

Sunday 5th December; 5:30 AM

I slowly wake up to the sounds of Nouakchott. The first call to prayer, about an hour and a half ago, blaring over the sleeping city, answered, mostly, by the loud braying of the donkey's and low woeing of the camels that live side by side in the streets. As my brains slowly clears, I hear the jittering of fruit bats in the trees all around the hotel we're staying as they prepare for a day of foraging. Then there are the barking of dogs, crowing of cocks, the humming of the fridge on the other side of the wall (I sleep next to the kitchen), and the low buzz of the city waking up. In Nouakchott, the hum of the waking city has little to do with moving of cars, although, I'm sure later in the morning it'll start as well, but seems to comprise a mixture of stirring animals and people, and the industrial sound of the countless air-conditioning units.

The fact that I wake up at this stupid hour of the morning has also a lot to do with the jetlag I'm trying to get over. I arrived yesterday at 2:40 in the morning, after a series of flights and inter-flight boredom lasting two days, during which, as usual, I slept very little. The flights from Perth to Singapore, and from Singapore to London Heathrow were fully booked, and I got pretty cramped seats with an absolute lack of comfort. The food, as always, looks nice on the printed menu, but looks and tastes the same as any airplane grub. The

only thing that makes it worthwhile is the red and white wine that I always try and apply to help me sleep. This sleeping, again, consisted of the usual balancing act between consciousness and sleep, and the eternal search for a non-existing comfortable position. Apart from the cramped space, the cool temperature manages to keep all passengers nicely uncomfortable throughout the flight, especially as the airlines always thoughtfully provide a thin blanket barely large enough to cover my legs or torso. So you're always left with the agony of choice: cold upper body, or cold lower body?

In Heathrow, flight connection time was, to say the least, generous. I spent it by taking the metro from Terminal 1 to Terminal 2, and then by having a real breakfast, with real espresso coffee and two cold croissants, and browsing the small collection of shops in the departure hall. Because my flight to Nouakchott via Casablanca was late in the afternoon, I was stuck with my entire luggage, and couldn't get through to the transit zone. I checked my email (@ 50p for 10 minutes) and noticed a mail with attachment containing my VISA for Mauritania. To get the bloody thing printed up I had to find my way to the "Business Centre", the name of which alone sent shivers down my spine, where they charged a reasonable, at least from a businessman's p.o.v., 5£ for 30 minutes. It only took me a few minutes to print the thing out, and I

checked out of there fast before they'd charge me more. Back in the departure hall I made a few phone calls (one to IMC and a few to BGS), had lunch, worked a bit on my laptop, and finally managed to check through to transit, where I still had to wait for three full hours. At least in the duty free zone, the shops were better stocked and more numerous, and I found a bit of delight in the Virgin record/DVD shop, where I found Bottom 2003 live and the full Comic Strip series on DVD. I walked past the seafood bar, but was a bit appalled by the pricelist, and by the fact that all clients were dressed as if they were about to enter a G7 summit meeting. I instead elected to buy a pre-packed egg sandwich and a large black coffee in the bar, where the clients were more varied, ranging from the G7-type to the backpacker tourist type (and me, perhaps, in the middle). About an hour before departure I moved to the gate and sat there until boarding could commence. As the gate area filled up, I already had the impression that the plane would not be filled up. My premonition was confirmed when I found myself seated all by myself in a row half an hour later. This was going to be a slightly better flight. They actually had given me the emergency exit seats, with more leg room. I settled down gingerly and waited for the next bland air plane meal. With a short flight of just under 3 hours there was only enough time to eat the "food" and doze off for half an hour or so, before we were landing in

Casablanca. Because it was now close to midnight, all shops, save a few, were closed in Casablanca. Luckily, I only had a few hours to kill, which I did by walking around the building looking at the other weary travellers. Even in the airport, cultural differences were apparent. Here, the smart G7 suite seems to be reserved for the westernised few, and most travellers, a lot of which would fly on to Rabat, Marrakech and Nouakchott, the only flights still flying this night, were wearing white or light blue boubous — large, wide pieces of oversized embroidered cotton chemises that seem to have the capability of keeping a guy warm in the cold evenings, and cool in the searing midday desert sun. The women sometimes wear black dresses, covering every part of their body apart from the eyes, but most wear more colourful dresses and have their face in full view. All in all, from the looks you get from those women, you get the impression that they are a lot more assertive than the average Western European girl. These women, I have the impression, can make any man shut up and retreat in disarray without a problem, while Western women would probably feel it inappropriate or impolite and would cope until they'd find a suitable excuse to bail out, not that I tested any of that.

As with the flight to Casablanca, not many people travelled to Nouakchott, so I again had the emergency exit seats all to myself. The food, though even less appetising as normal, killed a bit of

time, and before I could doze off, the pilot announced our imminent arrival at Nouakchott. As I stepped off the ladder to the tarmac of the airfield, a number of airport officials rushed up the ladder to assist a lady with her hand luggage. I didn't recognise her, but assumed she was the wife of a high ranking official, back from an exuberant shopping spree in London or something. I made my way to the arrivals hall, nothing more than a slightly decorated shed, and met Hadrami. He looked healthy, and surprisingly, very awake (an amazing feat at 3 o'clock in the morning). I handed my passport to him and saw it disappear disconcertingly in a small cubicle with a bunch of serious looking immigration officials / paramilitary people. Only the fact that at least one of them seemed to be on first-name terms with Hadrami filled me with the grain of confidence necessary to let go of the passport. I moved through to the luggage collection point, and waited patiently for my bags to come through. Meanwhile, Hadrami had joined me and said they were dealing with my passport and I should not worry. The bags came through real fast, as the plane was only half full, and soon I was standing next to my bags waiting for the passport. Hadrami went to check and came back to tell me I should go and collect it in person. I was ready with some US dollar bills to smooth the procedure and went in looking for the officer I thought was dealing with my case. I soon located my passport and sought eye contact with the guy.

Before I managed to get his attention he picked up my passport and moved into the baggage area looking, I guessed, for Hadrami. I joined them and he casually told me all is in order and passed the passport to Hadrami. From the way he was looking at Hadrami, I knew that behind the scenes some money would be passed on to the official, perhaps at Hadrami's office later in the week. As we stepped out onto the parking area behind the airport building, Al Wilkinson turned up from below a large tree. He seemed to have preferred staying out of sight while Hadrami was "sorting me out". Al also looked good. He immediately started joking his way to the car, and complaining about being back in Nouakchott. For him, who stayed about three years in this forsaken place during the project, life in Nouakchott is one living hell. Probably because of his introverted nature and disliking of the French "expat" community and his ingrained distrust of the Africans here (or probably anywhere), he leads a largely solitary lifestyle, fuelled by his favourite poison: gin-tonic. In a way, I made better friends than he did in the few days I was here in November 2004. Where Al sees the bad aspects of everyone here, I tried looking for the good parts, and because of my more direct and unassuming approach, managed to make good friends with Limam and Chebeny, both of whom had not a single positive thing to say about Al.

When we got back to the hotel (Residence Galaxy), I was

shown my room (just large enough to fit a dirty-looking double mattress, and the rest of the apartment: a simple kitchen, TV and satellite reception, and two simple rooms, one of which with en-suite bathroom. I took out the bottle of gin I bought in tax-free, and we both poured a stiff drink before sleeping. Al told me that alcohol restrictions seemed to have been tightened in the past weeks, and it gets increasingly difficult to get booze. Mauritania always had a no-alcohol policy, but at least some of the hotels and restaurants still served drinks. Even that, it appears, seemed to have been quenched. With this gloomy news we both retired.

Saturday morning, I woke up around 10:00 AM and had a breakfast of cornflakes and tea. Al looked like he'd been up for quite some time, and was keen to go and check his email. He passed me 50,000 UM (1000 ouguiya ~ 3€), effectively 10,000 UM per day for the next five days (subsistence allowance). I decide to join him and check my email as well, and half an hour later we were walking through the dusty streets of Nouakchott. He deliberately walked a bit around to show me where we are, and we ended up at a small photography shop where I had some passport photo's taken to be used for the application of my visa. On the way back to the apartment, we passed through a supermarket and got some supplies, which we left in the apartment. Since through all that we hadn't passed the cybercafé yet, we

walk immediately set off to the other side of town and communication heaven. The temperature had meanwhile started rising sharply, and I was truly glad to arrive at the place and find that the "VIP" room was actually air conditioned. The network was, however, extremely slow, and it took me 10 minutes just to get rid of all the spam in my inbox. Otherwise there was very little email of any interest. By the time Al had finished his email, it was lunchtime, and we stopped over at a small café (pizza lina) to have a bite. I asked for a beer, which is exactly what I'd need in this scorching heat, but got told, as expected, that they haven't got any. I settled for juice and a steak sandwich (excellent stuff), and we sat there eating and watching an Eminem special on MTV. After that, we were both saturated, and decided to have a siesta at the apartment. This "siesta" turned out to be a four-hour deep sleep for me, so that, when I woke up, there was only time enough for a stiff gin-tonic, and off to dinner again. Dinner consisted of a steak and chips, no alcoholic beverage, and we soon found ourselves plastered in front of the television back at the apartment where I watched two corny movies on one of the movie channels. Sleep came easy after that, and I found myself waking up to the hum of Nouakchott at about 5 in the morning.

Today, I ended up spending the time typing up stuff, having a much needed shower, and watching more television, while Al has gone

back to the cybercafé to finish checking and answering his mail, in what he hopes will be a faster connection. By the time he's back, it's lunchtime again, and we're off to the same place as yesterday, now eating a shawarma, and, you'd never guess, watching Eminem on bloody MTV again. I spent the afternoon typing a bit more, watching a bit more television, and basically getting bored until finally Hadrami turned up to get my passport and photographs. He only stays a short while, but displays his splendid unfettered sense of dry humour. And now, well, now it's just waiting for gin-tonic time, and dinner, with, perhaps another movie on the television. What a sad life it is we lead eh?!

Monday, 6th December 2005

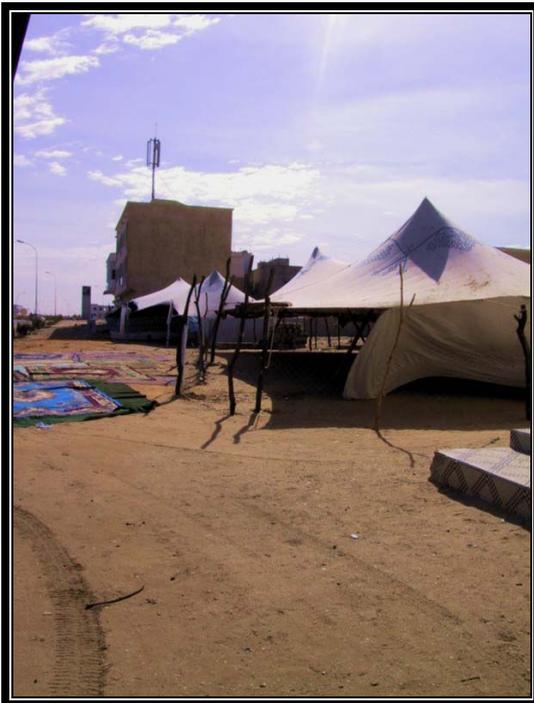
After breakfast Al and I walked to AOMRG and arrived there by 9:00. I found Limam in his office playing around with installing (or trying to) ArcGIS 9.0. I tried to help him, but failed eventually because the license is a non-floating one (I guess). We got stuck into Geosoft soon enough, and Bellal and a few other guys joined in. I jumped from ArcView 3.2a to Geosoft and to Excel all the time, trying to pass on as much techniques as possible. Limam also showed me some digital maps, and which I'll have to try and get on my thumb drive somehow. In the afternoon they brought around some typical green tea with mint, three cups as is customary. At about 17:00 I started feeling tired and hungry, and luckily my students were also

getting tired. I got a lift from one of them back to apartment where I found Al waiting. We went to a Moroccan restaurant in the evening where they actually served beers...

Thursday 9th December 2005

Well, I had a few more busy days full of instruction and sorting out hardware problems. Limam and Bellal are keen students (especially Limam), and they can, I think, comfortably make any map needed for the project. This is just as well, as I realised yesterday morning that I can't take the Geosoft license to Perth anymore, i.e. I can't do the remaining maps for IMC. I talked to Al, and he seemed to welcome the idea to let the OMRG deal with those final maps. When I told Limam, he also seemed pleased, and this morning he had all sorts of specific questions regarding the work, which I duly answered to his full satisfaction. I told him that it would be best to ask Al for supplies for the printer and so on, so that they'll be able to do the work. We sat down together and put together a "shopping" list, which I just gave to Al. Limam also suggested that I go with Bellal to the Chami area (East of Nuadjibou), rather than with him, because Bellal knows that area quite well. This does indeed seem like a good idea. Limam had already talked to a company for renting the car (a Hilux), and we arranged a large hammer to take into the field. Tomorrow, I'll change some of my money (black market) with Bellal, and we'll do some shopping and get

the car with driver. I also talked to the technician who will help me cut my samples after we get back on Tuesday. Looking at the map, this promises to be an interesting work, as there seem to be a lot of dykes some of which along the same direction as the ones in Sfariat. I'm quite keen to take on this short trip...



Bellal drives me to town and we end up on the side of a busy street surrounded by lots of men in white or blue mou-mou's waving thick wads of all sort of money around and trying to get in the car. I sit there thinking "we'd better get out of here", but notice that Bellal is not showing any sign of discomfort (yet), so I decide to ride this out. He has opened his window a tad and is exchanging all sorts of pleasantries and indignant retorts in Arabic. The guys on the other side of the glass

are alternatively laughing out loudly or on the verge of being really pissed off. The language of business seems to be universal, and I understand quite quickly that Bellal is in the process of tough pre-negotiation. I settle in for what will undoubtedly be a lengthy and tedious half hour (at least), and merely provide some information to Bellal once in a while. "Yes, I have 400 USD to change". "They are in 50\$ notes". "Yep, I also have €". "No I want at least 2200UM per dollar" and so on. After about 20 minutes, Bellal seems to have made his choice of the numerous "traders" waving their wads of money in our faces, and invites one in the car. As I, and probably Bellal, was expecting, we end up with four exceedingly excited guys in the back. One is in charge of the bundles of money, which he seems to be able to produce out of deep and hidden pockets of his boubou, another does a lot of talking, with Bellal as well as his "associates" and another two seem to be charged with the "dodgy" calculators. As soon as they have squeezed themselves in the car, Bellal start the engine and moves a mere 50 meters further along the road. Surprisingly, this seems to be far enough to leave us in relative peace, and no more "traders" are outside the car as the next leg of negotiations starts. As we are sitting in the front, the four guys in the back are forced to thrust their calculator-wielding hands in between or over the seats to show us their increasingly complicated calculations. As they are tapping values into those small machines, it is difficult to

follow their fingers, and Bellal repeatedly takes one of the calculators to check on their calculations. Finally, he starts telling me we are reaching a deal and I slowly start taking out my forex (after having double-checked all front doors are locked and windows are closed). Money exchanges hands and a lot of counting and double-counting ensues under watchful eyes. All is in order and the guys relax, shake our hands, and leave the car uttering all sorts of Arabic and French pleasantries. I've just gained several hundreds of notes of Mauritanian Ouguya (UM) for my few notes of "hard" currency. So, now we're ready to do the shopping. I ask Bellal to direct the car to a good and cheap supermarket, where we can stock up for the trip. He takes me to a corner shop, dominated by an old bearded guy in the corner, who seems to spend his time counting and re-counting filthy bills (literally filthy) of UM. Bellal exclaims that they know each other well, and that the guy is the "patron". The shop is small by any standards but, as often is the case with shops in Africa, stocked to the gills with all sorts of edible and non-edible stuff, certainly all we'd ever need for our trip. Bellal guides me through the chaos and start filling a series of cardboard boxes he grabbed from near the entrance. I had told him we'd be in the field for three days, and Bellal duly packs enough stuff to feed an entire army for several weeks. Rather than complain I let him stock up, knowing that any left-over stuff will be passed over to him

and his family. It later turns out not to be the case, Bellal will generously pass over lots of food stuff to people in the desert on the trip. After the shopping spree, Bellal and I have a bite next door from the Lebanese kebab shop and he gets a phone call (mobiles everywhere in Mauritania) from Dr. Kalidu, the new "Chef de l'OMRG" (director of the Geological Survey of Mauritania). He apparently wants to see me before we set off to the bush.

We finish our meal and get to OMRG where I am let into a plush carpeted office with a large solid wood desk covered with paperwork behind which "le Directeur" sits. We exchange greetings and he asks how the project is going. I talk a bit about the training and he asks Bellal whether he has learned anything useful. Then he asks me what I will do in the desert and how it fits in the Project. I have a hard time explaining what I want to do and why and make it clear that the trip does not directly relate to the project, which is why I am using the weekend rather than sacrifice time during the week. Kalidu understands and starts talking about his interest in scientific work but at the same time he makes it very clear that he can only allow Bellal to come along in the weekend and that my scientific interests should not interfere with the training program. I take the hint and tell him we'll be back on Monday to resume and finish the training program. I also explain that two OMRG scientists,

Bellal and Limam, will be involved in any publications coming out of the research. When we leave the office Bellal heaves a big sigh, happy that all is still OK. He says he's going to sort out a few remaining logistical things (car rental, fuel, sample bags), and we decide to meet the next morning for our trip north. I look into Limam in his office and find him happily practicing his skills on Geosoft. He just laughs when I tell him it's a pity he won't come, and tells me he's not worried, I'll be in safe hands with Bellal.

Friday 10th December 2005

Bellal has arrived with a Toyota Hilux and a driver. He presents me a bunch of receipts of some additional stuff he bought for the trip. They include jerry cans, sample bags, hammer and a few other bits and pieces. We will buy all the fuel we may possibly need before leaving Nouakchott so we don't have to worry about availability of fuel up north. At the filling station, Bellal tells me it'll be a straight drive up the bitumen road for three hours, after which we'll find the desert track to Tasiast, which will take us into the Chami map sheet. I decide to try out the filling stations latrine. The attendant, with an incredulous look in his face, vaguely points me towards the back of the building, through a now empty workshop, the floor of which is literally covered by a thick black oil-slick. I bravely venture forth, avoiding the worst parts of the oily floor, and push open the door to find myself in a small courtyard full

of goats and goat shit. I initially think that the entire courtyard is supposed to be the "toilet", but then I spot the half open door in the far corner with, vaguely visible, something looking like a French "squatting" toilet. I manage to both avoid the goats, who seem to dislike intruders, and the shit on the floor, only to find me faced with the horror of the "toilet". My immediate reaction is to bail out, back across the goat shit and oil slick to the safety of the car and find a tree somewhere outside Nouakchott to do my business, but my pride urges me on to at least give the "toilet" a try. I carefully investigate the floor in the gloom, and find it safe enough for a closer approach. The bowl is, as expected, filled with a brown substance, which my senses, all of them apart from the touch, identify as shit. I take a deep breath, place my feet on either side of the bowl, and have the fastest piss of my life. I gratefully inhale a deep lungful of "goaty" courtyard air and make my way back to the door, oil-slick workshop and, finally, the car. The diesel fumes that greet me as the driver is filling up the last jerry can clear the final reminder of the "toilet", but I already know that this memory will haunt me for the rest of my life. Bellal has, in the meantime, bought a big French buttered "baguette", and I soon find myself chomping away at that, life doesn't get better than that.

Soon we're on the road north, and as we are driving out of Nouakchott, I realise that the town

doesn't just stop, it fades into the desert sand. Brick and mortar buildings give way to wooden and sheet metal cabins and finally big "Bedouin" tents. All the time the sand gradually gains terrain, forming bigger and bigger leeward accumulations on the side of the buildings/tents. Finally there is just desert on the right hand side and a sporadic glimpse of the ocean on the left. The only life we now see are the occasional sea bird and, amazingly, every 50 kilometers or so, a lonely guy dressed in a blue boubou, riding on a camel through the desert. It seems that, no matter how remote you get in Mauritania, there's always someone in the vicinity. A lot of people in this country are nomadic and still live off herding camels.

Three hours later we hit a dirt track that seems to lead off straight in a barren landscape of the Sahara desert. The "road" follows a straight line, and often branches again and again, so that all we are following is a series of broadly parallel tracks. The surface is not always hard, and often we plough through large patches of soft sand, often forming low crests of dunes. Before the first one of those, the driver gets out and engages 4WD locking hubs and, back in the car, puts his foot down to negotiate the section. He seems to suspect we'll be getting a lot of this, as the locks stay on for the next several days, and our fuel usage probably triples as well. It takes another good hour to reach the camp of the Tasiast gold prospect, which was discovered by

the Office Mauritanien de Recherches Géologiques in conjunction with the French Geological Survey (BRGM) in 1995 or so. A Spanish company is now preparing the site into an open cast mine to be inaugurated sometime in 2006. We decide to break for a late lunch at the camp, and stop at a small cabin the company installed on the side of the track to avoid visitors entering the compound. The camp consists of a few brick and mortar buildings including a kitchen, a mess, a laundry, a small mosque (actually just a dark building with carpets on the floor), and several rows of single-room cabins. I can see that the site is expanding, as a bunch of workers are digging the foundations of a few more rows of single-room cabins to house the miners once the operations start. There's also an impressive workshop with a few bulldozers and various pieces of heavy equipment that are used for the ongoing exploration. Bellal seems to know most of the people on site, which does not surprise me that much as he was one of the geologists involved in the discovery of the deposit. We are, in other words, welcomed like Kings, and I am immediately shown in the mess where they make me a can of percolated Spanish coffee. None of the people I see are actually from Spain. The "chef" tells me that they're all back in Europe for meetings or something, but will be back in a week or so. Bellal tells me that we'll be made some lunch, after which we can go in the field for whatever remains of the afternoon

to sample a few dykes. I eagerly agree, as I am by now extremely hungry. The "chef" puts on the satellite television on CNN, but as soon as he's disappeared to go and cook us lunch, I switch to BBC World and watch the news. Food arrives: Spanish omelette and a salad with French bread. Great! After lunch, while I'm sipping a second cup of real coffee, Ahmed, the "chef", invites us to spend the night in one of the cabins. Bellal immediately agrees, while I do the obligatory "you don't have to do that..." bit. My protests go unanswered, and we are shown our accommodation. The cabins are quite spacious one-bed rooms, with a small desk, a wardrobe and a small sink. The generator of the camp stays on until 23:00 Ahmed tells me. This is getting better and better. The showers, in another building, have hot water and they have even put a clean towel and a bar of soap on the bed, just like in the hotels.

A bit later we've packed our bags in the rooms and are back in the car to look at a few dykes up north. We soon find some good outcrops and progressively work our way northeast, along trend with the main dyke swarm. By dark, we've collected a good number of samples and we head back to the camp in the dusk. The sun has been pounding on us all afternoon, and now we're all pretty tired. I let a sigh of relief when the lights of the camp get visible on the horizon. Luckily enough, Ahmed is waiting for us with some cold beers, and the promise of

a hot meal with ingredients we've supplied. He lets us eat in peace, but then comes back in to talk about the plans for the mine and how things will be in a few years. It looks like the operation will flow quite a bit of money into the region, but not quite enough to have a new town in the Sahara desert. The ore will also not be processed locally, but will be transported directly to Nouadhibou and from there to Spain for refining. All the Mauritanian people will get out of this is a few tens of years of labour for local people, although many Spaniards will be "imported" too, some tax money, and a few big holes in the ground.

Saturday 11th December

This morning, a dense fog hangs over the camp and the short walk to the ablution block has me shivering of the cold. Luckily, the water is warm, and a short shower soon has me both clean and warmed up. I get to the mess but see no one around, and make myself a big mug of "real" coffee. The BBC is showing a big fire just outside London at a fuel depot, servicing Heathrow and Luton Airfields. England seems so exotic to me. After about half an hour, I finally see all the Mauritanian workers leave the small "mosque" en masse, and I am soon joined by Bellal and Ahmed. We have some breakfast, and talk about all sorts of stuff. Ahmed says that one of the Spanish Engineers should be arriving later today or tomorrow to start the surveying work needed for the planned bitumen track to

Nouadhibou. We are offered another nights accommodation, but I explain that we're not sure that'll be possible as I plan to work on dykes further north and we may have to camp out. I see that, not for the first time, Bellal has a peculiar smile on his face, as if biting back a private joke, when I mention we may be camping.

We take the track up north towards a historic well called the "Agâda well", and Bellal explains that we can also pass through an old French Fort and a place with ancient rock engravings, if I'm interested. As if I could not be interested? Luckily, after about an hours drive, the sky start clearing up, and soon we're back in the blazing sun. This is a bit of a relief as I use a sun compass rather than a magnetic one and need direct sunlight to be able to get readings. All along the way up, we cross and pass numerous mafic dykes, which as they are the main object of my study, are not left unsampled. By midday, we arrive at a rounded large hill of granite rising above the generally flat desert plain. We stop alongside a small hut next to a waterwell at the foot of the hill. The well is dry, and the hut is dilapidated and unoccupied. Inside though I can make out a small gas stove and a typical small metal teapot used to brew the Saharan sweet green mint tea. Bellal joins me and explains that whoever passes uses the hut to brew their cup of tea. The hut appears to be an impromptu meeting place for wandering travellers.

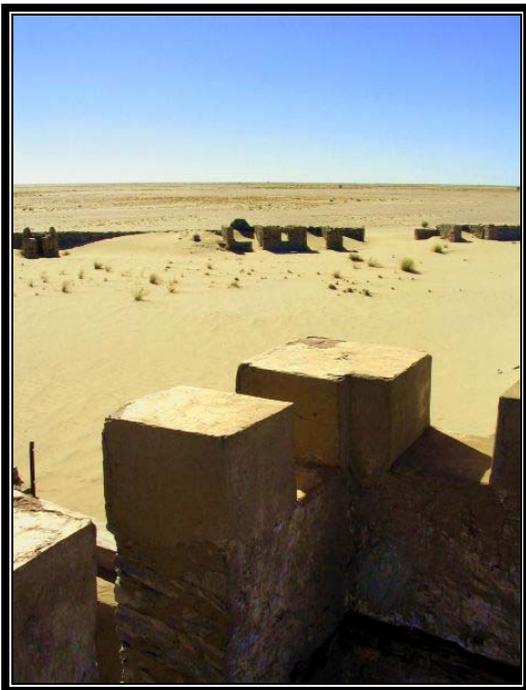


I leave the hut and look up the hill. As is always the case, I can't resist climbing all the way up to absorb the views. Looking north I see three wonderful mafic dykes snaking their way along northeastern direction and towards Western (or Spanish) Sahara. To the east I see the remains of what appears to have been a large building, presumably the French Fort Bellal talked about.



It appears to be located near the foot of the rounded granite outcrop I stand on, but several kilometres to the east, and I decide to walk to it rather than go down to the car and drive around the hill. Bellal and the driver are still down and I shout at them that we'll meet at the Fort. At first they don't seem to quite understand what I am talking about,

but when I resolutely turn my back on them and start walking East they get it, and soon I see their car disappear around the hill. The walk on the crest of the hill does my legs some good, and by the time I get to the slope going down towards the fort I feel invigorated. When I get down, however, I realise that the Fort is still over a kilometre away. I can see that the car is already there, and can make out Bellal and Ahmed wandering around the ruins. As I approach the structure, I notice some shiny objects in the sand, which upon inspection appear to be old broken glass bottles. A bit more rooting around reveals the remains of what was a barbed wire fence or something surrounding the Fort. I can imagine the French "foreign legion-type" legionnaires, getting pissed in this godforsaken place, and chucking their empty bottles in frustration at the poles of the fence.



A bit more looking around also shows the rusty remains of sardine tins, and unrecognisable bits and pieces of what may have been pots or pans. The ruins themselves are just that: ruins. The remains of the buildings are made up of cream-coloured brickwork. None of the roof is remaining, and there are accumulations of wind-blown sand everywhere, making it clear that the desert is slowly reclaiming this site. The Fort actually has several remains of outbuildings, some of which may have been stables, ablution facilities or solitary prison cells. The entire site has an overwhelming sense of desolation about it. Looking around, apart from the granite outcrop to the west, there is simply nothing interesting to see. All that's visible are flat, monochrome, featureless plains stretching all the way to the horizon. This must have been one of the most unwanted postings for any French recruit.

After a short break at the Fort we set off further north, and soon I can make out an elevated elongate hill in the distance, which Bellal points out is the Agâda dyke. When we get there, it is indeed an impressive dyke compared to any we sampled before. The 100 meter thick body rises some 20 meters above the surrounding plateau, and stretches all the way to the horizon on both sides. We find a track that passes through a low break in the dyke, and as we drive in, we see a few camels and an old battered Land Rover. Here, in the middle of nowhere is this man with his two

teenage sons. Bellal starts talking to the older guy in Arabic, probably explaining what we are doing here, and from the excited exchanges, I get the impression, not for the first time, that he actually may know this guy from the time he was mapping here. The two sons follow me, and one of them starts asking a lot of questions in pretty decent French. I explain that I'm after these black rocks, and that I find them interesting, and he just nods through all this as if he understand exactly why it can be so interesting to study these rocks. I ask him about school, and he says the new term will be starting next week, and that he's attending school some 50 kilometers north, along the railway line to Nouadhibou. As I climb the outcrop and listen to him, I notice that some of the flat surfaces of the boulders have geometric shapes on them. I look a bit closer and find vague carved figures of what look like antelopes. I point them out to the boy, all excited, but he just shrugs and says that there are a lot of these carvings all over the place. I still take out my camera for a few shots.



Bellal has by now joined me, and also looks a bit surprised that I am taking an interest in these particular carvings. He then mentions that these carvings here are nothing compared to the ones he planned to show me, if we have time. I take the hint and start sampling the dyke double-time, and soon we're on our way, first a bit along the dyke, which needs to be sampled in a few more spots, but as the shadows start to lengthen, I give up my sampling and Bellal takes us to where the carvings are located. At first we are driving straight on, but as we are getting in the general region of the carvings, Bellal seems to be having a bit of trouble locating the precise site. Finally we part at the edge of a flat-lying granite outcrop that develops in a low elongate hill, and he walks straight towards part of the outcrop that is literally covered with all sorts of organic and geometric shapes. I can recognise lots of antelope-like creatures, some with extremely long necks, possibly giraffes, and stick-like humans. Most of the stick-figures are shown in groups of three or more, holding hands. There are also geometric figures, such as a boomerang-shaped object, and rectangular sets of bowl-like depressions, possibly used for a ball-game of some sort.



There is at least an area of 100 by 100 meters covered by these drawings, with some surfaces destroyed through exfoliation, or covered by wind-blown sand. I am wondering, and hoping that this site has been documented in the past, as there is undoubtedly a wealth of information to be learned from it. It has in the meantime begun to slowly get darker, and we decide to make a move in the hope of still being able to reach the mine camp for the night. Our hopes, or shall I say my hope, as I got the feeling Bellal knew all along that we would not make it, fades as fast as the light fades. Bellal suddenly points to a couple of square tents, barely visible in the gloom, and says: "we'll sleep here". And just like that, Ahmed drives off the track, through a bunch of camels and goats I hadn't even seen, and up to the tents.

We all get out, and an old lady comes from behind the tent and starts greeting us. Some more Arabic ensues, and next thing I know Bellal says all is arranged and we'll sleep in the tent with these people. Because the men are not around, we'll wait outside until they come

back, which, as they apparently have just gone to retrieve a stray camel somewhere should not be too long. As I take my shoes off and put my gear away in the car, the lady has come back and asks in French whether I'd like to wash up a bit. I say yes, and off she goes again behind the tent. I follow, after having fished out my soap and towel, and find that another, younger girl, has prepared a small basin and some warm water in a metal teapot for me. I wash up a bit, and pass back the bowl and teapot back to the girl who is working on some stew in a separate tent that is used as the kitchen. It's getting darker and darker now, and Bellal and Ahmed, who have also freshened up a bit and are now wearing a blue boubou, start their prayer session. Mauritanian moslims, and possibly every moslim, pray at least five times a day. They seem to be able to do it in any condition and circumstance, and only need a small mat. The prayer session consists of a convoluted series of kneeling and bowing movements, interspersed by soft prayers and reflective moments. This all seems to be a very personal thing, as, while Bellal and Ahmed are praying, the women just continue doing what they are doing and do not even temper their voices to allow some peace and quiet during the prayers. When the car with the men arrives, in the middle of the prayer session, Bellal and Ahmed even interrupt their prayers briefly, just enough to shake hands, and then continue where they left off. The newly arrived men go in the hut, and

a minute later reappear with their own prayer mat and join the prayers. As I sit there in the sand, taking note in my notebook, I really feel like an "infidel".

After the prayers, we're all invited inside where the lady of the house is making some welcome tea. We all settle into a corner of the spacious tent and get a bunch of pillows to make ourselves comfortable. There are five women in total. One very old woman, dressed in black, two younger women, one dressed in black and another, the one who greeted us when we arrived, dressed in a white-blue dress. Then there are two young teenage girls who seem to be doing most of the work and keep on getting in and out of the tent. One of those keeps on giggling, and has very complicated henna designs painted on her arms and hands. I look around and am again surprised by how surprisingly large and comfortable the tent is. The white, tough canvas has been covered with light yellow linen inside, giving it a nice and finished look. The floor is covered with carpets, adding to the homely feeling in the tent. In one corner a whole heap more pillows and blankets are stored, next to some car batteries and a few metal trunks with household items. The young giggling girl is setting up a light, connecting some wires to one of the batteries, while a gas lamp is lit and taken outside, I presume to be used in the kitchen. Outside, the dark is getting deeper, and the camels are braying softly, as if

talking to each other about the day. That, and the increasing minty smell that fills the tent as the lady of the house is pouring the tea from one glass to another to make it form a mousse, makes us all relax. The tea is served in small glass cups that are washed in a bowl of water with amazing efficiency. There are only about five full cups worth of tea in one teapot, so the tea-ceremony takes considerable time to go through its paces. The ceremony, if one can call it that, involves brewing three consecutive serves of mint tea using the same green tea leaves, but each time adding fresh sugar and mint ("nana" in Arabic). As each brew takes its time, the tea-maker, or call it master of ceremony, has ample time to collect all used glasses, rinse them with water, and generally prepare the tray for the next shot of tea. The tea has to be served with a layer of foam on top, which is only achieved by the skilful pouring of the tea from high up, and pouring the tea from one cup to another until the right "head" is achieved. The tea-maker is allowed to sip from the glasses to check whether all is in order. All through this ceremony, Bellal and Ahmed are talking incessantly to our hosts, but unfortunately it's all in Arabic and I can't follow. Intermittently, Bellal explains a few things to me, or I get involved in the conversation with Bellal acting as a translator, but the talk mainly is in Arabic. Apparently, two women of the five are distant relatives of the men, and have walked in from Western Sahara to say hello. The man of the house, or

shall I say tents, offers me to ride his camel tomorrow, which I decline as politely as I know how to. He then offers us to stay tomorrow, at least until lunch-time, as they have planned to slaughter one of the camels (I think it's the one that had run away). Again, I politely decline. "Too many things to do" is the excuse we offer.

A rearrangement of pillows heralds the impending arrival of the food: goat stew on a bed of rice. Three women carry in the large flat dishes, which are to be shared among three each. I end up sharing with Bellal and Ahmed, and I notice the the two main men get a large dish to share wit two. The food comes with a large bowl of fresh camel milk mixed with some water ("zrig"). We all eat with out right hand, which requires quite a bit of dexterity that the white guy (me) lacks. My fumbling eating raises a few good natured laughs and Arabic jesting around the tent, but I don't let all that spoil my appetite. The goat tastes "goaty" and the rice, well, the rice tastes like rice. Apart from salt, no spices seem to have been used, but the dish tastes excellent nonetheless. The "zrig" does help to settle the food, and I actually manage to keep up with Bellal and Ahmed as we finish off the entire plate. Stuffed as I am now, I recline on my pillows, and enjoy the soft Arabic discussions going on around me. It's a real pity I don't understand any of it.

After all plates have been removed to the kitchen area outside, the women start erecting a linen barrier right down the middle of the tent, effectively dividing the space in a male and female section. The battery-operated lights get switched off, leaving only the cosy kerosene lanterns to cast a warm glow around the tent. Bellal and Ahmed continue talking softly to our hosts, and Ahmed keeps taking single-shot nicotine puffs on his small traditional tobacco pipe. Before the women finally turn in, they put a large bowl of "zrig" next to me, and Bellal explains that it's meant I finish it completely before morning. With that as a last thought I turn in myself.

Camels and goats get up quite early in the morning, it seems! As do Sahara women! I wake up at the crack of dawn, with rosy-orange light seeping through the tent-opening, and everyone up and about. Through the half-open tent flap, I can see camels running about, and goats looking for edible scraps between the tents. Bellal and our hosts are also up, probably doing their morning prayers. Thinking back to what Bellal told me last night, I quickly drain the bowl of "zrik". Not a moment too soon it seems either, as Bellal comes in just as I wipe the cream off my lips. Bellal explains to me that we'd better go immediately, and that we can eat breakfast in the car, as our hosts are slaughtering the camel soon, which would force us to stay for an extended brunch of lovely camel offals. I ask Bellal how

we can thanks the family, and he simply says we can leave them a box of tins and other provision we will no longer need anyway. This is, indeed, the last day in the field, and if all goes well, we should be back in Nouakchott this evening. It's hard to believe actually that, from where we are now, in the plain desert 100s of kilometres away from any "civilisation", we'll simply be driving for 8 hours or so and reach the bustling mayhem that is Nouakchott.

I get my stuff together, and find the "Pater Familias" preparing himself for the camel slaughter. I cannot guess what kind of Islamic rituals are to be followed to do this job. I stand next to him looking at the camel in the distance with its front legs tied together. He looks sideways at me and smiles. Oh, yes! That's the unlucky one! Meanwhile Bellal has joined us, carrying a small cardboard box full of supplies: corned beef, spam, sardines, creamed rice, bread rolls, sugar, salt and wax candles. Much Arabic ensues, followed by warm handshakes all round, and I take a picture of the host and Bellal in front of the tent. As we are getting in the car, I can see that he's a bit disappointed we can't stay for the camel feast. As we pull out of the camp, we pass the unsuspecting beast, which looks at us with those typical innocent and baleful eyes that would make any butcher soft in the knees. I somehow expect, however, that the butcher of this one will have little qualms.



As we drive north to reach the main trunk road from Noadjibou to Nouakchott, we still make a few stops to collect some more samples on mafic dykes along the track. Two hours later we start again seeing the tell-tale signs of civilisation in form of car wrecks, tires and scattered rubbish along the track. By now, I've seen enough sands and dunes, and I nod off and sleep most of the way back to Nouakchott. When we do arrive, it's just around 18:00 hrs. and I get to Al's flat just in time for a gin-tonic sun downer, and the magical sight of the returning fruit bats, by the thousands, from their day of foraging in the north.

"Oh yes!", I say to Al, "this is the life!". Looking into his super-strength gin-tonic glass, and then up to the silhouettes of fruit bats against the orange sky, he agrees.

Bert De Waele©

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