

by Kaylee Dall

This was my first time traveling to Africa and I've only been to 6 other countries before this trip. To say the least I was nervous but mostly excited to experience a place that had only been a foreign name in my house. I was even more excited by the people I told because no one knew where this huge gorgeous country was. My excitement lowered once I found out I had to take three flights to get there with an eight-hour layover in Istanbul. Nevertheless, the flights weren't all that bad with meals and free movies and Once I stepped out of the airport and could smell the fresh desert air in Nouakchott, Mauritania it made it all worth it.

We had a total of 12 people, 10 of us as travelers, 1 local guide, and 1 lecturer (Mohamed Halouani). To have four cars to transport us through the country, we each had a window to view out to the beautiful dunes and desert. The cars had to be some of the best they had in the country because the other cars driving around looked like they need a giant rubber band around them to hold them together. Our cars were Toyota land cruisers so we had plenty of leg room and enough room for all our bags. We did about 80 hours plus through the whole trip in the cars so we were familiar with them by the end of the trip. At least the cars had ac and kept us out of the heat a lot because it was in the high 90s. our guides were good at giving us day breaks to avoid the hottest times of the day.

The roads were unbelievable; the roads in the city had goats running all over the place and They use donkeys and old cars as transportation. The lanes and lights are just suggestions for them which made the driving a little scary but thrilling. They had trash everywhere; just piles of trash along the road and the sand just take over some of the roads and sidewalks. The roads out in the country were not even roads. We would be driving on the one paved highway and then just turn off into the desert and that was a designated road to the locals. There was no street sign or indication that I was a regularly used road.



During our many day drives, we stopped at beautiful places to see different important spots and just to gaze at the beauty that is the desert. one stop was Amogjar an impressive canyon with mesa range of mountains where the famous French movie Fort Saganne was shot. The same day we stopped and saw rock paintings discovered by the French naturalist Theodore Monod which were spectacular. We made a stop at azougui, the ancient capital of the Almoravids. The Almoravids were warrior monks Muslims who went to the conquest of Morocco, Spain, and sub-Saharan Africa from the eleventh century. The wall around the city is still standing but inside is just rubble. In the corner of the city, you can see some of the walls of the old mosque. The fortress was built among 20,000 palm trees with mountain views in the background which made for great pictures.

Along with many stops along the way we made day trips out to some of the most spectacular places Mauritania has to offer. We made a trip out to Ouadane one of the first cities of Mauritania. It was one of the main caravanning centers in West Africa in the 11th century and I was told there were 5,000 people living in the city at its heyday. It was hard to believe all that while most of the city lies in ruins. Earlier that day, we drove through Guelb Errichat a massive crater, which was believed to have originated from a meteorite by Theodore Monod. In reality, the crater was created by an extinct volcano and Monod had spent his last days looking for a meteorite that never existed. Being inside the crater made it hard to see its distinct rings but seeing how the volcano created the deep pockets up to the next plateau was interesting. Another day trip was out to see the white valley and the Terjit oasis. The white valley was unbelievable with how big the sand dunes were. Some of the sand dunes reached the top of the mountains. It seems that if you tried to climb one you would need a day to do it. Also, our guide told us that some locals believe some dunes are haunted because the sand dunes sing. The Terjit oasis was my favorite stop on the trip. When you're driving to it it's just like driving to anything else, just views of the open desert and sand dunes but once you start walking inside it doesn't even seem like you're in the desert anymore. Inside it feels like a beautiful tropical vacation. It has green foliage on the rock walls surrounding it and water streams through the whole oasis. The water was nice and cold and it dripped down one side of the rocks that surrounded the oasis. If there was a place in Mauritania I would want to live it would be the oasis.



The hotel in Nouakchott was above my standards. I was expecting something like a super 8 but it was closer to a high-end Marriott. Some rooms were smaller which didn't bother me in the least because I'm only one person. The huts in Attar were not as amazing as the hotel in Nouakchott but that understandable because it was not in that big of a city. They were spacious and they did have a private bathroom with AC. Chinguitty's hotel was spectacular for the small city out in the middle of the desert. Most of our group stayed in the nicer hotel with AC but because we were a bigger group they didn't have enough rooms. So, I stayed in the second-best hotel in the city and it honestly wasn't bad. The only thing I didn't have was AC. We had shared bathrooms but they were clean and I couldn't complain about it.



I wasn't expecting much when it came to the food as I was told it wouldn't be that great but the person they told me that was mistaken. Sure, it wasn't anything spectacular or unique but it was delicious and that all that counts. We had a lot of couscous with a meat stew which is my favorite type of food. We had fish, camel, chicken, beef, and goat, the only thing I wasn't a fan of was the goat. The best meal we had was in a small neighborhood in Attar that put together this beautiful outdoor dinner even though the main dish was a goat. They had a local band come and play for us. The whole





neighborhood came and listened to the music and people danced. Our drivers even got me up to dance for a song. The whole night was festive and energetic making me not want to leave even though our group was exhausted.

Nouakchott their main city didn't have any monuments or historical places to visit but we did see their national museum, which was small when you think of the United States national museum. There were only two rooms open because they were installing a new exhibit upstairs. One side had a traveling German show that somehow had Martin Luther King Jr. in it and the other room was the beginning history of Mauritania. The history of Mauritania is fascinating with only a couple years ago they abolished slavery and you still see traces of it today. Because there are no monuments to see the only other thing is there markets. We went and experienced their camel market and fish market. The camel market I was told had over 1,000 camels there, all to be eaten. We walked through a maze of camels and they all were so beautiful it was hard for me to imagine eating one. After we went to the fish market which was loud and energetic and there were fish everywhere with people descaling them and selling huge fish laid out on cardboard. An interesting thing about the market was most of the fish they catch gets shipped to China. We were there during sunset and with all the boats floating in the water and some decreitive boats lining the beach it was a beautiful place for taking pictures.



Chinguitty one of the seven holy cities of Islam and a world heritage site was one of the most interesting cities we saw. We stopped at one of the ancient private library's that holds hundreds of old manuscripts. These ancient manuscripts about math, poetry, law, philosophy, theology, and astronomy have never been cataloged and he keeps them in cardboard boxes trying to keep them in the best condition as he can. It was fascinating to see all these ancient manuscripts just lining the walls and how they used to be used. In Chinguitty, I got to ride my first camel which is terrifying once you find out the way you must get up and down but also thrilling. We also climbed this huge dune so we could watch the sunset over the dunes and the moon rise on the other side.



My first trip to Africa was without a doubt a success. Not only did I get to experience an amazing culture and see the Sahara Desert but I learned about a culture in the first person that was drastically different from mine. I don't miss the heat but I do miss the scenic drives through the deserts and the camel spotting's along the way.

