

HITCH – HIKING ACROSS THE SAHARA*G. F. Lamb*

If a giant were to pick England up and put it down in the middle of the Sahara desert, we should have quite a task to find it. The full Sahara area, stretching almost the complete width of North Africa, is many times the size of Great Britain.

About half of this gigantic area is mainly under French control. Very recently indeed, the discovery of oil beneath the sand has begun to bring changes: but less than three years ago most of the area had for countless years consisted of immense stretches of barren sand, intensely hot during the day, with few water wells and little vegetation. Large parts were almost uninhabited. In other parts there were just a few towns very widely scattered, and occasional wandering tribes of Arabs or Berbers.

Hardly the land, one would think, in which to go hitch-hiking. Yet this was just the mode of travel that Robert Christopher, a young American, decided to adopt in the Sahara crossing which he began in 1956.

When he was a child, every time he was naughty, his foster-mother used to threaten to send him to Timbuktu (an ancient city in the heart of French Africa). Instead of alarming him, the idea aroused in him a keen desire to see this distant place.

By the time he was a young man he was firmly gripped by the wanderlust. His first adventure was to go round the world at the cost of eighty dollars (about £ 28). After this, he determined that his next journey should be to travel right across the Sahara from Algiers, on the north coast of Africa, to Timbuktu, which is near the river Niger in the extreme south of the great desert.

The trans-Sahara journey began at a little town, Boussaada, known to the natives as the "Port of the Sahara," for it is here that the desert really starts. Christopher discovered that a desert truck was leaving for the south shortly, and he arranged with the driver to be given a lift as far as it went.

The conditions were agonizing. Three men – driver, greaser and passenger – sat side by side in the front seat, travelling at a bare 32 kilometres an hour, while the temperature rose steadily. In two hours a flask of cold water became hot enough to make tea.

Presently a fast moving weapons' carrier overtook them. Christopher stopped it and begged the lieutenant in charge to relieve him from the misery of slowly baking to death at twenty miles an hour. The lieutenant pointed out that strict military regulations forbade the carrying of civilians. Christopher replied by producing a permit from the War Ministry giving him permission to join the French Foreign Legion for a short period in order to collect material for an article. The permission had later been withdrawn, but fortunately the lieutenant did not turn the paper over and see the "cancelled" stamp.

He was dropped at the town of Ghardaia, a typical desert city, except that the flies are even more numerous and stickier than they are anywhere else.

"Anything that has the remotest relationship with food," Christopher states, "is constantly and completely covered with flies.... They have no hesitation in following the food right into your mouth, and I had to be vigilant until each mouthful was safely behind my teeth. I saw many children on the streets, but I got only a vague idea of what they looked like, for they all wore a mask of flies."

He was able to continue his hitch-hike to the south in the leisurely manner that was so typical of the desert. On the day of his arrival he discovered that there was a truck due to leave at once for El Golea. This truck was a new and powerful one, and carried all kinds of goods—pins and needles, sewing-machines, pots and pans, machine parts. It weighed ten tons.

For about ten miles outside the town the road continued. Then it stopped. The route lay across an apparently trackless desert. None the less, the driver (named Hantout) picked his way with uncanny skill.

It was difficult travelling. At times the sand became too soft to bear the weight of the heavy truck. It was then necessary to stop at once. If the wheels had been allowed to spin they would have dug themselves deeper. Ten-foot strips of steel mesh were dragged from the truck and placed together to make a runway for the wheels to bite on as the truck moved. When it reached harder ground the strips were collected up and dragged forward to the waiting truck. Christopher performed useful service in helping the greaser with this arduous operation.

The driver added to the discomfort of the journey by relating details of a recent case in which three English people had attempted to cross a part of the desert in a car with only one day's water-supply. Their car had become stuck in a sand dune, and three days later their bodies were found dried up like leaves. They had drained the radiator in their desperate thirst, and one of them tried to drain the oil from the crank-case. Hantout had been one of the search party, and he spared his listener none of the grim details.

The story came vividly to Christopher's mind on the second morning. The greaser announced that one of the two goatskin bags of water had burst during the night. Even if every thing went well, the rest of the journey would not be pleasant.

An outpost with a water-supply was found on one of Christopher's maps, and they set off towards it. By dawn they had gone fifty miles and dug out of five more sand dunes. Christopher was sick with thirst; and to add to his misery he had jumped bare-footed from the driver's cabin on one occasion, not realizing the intense heat of the sand. It was as if he had jumped into a bed of hot coals. With a scream of pain he hopped back into the truck.

Meanwhile, his thirst grew fiercer.

"Everything was dead and dry and hot.... My mind was foggy. I was on fire, the

inside of my head felt dried up, and my lungs hurt from the hot air There were times when I tried to make myself faint, but my head was pounding with such pain that it kept me conscious."

The outpost was discovered at last and it contained a well full of cool water. They drank until they could drink no more.

They certainly needed it. The heat was incredible. In the shade of the mud house the temperature reached 130°F, while out on the sand the thermometer registered 165°F, which is nearly thirty degrees higher than the highest temperature officially recorded.

EI Golea, a hundred miles on, was reached without further mishap. It was a fascinating little town, a true oasis, with so much water available that they hardly knew what to do with it. Every day of the week that he was there Christopher spent hours bathing in a little pool half a kilometre from the centre of the town, shaded by palm-trees and fruit-trees, or lying on the cool grass beside the pool, watching the birds feasting on the dates. What a contrast from the desert all around it!

The journey from EI Golea to In Salah was not without its excitements. It was made in a heavy truck carrying ten tones of ammunition, driven by a particularly able and experienced driver who made his way across the apparently trackless desert, was a source of constant amazement to Christopher.

During the next day Christopher suffered one of his worst experiences. Bahemed assured him that it would be a good thing to mix a little wine with his water. Christopher was doubtful, but he risked it.

The result was disastrous. During the heat of the day they were lying in the shade of the truck, the two Arabians asleep. Wanting something from the driver's cabin, he got up to get it. As he was climbing up he was suddenly overcome by a strange sickness. His head started to pound, and he found himself shivering violently. He knew he was going to collapse, so he made a desperate effort to avoid the blazing sand. His fall as he blacked out, fortunately, woke the other two, and they dragged him completely into the shade.

For an hour he could not speak. His two companions took off their turbans and poured water on them, using them to rub his body gently in order to keep his temperature down. When he recovered his senses they gave him as much water as he could drink.

The quality of the water is not the only respect in which In Salah differs from EI Golea. The latter town, with its shady swimming-pools and its luxuriant trees and plants has triumphed over the barrenness of the desert. In Salah is fighting a desperate battle for survival, and perhaps losing the contest. The sand is constantly encroaching on the town.

"Parts of the town are being swallowed by the desert. It is a frightening thing to see. Man has tried by every means to hold it back, but in spite of his efforts, the desert keeps tightening its strangle-hold. Palm-trees that once lifted their branches high above the dunes

are now like bushes, and some of them are completely covered. I bent down and picked dates off some of them. Many people have had to leave their homes. Storm fences do little, if any, good."

A truck was leaving shortly – a big, dirty, clumsy-looking oil-truck. This time the driver and greaser seemed reluctant to take him. Although they finally agreed, they did their best to go without him. It turned out that they believed him to be a French-man, and they disliked the French. When they found that he was American they became friendly at once.

It was unbearably stifling in the driver's cabin. Christopher was completely overcome at one point, and when a midday stop was made at a little mud-building outpost, he staggered inside, to the astonishment of the French officer quartered there, and lay down on the floor to be ill. Fortunately, he had recovered by the evening, and was able to continue the truck journey.

Tamanrasset was reached at last; and here Christopher made one of his most valuable contacts. This was Professor Claude Balanguernon, a remarkable Frenchman who has devoted himself to helping the Tuareg people. He succeeded in convincing them that education would be useful to them. Then most wisely, he adapted himself to their habits and customs, so that he could help them to get the most from their own natural way of life, rather than persuade them to adopt Western habits unsuited to their land and traditions.

Balanguernon acted as Christopher's guide, host, and friend while he was in Tamanrasset. With his assistance Christopher was able to spend a week in the encampment of the Tuareg Amenokal (King), an experience which he found fascinating. The Tuaregs, though their life is primitive, are a people of great dignity, extreme honesty, high intelligence, and with quite an ancient history. In preparation for this visit Christopher learnt to ride a camel, a task which he found more difficult than it looks. During his first lesson he was thrown over the animal's head three times, and once over its rear.

It was on this formidable type of transport that he was to continue his Sahara journey. There were no more trucks.

Balanguernon arranged for one of his most educated pupils, a young Tuareg noble named Boubaker, to act as guide for the first few days of the 1280 kilometres journey from Tamanrasset to Timbuktu. The start was made at dawn, Boubaker and Christopher each on a camel, with a third carrying Christopher's supplies. It would probably be two or three weeks before the next village was reached, so it was essential for him to take enough food and drink to last that time. Out in the burning desert there are no villages to turn to if food runs short.

The most difficult and dangerous stage of the journey now had to be endured. It began when Christopher was handed over by the leader of a big caravan to a small group who were willing to go to Kidal, about 560 kilometres from Timbuktu. The little party, two Tuaregs, a slave, and Christopher, began by setting out to find a well which was on their route, in order to replenish their water-bags. They reached it at last and it was bone-dry.

There was only one tin of food left in Christopher's pack, and the four of them shared the beans it contained. His guides carried no food at all, and very little water. By the time darkness came, Christopher's water-supply was down to one litre. At this point twenty large vultures were discovered, and these stood watching the travellers with interest "making up their minds whether they wanted white or dark meat for the meal they were sure they would soon be eating."

The vultures were to be disappointed. The four men went to sleep early – a desert custom when travellers are hungry or thirsty – and next morning were still alive. They had just enough water left to make one cup of tea each and then set off for the next waterhole, about five hours distant.

When they reached it, just before the hottest part of the day, they found that this too, like the previous hole, was completely dry. The next waterhole was two days away and the travellers now had neither food nor water.

The future looked grim.

There was just one chance of survival. One of the six camels could be killed. The decision was made – Christopher being asked to pay his share of the cost, to which he willingly agreed. Strangely enough, as soon as a camel was picked for the slaughter it seemed to know what was to happen and started screaming at the top of its voice.

When the victim was killed, the liquid in its stomach was caught in a water-bag by the slave. It would be hard to think of a less appetizing drink than the greenish fluid, like thin blood, produced from this source. Even the Tuaregs made faces as they drank it. Christopher could not tackle it, parched though he was, until he had boiled it: and even then he had to hold his nose while he drank it. Somehow he got it down. Together with the camel's flesh, the unappetizing liquid kept them going for another two days.

The region through which they were passing was known as the Land of Thirst and Death, and the name was well chosen. It was an area notorious for sandstorms as well as for dried-up waterholes. Christopher soon experienced one of them. Shortly after the midday stop on the following day, the camels all instinctively turned off their course to the right, making for the nearest depression in the waste of sand. The reason presently became clear to Christopher as he gazed at the horizon.

"It was incredible. The dunes seemed to be on fire, the peaks were melting away and the whole horizon was changing shape. Then as it started to get dark I heard a sound like wind blowing through the leaves of a tree."

His companions made signs for him to hide himself behind his camel and cover his head. He did so, but the force of the storm when it struck was too great to be avoided. "Even with the camel's body as a shield, I could feel the impact of the wall of sand that came streaming along the earth. The wind found even the smallest opening in my clothes, and the

sand felt like little needles."

There was nothing he could do but crouch down waiting for the storm to finish, while the sand steadily piled up on top of him. He found himself recalling a true story that just such a sandstorm, many years earlier, had completely buried a huge caravan of 1200 camels without leaving a trace of them.

The present storm fortunately was less drastic, and lasted only half an hour. But they all had seventy five millimeters of sand completely covering them; and it did not need much imagination to understand how a party could easily be buried and suffocated.

Kidal was the last town on his route before Timbuktu itself; but there were still over 450 kilometres of grim desert to be crossed. This proved to be the loneliest and most arduous stage of the whole desert crossing.

The stress of desert travel had affected him physically. His hand had become so cracked that he could hardly use his camera. To add to his troubles, he took his camel one day across a huge slab of rock on a slight incline. Then he realized that it was covered with tiny stones. His camel fell heavily, knocking him off its back; and though it was not really injured, it was so shocked and frightened that he could not ride it for some time, but had to follow it on foot.

Another little incident served as a reminder that the desert has many ways of destroying its victims. Christopher was helping to gather stones to place in the fire, for the kettle or pan to stand on. He picked up one large rock to find a four-foot snake coiled under it. It uncoiled rapidly and struck, but he managed to jump back just in time to avoid the deadly fangs. The guide's slave killed it with a stone, indicating by gestures that it was a very poisonous specimen.

A day later he caught his first glimpse of Timbuktu. He had reached his goal at last and his journey had taken him across 3200 kilometres of desert.

This was the end of his main journey; but it was by no means the end of his adventures. The stay in Timbuktu had enabled him to recover some of the weight he had lost in the desert, and he was beginning to feel fit and well. He experienced a curious longing to see some more of the strange and mighty desert before leaving the country, perhaps for good.

A sudden decision was made. He sent a telegram to Professor Claude Balanguernon in Tamanrasset, and then flew rapidly eastward by plane, partly across the Land of Thirst and Death across which he had so painfully toiled. From Agades he travelled north to meet Balanguernon, partly in a hired jeep with a French Lieutenant, partly by camel.

The arrangement was that the Professor would drive south in his jeep from Tamanrasset to a well at In Abbangarit, where Christopher would wait for him. If Christopher had not after all reached it by the appointed day, then Balanguernon would continue south on the primitive road towards Agades.

Unfortunately the caravan with which Christopher was travelling insisted on making a lengthy detour to water their camels at a well, some distance from the road. The American insisted on getting back to the road again as soon as possible, expressing himself vigorously to the leader by signs as they could not speak each other's language. But by the time they got back to the road two days had been lost.

The caravan presently left the route, but a boy acted as a guide to lead Christopher to the well at In Abbangarit. It was reached just at nightfall, and the following morning the boy went back, leaving Christopher alone to await the arrival, as he supposed, of the Professor from the north.

There is no village at In Abbangarit. The only building is a bordj, which is a simple mud structure consisting of a roof and four walls, with one hole to serve as a window and another to serve as a door. The well is about 275 metres away.

When he reached it he had a shock. There was water there all right – but it was a good 46 metres below, and there was neither rope nor bucket!

He returned to the bordj and searched his pack. The only possible container to bring up the water was a small metal teapot, which would carry about half a cupful of liquid at a time if a line was tied to the handle and the spout plugged up.

A line tied to the handle but where was the line?

Fastening together all the available bits of cord and articles of clothing he could at first make only 8 metres. On an inspiration he tore the turban he was wearing into four strips. Still the teapot reached no more than half-way down the well.

What else? His sleeping-bag? No, for it was now the winter season, which meant that the nights were bitterly cold, although the days, by normal standards, were still unbearably hot. Without a sleeping-bag or blanket he would freeze to death.

That night he lay in his sleeping-bag picturing himself dying of thirst and hunger if the Professor did not arrive in the next day or two.

He had with him a small recording machine. The notion of death suggested to him that it might be a good idea to record his last thoughts for the benefit of those who found his body. The set was battery-operated, with thin wire as the recording medium.

Wire!

It dawned on him suddenly that here was the 'rope' he needed to reach the water in the well. The wire was very thin, little thicker than a human hair, but it was about 305 metres long. By putting several strands together it should be possible to make a line strong enough to bear the weight of a small teapot half-full of water.

The scheme worked. Seven strands of wire, laboriously twisted together, just reached comfortably to water-level in the well.

The liquid brought up in the teapot was not particularly inviting – it was like a mixture of mud and sulphur – but it was drinkable, and it would save him from dying of thirst. He spent the whole morning drawing up potful after potful, and was able to collect five, 23 litres to take back to the bordj.

The following evening as he sat outside the bordj, staring only half-consciously at the horizon, he noticed a small sandstorm blowing vaguely in his direction. Could it be the dust raised by a Car? No, there was too much of it for that.

There was indeed too much dust to be raised by a small jeep; but it was a rescue party none the less. Two big Desert Patrol cars came roaring up to the bordj; and Death reluctantly departed.

Claude Balanguernon and a friend arrived a few hours later in the jeep. What had happened was that they had missed meeting Christopher during the unfortunate two-day detour. They had later been misdirected by a native who thought Christopher had returned to Agades. When they reached Agades and discovered the native's error, Balanguernon realized that Christopher must have missed them on the road, and that he was probably waiting at In Abbangarit, short of food. He very sensibly got in touch with the Desert Patrol and they sent out four trucks to cover the desert north from Agades, and in particular to visit In Abbangarit.

His foresight saved Christopher's life, and enabled the hitch-hiking journey across the Sahara to end in a return to the Hoggar region instead of in a sandy grave in the heart of the desert.

NOTES

Words Explained:

quite a task to find :	hard to find
gripped wanderlust :	overcome by the eager desire for travelling
trans-Sahara	
journey :	across the Sahara
give a lift :	take one up into vehicle for part of way
forbade :	commanded a person not to do or go
uneventful :	in which nothing worth mentioning happened
vigilant :	watchful, careful
arduous :	hard
uncanny :	strange
runway :	specially prepared surface in airfield for planes to take off from land

wheels to bite on :	to take hold of
desperate :	violent hopeless
grim details :	details causing great pain, shocking
make ... faint :	become unconscious
pounding :	thumping, beating
incredible :	hard to believe
oasis :	fertile place with water in waste of sand
notoriously bad :	much talked about for bad qualities
excitements :	things which set one in motion or rouse up
disastrous :	causing great sudden trouble feeling
collapse :	break down
sickness :	feel like vomiting
blazing sand :	hot shining sand
desert-strangle hold :	desert strengthening its grip on the city
triumph :	overcome
luxuriant trees :	strong in growth
desperate battle for survival :	fighting hard to live and not to die
clumsy-looking :	badly made, awkward in shape
reluctant :	not ready to, unwilling
it turned out :	it was found
stagger :	go with, take certain steps as if about to have a fall
formidable :	very strong, impressive
adapt himself traditions :	began to follow their customs
fascinating :	charming
primitive :	their life is of an early simple sort, undeveloped
detour :	by a roundabout way
grim :	severe, full of danger
parched :	dry for want of drink
instinctively :	by a natural impulse
crouch :	bend body low in fear
less drastic :	less strong in effect
stress-travel :	hardships of the travel
victim :	persons, animals put to death as offering to a god, here

inspiration :	persons who suffered at the hands of the desert. sudden bright idea
pack :	parcel made to be taken on back of man or animal
plugged up :	something used for stopping hole, get stopped with plug
line :	string
inviting :	pleasant, which one would like to drink
mirage :	effect giving seeming existence to water or trees in a sand waste
illusion :	the seeing of a thing when it is not present
winking :	get one's eye or eyes open and shut quickly
foresight :	power of judging about the future

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

1. Give an idea of the size of the Sahara. How does it compare with England?
2. What had Christopher's fostermother to do with his desire to see distant places?
3. How did he manage to get a seat in the weapons carrier?
4. What was the most noticeable feature of the desert city, named Ghardaia?
5. How did they manage to drive the heavy truck in the trackless desert with its soft sand?
6. What did the driver of the truck tell Christopher about three Englishmen who had attempted to cross the desert?
7. Give an account of the little town, named El Golea, and compare it with In Salah, bringing out the difference between the two.
8. What do you know of Professor Claude Balanguernon?
9. Describe the events leading to the killing of a camel. What sort of water did they get from its stomach?
10. Describe the journey through the land of Thirst and Death.
11. Describe the stay at In Abbangarit. How did Christopher manage to get water there?