

The Western Sahara – April 1 – 4, 2021 – Western Sahara/Morocco

We set the alarm for 5:30 am so as to leave our hotel room in Laayoune by 6:15 to meet Nico, co-owner with his wife of Martina Dakhla Rovers. We were to meet about an hour north of Dakhla at a gas station where we hoped to fill up again with gasoline. The evening before, after a 20-minute round trip walk to a café restaurant for dinner - we both ordered pizzas – I had filled the 4Runner's gas tank to the top. At a previous gas stop that day I filled both emergency 5-gallon roof top containers with gas. Still, there was some concern about having enough gas for the trip since most of the filling stations down here only have diesel.

We set out to explore the desert in the dark. I drove slowly at about 25 mph until we were out of town and on the two-lane highway. I probably averaged less than 40 mph – wanted plenty of time to stop for any highway sleeping camels or highway crossing camels or donkeys; not to mention bicycling or motorcycling Moroccans.



Many of the towns have either a large arched wall to drive through or some kind of display to let you know you have arrived. Also, most of the towns in southern Morocco have a long entry stretch of road lined with palm trees, streetlights and very wide sidewalks.

The only stop we made was to top off our gas tank in Boujdour about 9:30. After topping off the gas tank we stopped at a café for coffee and a breakfast of rolls. We arrived at our meeting point at 11:15 but the station was out of gasoline, only diesel. Nico and I discussed our gas and the range this gave the 4Runner. Nico said if we ran short of gasoline before we could fill up in

Aoussard – typically this station had gasoline – his wife Martina would bring us whatever we needed to make it to Dakhla.

Martina and Nico are Italian and mid to late 40's. Martina has a doctor's degree in ocean biology and Nico worked in the ocean shipping industry up till 2016 when they decided to move to Dakhla and make a living there doing whatever. They had discovered Dakhla about 2014 when kite surfing. The "whatever" to make a living turned out to be a tour company.



Nico and his assistant on day two of our desert drive.

I found them on the internet in Jan. 2020. Contacted Martina only to find they were 100% booked from Jan. – April and then some. In early mid-February someone cancelled, and we grabbed their spot. And then the world shut down due to the virus and we eventually made it back to the U.S. I stayed in touch with Martina for the next year and we were their second tour of 2021.



This is the Sahara and yes there are camels here. Nico said most likely any camel we saw would be owned by someone. Brands are on the neck or rear thigh. These camels were a couple of hundred meters from a water tank.

We spent the next three days following Nico and his assistant. We drove slowly, we raced through other parts bouncing along at 40 mph, we avoided the mine fields, we stopped at an abandoned Moroccan fort, we drove through the first Moroccan defensive berm at least twice – the 4th and most current berm is off limits to civilians – although we did spend our last night less than 20 miles from the berm, we drove over rocks, hard sand and soft sand. I got a little cocky late on the second day switching from 2-wheel drive to 4-wheel drive on the go when I switched too late and got stuck. So much for attempting to conserve gas.



Sand you can get stuck in and the rocky desert makes your tires old before their time.



We stopped to take a bearing and Nico saw this unexploded shell. He forwarded the coordinates to someone who will remove it.

While I reduced my tire pressure from 36 pounds to about 25 pounds (in Australia I went as low as 16 pounds on one occasion) Nico shoveled sand out of the front of our two left side tires. And 30 seconds later we were flying across the desert at 40 mph or more.

As bad as getting stuck in the sand was, it was our first night in the desert and Nancy and I trying to remember how to put up our tent was even more embarrassing. It took us an hour and only an hour because Nancy finally remembered she had color-coded the loops and the rods with nail polish and we could eventually make out the colors and get our tent up. In the meantime Nico and his assistant had erected a 12' x 12' x 7' high tent, tried to help us, disassembled part of the 4-wheel drive, cleaned it of sand and re-installed in their vehicle, and begun tea and dinner.



Second night we had the tent up in less than ten minutes. Both nights we used the rain cover on our tent – so as to reduce the amount of sand that will blow through the window screening.

The third night we stayed in a vacation home – not a U.S. vacation home by any stretch of the imagination -- the Rovers rent for their tours, the best in town. Solar hot water, generator for electricity, a bathroom that worked in a basic function – good enough to shower off two days of desert dust/dirt/sand.

The desert was wonderful. If you didn't like the scenery wait 30 minutes and you had new and different scenery. At times this part of the Sahara Desert reminded us of the Utah canyons, other times of west Texas, then southern Arizona without the Saguaros, I think we were even reminded of the high Wyoming plateau. The colors changed from red to white to yellow to brown and mountains from blue to pink to purple all depending on viewpoint, time of day, and sand in the air.



Some parts of the desert are flat, sandy and desolate.



Thought to be a pre-Muslim tomb. Maybe a dozen in the area.

Very few spring flowers. Short acacia trees or no trees spread across the desert. Saw several lizards, dung beetles and Nancy and I scared a large rabbit into running out into the open and away from us. The first night Nico volunteered to take us on a mammal hunting expedition. However, we were tired and said we would rather sleep between 10 pm and 2 am or later than walk/drive the desert. We did see five new bird species and a total of less than 20 birds in our three days.

We learned a lot of current Western Sahara/Morocco history during our time with Nico and a couple of days later with Martina (a day trip with her and she drove leaving me with nothing to do but look out the windows – great!). For those who missed it one of the last things trump did as President was recognize Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara and in return Morocco recognized Israel. The UN still has various posts scattered across the Western Sahara.



Exploring the remains of the abandoned Moroccan fort. Also saw a new bird for us and after our exploring the fort we had lunch.



Our third day brought us to this canyon/water hole. A 15 to 20 minute walk from where we parked the vehicles across sand and then up the rocks. At the end of the walk is a rain filled and very shaded water hole. Rain fills the rock hole and shade slows down the evaporation.



Nico told us this is a favorite photo opportunity of their guests. Nancy and I jumped out of the 4Runner to take our tourist photo.

Final bit of history: Morocco was the first country in the world to recognize the United States of America as an independent country.



Was lost in Dakhla when I saw this truck wash. The young guy spent more than 45 minutes washing the 4Runner – 4 hours later back at the hotel and sand was already evident on the rear bumper. Paid 100 dh or a little less than \$12 and this included the tip to the washer who was very happy with me.