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Western Sahara

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Introduction

Western Sahara—straddling the northwest edge of Africa—is a territory where history, politics, and culture are tightly interwoven, yet its story remains one of the least understood in the modern world. The broad, sun-drenched deserts and sweeping dunes may seem timeless, but underneath this apparently unchanging landscape lies one of the most complex and persistent territorial disputes of the twenty-first century. For decades, the people of Western Sahara have strived to assert their identity and political destiny, while the global community continues to grapple with the enduring question of its sovereignty.

Stretching over 272,000 square kilometers between Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania, and meeting the cold currents of the North Atlantic to the west, Western Sahara is often described as Africa's last colony. This designation is not merely rhetorical. The United Nations still considers it a non-self-governing territory, with the population and their representatives—the Sahrawi people and their self-proclaimed government, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)—awaiting a long-promised referendum on independence that, to date, remains elusive. Their quest for self-determination is set against a backdrop of intricate geopolitics, resource competition, and evolving international alliances.

Yet, Western Sahara is far more than a political chessboard. Its history is deeply rooted in the movement of peoples—nomadic tribes crossing vast distances, ancient traders navigating between Morocco and Timbuktu, and the introduction of Islam, which shaped the region's spiritual and cultural foundations. Colonialism brought profound transformations: Spanish rule, with its attendant exploitation and resistance, became the crucible from which modern Sahrawi identity, solidarity, and political ambitions emerged. The end of colonial rule did not herald independence, but ushered in new forms of conflict and displacement.

Against this history, Sahrawi culture has flourished with surprising resilience. Rooted in oral storytelling, music, communal rituals, and the traditions of both Arab and Amazigh heritage, it remains a living testament to the enduring human spirit. Despite decades of uncertainty, families persist in the face of adversity—both in the bustling port city of Laayoune and in the sprawling refugee camps across the border in Algeria. The tea ceremony, poetry in Hassaniya, the communal tent, and the shared stories passed from one generation to the next have become acts of cultural resistance and hope.

The question of Western Sahara's future remains both immediate and contested: as Morocco consolidates its hold over the majority of the territory and secures new international recognition, the Polisario Front and tens of thousands of Sahrawi

refugees persist in their call for independence. The issue is emblematic of broader concerns about decolonization, self-determination, natural resource justice, and human rights in a rapidly changing world.

This book offers an in-depth portrait of Western Sahara in all its rich complexity—its landscapes, people, and the challenges that shape their days. By weaving together the threads of geography, history, culture, daily life, conflict, and possibility, it seeks not only to inform but to invite readers to engage with the enduring enigma and vibrant humanity of this remarkable, often misunderstood land.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Shifting Sands and Coastal Breezes

Western Sahara, a land of vast desert vistas and a surprisingly dynamic coastline, offers a geographic paradox. It's a territory that, despite its immense size, is one of the most sparsely populated on Earth, largely due to its arid nature. Spanning approximately 272,000 square kilometers, which is roughly two-thirds the size of California, its landscape is primarily flat desert, punctuated by sand dunes and rocky plateaus. Yet, this seemingly barren expanse holds unique ecological zones and a climate that varies significantly from the perpetually cool coast to the scorching interior.

The territory's geographical boundaries are not natural formations but rather the result of colonial agreements, primarily between France and Spain in the early 20th century. To its north, Western Sahara shares a border with Morocco, a short stretch to the northeast with Algeria, and a long eastern and southern border with Mauritania. To the west, the North Atlantic Ocean provides a dramatic and often misty boundary, contrasting sharply with the desert heat just a few miles inland.

Western Sahara can be broadly divided into two main geographic regions, both carrying names that evoke a sense of history and, in one case, a touch of golden aspiration. To the north lies Saguia el-Hamra, and to the south, Río de Oro. These names, inherited from the Spanish colonial era, not only designate geographical areas but also reflect historical perceptions and a certain romanticism of exploration.

Saguia el-Hamra, meaning "Red Canal" in Arabic, takes its name from an intermittent river that flows through the region, eventually reaching the Atlantic near Laayoune, the territory's largest city. This northern third of Western Sahara, roughly 82,000 square kilometers, stretches between Cape Bojador and the de jure Moroccan border. While still primarily desert, the area around the wadi (dry riverbed) supports some vegetation, allowing for grazing and even limited cultivation of barley and corn in places like Smara. The landscape here includes rocky deserts known as hamadas, with some steep mountains and pronounced relief in the northeast near the Atlas Mountains.

Venturing south, we encounter Río de Oro, or "River of Gold." The name harks back to Portuguese traders in the 1880s who, mistaking a narrow inlet for a river, believed the area to be a source of gold dust traded by local inhabitants. This southern two-thirds of Western Sahara, encompassing approximately 184,000 square kilometers, is characterized by vast, flat plains, expansive sand dunes (ergs), and rocky surfaces.

The region includes the Dakhla Peninsula, a long, slender finger of land extending into the Atlantic, offering a striking coastal contrast to the inland desolation.

Despite the general aridity, the terrain isn't entirely uniform. There are small plateaus, though they rarely exceed 400 meters in elevation. The highest point in the territory reaches about 701 meters, located east of Aousserd, while the lowest point is Sebjet Tah, a depression straddling the Moroccan border, at -55 meters below sea level. These subtle variations in elevation contribute to different microclimates and ecological niches.

One of the defining features of Western Sahara's geography is the scarcity of permanent water sources. While flash flooding can occur in the spring, especially in the wadis like the Saguia el-Hamra, the water quickly evaporates and rarely reaches the sea. However, these wadis are depressions where water gathers during brief rainy seasons, particularly in autumn, allowing some vegetation to flourish along their banks. In the flat plains of Río de Oro, the permeable ground allows water to accumulate in the subsoil, leading to numerous wells that are vital for nomadic life.

The climate of Western Sahara is predominantly hot desert (Köppen classification BWh), characterized by extreme aridity. Annual average rainfall is remarkably low, falling below 50 millimeters across the entire territory. In some coastal areas like Dakhla, the average annual rainfall is a mere 45 millimeters. Most of the scarce precipitation tends to fall from December to March, with some thunderstorms occurring in August, which can trigger sudden flash floods. May and June are typically the driest months, with very little rain.

The proximity to the Atlantic Ocean profoundly influences the coastal climate, creating a stark contrast with the interior. Cool offshore ocean currents, notably the Canary Current, moderate temperatures along the Atlantic coast, keeping them relatively constant and spring-like throughout the year. This maritime influence results in lower morning temperatures due to fog, mist, and heavy dew that can penetrate several miles inland. For example, in Dakhla, located on a peninsula and exposed to ocean winds, high temperatures range from around 22°C in January to 26.5°C from August to October.

However, venture just a short distance inland, and the climate quickly transforms into a classic continental desert environment. Summers in the interior are long and exceptionally hot, with average high temperatures frequently exceeding 40°C in July and August. In some particularly scorching locations like Smara, temperatures can soar to 50°C or even higher. Imagine a desert landscape shimmering under a sun that pushes the mercury beyond what most can comfortably endure. These extreme temperatures mean that staying hydrated and seeking shade are not just recommendations but necessities for survival.

Even winters in the interior, while cooler than the blistering summers, remain warm to hot during the day, with average highs ranging from 25°C to 30°C. Nighttime temperatures, particularly in the northern parts of the territory, can drop significantly, occasionally falling below freezing, though this is a rare occurrence in December and January. The sky over Western Sahara is typically clear and bright year-round, making sunny weather the norm, even if morning mists and fogs can occasionally obscure the sun along the coast.

The prevailing winds also play a significant role in shaping the landscape and daily life. Dry northeasterly trade winds, often laden with sand and dust particles, blow across the territory for most of the year. These winds, while constant, can also contribute to the phenomenon of sandstorms, further adding to the desert's challenging conditions. The influence of the southwest monsoon, which brings rain to southern Mauritania, does not typically extend to Western Sahara.

Despite its harsh climate, the coast of Western Sahara supports a surprising abundance of vegetation and flora due to the increased humidity. Inland, however, the flora is typical of steppe and desert environments, with sparse shrubs in sandy depressions and some locust trees found along the wadis, where pockets of moisture allow them to take root. This limited vegetation supports a hardy array of desert-adapted wildlife, although large animal populations are not generally found.

The aridity and lack of consistent water resources have profoundly shaped human settlement patterns and economic activities throughout Western Sahara's history. Traditional nomadic lifestyles, still practiced by some Sahrawis, are a direct adaptation to this challenging environment, as people move with their livestock in search of grazing areas and water. The very essence of life in Western Sahara is intrinsically linked to understanding and adapting to its often-unforgiving yet undeniably beautiful geography and climate.

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