

# In search of the ancient rock art of Chad

Lucia van der Post ventures into deepest Chad on an expedition to document some of the world's oldest rock art – encountering vast deserts, magnificent caves and poignant vestiges of forgotten eras



The Ennedi Massif is a Unesco World Heritage site with abundant rock art. | Image: Hemis/Alamy Stock Photo

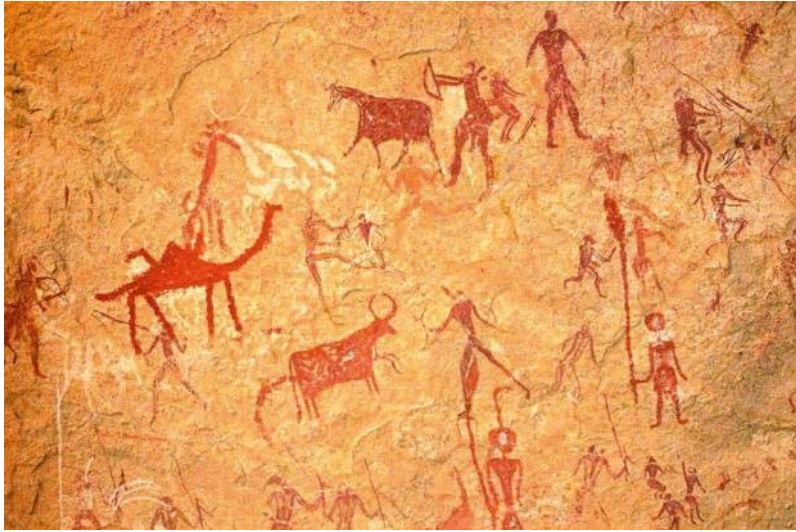
Deserts are special places but they are not for everybody. They are for those who love unpeopled places, whose hearts soar at the thought of lands that have been shaped only by nature and time, who don't mind the vast distances, the privations, the daunting logistics that journeying through them entails. **Deserts** are for those who are touched by **stark mountains**, huge dunes, starlit skies and nomadic peoples, for those who feel with Saint-Exupéry: "One sits down on a desert sand dune, sees nothing, hears nothing, yet through the silence something throbs and gleams..."



The author, third from right, and her fellow explorers. | Image: David Coulson/TARA

And for a true desert experience **it's hard to beat the Sahara**. I was invited by a family friend, David Coulson, the executive chairman of TARA (Trust for African Rock Art), which had a grant from the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation to document prehistoric rock art in the Tibesti and Ennedi mountains of northern Chad. He always takes along a few “paying punters” to help with expenses, and I liked that it was to be a **proper expedition** with a serious purpose, that it was going to the desert and that it also aimed to create more awareness in Chadian ministerial circles of rock art's importance, antiquity and frailty.

The Tibesti Mountains are a treasure house of rock art, much of it still unrecorded and known only to the **nomadic people** who wander through it, and they're as **remote and far from what we call civilisation** as anywhere I've ever been. There is no tourist infrastructure along the way, so to get there TARA uses the expeditionary know-how of Spazi d'Avventura, an Italian company that has been exploring the Sahara and the Sahel (the region between the Sahara and the savannah) for over 25 years. Alongside Coulson and a TARA colleague there were to be two young men from conservation group Factum Arte, who were going to use the latest technology to record the art, two Chadians from the Culture Ministry, a rock art expert from **Morocco** and seven of us punters who were going for the fun and the chance to visit lands that a mere 300 outsiders a year get to see.



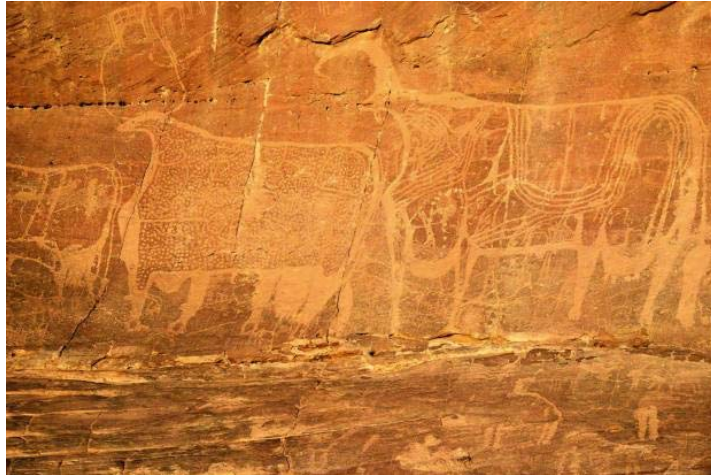
Paintings from the pastoral period. | Image: David Coulson/TARA

Coulson warned us that this wasn't a journey for wimps. It was long, three weeks in all; the food, he assured us, would be fine (and mostly it was – lunches were beautifully judged salads, dinners were high in carbs and low in protein, breakfasts were dried bread, muesli and cornflakes); we'd sleep outside on simple mattresses or in one-person tents; there would be few showers and for loos there would be the whole desert. "Anybody interested in coming," he warned, "needs to understand that this is not a stroll in a **Kenyan game park**. We are going up to the last frontier" – as Wilfred Thesiger called it.



The expedition group stops beside a sand dune and sets up a dining table in front of the Land Cruisers. | Image: David Coulson/TARA

As to those who were worried about safety, Pier Paolo Rossi, our Spazi d'Avventura guide, assured us we would be fine. While there was trouble **in the border areas** and around Lake Chad, we were going to be far to the east. More importantly, he knew the local Tubu and Teda people, he knew where the landmines were (left over from Muammar Gaddafi's ill-fated invasion in the 1970s and '80s) and the Tubu guides would lead us safely from well to well. It became clear that these are lands in which you could easily die, and nobody should even think of trying this trip alone.



A detail from a vast engraved panorama of 18 cows in the Tibesti Mountains. | Image: David Coulson/TARA

We were lucky in many ways. There had been good rains, so as we **set off from N'Djamena in our six Land Cruisers** with our Chadian drivers, cooks and guides, it didn't take long before we began to encounter sights that seemed almost biblical: long-robed men, heads covered with the traditional tagiyas, riding on camels across the plains or leading long trains of camels, donkeys, goats and cattle to drink; nomadic women dressed in an array of colourful garments riding on donkeys going in search of wood and water; and from time to time, the transitory huts of the nomads made from mud and straw. We began to get glimpses of the hardships and the beauty of nomadic life and to appreciate how extraordinary the people are who live it daily.



A painting of a decorated couple holding hands. | Image: David Coulson/TARA

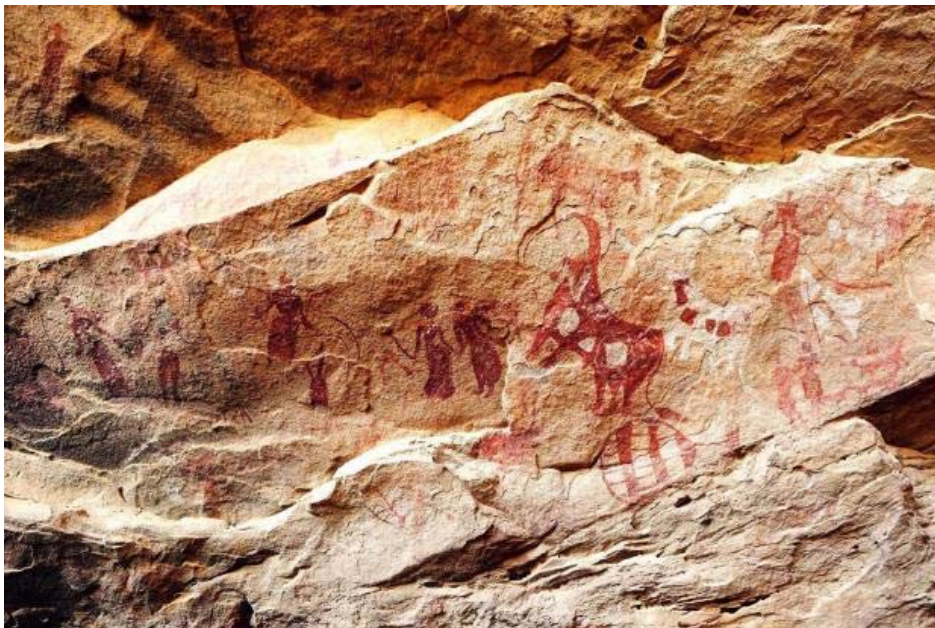
Our first night set the pattern of our journey. We'd find a **camping site** before the sun went down at about 5pm. Down from the Land Cruisers would come the mattresses, the tents, the dining table and

chairs at which we would eat under the stars, the food, the cooking utensils, the little bowls of water we were allowed each night.



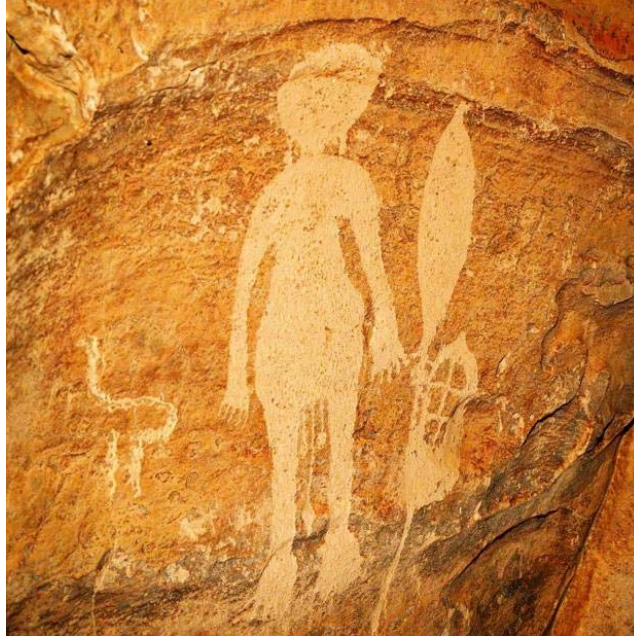
Members of the group descend a mule track into one of the many craters in the Tibesti Mountains. | Image: David Coulson/TARA

Each night we'd be prepped on the travels for the following day by Rossi. Sometimes Ferdie Saumarez Smith and Arthur Prior from Factum Arte would talk about the latest techniques for 3D documentation and replication of ancient artefacts. Their work in places like Tibesti and Ennedi is vital as such accurate reproductions bring some understanding of the art to people who will never get to see the remote sites.



Pastoral period paintings in the Tibesti Mountains, including a red and white bull on the right. | Image: David Coulson/TARA

Other nights Coulson would tell us about the rock art we'd come to see. He has been recording it (much of it with the late Alec Campbell, founder-director of [Botswana's](#) National Museum and Art Gallery) ever since paleoanthropologist Mary Leakey, some 17 years ago, urged him to do it for the sake of all mankind. Today the British Museum has a digital record of most of his work, but there's still much more to be done, which is why we are heading to Tibesti, via the Ennedi Mountains – another “Louvre” of the desert.



Warrior engravings, this one with a spear, are a common theme in Chadian rock art. | Image: David Coulson/TARA

Some of the oldest rock art, he tells us, is in [Namibia](#) and is about 30,000 years old. Here, in the Sahara, the oldest probably dates back more than 10,000 years, but much of it is from around 7,000 years ago. Sometimes the art was painted using red and yellow ochre and white pigments, while some was engraved using rocks fashioned as chisels. All constitutes a rich historical resource, connecting us to [Africa's](#) ancient past.

The art comes from a time before desertification set in and most of it is from the so-called pastoral period, which dates from the time domesticated animals entered the scene, around 5,000BC. In the caves and on the cliffs and boulders, we later go on to see [paintings](#) and engravings showing warriors, elephants, horses and the rituals of those long-ago days.

It is four days of hard driving before we come to our first paintings in the Ennedi Massif, a 44,000sq km wilderness of plateaus and canyons that is now a Unesco World Heritage site. But what a place Ennedi turns out to be. It is magnificent. There are soaring rocks and great caves and plenty of paintings, mostly of cows and a few dancing people, which the specialists all start to document. At night we [camp in the sand dunes](#) with great rocks standing sentinel over us.

After that it is onwards to the Tibesti Mountains, a [land of volcanic craters](#) and spectacular rocks and dunes that contains the Sahara's highest peak (over 3,300m). There are long drives but every day we stop for salad lunches in the shade of trees and some nights we camp beside the paintings we explore the following days – a huge lifesize elephant engraved on the side of a rock, a vast panorama of 18 large cows and one bull across a magnificent rock. On yet another day there are paintings in a cave overlooking the ancient shores of the paleolake Mega-Chad, now completely dried up; and also ones of highly decorated peoples and proud warriors wearing headdresses. We begin to get a sense of how the Sahara was once inhabited by a pastoral people with a great love of its domestic animals; we see that there are boats that floated on lakes that are now arid sand. Everywhere we find worked tools and shards of decorated pottery, all poignant reminders of a vanished civilisation. Every day is different.

One of my most abiding memories is of a lunchtime in the middle of a blinding sandstorm, a storm so bad we could scarcely see ahead, in the middle of which Ahmed Oumouss, director of Morocco's Centre for Rock Art Interpretation, his head almost entirely wrapped in his shawl, leaving just slits for his eyes and mouth, said "Quelle expérience, Lucia," with a smile as wide as the sea. His delight was palpable. For him – as for some of us – it was an **extraordinary, almost out-of-world experience**, like **being at sea** without knowing where the horizon was or when the billowing would stop, but encountered in the most privileged of ways, knowing that somehow Rossi would get us through it. We spent that night with the Land Cruisers formed into a laager protecting our little one-person tents all planted cheek by jowl.

For some, though, the journey was too hard. "The only desert I ever want to see again," said one member of the party, "is lying in a bath with a **negrini** in my hand watching Lawrence of Arabia on the television." As for me, I did find it hard at times, though it helped to remind myself that in the Empty Quarter Thesiger often went to bed after nothing more than dry bread and brackish water leavened with camel milk. The lack of washing facilities was the most trying aspect and some days involved long hot, sandy drives, but I look back on it now with the most unexpected feelings of great nostalgia. Because this was the desert as it really is – a hard, tough place but magnificent beyond my imaginings. I remember our little tents making up what Abiator Goi-Mbi, from the Chad Culture Ministry, called "the hotel of the thousand stars". I remember the vast rocks, like giant cathedrals soaring out of the sand; I remember the ancient lake beds, the gorges, the dunes, the little oases, the tantalising glimpses of nomadic life – turbaned men riding camels across the desert, younger ones gathered round wells in the oases, small groups of children shyly eyeing up our campsites. The vast horizons, the airy caves, the grace of the paintings, the endlessly shifting landscapes. This desert I remember as a strange, mysterious place where time has buried many things, where the sand has shifted and swallowed entire civilisations, erasing them from map and memory.

And there was the companionship of our small group – different ages and nationalities randomly thrown together but bound by a purpose and a shared sense that we were immensely privileged to be wandering safely through **these strange, moonlike lands**. They say that travel changes you. This certainly changed me. I can't stop having showers and counting my inordinate blessings.