



## MAURITANIA'S FORMER DESERT JEWEL, forgotten and fading

A few centuries ago, Tichitt was a citadel of trade where Saharan merchants bearing gold, salt and cloth would stop to water their camels and haggle. Today, red-and-white signs in the sand dunes point to where this once great hub of commerce and centre of Islamic culture lies. But visitors to Tichitt, a UNESCO world heritage site, are few now, and the great outpost in arid central southern Mauritania is all but forgotten. "Sometimes a month will go by without a car coming," Cherif Mokhtar Mbaka, an English teacher in the town, says sadly.

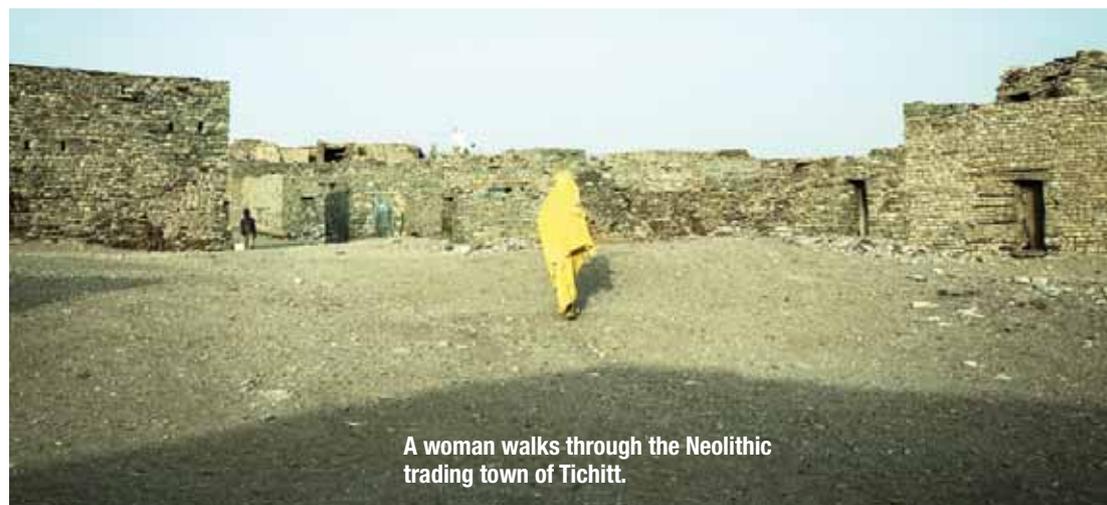
Grey-stone buildings dating from its golden age have survived but little else in the town of 2,470 residents, according to a 2016 census, points to its rich heritage. The trans-Saharan caravan route that flourished between the 11th and 19th cen-

turies brought a steady stream of traders to Tichitt, en route to Timbuktu and settlements in the Niger river basin. "The decline began when the trade began to prefer sea routes rather than land routes," Mbaka says. "Now it's over, and people are facing many problems." Today, the traders who come arrive on a monthly supply truck, bringing rice and pasta to the local shops—and leave again, with salt mined from a nearby saline plain, or sebkha.

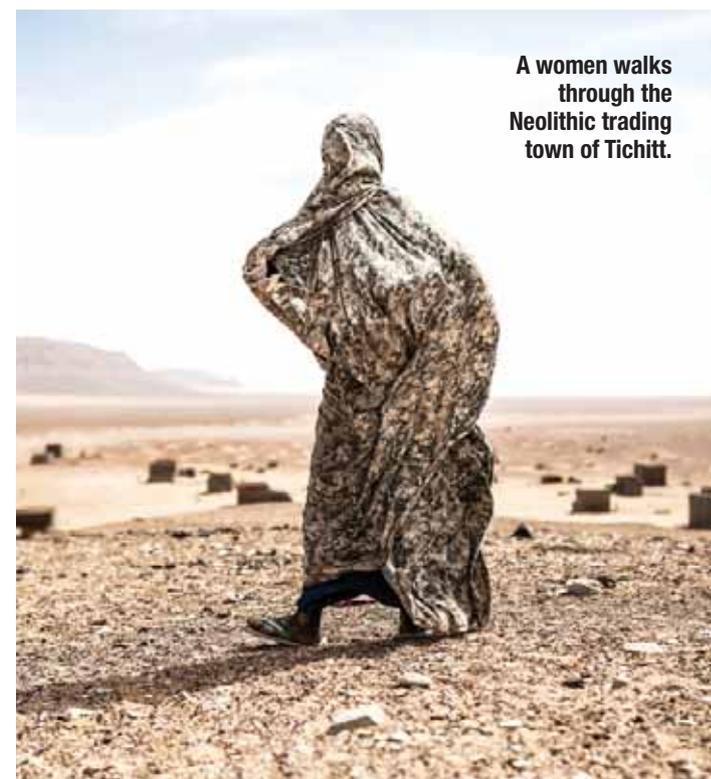
### Racing memories

Tichitt has lost another economic lifeline, too, in its more recent past. The renowned Paris-Dakar Rally used to pass through, bringing a caravan of race car drivers, journalists and tourists. "The old airstrip laid down by the French in the colonial era

was redeveloped for the rally," said local dignitary Mohamed Teya, recalling how dozens of planes used to touch down during the event. But, in 2009, organisers relocated the off-road race to South America due to security threats in the Sahara and the runway has since disappeared. Likewise, Tichitt's reputation as a jewel of Islamic culture has faded.



A woman walks through the Neolithic trading town of Tichitt.



A woman walks through the Neolithic trading town of Tichitt.