

RETURN TO MOROCCO

March 2016

It wasn't intentional but 10 years ago to the day I set off for Spain and North Africa. Morocco being the first country on my 2006 Trans-Africa Expedition that ended in Angola. This time I'd joined up with a seemingly capable group of riders for a simple tour of Morocco.

We disembarked quickly enough at Bilbao and were soon heading for the first night's stop in Salamanca. An uneventful ride, except that the guy with all the latest gear and unnecessary additions to his bike lost half his clothes across the motorway as he hadn't fastened his panniers properly. He had two large stickers on his panniers pronouncing him or his bike as a World Crosser. With the help of some tape we changed the C and r for another letter. The following day, heading for the south of Spain in the rain, someone jettisoned their wallet from an unfastened pocket. It was never found.

It was just a short ride to the ferry in the morning for North Africa, where Mr Fixit eased us through the border crossing like toothpaste from a tube. Finally we were on Moroccan soil. All too late though, as our ferry across the Med' had been delayed. We rode on, in the dark and the rain for several hours through the Rif Mountains, unable to enjoy the view, finally arriving in Fes at 10.00p.m.

By day, the men standing around in their hooded Djellabas looked the spitting image of Obi Wan Kenobi but by night they took on a more sinister appearance, looking much like the Grim Reaper.

It had been snowing heavily in the Atlas Mountains overnight and the leaves of the palm trees lining the road were bent 90 degrees as we left that morning. We must have been nuts but we pressed on over the Middle Atlas in minus 1 degree temperatures and snow flurries. The roads having just been cleared by a snow plough. I had every bit of clothing on, close to a survival mode, longing to drop down into warmer climes.

Finally we arrived at our destination, a small village on the edge of the desert and in darkness for a second night running. After parking up the others went on an hour's camel ride to a camp where they stayed the night. Me, I slept in the guest house where we'd parked our bikes. What bliss, after another long day in demanding conditions.

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Djellaba Wearer



Middle Atlas

RETURN TO MOROCCO (cont.)

Some welcome warmth and sunshine today, as we crossed the stone strewn Jebel Sahro desert, heading back towards the mountains and a visit to the Todra Gorge. The dead straight road was littered with rickety stalls, all displaying fossils and ornate minerals. The stall holders stood with their arms outstretched, holding their wares in the palm of their hands, hoping to part us from our money.



Roadside Stall

To my mind we wasted an hour visiting the Dades Gorge the following morning before heading off under clear blue skies and increasing temperatures. Then, frustratingly, we stopped for a full two hour lunch. By now we had no time left for eventualities, finally crossing over the High Atlas, late in the afternoon. Until now the roads had been great but that all changed as we began our descent into Marrakech on a road that was in the process of some serious reconstruction. We encountered gravel, rocks and slippery mud but no tarmac for miles. My bike's rear end went a couple of times and in one spot I slid and waggled but managed to hold on to it. Two others were not so fortunate and dropped their bikes, one trapping his leg under the rear wheel. Our "short easy day" had turned into yet another epic.

Some of us didn't even change for dinner that evening but went straight to the bar covered in mud, before a naff meal in the hotel restaurant. A good job that tomorrow was a day off.

Someone had to do it but it wasn't me. One of the group was parading around our Marrakech hotel in a Djellaba. Humph.

I was determined that today would be my last day riding with the group. The endless stops and unnecessary late arrivals were beginning to irk. It was meant to be a straight forward ride to Meknes with a detour to the Cascades d'Ouzoud. The bend was innocuous enough but she didn't take it well and left the road by going down an embankment and tumbling into a field. Her bike panniers bounced over her head in a cloud of dust and when I got to her she was lying in an awkward position, motionless. After what seemed an age she started to move and slowly straightened herself and eventually, after a cursory check of her limbs and for any injuries was helped to her feet. We repaired her bike as best we could with gaffer tape and ratchet straps, before slowly moving off.

The Cascades were reasonable enough with a pleasing rainbow but the river feeding it had more in keeping with Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, the water being so brown. Not an Oompa Loompa in sight but plenty of Obi Wan Kenobis.



Approaching Todra Gorge

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RETURN TO MOROCCO (cont.)

The south of Spain was far hotter than Morocco, with blazing sunshine for two days. Very pleasant but soon forgotten as I departed, the ferocious wind being a serious threat. I rode north across the newly built viaducts, high up in the Andalusian Mountains, heading for Santander and the Saturday night ferry, leaving the warmth of the Costa del Sol behind. Marbella to Guadalupe onto Valladolid and then Santander. Three days would get me there in a leisurely fashion.

The new tarmac with its granite chippings glistened in the morning sun as I departed the small Medieval Monastery town of Guadalupe. The snow capped Gredos Mountains came ever closer as I gobbled up the miles, blasting along sweeping roads, all to myself. The route over the Sierra de Gredos was a truly Alpine experience, topping out at 1,600 metres, except that I wasn't in the Alps but 100 kilometres west of Madrid. The mountains finally gave way to the plains of the Central Plateau and long straight roads to tonight's destination in a Vineyard.

Approaching the Picos Mountains, for a second time in six months, I made sure that I was fuelled up. I didn't want to have that uncomfortable feeling again of being low on fuel, miles from anywhere. Late that afternoon I was on the ferry for Portsmouth.

A trip in demanding conditions requiring both mental and physical resilience but then these trips are meant to be an adventure, aren't they?



Contact Gordon

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