



A woman walks through the Neolithic trading town of Tichitt.



Thierry Tillet studies rock engravings inscribed onto the ancient rock formation, Makhrouga, in Mauritania.

reins to stop, on spotting something interesting. If he doesn't know what it is, he takes notes and—in his only recourse to 21st-century technology—satellite coordinates using a GPS. Once home in southwestern France's Perigord region, he will transfer them onto a map, tirelessly completing what he calls his "spider's web". The hundreds of GPS points are not only a scientific record but suggest the route of his next expedition.

Searching for a bull

Tillet, the son of Parisian bakers, said his love of Africa and archaeology began after hearing stories as a child. But it was his first university professor who ignited the desire

Sheih and Ahmed, whom he has known for many years. Looks, gestures and common phrases in mixed mother tongues make up for any language barriers.

The days are punctuated by the same rituals: a sunrise departure, stops to drink green tea and finding a place where they can make supper before sleeping under the stars as the camels graze. After two days, the caravan stops at Akrejijit, an archaeological site discovered in 1934 by Monod and partly restored by a French team at the end of the last century. The foundations of the old buildings are visible again. European tourists disembark from their 4x4s in a cloud of dust and briskly visit the old town, just last year removed from the "red zones" where the French foreign ministry advises against travel. Tillet looks for a drawing of a bull on a rock, located during a previous visit. "It is two metres (6.5 feet) long," he says. "My GPS point tells me it's in 22 metres." He scans and searches, passing repeatedly through the ruins, but finds nothing.

'At great risk'

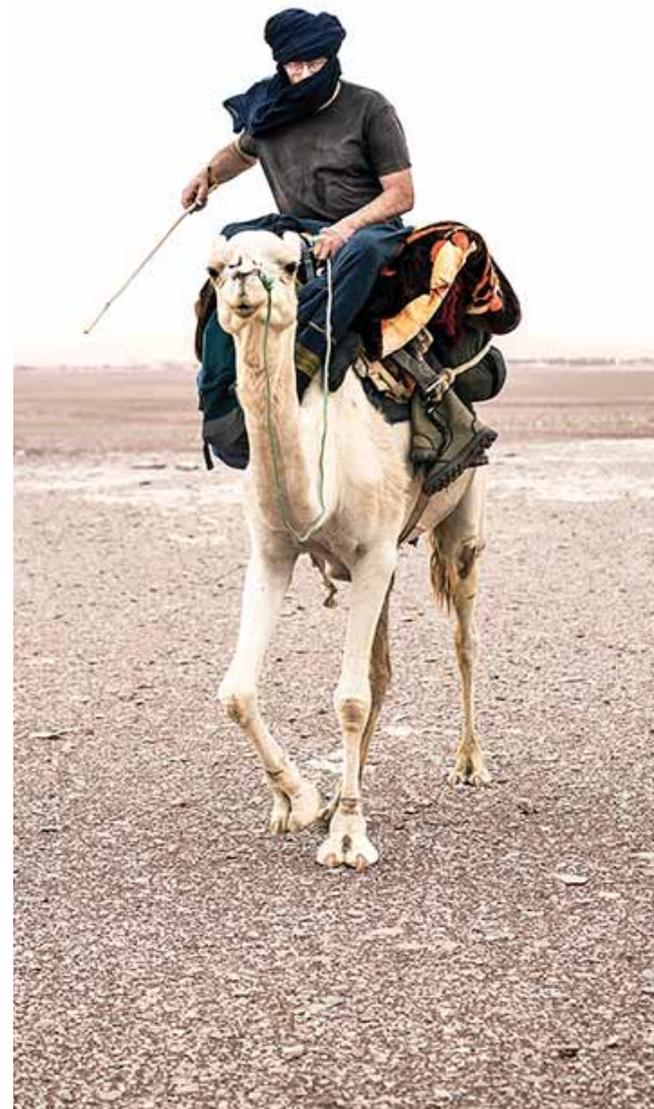
Concerned about kidnappings, the French authorities are not always happy about the caravan's off-the-radar trips. "These people are as worrying as they are fascinating, so we have to keep an eye out," a French diplomat in the sub-region later told AFP. Three-quarters of the caravan's route are in areas that travellers are officially advised by the French government to avoid. "Objectively, he sometimes puts himself at great risk," acknowledged Pierre Touya, president of the Association of Saharans which groups archaeologists, geographers and other enthusiasts.

Still, "he remains rational, does very good research and is supported by local knowledge," he said. On-the-ground information from locals is key to Tillet's preparations be-



Thierry Tillet is seen on his camel during an expedition between the towns of Tichitt and Aratane in South Eastern Mauritania.

to go and see it for himself, encouraging him to focus on the Sahara. On his first trip—in Algeria—it rained a lot. "For someone wanting to study the Sahara, it was a bad start!" he says, laughing. Tillet's wife occasionally used to accompany him on his explorations. But this time, his companions are Ahmadou,



Thierry Tillet, a Saharien Archeologist and explorer, rides his camel during an expedition between the towns of Tichitt and Aratane in South Eastern Mauritania—AFP photos