

MOROCCO PART 2 CARRY ON UP THE ATLAS

THE BEAR, ON IMTBIKE.COM'S MOROCCAN ADVENTURE TOUR IN MARCH OF THIS YEAR, SEEMS TO HAVE LOST HIS BAG AND WITH IT MOST OF HIS NOT INCONSIDERABLE MEDICAL EQUIPMENT. WILL HE FIND IT, OR WILL THEY SHIP HIM HOME IN A BOX? READ ON!



Roadworks stop on the Tichka Pass road, complete with dyed geodes.



“SO,” SAID DAVID, ONE of our tour guides, “the good news is that we have found the bag. The bad news is that it is still in Rabat.” This was particularly bad news for David, who was the one who drove the three and a half hours to Rabat to collect it and another three and a half hours back to Marrakesh. We don’t know what happened, but I suspect that I had not put it in the correct place to be collected and loaded into the van. Whatever: thank you, David for that long drive.

As I suggested in the previous story, the Djemaa el-Fna turned out to be quite an experience. Wonderful photo opportunities, too. And all because the place meets the basic requirement for a great tourist experience: it caters to the locals as well as the visitors. Any attractions or even entire cities which do that are always worth a visit; my examples have always been Barcelona and New Orleans, but there are many

others – including Marrakesh with this main square.

I’m not fussed about the distinction between tourists and travelers or whatever you want to call those people who travel but aren’t tourists. Who cares. What you get out of a place depends on how you approach it, and we all have the opportunity to make the most of that. Mind you, I do feel sorry for the people who

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are shepherded in and out of air-conditioned buses. But wait... air conditioned? Hmm...

The evening meal on the terrace overlooking the action in the square was quite wonderful, and as we stumbled back to our bus (yes, air

conditioned) we would, I think, all have given the Djemaa el-Fna top marks.

I had emergency supplies of my drugs and slept even without my CPAP machine, although a couple of glasses of local red wine with dinner might have had something to do with that. One advantage of staying in a golf hotel is, I guess, that firstly the other guests are mostly tired from a day out on the course and don’t do

much late celebrating, and secondly are keen to get out onto the course in the morning and don’t hang about at breakfast.

So after a relaxed breakfast – ah, I think I need to explain something here. Most hotels of at least reasonable



Left: Smooth and tempting: the road over the High Atlas is a motorcycling gem.

Bottom far left: Communications towers in Morocco are (poorly) disguised as giant palms.

Bottom left: My little balcony at our Ourzazate hotel was perfect for catching up with notes.

Right: The 200m high walls of the Todra Gorge are difficult to photograph, amazing to see.

Bottom right: Tajine cooking is not only delicious but also quite varied.

quality – and the Rotana Palmerai is of pretty high quality – have coffee machines. Usually there are at least two, more often four. While none of them make good coffee, they all make acceptable brews – but only when they’re working. And sadly there are like office printers, subject to mysterious failure. As a result, the machines that are working are working pretty hard, and you get queues. When other guests don’t hang about, as in this case, it is a lot easier to get your coffee. Might sound basic, but trust me, it matters.

Once we got away, saturated with coffee, it became clear that we were not far from the real riding, the road up to the Tizi-n-Tichka Pass. While it isn’t quite finished, this is one of the truly



great motorcycle roads of the world. Endless sweepers, wonderful views of spectacular mountain landscapes, and frequent opportunities to buy geodes. Geodes? These are geological secondary formations within sedimentary and volcanic rocks. They are hollow, vaguely spherical rocks, in which masses of mineral matter have been deposited. The ones for sale along this road contain crystals and can be quite intriguing and pretty. >>





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Sadly, I suspect the sellers have not been happy with the genuine article and have started dyeing the crystals with fluorescent colours. So, a distinct 'no' to the geodes.

Another distinct 'no' to the bloke who wanted to sell me some stickers at the top of the 2260m pass. The price? "For you, five Euros." I nearly fell off the bike laughing.

The shopping was better at Ait-Ben-Haddou Kasbah. This was a stop on the alternative and less trafficked road we took down from the pass to Ourzazate. Terrific road; very narrow, clinging to clifftops and sliding through seemingly impossible slots in the many small villages we passed. You have probably seen the Kasbah in one Hollywood extravaganza or another, but it's still just a small place by a salty river with, admittedly, lots of souvenir shops. I bought two genuine antique daggers (not that kind of genuine, or antique) at reasonable prices after cursory haggling, and discovered how effective the Kasbah architecture is at keeping the interior cool.

Good stop, and a good lunch in a remarkably genuine-looking little restaurant. Roger and David obviously

prided themselves on finding these places for us, away from the tourist bus traffic. This is much of the secret of a successful bike tour in a place that's so popular with tourists; you need to find places that have kept a bit of authenticity and that enjoy offering their won culture, not just Coca Cola.

“ IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE I REALISED THAT I WAS NOT UP TO MAKING DECISIONS SUCH AS WHICH WAY TO TURN. ”

Our hotel in Ourzazate was a perfect example. We covered what seemed like a couple of dusty kilometres through back streets before slotting our bikes into the enclosed secure shed at the back of the Riad Dar Daif. A typical example of the way architecture turns inward in places like Morocco, the Riad is arranged around a cool, moist, plant-lined

courtyard. Its rooms, or rather suites, have been fitted into the shell of the four-story building with all mod cons including air conditioning, without spoiling the atmosphere.

Sitting on my own little balcony in the shade with the views out to the Atlas, I thought I would gladly live in a building like this.

Out on the Route of the Kasbahs the next day – really just a rather good, sealed road past a lot of desert-brown small villages – we took a turn to the west to Todra Gorge. This is a flat-bottomed (and now sealed) canyon with 500-foot overhanging walls.

Wonderful to visit, seriously, but you would not want to be here when one of those overhangs lets go. I tried to do it justice with my 10mm, non-fisheye lens and found that I could not even get close to the power of those red rock walls.

Lunch at a small Berber restaurant on the way back to the main road was a hoot. It looked like something out of one of the better Star Wars movies – you know, Luke And The Droids Stop For Lunch On Tattooine – and while the food was pretty much the standard tajine and salad, the entertainment was terrific. It was a percussion concert provided initially by the staff, with us gradually being drawn into the performance. Our hosts had a number of hide-covered drums as well as a wheel hub off a Citroen – played with spoons – and Yasmin, the boss of the kitchen, even played a pair of tea glasses. All this was photographed by the rest of the kitchen staff with iPhones.

Another stop was to look at the khetteras, the underground water supply channels that take the place of the better-known qanats of Afghanistan. Sadly, there was a drought at the time and very little water was to be seen. There was, however, a cute young camel to photograph.

Erfoud, our stop that night, is the



Left: He's with the band! David shows off his drumming at lunch.

Bottom far left: Straw is light, so trucks get loaded up as far as possible.

Bottom left: It may be hard to believe, but occasionally that dry watercourse turns into a raging torrent.

Right: Basic engineering above one of the Khettera water canals.

Right middle: Well, hi there! Camels look a lot more sociable before they grow to their full height.

Right bottom: Wash day chez Bear at the Erfoud hotel.

access point for Erg Chebbi, Morocco's best-known sand dunes. Used for everything from Hollywood movie locations to practice venues for Dakar teams, Erg Chebbi also offers extensive tourist activities including the inevitable camel rides and romps in the dunes on four-wheeler ATVs. IT's all a lot of fun, and the best way to end a visit is by photographing the sunset over the sand. That evening, 250 Frenchwomen who had just completed a 100km walk in the Atlas checked in, donned their finery and were driven off somewhere else for their celebratory dinner. Outside, rows of Yamahas and later KTMs queued, waiting for their riders to tackle Erg Chebbi.

In town, meanwhile, on a little photographic expedition, a certain Bear stopped for a coffee with milk at a ramshackle but friendly roadside café.

I was to regret that coffee, or more likely the milk. I once read a report from a British bike journalist who was covering a Baja race, and who had contracted Montezuma's Revenge. He wrote that it was as if "the whole world fell out of my bottom". That was my night. I shall draw a considerate curtain over the rest of this experience. Roger looked at me in the morning and offered a ride in the van rather than on the bike. I refused of course, being the case-hardened Aussie I am but it wasn't long before I realised that I was not up to making decisions such as which way to turn.

The bike went into the van, and I took my seat next to David, who supplied me with water and stopped when I needed him to, but otherwise left me to my internally disturbed state. I guess it was not too bad; I got to see most of the scenery without having to stay entirely conscious.

By the time our free day in Fez came around, I was a bit better and managed to take in both the wonderful, crowded lanes of the medina and our obligatory visit to a tile factory. Contrary to my expectations, this turned out to be really interesting, and I am still in awe of the skills of the blokes who chip out elaborate shapes for mosaics.

I don't think I got as much as I might have out of the next day's travel because I now had stomach cramps, which possibly also spoiled by the stop in Chefchaouen, the





“famous” blue village. It’s a tourist trap, and while it was all quite jovial – and while they have taken the trouble to make the craftspeople’s work rooms accessible – I sat in the shade and drank bottled water. My loss, probably. The border crossing into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta was slow but not unpleasant, and we stayed the night in a Parador, one of Spain’s wonderful government-owned historic hotels.

I met an old friend in the Parador’s

reception. Back in 1979 when I had last been in Ceuta, I had had a bronze lion’s head pointed out to me on the wall of the post office. It had an open mouth, and the story went that if you told a lie while putting your hand into the mouth, it would close and crush your hand. Not true, by the way. But here on the wall of the Parador’s reception was the head! It had obviously been salvaged when the post office was demolished. It felt like



Left: Yamahas all lined up outside our hotel, ready for Erg Chebbi.

Above: Just a look at the kind of mosaic made in Fez, from hand-cut pieces.

Left left: Out on the open road – the edge of the Sahara can be a bit flat.

Below: Our IMTBIKE.com motorcycle fleet was mostly BMW GSs. I was on a 750.

old times to me, and I was tempted to have a beer with it.

Oh, important point here: the Moroccans, like Australians, understand the phrase “ice cold beer”. You may obtain this immortal libation not quite everywhere but in many places in Morocco.

I was much better for our ferry ride the next day, although I stuck to soft drinks on the short ride across the Strait of Gibraltar or Estrecho de Gibraltar (got to be fair). The run back to Malaga and the IMTBIKE.com base gave me time to think that apart from avoiding roadside milk coffee, I really should have done the company’s longer Morocco tour. There’s a lot more to discover there.

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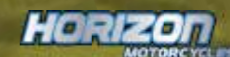
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