

## MY TRAVELS IN MOROCCO

by

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The `plane touched down at Quarzazate at 11.30. A warm, soft breeze and a starry sky welcomed me on my first visit to North Africa. The manic stamping of passports and the weight of my large rucksack brought me back to reality.

This was the beginning of the second part of my challenge - to cope with the physical demands of walking for 6 days and to live with people I had only just met.

After a morning briefing, we were transferred by coach to the start of the trek. In groups of 12, with our Moroccan guide, we walked along the M'Goun river, through the flower valley where thousands of roses are grown for perfume and rose water. Life is centred round the strings of oases and water channels irrigate the small fields where they also grow wheat, beans and animal feed.

A typical day would start with an early rise - at 6am. Sleeping bags rolled up and main rucksack packed, we collect our drinking water ration and pack our day sack. Breakfast follows; bread, butter, jam, cheese and freshly made pancakes.

Our main `sacks are loaded onto the lorry with the rest of the camp equipment and, after our warm-up exercises, we are off.

Today we walk through the valley accompanied by the beautiful scent of Almond blossom. We negotiate muddy banks, slippery dykes and a ledge with a deep water channel on one side and a vertical drop on the other - plus an overhanging rock at just the right angle to snag your rucksack. The concentration is palpable. We climb 500m and are rewarded with beautiful views - and our camp team with lunch and rugs spread out under the trees.

Re-fuelled with egg & vegetable tagine, bread and oranges, we walk over the pass of Jebel Timaourdine (2000m). The scenery is powerful, impressive and awe-inspiring.

On arrival at our next camp we are greeted with hot mint tea and biscuits. Dinner follows at 8pm and our Berber camp team provide us with good local cuisine. (No sheeps' eyes, I was relieved to find!) We eat by candle light, then huddle round the camp fire as the temperature drops to 2 degrees celsius. We are in bed by 10pm.

In the morning, the water inside the washing barrel has a layer of ice on it, so I rapidly go off the idea of a wash and return to the tent to find the `Wipes & Wet Ones`.

Now we face a 1000m climb, followed by a ridge walk. The ridge looks like your fingers, with your hand pointing up. We scramble and climb over rough, hard rock for 4 hours, marvelling at the views, whilst trying not to look down for fear of an unexpected attack of vertigo.

We descend through scree and a stony path lined with Thyme and Lavender; their fragrance filling the air as we brush past.

We walked for 10 hours that day.

The village houses are made out of mud & straw bricks, which are dried in the sun prior to building. We've been invited to take mint tea today at the Kasbah of El Hot and are met at the gate and welcomed by the owner. We leave the scorching sun and enter the pitch black Kasbah, climbing 3 flights to the roof to take photos. This accomplished, we descend, taking off our boots and rucksacks before being ushered into a cool and airy room where we sit on carpets and are served sweet mint tea by the owner's wife - one of the few women who will agree to be photographed. He tells us (in French) that his house is 100 years old and that he has 8 children.

We continue up the M'Goun river, crossing many times over stones, tree trunks or sometimes just wading through.

That night our camp is inside the walls of Ighrem Akdim village, at 1700m. Unfortunately, the toilet tents have to be situated *outside* the walls and down a stony path. So, unless you have `A` levels in map & compass, the easy option is not to drink too much!

Although we walk in `T` shirts and shorts, when we pass through a village we must all cover our legs - including the men. So, we wrap around a sarong.

When we reach a village, the children all rush to greet us. They are all very friendly and ask only for "Un stylo, s'il vous plait." We reply that we have no pens - no bonbons. Having been forewarned, some of us *had* taken pens and paper, but had given them to the guide who would pass them on to the schoolteacher or head man of the village for distribution. The children go to school at age 7 and before that attend Koran classes.

On the final trek day we are to reach our highest altitude at 2200m - about 6500 ft. - but first have to negotiate the freezing water in the M'Goun gorges. Although no more than knee deep, the current is quite strong. We change into training shoes and for 2 hours criss-cross the river more than 20 times. The wind is blowing straight from the snowy mountains of the High Atlas. My legs are blue and my feet numb and painful, as little pieces of gravel find their way into my shoes.

The pain stops at the village of Aguerd Zeka, where we emerge from the gorge into the sun and dry our white, wrinkled feet. We now have a 500m climb to the pass of Tizi N'Mademt, where we have our packed lunch.

We are in a land of rocks and scrub, but all the views are powerfully impressive - vast plateaux followed by range after range of mountains as far as the eye can see.

We cross the plateau of Imejane, then climb another 300m before a long descent into a dry, stony river bed for a further 2 hour walk. I think it was at this point I felt I had earned every penny of my sponsorship money.

At 6.15 we reach our final camp at Taghia (1640m). Charged with emotion, we enter camp for the last time - the men standing aside to let the ladies through first.

But it wasn't over yet! After dinner we had a party - the Berber camp team and guides playing drums, singing and performing local dances. We finished by singing Auld Lang Syne!

I slept outside that night, in the absolute stillness, under a navy blue sky and a myriad of shining stars, with woodsmoke drifting from the camp fire. A perfect ending to a truly amazing experience.