

Motorcycling Moroc

By William Prouty

In February 2002 I teamed up with British computer geek-turned-adventure motorcyclist Lee Crahart, for 3 stunning weeks thumping along Morocco's half-paved roads and spectacular backcountry tracks. Along the way we evaded stone-hurling children, sipped saccharine tea with a BMW-riding Canadian drug dealer, discussed politics with a French anarchist, and declined dozens of rides on camels... all coincidentally named Jimi Hendrix.

Solo Through Europe

Less than a year after television coverage of the Paris-Dakar rally sparked my cylinders, I checked my tank bags on a plane bound for London, bought a seasoned 1986 Yamaha XT600E Ténéré, and had racks and other overland modifications fabricated. Because Lee was still manacled to his office PC, we decided to rendezvous after two months in Chefchouen Morocco. On December 15th, with passport, green card (insurance), international drivers license and a wad of cash insulating my ribs I took a deep breath, exhaled steam through my helmet and set off on the wrong side of the road to catch the ferry to Europe.

Apart from a tank-sparking slide on Belgian black ice, a complete engine replacement in southern France and a run-in with Spanish Policía, my European wanderings went off without a hitch. I even found time to admire some of the castles, cathedrals and museums dotting the motorways, but by the time I finally arrived in Gibraltar to catch the Morocco-bound ferry, I was ready for fresh dirt.

Introduction to Africa

Crossing into Morocco was by far the most unpleasant experience of the trip. Jostling with carpet exporters, hash dealers and howling old women, after completing the stack of official paperwork I was so disconcerted that for 100 miles I blindly tailed another tourist with French plates. As police checkpoints became less frequent I regained my confidence, deserted my unknowing "wing man" and stopped to ask directions from a group of teenagers cooking fish by a river. Intrigued by my "Paris-Dakar Moto" they offered to share their meal and pointed out our location on my Michelin map. Digging deep to recall my high school French I think we talked about high unemployment and their dreams of becoming European soccer stars, but then again we could have been talking about the fish. In either case, whatever I uttered was coherent enough that one of the kids offered me a room at his family's home for the night... I think. With only his phone number, I set off to find the city of Ksar el Kabir.

When I finally pulled into the dusty little town near dusk I tried unsuccessfully to contact the family I was supposed to spend the night with. Resigning myself the local hotel, I searched out a cash machine. While waiting in line I met a fabricator named Hassane, and over a cup of tea I explained my situation. He took pity on my sad looking bike and invited me to his home for dinner. Such is the tradition of true Moroccan hospitality that I ended up spending the next three

days with his family, sharing sumptuous meals, discussing international politics, and generally immersing myself in Moroccan life. By the time I set off to find Lee in Chefchouen, my French was better than it had ever been, I had friends nearby, and my confidence was up.

After a challenging ride on washed-out roads, I approached Morocco's "Healing City" through a series of Rif Mountain switchbacks. Having spoken only ten words of English in the last 3 weeks of solo riding, the conversation with Lee and the two other overlanders staying at the dilapidated "Five Star" hotel was extraordinary. Chugging beers on the cliff-top terrace, we discussed bikes, tense boarder-crossings and compared tales of being run off the road. With waiters hovering nearby I felt like a colonial adventurer. It was good to be with bikers again.

Early the next morning we set off for the ruins of Rome's most southerly outpost and Morocco's ancient cedar forest with its troops of barbary apes. After a satisfying ride we pulled over to ask the locals about suitable campsites. With the stunned reactions including, "Why would you want to do that!? There are no people there!" we eventually settled on pitching tent on the concrete floor of abandoned ranger station deep in the forest. After our tiny fire died, I passed the coldest night of my life in full riding gear while Lee nearly died in his cotton sleeping bag.

A French Anarchist – "Keep Warm, Burn the Rich"

Pulling up to Morocco's largest waterfall, a dozen locals surrounded us hoping to either "guide" us to the falls or "guard" our bikes. As we attempted to break free from these persistent entrepreneurs, another overlander arrived... on a bicycle. He introduced himself as Stefan and after telling the pack of men to "piss off" in French, began his tale of wandering the world as a French Jedi anarchist. Over lunch, Stefan recounted stories of squatting in Paris, biking 10,000 miles across Europe sleeping on roadsides, searching for penguins, promoting socialism, and surviving on \$2 a day. Though not convinced of his cause, Lee and I picked Stefan's brain for everything from who and what you can barter with, to tips on locating campsites.

Lost in the Desert

Seasoned adventurers, we started off late as usual, covering a 150 mile stretch of road that averaged one tire bonfire (signifying the birth of a son?), 12 stray dogs, and 300 black plastic bags per mile before reaching the outpost town of Errichieda. Arriving too near dusk to ride into Algeria for a cheap thrill, we agreed on the less ambitious goal of crossing the 30-mile stretch of desert to Merzouga. Completely disregarding every safety rule in our bible, "The Adventure Overlanding Handbook" by Chris Scott, we set off... following random tire tracks, with only half a bottle of Coke, useless maps... in the dark. After an hour of sand traps, low speed spills, and frustratingly slow progress, we finally paused to rethink our "strategy" when the distant city lights guiding us began to move. Taking compass bearings and plugging the rough village coordinates into our GPS units, we agreed to ride another 20 minutes before resorting to a night of bush camping. As our deadline approached I grew anxious that we had missed the village entirely and were slogging ever nearer to the land-mined Algerian border. Just as I was resigning to pitch tent in the featureless ocean of sand and scrub, we crested a ridge and beheld twenty or so twinkling lights beckoning us to land. Within minutes we were flagged down by a swarm of

moped riding Kasbah managers, and gladly retired for the night.

Tucked away in Morocco's most southeasterly corner, the remote village of Merzoga strategically hugs the spectacular Erg Chebbi dunes that served as the set for the film "The Mummy." With annual motor rallies rooster-tailing nearby, this oasis town has developed into an overlander Mecca -- evidenced by hundreds of team and sponsor decals (including one Goldwing Club!) plastering every Kasbah foyer. Emerging from a well-deserved rest into blinding spring rays, we unloaded our gear, deflated the tires to 3PSI (rimlocks required!), and set off to play in the sand. With high revs, lots of speed and massive over-confidence, for 100 glorious yards I was master of the dunes, which made the following hour dragging my bike out of the sand relatively worthwhile. Dehydrated and exhausted from the effort we trudged back to the Kasbah to recover over our customary mid-day meal of Tajine, Snickers and Coca-Cola. Interrupting our indolence, four BMW riders entered the compound -- precisely spaced, beautifully equipped, completely in control and, of course... totally German.

The Germans and Mad Pete

Deutschland leads the world in the "very serious" sport of adventure motorcycling with dozens of catalogues and outfitters devoted to the pursuit. Fortunately, the Germans we met were always willing to share their wisdom, generally starting conversations with "Zat is incorrect" or "your frame vill break here. You need tee-tanium". Unfortunately, they are almost always correct.

The typical non-German overlander at best looks like a lost WWII military courier skirting enemy lines. At worst, riders risk being mistaken for refugees and finding themselves camped on a boarder awaiting amnesty papers. The beast of burden most often saddled by riders is some sort of bulletproof Japanese thumper. From this reliable and easily repaired base, racks, mounts, frames, luggage, tanks, GPS kits, lawn chairs, bags and spares are attached until a completely new, extremely ugly, severely overweight and possibly unrideable breed of bike is born.

There are always exceptions to overlander style, and Pete was one of them. Minutes before leaving for Zagora, Lee and I were intercepted by a XR400 rider outfitted in loafers, a tweed smoking jacket and an "old-school" open face MX helmet. Pete was British, suffering from a minor midlife crisis, and attacked the dirt with a vigour and zeal belying his years. Hearing rumors that two incompetent riders were nearby, he had spent the previous day tracking down our British plates in hopes of joining us. With my bike shedding bolts and killing small desert rodents with every toxic smoky start-up, I was glad for Pete's experience as we set off for Morocco's most desolate trails.

Buying Flying Carpets

I only use the term desolate in relative terms. Traversing ancient mountain passes and barren desert plains we restricted our water breaks to a maximum of 2 minutes. Just under the time it took the rock, fossil, pottery and carpet sellers to emerge from an extensive tunnel network linking Morocco to factories in Taiwan and China. To cope with the constant onslaught we

quickly learned to take the opposite fork at any junction with frantically waving hands and accelerate past packs of furiously running kids. On our low energy days we spoke Russian and Estonian dialects, the only languages enterprising vendors have not yet mastered to extract a tourist buck. Here are some of the more entertaining examples:

- "Algeria is very close, very dangerous. You stay here. Landmines!" Roughly 400 miles from the Algerian border.
- "Your GPS will not work in this desert. You will need guide. I will ride on back."
- "You should stay with me. There are no people where you go. Very dangerous."
- "You do not want to go to [*name of any city other than the one you are currently in*] There is no water there. It is very dangerous"
- "Jimmy Lewis is my friend. He stayed with me last year. He will return with his family soon." Pointing to a poster of Richard Sainct. "That is him."
- "Come see my treasures." Opening a rickety wooden chest filled with dozens of brass knives manufactured circa 2001. "These are old, very special. I only sell these to you."
- "Yes, I have four-stroke motorcycle oil. Wait here." Returning 30 minutes later with oil specifically for Diesel cars from a Mobile station within walking distance. "Here. Perfect for your bike. Your moto will like."
- "I know where to buy Morocco stickers. Come with me". Leading us into a room that looks dubiously like a carpet shop. "Tell me, which of these carpets do you like best?"
- "Can I have your riding jacket for my father? He would like it very much."
- "Can I have your [*GPS / Compass / flashlight / any piece of invaluable kit*] as a petit cadeaux?"

On the flip side, whether in-spite-of or due-to a lack of proper equipment and parts, Moroccan mechanics are among the most resourceful craftsman I have ever met. For only \$5 my thread-stripped magnesium oil filter cover was repaired with a bolt and length of pipe, and my damaged fuel-tank mount reinforced with copper wire. Although parts are more difficult to come by, according to overlander lore, damaged conrods have even been cast using hand drawn sand impression moulds... although if I ever reach that point it will be a good sign to head home.

After plotting route coordinates to Zagora on Pete's aviation map and entering them into my Garmin eTrex we set off on the most brilliant ride of my life. Playing tag at 60mph while sliding into corners on the pegs I felt like Jimmy Lewis... except when Pete streaked past me airborne every time I slowed for a ditch. Over the next two days we skimmed washboard roads, charged hard-packed hamada desert three astride, and seared 2nd gear in panoramic single-track mountain descents. When we finally arrived in Zagora my Paris-Dakar fantasy was all but reality after a team of awaiting mechanics rushed to meet us, offering any repair that they could find, whether it was needed or not.

Reaching the Beach

Bidding Pete farewell, Lee and I headed off for the Atlantic coast. After sampling Marrakesh's excellent nightlife with our bikes parked safely in the hotel lobby, we arrived at Essaouira, Africa's surf capital and former holiday residence of Jimi Hendrix, explaining the preferred nom du camel. Buying supplies, we met another rider packing his German registered BMW GS1100. Surprised by Jerry's (not his real name) friendly Canadian greeting instead of the anticipated

efficient Germanic mechanical audit, we agreed to follow him to his campsite and share dinner.

With the sun setting over the ocean we ate canned tuna round the campfire while Jerry recounted tales of touring Morocco every winter for the past few years. Curious how a Harley-riding "Deadhead" could afford to store his bike in Germany when he returned to Canada, I asked Jerry what line of work he was in. In a nonchalant rasp he replied, "Oh you know. I make some jewellery, do a bit of construction and sell some weed ... well, I sell a lot of weed." For the rest of the evening we learned the intricacies of eluding Hell's Angels, laundering money, and international hydroponics use.

Limping Home

After a few mornings being roused by the pack of friendly beach dogs, we set off on the last leg of our trip, quickly passing through the foul metropolises of Casablanca and Rabat. Pushing through strong headwinds and thick pollution, we were filthy and tired by the time we dined on McSahara Burgers in Tangier awaiting our ferry to Europe. Suffering from her heart transplant in France, the "Millennium Falcon's" only lifeline was my regular plea to, "hold together baby". By this point the bike had shaken the fuel tank from its mounts, was burning a litre of oil every 150 miles, ignored my requests for headlights and indicators, melted the plastics and luggage, and completely squared-off all knobbles the tires once had. In three months the Falcon had done a few thousand hard miles and was desperate for a garage. Anticipating hot showers and hundreds of pictures documenting the best riding of my life, I had to admit I was ready to go as well.

Long-distance adventure motorcycling doesn't require much more than a reliable bike with a big tank, a good sense of humor, a lot of duct tape and cable ties. Planning doesn't hurt, but in the end it comes down to just doing it... after which you'll never want to travel without the freedom offered by a big thumper. Tracks dissect nearly every bit of land on earth... so why not bring a bike? Addicted, I'm already planning my 2004 trip to Central America for more thrills, spills and blasts over lonely track. Until then... happy trails.

