

Into Africa

Under Saharan Skies



Clinging precariously to the northern tip of Africa, Ceuta is the last Spanish enclave in this vast continent and the point from which our Moroccan adventure begins. At the border, it's late November and 100 degrees. We park in the shade, and Lisa has to remain behind, guarding the bikes, because, under Moroccan law, wives are still regarded as 'property'. The officials won't deal with her. Visiting the row of low beige offices, I collect an assortment of brightly colored immigration documents and start the process, which is surprisingly fast in this far-flung outpost.

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Border formalities completed, we kick up the side-stands and tap through the gears, launching ourselves into the 20th country on our tour. Riding into the lush green Martil Valley, we begin to acclimatize to a different set of rules. We speed past a bizarre mix of new Mercedes and old jalopies waiting while a dusty herd of livestock ambles across the road unimpressed by the blaring barrage of car horns.

With the warm lapping waters of the Mediterranean to our left, the cool sea breeze flowing through the vents in our jackets is a welcome relief. On the outskirts of Tétouan the air is sweet, a piquant mixture of scents from the orange, almond and pomegranate orchards that encircle this ancient city. Dusk is setting in as we walk into the

medina (old town) through a vast stone gate of ornate interwoven arches to squeeze our way down a smoky, teeming alley, thick with the din and perfumes of North Africa.

The Muslim festival of Ramadan has just started, and we eagerly join in the search for food as the day (and the daily fast) ends. Following the crowd, we find two plastic chairs at a small eatery. Abdul, a local silversmith, invites us to join him for his first meal of the day, celebrating the breaking of the fast. The hood of his gray-and-brown *jellaba* covers his head. We watch as he expertly uses only his right hand and pieces of bread to eat. We follow suit, devouring a rich mixture of syrupy sweet pastries and spicy vegetable soup, all served with strong coffee.



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Riding the Rif Mountains

As we travel south of the city, the bikes are rumbling contentedly, and we hug the rugged contours of the Rif Mountain range. This is an unspoiled land of interlocking valleys and hidden gullies. Overhead, craggy limestone peaks tower, their jagged heights piercing a bright cloudless sky. We take a cautious pace, anxiously aware the region has a reputation for physical violence aimed at passing tourists who stray too close to the drug-growing areas. Fig trees, prickly pear and cacti lurk in the shadows of the steeper ravines. Thick cedar forests and olive groves blanket the slopes to our left, and the pungency of cannabis and peppermint wafts from the lower terraces. Morocco is sensory overload at its most intoxicating.

In the uppermost reaches of the Djibála range of the Rif Mountains, we pass the blue village of Chefchaouen, a favorite stop-off for the adventurous traveler. By late afternoon we are ascending, swapping ravines and gullies for farmed mountain terraces. The

lower Rif range spits us out onto the fertile, open plains of Saïss. On a windswept plateau, we pull to the side of the road and take in the majestic view. We are dusty, thirsty and tired. Sprawling into the distance, the mystical city of Fez, and beyond the walled city, on a milky pink horizon, the teeth of the middle Atlas await us.

Exploring Morocco's Imperial Cities

We find a small hotel room for \$8, chosen more for its secure parking than its dusty brick walls. There is no running water until 7pm, so we quickly freshen up with wet wipes, lifting the gritty dirt from our sun-kissed cheeks. The first of Morocco's imperial cities is just begging to be explored. An arid breeze massages the fortified ramparts of Morocco's largest market, or medina, and inside we fall under Fez's spell. Walking through the tangled narrow streets and alleys of what many consider the spiritual and cultural heart of Morocco, we are dazzled by the unfamiliar but exciting smells.

Soon we are caught up in the tide of the city's bustle, the jostle of passing mule carts and jellaba-robed masses. The rugs adorning dusty brick walls look ancient, and swarthy, toothless old men squint suspiciously and then slowly smile at us as we pass. Life courses through a web of light-dappled alleys no wider than my outstretched arms – little has changed here in centuries. On Talaa Kabira, the main street of the market, hundreds of small stalls spill into the street, a seemingly chaotic mix of sellers plying everything from bath plugs to embroidered yellow slippers, kaftans, and huge bags of ochre and yellow spice.

The next day, we ride the narrow, stony dirt track up to the main road and turn west for Casablanca. We follow



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the main road carefully past Meknes, the third Imperial city, as taxis weave around laden carts. Street vendors vying for our attention leap in front of us, only to jump back at the last possible moment. West of the city, we ride into open space and vivid sunlight, feeling at once a more comforting sense of freedom. Here and there thick cedar groves flank the parched plains, and several emerald-green date and palm groves cozy up to the road's edge.

Casablanca is surprisingly modern, its smooth contemporary skyline punctuated by the "Finger of God," the towering 656-foot minaret of the Hassan II Mosque. With its majestically faded architecture and worn colonial boulevards, this rough-edged metropolis of four million feels familiar to us, more akin to a forgotten city in Southern Europe, than its opposite twin, Fez. We are not here to sightsee but to pick up our visas for Mauritania, the long war between Morocco and Mauritania making it impossible to acquire them on the border.



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Victorious in our efforts at the consulate and with our visas safely secured, we sit outside our hastily pitched tent, sipping coffee from metal mugs and reflecting on the day. We watch the aquamarine sky gradually turn indigo then black, with the haunting song of at least a dozen muezzins calling the faithful as our evening serenade.

The next morning we leave the city behind and ride southwest toward the mountain town of El Bourouj. The landscape turns from a beige, dusty gray to tangerine as we climb, nearing the Atlas Mountains. At d'Ouzoud, the artisans swarm, offering their arts and crafts when we stop for water, though they seem more interested in our bikes than in landing a sale. Guides eager for business tug on our jackets, each of them trying to overtop the other in a buzz of frenzied yelling, and all of them fervently pleading for us to pitch our tent at their site. But keen to escape such attention, we push on.

To the Red City of Marrakesh

Two days' ride southwest we sit in a small cafe on the periphery of Africa's largest and busiest market square, the *Djema el Fna*, (assembly of the dead) inside the fire-red walls of Marrakesh. The vast tiled expanse heaves with a heady mixture of orange-juice stalls, dancers, snake charmers and red-robed water sellers, their collection of brass drinking cups jangling like jewelry around their necks. It's easy to imagine being in a scene out of *The Arabian Nights*. Our base for a few days is the Riad Nora, a quiet sanctuary walled off from the delicious commotion that is Marrakesh. Inside the Riad's high, seventeenth-century walls, we get the first chance we've had in a while to thoroughly inspect our trusty bikes, and spend a full day on overdue service well aware that the yet-to-be crossed snowcapped summits of the Atlas Mountains are almost within touching distance.



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Fifty miles south of the city, we follow a very rough track through a steep, arid valley of striated walls colored in dozens of hues of brown, red and cream. Our wheels crunch to a stop as we pause at the crossroads and eye the dark tar ribbon that will bear us south over the Atlas range and close to the border with Algeria. Our *real* Moroccan adventure is about to begin.

Four hours from the start of our ascent into the Atlas we are still grinding skyward, our progress slowed by the ice-and-snow-filled tracks. Numb hands squeeze brake levers at 9,000 feet, and we pull on extra layers by the side of the road. Below and around us is one of the world's greatest mountain ranges, raw and untouched. On the plateau above, a young boy dressed in rags minds his herd of scrawny goats, and the staff he carries is twice his

size. We wave but get nothing more than a stare in return. There are no other signs of life. With daylight fading, we make a hurried descent, speeding along the high stony plateau, heading toward Ait Benhaddou, with the Sahara silently, but powerfully, announcing its presence in the near distance.

The Sahara

Days have passed, as have successive towns and villages with exotic names: Ifrane, Azrou, Timahdite, Midelt, Er-Rachidia, and far-off Erfoud. Our destination is Merzouga, a small oasis that abuts Erg Chebbi, Morocco's largest genuine Saharan dune. It is another 35 miles via roadless, open sand plains to Merzouga, and we are already battling with the loaded bikes and our paucity of sand-riding experience. As night settles in, we pull into the courtyard of a small desert refuge to our great

relief. Worn out by the soft sand, we barely have the energy or time to pitch the tent and finish a can of corned beef with crackers before sleep overtakes us.

The next two weeks pass quickly, and with each day our skill improves. Barreling our naked bikes in and out of the surrounding dunes, venturing further from the safety of Merzouga as our confidence increases, Lisa and I grow used to the rear of our bikes sliding to previously impossible extremes. Her whoops and shouts of excitement can be heard over the noise of the engines, as she guns the throttle of her rowdy 650 and stands proudly on the pegs, enduro-style.

Problems Near the Algerian Border

Hard on the throttle of the 1100 in thick, soft sand, I'm suddenly jolted forward, thrown over the bars and winded by the impact. The bike is 10 feet behind me, upright, and stuck deep. Bizarrely, the bike's engine is still running. *How can that be?* Something is seriously wrong with this picture, I thought, and it didn't appear that the bike would be going anywhere under its own power until the problem was fixed.

Riding away on Lisa's 650GS, I feel uncomfortable leaving her alone and stranded in the dunes, but we have no choice. The local men will *not* deal with a woman's pleas for assistance no matter the circumstance. Back at Merzouga, I secure the help of Hasan, a local guide with a four-by-four. Three hours later, we've hauled the crippled bike back to a makeshift workshop, a lean-to erected by our tent, with blue tarpaulin lain on the ground to collect falling nuts and bolts. Four hours into the stripdown, the culprit is found: a destroyed driveshaft. In disbelief, we take a walk to clear our heads and take stock of the situation.



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"Salaam 'Alaykum" ("Peace be upon you"), the Touareg man says with a smile. We reply in kind, "Alaykum As-Salaam" ("Upon you be peace"). He stands tall, and his wrapped, indigo *tagelmust* (10-foot-long turban cloth) elegantly drapes his head. He is Amar, the head of his clan, and his practiced English is welcome, allowing us to dispense with our rusty French. While discussing our bike dilemma, Amar leans forward, pauses, and then with great sincerity and intent, he invites us to his Touareg camp for dinner with his father and family. "You will be my honored guests," he affirms, and we instantly understand the significance of the invitation being extended to Lisa too, as men and women never eat together in Touareg culture.

Living with the Touareg

The following night, our shoes left outside Amar's tent, Lisa and I sit cross-legged with him and his father around a low circular wooden table. With the billowing fabric of Amar's camp and soft embroidered pillows adding to the exotic air, we methodically wash our hands and feet in Muslim tradition. Dipping from a communal serving bowl, we enjoy a rich stew, using bread and the fingers of our right hands. Amar translates his father's whispered con-

versation, explaining that this is the first time his father has eaten in the presence of a female. We are both honored and humbled, and as the evening ends, we spy Amar's wife and daughter watching from the wings.

Though our wait for the replacement driveshaft to arrive from the UK takes five weeks, the delay has been a priceless privilege, living as we have for over a month within Amar's Touareg encampment and experiencing firsthand the secretive culture and rituals of northwest Africa's last true nomadic tribe.

As we ride south into the Western Sahara, through the disputed territories and toward Mauritania, we reflect on the lessons taken on board since leaving home. Adventure is a simple yet misunderstood term, and we're slowly coming to terms with the gritty reality of what it means. It is certainly bound up in learning to deal with the unexpected. If you're fortunate, it is about befriending someone special. Adventure isn't glossy Hollywood stuff. It's taking a chance, starting down a path fraught with uncertainty and discovering that the unknown is rarely dangerous – it's just...unknown.



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Northern Africa

FACTS AND INFORMATION

Total Mileage

Approximately 2,213 miles.

In General

The best time to visit Morocco is spring (mid-March to May) or autumn (September to November) as summer temperatures can be unbearable. Winters are cold, especially in the Atlas area, and many mountain roads may be closed due to heavy snowfall. The north coast and the Rif Mountains are often wet and cloudy in winter and early spring.

United States citizens do not require a visa for Morocco and are allowed to remain in the country for 90 days from date of entry.



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How to Get There

Casablanca and Marrakech are the main ports of entry. Morocco's main international entry point is the Mohammed V International Airport, 30km southeast of Casablanca. A cheaper option is to fly into Malaga or Gibraltar and take the ferry to Morocco via the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, from Algeciras or Tarifa in southern Spain.

Food & Lodging

The cuisine of Morocco is a mix of influences: Arab, Berber, Moorish, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, African, and Jewish. The ubiquitous meal of the Moroccan cuisine is couscous topped with meats (usually sheep, goat or chicken) and vegetables. All the major cities offer a broad array of accommodations, and free camping is allowed in the countryside.

Roads & Biking

In the major cities, streets are very congested, with many vehicles in bad condition wandering alongside pedestrians, scooters and animal-drawn carts. There are freeways linking the cities of Tangier, Rabat, Fez, Casa-

ablanca, and Marrakesh. Other cities have two-lane highways.

Don't drive at night – roadway lighting systems are poor or nonexistent. Traffic signals don't always work and when they do, they are often ignored.

The secondary roads are often narrow and poorly paved, and the roads through the Rif and Atlas Mountains are steep, narrow and winding. The rainy season (November–March) brings flash flooding sometimes severe enough to wash away roads in rural areas.

Books & Maps

- *The Rough Guide to Morocco*, by Mark Ellingham, Daniel Jacobs, Hamish Brown, Shaun McVeigh, Rough Guides, ISBN 978-1843538615, \$24.99
- *Lonely Planet Morocco (Country Guide)*, by Paul Clammer, Lonely Planet, ISBN 978-1741049718, \$24.99
- *Map 0742 Morocco/Maroc*, by Michelin National Maps, ISBN 978-2067118874, \$7.07
- *Waterproof Morocco Map*, by ITMB ISBN 978-1553413349, \$11.95

Addresses & Phone Numbers

- Visit Morocco, www.visitmorocco.com
- International Travel <http://travel.state.gov/travel>

Motorcycles & Gear

BMW R1100GS and BMW F650GS
Luggage System: Touratech
Helmet: BMW system 4
Jacket and Pants: Hein Gericke
Boots: Gearne and Alpine Tech 6



Always consult more detailed maps for touring purposes.