

Western Sahara

Mammal-watching

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1 to Dakhla

Our flight takes us via Casablanca to Dakhla in the Western Sahara. We'll cross the Tropic of Cancer just before descending to the airport, an indication of how far south we will have flown. Our arrival is late at night so we'll head to our comfortable hotel near the airport for a good nights sleep before starting our exciting desert and ocean mammal-watching tour the next morning.

Day 2 Catamaran trip in Bahia de Dakhla then to Sbeta Dune Camp in the Desert

After a relaxed breakfast we'll head to Bultalha where we'll meet our catamaran which will take us out in the waters of the Bahia de Dakhla. The Bahia is a large sheltered and very wildlife rich bay cut off from the Atlantic Ocean by the thirty-five kilometre long narrow sandy spit upon which the city of Dakhla sits. Our primary purpose here is to find a pod of Atlantic Humpback Dolphins (*Sousa teuszii*), a critically endangered species, with a world population of mature individuals perhaps as low as 1500. Like other *Sousa* species it has very specific habitat requirements, namely shallow inshore waters, and these put it in direct conflict with humans. The population in the Bahia de Dakhla is perhaps fifty animals but it shouldn't be too difficult to find them. We'll also look for Bottle-nosed Dolphins and occasionally Orcas are seen here too. Royal Terns and Caspian Terns will be in the air around us and we'll surely see flocks of Greater Flamingos flying past.

After lunch we'll head into the great arid landscapes that lie inland. The interior between the coast and the Mauritanian border is largely sandy and fairly flat, but there are extensive areas of dunes and also rocky outcrops. We'll head for our camp which lies behind a large barchan dune in a true desert setting and settle in for dinner before the first spot-lighting session.

Days 2(pm) – 4(am) Sbeta Dune Camp in the Desert: Sand Cats & Fenec Foxes

During our time in the desert camp, and indeed in Aousserd, we'll settle into a routine. Nightly spotlighting sessions that can last from 20.30 until well into the small hours followed by a good nights sleep and a very late breakfast/early lunch, some light afternoon wildlife-watching, and then, well-rested, back out for the spot-lighting.

The dune systems near Sbeta are home to quite large populations of the lovely little Fennec Fox. If one animal truly epitomises the Sahara it is probably this cute

little canid with its tiny sand-coloured body, beady little eyes, and most obviously, crazy outsized ears. We expect to see a number of these animals during our night time forays. We'll also hope to see the less common Ruepell's Fox.

Probably though the animal that may well have brought you to this corner of the Sahara will be the Sand Cat. Until recently there were few places that one could easily visit and have a reasonable chance of seeing this cat. Certainly the Western Sahara has a very good population and your chances of seeing more than one Sand Cat on our night excursions is high. Like the Fennec, the Sand Cat has of course a sandy desert-coloured coat (just try finding one in daylight!) and large ears. These give the cat a curious square-headed appearance and along with the striking pair of black stripes on the forelegs aids in separating them from the African form of Wild Cat which is also seen reasonably often on these night sessions.

There's some quite beautiful and interesting rodent species to be found here though how many we'll get to see depends on the ratio of wandering on foot or spot-lighting from the vehicles. The latter is the best way to find the carnivores but is less efficient at finding the rodents. Nevertheless we expect to see Lesser Egyptian Jerboas in some numbers and Gerbils too. There are several species of the latter possible...

At night we'll also encounter geckoes. There are some beautiful *Stenodactylus* geckoes here and the Elegant Gecko *Stenodactylus sthenodactylus* is quite common, we'll pick up its eyeshine from time to time each night. With luck we'll come across the extraordinary Sandfish. This skink has perfected an unusual form of locomotion, quite literally swimming through the sand!

We'll have plenty of chance to wander around the camp's environs. The unusual bulb *Albuca amoena* has pretty little green-striped white flowers and the incongruous fruits of the Bitter cucumber (*Citrullus colocynthis*) trail across ground that looks like it has never seen water! There's birds too such as Temminck's Lark, Bar-tailed Lark and the wonderful Greater Hoopoe Lark. We hope to see Dunn's Lark near the camp whilst out and about we'll surely encounter Brown-necked Raven, Cream-coloured Courser, and the handsome Lanner Falcon

Days 4(pm) – 7(am)

Aousserd: Sand Cats & African Golden Wolf

In the afternoon of Day 4 we'll travel across tracks used in the Paris-Dakar rally to the tiny town of Aousserd, nestled in an evocatively beautiful desert-scape of sandy flats and rocky massifs. En route we'll have chance to stop and enjoy the desert scenery that for much of the next few days we'll only see at night! Given the fabulously clear air and resultant star-spangled skies if there's a moon you'll get just as good views at night too.

Again our targets here are the Fennec Fox and in particular the Sand Cat again. However here we'll also be targeting another important mammal – the African Golden Wolf. Rather scarce throughout their admittedly wide African range, they

here inhabit the rocky massifs that dot the desert about Aousserd. African Golden Wolves were of course just Golden Jackals a few years ago, but genetic research has thrown up their interesting history – they are in fact not very closely related to the Eurasian Golden Jackal at all even though they look uncannily like them, but are in fact more closely related to the Wolf. As well as the Golden Wolf, Sand Cat and Fennec Fox we've a good chance of coming across the Desert Hedgehog here too.

The rocky outcrops are home to many *Uromastyx dispar*, the local spiny-tailed lizard, as well as *Trapelus boehmei*. Sandier areas are where we'll see *Acanthodactylus aureus* and hope to come across two really special reptiles; the Desert Monitor and the wonderful Saharan Horned Viper. Whilst relaxing in the daytime around our guesthouse in Aousserd we can watch White-crowned Black Wheatears and beautiful Desert Sparrows. A little further afield we can see Cricket Warblers, Fulvous Babblers and Long-legged Buzzards.

Day 7(pm) **Return to Dakhla**

During the afternoon of Day 7 we'll drive back along the tarmac road to the coast stopping along the way at a good spot for the localised Buff-rumped Wheatear. On the coast we'll settle into our rather gorgeous accommodation (at least in comparison with the previous 5 nights!) at the Vagabond Lagoon Ecolodge, a lovely and very comfortable lodge fantastically sited on the edge of Bahia de Dakhla.

Day 8 **Bahia de Dakhla**

Depending on how we did on the first day of the tour we might take another catamaran ride, or explore the white dune areas of the eastern side of the bay. We'll of course be again concentrating our efforts on the Atlantic Humpback Dolphins as well as other cetaceans.

Wandering near the hotel we might find the strange echinoderm the West African Sand Dollar (*Heliophora orbiculus*) washed up along the bay whilst *Afruca tangeri*, a fiddler crab, seems to be everywhere on the tidal flats. Helmeted Gecko is a rather common reptile close by the hotel. The bay hosts a wide range of birds and we'll certainly see more Greater Flamingos as well as Spoonbills, Western Osprey, Slender-billed, Audouin's and Mediterranean Gulls. The little succulent *Sesuvium portulacastrum* flowers close to the shore as do the impressive yellow spikes of *Cistanche phelypaea*, and anywhere where we can find vegetation there might be Painted Ladies and the local form of the Plain Tiger butterfly, *Danaus chrysippus* ssp. *Alcippus*, with a large white patch on the otherwise orange hindwing.

Day 9
Departure

A Morning flight departure from Dakhla

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the trip report from our reconnaissance visit to Western Sahara. If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

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