

Snaking Patterns of Sand

*Travels in
Morocco*

Mark Moxon





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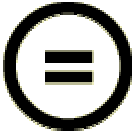
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Snaking Patterns of Sand: Travels in Morocco
v1.1, September 2004

Cover Photograph: Ben Saleh Mosque, Marrakech

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Foreword

This book is a collection of writing from the road, covering a two-week trip I made to Morocco in 2002 with my partner Peta.

This travelogue and more can be found at my personal website at www.moxon.net, where you can also find travel tips, recommended journeys and further free books for you to download. If you enjoy reading this book, then I'd be delighted if you would sign my website's Guestbook.

I've released this book and its companions via a Creative Commons Licence, which means you are free to distribute it to everyone and anyone, as long as you distribute it on a non-commercial basis and make no changes to it. If you know someone who might like this book, please pass it on; I make no money from it, but I do enjoy the thought of people reading it and recommending it to their friends.

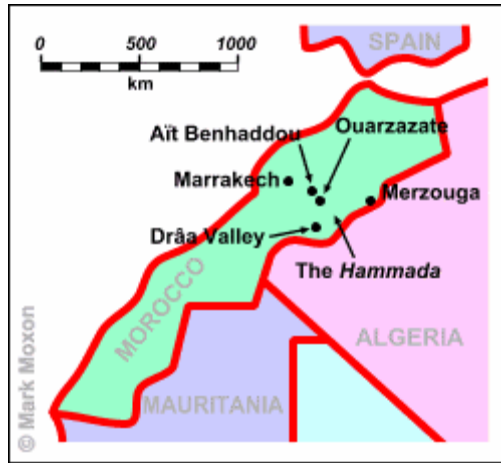
Finally, please be aware that this book is highly satirical, which means there's a slight chance that it might cause offence those who think my sense of humour is amusing as a puddle of mud. On top of this, some parts will be out of date – which is why each article is dated – and others will betray the naivety of a

traveller who discovered his way in the world by throwing himself into it headfirst. It is, however, an honest account of how I felt as I travelled, and as such, I hope you enjoy it.

Mark Moxon, September 2004

www.moxon.net

Map



Morocco

Arriving in Morocco

Written: 6 June 2002

You'd think that experience would be a great aid in calming nerves, but I'm still a mass of gibbering jelly when I arrive in a new country. It might not look like it from the outside, but landing in a country at midnight when you don't speak the language and don't have any local currency on you scares the shit out of me. I remember landing in Bali in exactly the same state, though then I was alone and had never been outside the western world, and of course I found somewhere to stay and took it from there, one day at a time. This always happens, but for some reason this infallible evidence doesn't make me feel any easier. I hate arriving somewhere new, but in a sense it's the whole point of travelling. It's a strange masochism that I've never got to grips with, to be honest.

But sure enough Peta and I landed at Marrakech, queued through the stamp-happy officials at the passport desk, changed some pounds into the local currency (dirham, which aren't available outside Morocco), and caught a cab to the hotel that Peta had reserved from home. Read that again; which bit is scary? Landing?

Possibly. Passport control? Nope. Catching a cab? Hardly difficult, though I had to negotiate the price in French on our arrival, which meant I had to unleash my French accent on the world, an act that makes my skin crawl in the same way that playing charades at Christmas with the family does. What about arriving at the hotel? Nope, they were politeness itself.

The only conclusion is that I am a complete wuss when it comes to arriving somewhere new. Perhaps it's this constant requirement to confront my fears that makes travelling so rewarding? Whatever, we arrived in Marrakech easily, quickly, and without any stories to tell.

Marrakech

Written: 7 June 2002

I forget how long I've assumed that Marrakech represents the sleaziest, most hard-nosed end of travelling. The first time I remember reading about it was in a book by James Michener, *The Drifters*, in which Marrakech was portrayed as a drug-addled place in which to lose your mind among the exotic *souqs* and smells of the *medina*. Then a friend I travelled with in Asia mentioned he had travelled in Morocco, and sucked in his cheeks as he complained about the amount of hassle he'd been given practically every single day of

his visit. Marrakech sounded like India, but worse.

The truth is somewhat more mundane, possibly because things have changed a lot since the days of Michener and the hippy trail, but also because Marrakech seems to have cottoned on to the fact that hassling the shit out of potential clients is not good business sense (which is more than can be said for the rest of southern Morocco). Marrakech is a clean and orderly city that reeks of the exotic, but doesn't come close to India for hassle... or, indeed, trippiness.

Thank goodness for this, for the *lingua franca* of Morocco isn't English, it's French. The thought of trying to persuade a particularly insistent scam merchant that you don't want to buy a carpet off him is fine when he's at least speaking some of your native language, but when he's jabbering on in Arabic or French, you can't help but wonder if you've accidentally agreed to buy three chickens, a Berber rug and an ornamental perfume jar with detachable lid. In India I'd try quoting Beatles lyrics to those who would insist on chanting indecipherable sales mantras at me, but when you can half-understand what's going on, but only in a schoolboy manner, it's disconcerting. Thankfully the Marrakchis are really rather jolly and friendly, quite unlike the hassling image they seem to have.

It's possible that the way you are treated has a lot to do with the way you present yourself. Every guidebook

you read goes on about the importance of dressing appropriately, and who can blame them. In a country where T-shirts are considered underwear and bare legs and tightly clad bottoms have the sexual electricity of women's breasts, the usual Brit-abroad vibe of shorts, flip-flops and pale flesh is the equivalent of wandering down the high street in a bikini, but this doesn't stop some people. I can only assume that it's these cultural ambassadors who attract the majority of Marrakech's hassle factor, because for those of us wearing trousers, shirts and an affable smile, the locals are a delight.

I was slightly disappointed, though. There's nothing like a calamity of humanity to wake you up after a flight, especially one that arrives in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night, and Marrakech was almost *too* easy.

Exploring the *Souqs*

There are two things about Marrakech that the guidebooks can't stop raving about: the *souqs* and the Djemaa el-Fna. The *souqs* are a good way to get out of the sun, and the Djemaa el-Fna comes into its own at night, so we spent the best part of our first full day in Morocco wandering around the former.

A *souq* is an undercover market, a mishmash of alleyways and shops that spill so many wares out into the narrow street that it looks like the inside of Ali

Baba's tumble dryer after a sandstorm. The *souqs* in Marrakech are excellent examples of their kind, and they wind on forever... or they do if you get lost, and getting lost is all part of the plan.

If, like me, you couldn't give a toss about shopping but are more interested in immersing yourself in the cultural experience of Marrakech's *souqs*, then don't kick off your exploration halfway through the England-Argentina game. World Cup fever stretches all around the world – indeed, we saw plenty of football matches in the desert, let alone a cosmopolitan centre like Marrakech – and Morocco is close enough to Europe to be footy mad. Even working in a *souq*, where the hassle factor is legendary and the haggling practically physical, means nothing when the football is on, and coming out of every little shop was the roar of the televised crowd. Even the carpet sellers ignored us as we wandered through this Mecca of salesmen, their beady eyes glued to the ball instead.

It made navigating the maze of shops pretty simple, despite the fact that the *souqs* are completely covered, only letting the odd ray of sunlight penetrate the murky haze of incense and genie lamps. Normally, one assumes, getting from one end of Marrakech's *souqs* to the other would require a deftness of foot that even Ronaldo would find difficult, but remove the obstacles of leaping salesmen and lingering crowds and it's a

piece of cake (one can only assume the other shoppers were watching at home, as the crowds were staying away in their droves). We shot through the *souqs* like a curling right-footer, and before you knew it we were blinking in the sunlight, wondering where it had all gone.

So we did it all again, this time from east to west, and yet again the only crowds and touts were on the TVs cunningly hidden beneath the curly toed slippers and woven hats. I'd expected exhilarating chaos and a severe test of nerves, and I found a pleasant shopping centre with lots of colourful goods and nothing to point towards the eccentricity of Africa apart from the lingering smell of drains. It felt a little, well, clinical.

One area managed to hint at the madness I'd hoped for. A small road branched left off the main drag, and pouring from it was a stench so nauseating it could mean only one thing: animals. And here we saw Morocco at its essence: men hoicked bundles of live chickens onto carts, the chickens tied by their feet into squawking clumps of ten, and sheep sat in their own stench in tiny cages the size of Japanese hotel rooms. Eggs were piled up to the ceiling and the stink was incredible, and everywhere we looked live animals were being treated as if they were dead. Unpleasant though it was to someone who's used to having his animal cruelty hidden behind closed doors, it was reality, and it

breathed.

The football-crazy *souqs*, bless 'em, just couldn't compete.

The Djemaa el-Fna

The Djemaa el-Fna is famous as *the* cultural centre of Marrakech, and for good reason. Forming both the geographical and social centre of town, this irregular and open-plan plaza is part market, part restaurant, part theatre and part hippie festival. It's fascinating, and really comes into its own at night, for every evening huge crowds of locals and tourists pour into the square in search of entertainment, nourishment and, for some, increasingly clever ways of extracting money from visitors.

The *souqs* form the northern border of the Djemaa el-Fna, and in exploring them Peta and I had wandered through the heat-crazed midday square many times. While the sun beats down the Djemaa el-Fna is relatively quiet, the sounds of the cracking tarmac only broken by the cries of the 30-odd orange juice stalls selling freshly squeezed juice for a paltry Dr2.50 a glass. It's an interesting sight in its own right; Moroccans, as in most developing countries, tend to lump all their businesses together by what they sell, so you have the street where all the shoe polishers tout for trade, the jewellers *souq*, the carpenters *souq*, the former slave

sellers *souq*, and so on. To a westerner, who is more used to having his shops dotted around town respectfully separate from each other, it's bizarre, and it makes you wonder how it is that so many outwardly identical businesses manage to survive. No doubt the Moroccans think we're insane doing it our way, too.

Besides, doing things our way would be unlikely to produce something quite like the Djemaa el-Fna at night. As the sun turns towards the horizon, rows of tables start to appear in the square, each surrounded by benches and shouting, touting chefs. It's not long before the smoke from countless barbecues fills the square with an eerie haze, as gaslights illuminate the clouds as they drift over towards the 70m-high Koutoubia Mosque to the southwest. It looks like a well-organised battlefield, and sounds like one.

'Bonjour monsieur, madame, you like brochettes, we have excellent saucissons, try our salade, you sit down here, best in the whole square, you remember, number 25 is the best, you come back later, we see you soon! Ah, madame, you looking hungry, you like chicken barbecue, best in square, ah yes, you sit here sir, welcome, bienvenue, bienvenue.'

We started our culinary introduction to Morocco with some snails from snail stall number one (one of five identical snail stalls all in a row), which at Dr10 a pop consisted of a hefty bowl of small snails in a soup

that tasted like dishwater. The snails also tasted like dishwater, which one assumes is what snails taste like before you smother them in garlic and herbs, but most intriguingly they actually looked like snails.

Whenever I've had snails in a French restaurant they've looked like fairly amorphous blobs inside beautiful shells – indeed, the shells are re-used like crockery, and aren't the same shells that the snails lived and died in – but in the Djemaa el-Fna the snails look like snails. They're attached to their shells by all manner of intestinal goo, which you can only break with some deft work with a stout cocktail stick, and when you've pulled out the body and it's sitting there staring at you, you realise that it really *is* staring: the only difference between a live snail and your meal is that your meal can't move its two protruding stalks, but in every other aspect you're definitely eating a snail, with all of the intestinal excitement that entails.

The main course, though, is more conventional (unless you go for the stalls that sell whole sheep's heads, which do exactly what it says on the tin). We opted for number 25, simply because the chefs seemed to be having more fun than their neighbours, and Dr150 later we were struggling through mounds of gorgeous food, from sausages to kebabs to salad. The atmosphere, though, was the most important bit, especially when the wind changed and our meal disappeared in the barbecue

smoke, an atmosphere made more surreal by the arrival of the local henna woman.

‘Hello madame, I bring you good luck,’ announced the woman from behind her *litham* veil, blatantly lying despite the evidence. ‘I make Berber henna tattoo for you to bring you happiness with your children.’

‘No thanks,’ said Peta. ‘That’s very kind of you, but I don’t want a henna tattoo.’

‘But it bring you very good luck,’ the henna woman continued, exercising the selective deafness that typifies the expert salesperson. ‘Here, I do a small design for you to bring you good fortune and many babies.’

And with that she flipped out her henna syringe and started doodling on the back of Peta’s hand, despite the fact that Peta was still eating.

‘Bring you wonderful luck from God,’ she warbled on. ‘Ancient Berber design, beautiful colour,’ she continued, despite the fact that it looked as if she was squirting goat shit onto Peta’s hand. ‘Small design, give you luck.’

By the time she had filled the whole of Peta’s hand with green goo, and had started on the wrist, it was pretty obvious that Peta was getting a henna tattoo whether she liked it or not, and that we were going to have to pay for it. We bartered the price down from her initial fantasy price of Dr300 to a more affordable Dr70, but whether that represents a rip-off or not I have no

idea... but I have a sneaking suspicion that whatever we paid would have been high. The moral of the story? If you want to say ‘no’, say it at least ten times, and mean it every time, otherwise you’ll end up buying everything in the shop... and out of it.

But it’s fun, just like the rest of the Djemaa el-Fna. As the day wears on, the rest of the square fills up with dancers, drummers and other bizarre stalls whose purpose is as mysterious as the pricing structure, and wandering around is a pleasant way to while away the hours and your small change (even simply watching requires a small payment, but at least it’s not a tourist thing – everyone gets hit for donations, including the locals). It’s surprisingly civilised, not unlike the *souqs*, and it didn’t feel quite as anarchistic and on the edge as I’d hoped it would, but the ambience is unique and the evocative images delightful.

Just remember that the chances are you’ll come away from the Djemaa el-Fna with more than you bargained for, even after bargaining.

Car Rental Scam

Written: 7 June 2002

My first experience of the business mentality of Marrakech kicked in within a day. The guidebooks were quite adamant that the best way to see southern Morocco

was by car (unless, of course, time is coming out of your ears, in which case public transport is often more intense), so we started hunting round for a decent deal. Anything that requires handing over your credit card for an imprint is worrying in any country, but in the developing world, where surreptitiously taking two imprints is not uncommon, it demands a leap of faith that I have a problem mustering. You simply can't believe salespeople, and that's true the world over.

So we thought we'd check out the hotel's own car rental agency, because at least we'd know where to firebomb in case of extraneous charges appearing on the bill, so we parked ourselves on one of the Hotel Tazi's sofas and started examining the car prices that they'd thoughtfully inserted below the table's glass.

The prices looked good, so when a man in a sweeping robe waltzed over and asked us if we were interested in renting a car, we nodded.

'Great,' he said, 'then please come with me. I will take you to our office.' And like obedient little lambs we tucked in behind him as he shot out into the streets of Marrakech. Two minutes later we'd been passed to a woman in the street like a couple of batons in a relay race, and she guided us through the winding backstreets to another hotel.

Then the negotiations began, though before I'd put my brain into gear for bartering, the price for ten days'

hire had tumbled from Dr4000 to Dr3500 to Dr3300 without us saying a word.

‘But the prices in the hotel started at Dr250 per day,’ I said, ‘so ten days makes Dr2500.’

‘Ah, but that does not include insurance,’ she said, ‘and you need insurance.’

‘The sign said it did include insurance,’ said Peta.

‘No, this cannot be,’ said our host, ‘but Dr3300 is very good price. New car, not two months old, very reliable, you go all round country and I give you my mobile number in case of problem. It is good, no?’

We’d been expecting to pay more, so we agreed that it was a fair price, and could we put it on credit card?

‘Credit card has six per cent surcharge,’ said our host, ‘but you can pay by cash, credit card, how you like.’

‘Ah, we might as well get cash from the ATM,’ we said. ‘It’s cheaper that way.’

‘OK, then we have a deal,’ she said. ‘Can I take credit card for imprint?’

‘Sure,’ I said, handing over my Visa card, which she slipped under a credit card ship and rubbed over with her pen until the numbers showed through. ‘Shall we go get the money now, then?’

‘Yes, that is good,’ she said, ‘and you come back in ten minutes, pick up car and you can park next to your hotel – I know the people there.’

‘See you in fifteen,’ we said, and sauntered back to our hotel, my mouth tingling with the slight metallic taste I get whenever I’ve put my financial future in the hands of someone from the business school of hard knocks. At the hotel, though, things got interesting when we asked about where we could park the car.

‘You renting from us, yes?’ said the woman at the hotel’s car agency.

‘Yes,’ we said.

‘Four-wheel drive for tonight, yes?’ she asked.

‘No,’ we said, ‘a small car for tomorrow. We’ve just been talking to the woman about it.’

‘Are you sure?’ she asked.

‘Um... no, I guess not,’ Peta said, and handed over our rental agreement. It was as if someone had flicked a switch on the woman’s back marked ‘Roll eyes, increase blood pressure, throw hands in the air and pout, *hard.*’ She flung out of the room, jabbering in Arabic, and when she had composed herself she came back and started to grill us about whom we’d been speaking to, and what they looked like.

It turned out that we’d been poached from the hotel by the man in the flowing robes, and our hosts weren’t happy. So unhappy were they that they instantly offered us a much cheaper price (Dr2800 all-inclusive), which for a Moroccan business is the equivalent of them handing you the shirt off their backs. It sounded

worthwhile, and the heat had put us in the mood for a bit of a *contretemps* with the lady from the rival firm.

Our first attempt to let her down gently didn't work; she simply wouldn't believe us when we said that the ATM wasn't accepting our cards, probably because to survive in Morocco you need a sixth sense as to when people are telling porkies. So we eventually turned to the truth, perhaps an unusual step in Moroccan business practice.

'OK, here is *la verité*,' I said. 'The man who brought us to you said he was from our hotel, but it turns out that he was lying, and when we asked at our hotel for parking details, they said that you were nothing to do with them. And that is not trustworthy business, so we do not want to do business with you. Please can I have my credit card slip back?'

'But I am with your hotel,' she said. 'I have good car.'

'OK,' I said, 'I tell you what, let's head on back to our hotel, and you can tell them that.' And we stood up and walked out into the street.

'But I have good car,' she stammered, running after us and betraying the first glint of panic in her eyes of a potential deal fading to nothing.

'Yes, but you just lied,' I said, 'so can I please have my credit card slip back. We do not have a deal.'

'Why you not want to do business with me?' she

asked, fluttering her doe eyes at Peta, instantly turning from hardnosed businesswoman to lost and lonely six-year old child in the fraction of a second. ‘It is not my fault that the man lied.’

‘I know,’ said Peta, patting her on the shoulder. ‘It is not your fault the man lied.’

‘Then we still have a deal?’ she said, inclining her head to Peta like a child to a mother when caught red-handed stealing from the cookie jar.

‘No, we do not,’ said Peta. ‘Please return the credit card slip, and tell your friend not to steal people from hotels by lying.’

Perhaps it was the failure of her emotional approach, or perhaps she realised that the deal was simply dead, but we got the credit card slip back and ripped it up into a million little pieces. And she turned back to her hotel, tail between her legs but ready to fight another day in the cut-throat world of Marrakchi business, as we got ourselves a car from the very grateful, and much cheaper Hotel Tazi.

Rock Men of the *Hammada*

Written: 8 June 2002

The next day we set off from Marrakech for southern Morocco in our pristine little Fiat Uno, which, with only 15,000km on the clock, appeared to be exactly what

we'd been promised the day before. Filling up with petrol in the centre of town – where the attendant refused to accept a credit card, much to my surprise – we stopped only to change some travellers cheques before heading east out of town. On the horizon the misty shapes of huge mountains loomed, barely visible through the dusty haze, and it wasn't long before the houses petered out and we were rolling along the right-hand side of the P31, the main road to the mountains of the High Atlas.

The drive wasn't particularly eventful until we started climbing into the foothills, when things started taking a slightly surreal turn. The landscape was by now utterly desolate with little sign of greenery (at least when compared to the smattering of palm trees that gave Marrakech a vaguely green appeal), and the heat that beat down on the rocky hills was practically visible. This wasn't surprising, as we were heading south towards the desert, but what caught me by surprise was the amazing number of nutters on the road, and I'm not talking about the drivers.

On the way up into the High Atlas, the local money-spinner (or otherwise) is rock, and there's plenty of it around. Of course, I'm not talking about just any rocks, but pretty minerals you might like to adorn your front room with, and you'd think from the roadside sellers that everyone in the world wants a piece of amethyst

next to the fireplace. Drive round a corner at a respectable speed, and suddenly you're slamming on the brakes and veering left as a total fruitcake in a white *jellaba* cape leaps out in front of you, urgently waving for you to stop.

But is he hurt? Or has his car broken down? Or maybe his house is on fire? Nope – actually, he just wants you to stop and buy some rocks off him, and there they are, piled up on a wooden table with a hand-scrawled sign saying '*minerales*', proudly proclaiming that he's yet another rock salesman.

I say 'yet another' because by the time you've gone round the fifth bend, you won't be bothering to slow down, or even to swerve, or you'll never get anywhere. The rock men are savvy enough to know that in a contest between them and a hurtling car it won't be the car that suffers broken bones, so they're nimble enough to get out of the way, but it's an amazing sight nonetheless, seeing grown men almost throwing themselves under cars for the sake of selling a simple rock or two. But when you live in a country that has 40 per cent unemployment and one in seven people living below the poverty line, survival calls for desperate measures.

Aït Benhaddou

Written: 8 June 2002

Once into the High Atlas mountains, the road weaves through eerie moonscapes that manage to combine the red hue of Australia's Kimberley and Pilbara regions with high flat-topped valleys of rock that recall Monument Valley in the USA. The driving is hot, dusty and draining – at least, it is in June – but it's worth it, for the High Atlas are home to the famous *kasbahs* and *ksars* of ancient Morocco¹.

Ever since hearing about the *kasbahs* of Morocco's deserts, I've wanted to visit them. I love castles, fortresses, citadels and anything else that evokes scenes from the likes of *Tales of the Arabian Nights* or (in my imagination) *Lord of the Rings*, and if they're in the desert, so much the better. I'm not sure why, but this combination, especially when combined with Islamic architecture, makes me go weak at the knees, as I'd found in India at places like Mandu and Jaisalmer. And just over the High Atlas, at a place called Aït Benhaddou, is the best-preserved desert *ksar* in Morocco. I was drawn to it like a rock seller to the sound of a car engine, and we rolled into the village after driving some 200km through the hairpin bends of the mountains.

¹ The isolated castles and fortified towns of the desert, respectively.

The *ksar* at Aït Benhaddou is simply stunning. As the locals will gleefully tell you, it's regularly used in adverts and films, the most famous of the latter being Orson Welles' *Sodom and Gomorrah* and David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*; indeed, to keep its appeal for filmmakers, it's been restored and maintained while others have crumbled into the dirt from which they were made, and the result is a truly amazing sight.

We arrived in mid-afternoon and decided to explore straight away, heading off through the village in the general direction of the *ksar*, which sits on the opposite side of the Oued Ounila (*oued* is the Arabic name for river). Within about two minutes of hitting the streets we'd picked up a little boy who insisted on being our guide, but although he was annoying (mainly because we knew he'd want money for invading our personal space), he wasn't the biggest irritant. That honour goes to the *sirocco*.

The *sirocco* is the name given to the desert wind that blows from the Sahara, and when we visited Aït Benhaddou it was having a really good day of it, churning up the sand and hurling it down the river valley that we had to cross to get to the *ksar*. Imagine skydiving in an oven, with someone hovering 30m below you, throwing handfuls of sand and grit in your face every 30 seconds, and you're close to the *sirocco* experience.

If you've ever wondered why the Berber people of the Sahara wrap their heads in scarves, leaving only a tiny gap for their eyes to peep out, then after a few minutes in the *sirocco* it's bloody obvious. I doubt they sell many exfoliating creams in Morocco – standing outside does the trick quite nicely.

But it's worth the hurt to see sights like the Aït Benhaddou *ksar*, which rises out of the desert like something straight out of desert folklore. Its squat towers and small-windowed buildings are exactly the same red-brown colour as the surrounding desert (not surprising as they're made from the same stuff), and wandering the streets of the ancient citadel is like stepping back in time. It's also surprisingly cool and an excellent shelter from the wind, which kicks back in again as you escape from the shelter of the dwellings and onto the top of the *ksar*.

As desert experiences go, it's difficult to beat the feeling of sitting on top of an ancient castle, looking over the same hills, valleys and oases that the ancient Berbers would have surveyed from their fortified town. Although *ksars* are built from sun-dried clay and mud (known as *pisé*) and don't last very long in the rain – if left untended, your average Berber *ksar* would be in ruins after 50 years – it makes no difference that they aren't completely identical to the *ksars* of ancient times. The atmosphere is completely authentic, and as far as

I'm concerned that's the most important bit.

Morocco, German-Style

Written: 8 June 2002

As we booked into our room in the Hotel Baraka in Aït Benhaddou, an incredible sight pulled up outside the hotel, almost crushing our little Fiat Uno. Into the tearing wind of the desert rode a colossal bus pulling an equally colossal trailer, and branded onto the front in huge Teutonic lettering was a capital 'D'. The Germans had come to the *ksar*.

I don't mention the fact that they were German because I have a problem with Germans on the road. Far from it, in fact: Germans have provided me with some of the most bizarre travelling memories I have, and I love them to bits. And this bus is a case in point.

Consider the desert. It is not particularly small... or it wasn't the last time I looked. One of the biggest challenges facing countries like Mauritania and Mali is that a large proportion of their countryside is desert, and if there's one thing desert is, it's hard to live in. And this means that there's not a huge space problem; you can pretty much pitch your tent anywhere, as it were.

I only mention this because around 25 happy Germans poured out of the bus and right into our hotel, shattering the peace and clattering louder than the

sirocco. ‘Are they all going to fit into the hotel?’ asked Peta of the proprietor.

‘Oh no,’ he smirked, rolling his eyes in the way that people do when confronted by buses like this, ‘they all sleep on the bus.’

The trailer held the secret. About the same size as the bus, the side peeled back to reveal 24 bedrooms, each about the size of Elvis’ coffin, all stacked up in two rows, each bedroom parallel to the trailer’s axles. With all the expanse of the desert at their disposal, the Germans were opting to coop themselves up into a huge and indescribably hell-like stack of snoring, farting and bad dreams. My jaw still aches from where it hit the floor; I’d never met people who thought that getting into the local culture meant impersonating the chickens in the Djemaa el-Fna.

Luckily they all seemed perfectly happy, even to the point of clapping along to the night’s inevitable drumming with a typically Aryan lack of timing.

Thank God for the Germans. Life would be so much duller without them.

Drâa Valley

Written: 9 June 2002

Heading south from Aït Benhaddou, the P31 passes through the wonderfully named Ouarzazate (pronounced

‘Wah-za-zat’) and plunges into a barren wasteland that still manages to play host to colourful characters jumping out of the cliff faces and into the path of the oncoming traffic.

The hairpins might be scary – especially given the propensity for Moroccan lorry drivers to drive in the middle of the road, especially around blind corners – but once the road has wheezed its way over the 1600m-high pass at Tizi n’Tinifift, you plunge into the greenery of the Drâa Valley, home to lots of *kasbahs*, Berber villages and *palmeraies* (the name given to the oasis-like farms around towns, where they grow dates, fruit and vegetables).

The Drâa is described in pretty gushing terms in most of the guidebooks on Morocco – ‘magical’ is an oft-used adjective – but in reality it’s just a pleasant valley with some pleasant sights... but nothing mind-bending. As if to rub it in, the last 172km leads you to a complete dead end, so if you decide to drive right to the end of the road at M’Hamid, you have to repeat the majority of the valley drive on the way back north. But the Drâa does have its moments, and it’s worth it just for the experience at the end of the road...

Before M’Hamid, though, there are plenty of *kasbahs* to meander past, lots of pretty (and not so pretty) Berber villages, and a whole cadre of boys risking permanent damage by trying to sell your

speeding car a bag or two of dates.

The big problem with the *kasbahs* for which the Drâa is famous is that it's almost impossible to tell which buildings are the ancient *kasbahs*, and which the more modern town houses, because they look identical. The Berbers make their dwellings out of mud, clay and straw, just as they have done for hundreds of years, which has the pleasing effect of making all their villages look relatively mediaeval. Unfortunately it also means that you have no idea whether you're admiring the ramparts of some long-forgotten Berber architect, or the latest 'Tab A into Slot B' breeze block structure that's simply been smothered in earth. It helps not to care, really; beauty is in the eye of the beholder, after all.

But it does soon become a little samey, which is why it's a strange relief to leave the most fertile section of the valley, between Agdz and Zagora, and to leap once more into the stony *hammada* between Zagora and M'Hamid. This is true one-horse territory, and the shock of leaving the palms behind is almost as intense as the shock of seeing yet more people trying their very hardest to sell you rocks, dates, or even both. The stony *hammada* is as close to hell as you can imagine (well, it is if you're from a rainy place like England), and the mind boggles at what it must be like to grow up in a place like the *hammada* of southern Morocco.

The End of the Road

Perhaps the closest one can get to the desperation that lies at the end of the P31 is by visiting M'Hamid, the village that marks the end of the road, and which sits a mere 40km from the Algerian border. The old village of M'Hamid was destroyed in the 1970s by Polisario (the movement to liberate Western Sahara, the southwestern chunk of Morocco that tourists rarely visit), and a new one was built 3km further up the road, but it might as well have been destroyed last week for all the charm that M'Hamid exudes.

We pulled into the outskirts of M'Hamid and booked ourselves into the somewhat empty Carrefour des Caravanes hotel, whose welcome sign boasted a swimming pool and real Berber-tent accommodation. The swimming pool proved to be half dried-up, so our swift swim felt more like a sheep dip than anything else, but suitably refreshed we thought we'd check out the options for food in M'Hamid.

M'Hamid is a complete shit-hole. It's probably unfair to be too harsh on a town that's been destroyed once too often, but even if you ignore the utterly depressing architecture, the people make M'Hamid as close to hell as anyone wants to get in this life. It's possible that it's worse in the off-season – and June is most definitely off-season – but when we pulled in through the main archway into town, the local touts

landed on our car like flies round shit.

‘You want see dunes?’ they cried. ‘Just three kilometres away, can be done in your car, no problem getting stuck, cheap price, you come with me yes, I have great camel trek, biggest dunes in Morocco, you come, yes, yes, yes?’

We tried to ignore them politely, but despite our protestations that we only wanted to wander round M’Hamid and were more interested in a cold drink than a trek into the desert, things got worse. I shook my head and told myself not to be stupid, but all I could see were hundreds of monkeys leaping out of the safari park, jumping on the car and playfully trying to bend our windscreen wipers and rip off our wing mirrors. This couldn’t be – this was M’Hamid, and they didn’t have monkeys here. It must be the desert heat.

A sharp rapping on the window brought me back to my senses, but by now it was too late. We weren’t going to open the doors in case the rabid hordes of M’Hamid managed to pull us limb from limb in their mad rush to extract tourists dollars from the tourists, so a quick slip into reverse and a sharp wheel-spin threw off all but the more persistent hangers-on, and we turned round and shot back into the main street. A quick drive down the street and back proved conclusively that M’Hamid is not only at the end of the road but also at the end of the world, and before you could say ‘camel trek’ we were

heading north again, back to the shelter of our hotel.

The Dunes of M'Hamid

A couple of kilometres out of town, I spotted some sand dunes just off the road, and not wanting to admit failure in the face of Moroccan adversity, I decided we should explore. There was nobody around and the dunes were within spitting distance, so we slapped on the handbrake and hopped over onto our first Saharan dunes. They might have been small, but there were definitely dunes, and they were isolated enough for the imagination to fill in the rest.

But even here, in what felt like the middle of nowhere, M'Hamid managed to ruin things. No sooner had we scrambled up the first dune, than a young man in a London Hard Rock Café T-shirt bumped up on a moped and started following our footsteps, quite literally. Worn down by heat and utter frustration at the seemingly unending reserves of irritating touting that M'Hamid was throwing at us, we tried to talk our way into some peace and quiet. It took some ten minutes of politely refusing the offers of treks and guided drives into the desert, but eventually I grabbed his hand, shook it with a meaningful *au revoir*, and made it perfectly clear that he was leaving. We sauntered off, and miraculously he didn't follow us. We had the dunes to ourselves, for now at least.

They weren't that big, though, so after a few photos and moonwalks down the slopes, we ambled back to the car, and back into the happy embrace of our man from the Hard Rock Café, who seemed incapable of understanding the word 'no' until we'd spelled it out for him in burnt rubber on the road. It's possible he managed to get away with a windscreen wiper or two; we weren't even looking by this time.

Luckily the people at the Carrefour des Caravans were delightful, and we ate a sumptuous meal of *salade marocains* and *tagines* under the stars in a Berber tent, drinking mint tea with the proprietor while making small talk about children, weather and the pros and cons of living in the desert. By the time we retired to our bed in a genuine Berber tent next to the hotel's own private sand dune, I thought that perhaps things weren't so bad in M'Hamid after all.

And that's when the local sandfly population betrayed their roots as true locals by biting the crap out of us all night, making sleep impossible and giving us hours of waking nightmares in which to ponder the delights of M'Hamid again, and again, and again, in action replay.

I can safely say that I will never again visit M'Hamid. Polisario had the right attitude, it seems.

The *Hammada*

Written: 10 June 2002

More eager to get out of M'Hamid than it is possible to express in words, we got up with the sun, kicked the hotel staff awake (who were asleep on mattresses in the driveway), and hit the road back into the Drâa Valley. Driving before the sun has had a chance to melt the desert is a wonderful way to appreciate the *hammada* without losing your marbles, and we were hoping to make it back up the Drâa and onto Route 6956, heading east towards the real Sahara, at a place called Merzouga. But this was all days away, for stretching out in front of us was some 450km of winding roads through one of the most inhospitable parts of the world you're likely to find: the Moroccan *hammada*.

Hammada means 'stony desert', and it's accurate: there's a lot of desert, and there are lots of stones. Indeed, after the hard-to-refuse we'd been swerving round for the last couple of days, the *hammada* went one better and threw the keenest salesmen of all at us: the fossil men. It's an ingenious way to persuade people to stop and look at perfectly normal rocks piled at the side of the road, for who knows which innocent-looking rock will contain a fossil that redefines the science of palaeontology?

I know which one: none of them. There may have been some very important finds made in Morocco in the

last few decades, but you're not telling me that the nutters leaping in front of cars on Route 6956 know anything about dinosaurs. As with all the other routes into the land of the Berbers, it's just another way to make a living in a place so inhospitable it makes the mind boggle.

It's quite a sight seeing people out in the *hammada*, to all appearances wandering through the desert with no packs, no bottles of water, and no worries. To a visitor from the cool temperate climate of north Europe, the dry heat of the *hammada* in June is something else. Driving through the black stony desert without air conditioning is like sitting in an industrial hair dryer with the heat turned to 11. After an hour or so you can feel the individual cells in your body start to rub together like millions of individual sand particles, as the water evaporates from your body without even having the decency to hang around as sweat for a while.

It's like Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* when he's being dragged through the desert by the ugly one, who refuses to give him any water. Clint's face dries and cracks, and his lips turn into clots of desiccated skin that look like they're about to fall off his face, but it's not until you've lived through a few days in the scorching dryness of the *hammada* that you realise exactly *how* dry the desert is. It's so dry it makes you wonder how anything lives out here, let alone

fanatical fossil salesmen.

The road, though, was in excellent condition, and even had carriageways in both directions for most of the trip, only slipping into single-track bitumen for two sections (if you ignore the section leaving M'Hamid, which we desperately tried to do). It was such a good road that we managed to cross the entire section south of the Jebel Sarhro mountain range before lunchtime, the handful of one-horse towns *en route* presenting no challenge that an experienced fossil-dodger couldn't handle.

If we stopped in the middle of absolutely nowhere, children would spring up out of the desert and would start running towards the car, waving their hands and no doubt dreaming of what they'd buy with all the proceeds from the Big Fossil Sale of 2002, but they didn't catch us, much to their surprise. Indeed, when Peta stopped to relieve herself behind a bush in the most desolate expanse of desert you can imagine, I wasn't that surprised to see a man on a bicycle suddenly appear as if from nowhere, right behind Peta; I dare say he was more shocked, which felt rather good after all the madmen leaping out in front of the car all day.

It was a delightful surprise, then, to arrive in Rissani, some 380km from M'Hamid, to find the wonderful Hôtel Kasbah Asmaa, complete with a fully filled swimming pool, air conditioning, and ice-cold

beer. Without a second thought we decided to take it easy for a couple of days, if only to wash the memory of M'Hamid out of our hair.

I'd still spend the next few nights dreaming of minerals, dates, fossils and hot, hot stony desert, though. It's not something you forget in a hurry...

Merzouga

Written: 12 June 2002

While lazing away the hours in Rissani, I'd been investigating the route to Merzouga, the home to the only genuine Saharan *ergs* in Morocco (an *erg* being a classic, sand dune desert). There are two roads to Merzouga, but both are relatively scary. The route from Rissani is the shorter of the two, but sections of it are pretty rough, and in a rented Fiat Uno it's probably not in your interests to try it, unless being stranded in the middle of the desert is your cup of tea. The other route, from Erfoud, is easier to follow, but it's still along rough dirt roads (or *pistes* as they're known in Morocco) and the guidebooks are careful to sound a note of caution, while still saying that normal cars *can* reach Merzouga without serious problems.

Not wishing to get stuck with a stranded car in the desert, Peta and I had popped into Rissani to check out the score, only to be welcomed by the usual gaggle of

young men trying desperately to sell us their guiding skills and goodness knows what else. They felt about as trustworthy as the most dodgy Moroccans do – in other words, you'd trust them as far as you can spit, which in the desiccated desert is no distance at all – so we turned around and decided to risk driving to Erfoud and then down to Merzouga.

It proved to be no scarier than the corrugated dirt roads in outback Australia, and we made it to Merzouga without any lasting damage (though the bone-shaking roads made it sound as if the car, now nicknamed Sandy, was about to fall apart in spectacular style). Things were helped by a couple of tourists we'd brought along from the hotel, Mike and Marie, who would have been very handy if we'd got stuck in sand, and provided us with enough confidence to tackle the desert and win.

The drive itself was beautiful, and after about 40 minutes of rattling and swerving round the potholes, the sand dunes of Erg Chebbi popped into view on the horizon, like a huge red mountain range in the distance. We bumped our way along the dusty dirt road straight towards the dunes, and as they got closer the red dissolved into a myriad mix of peach, ochre and brown, giving the dunes a magical look that made all the bouncing worthwhile.

Sure, we got stuck in the sand when we got to Merzouga itself, but who cares? It was the work of two

minutes to push us back onto the road, and it wasn't long before we'd found a genuine oasis at the end of the caravan route: the Ksar Sania has atmospheric double rooms set in their own desert cottages (complete with roof), and suddenly life never seemed better. The peach dunes rose from the desert a stone's throw from our roof terrace, camels wandered around, mini-dust storms blew through town, and the peace was complete.

How I love the desert, especially when you can get a nice, cold bottle of water to keep the heat in check...

Exploring the Saharan Dunes

There isn't a lot of water in the Sahara, and the sign in the hotel made the point pretty succinctly:

Ksar Sania
Water is very precious.
Water is necessary for life.
The desert has a serious lack of it.
It hasn't rained since 1995.
Do not waste it.
Help us to conserve it.
Françoise and Gérard

It's obvious just how dry it is in the desert from the speed at which your clothes dry after washing: lie your soaking towel on the roof and the scorching winds will

dry it in under 15 minutes, not surprising then you consider the maximum temperature when we were in Merzouga was a whopping 48°C (and the minimum was 27°C, a respectable temperature for a midsummer's day in England).

Your lips dry up unless you constantly apply lip salve, your skin starts to flake, and the flies will land on absolutely anything that contains even a hint of water, including tear ducts, the corners of your mouth, and any portion of visible, sweating skin. It is hot beyond words.

But that's the point, and it would be a pretty stupid thing to complain about the heat when you've just crossed hours of stony desert to check out the Sahara in June. If you wanted to explore the desert in a more amenable climate, then although Merzouga hasn't had any rain since 1995, it's not devoid of water. Indeed, when it rains in the High Atlas, and when the snow melts, the rivers rage, creating havoc for local transport but feeding the oases with enough water to sustain life. Merzouga even boasts a lake for part of the year, and it glimmers on the horizon, attracting flamingos into the otherwise utterly inhospitable environment of the desert. As you drive along the roads of the *hammada* the most common road sign is the one warning of a ford in the road, sporting a car plunging through water, spraying out from under its wheels. It's an odd thought as you rattle over river-beds that look like they've never seen

water, let along flooding.

But without this amazing lack of rainfall you wouldn't have the dunes, and it's the dunes that make the Sahara. Stony desert is one thing, but after a while the beauty of the *hammada* begins to pale, which is why it's such an epiphany driving to Merzouga and seeing the huge dunes of the Erg Chebbi rising up on the horizon. Located right next to the town of Merzouga, the dunes rise up 150m in huge piles of peach undulation, and if, like me, you're unable to pass a mountain without wanting to climb it, you're in for a treat.

Climbing sand dunes is an art, and it's one I don't particularly understand. Dunes are no more than huge piles of sand – indeed, in the Erg Chebbi you can see the underlying ground, and it genuinely looks like someone has simply dumped a load of peach-coloured sand straight onto the ground – but climbing huge piles of sand is no joke, especially in the baking Saharan sand. If you try to traverse the dunes, you'll slip downhill; if you try to climb straight up, then it's two steps up, one step down; if you climb in boots then they'll fill with heavy sand within two minutes, but if you climb in sandals your feet will fry; your water will be as hot as tea within half an hour of setting off; and when the wind blows, as it does an awful lot in the desert, your molars fill up with sand and your eyes feel like sand pits.

Get up that dune, though, and who cares about the

hurt? The landscape is like no other, because Erg Chebbi is nothing other than a peach sand mountain range. OK, so the mountains aren't huge, but the range of textures and colours is so other-worldly that it's trivial to trick yourself into thinking that you're staring at a massive Martian landscape of rifts, valleys and dizzying heights. The dunes don't go on as far as the eye can see – they're bound on all sides by *hammada* – but they do extend for a number of kilometres in each direction, and it's easy to kid yourself that you're surrounded by sand right to the horizon and beyond.

Which is one of the points of the Sahara, I think.

The Sahara by Camel

Written: 14 June 2002

Climbing dunes is one way to explore the Sahara, but by far the best is to book your passage on one of the ships of the desert – the camel. As you drive into Merzouga over the rattling *hammada*, herds of camels loiter round the edges of the desert, looking dour and almost surprised to be there, and there's no shortage of offers of camel treks from hopeful locals once you roll into town. We booked a two-day trip on our arrival, and settled in to wait for our ships to disembark.

It was at this point that the strange stirrings in my stomach reminded me that whenever I head off for a

short break in sunny climes, the local bacteria always club together to welcome me to their lovely country. It happened when I visited Sumatra for a two-week holiday, and Morocco wasn't going to be an exception, but I figured that being ill in the desert wouldn't be that much of a problem; after all, the biggest problem with an upset intestine is finding the toilet, and when a whole dune system is available for your ablutions, it can't be that bad. I certainly wasn't going to miss out on a voyage through the beauty of the Sahara for want of a few unscheduled stops.

I'd forgotten about the most bizarre aspect of camel trekking, though: the awesome power of the camel's digestion system. Camels regurgitate their cud and chew it again and again, and the size of a camel's stomach belies the fact that it's a huge sack of rotting grass and methane, but in the Sahara I drew the short straw, for as soon as we'd met our guide, Hamid, and mounted our camels, he tied my camel behind Peta's and led us into the dunes. This meant that for the whole two hours into the dunes I was party to a perfect backside view of Peta's camel crapping, pissing and farting right into my path. Add in the back-and-forth rocking of the ride that feels just like a slow-motion bucking bronco, and you've got all the ingredients for an intestinal cocktail thrown into the mixer. I was shaken and things stirred.

But I'm not going to let this account of the Sahara

slide into obsessive musings on being ill abroad, for the desert is stunning even when your experience of the dunes is a little more intimate than you'd hope for. We rode out through the *ergs* (the Arabic name for sand dunes) in the direction of Algeria, and after a couple of hours of bumping and grinding our way past peach dunes while the sun sank to the horizon, we arrived at our camp for the night, tucked around the back of one of the large mountains of sand that characterise the Moroccan Sahara.

Here Hamid and the nomad who looked after the tents entertained us with tricks and half-mimed stories about the Algerians while the sun dipped below the horizons and the stars came out. The moon was no more than an Islamic crescent and had soon disappeared behind the dunes, and the sky was simply incredible; there were so many stars that the familiar constellations were impossible to pick out for someone who's used to seeing no more than a handful of the brightest stars in the sky, and the milky way produced enough light to see by.

Hamid showed us how the nomads used the stars to navigate to Algeria, Marrakech and Timbuktu – an impressive feat considering his command of French was about as paltry as ours – and he also explained how the border with Algeria was closed and policed by soldiers, but this didn't stop the Algerians nipping into Morocco to steal the camels for food. We could see into Algeria

from our camp – it was only a few kilometres away, closer even than in M’Hamid – and it all seemed rather tranquil for such a screwed up area of the world. Then again, as Hamid said, ‘Morocco is good. Algeria is bad.’

We slept under the stars after a meal of meat and veg cooked in a *tagine* (which I did little more than poke at), despite the scarab beetles scurrying around the camp, who were presumably more interested in collecting camel dung than biting the tourists’ toes. It was surprisingly relaxing, and we were up with the sun for breakfast, some hard-selling from Hamid who had brought along some polished fossils just for us to barter over, and the return journey to Merzouga.

This time things had taken a turn for the worse, and all I can remember of the lolloping journey back to the hotel was a lot of clenching of teeth and other parts of my anatomy, followed by huge relief at our arrival back home. *En route* we crossed vehicle tracks that Hamid said were left by the Paris-Dakar rally, and despite it being the wrong time of year for the rally, one of the water pumps that supply Merzouga with water from beneath the dunes had ‘Fuck ze Paris-Dakar’ graffitied on the side in surprisingly phonetic vernacular. By this stage all I could think of was how much wind the ships of the desert had in their sails as they crossed the dunes, and it was all I could do to get back to the hotel without collapsing.

The Sahara really is something else, though...

Driving in a Sandstorm

Written: 15 June 2002

My stomach wasn't the only place where a storm was brewing. The morning after our return to the comparative civilisation of Merzouga a sandstorm whipped up and started filling every crevice with gritty dust.

Sandstorms aren't really storms of sand, they're just high winds in a place where everything is perpetually covered in drifts of desert. If you had high winds in a place like Australia's Fraser Island, the largest sand island in the world, then you could have a sandstorm, but all it takes to reduce visibility to practically nothing in the Sahara is a bit of a breeze, and when the *sirocco* is whipping its way through the land, the chances are reasonably high that you're going to get caught.

We got caught, no doubt about it. We'd already decided to stay an extra day to recover from the bruising that a camel trek over undulating dunes gives your thighs, but the excessive heat wasn't helping my continuing problems with my gut, and worse still, Peta had finished her book and there's precious little to do in the desert. We were going stir crazy, and despite the sandstorm outside and the scary prospect of driving

while ill, we decided to throw caution to the driving winds and head north. It was fun.

Driving through a sandstorm is an experience, especially in a tiny Fiat Uno over corrugated roads in the scorching desert heat. On the way in we'd wondered why the roads of southern Morocco were lined with rock cairns, even those roads who had long since been paved with bitumen, but driving through the storm it became obvious: you can't see the road at all when sand is blowing across it in snaking patterns that hide all the detail. We crawled along the road, all the time keeping a lookout for hubcaps on the side of the road (we'd lost one on the way to Merzouga, and presumed that the *piste* had rattled it off the car on the way in), and despite the clouds of sand pouring into the car through cracks in the doors and air vents that said they were shut but which obviously weren't, we made it to the main road where the storm calmed down and the road stopped rattling quite so much.

We'd gone out in a blue car and came back in a peach one, but at least we'd survived. I just kept thinking of that poor, lonely hubcap, somewhere out in the blistering desert, wondering what on earth had happened. Fiat Unos just weren't designed for desert driving, I guess...

Space Invaders

Written: 15 June 2002

Perhaps it was my fragile state on emerging from the desert, but Morocco really got to me for a couple of days after Merzouga. I've been in quite a few countries where I've been struck down by nasty stomach bugs – it's part and parcel of travelling in the developing world, and however careful you are, you can't really avoid being ill at some stage – and although it's possible that my tolerance of the hassles of some places has been undermined by ill health, I've been incredibly ill in places which I've adored unconditionally (such as India), and I've been incredibly ill in places I haven't warmed to as much (such as Indonesia). Morocco falls into the latter category.

Hassle is par for the course when you are an obviously rich westerner travelling in a relatively poor country, and that's no surprise. After all, you probably have more money in your money belt than the locals earn in a year, and that's going to cause some problems. However each country has a different type of hassle factor, and I found Morocco to be one of the most unnecessarily unpleasant.

Touts will hassle you until the ends of the earth, but if touting is taken too far then it's self-defeating: the world is a big place, and if tourists can't stand the hassle, there are plenty of other countries where

travelling can be more pleasant. In India, for example, I found the hassle to be legendary, but it was done with such a feeling of fun about it that it was more like a daily game than a chore. Sure, some places like Agra and Fatehpur Sikri have tipped over the edge and are irritating beyond belief, but as a rule I found the hassle in India to be totally acceptable, and a part of the spirit of the place. Indonesia, on the other hand, was different. Away from the tourist areas the people were wonderfully friendly, if a little over-invasive of one's privacy, but in the tourist spots of Java and Sumatra the touts were often unpleasant, and I found the same flavour of unpleasantness in southern Morocco.

The difference lies in respect for each other as human beings. I'd be a fool to harp on about respect when the West has effectively stomped all over developing countries for most of modern history, but the worst touts in Morocco and Indonesia obviously have absolutely no respect for tourists at all – they seem to view westerners as walking wallets, and nothing more. I can sympathise with this view, as no doubt plenty of tourists act like walking wallets, but it does make the whole exercise of exploring the country a chore, and this can't be good for the long-term tourist industry.

Take Tinerhir, for example. Tinerhir is on the main east-west highway from Marrakech to the desert, and is the stopping-off point for exploring Todra Gorge, a huge

gash in the High Atlas that's a not unpleasant stop for the night. Tinerhir, though, is nothing special, and given the locals' approach to tourism, I doubt that will change.

We stopped at Tinerhir for a drink and to try to track down some pharmaceutical help for my worsening intestinal problems, and as soon as we were out of the car, the touts descended. We politely told them we weren't interested in having a guided tour and that we only wanted a drink, but shaking off Moroccan touts takes a lot more than a polite no. It takes almost forcible 'no's, to the point of distraction.

We did manage to get to a café, though, and sat down at a small table, hoping for peace so we could plan our next move, as the pharmacy was firmly shut, unlike my little problem. And, of course, that's when the next tout showed up, starting off with the usual small talk.

«*Bonjour, vous êtes Français?*» – he tried.

«*Non, Angliases*» – we said, refusing to be drawn into too much French in the hope that he wouldn't have much English.

«*Je ne parle pas Anglais*» – he said, shrugging
'What a pity', we lied. 'Ah well.'

«*Il fait chaud*» – he chimed, trying for the Achilles heel of English people everywhere: the weather.

'Um,' we nodded unconvincingly, trying to fake it that we didn't understand. This didn't stop him pulling up a chair and plonking himself down at our table.

‘Is possible to make guide *kasbah*,’ he suggested, suddenly overcoming his lack of English. ‘Today market *especial*, then *palmeraies*, then special for eating in Hôtel Kashbah, *c’est mon restaurant*, yes?’

‘No thanks, we’re not interested in a guided tour,’ we repeated. ‘All we want it a drink, and then we are going up to Todra Gorge to find a hotel and to have a shower. We have been driving for five hours, you know.’

‘*Oui*,’ he continued, ‘but is possible to make guide to *kasbah*,’ *palmeraies*, market, eating, yes?’

We repeated our explanation in French, in the hope that five hours’ driving in the heat would elicit some sympathy.

‘But this hotel also has *douche*,’ he said, as if that would make a difference.

‘I don’t care if it has a shower,’ I said in French, ‘because I am ill and I am tired, and all I want is a rest.’ I even smiled in a slightly self-pitying way, desperately trying to appeal to the man’s human nature.

‘Yes, but is possible to make guide *kasbah*,’ he said, sticking to his guns. ‘I guide.’

«*Non, merci*» – we said. «*L’addition, s’il vous plaît.*»

‘I order whisky Berber,’ he said, referring to the custom of drinking mint tea, during which it is impolite to drink fewer than three glasses.

‘No, thank you,’ we said, pre-empting a disaster.
«*C’est combien?*»

And we paid the waiter to the sound of the man’s mantra, ‘Is possible to make guide to *kasbah*, *palmeraies*, market, eating, yes?’

Unfortunately it’s practically impossible to get away from this sort of conversation, which is depressingly familiar in southern Morocco (I have no idea if it is as common elsewhere, but I sincerely hope not). There are plenty of lovely people behind the touts’ tenacious approaches, but you have to go out of your way to find them; on our way north from the desert we stopped at a natural rock pool, Le Source Bleue de Meski, where a bunch of young boys started splashing us, much to the consternation of their mothers on the touchline. We didn’t mind, of course, and the women were so relieved and impressed that Peta had reacted so pleasantly to their children’s antics, that they waved her over and chatted away in basic French. They were lovely, and no doubt far more typical of Moroccans than the idiots who approach you whenever you arrive anywhere.

On the other hand, another little boy at the pool made some camels out of grass and insisted on giving them to us (despite my refusal three times), and on the way out he flagged down our car and demanded a present (so he got an old chocolate bar that had melted

in the sun). Perhaps there's a culture in some parts of Moroccan society that sees bleeding tourists of money as a solution to the country's financial woes, but this attitude is totally destructive. I doubt I'll bother to return to Morocco, because the hassle is so irritating, and it's not because of the hassle, just the way it's done.

Try as I might, I just ended up disliking most of the Moroccans I met, because they almost all end up trying to sell you something, even those who are apparently chatting to you because they want to chat. If the hard sell isn't in your face within two seconds of the locals springing into your way, it'll crop up soon enough: five minutes into your conversation you'll find out that your host has a carpet shop, or runs a restaurant, or is a tour guide, or has something else that you didn't know you wanted but won't be able to refuse... and when you refuse, the reaction is designed to make you feel guilty. It's hard going, and it can't help but turn you into a cynic.

It's counterproductive, frequently unpleasant, and gives the rest of the country a bad name... and when tourism counts for a significant amount of your country's income, it's pretty stupid. Perhaps this is why the authorities in Marrakech have put a lot of effort into tackling the problem of *faux guides* in the city centre, and the result is a refreshingly hassle-free environment, one in which one feels one can spend time and money

enjoying oneself, rather than side-stepping the touts. I can only hope that this lesson extends to the rest of the country, because while Moroccan hassle might be legendary, it's not the sort of legend that makes visitors want to come back.

And if people don't keep coming back, then the touts have only got themselves to blame. A recent government study showed that 94% of people who visit Marrakech do not return for a second time, which was what prompted the cleaning up of the city's touts. Let's just hope they manage to sort out the rest of the country too.

Desert Food

Written: 16 June 2002

The guidebooks will tell you that Moroccan food is excellent, and in general they are right. Marrakech is an amazing place for a feed, and by all accounts the northern cities like Fés and Meknès are excellent too. What they don't tend to mention is that once you're out of the cities and in the desert, you're in for the same food all the time, especially in the off-season. It can get really wearing.

The Berbers, who inhabit southern central Morocco, are deeply proud of their food, which basically boils down to the following:

- *Salade Marocaine*, which consists of chopped tomatoes, onions, green peppers and cucumber, with boiled potatoes and olives if you're in a really classy establishment.
- *Tagines*, which are named after the pots in which they are cooked. A typical *tagine* contains some kind of meat (mainly chicken or lamb) along with potatoes, carrots and a smattering of other vegetables, all cooked in the same juices.
- *Brochettes*, which are skewered bits of marinated meat, cooked on a barbecue.
- *Harira*, which is a bit like tomato soup with pulses and various other vegetables chucked in.
- *Couscous*, but only in theory. *Couscous* takes forever to cook, so unless it's already cooked or you're in a city, the chances are slim of finding any. Which is a pity, because it's not bad.
- Moroccan bread, which comes in a loaf shaped like a large, flat bun, and which is handy for soaking up the soups and juices of the above.

That's not a bad spread, but what amazed me was how totally inflexible the menus were in the desert land of

the Berbers. Every hotel we stayed in, and every restaurant, provided us with the choice of *tagines* or *brochettes*, but precious little else except salad and bread. The first day it was fun, the second it was OK, the third it was a little repetitive, and by the fourth day I was dreaming of anything other than yet more *tagines* and *brochettes*. After getting sick on whichever *tagine* it was that blew my stomach away, I couldn't even stand the word *tagine*. And as for *brochettes*, after a while all I wanted to do was stick the skewers into the authors of our guidebook, who couldn't fall over themselves fast enough in proclaiming Moroccan food as some of the best on the planet.

Yes, the food in the Moroccan desert is good, but only for one meal. After that, it's utterly, utterly boring, which is not something the guidebooks point out. Perhaps I'm missing something, but there's a restaurant down the road from me in London where they sell top-quality Moroccan food. And guess what they sell? Salads, *tagines*, *brochettes*, *harira*, bread and precious little else. Except in London they're three times the price, of course.

Ouarzazate

Written: 16 June 2002

By the time we arrived at Todra Gorge, after a long and

tiring drive through the sandstorms of the south and the touts of Tinerhir, we were both feeling totally knackered. I hadn't eaten properly for three days and was surviving on oral rehydration salts and dried biscuits, and Peta was suffering from the excessive heat of the desert. We needed a break.

This we completely failed to get. Todra Gorge is a pleasant spot *en route* from the east to the west, and in the 300m-high gorge there's a natural spring, a couple of hotels and restaurants, and a respite from the touts by dint of a Dr5 entrance fee at the end of the sealed road. However all this passed us by somewhat as first me and then Peta felt hot and then slightly dizzy, before we each threw up copiously, noisily and regularly in our hotel. We managed to eat precisely nothing, and lay in sweaty sheets for a whole night, sleeping on and off for 12 hours before the sun rose on another day of hot, slightly swaying travel. Peta felt well enough to drive, but I lost my breakfast to the gorge, and we decided enough was enough, and that I needed a doctor. The only problem was that it was Sunday, and like most of the world, Morocco shuts down on the day of rest.

Our first port of call was Tinerhir, where the pharmacy was shut and the touts couldn't seem to work out the difference between 'doctor' and 'guided tour of the *kasbah*'. So we struck west along the P31, looking for any signs of pharmaceutical life all the way to

Ouarzazate, where we'd been only a week before. Ouarzazate boasts a hospital, but even this was shut, and it took us some time to track down the only open pharmacy in town. It's true the world over, not just Morocco, but if you're going to be ill, the best advice is to try not to make it happen on a Sunday.

Luckily we found a supermarket that actually resembled a supermarket (though it was only a resemblance), so we were able to stock up on comfort food to ease us through our recuperation, because by this time we'd had enough of regurgitated Moroccan food to last us a lifetime. It gave us just about enough strength to get back to Marrakech, where you can live a life of western luxury, even down to the delights of McDonald's and Pizza Hut.

Which helped immensely, I have to admit...

THE END

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Happy travels!

Mark Moxon, September 2004

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