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# SANDS OF THE SAHARA: A TRANS-SAHARAN CROSSING FROM MOROCCO TO MALI

*An Anniversary Follow the Leader Trip with Alberto Nicheli*

### TRIP DETAILS

22 days ~ Morocco,  
Mauritania, & Mali

20 days extremely rugged  
4-wheel-drive travel

12 nights camping,  
9 nights hotels

### 2009 DATES

Sep 27–Oct 18

### 2009 LAND COST

\$7,195 per person  
(10-16 members)

\$7,695 per person  
(6-9 members)

\$1,200 single supplement

TRIP LEVEL  
MODERATE

### HIGHLIGHTS

- *Explore the remote wilderness of the Sahara desert on an expedition crossing this unvisited and pristine landscape—nobody else is offering anything like this!*
- *Unique cultural encounters with Berbers, salt caravan traders, and the descendents of the Moors*
- *Spectacular landscape, images, and culture—magnificent opportunities for photographers*
- *Visit the legendary cities of Marrakesh, Bamako, and the Oasis of Chinguetti*



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*“My idea of a perfect tour is based on an itinerary that starts at one point and ends at a different point, crossing totally different environments. What’s more, the two points are in far different geographic, cultural, and climatic environments, and the itinerary brings us to discover a variety of realities. The line of the itinerary must be like a story that we experience together: from tribe to tribe, oasis to dunes, desert to Sahel, ocean to island, forest to Savanna...”*

*~ Alberto Nicheli*

Say the word “Sahara” out loud, and without so much as a photograph or even a line of description, that simple name will evoke vivid images in the minds of any traveler. The Sahara is simply iconic, one of the last great wildernesses left in an increasingly crowded world. Stretching from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, covering three and a half million square miles—nearly the size of the continental U.S.—the Sahara is practically synonymous with the word “desert.” The empty reaches of this shifting landscape has never been the place for everyone, but those who rise to the challenge of leaving civilization far behind are forever changed by their journey.

Our trip across the Sahara leads us from paved roads to rutted tracks to invisible dune trails that exist only in the memories of our skilled guides. This is Berber country, where nomadic caravans still lead their hardy teams through high mountain passes and endless miles of sand. Refuge from the ever present sun can be found in the form of hidden, palm-shaded oases, or by waiting for the cover of night, when shimmering stars pierce the dark sky.

The Sahara, of course, is more than just sand dunes, and the beauty of this trip is the great variety of terrain we will be able to cover. Traversing Morocco, Mauritania, and Mali allows us to take in many distinct landscapes, cultures, and historic traditions. We’ll see it all, from the jagged peaks of the High Atlas mountains to the fertile marshlands of Banc d’Arguin National Park, where tens of thousands of shorebirds nest. We’ll travel generally from North to South, with excursions to the coast and cities, following in the footsteps of the ancient Berber caravans.

People have inhabited North Africa since the dawn of recorded history, and we’ll visit the ruins of the ancient world alongside the wonders of the modern. In the swirling *souks* of Marrakesh we’ll sample timeless recipes that



are fragrant with cinnamon and mint; in the Malian capital of Bamako we'll observe the free-spirited rise of Africa's fastest growing city. Along the way, we'll explore mosques, temples, stone-walled libraries and tiny fishing villages. Like the ever-shifting sands, the influences on North Africa undergo a constant churn, mixing traditions from the French, Spanish, Arab, Berber, and Central African cultures. One civilization augments the next; new ways of life arise and the old ones are relegated to the past, taking the form of mysterious inscriptions and nameless tombs.

The desert may seem empty, but it is never silent. Those who know their way through the Sahara say that the desert speaks, whether it is the rushing of the wind or the trickle of water feeding a hidden pool. Northern and Western Africa is a world of extremes: the emptiness of the dunes becomes the fertility of the marsh; the din of a bazaar gives way to the peace of an oasis; the heat of the day becomes the chill of the evening. Come with us to the Sahara and hear the voice of the desert for yourself.



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FOR INFORMATION OR RESERVATIONS, CALL TOLL-FREE | 888 MTSOBK (687 6235)

## ITINERARY

☞ This trip begins with a rendezvous in Marrakesh, Morocco on the morning of Day 1.

### DAY 1 ~ Arrival in Marrakesh, Morocco

Your tour leader or a Mountain Travel Sobek representative will meet you outside the customs and immigration area at the Marrakesh airport upon your morning arrival. He or she will escort you to your hotel. Your first day in North Africa will be spent in the ancient city of Marrakesh, known as the City of the Seven Saints, as the tombs of several of the saints are found here. It is also one of the centers of the mystical Sufi religion, with its whirling dervishes and exquisite poetic tradition. The tombs along with the many mosques and palaces lend this quickly modernizing city an ancient atmosphere.

After lunch (on your own) and a trip briefing by the leader at the hotel, we'll take an optional afternoon walk to the medina, the fabulous "old town" of Marrakesh, where we'll wander its narrow streets and enjoy the circus of entertainments of Marrakesh's famous square, Djemma El Fna, with its snake-charmers and fire-eaters—a veritable scene out of *The Thousand and One Nights!*

The cuisine of Morocco mirrors the culture—diverse, colorful, festive—and it relies on an array of spices to produce distinctive results. The flavors of cinnamon, saffron, and mint collide, and tonight in a local restaurant we'll have a chance to sample some of the tagines that characterize the food of this region. Dinner at a traditional restaurant in the French Quarter.

D...TBA

*Founded in 1070–72 by the Almoravids, Marrakesh remained a political, economic and cultural centre for a long period. Its influence was felt throughout the western Muslim world, from North Africa to Andalusia. It has several impressive monuments dating from that period: the Koutoubiya Mosque, the Kasbah, the battlements, monumental doors, gardens, etc. Later architectural jewels include the Bandiâ Palace, the Ben Youssef Madrasa, the Saadian Tombs, several great residences and Place Jamaâ El Fna, a veritable open-air theatre.*

~ Medina of Marrakesh,  
[whc.unesco.org](http://whc.unesco.org)

### DAYS 2-3 ~ From the High Atlas to the Ocean

Using 4x4 vehicles, we'll head into the High Atlas Mountains. The Berbers have lived in North Africa for over 5,000 years, but with the Arab invasion in the 7th century, this distinctive tribe was forced into the mountains, where they still live. Though they have adopted Islam as their religion, their culture is still distinctively Berber, with its own language and customs. Along our route, we'll pass through several Berber settlements and have a chance to interact with some of the locals.

Dominating the scenery in this region is Oukaimeden, a nearly 11,000 foot peak that is used as a ski resort in wintertime. At the high pass of Tizi-n-Test, we'll straddle Morocco's dividing line, with Marrakesh on one side and the Sahara stretching out on the other. As we descend, we'll stop to visit the oasis of Darendant. From here a rutted track takes us winding down to the ancient seaside village of Ifni, a Spanish slave-trading port until the Spaniards were expelled by the Berbers in 1524. The Spanish later reclaimed its medieval fortress in the 19th century, but abandoned it for good in 1969. Today, the city is mostly empty, with echoes of bygone conflicts lingering in the abandoned buildings.

B,L,D each day... Taroudant Hotel Palais Salam (Day 2); Ifini Surte Loca Hotel (Day 3)

### **DAYS 4-7 ~ Traveling South**

Beginning in 1884, the western portion of the Sahara became a colonial territory of Spain, which is why it is still known today as the Spanish Sahara. Over the years, Spain fought off numerous challenges to its colonial authority, first by indigenous Sahrawi tribes and later by the Moroccan Army. Finally, in 1975 following the death of Franco, the Spanish withdrew, leaving the area to the Moroccans (as well as the Algerians, who supported the Polisario armed front.) The road we take through this fascinating region follows the coastline between desert and ocean. Our journey takes us first to Cape Juby (founded by the British NorthWest Africa Company in 1879) and then to the town of Al-Ayoun, formerly known as Villa Cisneros. From here, the Canary islands lie just one hundred miles offshore.

After a stop at the Gulf of Dahkla, we'll cross over into Mauritania and arrive at Nouadhibou, the country's commercial center. This is one of the world's great fishing ports, and it is one of Africa's most vital economic zones. Incidentally, it was near here that the French frigate *La Meduse* sank in 1816, an event which was the inspiration for Théodore Géricault's haunting Romantic painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*, which is currently displayed in the Louvre.

*B,L,D each day...MTS Camp*

### **DAYS 8-9 ~ Banc d'Arguin National Park**

Encompassing about 12,000 square kilometers of islands, sand dunes, coastal marshes, and open water, this park is as diverse as it is large. It also happens to be a paradise for amateur birders and professional ornithologists. Over 40,000 pairs of nesting water birds can be found here and species include flamingos, broad-billed sandpipers, terns, and pelicans. The area was set aside as a nature reserve in 1978, and today just a handful of Imraguen tribesmen live within park boundaries, practicing a subsistence lifestyle that revolves around fishing. In addition to exploring by foot and vehicle, we'll spend one full day on a wooden fishing boat, sailing between the tiny islands that dot the coastline, which provide vital feeding and nesting habitat for the myriad bird species found here.

*B,L,D each day...MTS Camp*

### **DAY 10 ~ Tanamera**

Leaving behind any trace of a road, we'll head inland across a long chain of sand dunes known as the Erg Azefan. Combining compasses and GPS units with celestial navigation and traditional know-how, we'll make our way through the trackless desert. In the evening, we'll camp at the base of the Tanamera monolith, which rises eerily from the moonscape of the desert.

*B,L,D...Camp*

### **DAY 11 ~ Atar**

Today we emerge from the desert and enter the oasis village of Atar, one of the largest settlements in Mauritania's north. It is an important market centre for a vast region, with a very lively atmosphere, as nomads come in and out of town to both buy and sell their products (mainly foodstuffs and animals). This night will be spent in a local hotel where we can wash away the grit of the desert, before plunging right back into the sand.

*B,L,D... El Waha Moorish Hotel*

**DAYS 12-13 ~ Chinguetti and the Adrar Mountains**

We will spend the day soaking up the atmosphere of the 8th century city of Chinguetti. Once the capital of the Moorish people, Chinguetti is held to be the seventh most holy city of Islam. The city is characterized by distinctive red-stone architecture and it is also known as a center of learning, with many important libraries housing seminal Koranic texts. In the old quarter of town, known as the *ksar*, stands a white stone fort with five towers, a remarkable example of Berber architecture. These ancient buildings are beginning to show the ravages of their harsh environment; the desert is on the march here, encroaching further and further into the city at a rapid clip. Already several buildings at the edge of town have been abandoned to the relentless sands.

Later, we will make our way to the Adrar massif, where darkly majestic mountains rise from a sea of yellow sand. Deep in the canyons we'll search for the lush oases where date palms grow, and the ancient Berber caravans used to sit in the shade to wait out the heat of the day. These verdant areas are watered using traditional irrigation systems fed by springs that have their origins in mountain caves. We'll visit typical adobe villages where the houses have conical grass roofs built by Moorish tribesmen. At night, we'll camp in the dunes beneath the countless glowing pinpricks of a starry desert night.

*B,L,D each day...TBA*

**DAY 14 ~ Nouakchott**

Nouakchott was just a small fishing village until the late 1950s when it was selected as Mauritania's capital; it subsequently exploded into the country's largest urban area. The name means "place of the winds" and the city has become a melting pot for urbanized North Africans and their nomadic countrymen. Even today, some of the urban population acts nomadically, setting up and striking camp within the city limits. The central market is lively and we'll also have a chance to visit Nouakchott Museum, which has many exhibits describing traditional nomadic lifestyles.

*B,L,D...TBA*

**DAYS 15-16 ~ Nouakchott to Kiffa**

We'll leave Nouakchott on an asphalt road that crosses the dunes. This road, known as "la route de l'espoir" (the road of hope), links the coast with southwestern Mauritania. Our destination, Kiffa, is renowned for its traditional glass beads produced by Moorish women. Kiffa beads, as they are known, are made of powdered glass and are acknowledged to represent the highest level of skill in the craft of artisanal beadmaking. We will be invited into a large tent to view the production process for these beautiful, colorful little treasures.

*B,L,D each day...TBA*

**DAYS 17-19 ~ Aoudaghost**

Accompanied by a local guide, we'll go off road and head back into the heart of the desert. Along the way, we'll pass sand dunes, the occasional lake, acacia forests and even encampments of nomads. The highlight of the itinerary is the archaeological site of Aoudaghost, with its miles of ruins hidden in the mountains. Aoudaghost is believed to have been the northernmost town of the Ghanaian Empire, one of the oldest known kingdoms in Africa, dating back to the 6th century. Aoudaghost was a rich caravan town, an important site for the trading of gold and salt. Using the light from torches, we'll explore deep caves in search of ancient clay granaries that are hidden there. Only a few areas of Aoudaghost have been studied, and much archeological excavation remains to be done. A mysterious necropolis of unknown origin can be found to the north, and multiple cave paintings can be seen on the southeast

side of town. Thanks to its remoteness these sites are rarely visited by western tourists. Aoudaghost was abandoned in the 17th century, a victim of the drought and sands that even today threaten the survival of other North African towns, including Chinguetti.

*B,L,D each day...Camp*

### **DAYS 20-22 ~ From the Desert to the Savannah**

South of Ayoun al-Atrous (the site of one of the more grueling stages of the Dakar Road Rally, an annual off-road automobile “race” (rally) from Paris, France, to Dakar, Senegal), we’ll reach the Malian border at the small town of Nara. Look one direction and all that can be seen is flat savannah stretching out to the horizon; turn around and you’ll be greeted by baobab trees and the small adobe houses, swirling colors, and vibrant street markets.

We’ll move onwards to Bamako, the lively Malian capital on the banks of the Niger and the fastest growing city in all of Africa. After lunch in a trendy African restaurant, we’ll hit the streets for a day of exploring this fast-paced urban area. The National Museum here is a real treasure, rich with archaeological, ethnographical and tribal art masterpieces from all over Mali. Bamako’s markets and bazaars hum with a bustle of activity—women in multi-colored *boubous* and the “*bana bana*” (street sellers) who hawk all kinds of objects from artwork to fruit for the “best price” offered. Bamako, a meeting place for people from all over Northern Arabic and Western Black Africa, is the most authentic example of a true African city.

On our last day in Mali, we’ll have day-use rooms available at the hotel, so you can shower up and get ready for your departure from West Africa. You’ll be transferred to the airport in time for your flights home.

*B,L,D each day...Residence Nzaha (Day 20), TBA (Day 21), Hotel Plaza (Day 22)*

## 2009 LAND COST

\$7,195 per person (10-16 members)

\$7,695 per person (6-9 members)

Rates quoted are per person, based on sharing double accommodations.

Single Supplement—\$1,200 for “requested” singles; \$600 for “forced” singles. If you prefer single accommodations, you must pay the Single Supplement Fee. If you’re traveling alone and wish to share accommodations, we’ll try our best to find you a roommate. If that’s not possible, we will only charge you the “forced” single price.

### Tier Pricing

Adventure travel works best with a small group of people. In order to operate these small groups, our trips are priced according to the number of full-price passengers on the trip. (Mountain Travel Sobek staff, trip doctors, and other discounted travelers are excluded from the count for this purpose.) We initially invoice you at the highest tier level price (the smallest group size we can operate). If the price drops due to an increase in group size, you will be refunded the difference.

### What’s Included

- ◆ expert leadership
- ◆ accommodations
- ◆ tent accommodations and all trek arrangements in the field, including camp and cook staffs, sleeping bags, group camping and commissary equipment (comfortable, well-designed two-person dome tents with small veranda, kitchen and dining tents, bath and toilet tents)
- ◆ meals as noted (B=Breakfast, L=Lunch, D=Dinner)
- ◆ sodas, tea, coffee with meals
- ◆ airport transfers
- ◆ sightseeing as noted in the itinerary
- ◆ ground transportation
- ◆ additional guides where necessary
- ◆ entrance fees and permits
- ◆ tips for hotel, restaurant, and camp staff and drivers
- ◆ basic medical and evacuation insurance

### What’s Not

International airfare; hotels, dayrooms or meals in Europe en route; visas; optional tips to guides; cost of medical immunizations; insurance other than basic medical and evacuation insurance noted above (we strongly recommend you purchase the supplementary trip insurance offered by Mountain Travel Sobek, which includes trip cancellation insurance); excess baggage charges; airport taxes; early or late airport transfers; premium wines or alcoholic beverages; drinks at lodges; laundry charges and items of a personal nature.

*Note on tipping*—Group members can contribute toward a group tip for your trip leader. We suggest each trip member tip about \$120-150 (\$10 per day). All other tips for drivers and guides are included in the price of your trip.

### **Air Travel**

Airfare is not included in the land cost of our trips. We can provide specific recommendations regarding who to contact to assist you with your air. In addition, many travelers elect to use their “frequent flyer” miles when traveling with us. **But please check with our staff before purchasing or obtaining your tickets.** We need to verify your arrival and departure schedule and ensure we have enough participants to operate the trip.

## **WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT**

### **Expert Leadership**

Expert leadership is the key to an exciting, unforgettable experience. Our trips feature gifted leaders for whom leading trips is a true vocation. Besides showing you wonders you’d never find on your own, they make sure everything runs smoothly and safely without a hitch. They are knowledgeable about all aspects of your trip, and take great pleasure in sharing their insights with you. More than just guides, they positively elevate your experience by being teachers, companions, and the best of friends. You’ll be in good hands with them every step of the way.



**Alberto Nicheli** is Italian by birth but has the heart of a nomad. He's traveled extensively throughout West Africa since 1975 and been a resident of Togo since 1984. Alberto has fast friendships with chiefs and elders in many remote villages and works energetically to preserve and understand their ways of life. His expertise is well known: he did field research with Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith for their book *African Ceremonies* and past *National Geographic* articles on West Africa.

Leader assignments will be confirmed in the Final Bulletin sent to you three weeks prior to departure.

### **Activity Level**

Mountain Travel Sobek trips are designed for flexible, energetic people who like to be active and have a spirit of adventure and a positive attitude. Although this is not a strenuous safari, we do spend a lot of time exploring in remote areas, which can be tiring, and it also involves walking in remote parts of the African wilds.

Vehicular travel will be aboard four-wheel-drive. Please note that much of our travel will be over rough or non-existent roads in rugged 4-wheel-drive vehicles, which can be a very jarring experience and is not recommended for people with severe back problems.

## THE NEXT STEP

### **Ready to go? Signing up is easy!**

Just call us at 1-888-MTSOBEK (687-6235) and reserve your spot! You can also book a reservation online at our website ([www.mtsobek.com](http://www.mtsobek.com)). If you prefer to use a travel agent, he or she can book your trip at no extra cost and provide other helpful assistance.

### **Then Leave the Rest to Us**

Before you go, we provide you with extensive pre-departure information, including clothing recommendations, suggested reading lists, up-to-date health advice prepared by our consulting physician (an expert in wilderness medicine), and other details from procuring visas to advice on local customs.

### **Why Mountain Travel Sobek is Your First Choice for Adventure**

Mountain Travel Sobek is the pioneer in active adventure travel. No other adventure travel company can lay claim to that title. We were the first to take Americans trekking in Nepal, raft the wild rivers of Africa, and open up many previously inaccessible corners of the world to curious travelers. We set the standard for adventure travel and have a strong reputation for excellence that we do everything we can to maintain. Since we are the leading adventure company, we have a lot to live up to, so we make sure we provide safe, quality trips and the best customer service to our passengers.

With Mountain Travel Sobek, you'll explore Africa in the company of an excellent guide whose knowledge of the fauna, flora, people, and geography will add immensely to the depth of your experience. We offer *real* safaris that put you in the heart of the African wilds. You'll get much more than wildlife viewing, you'll get the kind of wildlife interpretation that leads to a genuine understanding of what you're seeing.

Isak Dinesen wrote, "When you have caught the rhythm of Africa, you find it is the same in all her music." Join us and discover the rhythm of Africa—its heartbeat and its music—for yourself. Its song will linger in your ears for a lifetime.

### **References**

Don't take our word for how great our trips are. We'll be happy to provide you with references of satisfied past travelers.

### **Questions?**

Feel free to call us at 1-888-MTSOBEK (687-6235) if you still have any questions or concerns. We're here to help you. You can also check out our award-winning website at [www.mtsobek.com](http://www.mtsobek.com).

### **Note on Itinerary**

Although we will do our best to adhere to the itinerary schedule as listed, it is subject to change. Please read the Limitation of Liability and Booking Conditions in the four-page Participant Information Form. You can find all this information on our website at [www.mtsobek.com/faq](http://www.mtsobek.com/faq) and the form itself at [www.mtsobek.com/pdf/participant\\_info.pdf](http://www.mtsobek.com/pdf/participant_info.pdf).

**Terms & Conditions**

Once you have made a deposit for a trip, you agree to be bound by all our terms and conditions including the Limitation of Liability Clause. The full Terms and Conditions can be found at [www.mtsobek.com/faq/#liability](http://www.mtsobek.com/faq/#liability) or call 1-888-MTSOBEK (687-6235) for a copy. These are partial conditions. Your participation is contingent on your signature on the full list of terms specified in the four-page Participant Information Form ([www.mtsobek.com/pdf/participant\\_info.pdf](http://www.mtsobek.com/pdf/participant_info.pdf)). Any dispute concerning, relating or referring to the Terms and Conditions, to any literature concerning this trip, or the trip itself, shall be resolved exclusively by binding arbitration in San Francisco, California, according to the then existing commercial rules of the American Arbitration Association. Such proceedings will be governed by substantive California law (but not procedural law) without regard to the California Arbitration Act.

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