

Reflections On Life In The Peace Corps In Mauritania

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I don't think anything can prepare you for the reality of Mauritania; it is, undoubtedly, a place of stark contrasts, diverse peoples, extreme poverty and haunting desert landscapes. The beauty of the sand dunes, date palms, and oases is tempered by the heat, the poverty, and the relentless desert sun that dries out the land and perpetually beats down on the people. The difficulty of living here and the harsh conditions that characterize the Saharan desert are balanced by the overwhelming hospitality of the Moors that inhabit this land. I live here in the capacity of a Peace Corps volunteer and, in the four months I have been in Mauritania, I have had moments of amazing revelation, moments of deep anguish, and, because of the slower pace of life, many moments of mind-numbing boredom. This is an experience that defines a lifetime and I know that my life has been undeniably altered by being here.

In many ways Mauritania represents a land of vast extremes. That was my first impression of Mauritania, as I stepped off the air-conditioned and modern Air France airplane into the Saharan sunlight. Although it is one of the biggest countries in western Africa few people outside of the region have heard of it, and although oil was discovered off the coast, it remains one of the most impoverished countries in the world. I had been to the desert before when I visited the Middle East in college, but that was the oil rich opulence of Saudi Arabia; the air conditioned Gucci stores and the countless BMWs on the tarmac roads. Mauritania is a different story. Coming here is like going back in time to a place where donkey carts outnumber automobiles, electricity is non-existent in many villages and houses are still built with stones and mud. Nouakchott, the "cosmopolitan" capital of the country still has unpaved roads, herds of goats that meander through housing areas and camels used to transport goods. Because of swarms of locust, drought, and ever present desertification, food can be scarce and hard to come by. In spite of that, Mauritians are some of the most generous, hospitable people I have ever met. They open their houses, and in many cases, their tents to fellow Mauritians and foreigners alike.

My life here is a stark deviation from the life I led in America. I sleep outside because the desert wind is cooler than the air inside my stone house, I eat things I never thought I would

ever eat like goat stomach, I speak Arabic, although broken and disjointed, and I survive on a meager living stipend. Gone are the comforts of my former life: easy access to my family and friends, my beautiful apartment in Virginia, my parent's comfortable house outside Washington D.C., my car, Dad's debit card (just kidding), air-conditioning, English. But despite that, despite the difficulty of living here and the severity of the conditions, I truly believe that being here is important for both myself and the people of Mauritania. I have learned, rather abruptly, that material wealth does not equal happiness, that there are certain aspects of humanity that are not culture bound—that everyone shares the same range of emotions and feelings, and, for the most part, seeks the same comforts and desires; whether or not you live in a tent in the desert or a house in America. I have learned to establish standards that I choose to live by, and not to allow anything or anyone to compromise those standards. And, most importantly, I have learned to be more accepting of diversity. I cannot say whether my living here will ultimately have an effect on Mauritania and Mauritians, but I truly hope it will. I hope that by being here I can represent America in a way that is understandable and accessible to people who would, otherwise, have no real interaction with the West. I hope that I represent America, and the West in a gentler and softer light. There is a book called *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula Le Guin who writes:

“Why” he said at last, “why did you come alone?”

“I thought it was for your sake that I came alone, so obviously alone, so vulnerable that in myself I could pose no threat, change no balance. Alone I cannot change your world, but I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak. Alone, the relationship I make, if I make one, is not impersonal, not political. It is individual. Not We and They, but I and Thou.”

That is what I hope to achieve here.

Mauritania is a country unlike any other and I feel fortunate that I, unlike most Western people, get the opportunity to live here and experience life in a way that so directly contradicts the life I led in the West. I would be lying if I said that living here is easy, but I think being here and experiencing life in Africa and the desert is an amazing experience and opportunity. Every morning I get to wake to the sounds of prayer call, I get to learn Arabic, and I get to watch the Bedouins herd their camels across the yellow desert while the sun melts into the horizon. Few people get that opportunity.