

# TOURING MOROCCO

What life was like centuries ago

Morocco Adventure Tour hosted by IMTBike

words + images: Victor Cruz

On the road from Rabat to Marrakech a well-fed Moroccan beetle hit me in the face. Getting hit by bugs is nothing new. A bee once flew down my neck and stung me in the stomach. But this was an entirely new creature: after wiping off the beetle's liquidity, the stench was horrific, worse than fermented dung, and the stink lasted inside my helmet for a quarter hour. Three days later I would be riding a camel in the Sahara, then climbing a dune while a wind storm that darkened the sky swept in to sandblast my legs.

Where water meets the desert, Morocco becomes a land of contrast amid the sameness. Vast swaths of scrub and desert cake the land in monotone beige, giving rise to storied buildings in the same color hue. Rare signs of water from feeble rivers erupt the valleys in a profusion of green palm trees hemmed in by three bands of the Atlas mountain chain that towers to 13,000-feet.

To say Morocco and its bustling medinas gave me culture shock says little and a lot. It's not every day you see a camel's severed head dangling in an 11th century food market. Or slabs of chopped unrefrigerated meat buzzing

with African flies. I saw my first donkey parking lot. These pack mules are used for carrying everything — from mint leaves to pelts, for pulling carts and for riding. You can draw comparisons to our own culture by what you don't see. You don't see strip malls or the mega chains that have homogenized America. You don't see men wearing shorts, dogs on a leash, or obesity. I was surprised not to see more wildlife, such as turkey vultures, lizards, snakes or any roadkill, despite riding 2300 km under a blaze of sun. We saw stork nests perched high on minarets. Most women wear the Muslim head covering called a hijab, while the men dress in a mix of Western and traditional djellabas; they sit quietly in cafés smoking cigarettes and drinking glasses of sweetened mint tea. Mosques are beautifully inlaid with colorful tiles and mosaic. Armed police set up check-points about every 40-50 miles. They waved us through without hassle. Tourists in Morocco are treated with a hands-off policy, in support of the King's directive to attract tourism. Everywhere, people wave hello. Locals speak French, Spanish, Arabic and Berber.

Large displacement bikes are rare in Morocco, so our group of mostly Canadians riding 15 BMWs (mostly F700 GS) was a hoot to young boys sharply dressed in school uniforms who would run up and make the universal throttle-rev motion. School is not mandatory. Educated at Harvard and



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married to an engineer, current King Mohammed VI issued reforms such as giving women the right to file divorce. Yet there's still no free press (criticism of the King is forbidden) or tolerance for gays; violations have led to prison. Every hotel lobby features posters of the King: the King sipping tea, the King skiing, the cheerful King smiling.

Like that dung beetle, every day colorful impressions made an impact. Riding through a town you see a man carrying a cow's leg over his shoulder. A half-dozen denuded chickens swing from a cart. I came to Morocco to take a break from our Western culture, bending the arm of my friend Moe to join me. On the third night while visiting Jemaa el-Fnaa main square in Marrakech, Moe was run over by a reckless moped. We were in an enclosed tunnel-like alley dating back centuries, filled with vendors hawking wares of every sort. An old woman in a kerchief extended her palm, reciting a jumble of words; a coin makes her flee. A beggar sat with two sleeping babies, their feet blackened. Luckily, Moe didn't require a hospital. The moped kid took off. A group of men gave chase as news of my befallen buddy traveled up the alley. "Do you want money for this?" someone asked.

The road over Tizi-n-Tichka Pass in the High Atlas Mountains from Marrakech to Ouarzazate was full of twisties not for the squeamish. By New Eng-

land standards, roads are well paved, narrow and in great condition. We rode past a market where men loaded up cars with live sheep. A man walked a black goat by its horn. Ouarzazate is the Hollywood of Morocco, with studios that have produced movies such as *Gladiator*, *Babel*, and *Lawrence of Arabia*. It was here where my pal Moe got blindsided again. This time by some nasty bacteria shipped directly to his gut via the tap water. It left him comatose for 48 hours, missing a ride into Todra Gorge, a narrow canyon in Tinerhir with walls that jet up 500-feet high. We lunched in a Berber home with a family of three generations. Every meal featured tagine, an earthenware cone-shaped pot used to cook everything. Vegetables, lentils, olives, couscous and chicken with cumin were common. Moe also missed a visit to the fossil fields next day in Erfoud and tea time with a nomadic family living under tents in the middle of nowhere. In Erfoud we stayed two nights at Kasbah Hotel Xaluca, a motorcycle mecca and training grounds for Paris-Dakar racers. The dining room buffet was abuzz with KTM, Yamaha and BMW teams towed in from Spain.

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Near the tail end of the week we traversed the Rif Mountains on roads tailor-made for motorcycles, where conifers and deciduous trees appeared for the first time. It was strange to encounter Barbary apes in the cedar forest at Azrou. A highlight was the stunning blue city of Chefchaouen where buildings are painted blue to ward off mosquitos, as local lore claims. (The area supplies Europe with 80% of its hashish.) The ride north from there to Tangier was spectacular, a road on a high ridge like many others in Morocco but this one left you stupefied with 180-degree mountain valley views.

Tour begins and ends in pedestrian-perfect Málaga, Spain, with overnight stays in Rabat, Marrakech, Ouarzazate, Erfoud and Fez. IMT Bike lived up to its tagline, "passion for motorcycling." Most days were long in the



saddle. Clutches out at 8:00am, we'd clock 250-mile days at top speeds of 75mph, rolling us in around 5:00pm, ready for a Casablanca pilsner. Morocco is cheap. Bountiful family-style meals never topped \$15. Hagglng is commonplace and annoying if you don't find humor in it. IMT did an excellent job with itinerary, restaurants, hotels, pre-ride briefings and attentive service. The only fault I can cite is that head guide Roger Falgàs didn't stop for roadside apples (!) More than 1.8 billion people or 24% of the earth's population identify themselves as Muslim. It was a real privilege to get a peek into this friendly Arab culture and to come away changed for the better.

Visit IMTBike Tours online: **IMTBike.com**

*Victor Cruz is a 16-year member of the Yankee Beemers, serving as Secretary and editor; a long-time contributor to Backroads and principal of MediaPR.net.*





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