



Sahara Unveiled: A Journey Across the Desert

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It is as vast as the United States and so arid that most bacteria cannot survive there. Its loneliness is so extreme it is said that migratory birds will land beside travelers, just for the company. William Langewiesche came to the Sahara to see it as its inhabitants do, riding its public transport, braving its natural and human dangers, depending on its sparse sustenance and suspect hospitality. From his journey, which took him across the desert's hyperarid core from Algiers to Dakar, he has crafted a contemporary classic of travel writing.

In a narrative studded with gemlike discourses on subjects that range from the physics of sand dunes to the history of the Tuareg nomads, Langewiesche introduces us to the Sahara's merchants, smugglers, fixers, and expatriates. Eloquent and precise, *Sahara Unveiled* blends history and reportage, anthropology and anecdote, into an unforgettable portrait of the world's most romanticized yet most forbidding desert.

Sahara Unveiled: A Journey Across the Desert Details

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From Reader Review Sahara Unveiled: A Journey Across the Desert for online ebook

Otto says

I am currently obsessed with deserts in general and the Rub' al-Khali and the Sahara in particular. And I loved this book; but I fear my obsession with deserts might have coloured my view of this book to an unacceptable degree. This is a fairly straightforward narrative about Langewiesche's trip through the core of the Sahara from Algiers to Dakar. He interlaces the narrative with a few Tuareg stories and a little bit of politics mainly dealing with how the desert peoples interact (or don't) with the peoples of the Sahel and the Mediterranean coast. So all of this is good.

But there are a few hints that I would not have liked this kind of travel book had it not been about the Sahara. First of all I have a few qualms with the style: it's a spare, Hemingwayesque style that is a bit affected. When writing on what happens to the human body when deprived of water this style is very effective. But through most of the book it feels a bit too much like a bad imitation of Hemingway.

The second problem I had with the book is that the author just doesn't seem to like the people he meets very much. Of if he does, he doesn't portray them very sympathetically. They all seem a bit remote. The author, too, seems a bit remote for most of the book - but this might be a good thing because it makes the Sahara the main character. But I do prefer such travel books as Tim Mackintosh-Smith's where the characters appear more three dimensional.

But despite these few negatives, the book was still a very rewarding read and despite my qualms about the prose it was very readable and I read the whole book in just a couple days.

HBalikov says

Langewiesche provides a mostly quiet journey full of small delights and surprises as he travels (basically) two legs (one south, one west) of a triangle from Algiers to Dakar to give us an up close and personal Sahara Desert experience. We meet locals; we encounter cultures; we hear of individual and collective aspirations.

Langewiesche, as a pilot has roamed the world. As a correspondent for Atlantic Monthly and Vanity Fair, he has honed his narrative and background research skills. Though this is one of his early efforts (about two decades ago), many insights and observations seem to be consistent with current events. As readers we benefit from all of this. For example, this excerpt:

...In that sense the word "Berber" still expresses a common European attitude toward North Africans, though "Arab" is more commonly used. But the Arabs are if anything overcivilized. Inspired by Mohammed's teachings, their armies came to North Africa from the Middle East in the seventh century A.D. and didn't stay long. When the soldiers left, their followers remained behind as merchants and missionaries. They began to trade south into the Sahara. They interbred with the Berbers, and taught them a new philosophy and religion, and the language to understand it. Over the following centuries this potent combination spread into every corner of the wilderness, replacing the original Berber tradition. North Africa did not surrender to the Arabs, but was persuaded by them, and underwent a collective change of mind. The most determined holdouts were the tough mountain herders of the north and the even tougher Tuaregs of the central Sahara, a

Berber people also originally from the north, who to this day have retained their Berber customs and language. But they, too, converted to Islam."

One of the sections that I found fascinating concerned the city of Tamanrasset and a people called Tuareg. We learn why this city of over 50,000 with a significant middle class can exist in such a remote location. "...there is no telephone connection (probably now there are satellite phones and maybe cellphones), no good road, and no decent postal service (though I expect that the Internet is now accessible)...(but) Groundwater is in such short supply that new households are not allowed to hook up to the municipal system, and old households are severely rationed..." We learn of Charles de Foucauld, an army officer in the early 20th Century who decides to abandon his military service for service to his god. He plunks himself down close to here and attempts to convert the Tuareg. After a decade he has not succeeded with even one convert. And, then he is murdered. A bit ironically, his little home becomes the destination for religious tourists and he is on the road to sainthood (beatified in 2005). We also get some insights into contemporary life from Langewiesche's stay with a "friend" Addoun. And we learn how visitors and travelers, again and again, misjudge the town, the people and the desert to their detriment and death.

He also provides us background on the Tuareg people who have had a nomadic existence in this area for over 3,000 years and their resistance to change and domination. They "...were not traders. They were camel breeders, desert guides, toll collectors, bandits. They were opportunists..." who learned to siphon wealth from those who passed through their territory. "When the time was right the Tuaregs would cut their victims out of the caravan, to rob and kill them in private. They counted on the remainder of the caravan simply to ride away. If the Tuaregs did not overreach, they could chew like this at the same caravan for weeks."

Some things change and some things stay the same. Langewiesche is very good at giving his reader a sense of both.

Thurston Hunger says

Coming out watching a How the Earth Was Made overly dramatic documentary on the Sahara with my 8-year old boys, I wanted to explore the Sahara in a more subtle (and remote via reading) fashion.

Just happened to select this from the stacks at the library, unaware of the author or anything, and the wandering paid off. Despite its subject, the writing is never dry, often it veers into lyrical quality. The description of people surrendering their homes to the sand, opening the windows and doors and punching holes in them hoping that the dune will move through the home eventually was just a brief moment in the book, but amazing to me.

The book spends much more time on Ameer, and his "two" wives. One of whom we feel Langewiesche falling in love with, is this the unveiling of the Sahara that the title speaks of. It goes on with some pining and plenty of distance, and just when I thought this was going to be focus for the entire book, that story and the lovely Malika vanish. More "travel" books should adopt extensive existential interludes? Nah....but it was an interesting device.

Another element of the book that transfixed me was the Tuareg painted as the rogues if not villains of the desert. Recently around here, music from Tuareg tribes and an excellent exhibit at the Cantor Museum a few years back showcased some of the beauty of that nomadic culture. So having them seen as potentially marauders if not murderers was interesting. Of course all cultures, all stories, have multiple sides. Some of the early tales of colonization show that from all cultures.

The tales both of the author and others being stranded in the sand. This spoke as much about the merciless isolation of man as any psychological novel could.

Definitely recommend this, if something about the Sahara catches your imagination, as it does mine.

Andrea says

I am in awe of William Langewiesche (pronounced long-gah-vee-shuh). This is an amazing book where you are taken on a journey and meet a complete cast of characters that not even the best of authors could create in fiction. He shares with us the many stories of those who inhabit the desert. We learn the history of the inhabitants, the political climate, the way of life that would seem foreign to those of us in the west. There is humour, adventure, danger and resolution. I have always been fascinated by the desert and this book just drew me right in. Langewiesche would be a fascinating person to sit down and talk with for I am sure he would have plenty of stories to tell! As a writer I am deeply inspired by his work. I am definitely going to purchase this book and keep it on my shelf. I look forward to reading more of his work!

Gavin says

As someone who still dreams about exploration, although at this point interplanetary seems the main way to go, I found William Langewiesche's book on the Sahara fascinating. I did achieve touching Moroccan soil for a few hours last year, but Africa, and the Sahara are definitely high on my list to try and experience more.

That being said, I'm not sure about traveling from Algiers south to Niger, and then west to Dakar by myself. Langewiesche does exactly this trip solo and has some adventures that I could do without, but I suppose that makes for this memorable book.

Living in Arizona gave me a taste for arid places. Camping in Joshua Tree and Death Valley with the Fahrenheit in triple digits makes me think that I could attempt this trip, but truth be told I was not in sand and certainly as far from civilization as Langewiesche. Yet people do live all over the Sahara and survive in some pretty incredible places. Yet I, like the author, perhaps would come to this experience with some book learning and not much else.

Definitely a keeper of a book, all the better because it was in the free bin at McKay.

Sue says

I read this because I absolutely love this author's articles in The Atlantic Monthly and other magazines. Even if he writes about subjects I don't have interest in, he can make me be interested in them on the strength of

his writing. That said, I was a tad disappointed with this book overall. It didn't seem quite up to snuff with his other works. I'd still recommend it to anyone interested in the area or anyone interested in the author.

Christina says

With his characteristic clear, clean prose, Langewiesche weaves topography, history, culture, politics, anecdotes, fable, geology, economics and personal experience into a taut and fascinating tapestry, revealing one of the world's most isolated and inaccessible places. At once sympathetic and clear-eyed, deeply knowledgeable and endlessly curious, he's an ideal guide, especially to the peoples who inhabit and cross this region of extremes.

Jenelle says

really good preparation for my voyage. Langewiesche goes and figures out every corner of the desert, from Algeria to Senegal, does it to the confusion of everyone he encounters. I get it. laced with history & folklore, back- & forward-narrative in a natural, flowing progression. never gets too dense with reference like Sebald's Vertigo. felt more like Sans Soleil, like real travel, like the way a brain works or at least mine, than maybe anything I've read. there are moments when Langewiesche is perhaps too sure of his impression & perspective, but generally I loved t/his journey we went on together, am endeared to the smell of his strong pheromones permeating the book. ultimate crush: adventurer in the archive stacks. if it ends without a satisfying recapitulation, with a feeling of vapor & mist, the fast fade of the image burned on your retina from staring at something too long once you've moved your gaze: it should, that's how journeys go.

Clark Hays says

The Sahara: unwelcoming refuge to survivors and dreamers and outcasts

As much as I might like to, I will never travel across the Sahara desert.

It sounds beautiful and amazing and romantic and inspiringly desolate, but I will never willingly submit myself to 120 degree temperatures unless I'm wearing a fully air-conditioned suit of clothes AND I'm riding inside a fully air-conditioned car that can't ever break down. And that car would need a mini-bar. Other reasons I probably won't visit the Sahara: I don't want to entertain the possibility of ever having to drink radiator fluid, or worse, just to avoid death from dehydration, and I'm not crazy about goat stew.

For those reasons and more, I'm glad William Langewiesche allows readers to accompany him on his epic journey across a desert as large as the continental United States. Sahara Unveiled is a wonderful book that meanders through the politics, geography, flora and fauna and history of the Sahara, and its people. It is deceptively spare, empty almost, as if conscious of -- or at least appropriately influenced by -- the desert he writes about. But it rewards patience with a slowly-building appreciation of the Sahara and all who live in it and pass through it: the survivors and the dreamers and the outcasts.

Langewiesche is either a very talented writer, or a very interesting thinker able to accurately record his keen insights about people and the natural world around him. Or maybe both. As a result, the book reads as if out

of time, reminiscent of the works produced by all the mad, classically educated and perpetually wandering, perpetually bemused Englishmen of a hundred years ago, only it's fully modern.

He almost died on his journey, and tries hard to never romanticize the desert (which of course has the opposite effect), carefully recounting the stories of some (many) who died along the way. The horrific demise of the Belgian family stands out as a stark reminder of why I, personally, won't be making the trek.

Along the way, like the oases he describes (point of fact: they aren't shimmering mirages lined by palm trees, but rather more often ramshackle villages of abject poverty built around life-sustaining wells) he intersperses his own baking hot journey with illuminating detours into a variety of engaging topics: how sand dunes form (for much more on this subject, check out *Sand: The Never-Ending Story*), the care and feeding of scorpions (and French lovers, for that matter), how to grow date trees, the history of shifting tribal and alliances and geopolitical forces, ancient myths and fables of the residents and more.

It is a hot, dusty and rewarding trek and I learned much, but I was constantly irritated by the description of how women are treated. He handles the topic with grace and allows readers to arrive at their own conclusions.

Sahara Unveiled made it to my list of all time favorites. And, though I've already established I will likely never, ever journey to the Sahara, or to the surface of the sun, I would love to see the 400,000 (!) Neolithic paintings at the Tassili plateau.

Cathi Davis says

This is a book best read slowly. My copy is underlined, annotated, illustrated, and memorable quotes rewritten on the fly ends. To wit,

the desert teaches by taking away.

History in Africa lies on the land like a trap.

I felt threatened, weakened, overwhelmed. The heat had sharp edges.

It is the desert of more so, drier, fiercer, and wilder.

He lived unrestrained by a proper upbringing, unrestricted by family or friendship, unconcerned with his dignity or comfort, and unafraid of dying.

I made no demands, volunteered nothing, and did not complain.

I'll let you read the book to see the context for these quotes, but William Langewiesche uses simple powerful words to describe a powerful place. Unlike most travel books, you have NO desire to visit the Sahara after reading this book. He clearly loves and respects the desert, but does such a good job of NOT romanticizing it that you are well warned of its terrible allure.

His description of the deaths of a Belgium couple and their five year old son is so sad and searing. He ends it with, "I cannot stop grieving for the Belgium boy." And makes it very clear that he will never bring his own

son to the Sahara.

Hthayer says

For ages now I have loved the idea of the Sahara, the vastness, the emptiness, the dryness, the people. In part this interest stemmed from, or at least was fueled by, a lengthy article in the Atlantic Monthly that I read about 20 years ago, cut it out of the magazine, and read it again and again until it was in tatters. About half way through "Sahara Unveiled," I realized that the author of this book was the author of that article, and this was the "book length" version. This is an honest, unromantic view of the realities of the Sahara, the frustrations, the dangers, the beauties, the politics. My only complaint is that it was not five times longer.

Leah says

I surprised myself by not enjoying this as much as I expected to. I'm not sure if I wanted to hear the author romanticize the Sahara or not, but even though he constantly reminded us NOT to romanticize the desert, I thought he did it all through the book.

The language of the book is very spare, perhaps an attempt to reflect the atmosphere of the desert itself. I found this distracting, and almost stopped reading, but luckily I found the chapter on the Tuaregs.

This chapter made the book worth reading, for me. It was a surprisingly nuanced discussion of how the Tuaregs (nomadic desert dwellers) were more or less brought into being by the French, then drew their identity from their opposition to the French, and are now left stranded in a country that is no longer run by the French.

It's a complex story, full of sad stories of inhumanity. This chapter's balanced and complex look at the Tuaregs did more to de-romanticize the Sahara than all the rest of the author's pseudo-anthropological musings.

In the end, it was a good book. Recommended if you like history, African history, anthropology, or nature writing.

Natalie says

Anthro-dreamboat: this book is like reading the travel journal of your sexiest professor, the rugged one who lived a way cooler life before he began teaching you at some hallowed institution, you know, the one with BETTER THINGS TO DO. The vignettes in this would make for beautiful movie scenes: the French couple with their long-suffering pet scorpion-in-a-shoebox; all the cafe scenarios wherein the author is drinking some sort of bad, mud-tasting coffee and chewing on a stale baguette. These are the kinds of travel sketches that are fragrant. I was struck many times by the author's arrogance & I would like to read the female version of it: a confident female traveler who is not overly impressionable, who is sure-footed and capable. This really made me want to dress like Isak Dinesen in the desert.

Leigh says

Stunning, stunning book. Read this ahead of a 250km foot race I did in the Sahara Desert and the world that Langewiesche painted was lush, austere, and enchanting all at once. One of the most immersive books I've ever read. It gave me a greater appreciation of the desert once I was there. Even if you don't plan to go and see the Sahara in person (or particularly if you don't plan to do so) you should read this, if only to experience the magic of the Great Desert.

Joseph Gendron says

This book opened a whole new part of the world to me and I appreciate so much the author's ability to describe the scene, reflect on historical events and persons, and take the reader on an incredible journey along what looks like a 2,000 mile route thru and on the edges of the great Sahara. The place names were so wonderful; a sampling: Oargla, M'Zab, Tamanrasset, Tchin-Tabaradene, Dogondoutchi, Nouakchort. This is "back-world" adventure writing at its best, done in the raw. The descriptions of the various countries involved in the narrative - Algeria, Niger Mali, Senegal, Mauritania - were so rich and striking in their differences yet all sharing the immensity of the desert's reach. I did not want the journey to end.
