



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon

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## The Great Sahara Desert

**THE** great Sahara Desert was on my list of places to visit before I leave this world, and when my wife and I together with a friend of ours were travelling in Algeria and Tunisia for 1½ months in November and December 2012, we had the good fortune of being able to spend half a month exploring a sizeable part of the great desert that makes up the bulk of Algeria's territory.

The Sahara has an area of over 9.4 million km<sup>2</sup>, about the size of USA. It covers much of Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Algeria, Niger, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Chad and Sudan. The name given to this vast area, i.e. Sahara, comes from the colloquial Arabic word for desert.

Algeria is a North African country located on the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. With an area of 2,381,741 km<sup>2</sup>, it is the largest country in Africa after the secession of South Sudan from Sudan and is more than 7 times the size of Malaysia. However, about 80% of its territory is part of the great Sahara Desert which is understandably very sparsely populated, and so this large country only has a population of 37 million people.

After spending about one week exploring the cities and Roman archaeological sites in the northern part of the country, we left Tlemcen for Taghit which is about 680 km to the south. We soon entered the great desert with vast plains of little vegetation on both sides of the road. Taghit itself is a pretty oasis town set in a broad valley with giant sand dunes to its south.

As we continued our journey to Timimoun and then to Ghardaia, we encountered more and more giant sand dunes and were thoroughly amazed and mesmerized by those spectacular sculptures of sand which are the result of the forces of nature.

Sand dunes are what most people will expect to see in a desert, but in the great Sahara Desert, sand seas constitute less than 20% of the total area and sand dunes make up only a small part of the sand seas. The desert is principally rocky in nature and can take several landforms such as stone plateaux, gravel plains, dry valleys, and salt flats.

When we were in Tamanrasset deep in the Sahara and about 300 km north of Algeria's southern border, we spent 3 days doing the so-called Assekrem Circuit in the surrounding desert, seeing nothing but spectacular rock formations and rock-strewn plains.



We then flew to Djanet in the east and spent about 5 days in the Tassili n'Ajjer National Park in south-east Algeria. This national park is a UNESCO world heritage site and is noted for its prehistoric rock art and other ancient archaeological sites, dating from Neolithic times when the local climate was wetter, with savannah rather than desert. The art depicts herds of cattle, large wild animals like crocodiles, lions and giraffe, and human activities such as hunting and dancing.

We travelled by 4WD in the desert about 120 km from the village of Djanet and got as close as 20 km from the Libyan border. We had a Tuareg guide, Ali, and a Tuareg driver named Hamdani. The Tuareg are a Berber group who live in the Sahara regions of Africa. They followed a traditional lifestyle of camel nomadism until fairly recently. We camped at four different locations in the desert, seeing many rock pictograms and petroglyphs in addition to interesting rock formations and spectacular sand dunes. Hamdani was a good cook and Ali, besides being our guide-cum-comedian, pitched our tents and boiled tea (of which the first cup was usually very bitter while the second cup very sweet) for us after every meal. We had a great time in the great Sahara Desert. I consider my Sahara experience as the best part of this trip. ■

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.