All provide food for gulls, crabs and the sly desert jackals.

The five fishermen at Cap Tafarit were friendly and welcoming, like all desert folk, and they shared their food with us. They cooked up a fish and rice dish and we supplied green vegetables, water and fresh bread. We sat in a circle in the sand, eating with our right hand and discussing, in French, the fishing, the bird life and the jackals. After our meal Ahmed made tea, a lengthy ceremony of pouring, tasting, mixing and sweetening and at last a tiny glass of hot sweet liquid appeared. It is delicious, and after Ahmed's two small glasses have served everyone they come around again for a second of the traditional three glasses.

In the evening a great stillness descended on this boundless landscape - the wind dropped and the setting sun threw lengthening shadows across the sand in a spectacular light display. Dusk turned into night, and a bright quarter moon rose on the Eastern horizon.

LONE JACKAL

I slept in the Land Rover, ungraciously declining one fisherman's invitation to sleep with him in his hut. Ahmed, wiry, wily and tough like all the Moors, slept in the desert. He pulled up a blanket and wriggled down into the soft sand, quite at peace with the rugged desert life, and immune to the cold, the scorpions and the jackals.

This night was the culmination of so many weeks of preparation, so many weeks of travelling. Here I experienced again the indefinable thrill of the virgin desert. I was answering a deep nomadic calling to witness the majesty and the mystery of life in a boundless sea of shifting sand. This is a place where human values become keenly honed; a place where life is so hard won, and so easily lost.

The stars were brighter than at any time on this trip, a closely covered tapestry of twinkling lights sharply focussed by the clear, unpolluted air. The night was still. Waves lapped softly on the beach, and far away a lone jackal howled.

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## **Part Two ~ INTERPOL**

I had travelled overland to Nouakchott, Mauritania, on a photographic safari, and was now facing a traveller's dilemma: how to get back home to UK. The route North out of Mauritania led through the disputed territory of Western Sahara and was now closed to overland traffic. The closure stemmed from a variety of local tensions and not least the presence of an un-cleared minefield on the disputed border. The only other land route led to Senegal, 1000 miles in the wrong direction.

After travelling happily around Mauritania, meeting Moorish nomads in the desert, sharing a calabash of warm camel's milk with Bedouin herdsman in their black tents, visiting Atar and then venturing to the lost Islamic city of (click here...) Chinguetti, I returned to my shoreline base a few kilometres north of Nouakchott.

## **POLICE SCAM**

On one last trip down to the town from my beachside camp, I was stopped at a police road block, a not uncommon occurrence, and one which usually ended with a request for a bribe. I was asked for my International Vehicle Certificate, the so called Carte Gris. The police officer wanted to check out the vehicle numbers. I opened the bonnet and showed him the factory identification plate with chassis and engine numbers stamped on it - but the look in the policeman's eye told me this was a scam.

Yes, he too could see the correct numbers, but he pretended not to; he wanted money, but I wasn't paying. He then said he wanted to see the chassis number stamped on the chassis, and despite my protestations he told me to start scraping the paint off the front chassis section under the wheel arch. I refused; it was too hot, I was on my way to the souk and I couldn't be bothered to spend the morning grovelling around under a car in the dust and the dirt, all at the whim of a bent policeman.

## **ARREST**

I closed the bonnet, got back into the car and waited. A small crowd had gathered, and one came forward and started scraping away at the chassis with a piece of sardine tin. Still the magic number wouldn't appear. The policeman told me this was

'tres serious' . The chief was duly summoned, peered under the wheel arch and directed that I should be arrested and taken to the General de Gendarmes.

The officer let himself into the Land Rover and told me to drive off down the street. One of the crowd jumped in too, saying that he knew the British Consulate. There is no British consulate in Mauritania, so I threw him out. I drove downtown in a rather icy silence and was directed to a huge concrete barrack, bristling with radio aerials, masts and satellite dishes. Every window was barred, every passageway was guarded by an armed soldier and every doorway was manned by a warden with a loaded revolver at his side. This was the interrogation centre.

## **SHOUTING**

I was led into the building, through two locked gates, upstairs, through more gates, each one locked again behind me, and down the long barred passageway and to an office marked 'General Judiciare'. Lots of shouting was coming from within. My arresting officer went to knock on the door, and then stopped until the noise had died down. Eventually three red faced men were led out of the office, leaving only the General Judiciare and a weasel-eyed youth dressed in a shabby djellabah; a police informer, no doubt.

The policeman explained my charge to the General who looked very grave. I still wasn't quite sure what the charge was....He examined my passport, the Carte Gris and my driving permit. Then he announced that this was a very serious matter and that he would not be able to deal with it. This was a job for INTERPOL.

Now I was getting not just irritated but nervous as well - the signs did not bode well; "Enemy agent arrested by Interpol", I could just see the headlines - what a way to end my trip. I was duly escorted to another office on the same floor which was marked 'Chef de Departement Interpol'. My captor went in and explained the charge against me. The Chief looked up and examined me minutely. Perhaps he was looking for the tell tale signs of a terrorist, a nervous twitch, a fluttering eyelid, a trembling lip. All he got from me was an impatient scowl. After a few questions regarding my origin (UK) and destination (Senegal) he despatched a smartly uniformed lieutenant to examine the suspect car.

Down the barred passage, through the gate on the stairs, past the gunslung door keeper, out of the steel gate and into the car park. Here my police captor was invited to read out the numbers from my document, while the Interpol officer identified them on the chassis. After each number Lt Interpol repeated it slowly, 'oui, oui' until the sequence was all complete. He was satisfied that the car was legal. A good start... but my passport was still being held in the Interpol office. I was escorted back to the office upstairs. The officer explained his findings to the Interpol Chief, who stared for an eternity at my passport. Suddenly he looked up and said, in perfect English, 'welcome to my country, you are free to go'. With a forced smile and much relief I collected all my documents and was escorted out of the building.

## **HARASSED**

The matter had taken all morning; I was alarmed, unnerved and fairly harassed by the whole event. And I had missed the souk and the Post office, and the museum was now closed. I returned to my campsite with growing frustration at my predicament, unable to return to UK overland, unable to sell the vehicle and fly home, and unable to ship the vehicle back as cargo. The only cargo that leaves Mauritania

is iron ore, carried in bulk carriers from Nouadhibou, with no facilities for cars or passengers. And none was due out for at least 3 months.

Back at my campsite on the beach I met Guy, a Frenchman and his co-driver son Cyril. They had suffered a similar experience at a police checkpoint. Their Carte Gris had been confiscated so they couldn't leave the country. Guy is an experienced Saharan traveller and Cyril a regular driving companion. They were both bona fide tourists like me and outraged at the insult and the sense of exploitation to which they had been subjected. They felt there was a hostile element in the local officialdom and, like me, they didn't like the smell of it. They too wanted to return to Europe without delay.

We decided then and there to make a run for it across the border, through the minefield and into Western Sahara, which is now under Morocco's administration. We knew of a guide, Hassan, who claimed to have done this run several times and survived it. But before we could consider making an impromptu departure from this growing nightmare there were two major problems to solve. Firstly my Carnet de Passage en Douanes was 'open', and would have to be officially closed by exporting the vehicle. Otherwise I would be liable for a claim of £15,000, the value of the duty, on my return to UK. And secondly Guy's car would be illegal without the Carte Gris and he would have serious trouble taking it home to Europe. We both set off to try and orchestrate some solutions; he went to the Traffic Office, and stated his intention to travel "South to Senegal". I looked up my friend Claude, an enterprising Frenchman I had met in the desert and explained the problem - I wanted my Customs Carnet stamped with an official export seal, signed, countersigned and officially closed, cancelling the liability.

Claude took my carnet and £150 in cash, handing me his passport as security (no one trusts anyone in a place like this) and disappeared downtown on his motorbike. It was now noon, he said he'd be back at 4pm. He wasn't. At 10pm he returned, empty handed.... There were many difficulties, he said; the customs office was under security, the all important rubber stamp couldn't be found and no one of authority could be persuaded to countersign, authenticating the stamp.

### **FALSE DOCUMENTS**

Meanwhile Guy had been asked to return the following day to reapply for the confiscated Carte Gris. Hassan was standing by, and was keen to leave as soon as possible to avoid detection by secret police informers who were everywhere.

Hassan was a highly strung, nervous man, thin and lean like all the Moors. He came with good credentials which is all important when dealing with desert guides. He had guided several travellers over the border for different reasons, generally ones for which you don't ask an explanation. We negotiated a fee in French francs, to be paid on arrival at the far side of the minefield, and we agreed to meet up again at noon the following day. Hassan melted into the desert haze....

At 11am the next day I heard the roar of a desert bike. Claude had returned, looking very pleased with himself. He brought my carnet, all properly stamped and discharged. What a genius! I was now free of that last prohibitive burden. By 12noon Guy and Cyril arrived. Guy had pledged his intention to depart via Senegal today and had been handed back his Carte Gris in return. Little did they know his real destination. Now there was a certain sense of urgency; we were both carrying

falsified documents and we were keen to disappear into the great anonymity of the desert without delay.

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Part three

~ DESERT STEALTH ~

The tide was already advancing when we set off up the shoreline. Hassan was in my passenger seat looking intent and purposeful. I was leading in the first Land Rover and Guy was in the second. Cyril, our navigator, was taking satellite fixes on his GPS. We were quietly slipping away from the political and bureaucratic bonds which had threatened to overwhelm us. I had already been arrested and questioned by Interpol on a flimsy charge concerning vehicle documentation, and Guy had had his vehicle papers confiscated in a Police scam which seriously curtailed his liberty. We both felt we had overstayed our welcome and that it was now time to leave....

FUGITIVES

We picked our way through sundry beach obstacles like rocks, wrecks and seaweed, and struggled on all afternoon through the soft sand. We were compelled to drive with two wheels in the rapidly advancing sea and two on the shore, with wipers in constant use washing off the salt spray.

As we were now fugitives and carrying false papers, we could not go into Nouadhibou to collect fuel and water. So we had prepared for a 600 mile journey without supplies. The next stop would be in Southern Morocco in five days time, Allah willing. The extra weight of 8 jerrycans of fuel and 4 of water, nearly ton, slowed down the car considerably. Wrestling with a strong headwind and the soft beach watered by the flooding tide, my old Land Rover puffed along in third gear, making a lot of smoke and showing her age. Frequently I had to drop down to second gear in the softer bits. Fuel consumption rose alarmingly, as I had expected, and as it rose so the weight of extra fuel was reduced as one jerrycan after another was used. The fuel economy improved slowly throughout the journey.

Big flocks of sea birds rose up off the shore, circled noisily and settled down again after we had passed. We were nearing the bird sanctuary of Arguin where countless birds come every year to nest and feed in the shallow water. 10 miles off shore the depth of the sea is still only 1 metre, and in between are many sand banks showing above the surface. I saw flamingos, pelicans, white storks, egrets and herons. I saw fish eagles too, on tucked wings, darting abruptly out of a cloudless sky. They spread their wings at the last moment and reach the water flaring a broad tail. The surface breaks with a small splash and they soar away majestically with a plump dorade or sea trout clasped tightly in their talons.

As we drove on we saw several wily jackal feeding off seaside fare on the tideline. They would always be feeding singly, and would look up with amazement at our two diesel Land Rovers gunning through the soft sand before turning away and trotting off, their long foxy tails streaming out behind them. They would slip quietly out of sight over the ridge, where they would watch and wait for the unbroken desert silence to return.

NO MAN'S LAND

After about 100 picturesque but most uncomfortable miles, we left the beach and the awkward driving angle of the shoreline and cut off East across the desert. Hassan directed us around rocky outcrops, soft sand and big sweeping dunes. There was no piste to follow, no nomads, no camel drovers. We relied upon Hassan's nomadic instincts to guide us across huge tracts of sand devoid of any discernible landmark. After searching an open plain briefly we came to a small, deep well where we stopped for a break. I picked up a bleached camel's skull, took some photographs of it before putting it in the car as a memorable souvenir. Hassan looked horrified. We drew some water from the well which was cool and clear and lying at a depth of about 100 feet. We continued a little further and stopped for the night in the lee of a large dune.

I checked fuel levels, oil levels and water levels, tyre pressures, springs, bolts and shackles, engine mountings, prop shaft couplings and wheel bearings. Then I set about restoring some order to the interior which was now full of blown sand and unstowed jerrycans.

After dark we made a small scrape in the sand and lit a fire of camel thorn. The dry twigs were lit with a single match. I then added some driftwood that Cyril and I had collected on the shore and we had a welcome fire to warm the sudden chill of the desert evening. Hassan mustered the perennial teapot from his bag of belongings and soon we were sipping sweet golden tea, the staple diet of all desert travellers. We combined our food rations which comprised fresh vegetables from the market at Nouakchott, dehydrated meat and rice from UK, and assorted French herbs and seasoning from Guy who was an expert at making the most out of desert dinners. We had a memorable meal under the stars, and I was now quite relishing our fugitive status, adrift in the desert and alone in this timeless landscape. No one in the world knew either our whereabouts or our destiny. Tomorrow we would take as it came, although I believe we were all just a bit uneasy about the impending border crossing and the dangers of no-mans land, the minefield and trigger happy border guards.

We awoke early to a hazy sky and a warm dry wind which promised good travelling conditions. We breakfasted on stale bread, date jam and coffee. Our little desert campsite had been surrounded in the night by jackals, many paw prints telling of their curiosity, while spiders, beetles and scorpions had all left their tracks in the soft sand. There are few places in the desert where beetles and spiders don't roam by night. Scorpions are more local and prefer rocky terrain for cover.

DESERT REFUGE

Our day's destiny was a desert refuge built near two wells, a small square shelter installed many years ago for the benefit of nomads and stranded travellers. Here we would lie up during the heat of the afternoon and move on again at dusk. It was imperative that we arrived in the border region after dark in order to avoid detection.

We set off in the general direction of some dunes on the distant horizon. As the day wore on and the temperature increased, the dunes shimmered and disappeared into the heat haze. Still we kept on, and occasional checks on my compass told me that Hassan was holding a straight course. We made good progress on a great boundless expanse of hard, flat sand. We drove at 50mph to skim over the softer patches, swerving occasionally to avoid sudden hollows, sand banks or rocks that came into view. As the sun gets higher these obstacles become so nearly invisible that it is

possible to drive at full tilt into a solid sand dune without seeing it. This sort of driving requires total concentration all the time and can be quite tiring in the desiccating heat. Drivers become adept at unscrewing their water bottle with one hand, taking a long deep draught, replacing the cap and stowing the bottle again, all without taking their eyes off the sand ahead.

At last this endless flat pan changed and small dunes now filled the landscape. Each dune has a soft leeward side and a hard windward side, dictated by the direction of the prevailing wind. So we drive up some and drive around others. The danger in this dune terrain is driving round in circles, circumnavigating each dune in turn and forgetting the overall heading. Each dune is identical and all sense of direction is quickly lost after the first detour.

Hassan sat attentively in his seat beside me. While I was looking closely at the route ahead, he was looking out of the side windows. He was looking at the shape of the dunes. He looked at the run of the ripples in the sand, the angle of the sharp sandy ridges, the curl of the tail of each dune. This told him the direction of the prevailing wind, the lie of the dune and the best route to take. He was working in instinctive harmony with the desert rather than trying to tame it with the mechanical might of a four wheel drive Land Rover.

We cleared the dunes at last and emerged on a broad open plain sprinkled with rocky outcrops, boulders and shallow wadis. Hassan guided us to a low ridge some miles away. As we came over the rim of the ridge we found the two wells and the refuge hut directly below. Finding this isolated spot was a tribute to Hassan's navigation and to the two Land Rovers' endurance in the harsh driving conditions.

It was three o'clock. We lunched off some tired lettuce, green tomatoes and a chopped onion, adding a tin of sardines and some French beans. We would leave at 6pm, Hassan announced, before going off for a sleep in the sand.

It was very hot. Guy and I walked down to the well. Two circling ravens followed us down and when we arrived they alighted on the well structure. They were unusually close, and both were calling loudly. It was very unusual to find crows this far from civilisation, and the Arabs usually associate the big black raven with bad luck. These two were so persistent that we figured they wanted water. We duly lowered the well-bucket and drew up some water into the camel trough. Both birds drank deeply, splashed about and then took flight. One alighted briefly on my roof rack, and then they both made off into the haze.

BORDER PATROL

6pm came and went; Guy, Cyril and I were all ready and loaded in our respective Land Rovers, but Hassan was obviously in no hurry. 6.15pm and the shadows had started to lengthen on the dunes, and the fierce heat of the desert sun was beginning to wane. A light breeze wafted periodically across the hot sand; otherwise all was still and quiet. I toyed idly with a Kalashnikov cartridge case I had found, and recalled this area was a war zone during the past 17 years of the Gaddafi-armed Polisario rebellion against Spanish rule in Western Sahara.

Suddenly Hassan jumped up and shouted - four Toyotas had appeared on a distant dune, and they looked suspiciously like a border patrol. They were driving well spaced and heading our way. We jumped into our Land Rovers without waiting for a

second look and took immediate and urgent flight. A border patrol was the last thing we wanted to meet as we were about to cross into this sensitive and prohibited area.

We drove uncomfortably fast over some intolerable terrain. We were heading straight into the setting sun which made the rough driving even more difficult. Hassan was peering back, looking for the telltale dust cloud of pursuing vehicles. We dodged and turned like coursed hares, altering our course and bearing to gain any land fall, rock or dune that would conceal our presence from would be pursuers.

Hassan was intent on his job, guiding our expedition in the general heading, I hoped, of our illegal destination; and I was equally intent on mine, keeping the Land Rover moving safely over the rough ground and making fast progress. Guy could be relied upon to follow in my tracks like a shadow, although I kept him in view in my mirror wherever I could take my eyes off the desert for a split second. Cyril was taking GPS fixes all the way, just in case we had to back-track after dark.

DESERT DASH

This desert dash went on for many miles until Hassan was sure that the dangers of pursuit were over. We crossed a ridge, stopped the Land Rovers and cut engines. Then we walked back up the ridge to look and listen. All was silent, there was no tell tale dust cloud, no revving engines. We relaxed. We modified our progress to a reasonable pace and were able to choose slightly kinder routes through the rock strewn ground. Both the vehicles had received a real shaking and it was good to be able to drive with a little more sympathy for the long suffering suspension.

We drove on through some of the most spectacular landscape of this trip. The sun was nearly horizontal now and the low dunes took on a rare sculptured quality. The dazzling white light on one side was contrasting with deep black shadows on the other. Wind-honed ridges were sharply defined against the darkening sky. Boulders loomed large and stark, their gaunt outlines rim-lit by eerie beams of light which penetrated this utterly lunar landscape. The sky above was turning to a deep azure, the sun lighting the distant rim of the horizon and the landscape casting curiously surreal shapes and shadows. I would love to have stopped here and witnessed the same spectacular light show for several more evenings, but Hassan was showing signs of restlessness and obviously this was not a place to linger.

Hassan was already nervous, now more so after the border patrol incident. He told me he felt ill, so I handed him the water bottle. He continued to complain, rubbing his tummy, and I told him to think about all the money he was going to earn from this trip. He cast me a withering look while I smirked unsympathetically behind my sunglasses. Later we stopped by the barely adequate cover of a small thorn bush where he made some unpleasant noises. Gosh, he really was nervous!

AFTERGLOW

Our route took us over an expanse of flat rock, a molten spill from some long extinct volcano. The solidified waves undulated gently, a welcome change from the bump and bounce of the desert floor. Now it was nearly dusk and a luminous afterglow briefly favoured the landscape. The far horizon turned a spectacular colour, changing from amber to yellow and then to turquoise as the fading light receded. We were nearing the border territory. Hassan ordered no lights; we disconnected the interior bulb and used no footbrakes for fear of displaying our presence. It was the footbrake

restriction that was the most difficult to remember when sudden evasive action had to be taken around obstacles emerging unannounced out of the darkness.

We were now driving under the romantic but totally inadequate light of the rising moon. Ghostly shapes loomed nearby without warning, silhouetted in the dying halo of the distant afterglow; bushes, rocks, dunes, and hills; we didn't stop, but quickly altered course without braking, resuming our intended direction. On top of a slight rise Hassan stopped, silenced both cars and got out to look and listen. Our eyes were now well accustomed to the gloom and we could discern dunes in one direction and a rock strewn wadi in the other. Beyond lay an area of low scrub alternating with larger rocks. Across the wadi lay the border, no-man's land and the unmarked minefield.

The silence was overwhelming, that great unbroken silence that envelopes a desert at nightfall. Not a breath of wind, nor a rustle nor a squeak. The stillness was unnerving and told us nothing. Undeterred, we vowed to drive Hassan across the wadi where he could proceed on foot, taking his belongings and some water to a safe hideout near the well patrolled official route from the border to Nouadhibou. He would then collect them the following day after leaving us at the border. He planned to join the official military convoy which would be passing that way tomorrow afternoon, probably after the escort guards had departed, hiring his services to another driver as a guide. He would then jump truck before the checkpoint at Nouadhibou and pick up another convoy truck south to Nouakchott the following day.

HEAVY VEHICLE

We drove another mile or two in the darkness and then stopped in the cover of some low bushes. This was to be our rendezvous. Hassan got out, took his minimal possessions with him and disappeared off into the desert. We would camp here until dawn, show no lights and make no sound. Guy, Cyril and I set about making ourselves comfortable, cooking up our dinner on well shielded cookers, opening and closing the doors silently and observing the no-lights rule. I drew all my curtains carefully and lit my last candle which I stood in a modified sea shell on the floor. It gave an adequate if minimal light. I fell into an uneasy sleep at around midnight.

I awoke in great fright an hour later with the sound of a heavy vehicle advancing towards us. The noise was mechanical but unrecognisable. Maybe a desert truck or a half-track scout car - the imagination ran wild at that early hour. I called to Guy parked nearby - yes, he'd heard it too. I opened the curtain and peered out, and there in the distance was a powerful searchlight piercing the darkness. I was very alarmed but it was already too late to do anything about it. Movement attracts attention, even in the dark, and we both sat fast in our bushy enclave and observed the intruder through the window.

The vehicle moved slowly, but maintained direction, not weaving about as if looking for a pair of desperate fugitives. Soon it dawned on me, as it did on Guy and Cyril. We both called out together 'Le train, c'est le train'. This was the great desert railroad, reputed the longest and heaviest in the world. It is an iron ore train that runs along the border all the way to Choum, 300 miles to the East before turning North to Zouerat. This mighty train thundered by, uncomfortably close, with four giant engines pulling over a kilometre of ore trucks. Phew! The danger of imminent arrest had passed and we could sleep again.

I settled down, quite fatigued by the events of the day. Barely an hour later I was suddenly startled out of my sleep by something bumping into the side of the Land Rover. I shot out of my sleeping bag and peered out - nothing to be seen. Then I heard the distinct sound of a low voice. For the second time that night I was seriously alarmed. I looked across towards the other vehicle and saw a shrouded figure. It was Hassan! He was nervous about our position and couldn't sleep, so had come back earlier than expected. The time was now 2am and the moon was high in the night sky. Hassan wanted us to move again. We would lie up a few miles away before moving on at dawn. We started up and moved off without delay and drove for some miles in the opposite direction we had followed last night. Still without lights or brakes, we were now blessed with more light from both moon and stars. Hassan led us to an open hollow and we stopped and shut off engines. We went back to sleep.

POLAR STAR

At 4am we awoke to witness the full celestial splendour of the African sky. From horizon to horizon all available space was closely knit with a great multitude of stars. The whole astral canopy sparkled and twinkled as we stood and gazed. Far above was the Plough in the Great Bear constellation, bright among a multitude of supporting stars. At one end lay the unmistakable quartet of the Southern Cross, its stellar attendants pointing determinedly to the South. At the other end, far across this great immeasurable divide lay Polaris, the North Star, a timeless beacon hanging bright and unchanging over the North pole. I had never seen the Southern Cross before, and to see both North and South at one time was a rare treat. We watched this spectacular vista in awe. Over in the West the Moon's great golden orb slowly reddened and waned, and far in the East the first hint of a new day sharpened the distant outline of the desert horizon.

I was jolted out of my reverie by the urgent voice of Hassan instructing us to move again. It was very cold now and I reached for my mountain sweater, stowed since I crossed the Atlas range some weeks ago. As I had been leading all of yesterday, it was Guy's turn to lead today. Hassan sat in his front seat and Cyril came with me. We travelled for some way in an elusive circle before crossing the railway line at a point where an advancing dune had bridged the steep embankment. The two Land Rovers bounced awkwardly across the rails and we then headed North into the blackness. It was very dark, and we were in that hesitant interval where night seems reluctant to give way to a new dawn. The moon had shed its light and dawn was still embryonic. The increasing radiance of the Eastern horizon gave us direction but no light. We trundled on, Guy picking his way between the rocks and me following closely in his tracks.

UNWELCOME

We must be almost on the border now. The railway runs along Mauritania's boundary, and we were now some way North of it. There were no boundary markers in this uninhabited tract of desert and no one to see them if there were. We stopped, switched off our engines and listened. We applied the sort of concentration generally unemployed in normal life, and picked up even the faintest sounds in this silent wilderness. A scuttling scorpion, the faint rasp of sand slipping down a new dune, the rustle of Hassan's djellabah. We heard no vehicles and no voices; there were no sounds of a desert patrol nor the ugly clamour of military hardware.

We remounted and drove off. We crossed the border without incident and were now in the narrow tract of no-man's land, briefly immune from international law and not

particularly welcome on either side. We turned sharply West and drove down the course of a long wide wadi. A line of big dunes marked the far side of this curious corridor, and our two Land Rovers were dwarfed by the scale of this great silent landscape.

We drove a long way down this desert wadi and after 30 miles or so it was getting quite light. On the top of a distant dune I saw a radio mast - the first look out post on the Moroccan border. Another mile or two and there was another, and silhouetted against the dawn sky was a lone figure, high up above us and about a mile off. I saw the glint of binoculars reflecting off the rising sun. We were now under observation. We drove on.

SAND TRAP

The going was deteriorating. Gone was the level sand and the surface rocks; the desert floor was now becoming rough and undulating with deep sand bars interspersed with big boulders. Suddenly Guy's Land Rover lurched sideways and slid into a deep, sand filled trough. He struggled through with much wheel churning and finally scrambled to safety. By the time I saw what was happening my front wheels were already in the sand and it was too late to stop. I slipped sharply into low gear (I was already in four wheel drive) and accelerated, trusting in traction and momentum to gun through the obstacle. My briefly considered plan failed....

The softened sand was now undriveable and the poor Land Rover sank deeply, heavily and unhappily stuck. What an embarrassment, under the very eyes of the border guards.... Cyril and I jumped out - we both knew what to do; desert travellers spend a lot of time extricating vehicles out of sand, but we hadn't expected to be doing it under military gaze or indeed, in no man's land. I unhooked my aluminium sand ladders while Cyril dug furiously under the wheels. Guy ran over with another shovel and after a brief eternity, which probably only took about a minute, we were ready with the sand ladders. I engaged gear and crawled slowly forwards, felt the ladders bite and roared off across the sand. I made good progress and gained a full 15 metres, narrowly failing to make it to the safe haven of the rocky lip.

The car was well bogged again in this sloping sand trap and was now seriously canted over too. This time we abandoned the shovels and dug with our bare hands, pulling great armfuls of soft sand out from under the wheels. Cyril ran back and collected the sand ladders, now deeply buried in the sand and visible only by their tie-ropes lying in the surface. Guy and I continued digging and then we replaced the sand ladders. I tried again, gingerly feeling for the security of the ladders under the wheels before letting in enough power to leapfrog across the remaining sand. This time the front wheels reached the rim and scrabbled for a grip; the rear wheels were still throwing sand into the air and burying themselves like two great dung beetles. The four wheel drive juddered, gripped at last and the vehicle pulled clear and out on to the security of the sharp rocks.

Without a moment's delay we reloaded the sand ladders and shovels and continued on our way, barely three minutes behind our self appointed schedule. Hassan didn't help, guides never do, but made anxious noises about patrols and guards and complained about his nervous tummy.

We continued down this deteriorating promenade, weaving around to avoid the larger rocks and deeper sand traps. We passed several more border posts - at one a

soldier was waving us forward - I didn't know if the wave was a warning, an instruction or a greeting. We drove on.

MINEFIELD

We were now in the vicinity of the minefield. The mines had been laid by a military alliance to keep out the rebels fighting for the independence of Spanish Sahara. The rebels had dug them all up and replanted them, and now nobody knows where they are. But every so often a vehicle triggers one and another driver's journey through life is suddenly over. We had to trust that Hassan really did know his way through the mines and wasn't just playing Russian roulette with our safety. All the same, I rather ungallantly lengthened the gap between Guy's leading Land Rover and my own - just in case....

We came across a well marked piste with regular stone cairns showing the way. Hassan led us to within 15 metres of it, turned us sharply parallel and we drove some 100 metres before crossing it at an awkward angle. Perhaps he really had been this way before. I glanced at Cyril and he glanced at me. We drove on in silence, following Hassan's now increasingly difficult route.

Guy's Land Rover was a Defender 110 model with fully independent suspension and permanent four wheel drive. It out-performed my older Series 3 car on terrain like this and I was struggling a bit with some of the bigger obstacles. Hassan was clearly taking us where no mine laying rebel would bother to lay mines, an un-crossable tract of boulder strewn wadis which would be impassable to any but the most committed drivers.

DEEP GULLY

We encountered another piste, at the end of which we could see a Moroccan border post, radio mast and water vehicle. This looked promising, but Hassan ignored it, like the last one, crossed over and continued another mile or two through the boulders. When Guy reached a crevasse with a sudden drop he was compelled to back up and re route into it. He disappeared out of sight and seemed to be gone a long time. I waited. Suddenly the car reappeared some way off, with no particular indication as to how it had got there.

I arrived at the edge and drove over at a shallow angle so as not to belly down on the crest. I traversed the side at an alarming pitch and drove into a deep gully with no obvious exit. I reached the floor and crossed it without stopping. The slope ahead was short but very steep, at least 1 in 1, so I maintained enough momentum to roar up the other side again at a slight traverse. All I could see coming over the crest was the sky. I straightened up just as I felt the car might roll and rattled over the top in a cloud of dust, sand and exhaust smoke. There next to me was the other Land Rover. I pulled up. Guy looked pale but relieved. Just beyond lay the cleared piste, graded and mine free. What a welcome sight it was!

Hassan got out of the car and looked around like a hunted jackal. We had arrived at last and his job was over. We were in sight of the border post, and he was in walking distance of his belongings deposited last evening. He had nothing to fear from the Morroccans, but didn't want to be seen by the Mauritians waving goodbye to 3 Westerners heading in the wrong direction through prohibited territory!

We paid him our agreed fee, in cash, which was carefully counted out on the seat. He had done a good job, we had arrived at the border and that's what we were paying for. He tucked the money under his djellabah, bid us goodbye without ceremony and disappeared into the heat haze.

It was hard to believe that the stress and strains of the last few days were now nearly over. We had crossed the dreaded minefield, dodged the border patrols, eluded the military and arrived at the doorstep of a friendly country - albeit illegally. We had satisfactorily bolted from Mauritania but still had to ingratiate ourselves with the Moroccans. We expected at least some hassle before we could declare this unintended adventure a success!

STEEL HAWSER

We climbed into our cars, drove onto the piste and turned for Morocco. At the border a big steel hawser was drawn across the gap. A Moroccan soldier sauntered over, saluted graciously and bade us welcome to his country. He deserved a hug!

"Did we have papers? No?" Then he would have to ask Le Capitaine if we could cross the border. Le Capitaine had to be summoned - no, he didn't know how long he would be, and yes, we would have to wait at the barricade until he arrived. So we waited....

It was mid morning now - we felt we'd been driving all night. We made coffee and the guard joined us, but observing diplomatic protocol we remained on the Mauritanian side of the steel hawser while he stood somewhat imperiously on the Moroccan side. Away on the hill the border post observed all through their binoculars, and the information was radioed back to headquarters. The coffee was passed over the hawser, and then the empty cup passed back again!

A swirl of dust across the desert and the roar of an ill-silenced Pegaso truck heralded the arrival of Le Capitaine. He jumped out of his truck and saluted us in the Morocco military's inimitable style. He then subjected us to some pretty detailed questioning.

"Where had we come from? Why had we broken international laws? Who were we working for? We're we carrying arms? Did we work for a government agency? Who was our guide? Where were we going? How many more of us were there over the border....?"

DETENTION CENTRE

A sinister sidekick got out of the truck and proceeded to examine our vehicle documents. He was the customs officer. I kept my fraudulent carnet out of sight, showed him my International Vehicle Certificate and Guy handed over his Carte Gris. Another unidentified officer with a narrow face and thin lips took our passports from us and examined them minutely. Eventually he made an affirmative nod to Le Capitaine. Le Capitaine signalled to the border guard and the hawser was suddenly dropped; we were through at last, out of no man's land and now under Moroccan rule.... We were directed to pull over and switch off engines.

The customs man then proceeded to take my vehicle apart, emptying all the lockers, tool rolls, spare parts boxes, food bags, clothing, maps (I had some restricted circulation military maps which I had taken care to conceal beforehand) notebooks cameras and navigation equipment. I watched helplessly as my entire world was

dismantled to satisfy some passing stranger's insolent curiosity. Guy's treatment was similar. We felt violated.

Le Capitaine then addressed us. We had entered the country illegally. He would be prepared to recommend our entry application to the Immigration officer at Dhakla, some 200 miles away. This may take some days. Until then we were declared illegal immigrants. We would be held in a detention centre in the desert. The interview was now over. Guy and I looked at each other - this was roughly what we had expected but now it came as a bit of a surprise. Cyril opened his mouth and then said nothing.

Lt Sinister, the sinister sidekick, let himself into my car and Lt Thinface got into Guy's car. Le Capitaine remounted his desert charger. We set off in a dusty convoy for the detention centre five miles away across the desert. When we arrived we found we were not alone. Lt Sinister and Lt Thinface went off with Le Capitaine, taking all our papers with them, and we were told to park in the compound and await further developments "in a few days".

There in the compound were five Westerners - all were awaiting His Majesty's pleasure and most were guilty of nothing worse than being refused entry into Mauritania after legally exiting Morocco. They found themselves stranded in no man's land with no official status and no entry/exit visas valid for either country. "Dropped in it" as one of them observed!

SURVEILLANCE

All were waiting for official re-entry papers from Morocco and all were delighted for the dull routine of desert detention to be relieved by the arrival of some new faces. There was a cheer when we arrived in the camp and much laughter.

There was Don the American, an ex Marine, a massive man with sense of humour to match. He was driving an improbably small van. There was the splendid German, Leider, who had rolled his jeep 80 feet over a cliff in the Atlas mountains. Don said he'd been drinking. He spent the night in it, unconscious, and was woken by two shepherds who had righted it for him next day. He had driven down a wadi and regained the road. The screen was out, the doors were jammed, the roof was stoved in and all the lights were broken. It looked terrible, and Leider looked little better but was still laughing about it.

Then there was the pair from Norway who had driven all this way only to be refused entry at the border. They had been asked to pay bribe money at the first checkpoint, to which they complied, and had then been refused entry as well. And finally there were the two motorcyclists, French and Dutch who I had met far off in the hills when touring around Chinguetti a fortnight ago. They, like us, had done a runner from Mauritania and had travelled under cover of darkness from Nouadhibou, skirting around the check points which preside over the minefield. They believed their bikes were too light to set off a land mine designed for vehicles; maybe they were right, we'll never know...!

The senior detainee, Don, had been here for a week, a long time to spend in one of the least hospitable tracts of the Sahara. The compound was a flat patch of desert bordering a range of sand dunes. Overlooking us was a hill and on it was a military fort looking like something out of Beau Geste. Watch towers stood at every corner and we were under surveillance day and night. There was a military supply tent in the

centre which gave some shelter from the desert sun, otherwise the area was fenced entirely by desert. There wasn't a single human habitation for 100 miles in each direction; nothing but windswept dunes and over in the West the barren and deserted coastline of the Atlantic.

PRISON ROUTINE

There was no water and no food supplied in the camp, but the military tanker would call in twice a week to fill up our water cans. Occasionally the guards would come down from the fort at midday with a newly baked loaf which was a welcome change from the biscuit and jam diet that some of the occupants had been on. We would make the guard welcome, chat to him and try to find out more about the fort, the officers and information about our release.

Most of us had plenty of food in various forms, some of it more appetising than others. We all shared out our resources and between us we did fairly well. Even my bagged and sweating baguette from Nouakchott was turned into something palatable by the imaginative Don.

Don made a chess set out of pebbles and bottle tops. I made a chess board out of one of my locker doors, and we had a tournament. Leider knocked me out in the first round in a convincing defeat - his condition can't have been as bad as it looked - and I set about servicing the long suffering Land Rover.

The day rolled by, conversation lulled and prison routine re-established itself. The next day was long, hot and pretty boring with no news, no information and no particular reason for our detention, least of all the others.

There was a big excitement a day later - a stripped down jeep arrived in camp and an officer got out and held up a passport. "Americain" he announced, and Don was freed. "Norvege" and two more were freed. "Allemande", and Leider beamed. The motorcyclists were also freed; all were told to assemble by the fort where they would pick up a military escort to Dhakla. They all rushed to their vehicles in glee, packing up ready for the off. The officer said he had instructions to order the "L'Anglais et les Français" to remain in the compound. Then he rattled off into the desert leaving a cloud of dust behind him. Our time for release had not yet come and we settled down rather unhappily to wave goodbye to the others. A silence fell on the camp after they all left, and that day seemed to be the longest of all.

Next day the guard brought down a loaf and reported that a vehicle was expected from Dhakla the following day, a Friday. It was a long shot that the event had anything to do with us, but we enjoyed talking about the possibility of release before the weekend. Otherwise we might be there until next week.

Its surprising how many things one can find to do in the absence of any other diversions, in a patch of desert surrounded by land mines and under observation by a military guard. Both Guy and I spoke each others' language moderately well, take or leave a few grammatical howlers, so to improve a little I gave Guy and Cyril lessons in English and they gave me lessons in French - we all improved immeasurably, and given longer we would have all become bilingual.

RELEASED

Friday came and went and we had not learned of a vehicle arriving at the fort. Now it was Saturday and we had rather resigned ourselves to a weekend in the camp when up came a jeep with an officer waving a typed paper. "Français" he called, and Guy and Cyril ran forward. "Anglais", and it was my turn. Our detention was over, our documents were all signed and stamped and our status now legal. Our passports were to be returned to us at Dhakla, together with our Carte Gris. We would be escorted back by two guards today and collect our passports on Monday.

We saddled up our Land Rovers and left the unmemorable detention compound with barely a backward glance. We drove up to the fort and waited for our escort. Soon a large Mercedes saloon appeared and we were beckoned to follow. The road to Dhakla is a military supply route, and it was in excellent condition apart from one or two unstoppable sand dunes creeping imperceptibly across it. The Mercedes raced off at breakneck speed. Guy followed close by, his 2.5Tdi diesel engine giving a good cruising speed. I rumbled along behind, much slower in my venerable old 1983 Land Rover and not trying too hard to keep up; after an hour I was far behind, happily basking in a new found freedom from the intolerable stress of the last ten days. My flight for freedom was over and my travels could now resume without the unthinkable worries of recent days.

I came over the crest of a shallow hill and there was Guy and Cyril pulled over onto the desert. Our guards had stopped. They were making tea for us 'to make us feel welcome'. By the time I came chugging up the tea was ready, the glasses were laid out and I was invited to sit, cross legged in the sand around the little fire. Small desert blooms waved gently in the wind. The sun was high in a cloudless sky, and the soft sand warm underfoot.

I was offered the first glass because I had taken the longest time to get there! I accepted the honour with pleasure and we spent a memorable time swapping desert tales with our new friends.

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