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# Mauritania

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Geography and Climate of Mauritania
- **Chapter 2** Natural Landscapes and Ecology
- **Chapter 3** Early Inhabitants and Ancient Civilization
- **Chapter 4** Arab and Berber Influence
- **Chapter 5** The Arrival and Spread of Islam
- **Chapter 6** The Almoravid Movement and Medieval Mauritania
- **Chapter 7** Colonial Era and French West Africa
- **Chapter 8** Independence and Nation-Building
- **Chapter 9** Political Systems and Government Structure
- **Chapter 10** The Role of the Military in Politics
- **Chapter 11** Human Rights and Social Justice
- **Chapter 12** Demographics and Ethnic Groups
- **Chapter 13** The Haratin: Legacy and Identity
- **Chapter 14** Society, Family, and Social Structure
- **Chapter 15** Religion and Spiritual Life
- **Chapter 16** Education and Literacy
- **Chapter 17** Economy: Agriculture, Livestock, and Fishing
- **Chapter 18** Mineral Wealth: Mining, Oil, and Gas
- **Chapter 19** Urbanization and the Rise of Nouakchott
- **Chapter 20** Culture: Language, Arts, and Music
- **Chapter 21** Cuisine and Everyday Life
- **Chapter 22** Environmental Issues and Challenges
- **Chapter 23** Foreign Relations and International Partnerships
- **Chapter 24** Travel and Visiting Mauritania
- **Chapter 25** Prospects and Future Outlook

## Introduction

Mauritania, stretching majestically along the edge of the Sahara and the Atlantic, is a country where worlds meet and merge—geographically, culturally, and historically. Officially called the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, this vast nation acts as a crucial link between the Maghreb of North Africa and the Sahelian heart of sub-Saharan Africa. To the north and east, ancient trade routes recall centuries of exchange and migration, while the bustling capital Nouakchott, perched on the Atlantic coastline, is a vibrant testament to the country's rapid urban transformation. From wind-sculpted dunes to savanna and salt flats, Mauritania's dramatic landscapes are as striking as its peoples are diverse.

Yet Mauritania is more than a tapestry of landscapes and ethnicities. It is a nation of complex social hierarchies, with deep legacies of heritage, tradition, and change. Its population—estimated at five million—comprises Arab-Berber Bidhan, Black Moors (Haratin), and communities with roots across the Sahel, each contributing to a rich mosaic of languages, beliefs, and social customs. All Mauritaniens are bound, however, by a strong Islamic faith which influences daily life, shapes cultural norms, and underpins the state's institutions.

Mauritania's past is marked by migration, conquest, synthesis, and struggle. From the prehistoric Bafour to Almoravid scholars, from French colonization to the trials of independence, the nation's story is one of adaptation and transformation. The scars and legacies of slavery remain deeply etched in society, alongside a continuing search for unity and inclusion amidst rapid urbanization and change.

The country's economy, historically reliant on agriculture, livestock, and the bounty of the Atlantic, has increasingly turned toward the riches beneath its soil and sea. Iron ore, gold, and recent gas discoveries hold the promise of prosperity, yet challenges persist: poverty, social disparities, infrastructure deficits, vulnerability to climate and price shocks, and environmental threats such as desertification and resource depletion. Mauritania stands at a critical crossroads, poised between opportunity and risk as it navigates a path toward greater stability and growth.

This book aims to present a comprehensive portrait of Mauritania: its geography, history, people, and identity; its achievements and struggles; its vibrant traditions and landscapes; and the realities and hopes of its future. Designed for both the curious traveler and the engaged scholar, "Mauritania: Portrait of a Country" is an invitation to discover a land too often overlooked or misunderstood—a nation of enduring complexity and quiet resilience.

## CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Climate of Mauritania

Mauritania's identity is inextricably linked to its vast and often formidable geography. As the 11th-largest country in Africa and the 28th-largest globally, its sheer scale—encompassing 1,030,700 square kilometers (397,955 square miles)—is difficult to fully grasp without a sense of its prevailing emptiness. Imagine a land mass roughly equivalent to Egypt, or slightly larger than three-quarters the size of Alaska, and you begin to appreciate the sheer expanse. This immense territory serves as a literal and figurative bridge between the sands of North Africa and the more verdant lands of sub-Saharan Africa.

The nation's borders are as diverse as its landscapes, marking its unique position on the continent. To the west, the endless expanse of the Atlantic Ocean defines its coastline, a vital artery for trade and sustenance. To the north and northwest lies Western Sahara, a territory whose status has long shaped Mauritania's regional diplomacy. Algeria forms its northeastern frontier, a silent stretch of desert meeting desert. To the east and southeast, the vastness of Mali extends, while the Senegal River to the southwest traces a natural boundary with its namesake country, Senegal, marking a noticeable shift in climate and culture.

The dominant feature of Mauritanian geography is, without question, the Sahara Desert. It is not merely a part of the country; it *is* the country, covering approximately three-quarters to 90% of its total land area. This isn't just desert as a concept; it's a tangible, pervasive reality of vast, arid plains, where sand dunes can stretch for miles, creating a seemingly endless panorama of ochre and gold. These are not always towering dunes, but often immense, undulating sheets of sand that ripple across the landscape like a frozen sea.

Interspersed with these sandy expanses are semi-desert regions, where sparse vegetation manages to cling to life, offering a fleeting green against the prevailing aridity. The landscape, for the most part, is remarkably flat. Coastal plains generally hug the Atlantic at elevations under 45 meters (150 feet), gradually rising to interior plains that typically range from 180 to 230 meters (600 to 750 feet) above sea level. This gentle ascent contributes to the sense of boundless horizons, where the sky seems to meet the earth in an uninterrupted curve.

Yet, the monotony of these plains is occasionally, and dramatically, broken by the appearance of isolated ridges and cliff-like outcroppings. These geological formations stand as stark monuments to ancient tectonic shifts, offering unexpected contours in an otherwise smooth canvas. The most prominent of these is Kediet ej Jill, a towering anomaly in the otherwise flat desert. Reaching 915 meters (3,002 feet) above sea

level, it stands as Mauritania's highest peak, a sentinel overlooking the surrounding desert, and a significant landmark for those traversing the country's northern reaches.

The climate of Mauritania is, predictably, hot and dry. This aridity is a direct consequence of the northeastern trade winds, which sweep constantly across the northern parts of the country and for most of the year over the remainder. These winds, while constant, bring little moisture. Their drying effect is further amplified by the infamous harmattan, a hot, dry, and often dust-laden wind that originates in the Sahara itself. When the harmattan blows, it can transform the air into a hazy, almost tangible presence, carrying fine sand and dust far across the landscape, sometimes even reaching the coastal areas and obscuring the horizon.

Average temperatures across Mauritania hover around 24 degrees Celsius (75 degrees Fahrenheit), which might sound pleasant enough to those accustomed to cooler climes. However, this average masks the extremes. Summer temperatures are notoriously fierce, frequently soaring to between 38 and 46 degrees Celsius (100 and 115 degrees Fahrenheit). Such temperatures demand a different pace of life, with activities often shifting to the cooler hours of early morning or late evening. Conversely, temperatures rarely dip below a mild 20 degrees Celsius (68 degrees Fahrenheit), meaning true cold is almost unheard of in much of the country.

Rainfall, a precious commodity in any desert land, is sparse and notoriously sporadic in Mauritania. The majority of the country's meager precipitation falls during a short, intense rainy season, typically occurring from July to September. This brief window of moisture is crucial for the country's agricultural and pastoral life, but its unreliability can lead to periods of severe drought. The southern regions, closer to the Sahel, fare slightly better, receiving more rain with an average of 500 to 600 millimeters (19.7 to 23.6 inches) annually. This allows for more substantial vegetation and supports a greater density of both human and animal life.

In stark contrast, the northern two-thirds of the country receive a paltry amount of rainfall, often less than 100 millimeters (3.9 inches) per year. In some years, entire areas might not see a single drop. This extreme aridity makes large-scale agriculture impossible in these regions, limiting human habitation primarily to nomadic populations and those settled around oases. The consequences of this ongoing aridity are profound: since the mid-1960s, a period marked by extended and severe droughts, the Sahara Desert has been inexorably expanding, encroaching further into previously semi-arid zones and pushing the boundaries of habitable land.

Despite the pervasive desert, Mauritania is surprisingly home to a variety of terrestrial ecoregions, each adapted to the specific climatic and geographical conditions. The Sahelian Acacia savanna, found in the southern reaches, represents a transition zone, characterized by grasslands dotted with acacia trees, providing crucial grazing land. Further south, the West Sudanian savanna offers a slightly denser tree cover and more

consistent rainfall. As one moves north, the landscape shifts to Saharan halophytics, specialized plant communities that thrive in saline soils, often found in salt flats or sebkhas.

The vast majority of the country is covered by various classifications of desert and semi-desert. The Atlantic coastal desert, for instance, represents a narrow strip along the ocean, where the proximity to the coast offers some relief from the interior heat, and fog can sometimes provide a unique microclimate. Moving inland, the North Saharan steppe and woodlands, and the South Saharan steppe and woodlands, describe vast, arid plains with scattered, drought-resistant shrubs and trees. Finally, the West Saharan montane xeric woodlands refer to the sparse vegetation that manages to survive in the higher, rockier elevations, such as around Kediet ej Jill, where slightly cooler temperatures and occasional moisture might allow for a greater diversity of hardy plant life. These ecoregions, while seemingly barren to the untrained eye, are home to a surprising array of resilient flora and fauna, forming interconnected ecosystems that are delicately balanced against the harsh realities of the Mauritanian climate.

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