

A trip to south-west Morocco (Agadir - Dakhla) 12.-18.12.1995

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Flight

We bought a package tour to Agadir for FIM 1395/person from Kymppimatkat. Unfortunately, the hotel fare for the last evening was not included so we had to pay this ourselves (DH 160 for the room). We flew with Sunwing in a Boeing 757. I wasn't very happy with the plane either. It was quite cramped and they seemed to have saved every penny they could on everything. I hope safety wasn't similarly affected.

Car rental

In Agadir we rented a car, a Peugeot 309, which was quite good except that when filled up, it reeked of petrol. And there were no seatbelts in the backseat. The super drive price was 6300 Dh/week. The airport rental offices were supposed to be open 24 h, but we found out this only held true if you had a prior engagement. Well, we got the car in the end, around 8.30, after some hassles. The airport had moved since our last trip, so it was in fact quite far away from Oued Sous, our first destination (and on the other side of Ait Melloul with rush-hour traffic all the time). Petrol in Agadir cost 7.50-8 Dh, but in former Western Sahara it only cost 5 Dh. We were told this was because in order to get people to move to former Western Sahara, everything is subsidized. We drove altogether 3100 km.

Weather

The weather was very rainy, in fact we only had one and a half partly sunny day. It was raining every now and then all the way from Agadir to Dakhla, which meant that the desert was unnaturally green, with lots of minute green bushes. Some of the larger ones could be seen to have small flowers if you looked closely enough. There were puddles everywhere, in fact it often was like driving in a marsh. We saw one man washing his laundry in a puddle on the road. The kids were playing in the puddles everywhere. Only at one point was the water almost too deep for the car, but we got through, just short of getting water inside the car. The rain made it rather cold too and we had one or two days with storm winds, which created a sandstorm one day (it rained more later so I supposed it might then have been too wet for sandstorms, although the sand travels great distances). However, for us, who spent lots of time driving, the cool weather was a blessing. Nor did the rain disturb our birding all that much. We had to be careful not to get stuck in the mud though. In the end we only got stuck twice and then in deep sand. On average the sand was easier to deal with because it was wet.

Accommodation

We stayed in Goulimim, Tan-tan, Layoune (2 nights) and Dakhla (2). In Goulimim we stayed at our old hotel, Es Salam, which was still quite price-worthy, 158 Dh for one room for three persons. At Tan-tan we only found one hotel with shower on the room, the Hotel Royal** 250Dh/3 (150Dh/2), not very good but acceptable. At Layoune all the better hotels (3-5 stars) were filled up because of the continuing UN presence in the town and we couldn't locate any

1-2 star hotels despite driving around for hours. In the end we stayed both nights at hotel Massoud, quite simple, with the shower in the corridor, but costing only 20 Dh/person. At Dakhla the cheap hotels seemed to be filled up, so we stayed at the best hotel, Doumss***. We had to pay altogether 511 Dh/night for a double and a single room, since they could not accomodate three in one room.

Food

We ate tajine twice, with fish and camel, good both times, but took time to prepare. Three times we had mutton, once it wasn't good. We ate fish many times, very good. We bought bread, mandarins (very good), bananas, youghurt, etc from the local shops.

Police Controls

Between Goulimim and Dakhla, there are about 10 police controls, most of which ask for a lot of information (passport details, names of parents, marriage status, home address, number of children, dates of arrival and departure, destination). We were recommended to have a paper with these details ready. We should have taken a lot of copies, maybe they would have accepted just being giving the copied sheet? I don't know, sometimes I felt they rather liked asking all those questions. In any case, since I was the only one who spoke French, I ended up answering all the questions and some others that came up as we talked. It was one way to communicate with the locals of course. It often took so long because of the interruptions when other cars came along. Simply writing down the facts wouldn't take more than 5-10 minutes. They often asked us, after we'd told them we were going to Dakhla, whether we also were going to Mauretania. This I understand is not possible/legal for tourists. In fact, as we went south from Dakhla, we had to leave our passports at the last police control, so they obviously wanted to make sure we wouldn't go any further. The southernmost legal spot is the town of El Argoub, 76 km south of the police control, around 300 km north of the border.

Mines

We were warned about mines at the Dakhla police control, they told us to keep to the tracks, preferably good ones and not go off driving where nobody else had gone before us. This concerns the area on the mainland near Dakhla. We drove as far as the wadi, 1-2km to the east of the road, there were lots of tracks, although most had been driven only once or twice, so people don't seem to think it is such a big risk.

December 12th

Agadir - Tan-tan, 413.9 km

We had arrived way past midnight and only had time to get three hours sleep. At 6.20 I went down to the reception to get our change of cash (which they had promised would be there at 6am, as we had faxed beforehand from Finland) and to get breakfast which they had promised for slightly past six. I hadn't expected to find anybody awake and I didn't. The receptionist was fast asleep. When I got him awake he made to understand they didn't have the money, but breakfast would be forthcoming. Well, some time around seven things started to happen and by 7.30 we had breakfasted and were ready to leave for the airport and the car.

We took a red taxi Dh 20, which turned out to be for inside the town traffic only. So we had to change into a blue one, which took us to the airport for Dh 150.

When we got there at 8am, none of the car rental offices were open. At 8.30 when the office in town opened I phoned them, and they told us the car was on the way. We had ordered the car for 7 am, since dawn was about that time, but they figured since the first flight arrived at 8.30, nobody could be needing a car before then. Well, the papers were written pretty quickly and we got on our way towards Oued Sous. The drive there seemed endless (we hadn't know about the airport's move far outside town, it used to be close to Oued Sous), the traffic in Ait Melloul was really slow. I figured it would have been faster to take the relief road to northern Agadir and drive south to Oued Sous from there instead.

Finally, at Oued Sous, we noted that there were few birds, but too many locals around, trying to advice us. We met a Swede who had just birded the area without seeing anything special, so we decided we would just bird from the car, we didn't feel like leaving it with all our gear inside on the first day of the trip. At Oued Sous, leaving things visible in the unguarded car seems to mean almost certain burglary. Two Finnish birders were robbed by a man who threatened them with a knife. Birds included: Ruddy Shelduck 2, juvenile Bonelli's Eagle, Black-winged Stilt 30, Little Swift 5, Rock Martin 30.

The towns around Ait Melloul had grown into each other. Jorf, just to the south, was just as bad, very slow traffic. We had many Collared Doves in the area though. On earlier trips we'd only seen one, and now the species seemed to be common. This proved to be the case everywhere, although there were fewer further south.

In the end we got to Oued Massa, where we decided to drive straight to Sidi R'bat, to do some seawatching and eat something. The sea was pretty quiet (Gannet 50, Cormorant 35), but to our surprise we again (as in 1990) had a flock of passing Bald Ibises, 46, this time, not a bad number. Our fish tajine arrived in the end (Dh 120) and afterwards we drove along the river, which was unusually dry and empty (Glossy Ibis 33, Ruddy Shelduck 28, Black-headed Bush-shrike). Even most of the Coots were gone. There was a small flock of gulls on the shore, including a Mediterranean Gull. Wader numbers were also quite low.

We drove south and then decided to carry on to Tan-tan. We were stopped once for the first arduous police control, which took about half an hour. We asked some police officers for a hotel and the only one they knew was the Royal, where we ended up in the end, not having found the ones mentioned in our guide book. In fact we never found any of the ones we looked for based on the guide book in any of the towns, although the book was quite new. The first room we were shown, a double, was quite clean, but when we wanted one for three we ended up with one where the bathroom didn't seem very clean.

We ate some fish at a street 'restaurant', quite good, but we weren't given anything to eat with. Eating with your hands seemed normal at street 'restaurants', we noted later. I once asked for a fork and a knife and received a spoon and a small knife, which was all they had. But the food was good.

December 13th

Tan-tan - Layoune 423.0 km

On our way out of the town, at dawn, we checked the river. Lots of Chiff-chaffs and a Bluethroat. At Tan-tan Plage we did some seawatching, but the wind was quite hard and we weren't very high up. Saldo included: Gannet 100, Cormorant 40, Common Scoter 38, Great Skua, Mediterranean Gull. We had tea and then noticed a sand quarry

about 500 m past the main road crossing with a lot of Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Just south of the town we had views of the beach near the harbour, altogether we estimated about 30.000 Lesser Black-backed Gulls, of which 22.000 on that beach. The cliff was very high at the point we stood, where the road is near the edge and there were Cormorants sitting on the cliff. We photographed some of them.

The first of the wadis between Tan-tan and Tarfaya is Oued Chbika, it held 50 Flamingos. At KM 65 to Tan-tan we stopped to check a scrubby area. The wind was too hard though, a sandstorm was clearly approaching. We had our first Red-rumped Wheatear.

The next wadi is Oued Ma Fatma (KM 128 Tarfaya) which seemed very nice, with 30 Black-necked Grebes, 150 Flamingos, 6 Ruddy Shelducks, 123 Shoveler and 350 Audouin's Gulls. The road was quite high, so by stopping before or after the bridge one had good views. We also tried driving under the bridge to be able to read the colour-ringed gulls, but were chased away by a military guard who arrived from further up.

The third wadi is Oued El Ouaar (KM 119 Tarfaya, 92 Tan-tan), where we had 24 Black-necked Grebes, 18 Flamingos and 2 Ruddy Shelducks. We spent some time photographing the Grebes. They were making a new causeway beside the old one.

At KM 100 to Tarfaya we had an adult Peregrine sitting by the road. Our next destination was Golfe Niila, a vast lagoon with lots of birds. We had heard one needed a permit to visit the area (why I don't understand, since our visit only involved watching from the parking lot, which is high up and affords good views). But unfortunately the village where one had to get the permit (Sidi Akhfenir) was not posted so we had driven past it. The military guard didn't speak any French, but another local explained to us that we needed to get the permit and then come back. So we drove the 23 km back to Sidi Akhfenir. The official who granted permits was of course not there, but he was to be back inside half an hour. So we ate fish and mutton at a street 'restaurant' and returned an hour later. The official was still not back, but arrived soon after. Writing out the permit took about half an hour and they gave it to us in a sealed envelope. Arriving back at Niila we gave the envelope to the guard and so never even saw the permit. I thought he was going to give it back, since it was for a week, but he said it would be alright anyway.

The lagoon is huge and most of the birds were on the far side. The waders are too small to identify there, but some which are nearer, especially on a mudflat to the right, could be identified. Larger birds on the far side could be identified. The water had been lower when we first arrived, but now it was getting pretty high and most birds were resting on the sandbanks on the far side. Low water seems pretty important for this site. We had heard that you can hire a fishing boat to take you around, but no-one offered, so we skipped it. Using a scope from a boat is pretty difficult anyway. We counted: Cormorant 50, Spoonbill 26, Flamingo 182, Ruddy Shelduck 50, Knot 35, Bar-tailed Godwit 2100, waders in all over 10.000.

Tarfaya was a big disappointment as it looks so good for seawatching on the map and we had heard of large flocks of gulls present there. In fact, one couldn't even reach the tip as it was in a fenced area. The beach only held a few gulls. However, one could watch from just north of the tip at the beach, but the sea wasn't exactly close. We didn't stay there. No hotels of note in Tarfaya, but at least one cafe-hotel was seen.

At KM 224 Tan-tan we had a Long-legged Buzzard as it was getting dark.

We had heard that finding a hotel in Layoune might be difficult because of the UN soldiers and so indeed it proved to be. After having driven around this very confusing town for about an hour, and having asked at several luxury hotels, we ended up at a simple hotel, which seemed clean, but turned out to harbour lots of flies on our return journey. We went for a short walk, had a meal of chicken (good) at a cafe opposite the hotel for 110 Dh.

December 14th

Layoune - Dakhla 603.7km

We left at dawn. It was raining and we forgot to stop at a petrol station on our way out of the town. We had intended to drive to Layoune plage, but took another road to the shore instead (our maps weren't exactly accurate). We drove along the shore for a few km and saw a flock of Sanderlings. It was raining harder all the time, so we decided not to go to Layoune plage at all. Instead we continued south. At Layoune port we had to get petrol and also checked the shore, where there were some waders and gulls. We had tea and warm bread at a cafe before leaving for Boujdour. Some 50 km south of Layoune there was a pair of Little Owls near the road. As we stepped out of the car they both disappeared into the ground.

Just before Boujdour we were interrogated twice by the police. Almost the same questions at both posts, only one km apart. At the second, their hut had been surrounded by water so a tent had been put up instead. While being questioned I was told that Holland had beaten Finland in football and five fishermen from Boujdour had drowned the previous day in the storm. We wanted to do some seawatching from Boujdour, but as we got to the beach almost the whole town seemed to be there. They were watching while several ships including a warship were searching for the missing fishermen.

We were told not to take any photographs and finally managed to convince the locals that our scopes weren't cameras. In order to watch in peace, we drove to the end of the pier and watched from the end of it. The high waves came over the pier regularly and we were soon pretty wet. We saw a guard approach us, but he stopped when he saw the waves drenching the pier. On our return trip we found out a permit was needed to watch from the pier. We counted about a hundred Gannets in 10 minutes, but perhaps surprisingly saw nothing special.

The last stretch to Dakhla was fairly empty, most of it similar looking near-desert, but a short part was more mountainous. Not many birds though, although we stopped a few times. At the crossing to Dakhla, we were again questioned by the police. Outside the hut we had our first Red-rumped Wheatears and some very tame Thekla Larks. There were two officers at the post, but it still took a long time, since the senior one was busy writing up previous

information and the junior one had to question other bypassers as well. The senior officer soon started talking very enthusiastically with me (I didn't understand everything) and asked me whether I'd be willing to take over the typing from him. His back was quite sore as there were so many foreigners passing, sometimes a hundred a day. But we were the first Finns. I had to explain that I wouldn't mind except that we were in a hurry to do some birding before dusk.

In the end we didn't have much daylight left, so decided to skip the first Dakhla sites, which would have required walking and drove out on a high 'sand cliff' overlooking some mudflats actually not mentioned in our gen. We could see huge flocks of waders very far away as well as large flocks of gulls. We also saw flock of terns with yellow bills.

It was by now too dark to be sure of the identification, so we just estimated the flocks and then we drove to the town.

We were again questioned by the police just outside town, but this time it didn't take long. The best hotel in town, Doumss, had rooms available, but the two cheaper ones we found were full, so we stayed at Doumss although we had to take a single + a double as they did not have rooms for three. We had dinner at the hotel, which was a mistake, since the mutton was almost impossible to cut with a knife. It wasn't cheap either.

December 15th

Dakhla 132.3km

We had decided to start at Taourta in order to see some passerines. The area consisted of small fields with bushes in between. It was irrigated. We walked around for a while, but it was so wet, we couldn't go everywhere. We saw a Glossy Ibis, A Palm Dove, two Moorhens, five Hoopoe Larks, a Richard's/Tawny Pipit and three Red-throated Pipits. The locals came to talk to us and told us they had a very deep well.

At nine we continued north. Three Bar-tailed Desert Larks showed well near the road and we took some photos. We stopped for a quick look at the Royal Tern site at KM 18-20. About 130 Royals were still there, but they were flying off, one by one. We also counted 2500 Audouin's Gulls. We had hoped that the tide would be in, but it was still going out.

We tried to reach the fishing village mentioned in BW by the Dutchmen, but the locals told us there was no village, just a few boats. Also the track there, through the sand, was not good enough for an ordinary car. We tried, and got through some difficult patches, but in the end we were properly stuck. Fortunately the locals, who were there to collect empty cans, presumably for their fishing nets, came to our help and with 8 pushers the car came off easily. The locals told us the track would only get worse, so we turned around. From this point we could see the hill the Dutchmen had used for seawatching, but it was too far away for us to fancy a walk.

We drove back to Taourta instead, to the beach just north of the farms and seawatched from there. A large gull flock roosted on the sand (Lesser Black-backed Gull 1300, Caspian Tern 130). The seawatching of about an hour, produced 500 Gannets and 30 Great Skuas.

Our last site in Dakhla was the south-east mudflats. We had some problems locating them. The refugee camp was about south-west of the town. We drove past the camp (on the west side) and then to the shore. We took a very bad track which soon almost disappeared. Some way further south there were mudflats which we watched for an hour, before continuing south. We finally got back to the track leading to the army camp and realized we should have stayed on that track until the camp, parked there and then walked to the beach. At the beach we counted the largest gull flock in Dakhla (Audouin's 600, Lesser Black-back 22.000), 450 Caspian Terns and 400 Sandwich Terns. Waders included 300 Grey Plovers, 1500 Ringed Plovers, 1500 Kentish Plovers, 1 Knot, 500 Sanderling, 20 Little Stint, 100 Curlew Sandpiper, 400 Dunlin, 600 Bar-tailed Godwit, 2 Greenshank and 25 Turnstone.

It was beginning to get dark and the boys wanted to visit the light-house visible on the south-west side of the headland. We drove towards it and managed to find the just driveable track leading there.

It was obvious the light-house had not been in use for some time. Still it seemed to be a good place for seawatching. We left with just enough light to find our way back to the town.

We had dinner at a local restaurant (a round building by the main road) with a female waitress. We had fish, which was quite good.

December 16th

Dakhla - Layoune 666.3 km

We had decided to start at the wadi opposite the Dakhla peninsula, since we wanted to drive north the same day. We had to 'sign-out' from the town (ie. they wrote down our info once again, even though they saw that all the details were already noted in the book of arrivals) and when we passed the checkpoint on the mainland, we had to leave our passports there. We were told we couldn't go further south than El Argoub, some 75 km from Dakhla. We were also told not to stray from the road as there could be mines. Or at least to keep to the tracks. Well, we wanted to find the wadi and there weren't any proper tracks, but bad tracks everywhere. So we just chose one of those and found the wadi. We couldn't find the waterholes mentioned by the Dutchmen though. There were some tents in the wadi so probably there was water somewhere, but we couldn't find it, despite driving about 2 km northwards along the wadi. Just when we were deciding to leave we heard the Spotted Sandgrouse calls, but we couldn't locate them. The area was surprisingly devoid of birds, just a Black Wheatear or two.

Back on the mainroad going north we had two Cream-coloured Coursers, four Thick-billed Larks and two Horned Larks (6km south of the Tichla crossing). Further north (3.5 km S of the Tichla crossing), the mudflats in the bay were visible and we drove off the road to the edge of the cliff. We saw 54 Flamingos, a large Falcon which disappeared behind a cliff, 400 Bar-tailed Godwits and 10 Royal Terns.

At 49 KM to Dakhla (near the bottom of the bay) we again drove to the edge of the cliff for a look. The site produced a flock of locals around a camp fire, 252 Flamingos, 10 Little Egrets,

12 Spoonbills, 3 Ospreys and probably the same large falcon, a Barbary or a Peregrine, sitting on the mudflats.

At the Army checkpoint we got back our passports and then we headed north. We did some birding at one or two scrubby spots and had a male Spectacled Warbler.

At Boujdour we went to the pier, but were soon told to leave by some guards. So we continued to seawatch at the beach for a while, until a rainstorm approached. At 14.25 we had a Cory's Shearwater passing pretty close. Fifty Gannets and a Great Skua were also seen.

Between Boujdour and Layone we had a Long-legged Buzzard, two Cream-coloured Coursers (at 384 S of Tan-tan) and a Little Owl at the same site as earlier.

At Layone we visited the bridge north of the town (Pont Marche verte) although it was by now almost dark. Records included: Flamingo 77, Ruddy Shelduck 2, Shelduck 20, Shoveler 15, Long-legged Stilt 50 and some other waders which were difficult to identify in the darkness.

We drove around for a while looking for hotels, but in the end decided to head for hotel Massoud, as none other seemed to have free rooms. We had dinner at a cafe below the hotel and it was quite ok.

December 17th

Layone - Goulimim 478.6 km

We left early, in order to reach Tarfaya by dawn. Once there we did some seawatching from just east of the inaccessible point 7.45-9.00. The sea seemed rather quiet, but Tapani got a brief glimpse of a small shearwater. It couldn't be relocated unfortunately. At one point we heard the call of a Richard's Pipit and after a while we managed to locate it, sitting on a lamp-post. It flew over us and then headed out to the sea. We followed it with the scopes until it disappeared from view towards the north-west. On the beach, in a small flock of gulls, we found an adult Kittiwake, quite a surprise. Other records included: Gannet 400, Little Egret 8, Black Scoter 3, Sanderling 60, Arctic Skua 2 plus 6 unidentified and Great Skua 10.

On leaving Tarfaya, we stopped for a while and photographed the shipwrecks on the beach with their gravestones.

Our next stop was at Golfe Niila. Unfortunately, the tide was in, so most of the birds were on the other side. We watched from the parking lot and a little further to the east 10.20-12.00. It started to rain slightly. Records included: Gannet 300, Cormorant 50, Grey Heron 40, Spoonbill 12, Flamingo 150, Ruddy Shelduck 88, Pintail 22, Marsh Harrier 5, Osprey 2, Oystercatcher 320, Grey Plover 50, Knot 40, Sanderling 50, Dunling 100, Bar-tailed Godwit 1000, Whimbrel 5, Curlew 20, Greenshank 1, Arctic Skua 1, Great Skua 1, Slender-billed Gull 1, Audouin's Gull 100, Caspian Tern 5, Sandwich Tern 30, Hoopoe Lark 1, Red-throated Pipit 1, Sardinian Warbler 1, Black Starling 7.

In a bay 15 km north of Niila we had 160 Audouin's Gulls, 230 Lesser Black-backed and 10 Yellow-legged. At Oued Ma Fatma we counted Black-necked Grebe 17, Flamingo 10, Ruddy Shelduck 9, Shelduck 2, Shoveler 40 and Audouin's Gull 600. Further on we had 2000 Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

At Oued Chbika we had three Glossy Ibis, 69 Flamingo, 62 Coot, 9 Avocet, 1 Black-tailed Godwit, 200 Audouin's Gull, 350 Lesser Black-backed Gull and a Caspian Tern. Between Tan-tan and 32 km S of Goulimim we recorded: Long-legged Buzzard 12, Bonelli's Eagle 2, Lanner 2, Lesser Short-toed Lark 2, Horned Lark 1, Red-rumped Wheatear 10 and Trumpeter Finch 10. Many of these were at km 42, 40 and 32. Then it got dark and we headed to Goulimim where we stayed at hotel Es Salam. We ordered camel-tajine, which was quite good, although it of course took quite some time to prepare. We ordered it as soon as we arrived and it took about 2 hours before we were served.

December 18th

Goulimim - Agadir 387.2 km

At dawn we drove back to km 42. The fields were rather green and filled with birds. In an hour we recorded: Hen Harrier 1, Rock Dove 130, Hoopoe Lark 1, Thick-billed Lark 8, Lesser Short-toed Lark 500, Horned Lark 1, Spanish Sparrow 300, Trumpeter Finch 1, Corn Bunting 10.

At km 40 we had: Moussier's Redstart 2, Scrub Warbler 5 and Spectacled Warbler 1. On the way to Goulimim we saw: White Stork 7, Lanner 2, Lapwing 1, Black-bellied Sandgrouse 7 (at Tiznit 124 at 10.05), Hoopoe Lark 6, Lesser Short-toed Lark 10 and Horned Lark 3.

Driving back through Goulimim we got stopped by the police for running a red light and almost fined, but luckily we managed to talk us out of it this time. We continued towards Sidi Ifni. Our first stop was as we reached the hills, in a green valley. We saw some warblers and our first Great Tits there. At KM 20 we had a second-winter Bonelli's Eagle fly past. We tried to follow it, but unfortunately it flew away from the road. A little later we saw a Lanner.

Sidi Ifni was rather quiet and the sea was calm, we only had 5 Gannets.

We drove towards Tiznit, hoping the road would again go through some nice mountainous area, but it didn't. The habitat was pretty boring, birdingwise.

So was the road north from Tiznit towards Agadir, boring and slow with plenty of traffic. About 20 km south of Agadir we turned east and headed for Biougra, in order to get away from the traffic. This road wasn't much good either (one Cirl Bunting), and the road from Biougra to Agadir went through many villages and was therefore pretty slow.

The last hour of daylight was spent driving about 9 km north from Agadir to a village where we had bought some very nice small fried fish on earlier trips. Unfortunately the booth was closed.

We returned the car, had dinner, packed our stuff and left for the flight. Both Raino and I had slightly mislaid our tickets, but fortunately we found them after a little searching. The flight was delayed of course (about two hours), but the time was spent writing cards. Arrived in Helsinki at around 9 am.

References:

- Richard Bradbury 1995: Southern Morocco and Dakhla (Birding World 8/6 p. 239)
- Theo Bakker & Koen van Dijken 1995: Dakhla, southern Morocco (Birding World 8/3 p. 99)
- Annika Forsten 1990: Morocco (Winter) Guide (trip report)