

Bakhaarka Tableland

Deserts dominate the southwestern coastal regions of the northern “horn” of Malajuri, shading to jungle terrain only further inland. Much of this area is known as Ram’ Tu. Northwest of the settlements in this area, in what is now a trackless waste, is a great plateau, at the heart of which is a large freshwater lake, some 3.5 miles southwest-northeast by 1.5 miles southeast-northwest at its widest (6 by 2.5 kilometres), the centre of the **Bakhaarka Oasis**. The Oasis lies in a great, cliff-ringed, oval hollow, whose lower parts by the lake are filled with palm-tree forests, flowers and other vegetation, some birds, insects and other small creatures. Once the legendary **Bakhaarka City** stood there too, and a few smaller settlements by the lake, all now crumbled to dust, as this has become a shunned and haunted place, around which tales of ghosts, ghûls and worse cluster. Only a few foolhardy treasure seekers have ventured near in recent decades, and fewer still of those have returned, only rarely bearing more than a handful of scraps of treasure, along with tales of weird mirages, solitary ghostly figures that stalk the dune-fields, unnatural half-human raptors hovering far overhead, giant serpent or dragon trails in the sand, and a huge, sphinx-like creature seen striding along far-off. Stories persist of great riches lost in the city’s ruin, however, that continue to bring occasional adventurers to dare the deadly desert, and chance their doom.

Set at around 33 degrees South latitude, the cliffs of the **Great Escarpment** ring the western, southern and eastern sides of the Tableland, reaching up to 200 feet in height in some parts (60 metres). The cliffs are generally lower further north, and the northern edge is undefinable, as it angles gradually down into the sands there. Three breaks in the cliffs, one each on the western, eastern and southern sides of the Escarpment, form easier valleys up to the plateau top. Old tales suggest they once formed routes to the central oasis and the city there. No trace of any such roads can be made out now. The Tableland is roughly 30 miles east-west by 20 miles north-south (50 by 30 km).

Although the Escarpment cliffs are ancient, and quite natural, some features of the desert on and around the plateau seem much less natural, and while probably ancient too, seem somehow less ancient than the cliffs. These are the gigantic, stone, claw-like forms that appear to have erupted from the desert sand, as if some vast demon were trying to drag the entire landscape down into the dust. They are known locally as Zaziq Pillars. They resemble curving, rib-like fossils, and while made of stone, they are far harder and more resistant than any other of the local rock outcrops across the desert, including the Tableland’s cliffs. While they are very obvious landmarks, often reaching 200 to 300 ft in height (60 to 90 m), their similarity to one another makes them dangerous to rely on as travel guides. Some are rumoured to have strange powers, and perhaps to move at times when no one is watching them, or so the tales suggest. Luckily, none lie very near the civilised parts of this region, and locals sighting one of the claws by accident in the far distance will make suitable protective signs to ward-off their supposed evil powers. Quite how these may relate to a couple of curious, large craters southwest of the Tableland, and another on one of the small offshore isles near the mouth of the Bay of Jaffra, is unknown. That isle, and one more that lies west-southwest of Bakhaarka, which has a trio of Zaziq Pillars on it, tend to be shunned by sailors, just in case. Plus of course, the desert has more typical dangers as well - heat, sand, no water, sandstorms, ordinary snakes, jackals, desert lions and wolves, vultures, scorpions and the like.

Items found on the map were drawn from, adapted and suggested by a variety of sources, including random tables in the Shadowdark RPG rules (by The Arcane Library), the *Dread Laironomicon* and *Dread Thingonomicon* from Raging Swan Press, the revised edition of the *Tome of Adventure Design* and the *Nomicon* from Mythmere Games.

Labelled Places

Aktim-Buqtu (Ruins): A network of low stone wall remains are scattered across the open desert here, poking through the drifted sand and a few low, small dunes, just east of the edge of the denser dune-fields of the map’s northwest corner, a short way north of the Bakhaarka Oasis. The area involved could easily have accommodated a town-sized settlement at one time, and perhaps the Justice Statue that lies in the dunes a little southwest of this site originated here.

Bakhaarka City (Ruins): An extensive series of overgrown and sand-choked ruins by the southeastern side of the lake in the Bakhaarka Oasis, this is detailed further by the separate Bakhaarka Oasis Atlas map.

Blacksand Hollow: Less than a mile northeast of the northeasternmost Zaziq Pillar on the map is a depression in the desert, completely surrounded by crescent dunes. The sand of the Hollow seems black, but close inspection shows it is not really sand, but is almost all the crushed shells of innumerable scarab exoskeletons. The area covered by the “black sand” is around a mile in diameter (1.5 km).

Boulder Field: On, and extending a little way off, the western map edge, this is an area scattered with huge boulders that have apparently fallen from one of the higher parts of the western Escarpment cliffs nearby. The rock is the same, certainly, although some of the boulders have clearly rolled a long way. The drifting sand dunes have hidden any such rolling tracks long ago.

Devil Dunes: North of the line of The Three Camel Zaziq Pillars on the Tableland, northwest of the Bakhaarka Oasis, and towards the southern edge of the denser dune-fields in the map's northwest, the wind seems to swirl perpetually over the sands, bringing dust devils skipping across the dunes here regularly.

Dibruh Arch: A little less than a mile (1.5 km) north of the Ghost Oasis, at the northwestern end of the Great Escarpment, a pair of ancient stone pillars jut at angles from the sands resting against one another near their tops, forming a triangular archway. The opening is aligned directly north-south, so seems to point right at the Ghost Oasis. Although the shifting sands mean the surface level changes at times, in general, the pillar tops are about 16 ft above that surface (5 m), and the Arch can be seen from the Ghost Oasis. Although wind and sand scoured now, the pillars were once finely carved with vertical fluting. Both their tops have broken off and are nowhere to be seen nearby, and their bases are solidly buried deep in the sand.

Dragon Crown: Among the eastern tract of the denser dune-fields in the north of the map, the gleam of this lost treasure may be glimpsed on, or sometimes half-buried in, one of the dunes. It is a golden crown in the form of a circlet with a dragon's head at the front, wrapping around the circlet's band as its wings. It is astonishingly well-made and beautifully intact despite its location, and the likelihood it has lain out in the desert for many generations. It still retains all its perfect ivory-chip teeth and sapphire eyes.

Dune Valley: South of the Bakhaarka Oasis in the central Tableland, with one of the Zaziq Pillars located like a marker near its southwestern end, a pair of unusually high, long seif dunes form a deep, shady valley trending southwest-northeast, ending a little way from the valley mouth through the cliffs surrounding the Oasis on its southern side. The dunes run more or less parallel to one another for nearly 3 miles (5 km), and most curiously, their trending direction is quite across the usual northwest-southeast line that virtually all the other dunes in the map prefer. Where the shadows are deepest in mid-valley is a hollow near the western dune's base, with a scatter of humanoid bones among the sand. If disturbed, these form-up into four web-covered Sandy Skeletons and will attack. Sandy Skeletons are like the typical undead animated creatures of RPGs, but whose bones are covered with a magical armouring of rough desert sand. This makes them much more robust and a lot harder to damage than normal ones. They are armed with scimitars, spears and bows, and their magical spiderweb covering enables them to reform even if completely destroyed or magically de-animated, after a short pause. Part of the Dune Valley is shown in more detail on the separate Atlas map for the Bakhaarka Oasis.

Ghost Oasis: Where the line of the Great Escarpment cliffs sinks into the sand on the northwestern edge of the Tableland, rare tales tell of what seems to be a little, palm-ringed oasis, with tents, camels, a small group of Human merchants and caravan guards encamped by it. Anyone investigating may struggle to tell if this is an illusion, a vision of ghosts, or some strange, planar projection, as nothing here can be touched or interacted with, nor can the vision, if it is, be dispelled. The Dibruh Arch, which seems aligned directly towards this location, is barely a mile to the north (1.5 km), and can be seen from this site.

Ghûl Tombs: Two groups of these unusual Tombs are shown on the map, one in the lower left corner, northwest of Hamaari Crater, the other southeast of the Oasis, set roughly midway between three surrounding Zaziq Pillars on the Tableland. Each group has between ten and twenty Tombs. Tales say that they cannot be counted, and also that one should not try to do so. Anyone ignoring this prohibition will end up confused during the task without ever accomplishing it, and unless guided by someone else not involved in the counting, may simply wander off into the desert and die there. An individual Tomb stands like a tall, rounded-top menhir, each fairly near one another in a random pattern. All are roughly 15 ft tall (4.5 m) and about 8 ft in diameter (2.4 m) at the base, tapering slightly towards their tops. They are hollow inside, with a single, round-topped opening at their base, which is typically around 4 ft high at most (1.2 m). Their surfaces are roughened and worn by the desert wind, and they are made from clay, baked over long ages to a concrete-like hardness by the sun. Stories about them often describe them as like great hooded spectres, and they do indeed have such a likeness and an eeriness about them, whether from a distance or closer-to. Set up in the ancient past as tombs for the dead, some still have bones, cremation urns, or canopic jars inside them, the ceramics sometimes finely and colourfully decorated with abstract and linear designs, with an occasional minor object made from precious metals and gems. Ghûls lurk in some, ready to pounce on unwary visitors, clinging effortlessly to the higher interior or exterior of the Tombs. Ghûls look like skeletally-desiccated, mummified humanoids, whose dry skins are hard as, and the colour of, mahogany, with a roughened, sand-like surface. They are demonic eaters of the dead, not averse to killing the living first. They have other powers much like

the more traditional RPG Ghouls, including a paralysis ability to affect the living by scratchy skin contact. While demons, they are classed as undead, albeit ones that will only react to local religious customs and symbols, the more ancient the better. The Tombs in the normal desert have only these creatures. Those on the Tableland though have a couple of special features. One of the Ghûls there still wears some tattered finery, and stalks in a regal manner, wearing several golden chains and necklaces, and just one of these Tombs contains any bones, a pile of long, unusually thin ones. If disturbed, these assemble into a Bone Naga. The Tableland Tombs are shown in more detail on the separate Atlas map for the Bakhaarka Oasis.

Halak-Sha's Lair: The lair of the Lamia who controls much of what happens across this mapped Tableland zone, is in an ancient rock tomb in the cliffs surrounding the Bakhaarka Oasis, on its northeastern side. It is detailed by the Halak-Sha's Lair Atlas map. Its location is refined on the separate Bakhaarka Oasis Atlas map.

Hamaari Crater: Not far southwest of the southwestern Great Escarpment is this huge, rocky crater, surrounded by dunes that often have a rocky core. It is a most distinctive landmark. Its form suggests something gigantic erupted or broke free from beneath many ages before, as its steep, thin, ragged, rock edges - rather like an incredibly massive bubble or eggshell - ring a central, sand-filled plain almost three miles across (5 km).

Haunted Sands: Near the mouth of the western valley leading up through the Great Escarpment cliffs to the Tableland is an area where ghosts lurk, taking the form of groups of dust-devils as if at the beginning of a sandstorm. With their ability to whip the sands to stinging fury, and call with reedy, wind-like distant voices, they can readily scare animals and wanderers alike when passing through here. The ghosts are attracted to the living whether by day or night.

Jackal Den: Several shallow caves in the southern base of one of the Zaziq Pillars in the Tableland's southwest are the den of a pack of Jackals, when not out foraging. The site is roughly 4 miles (6.5 km) northeast from the Jackalfolk Caves at the foot of the Great Escarpment.

Jackalfolk Caves: A small tribe of humanoid beastfolk of jackal form live in a village-sized collection of small, natural caves in the foot of the Great Escarpment on its southwestern side. They roam the desert over long distances, seeking carrion and sometimes attacking small groups of weary travellers. Some may inflict a form of lycanthropy on bitten victims which turns the unlucky ones into Werejackals.

Jhikuf Trees: Among the palm forests of the fertile hollow surrounding the Bakhaarka Oasis in the map's centre, on the lake's northwestern side, is an extensive area where many of these once-sacred fruit trees still predominate. The Jhikuf bears orange-sized, dark blue fruits regularly all year, which have mild healing properties when fresh. This power fades about half a day after picking, although the fruit remains tasty and nutritious for up to a week, even in desert conditions. They can also be dried and still retain this edibility (only) for some months. The area occupied by the Jhikuf Trees is better-defined on the separate Atlas map covering the Bakhaarka Oasis.

Justice Statue: A little way northwest of the clustered trio of Zaziq Pillars immediately north of the Bakhaarka Oasis, known as The Three Pylons, a tall, faceless, female statue lies half-buried in the sand. She holds a set of weighing scales in one hand, and an unsheathed scimitar in the other. The ruined settlement of Aktim-Buqtu lies little more than 1.25 miles (2 km) away to the northeast, beyond a line of dunes.

Khazifa's Tomb: In the base of the highest Great Escarpment southern cliffs, this is the westernmost of a large collection of rock-cut and natural cave Tombs. It has an elaborately-carved stone frontage, with ancient pictographic inscriptions telling Khazifa's name and some of her lifetime's achievements as Bakhaarka's ruling Queen in long-past times. Within lurks the undead Mummy of Khazifa. She wears a long, sable dress that shimmers like a starry night sky, and a gem-studded golden mask. If her Tomb is disturbed, she strides about seductively, and need not necessarily simply attack in a conventional fashion. Her Tomb chambers are richly-appointed with treasures, and decorated with many wall paintings and carvings that remain in quite good condition. Magically powerful, if destroyed and her Tomb robbed, she will reform here after a short time, and then pursue the thieves, restoring everything and destroying those who took her possessions, regardless of how long that may require. She always knows where her treasures are situated, no matter the distance.

Lost Traps: One of the hollow valleys in the denser dune-fields of the map's northwest, close to the northern map border, are some lost, long forgotten, bone-barbed old nets buried in the sand, easily sprung when an unwary foot steps on its trigger, despite their age. The nets are surprisingly tough, and can easily encompass a couple of typical adult Humans, doing some minor damage to unprotected skin in the process.

Owl Rocks: A couple of miles (3 km) northeast from the ruins of Shirrag Village and its Zaziq Pillar, two large rock outcrops stand out from the sand of the southeastern Tableland, mostly free from the dunes. The Rocks have been relief-carved at some earlier epoch with Human-sized owls, all shown standing, wings folded, facing forwards, and despite their age and the wind-scouring apparent on them, some still retain traces of red, black and white paint across their scale-like feather patterns especially.

Rainbow Rocks: In one of the more exposed areas of flatter desert on the central-eastern Tableland east of the Bakhaarka Oasis, the wind often scours away the sand, leaving great sheets of the underlying rock visible. In this vicinity, the Rocks show striated patterns with various striking colours in variable-width lines next to one another. These are quite natural parts of the rock formations, and make a useful landmark, until the sands drift across them again. The Rainbow Rocks are also attractive to the local pony-sized iguanas that like to bask on them to warm-up. They live in low caves and hollows they clear of sand beneath the rock sheets.

Sand-Choked Tombs: The easternmost of the rock-cut and natural cave Tombs that run along the face of the Great Escarpment west from here to Khazifa's Tomb, run up the broad, ramp-like valley that cuts through the Escarpment cliffs on its southeastern side, linking the lower desert plains with the upper Tableland's plateau. While some of the lower Tombs are partly filled with sand, or occasionally concealed behind drifted dunes against the cliffs, nearly all those on the ramp are hidden by drifted sand, with often only a few higher carved-cliff indications of where such Tomb entrances may lie. Some contain undead mummies, others ordinary ones, and some contain their original treasures. Those that are occupied commonly have sealed entrances. The emptier ones are usually sand-choked inside. A couple of the "empty" Tombs hold caches of water flasks and dried food supplies, likely stored by prospective tomb-robbers who never returned for them, for whatever reason. The water has long since evaporated, but some of the dried foods may yet remain safely edible.

Sandstorms: While sandstorms are apt to occur anywhere in the desert, the top of the southeastern ramp-valley up and through the Great Escarpment is particularly prone to fell winds from the northwest, even when calms prevail only a short distance away. These create frequent minor sandstorms at the top and down the ramp, which may explain why the Tombs on the northwestern side are perpetually Sand-Choked.

Sandy Pool: On the desert floor in the southeast map corner is this long-dried-out hollow that once contained a small lake. It is defined still by a ring of brown along its former shoreline, composed entirely of scarab shells.

Sapphire Claw: On the eastern Tableland north of the eastern valley through the Great Escarpment is this easternmost Zaziq Pillar on the plateau. Along its southern base is a scatter of many, glinting, old, metallic-blue, desert dragon scales and skin husks, shed and scraped-off here in times long gone. The sunlight reflects brightly off these at times, for all the dragon has long-since departed. They tend to shed the ubiquitous sand when it drifts over them, always staying on the surface, and oddly not being blown away from this Pillar, no matter how strongly the wind may gust.

Scarab Door: Around two miles (3 km) northeast from the Dibruh Arch in the map's northwest, hidden away in the denser dune-fields of the area, one otherwise unremarkable dune's southeast short face, has a wooden doorway set into its base, flanked by a pair of Human-waist-high piles of scarab shells, that to the left when facing the doorway all blue, that to the right all green. The Door cannot be opened, nor can the dune be excavated to try to access what may lie behind it. Sand simply fills in during any attempt.

Shirrag Village (Ruins): By the western base of the Zaziq Pillar near the top of the ramp-valley up through the southeastern Great Escarpment, are the stony remains of a village-sized settlement. Low building-shell walls are arranged alongside a dried river bed that trends southwest from here towards the ramp through the cliffs. The river channel emerges from a sand-choked cave in the southwestern foot of the Pillar rock. Scorpions and snakes are the only living inhabitants here now, and digging in the sand is liable to attract them. Buried deep in the sand drifts and dunes are many humanoid skeletons. Small, stunted, sickly thornbushes grow by the wadi and the village ruins, many of which are dead, although they still form useful cover for more snakes and scorpions.

Sinking Sands: In the map's top left corner, and extending a little way off it to the west, is an extensive area of flat, sandy, dune-less desert, northwest of the Tableland. Its boundaries are ill-defined, which makes it especially dangerous to travellers, as there are quicksand sinks here that will suck down and quickly kill careless wanderers. Unfortunately, its appearance is not dissimilar to the many other flat, dune-free areas of the desert found across much of this map, although the perceptive may realise the Sinking Sands are only near the western edge of some of the more dense dune-fields in the map's northwest quarter, extending east to the northern side of the Oasis particularly.

The Three Camels: A trio of Zaziq Pillars on the Tableland, along a loosely southwest-northeast alignment west and northwest of the Bakhaarka Oasis, have one curious feature in common. Each has the desiccated corpse of a camel at its foot, tied securely to some part of the Pillar's base by its reins. The two northernmost are shown, with more detail, on the separate Bakhaarka Oasis Atlas map.

Tombs: A large collection of rock-cut and natural cave Tombs are set into the cliff base along an approximately 4.5 mile (7.5 km) stretch of the higher southeastern Great Escarpment, from Khazifa's Tomb at the west end to the Sand-Choked Tombs of the upper northwestern side of the great ramp-like valley that rises up through a gap in the Escarpment's cliffs further east. Many are empty, some not, although a lot are at least half-filled with sand, drifted in through their open doorways over the ages, and a few are completely lost behind dunes piled at the Escarpment's foot. Occasional natural or undead creatures may be encountered within some of those that remain more accessible.

Vulture Crag: Part of the southeast-facing cliffs of the Great Escarpment on the northern edge of the eastern valley sloping up to the Tableland through the Escarpment, is carved with huge relief figures of ancient deities and heroes, all now damaged and wind-scoured by the ages. There are also early pictographic inscriptions, mostly again too wind- and age-blurred to be read. On the surviving ledge-like segments of the carvings, natural uncarved ledges and along the clifftops, are favoured resting, roosting and nesting spots for many vultures, when they are not out riding the desert thermals looking-out for suitable carrion.

Yeziw Wolves: A hollow surrounded by a series of crescent dunes near the east side of the denser dune-fields of the map's northwest, is the lair of around a dozen tawny desert Wolves, who range widely in the area north of the Bakhaarka Oasis.

Zilug Claw: This Zaziq Pillar, on the higher southern Tableland, well south of Bakhaarka Oasis, is more of a useful landmark than most of the others in this region, as the entire feature has an unusual, very obvious, spiral form from its base to its tip, although it is composed of the same rugged rock as the others.