

The Corn Flake Traveller in Mauritania





Camel
Flair
Vibes



Mauritania is not an easy country to get to and doesn't receive many visitors but with fantastic Saharan scenery and warm, hospitable people it is well worth the effort for those more adventurous travellers. I went there myself during a 6 month back-packing trip of West Africa and even found it difficult to get there from neighbouring Morocco, which involved getting a visa from Rabat then travelling about 36 hours by bus and taxi across Western Sahara.

The bus journey was full of desert scenery, particularly after the Tan Tan area. There were lots of checkpoints, where annoying military men would come on the bus and look at everybody's documentation. They kept asking me my profession,

to which I would reply 'secret agent' and then they would nod and go away, showing how worthwhile the questioning was.

The Western Sahara is a disputed territory, or as others may describe it, Morocco is occupying the territory, and it certainly looked that way with a massive Moroccan military presence. I got the impression that this area of the planet is considered to be a country by its people but a province of Morocco by Moroccans. Dakhla (the most southern city) was full of soldiers walking and cycling the streets, there were also lots of U.N trucks driving around and I even met some Moroccans and U.N workers who were receiving big financial rewards to be there.



The only way to get to Mauritania was to take a taxi 400km through more endless desert, and more checkpoints, to the border, then after crossing to be dropped 50km away in the mining city of Nouadhibou.

The taxi driver was great and did everything for us, including paying all the bribes and tips needed to get the passport stamps. It took about an hour to clear the Moroccan side but this was mainly because we turned up just after an 'Overland Tour' (23 tourists travelling from Gibraltar to Cape town on a truck converted to hold equipment, people and food) so we had to wait for them to pass.

The drive through no man's land was interesting. There was no road, just sand and the drivers really needed to know where they were going to navigate around the mine fields and the many burnt out cars, which were revealing the location of mines. It was like an assault course and took us about 30 minutes to go through about 5kms of no man's land before we eventually came out at the Mauritanian border control. Again the driver did most of the work, except when we were required to go up to the desk to state our professions and where we were going, it was pretty good fun wrestling through the Africans, all fighting to reach the front of the cue.

While waiting I went and talked to the money changers and was shown straight away the hospitality of the Mauritians, one guy bought me a drink and another offered me a bed in his home. Annoyingly I couldn't accept his offer as I already had the taxi to Nouadhibou paid for.



Once in the town we walked around a bit, sizing up the place, then we got a double in a hotel, which was an annoyingly expensive \$15. Now I felt like I had arrived in 'Black Africa', really poor people, shitty conditions and lots of very friendly black skinned people, I soon lost count of the number of people that stopped us to say bonjour and shyly smile.

The next day we went south to a beach with some ex-military tunnels and about 10-15 shipwrecks just off the shore. In the afternoon I walked around town looking for a hotel that would let us camp in their grounds but most of them wanted virtually the same price as a room. We met a really friendly car mechanic called 'Commando', who showed us to a hotel that resembled a building site and was the same price as the others. He then offered us his house to sleep in and I didn't want to say no after turning down the money changer at the border, these opportunities don't come around very often (except in Mauritania as I would begin to learn).

He showed us to his shanty town house made from corrugated iron and when I saw it I knew I was right to not refuse the offer, he gave me the padlock key then we went for chicken and chips. He was a really nice guy from Senegal, genuine, honest and good hearted, well obviously as he gave us his house to sleep in. He came to Mauritania to find work, having to leave his family and 7 children in Senegal. He refused his Muslim parents attempts to suck him into religion so signed up for the Senegalese army as a young man, sadly "he didn't like the strict lifestyle so he chose whiskey and love instead", his words. On the way back from having chicken we stopped off at a bar so Commando could have some whiskey then he went to sleep at his brothers and I got comfy in his house.

I slept really well on the sand floor, in the morning Commando came and took us for a tea and egg sandwich breakfast, I bought his again, meaning we paid about \$2.50 to buy him food, in exchange for sleeping in his house. He showed us the garage where he worked, it is amazing to see how they keep these rusty old cars going, some must be at least 40 years old and more than 50% rust.

There wasn't much of a public transportation system in this part of the world, it was mainly taxis that would wait until they were full and charge quite a bit for inter-city transfers. When I heard about a free ride on the iron-ore train I jumped at the chance and after saying goodbye to Commando we went to the station to wait. It is one of the only railway lines in the country carrying millions of tonnes of iron-ore every year from the mining centre of Zouerate, 700km away, to the port in Nouadhibou.

The train turned up at 3:30pm and left shortly afterwards, there was one passenger carriage but you had to pay a \$9 fare, so I opted to ride in an empty wagon for free. The trains can be up to 3km long and carry up to 22,000 tons of ore, using huge diesel engines to pull along one of the longest and heaviest trains in the world. Our train was not that long, probably just over a kilometre, with empty carriages as it was heading back to the mines. Shortly after leaving, when we had built up some speed, we realised they weren't empty at all, in fact there were plenty of iron filings left inside which soon filled the air and completely covered us. It was

really hard not to breathe it in and after an hour the train stopped for a few minutes and my fellow traveller ran back to the passenger carriage.

I stuck it out and stayed in the wagon, enjoying the scenery until sunset and then lying down in the part of the train with the least iron filings in the air, shutting my eyes and listening to my ipod. I probably managed to sleep about an hour and even ate when the train slowed down.

At about 1am the train arrived 460km inland in Choum and this is where most people got off and jumped into 4x4's that were waiting to speed people through the Mauritanian desert towards Atar. The bags were covered in iron, I was covered, my nose full of black stuff, the turban had really helped but it was a losing battle and my eye lids even stuck together when I was sleeping because my tears had mixed with the filings.

We arrived in Atar at 4:30am and a helpful guy showed us to a hotel, which was unfortunately closed and couldn't be woken, so we accepted another offer and slept at this friendly strangers house. People in this part of the world are very accommodating and welcoming, the family put some mattresses in a separate room for us and I managed to sleep about 3 hours. When awake they offered us a shower and some food but we didn't want to impose further, so left and checked into a hotel. The dad of the family even left with us to help us find the hotel, where I had the most needed shower I have ever taken. It took an hour of washing to get about 90% of the iron off (think of the places sand reaches when you go to the beach and times that by a couple of billion), then we slept until mid afternoon, before exploring the town a little bit.

Atar is a dusty, dry desert town, right in the outback with little tourism. Everyone is dressed in colourful clothes, turbans and full body dress and all the females cover their hair. Tourism has really dropped in the last few years, virtually disappearing and whilst walking around we had so many offers of taxi's, tours and places to stay. The attention became tiring in the end so I went back for a bath and an early night.

Next day we took a pick-up truck (they act as public transport in this area) to Chinguetti, an old town in the desert surrounded by really beautiful and dramatic, dune-filled desert scenery, it was so nice I ended up staying 4 days.

On one of the days we had some breakfast (the bread in this country is really nice) then Cheikh, our hotel owner, took us for a walk around the old Chinguetti town, a Unesco listed site dating back to the 13th century, with a mosque and libraries full of old Koran's.

The bricks didn't look that old to me but maybe there are different weathering rates in the desert. It was a cute little town and there was lots of evidence showing how the desert encroaches and grows, there were walls in the process of being buried and signs on the walls showing the sand levels over the years. Again the decline in tourism was apparent as we were inundated by artisanal sellers, I felt sorry for them but couldn't help but think that actually they

are better off without influence from the West. From the old town we went for a walk onto the dunes but only briefly, as it was cloudy and even rained for 10 minutes, typical an Englishman comes to the Sahara and it rains.

In the evening I met a policeman from Quebec who had visited Chinguetti many times and was learning from the nomadic people how to exist in the desert. He bought himself a camel and had already spent one month in the desert on his own but needed plenty more training before he achieved his desired 5 months. The camel can carry over 100kgs and go 6 months without water, taking all it needs from the vegetation that grows in patches in the desert. Funny though, that his biggest problem is the camel wandering off in the night, one time he spent 2 hours searching for him in the morning, even though he had tied his legs together.

I found the scenery around the town to be breathtaking and the town had a very relaxed vibe. On another of the days we left the town with the policeman and his camel, who were heading along a river bed to an oasis 12km away. After a kilometre we went a different way and climbed some big dunes for some Corn Flakes and amazing scenery. The sun was shining making shadows and shapes in the endless sea of orange and white sand dunes, exceptional and easily in my Top 10 favourite places ever.

I walked around town to meet some locals who were all very pleasant, people that seemed happy and at peace, I also had to spend hours and hours repeatedly washing iron out of my clothes.

From Chinguetti we travelled to Nouakchott, where we spent a couple of days arranging a visa for Mali. Travelling meant getting squashed into cars with locals, who were very friendly, offering us food and drink but on one journey a woman prayed and chanted about 80% of the time.

We drove through herds of wild camels and from Nouakchott we followed the 'Road of Hope' spending a night in Aleg, one in Kiffa, then 3 nights in Ajoun el Atrous. The towns were full of rubbish, with kids playing with it and goats eating it and we were always

the centre of attention, for the whole town sometimes. The hotels were expensive so we paid to camp in the grounds, although we did treat ourselves to a room one night to be able to take a shower. From Atrous it was hard trying to arrange transport to Mali and we made a mistake when we chose a dodgy offer and were Almost Kidnapped by Al Qaeda.

For its lovely people and the spectacular Sahara I thought Mauritania was a great country, 1 of 64 countries I have now Corn Flakeified. To get updates about my mission to eat flakes in every country in the world, please 'Like' my 'Travelling with Corn Flakes' facebook page.

