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# Living in Mauritania

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## Introduction

Welcome to *Living in Mauritania: A Guide for Expats*. Whether you are moving to Mauritania for work, adventure, or personal reasons, this book is designed to be your roadmap for navigating the unique landscape of one of West Africa's most captivating countries. Mauritania, spanning from the Atlantic coast deep into the Sahara, is a land of striking contrasts and rich complexity—where ancient traditions coexist with ambitious new economic ventures, and sweeping sand dunes meet bustling urban centers.

For many expats, moving to Mauritania presents both exciting opportunities and formidable challenges. Its vibrant culture, influenced by both North and Sub-Saharan Africa, offers life lessons in hospitality, adaptability, and community. At the same time, navigating daily life requires understanding an unfamiliar bureaucracy, managing practical concerns like healthcare and access to services, and acclimating to an environment that can be both harsh and breathtakingly beautiful.

This guide aims to demystify the realities of life in Mauritania. We delve into essential topics such as visa and residency regulations, the local job market, housing, transportation, and healthcare system. We also explore the nuances of social customs, religious practices, and the intricate balance required to thrive in a country with deep cultural and historical roots. Whether you are a single professional, a family with children, or a retiree seeking a new adventure, the guidance within these pages will help make your transition smoother.

Living in Mauritania is undeniably a journey of discovery. You'll encounter moments of profound cultural immersion: traditional music in the markets of Nouakchott, the silence of the desert at dawn, or the warmth of mint tea shared in a local home. These experiences can foster a deep appreciation for a country that is often misunderstood or overlooked on the global stage.

Yet, being an expat in Mauritania also comes with real considerations — from adapting to the extreme desert climate and understanding the scope of healthcare to accepting the limits of local infrastructure. Security, legal systems, and even grocery shopping can differ vastly from what many are used to. With pragmatic advice and informed perspectives, this book aims to equip you for both the joys and frustrations of Mauritanian expat life.

As you embark on your Mauritanian adventure, let this guide be your companion—offering the knowledge, resources, and cultural understanding necessary to not just survive, but truly thrive, in this extraordinary nation.

## CHAPTER ONE: Understanding Mauritania: Geography and History

Mauritania, officially the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, is a country that truly embodies the term "land of contrasts." Situated in Northwest Africa, it acts as a cultural and geographical bridge between the North African Maghreb and the westernmost part of Sub-Saharan Africa. This unique positioning has shaped its landscape, climate, and the very fabric of its society. Covering a vast 1,030,700 square kilometers, Mauritania is the 11th largest country in Africa and the 28th largest globally. Yet, despite its expansive size, it boasts one of the lowest population densities in the world.

Venture into Mauritania, and you'll quickly grasp its dominant geographical feature: the Sahara Desert. Approximately three-quarters of the country's land is desert or semi-desert, a proportion that has unfortunately been expanding since the mid-1960s due to prolonged and severe drought. This means that much of the interior is characterized by vast, arid plains, broken occasionally by ridges and dramatic clifflike outcroppings. Imagine endless stretches of golden dunes, constantly shifting and painting a breathtaking panorama of colors at sunrise and sunset. These dunes generally increase in size and mobility as you head further north.

Despite the overwhelming presence of the desert, Mauritania isn't a monolithic expanse of sand. The country can be broadly divided into distinct ecological zones. Along the Atlantic coast, which stretches for about 750 kilometers, the climate is more temperate, moderated by ocean breezes. This coastal strip, particularly around Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, offers a stark contrast to the scorching inland temperatures. Further south, a narrow belt along the Senegal River Valley provides more fertile ground, where agricultural activity is possible. This southern region presents a noticeable difference, with traces of tropical forest near the river giving way to brush and savanna further east.

The interior features a series of sandstone plateaus, with the Adrar Plateau reaching an elevation of 500 meters. At the foot of some of these dramatic scarps, you'll discover spring-fed oases, offering pockets of lush greenery amidst the aridity. Isolated peaks, known as *guelbs* (smaller) and *kedias* (larger), punctuate the plateaus. The most prominent of these is Kediet ej Jill, near the city of Zouïrât, which stands as the highest peak in Mauritania at 915 meters. This diverse topography, from shifting sands to rocky outcrops and coastal plains, creates a landscape of striking beauty and harsh realities.

Mauritania's climate is predominantly desert, as you might expect, with scorching, dry summers and mild, dry winters. The relentless northeastern trade winds contribute to this aridity, blowing consistently in the north and for most of the year across the country. The *harmattan*, a hot, dry wind blowing from the northeast or east, further intensifies this drying effect. While some winter rains occur due to climatic disturbances from mid-latitude regions, most precipitation, particularly in the southern half of the country during summer, is a result of rain-bearing southwesterly winds. Temperatures can regularly exceed 40°C in inland desert areas during the day. However, the coastal areas, including the capital Nouakchott, experience a more moderate climate thanks to the Atlantic Ocean's influence, making them considerably cooler than the interior. The cool season, spanning from November to February, is generally the most comfortable time to visit, offering milder temperatures. The rainy season typically falls between July and September, bringing some much-needed rainfall, especially to the southern regions, though sandstorms remain a possibility across the country.

The history of Mauritania is as rich and layered as its desert dunes, shaped by ancient migrations, powerful empires, and colonial encounters. The country's name itself is derived from Mauretania, an ancient Berber kingdom that flourished from the 3rd century BCE to the 7th century CE in a considerably more northern region of what is now Morocco and Algeria. The early inhabitants of modern Mauritania were the Bafour, believed to be a Mande ethnic group, with connections to the contemporary Arabized Imraguen ("fishermen") found on the Atlantic coast.

Berber immigration into the region began around the 3rd century AD. These nomadic tribes established a strong presence, and by the late 7th century, Arab tribes migrated into the area, bringing with them Islam, Arab culture, and the Arabic language. This period marked a significant turning point, with Islamization spreading throughout the region, reaching the Senegal River by the 11th century. The Almoravid movement, a puritanical 11th-century Islamic reform movement, originated in the desert regions of what is now Mauritania, spreading its austere form of Islam across North Africa. This era highlights Mauritania's historical role as a cradle of significant Islamic cultural and religious development.

For centuries, Mauritania was a crucial hub on the trans-Saharan trade route, connecting sub-Saharan Africa with the Mediterranean. This exchange of spices, gold, and other goods led to a unique cultural blend, influenced by Arab, Berber, and West African traditions. The ancient cities of Ouadane and Chinguetti, both UNESCO World Heritage sites, stand as poignant reminders of these once-thriving trading and religious centers, preserving an urban fabric that evolved between the 12th and 16th centuries.

In the early 20th century, France colonized Mauritania as part of French West Africa.

French rule brought legal prohibitions against slavery and an end to inter-clan warfare, though 90% of the population remained nomadic during the colonial period. Mauritania finally achieved independence on November 28, 1960, with Nouakchott established as its capital.

The post-independence era has seen its share of political shifts. Mauritania's first president, Moktar Ould Daddah, initially ushered in an authoritarian one-party state, justifying it by stating the country wasn't ready for Western-style multi-party democracy. He was eventually deposed in a bloodless coup in 1978. A series of military rulers followed, leading to periods of both military dictatorship and attempts at democratic transitions, including the first democratic presidential elections in 2007, and further coups in 2005 and 2008. The country also faced conflict over the disputed territory of Western Sahara in 1976, resulting in a partial annexation that was later withdrawn.

Mauritania's cultural heritage is deeply intertwined with its nomadic traditions and Islamic faith. Traditional Moorish music, intricate textile art, and camel racing are all integral components of social life. The society is traditionally organized along tribal and ethnic lines, with strong family and community ties. Hospitality is a cornerstone of Mauritanian culture, with guests being welcomed with open arms and treated to generous offerings, including traditional meals and the ubiquitous mint tea, a fixed ritual symbolizing welcome.

Economically, Mauritania's resources have long been a driving force. The country boasts significant mineral wealth, with large reserves of iron ore, copper, gold, and gypsum. Iron ore, in particular, has been a key export, making Mauritania the second-largest African producer. The country's extensive Atlantic coastline also supports a thriving marine industry, with fishing products being a major export. In recent years, significant discoveries of offshore oil and natural gas reserves have further expanded its economic potential, attracting considerable foreign investment.

However, despite these rich resources, Mauritania's economy faces challenges. It remains highly dependent on extractive industries, making it vulnerable to fluctuations in global commodity prices. Half the population still relies on farming and livestock, a lifestyle vulnerable to the recurrent droughts that have plagued the region. Infrastructure development, while improving, still presents hurdles, particularly regarding road networks and access to basic services like electricity and sanitation, especially in rural areas.

Understanding Mauritania's geography, from its vast desert interior to its fertile river valley and rich coastal waters, provides essential context for any expat. Similarly, its long and complex history, marked by cultural fusions and political shifts, has profoundly shaped the nation's identity and continues to influence daily life. This foundation offers a starting point for appreciating the unique environment and cultural

nuances you will encounter during your time in this captivating West African nation.

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