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## Where Hospitality Is an Oasis

By CHRISTINE NEGRONI

"FORGET about the problems between America and the Muslim world -- tonight you are a Mauritanian," Alyen Ould Nolkhayatt said, motioning for me to eat my dinner.

Six months earlier, I had never heard of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, population 2.7 million, a West African nation of fishing and iron mining, where the Atlantic ends and the Sahara begins. I'd been invited on an expedition to recover the wreckage of a BOAC airliner that made a forced landing in the desert in May 1952. The 18 people aboard, including a baby, had been stranded in one of the harshest environments on earth. I thought the accident and unlikely survival of all but one of them was a compelling tale and might make a good book.

For four days in May, the passengers and crew languished in the desert awaiting rescue, only to learn that their location was so inaccessible they'd have to get out on their own. With local people providing camels and guidance, they made the harrowing 15-mile walk to an oasis. The first officer, Ted Haslam, died of heat exhaustion shortly after completing the journey.

On the 50th anniversary of the event, Rob Watt, a British police officer whose hobby is desert history, arranged an expedition to the site presuming that the plane, which he'd last seen in 1995, was still there, preserved in the dry heat. Accompanying him were Olwen Haslam, the co-pilot's widow, and one of only two known living survivors, the infant, Richard Gurney, now a 51-year-old auto mechanic in New Zealand. A television documentary crew would come along.

To write about the survivors' ordeal, I planned to make the same walk, from the crash site to the oasis. It would be a 16-hour walk with two guides and two camels.

Mr. Nolkhayatt, the man responsible for outfitting the entire expedition with food, water, tents, camels and other essentials, had also arranged for my camel drivers, Sidi Ould Dauh and Ahmed Ould Ed-Kayer, promising me that they knew every inch of the Mauritanian Sahara.

I'd been studying Arabic, and Mr. Nolkhayatt gave me a list of essential phrases in Hassaniya, the local dialect. But the word Sidi and Ahmed used most often was, "Christina!" bellowed in a manner that suggested I was about to take a fatal step.

"Christina!" Sidi barked not long after we'd begun our walk. "Ne'sti?" Are you sleepy?

"La." No, I insisted, and in fact I was not. I was enjoying the walk, marveling at how the sand dunes, pumpkin orange under the sun, had turned silver in the moon light.

Like the people on the BOAC flight, I had started my trip in the cool of the evening to reduce my walking time during the day, when temperatures can rise to 130 degrees.

Sidi was chatty, and I was eager to practice my rough Arabic. Pointing to the lead camel I asked, "Ismak Jemil?" What is the camel's name?

"Shamel," he replied.

I repeated the question pointing to the second camel. "Shamel," he replied again.

For the next hour we worked on Sidi's pronunciation of the English hard C until he finally had "camel," and I learned that real nomads don't name their camels.

We kept a steady pace, the guides selecting the shallowest path up dunes 15 to 20 feet high. We sunk calf deep into the soft sand on the descent. Sometimes we were able to walk on plains composed of hard-packed sand and we cut a haphazard track, reluctant to stray off the easy walking surface.

We'd been on the march for about 90 minutes when Ahmed tossed his walking stick to the ground in the path of his camel, which stopped abruptly. Both men knelt, pressed their foreheads into the sand and began evening prayers. The desert was silent except for the murmur of the men reminding themselves of their humble place in the universe and the greatness of God. Standing nearby, I said a prayer on the same theme.

Around 1 a.m. we climbed to a low plateau of hard-packed sand with a small stand of thorn trees. It was nta you. Time for tea, a ritual rigid in its preparation and nearly religious in its consumption.

The strong, sugary tea is prepared in a small teapot that sits directly in an open fire and is served in what looks like shot glasses. Tea time is over only after three rounds have been served.

I had some tea and fell asleep. When I awoke, Sidi and Ahmed were reclining nearby. One million dazzling stars filled the sky.

"Yalla nemchou." Let's go.

"Boukra," they said in unison. Tomorrow.

"La. La. Yalla nemchou."

Ahmed and Sidi were unyielding, and soon were asleep. In spite of my worries about walking in the heat of the day, I slept, too.

I awoke just before dawn. Ahmed was kneading an enormous lump of dough for desert bread, which he baked in a recess of sand beneath the fire. We ate it with dates and cheese and started the second leg of our trip while the dunes were still cool.

Aioun Lebgar, the oasis community where we were headed, was not unknown to me. Earlier in the week, I had gone there with Mrs. Haslam and Mr. Gurney, who wanted to thank the villagers for their help 50 years earlier and for their ongoing care of Ted Haslam's gravesite. I'd interviewed the 68-year-old man who had arrived at the crash site with food, water, tents and camels. He and his neighbors were credited with keeping the survivors alive.

The dunes had given way to a plateau littered with sharp-edged stones. Above rose a steep range of ugly, desolate hills 300 to 400 feet high. Ahmed knew a pass where we could cross at 200 feet, though the area was strewn with shoebox-size rocks. By now, the sun was fierce.

The precariousness of this section of the journey became apparent when Sidi and Ahmed motioned for me to precede them so they could attend to the camels. I chose each step carefully, the stones clacking and shifting with every footfall. Behind me, I saw the camel drivers clearing a path for the animals by moving the stones one by one.

The Sahara is at times arrestingly beautiful: horizon-to-horizon vistas of sand in a palette of colors, luxurious arches of palm trees swaying in the wind. Where it is ugly, it is relentlessly so: heaving mountains of rough stone unbroken by the slightest sign of vegetation, vast expanses of sand obscured by a veil of dust.

From the top of the pass, I could appreciate the juxtaposition of the spare and the lush. I could see date palms in the distance. Pointing them out to Sidi I said, "Zane." Beautiful. He nodded and with a big smile said, "Aioun Lebgar."

"Aioun Lebgar?" I repeated. The sun was high in the sky; it was not yet noon. Could we really be that close?

"Moomtaz!" I shouted. Excellent. But how could it be? We had followed the survivors' route and yet altogether, we could have walked no more than seven hours.

Relieved and ecstatic, I walked the last few miles with renewed energy.

In Mauritania, people take seriously their religious obligation to provide zakat, which includes hospitality to travelers. A bowl of zrig, a frothy drink of goat milk, sugar and water, was offered; as ever, someone started making tea.

In the afternoon, Yousef bin Olan, a driver for the expedition, arrived to take me to the old city of Atar in northwestern Mauritania, where I would rejoin the

rest of the group on the way back to the capital, Nouakchott. I said a tearful goodbye to Sidi and Ahmed, choking back the urge to say, "I'll send you copies of the pictures." Where do you write to a nomad?

Although the trip was not what I expected -- my seven-hour trek was not the harrowing walk to survival I had envisioned as the centerpiece of a book -- I'd come to Mauritania following a story that was, at its core, about hospitality. And like those aboard that airplane 50 years earlier, I had found it in abundance.

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