

10.10.2016 Rissani, Sijilmasa, Merzouga

Today we are up for an excursion to Rissani. This city is an important supply hub for the smaller desert towns and therefore has a large souk (market). As we enter town school has just finished and the streets are flooded with youngsters on foot and bike.



Here we have for the first time the opportunity to visit the inside of a Kasbah. Kasbahs are traditional living quarters with a high outer walls for protection. Each Kasbah is basically a village in itself. They are intentionally designed with a very complex layout with nooks and crannies to confuse attackers. Inside a Kasbah it's almost dark with very little sunlight, therefore it is quite cool. The kids living here are immediately offering their guide services, but of course they want to be paid.



After we visited the Souk, we tried a „Berber Pizza“ – pitta bread filled with Moroccan spiced minced meat – it tastes very good. Though we haven't tried camel milk yet, not sure how our digestive system might react ☺





A must here is also a visit of the ruins of Sijilmassa, which are located at the outskirts of Rissani. Sijilmassa was the first city in Morocco and the former capital of the oasis region of Tafilalet. Still today a lot of buildings in Morocco are built of tamped clay. These buildings do not easily withstand rain and need constant maintenance, but they are very environmental.



In close proximity of the ruins is a graveyard, which is also quite interesting.



11.10.2016 Desert track Taous – Ramlia – Mhamid I

Today we will start to drive one the longest desert tracks in Morocco, starting in Taous heading West towards Mhamid. This track is quite well known by the off-road community and very popular. We have been reading various reports about the 'false guides', standing by the road, waving and gesturing that the track is closed. Once you stop they will tell you horror stories of tourists who got lost and died of dehydration with the aim to be hired as a guide through the desert.

And indeed, as soon as we enter Taous the first guy comes running towards us indicating in sign language that the track is closed/ impassable. Well, we are prepared and know the trick so we do not stop for these false desert guides.



The start of the track is quite bumpy and heavily used as a lot of heavy mining trucks pass through here. Later the track gets much smoother. During lunch break at some stunning black and beige rock formations, some dromedaries in the same colours are visiting us. We can watch them passing by from our chairs.



Along the track is the village of Ramliya in the middle of 'f***** nowhere', where we plan to stop for a coffee break. But as soon as we enter the village we are confronted by aggressively begging children; first three of them then more and more. They scream and beg and as we drive slowly through the village, they run after our camper and try to hang on to our car, one is holding on to our back light for a ride... We are shocked and decide better not to stay in this village having to deal with these totally wild and uneducated children. An older man who is witnessing the children terrorizing

us, is picking up a stone trying to chase the children away from our car. Under shock we take the wrong turn and have to drive back – luckily the children are gone. It is a pity to see that tourists are chased away by mobs of aggressive children, otherwise we would have spent some money in this village...



The track behind Ramlia is not easy. We have to cross a dry river bed and climb out of it via a steep and sandy slope. Even with the Unimog we need two attempts to make it up and out the river bed...



And when you expect it least, someone is jumping out of the bushes even here in the middle of nowhere and is wanting something. Unbelievable!



We are caught in a second sand storm and try to hide from the wind. We find a secluded place close to an old mining site. Also here the mine shaft behind us is not secured at all and goes a long way down... Luckily in the evening the storm is easing.



12.10.2016 Desert track Taous - Ramlia – Mhamid II

We continue on the track Westwards. In the village of Taфраout two children are running towards us trying to intercept us on the main track, but we are faster... Amazingly they can run barefoot over this sharp and quite big rocks. In Taфраout a huge Berber sign “Yaz” - meaning freedom - is painted onto the hillside.



We reach Lac Maider, which is dry during this season. The track through the dry lake is covered in „Fech Fech“, a very fine powdery dust, which is created by the erosion of clay-limestone. The dust can form a dry crust on top of the wet soil and drivers are tricked into believing that the soil is dry. But there is always a risk to break through the thin dry surface and get stuck. While crossing the 25 km wide lake we create huge and long dust clouds behind us.



This epic wide landscape without any other traffic and obstacles is the ideal spot for Dewi to drive the Unimog for the first time. Luckily, the only tree for miles, which we picked as our lunch spot, survives her driving.



Further down the track we pass a small grave yard located close to a well with one separate grave sticking out. We would have loved to know the story behind this failed settlement trial on such dry land.



Again we are passing a military check point and hand over the obligatory ,fiche'. Not far after the first check point we pass a second one, where they do not allow us to turn onto the track towards our destination Mhamid but ask us to turn towards Zagora. As it is getting late we stop for the night at a steep and rocky pass, luckily we find an almost even spot.



13.10.2016 Tagounite

The track is interesting, but we can only move slow – for 15 km we need 90 minutes.



We are climbing out of a valley through a steep pass and are rewarded with a fantastic view of a valley basin. In the middle of the basin is just one remote well. At the other side of the basin the same procedure, we have to crawl up the slope and after crossing the highest point of the pass, we have to slowly crawl down again.



We come to large flat which reminds us of Southern Africa. Only the herds of Zebras, Wildebeest and Giraffes are missing. Another military check point, of course they request another fiche and off we go!



On the horizon a huge dust cloud has formed and unfortunately our way to Tagounite is leading us exactly into the dust. On the bright side, the sun is blocked out and it is not that hot anymore. But the wind is always blowing a fistful of sand into our faces.

We have to ask for the right way, passing small villages and hope to not get stuck in the narrow roads with low hanging cables.



In Tagounite we fill up our tanks, as this is the last fuel station before we head to the sand dunes of Erg Chegaga, which is planned for tomorrow.



For today we stay at the camp site 'Les Palmeraies'. It is still very windy, visibility is low and even worse in the desert as the camping site manager explains to us; he is also running a camp site with Bedouin tents in the sand dunes. A good opportunity to take a break.

Late in the evening a few Spanish campers arrive and park directly next to us, although the entire campsite is empty. They talk loudly, cook, eat and make noise until midnight. How selfish! We are not amused.

14.10.2016 Erg Lihoudi, Mhamid

Our strategy to sit out the stormy weather worked out and we wake up to blue skies with no more trace of dust. En route to Mhamid we head for the Erg Lihoudi aka the "Dune of the Jew". A few hundred years ago, a Jewish trader vanished in these dunes and his wailing can still be heard during some nights. Here are a few Bivouac/ tented camps which serve tea and food, but as there are no other tourists the dunes are exclusively ours today.





We continue through the desert towards Mhamid, and enjoy the drive... It is really exciting each time a dromedary caravan appears at the horizon, we feel a bit like Lawrence of Arabia... Nowadays almost exclusively tourists and their gear (mattresses!) for a desert bivouac are transported on the dromedaries.



In contrary to our worst fears, Mhamid is very quiet – we had read many reports about touts and false guides which are forcing their services on tourists. Luckily no-one is bothering us. Generally, it seems to be rather quiet on the tourist side or are we still in low season?

We have lunch and coffee and wait for the heat of the day to pass before we drive onto the track towards Fom-Zguid. We choose a camp site inbetween the dunes and have a relaxed evening: No wind, no biting animals and no noisy neighbors. We can start a camp fire and barbeque our beef we got in Rissani.

