

# GETTING OFF THE MARRAKECH EXPRESS

FROM SAND SEA TO SHINING SEA

SARAH CROFTS







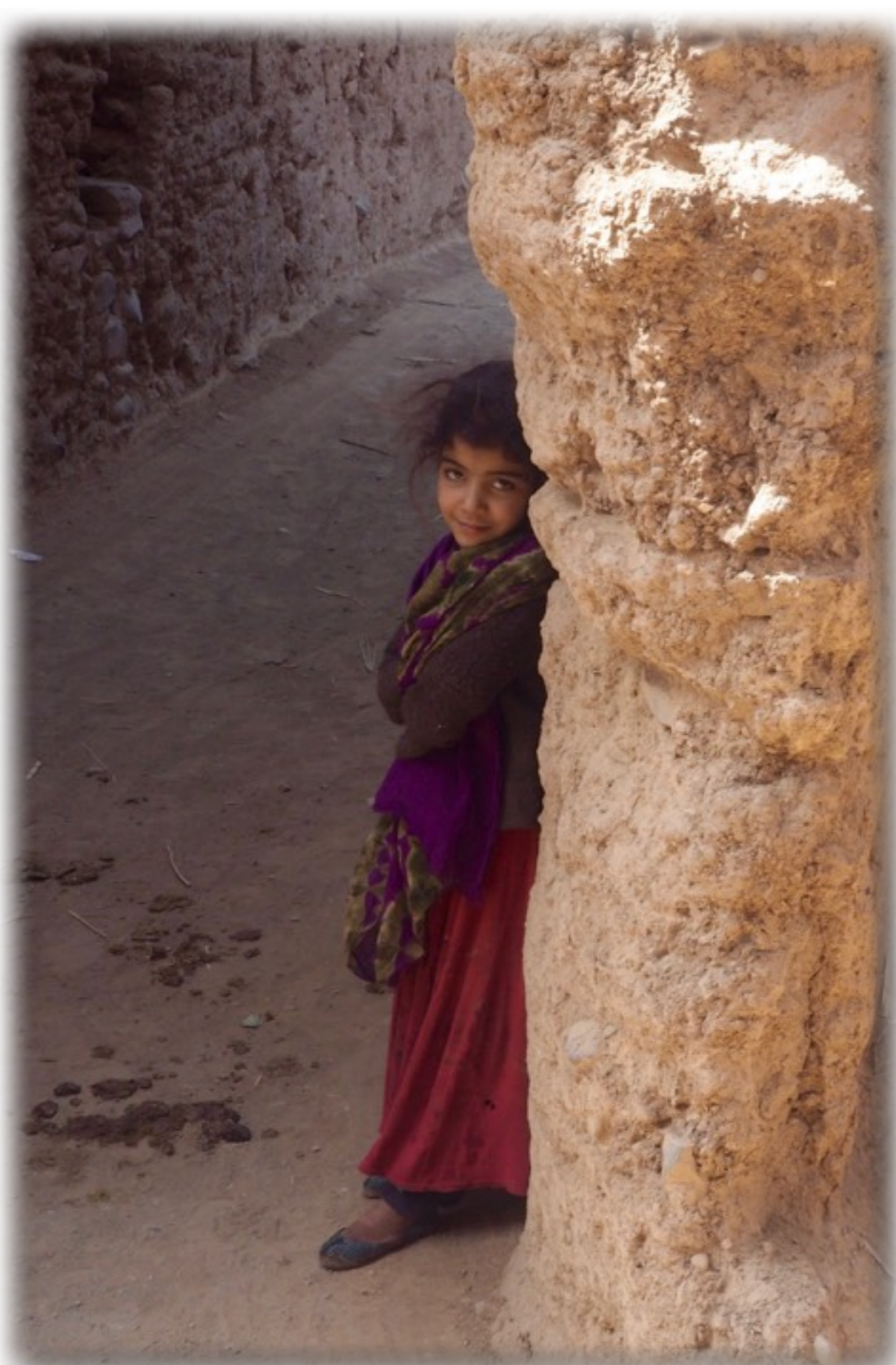
This winter I made my fourth and longest trip to the magical, mountainous Morocco and I am in no doubt it will not be my last!

My 11 year old daughter Tabitha and I spent ten weeks touring the country in our 21 year old VW campervan called Eileen.

We covered just under 5000km taking in the wild Atlantic coast down into the Western Sahara, stopping in three of the four Imperial cities, climbing mountain passes in each of the Anti, High and Middle Atlas as well as the Rif Mountains and visiting both of Morocco's sand seas Erg Chigaga and Erg Chebbi.







What an incredible country Morocco is, even a short weekend visit to the teeming hub that is Marrakech is enough to swamp your senses but it surely only serves to stoke the adventurous spirit and whet the appetite.

So what do I recommend? Everything!! Seriously though, you only get a 90 day visa so even if you are lucky enough to have three months to devote to Morocco you still have to have a degree of focus and planning.

To that end I have loosely mapped out four potential routes you could self drive or hire a driver/guide.

This e-guide follows the first route I have called **From Sand Sea To Shining Sea.**





Obviously we drive our own hotel and restaurant so unless it's campsites you're after I'll leave you to research those things yourself – that's part of the fun anyway!

Suffice to say that every town has many restaurants and cafes as well as lots of riads, auberge, hotels and hostels – if you're lucky you might even be invited into a Moroccan's home to stay and eat with the family.



If you hire a driver/guide rest assured he will have a cousin or a brother in every town who has a hotel or restaurant.

Moroccans are super friendly and exceedingly helpful especially if there's a few bucks to be made.

You will almost always pay more than the locals unless you're looking at a clearly marked price but even so the country is markedly cheaper than Europe and your ££ or \$\$ will go a great deal further. When buying souvenirs haggle and haggle hard, have a fixed price of what you want to pay and stick to it – but be fair too, these guys are earning a living after all.

I failed to get a beautiful pair of babushka shoes in Chefchaouen as I wanted to bargain and the shoemaker simply wasn't interested. His work was very good and we were in quite a touristy town so he held the upper hand on that transaction.

Drivers and guides will be on some sort of commission for every tourist they enthusiastically herd thru the door of whichever establishment it is, be it shop restaurant or accommodation.

Most of the time it's absolutely fine but if you don't like the look of it then ask for somewhere else .- easy enough for on the spot restaurant choices but it's probably wise to some advance planning for overnight stops.

Just a few admin items before we get to the good stuff:

- Currency – the Moroccan Dhiram can't be obtained in great amounts outside of Morocco – money exchangers are at the airport and marine ports and generally have a similar rate to the banks. It comes in notes and coins and it's approx. 0.85GBP to 10DH
- Morocco is very much a cash economy – larger supermarkets will take credit/debit cards as will larger hotels but if you expect to pay with cash you won't go far wrong





- Banks/ATMs – plentiful in all of the towns you will pass through, not so much in the smaller villages tho. ATM withdrawal limit is 2000MAD (also denoted as DH)
- Fuel stations can be infrequent on the more remote routes but again all towns have at least one if not several modern pump stations. Keep yourself topped up and you will be fine. Fuel is cheap!
- There are a couple of Toll Roads in the north, they're worth using as you can definitely travel faster!
- General roads vary in condition from pretty good to pretty dreadful. We did go on piste or campo (unmade) roads but it's not necessary.
- There's a lot of traffic around towns and Moroccan drivers can be a little reckless but to be honest I found Italian drivers much more scary!
- Watch out for the donkeys!!
- Watch out for scores and scores and scores of school kids on bicycles!!





# Morocco



- Generally traveling speeds are lower than Europe due to other traffic on the roads (see above). That's a good thing, you can enjoy the journey and the scenery and not feel pressured to tank along!
- Check your vehicle has a Sat Nav, if not look at an offline app on a phone or tablet called maps.me and invest in a paper map too – it's a great souvenir to trace your route on anyway
- If your smart phone or SIM enabled tablet is not locked to any particular network you can get a Moroccan SIM easily. Data is cheap in Morocco and once you have your SIM you can re-charge it easily too.
- Morocco's weather ranges from snow in the mountains during winter to blisteringly hot desert conditions in summer. Spring comes late in April/May and is a great time to visit, you're less likely to be stymied by snow on the high passes at least! That said we had predominately good weather from mid-Jan to end March with one bout of heavy rain and an unexpected late snow storm, both in the north of the country.
- A hand sanitizer and some wet wipes are always good to have in your bag.
- Most tourist places will have a European bathroom but occasionally you may be presented with a Berber toilet aka a 'squat bog' as we call them. Give it a go, it's all part of the adventure!
- Be considerate that the majority of Moroccans are muslim – short shorts, strappy tops and lots of flesh on show isn't respectful when exploring the local medina or tourist attraction. It's good to have a scarf handy in case you need to cover your head. Inside hotels and resorts western dress styles are fine of course.
- Even if you're not planning to camp, a lot of campsites offer bungalows or even berber tents which are worth investigating
- Riads are traditional Moroccan guest houses, usually built around a central courtyard. They range from simple and modest to sumptuous and luxurious according to your budget – well worth investigating especially in Marrakech and Essaouira





- It's cheap to eat out, especially if you aren't on the major tourist route.
  - A typical menu might be soup or salad, tagine or brochette and flan or sliced oranges sprinkled with cinnamon. Prices vary but range from 50dh to 100 – 150dh
  - Brochettes are skewers of beef, mutton or chicken usually served with chips/fries and Moroccan salad of red onion and tomato
  - Tagine is the staple of Moroccan food and can be found everywhere. Slow cooked in the traditional domed clay pot using the aromatic spice mix you can buy to take home. Choose from chicken, beef, mutton or fish and vegetables or lemon, with couscous or without, and you will be served bread to soak up the juices. Delicious! So delicious I actually bought my own pot and cook it myself now.
  - Freshly squeezed orange juice is another trademark Moroccan delight, along with the ever

present mint tea served everywhere and in the larger bazaars when negotiating a price for that carpet you're taking home!

- Expect to drink bottled water or soft drinks





So, I'm just going to skip right into the route suggestion and places I recommend you visit along the way.

Starting and finishing in Marrakech I'm going to take you in a loop south east to the desert then west to the coast then north east back to your starting point.

This route takes in the amazing Tizni n'Tichka pass through the High Atlas Mountains past film sets fans of Gladiator (and other movies) will immediately recognize, the soaring sheer sides of the Todra Gorge be-

fore arriving at one of Morocco's mind blowing sand seas Erg Chebbi. After you've shaken the sand from your shoes head for an overnight stay in a berber tent at Camp Serdrar and visit the Tazzarine Petroglyphs on your way west to the Atlantic coast. Explore the cool surf town of Essaouaria before making your way back to the melting pot of Marrakech.

Going west to the desert means crossing the High Atlas Mountains taking the N9 and the Tizi n'Tichka pass. At 2,260m it is the highest ma-





major route mountain pass in North Africa and gateway to the Sahara. The road is pretty good to the top on the Marrakech side although it does deteriorate a little as you descend towards the ancient Kasbah of Ait Bennhadou. The views are amazing and you're likely to see snow at the highest point. Depending on the time of year the pass can be closed so factor that in when planning.

Arriving in the valley take a left turn and travel a short distance and you will arrive at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ait Bennhadou – an ancient and impressively well preserved Ksar (fortified village) made up of several kasbahs. Historically an important point on the old caravan route between the Sahara and Marrakech. These days a popular tourist attraction not least due to the number of popular movies filmed here including *Gladiator*, *Time Bandits*, *The Living Daylights* and some *Game of Thrones* scenes.

It's a fascinating place to walk around and there are plenty of souvenir shopping opportunities here too. Accommodation is available and there are lots of roadside cafes restaurants.

In nearby Ourzazate you can also take a movie studio tour on your way to our next destination the Todra Gorge.



Picking up the N10 it's a fairly fast run to Tinghir, a medium sized town with plenty of restaurants, bank & ATMs and accommodation. There's even a small supermarket here.

The real draw is the Todra Gorge a canyon of spectacular proportions with a span of just 10m at it's narrowest point.







The gentle glacier stream you can dip your toes into on a hot day is a mere shadow of the river that must have thundered down the Atlas to carve this out this natural wonder.

Access is easy and you can, by all means, drive through the gorge as the canyon walls soar around you and continue up the concrete road to the villages beyond such as Tamtatouchte.

The colour and strata of the mountains as you pass through are stunning.





I can highly recommend a fabulous lunch stop in Tamtatouchte at Restaurant Tamda.



Time to leave the mountains behind and head east to experience one of Morocco's natural wonders the sand sea that is Erg Chebbi. Taking the N10 from Tinghir continue east on the R702 to Erfoud – not a national route but in fair condition and flat run through a somewhat bleak valley floor.

Reaching a maximum height of 150m, running approx. 28km north to south and 7km east to west the sand sea is tantalizingly close to the Algerian border.

Even so, keep your eyes peeled as you truly enter dromedary country!

This is the most accessible dune in North Africa – you can literally

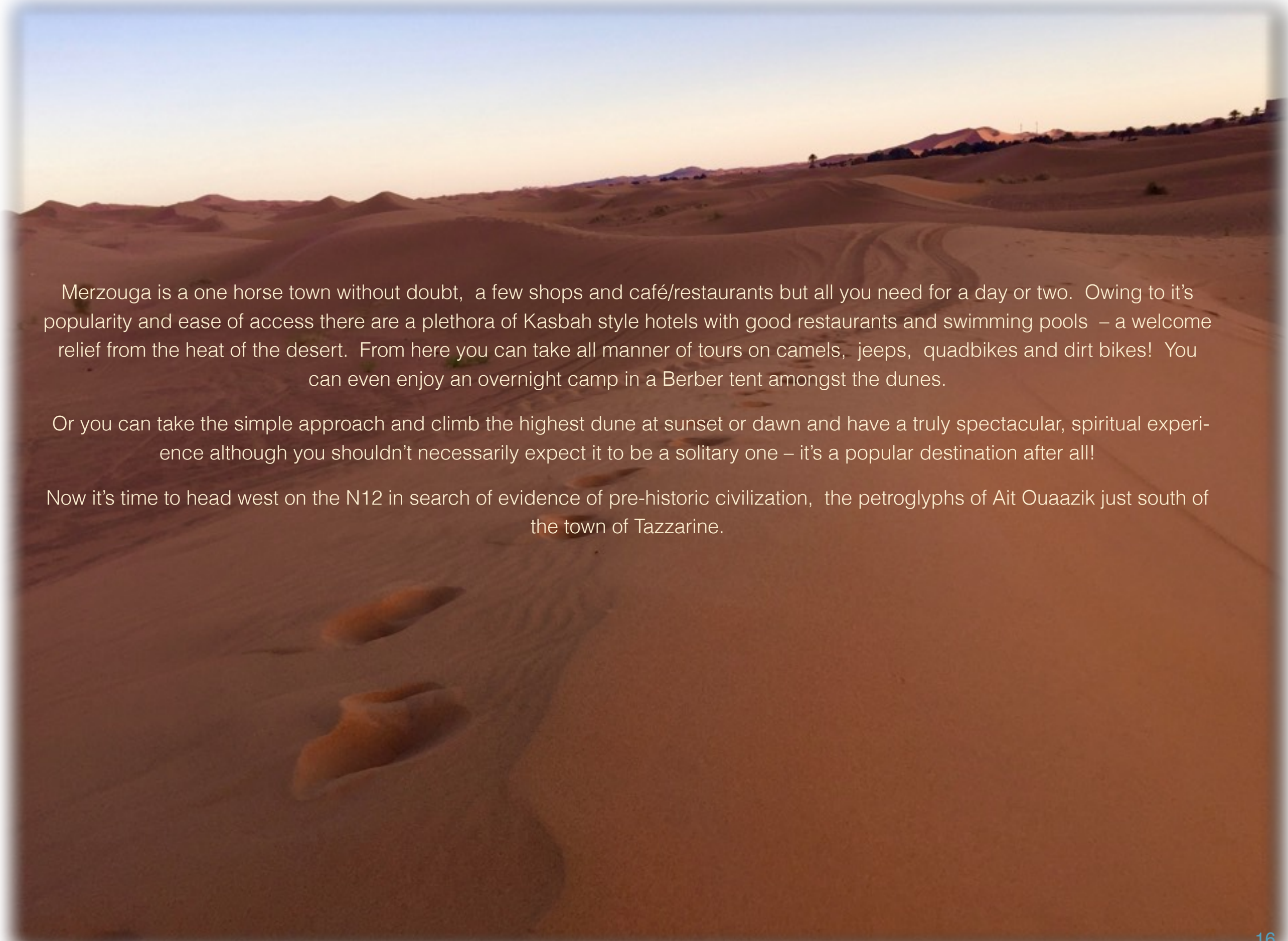






**Continuing south from Rissani, Erg Chebbi rises out of the desert floor as you approach.  
The Sahara sand glows like rose gold before your very eyes.**





Merzouga is a one horse town without doubt, a few shops and café/restaurants but all you need for a day or two. Owing to its popularity and ease of access there are a plethora of Kasbah style hotels with good restaurants and swimming pools – a welcome relief from the heat of the desert. From here you can take all manner of tours on camels, jeeps, quadbikes and dirt bikes! You can even enjoy an overnight camp in a Berber tent amongst the dunes.

Or you can take the simple approach and climb the highest dune at sunset or dawn and have a truly spectacular, spiritual experience although you shouldn't necessarily expect it to be a solitary one – it's a popular destination after all!

Now it's time to head west on the N12 in search of evidence of pre-historic civilization, the petroglyphs of Ait Ouazik just south of the town of Tazzarine.



Dating from a time when the desert surrounding them was a lush and verdant savannah, approx. 5000BC, the rock carvings litter what would have been the tribe's camp atop a small hill overlooking the valley floor.

Onsite you will find Ahmed who is the guardian of the engravings and who will, for a small fee, explain the history of the area and point out the incredibly well preserved carvings. Monkeys, ostrich, rhino, fish hooks, sun dials, antelope are clearly visible and recognizable. Ahmed will likely brew the ubiquitous Moroccan mint tea and as you sip and absorb the vista it's entirely possible to imagine the how the tribe lived. Shivers will run down your spine as you realize you are seeing the very same view that they did as they sat and carved out the animals they saw roaming below them.

Book a night at Camp Serdrar (<http://www.camp-serdrar.com/index.html>) in a room or a berber tent and Brahim can organize a trip for you, or you can drive yourself – it's a piste road and bumpy but entirely do-able. If you book a driver you may well get to meet one of two local teachers who volunteer to guide and translate – we had the most amazing experience with Hicham and Brahim when we met them this way. Give them our regards if you do!







As you return to the N12 and turn left you are heading for a crossroads in more ways than one.

At the small town of Agdz you can choose to continue over the high altitude mountain plains where saffron is harvested for Taroudant (taking the R108) or you can pick up the N9 and head back to Ouarzazate and eventually Marrakech. Choose the former if you're up for a long day's drive that ultimately leads to the Atlantic Coast, take the latter for a shorter trip and a return along a familiar route.

If you're still with me then let's continue.....

It is a long drive but the

scenery is beautiful and towns are fairly frequent along the way for refreshments and you might even stop at a co-operative to buy some saffron.

Arriving in Taroudant you may choose to stay longer than we did at this chilled and interesting town. Often billed as a chilled version of Marrakech the town's medina and souk are reputed to be a great place to explore without the constant sales pitch of the larger city's souk.



We only stopped for a rather memorable roadside lunch when we passed through – keep an eye out for petrol stations with a butcher and a bbq alongside.

Choose your cut from the carcass hanging in front of the counter and have it bbq'd into brochettes as you wait, or usually there's charcoal cooked tagines available too.

Delicious and another fantastic way to truly experience Morocco!





**You're now only a short hop to Agadir, a modern town thankfully with a good ring road but still teeming with traffic. You will still jostle with donkeys and tractors amongst the flash 4WD jeeps whose drivers are using their iPhones!**

**We only stopped to visit the Carrefour supermarket to stock up on essentials such as..... biscuits, beer, wine and gin!**

**Morocco is a muslim country but it is not alcohol free by any means, in fact wine is made in the Meknes region. However, it is not easily available and the only supermarket to sell it is Carrefour. Some larger hotels and restaurants do sell alcohol too but either way it's at a price!**

**Joining the N1 and probably feeling happy to leave the heavy traffic (it's not really heavy but feels like it when you've been cruising empty roads high in the Atlas!) you will turn north and catch your first sight of the Atlantic Ocean.**

**This coastline is wild and craggy interspersed with beaches and coves and loved by surfers and for a while you will run parallel to the sea. Stop in Taghazoute, a popular surf town hangout. Maybe take a lesson or two and perhaps treat yourselves to a more 'westernised' meal of pizza or burgers, I even saw a menu that included bacon but I didn't order it!**





As the N1 turns inland the road will rise and the terrain will become windswept and craggy. Roadside sellers of argan oil and honey will hold up their wares as you motor past and you'll see goats in the argan trees performing their part of the process in pursuit of argan oil – google that one!

You're now heading for Essaouira and you can expect to enjoy some great fish and seafood at this lovely town with its mix of western tourist, wealthy Marrakechian and surfer/hippy drop out.

Before you arrive and if you prefer a more chill place to surf or hang then take a small detour to Sidi Kaouki and take a look.

There's a great deal more to Essaouira than might at first be apparent, formerly known as Mogador it has always been an important port and as such has an interesting and long history. The medina is another UNESCO World Heritage site and nowadays is packed with artisanal workers plying their trades – metal and woodworkers, artists and purveyors of all things Berber.

Here you can explore the small but teeming harbour. Time it right and you can take your lunch directly off the boat and carry it a few feet to one of the many restaurants just outside the harbour wall where they will cook it for you. Alternatively each restaurant has its own plentiful supply – they probably beat you to the boats! Choose from eel, dorada, prawns, crab and much more.



Take a culinary class and learn how to make the traditional Moroccan dishes of tagine and couscous, buy your own tagine pot and spices too!

Be sure to visit the medina at night and enjoy a meal and some traditional Moroccan or European with a Moroccan twist live music.



**Argan Oil, first step on the production line!**





With only 200km between Essaouira and Marrakech sadly the end of the road is in sight but don't be too disappointed as you're going to end on the high that is Marrakech itself!

I might actually recommend that you split your time in Marrakech to before and after your roadtrip – it would make an interesting comparison.

I've done both and still love the city and always try to stay as close to, or inside, the medina.

This city is a head rush for me every time, it has long been a seat of power for the various ruling dynasties and especially the Saadian Sultans who built such epic palaces such as El Badi. The Bahia Palace is worth a visit to see a lovely example of Moroccan architecture. Yves St Laurent's Jardin Majorelle is not to be missed, even if, like me, you're not a huge garden fan! The Koutoubia Mosque dominates the skyline and the call to prayer can be heard far and wide. If you're not muslim you can't enter but you can admire the architecture and the minaret from outside.

Stroll the Jewish quarter and find the Kozy Bar in the Kasbah for a glass of wine or beer at sunset and watch the storks coming into land on their enormous nests.

For me Marrakech is all about the central square of Jemma el-Fnaa and the winding, crazy lanes of the souk leading directly off the square.

During the day buy freshly squeezed orange juice from vendors in Jemma, dodge the snake charmers and monkey handlers and plunge into the souk and allow your senses to be flooded!

Every vendor will call you, tempting you to inspect their wares. As you've already found each opening line will be 'hello, how are you? Where you from?' in an effort to engage and start a dialogue.

I've never had any real hassle as long I've responded with a smile and a polite 'no thanks' to whatever is on offer. If you do fancy a closer look then get your haggle on and see if you can get a good price, but don't forget you'll likely have had better prices on your roadtrip outside of the city!

Don't worry about losing your bearings, but do make sure you don't lose your belongings, keep bags close and valuables zippered inside.

Show the slightest hesitation at the junction of a narrow lane deep in the heart of the souk and young boys will descend with offers to guide you – for a fee of course! Sometimes you need their help, other times you don't but they're difficult to shake especially once you've spoken to them and made some sort of contact!

My advice is, either firmly say 'it's ok we aren't lost thanks' or take their help and give them 20dh for the service!







It's worth hunting down the Henna Café  
<http://www.hennacafemarrakech.com/> if you'd like to get some fabulous henna and support a cultural foundation. Enjoy a drink and a bite to eat whilst you choose your designs.





End your trip with the high of an evening spent eating street food and soaking up the atmosphere of Jemmaa after dark. Take a seat at one of the many terrace restaurants and sip a drink as you watch the sunset as the food sellers start to construct their stall.

As darkness falls delicious smells start to rise, wander through the food market and prepare to be heavily canvassed to try each and every stall. This is the only place in Marrakech that I have found to be a bit full on – be prepared! I usually go with a stall where the sproikers have been good natured and made me laugh.

After eating wander the square, watch the crazy fairground style games to win bottles of soft drinks, lean in to listen to the storytellers where boys and young men sit with rapt attention (unfortunately it's in Berber or Arabic but still wonderful to witness). Avoid the persistent henna ladies and whilst you can admire the water sellers traditional dress it's probably best not to buy his water unless you've acclimatized to it.

Maybe you'll round off your stay in Morocco by letting someone else do the driving and take a horse drawn carriage ride.....





I'll leave you there for now – drink in the sights and the sounds and the smells that are the wonderfully overwhelming trademark of a Moroccan adventure!







[www.veedubadventures.co.uk](http://www.veedubadventures.co.uk)

