

MUSCULAR DYSTROPHY CAMPAIGN SAHARA TREK – NOVEMBER 2007



Day 1

There had been so much to do. Like any trip away from home all the last minute tasks had to be done. Animals to sort, fridge to empty and of course packing – not just for myself but for Laura too, who was off to Mum & Dad's with Peugeot her hamster and Bracken. Skiboat the cat was house-sitting here.

My great friend Nick had offered to house my car and drive us to the airport so we were delivered in style to the door of terminal 2. It didn't take more than a glance to spot the assembling group of trekkers in their bright orange Muscular Dystrophy Campaign T-shirts. I have to say, and those of you who know me will laugh, I had oops, accidentally forgotten to bring my oversized, baggy, droopy, bright orange T-shirt!

It is strange looking back, the group all slightly nervously standing about. They were just faces then, no more. Now each one of those faces is a friend and the faces have become personalities. My major anxiety had been concerning my fellow trekkers and whether I would find any camaraderie amongst the group. I met Bharti and Jean straight away before check-in and arranged to have coffee when all the security stuff was dealt with.

Jean, Bharti and I found a quiet place to wait and got to know each other a little, telling of our reasons to be on the Trek and where we came from and all that stuff. I began to realise that I had some really good companions with me and that I was in very good company.

On arrival at Ouzarzate we were met by our head Guide from Across the Divide, Vinney and also our two Berber local Guides, Abdul and Hussan, who had all the local knowledge we would need.

We finally arrived at the hotel at about 1.40 am. We had the first of many Trek Briefings being told to be up and ready by 6.45 am! So not much sleep was to be had then!

The hotel had a faded but comfortable feel. Big rooms with balconies mostly surrounding the huge palm surrounded pool. I decided to get up in time for a swim – on the basis that two days into the desert I would be desperate for a dip, so should take the opportunity while presented!

Day 2

By 7.45 am we were all heading off in 2 mini buses out towards nowhere. We began to feel very adventurous and excited about the week ahead. Another hour and in the middle of nowhere ahead was the oldest battered truck you have ever seen. We were not unreasonably amazed to be informed that this was the

transport for the next couple of hours. What was more – there was no road to be seen anywhere!

Luckily I gained a place – standing-room only of course - at the front of the truck behind the cab. Yes it was very dusty, but more stable and a great view.

We were an odd convoy! Ethan was in his smart 4x4 transport - as a wheelchair bound MD sufferer he was approaching the trek from a different angle to most of us. A bashed up white van with no glass in the windows, a flatback truck and this ridiculous old lorry laden with us!

We lurched across sand tracks often getting stuck for some while. We passed small towns which had no apparent access; children came from nowhere to watch this strange convoy heading for the Sahara edge. At one point, we were stuck in sand for about an hour – hot sun, gorgeous carbon emitted fumes and warm water all to hand. But we were starting to get on well and the group was gelling well. Stories of why we were attempting this trek were emerging and lots and lots of banter and jokes bounced about the truck. I was starting to have fun.

The camp was fantastic. Beyond my wildest hopes. Jean and I joined 5 others in one of the Berber marquees. We found nice thin mattresses on rugs which were on matting. So comfy. We stayed with the same people all week so my group, to whom I am still devoutly attached, were:

Colin, Jean, Mark & Nikki, Nuala and Dario + Me!

Five or six tents set up around a large camp fire with rugs on the ground around it. A couple of tables to serve our food made the central camp. Outside this area behind the tents, were the 'amenity blocks'. Well, six little toilet tents with either a long drop loo or a simple bowl to wash from. A water butt stood between these tents – help yourself cleanliness. Perfect. I showered every night and never felt dirty. What more do you want?

I am so lucky to have ended up tenting with these guys – apart from Marks sweet little snorey noises, no one made a sound of any description at all, except for all the hoots of laughter and talking that went on. Other tents, by contrast were full of snorers – that would be very loud snorers!

Day 3 14miles

We impressed the Guides by being awake well ahead of the 6.30 wake up call! Breakfast was served to us by the Berber ground staff. We had, and each morning too, freshly squeezed orange juice – impressive.

Breakfast was also the famous bread, rotti, little cakes butter jams. Sometimes pancakes too. Delicious. The sun came up each day as we had breakfast so it was a special daily feast.

We set off out of camp as one big group at 8.00 am sharp (ish). There was a feeling of uncertainty amongst the group, not least because some of us were clearly going to be faster walkers and aimed to walk hard and get ahead out of the sun each day and into lunch or night camp. One or two trekkers were very obviously going to hold the faster group back considerably.

We walked away from camp and headed up onto a ridge with amazing views either side, back down across the plateau with the camp looking minute below and away across a family house with a few small dunes to a long plateau with distant mountains.

We dropped down and had a wonderful visit to the family house below, where we were made tea and shown into the living room of the home complex. It seemed that 6 or 7 people lived here with some small children. There were 4 buildings around a central cool courtyard all made of a daub type construction. They had a well and away from the house was a lush area where they grew crops, corn, henna, carrot we noticed. This family though very rural were not poor, just living a simple dessert life.

I love to meet local people when I am travelling; it really brings the journey to life. I love to go into houses, drink tea and try and communicate. I am always happy to take off my shoes and sit awhile. But most of the group were not at all comfortable with this, and hung about outside.

We stopped for lunch at a small farm. Well – a tiny house in the middle of a plateau with some animal shelters and a few scattered trees. But it was the shade that we were borrowing and the ground staff had arrived ahead and prepared lunch. All laid out ready. We had a delicious vegetable and egg dish with of course, famous bread. Oranges for after and a chance to replenish our water supply. I had drunk over 2 litres of my 3 during the morning.

We began to find our kindred spirits and our sense of humour! Jean and I hit it off so well; I have found a sole-mate. We giggled and laughed for 5 days solidly only stopping long enough to sleep. Such fun and to our amazement, no one found our hilarity annoying and said we were uplifting. I said we were with a very good group – kind and tolerant too!!!! Everything was funny. Other people joined in too and the trek was turning into one big smile opportunity.

We were strictly not allowed to divert off the route without a guide. We were not allowed to walk in front of the Berber Guide either. Sometimes, one of us did, inadvertently. Especially if the guide had been asked to slow down. We would get mildly told off. Which we then termed – being put on the naughty step. The two British guides Vinney and Paul, who were in charge of our general safety and lead the trek, were named – The Grown-Ups. We could not go anywhere without a 'Grown up'.

I found it hilarious to ask permission to wander sideways to hide behind a tiny skinny tree to go to the loo. Which involved a nappy sack, loo roll, anti bacterial handwash lotion. And of course, locating this kit, taking off a day pack, let alone walking off to the distant tiny skinny tree! Having, of course asked permission from the 'Grown-Up'. Indeed one could become quite proud of these achievements too.

With only the group, the dessert and the trek on our minds, without mobile phones, commitments, cars, family – one becomes very focused on just the immediate. Although conversation was wide and broad, the group as a whole were supporting each other to enable us to manage this huge walk. So the minutiae which surround our normal lives become very focal in this environment.

Apart from 'bottom' talk, much time was spent foot pampering. It hadn't occurred to me to take foot powder with me. But every morning, lunch and evening someone lent me some so I was able to join this wonderful pass time. I used to muse at 5.30 pm, that all I was doing was tending to my feet. Normally I would be, like lots of us, in the car, cooking a meal, fetching carrying, as we do. But not this week – I sat on my mattress for as long as I liked and pampered my feet. Bliss. Specially, since my feet faired very well and I really had no problems.

We passed close to a camel herd with distant nomads tents. It seems that the camels stay within a couple of kilometres of their owners camps. The nomads have a nine month tour from north to south, in the west of Morocco. When they get to the most southerly point, they turn back for another nine months.

The camp came into view as tiny white dots and gradually over a couple of hours got larger and larger until we were back in our tents, all the same as the night before except another location. Long drops had been dug, a fire prepared, hot tea ready and gentle smells of food from the catering tent. Home. We had walked all day with little breaks. 8-5 not bad. I felt great, ready to wash, but great. This was serious fun.

Each evening at 6.30pm there was a briefing about the next day and covering any matters arising. We were told a little of what to expect the following day, the route, lunch arrangements and reminded: Not to be late getting ready, have lots of water, don't go out without a 'Grown up', don't walk in front of Berber guide. These were indeed very important reminders as although the desert looks wide open and empty it is imperative to keep a large group of people together and uniform. Still I did laugh a bit. Then, glory of glory – the bar would open! Can you believe? A choice of soft drinks (as if!), beer or red wine. This bar was run on a tab system which we paid at the end of the trek back in Ouzarazate.

Naturally, I particularly was very abstemious. One beer did nicely. Some had more, some had much more. But we had some great evenings round the fire and all relaxed ready for the next day. Dinner was served at about 7.00pm, soup and famous bread to start with, then a stew of sorts with either pasta, couscous or potato. Followed by fruit salad. Not bad. I wasn't ever hungry on the trek. Just starving when I got home.

The Berber ground staff put lanterns around the camp at night fall which looked lovely and lit our way to the loos and our tents. Evening wear was casual, with the exception of the very fetching addition of head torches. Bed by 10.00 small giggle and hopefully sleep. I did sleep pretty well all week. I had been paranoid about not sleeping as I count my hours anyway, but it wasn't too bad. Without all the grind there is at home I was very relaxed and even dosing seemed to be restorative.

Day 4 – 13 miles

Getting used to the potential 6.30am wake up call, we were all up way before, impressing Vinney (head Grown-Up). Another great breakfast of freshly squeezed OJ, pancakes, jam, cakes and ye olde bread. We were given a packed lunch for today, clearly we were going to be walking through an area inaccessible to the back-up team.

The guides had thankfully decided to divide the group into two. We were able to decide which group we wanted to walk in. I had no doubts that I would be well able to be in the faster group. Jean, Colin, Nuala and Dario from my tent joined me with several others. Paul was our designated Grown-Up which was fabulous as he had a great sense of humour and laughed hugely with us while definitely being in charge. We alternated Berber guides.

The walk ahead was to be long and flat but over small sand-dunes. There is no way to know what this means until you get to it. We were to lunch under small trees and then head not too far away to a Pub!!!! Sounded great until reminded

that we were in a Muslim country and Pubs sell Fanta, Coke and Sprite if we were lucky!

We saw several nomad camps with camels and goats strewn over a huge area, grazing. At one point a nomad woman came running over to the group calling in Arabic to Hassan, our guide. It turned out that she recognised him from two years before somewhere else in the dessert!

It is very rare for Nomads to invite people to their tents, but as she had met Hassan before, she wanted us to be her guests. She threw large rugs onto the sand and indicated us to sit. She produced a massive platter of dates – covered in flies – and offered them around. Most of us were able to accept, but some people felt the hygiene risk too great! I don't find these situations hard, in fact I just love to be invited into local homes wherever I am. We were able to take photos and some of us went into her huge tent. It was amazing and quite cool under the heavy woven black tenting. She had all sorts of trunks and cases arranged around the sides and a small stove towards the entrance. It did smell of goat dung and I gather that they have the baby animals in with them at night. I asked her if I could take a photo of her and rather sweetly she re-arranged her head covering to show her face and gave a huge smile. I was then able to show her the picture on the tiny screen of my camera. To her joy! Outside the tent, there was a bread oven – a hole in the ground with a clay-type dome top on it. They light a fire and then put the bread under the clay dome. So simple, so clever. Just great to see successful survival at such a simple level. We came away feeling that this could be a preferable way of life to our own complicated cluttered lives.

It really was a long morning. The latter part of the walk was across low dunes with quite thin sand. It got hotter and hotter and there was absolutely no shade. When we stopped to rest, it was in the midday sun. We could see the 'tree' where we were to have the lunch stop, but it was still tiny. Another hour's walk. Each day, this was the most enduring part. The walk into lunch.

After lunch it was a nice walk as we could see the village ahead on the ridge and we passed their cropping area and sand barriers protecting the village from the winds and sand-storms. They weren't very high, so the sand must swirl at below 4 foot. It was interesting that the cropping areas were so far from the village – at least 3kms.

Ethan and the ground staff together with John were waiting at the café for us. Orders for Fanta were soon placed and we settled down into what I classed as luxury – a plastic chair!

I felt very hot and dirty, the sand and dust stick to your legs in a coating. The others were about 45 minutes behind us, and while we all enjoyed more yummy Fanta, we decided to walk up to the village itself and explore. Most of us went and it was great to see their school, Mosque and homes, a great opportunity. The children were well versed with the occasional tourist group and did their bit while the women, mostly weaving carpets outside the houses, ignored us. They seemed prosperous, if very simple. The children were all well clothed and happy. I have seen real poverty in India, this was nothing the same. They had plenty of hens and goats and signs of harvest were evident. The school was a fair sized complex, the size of an average English village school. But the teacher, who was there on our visit, has to tour several local schools so education in such remote parts is very part-time. But the children all spoke French as well as Arabic and the older children who go to school in a larger town spoke a little English.

After that it was only a half hour walk into camp for us. Another great spot under a ridge of sand, tents all in the same places, fire pit dug, tea brewed, Berber in formal dress ready with the kettle of water under which we washed our hands. Very colonial, must have been the form in the desert for hundreds of years.

Tent-Time – for our seven, a great part of the day. Tent-time was a ritual for us. It took place twice a day. When we woke in the morning and at the end of the walk each evening. Tent-time means the time when my wonderful tent-mates and I gossiped, foot-tended and got to know each other better, each coming and going from the marvellous make-shift shower room. I was so lucky with my tent-mates. Any would have been good, but we remain a very close group. We shared, laughed, put up with and generally grew close during the week.

So tent-time was from about 5 till 6.30 each evening, before the bar opened and the briefing for the next day. We took the same sleeping places each night. As it was so much milder than we had expected – all those expensive thermals I had bought – I suggested we sleep under the stars on the rugs around the fire. It was great, so mild, just a little breeze, and a huge star studded sky above. Quite funnily, lots of people started outside but strangely, by morning only about 5 of us remained. Lots of talk of creepy crawlies and other beasties. Well, I reckon they would as likely be in the tents as outside them. Indeed, amazingly we had a mouse in our tent one night. What does a mouse live on in the desert? He must have thought it was Christmas when we rocked up! (Oh he was probably Muslim so may be not Christmas!) He was much more hamster shape than mouse shape. Quite sweet really. But a bit spooky to think he might run over me in the night.

Day 5 – 14 miles

Wonderful to wake up see daybreak. The stars slowly disappeared and the next guaranteed sunny day dawned.

Again the faster group left 15 minutes ahead. Up onto a spectacular ridge, kind of a sheer drop either side, but that was more an illusion. Poor Annie who had stoically walked with the slow group the day before and had far too much sun, found this climb very hard. The first part of the climb was steep and we were not in our stride as it came up straight out of camp. But it was soon over and once onto the rock it was a gradual climb. The views were stunning, we could look back at the plain we had crossed the day before and see the tiny white dots which had been our substantial camp. We could see the other group, small as ants making their way to the base of the ridge. The colours were fabulous, faded fawns and browns with a mist layer above which was the dark blue sky. Stunning and very tranquil. The rocky ridge gave way to a sharp sand peak. Abdul was our guide and his footprints were the first to touch this fresh sand. As we walked through the sand, we made a flat path. Some of us were not keen on the height and struggled bravely with the drops to either side. But Jean and I were having a party! Hopping and skipping along and doing balancing acts and playing games with or shadows. It was an amazing walk.

We were on a massive 200ft high wind sculptured sand dune and the next stage was to descend down the sand to the next plateau. Local children from the village we had visited had come along to meet us. They were able to run up and down the sand with such ease. Why they weren't in school while they had the precious attention of a teacher was a mystery to me.

Way below, we could see Ethan in his 4 x 4; it looked so small extenuating how high we had climbed. Some people started to race down the dune arm in arm, it looked amazing. The sand is surprisingly solid and if you put your heels down first it's easy to walk down. This is termed Berber Skiing! Probably for the benefit of the tourist trade.

I found this a very emotional moment and this scene epitomised why I had come to Morocco. Paul – our Grown-Up – had to call me down in the end; I had become rooted to the side of the dune to overcome to move. Jean gathered me up and after I'd emptied my boots we walked swiftly together until I had recovered. Everyone had their emotional moment I was thankful that I was on my own for mine.

Jean was great all along. She doesn't have MD in her family but was inspired to fundraise for Muscular Dystrophy Campaign by a TV programme about a family with MD. I found it hugely flattering that some of our group had decided to support MDC for reasons other than being close to an MD sufferer. We need as much support as we can get and these people had decided to raise their minimum £2,500 and trek for Muscular Dystrophy Campaign.

Eventually we turned up through a sandy pass. Poor Annie was dropping behind and Paul was having to encourage her every inch of the way. She needed to get out of the sun, but we had to plough to the lunch stop. The rest of us waited on the sandy hill for Paul to bring Annie up to us and we then descended down a very pretty little pass with rock, sand and scree. It was a much more attractive area than we had been walking on. The change in the scenery added interest to the walk and made the end of the morning more possible. But Annie couldn't make it. She had got to that awful point where you just want to give up. She was asking to be left alone to sleep. Obviously Paul radioed for help and the emergency 4 x 4 was ordered up. Abdul, still in his bad mood lead the rest of us on, while Paul stayed with Annie.

We sat and lay, thankfully under the temporary canopies and ate our lunch. It is great to take boots off, shake out sand and just relax with one another in the middle of the day. After lunch, we entered another very different plateau. Dusty and probably in previous times a lake of huge river. It was a vast area which we walked directly across from side to side. There were nomad camps dotted at the edges and herds of camels and donkeys 'grazing' on something, not sure what! It took about 2 hours to cross it and it was quite a fun walk, jumping the dusty little ridges and coming close to the camels and donkeys. These were obviously quite wealthy nomads who had the odd truck and certainly many many animals.

Vinney – Grown-up no. 1, is a fossil expert. He had been very excited about the afternoons walk, as we were going to pass, and indeed stop at, a massive fossil-rich area. So having crossed this vast plateau, we duly lingered to look for fossils with Vinney hugely excited to be back at this very special place. For someone who is not particularly conversant, he came to life encouraging us all to scout about for amazing fossils. Well, some people were keen, but it was really very hot and most of us just sat and waited for the signal to move. Jean, Nuala and I took the opportunity to have a detailed hysterical conversation about something or another, which reduced us to a pulp of giggles. When it was time to move ahead, Jean and I were still laughing stoutly.

I had read that we were going to walk through a gorge with palm trees at the end and a small village - with a pub no less! On we went and surely enough this very lovely gorge opened up and at the end was a large stand of palm trees. A little place which consisted of no more than a pub, tourist shop (of sorts) and

some tents. It was called M'Harresh. A lovely café/pub, very typical of the Moroccan Sahara and a few rooms had been created for trekkers in small groups. Lovely wash area with basin and proper loos and of course the much welcome Fanta! It was a great stop and with the nights camp just a km or so beyond, we could linger and make our own way into camp when we were ready which was a great treat.

We had a couple of drinks and used the loos and a good wash. We later discovered that Nuala had had a proper shower!! How clever was that? This place was quite special, adapted for the tourist trade, but used by locals and really quite pretty.

Paul and Craig – huge characters and a massive asset to the Trek, two northern guys who had basically ended up on the Trek by default. Or rather, had a few pints in their local and committed themselves to it! We sat and had this great talk while the sun went down. This is what happens, you laugh and joke a lot and walk hard and then wonderful important conversations strike up and you remember that moment forever.

We were all tentative about the next and last day. It was supposedly the hardest. I felt able to deal with anything and our tent was really very in control of our abilities and we had all succeeded so far. We had very little wear and tear. Poor Mark had had bad 'chaffing' on the first day which we all helped him repair and lent all the right potions and powders to combat this problem. But apart from that we only had minor blisters between us. Within half an hour of arriving in camp each evening, our tent smelt wonderful. We showered, shared lotions and moisturisers and sprayed ourselves with lovely aromas.

Other people fared not so well. Each morning at 6.30 am Annie, our trek doctor, held Blister Clinic. Our very determined Tony suffered enormously. I found blister clinic so off-putting that I used to listen to my MP3 at that time. The talk of loosening toe nails, holes in feet and how best to strap feet, was too much for me. I was so lucky.

Day 6 – 13 miles

The last day. We had come so far. We had made great friendships, heard moving stories and today we would end so many months of planning and wondering. By the end of the day, the trek would be over. No more training, no more fundraising, no more anxiety.

We walked out of camp for the last time at the usual 8.00 am. With the palm tree gorge behind us and the rocky outcrop which sheltered us last night getting smaller as we walked, we marched steadily out across the plateau ahead towards some 3 hours away, tiny dunes. I really enjoyed the morning. I was so fit and in my stride now and also very rested and relaxed. It was a truly great walk. A long walk of nothingness. Cool breeze, vast expanses with total barrenness around. The toilet stop was just – don't look! But there was something about this-mornings walk that was truly great. I was exhilarated. Several of us were really enjoying ourselves.

As the dunes became gradually larger and easier to make out, we could also see the tiny white dots of the lunch tents. We were hot and tired when we reached the lunch camp. But it had been a great morning. We settled down in the shade of the canopy with a delicious lunch of lentils, salad and ye olde bread (optional). Then, off with the boots to get the sand out. But: the dunes to our right were irresistible. Paul wanted a photo taken on the dune so we went and took some

pictures and then I just raced away up onto the high dunes. Spectacular. Just as far as the eye could see sculpted sand against a dark blue sky. Different contours forming peaks and hills with big valleys sweeping below. A very moving sight. Jean, Colin, Chris and Paul joined me. We took some great pictures. It was great to be away from a large group of people. A group makes quite a noise and to be on the dunes in silence was wonderful.

We walked the few hundred yards back to lunch camp and relaxed in the shade on the carpets under the canopies.

We were to walk as one big group for the last afternoon. We started out across the wonderful dunes. Up and down for about 1 ½ hours. Glorious. Several people were very tired and struggling. Terrie had developed giardia – a very nasty water-borne bug – making her feel very unwell. She was being so brave. Annie was very tired. Tony's feet were uncomfortable (to say the least) and lots of other people were near to the end of their capabilities. After about 3 hours we reached another larger dune range and Ethan was there to meet us with the 4x4 team. This was the point where we turned for the last half hour into camp.

Across The Divide – our British guiding company – have a policy of a Quiet Moment. This is ten minutes silence towards the end of any trek when everyone reflects on why they are there, on the trek experience and the affects on us for having succeeded.

We all went to find a place on our own or in pairs, Jean and I went together, we sat up on a high dune. I found that I was not really able to reflect 'to order' and I had indeed had a few emotional moments earlier in the trek. But it was a very moving ten minutes, and to 'hear' the silence was massive. We had not often had the opportunity to be in total silence. Even if I was awake in the night, someone would be snoring!

When we re-grouped, there were some very big tears amongst us. A good proportion of the group had been touched by Muscular Dystrophy. Kelly had lost her Mum three weeks prior to leaving – the funeral had been two days before. Alison lost her young son last year. Terri, Gary, Bharti, and I have children with MD, Claire has brothers with MD. Some people had lost a friend and of course, Ethan is a sufferer.

I hadn't talked about Laura's MD much at all during the trek. There was no need to; everyone knew how it felt to be touched by this disease. I had immediately found huge solace from being with people who were in the same situation as myself. It was the first time I had even met another person who had a child with MD. I would be in my sleeping bag at night and just feel like there was a warm blanket of understanding over me.

We were such a close group, every one of us got along with each other. Even now, not a day goes by without some contact with one or other of the group. I hadn't been ready for this at all and it is the greatest aspect of the trek for me.

It was only another 20 minute walk into camp for the last time and Ethan came out to meet us in his wheelchair with the help of his chauffeur and we formed a line for a photo shoot before walking, with Scott pushing Ethan, into camp in one large strong group.

We had all made it, it was the strangest feeling, it was all over, months of planning and anticipation, finished. To my enormous delight – there was

sparkling wine to greet us under the MDC banner! A real tonic, a blue plastic mug of amazingly good fizzy wine.

That was the start of a real celebratory evening. We were supposed to be celebrating the next night at the suspiciously named 'Gala Dinner' – but everyone was elated and the minute the bar opened, off we went. Out came various bottles of Jack Daniels etc which had been hoarded from Heathrow for just this moment.

Poor Vinney – serious senior Grown Up hadn't got a hope of keeping us down. We were going to party.

DAY 7 – I'm a Successful Trekker – Get Me Out Of Here!!!

Nursing some impressive hang-overs we packed up, ate breakfast and discovered that the re-hydration sachets we had been told to bring, were excellent headache cures! It was sad to say good-bye to the fantastic ground staff who had dug long-drops, put up tents, served tea, set lanterns at dusk, and cooked endless fantastic meals. They had been amazing and had entered into the trek joining the group at night with their singing and dancing giving us a flavour of their culture.

We climbed back into the tatty old truck that had deposited us 5 days before. Off we rattled across the barren plateaus towards civilization. The truck was hard going, but great fun though I did feel I was leaving a very special experience behind me. We arrived at the hotel at about 3.30 claimed our rooms and Jean and I headed straight for the very cold but deliciously inviting swimming pool. A few of the others were there and after a quick dip we headed out to find coffee.

Colin, Craig, Kelly, Jean, other Paul and I headed out and indeed found a great café and downed two big latte style coffees each. AND some local sticky cake things as well. Superb. Back in the bar, everyone was aware that they were in for a very early start – 3.00am to be precise. Some people, the hard core guys stayed up all night, others went to bed really early. It was great to sit quietly in small group starting to say good-byes and promises of keeping in touch – and how we have!

I was the only one who had elected to stay an extra day. But I was tired and glad to go up to bed at about 10.30. I got up at 3.00am and waved them all off in their mini buses, went back to bed and slept soundly. In fact, I slept nearly all day the next day either by the pool, or back in bed. It was no hardship to get up then at 3.00 am 24 hours after the others had. I was excited about seeing Laura again and ready to get back to normal. But leaving Morocco was a wrench – I was leaving the place of a very special experience.

I have travelled extensively, but usually alone when you only have your own memories. Now I had walked the Sahara with 24 or so other people and it is so much easier to keep the experience alive. We are meeting up for a night away on 2nd February.