

MAURITANIA
16 – 25 May 2010
By Karen Hauptfleisch

16 May: Having spent the previous 38 days visiting 7 West African countries, using mostly local transport to cover the 13 000 plus kilometers, I considered myself a seasoned African traveler. Our planned smooth 1050 km (24 hour) trip from Bamako to Nouckchott had been rudely interrupted in Nioro du Sahel the previous day where, having missed our transfer bus to Nouckchott, we spent the evening sweating in a hotel with temperatures reaching 45°, fantasizing about ice cold beers.

Armed with 5 kg of peanuts and a newly acquired cooler box filled with ice, I waited patiently for the bus to arrive. 6 Hours later, the only thing left in the cooler box was warm water and I crawled my way out under the peanut shell mountain, any thoughts about being a seasoned African traveler long forgotten. The short bus ride to the border was spent in silence.

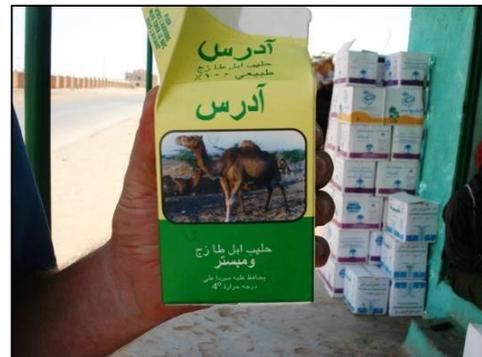


Camels in the desert

Being stamped out of Mali, we cheerfully followed some of our fellow passengers walking the 1.3 km to the Mauritanian border, where we discovered that our luggage was still in Mali. 30 Minutes later, I was back with both our backpacks. It has been the worst traveling experience of my life. Sitting on one backpack, the other strapped to my back, I clung desperately to the poor motorbike driver. We passed several camel carcasses and being unable to move while cramps almost drove me to tears, the thought of dying in no mans land had me on the verge of hyperventilating. Border posts are somber places. If it wasn't for that, both

immigration officers and fellow passengers watching the skew spectacle on the motorbike, would have cheered excitedly when I finally arrived. Instead, the immigration officers showed their relief by waving us through without one glance at our luggage,

The carpets that were rolled out should have set off an alarm regarding the time before departure. But we did pay for a direct express bus from Bamako to Nouakchott, so I joined the rest of the passengers on the carpets.



Camel Milk

Just as I was drifting in to this peaceful sleep, Alan's warning about being shot by the immigration officers should I shout when I find a rooimannetje spider running over me, reached me. Sleeping was not an option afterwards.

So I waited, and waited. I could not understand a word of French, Arabic or Spanish and when another bus arrived at 24h00, confusion reigned again. Some passengers rushed to the bus but the luggage was first offloaded and we finally departed at 02h00. I was so relieved to get a double seat all to myself and could just imagine getting some heavenly sleep in, waking up refreshed in Nouakchott.

When Valerie, a fellow passenger acting as our translator, informed us that our fellow passengers refused to pay the 1500 CFA requested from everyone by the bus driver in anticipation of bribes being payable, my heart filled with pride.

During the next 24 km, there were 3 police roadblocks that took 3 hours. Our senses of humour joined the plastic bags flapping in the small trees in the desert. Without hesitation, we all handed 1000 CFA over to the driver.



I do not do well in the desert

37 Stops would follow the next 19 hours where; except for the one thorough search where we had to explain what the soya, vitamins, candles, mosquito coils etc were, and the police guy decided that the international adapter was his to keep; we only had to show our passports.

Somewhere along the 1000km stretch I realized just how lucky I was to have AI as my travel buddy. Even the police seemed perplexed by our intention to go to Zouratt and kept on telling us that it was extremely hot there.

Tension was building up in the bus but everyone looked out for one another and between French, Arabic and in my case, Sign language, we managed to wish one another a safe journey after finally arriving in Nouakchott at 24h00

18 May. Trying to restore some of my energy and my sense of humour, I went for a walk on my own and found myself lost in Nouakchott, somewhere close to the Olympic stadium, a sign saying it was 12h04 and 44° C. Reading the street name turned out to be hopeless, since they were in Arabic. Luckily my GPS got me back and just to make double sure, we went for a pizza that evening.



More desert

19 May. An adventurous 14 hour 4X4 drive through the desert followed. The unexpected sight of a mountain range stretching for at least 70 km compensated for the long stretches of nothingness and camel carcasses along the way

20 May. The day was spent recovering, trying to get an interpreter, visiting the museum and market, reading my new novel I swapped in Nouakchott, and watching endless senseless movies on cable TV. After days of suffering in the heat, we sat shivering under blankets in front of the air conditioner in the apartment. Overtiredness and the desert brought no sleep.



Some of the Mauritanian ladies

21 May. Eli, the apartment owner dropped us off at 8h00, 10 km from town and between writing, sign language and a few broken French words, we understood we would be picked up by 10h00. My GPS showed the highest peak to be 6 km away. 30 Minutes into our hike we realized we would never make it back in time and set off exploring the section being mined. Hiking down, I could not stop the tears. I did not know if it was due to the malaria tablets, PMS or the fact that the mountain was being destroyed by the mining.

Sunrise on Africa's Peaks - Mauritania

22 May. Communication was a challenge but we were grateful when our adopted family picked us up at 9h00. They had brought re-enforcement, the local French doctor and a colleague and we traveled with the French doctor to a mountain 42 km away through the desert. Upon arrival, the doctor was instructed to climb the mountain that resembled a camel with us, while the rest of the group prepared the picnic in the only shade for miles. A healthy lunch followed before we all returned to Zouratt in 3 vehicles. According to our "family", this was the most beautiful mountain in Mauritania

23 May. Ali dropped us once again 10 km outside the town and armed with 5 l water each, 4 different GS coordinates found on the internet the day before, our senses of humour and the knowledge that we would be picked up in 6 hours time, we set off. A wonderful surprise awaited us, finding that the mining was restricted to some parts. I did a handstand when we got the peak whose coordinates I discovered two months ago. Having the time, we headed towards a peak that looked higher. EUREKA! The GPS confirmed that it was higher and a bottle, most probable left behind by the AFROPEAK team, convinced us that this was the real McCoy. Just to make 110% certain, I measured several other peaks, all very close to 915 m.



The French Doctor and Ali on Camel mountain



The mining on top of the mountain

Feeling strong and adventurous, we decided to go down another route.

3 hours and several kilometers further, we were dehydrated, exhausted and stuck. Descending was not as easy as

it seemed. Sheer cliffs made us think twice before going down them and the scree on the easier routes was not an option, I phoned a Spanish friend of Ali that spoke English, explaining to her that we would not be down by 16h00. We backtracked, made another call at 16h00 and were down by 17h00. The family arrived 10 minutes later, picnic basket and all. I could not refuse the tuna sandwich, baobab juice, apples and tea.



The false peak



It was not so easy trying to get down

24 May. Just when I thought the 4X4 desert adventure back to Nouckchott was getting boring, a fellow passenger handed out bubblegum and our fellow passengers started chewing gum very loudly. The temperature shot to 48 degrees but when the driver was interrogated by the loud chewing passenger about paying for an air-conditioned vehicle, he just shrugged his shoulders, explaining that the air-conditioning gas was low. I opened my window, blotting out the bubblegum chewing. Raindrops started falling, followed by sand storms, forcing us to stop for short periods.

Getting to the hotel was another challenge since our taxi driver didn't know where to go and couldn't speak English. Showing him the map on the

Sunrise on Africa's Peaks - Mauritania

GSP was not effective but we did manage to get out and walk the rest of the way without shedding any tears.

25 May. Once again, our taxi driver could not speak English and an adventurous 10 km followed after we showed him a piece of paper with our destination written on it. We were stopped by what seemed like another taxi driver, who yanked my door open, gesturing for us to get into his taxi. Our taxi driver sped away while I clutched my small backpack. 1 km further another taxi swerved in front of us, signaling for us to stop. Our taxi driver put his foot down, we were unsure if we were part of an attempted hijack or a taxi war. Another taxi and three hours later, we were stamped out of Mauritania.

Stats. Hours in country 210 hours

Hiking. 15 hours.

Waiting for transport. 16 hours

On transport. 54 hours

Km traveled. 2700 km



More camels and sand



A Sandstorm



Plastic bag on top of the mountain