

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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DESERT HEAT

By Charles Fitzhugh Talman
Authority on Meteorology

Meteorologists attached to the invading Italian army will perhaps be able to tell us before the present war is over just how hot the weather really gets in the Danakil desert region of northeastern Ethiopia, where a recent traveler claimed to have measured air temperatures as high as 170. Such readings are incredible if the thermometer was exposed, as is customary in weather observations, at a height of at least a few feet above the ground. On the other hand, the surface of the ground itself has been known to get as hot as that in African deserts and nearly as high a temperature may occasionally prevail in the air a few inches above it.

In his book on the Sahara, an English translation of which has just appeared, Prof. E. F. Gautier writes of that desert:

"At the surface of the dunes the mobile grains of sand touch only in limited portions of their periphery; air is imprisoned between them, forming an insulation against the heat. The heating thus remains localized at the surface, which becomes scorching hot. In the battle of Metarfa, which was fought in the dunes, the native foot soldiers, incapable of holding a prone position for firing, remained standing in spite of orders and all were killed." The surface loses heat very rapidly as soon as the sun sets, and even summer nights on the dunes are delightfully cool.

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