

Morocco's Deserts

Nothing but perfect silence

>Text and photos Armin Gemmer



Street sign
علامة على الطريق

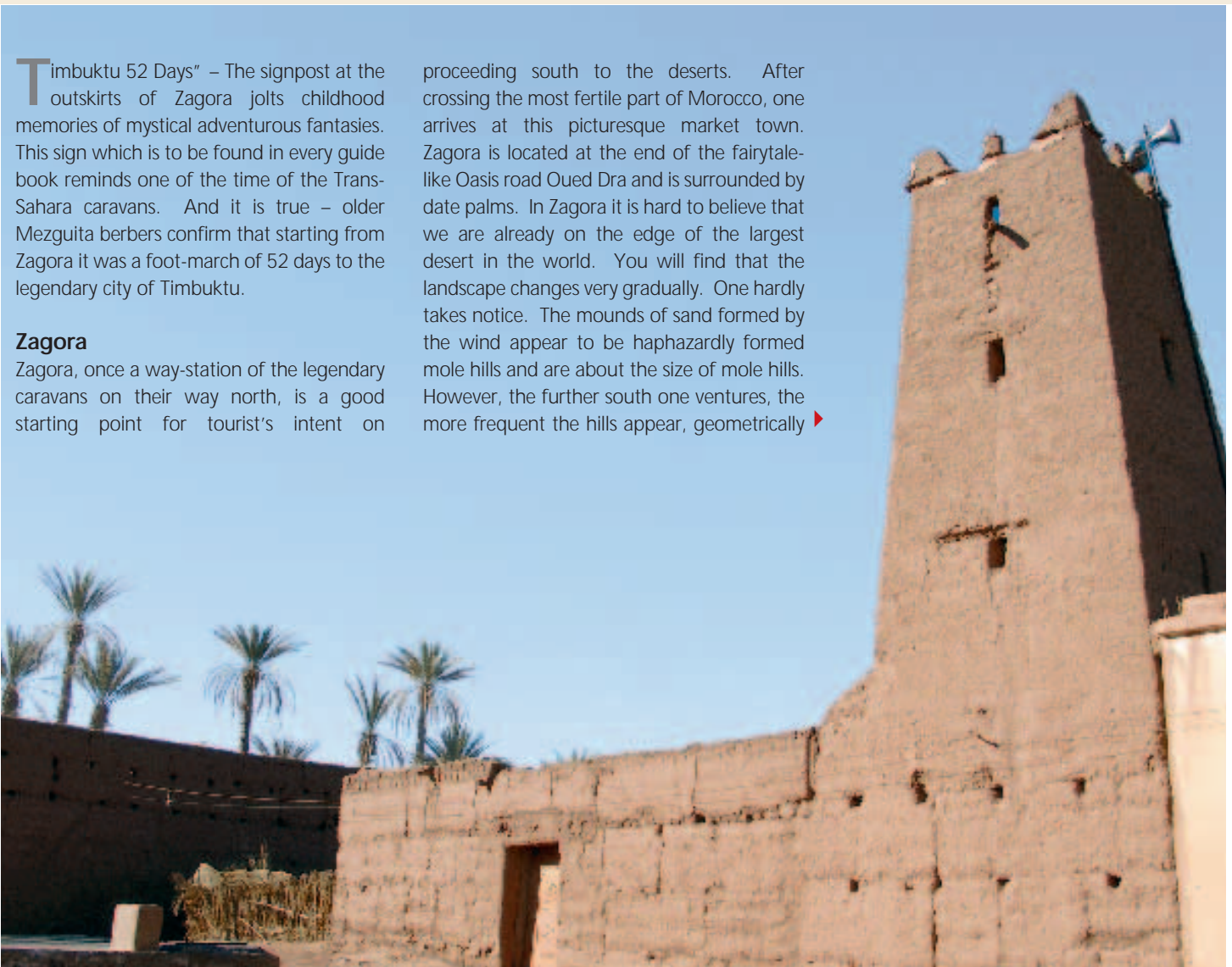
Not all deserts are the same. Often, tourists are disappointed – even the Sahara consists mainly of stones and rocks or gravel and debris. But in the extreme southeast of Morocco there is a splendid golden yellow dune ridge forming unending seas of sand. These are the deserts we know from mystical pictures and films. But then again, seeing them in real life is an entirely different matter, resulting in the feeling that time and space do not exist. The masses of sand provide one with a feeling of distance and smother all sounds. Even one's own voice comes as a surprise and startles the hiker. Here there is nothing but perfect silence.

Timbuktu 52 Days" – The signpost at the outskirts of Zagora jolts childhood memories of mystical adventurous fantasies. This sign which is to be found in every guide book reminds one of the time of the Trans-Sahara caravans. And it is true – older Mezquita berbers confirm that starting from Zagora it was a foot-march of 52 days to the legendary city of Timbuktu.

Zagora

Zagora, once a way-station of the legendary caravans on their way north, is a good starting point for tourist's intent on

proceeding south to the deserts. After crossing the most fertile part of Morocco, one arrives at this picturesque market town. Zagora is located at the end of the fairytale-like Oasis road Oued Dra and is surrounded by date palms. In Zagora it is hard to believe that we are already on the edge of the largest desert in the world. You will find that the landscape changes very gradually. One hardly takes notice. The mounds of sand formed by the wind appear to be haphazardly formed mole hills and are about the size of mole hills. However, the further south one ventures, the more frequent the hills appear, geometrically ▶



Traditional Berber Kasbah

بيت بربري تقليدي



Leaving from Mhamid

عند مغادرة محاميد

spaced like an attacking army that begins to completely command the overall appearance of the landscape. In the town of Tamegroute, 20 kilometers southeast of Zagora, it has become a part of everyday life to fight against the dunes which are as high as a man.

Traditional Houses of the Berbers

I learned a great deal about the austere life of the berbers because of my good fortune in meeting Abdullah. He is a student from Agadir and was on the way to his family. They live in a village near Tamegroute. My fellow-traveler wanted to spend the semester break at home and invited me to stay in his family's Kasbah for a few days. Kasbah is the original meaning of the Arabic word for a citadel, but the berbers of southern Morocco call their houses Kasbah too, as they are built like fortresses and protect their occupants not only from sand but also from neighboring tribes. The bedrooms and living rooms of the buildings are positioned around a rectangular



Transport in the desert

واسطة نقل في الصحراء

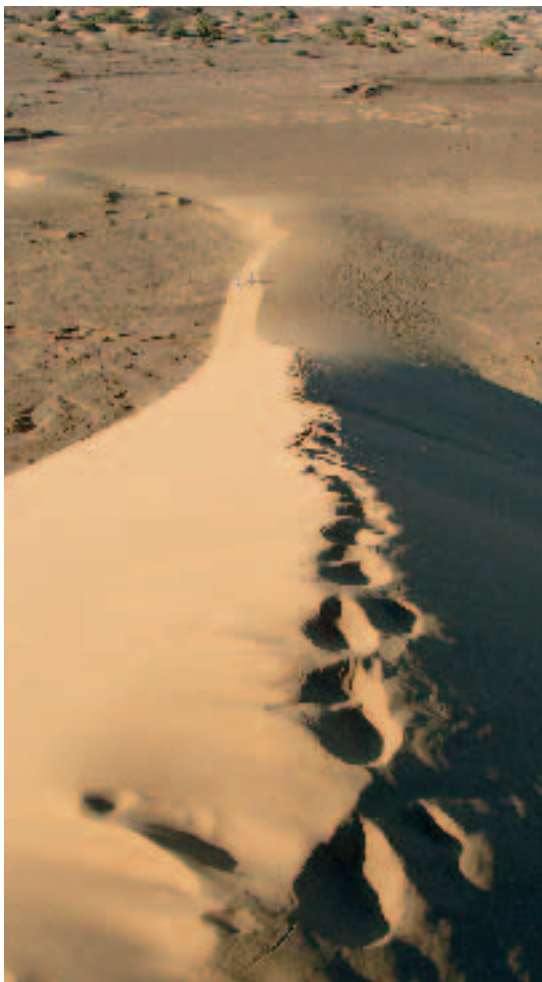
courtyard to which there is only one entrance which can be closed off with a massive door. There is no other opening to the outside; all doors and windows are on the courtyard side. The roof has a tower from which one can observe the surroundings and where there is a good view to the far distance. After experiencing the hospitality and the daily life of the berber family for two days, Abdullah, Abdullah's friend Fadil and I began our trek into the desert. Fadil is well acquainted with the desert, even at the tender age of 16, and he has been already to Timbuktu a dozen times with his father.

Mhamid

The town of Mhamid lies approximately 100 kilometers to the south. After the impressive view we got while crossing the Tiz Beni mountain passes which lie 45

kilometers from the border to Algeria, the last settlement before reaching the Sahara, Mhamid, was our destination. From Mhamid it is only possible to proceed by off-road vehicle, on foot, or on camel back. Because of the advancing of the desert, the city is seriously threatened.

Mhamid lies on Oued Dra. The wadi, which seldom has water, divides the wide-spread settlement into two sections. The city used to be a center for nomads and passing caravans. Today it is the starting point for camel safaris into the desert. For those who haven't pre-booked a safari, ▶



Tinfou Dunes

كثبان تنفو



Oasis Mhamid

واحة محاميد



A small caravan on a traditional camel track

قافلة تقليدية صغيرة

there is still an opportunity to take part in a desert expedition from here. After leaving Mhamid, the dunes are at first small and covered with growth, but this soon changes. A short trip of a mere 10 kilometers by off-road vehicle or camel takes you to Erg Lehoudi where you are surrounded by 100 meter tall sand dunes. For those fortunate people who have a few days to spend here, a trip to the dune fields of Erg Chigaga is a delight.

Tinfou Dunes

The Tinfou Dunes are a worthwhile destination. After having spent the night in Mhamid, we drove back to Abdullah's parents' home and headed west early the next morning – neither by off-road vehicle nor by camel like the majority of tourists, but on foot. A donkey carried our supplies and tent. As the Tinfou Dunes are in the middle of a desert of stone, they are quite easy to reach and are considered a good tip. Hardly any tourists find their way

here. On the way, we climbed an inselberg. At the top we were treated to a never-ending view of the surrounding desert. And the extraordinary treat – there were ruins of walls so that we could see that at some time in the past there was a city here. This singular place is not mentioned in any travel guide. After my friends served a feast from the bags we brought along, we climbed up the sand ridge which is several hundred meters high.

The Tinfou Dunes in the language of the berbers is golden sand. They are rapidly growing wind dunes in the middle of a picturesque landscape of rocks. There we spent the afternoon. While my friends set up the tent, I took the opportunity to observe the sunset and to experience the peace of this place. Even the most beautiful pictures are not capable of transporting this experience of peace and quiet. One can only appreciate it in its magnificence on the spot. ■



Oasis Mhamid

واحة محاميد



Ruins of the antique city on the top of the mountain

بقايا مدينة قديمة على جبل



Abdullah and Fadil doing the traditional tea ceremony in the desert

عبدالله وفاصل يهينان الشاي