

Africa

South by Southeast: Morocco to Ghana



In the dim morning light, a glance down at my watch confirms it's 6:30am. We broke camp and left Dakhla (Morocco's southernmost town) an hour ago. I ease my grip on the handlebars and take in a deep breath. The wind drying my face does little to relieve the anxiety I feel as we ride south to the notorious Mauritanian border. Lisa is tucked in behind me, her single cylinder thumping a steady rhythm.

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We travel south on the margin of civilization, deep within the disputed territories of the Western Sahara, a vast uninhabited and inhospitable stretch of barren desert, long fought over, with Morocco and Mauritania laying hostile claim. To our left the Sahara silently reaches out, shifting sand lit by the fast rising sun. It is 9:00am and already 100 degrees.

Treacherous Sands

We are, however, among new friends. After a chance meeting with them in Dakhla, Lisa and I ride ahead, followed closely by José, in his short wheel-based 4x4, with David and Katja, in their Land Rover pickup, taking the rear. We will act as scouts, defining the route that best avoids the worst of the sand and relaying the information via our radio systems, and they will carry our heavy bags in the Land Rovers.

Dry-mouthed and on tenterhooks, we pull up and stop a few feet past the first checkpoint to drink some thick sweet coffee served from the back of David's 4x4. As we check through our returned papers, each of us retells the horror stories we know of doomed attempts to reach Nouakchott, Mauritania's capital. José mentions three Frenchmen, who, upon crossing into Mauritania, turned off the trail and were blown up in minutes. David then



darkens the gloom with stories of sun madness, death by dehydration and poor souls forced to drink radiator fluid to survive. Whether it's a tale of sudden or agonizing demise, the theme is the same, and none of us feel the better for having broached the subject.

The bloody war between Morocco and Mauritania is long over but a terrifying legacy remains scattered ahead: thousands of pressure-sensitive mines still hidden in the loose sand. And the few wanting to pass this way have been on their own for the past two years, ever since the discontinuation of the twice-weekly military convoys from Dakhla to the Mauritanian border. The safety of Mauritania-bound travelers is no longer a responsibility Morocco wants.





📍 *The going gets tough in Mali.*

At the second checkpoint gentle application of the rear brake on the loose sand brings our bikes to a sliding stop. We are deep within “no man’s land.” A cheerless guard in a low stone building checks our documents while rats the size of cats scurry behind him, occasionally pausing to dine from the wooden bowl on the floor that the guard had eaten from just moments earlier. He asks us for a *cadeux*, a gift, and seems overwhelmed when we hand him a small bottle of eyewash. What for us is a simple saline solution for him is a miracle potion.

With our papers stamped we are underway again, though night will soon be upon us. Every alarm bell in my head is ringing. Ahead of us: 45 miles of minefield. Our only guide, a narrow electronic ‘breadcrumb’ trail on the GPS screen. Nerves and riding the soft sand in the dark are getting the better of us. The 4x4s overtook us a while back and now regular, our falls are increasing, and with each one the distance between us and our companions grows. Hard on the throttles of our bikes our wheels spin furiously,

digging deeply into the soft furrowed sand. Up ahead, the dim lights of the 4x4s fade as we fall farther behind. I pull alongside Lisa, and after some discussion we resolve to stay put until daylight arrives or our friends return. Our fear growing with each passing moment, we dare not get off the bikes or move a step to the side because of the mines. Cutting through the darkness, David’s flashlight finally strikes Lisa’s bike, and we’re relieved beyond measure to have been found. Taking our new position between the Land Rovers, we ride deeper into the minefield. Falls come and go, and at 10:00pm we clear the last few feet of mined terrain and can see the distant blush of town lights through our dusty goggles.

A chaos of shanties, air thick with dust, and narrow dirt roads teeming with clapped-out cars signal our arrival in Nouadhibou. We have been in the desert less than two days, but the small town is intimidating after the solitude and silence of the Sahara. Inside the refuge of the Auberge Chinguetti we violently gulp down mouthfuls of water from thin plastic bottles, spilling as much as we drink. Our bodies are spent – this is beyond adventure, verging on madness. Still dressed in our dusty riding suits, we haul our heavy bodies onto the filthy bunk beds and fall asleep within seconds.

The route to Nouakchott is much more difficult than the journey to Nouadhibou. The sea of sand has towering dunes so immense that skirting them is impossible. An overwhelming landscape, without markers, trails, fuel or help. Heading south, the bikes are sliding in the deep soft sand as we crest the top of the Leurier Bay. A few hundred feet to our right we can see our four-wheeled companions make their own way. We are speeding across the

Sebkha Aoueïtal, a wide stretch of salty sand flats. Up on the pegs, I snatch a glance at the speedo, the needle at 65mph and rising. The front wheel of my 1100 GS, no longer ploughing the sand, is instead skimming the surface. The adrenaline-fueled exhilaration is almost overwhelming and a far cry from our slow nervous ride through the minefield. We quickly relay the warning of ‘super’ soft sand ahead through our radios to José, David and Katja, watching them sweep even wider to avoid entrapment.

Our limbs are heavy and cramped from the massive effort of being up on the pegs for 12 hours at a time. These past four days south from Nouakchott have been the toughest riding either of us has ever tackled. Resting inside our tent, sheltered from the cold desert wind, we look out into the night, feeling the dizzying solitude of the Sahara.

The Sahara has stripped us of ego, of what we ‘imagined’ adventure to be and the ideas of who we thought we were. Exhausted and dirty, we are all the richer for the experience and also a little sad that all too soon we’ll be past this part of our journey. But right now, I’m happy to lose myself in this land without echo. Tomorrow we’ll race the tide the last 114 miles along the desolate beach south to reach Nouakchott and spend New Year’s Eve in the Mauritanian capital.

Senegal and Mali

After our New Year’s Eve celebrations and a week of exploring Nouakchott, heartfelt hugs full of friendship and admiration mark a poignant moment as we say farewell to our traveling companions. With the hazy bustle of Mauritania’s capital behind us, Lisa and I look ahead to Africa’s West coast, the ride toward Senegal. The long rest

we enjoyed in Nouakchott has done us good, and the feeling of asphalt under my wheels feels strange but comforting after the grueling desert. The countryside is once again greening as we venture deeper into this sub-Saharan region.

Horror stories of theft and aggravation have put us off entering Senegal via ferry at the Rosso border. North of the chaotic port we turn right off the tar. We are making our way to a little known crossing north of St Louis. We find the start of the Diama Piste as we snake our way around the piles of rotting trash steaming in the sun, the sour stench catching in our nostrils. No asphalt here. Recent bursts of rain and a stream of laden vehicles have churned the piste; and those deep channels, hardened to cement in the scorching heat, snatch at our wheels and jerk the handlebars violently. The track requires all our concentration.

Quite suddenly an explosion out of the undergrowth to my left grabs my attention as five large, grunting warthogs burst onto the scene, heading straight for my front tire. Startled by the roar of our passing, they all dart left, now running parallel to the bikes and just a few inches away from my feet. As I pull away, they dive back into the vegetation.

Inside the brightly painted passport hut, a fat guard flicks through our paperwork, his round cherubim face a picture of lethargy and boredom. Thirty minutes go by and only the painfully slow movement of his pen convinces me he's actually still conscious. He lifts several small wooden stamps, casually inspects the bottom of each, and with the correct stamp chosen, he slowly rocks it back and forth in the dried-up ink pad, as if lulling it to sleep. In the broiling heat, I'm con-



🕒 *Skirting unchecked bush fires in Senegal is a daily hazard.*

🕒 *Having fun with street kids in Senegal.*



templating reaching down, grabbing his hand and planting the stamp myself; but finally he manages the effort unassisted and we can legally enter Senegal, our 22nd country.

Grey arched girders pass overhead as we cross the bridge to St. Louis, which is perched on a sliver of land in

the mouth of the Senegal River. The capital of Senegal and Mauritania until 1958, it was the first French settlement of l'Afrique-Occidentale, and named after the French king. Once a thriving port notorious for its trade in slaves, St. Louis now exudes an air of relaxed resignation. Paint peels off the walls of the small shanty cafes. Men swathed



📍 *Dashing across a railway bridge and hoping for the best.*



📍 *Wild elephants at their morning baths in Ghana.*

in richly colored folds of fabric slowly draw on thin cigarettes and the smoke curls gently in the air.

It's the first of February, and the heat is soaring as we ride a dusty trail through dense scrubland to the border of Mali, one of the world's poorest countries. A former French colony, Mali gained independence in 1960 but has since suffered rebellions, two coups and a 23-year military dictatorship. Life here is tough and its price cheap.

Strong dusty harmattan winds push at us from the east. From the small town of Kedougu, we follow a narrow stony cattle track to a remote village where we set up camp before entering Mali. We ask Djibo, the chief of the village for his permission to sleep under his protection for the night. He grants his permission and in doing so he draws a circle in the dry dirt with his staff, encircling our hastily erected tent, and decrees that no one may enter. We are grateful for his gesture because the idea of "personal space" is an alien concept here. The setting sun is diffused by the dusty haze as we sit around the small crackling fire of tinder-dry acacia twigs. Djibo's strong features are accented by the flickering light. Then leaning forward, gently explaining himself with gesturing hands, he astonishes us when we realize he is saying, "We have never seen a white person."

Across the Faleme River

Yesterday's stony track has vanished, and we are relying on the GPS. Making our own way, we ride roughshod

over the coarse grass, slowly picking our way through boulder-strewn thickets of sharp scrub. Branches snatch at the handlebars and snag our jackets. Our sluggish pace, the lack of moving air, also means we are feeling the full effect of the blistering heat of the day. A small sandy trail winds its way through a maze of contorted trees, leading us up and over the small rise ahead. We jam on the brakes and slide to a stop, our hearts in our mouths as we gaze out and across the wide glistening waters of the Faleme River. From our small plateau the river stretches into the distance without a crossing or bridge in sight. Down below, two ancient dugouts, little more than hollowed-out tree trunks, bob in the water. Ten minutes later and we are deep into negotiations with Moussa, the dugouts' owner, bargaining for a trade to set us ashore on the other bank. He does his frenetic best to assure us of his craft's security. And though less than convinced, with no other option in sight, we have to chance it.

We agree upon a price and carefully walk the bikes down the steep, washed-out gully to the river's edge. Enlisting the help of five local men, we hoist the 1100 GS into the ancient vessel. The dugout instantly concedes four inches to the water. The risk seems insane. And I hold my breath watching Moussa's slow progress, as he takes one precarious stroke at a time, shifting and adjusting his body like a tightrope walker to compensate for the weight. But soon enough the triumphant hoots echoing from the far shore allow me to relax a bit before he returns for Lisa's bike.

Safely on the other side, we reassemble the bikes, load the kit and connect the fuel lines. The entire endeavour has taken us two and a half hours and cost us 10,000 CFA (\$21), a few ciga-

rettes, a half-used tube of crazy glue and a key fob. Lisa and I are ecstatic to have made it over, but now it is approaching midday, with a long ride ahead, and we are desperately tired from the tense crossing.

The air is thick with dust, and a brief stretch of flat land through scorched savannah is behind us – our trail having turned from deeply grooved hard-pack to a tortuous winding rocky path. The route is barely visible but for a faint meandering line of wear on the terrain. Sharp volcanic surfaces tackled in the afternoon require all our attention because a fall could easily puncture a fuel tank. The physical exertion of hours upon hours of slow maneuvering is draining us. Our once black jackets, are now crispy and white, the arms and chests rimed stiff from all our sweating. There are no signs of life, no villages, no cattle, no lone herdsmen on the horizon, even the vultures don't venture here. The riding has been harder than we'd imagined and our precious water has been drunk and both of us are now suffering cramps from dehydration and bouts of hallucination. Without water for two days, we've resorted to drinking the salty brine from the cans of vegetables in our store. Pitching our tent is also a concern as we've been skirting unchecked bushfires for most of the afternoon. Tonight we'll sleep under the stars, but with one eye open.

Sweet Water and Elephants

The excited shouts of children signal we're on the outskirts of a small community, and within seconds we are surrounded by the rest of the villagers. It's clear we are in need of water, and our new friends lead us from the bikes. Twenty pairs of hands point to a small mud-bricked enclosure, their prized resource, a hand-pump well. Since our journey's inception we've been raising



📍 *Just one part of the struggle we faced crossing the Faleme River.*

funds for WaterAID, an international charity committed to providing water to the poorest regions of the world. But never did we imagine their work would touch our lives so directly or profoundly. Barely visible letters scrawled by finger into the dried mud around the well simply read, "This well was installed by WaterAID in 1992."

With each tilt of the handle we draw up water from deep within the earth. Suddenly it erupts from the neck, falling heavily into our open mouths and spilling down our fronts – luxury, ecstasy and relief all rolled into one single moment. Thirty-five miles north of the well we reach the village of Bafoulabe. The 102 miles ridden since entering Mali via the river has taken us almost five days, and we feel as though we've been to hell and back.

After exploring Burkina Faso on good tar and without any problems, we reach Ghana and relax in relative ease at Mole National Park. In the early morning, sitting outside our tent, we can almost feel Africa's pulse, our



📍 *Overladen trucks overwhelm the track in Senegal.*

gazes fixed on the scene. Staring in disbelief and wonder, spellbound, we watch 40 wild elephants bathe and graze just 50 feet below us for two hours, their sweeping trunks spraying high, arcing jets of water as the calves roll and frolic in a muddy pool on the otherwise open and sere savannah. Our earlier hardships easily fade away, made all the more worthwhile for this single privileged and magical moment. Our journey into Africa's heart has now truly begun.



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Africa

FACTS AND INFORMATION

Total Mileage

Approximately 3,546 miles.

In General

Mauritania, Senegal, The Gambia, Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana are all extremely different. The Saharan countries of Mauritania, northern Senegal and northern Mali have suffered from severe drought for years. Mauritania and Mali are two of the poorest countries in the world. The Gambia, southern Senegal, southern Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana are sub-Saharan/sub-tropical and generally have huge areas of green countryside covered in grassland and woody shrub.

The best time to visit is from November to May, when temperatures average 86° F. In other months temperatures average 104° F, with the interiors reaching as high as 130° F.

How to Get There

Air France makes direct flights to major north and west Africa airports from the USA.

Food & Lodging

Camel meat is readily available and often served with onions, couscous or rice. In the desert this is often the only food available. The one-pot goat or lamb stews are popular (around \$2) but can be very hot and spicy! In Saharan areas food is at times hard to obtain and going hungry isn't unusual. Fruit is plentiful in the more tropical regions. Camping is possible outside major towns and cities. Major hotel chains operate in the larger cities, but the cheaper option is to stay at an auberge (hostel). Auberges often have small but secure parking areas, and paying a little extra for this is a good idea.

Roads & Biking

In the Sahara there are no roads, only pistes. In order to take the correct piste ensure that you have a good GPS route or hire a guide. Land mines remain a real danger in this area. Once past the Sahara, roads are generally in a bad state and it can take many hours to cover small distances. There may be basic huts/shacks with water and dried snacks; however, many roads have no access to gas, so carry additional supplies. Do not drive at night as many cars have no lights.

Books & Maps

- *Africa: North & West*, Michelin Road Map No. 741 ISBN-13: 978-2067128323, \$11.95
- *The Rough Guide to West Africa 5* (Paperback – June 16, 2008), ISBN-13: 978-1843538509, \$34.99

Addresses & Phone Numbers

- Advice on malarial areas and anti-malarial drugs:
www.cdc.gov/travel/
- Up-to-date information on visa requirements and travel advice:
www.travel.state.gov/travel/
- Tourism, travel and information guide to the African continent, country specific:
www.africaguide.com/

Motorcycles & Gear

BMW R 1100 GS and F 650 GS
Helmets: BMW System 4
Jacket and Pants: Hein Gericke Tuareg
Boots: Alpinestars Tech 6
and Gearne SG10
Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega

