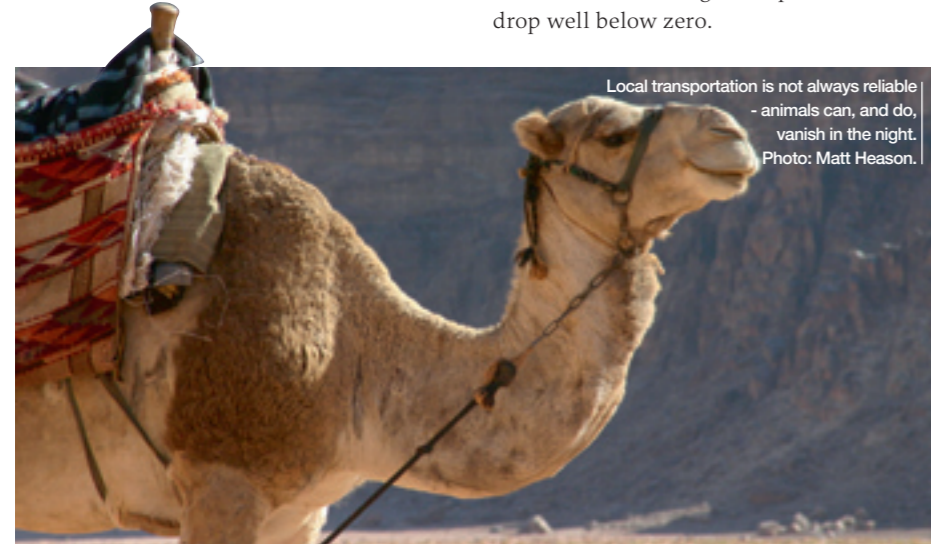




Hill Skills: Desert trekking by Dom Hall

The word desert conjures up images of endless sand dunes, camels and blistering heat. But in reality desert areas can encompass an incredible variety of terrains and climates – what do you need to know when travelling through them?

Most large tracts of desert are characterised by vast gravel plains, dry mountain ranges, canyons and stony tundra. They can even be covered with coarse vegetation or cacti. Despite their differences, all deserts share one major characteristic: a serious lack of water. Deserts are defined as areas that have little-to-no rainfall (less than 250mm per year), and where water of any kind is extremely scarce. It's thought that some areas of the Atacama Desert in Chile have never actually seen any rainfall!



Local transportation is not always reliable - animals can, and do, vanish in the night. Photo: Matt Heason.

Hot work?

Most people find that dry climates are generally easier on our bodies than damp and humid ones, but even so, try to acclimatise slowly before beginning any serious activity. Allowing at least three days of moderate exercise in the heat before you start your activities for real will mean that you're more comfortable in your surroundings when the going gets tough. Although it may be scorching in the day, don't underestimate how cold the nights may get. Desert skies are normally clear, and this allows the earth to radiate all the heat of the day back into space, making for some chilly evenings. Make sure you take a good sleeping bag and a few warm clothes in case of cold snaps. In some desert areas, such as the Gobi Desert in Central Asia, overnight temperatures can drop well below zero.

Drink like a fish

As a rule of thumb, each person trekking in the desert should be consuming around 7-8 litres of water per day to just to keep moving, and more if you are carrying packs or digging vehicles out of sand dunes. In particularly dry (but not necessarily hot) deserts you may not even notice yourself sweating, as sweat evaporates as soon as it is created. This can be especially dangerous, as you may not even notice that you are getting dehydrated. Make sure you keep drinking water regularly, check the colour of your pee, and learn to recognise the signs of heat exhaustion and dehydration in yourself and others. As you lose fluid you'll also lose vital minerals and salts, so don't be afraid to add salt to your food every night, and carry a few packets of rehydration salts with you at all times, just in case.

How to travel

Try to plan your trekking days to start before dawn to take advantage of the cool mornings. Plan a long break in some shade during the hottest part of the day (normally from 11am until 3pm) and continue trekking into the late afternoon when it's cooler. If you're using pack animals or vehicles to carry you or your equipment, this also allows time for everyone, and everything, to rest or for any repairs that might be needed. When trekking use binoculars frequently to judge the terrain ahead. Short detours around sand dunes and gorges spotted in the distance can save you hours of effort, and the curses of the rest of your team!

In deserts you need 7-8 litres of water just to keep moving. Photo: Sam Leggett.



Plan for the best – prepare for the worst

Always make sure that you have a generous emergency supply of water with your vehicles or animals to get you out of trouble; carry at least two litres with you at all times, even when you sleep. Animals can, and do, vanish into the desert with all of your supplies, water can be tainted, and support vehicles can break down. Make sure you keep a compass close to

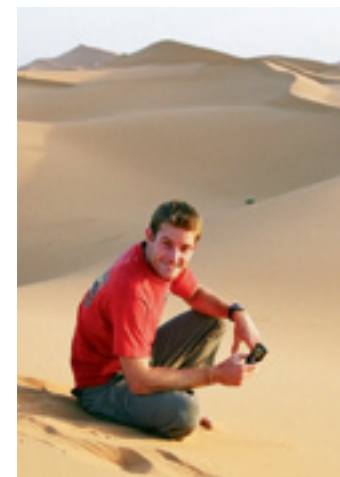
hand, be sure you know how to use it and learn the direction that help may lie in. Making small mistakes can lead to big problems, so you can never be too prepared.

Don't let this put you off! As with all wilderness environments, at first glance it can all be seriously intimidating. But treat the dangers with respect, and with some forward planning and a few new skills, you'll be able to leave the tourists and the 4x4's behind, and

explore some of the last great wilderness regions on earth. ■

Dom Hall runs Fieldskills – an expedition training and support company. Fieldskills run a range of UK-based expedition training courses including: desert safety training, tropical forests, savannah and mountain environments, and general expedition planning. For more information see www.fieldskills.com.

Expert Q&A



Our desert expert is Matt Leggett. Matt has been working as an explorer and expedition leader for over eight years, leading numerous expeditions to remote desert, jungle and mountainous regions. Most recently he developed, and led, all four expeditions for Ben Fogle's current 'Extreme Dreams' series with the BBC – trekking from the Equator to the Tropic of Capricorn. He currently lives in Edinburgh with his wife Sam.

Q. I've heard that less is more when it comes to clothing in the desert – is that right?

A. Perhaps surprisingly, no! Avoid shorts and short sleeves at all costs, these will only increase the loss of water from your skin and inevitably lead to painful sunburn. Lightweight and loose fitting clothes are by far the most comfortable. Get yourself a good hat with a wide brim, or even better, copy the locals and buy yourself a long cotton 'shemagh' or headscarf, which can double up as a hat, scarf, towel, sarong and pillow all in one.

Q. Is it possible to wash in the desert?

A. When water is short, washing is a waste of valuable water supplies. Instead take a small pack of wet-wipes and a miniature spray bottle of water to cool you down – you won't be much cleaner, but it'll make the world of difference after a long day.

Q. What's the best way of camping out – do I need a tent?

A. This very much depends on the area you'll be camping in, but normally sleeping under

the stars is the way to go. This is quick and simple, with a million-dollar view of the stars. However, in some areas strong winds can make your night a sand-blown misery: have a shelter of some kind close to hand, or construct a lean-to using a tarp to give you some shelter.

Q. What kind of footwear is best?

A. It's very unlikely that your boots will need to be waterproof, so most lightweight fabric boots are often excellent for desert trekking. Don't be tempted to use sandals. Army desert boots are excellent for hot and arid environments.

FURTHER INFORMATION



Fieldskills
Specialist expedition services company providing a combination of advice, training and logistical support.
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Royal Geographical Society (RGS)
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