

Deserts, Wildlife & the Sahara's Garden of Eden

“Sahel” - a word alone which evokes the unknown. A zone just south of the Sahara Desert, which extends from the Atlantic Ocean right the way across West Africa and Sudan to the edge of the Red Sea.

In 2002, I sat at a bus stop in Bobo Dialasso for hours on end, waiting for transportation to the north of Burkino Faso where I'd cross the border to Mali.

Travelling by road during Ramadan was one of the most memorable life experiences. The window next to my seat was smashed and the cold desert wind whipped through the open space and stung my face.

I looked ridiculous wrapped up in a *tagelmust* — a long piece of fabric worn mostly by Tuareg men, which is wound around the head and face into a protective turban and face mask — but thankfully nobody batted an eyelid.

The atmosphere was convivial. My fellow passengers descended the bus

throughout the night to eat and they invited me to join. We sat at roadside shacks illuminated by oil lamps and drank coffee served with sweet condensed milk from large tins.

It was a very long journey indeed. The waiting time, stopping/starting, police checks, bus break-downs, and time for food and prayers lasted a total of 30-something hours. But I'll never forget the end reward. Arriving in Mali felt like being handed a pot of gold dust, and it still does whenever the mind wanders there.

Sadly, it's rare these days to read anything positive about this region. In the midst of a humanitarian crisis, submerged in conflict, and with poor security in northern Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, there is little which publicly encourages travellers to visit.

And yet, there are those who gently continue to showcase the allure of the desert and its people with a huge amount of untapped knowledge and experience.

Let's move further east and talk about Chad. Referred to by The Telegraph as

“the most beautiful country in the world that you're not supposed to visit,” half the country is doomed to the FCO’s red “advise against all travel” colour block. The other half is a marginally cooler orange, denoting “advise against all but essential travel”. So we’re off to a good start then!

Yet Chad is a staggeringly huge country, with 496,000 square miles of desert, mountains, savannah, and wetlands. It remains a vastly unexplored, challenging, and astonishingly beautiful place to visit.

Zakouma National Park, part of the Sudano-Sahelian ecosystem in the south of the country, is one of the continent's greatest conservation success stories. Recovered from the brink of devastation by conservation group, African Parks, 95% of its elephants had been annihilated through poaching between 2002 and 2010.

The results of this resuscitation have been deeply encouraging, with an elephant population steadily on the rise, along with many other species. Zakouma is now firmly on the map for adventurous safari enthusiasts who are

drawn to its low-density tourist model, unspoiled terrain, and the sheer volume of wildlife.

In the northern part of the country, the Tibesti Mountains unfold in the middle of nowhere – a land of ancient volcanoes, thermal springs, prehistoric rock carvings, sand dunes, and salt formations.

Whilst in the northeast part of Chad, the Ennedi Massif is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with remnants of human habitation which date back 7,000 years. Often referred to as the “Sahara's

Garden of Eden”, those bold enough to venture here will be rewarded with an extraordinary sandstone landscape and an environmental oasis of infinite plant life, birds and mammals, which exist in semi-desert climates.

Chad is also the best place to witness the annual Gerewol festival, where young Wodaabe men dress up in full regalia, to attract a potential wife. The Wodaabe (meaning “people of the taboo” in the Fula language) ethnic group are nomadic pastoralists from West Africa’s Sahel desert, spanning Niger, Chad, parts of the Central African

Republic and Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and Cameroon.

In the past, the Gerewol festival was more commonly witnessed in Niger, but it is reputed to have felt like more of a tourist affair, and in any case, is now safer to attend in Chad.

There are few remaining places in the world that denote the spirit of adventure in the same way as Chad. Even fewer offer a totally untarnished natural environment with the potential to test our limits in the most captivating way.