

The Sahara Desert Challenge

THE SAHARA

A trek into the Sahara is the ultimate challenge. The Sahara is the world's biggest desert, larger than the entire United States, a vast sea of sand and rock (or 3.5 million square miles of sand and rock) swept by raging winds and shifting dunes. And yet, for centuries, explorers, adventurers and traders have been moved to uncover its mysteries and pit their wits against its fickle topography.

This is not an adventure for the faint hearted. The Sahara remains one of the last true areas of wilderness: the hottest, driest, most inhospitable place on earth. Out on the sands, the summer temperature can exceed 50°C in the shade at midday, and plummet to almost freezing at night. The rainfall rarely exceeds four inches a year. But when it rains, it can rain in torrents, washing all before it. Luckily our trek is planned for October, when temperatures will be much more reasonable!



You will discover a landscape of awe-inspiring beauty. The *ergs*, or great sand seas familiar from the *English Patient* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, are only part of the picture, accounting for less than 20% of the desert surface, (though some of these dune fields are immense; there is one the size of France). The rest is composed of *reg*: arid, boulder strewn plains where ceaseless winds and furious sandstorms have whittled the rock into bizarre sculptures. There are high rocky plateaux, the *hamada*, strange and silent as the moon. And above and between lie extinct volcanoes and dried up *wadi's* or riverbeds, shadowy canyons and mountains so high, their summits are touched with snow.

So why do it?

Because only in the desert can you understand the immensity of Nature. The vastness of the sky, the infinity of the stars, the absoluteness of the silence. A silence broken only by the rasp of the wind or the scuffle of some desert denizen – a silence unimaginable in our busy, overcrowded lives.

Because the Sahara isn't just an exotic holiday destination, but a region quite beyond our everyday imaginings. A place where light rays bending in the moistureless air create illusions of distant water. Where entire civilisations have vanished into the sand, leaving nothing but their image scratched on a wall of rock.

Where uncharted rivers flow deep beneath the earth. Where one red boulder among the countless billion boulders turns out to come from Mars.

Our trek route has been designed to show as much as possible of the varied landscape of the Sahara, and also typical oases fringed with the date palms and acacia. It takes us well away from the established travel routes along a trade route still used by the nomadic Berber and Toureg tribesmen, whom we will hope to encounter during our journey. *(All distances shown at the end of each day are approximate).*

DAY 1. London to Quarzarate

The journey begins with a Royal Air Maroc flight from Heathrow to **Casablanca**, then on to **Ouarzazate**, the capital of Southern Morocco and the threshold of the Sahara. We arrive late in the evening and transfer to a hotel for a good night's sleep.

DAY 2. Into the Sahara

The challenge begins. We take a coach out of town, following the route of many films before us, for Ouarzazate is Morocco's answer to Hollywood and many famous films have been shot in the spectacular locations that abound here on the fringes of the desert. Film buffs can look out for the atmospheric Kasbah of Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky*, the adventurous canyons of *Romancing the Stone*, or the epic landscapes of *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Jesus of Nazareth*.



We stop for lunch at **Tazerine**, then climb aboard open trucks. Little by little human habitation fizzles out, as we bump and jolt towards the heart of the Sahara. When the track gives out at **Oum Jrane**, we disembark and walk, giving those travel-weary muscles a welcome stretch. All the day's long journey becomes worthwhile when we reach camp, where we shall spend our first night in the desert. Here, beyond the glare of civilisation, the cold, dry desert night reveals stars as you have never seen them, piled high, layer on layer, seemingly close enough to touch. It is a sight never to be forgotten. (3-4km).

DAY 3. Wadi to desert plateau

Today we follow the course of the **Boukechba**, now a dry and rocky valley, into our first region of *erg* or dunes. Nothing can quite prepare you for the wonder of this extraordinary landscape, which, with the play of the wind and shadow, seems to ripple and dance before your very eyes. As the sun climbs high in the sky, we thankfully come to a band of tamarisk trees, clinging improbably to life amid the shifting sands. Here we stop for rest and lunch in the shade. The afternoon's walk leads us from the dunes to another typical feature of Saharan topography – the *reg*. This area of flat, boulder-strewn plain seems at first to be lifeless, but in fact teems with creatures successfully adapted to its harsh, arid conditions. As we settle into our

overnight camp at dusk, many of these animals begin to emerge, using the cool night hours to forage and hunt by the light of the blazing stars. (22km)

Day 4. Across the sands

After waking at 7am, followed by a good breakfast with coffee and orange juice, we do a little bit of limbering up and stretching before aiming to start walking at 8.30, so we can get a good few miles in before lunch, which today is taken under the shade of another isolated group of tamarisk trees. A small diversion can be made into the village of Tafraoute, where no doubt many local children will come out to meet the group. Alternatively, a direct route can be taken direct to camp which lies at the foot of a huge dune. (20km)



DAY 5. Mountain and oasis

This morning we have a climb to reach the top of a huge sand dune which we follow as it snakes along in a fine edged crest. An exhilarating descent of the dune leads us down on to some plains which are crossed before a range of hills is encountered with a small climb, followed by a descent to a lunch spot where the support crew will have erected some cover so we can rest in the shade whilst having lunch.

Continuing after lunch we cross another plain, encounter a rock field where we can search for interesting fossils, and finish the day by passing through a beautiful gorge to camp. (18km)

Day 6. Walking with the winds

Our final morning of trekking takes us across a wide open plain with expansive views of the surrounding country. Here we might experience one of the poetically named, but bullying desert winds – the *Sirocco*, or perhaps the *Haboob* before finding another tent erected to give us shade for lunch. The final afternoon can be tough as we traverse an extensive range of dunes, before arriving at our camp which is hidden from view until we are almost there. Tonight will be our last night in the lonely desert – but first we must party, celebrating our achievements with our newfound Moroccan friends. (26km)

Day 7. Back to civilisation

It is worth rising at dawn to witness one last spectacular desert sunrise. Today, we view the desert in a different rhythm, as we ride back in open-air trucks to the road where our coaches are waiting. The return journey to **Quarzarate** takes around 4 hours, where civilisation beckons in the form of a welcome shower and a final night of well-deserved celebration.

Day 8. Home

We leave early in the morning for our flight back to **London** via **Casablanca**.

- *This route is subject to weather conditions, permits and the overall fitness of the group and consequently may change in some details. However, the structure of the trek will remain the same*
- *Each day requires about eight hours of activity*
- **Visas are not needed for UK passport holders other nationalities need to make their own checks.**

