

A Desert Adventure

Few destinations are more isolated or intriguing than the wild, hot terrain of the Sahara Desert. Accompanied by three camels and two Moroccan guides, **Claire Nelson** heads to the magnificent dunes at Erg Chigaga >

MEET THE AUTHOR...

Claire is a freelance writer whose travels include hiking New Zealand's Abel Tasman Trek and Scotland's Great Glen Way, as well as cycling across the Czech Republic.



Visions of huge golden dunes and rolling sands had piqued my curiosity for a long time. So when I read about Erg Chigaga, one of the Moroccan Sahara's largest dune fields, I knew I had to go there.

Erg Chigaga is an area of massive dunes stretching over 40km, the tallest of which is 300m high. The incredible beauty and tranquil nature of these dunes makes them the Holy Grail for any desert trekker. The place to start the journey from is M'hamid, a small village on the very edge of the Sahara. It's possible to make the 60km journey to Erg Chigaga in one day in a 4x4 – for the more adventurous, it takes three to four days on foot.

SETTING OUT

On New Year's Eve myself and my partner Ben were in M'Hamid getting ready to head into the desert. It had taken nine hours to reach the village by bus from Marrakech the day before and we'd booked a six-day camel trek to Erg Chigaga with a local tour company. That morning we began the walk out of town with three camels carrying our gear and supplies and two local men, resplendent in blue robes and black turbans. They were 24-year-old Barack, our guide, and 18-year-old Mohammad, our chamelier. Our companions lead the way as we ventured into the desert.

After a couple of hours of walking through a small windstorm, we stopped for lunch behind a clump of trees. Mohammad prepared a pot of bitter gunpowder tea made with a fist-size rock of sugar. This ritual of making tea, or 'whisky-du-Berber' (whisky of the Berber) was performed every time we stopped. And with every fresh serving we would raise our tea glasses, with a shout of, "B'seha!".

Lunch was a salad of freshly diced vegetables and sardines with a side of bread. The perfect meal after walking in the whipping winds. Occasionally, the camels, set free to graze, would sidle over to us to investigate our lunch. Mohammad would leap up to shoo them away, clapping his hands loudly.

Trekking in the desert is physically demanding. Walking across sweeping, dry terrain, the wind and heat sucks the moisture from everything and it is said you can only go four hours in the desert without water. Fortunately, we were provided with a supply of bottled water, one of which we always carried with us as the camel train moved quickly ahead. Walking on soft sand is slow going and it was easy for the camels and guides to get far ahead of us. Often they were just a blot somewhere in the distance.

That evening, just before sunset, we stopped to set up camp behind a dune. The camels were unloaded and left to graze and firewood was collected. The sun was setting so quickly I could see it lowering below the horizon before my eyes. A large black canvas tent was erected. We sat inside it, watching Barack prepare dinner on a gas cooker in the corner. The only light was from a candle, placed on top of a plastic bottle in the middle of the tent. A wonderful refuge from the sudden cold of the desert. Smells of cumin, spices and pepper rose from the pot in the corner.



Entering the Sahara: only the nomad guides know the way



Breakfast in the Sahara: now that's what we call al fresco

Dinner was vegetable tagine. Barack was an excellent cook and it was clear we would not go hungry in the desert. Forks were provided, but I tried to eat in the traditional way, using chunks of bread to scoop my food. As it was New Year's Eve, there was entertainment. Barack had brought his guitar and played some beautiful nomad songs. Mohammad used a plastic jerry can as a drum to accompany him. As the clock struck midnight we clasped hands together in celebration and whooped loudly into the sky, our voices carrying across the desert and into the new year.

THE NOMADS

I had underestimated how cold the desert nights can be. It was winter, and most nights the temperature drops below freezing. Wearing every item of clothing I had brought with me was the only way to sleep comfortably. The next morning everything was packed up and loaded onto the camels and all our rubbish was





We started out with three camels... and returned with five!

burned on the embers of the fire: paper, plastic, it all went on, sending up small plumes of acrid black smoke. Food waste was simply thrown to one side, where the camels cleaned it up with just a few nibbles. With little but the ashes of our fire remaining, we continued on our journey.

People have lived on the edge of the desert since the ice age when it was much wetter than it is now. Back then the Sahara could supply everything a family needed. Barack's grandfather was a true nomad who spent his life in the desert. His father was born in the desert too and lived the first half of his life in the same way. Then things changed; the modern world and the arrival of tourism seeped into the desert and people began to move toward the villages. Like many of the nomads, Barack's father relocated to M'hamid to make himself a living. Barack is now of a generation of nomads who rely on tourism for income and his mobile phone is a subtle symbol of modern change. Yet he still thinks of the desert as home; it is where his heart is and he knows it inside and out.

The climate of the Sahara has also changed enormously, alternating between wet and dry over the last few hundred thousand years. Barack often stopped to show us chunks of broken rock, revealing the fossils of trilobites and similar creatures. A reminder that this vast desert was, once upon a time, full of water. Of course, there is still water in the desert, for those who know where to look, and that afternoon we stopped at a well. Barack lowered a bucket into the depths and filled the stone trough beside it with cool water. Each of the camels was given a turn to drink, slurping loudly.

"Wash?" asked Barack, lifting the bucket up high. Ben didn't hesitate and allowed Barack to pour the cold

water over his head rinsing off the sweat and sand of the morning's trek. Barack had a wash himself and threw a handful of water up into the air, shouting, "Water is life! In everything!"

We arrived at our next camping spot in the early afternoon in an outcrop of shrubby hills, which provided much-needed shade. Ben and I walked up to a stony plateau not too far away. From the top it was possible to see for miles. Sitting there, looking out over the golden-lit valley, I thought of the likes of British explorer, Wilfred Thesiger, who could have come to place like this and not have it marred by the sparkle of a 4x4 vehicle somewhere on the far horizon. Yet, while less isolated than Thesiger was in his time, I was still so far away from anything I recognised. Sitting on that plateau in the Sahara, I felt really alive.

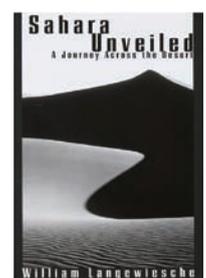
That night, to go with our pot of Harira soup, Barack baked a loaf of bread. This mundane activity seemed miraculous in the desert. Our guide kneaded and stretched the soft white dough onto a square of fabric. The bread was placed into the pre-heated sand beneath the embers of the fire, covered and left to bake. I watched entranced as the sand began to rise with the dough beneath it.

OLD PROVERBS

'Trust in Allah, but tie your camel' is a proverb that seemed particularly apt on the third morning of our trip. Mohammad went to collect the camels for our final day's trek into Erg Chigaga. After an hour he hadn't returned. It seemed the camels had wandered away much further than usual. By lunchtime, neither Barack nor Mohammad had come back. Ben and I tried our best to join in the search, but how do you find a lost

USEFUL GUIDE:

For a unique perspective that embraces the rich cultural and historical (as well as the physical) side of the Sahara, check out *Sahara Unveiled: A Journey Across the Desert* by William Langewiesche. An insightful and evocative guide to the world's largest desert.



The wind creates an ever-changing and striking landscape

"Trekking in the desert is physically demanding... the wind and heat sucks the moisture from everything"

camel in the desert, let alone three? There were tracks everywhere, both old and new. The term 'needle in a haystack' sprung to mind.

Barack returned in the afternoon but then continued searching while we held the fort at camp. Just as well, as a large herd of nomad goats arrived and we quickly rescued our supplies from their hungry mouths as they swarmed over the camp.

By sunset there was no sign of Barack, Mohammad or the camels. As the chill of the night began to set in, Ben and I collected firewood and built a fire. I searched through the boxes of supplies with a torch to find everything we needed to make some tea. This felt like a true adventure.

I filled the little grey teapot with water and placed it on the fire. Once it boiled I scooped in a heap of the bitter gunpowder tea leaves. Recalling when I had watched Barack make it, I let it stew and added a handful of sugar cubes. Tasting the tea, it was still too bitter, so I added another handful of sugar. As I was tasting it again, we heard a voice.

"Barack?" we called out. The moon had not yet risen, and there was no light except for the fire. Barack had found his way back. We grasped his hands in happy greeting as he slumped himself down beside the fire.

"Tea?" I offered him. "It's nearly ready." I was delighted to be able to offer our guide some tea, but it was still bitter. Kindly, Barack drank the glass I offered him anyway.

Need to know: Sahara

Tips for trekking the Sahara

When's the best time to visit?

Between September and February when the daytime temperatures are bearable. Keep in mind that the nights can drop below freezing, so pack warm layers.

What's the best way to arrange a guide?

There are plenty of international companies offering guided treks online if you want to pre-book your trek. We booked via Sahara Trek (www.saharatrek.com), however, you can also book locally. Many tour companies and individual guides in M'hamid now have websites – although it's easy to arrange a guide once you get there. In fact, many guides will offer their services as soon as you arrive.

Is there more than one route?

Erg Chigaga is 60km from M'hamid. Most tours will take a similar route to get there in three days. Longer treks, taking a wider course, are sometimes available. You can also arrange with a guide directly to take a different route altogether; they know their way around and will be able to suggest other options.

What should I take?

Nothing you don't mind getting damaged. Sand will get into everything. Any plastics – such as your camera or mobile phone – will come out scratched and weathered. Resealable plastic bags do help, but avoid taking anything you're precious about. Sunglasses and a headscarf will help keep the sand out of your eyes, ears and mouth.



"We saw in the far distance the magnificent, golden horizon of Erg Chigaga. Arriving on foot is surely the best way to take in this sight"

"It's good!" he lied. "Some more?" He declined, and we laughed. Shortly afterwards, Mohammad found his way back too. We were still without camels, but at least our friends were safe and the four of us were together again.

While Mohammad fell asleep by the fire, wrapped in his djellaba, Barack prepared a tajine. He apologised to us, embarrassed about the camels.

"Pas de problem!" we said. "C'est la vie!"

Spirits high again, the guitar was played and we took turns to concoct silly sounds about missing camels. We didn't bother erecting the tent, being much happier to sleep out under the stars. This was camping in the desert as it was meant to be.

ERG CHIGAGA

Our new plan was for Ben, Barack and I to walk to Erg Chigaga, leaving Mohammad with our supplies. He would stay with our belongings and arrange for a 4x4 to collect him and bring our baggage to us. So that morning we packed only what we needed for the day into our small daypack and carried two large bottles of water. Shaking Mohammad's hand, we said we hoped to see him again, "Insha'Allah".

We followed Barack across difficult walking terrain of soft-rolling sand, lizards scuttling away under foot. It was uncomfortably hot and flies settled in hoards on our backs until the moment we stopped, when they would buzz like a cloud around our heads. Crossing each long, vast plane, we would climb to the top of a rise, only to see another empty plateau stretching out ahead. This pattern was tiring, yet the extraordinary emptiness never ceased to amaze me. After a few hours we saw in the far distance the magnificent, golden horizon of Erg Chigaga. Arriving on foot is surely the best way to take in this incredible sight.

The camp at Erg Chigaga was a row of clay huts at the foot of the first huge dune. We were welcomed by Lashan, a jolly Berber who worked at the camp. Lunch was a 'Berber omelette' made by Lashan, who then showed us to our room. These huts are basic,

with no hot water or electricity – only candles for light, yet it felt luxurious.

Ben and I climbed the high dune beside our camp, a weary task for the legs, but we were rewarded for our efforts. At the top, the sun beamed on enormous rolling dunes of sand, which stretched for miles into the distance. It was utterly breathtaking. Walking along the spine of the dune, we watched the sunset, casting shadows on the valleys and turning many of the dunes a vivid gold.

That evening we took tea with Lashan in the camp's communal dining tent and, by candlelight, listened to him tell us tales of the desert. The Berber drew an invisible map on the plastic tablecloth with his finger, describing the expanse of Chigaga. He also told us that people easily lose their way in the desert but Berbers and nomads never get lost. They sleep during the day, he explained, then travel at night, guided by the North Star.

The beauty of Erg Chigaga was too strong to resist and the next morning Ben and I woke before sunrise to revisit the dunes. We climbed the huge wall of sand again, the ice-cold sand filling our shoes. At the top we sat and watched the golden light of the sun break over the desert, bringing the whale-backed dunes to life. Erg Chigaga had been everything I had imagined: it was nothing short of magical.

THE RETURN

Our luggage had arrived during the night and Barack had found us a caravan of five new camels, lead by an old nomad who agreed to accompany us. We said goodbye to Lashan as we left Erg Chigaga, following Barack, the old nomad and the camel train back to M'hamid.

Due to the delay caused by the missing camels we had to make the return journey in two days. Our nomad guides knew short cuts and by putting in a couple of extra hours a day we returned on time.

The Sahara had drawn me in and just as the sand had got into absolutely everything, the desert had undoubtedly got under my skin. **T&M**



In the deep, limitless darkness of the desert, a fire provides the only light



Getting there

Air, land and tour information

AIRLINES

Moroccan airline Atlas Blue and Royal Air Maroc as well as easyJet and Ryanair all fly regularly from London to Marrakech. You can also fly with Royal Air Maroc direct to Ourzazate, which is only a five-hour bus journey to M'hamid.

ROAD TRAVEL

There are regular buses from Marrakech to

M'hamid (via Ourzazate), with one departing every morning and evening. Some tour companies offer private transfers for an additional cost. Alternatively, you can rent a car and drive. Be warned, though, the road through the Atlas mountains can be a little precarious.

