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Visiting Western Sahara

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Introduction

Western Sahara is a territory located on the northwest coast of Africa, bordered by Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania, with a long coastline along the Atlantic Ocean. Spanning approximately 272,000 square kilometers, it is one of the most sparsely populated territories in the world, predominantly characterized by low, flat desert landscapes, with large areas of rock or sand rising to small mountains in the south and northeast.

The region's history is complex. Formerly a Spanish colony known as Spanish Sahara until 1975, its status has been disputed since Spain relinquished control. Morocco administers about 80% of the territory, primarily the western part including almost the entire coastline, while the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), led by the Polisario Front, controls the remaining 20%, mostly inland areas near the Mauritanian and Algerian borders. The United Nations classifies Western Sahara as a non-self-governing territory awaiting a resolution on its final status, which remains contested. A UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991 largely ended armed conflict, but tensions persist, and the ceasefire broke down in 2020, leading to ongoing irregular skirmishes.

The climate is characterized by hot, dry desert conditions. During winter and spring, the hot, dry, dust-laden sirocco wind can occur, and widespread harmattan haze often severely restricts visibility. The best time to visit, particularly the desert interior, is during the cooler months from November to May. Coastal areas, like Dakhla, experience strong winds for much of the year, making them popular for watersports.

This guide aims to provide practical information for tourists considering a visit, focusing on the areas accessible to travelers, primarily those administered by Morocco. It is important to be aware of the ongoing political situation and potential safety risks.

As you consider visiting Western Sahara, your journey will take you through a land of striking contrasts and significant cultural depth. You'll explore cities like Laayoune and Dakhla, each offering unique experiences shaped by the region's rich history and vibrant Sahrawi culture. Whether you're seeking the thrill of watersports along the windy coasts or the serenity of vast desert expanses, Western Sahara promises an adventure unlike any other.

The complexities surrounding Western Sahara make it an intriguing destination for the discerning traveler. With careful planning and respect for local customs, your visit can not only provide personal enrichment but also support the communities and economies within this contentious yet captivating territory.

CHAPTER ONE: Entry Requirements & Getting There

So, you're thinking about visiting Western Sahara? Excellent choice, if you favour destinations that offer more than just pre-packaged predictability. But before you start dreaming of desert vistas or Atlantic breezes, let's tackle the practicalities of actually getting yourself there and ensuring the authorities are happy to let you in. The first thing to understand is that your point of entry and the associated requirements depend entirely on which part of this complex territory you intend to visit. For the vast majority of tourists, this means accessing the roughly 80% of the land administered by Morocco, and thankfully, the rules for this are relatively straightforward, mirroring those for entering Morocco itself.

If you hail from the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or any country within the European Union, you're generally in luck. Morocco extends visa-free entry privileges for stays of up to 90 days to citizens of these and many other nations. This courtesy typically requires your passport to be valid for at least six months beyond your intended date of arrival, and you'll need at least one completely blank page for entry and exit stamps. Always double-check the *current* requirements for your specific nationality with the nearest Moroccan embassy or consulate well before your travel dates, as regulations can occasionally shift with the political winds. It's far better to be certain than to face disappointment at an immigration desk.

For citizens of countries not on the visa-exempt list, a Moroccan visa will be necessary. This generally involves applying at a Moroccan embassy or consulate in your home country or country of residence *before* you travel. The process usually requires submitting an application form, passport photos, proof of travel arrangements (like flight bookings or hotel reservations), and evidence of sufficient funds for your stay. Processing times can vary, so apply well in advance to avoid any last-minute scrambles. Remember, this Moroccan visa grants you access to the parts of Western Sahara administered by Morocco.

A small but crucial detail, regardless of whether you need a visa or not, concerns your passport stamp upon arrival. Whether you fly directly into Laayoune or Dakhla from somewhere like the Canary Islands, or enter Morocco first and then travel south, *ensure you receive a clear entry stamp from the Moroccan authorities*. This stamp is your official proof of legal entry into the territory under Moroccan administration. Without it, you might encounter significant difficulties when you try to leave, potentially facing questions about how you entered or even fines. If, for some reason, an official seems to overlook stamping your passport upon arrival (unlikely, but possible), politely request it.

Think of your passport as your golden ticket, and like any valuable document, ensure it meets the entry criteria. That six-month validity rule is non-negotiable for most international travel these days, and Morocco (including its administered territories) is no exception. Running afoul of this can lead to denied boarding by airlines or refusal of entry by immigration officials. Equally important is having that pristine blank page; immigration stamps need their space, and a full passport can sometimes cause unexpected hurdles. Keep your passport safe and readily accessible during your travels, especially when nearing border posts or checkpoints.

Now, what about the other 20% of Western Sahara, the area east of the Berm controlled by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), often referred to as the "Free Zone"? For the average tourist, accessing this area is practically impossible and strongly ill-advised. There are no formal, legal border crossings open to tourists from the Moroccan-administered side due to the heavily militarized and mined sand wall known as the Berm. The border with Algeria, which backs the SADR, has been closed for decades. Furthermore, there are no recognized international border crossings allowing tourist entry from Mauritania directly into the SADR-controlled zone.

Essentially, the procedures, paperwork, or permissions required to enter the SADR-controlled areas are largely academic for tourists, as there's generally no safe or legal way to get there. Attempting to circumvent the established routes or cross the Berm is exceptionally dangerous due to the high concentration of landmines and unexploded ordnance, quite apart from the political and military sensitivities involved. Any travel plans should realistically focus on the Moroccan-administered western part of the territory, which holds the main population centers, infrastructure, and attractions accessible to visitors.

With entry requirements clarified – essentially, follow Morocco's rules for the accessible parts – let's consider how you physically arrive. There are several established routes, each offering a different travel experience. You can fly in, drive overland from Morocco in the north, navigate the frontier from Mauritania in the south, or take advantage of the surprisingly comfortable long-distance bus network. Your choice will likely depend on your starting point, budget, time constraints, and appetite for adventure.

Flying directly into the region is often the quickest and most convenient option. The two main airports serving Western Sahara are Hassan I Airport (IATA code: EUN) located just outside Laayoune, the largest city, and Dakhla Airport (VIL), situated near the eponymous coastal city famous for its lagoon and watersports. Both airports handle domestic flights connecting them to major Moroccan hubs, as well as a limited number of international connections.

The primary airline serving these routes is Morocco's national carrier, Royal Air Maroc

(RAM). They operate frequent flights connecting Laayoune and Dakhla with cities like Casablanca and Agadir within Morocco proper. These flights are treated as domestic services, meaning if you arrive in Casablanca internationally and transfer to a flight to Laayoune or Dakhla, your main immigration procedures will happen in Casablanca. The flight south is then similar to a domestic hop within any country.

Intriguingly, there are also direct flight connections from the Canary Islands (Spain) to both Laayoune and Dakhla, typically operated by airlines like Binter Canarias or possibly RAM. These flights bridge the relatively short distance across the Atlantic and offer a popular route for European visitors, particularly those heading to Dakhla for kitesurfing holidays. If arriving via this route, you will pass through Moroccan immigration and customs upon landing at Laayoune or Dakhla airport, as you are entering Moroccan-administered territory from Spain.

Occasionally, especially catering to the Dakhla tourism boom, seasonal charter flights or even scheduled services might operate directly from European cities, such as Paris. These provide a seamless link for tourists but are less frequent than the connections via Morocco or the Canaries. Check airline schedules carefully when planning, as routes and frequencies can change based on season and demand. Regardless of the origin, arriving by air places you directly into one of the territory's main urban centers.

For many travelers, particularly those exploring Morocco extensively or undertaking overland journeys across Africa, arriving by land from the north is the most common method. The transition from Morocco proper into the Moroccan-administered parts of Western Sahara is remarkably seamless. There are no formal border posts, no additional visa checks specifically for entering the territory, and no new stamps in your passport. You simply continue driving or riding south along the main coastal highway, the N1 (or RN1).

This lack of a formal border crossing underscores Morocco's administrative control over the area. As you travel south from cities like Guelmim or Tan-Tan (which lies just north of the boundary often depicted on maps), the landscape gradually becomes more arid, but the administrative reality, from a traveler's perspective, remains unchanged. The road signs, police presence, and currency are all Moroccan. You might notice a subtle shift in atmosphere or architecture as you approach Laayoune, but there's no single point where you'll feel you've crossed an international frontier.

However, while there's no border, you will encounter numerous checkpoints along the N1 highway, operated by Moroccan police or Gendarmerie Royale. These checkpoints are a standard feature of travel in the region and throughout southern Morocco. They are typically professional and routine. Approach them slowly and stop when indicated. Usually, they will want to see the driver's license, vehicle registration, and insurance (if you're driving), and they may ask to see passports for all occupants. Often, especially for tourist vehicles or public buses, they might just wave you through with a

cursory glance.

It's advisable to keep your passports and any vehicle documents easily accessible to avoid delays. A friendly greeting ("Salam aleikum") is always appreciated. These checks are primarily for security and monitoring movement; they are not immigration procedures. Your passport will not be stamped here. The frequency of these checkpoints can vary but expect several between Tan-Tan and Laayoune, and further south towards Dakhla and the Mauritanian border. They are a normal part of the landscape and shouldn't cause undue concern, provided your papers are in order.

For the adventurous overlander heading north from West Africa or south towards it, the border crossing between Mauritania and the Moroccan-controlled part of Western Sahara is the principal gateway. This crossing lies at the southern tip of the territory administered by Morocco, beyond the town of Guerguerat. It connects the paved Mauritanian highway from Nouadhibou with the Moroccan N1 heading north towards Dakhla. This route is a vital artery for trans-African travel and trade.

Navigating this border involves several distinct steps. If heading north, you first complete exit formalities at the Mauritanian border post. This includes getting your passport stamped out of Mauritania and potentially dealing with customs procedures if you are driving your own vehicle (exporting it temporarily from Mauritania). Once cleared by the Mauritanian authorities, you enter a stretch of desert track often referred to as "No Man's Land."

This buffer zone, several kilometers wide, separates the Mauritanian and Moroccan frontier posts. It is essentially an ungraded, sandy, and sometimes rocky track across the desert. While the main track is well-used and generally considered safe to traverse if you follow the tyre marks carefully, it requires cautious driving. Stories of getting stuck or minor difficulties are common, though usually resolved with patience or help from other travelers. It's crucial to stick to the established path due to the historical risk of landmines in the wider area, although the main transit corridor itself is heavily trafficked.

After successfully navigating "No Man's Land," you arrive at the Moroccan border post at Guerguerat. Here, you undergo Moroccan entry formalities. Immigration officials will check your passport and visa (if required for your nationality) and provide the crucial Moroccan entry stamp. If you are driving your own vehicle, you will also need to complete temporary importation procedures with Moroccan customs, which usually involves checking your vehicle registration (carte grise), proof of ownership, and vehicle insurance valid for Morocco (often the 'Green Card'). This process can sometimes take a bit of time, so patience is key.

Once you have cleared Moroccan immigration and customs, you are officially in the Moroccan-administered part of Western Sahara and can proceed north on the paved

N1 highway towards Dakhla. The entire border crossing process, from exiting one country to fully entering the other, can take anywhere from a couple of hours to half a day or more, depending on traffic levels, the efficiency of officials on the day, and whether you encounter any complications with paperwork or vehicle checks. Ensure you have all necessary documents readily available and copies prepared.

For those who prefer not to drive themselves, long-distance buses offer a surprisingly comfortable and reliable way to reach Western Sahara from Morocco. Major players like CTM and Supratours (the bus division of the national railway company, ONCF) operate routes from large Moroccan cities like Casablanca, Marrakech, and Agadir, extending all the way south to Laayoune and Dakhla. Some services even continue right to the Mauritanian border post, catering to travelers heading further south.

These buses are generally modern, air-conditioned, and equipped with reclining seats, making the long journeys (it's over 1,600 km from Casablanca to Dakhla, for example) relatively bearable. Tickets can often be booked online or at bus stations in Morocco. The journey follows the N1 highway, offering window-seat views of the changing landscapes as you head south. The seamless transition from Morocco proper into Western Sahara means no border formalities interrupt the bus journey itself.

When the bus reaches checkpoints along the N1, the procedure is usually handled efficiently. Sometimes an officer might board the bus for a quick passport check of all passengers, or the bus driver/conductor might collect passports temporarily to present them to the officials at the checkpoint booth. Passengers typically remain on the bus. It's a routine process handled hundreds of times a day. Arriving by bus deposits you directly in the central bus station of cities like Laayoune or Dakhla, ready to find your accommodation.

Taking your own vehicle, whether it's your personal car, motorbike, or a rental picked up in Morocco, provides the ultimate flexibility for getting to and exploring Western Sahara. The freedom to stop whenever you wish, detour slightly (where safe), and travel at your own pace is a significant advantage on the long desert roads. As mentioned, the N1 highway is the lifeline, running south from Moroccan cities like Agadir. Ensure your vehicle is in good working order before setting off, as repair facilities become scarcer the further south you travel.

When driving south from Morocco, remember those checkpoints. Have your driver's license, vehicle registration (V5C for UK vehicles, Title for US, etc.), and proof of insurance readily available. For foreign-registered vehicles, valid international insurance (like the Green Card covering Morocco) is essential. Rental agreements should also be kept handy. If you rented the car in Morocco, ensure the rental agency permits taking the vehicle into Western Sahara (most do, as it's administratively treated as part of Morocco, but it's wise to confirm).

Fuel availability is a key consideration when driving. While major towns like Tan-Tan, Laayoune, Boujdour, and Dakhla have reliable petrol stations, the stretches between them can be long. South of Tan-Tan, it becomes particularly important to adopt the habit of filling up whenever you see a station, even if your tank isn't near empty. Running out of fuel in the middle of the desert is an inconvenience you definitely want to avoid. Carry plenty of water and perhaps some emergency snacks, just in case of unexpected delays.

If entering Western Sahara by car from Mauritania, the process at the Guerguerat border post involves those extra customs steps for temporarily importing your vehicle into Morocco. Ensure you have originals of your vehicle registration and proof of ownership. Moroccan customs will typically issue a temporary import document (often called a 'D16Ter'), which allows your vehicle to remain in Morocco (and the territories it administers) for a set period, usually up to six months. This document is crucial and must be kept safe, as you will need it to exit Morocco with your vehicle later.

Regardless of how you choose to arrive – soaring in by plane, cruising down the highway from the north, navigating the sandy tracks from the south, or relaxing on a long-distance bus – reaching the threshold of Western Sahara is the first step in an unforgettable journey. Understanding the entry procedures, particularly the alignment with Moroccan regulations for the accessible western regions, and knowing the different travel options available, allows you to plan your arrival smoothly. Once you're officially in, the vast landscapes and unique culture of this desert land await your exploration. Preparing for the journey in is just as important as planning what you'll do once you're there.

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