

EPIC WESTERN

John Pearson grabs a fistful of dirhams and heads into remotest, wildest Western Sahara with his 110. Go ahead, John, make our day... PHOTOS: PAT SUMMERS





Ships of the desert, and some camels



Scientific research – is this a Neolithic burial site?

The Moroccan army sergeant smiles, throws his arms out and declares: 'You are welcome to enjoy our sand, our rocks, our everything.' Which, bearing in mind we're on a sandy, rocky ridge surrounded by sand and rocks, we wonder what the 'everything' includes. I'm with a group of travellers on an expedition with Paul Blackburn's OneLife Adventure. We've travelled south through Morocco and are deep into Western Sahara, alongside the Mauritanian border. We're close to a sensitive military area, hence our interception by the camouflaged desert patrol Toyota. But after a friendly chat between him and Paul, we get the smile and the welcome before the Toyota heads off in a cloud of dust. Western Sahara is precisely that: the western end of the mighty desert, the last, vast chunk before it meets the Atlantic Ocean. To Moroccans, Western Sahara is the Southern Province, a place they've controlled since the last century after a war with Mauritania and the indigenous Sahrawi people through their liberation movement, the Polisario Front. The dispute started after Spain relinquished control of the country in 1975, which it had occupied since the late 19th century. Surrounding countries laid claim to

it – which the locals weren't too keen on. The United Nations brokered a ceasefire in 1991 and since then Morocco has encouraged its citizens to settle there, with cheap fuel and a major property development and infrastructure programme in its coastal towns. The idea is that, should the UN succeed in achieving a referendum to decide between independence and total integration with Morocco, there'll be many more Moroccans than Sahrawis to swing the vote. During the war the Moroccans put a huge effort into building a big wall of sand and rock – The Berm – to help defend the country. This runs parallel to the Mauritanian border from the north, and then sweeps west to the Atlantic. To the east of the berm, between it and Mauritania, is a Polisario-controlled zone. There's a strong military presence in the region – hence our interception by the desert patrol. After all, a convoy of kitted-out 4x4s in North Africa may not be a group of tourists... The military presence helps to make Western Sahara a safe place to be, and all the people we met were friendly. Not that there were many people: it's one of the least populated places on earth. My partner Pat and I meet the OneLife group on Brittany Ferries' Portsmouth to Santander crossing before taking a couple of

days to drive through Spain to a campsite at Tarifa. We then catch a boat from Algeciras to the fairly new Tangier Med port in Morocco. And what a difference this is! Anyone who's been to Morocco through Ceuta in the past will know of the lengthy queues to get paperwork sorted, and hassle from local touts who try to relieve you of as many dirhams as possible for not very much help. Processing the paperwork is much slicker at Tangier and the touts are banned, making entry to the country a much less stressful experience.

Days one to three

Tangier Med to Anti Atlas mountains, 615 miles

Highlight: Ait Mansour gorges

Our first two days are spent on Morocco's motorways. The hotbed of traffic chaos called Marrakesh is now thankfully bypassed with a dual carriageway that was built three years ago. Locals call it the Long One, and it climbs through the High Atlas mountains, the highest pass topping out at 1303 metres (4275ft), which is almost as high as Ben Nevis. This majestic mountain range, the longest in Africa, runs diagonally across Morocco from



Ken's Hill – so good, they drove back up it too

northern Algeria to the Atlantic coast. South of the High Atlas is the Anti Atlas range, a final barrier before the Sahara desert. The town of Tafraoute is the gateway to the Anti Atlas, which is where we top up with supplies.

Initially we're on tarmac, threading along narrow mountain roads, but after 1518 miles of the trip we turn on to our first loose-surfaced track, heading into the mountains.

Our campsite is in the spectacular Ait Mansour gorges, reminiscent of the Grand Canyon. It's a great place to be.

Days four and five

Anti Atlas to the Sahara, 234 miles

Highlight: Into the Sahara desert

We drive through the gorges, marvelling at the amazing rock formations before diverting into the bustling town of Assa for fresh bread before camping in the Draa riverbed.

Next day it's getting hotter, the terrain is increasingly dusty and vegetation is sparse. We drive through a gorge with derelict fortifications towering above us. Soon, we're in the mighty Sahara. As if on cue to herald our arrival a herd of camels crosses the track, and there are mirages appearing ahead of us.

The Sahara has large areas of often viciously sharp rocks and stones (Hamada) that will shake loose anything not tightly secured and destroy worn or poor-quality components.

The last few miles of the day are on a route used in the Dakar Rally when it did actually

go to Dakar. The terrain is rough; it would be hard to drive flat-out across this day after day.

Shortly after crossing the dotted line on the map that signifies we're in Western Sahara, we camp in a sandy oued (dry riverbed).

Day six

Oued Afra to Oued Kasat, 56 miles

Highlights: Ken's Hill and the fossils

Our drive today is mostly through a vast area of nothingness. We halt by the ruins of what we suspect is a former Polisario defence position. Several graves tell the grisly outcome of a Moroccan army attack. Among the ruins are pots and kettles, an empty mortar case and a Zenith carb float bowl. This looks like it's from a Series III or Santana, which were used by the military – many are still in use by locals.

We reach the steep Crab al Hawa hill, which is also known to Onelife travellers as Ken's Hill because it's a favourite of Ken Illingworth, one of our fellow adventurers. We drop down it in low range first, then turn around and go back up what is quite a testing climb. We drive through what looks like a disused quarry, but on closer inspection some of the rocks are fossils from millions of years ago.

The terrain gets increasingly bleak. It's hot and windy; the sort of place only the most resolute of solo travellers would venture. We reach the Ghat Mezwer, a vast, smooth, flat area of silt that gives some respite from the continual pounding.

Days seven and eight

Oued Kasat to Oued Kang Santamat, 124 miles

Highlight: Prehistoric rock art

After camping overnight in another oued we drive on a tarmac road for a while before heading into the desert again.

After a few miles we're intercepted by a desert patrol Toyota. The soldiers are polite, but we're in an area where they don't want us to be and we're escorted back to the road.

In Smara we brim our diesel tanks and jerry cans, ready for six days and up to 600 miles of desert before we see civilisation again. We also stock up on food and drinking water.

Overlooking tonight's campsite is a ridge where there's an amazing concentration of engraved and carved prehistoric rock art. The creatures depicted include antelopes, giraffes and rhinos, all of which are now only found further south in Africa; evidence that at one time this was savannah with water sources.

Days nine, 10 and 11

Oued Kang Santamat to Manhar Nagjir plateau, 311 miles

Highlight: Crossing Tropic of Cancer

Next morning we're heading south-west, with the flat-topped Galtat Zemmour mountains to our left. Then we go into an area of such

nothingness, even the smallest of plants that can survive on just moisture from the occasional mist don't bother to grow here.

The next day's driving is more of the same. We make a detour for some scientific research that Paul has agreed to do. A lecturer at the University of Bern in Switzerland is recording Saharan Neolithic burial sites. He's disabled and can't visit them himself, so relies on travellers to confirm their existence. Paul takes measurements and photos to send to him.

Next day, the scenery changes dramatically: after days of pancake-flatness we're into rocky valleys, with towering flat-topped mountains.

Then we reach another imaginary, but significant line – the Tropic of Cancer. At the time of writing it's 23° 26' 14.675" north of the Equator, and is the latitude circle that marks the most northerly position the sun appears directly overhead at its zenith. I've previously crossed the southern line, the Tropic of Capricorn, but I've never been into the Tropics through North Africa before.

Day 12

Manhar Nagjir plateau to Cintra Bay, 106 miles

Highlight: Completing this gruelling leg of our adventure

Today is the final leg of our big desert drive and we're tracking west towards the coast at Cintra Bay. It's more of the same initially, 

HOW WE GOT THERE

We sailed with Brittany Ferries from Portsmouth to Santander. There are up to five UK-Spain sailings a week, and fares start from £284 each way for a car plus two people (£424 in high season), including a cabin. To book: brittanyferries.co.uk or 0871 244 1400.

Alternatively, OneLife Adventure is an agent for Brittany Ferries and you don't have to be travelling with the company to access its discounted rates. Brittany Ferries can also arrange accommodation for your drive across Spain. See brittanyferries.com/holidays.

OneLife arranged our crossing to Tangier Med with Conconia Euroferry (about £160 return).

YOU CAN DO IT TOO

Paul Blackburn and his wife Anne are celebrating 10 years of OneLife Adventure (onelifeadventure.co.uk) in 2014. They run trips in the UK, Portugal, Spain, the Pyrenees, Iceland and various countries in North Africa. New for 2014 is an adventure in Greece.

Paul's one of the best expedition leaders I've travelled with and is someone you can trust to get you through demanding conditions. He has good vehicle technical skills, he's an outdoor living expert, he has decent medical knowledge, he has excellent language skills and is an off-road driving guru. Paul always researches the places you visit, so you learn a lot.





Chilling: abandoned rebel base has graves nearby

NEED TO KNOW

- **PAPERWORK** You need to fill out an immigration card (the ferry ticket agent will issue one), hand it in and get your passport stamped and a CIN number allocated. This can be done on the boat. You must have your vehicle's V5 and insurance green card (you can buy local insurance at the port for about €90). You also need to complete a D16 temporary vehicle importation document, valid for six months. This can be done online and printed out. A good adventure guide will ease you through the form-filling, which is in French. Your guide should also take along printouts of your details, including passport info, to save time at the many checkpoints.
- **LANGUAGE** Arabic, French, some Spanish.
- **CURRENCY** Dirham (12 = £1).
- **COST OF DIESEL** 47p per litre Western Sahara, 65p Morocco, £1.18 Spain
- **FOOD AND DRINK** Carry tinned/dried food; buy meat, veg and water at towns en route.

with miles of Hamada, but then the ground changes to sand and gravel, with occasional swathes of spiny acacia trees. We drive some vast, white sandy plains. The convoy spreads out to over a mile to avoid the billowing dust. We reach a much more demanding area – a series of hills, with sandy climbs and descents. We're driving straight across the desert, with no tracks between us and the coast.

It's tough going; the last 20 miles seems to take for ever. Eventually we get to the coast. It's too late to reach the beach at Cintra, our intended campsite, but we're all pleased to have completed a gruelling but fascinating leg of our adventure.

'Well done, guys. That's a hell of an achievement,' says Paul. And he's right.

Days 13, 14 and 15

Cintra Bay-Affrar dunes, 381 miles

Highlight: The sebkhats

The next day is spent driving north along the coast, past the rapidly expanding town of Dakhla to a clifftop wild camp near Boudjour.

From there we go west on what is an exceptionally rough track, even by the standards of what we've driven so far. Our destination is a cluster of massive sebkhats, literally giant holes in the ground. I've used the word 'vast' a lot in this story, but nothing else describes the scale of these craters, which act as sumps when there's heavy rain. Zoom in to N26° 00.00, W14° 09.500 on Google Earth and you'll see their immense scale.

There are three sebkhats – Arryd, Ayridal and Amasin. We drop down into a gorge that leads to Arryd, camping overnight before heading in to investigate. It's a fascinating drive, with deep strata of rock alongside, showing millions of years of deposits.

Next stop, the Affrar dunes that run all the way to Laayoune. We drop tyre pressures to 18psi and the dune driving fun begins.

Day 16

Affrar dunes to Laayoune, 142 miles

Highlight: Sand driving

The dunes get more demanding as we drive north, and the wind is getting stronger. Our route is blocked by some huge dunes, so we have to backtrack through a rocky valley.

The wind is whipping in from the east, blasting sand horizontally in front of us. Our convoy looks as if we're driving through thick, beige fog. I'm pleased we're in the safety of a

Land Rover; anyone caught out in this would be battling for survival and seeking shelter.

We eventually reach the M5 road to Laayoune and our campsite by the sea.

Day 17

Laayoune-Tangier Med, 109 miles

Highlight: The Plage Blanche drive

Most of the next day is on tarmac until we take a track to Plage Blanche, where we camp on the beach. Our final off-road drive of the trip is along the beach before picking up the main road north for the long drive home.

Western Sahara is a safe and friendly place for an adventure that took us to what must be the official Middle of Nowhere. And, of course, there was a lot of sand and rock. **LRO**



OUR FELLOW TRAVELLERS

The OneLife Adventure group comprised an equal number of Defender 110s and Toyota Land Cruiser 80 Series. These are probably the best vehicles for a demanding adventure like this, being uncompromisingly tough, capable and straightforward to work on in the event of something failing miles from anywhere.

TOMAS & HANNA LJUNBERG

DEFENDER 110 Td5 STATION WAGON

Tomas travelled extensively in Africa in the 1970s with a Series IIA before getting married. He's accompanied on this trip by his 20-year-old daughter Hanna.

Tomas owns four other Land Rovers, including a Series I and a Defender 130, which he's going to convert into a camper. He has a former garage workshop (with lift) to house and work on his Land Rovers. Lucky man! Camping kit: Oztent RV4.

KEN ILLINGWORTH

DEFENDER 110 200Tdi HARD TOP

Ken's an experienced desert traveller, having completed many adventures throughout North Africa. He sleeps in his 110, which is kitted out for the purpose, and it's very capable. His family has nine Land Rovers among them, including a 90 that once was an LRO workshop project.

HARRY McCELLAN

DEFENDER 110 2.4 TDCi HARD TOP

Harry has done many adventures on foot, cycle, motorbike and in his VW campervan, but the purchase of his nicely kitted-out Defender – which he sleeps inside – has allowed him to, as he says, 'Carry on when the tarmac ends'.

This is Harry's first big overseas Land Rover adventure. He'll do another big guided trip and will then go solo when he feels experienced and competent enough.

WARREN ILLINGWORTH (SON OF KEN), ANDREW BRIERLEY AND DENIS JONES

all run modified Toyota Land Cruiser 80 Series models, with roof tents. They're all experienced at desert travel.

