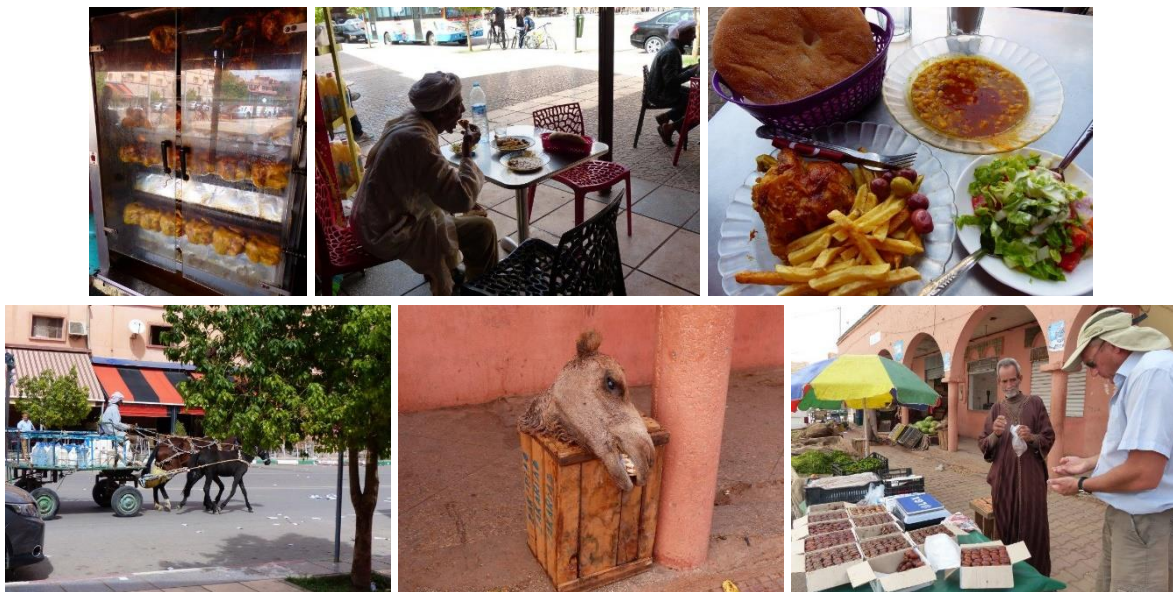


06.10.2016 Bouarfa, Mengoub

Bouarfa is about 110km away from Figuig, we arrive there at lunch time. Several times we are overtaking the same totally overloaded pick-up truck and each time we greet each other with a big “Hello”.



In Bouarfa we have to fill up on Diesel and want to buy some fresh produce. However, we rather give the Camel meat a miss today and better order a meal in the only restaurant in town. They have one dish on offer: barbecued chicken with French fries, salad, pita bread and spicy beans – very typical Moroccan.



We drive towards Mengoub, where we are looking for the starting point of the track which is not easy to find. Is this unmarked sand track really the beginning of our track? We decide to go for it and it becomes more and more adventurous, as no-one has been on this piste for quite some time. The car tracks are hard to recognize and are covered with sand which has been blown over the track.



Another difficulty is that there are side tracks forking off, but these tracks normally only lead to Nomadic herder's camps. As most of the Nomads nowadays have trucks, the side tracks look well used and can easily be confused with the main track, but only to end at a dead-end point – either the current camp or where it previously was. Nevertheless, some tracks lead back to the main track, as long as we can keep our geographical direction right. Well, and where there is no way – we make our own...

Thanks to our GPS navigation system we are lucky to reach the main track after 35 km. This all took of course much more time than expected and we are lucky to find a well-hidden place close to a river bed before it is getting dark for the night.



07.10.2016 Anoual, Talsint, Beni Tajjite

Today we have a clear track to follow and do not have to repeat our off-road adventure "Driving by Compass".



From quite some distance away, we could already see two nomads waving at us with an empty diesel canister. We are in good spirits and agree to give them 10 L of our diesel. Later we met a Dutch traveler who even started to sell the petrol he is carrying for his motorbike, as so many nomads have been asking him for petrol. It seems these Nomads never carry enough fuel when driving into the desert...



Soon we are back on a tar road and drive through many small villages to Talsint. These villages are not very pretty, they mainly consist of unfinished buildings which look abandoned. Suddenly – dromedaries on the road!



We take a break in Talsint where our arrival is closely watched by the locals. It is strange to always only see the male half of the population on the streets.



While looking for a place for the night we take a small piste and find a suitable spot in a valley basin not far from a mining site.



And we thought that we found a quiet place for the night... Suddenly a Bedouin on his motorbike appears and is begging. Normally we do not support this begging



“culture”, but he is very determined. We give him some of our carrots, bread and of course sugar. He does not look too happy about our small contribution to his livelihood – but what does he expect?

He puts everything in his bag and drives BACK the same way he came from!! We assumed he had stopped at our car on the way to somewhere. But now we realize that he has obviously followed us for a while only to beg for our stuff...

In the evening the heavy thunder storm is catching up with us. We had been watching it from the distance. Such a heavy rain and storm comes unexpected and we go to sleep slightly worried as we are parking not too far from a (still) dry riverbed.



08.10.2016 Erfoud

After the rain everything did not turn miraculously green overnight as one may expect so...

We follow a picturesque valley, where we can get a glimpse of the village life and pass by a large cemetery. The graves are marked with a stone, but without any writing on it. We assume a tradition of anonymous burials, as the stones all look the same and are not placed in any order. Hard to believe that after a few years anyone can remember which grave is the one of his or her ancestors.

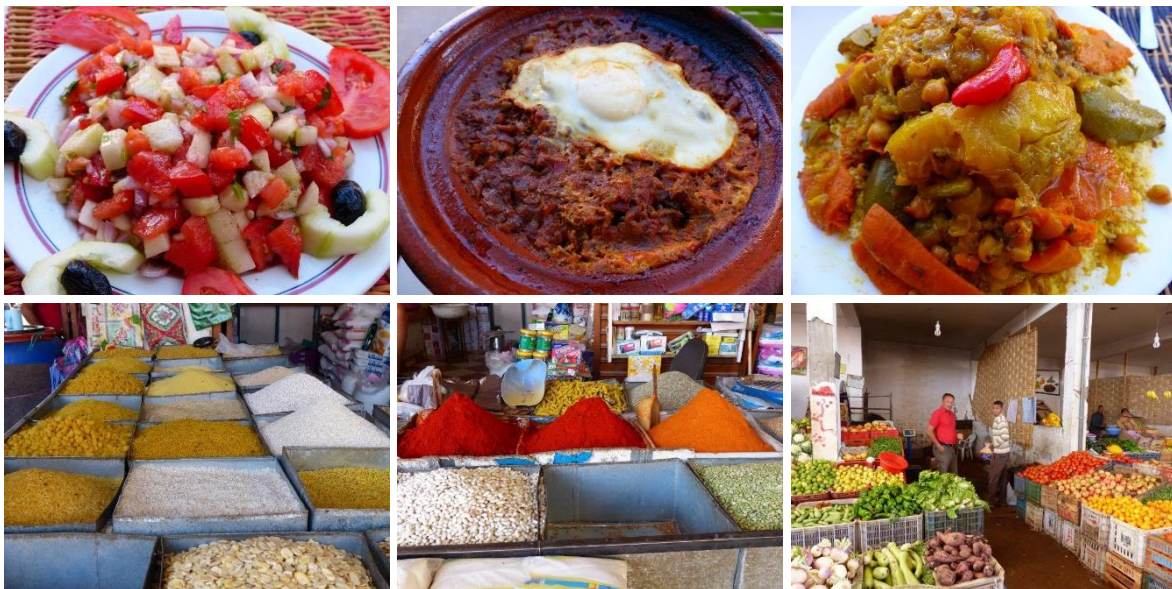


Passing some huge reforestation efforts we drive until we reach the Ziz Valley. From the viewing platform, we have a great view of the valley, where the palm trees cut through the valley like a green river.



For lunch we arrive in Erfoud – the gateway to the sand dune area Erg Chebbi – and treat ourselves to a local lunch. We need energy for the next desert track. Kalya is a local specialty cooked in a Tajine pot with an egg on top.

The town is quite busy as a professional desert rallye just finished. There are 4x4 quads, race cars, support vehicles, car trailers and many guys dressed in team T-shirts. We stock up on our veggies before hitting to the sand dunes of Erg Chebbi.



Arriving at Erg Chebbi we find a quiet spot for the night at the Western side of the dune area just before Merzouga. We decide to have a sundowner on top of one of the sand dunes but unfortunately the clouds are gathering up as soon as we start climbing the dunes and the sun is gone.



In the far distance is a large thunder storm and we can see the lightening and hear the thunder. Suddenly on the horizon a large cloud is forming on ground level rather quickly. It looks like a sand storm and as it turns out, this is indeed a sandstorm! What a natural phenomenon!

Still up on top of a sand dune, we do not realize at what speed the sand storm is moving towards us and make the mistake to watch it for a few minutes too long. On our way back to the car, we get caught in the middle of the sand storm. The sand is blown into our faces, we cannot open our eyes anymore, visibility is zero, orientation lost within 30 seconds. Luckily Werner's jogging app on his I-phone guides us back to the Unimog per GPS. Phew, what an extreme experience.

Back in the car, we find sand in our eyes, nose, ears Dewi has very weak knees and is a bit under shock from this experience. From the inside of our safe car we watch the sand storm passing by, while the whole Unimog is shaken by the strong winds and Werner is worried that we are literally sand blasted. Inside the camper we have plenty of sand too, as we forgot to close the roof hatch.



09.10.2016 Merzouga, Jbel Bega

The next morning's blue sky is greeting us as if nothing ever happened last night...

We are just about to get up, as we hear someone sneezing!? Are we not alone in the dunes? Well, the first fossil seller has taken position in front of our car presenting his merchandise. These sellers are very determined, as they drive with their small motorbikes along the sand dunes looking for potential prey... eerhh customers. We are sorry for him as his determination is not rewarded but also today we do not want to buy any (fake?) fossils. At last we give him our dates...



Today, our plan is to drive another track to the East of Merzouga. We are passing a small village where amongst the ruins only one little house is still inhabited. Fresh bread is baked in a traditional wood fired clay oven. Also here tourists prices are asked as the lady wants 10 times the normal price for bread. No wonder business is bad...



We thought the track would lead through the desert landscape of the Erg Chebbi but we are passing mainly through a stony plateau. In some parts the track is hard to follow and not recognizable anymore, but we have an Unimog, and "...if there is no track we are going to make our own..."



In the late afternoon, we are passing one of the frequent military check points, as we are driving again close to the Algerian border. The commanding officer himself asks us where we want to go and we reply “to Merzouga”. However, this track leads to Taous, a town just a few kilometers South of Merzouga. Now the officer is worried and decides he has to ensure we get on the right track.

Rather impatiently he orders his driver to get the car ready and we are treated to an armed escort with a Hummer! We tried in vain to convince him that we know our way and even show him our navigation system, but the armed convoy is definitely on. We have the slight suspicion that we are a good excuse for a little joyride with the Hummer. Sitting all day in the desert must be boring.



Abandoned mine shafts are along our way. These very deep shafts are not secured and very unsafe. If someone would fall in one of these shafts, there would be no way to climb back out again and one is left to his/hers fate.



We stop for the night at the foot of the ,Jbel Bega' mountain, but also here, our hope to be out of reach of any fossil dealer is not fulfilled. After about 15 minutes two boys with a motorbike are next to us and start to display their merchandise. A famous hunter – whom we all know – commented that “with our Unimog tire tracks we are even easier to spot than a pack of wild pigs after fresh snowfall in winter...”

