

## MOROCCO OVERLAND

*Imagine a life where ... your home is just sheets of plastic, corrugated iron and a dirt floor. Imagine a life where ... your donkey is the only means of transport. Imagine a life where ...*

Coast to coast; forests, mountains, gorges, desert, Roman ruins and wild camping. 'Make the most of your Land Rover on an adventure with the experts' was the tag line. The idea of driving across Morocco has long been one of Angus's ambitions, and in November of last year our research into taking an overland trip became a reality. I should say that it was mainly my preference for personal security that we chose to travel with a company with experience and expertise of the country. Notwithstanding notions of Nash's Marrakesh Express (1969), and the cache of the post-hippie trail, I was wary of travelling independently in remote areas of northern Africa. So we researched 4x4 vehicle overland trips and booked to join a reputable company, who regularly run overland adventures for a variety of off-road experiences. Their aim is to encourage owners to fully utilise the potential of their vehicle, to experience just the right amount of adventure and fun within the limitations of their ability to drive across a variety of terrains safely. In other words, you need to know your 4x4 vehicle's true 'technical' capability and be confident enough to drive it across some pretty uncompromisingly tough terrain, without being precious (as Angus says, no 'I need to polish the bodywork' announcements would cut the ice on this trip!). Fundamentally, this was an intense off-road driving and camping trip. It was definitely going to be a fair test for our ex-military Land Rover 'Wolf' ambulance! (The term 'Wolf' is the name given to upgraded and strengthened Land Rover Defenders supplied to the British military.)

In brief, the itinerary promised a round trip of around 2,000 kilometres, beginning with a ferry from Algeciras, Spain, across to the port of Cueta (actually part of Spain), staying overnight in Chefchaouen, Morocco. Then driving via the remains of the Roman settlement, Volubilis, to Zaida in the lower Atlas mountains and the apple-growing capital Midelt, over the Jbel Saghro range—mainly off-road—in the high Atlas mountains and down through the Todra gorge. Next, more challenging off-road driving through the Vallee du Draa, rich with date palms, green and fertile banks, to Zagora bordering the Sahara desert, (with a spot of wild camping), including following in the tracks of the Dakar rally route to Tantan. Then returning along the coast, high across the cliffs and via Cape Draa and down onto the coastal dunes at Targa Wassay (wild camping in the sand dunes), ending with an overnight hotel stop in the colonial splendour of the Palais Salam, Taroudant (the only hotel stop!). Finally, driving across the picturesque Tizi-n-Test



pass, climbing to 6,785 ft, on multiple hairpin and hair-raising bends and descending to an overnight stop in Marrakesh, before heading back to the port of Tangier.

At the same time that we were planning our trip, an interesting piece of television memorabilia was featured in celebration of fifty years of the world's longest running children's TV show, the BBC's Blue Peter. I downloaded a copy of their 1968 programme to take with us, featuring presenters Valerie Singleton, John Noakes and Peter Purves who set off from London in a Land Rover to go on a safari through Morocco, ending up in Marrakesh—sounds familiar!! Their trip began with the Land Rover being craned onto a freight ship at St Katharine's Docks—cheating! It was a nostalgic programme (for a child of the sixties!) and their route was not dissimilar to ours, in part. Consequently, we held an open air film show featuring the Blue Peter episode from the back of our Wolf in the sand dunes at Targa Wassay, with the Atlantic Ocean breakers as a background accompaniment. A charming anecdote from one member of the group is that he can remember watching this very episode as a boy of eleven and it is what inspired him, years later, to take one of these overland trips with his wife and eighteen month old daughter. That was ten years ago and he has since returned eight times! The power of TV—or Blue Peter!

'Remember convoy procedure, make sure you keep up with the vehicle in front but do not lose sight of the vehicle behind you.' This was definitely the mantra that was important to adhere to, but having CB radio helped keep us in constant communication. In particular, our group leader was able to warn us of approaching hazards, but also ahead of police checks—of which there were numerous around towns—and army checkpoints, which we encountered more in the south, across the Sahara, nearer to the Algerian border (over which there is still a dispute between Morocco and Algeria). This is where your paperwork had to be in order, and was

another reason why travelling as part of a group meant that we were well prepared.



Morocco's vast landscapes are equal in their grandeur to some of the national park landscapes of sister continents in America and Australia. Driving over Jbel Saghro range and an area named 'the black mountains', there were geological structures similar to the hoodoos (irregular columns of rock) which can be found in Bryce Canyon, Utah. Approaching the Atlas mountains, we

drove through stunning, often lunar-like landscapes. In the mornings, there was a richness in the colours of the rock and sandstone; soft pinks and orange ochres. One of the surprises was the richness of vegetation in the most unlikely spots; wild rosemary and rocket growing in dry, sandy soil (delicious vegetation for the camels!) ... and yes, there are camels—single-humped dromedary camels, gently grazing; the ships of the Moroccan desert.

***Kate Cameron***

*(To be concluded)*

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*(Continued from Bosham Life, March 2019, pages 14-15)*

We passed mountain Berber communities living in a variety of homes ranging from makeshift tents—wood, sticks and branches covered in plastic—stone-built and a few purpose-built (mud). In the south, most Berber communities were living simple lives in remote rural landscapes with just their donkeys and small flocks of sheep and/or goats and the inevitable dogs; using primitive agriculture—wooden ploughs—tending small patches of land to grow vegetables and fruit. It became a comfort and a



challenge to catch sight of a Berber in these remote areas by scanning the landscape for a few black dots in the distance; as the images became clearer, there came into view a small flock of sheep or goats—and then a further, careful look and there was a shepherd Berber, often alone. These small flocks of sheep or goats were always accompanied by a shepherd—nearly would be a makeshift pen, for safety overnight. It is a Biblical landscape—and not just to look at, but a country in which to be absorbed.

At the roadside, Berber children ran to wave and yell out, hoping for handouts of sweets or 'stylo'! Some offered homemade bread, which was baked in roadside clay kiln ovens. We drove on small, narrow tracks through some more established Berber villages with their mud-built houses or ksour; women were washing laundry in the rivers, there was sweetcorn drying on the side of the road, tapestries of coloured bedding and clothes draped over mud walls, chickens and dogs were roaming and always the young children would wave happily or come running towards us. We passed many school buildings which were all well built, and uniformly, in brightly painted colours; some had their own minibus. Also along the roadside we encountered a wealth of produce for sale at times—pomegranates, olives, honey, bread, oranges, dates. A main source of income, particularly for Berber women, is the production of Argan oil. Driving through villages, we rarely stopped, unless to source basic provisions in a local 'shop'—flat breads and water. Although mostly greeted with smiles and waves, there were a small number of children who gesticulated rudely. What must we look like in our brash, laden vehicles and—to their eyes—huge wealth? I was unsure about some of our group throwing out 'bon-bons'—mostly, it felt uncomfortable; voyeuristic and bourgeois. The mobile phone is widely in use and small solar panels for re-charging could be seen propped up against the most primitive of homes. It clearly enhances the natural 'bartering' culture and greatly enhances their connectivity. However, for the Berber-Muslim communities, it must be opening up a world beyond anything that they could previously have imagined.

Of course, Morocco is not only a feast for the eyes, but also a feast for food lovers—home of the tagine, couscous and mint tea. However, there is always a risk of an upset stomach when eating food away from home, mainly linked to the water. As independent travellers, we were always well stocked with provisions, so we took quite a lot of tinned food, pasta, rice and dry biscuits with us. Also, we didn't want to risk being ill, with the amount of driving we were doing on a daily basis. Of the fourteen members of our group, sadly four were ill during the trip, thanks to eating local food. We regularly bought fresh fruit, freshly baked flat breads and I loved the delicious mint tea, which most roadside cafés served.

Finally, we had an overnight camping stop at Marrakesh and at dusk we took a trip into the medina quarter and infamous main square, Jemaa el-Fnaa, where locals and tourists flock every evening. How to describe it? It's a fusion of festival and market trading with what's said to be the largest outdoor 'restaurant' in the world. There are street performers, musicians with a propensity to bang drums, storytelling and yes, there were snakes, but no snake-charming!! (I'm not a fan!) I made the mistake of trying to take a quick photo and was immediately confronted and asked for money and, 'Did I want a picture with a snake draped around me?!' Within the overwhelming chaos we found the street food area, accosted and bombarded with offers of dining... singing and dancing around us, it was a circus of musical theatre! After our meal of grilled lamb, we took our chances in the souks. Bursting with colour, characters and more hassling, most certainly for 'made in China' copies! In short, the square is vibrant, frenetic and intense. Once visited, never forgotten.

So, what were our highlights? For Angus, it was driving across the Sahara for hours in a sandstorm! Also, the Wolf's ability to cope with the terrain; as a twenty year old vehicle with sixty year old technology (no computers) against the Land Rover 90s and 110s with us, (90 and 110 refers to their wheelbases in inches). My highlights included seeing the hard-working donkeys (which appear to be cared for)—still the most used transport for Berbers and in general use across Morocco. Also the Berber villages and shepherds with their goats and sheep in the remotest of places; you're never far from a Berber! Finally, haggling with Mohammed in Zagora to buy my magic carpet and he taught me how to tie a scarf around my head—Berber style—as protection across the desert.

This is just a snapshot of our Moroccan adventure. The absence of technical difficulties is evident. Our Wolf conquered the terrain as a result of Angus's propensity to over-engineer, together with skilful driving throughout. And if there's one thought to take away, it's to see Morocco while you can, before the country becomes more westernised and the magic of its people is altered forever.

***Kate Cameron***

