



Air Mountains and a rare sighting of antelope caught by Jean Clottes



Sometimes pushing is required

Our first campsite was between two enormous dunes miles from anywhere, so when two Tuareg women suddenly appeared with several children in tow we were very surprised. They settled down by the fire and laid out a cloth on the ground on which they spread a whole range of arrowheads. Where the family came from was a mystery, but even more incredible was where did the arrowheads come from? Our guide, Cheikh, explained that the desert was littered with pre-historic artefacts and as we were so interested he would take us to a site in the middle of the desert where we could collect sackfuls of them.



Fine arrowheads collected by the Tuaregs in the Sahara

Cathy bartered with the women and after a few dollars had changed hands the family rose to its feet and melted back into the night.



Cathy bartering with women from the night

Next day we passed out of the mountains into the true Tenere. It was a thrilling experience to think that I was now in the heart of the Sahara Desert. We drove north-east across a vast flat sea of sand. Soon the mountains disappeared and we were surrounded only by the rim of the horizon, just as though we were in the middle of an ocean. Robert was in charge of the map and when we stopped he reckoned that we were close to latitude 20 N and longitude 10 E, plum in the middle of the Tenere Desert. We believed him!

The ground was as flat as a pancake and as there were no irregular features to invite a choice, we just unrolled our swags and lay down on the

ground to sleep. Waking in the morning was a very strange experience as there was absolutely nothing surrounding the camp to focus on. There was also nothing to disappear behind, so to satisfy nature's needs we each walked off to a different point of the compass.

We drove off towards what Cheikh said was the edge of an ancient lake and on reaching the spot we became beachcombers. He was right about the artefacts as the ground was littered with them and within minutes we had an amazing collection of stone tools and shards of baked clay from broken pots.



Actual size of my stone axe from the Tenere

I have the axe that I collected that day on my desk. I play with it often as it fits in my hand as comfortably as my computer mouse. Laying the mouse and the axe together reminds me of Armstrong's, *One giant step for mankind...*

We raced down the desert towards the big dunes in the south. We stopped for lunch and once the cook had a fire going he started to knead dough into ostrich-egg size lumps. When the fire had burnt down to coals he pulled them back and placed a tin plate on the red-hot sand and dropped the lumps of dough on it to bake. I am not saying that it was the best bread I have

ever had, but watching the whole process made it a very special meal and the sound of the sand being ground between my teeth added a certain unique sensation to the taste!



Bread rolls for lunch

As we approached the dunes things got more exciting and the skill of the drivers more incredible. From our viewpoint the dunes looked impassable, but somehow the drivers knew where the hard sand was and by traversing across the slopes they were able to duck and dive through what looked like completely impossible terrain. The beauty of the dunes was astounding, the scene changing all the time. Stopping to take a photograph was not an option as racing along in top gear was imperative, however, Damon did manage to get two fabulous shots while holding on with his teeth!

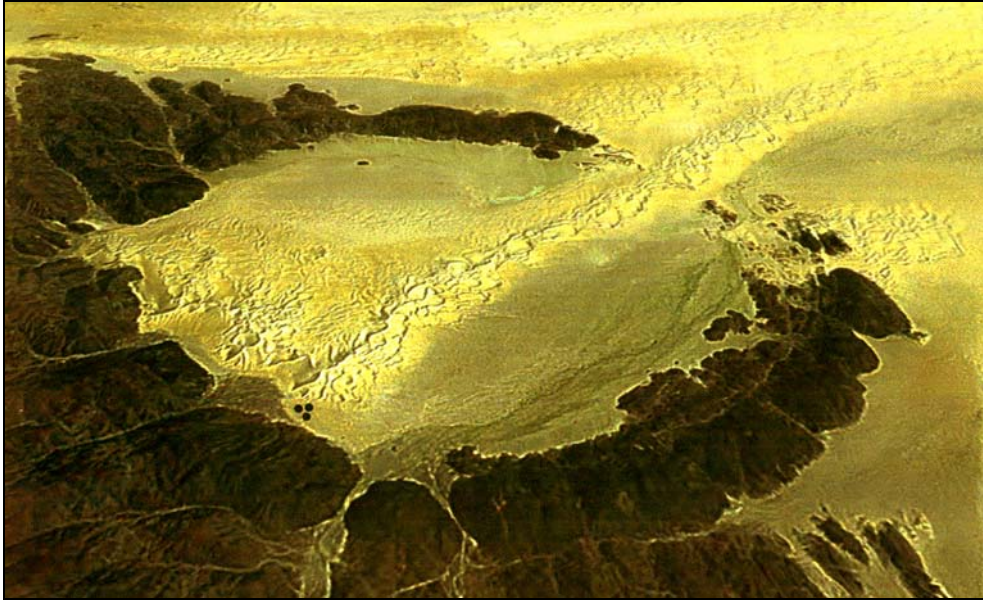


Scalloped dunes in the Sahara



Reflected dunes in the Sahara!

Our destination was the ancient volcanic crater of Arakua. The crater has only one opening on the side out into the Sahara, so the constant east wind carries sand through the gap and, we were told, created the largest sand dune in the world. It was enormous and certainly the largest in the Sahara. We arrived in the evening and camped at the base of the dune (marked with three black dots). Robert announced he was going to get up early and climb the dune! Damon said he would climb the mountain opposite and take a photograph of him on the top of the dune to prove he had done it! You can't see Robert in Damon's photograph, but you do get a good idea of the size of the dune and the colossal volcanic crater. I stayed at the bottom and explored the riverbed that lay between the dune and the mountain where I found amazing evidence of human occupation.



'Arakua' crater and the largest sand dune in the Sahara

If you look at the photographs, you can see that below our campsite (marked with a single white dot) in the dark dry riverbed there is a black slug shape (marked with two white dots). I walked down to this area and found it to be an enormous tumulus made of football-size rocks! The flood plain of the river is strewn with these rocks and for some reason a vast quantity of them had been collected into an enormous heap. I paced out the tumuli and found it was as long as two tennis courts put end to end and as wide as a single court. I could not see over the heap so it was well over six foot high, possibly eight in places. On top at one end were three standing stones some three foot high. I asked myself, *What is it and what is the purpose?*



Damon's photograph of the giant 'Arakua Tumulus'
Unfortunately Robert is too small to see at the top but he is there

I was fascinated, although no one else seemed to be, and the Tuaregs didn't wish to talk about it. Surely it must be a vast burial site that had been built up over many thousands of years. The number of man-hours required to collect such a colossal heap of rocks would have been simply staggering.

David showed us some Tuareg carvings that he had found the year before. These are of a much later period than the *Dabous Giraffe*, only 4,000 years old, and reminded me very much of the rock art of New Mexico.



Tuareg carvings at Arakua



The bulling giraffe at Arakua

Much more interesting and certainly more artistic was a tiny carving of a giraffe that must have been a lot older as that animal had probably disappeared by the time the Tuaregs arrived in the area. I think it is one of the most expressive carvings I have ever seen and it was only 18 inches high!

David and Alec had explored Arakua the year before and had run out of water. They had been saved by the sudden appearance of a Tuareg on his camel carrying water bags for his goats. David asked Cheikh about this old man, who had lived some way up the riverbed, and had been told that he had died.



Desert travellers meet in the Sahara

I had just arrived back in camp from my exploration of the tumulus when I saw a Tuareg riding a beautiful cream-coloured camel coming along the side of the dune. I called over to Cheikh to warn him that we had a visitor. The two men met and I was able to take one of the best photographs I have ever shot with Arakua in the background.

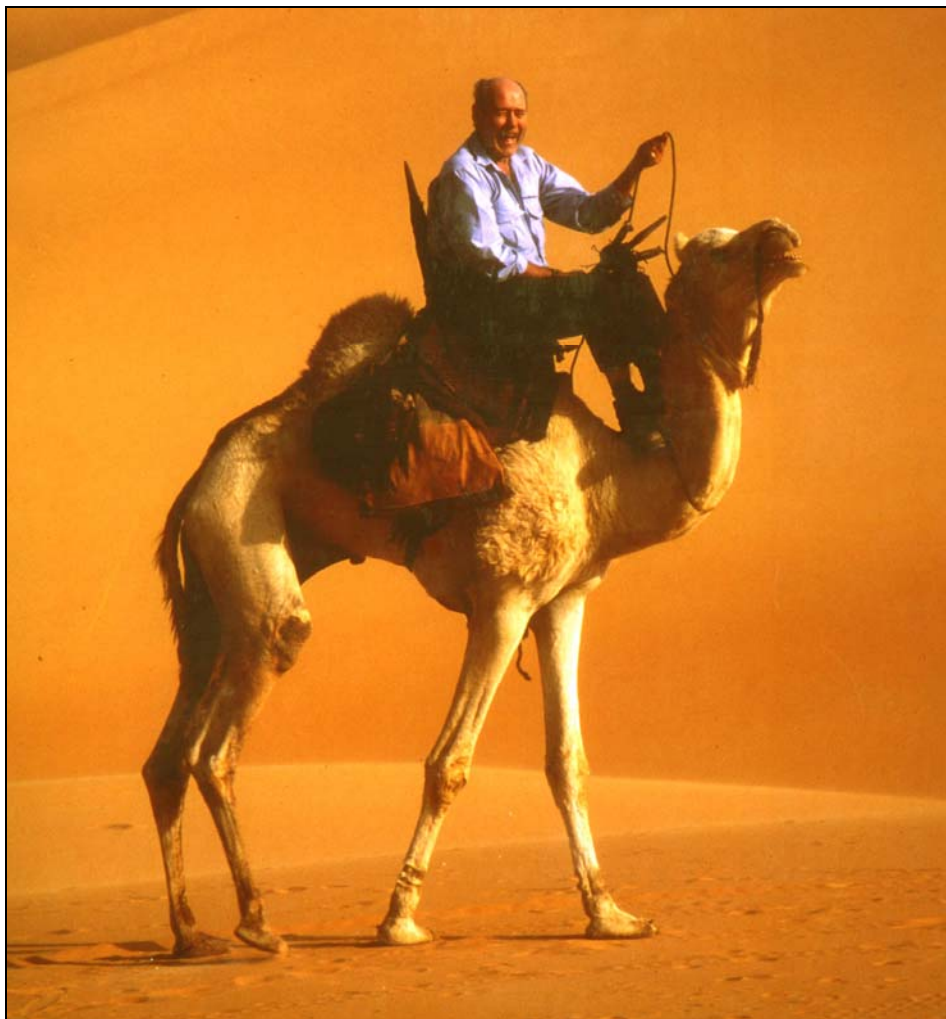


Goat cheese being traded in the desert

The rider dropped his camel to the sand and the two men started the long process of asking each other how all their relatives were. Once this was over they sat down and proceeded with the business of bargaining over the cakes of goats' cheese that the trader pulled out of a filthy canvas bag.

The cheeses came in six-inch wide discs about half an inch thick. Like a magician with rabbits from a hat the trader began pulling one at a time out of the sack and passed it to Cheikh who then held it up for careful examination. The cheeses he liked he stacked in his lap and gave the rejected ones back. Out of the ten cheeses offered, seven were deemed to be acceptable. As I watched the transaction I decided that there was no way I would be tempted to sample any as they certainly didn't look edible to me!

The Tuareg's camel was one of the most beautiful creatures I had seen on the whole trip and when the owner asked Cheikh if I would like to have a ride I immediately accepted the offer. I think this cost me more dollars than all the cheeses put together, but after riding around on the superb creature for ten minutes I decided that I had got the best of the bargain. The animal rose with me on its back in a smooth flowing motion and then walked gently away as though it was treading on air. With slight pressure from my foot on its neck the camel broke into a gentle trot and we began to circle around the camp. It was an incredible sensation, almost like being in a hammock!



Falling in love with a camel

By this time David had arrived and took a photograph of me and from the look on my face I think you can tell what a fantastic time I was having. I returned and when the owner uttered a gentle command the camel settled back down onto the sand and I reluctantly slid off.



A quern found by Jean

The following year, after they had completed the scientific research of the Dabous Rock carvings for the Bradshaw Foundation, Jean and his team visited several rock-art sites that the Tuaregs had located for him. At one Jean discovered a beautiful quern used for grinding seed when the Sahara was covered in lush grass that was able to sustain herds of cows and goats.

On one of his trips to the north of the Tenere David picked up a grinding stone that had a superb relief carved along its spine that looked to me like a canoe paddle. 10,000 years ago this area of the Sahara had permanent water in vast lakes surrounded by papyrus reed that surely were used for building rafts so they must have had paddles. I have a copy on my desk and it is a very spectacular carving. It measures 14.5 inches long and 3.75 wide.



Grinder found in the Tenere by David Coulson



Egyptian girl using a grinder and quern to turn grain to flour

We arrived back at Iferouane and said goodbye to Cheikh and our drivers by presenting them all with the same medal that we had given the ministers on our arrival. Our trip was over and a plane arrived to take us back to Agadez for a shopping spree in the local souvenir store that consisted of a hermetically sealed *Black Hole of Calcutta* type room. Peter exchanged our CD player for a Tuareg sword and Robert bought several lethal-looking spears. I quickly escaped and luckily did so as I was at once cornered by a street trader with an old wooden carving of an *African mother and child* that now sits on my windowsill. I love looking at her Modigliani face as she sits beside the computer screen watching me! For me she represents all the peoples of the Sahara that have survived for generations in this now bleak part of the world.

We had had a brilliant trip and seen what must be one of the greatest art works in Africa. It was now time to return home and see what we could do with the mould to make the whole project worthwhile. We had promised the ministers and the mayor an edition of the cast for the town of Agadez to mount at the airport in return for permission to take the mould.

David had also promised through TARA to pay for a permanent guard to protect the carving from now on as making it into a tourist attraction was going to leave the carving open to casual damage or even intentional vandalism by religious fanatics. Many carvings had been used as target practice during the latest wars between Libya and Chad, so that by bringing world attention to the *Dabous Giraffe* we may have signed a death warrant for them. I hope not. I have been recently told that TARA's guards are doing a good job of protecting the *Giraffe* from the growing number of tourists, which is very great news indeed.



Madonna of Agadez

The first job was to get the mould to Merindol's studio in France and then for them to make a positive plaster cast that I could use in England for an aluminium casting. There was a suggestion that the cast should be done in Arizona using a stone resin material so we flew down to inspect the factory. Robert decided to have an edition made by them for Ramiilaj and it was on this that I did the water experiment.

I felt that we needed to do something that was much more permanent, having had experience of resin when I first started casting life-size sculptures. Resin only has a half-life of 25 years and having gone to all the trouble of taking the mould I felt that we needed something that would withstand the test of time, so the choice was either bronze or aluminium. I chose aluminium as it is one third of the weight and so we would only need to use standard two inch galvanised scaffold piping to build the frame.

When the plasters were ready we took them to the Morris Singer Foundry and they made a six-panel casting that could be bolted together and mounted on a framework. When it was finished Peter, Mark and I put it together in the Agecroft garden to test the simplicity of erection.



Aluminium cast erected in the garden at Agecroft

The first edition was to be shipped to Niger for assembly in front of the Agadez terminal by Peter and Cathy. Achieving this in the most appalling heat had been a nightmare and Peter was very glad that we had chosen aluminium and not bronze! A mud-brick wall was built around the outside of the frame to hide it and when all this was done a ceremony took place with Niger ministers, the mayor of Agadez, David Coulson and Jean Clottes.

The second cast was exhibited in London in the gardens of the Royal Geographical Society and then shipped to Cologne and exhibited in the famous zoo beside their Giraffe House. When Peter and I visited the zoo a baby giraffe had just been born, which was a very fitting event to celebrate the exhibition of a 10,000-year-old carving from the Sahara, especially as Cologne was the very first zoo to house giraffe in Europe.



Peter at Cologne Zoo with the baby giraffe

Our next success was to sell an edition to Copenhagen. We shipped it out and went to erect it for them outside the city's museum. By this time the team were getting very professional as my youngest son, Mark, had joined them, adding his strength to the task. The fourth cast was shipped to Washington D.C. to exhibit at the *National Geographic Magazine's* headquarters. This turned out to be so well received that Robert and Damon decided to donate it to the Society and it is now permanently fitted to a wall of the NG's Explorers Hall.

I think the adventure has been worthwhile as hundreds of people who would never be able to go to Dabous have been able to see at least an exact replica of this amazing carving. In Cologne, Copenhagen and London it was displayed so children could feel the engravings for themselves, just as we had. Being able to do this really illustrates that the desert was once lush grassland on which all the African animals roamed, especially giraffe.

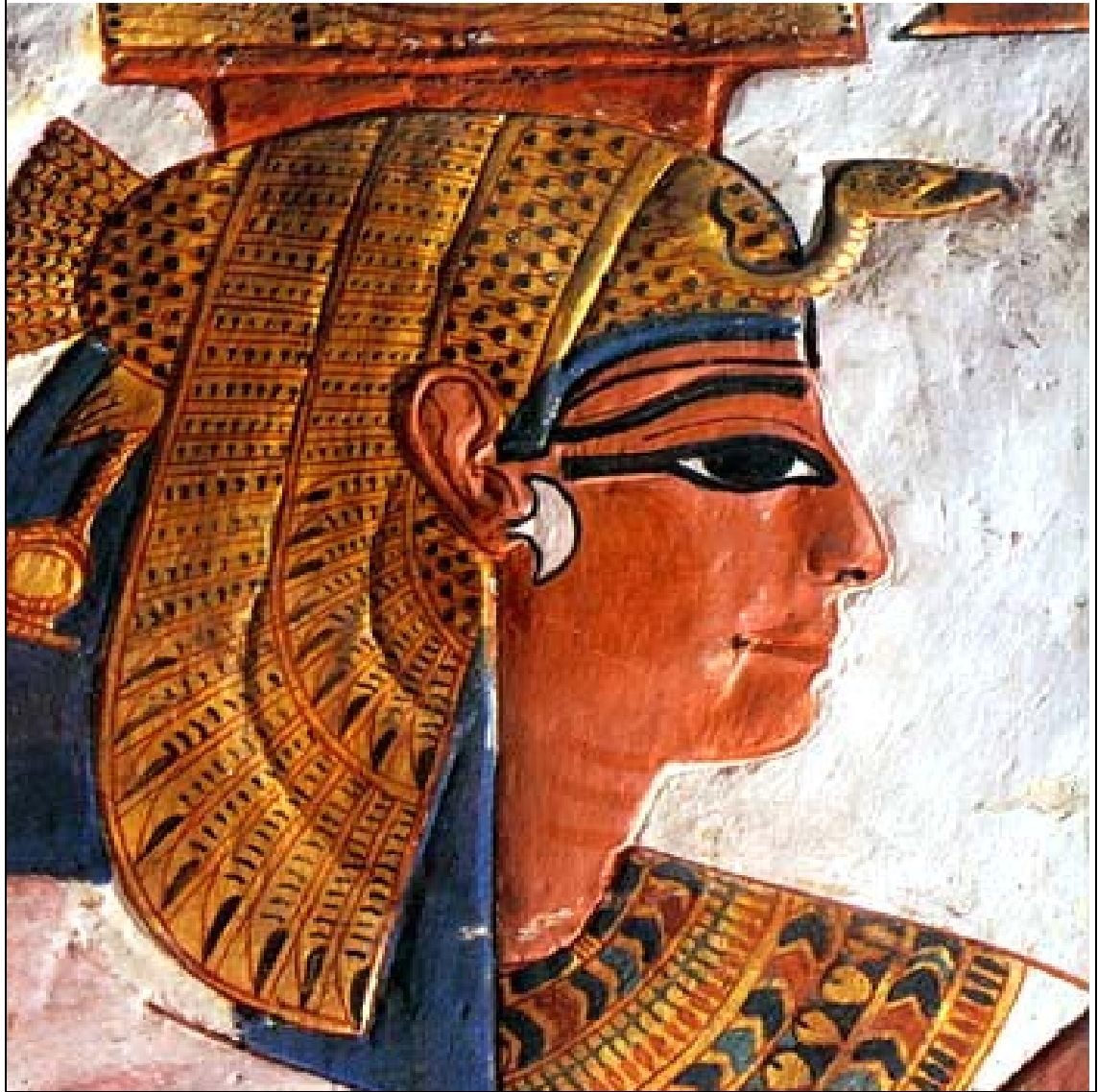
Now all the vegetation has disappeared from the Sahara and the only remaining life unique to those times lives right in the middle in a rock pool trapped in a canyon in the Tassili Mountains. The pool is the home to two crocodiles that probably don't have a very rosy future, although recently an Irish girl has discovered in the Western Sahara crocodiles who have cleverly adapted to *climate change* by hibernating in 20-foot long burrows during the dry season. She found them by attaching a movie camera to a child's radio-controlled battery-driven toy tank and manoeuvring it down the burrow to film them while they slept!

The Sahara Desert is a wonderful place to visit, but the dangers of the sand have been added to by the warring countries to the north and south. Just two years after our visit 14 tourists were kidnapped and held to ransom for six months by the northern tribes.

Having a whole *Giraffe* cast is not something everyone has room for on their wall, so we cast the large *Giraffe*'s head as a small three-foot square panel. What a beautiful creature and so majestic. No wonder giraffe were worshipped by the Hunter Gatherers as a Rain God 10,000 years ago.



The line coming out of the giraffe's mouth ends at a manikin near the animal's knees



Queen Nefertari