

A TRAVEL DIARY: MAIDUGURI, SUKUR AND LAKE CHAD

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The August newsletter of the Lagos Branch billed this as an adventurous trip without guarantees. In truth the organization could not have been smoother, the only deviations causing short delays being the departure from Lagos, an hour late courtesy of the airline and a 20min unscheduled stop on the road to Sukur, to change a fuel filter.

The arrival at Maidiguri in the State of Borno, necessitated various formalities, and expatriates are required to register with customs and immigration. Passports must be presented and it is advisable to carry them at all times.

Sukur

On Saturday the day started early, 5:00am, with a quick shower followed by an ample breakfast, conversation and anticipation of the day's adventure, as well as speculation on the arrival time of the 4x4 vehicles. They did arrive on time and shortly after 6:00 we were on our way out of town for a fuel stop on



the side of the road, before crossing a river marking the ancient shores of Lake Chad on the outskirts of town.

The journey took us through Bama and passed the balancing rocks near Gwoza. Anyone fortunate enough to have a copy of "Enjoy Nigeria" will recognize them from the cover of the book by Ian Nason.

Sukur is 25km South of Gwoza and the rough dirt road to the left is indicated by a small road sign.



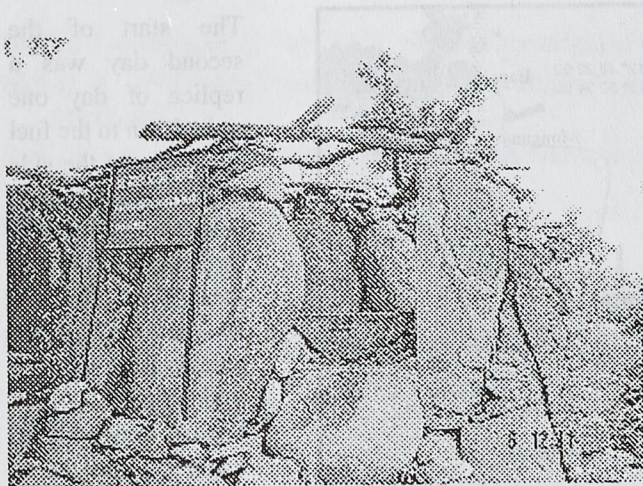
The track follows the power lines to the school where we were advised to leave the vehicles.

The rules and regulations covering access to the site are not clear and initially we were told that without a permit from Yola, access would not be granted. It would have been a great disappointment to have been turned back at that point. Our collective

message to the authorities is that access procedures should encourage visits to this Nigerian "World Heritage Site" and consideration should be given to enhance, preserve and promote the mountain kingdom as a destination for ethnographers.

The traditional ceremonies still take place, Zocu in September and Yawal Diba in February/March when a bull is slaughtered as an offering to ancestors for luck and goodwill.

The climb of some 340 meters from the school at the base to the summit, will take the best part of 90 minutes at a medium pace. The approach to the summit is misleading and on more than one occasion gave the impression that the summit was close, only to disappoint the climber at the appearance of the next horizon.

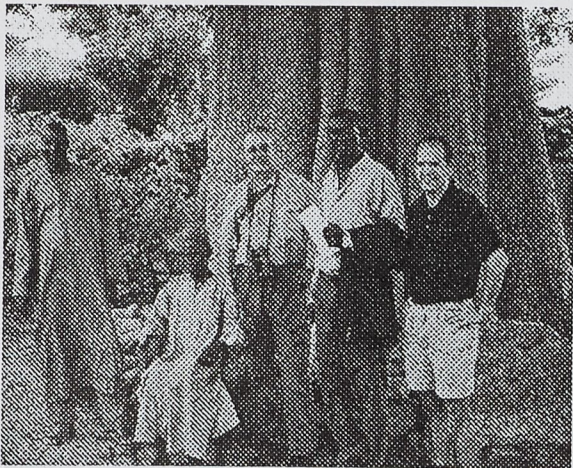


The Llidi's throne



The first gate

The "Via Sacra," as it is referred to in Raymond Hickey's article in the Nigerian Field, volume 66 2001, was not as grand as depicted there, as much of the roadway was overgrown, the mention in the article that sparked some debate was, why Andrew Iro Okungbowa found it necessary to turn back at the half way mark of the climb to the mountain fastness. Some



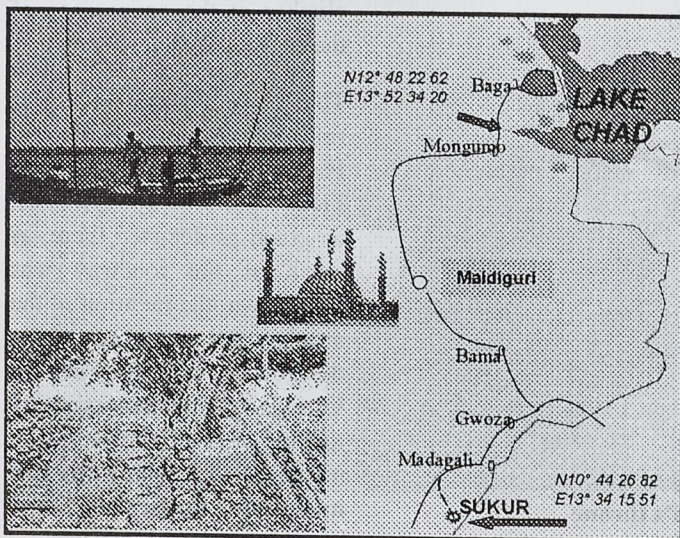
suggested the significance and awe of the place, whilst others considered the possibility of physical exhaustion. I was open to the former argument, looking for the spiritual significance, the mountain in Moriah where Abraham met with his God, or where Moses stood before a burning bush and removed his shoes because of the holy ground on which he stood.

Ubiquitous blue signs now label most of Sukur's features, giving the site the appearance of a museum.

Yet the guides and the Llidi are sufficiently informative themselves. After the visit, and some contemplation, we concluded that the authorities could do well to focus more on supporting and further promoting the traditions that are still active, lest Sukur's soul quits finally. Making access requirements more realistic is a necessary change in any event.

Robert made a formal speech to the Llidi and presented him with gifts of medical supplies and some money. The Llidi reciprocated by blessing the group, the manifestation of which was a refreshing rain shower, which only stopped when we reached the vehicles an hour later.

Lake Chad



The start of the second day was a replica of day one right down to the fuel collection at the side of the road. The plan was to head North through Gajiram and then East towards Mongumo where we would take a left turn and head North towards Yoyo health clinic and a nondescript point at

N12 47 16 87 E 13 40 17 87. There we would head East for the lake taking care to avoid the many areas of marshland. Whilst the tracks were for the most part good (we did see a number of two wheel drive vehicles on this section of road) 4x4 capability is recommended as is the need for a guide from the area to ensure the most direct approach.

After travelling approximately forty kilometers on the dirt road we reached what must have been a thriving fishing village at one time. Now all that remains of the industry is broken down smokers and drying racks, the lake's closest shore about ten kilometers beyond the outer perimeter of the village.

Ten kilometers along there was a fishing village and the aroma of sun dried fish indicated that the industry was booming. The small size of the fish was noticeable and concern was expressed that the lake was being over-fished.

Thanks to Phil Hall who spent much time in the area researching the migratory patterns of the bird life, we were able to get to a little known access point to the lake and most probably were the only expatriates to visit this site for many years. The access to the lake is a trade centre for the export of goods to Chad and a thriving trade between the truckers and the boat owners was taking place. Some concern was expressed regarding our presence there, as in Sukur, without official looking paperwork.

The bird life in the area was prolific, particularly between the tarred road and the lake where eighty three different species were spotted during the two hour journey. The turnaround time at the lake did not allow for more than a short boat trip onto open water, but the objective of visiting two sites of interest, during a slightly extended weekend, was achieved.

Further reading

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Hickey, R. 1985. "The Peoples of Pre-Kanuri Borno," *Annals of Borno* II. University of Maiduguri.

Kirk-Greene. 1960. "The Kingdom of Sukur: A Northern Nigerian Ichabod" *The Nigerian Field* XXV: 67-96.

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Nason, I. *Enjoy Nigeria*, Spectrum Books Ltd., 1993.

<http://www.mandaras.info/MandaraMountainsHomepage.html>