

MOROCCO PART 1 CARRY ON UP THE ATLAS

THE BEAR LAST SLEPT UNDER MOROCCAN SKIES NEARLY 45 YEARS AGO, SO HE THOUGHT IT WAS HIGH TIME TO TAKE ANOTHER SNOOZE. ER, LOOK. AN INVITATION FROM MOTORCYCLE TOUR ORGANISER IMTBIKE.COM TO JOIN ITS MOROCCAN ADVENTURE TOUR IN MARCH OF THIS YEAR CAME JUST IN TIME, THEN.



TRANSPORT STAGES ARE AMONG my least favourite ways of spending time on a bike, although skimming the E3 motorway behind the Costa du Sol's grimy beaches on the way to Algeciras and the ferry to Africa is not too bad. You get a choice here between the tollway and a somewhat slower motorway, and we were using the more expensive option because we didn't want to miss the ferry. My rental F 750 GS was happy enough at 130km/h.

Inevitably, toll collection points cause problems for motorcycle tours. In this case I was the (first) sufferer as the machine stubbornly refused to accept my credit card. There had been no problem a couple of days before, but now that there was a chance to hold everyone up – yee ha! I finally gave up and moved to the next gate, which was fine.

Getting a motorcycle onto a ferry in Spain and Portugal is like playing three-dimensional PacMan in the terminal. You go in, say, that direction, then do a 90 degree turn, go a little further, do another 90 degree turn,

ride on again and lose sight of the bike in front of you among the towering containers. Someone with a whistle and a near-terminal (sorry) case of apoplexy emerges from between the containers and furiously waves you over to somewhere where you can do another right-hand turn before finding



Above: Mint tea is the go-to drink in Morocco. Well, except the locals mainly drink Coke.

Below: Guarding the ancient mosque in Rabat is a full-dress job.

Top right: Who needs an ignition switch when he has a plug cap?

Right: That tower is 44metres high, and was due to be twice the size.

yourself lined up a hundred metres from the ferry.

Once aboard I found the ferry plain but pleasant enough, and spent most of the short trip across to Tangiers queuing to have my paperwork checked at a little office cubby with its Moroccan official. This seemed like a good idea but turned out to make bugger all difference once we were

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on African soil, where there were three more detailed examinations by different officials. Once through that, I resumed battle with cash machines and finally got some money – from the last of the half-dozen ATMs.

Roger, our lead guide, collected the money for our group's cash float to



cover fuel, coffee stops and lunches. This float is a great idea. It speeds up stops, and reduces cash anxiety.

One final roadblock and check by the Royal Constabulary – there are many of these stops – and we were on our way. Morocco is one of those wonderful places where you always

get at least one answer per head to casual questions. Asking why there were so many police checkpoints, I was informed that it was: 1) because of bad people; 2) to control smuggled drones; 3) because Algerians came across the border to kill tourists and hurt the Moroccan travel industry; >>>





and finally 4) why not, at least they're getting some exercise.

We were always waved through, so I guess the Royal Constabulary didn't have any concerns about us being bad drone-bearing Algerian killers. I did get stopped once, but the officer only wanted to shoot the breeze. We exchanged information in mutually poor French, and I rolled on.

A new country and a new culture are always interesting, but this was still a delivery stage, down to the national capital Rabat. There is a limit to what you can discover from looking at the sides of the motorway. Apart from the shepherds, a regular coterie of watchers lined the road – not an unusual feature in countries with high unemployment and a flexible sense of time – and small bands of beggars roamed the petrol stations. They didn't look too badly off. Probably the most interesting novelty was the Berber alphabet which has joined the French and Arabic signposting. Based on an ancient local script, it looks a little like a combination of Greek and Korean.

As we rode into Rabat alongside the main royal palace on a very good

road, I noticed bunches of uniformed blokes gathered at each entrance and guard house. There seemed to be half a dozen different uniforms, and I finally worked out that each of the branches of the military, as well as the police forces, must supply guards. A good way for them to keep an eye on



Above: Lunch usually featured tasty salads followed by cut-up fruit.

Below: The original Moroccan 'motorcycles', camels. They will go just about anywhere, too.

Top right: Bear dons helmet ready for a day's ride outside the hotel in Rabat.

Right: The owner of this copper and brass shop was not keen on photos. Oops, sorry...



each other! Mind you, they didn't seem to have this guarding business sorted; all they were doing was smoking, laughing and telling each other lies about their soccer prowess.

Like other developing countries, Morocco has its architectural statement building – in this case, the 250-metre Mohammed VI Tower, the tallest building in Africa. Looking like a stretched version of London's Gherkin, it is designed to be visible from 50 kilometres all round. It is not quite finished, but already looks quite elegant if also totally out of place in a city that lacks other high rise.

Turning into our hotel driveway, I was nearly cleaned up by a Goldwing ridden with more elan than caution or, dare I say it, skill.

The Dawliz Resort & Spa turned out to offer both cool halls and outstanding displays of art, both paintings and sculptures. IMTBIKE.com has a sure touch with selecting hotels; they are invariably high standard and either new or older but unique in some way. The Dawliz punches both tags.

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Our group of 16 had begun to become familiar by now. Made up of Americans, Germans, Poles, Portuguese, a Spanish couple from the Canary Islands and an Israeli as well as Terry from Wollongong plus the guides Roger and David (both from Barcelona) it settled easily into English for





Above: Marrakesh's Djemaa el-Fna in the evening light. All kinds of entertainment.

Left: Going home, effendi? Moroccan taxis are usually based on three wheelers.

communication and flexible bunches of people for conversation. The ideal setup, really, and we spent dinner getting acquainted.

Our first real contact with Morocco and its culture came the next morning when we rode over to look at the square red tower on the hill across the river. This is the Hassan Tower, a 140-foot red stone minaret built during the reign of Yacoub El Mansour, a sultan of the Almohad Dynasty. Construction began in 1195 AD and was intended

to produce the largest mosque on Earth. Four years into construction, however, the sultan died and, as so often when the boss snuffs it, his project died with him.

Today only columns showing the intended layout of the mosque surround the Hassan Tower, which was supposed to be twice the height or nearly 90 metres tall. Here's a fun fact: each of the six levels inside the Hassan Tower is a single room with ramps to allow the muezzin to ride a horse to the top for the call to prayer. Everywhere else the muezzin has to climb stairs – this was clearly going to be classy!

Back on the road and past the moderately thick Rabat traffic, we got our first taste of Moroccan corners. The road was in surprisingly good shape considering that recent rain had clearly (or rather grubbily) dumped huge amounts of mud on the surface. That had simply been scraped up and dumped on the other side of the Armco, making the road feel like some kind of channel. In many ways, the Moroccan countryside reminded me of New Zealand: »

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erosion still has a lot of work to do.

We stopped in Rommani for mint tea, a drink I was beginning to appreciate. I've always thought mint's flavour was too strong to blend well with other herbs, but in a glass of tea with sugar it tastes wonderful, whether you're hot or cold. Looks like I'll be adding mint to my little herb garden at home.

There was not much in the way of scenery for the rest of the day except for the growing presence of the Atlas Mountains in the distance. At least we had a chance to get used to the endless police checkpoints.

At a fuel stop I admired the premix pump and then found myself confused by a moped with its plug cap unattached. Someone noticed my attention and the owner came out of the café to explain things to me. See here — he pointed to the ignition lock without a key in it. Now watch — he replaced the plug cap and swung the kickstarter to start the engine. And presto — he disconnected the plug cap again and the engine stopped. Aha. He didn't have an ignition key, so the ignition stayed on, and he used the plug cap as a kill switch. Bravo. He smiled modestly.

I had the first of several offers to swap bikes at the same fuel stop and sadly had to let the opportunity

go. Somehow, his Highlander moped would not quite have served me as well as the BMW F 750 GS, not to mention IMTBIKE.com's disappointment.

That brought back some memories. Forty-odd years before and a hundred or so kilometres south of there I had a seriously scary swap proposal. The policeman who wanted to trade his BMW R 50 for my (borrowed) Yamaha XS1100 became pretty insistent. It didn't help that he looked like Idi Amin and, unlike me, was heavily armed.



Above: No, I'm not sure what kind of animal that is that's being offered for dinner at the Djemaa.

Below: Scooters are everywhere, mostly with brand names that you've never heard of.

Right: Dinner in a restaurant high above the square allows views of the ACTION BEDLOW.

I think he really just wanted a ride, but the thought of letting a stranger head off on Mrs Bear's and my only transport there in the desert really was distinctly scary. Even if he was leaving the well-worn R 50 as security... He gave up in the end, and shook my hand with roars of laughter before



removing his scissor-spread road spikes and waving us on.

Back to today, where we turned out of the Marrakesh traffic — a bit more serious than in Rabat — into the Palmeraie. This is an ancient forest of date palms with several hundred thousand trees. It measures five miles (8km) in length, and covers 54 square miles (140 sq km). It is known for its eponymous palm trees and resorts including the Palmeraie Rotana Resort, where we were staying. It's also the place if you can't wait to try a camel ride. Just sayin'.

But we had plans for an evening in another part of Marrakesh, the Djemaa el-Fna. Time for a bit of background. Like any other country you're likely to visit, Morocco has a certain number of attractions which you should not miss. Some of these are natural like the Atlas Mountains or Todra Gorge; some are human-made like the Kasbahs or the medina of Fez; and some are humans themselves, like the crowds that make up the nightly theatre of Marrakesh's main square, the Djemaa el-Fna or "assembly of the dead". Better not to ask for too many details there, I suspect.

This place has been going since the 11th Century in various incarnations. Once, its main evening attraction would have been the storytellers

whose wares were the communal memory of the Berber tribes. For centuries, it was a vast food market with farm traders coming down from the mountains to set up their

“ HE POINTED TO THE IGNITION LOCK WITHOUT A KEY IN IT. NOW WATCH - HE REPLACED THE PLUG CAP AND SWUNG THE KICKSTARTER TO START THE ENGINE. AND PRESTO - HE DISCONNECTED THE PLUG CAP AGAIN AND THE ENGINE STOPPED. ”

canvas tents each day. The hikayat or storytellers have gone along with the whispering fortunetellers, unable to compete with the more spectacular attractions made possible by electricity and the internet. The farm market has mutated into a food market offering

local delicacies, although you can also buy everyday groceries — especially olives.

So the Djemaa is not what it was, but as Lonely Planet says, it's "nightly carnival continues to dazzle. Amazing musicians strike up the music and gnaoua troupes sing while henna tattoo artists beckon to passersby, and water-sellers in fringed hats clang brass cups together, hoping to drive people to drink. This is a show you don't want to miss, and it's a bargain too: applause and a few dirhams ensure an encore... The square's many eclectic exhibitions are not without a darker side, though; you are likely to see monkeys dressed up and led around on chains for entertainment."

We were set to wander around the square for a while ourselves and then to have dinner at one of the restaurants overlooking the action. Unfortunately, though, I had a problem to solve before heading to the Djemaa from the hotel. The bag that the support van was supposed to have been carrying for me was nowhere to be found. That meant my CPAP machine and my medical backups were missing. And that was not good news. Could the bag have been sent to the wrong room at the hotel, or could it somehow have been lost completely?

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