



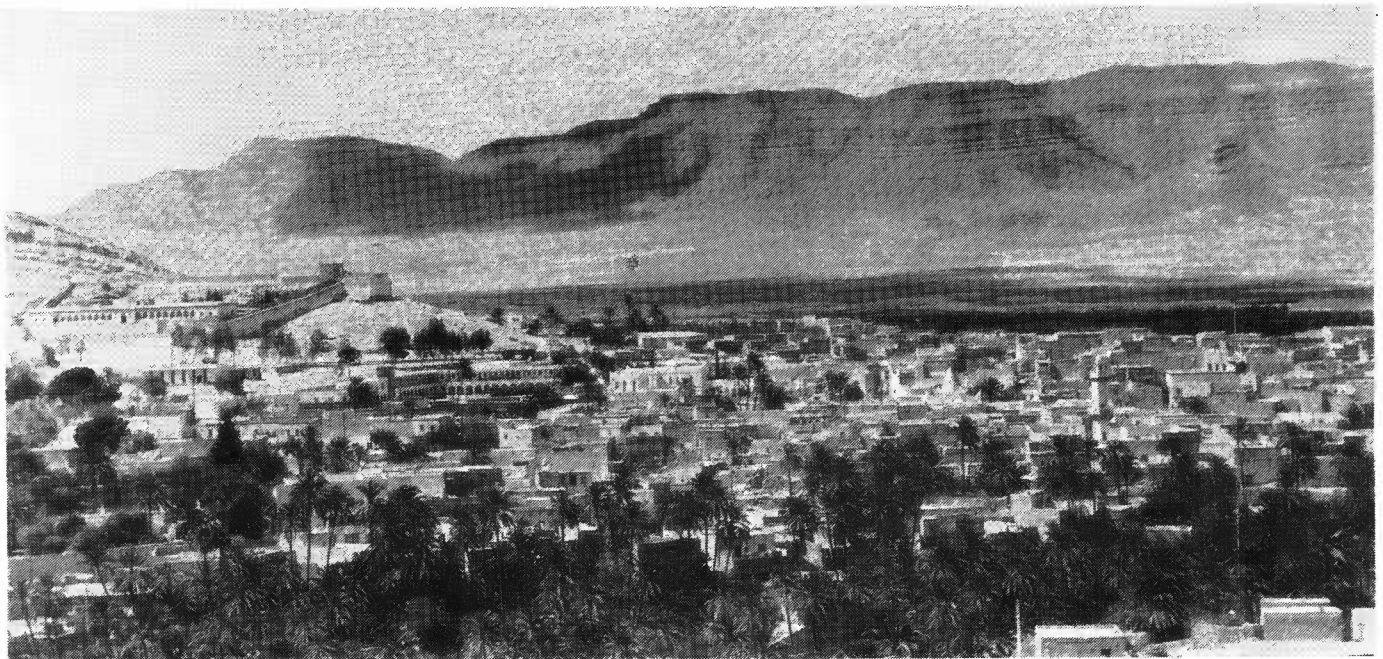
Today's Sahara is for the Family

Despite the tremendous tourist influx, the Sahara of course still has its vast remote areas.

by Edward Iginio Placidi



Saharan village (which we visited) off the beaten path.



The oasis city of Bou-Saada in the northern Sahara.

Like few other places on earth, the Sahara has always struck fear in man. You may imagine it as a vast, waterless wasteland where countless forgotten voyagers have succumbed to a merciless sun. Or you may envisage the salt caravans and daring traders that once crisscrossed the desert by camel, contending not only with the harshest of elements but with fearsome marauders. Yes, the awesome Sahara is still there and some of its inhabitants still travel by camel.

But there have been new additions to the landscape, twists to myth and reality. Over the last decade the main routes through the Sahara have become beaten paths, plied not only by an ever-increasing number of trucks transporting goods, but by more and more adventurous Europeans and Americans carrying their own gas, food, water and spare parts in their four-wheel-drive vehicles. Yet, it hasn't stopped there. Today the Sahara is a place for a family vacation.

As you motor into Algeria's desert expanse, it quickly becomes clear that today's Sahara is catching up with the times. The main roads are nicely paved and half of the many vehicles whizzing by belong to tourists, including more and more families. Parents are taking their children with them in Volkswagen

buses and standard passenger cars. Entering Algeria either via Italy and Tunisia (boats regularly sail between Naples, Palermo and Trapani, Sicily, and Tunis) or Spain and Morocco (with daily sailings from Algeciras to Tangier and Ceuta), they travel the circuit of oases cities—Bou-Saada, Laghouat, Ghardaia, Ouargla, Tougourt, El Oued and Biskra—which have blossomed into tourist Meccas.

Gas, food and water are plentiful in these urban oases. Motorists find many restaurants, well-stocked shops and even large luxury hotels (for hotel and other information you may contact the Algerian Ministry of Tourism, 42 Rue Khalifa Boukhalfa, Algiers, Algeria). Squares abound with cafes for ogling passers-by and sipping coffee, while bustling markets offer goats, carpets, kaftans, brass items and other artisanry and fresh produce grown on fertile oases acreage.

Ghardaia, Algeria's holy city and the most important commercial center in the northern Sahara in the days of the camel caravans, attracts the most visitors. Tourists flock to its bazaars and wander the narrow covered streets that wind around its high volcano-shaped hill which is topped by the soaring minaret of an ancient mosque. On Ghardaia's straight lanes are a number of hand-painted, multi-

colored signs imploring visitors to respect the people's traditions. They depict two sets of tourists: one set in shorts and sleeveless, with a big red X over them, the other set fully clothed.

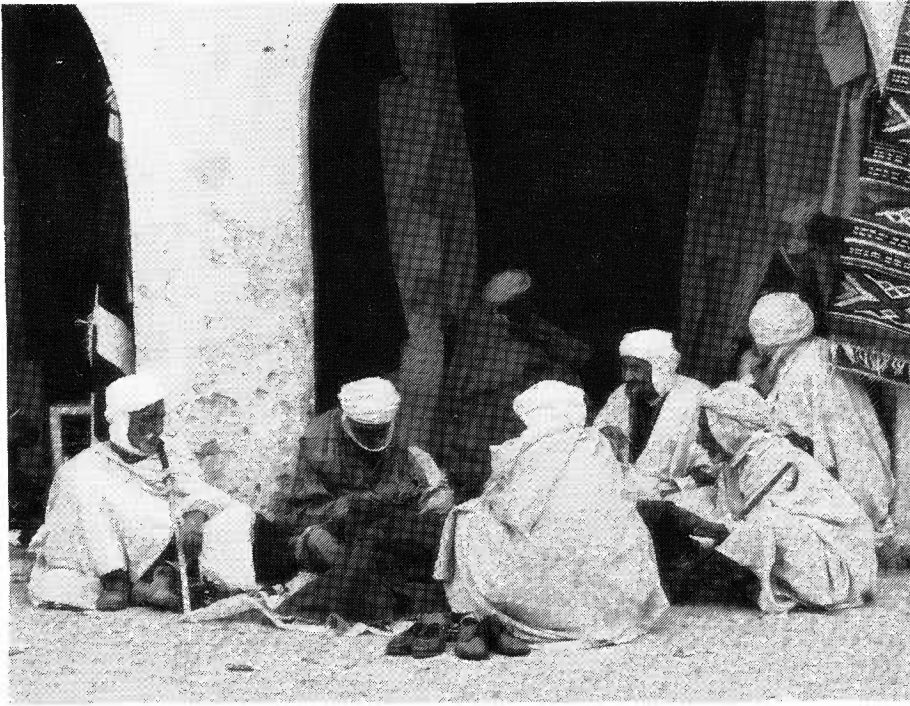
Beyond the cities, another tradition, the camel, lives on but now usually only seen grazing on sparse shrubbery, not in caravan file. Motor vehicles are in command now, so you are never alone for long on the main roads in the Sahara today, and a breakdown poses no great threat anymore.

Most vacationing families only swing through the tourist centers in the northern Sahara, which are from 100 to 200 miles apart. Few make it as far south as In Salah, in the center of the Algerian Sahara about 800 miles from the Mediterranean coast, where the paved road turns to desert track. They experience the awesome Sahara but not the fear or the risks that once plagued Sarahan travel.

Some motoring families do leave the paved road behind though, looking for more than just a panorama of the forbidding isolation of a Sahara they've envisaged. Few stray very far, but they find the space to explore and be alone with the desert. If they camp out in they experience the Sahara's threatening extremes: a radical change in temperature



Off in the dunes, the adventuresome can still find what they are looking for. (The author pictured here by his Land Rover)



Men of Ghardaia relax from the noon day sun in a shady bazaar square.



Ghardaia, Algeria's holy city and the most important commercial center in the northern Sahara in the days of the camel caravans, is a tourist Mecca today.

from a steaming day to a freezing night (November through March are the least severe months).

Despite the tremendous tourist influx, the Sahara, of course, still had its vast remote areas. The desert is actually increasing in size every year and the adventuresome can still find what they are looking for. But don't venture off into the dunes without being adequately prepared; there are a number of books to aid the traveler in outfitting and taking necessary precautions for such a jaunt.

But beyond the pavement is where the centuries peel away, as we discovered when we veered off into the Sahara's endless broad plains, barren mountains and white dunes.

On our second day out, forty miles into the desert, we sighted palm fronds on the horizon. A settlement was ahead. Villagers were standing on dunes eyeing our arrival. Some smiled a puzzled smile. As we walked among the mud hovels, young girls scampered away and women ducked into doorways. Then we were approached by two elderly women dressed in bright colors with tattoos on their faces and heavily laden with jewelry and beads. They led us to the shady side of a dune and brought goat's milk and biscuits. Insisting we have more and more food and drink, villagers slowly began congregating around us. Gestures and few Arabic words were all we had.

Later, as we resumed our walk around, two men called us down into a pit. (With the Saharan water level dropping, deep pits are dug for planting date palms.) They began preparing mint tea and sent a young boy to fetch more goat's milk and dates. They showed us their simple tools and how they prepare the soil so a newly planted palm's roots can spread out. When they deemed our appetites were sated (as their ancient customs dictate in welcoming strangers), they bid us adieu and returned to their labors. We departed with the entire village waving goodbye.

It wasn't an experience we expected in today's Sahara, but it made the risks of our off-the-road trek worthwhile. Maybe myths are crumbling and realities are changing, but the awesome Sahara is not a thing of the past, yet.

