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fore leaving. By email and phone, he finds out about nomadic tribes' movements or where there are wells for the animals to drink. For decades, the region has been buffeted by inter-communal clashes, separatist insurgencies and conflicts between religious groups—and Tillet has often found himself on the front row. In the 1990s, he met Iyad Ag Ghaly, then a rebel leader and now head of one of the main jihadist coalitions.



Thierry Tillet (center), a Saharien Archeologist and explorer, talks with his friend Bauh-Ahmed (left) for the first time after five years, in a Ne-madi camp between Tichitt and Aratane in Mauritania.

He also met French ethnologist Françoise Claustre in Chad before she was kidnapped in 1974 by Hissene Habre's rebels. And he has shared mechoui, a meal of slow-roasted lamb, with former Malian president and fellow archaeologist Alpha Oumar Konaré. "As long as I don't bump into the bastards, it's all right," he smiles, talking about the jihadists, who are an escalating threat in the Sahel region.

In 2009, he was forced to hide in the northern Malian town of Kidal. Alerted to the presence of "likely unfriendly" groups at a time when Tuareg independence rebellions and jihadist groups were emerging, he left at 4:00 am in a pick-up truck, his head down and face hidden. That same year, he and his camel team were woken in



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

the night by the blinding light of a surveillance drone in the desert of Mali's Taoudenit region. The jihadist expansion in the Sahel-Saharan strip has reduced exploration possibilities. But, according to a source close to the authorities, interviewed in Mauritania's capital, Nouakchott, a security grid set up a decade ago to counter the emerging jihadist influence is "once again allowing scientists and tourists to come".

'So much to document'

It's day four and, after a cold night, he groans from the pain of an old foot injury as he climbs into the saddle. But, neither the discomfort nor deteriorating regional security will stop him. This desert is "the place where I feel the best, where you can't go wrong", he says. When he reaches Qualata near the Mali border after what will have been a two-week journey, Tillet plans to relax and

drink tea with an old acquaintance.

Even if he didn't find the elusive caravan depot this time, he's happy with the information gleaned. Previously the projects were funded by his former employer, the CNRS, but since retiring in 2012, he pays the several thousand euros needed for the trip himself. Monod got off his camel for the last time aged 93 and Tillet, a member of the French Society of Explorers, hopes to go on for a long while yet. "There's still so much to document," he says. For next year he is planning his longest route so far, at more than 1,000 km, back in the Sahara, with its many silences but, as he says, "where it's never boring".—AFP



Thierry Tillet is seen with his camel caravan in the desert between Tichitt and Aratane in South Eastern Mauritania.