



West Africa

GEOGRAPHY

Travels in the Sahara

Few of the world's deserts are less visited than Africa's Sahara, where wars and political unrest have kept outsiders away for decades. In 1997, however, Americans Donovan Webster and George Steinmetz obtained permission from the governments of Niger and Chad to travel in the region. Here Webster describes some of what they found.

The first dead camels turn up on Day 2. They're mounds of pale, chalky bones, scattered atop dishes of . . . apricot-hued fur. Each is the size of a kiddie wading pool, and they rest balanced on low, wind-sculpted pillars of sand. In the . . . Sahara, humidity sometimes hovers in the teens and daytime temperatures can reach 130 degrees Fahrenheit. Consequently, the desert's sandy surface is sterile, and microorganisms can't survive there. Decay comes in the abrasive form of wind-blown grit.

. . . We left Agadez, Niger, driving east in a line of four-wheel-drive vehicles. . . . After a day's drive into the scrublands east of town, we topped a rocky bluff, and beyond it began the Ténéré, a landscape of dune fields and sand plains larger than Germany with a name that means "nothing" in the language of the Tuareg.

Here strings of dunes stretch east to west, a hundred feet tall and several miles long, piled up by the wind. Devoid [empty] of water and completely unsettled, the Ténéré is lonely, hot, and breath-takingly gorgeous in rounded shades of beige.

Most every day we drive about 70 miles across the soft sand, often becoming bogged down and having to dig our way out with hands and shovels. . . . We pause at midday, when the sun heats the desert so thoroughly its sand grows impassably soft. Then we wait out the inferno for a few hours, hiding beneath a large canvas sheet draped across the roofs of the parked cars—creating the only shade for hundreds of miles. . . .

Having faced down the worst heat and distance of the Ténéré, we suddenly come upon the town of Bilma, an Eden in the furnace of sand. Here groves of date palms grow and pools of clear water burble from the ground thanks to a . . . break in the desert's deep substrate [base] of rock. One morning, standing at the edge of a pool, I notice an outflowing creek and follow it. Stepping through a wall of brush, I come across irrigation ditches running off the creek into dozens of gardens: corn, cassava, tea, groundnuts, milo, hot peppers, even some orange, lime, and grapefruit trees.

. . . Heading back to town, I come upon an outpost alone in the desert. Surrounded by cactuses and scrub, it's the local weather station, and the gray-suited man running it is Bilma's weather officer, Nouhou Agah. He may have the least demanding job for a thousand miles. Each day . . . Agah rises, checks the rain gauge, anemometer [an instrument

that measures the speed or force of the wind], and barometer, then writes his findings in a ledger, which he sends off to the capital of Niamey once a year. . . He shows me his precipitation ledger, running a finger down its grid of mostly zero rainfall totals. He points out April 29: 1.5 mm of rain. On May 6: Trace. On July 21: 1.1 mm. And—he gets excited—on August 4: 10.5 mm, less than half an inch. “A downpour like we have not seen in most people’s lives,” he says. . . .

The deserts of Niger and Chad differ, with the topography of each roughly mirroring the spirit of its people. Niger’s Sahara is a world of smooth dunes and the friendly . . . Tuareg. Chad is a land of stony, eroded landscapes and the rock-hard Toubou, a seminomadic people whose men wear long daggers lashed to their biceps like advertisements of ferocity. . . .

The Toubou inhabit a desert characterized by rocky spires, volcanic peaks, and screaming gales. So it’s fitting that as Steinmetz and I cross into Chad’s Sahara, a relentless wind from the northeast, called the harmattan, greets us. This wind whips the desert, turning its air to a gritty scrim [a kind of theater curtain] so dense the sun behind is a pale disk you can stare at directly. It signals an end to the 60- or 80-degree cool of the North African winter. When it leaves, the roasting 120- or 130-degree heat of the Saharan summer will arrive, bringing with it the relief of occasional rain.

From “Journey to the Heart of the Sahara” (retitled “Egypt’s Journey to the Heart of the Sahara”) by Donovan Webster from *National Geographic*, March 1999. Copyright ©1999 by **National Geographic Society**. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. Why is there water at Bilma when the rest of Niger’s Sahara is so dry?

2. What differences does the author observe between the Sahara in Niger and the Sahara in Chad?

Activity

Imagine that you live in Bilma. Write a letter to a pen pal in America telling about yourself and what life is like in your part of Niger.

that some Beninois mothers now no longer consider educating their daughters to be a “waste of time and money.”

Reading 56

1. There is a break in the rock that lies beneath the desert, which allows underground water to reach the surface.
2. The Niger Sahara is mostly sand dunes, while the Sahara in Chad is characterized by rocky spires and volcanic peaks.

Reading 57

1. The author says that Timbuktu had teachers, that the king honored learning, and the sale of books was the most profitable type of trade.
2. Answers will vary but should note, in addition to the references to books and learning and to the skilled trades already mentioned, the descriptions of the people’s wealth, housing, and to their food and water resources. The amount of leisure time the people enjoyed is also indicative of a high standard of living.

Reading 58

1. She put a spell on the drinking water to make people not cause trouble and obey the clan leaders who controlled the government.
2. Answers will vary but should recognize that the story is a criticism of Somalia’s government and its effect on the Somali people.

Reading 59

1. a series of cracks in the Earth’s crust running from the Red Sea south to Mozambique
2. Lake Victoria is a cool freshwater lake located between the rift’s two branches on a plateau in Kenya. Lake Assal is a hot, salty lake located right on the rift, below sea level in the desert of Djibouti.

3. Answers will vary but students should note that Earth’s crust is very thin there and that magma is close, which produces heat from the ground in addition to the sun, which heats the rest of the desert.

Reading 60

1. They seemed to be traders who were only passing through Kikuyu territory. The Kikuyu viewed them as wanderers who would someday return home.
2. After an incident resulted in British retaliation against the Kikuyu, they refused further trade. The British then began to seize food from the Kikuyu and soon claimed ownership of their land.

Reading 61

1. No, because this clothing is sold to, and sought after by, Zambians of all income levels, from poor farmers to white-collar workers and residents of upper-income neighborhoods.
2. They believe it is more fashionable and of higher quality than other clothing. It also symbolizes the power, wealth, and opportunity that the West represents to many Zambians.
3. She states that Zambian high school students won’t wear jeans because they do not want to be mistaken for street vendors.

Reading 62

1. because his boat provides services typically available in a town, such as a clinic, a pharmacy, and a market, as well as a population of 5,000 aboard
2. Many people’s access to the goods and services the boats provided would be greatly reduced as would their ability to travel from place to place. There would also be less opportunity to sell their own goods. This is because there are few roads and the river is the region’s main “highway.”