

Travel

Sunset in the SAHARA

We met our camels at a base in the Merzouga Desert on the fringe of the Sahara after a 45-minute 4WD drive from the town of Rissani in Morocco.

Close up, the single-humped dromedaries, as they are correctly named, have the most quizzical faces with large lips in a permanent smile, small hairy ears, bushy eyebrows, two rows of long eyelashes to protect their eyes, and nostrils that seal shut against the elements. They look like a caricature of themselves.

Cleverly adapted to the desert environment, the camel's hump stores fat which they convert to water and energy, giving them the ability to travel up to 160 kilometres without water. When they stop to drink, they can take on a staggering 130 litres of water in just a few minutes.

The stately creatures obligingly folded their knees on command, allowing us to climb aboard. Our ships of the desert then made their stoic way up the steep dunes led by a tribe of blue-clad Berber boys. I was mesmerised by the tall graceful shadows we cast as our caravan climbed the sharp red sand-dune ridges, and fascinated by the prints left behind us by the camels' thick footpads which splay out as they walk, helping them navigate rough terrain and shifting sands.

The colours of the desert were chameleon – they played games with my eyes, constantly changing with the light and shadows. From a distance, the dunes appeared terracotta-red, but close up, the sand was ripe apricot, glowing in the late afternoon sun, and after dusk, a warm beige, the colour of the camels. Had it not been for their brightly-coloured passengers, the animals would have merged into the landscape, perfectly camouflaged.

JUSTINE TYERMAN finds herself mesmerised by the wonders of the desert



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Sunset in the desert is a spectacular sight. (OJM Photography); Our tented enclave amid the red dunes. (Justine Tyerman); Justine (right) and friend Margy about to head off into the Sahara on their camels; Close up, camels have the most quizzical faces. (Andrea Boccini).

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As the sun began to fall from the bleached blue sky, we dismounted and clambered to the highest point on a sand dune mountain, just 55km from the Algerian border.

Sunset in the desert is a spectacular phenomenon, a dazzling kaleidoscope of burnt orange, crimson and gold. I held my breath, transfixed as the blood-red orb slid behind the shimmering horizon in a final display of fire. The heat radiating off the sand was intense, but when I buried my hands below the surface it was wonderfully cool.

I found myself reluctant to remount and plod back to our campsite for dinner. I doubted I would ever pass this way again and

wanted to savour every second. The surreality of the experience continued as our camels graciously knelt down outside a luxury tented enclave amid the red dunes. After freshening up in the en suite bathrooms attached to the spacious bedrooms, we sat around a campfire and were entertained by a troupe of highly-talented musicians and dancers from Senegal and Mali.

Our hosts served us delicious hors d'oeuvres, chilled wine, beer and a lavish three-course feast of Moroccan salads, tagine, couscous and platters of fresh fruit.

Later in the evening, we stumbled to the top of a sand dune behind the camp to do some serious star-gazing.

I lay back on the sand, still warm from the sun, and scooped up handfuls of the primordial stuff, acutely aware of the sensation of the fine grains running between my fingers. The sky was immense and the stars dazzling.

Weeks later when I arrived home, grains of Saharan sand were still embedded in my camel-riding socks and shoes. I shook them out and kept the tiny red granules in a little glass jar, a timeless memento of the desert.

Justine Tyerman travelled courtesy of Innovative Travel, a New Zealand-based travel company with 28 years' experience. Justine flew Emirates from Auckland to Casablanca, Morocco return.



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