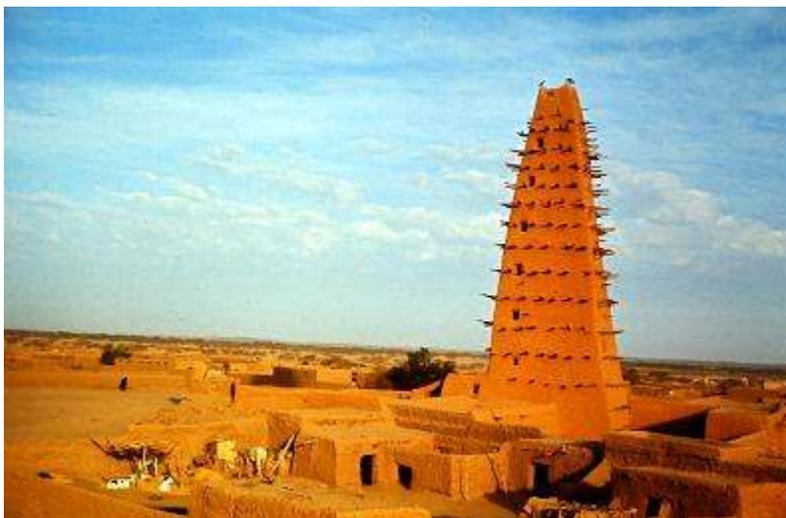


Leave in the Sahara 1961

David N Hall

I had intended to go to the Tibesti mountains. I wanted to learn more about the Tibbu people who, Herodotus said, were fleet of foot and spoke in a squeak. Wilfred Thesiger, the great explorer of Arabia, had seen small crocodiles in the few water holes in the mountains when there in 1938 when he climbed Emi Koussi. When I applied for permission to enter from the French Embassy in Ghana, I was refused, Ghana being extremely unpopular with the French at the time. Hence I had to switch plans to the southern Sahara in Niger and Mali.

Lance Corporal Davies, half Ghanaian and half Scott, was to join me from the Squadron, and I knew him reasonably well. He was short and wiry with six years good service behind him, and he was keen to join me as the only Ghanaian. I had adapted my Land Rover to take sand channels and sun compass, and to have panniers for soft goods such as bedding on either side. We motored along the coast road laden with petrol and food, through Togo and Dahomey, and on entering Nigeria I was asked for my vaccination certificate which I did not have with me. I was then threatened with a dirty looking needle in a tobacco tin with water in it. Eventually we were allowed through, even without having to bribe my way past the needle. We drove on from the coast, up through the rain forest, past the Jos Plateau, to Kano, where a kindly Mr Pine-Coffin, a British official, gave us the use of his shower and provided some fresh food. We drove on into Niger through the busy town of Zinder to the desert town of Agades with its famous mosque tower with bits of branch sticking out for builders to climb and replace mud washed away by the annual rains. We had covered 1,500 miles from Accra to Agades. Davies had brought insufficient blankets for the cold winter nights in the desert, not believing that it could be cold, so now was the time to buy him one before we went up into the desert mountains of the Air.



We were delayed a few days in Agades (Photo of mosque with its scaffolding) waiting to obtain local passes. I learnt the meaning of time to the local people. They did not seem to have a thought for 'saving time'. We camped outside the town near a Tuareg encampment where we learnt some of our first words of Tamashek, and how they

lived and ate. We found the people friendly and helpful.

I recall there was a Tuareg prisoner being taken to the gaol who would not be seeing the desert for some time, and I felt for his yearning for the open spaces. I discussed that with the Tuareg family, and they confirmed my concern, but said that it had been something to do with a sword fight. Some eight years later was to visit the uranium mine at Arlit in the western Aïr, I was horrified to find a shanty town of Tuareg families near the mine for the workers. These families, attracted by employment, had dragged themselves from their true environment of their open desert into such appalling conditions.

It was with the family in the wadi near Agades that we quickly learnt the Tuareg reliance on tea and sugar. Like the Arabs in North Africa, they offer tea to any passer by. Taking tea is a slow and formal procedure. It allows ample time to complete greetings and to ask for news and discuss pasture. Each of three glasses will come out weaker, but sweeter. There is negro or verte. One would never ever refuse tea, and would not leave until everyone's glass is cold.

With passes at last arranged, we set off by night with the Chief of Police as a passenger to Iferouane, an oasis two hours driving along a dirt track way up in the hills which was where we would leave the vehicle and resort to camels. The Chief of Police was going up into the Aïr to investigate a fight between two Tuareg there. They had been using their large heavy swords they all carried. It was difficult going along a rough track which it would have been easy to lose sight of had he not been directing us. Two or three times he told me to halt. In the headlights there might be a gazelle or a bustard. He would raise his rifle and we would throw the body into the back of the Land Rover - meat for the people of Iferouane. With arms and ammunition now pouring into the region I fear that most wild life will have been shot for meat.



It was late at night when we arrived in the small oasis of Iferouane. The Chef de Poste, Monsieur le Commandant, welcomed us and gave us comfortable accommodation. We woke in daylight to find the stunning beauty of the mountain of Tamgak to the east beyond gardens of salad and vegetables, and sandy hills with dark granite boulders in other directions. That morning we arranged with the Commandant to hire camels and a guide to penetrate the Tamgak Mountain which had a deep fault running right through it. We calculated the cost to be about four shillings a day per animal or man who turned out to be a very fit young man called Marmounta. As so often happens when arranging camels one is assured that they will be ready the next morning, but when the time comes, they are still out and will be collected from pasture. Eventually we loaded the angry camels and headed eastwards to the mountain travelling on into the fault cutting through Tamgak. While the mountain looked close in its slightly bluish haze it took many hours to reach it, and the rough path involved going round huge boulders. The oued (wadi or dried river bed) was green with palm trees acacia and shrubs. We were making good

headway into the deep cleft, and suddenly we came upon a deep blue pool surrounded by green reeds. I remembered hearing of Thesiger's crocodiles he had found in the rock pools of Tibesti, and while the weather was pleasant in December, it was not warm enough to swim. I extracted some weed which eventually I sent to Kew for identification with other material. However, after months in the desert, the samples were far from being in perfect condition for them - as they rightly pointed out.

Marmounta, our guide, became a good friend for our journeys in Niger. As we climbed the oued the route became harder for the camels as well as ourselves. At one point I wanted to see what it was like higher up the cliffs on either side, and at once Marmounta rose to the occasion and climbed with me, but he was like a mountain goat: fast, nimble and very fit. On the next day we came upon another pool which looked similarly inviting, and it was shortly after that we came upon a Tuareg family living in small shelters with their herd of goats. We spent the night nearby and were presented with a kid goat and some camel milk. Marmounta skinned the animal and hung it on a tree until the fire was ready. Then he took the liver and kidneys and probably other delicious parts and cooked them rapidly in the hot cinders. These were the delicacies. He was a dab hand butchering the kid and preparing to boil it. Out of his robes he produced a ball of spice and cut some into the pot. As he did so I noticed the worms receding into it.



It was soon time to make the return journey down the oued to Iferouane to be there in time for National Day celebrations. When, in later years, I studied the space imagery of Tamgak I realized that had we gone on for another day we might have seen the sand sea on the other side of the mountain.

The day following our arrival back in Iferouane, Tuareg started assembling for National Day in the oasis from the surrounding area, faces veiled so that only eyes could be seen, armed with their heavy swords as usual, and dressed



overall in their best. Many were on their decorated camels with heads reigned back to show them off. We were popular with the women because we used my Land Rover to bring them in from the outskirts of the oasis. We also used it to start the camel race, and then the children's' donkey race. There was a band of a piper and a drummer. A highlight of the day was the 'tendé' when women squatted in a large circle, one of them with small drums. They chanted tunes, and then the young men, mounted on their camels in all their finery, would glide past them, showing off.

A few days later we were off in a westerly direction this time with the intention of recording on camera some of the rock carvings Marmounta had told us about. We travelled about 20 miles a day, stopping for a break at midday when we would make a fire from dead wood in the area. Marmounta would mix flour and water, and the dough would then be placed under hot ashes to rise a little and cook. That, with the sand shaken off, with a little goat's cheese and three small glasses of tea, all made an excellent lunch. This time I had changed from my army boots, which were giving me blisters, into a pair of *ship-ships*, thonged open sandals, made from goat or gazelle skin in a Tuareg design. They were ideal, even for bounding over granite boulders, though there is a sharp thorny grass seed that seems attracted to open feet.

I found Lance Corporal Davies a reasonable travelling companion. We could have a good laugh, but there were times when he seemed really depressed. He would then talk little and be utterly boot-faced. I could not get through to him. It must have been very strange for him to come on such a journey of three months.



Eventually we started to find carvings on the sides of boulders above the oued. There were giraffe, elephants, and even a rhino, but the most astonishing were the carvings of people in a kind of skirt with a headgear rather like that of a diving helmet, but larger with spikes sticking out. They looked like men from Mars. I later discovered that the 'skirts' were leather, that the helmets were probably masks with feathers sticking out.

They carried small shields and a lance. When a few years later I went to visit M Henri Lhote in Paris at the Musé de l'homme, he was thrilled to see the picture of the rhino so far north in the southern Sahara. On our journey back to Iferouane a stately man on camel stopped a safe distance from us. Only his steely dark eyes could be seen through his veil, and Marmounta told us to stay while he rode over to greet him. After the many formal greetings the man was clearly asking questions about us, glancing at us rather disapprovingly. Then suddenly he turned his camel and went off at a gallop, leaving the desert empty again.

Because our course of travel had been a series of bends, sometimes following the course of oueds, I could not make a map of our route. Many Tuareg in those days would not have understood maps, and measured distance in camel time, and direction was given by pointing.

After that trip we drove away to Mali, extremely sad to be leaving Marmounta and the Commandant and many friends made during our time there. Many of the villagers came to see us off, and the Commandant gave us a formal farewell. We drove through Niamey, the capital, and on into Mali, visiting the village of my batman, Tahoua (the name of the village) where I was greeted with great warmth. Then we drove as far as we reasonably could to the north of Mali to the oasis of Tessalit and Kidal. On arrival at Kidal a cable awaited us from General Steve Otu, the head of the Ghana Army, wishing us the best. I think it was in Tessalit that one evening we were sitting on a stone step, and I was pointing out Polaris, the North Pole star to Davies, and a pair of headlights way in the distance signified a visitor coming down the route from Algeria. Polaris was above those lights which helped to identify the star. The visitor was the Australian born traveller and writer, Barbara Toy, whom your Ma and I came to know in later years. The next morning I helped with some translation in conversation between the Commandant and Barbara, and before she left she gave us two oranges. Never could oranges taste so good after a couple of months of no fruit.



From Tessalit we made excursions by camel into the Adrar des Iforas with Saladin our guide who knew his camels well. We found a wide variety of rock carvings in this area, mainly of animals. At one stage a camel became sick. Saladin bled the

beast, giving it a cut near the eye. The camel recovered quickly and on we went. We learnt in the Adrar des Iforas again that the tribes from the south of Mali, in dominant control of the country, were taxing commodities such as tea and sugar, the staple items of the Tuareg in the north, leading to hard feelings between north, the land of the Tuareg, and south of Mali. This divide between tribes clearly exists today.

After three or four weeks we headed south to the River Niger and along to Timbuktu. Never far from the River Niger, we found ourselves in savannah land of open land with trees and 'fossilised' dunes, no doubt active sand dunes at some drier stage in the past. One night before reaching Timbuktu we had set up camp when, just before dark, a camel train arrived and set up camp for the night



nearby. They were friendly, hardy looking Tuareg who collected an enormous pile of wood and made a fire of Guy Fawkes size. They sang and laughed late into the night, well after I was asleep, yet when we woke the following morning they had gone, travelling to Taoudenni, the remote salt mine some 260 miles north in the Sahara. We were told that there the workers are more or less slaves. There is no way out, and their little earnings lock them into this totally isolated and desolate place in the Sahara. Later, in 1969, a military prison was established there for political prisoners.

We camped well outside Timbuktu near an Arabic family, the father of whom was known as Monsieur le Longue because of his unusual height. They lived in a large white tent - different to the dark and smaller Tuareg habitations. Le Longue always had to be back in his tent by four o'clock to listen to the BBC Overseas news, which was the only news he trusted.

A Tuareg family nearby had a one eyed slave women who, whenever we went to visit, would be in charge of lighting the fire for the traditional three glasses of tea. She would squat on the ground apart from us and the owner would throw the matches on the ground for her to pick them up and start the fire. It seemed that she was treated appallingly.



We went into the town of Timbuktu and were told that we had to live in the government rest house, and were warned not to take any photographs. I can't say that I obeyed the latter. I did

not manage to photograph a tragic sight of a woman chained to a log in a cellar with the open door above her. We saw the house that had been occupied by Alexander Laing, the first European to reach Timbuktu. He was murdered on the night of his departure in September 1826, and his papers have never been found.

We hired somebody with a punt to take us down the busy backwater towards the Niger River. The boards of the boat were sealed with reeds, and the punts were larger and heavier than those on the Thames. However, I stood bare feet on the stern poling efficiently much to the surprise of other boats passing by.

Having crossed the River Niger to the south side on the way south to Ghana via the wonderfully named capital, Ouagadougou, we passed the Hombori heights. For almost a day's travelling we could see a huge wedding cake of a mountain on the horizon ahead, and as we got nearer we detected the tall chimney shaped mountains as well. The only accident we had was along the track when a goat shot out in front of us and was knocked dead. We shouted, but there was nobody about, so I cut the beast's throat and pointed it eastward in the hope that if it were found it could be eaten. A little later we came across a hefty looking wart hog nearby. I got out of the Land Rover, but got back in quickly when it started pawing the ground and looking aggressive with its short horns and hard looking head.



The moment we crossed into northern Ghana we found that people waved madly to us and at once we felt among friends. Spending one night in Tamale, in the north, I met the wife of an officer in the squadron. Probably totally misunderstanding, I thought she pointed out where she lived and said that if there was anything she could do, please call (or words to that effect). It sounded as though she was offering a certain service! She was Victoria Afrifa, the wife of one of my officers. Years later he was to become Ghana's Finance Minister, but, with General Fred Akufo, another of my officers, they were taken to the beach and shot during a coup.

On arrival back in Teshi, Accra Davies and I parted, having had three months together travelling hundreds of miles by Land Rover and camel. We did not keep in touch with each other for very long. He had been a good companion, though at times he could be extremely sulky, rather like a disgruntled teenager. He probably found it difficult being with a foreigner, and one who was an officer in his army,

Before leaving Ghana I produced a report which included some notes on Tamashek, the Taureg language. Later, when back in England, I produced an article in *Wish Stream*, the Sandhurst journal, and in *Sapper* a Royal Engineer publication about the expedition.

I had a few weeks to await my ship to Liverpool with my Land Rover, and the time was full of interest. There was some political unrest. The Queen was to visit Ghana, and

Duncan Sands was visiting, based at the British High Commission. Within the Squadron I learnt that there was a plot to bomb the President's palace using a two inch mortar. A soldier was going to meet somebody from the Squadron to borrow a hand book on the weapon. Captain Osafo and I drew pistols and ammunition and lay in wait to ambush the visitor, but he failed to come. I rang the British High Commission to inform them and was asked to come and brief the High Commissioner and Duncan Sands at once. In fact there would have been little danger to the palace or the President from a two inch mortar, especially when fired from a distance by a totally inexperienced terrorist.

In the following days a few bombs were left at strategic spots, but some failed to go off and the explosive was still in a plastic bag. I rushed round to make them safe. One had used safety fuse - far, far too much. This was coming to the end of Kwame Nkrumah's reign as President of Ghana.

I was the penultimate British officer to leave Ghana having been seconded from the British Army. I already knew that my next posting was to the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst as a military instructor.