



Sahara Desert Trekking

By Bob Spence

After flying to Ouarzazate, we took a spectacular drive through the rugged Anti-Atlas to Zagora and the 'Route des Kasbahs' with time for a quick stop to pose in front of the famous sign 'Tomboctou 52 Jours'. We headed off across stony plains into the desert and found ourselves at our first camp which consisted of a large comfortable mess tent (with rugs, table and stools), four camels lolloping around a nearby well and two very pleasant chaps one of whom only spoke Berber and the other fractured French, which matched mine quite well. There was no difficulty in communicating and we quickly established a good rapport. There is no class distinction here, unlike on our other treks, and it was good to chat with Hussein 1 and 2. We called them Hussein and Saddam, and they call us Ali Baba and Bahmed. There was very welcome democracy in that they ate with us and we were all in it together - there was no question of *them and us* although they put the tents up, cooked, looked after the camels and so on. Sometimes we led and sometimes the 'Husseins' led - especially when there was no path to follow! Mint tea, biscuits and raisins were produced followed by a delicious supper of spicy vegetable soup, beef stew and herb tea - although we indulged in some whisky to wash it all down with. Establishing a pattern that was to continue for the next 10 days we were in bed by 9.30pm, lulled to sleep by the accompaniment of growling camels and braying donkeys.

The next few days were over low hills - arid, stony country with the sporadic oasis as a patch of green. Well defined paths led through the escarpment to summits affording great views of Zagora and far ranges of hills. We followed dry, bouldery watercourses with the occasional pool of water, often accompanied by mating locusts. Across greenish basins with some noisy frogs, a few flowers and birds and the occasional sign of humankind in the way of the odd ring of tones and ruined corrals. Delicious lunches of chopped onions, cucumber, peppers, carrots with tinned fish and fresh orange slices sprinkled with cinnamon were taken lying on rugs under lone tamarisk trees. We passed small palm oases, wide dry wadis, steep scree-filled passes and deep gorges with often not a breath of air to cool us. I often filled my hat with water from the infrequent pools and threw it over my head to provide some relief.

One afternoon a local nomad family came to visit - amazing the primitive conditions they lived in but they seemed happy contented and relaxed. Incredible to think that in the 21st century people can live like this - one family miles from anywhere, no water no school, minimum possessions, nothing. Our jellybabies went down well with the children.....

We then got into the desert proper. We set off towards the sand dunes through a low-lying area of dampness and thick, flowering bushes - apparently there had been no rain for three years until about two months ago when a deluge produced all this greenery. We even disturbed a colony of literally thousands of cranes on their passage to Europe. The next few days varied between low dunes, high dunes, salt flats, patches of greenery and wadis with the odd well and nomad encampment. The dunes at Chegaga, allegedly the highest in Morocco, were all that I had expected - just like the pictures! Reddish sand with sharp crescent shaped top edges. We climbed them in bare feet to watch the sunset. A Berber jam session accompanied a superb goat tagine and we slept outside under a fantastic array of



WALKS WORLDWIDE
12 THE SQUARE
INGLETON
CARNFORTH



LANCASHIRE LA6 3EG

T: +44 1524 242000

F: +44 1524 242657

INFO@WALKSWORLDWIDE.COM



stars on a perfectly warm night, with a full moon and full stomachs – what more could anyone want?

Walking on the dunes was difficult – sometimes that sand was soft and sometimes very soft. We came out of the dunes on to salt pans with a breakable crust scattered with camel bones, scrub and the odd acacia tree. Everything was covered in a fine layer of sand and the way was not obvious at all. Hot featureless terrain and I walked for some way in the shade of the leading camel. Real desert country. In the middle of nowhere we came across two rows of terraced, mud brick houses entirely deserted, abandoned in 1980 when the well dried up.

After the Draa River, in which there was a tiny bit of water, we came to the first shade we had seen for a while. This last day was also the only time we saw any other trekkers plus we had an unusual encounter with an isolated 'poste militaire' – a very lonely posting every two months spying on the Algerian border about four miles away. Real 'Beau Geste' stuff! After paddling through the muddy river bed we were soon amongst million of date palms and elaborate irrigation systems and to our rendezvous with the ladies (known as "les gazelles"!). An emotive farewell to our superb companions 'vrais gentilhommes' and we walked our last few miles (the ladies on the camels!) to The Auberge Le Pacha which is a splendid place, artistically set out in an arrangement of little tented huts with individual gardens. I took a long, long shower, enjoyed a delicious beef and date tagine washed down with a bottle of local rose and collapsed into a real bed

We were both pretty tired after some hard trekking in quite rugged conditions but we had a great experience in something we had never done before and absolutely thoroughly enjoyed it. A really excellent holiday!



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