

## Laying Low

The news that al Qaeda had blown up the French Embassy in Mauritania a few days before I arrived, killing several people, was a reminder that the group was active in the country. About a month before I arrived, a couple members of the terrorist group had kidnapped an American professor working there. He resisted so they shot him in the head, killing him. The thought of bypassing Mauritania occurred to me several times. I could just travel to Senegal which is calmer and also, I was sick; I hadn't eaten for a couple days so maybe just returning to Senegal where I would fly home from was a good idea. But I decided since I paid over \$100 for a visa and was already next door in Mali, I may as well visit. I would just lay low and leave if I felt it was necessary.

The bus trip into Mauritania was a long, hellacious trip. Because there is no international service, the trip required a long bus trip in Mali, a switch at the border, a long wait at the border and then boarding the Mauritania bus for a long trip to Nouakchott. As we got closer to the capital the police stops increased because of the heightened security due to the embassy bombing. This delayed my arrival even longer. I was told it would be over 30 hours on the bus; it turned out to be 35. There was no air conditioning or windows to open either. The driver would open the doors periodically but that let in the sand so he couldn't give us ventilation too often. It was a horrible trip but near the end I was able to eat a whole apple, so my appetite was coming back.

Due to my illness, I didn't do much in Nouakchott which was my plan. I arrived at Auberge Menata and took a shower, a hot shower, which despite it being hot outside was a welcome change. I got cash from the one ATM in the country that takes international cards, bought water and a cookie and then slept. The next day I was able to eat 2 eggs and a danish and the next day a full meal. The market in the capital had several items that I bought including a couple of rugs, some mint tea and a blue outfit that many of the locals wear. It was near the end of the trip so it was a good time to souvenir shop.

In the northwest corner of the country is the coastal city of Nouadhibou. It is a little cooler because it's on the ocean and was windy. Not much to see though besides the old port and a fish market. It's more Arab and traditional in this area as well.

Mauritania is about half Arab and half black, but the Arabs seem to have more power economically and politically and the leader is Arab. He is more moderate which some Arabs don't like which has led to some radicalism.

The overnight train to Choum was via the world's longest passenger train, an iron ore train but there are passenger seats in the back two cars. Train tickets are available, but



they are just to get on the train not for an actual seat. When the train arrived, people scrambled and trampled old ladies to get on the train. It was difficult with a backpack strapped to my front and back, but a young local man helped me trample and push people to get a seat. The seats were cushioned but had springs protruding in some places. A seat is better than standing which others had to do while others decided to ride on the roof which is free. The train is nearly two miles long, so it is quite a sight, but slow and jerky. The beginning of the trip allows for views of the desert but by Choum it was definitely time to leave.



There is little to see in Choum but it is the train stop for Atar which then leads to Chinguetti, the gateway to the Sahara Desert. The city of Chinguetti is also a historically important city. It is the seventh holiest city in Islam and has many libraries with old Islamic manuscripts especially those dealing with Islamic law. The city was where many in West Africa gathered before crossing the Sahara to reach Mecca on the hajj. Those who could not afford the pilgrimage to Arabia would also gather here to meet with the pilgrims. Chinguetti was also an old

caravan city as people crossed the Sahara but those days are long gone.

Despite its declining importance, both the old town and new town of Chinguetti are of interest. The new city has most of the hotels and restaurants and the old town is the historic center. In the old town, the Friday Mosque is a stone building with five ostrich eggs on top. Unfortunately, many of the buildings are falling apart as the desert continues to slowly destroy them. Strolling through the streets, little kids greet visitors and teenagers dance and flirt with each other. On the edge of the old town, I sat and watched the camels and herders return from the desert as the sun set. Walking back a short half mile stretch of road to the new town, I returned to my hotel and organized my trip into the desert.

On the Sahara Desert trip, I was expecting more camel ride and less desert death march. The bigger sand dunes cannot safely be traversed with passengers on the camel, so I had to walk which made for a difficult trek. The middle of summer, called the Guetna season, is sizzling hot with temps over 110 degrees. The scorching sand slid into my sandals and it felt like fire ants gnawing at my feet. We mercifully made it to a small oasis, and I was able to lie down and also rehydrate as it felt as if I was nearing heat stroke. Then we walked a couple more hours before sundown.

Despite the painful trek, there were a couple of memorable moments. One was meeting other people in the desert, extended families crossing the desert. The men and older children usually walked and the women and very young were on donkeys with the family supplies (including possibly their shelter) on the camels. It seems like a difficult life. The sunrises and sunsets in the desert are also remarkable and it is one of the few parts of the day that the temperature is comfortable.

Mauritania was the country I visited after Mali, while Burkina Faso was the one I visited before. The calm capital of this calm country is Ouagadougou. There really isn't much to see as a tourist but it seems more organized and safer than other capitals in West Africa. One noticeable area of disorganization is in the southern part of the city center in which the government destroyed many of the residential buildings. The government then required that only buildings that were at least six stories high could be built in the area. The idea was to have the West Africa version of Manhattan.



They are still waiting for investment so that the buildings can be built.

The flattened, barren area is conspicuous among a fairly vibrant city center. There are government buildings such as the Justice Palace, World Globe Statue and the People's Place. The Grand Market was partially destroyed so it is not as unruly as other grand markets. The Great Mosque and main Cathedral (where I stayed by) are also worth looking at while visiting the center.

Laying low in Mauritania and Burkina Faso turned out to be a good plan. In Mauritania, the al Qaeda stories were unnerving, but the heat and my physical and mental state were more of a deterrent to a longer stay. Burkina is pleasant but doesn't have that many things to see. The main attraction, Park National du W, was closed during the summer. I was pleased with what I saw in the two countries, but there are more possibilities for those who do not want to lay low.