

# Launching a sojourn to uncover Africa's past — but first a wait in Agadez

By Paul Sereno

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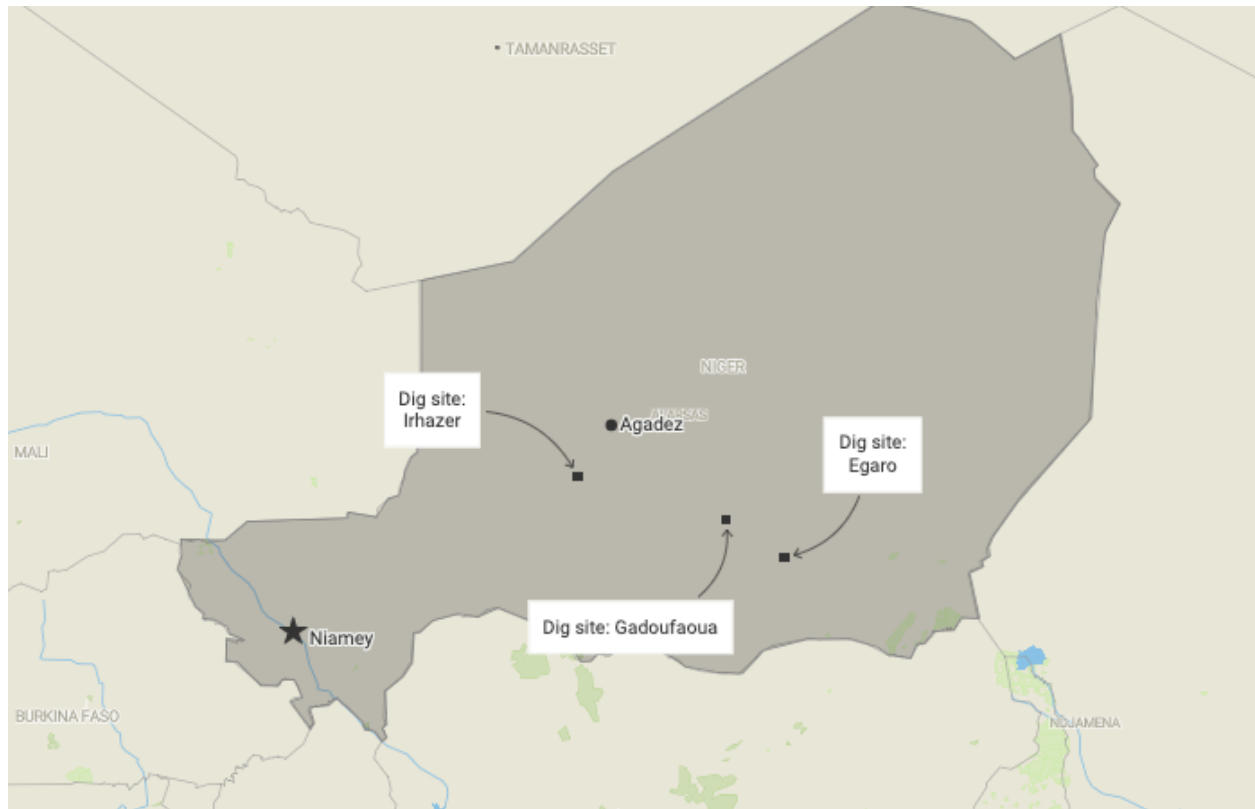
Team members Filippo Bertozzo, Álvaro Simarro, Francisco Gasco, Robert Laroche, Erin Fitzgerald, Stephanie Baumgart and Ana Lázaro work on bones of an Ouranosaurus dinosaur while Paul Sereno meets with Boube Adamou, Mawli Dayak and others at the Musée National Boubou Hama in Niamey. (Dan Vidal)

AGADEZ, NIGER — Before COVID-19 shut down travel, I led expeditions that discovered some 25 tons of rare fossils scattered across the Sahara Desert, in remote areas of the West African country of Niger. They were awe-inspiring finds, including never-seen dinosaur species and human graves from a Saharan culture that thrived thousands of years before the pyramids. I reburied it all for another day, when I could return with a team capable of collecting it all.

But the pandemic intervened, and a year and then two and then three passed. One memorable day a few months back, the ultimate expedition I had so long envisioned became reality with an email from an anonymous donor who would fund it. We made plans to return late this summer.

I assembled a paleo team composed mostly of students and freshly minted professors exuding the grit and wit needed to handle the great challenges ahead, both mental and physical. These are souls ready to drop everything for the opportunity to venture into the wilds of the Sahara and wander Africa's deep past. Although a few were in my Fossil Lab at the University of Chicago, most came from elsewhere — Canada, Belgium, Germany, France and Spain. I also needed a geo specialist, someone who could date the rock that entombed the dinosaur specimens. In all, some 20 participants joined part or all of the venture. Completing the team are Nigerien students and Saharan guides, key to any sojourn in the desert. I knew most team members only digitally from team Zoom calls, meeting them face-to-face for the first time at the gate in Paris' airport for the flight to Niger.

Be clear, this is no ordinary fossil field trip. I am writing this from the oasis of Agadez, our base, which we will leave for a month at a time under armed guard, camping in the open with temperatures reaching 120 degrees Fahrenheit or more in the afternoon. Water is for drinking, cooking and essential hygiene; no showers. We packed generators and every battery-powered gadget that would help us find, dig, relocate and survive. A flatbed of essential gear left the Fossil Lab in the weeks before the expedition and was airfreighted to Niger, then trucked 650 miles to Agadez.



We spent our first week in Niger's capital, Niamey, focusing on the Paleontology Hall at the national museum, the Musée National Boubou Hama. The museum highlight is Niger's first named dinosaur, the famed sail-backed plant-eater *Ouranosaurus* ("brave lizard"). Collected in 1966 by French paleontologist Philippe Taquet, it was installed in a sand pit as the centerpiece of the now aging hall. They attempted to protect the dinosaur from a leaky roof with a cover of heavy plate glass, which sealed the dinosaur in but allowed mold to grow. When the glass was removed, bones were broken. So our job was to identify, log, repair and pack up the bones of this rare and significant dinosaur, using stereophotogrammetry to capture 3D digital images of the bones.

A few years back, I launched an international foundation, NigerHeritage, that will chaperone the return of the immense amount of Niger's patrimony, both dinosaur and human, that I have had the fortune to discover and develop over several decades in Chicago. The culmination will be the creation of world-class museums envisioned for Niamey and Agadez, where *Ouranosaurus* will join many others on display.

Many challenges await anyone trying to launch a three-month expedition into the desert with an international team in aging Land Rovers. Permissions are required from several ministries for the right to recover fossils and from regional authorities, for security and for use of the vehicles. Being an adept project ambassador is a requirement — in French, the lingua franca of this nation of many African languages.

Nerves of steel are also requisite. In the desert, only national paper money works — no cards, no banks, not even dollars can buy all of the necessities of the expedition or come to the rescue in an emergency. Physical transport of cash is the only sure means, with astute conversion to local currency in Niamey, which quintuples the volume of cash to haul around.

Suffice it to say that no one at the downtown Chicago bank we used had ever witnessed a cash withdrawal as large as the one I had to make in preparation for this expedition. It generated incredulous looks from the official at O'Hare who asked why I was transporting a heavy sack of cash. Well, of course, it's for a dinosaur expedition, I explained.

In the Sahara, if you want security, you bring it with you. Heavier security than usual is needed to avoid any incident involving armed bandits who roam the open desert. This is not just for the safety of my team, but also for the continued well-being of our museum effort and the recovery of tourism in Niger's north. After much discussion, an armed escort of dozens of guards was arranged.

Now we are completely packed for the venture. A row of overloaded vehicles is parked beside a desert-worthy transport truck stacked as high as it is long. It's an immense amount of material for the expedition — plaster for field jackets, tents, cots, food, med kits, generators, tools — everything you could possibly need, as well as many 55-gallon drums of fuel and thousands of gallons of water.

But we are waiting, for several days now, for final approval from Niamey to assemble the guard. To this team of young fossil hunters, each day of waiting feels like an eternity.

**DISPATCHES FROM THE SAHARA DESERT:** *The Tribune* is following the progress of University of Chicago professor Paul Sereno and his team over several months on an expedition in Niger in Africa. They are uncovering the traces of a human civilization that lived some 10,000 years ago in what is now the Sahara Desert. For more information, also see [Africa's Lost World](#) and [NigerHeritage](#).