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SANDS OF TIME

Sculpted by millennia, Chad is a place of ancient geology and epic grandeur. Aminatta Forna finds her place in it all

Photographs by Alistair Taylor-Young





from a distance, the sandstone pillars resembled a gathering of giants turned to stone by a displeased god. Our group of eight travelers had set out when the sun was at its zenith, and now, as it made its descent, we arrived at this place with air so pure it seemed to hold no scent. The only sound was the wind, as faint as breath. The rocks are called tassili, and some stand more than 300 feet high. They have been carved by this same disarmingly gentle wind over many thousands of years. This is what deep time feels like.

When I was a child, a teacher tried to give my class some sense of eternity. Imagine a rock 10,000 miles by 10,000 miles. Every 10,000 years a small bird comes and wipes its beak this way and that upon the rock. Deep time, Earth time, captures the entire process of erosion, until the rock is finally worn away.

The 15,000-square-mile Ennedi Massif, in north-

eastern Chad, is a plateau the size of Switzerland. Between 350 million and 500 million years ago, this part of the globe was an ocean. Then the ocean disappeared, leaving the sandstone floor exposed. The climate shifted from rain-soaked to arid. Sun, wind, and water sculpted the sandstone into a dramatic, desolate, unearthly landscape of gorges and valleys, inselbergs and stacks, towering tassili and natural arches. In the desert the delicate threads of life become apparent in trails of tiny footprints scattered across the sands: here, the tear-shaped tracks of a lizard; there, the dimpled prints of a gerbil.

I have traveled to many deserts, but as I lay in bed in the open air and gazed directly into the face of the moon, it was clear to me that the Ennedi was the emptiest landscape I had ever experienced.

Chad is not on most Westerners' radars. A landlocked nation in north central Africa, it has long been at the cultural crossroads of North Africa and



From far left: Youths gather at the base of Aloba Arch, the world's second tallest natural arch; heading into the d'Oyo, a labyrinth of narrow sand pathways and steep pinnacles; from the air it's easy to make out the trees that line the course of the Ennedi's seasonal river


sub-Saharan Africa. Chad's recent past is full of coups and rebellions, but today it is a safe haven, especially compared with neighbors like Niger and Sudan. In 2016 the Ennedi was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Two years later the Chadian government partnered with African Parks, a non-profit that protects and manages reserves and parks across Africa, to create the 19,300-square-mile Ennedi Natural and Cultural Reserve.

We had reached the Ennedi via a three-hour private charter from N'Djamena, Chad's capital, in a Cessna piloted by a Scot named Angus who swung low "to take a look at the landing strip" before dropping us neatly upon the dry riverbed. There we were met by our lead guide, Rocco Ravà, and loaded into a couple of Land Cruisers for the short drive to Warda Camp, the semipermanent base camp operated by our host, the Société de Voyages Sahariens, an

adventure travel company owned and run by Rocco and his brother Tommaso Ravà. Our sleeping tents had been erected in a line at the base of the giant rocks. After an arrival lunch of salad and bresaola, we slept during the heat of the day and awoke at four to explore with Rocco and Tommaso. Everywhere I looked, the towering rock formations took on different shapes: an elephant, an ape. From the tops of the same cliffs, actual animals—pied crows and baboons—followed our progress.

The massif is, somewhat counterintuitively, a water-rich desert landscape, composed of sandstone sitting on a granite Precambrian substrata that holds seasonal pools of water, or gueltas, which support a remarkable diversity of life. Rocco tells us that there are more than 525 species of flora and 60 of fauna here. It's why the massif has been dubbed the Eden of the Sahara. Although we couldn't see much life aside from the baboons and crows, the





Stopping for a picnic lunch in the shade of a large tassili

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Ennedi is a stopping-off point for tens of thousands of birds on their migration between the Sahel and Europe. They arrive during the rains in March to join ibis, Nubian and Arabian bustards, African eagles, and white vultures. The Ennedi is also home to honey badgers, antelope, and caracals. There may be a few remaining cheetahs, though the brothers haven't seen one in more than 10 years. Closer to home, morning revealed the footprints of a hyena that, I was told, regularly passes through camp on the way to its lair after the night's hunting.

I lay in bed in my tent the next day and watched the sun rise through a gap in the rock. The rose-hued morning light blended with the color of the sandstone. Two hours later we were driving toward a stone skyline. Our destination was the Guelta de Bachikele, a narrow canyon where rainwater pools in the shade of the rock to form a small oasis. Around it, fan palms spring and fig trees grow espaliered against the rock. Hundreds of camels were making their way to and from the water, the young in the shelter of their mothers, the old and lame bringing up the rear. Two boys urged their camels to their knees, quickly dismounted, and stripped them of the blankets they use as saddles. We watched as the animals raced to join the others wading up to their hocks in the water.

The boys were Zaghawa. Along with the Toubou, who have a reputation for extreme hardiness (legend has it they can survive for three days on a



single date: eating the skin on day one, the pulp on day two, and sucking the seed on day three), the Zaghawa are nomadic people who inhabit the Ennedi. They begrudgingly acknowledged our greetings, waving off our attempts to take a photo of the people and their livestock. At this time of year, some nomads drive their camels, sheep, and goats from east to west, following the path of the rain, while others journey from north to south, exchanging salt from the north for sugar, flour, and millet in the towns they visit.

From the guelta we made our way past hosts of tassili to picnic beneath Aloba Arch, the second tallest natural arch in the world, a dizzying landform about 400 feet high and 250 feet wide. The late afternoon drive home offered further vistas—of rock formations now glowing golden in the setting sun, of a shaded canyon through which herds of camels made steady progress.

Our second morning, after breakfast and a briefing on the day's activities from Rocco, we drove out until we reached a lookout point on top of a plateau above a massive rock formation known as the d'Oyo labyrinth. A few minutes later I was sitting in the front seat of the lead Toyota, watching Tommaso and Rocco as they conferred at the edge of a ridge that fell away sharply from where they stood. "Andiamo!" Rocco swung himself into the driver's seat and revved the engine. Over the edge we went, plowing through the thick sand straight down the vertiginous slope.

At the bottom, we left the cars and walked toward the rocks, slipping into the shadowy gap between two walls. Inside, the labyrinth was made of dark doorways, steep-sided gullies, dead ends, and sudden sunlit openings. The geometric precision of the formation is a result, once again, of the combined forces of wind and water. Sandstone is soft, as

Clockwise from top left: Isolated rock formations, the result of millennia of wind and water erosion, punctuate the stark landscape; desert fan palms are one of roughly 500 types of plants that grow in the Ennedi; a portable home put up by the nomadic Zaghawa; an abandoned Libyan tank from the 1987 Chadian-Libyan conflict

Opposite page: Local boys get out of the sun at the base of a mushroom-shaped rock formation



rock goes and erodes relatively easily. Over time, rainwater had worked its way into tiny fissures, and the wind followed, gradually widening the fissures into cracks and the cracks into chasms.

In this place of ancient wonders, perhaps none is more arresting than the crocodiles of Guelta d'Archei. Tommaso and a young village woman who acted as our guide led us on an arduous two-hour trek to the small water hole where the crocodiles have been seen. Tommaso chatted with the woman in Chadian Arabic, in which both Tommaso and Rocco are fluent. (They also speak some Dazaga, the language of the Toubou.) The Ravà brothers were raised right here in the desert. In 1975 their Milanese parents, a biologist mother and a doctor father, spent a period living in Kenya before traveling home through the Sahara, where they fell in love with the desert. They quit their jobs and moved to the Sahara. The brothers and their sister joined their parents on many of the expeditions they led, first nestled among the guests' luggage and later as guides themselves. They have been leading tours for researchers, visitors, and scientists ever since, including the French naturalist Théodore Monod, a world-renowned expert on the Sahara.

Tommaso warned us that, with only four crocodiles remaining, we might not be rewarded with a sighting. But we were lucky. Lying just beneath the surface of the water was one small crocodile. The presence of these Saharan crocodiles,

Crocodylus suchus, is unexplained. But they are presumed to be a relic of a time, more than 8,000 years ago, when the land was covered in water. These are the descendants of the crocodiles that were stranded in the guelta when the seas slowly evaporated. Supposedly, when the crocodiles disappear from the guelta, so will the water. The reptiles are considered sacred and are safeguarded by the people with whom they live in harmony. There is no record of an attack on a human, goat, or sheep. A conservation plan is currently being developed to protect this critically endangered species. In 2019 three of the four animals were caught to determine their sex and collect DNA samples. All three turned out to be females. The sex of the fourth, discovered a few months later, remains unknown.

"If you talk to someone who doesn't know the desert," said Rocco, "they believe that the Sahara is



just sand with dunes. That's false. The Sahara is 9 million square kilometers. Sand in all its forms only takes up between 17 and 18 percent of the space. The rest is large massifs, mountains, and above all empty spaces we call 'reg.'" He was talking about stony plains: miles and miles of gravel and pebbles.

That morning our convoy headed northwest toward Bichagara, a region known for its rock paintings and dramatic formations, where we'd be fly camping, truly out in the elements. When I asked Issa Hissein, a driver and our chief navigator, how he knew the route, he explained that during the day he used the position of the sun; at night, the stars. "L'étoile polaire, ça ne bouge pas," he said. The North Star doesn't move. When I showed him a compass, he peered at it, seemingly without recognition, before handing it back. The Ravà brothers relied on hand-held GPS systems. Still, there were frequent discussions about the route, because the desert winds mean the landscape is continuously changing. Nothing stays the same, and nothing can be relied upon.

Home that night was a tent pitched at the base of a sand dune, smooth as brushed gold. The next day, on an early walk, we spotted a salt caravan journeying across a distant landscape. Tommaso's words on the attraction and hazards of fly camping came back to me: "If the wind picks up, there is nothing to do; you just need the patience of the nomads." Fly camping is an important part of any

journey to the Ennedi, he told me, for it is as close as visitors can come to understanding what life is like in the desert.

We had a glimpse of past lives as we stood before one of the hundreds of examples of rock art. A line of cows traversed the side of a lone rock. Elsewhere were depictions of giraffes, elephants, and rhinos as well as people dancing, horsemen carrying spears and bows, and herdsmen tending cattle. The images attested to 8,000 years of human presence along with the changing ecology and climate of the region over the millennia.

The hull of a Libyan tank, abandoned since a Chadian-Libyan skirmish in 1987, lay half-buried in the sand. The so-called Toyota War of that year saw the forces of the Chadian army in a fleet of Toyota pickups rout the better armed but less disciplined Libyan army in their tanks. Their victory brought an end to a decade of fighting over this territory, which



Sand, towering tassili, and camels make for a typical Ennedi vista

Opposite page: Erected at the base of the giant rock formations for optimal shade, the tents at the semipermanent Warda Camp have private bathrooms and showers

was then thought to contain oil. That is no longer believed to be the case. The tanks remain as a monument to that conflict and to the many fighters buried beneath the sands.

During our second night spent camping out in the open, deep in the desert, I awoke several times. This was the end of my trip, and sleep felt like a waste. Around me the tassili threw heavy shadows beneath a nearly full moon. “To be in the desert,” Rocco had said, “means always having the possibility of moving, of moving around while being spartan, while being light. To be able to benefit from that is the beauty of this space.” I had come to understand the transformation that had taken place in the hearts, minds, and souls of the Ravà parents when they made the fateful decision to travel home to Italy through this area all those years ago.

The desert had brought me to an awareness of a

beauty both subtle and sublime, an integration of shades of color, line, and shape. I was aware of its impact upon my sense of myself, my feeling of vulnerability and smallness, but also of harmony with a world that existed beyond my knowledge and experience, both in space and time. In our world we talk often and glibly of freedom. But we have only the faintest idea of what freedom can mean. ●

Africa specialist Journeys by Design arranges privately guided explorations of the Ennedi Natural and Cultural Reserve. Costs for an eight-night Chadian adventure into the Ennedi start at \$12,195 per person using Warda Camp (wardacamp.com) on an exclusive basis. Costs are subject to group size and include a private camp, desert guides, and private charter flights but exclude international flights. The best time to travel to the northern deserts of Chad is November through March; journeysbydesign.com