

# Sculpted forms of sand and rock



PHOTOS BY JOE RAY/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

## If you go . . .

**Visa**  
US citizens must obtain a \$100 tourist visa through the Algerian embassy. Information can be found here: [www.algeria-us.org/content/view/38/35/](http://www.algeria-us.org/content/view/38/35/).

**Guides**  
A guide service is not only a must but also a legal requirement in the Algerian Sahara. Typically, you're met at the **Tamanrasset airport** and dropped off there when you leave. "Tam" tends to be used as a base on the first and last nights of a trip.

**Prices vary** by agency, whether you are traveling by 4x4 or camel, how many people you travel with, and your itinerary. Count on **\$641-\$1,282 per week**, all-inclusive. If **what you eat** is a concern, discuss that with your agency before you go.

**Working knowledge of French** is useful, but tour operators will make sure that an English-speaking translator is part of your group.

**Guide agencies**  
**Akar-Akar**

Abdou Zounga and Salah Kberat's employer is one of the oldest and most respected tour operators in Tamanrasset. Food is good (three square meals a day), staff friendly, and management works hard to accommodate your needs. Their booking for English-speaking clients is run from France: 011-33-2-47-50-66-10

**Agence Mero-N'Man**  
The agency's name translates into "what the soul desires," which is especially helpful if you wish to take a camel trek across the desert.

011-213-293-44201  
E-mail [mrjrouani@hotmail.com](mailto:mrjrouani@hotmail.com) or [info@meronman.com](mailto:info@meronman.com)

**DANGEROUS BEAUTY**  
Take an armchair trek at [boston.com/travel](http://boston.com/travel).

## ▶ SAHARA

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time dissolves and the silence becomes addictive: literal quiet comfort that allows the beauty of the desert and the people who live here to reveal themselves.

"We don't follow time," says guide Abdou Zounga as we share a pungent lamb, barley, and vegetable stew called chorba. "No one here ever asks what time it is."

Zounga, 30, is a Touareg, desert nomads descended from Berbers who have roamed the northwest African desert for millennia. Though he earned a degree in computer programming and had a desk job in the city of Tamanrasset, the call of the desert was too strong.

"I told my father, 'I'm sorry. I can't do this,'" he says of life connected to a keyboard. "I want to be physically tired at the end of the day. . . . In [the 9-to-5] life, my eyes were red, I trembled, I couldn't sleep," he says, taking up the hunched-over form of a programmer as he talks.

"Sometimes the Touareg are hard people and the Sahara can be a hard place," says Zounga, "but even when life is hard, it is beautiful."

This is understatement. Even in the age of satellite phones and GPS tracking, the desert quickly hobbles or kills the unprepared. The traditional Touareg headscarf known as a cheche (or tagelmoust) that seemed so awkward to wear on the first day eventually becomes soothing, protecting from wind, sand, and sun. As we drive, I ask about the hundreds of car-sized mounds of rock that line the trans-Saharan nomadic trails. "Those are burial mounds that predate Islam and Christ," says Zounga.

Even with expert guides, there are moments when a visitor wonders whether they will have their own trailside tomb: Tires can blow several times a day, rims warp, wells run dry.

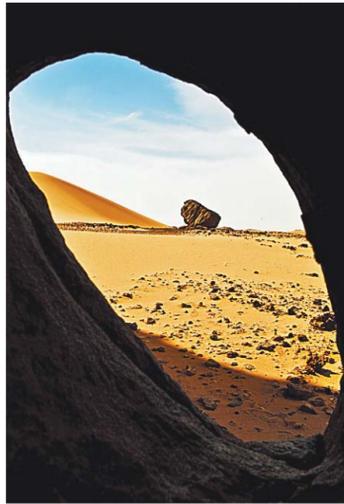
These situations lead to a set of survival rules. If you find water, top off your cans. If you find firewood, take it. If someone needs a hand, help him. These

Pilgrims congregate at the hermitage of Pere de Foucauld at Assekrem in the Hoggar Mountains. In a desert garden Mohamed Ali, a Touareg farmer, makes a sale as Salah Kberat looks on. Some rock formations were created when the desert was the sea.

are not suggestions — this is the desert.

Over the course of a few days, fear of the unknown is replaced by a heightened sense of surroundings. Our first night out, we sleep beneath a freestanding rock arch hundreds of feet high. With no light pollution, the stars are so bright that picking out the principal constellations becomes tricky. Orion has a bow-shaped string of stars to his side that I've never seen and all seven sisters of Pleiades are visible. One moonless night, I take a 10-minute walk to the top of a dune and, once there, realize I've done it by starlight.

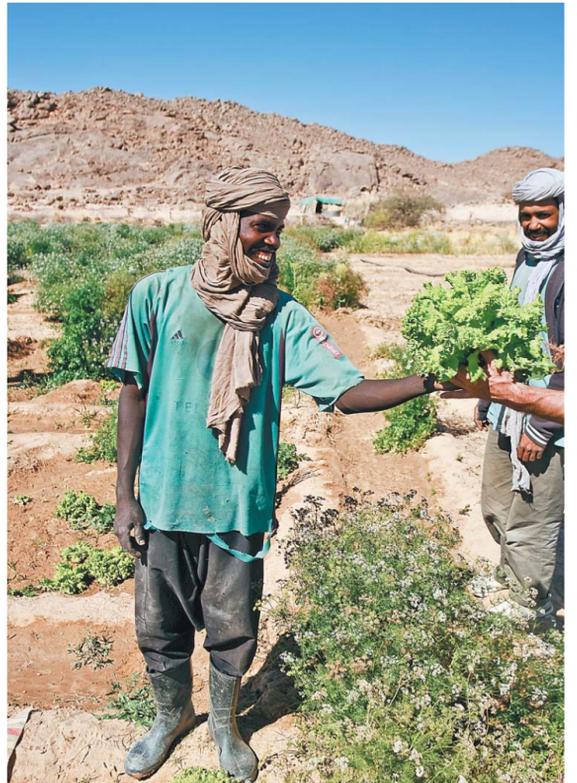
In some spots, rock formations bubble out of the ground like inverted mud pots — testament that the desert was the seabed millions of years ago. Elsewhere, top-heavy rock formations rise hundreds and thousands of feet into the air,



their bases literally sandblasted by time. In one spot, heat and humidity have taken a tall column of rock and cleaved it in two, leaving it looking like a couple standing in the sand, locked in an embrace.

This beauty is the backdrop for life as a Touareg, and while nomadic life may be losing ground to the modern world, there's a romance to it that makes you believe it will hold on for a few more generations.

"One of the first things I learned as a child was respect for my elders," says Zounga, explaining a system where the final say always goes to the oldest in a group. As part of a team of



guides, this might mean he calls the shots on one trip and washes dishes on the next, all depending on the ages of the others.

Aside from an old-fashioned respect for elders, one of the most important traits that Zoun-

ga explains is solidarity among Touaregs, no matter which country they are from. Another is sharing whatever you have, whether it's with someone who needs it more or as a way to ex-

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