



THE SUDAN IS ARGUABLY THE MOST HOSPITABLE OF SAHARIENNE NATIONS, AND BEST EXPLORED NOT BY PLANE, BUT IN A 46-YEAR-OLD LORRY

WORDS | RAF JAH

SANDS OF SUDAN

The coffee shop is run by Dinka, Nubian and Baraka women, who are bombarding me with questions about the children I don't have. Arab men are cackling with laughter at the banter. On this cool and pleasant morning, most of us have cloth wrapped around our heads. The town is quiet now: the weekly boat has gone, the restaurants are no longer burbling with cauldrons of delicious food, and no longer open early.

Wadi Halfa is a border town in the classic sense of the word. This is the northern gateway to the Sudan: a dusty town sitting on the banks of Lake Nasser and hosting the weekly ferry from Egypt. It makes its money from trade, and the delay in trade that forces people to stay.

My friend Andri and I collect our 46-year-old ex-Swiss army lorry from the port; clean it, refill our water cans and check the oil as we prepare for our great adventure: crossing a 250-mile stretch of the Sahara desert to reach Khartoum.

It is late afternoon when we reach the police tent on the edge of town. A constable appears; all around him are large brown mountains of bare rock and sand. Before us, a highway of flattened sand plunges between the mountains



following the railway line. "Where are you off to?" asks the constable. "Abu Hamed," Andri shouts down from the cab, "Oh ok." This seems reasonable to him. "Bye bye," he waves, making an annotation in his book, and with that goes back into his tent.

I point us south and we "step down" off the macadamised road onto the vast sand highway. Sir Winston, as we have named our lorry, powers along at 45mph, throwing a hint of dark smoke from his exhaust, but generally taking the power-sapping path in his stride.

A few miles from Wadi Halfa a few conical huts appear beside the Khartoum railway line. This station is simply called "No. 1". I snap a photo of this lonely little outpost and carry on into the sand. A line of mountains appears to the southwest and disappears. Little seems permanent in the desert.

All too soon, the sun is low on the sky. It's time to stop and brew tea. Camping is easy: we eat, I write my expedition log and then we climb into the back of the truck and sleep on mattresses. Our GPS tells us that we are 58 miles out of Wadi Halfa, although it already feels a world away. ⇒

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We set off as morning breaks, after a slap-up breakfast of tea, old bread and tangy white cheese. The scenery is ever-changing. Mountains appear and we think we will be in them in a few minutes, but instead of growing larger they melt below the horizon. Large clumps of rock turn out to be small foothills. The road dips down and climbs long hills. The desert is not flat, that is for sure.

Just after lunch, we get properly stuck in fine white sand that runs between my fingers. Sir Winston's axles are not even visible. "This is not good," I mutter. We pull our spades out and start digging, slowly working our way in towards the lorry's wheels. After shifting what must be two tons of sand, we manage to extricate ourselves with a pair of sand ladders and some careful driving.

We keep trying to get through the desert, but each way we turn seems to be barred by a line of soft sand that precludes our passage south. I am at a loss, we are simply too heavy. We will never get to Abu Hamed, let alone

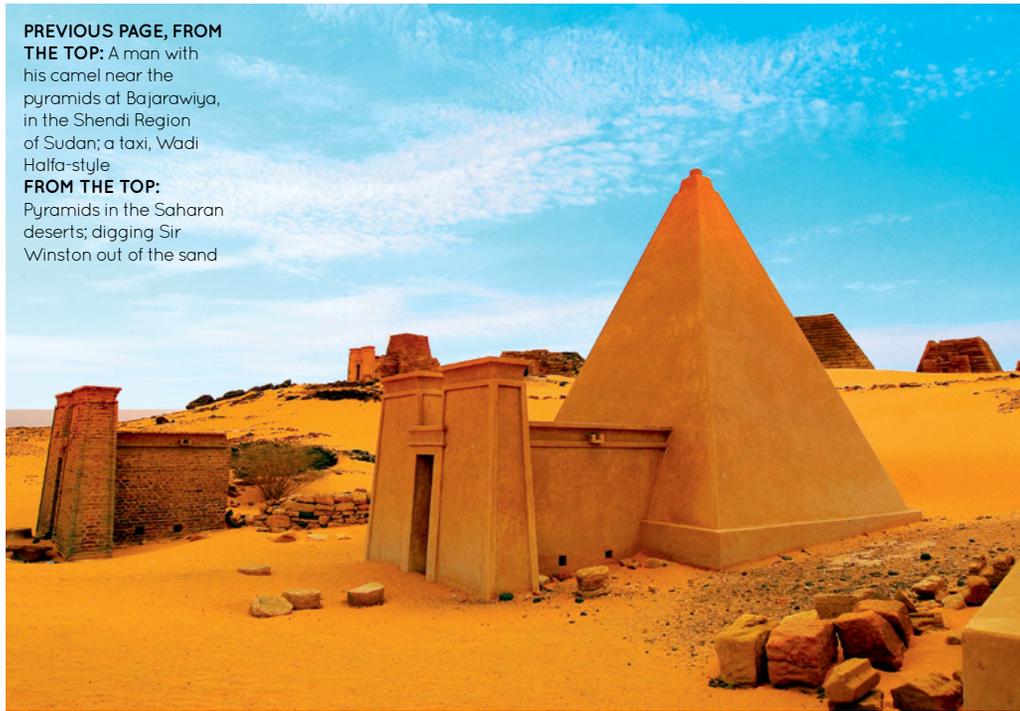


Khartoum like this. I stand on the roof with a pair of binoculars, scanning the terrain for any signs of strong ground.

There is tantalisingly hard stone ground 200 yards in front of us, but it might as well be on the other side of a gorge. In desperation, I take out our satellite phone and call a friend in Wadi Halfa. Mazaar is friendly and succinct. He has guided many an expedition through the Sahara. "Go back, cross the railway line, go far from the railway then you will find a track that leads to station No. 5," he instructs.

We follow his instructions, which lead us to more virgin sand with no tracks in sight. Disconcerting. But our isolation does not last: far in the distance, we see a huge truck, heavily overloaded with bales and people and yet making good going. We roll onto its track and turn south. Immediately we are rewarded

PREVIOUS PAGE, FROM THE TOP: A man with his camel near the pyramids at Bajarawiya, in the Shendi Region of Sudan; a taxi, Wadi Halfa-style
FROM THE TOP: Pyramids in the Saharan deserts; digging Sir Winston out of the sand



On our last morning in the desert, we take tea with the most dramatic of ochre sunrises before charging off into a sandstorm

and our speed picks up. An hour later, we pull into station No. 5 and change drivers.

Working our way around some more mountains, we drop down into a wide valley and climb back up to an astonishing junction in the desert. This is station No. 6, where a small village of men are lounging around in flowing white robes, surrounded by machinery and a water bowser. But we do not stop.

When the sun calls time on our day, we start looking for somewhere to sleep. The land around is flat rock, and so we veer off the track and drive into the desert towards a small mountain where we park out of sight. We are treated to a stunning sunset as we make our simple dinner. As I do the truck log and our end-of-day navigation, I note that we are only twelve miles from the River Nile. Tomorrow will probably see us in Shendi region.

On our last morning in the desert, we take tea with the most dramatic of ochre sunrises before charging off into a sand storm, which forces us to wrap our *shemaghs* tightly over our nostrils as sand swirls into the porous cab. The thin cloth allows us to breathe and our

headlights give a clue as to the way forward. We slow Sir Winston down to a crawl, careful not to fall into a hidden wadi.

The storm stops as abruptly as it started, and we burst out into a grey sunless light, surmount the railway line for the last time and pass station No. 10 junction. As suddenly as we left it, we are back on tarmac. The road-building gang working up from Khartoum has reached north of Abu Hamed.

We stop north of Berber for an excellent brunch of lamb, bread, fowl, felafel and onions, sitting under palm fronds covered in dust. We feel filthy, but the lone server and four other clients make us feel very welcome. We may be on tarmac, but the hospitality of Sudan's desert people is ever pervasive.

The rest of the journey passes in a haze as we pass through a dirty-looking desert of small black rocks and grey sand. We stop only to change drivers and drink Turkish coffee. Long after dark we enter the outskirts of Khartoum, to search for a friend, a bed and a shower. The desert has treated us well, but it's time for a little luxury. ☺