

DESERT DREAM

I had a dream of going to the Sahara Desert. I was going to Morocco for a one-week yoga and surfing vacation, I decided to extend my stay and take a trip to the Sahara Desert. The desert, I heard, is a very powerful and mystical place; Jesus went to the desert for spiritual practice, Moses went to the desert for spiritual answers, I wanted to go to the desert to meditate, and experience the silence and the stars.

The way that I learn in life is to observe the way I live, the consequences of my actions, the wisdom that I learn along the way teaches me about life and answers some of the questions that I have. Life is a “full-contact sport” not to be observed from the sidelines but to participate in fully. One Zen teacher, when asked about the meaning of life said, “ you are a fool, everything that you need to answer that question you have inside of you, you are not lacking anything, look inside”. I wanted to go to the Sahara Desert to look inside, but I didn’t have a clue where in Morocco the Desert was located. Younes, the manager of the hotel where I was staying for the yoga and surfing retreat was kind enough to offer to make some arrangements for me. After a few conversations he understood what I wanted and assured me that it would be “no problem” to arrange it. A few days later he informed me that everything had been arranged and that a car would pick me up on Sunday morning after the retreat to take me where I wanted to go. What I wanted was to experience 5 days of meditation in the “desert quiet” under the “dazzling stars fields” in an isolated place in the sand dunes, far away from any other people, no city lights, no car sounds, just me in a tent with simple food and water. Younes informed me that the cost for this wonderful adventure would be 4000 dirham (\$484 US dollars), for the car and driver and approximately 702 dirham (\$85 US dollars) each night for my stay in the desert.

Many times in the weeks and days leading up to this trip I had thought about canceling, “I could stay in a nice 4 star hotel laying around the pool or going to the beach, something less scary, no one would know” As the day of my departure approached my fear level was getting higher and higher. I shared with my fellow yogis my plan to go to the desert for 5 days of solo meditation, the responses ranged from “ that sounds like quite

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the adventure” to “ why would you want to do that?” and “aren’t you afraid?” To tell the truth I was more than afraid I was terrified and I couldn’t identify why I was so terrified, it felt like I was going to die. I had no idea where I was going but “death” was involved. I think it had to do with trusting that I would be safe where I was going even though I had no idea where that was. By Sunday morning the day of my departure I was so terrified that I wanted to hide under my bed. I kept tell myself over and over, “KEEP PACKING”, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do. After saying goodbye to my friends (“good luck”, “safe travels”, “have fun” “Why are you doing this” someone asked again?) I don’t want to live ruled by my fear and the only way out of it I can see is to go into it...put myself into situations where I am terrified and identify what I am afraid of. I put my luggage in the car and we drove off (to somewhere, the desert, maybe?) down the road. The driver and I made our introductions (his name was Abdul), he informed me that it would cost me 5000 dirham (not 4000) to take me to Quarzazate, our destination. I was not surprised that he was asking for more money, haggling is part of the Moroccan culture. What I was surprised about was the driver telling me that it would be over 300 klm (7hrs driving) to our destination and he would be staying in Quarzazate for 5 days waiting to take me back. We haggled back and forth each stating their case (he was more eloquent than I), he said he would take me for 4500 dh, I said I would give him 4250, he responded “what’s the difference between 4500 and 4250” to which I responded “ for 4250 you take me to the desert for 4500 you take me back to the hotel (secretly I was hoping he would take me back)”. He did not like my answer but I left him no option but to accept my price or not make any money. There was a heavy silence in the car in which I had time to reflect on what a clumsy haggler I was but he would have to get over it. We stopped for lunch before we left Agidir, I then learned that I would be paying for lunch and also that Abdul felt the need to eat what I was eating. Sometimes I don’t eat meat, for lunch I ordered salad and bread, I could tell that Abdul was upset at not having meat which he ended up ordering on his own (lamb), I did eat some with him, it was delicious. After lunch our long drive began.

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Because I had zero knowledge of where I was or where I was going I was freed up to just be present in the moment. There was an innocence and an openness of having no expectations that was very exciting and exhilarating, I felt like a child, wide-eyed in wonder. The places we were traveling in Morocco were like nothing I had experienced before. I imagined “this was what Mars must be like” it was so stark and barren and at the same time full of shapes and colors. There was one area we went through that I imagined that the crop for the area was rocks, they were so thick and abundant on the ground covering a huge area, like they were poured out of the mountains and ran down like a river a river of rocks and spread out over the plains. The earth was a rich dark red like organ meat. Out in the middle of nowhere we would come upon a man here or there with his donkey hooked up to a stick plowing between the rocks to plant some type of crop (I learned it was Semolina for making couscous). I could see on the distant hills ruins of watchtowers from the days of caravans sticking up like Rooks of a chess set. Everything I saw and experienced was new. One of the benefits I found of having absolutely no idea where I was heading was the only way out of my anxiety and fear was to be present in the moment with what was happening, it was very freeing and very exciting it was like seeing things for the first time and the last time, I called it “living life on the front-lines”.

Towards the end of the day and into the night we were traveled through mountain passes over narrow, steep roads, it was pitch black no street lights. It seemed that my driver thought he was a better driver than I thought he was. He was exhausted from driving, traveling over treacherous roads in a late model Mercedes Benz. He was driving too fast, accelerating towards sharp corners and braking in the corners because he was going too fast. I expected the Benz to go through the guardrail and down a cliff at every corner. I stopped watching and did meditation in preparation for death. Amazingly we did not die in a car crash. Exhausted we reached our destination for the evening Quarzazate, it was obvious to me that we would not be going to the desert this evening. When we arrived in Quarzazate we stopped (it seemed to me) at a random hotel, my driver got out and told me to wait in the car, I was not exactly sure

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what was happening, I waited in the car to see. When Abdul returned he brought with him a man that he identified as owning an expedition company and I would be talking to him about arranging the trip to the desert, we agreed to drive over to his place of business to discuss the details. It was immediately evident to me that no pre-arrangements had been made to set up my trip and I would be starting from the beginning describing what I wanted for my trip to the desert. The expedition company owner was very accommodating in helping get what I wanted and was surprised at my unusual request, “yes, I want to spend 4 days alone in the desert far away from other people and city lights”. Normally people who went to the desert went to a bivouac camp already set up where they had their own tent but there was a communal tent for meals and entertainment (local musicians).

After we had finished with the details it was time to negotiate the price. I had been told by Younes that it would cost me about \$85 per night. I found out the actual price would be around \$300 per night for 4 nights, needless to say I was quite surprised by the price and not happy. I tried to haggle the price down but I was tired and not in the mood to spend a long time in the process, I did manage to get a 10% reduction. This time I surmised I was on the other end to the “limited choice” options, pay up or go home and I really wanted to go to the desert so I paid.

After breakfast the next morning I met the new driver who would take me to the desert. Introductions were made, I made arrangements with Abdul to be picked up after 4 days and said goodbye loaded my luggage into the SUV and we set off. One reason the cost was much higher than anticipated was that it was another 250 km from Quarzazate to the desert camp, another 5 ½ hr drive. A major part of our drive was through a valley that was one of the two major valleys in Morocco that produces the majority of the dates in Morocco. The valley was over 250 km long and contained millions of date palms. I was told by the driver two interesting date palm facts: only the female palm trees produce dates, the male trees are for pollination and the palm fronds of the male trees are harvested for burning for fuel and there were 17 different kinds of dates.

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Along the way we stopped at a couple of markets to get my supplies; dates, figs, bread, almonds and peanuts, cheese, water, candles, coffee, milk and honey. After a long drive we arrived at the last town before heading off road into the desert.

One point that I found interesting and challenged my ideas; many Moroccans treated their land like a big garbage can (similar to how it was in the US prior to the 80's), for example; Abdul bought some music cds, he unwrapped them and threw the wrapping out the window, took the cds out of the case and put them into his personal case and gave me the empty cases to throw out the window, which I did (I had just met him and was not about to tell him how to live his life). Everywhere I looked there was garbage, even as we drove into the desert there were plastic garbage bags on the ground and pieces of paper lodged in the bushes.

There wasn't an actual road leading into the desert only a track from other vehicles heading the same way and it didn't go in a straight line. We wound our way through the desert around dunes and bushes until we reached the "base camp" 20 minutes later. After explaining that no, I didn't desire lunch at this location and that I wanted to reach my campsite as soon as possible we loaded back into the 4 wheel drive and sped off across a wide open plain (an interesting note; only 15% of the Sahara Desert is sand dunes, a majority of it is rock strewn plains). After driving for a bit in a straight line we began to encounter rocks strewn all across the plain, rocks, tufts of grass and piles of sand had us slowed to a crawl, weaving in amongst these obstacles, sometimes almost in a full circle. As we're driving I'm in the back seat thinking to myself, "where are the sand dunes? this is Not what I had in mind, I want sand dunes...big ones, I'm going to get ripped-off and not get what I want". I was feeling very disappointed. Fortunately I was able to stay aware of my thinking process and identify and recognize this pattern of thinking and realize that I often think like this. If I don't get instant gratification I equate this with not getting what I want even as I am getting what I want (I'm in the Sahara and I am going to the sand dunes). I coached myself to be patient

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and in the distance I saw the sand dunes stretching towards the horizon, this was exactly what I had wanted.

After a roundabout drive we arrived at the dunes and they were amazing, they stretched far into the distance, beautifully colored and shaped. We gathered up my supplies and headed out walking across the dunes. After walking for a little ways, cresting a rise and looking down between some dunes I saw my tent, what a great location! The tent was approximately 10'x10' square and had a center pole support and was staked down at the four corners, had a thin mattress and blankets and carpets on the floor, it looked right out of Lawrence of Arabia. For a stove there was a 2-gallon tank of propane with a small burner screwed to the top and 3 five gallon plastic cans of water. After getting my supplies situated in the tent and taking a "I just got to my tent" picture I half heartedly reassured the guys that I did not need them to check on me every day. I was actually very afraid and had mixed feelings about them checking on me. What I really wanted was to be alone yet feel safe and it was not something I could communicate or maybe even get from them if I could. I probably could have said, "come check on me but don't let me see you", which kind of defeats the point of being alone. Anyways they left and I wasn't sure if they were or weren't going to check on me. I've been on many solo retreats and been alone many times but I had never been alone in such an alien place, I felt very much alone, very small and very vulnerable. I wasn't so far out in the desert. If it had been an emergency I could have hiked out in a day or so with a good sense of direction and some luck. It wasn't as if I had been dropped off in a rowboat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. There was a level of risk (small and mostly mental projections) but it was not an absolutely foolish risk. This adventure was a way to learn about myself, but not die in the process. What was I learning about myself? I went to Morocco, got in a car that was driven-off I knew not where, I experienced terrible fear, I kept imagining that I would be killed (whether by bandits, car crashes) or sold into slavery...I WAS NOT SAFE and something "bad" was going to happen to me, I would not get what I wanted, I experienced the thrill of "Not Knowing" and being in the moment. This was some of what I learned about myself so far.

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My Zen teacher used to talk about Socrates who walked around Athens saying, “You must know yourself, you must know yourself”. I was really getting to know myself as a person full of fear, yet brave enough to move forward in spite of this and because of that was having a great adventure.

“I AM ALONE IN THE SAHARA DESERT, WHAT A THRILL”, yes, I was scared, yet thrilled at the same time at what I had accomplished so far. I explored my tent and set it up to my needs, food here, water there, make my bed and set up my meditation cushion and then I took time to explore the surrounding sand dunes. I realized right away how easily I could get lost in this environment with no clearly distinguishable landmarks (all the dunes looked similar to me). I devised a way to make a landmark. My tent was near the highest sand dune in the area, by walking up to the top of the dune (making footprints) and keeping track of the dune with the footprints on it I was able to go for walks and not worry about getting disorientated and lost and having to follow my footprints back the way I had come. After a cursory exploration I returned to my tent to eat a light meal, do some chanting and sitting meditation before going to bed. At this point my fear level had grown pretty high I was sure some desert bandits or wild animals (probably wild dogs, “do they have wild dogs here...probably”) would invade my tent in the middle of the night and attack me, “Oh Dear Me”. Earlier I had collected some stones from around my tent, with these piled near me and my pocket knife clutched to my chest I went to sleep...It started to rain, rain? Now I had another thing to worry about (a flood maybe? Getting wet?). This may seem funny and I can laugh at it (I could laugh at myself on some level then) but it was important to be able to feel my fear and then face my fear and not pretend I was not afraid, otherwise it would not be possible to find real bravery only false bravado.

Another thing I learned on my first night laying in my bed; there is sand in the desert and it gets into everything, your eyes, your ears, your nose, mouth, hair, bed and there’s nothing you can do to stop it you just have to accept it. I did fall to sleep eventually and survived the night to wake up the next day. I had breakfast of figs, dates, bread with laughing cow

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cheese some almonds and peanuts, instant coffee with milk and honey. The honey was amazingly fragrant and tasty like there was perfume in it. After breakfast I began my meditation retreat.

The retreat consisted of sitting meditation for 1 hr then walking meditation for 10-15 min with each practice period 3-4 hrs long and three practice periods a day. I added bowing and chanting meditation in the morning and just chanting in the evening. I eat two meals per day, breakfast and early dinner (4 pm) and gave myself time for walks in the dunes and lying in the sun. The daytime temperature was in the 70's (very pleasant) and at night cold in the low 40's. The desert seemed to "suck" all heat up at night and I could feel it being "sucked" out of my body.

The first day the wind had been blowing mildly but at a steady pace, by the afternoon of the second day the wind was blowing very strong, a sand storm was coming. By early evening my tent had taken quite a beating from the wind and sand. As I looked at my tent to ascertain the situation I could see that the tent had not been put up well and was unlikely to survive the sand storm through the night. Yes it had been staked down at the four corners but it had not been staked and tied down on the four sides and this was taking the hardest beating from the storm. By night the sides of the tent were starting to lift away from the ground and sand was blowing in. Not only was sand blowing in but also because the wind was getting under the tent it was starting to lift the whole tent up from the ground and it became evident that the tent blowing away into the night was just a matter of time. So I'm sitting in my tent in a sand storm in the middle of the Sahara Desert at night, my tent is starting to lift off the ground because it has not been properly staked down and I'm thinking, "I can't imagine why they didn't put the tent up correctly, they live in the desert and know the correct way to put up a tent" and all sorts of reasons are going through my mind ending in "disrespect for this crazy foreigner who wanted to be alone in the desert".

Then, one of the tie-downs on a corner breaks, sand is pouring into the tent almost completely covering the carpets. I don't know if you've ever

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hat that “sinking feeling” when you start to realize that you may be in “over your head” and that there may be dire consequences to the situation. I suddenly felt the immensity of where I was and my insignificance in the face of it. My tent was “blowing away” in the middle of a sand storm, at night in the Sahara Desert (this was not something I would just be able to walk away from), I was getting that “sinking feeling”. I realized that sitting there worrying was not the answer and that I needed to do something. Having grown up on a farm where you had to solve your own problems and being a person who thrives on solving problems I started to focus on the problem at hand. I did not have the supplies needed to properly stake down the tent, one of the corner tie-downs was broke. I did have one extra tent stake and a canvas bag that a carpet that I had purchased came in. I could use the extra stake and with my pocketknife cut up the canvas bag and weave it into some rope that I could use. Eventually with ingenuity I secured my tent back down, buried the edges of my tent deep in the sand to keep the wind from blowing under it and battened down the hatches. After securing my tent I still had the tremendous energy of the storm to contend with, wind blowing, sand driving against my tent, tent straining against the tie-downs, canvas flapping loudly in the wind, it was frightening. Even though I was relatively safe I still felt battered around by the storms energy, I decided that I would do some strong chanting to bring my energy up so that it matched the storms energy. With strong chanting I was able to regain my equilibrium enough to finish my meditation practice and go to bed, even if I was still afraid. I left the candles burning so that I felt a little more secure not being in complete darkness during such a fierce storm. By the next morning the storm had blown out and I was still there, I hadn’t blown away in the night. I spent the morning taking everything out of the tent and shaking the sand out of everything. After cleaning my tent, putting my belongings back in and resetting everything I took a 2 cup shower and had breakfast. It felt good to have made it through the metaphorical “cleansing” of the storm and the literal cleansing of my tent and me. I felt calm and centered. After breakfast I continued with my meditation retreat.

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Later in the day a young man from the expedition company did come to check on me to make sure I was OK after the storm. I did not get angry with them for putting up the tent in such a flimsy manner. But I did point out how it was put up, what I thought was lacking and asked him to bring me what I needed to so that I could secure it properly. To his credit I did sense that the young man felt a sense of shame for the poor way the tent had been put up and quickly asked me what I needed and promised to be back shortly with the supplies. After receiving the supplies I secured the tent properly and I was a “happy camper”. It is ironic that after the rain and sand storm there was barely a “puff” of wind for the next 2 days. It was as if the storms outside of me matched the storms that raged within me and until they raged and then subsided I was not able to find peace inside.

The next two days I experienced the completed quiet and stillness that I had imagined was to be had in the desert. There was not a single sound at night, zero sound; it was such an amazing experience, it was as if the world had stopped, frozen in time, the only sound was my breathing and the beat of my heart in my ears. And just as the sand storm reflected the storm raging in me, now the quiet outside was reflected inside of me. Sitting meditation in my tent, the silence was like a physical force. There was no need to “try” to quiet my mind, only sit in the absolute quiet around me and in me. I could feel the pressure to distract myself away from the immensity of this experience (like whistling when you are alone in the dark and your afraid) and I didn’t want that I wanted to experience it fully. I left my tent with a blanket and went to sit atop a nearby sand dune and look at the sights that will forever be in my heart. The moon had not yet come up, the light that illuminated the night came from the billions of stars overhead. There were so many stars they were as thick as clouds. I could see part of a swirl from the Milky Way curling overhead. There were no mountains or hills near me so I could see the stars all the way down to the horizon 360°, it was like being inside a giant “star bowl”. And the silence, so complete, absolute, not a single sound, not a leaf or twig bug or bird no cars or even plane sounds, it was if the whole world had stopped into a

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single moment. In this moment of time I felt complete with nothing lacking.

I had had great expectations of what my experience in the desert was going to consist of and I got so much more that I could ever have imagined. To be in a sand storm and experience the raw power of the desert and feel my insignificants in the face of that, to take charge and be responsible for my own survival, was a gift. To see my fear, feel it fully and not run away, was a gift. To sit in silence, complete stillness and experience it without distractions, was a gift.

Why did I go to the desert? I am searching for something. What am I searching for? I want to know what life is about? I am finding that it is not what I imagined. It is storms, surviving storms, quiet quiet nights, star fields, driving across Morocco not having a clue where I am going, getting what I want but not in the way I imagined and so much more. I am amazed what an adventure facing my fears, not knowing what the outcome would be created profound stillness, peace and the beginning of trust.