

cycling morocco



Sylvie's Travel Journal
CYCLING TRIP - October 2006 to... MOROCCO - PART 1 and 2

By Sylvie Theberge

www.sylvietheberge.com

I left Toronto for England on October 6 and a few days later, Martin and I left for Agadir, Morocco. We cycled in the High Atlas from Marrakech to Ouarzazate and in the “Gorges du Dades” and the “Gorges du Todgha” (pronounced Todra). The 250km route from Marrakech to Ouarzazate has an impressive mountain pass that reaches 2300m. The hairpin bends are endless. Men and young boys are spread out along this route waving amethysts, fossils, and other rocks and minerals of all shapes and sizes, some real, some fakes. Some vendors are quite persistent, seemingly undeterred by the fact that if we carry rocks on our bicycle, we might be rolling back all the way to Marrakech. Their thinking was justified, as Martin - a budding geologist - loaded up his panniers with them. I didn't care as long as he did not sneak them into mine.

Near Ouarzazate, there is a town called Ait Benhaddou. It has an impressive Kasbah constructed in its traditional way, using mud, straw, and timber. This is where parts of Lawrence of Arabia, Gladiator, Jesus of Nazareth and many other films were made. It has been rebuilt for this purpose and is one of the finest Kasbahs in Morocco. In Ouarzazate, we had the privilege of waving to the King. When we arrived, the sidewalks and roadsides were thronged with thousands of the devotees of the Royal Family. They patiently waited for hours for a mere glimpse of him and then he swept through in seconds, in the middle of an American presidential style cavalcade. Security was tight and long before the cavalcade passed by, we were told we could not take photographs or watch from anywhere other than ground level.

Ouarzazate (altitude 1160m) is considered a dump by many, but I didn't mind the town. The film industry has brought in a lot of money to this large tourist centre (population 50,000). It is almost impossible to bypass it if one wishes to visit the south of Morocco. This is where trips to the desert begin and there are plenty of people willing to take you there - for a lot of money. Just as we arrived in Ouarzazate, I broke a spoke which jammed the rear wheel. Although I had a spare spoke, neither one of us had the tool to remove the free wheel (so much for being the organised world cyclist...) We either had to find someone to fix it or my Moroccan travels would end here. All of the shops we had gone to were unable to help us. A man hanging around our hotel offered, generously we thought, to take us in his car to a shop he knew. The mechanic at the shop needed an hour to fix it so we went to the nice man's office for tea but he spent the next two hours trying to sell us a tour in the desert. You quickly learn that nothing is for free in Morocco and that an invitation to tea is likely to lead you to a shop of some kind. In some cases, as it becomes obvious to the shopkeeper that you will not buy anything, you are asked bluntly for a donation, such as the clothes on your back. One jewellery salesman asked Martin for the pants, jacket, and shoes he was wearing. One carpet salesman (I'll explain at a later time about how I ended up in his home in the first place) wanted my cycling trousers... he was twice my size.

Our second adventure was in the gorges which were nothing less than stunning with some of their towering walls reaching a height of 300m on either side of us. The 42km track connecting the northern ends of the Dades and Todgha gorges will go in my cycling history as one of the toughest cycling I have done, considering I pushed the bike uphill for half of that distance, i.e. until we reached the 2800m pass. The rough dry river bed formed the track for much of the time. Martin was determined to stay on the saddle but would sometimes have to swallow his pride and push the bike along.

Martin and I returned to Agadir two weeks later. I forfeited my return ticket to England and decided to continue exploring this amazing country. Martin went back to work but will join me again in March for the following six months. Martin asked me towards the end of the two weeks if I have ever considered becoming a tour guide... I think this was his nice way of telling me that I was bossy... but really, I spoke French and

the locals spoke French. Very little English being spoken in Morocco, I would automatically take the lead which was frustrating for Martin. Now, other than the fact that I will have no one to boss around, I will miss the safety and pleasure of his company but as he would say, I will miss being the Sergeant Major.

THE SOLO PART

I began this solo part of my cycling journey in Tiznit, which is about 1 hour drive south of Agadir on the coast and I was going to head eastward, hopefully all the way to Merzouga. Beyond Merzouga are the Sahara, Algeria, and Tombouctou (it used to be a 52-day trading route to Mali, by camel caravan). I made it as far as Tata (5 days ride), passing through Tafraoute and Igherm. I found this route through the Anti Atlas to be as subliminal as the High Atlas. In Tata, I was told I was in the hottest town in Morocco; it reaches highs of 50 degrees Celsius in the summer. I found the day temperature in the beginning of November almost unbearable.

Tata is a sleepy town with an African feel to it and has just a handful of cars in its streets. It is also called 'ville rose' because of its pink-painted buildings on the main street – although they were desperately in need of a new coat of paint. I met a group of French people (11 camping cars), who were members of an organization called 'Les Amis de Tata'. They have been going there every year for the past 7 years, handing out wheelchairs to the disabled. The little corner where I had set up my tiny netted one-man tent and my cooking apparatus attracted much curiosity among the campers, especially once it was noticed that it belonged to a solo female traveller. This usually initiated a conversation, followed by an invitation to lunch or dinner. The Tata group offered to feed me for the next three days if I stayed.

I always found it entertaining to watch between 10 and 20 camping cars making their entry through the fairly narrow doorways of camping grounds, in such an orderly fashion, each vehicle wearing its allocated number on the windshield.

I became sick in Tata and through the French organization, I met Tata's mayor who offered me the service of his private doctor if needed but I decided to return by bus to Agadir and all its comforting food and accommodation. Today, November 14, after nearly two weeks of R & R, I am well again and leaving tomorrow.

THOUGHTS, IMPRESSIONS, STORIES - Weeks 1-4

My first attraction to Morocco is its subliminal landscape and scenery but I also love the friendliness and hospitality of the Berber people. I love the freshly squeezed orange juice (by far the best in the world). I love the cheers, thumbs up, and signs of encouragement I receive along the route by local drivers and tourists alike... the "Bon Courage!" as I begin a pass and the "Bravo!" as I reach the top. I love being able to communicate with a people of a totally different culture in my first language... everyone who has gone to school can speak French in Morocco...

However, cycling - alone and unsupported - through Morocco is not without a minimum of fuss. Morocco can be demanding and frustrating at times:

Morocco has 4 mountain ranges; there is one mountain pass after another... In the far south - the sub-Saharan - settlements are far apart... On many stretches, you'll run only into nomads and Berber shepherds... the roads are deserted... the land arid... and the hammada (stony desert) can be monotonous. Water is always a concern unless you carry a pail and a rope to draw water from wells – that's after you find the well of course.

According to Moroccans, I am an extra-terrestrial – (they told me) - no Earthly woman could possibly travel alone on a bicycle. As I said earlier, I receive many greetings, enthusiastic waves, and good wishes but other times, the attention I receive is less pleasant. But... whether on a bicycle or otherwise, Western women get stared at constantly. These endless up and down stares and the "Bonjour, ça va, vous êtes de France? Première fois au Maroc?" are sometimes intimidating, annoying, and eventually wearing but in the end, harmless.

Everyone knows that Muslim men rarely meet women prior to marriage so they give their attention to the Western women. In the cafes, streets, bars..., the segregation of the sexes is evident. I stayed at the local hotel in a small non-touristy town called Igherm. To get to my not-so-hygienic \$7 room - I convinced the manager to wipe off the table which still held the remnants of a tagine eaten by the previous guest - I had to pass perhaps 50 men sitting inside and outside the Hotel Café (I think Igherm's hang out). All rooms were occupied by men only. I felt a little out of place but not the least threatened. Overall, Moroccan people show great respect towards visitors to their country – men and women.

ABOUT DOGS... AND CATS

Each day that goes by, each place that I pass through, adds to the list of memorable people, events, experiences... Sometimes, an experience can be a little traumatizing... In that same town, Igherm, I was sitting at an outdoor café (don't picture an outdoor patio at Starbucks but rather a few plastic tables and chairs on the pavement) enjoying a pressed orange juice (I may be overdosing on vitamin C with sometimes 5 glasses a day) when I saw 5 men running after a dog. One of the men had a pail in his hand and was trying to get the dog to drink from it. The dog was not interested. The waiter told me in his bad French that the dog was sick because it ate meat and must be killed. The man with the pail got tired of the dog's disobedience and threw the liquid at it. The dog instantly ceased up, walked a little bit more, received more of the liquid, and died. A few hours later, I happened to look out my hotel room window and the same scenario... another dog... just in front of the butcher shop. The next morning, as I left Igherm, I saw 5 dogs lying dead in the street and the smell, needless to say, was a little foul. It was explained to me that wild dogs are used to "clean" the "unwanted" parts of the butchered animal. The butcher throws these in a corner of his shop. At the end of the day, they get 4-5 stray dogs (they are roaming everywhere) which happily fill their stomach. I am not sure exactly why they must be killed afterwards, whether there are too many dogs, whether they have rabies, or whether they actually do get sick from eating the meat and eventually die. In normal circumstances, this process is done more discreetly (they make the dog drink the poisoned liquid after they have eaten) but the odd dog fails to drink enough. I was as shocked and traumatized as when I saw a dog going into the boiling pot right in front of my eyes in Laos. One way or another, a dog's life is not a happy one in Morocco. Dogs are regarded as dirty (one that pats a dog must wash his/her hand 7 times...) and are ignored. People also seemed oblivious to their wolf-like barking that went on all night, every night, and all around you. Between the dogs barking and the muezzins calling the faithful to prayer at 5:00 a.m. (in some places, it went on for an hour, especially on Fridays), a good pair of earplugs was justified.

Cats, on the other hand, are left roaming peacefully around and are sometimes fed. It was Prophet Mohammed's beloved animal I was told. As soon as you sit at a restaurant, especially in the evening, you are immediately joined by 6-7 cats. The cats might hit the jackpot, i.e., hit a table full of cat lovers and get their feed of tagine and couscous for the night.

...AND KIDS

One of a cyclist's fears on the road is that of being chased by a dog... Once you spot the dog, you "cycle" for your life! In Morocco, what you desperately try to outrun are the kids hounding you for "un bonbon, un dirham, un stylo..." When cycling with Martin, one of us would shout, "Watch out! Kids ahead... on your left... at 10 o'clock!" One kid spots you, then yells out, "Bonjour Madame, bonjour M'sieur!" loud enough to warn all the kids in the village or in the nomad's camp. Then they attack! They dart in front of you, get a hold of your rack, your spare tire, anything... they tug and pull... they point to your bags and say, "beaucoup de bonbons!" Parents sometimes watch but do not intervene... they sometimes beg themselves. Meanwhile, I would look desperately for my getaway – a downhill. Twice, kids have thrown rocks at me in their frustration of being ignored. Once, I threw rocks back at them... just before my escape downhill.

In my opinion, the harassment of tourists by children for pens, money, and candies... is out of control in Morocco. Unfortunately, no one other than the tourists themselves can be blamed and Moroccans will not hesitate to tell us that. I have watched tourists from camping cars and 4 X 4's throw candies and clothes out

of their windows at people alongside the road. This is a sensitive issue for me... I have seen the same practice in others countries but I can't remember it being as bad as it is here. Companies that organize cycling tours in Morocco make some mention of this: "...the tourist might face the "occasional" request for a "stylo" or "bonbon"..." However, it is much more than an occasional request and it is not only in the villages and towns but also along rough tracks (pistes) where you often find only nomads. When I pass a village while the children are in school, I get a little piece and quiet.

It bewilders me how some people seem unaware of the bad impact this bestowing of "gifts" has on the local population... these children are becoming tyrants and vultures... you have to be on the seat of a bicycle to know this. It is hard to resist the temptation of giving to the children and watch them smile but why not use better channels... there are plenty of other ways to give to Morocco's neediest.

Every time I am under attack by a "stylo-mob", I promise myself to write a newspaper article upon my return... to raise awareness on this issue... I might even write to Morocco's King Mohammed VI himself! Then I feel better... until the next attack!

THE BEGGING BUSINESS

The begging in Morocco doesn't stop here however. There is also the begging (like anywhere in the world) by the old, the infirm (so many of them); the abandoned wives... in cafes and restaurants, in the streets, at the market... and while you are on the phone. One man wanted the use of my phone card for a long distance call to "let his wife and children know he was okay". I refused and he told me, "no problem... if you don't care about doing a good deed... helping out people... no problem..." I let him use my card... even though he smelled of alcohol. I have yet to make a phone call without being asked for some "dirham" One problem here is that as soon as you give they are after you for more.

Morocco is renowned for its hospitality, particularly by that of the Berber people in the south. You are unlikely to travel to Morocco without being invited into someone's home. One day, my first day of cycling after Martin left, a guy on a scooter (about 18 years old) invited me to spend the night with his family. I had only cycled 40km by then but I was at the bottom of a pass and I knew I would not reach a place with accommodation by night. Mahfoud introduced me to his family and gave me a tour of his house. Among several rooms, there was one for the donkey, one for the chicken and one for the well. He showed me how the well collects water from the rain. He pulled up some water in a pail to quench his thirst all the while telling me about the fish in the well that died the day before.

I spent most of the time in the "living-room/guest room" with Mahfoud and one of his brothers while his mother and sisters were preparing the tagine for dinner, following the commands of the males of the house. I would have preferred to be in the company of the women and take part in the meal preparation but I could not communicate with them... I could only smile and make sounds of appreciation. All the males in the house spoke functional French and monopolized my attention. In the "salon" (living/guest room), the walls were bare and the only piece of furniture was a satellite TV with a gazillion stations and we watched episodes of Tom and Jerry while eating the delicious tagine. This was not my first experience eating in a Berber home and I am always disturbed by having to eat with the males while the women eat what is left over afterwards.

The number of satellite dishes you see in the most ubiquitous of places can shock you at first but no more than the desert man with his cell phone. I was somewhere in the presence of a Tuareg (the exotic Blue Man of the desert – he is wrapped up from head to toe in an indigo fabric) who was playing the Moroccan drum when I suddenly heard the tune of "Jingle Bells". The Tuareg pulled out a cell phone... the atmospheric mood was quickly halted. With the satellite dishes, the cell phones, and the cheap internet cafes everywhere (about 75 cents per hour), people here are very aware of how the other side of the world lives and most - especially the young men - would like to get out. There is little hope, even for the well educated people, to find a job and 70 per cent of Moroccans are under 30. While being given a tour of Mahfoud's village, the Berber women (with only one eye showing through their many yards of colourful fabric) were chatting with

Mahfoud. Before he began translating, I told him what I guessed they said, that is, that I could be a possible marriage candidate... I was right... even though I am sure they knew I was old enough to be the boy's mother. I had told Mahfoud and his family upon my arrival that I was married. In any case, I did not worry about Mahfoud or his brother - they were both as respectful as one can be and outstanding hosts. Young Moroccans will "chat" you up, indiscriminately of your age. You could be 80 and be made to believe that you are the most beautiful woman to ever walk this planet. One guy in Marrakech, the guardian of a hotel by night and studying physiotherapy by day, tried to seduce me by telling me that the moment he saw me, his heart nearly exploded (well, something like that in French), and other statements of the sort. He told me that he was not after any papers to leave the country and so on. He was quite full of it but I didn't tell him that.

I slept on the roof terrace of Mahfoud's house, in my tent. At 5:00 a.m. the next morning, I was awakened (like every morning wherever I am) by the Muezzin who happened to be Mahfoud's father. I actually could see him across the street and through the darkness. He was high up on the minaret, chanting into the loud speakers.

SOMETHING I HAVEN'T TOLD YOU

Since my intention was to give only a brief summary and a few insights of my journey so far, I will stop here even though I have not talked about the weather (The temperature has varied from sub-zero to above 40°C), about the flying black birds in the desert (i.e., the black plastic bags amidst the other rubbish littering the landscape), about the many street kids - 8 to 16 year olds wandering the streets at all hours of the night, having been abandoned by their parents. I haven't touched on the convoys of camping cars or 4 X 4's. They travel in large group (up to 20) for safety while I am alone with my bike and "froggy" - that's my mascot which sits in the front pouch of my handlebar pannier. I have had many requests for it - children and adults alike. One boy snatched it from me once but froggy and I got reunited.

I did not touch on diabetes being a serious problem in Morocco because people put a ridiculous amount of sugar into their drinks, including the tea which they drink all day long.

I didn't tell you about the wild dogs that eat babies and women, the scorpions that kill you within one hour (the brown ones if I recall - they exist in 5 different colours), and the bandits roaming in the desert... that is what some Moroccans told me who thought I should not camp wild in the desert, and definitely not alone in a tent. Mind you, I am used to being given the worst case scenarios about the dangers ahead but the reality is that people love dramatising and exaggerating the risks.

I didn't talk about walking past a dead body in Agadir... There is not much to tell here. I was simply walking, not paying attention to my surroundings, when I happened to look down on my left where a man was lying dead... I believe he had died of a drug overdose. There were three or four people around and one policeman was walking away from him and somehow, no one seemed to feel a sense of urgency and everyone was acting as though everything was cool.

I could also talk at great length about the interesting characters I meet (the majority of the tourists are from France). For instance, there is Jacques who did "Le Marathon des Sables", a yearly event which consists of doing 7 consecutive marathons through the desert while carrying all the needed supplies (stove, food, etc.)

There are one thousand more things I did not talk about and which I would love to share with you but for the moment, my diary will have to do.

PART 2

SUMMARY – Week 5 and 6

I spent 9 days recovering in Agadir. My visit to a doctor cost me \$22. Once better, I decided to return into the Anti-Atlas, but slightly north of my previous route. I have set myself the objective of reaching M'hamid, at the end of the Draa Valley. The Draa Valley is a ribbon of palmeriaes, kasbahs and Berber villages. It is 300km long, beginning in Ouarzazate and ending in the tiny village of M'hamid. From M'hamid, the border with Algeria is only 40 kilometres away. My previous idea of getting all the way to Merzouga has been put on the back burner. I have lost several days but mainly, it is far and a serious undertaking by bicycle.

My route for this third leg of my Moroccan journey will begin in Taroudannt, about 1 hour drive from Agadir. From here, I'll head eastward to Aoulouz, Talouine, Tazenakht, and Agdz, which intersects with the Draa Valley route.

MOROCCO – PART 2

I rode between Aoulouz and Talouine amidst a land sparsely populated with argon trees. These trees are drought resistant and endemic to southern Morocco. Goats – having adapted to a lack of vegetation on the ground, climb into the branches of these trees and strip them bare. The inner nuts of the argon fruit are pressed to release the valuable oil, which is used in cooking and cosmetics. The inner nuts have often passed through a goat's digestive system before being collected. If you overlook the damage these domestic goats create, their skipping and shimmying up the trees is impressive to watch. These flocks of goats are of course tended by shepherds. I was taking some photos when a boy ran towards me and asked me for “un dirham pour la photo de l'animal”. I had to break my strict rule against giving candies to kids. The kid's father was in sight and I had already taken the photo. Perhaps I should have asked permission although I am not in a habit of asking authorization to take photographs of animals and flora on public land. I gave the kid a candy. Then he said, “un bonbon pour le papa”. I gave him my second and last candy for ‘papa’. As I stated earlier, nothing is for free! Every Moroccan seems to have jumped on the begging bandwagon although they may prefer to look at it as though they are being entrepreneurs.

In Talouine, I stayed a few kilometres outside the village at the auberge-camping Toukbal, the name of North Africa's highest mountain which peaks to 4167m I set up camp on the pool deck, and enjoyed beautiful views of the surrounding hills and mountains. It is here that I met Olivier and Sylvain, two Frenchmen travelling in a land rover and whose company I would enjoy several times on my route. After 3 days at this pleasant and relaxing campground, I had to push myself to leave, unlike at some places where morning couldn't come soon enough, such as at some of the bleak prison-like hotel rooms with hole-in-the-wall communal toilets alive with roaches or croaking frogs. There were only a few visitors at the campsite at night and the place was empty during the day. I could never get a straight answer as to whether I was in the low or high season; whichever it was, it was the season that benefited the locals the most as I would find out when I would ask to pay the low-season prices. In other words, to them, it was always high-season.

I spent much of my time at the Taliouine camping ground with the young camp manager, discussing Moroccan life. This is where I learned how the saffron is produced. Taliouine and its surrounding areas provide the saffron to the entire country. For a period of 3 weeks in November, the stamen of the flowers is delicately picked at sunrise, by hand and with the nails, and dried out... an apparently tedious process.

We talked about Ramadan, a topic I have discussed with a few Moroccan acquaintances. Martin and I arrived in Morocco in the midst of Ramadan and ended with Eid at about the time he left. Moroccans are definitely livelier now that their month long fast is over. During Ramadan, people mostly dozed the foodless hours away. In the mornings, spirits were high but by afternoon, tempers frayed as the hunger pangs set in. When the signal from the mosque came, people ran to eat; if we asked for a hotel room at that time, we were

greeted with a complete lack of interest or told to come back later. When we were in a bus late in the day, I always worried about the driver falling asleep at the wheel, considering the fact that even I could never keep awake because of the heat and lack of air circulation - and that was with food in the belly. I asked several Moroccans about what would happen if they disregarded the rites of Ramadan; most liked to say that they have a choice but the reality is that they risk between three and nine months imprisonment if caught eating, drinking, smoking, or having sex. My host told me that children, sick people, and people who have to walk more than 84km in one day, can eat. I found the latter criteria a rather odd number. My host admitted that some ignored the ways of Allah and eat as they pleased in their own home.

From Talouine, I cycled the 90km to the next town called Tazenakht. On this very isolated and lightly travelled route, I encountered few people other than shepherds. The only request for candies and dirham was near the beginning as I was climbing the 1900m pass. A boy on a bicycle spotted me, raced down the mountain to meet me and asked me relentlessly for “un bonbon s.v.p.”. He could not keep up with his little out-rider so he gave up, said “Au revoir”, and left. He re-appeared a short while later, ahead of me. He had taken a short cut straight up the steep side of the mountain!

There was no time for me to take breaks as the terrain was difficult but in any case, there was not even a good rock for me to rest on. The couple of villages I saw were several kilometres off the main road. I felt literally in the middle of nowhere; all I could see was an endless hilly land of stones and sand and yet, people would appear like by magic on the road side. I had four separate invitations to tea – all by men - despite the fact that there were no houses anywhere in sight. Tea drinking – also called Berber whisky - is central to the Moroccan’s social way of life. Surely, they must hide a tea pot and tea glasses under their flowing and flapping jellaba. I declined all four tea offers because I would never reach Tazenakht but also because I would probably be asked for a donation of my possessions, or be expected to give a tip of some kind, or worse and even more likely, for a ‘relationship’. Moroccan men are by no means all bottom-pinching-money-grabbers--women-hunters – many are genuinely generous, sincere, and hospitable - but sometimes you can’t be bothered to find out.

Once I began ‘hitting the wall’, I stopped to refuel. I took a quick glance around to make sure that I could eat peacefully without attracting any curious onlookers. Seeing no one in sight, I sat on the stoney ground after a quick check for scorpions. I proceeded to wolf down the rice pudding – rice, eggs, sweetened condensed milk - I had made the night before and tossed into a plastic bag (probably not very sightly but deliciously full of the calories I needed). Just then, a rather eerie looking man in a groaning, dilapidated ‘camionnette’ stopped and offered me a ride. I politely declined and continued eating. For a few seconds, I thought of the vulnerable situation I was in. Minutes later, a shepherd-man miraculously appeared behind me; I had never heard his footsteps. He took a look at my pudding and half smiled and half smirked. Communication was difficult but he managed to ask me for a radio. I gave him a banana instead. Surely, people think that I am carrying a genie’s lamp inside my panniers. (I actually did have a radio but I was not ready to part with it).

My next encounter on this road was with a man who insistently wanted me for his wife. He was selling rocks and some trivial, garish trinkets on the roadside – something I had not run into since the Marrakech-Ouarzazate route. I stopped because I found his set up quite eye-catching and so oddly located. The man shook my hand and kissed me on both cheeks before I could react. He placed a piece of rock with silver glitters in my hand and said, “un cadeau pour toi”. For all I know about rocks, I could have been handed a piece of lead. I gave it back to him, expressing that I had no interest in rocks. He said, “Pas de problemes, seulement regarde pour le plaisir des yeux”. This is one of the most commonly used sentence by the hawkers on the road and in the street stalls alike; they just want your eyes to get some pleasure but once they have your attention, they begin their crafty sales pitch on you. The man asked me if I had children. I said, “Yes, I have many and a husband too”. That did not help because he started to get all kinds of things out telling me, “cadeaux pour les enfants”. Throughout it all, he kept telling me, “Toi jolie, bonne femme pour moi”. I needed to get out of this awkward situation but I did not want to make the man angry. This was the right time to buy something, make him happy, and vanish. I bought a necklace – a stone tied to what looked like

a piece of dental floss - for which he demanded the grossly inflated price of \$10. I gave him \$2 for it even though it was only worth 25 cents. When I left, the cheeky toad – to put it nicely - tried to kiss me again but I pushed him away and made my escape before things turned sour, leaving him dreaming of marital bliss.

I got to Tazenakht and found a hotel room for about \$5. Every corner of the country has its specialty or is renowned for something or other – The argon trees around Aoulouz, the saffron in Talouine, the “babouche” – leather slipper worn by most Moroccans – in Tafraoute. Tazenakht is known for its cooperatives and its production of Berber carpets. The town has no attractions, so the tourists who do stop usually consider buying a carpet. The problem is that every second person in the town is into the carpet selling business. I fell victim to a zealous carpet salesman who used the oldest trick in the book on me. A man hanging around the hotel lobby quickly spotted his prey (it is impossible for me to stop anywhere incognito) and asked me to translate a letter in English for a friend of his in Quebec. I said, “But people in Quebec speak French”. He found some quick reply to that comment. I said, “I am very busy and tired”. He said, “Les gens presses sont deja morts!” (People in a hurry are dead already). They always say that. Then he used the guilt trick on me, insinuating that I didn't have the compassion to help a fellow citizen in the dire predicament of writing a letter. In any case, I said, “Meet me here at 7:00 p.m. and I'll translate your letter while I eat dinner”. I did not show up but he found me at the internet cafe. I left the internet and translated his letter. His letter seemed so well rehearsed that I knew then that I wasn't his first victim. After the letter, he said that to show his gratitude, I must accept tea with him at his house. I said, you don't need to make me tea, just saying ‘thank you’ is sufficient. “If you refuse tea from a Berber Moroccan, you break “la baraka” and that is very bad; it is the grand-father's tradition”. Well, not wanting to break anyone's “baraka”, I went for tea. “Five minutes, no more”, I said. I knew that he was taking me to his carpet shop because the letter I wrote was about a carpet his English-speaking-Quebec-friend had bought and about his hope that it was fitting nicely in his living room. We walked down some alluring alleys, up a narrow flight of stairs and ended up, of course, in his carpet-factory shop. I told him about the less than remote chance that I would buy a carpet from him and that I did not even have a house, that my tent was my house at the moment, and that as much as I would like a carpet for it, it would not be very practical. Eventually, it became clear to him that I was not going to buy a carpet so he proceeded to ask me for some medicine and the cycling trousers I was wearing. He said, “These pants would be very good for me to do sports, can I have them?” He was twice my size.

From Tazenakht, I went on to Agdz, on the Draa Valley. From Agdz, you either go north to Ouarzazate or South to M'hamid, where the road ends.

I stayed in the ‘Ksar deTamnougalt’ (fortified village), a few kilometres south of Agdz, in a Kasbah (fortified house) in the middle of the palmariaie. A section of the Kasbah had been turned into an auberge and restaurant. I met Olivier and Sylvain again at this Kasbah. It will be one of the most interesting and welcoming places I will ever have stayed at. It was recommended to us by people we met at the Taliouine camping ground. Word of mouth is often how I would decide on my next accommodation. We befriended the hosts, including Yacob, the owner, and got nothing less than royal treatment: Moroccan music and dance, outstanding food, and fabulous company. I could not afford a room so I was allowed to pitch my tent on the beautiful roof-terrace or sleep on one of the ‘banquette’ under the Berber tent from where I had striking views of the Ksar, palmariaie, and the weird-looking mountain range Jebel Kissane.

The next morning, I headed south towards Zagora. I left late thinking I would only cycle halfway the 100km route. I was given the location of another Kasbah-turned-auberge half way to Zagora but since the route was flat and there was no wind factor, I made it easily to Zagora. I was accompanied for much of the time by the hundreds of students going to or from school or their bicycles. Despite pedalling rusty old boneshakers, they frantically gave me chase whenever I overtook them. The male-female student ratio I observed was about 10 to 1. The female students all walked. On foot or on bicycles, they travelled distances of several kilometres. As there are too many students and not enough schools, the teaching day is divided in half, some attending school in the morning and others in the afternoon. In 2001, 34% of Moroccan men and 62% of women were illiterate. In rural areas, illiteracy rates were 63% for men and 78% for women. Today, half of Moroccans cannot read or write. When it came to communicating in French with Moroccan male students I encoun-

tered on the road, the number of questions they fired at me gave me an idea of their grade level. As far as the female students went, communication with them was almost impossible as you are constantly surrounded by a crowd of men.

Woman's conditions in Morocco are not very desirable. However, since 2004, there is a new law aimed at creating equal rights between men and women. Today, women can choose their husband, travel alone, refuse polygamy, and the age of marriage has gone from 15 to 18. The women in the north of Morocco are much more emancipated than in the south and there is also a big difference between the cities and rural areas. Still, judging by the cafes, where I have not once observed the presence of a local woman, it looks as though it may take a long time to change old traditions and mentalities.

I thought I had made a quiet entry into Zagora, a big town well used to the comings and goings of tourists. I will find out later that just about everyone in the town knew that I made my entry at exactly 3:30p.m., and where I was staying.

I knew where I wanted to stay in Zagora – another referral - and when approached by the touts, I would say, “No, thank you, I don't need a hotel, and yes, I know how to get to ‘Le Camping Oasis des Palmiers.’” Still, they insisted on leading the way. Two or three chaperons quickly became ten irritating kids. “We know a very good short cut”, they said. “How much do you want for this little service?” I asked. “C'est gratuit”, one replied. “Nothing is ‘gratuit’ in Morocco”, I said. “Okay, just come and visit my brother, cousin, uncle, grand-father's... shop later, ‘juste pour le plaisir des yeux’. You don't have to buy anything, just a little publicity to your friends back home”. I was fully aware of the commission they would earn just for getting me inside a shop.

I was given tea upon my arrival at the camping ground ‘Oasis des Palmiers’. Despite this nice reception, I left because the rocky ground was unsuitable for a tent. Also, I wanted to be closer to the city and the next morning's souk. My chaperons found me within minutes. Since I couldn't get rid of them, I thought I should make the best of the situation and try to enjoy their company. Telling these kids to leave you alone is easier said than done. I could have threatened them to go to the police but if it came to that, it would be time for me to leave the country. It's better to play along; although I find it gruelling at the end of a cycling day... it is the repetitiveness of it that becomes tiresome.

I let some of the kids try my bike. I tried theirs. How they cover even a few metres with their tattered bicycles is beyond me: no brakes, a chain which comes off at every rotation, no seat... Naturally, they would have liked to become the new owners of my bicycle... one offered me two camels for it.

I moved to “Les Jardins de Zagora”, where I became a prisoner. Every time I got out, there would be someone waiting for me just outside the grounds, trying to get me into their shop. If I asked for directions to a phone, a street, or anything else, I would have to promise to visit a shop. I said to the guy number 15, “Do you know that 14 people before you have asked me to visit their shop?” “The fastest runner wins!” he replied. Everyone is just trying to stay afloat, to survive, and that meagre commission-based earning might be their only ticket to a better future!

King Mohammed VI (also referred to as ‘Le Roi des Pauvres’) is well respected for his efforts to improve the economical situation in Morocco, the biggest problem being corruption. Still, 20% of the population lives under the threshold of poverty. 72% of the elite – the well-educated Moroccan – are highly tempted by emigration. Since they cannot find a job, they try to find a ‘gazelle’ (name given to the foreign female tourist). There is also the rural exodus – although not unique to Morocco – where villagers are leaving the countryside in droves, only adding to the population of the shanty towns in the cities.

In the evening, when I dared to venture out of the campground again, one guy was following my every move. Like the others before him, he was firing a barrage of ear-battering, senseless questions at me. Eventually, I explained to him that I was tired and would appreciate being left alone. “You are tired? Want ‘massage Berbere’?”

Despite it all, it is in Zagora that I met two of the most genuine Moroccans on this trip. I was having dinner under the Berber tent-restaurant at the campground when two Moroccan-tourists invited me to join them. When I mentioned my intention of visiting the souk the next morning, one of them offered to accompany me. Exploring and discovering a site on your own in Morocco is a pleasure so often ruined by hawkers and hustlers; on the other hand, visiting a souk with an honest Moroccan is a truly enjoyable and enriching experience... and quite economical. I bought loads of fruits and vegetables at the Moroccan price (two bags full for \$1), much cheaper than the already low-price I thought I had been paying all along.

I had all the intentions of spending two nights in Zagora but I had to alter my plans. I thought that inside the camping grounds, I had found peace and safety... but the harassment would prevail. The owner of the camping took a fancy to me and became my unwanted shadow. I had already explained to him that I was being pestered outside his grounds. He said that if it happened again, I should threaten the offenders to go to the police and they would scamper quickly. Maybe I should apply his own solution on him and see if he scurried too! Moroccan males typically work you in this manner: they invite you for tea, dinner, and a relationship. This man invited himself for tea, offered me a trip in the desert where I would only have to pay the cost of the petrol, proposed a candle lit dinner and begged for a relationship. No matter what I said, he would not get the message so I packed up and left at midday, desperate to detach myself from my amorous Moroccan shadow.

I was half way between Zagora and M'hamid when I was spotted by Olivier and Sylvain. They noticed me while I was trying to make a phone call to them. I was encircled by several males and I was thankful that the requests for bonbons, dirham, and offers of trips in the desert were now directed at them. (I have not talked as much about the 'bonbons' mobs but they have not disappeared. How could they when just yesterday, I saw the passengers in a tourist mini-bus throw money out of their windows so that they could take photos of the kids running towards them?)

My bicycle was loaded into the jeep and we headed for M'hamid together. We stayed outside a little village called Oulad Driss in a family home that gave us a taste of the traditional Berber life in the desert. Life for the locals here is not easy. The palm trees are dying and the wells are empty. Water has to be brought in by trucks. A dam was built in Ouarzazate to satisfy the needs of a growing city, but mainly of the golfers, resulting in serious drought for about half of the length of the Draa Valley.

As it has become a bit of a custom, I was asked by the father at the family home to watch the stars with him on the roof terrace and the son tried repeatedly to convince me to stay for a month or two. Olivier and Sylvain gained some awareness of what I was dealing with in such a male-dominated country. They said if they were in my shoes, they would not be prepared to put up with it. They were never present when I was asked for a 'relationship'; I would relate my stories to them afterwards. For example, on one occasion, a shopkeeper, a young fellow, had shaken my hand - all the while trying to pull me closer to him - literally crushing it (I heard my fragile bones cracking) in his eagerness, perhaps, to touch a 'gazelle's hand for the first time. I came out of the shop to join up with Sylvain and Olivier, holding my hand in agony.

Every tourist arriving in M'hamid will be immediately hassled to go on a camel, a walking trek, or a 4 X 4 trip to the 40km long Chigaga dunes, 60k away. Hands will pull you in all directions. Olivier, Sylvain, and I had already experienced the desert with a camel during a previous trip and we were glad we didn't have to go through the price haggling and the challenge of differentiating between a real and faux-guide. Here, in M'Hamid, the desert begins in the true sense of the word. From here, it stretches for thousands of miles to the savannahs and forests of Africa.

I cycled back the section of route I had missed the day before. Olivier and Sylvain, after a little exploration of the desert in their land rover, picked me up. We drove back to the Kasbah 'Chez Yacob' where I spent 2 nights. When it came time to pay, I was told to pay what I wanted. I wish they didn't do that... I always end up paying an outrageous price in fear of appearing uncharitable... and I did. On top of that, I always man-

age to miscalculate the number of nights, number of meals, etc., in their favour. Here, I paid for 3 nights plus meals instead of two. At one hotel in Agadir, I paid for 4 nights instead of 3. I wish they kept a record rather than rely on my failing memory. At the camping in Talouine, I had to recall every single item I had bought and consumed in 3 days: water bottles, orange juice, telephone cards, meals, the tent, etc. no record whatsoever was kept. In any case, for my stay at the Kasbah, I gave my host 600dr (\$85) for 2 nights, 5 amazing meals, drinks, laundry (hand wash), entertainment, but most importantly, great hosts and fabulous setting. I started with 400dr (55\$) and when I would ask if the amount sounded right, I would be told, "Yes, it's good student price". Not being a student, I would feel guilty and pay more. I was only charged 16\$ for the night – including meals - I had spent there a few days earlier. Before paying, the host had asked me several times to stay for a couple of months – suggesting that I could teach in the village or learn the Berber language – and I feel that perhaps he resented my refusal to do so.

I left the Kasbah and cycled the 75km to Ouarzazate, a tough cycling day because of a major mountain pass but mostly because of a dreadful head wind. I crawled upward from the start and did not stop climbing for 42km. A swooping 4 km descent followed and the rest of the way was up and down with a gentle glide down for the last 10km. I cycled the last 5km to Ouarzazate in darkness and that was eerie. I saw one village during the entire day. I had left at 11 o'clock in the morning because Olivier and Jacques were also going to Ouarzazate and they were going to pick me up wherever I was in the late afternoon. I never saw them.

A cold rain fell on Ouarzazate during the night and the morning brought in a magnificent, clear, and crisp display of snowy mountain ranges in the background. I cycled to Tazenakht from where I took a bus back to Agadir. This is where my cycling journey in Morocco ends. I have felt ill the past few days, not having recovered adequately from a cough, aggravated by the dust and diesel fumes.

The bus journey back to Agadir was 5 ½ hours. We made a lunch stop in a village where a local man asked me if I was looking for him because he happened to be looking for a wife just like me. This was not a good chat up line. Later in the bus, another man, who sat next to me, wanted a 'relationship'. He waited for the commotion of the people getting off the bus to do a bit of groping. I slapped him to get him off me and told him what I thought of him and he began apologizing profusely. He knew that if I made a complaint about him, even to the other people in the bus, he would have been in deep trouble. Perhaps naively, I rely much on my sixth sense to judge the good or bad intentions of the people I meet. At the moment this man sat beside me, I sensed he was up to no good. I sensed that the man in the pick up who wanted to give me a ride was not trustworthy; I sensed that the man with the rocks who wanted me to be his wife was overly amorous although not dangerous; I would have gone anywhere with the guy who guided me in the souk in Zagora.

The bus to Agadir actually stopped in the town of Inezgane, 10km from Agadir city centre. It was nearly 8 p.m. and the vultures just outside the bus knew that I was a perfect prey at that time of night. I was trying to put the gear on my bicycle but it was difficult to hold the bike, keep an eye on my luggage, and clip the panniers on at the same time, especially under so many watchful eyes. One kid took upon himself to hold my bike and I knew that would mean a tip but he was helpful. Then they started talking taxis. They quoted me a price. I said, "You are asking me for the same price that it costs to go all the way to Ouarzazate from here!" The price went down a bit. I made it clear to them that I had no problem cycling the 10km in the dark, that I had a light and that I had cycled the route before. The price went down a bit more. They told me that I would get the whole taxi to myself. I said, "I have no problem taking a taxi with 10 people in it, Moroccan style!" We agreed to a price for the taxi, a price for the kid holding my bicycle, and a price for the kid who found me the "taxi special pour la bicyclette".

Back in Agadir, I made some inquiries about the cheapest flight to England. Flying from Agadir, I would have to pay nearly \$500. Flying from Marrakech would cost me \$170. So I took the 4 hour bus ride to Marrakech and got to see the city again for the 5th time.

My bike was in a box which weighed nearly 40kg. I could barely move it and I was wandering how I would get to the bus station in Agadir, then to the hotel in Marrakech, then to the airport... But how could I forget

so quickly that in Morocco, there are no problems, only solutions, if you are willing to spare a little cash. In Marrakech, a taxi driver spotted my box in the bus compartment. He knew I would need a van or truck, just what he happened to be driving. At the moment I came off the bus, he proposed his taxi and my ride to the airport at 5 a.m. the next morning was immediately arranged, for a price negotiated fairly.

At the airport, I was charged \$15 for my 25kg of excess luggage. They charged me the price of being 1kg over the limit. I was a happy camper.

Back in England, I see the sun as rarely as I saw rain in Morocco but every country has its good points and bad points. The following is my personal list of the pluses and minuses of Morocco.

BEST ABOUT MOROCCO

The harira soup

The orange juice

Cheap cost of vegetables

Little rain (good only in a selfish way – they desperately need rain)

The Moroccan style “salon”

The scenery

Buses (cheap and you can flag one down anywhere if stranded on the road and there is never a problem to put a bicycle in or on it)

Relaxed people (no rat race there)

Cheap internet

WORST ABOUT MOROCCO

The “bonbons” mobs

Lack of variety in food (tagine – a type of stew - and couscous) You tired of it after a while – I tasted some pretty bad tagines)

The men who want a ‘relationship’ - but worse still, the staring.

The flies (they get pretty annoying during the summer and the date season)

The repetitive “Bonjour, ca va?, Vous etes francaise...?”

Still, Morocco is a great country, well worth visiting, and will hopefully return some day for a third time.

Edited on December 31, 2006

