

Western Sahara or Southern Morocco? Approach to Zug

The North African train is located in an extremely conflict-ridden region. Traveling there is correspondingly dangerous. As long as that is the case, it remains for me to get closer to the place in other ways.

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Edited by Daniel Godeck

My list of places named Zug includes the one on our map in the Western Sahara. This territory in northwestern Africa has long been considered a hotbed of conflict. The Moroccan state claims this region for itself and controls 80 percent of it. The remaining 20 percent is under the control of the Frente Polisario, a military-political guerrilla movement. It claims complete autonomy for Western Sahara, known as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. In the Western Sahara conflict, which has been going on since 1976, a cease-fire has been in effect since 1991 and is monitored by the UN. However, a renewed escalation is only a question of time.

Through acquaintances in Berlin I get to know Saïd. He is in his mid-20s, comes from Morocco and has been living in Germany for several years. Although he has never been to Western Sahara, he helps me understand why it is so difficult to visit the place in this region. Because the Western Sahara conflict is a highly charged issue in Morocco, Saïd does not want to reveal his real name. I meet him for a conversation in a Berlin café in early 2023.

Remo: How do people in Morocco look at Western Sahara?

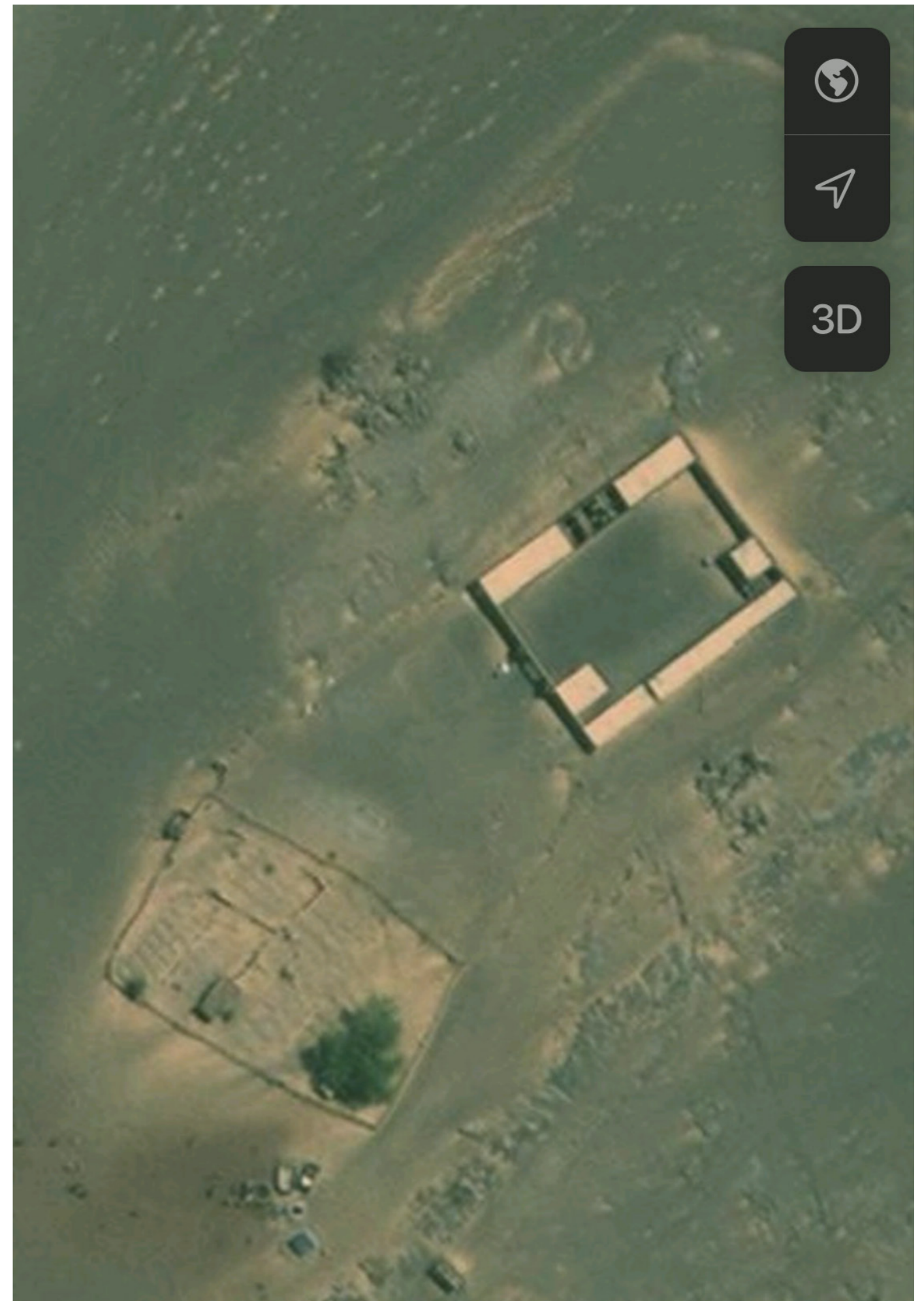
Saïd: Western Sahara is a taboo subject in Morocco because almost every person says that Western Sahara is part of Morocco. Anyone who says otherwise is considered an enemy.

Why is this so?

To understand, we have to look into the past. Before colonization, the country of Morocco was a large country. The two colonial powers, France and Spain, divided up the country. When they withdrew in 1956, Morocco tried to regain the eastern part of Morocco - the western part of Algeria; a zone that belonged to Morocco before colonization. This went down in the history books in 1963 as the Sand War. There were also territorial disputes in the southern part of Morocco, bordering Mauritania. Today, this area is politically very unstable.

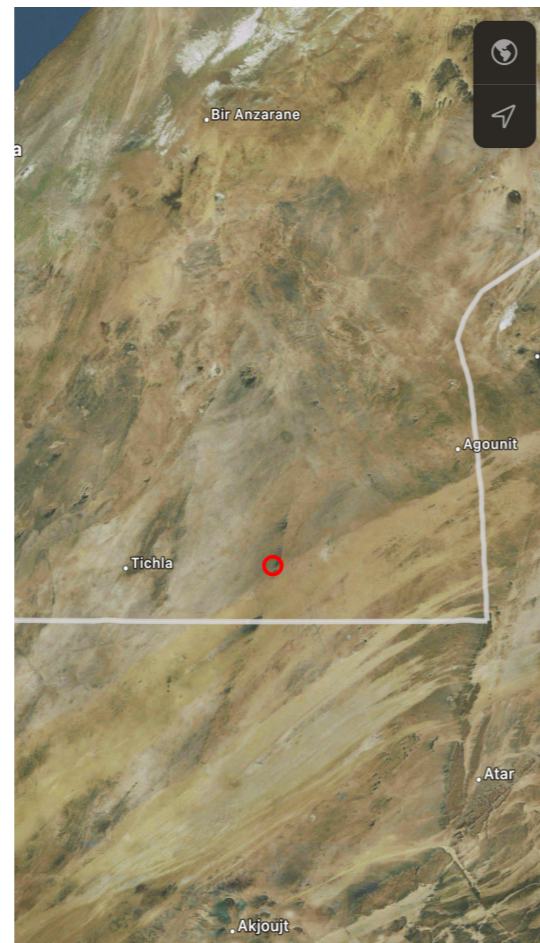
Do Moroccans themselves move around in Western Sahara?

Many Moroccans travel to this region, which is called southern Morocco in Morocco. On the coast, there are towns known for water sports





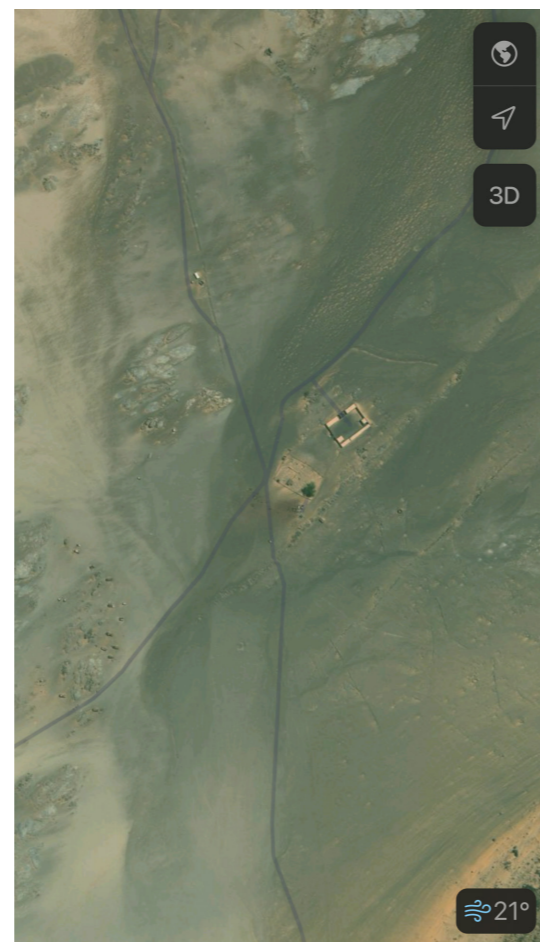
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like kite surfing. It is definitely possible to travel there as a Moroccan or as a foreigner. In the cities in the west it is not dangerous. But it is really risky in the east of southern Morocco, where Zug is located.

Saïd reports that he once met someone who could identify himself as a citizen of Western Sahara. On his identity card was written: Western Sahara. At the same time, he had a Spanish passport. Even though Western Sahara may appear in official documents, for the vast majority of Moroccan society this designation does not exist. And: Only a few countries recognize Western Sahara as an independent state. Saïd also sees this as a political game. For example, Morocco is an important transit country for migrants, simply because of the two Spanish exclaves Melilla and Ceuta. If European countries were to recognize Western Sahara as an independent state, Saïd suspects, they would put the Moroccan state on the spot, whereupon the latter would prevent fewer migrants from fleeing.

The Wikipedia article on Zug states that the region of the same name has an area of about 47 square kilometers, roughly twice the size of the Swiss city of Zug. The population is put at 833 in 2004 (Zug in Switzerland: 31,345 in 2021).

If you look at Google Maps at the satellite image of Zug in North Africa, there are only two buildings visible ...

That also irritated me. Possibly there are many nomads there. Further I found on Google Maps pictures of group tours, which were supposedly made in Zug. But whether this is really in Zug, I doubt. Why are no photos of the place itself published? Of course, if a place is not famous, there are no photos from there. But why are photos published that were pretty sure not taken there?

Another thing that stands out is the letter G in the place's name - a letter that does not exist in Arabic. What do you deduce from this?

There are many different languages and dialects between northern and southern Morocco. Within the different dialects, in turn, there are mixed forms. Perhaps the French and Spanish influence is evident here. The people in the Zug region, the Tuareg, do not speak Arabic. They have their own language, although a part of this society probably still speaks an Arabic dialect. They speak a variant of Amazigh called Hassaniya. This explains the letter G in the place's name.

Saïd doesn't know anyone who has been to Zug. Because the place is very far south. But

1 Screenshot Google Maps: Train in Western Sahara or Southern Morocco (© Google Maps)

2+3 Screenshot Google Maps: The town of Zug is circled in red (© Google Maps)

4 Screenshot Google Maps: Zug in French spelling with an O (© Google Maps)

5 Screenshot Google Maps: On January 9, 2023, it was 21° and windy in Zug (© Google Maps)



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6 Screenshot Google Maps, German version: With reference to Western Sahara (© Google Maps)

7 Screenshot Google Maps, Moroccan vers.: Without reference to Western Sahara (© Google Maps)

8 Over coffee, Saïd talks about the region where Zug is located

above all because of the political situation. And what if an artist from Zug, Switzerland, came there with a notepad and a camera? Saïd says that might be met with suspicion from the locals: «Is it a spy?»

In other words, you wouldn't recommend that I travel there?

Absolutely not. To get there, you first have to travel through Morocco. If you travel from northern to southern Morocco, you have to pass through a checkpoint. In the southern part of the country, there will definitely be many of these checkpoints where the Moroccan military will ask for your ID or passport. On the border between Morocco and Mauritania is no man's land. It's really dangerous there. You never know what person you're going to run into and who you can trust. And if something happens to you, you are on your own.

Because of the difficulty of getting to Zug, this is the only approach I have for now. What I learn is that even the view of a place is always a question of perspective. For some, Zug is simply a small town in the south of the great kingdom of Morocco. For others, Zug is in the Western Sahara and belongs to a state independent of Morocco. Still others do not know that this place or another Zug even exists.

Will the Western Sahara conflict be resolved one day? What will happen to Zug is also an open question. «Maybe Zug will be destroyed», says Saïd, «or they will open the borders to visitors.» With a laugh, he adds: «Then you'll be the first to go there.» ■



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Related links

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zug,_Western_Sahara
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sand_War
- https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demokratische_Arabische_Republik_Sahara
- [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuareg_\(Sprache\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuareg_(Sprache))
- https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frente_Polisario
- <https://www.blick.ch/storytelling/2017/kriege/westsahara/>
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- <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/vor-40-jahren-spanien-ueberlaesst-marokko-die-west-sahara-100.html>
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(Websites visited on January 7, 2023)