

STRiDA's Sahara Trip

The Traveler :

Régis FENDER, born at Thionville on 23 March 1972.

After dropping out of his sociology/law course (too much criss-crossing France with a rock group), Régis did one thing after another (farmworker, supervisor, carpenter, driver, care assistant, salesman, etc.) and qualified in naturopathic medicine.

He currently works as a helper in the "Corail" Occupational Therapy Centre (CAT) at Yutz in the Moselle. He is an author (four books in all, two of them accounts of his travels), a photographer, a founder and active member of a charity (FILI), and a frequent traveler around Africa and Europe (on foot, by pirogue, by bike).

The journey :

A 3000km trip from Marrakech to Saint Louis in Senegal (Morocco – Mauritania – Senegal) on a Strida folding bike with 16" wheels and a belt instead the conventional chain (so the bike had only one speed) !).

This jaunt from the Moroccan High Atlas to the banks of the Senegal river, taking in 1400km of the Saharan desert and its sandblasting winds), lasted just over five weeks in daily stages of ten hours' cycling covering about 160km each (the longest was 223km and the shortest just 33km).

A five-litre jerrican was fitted into the luggage rack, with room for the sleeping bag underneath. The front of the bike carried an ultra-light tent; tools, spares and other kit were stowed in a backpack which weighed about 5kg fully packed.

Seven tyres and six inner tubes were needed between Marrakech and Saint Louis (on the worst day there were three punctures plus one dead outer tyre), but no mechanical hitches.

The bike was a great hit – photographed again and again – and there was plenty of encouragement all the time: arm waves, thumbs up, honking horns, etc. Every wave, thumb and hoot made up for hours of fatigue !

The worst trouble came from the violent and unreliable desert winds – and sunburn (constantly-blistering skin under my t-shirt).



Night stops of all kinds :

When tiredness or nightfall made me stop, I'd have to find somewhere to spend the night. Such as :

a olive grove, an orange grove, an lively and cynical old fisherman's hut, deserted houses or empty cabins, nomads' tents (along with the nomads), villages on the edge of the Sahara (in local people's houses), in service stations, by the roadside, on the ocean shore or a river-bank, at inns and – most often – in the open.

Kinds of road :

My route took me over all kinds of surface :

Smooth, recently-laid tarmac, asphalt made with shells for aggregate !), sandy or stony tracks, roads with drifting sand, a beach (for 15 kms), roads with potholes, roads with anti-personnel mines at the edges : the recent fighting between the Saharans and the Mauritanian and then the Moroccan governments made crossing the Western Sahara hazardous because of these mines).

Tales to tell :

There were odd encounters and surreal situations all along the journey :

I was chased by roving dogs,

I got lost for three days and two nights on the track ways of the Moroccan plains, dotted with nomad encampments,

I shared a calabash of curdled milk with some nomad women while their patriarch with his age-old beard bent piously over his ancient Koran,

At nightfall one old nomad took me for an evil spirit, and chased me with his stick before he realized his mistake (after I'd addressed him in the customary way),

I begged water from the few vehicles I met in the desert,

I was the guest of a member of the royal Alaouite family at a religious and tribal centre (Zaouia),

A swarm of urchins tried to filch my spare wheels in Mauritania,

An old fisherman, a true Wise Man, made me welcome to his home and his clear-eyed vision of the world,

I managed to dodge a bid for bribery on the border between Mauritania and Senegal, and scorned all sorts of pimp,



for three whole days (between Nouadhibou and Nouakchott) I fought headwinds which would suddenly veer round to the side and push me right off the road,

I met plenty of other travelers and drifters: Swiss, Spanish, American, Irish, French, Italian, Dutch,

And so on.

Upcoming projects and plans :

I made a log and photo diary of this trip, so I'm looking for exhibition sites,

A book is under way, with photos,

I'm also researching a bike trip (on the Strida) tracing slavery routes in West Africa (Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, and Benin).

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