



INTO THE MYSTERIOUS DUNES

Founders of Wild Morocco
EMILY BURROWS AND YAHYA BOULFRIFI reveal the treasures of the Sahara Desert

WHY SHOULD TRAVELERS TREK TO THE SAHARA DESERT?

The silence, the amazing way of life, the stars that light up the night sky, and the sunrise over the sea of sand combined with experiencing the true local hospitality and culture make for an unforgettable adventure.

WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO VISIT?

Our preferred time to visit is from early October until the end of April. In January through mid-February, it's not uncommon to see newborn camels and the carpets of wild rucola throughout the dunes. For photographers, the winter light conditions are perfect for capturing the landscapes due to the low winter sun. Nights are cold, but winter is generally less windy than spring.

WHAT ARE THREE PLACES THAT TRAVELERS SHOULDN'T MISS?

Erg Chigaga is a vast sea of sand where the dunes reach 300 feet in height and span approximately 40 kilometers. As night falls, you can sleep under a canopy of stars.

Erg Zahar is also known as the "screaming dunes" for a legend tells that a village is buried beneath the sands. Views of the stretching dunes are visible from the highest point of this little-visited region.

The abandoned village of **Erg Smar** is a unique place with plenty of trees for picnic lunches and overnight camping.

WHAT IS A MUST-DO EXPERIENCE?

Beyond a sunset camel trek, we recommend multi-day backcountry hiking in the **Iriqui National Park**. You can either start from or finish at the Erg Chigaga dunes at the heart of the park. These types of hikes allow visitors to experience a nomadic way of life for several days. The goal is to disconnect from the outside world, to enjoy the rich environment, as there is far more to discover than sand dune, and to embrace slow travel.

DESCRIBE WHAT IT'S LIKE TO SPEND THE NIGHT IN THE SAHARA DESERT

The quietude and space in the desert are otherworldly, and the night-sky is boundless. The evenings are spent next to the campfire where we normally play music, either desert shanties or desert blues. And the most impromptu of

instruments always works — such as the jerrycan! If the weather and temperature are right, we recommend sleeping under the stars and falling asleep to the views above.

WHAT ARE THE BEST DINING OPTIONS IN THE SAHARA DESERT?

What surprises visitors most about visiting even the remotest areas of the Sahara Desert is the ability of nomads to create a steaming hot tajine served with fresh bread! There are limited restaurant options so most accommodations provide full board. Don't miss the opportunity to bake fresh bread with a nomadic family at a campfire.

WHAT ARE THE BEST LODGING OPTIONS IN THE SAHARA DESERT?

Yahya opened the rustic **Camp Al Koutban** which is located at the base of the remote dunes of **Erg Chigaga**. The camp is encircled by smaller rolling dunes for privacy and shelter, and these also offer a great vantage point. The sleeping tents at Camp Al Koutban are carpeted and lined and guests sleep comfortably on king-sized beds. There is a separate shower and toilet facility on-site with hot water and a separate dining-salon tent and outdoor space for relaxation and enjoyment of the campfire.



BACK TO BASICS IN THE DESERT

Emily and Yahya share tips and tricks on what to bring to the desert.

- Do not leave home without your camera. The desert is filled with picture-perfect landscapes at every turn. Make sure to bring your device chargers and power banks.
- Sun protection includes a hat and neck scarf, although we provide the local "turban" which doubles up against the sun and wind.
- We advise against heavy leather walking boots. Use trekking sandals with socks or trainers for the desert.
- Bring a fleece or jacket for the evenings. With the heat of the sun in the daytime, it will feel cold at night by comparison, particularly from December to February.
- Wear comfortable, loose clothing in the day, especially for the driving days in the car. Pack clothing you can layer easily and don't mind getting dusty. Unless you plan to visit very up-market restaurants and hotel bars, you won't need to dress formally in the cities.
- A personal travel kit of imodium, antihistamine, painkiller, rehydration powders, insect repellent, support bandages, band-aid, blister plasters, antiseptic wipes, dressing, hand-gel, eye-drops, and lip balm. You should also bring motion sickness tablets, in case of car sickness on the winding roads across the Atlas Mountains, and through the desert terrain.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WILD MOROCCO.

TOP THINGS TO DO IN THE SAHARA DESERT

- 1 Watch the sunset from the tallest point in the Erg Chigaga dune field.
- 2 Hike through little-visited regions of the Iriqui National Park.
- 3 Marvel at the Milky Way in the night sky.

FOUR DAYS IN THE DESERT

A look into trekking in the Sahara Desert with Wild Morocco.



DAY 1

The morning trek follows the southern banks of the **Draa River**, through the palm groves and original settlement of **M'hamid**, which is approximately 300 hundred years old. Visit ancient pise-mud buildings and enjoy the shade from the trees. After lunch at **Ras Nkhal**, continue towards the *marabout* (the shrine of a holy man) of Sidi Naji, close to where overnight camp will be established, in the seclusion of small dunes.

DAY 2

The trekking terrain is largely flat, which gradually transforms into the rolling sand dunes. This is a little-visited dune region in **Zahar** where you can enjoy the wide-reaching views across the *erg* (sand sea) and then the sunset. Zahar is also known as the "screaming dunes" because of a legend about a village buried beneath the sands.

DAY 3

Cross the bed of the Draa River to begin the return trek to your starting point. The size of the river bed is astonishing, given that it is now dry; although it once flowed in abundance through the desert.

DAY 4

Visit the village of M'hamid to complete your four-day circuit. The terrain becomes marked by desert scrub and earth banks, and palm groves become more apparent the closer you reach M'hamid.

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PHOTO BY ALEX DISARCO.

In warm conditions, guests can dine outside. Evening entertainment is around the campfire after dinner, and this often involves singing and playing the drums.

WHAT IS THE MOROCCAN NOMADIC WAY OF LIFE IN THE DESERT?

Our team is the last generation to have grown up as children in the desert, previously practicing a way of life that was unchanged for centuries. Water in the region is obtained through deep wells, yet it is now proving scarcer than ever.

Some families who once practiced transhumance have opted to locate at the M'hamid village at the desert frontier. These families, approximately 35 in total and including Boulfriji's family, once lived in a desert settlement when their water

source was reliable. They were able to farm the land and keep livestock. But once the water from the river Draa was dammed upstream, life in the settlement eventually became untenable. The desert encroached on farmland. However, there are handfuls of families that still live in the region, keeping a few animals and growing subsistence crops.

HOW CAN TRAVELERS MEET THE LOCALS?

When you hike with us, you will spend several days with the men of the region. There will be a local guide, cook, and camel handler. The majority of our team are indigenous Berber or Sahrawi, whose forebears migrated from further south in Morocco. The local guide will act as a bridge between the visitors and the cook and camel-handler.



Emily Burrows camping in the Sahara Desert.

Young men are often the breadwinners of their extended families. Our guests will also be able to meet some of the nomadic families in the region and bake fresh bread in the sand beneath the embers of the campfire with them, to enjoy with a cup of tea.

Each town hosts a weekly *souk* (market) where locals travel from nearby villages to stock up on essentials such as produce, meats, household items and clothing. It's a true feast for the senses.

WHAT ARE LUXURY OPTIONS FOR TRAVELERS TO THE SAHARA DESERT?

We offer a private 4WD service round-trip from Marrakech, or from the nearest airport, with an English speaking driver who knows the region. Should travelers want to camp in luxury for the night, we can arrange a stay in a completely private camp, with one fully-furnished bedroom tent and en-suite bathroom. The camp is isolated and it's staffed by a team of two. Options for activities from the camp include remote picnic lunches, visits to the Erg Smar settlement, or guided day hikes. The camp is a 2.5 hour off-road drive, or a three-day hike from the nearest road.

WHAT IS DESERT CUISINE LIKE?

Cups of tea are shared throughout the day. Don't be surprised if your host serves peanuts, sweets, or even a fresh omelette when stopping by for tea. A steaming hot tajine perfectly spiced and prepared over a charcoal fire and then scooped up with fresh bread is a treat! ■



PHOTO BY S. CALLENS.

THE BEST SOUVENIRS FROM THE SAHARA DESERT



Fossils



Tea pot



Leather sandals



Cheche (desert turban)



Melhfa (colorful ladies' dress wrapped around the wearer)



Tamegroute pottery, which is usually a vivid dark green