

The Journal



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Chapter 2: Morocco & Mauritania

Day 10: Gibraltar to Sale, Morocco

The alarms went off and we swiftly got out on the road and headed to Algeciras, the Spanish port where we would pick up the boat to Morocco. Unfortunately we had heard that morning of an earthquake that had devastated several of the coastal towns of Morocco, 19 lay dead and that was our destination. Hmmmmmm.

Thankfully the information we had gave us no reason to think we would be compromised by the situation and that it was actually out of our direct route. We pressed on and made it across the small stretch of sea without problem and landed in Ceuta (Sebta).

We then had the not insignificant procedure of checking ourselves and the vehicles into Morocco but thankfully though long we got through and made our way towards Rabat.



Fortunately we saw no evidence of the reported earthquake so it must have hit areas well away from our route as we thought. Quite against our expectations the country was lush and verdant and the roads smooth and speedy. Unfortunately Bert seemed to have not registered the new thermostat and was overheating worse than before. Not what you need before heading into the desert.

We checked into a campsite in the coastal town of Sale, near Rabat, and decided to get to the bottom of the heating problem by taking Bert to the main Landrover dealership in Casablanca the following day.

Day 11: Sale & Casablanca

We decided to split up into two groups with Giles and Austin taking Bert to Casablanca and Andy and Duncan staying in Rabat to pick up visas for Mali. This proved the start of a very long day with Andy and Duncan spending hours in the embassy resolutely refusing to move until someone on their lunch break took pity on them and furnished them with our visas. Austin and Giles ended up driving into central Casablanca (6 Million people, size of London, no map...lots of pain). They eventually found the garage and headed to a hotel where they found they needed their passports to check in which were in the embassy....

One trip to the police commissary later they were checked in and the two groups collapsed in their respective locations for the night.

Day 12: Sale to Casablanca

The two groups joined up today and unfortunately missed the opening time for the Mauritanian Embassy so the visa applications would have to wait another day.

Likewise the news from the very competent mechanics at the Garage (SMEIA Dealership, Blvd Ba Hmad, Cas.) was not great. The radiator was corroded to the point of death and needed replacement, bad news not to have picked up on this before leaving but thankfully it was able to be sorted there and then and we could pick Bert up the following day.

We ventured out into Casablanca for sustenance that evening and failed to find Rick's Bar or Humphrey Bogart but did have a hearty Tagine and some kind of fish.... (uh oh here we go).



Very strange night out in Casablanca

Day 13: Casablanca to Marakesh

A much better day today saw us successfully picking up our visas from the chap at the Mauritanian Embassy as well as being reunited with Bert.

He was looking grand with a brand new radiator (clean teeth I like to think) and raring to go.

We wasted no time in getting packed up and heading for Marrakesh, Casablanca had proved to be frantic, smelly and pretty darn expensive.

The drive to Marrakesh was beautiful and gave us a great sense of beginning to get out into the Africa we were expecting. All deep red earth, eucalyptus trees and low mud buildings. That's a bit more like it. Our moods have lifted exponentially and it feels great to be on the road again, if only for a short while.

Bert behaved like a true gent on the drive down and refused to get hot under the collar, proving the expense of fitting the radiator worthwhile and an all round relief.

We settled down that night for a beef stew in our set up that is looking more professional by the day and working more efficiently each time we set up. Dare we say it we am even comfortable camping!

The couple of days we plan to check out Marrakesh and give Bert and Ernie a bit of a trial up the nearby Mountain ranges to see how they cope with some rougher driving conditions. And then we make for the desert.....

Day 14 to 15: Marrakech to Imlil

We set off early from our campsite and headed towards the imposing, snow-capped Atlas mountains for a few days 'rest and relaxation', driving through the dramatic foothills on our way to the village of Imlil. After leaving the two vehicles under the watchful eye of the hostel owner, Mohammed, we headed out with his brother on a tough two day trek up Jebel Toubkal. The highest mountain in the Atlas, it is snow capped and despite being incredibly hard going it was exhilarating to reach the top.



Trekking on Jebel Toubkal

Day 16: Imlil to Agadir

Up early to descend down to the coastal town of Agadir. Wonderful views of the Atlas Mountains surrounded by a lake of clouds. The countryside became progressively drier with the odd orange tree plantation; the fertile valley sandwiched between the high atlas to the north and the anti-atlas to the south. As we reached Agadir itself the temperature climbed noticeably, as did the development. The town is extremely developed, including a French style hypermarket allowing us to stock up before heading out into the desert. Anti-malarials were also started, a sign that we had really begun. Sadly Austin was struck down with a dose of Moroccan D&V, inevitable in a trip like this.

Day 17: Agadir to Layoene

Again an early start in order to try and cover as much distance as possible before the light disappears. The drive took us along the coast, at least on the map, but in reality it was along the edge of the Sahara. Countryside varies between the odd dune and acres and acres of dry desert scrub.

Towards the end of the day the sea finally came into view, although we had the pleasure of driving through a locust storm before hand!!

The night's camp was in the desert itself (Les Bedouins), an amazing campsite 4km off the tarmac road, with

fantastic toilets (particularly in Austin's opinion) and views of the desert at night.



Les Bedouins Campsite

Day 18: Layoone to Dakhla

Beautiful morning as we packed up in the still desert air, unaware that the weather was about to change. Driving again down the edge of the Sahara sandwiched between the sea and the desert with a vast expanse of nothing for hours on end, quite awe inspiring. We also had a taste of a sandstorm, with driving sands for hour after hour. Neither vehicle, we have since discovered, is 'sand tight', you could build a sand castle in the foot wells by the time the day was done! Dakhla itself is on a peninsula with water either side, the wind had dropped and we were able to pitch camp in a site surrounded by four wheel drives now, instead of the ubiquitous RVs, evidently things were getting serious...

That evening we met a French couple and an Arabic speaking German whose journey down the coast was similar. Space was duly made, after all schoolboy French at border crossings only gets you so far...



Sandstorm

Day 19: Dakhla to Nouadibou, Mauritania

Left not as early as we would like, the campsite water pump required our tools to begin to work! Heading down to the Mauritanian border, again through acres of desert scrub, we began to bump into local "guides" who could facilitate the border crossing etc. With our fluent French and Arabic on board we were hopeful that we would be okay, besides there was no more room at the inn!

The Moroccan border was exited with minimal fuss, although we naturally were made to wait until after lunch. Off into no-mans land we headed. Within about 500m one vehicle was partially stuck in deep sand and there appeared to be no border post at all, bit of low ratio and we were off, hoping that the tent on the horizon was the post. It was, and thanks to our fluent French speakers, who brilliantly put the whole place at ease, plus the good fortune of the local regional army commander making his inspection, we got through with minimal hassle. This time we decided to take up the

offer of a guide to the campsite in Nouadibou, arriving at dusk after our guide seemed to ignore all the nice roads that the other traffic was taking...we should have known.

Day 20: Nouadibou to Nouaghar

Sadly we left our French couple and German behind, replacing them with 'Comedy Ahmed', our guide. Promising us sincerely that we would reach the capital in one day and that taking a 2wd camper van and motorbike (piloted by a Swiss pair) with us would not slow us down, we duly set off into the desert.

Ahmed drove the camper van, which was worryingly stuck within an hour of leaving. Our electric compressor became the most useful bit of kit as tyre pressures were dropped from a controversial 60psi down to a much improved 20psi. The vehicles were impeccable, easily coping with the desert terrain, which is more than can be said for Comedy Ahmed driving the van. Mind you the regular stops to dig it out at least allowed one of us to perfect the desert toilet....

GPS and our maps proved what we knew, progress was slow, the route was bizarre but against all the odds, Comedy Ahmed got us, the motorbike and what remained of the camper van to a small fishing village called Nouaghar at only ten o'clock at night. Still, it'd only been dark for three hours and we'd only had to

Yet more 'permits' to purchase and an entry fee to the campsite (in truth just a walled off piece of desert) and we finally crawled into our sleeping bags at just gone midnight – way past our Africa bedtime of eight thirty. Worryingly, on the short trip to the campsite Ernie's clutch started sticking in first and second gears – not a lot we could do now though.

dig/pull/push the camper van about a third of the way.



Heading into the Desert (Swiss man on motorbike)



Towing the camper van out of sand (Comedy Ahmed driving van)

Day 20+1: Nouaghar to Nouakchott



Due to the tides (!) we weren't able to leave until one o'clock (we'd passed on the opportunity to leave at 1am) and so were looking forward to being able to have a slow start to the day. Sadly the local children didn't agree and breakfast (deep fried dough balls) was served at 0730 accompanied by much singing. Comedy Ahmed decided it was unwise for the camper van to continue (what exactly had he thought and where were they to go from there?) and suggested just the Land Rovers head South from there. As there's no road (obviously) the route takes you along the beach. The journey has to be timed correctly though, as the sea comes up to the dunes at high tide and many vehicles have been washed away due to getting it wrong. Fortunately for us, we had Comedy Ahmed to guide us so we were able to spend an hour or so exploring the town before heading off with confidence.

It's amazing where and how people are able to survive and Nouaghar is a case in point. Only a collection of a few dilapidated shacks on the edge of the most barren desert yet the people were friendly and helpful.

We left the village at 1 ish (slightly later than Comedy wished) and still ended up stopping on the beach to allow the tide to go out a bit more. Speeding over the beach, up against the waves and with the seagulls scattering will remain one of the highlights of the trip. After that short stretch we dropped Comedy off and made 'surprisingly good' time along the well pisted (and eventually tarmac – hurrah) roads to Nouakchott..

We checked into Auberge Sahara – an absolute oasis of a place with hot showers, friendly staff, other English people and a dodgy Frenchman. As the valve on one tyre was playing up we decided to change it. We can now conclusively say attempting repairs on your Land Rover at six o'clock in the evening, in the semi-darkness, on

gravel, after a two day hard trek across the desert is not a good idea. Fortunately (again) we didn't cause too much damage and have only a slightly bent jacking point as punishment. On the plus side, we met two English people who we offered lifts to and JP, our French 'businessman' who 'had done the Paris-Dakar many times' and could guide across the notoriously difficult Senegal border.

Day 22 Nouakchott to St Louis



Another early start to try to repair some of our mistakes the night before (successfully) and now there were seven of us. Confidence was high that despite our lack of Carnet, JP would be able to get across the border. Confidence dipped somewhat when he got us lost within the first 2 miles.....

Victoria, Matt and 'JP'

The journey to Senegal made a nice contrast to what we'd seen before and the scenery was at least starting to resemble African savannah. JP guided us South to Rosso (by all accounts a very difficult place to cross with no Carnet) and then along the piste to Djama – a small border post where we might be able to blag our way over without it costing too much money. Sadly the border guard there was less than impressed with the age of our cars and would only agree to us entering Senegal if he escorted us the following day to the Gambia – naturally we would have to pay for his 'expenses'. It was the best of a bad deal and so we headed to St Louis for the night with an agreement to meet him next morning for our onward trip to The Gambia.