

# QUAD

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## QUAD TREKKING

The dunes of Mauritania



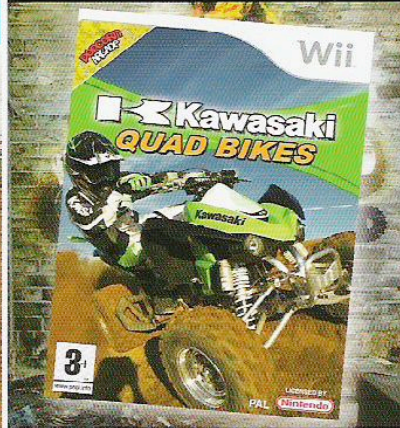
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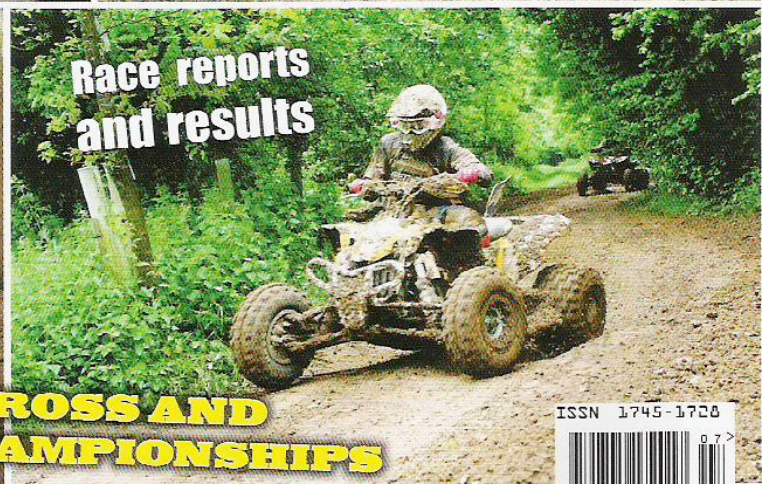
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ISSN 1745-1700



# Mauritania Mania



## Quad trekking on the dunes of Mauritania

Sand is the new snow. Forget about skiing, and follow me for a week of surf and off-piste, on the dunes of Mauritania, in northern Africa, where you will see that the slopes of the Erg Makteir are at least as much fun as the 'black' runs of the Alps

Words & photography: **Pierre Devaux**

The steep incline of the dune that stands in front of me is impressive. It's a sort of slide of soft sand, fifteen or twenty metres high, the angle of which, specialists will tell you, cannot go over 34 degrees. That's not so reassuring when you realise it equates to slopes of more than 65 per cent. Didier, who is not naturally shy when it comes to turning on the throttle, is stuck some length from the ridge. As instructed by Jean, the boss and guide of New Gate Travel, I knock down to second gear, open fully and begin climbing. The Suzuki mono screams and, at the contact breaker, spits out its forty horsepower to propel me, almost too easily,

towards the sky. The front wheels are already reaching the ridge when I realise that, instead of the platform that I was expecting, the other side of the dune is as steep as the one I just ascended. Instinctively, I had cut the gas before reaching the top, and the quad dived in the front, towards the bottom of one of the sandbanks. Yes, one of those that our guide warned us about! In a desperate attempt, I pushed the handlebars and landed on my back, while the quad took its leave, on its side, in the other direction. Damn, this sand is so hard. I must get up quickly because Didier is coming back. This time, he stops right on the ridge and comes down

to help me to put the quad back on its wheels.

Three days have passed since our arrival in Mauritania. Three days during which we have behaved as nomads on the foothills of the Erg Makteir, a vast ocean of furious sand that spreads over more than five hundred kilometres, between Atar and the borders of Algeria and Mali. All day long, Jean guides us on loops that regularly return us to a narrow plain at the bottom of the cliffs of the Adrar, where we get assistance to fill up, eat and drink.

### **Bivouac at El Beyyed**

We stop off near El Beyyed, an

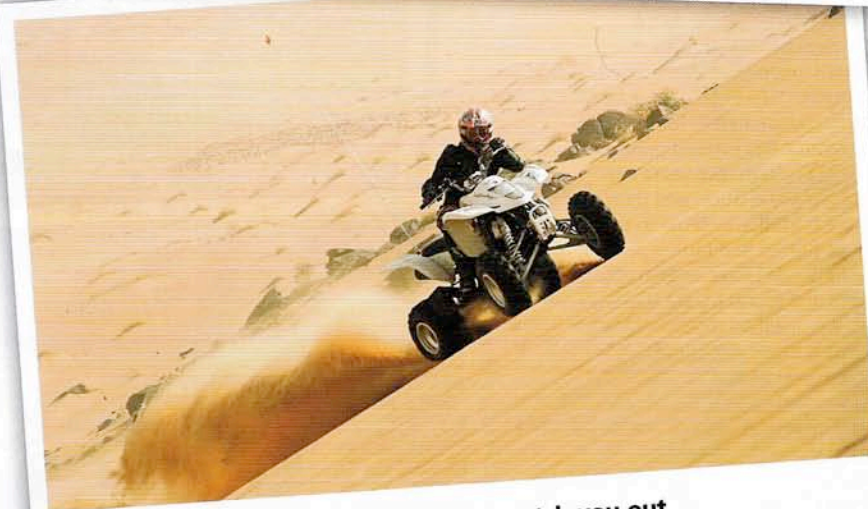
area surrounded by a little vegetation and a few nomad tents, lost within a large valley, sculpted in the high plateaux of the Adrar. At the 'bivouac' – basically, a ramshackle camp – Jean makes full use of his skills learnt in a previous pharmacist job and distributes analgesic and anti-inflammatory drugs to calm down aches and pains; eye drops to cool off eyes burnt by the sand; and, finally, anti-diarrhoea drugs and intestinal antiseptics to cure the violent heat-shock affecting half the group. The next morning, he sets up a challenge at the bottom of a huge sand cascade lying against the cliff, but no one, including himself, succeeds in conquering the "impossible climb". We then stop off for a visit to an "Archeologic museum", where Islem, the local chief, presents historical details, and shows the tools and carved stones that he recovered on the plateau.

With the cultural stopover finished, the trip resumes amidst ever-growing dunes. Somewhat later, it is Jean-Michel's turn to stall at a treacherous point. He is the head of the gang of quad-lovers that I joined, and he doesn't stop smiling, despite his aching wrists and shoulders. "We always overdo it with Jean, and I saw him bump when he reached the bottom of the dune," he explains with his drawling accent. "I wanted to go a little further but the gap was even wider. The bumper dug in and the quad stalled, I hit the handlebars with my helmet and even bit my tongue. That aside, this is pure happiness. I didn't know such extremes existed!"

The desert landscape that we crossed to reach Ouadane then Chinguetti cities provided Jean-Michel with another vivid memory. "Driving on these great, flat plains has been



**The 6x6 truck carries a week's worth of fresh supplies and fuel**



**Soft sand dunes can catch you out**





enjoyable, too," he admits. "It's magnificent. With the wind, we don't even see the horizon. How is it possible to find such immensities without dimension, yet on all sides, dune ranges more than a hundred metres high?"

### **A custom-made trek**

"We have the freedom to make this trek exceptional," explained our guide. "I have tailored it as if I were to ride it myself, for fun. The programme has evolved quite a bit since its creation, five years ago. I first drove the truck, and then people started asking me to take groups farther and farther away in the dunes, so I have trained other drivers and found Mauritians who are qualified to assist. No two groups are ever alike, and it is fair to say that, since I like the unexpected and welcome challenges, every circuit is unique". Jean is a genuine aficionado who has ridden a motorcycle for a long time, and has even taken part in the Dakar Rally, driving an ATC and a truck.

### **A fond farewell**

Lying down on the departure room floor, while waiting for the plane, Emilie, the only woman of the group, closes her eyes, as if to retain the pictures she holds in her head. "We sometimes had the impression of being lost at the very end of the world," she admits, "All alone with our quads with just dunes that spread to the horizon for company. It's a great experience, to discover another country and another culture. Also, I have greatly appreciated the camaraderie." Emilie doesn't mind admitting some aspects of the trip were tough: "I knew that I would suffer," she adds, "With ten guys, it was going to be physically challenging. But I didn't expect to be so affected by the heat. The bivouac doesn't have the usual comfort. Washing with wipes for a week didn't trouble me too much, but I was glad to shower when we got back to the hotel. It was awesome and I only want to remember the good things. Seriously, we had a brilliant week."



**Regular maintenance is vital**



## The details

**Title:** Sand Trek, bivouacs and dunes

**Country:** Mauritania

**Time:** October to April

**Length:** 8 days/7 nights

**Type:** Saharian sportive trek

**Course:** Loop of about 1,000km (620 miles) around Atar

**Ground type:** Trail and off-trail, sand and regs

**Rider level:** Average to experienced  
Accommodation, food and drink:  
Bivouacs and all included.

**Costs:** From 2,250 euros (£1,782) per person, including flight

**Machinery:** Suzuki 400 LTZ or Polaris 500 Predator included

**Contact:** New Gate Travel

**Tel: France:** +33 4 50 46 90 23/+33 6 75 37 03 66

**Web:** www.newgate-travel.com

With thanks to Régine and Jean and all the New Gate Travel team, to Point Afrique and my fellow quad trekkers.

### Don't overlook Mauritania

The events of December, followed by the cancellation of the Dakar, along with the withdrawal of numerous tour operators, have put Mauritania in depression. There are security concerns, but we did not feel under threat at any time. Aggressions against French travellers are not unknown, but remain isolated cases. The Al-Qaïda threat put forward by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs actually includes all of Maghreb. "There is no security problem in Mauritania," assures Sidi Ould Memoum (pictured), an influent Atar businessman. "There are just bandits that behave stupidly. The media has

made things seem worse than they really are." Bravely, the Point Afrique has maintained its weekly charter flights, but until when? The number of travellers has severely declined. "Here, everyone has problems," adds Sidi Ould Memoum. "Some had invested a lot of money in anticipation of the Rally. These events have put an end to the tourist season. We hope that the Mauritanian government will help us out."

### Mauritania in brief

**Location:** Two times the size of France, Mauritania extends from the south of Morocco to the Senegal river. It holds a little more than three million inhabitants, of which half reside in Nouakchott, the capital.

**Land type:** Essentially desert, with the exception of the Senegal River valley.

**Land use:** Mauritania's major resources are fishing, iron mineral extraction in Zouerate, and agriculture.

**Official language:** Arabic, but French is widely used.

**Currency:** Ouguiya (1 euro, or 79p = 330 O.M.).

**When:** The most favourable time runs from November to March. The summer is torrid (>40°C) in the country. Between July and September, a little rain sometimes lessens the aridity of the south.

**How:** Flights are available from Royal Air Maroc and Air France, from London Heathrow. Phone flight operators for details.

**Formalities:** Valid passport, visa, yellow fever vaccination for all stays of more than fifteen days.

**Web:** www.infomauritania.com



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