

Morocco

High Atlas Crossing on Horseback

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A diary

by Hartmut Porzig



Ascent to Tizi-n-Ttichka

Quite a lot of different trail rides are offered in Morocco, but this one is exceptional: It only takes place two times a year, the one in spring crosses the mountains from the south to the north, the one in autumn moves in the opposite direction. Since I had never been in Morocco before, I had absolutely no idea what to expect. Naively, I imagined the Atlas to be a somewhat downsized version of the Alps, except that the architecture of the houses might be slightly different from what I knew from Switzerland and Austria. When I finally got there I felt a little like in the story of the two friends who always discussed about life after death and promised each other that the one who would die first should report to the survivor. Sure enough one died and indeed appeared as promised. His friend eagerly questioned him: "Tell me, is it how we imagined?" "No, completely different" answered the Deceased and vanished.

One amazing thing about the Atlas Mountains is the striking difference between the southern side with its completely bare moonlike appearance and the northern slopes with relatively rich vegetation and farmland. Another is the surprising lack of impressive rocky peaks. The intense weathering and the strong temperature gradients have transformed many mountains into enormous heaps of rubble with occasional boulders. To me, the spring riding trail from the desert to the northern slopes seems the most attractive because the climax of the heroic landscapes and sceneries is concentrated in the second rather than the first half of the ride. But let's start at the beginning.

EasyJet operates a relatively cheap daily flight from Geneva in Switzerland to Marrakech. Unfortunately it starts so early in the morning that it cannot be reached by train from other major cities of the country. To catch it, one has to spend a night in Geneva. Perhaps this is exactly what has been intended. Anyway, I arrived quite early in Marrakech airport and moved through a remarkably slow passport control with officials that did not seem really interested in letting people into their country. When I finally arrived in the baggage reclaim area, the conveyor belt had already been switched off and my poor luggage had been placed in a dark corner as being probably abandoned. In the entrance hall I learned that I had to wait for a few more hours to meet my fellow riders arriving from England at a more convenient time. The only exotic thing in this airport was the non-functioning teller machine, which shared this property with its companions in most other African airports. Finally an English couple showed up and turned out to represent the total rest of our party. A forth member had cancelled the trip on short notice.

A friendly driver dropped us at a hotel close to the city walls of Marrakech and vanished with the promise to pick us up the next day at six o'clock in the morning. Left with an afternoon and an evening in the town, we were slightly surprised by this arrangement because our program did not mention a stay in Marrakech at the beginning of our trip. It rather promised travelling by car across the mountains and passing a romantic first night in a palm plantation in the middle of the desert. Whatever the reason for this change, it really remained the only slight disappointment on the whole journey. We decided to make the best of it and embarked on a walk through the city and on finding a decent restaurant for lunch. We could not resist venturing on a short stroll through a small part of the huge suq (market). In spite of the bright sunshine, the small streets remained in a kind of mystic half-light, because the room between the rooftops of the houses on both sides is covered by various kinds of sunshades. I resisted the temptation to buy anything because I would have had to carry it for two weeks across the mountains.



Djamaa el-Fna in Marrakech

In the surroundings of the huge central place, Djamaa el-Fna (Place of the Beheaded) many restaurants and coffee houses wait for the hungry and thirsty. We mounted the steps leading in one of the rooftop restaurants which promised some fresh wind during the hot midday time only to discover that we had picked the one place with the worst service in town. As in most restaurants there were exclusively male waiters which appeared to be remarkably disinterested in their visitors. After about 2 hours they managed to serve some food which, however, was surprisingly tasty.



Kutubiya Mosque, Marrakech

We spent a hot afternoon mostly in a beautiful park not far from the famous Kutubiya Mosque, the minaret of which represents a landmark of the city of Marrakech. Erected in 1189 it looks very unlike the typical modern minarets but resembles rather a normal Spanish or Italian church tower. Indeed this type of architecture came to Morocco with the Arabs that had been driven out of Spain during the Reconquista. For dinner we found a very nice rooftop restaurant close to the old city wall that was run by a women's cooperative. Fittingly, its name was 'Nid de Cigogne' (The stork's nest) because right over the street storks had built their nest on top of the city wall and were feeding their young. The women of the cooperative were much more efficient than the males during lunchtime and served a good and reasonably priced menu in record time. When we returned to the hotel in the dark, all the streets were as crowded with people as Piccadilly Circus in London. It was impossible to feel frightened or lonely.

The next morning we assembled at 6 am in the hotel lobby and were indeed picked up right in time by a young man with a minibus who was supposed to drive us across the mountains into the desert east of Ouarzazate where we should meet the horses and our guides. We drove on a breath-taking winding road across the mountains to the desert city of Ouarzazate and after a further 30 to 40 km we arrived at the palm plantation of Skoura on a farm harbouring about 30 Berber stallions. We were welcomed by a Frenchman who owns the place and is organising horse trail riding at various locations in southern Morocco. There was a relatively brief instruction period about how to handle Berber stallions before we mounted our assigned horses and had to demonstrate our skills in a riding arena that occupied the space in the middle of the farm yard. The horses looked relatively small but were well trained and in good shape overall. On our trail they proved good humoured, sure-footed and keeping a solid pace in all gaits. Fortunately, tack and saddle were more practical and easier to handle than in most of my earlier trails and hence, it posed no problem that everybody was expected to do the tacking without much help from the guides. Before long we were set to leave the farm for our first stage together with two Berber guides both of which were fluent in French while only one of them could communicate in English. All the luggage, camping equipment, supplies for animals and humans together with a support team of two (cook and driver) went in a small lorry to meet us at tonight's camp.



Kasbah of a village close to Skoura

Here on the south side of the Atlas all life is concentrated in oases along the few rivers that come from the mountains. There are large palm plantations, orchards and small grain fields that are irrigated by a channel system fed by the rivers. The villages constructed from clay bricks, usually outside the agricultural area, having the same colour as the surrounding barren land, fit perfectly unobtrusively into their surroundings. In many of the villages we spotted the remains of surprisingly large Kasbahs, castle-like structures that were once owned by the local Pashas (big land owners). As all the mud brick buildings need constant maintenance, the Kasbahs that lost their function without being transformed into guest houses or dwellings for ordinary people rapidly disintegrated. Unlike ruined medieval castles in Europe, the fragments of which are still visible after hundreds of years, all that remains after fifty or hundred years from even the most magnificent Kasbah in the Berber country is a contour-less heap of clay.



Abdi, one of our two guides



Village and Oasis close to our first camp site

The first stages followed more or less the valley of the river Dades where gravel desert alternated with river oases. Our first camp was located on top of a barren hill looking down onto a large oasis and the associated village. Although the oases look quite fecund, the fields are all very small, more like beds in a garden. The farmers have kept alive age-old techniques like ass-operated stone oil mills and threshing with flails on smoothened surfaces in the fields. The weather was windy but quite warm. Nevertheless, each evening our friendly helpers erected a separate shower and toilet tent that allowed the luxury of a hot shower even in the driest places, albeit with a limited amount of water. Dinner was usually served late after sunset in the dark, requiring head lamps to appreciate the excellent food that our cook had prepared.



My horse 'Neptune' finding something to eat everywhere

Before we left our campsite on the next morning an elderly worn-out looking couple showed up and started to collect carefully into bags every straw that was left by the horses. Later on our itinerary through a hilly gravel desert with very little if any vegetation we met a shepherd with his goats and sheep. To me it remained entirely unclear on what these animals were supposed to feed. Living conditions for farmers at the brink of the desert must be extremely hard for animals and humans alike.



Riding into the desert...

After the gravel desert we again reached the river which we followed for the whole rest of the day crossing the water several times. Surprisingly, the shores of the clear and lovely river were often completely bare. Abd-ul-rahman (called 'Abdi'), the one of our two Berber guides who knew some English, explained that the bottom was too salty for any plants to grow. Indeed crystallized salt was visible at many places on the river banks. However the water of the river itself was soft and sweet. In some places farmers have constructed channels that lead water of the river to their plantations which are located in some distance from the river. In places the valley became relatively narrow with rock formations on both sides and flowering Oleander shrubs as the only vegetation. In smaller side branches of the river we discovered small tortoises and toads with all kinds of colour patterns. Finally we reached a green oasis with a beautifully restored Kasbah which is now used as a guest house for well-to-do tourists. Our cook prepared a perfect lunch that was served in the shadow of a small farm house to make the heat tolerable.

An oasis with Kasbah converted into a guest house



Carol mounting her horse after a surprise bath

In the afternoon we continued to follow the river the banks of which now showed increasing vegetation. During the frequent river crossings Carol took 3 times a bath in the river because her horse seized any possibility to lie down in the middle of the water without previous warning. In the evening we pitched out tents on a dry hill close by the river where I took the opportunity to use the fast running and surprisingly clear water for a whole body wash without water restriction.



Vegetation and
withered rocks along
the Dades river

When I returned the horses stood as always tethered to solid iron tent pegs in respectful distance from each other busy to munch their fodder. Although occasionally they can seem quite nervous and are neighing a lot, they usually remain patiently waiting and resting on their spot during the whole night in spite of the relatively short ropes. It was absolutely amazing to watch a horse that had entangled itself with his legs in his rope. Our horses at home would panic and would try to tear apart the rope or the peg or both. Not so these stallions. They would turn themselves quietly in the opposite direction until the entanglement loosened itself.



At the shore of the lake of
Ouerzazate

We continued the ride along the Dades River the next morning under a burning sun. While we approached the large artificial lake of Ouerzarzate, called Barrage El-Mansur-Eddahbi, the river banks became gradually less steep and the valley turned into a narrow oasis. On both sides we encountered ruined Berber villages. The villagers had to give up their houses because of the reservoir. Our support staff had erected the big mess tent to create a shadowy place for lunch directly at the waterfront. Since the water had about 30 °C, was clear and full of small fishes we all started a swim in the afternoon. Opposite to our resting place, on the other side of the lake, one could see a rock formation with many caves that had served in olden times as dwellings for people that our guide called 'the small people' without making it clear whether he meant 'short' people or 'poor' people.



Encounter in the desert

Later we moved with the horses through a slightly hilly dry country with many dried-up riverbeds. The whole area looked like an immense alluvial plain consisting from material washed off from the Atlas Mountains in the background. We climbed a prominent hill and were surprised to find the hilltop crowned with small stonewalled platform adorned with a painted panorama of the surrounding mountains. Years ago this monument in the middle of nowhere had been created by some idealistic Frenchman. We tried to identify all the mountains and landmarks that carried their Arabic and French names on the painting. From the indication of the elevations we learned that we were travelling constantly more than 1000 m above sea level. While we moved on, the wind got stronger and we occasionally caught rain drops. Heavy clouds were seen on the mountain tops of the Atlas but they did not move any further into the desert. The camp for the night had been established close to the oasis of Nagga on a dry plateau between two dry river beds where our small sleeping tents collapsed in the storm before we had a chance to move in. The big Bedouin-like tents were also rocked by the storm but remained upright. We had to pass the night in the mess tent where the tarpaulins flapped against their supports making a noise like a modest gun battle. The air was still quite warm and hence, we considered briefly sleeping outside under the starry sky. Yet, the storm blew such a lot of dust and sand across our camp that we quickly dropped this idea. The horses just turned their backside into the wind and only cared about their hay and straw that tended to be blown away while they were chewing.



Camp in the middle of nowhere with one of the sleeping tents collapsing in the storm (far right)

The next morning we first had to pass through a small village in a modest river oasis. It was already harvest time for the barley growing on miniature fields. We observed women squatting on the bottom busily cutting the ears with sickles. Of course the fields are too small for any machine but what about a scythe? After cutting the ears are tied up to bunches and afterwards are collected onto heaps on the family thrashing floor where thrashing is performed later with flails like it has been done for the past 2000 years. The wind was certainly strong enough to blow away the husks. An elderly woman apparently had some ailment and asked our guide for a medicine. He turned out to carry quite a supply of drugs in his saddle bag and handed her some tablets. Whether this was an adequate therapy we will never know and unfortunately I did not understand a word from their conversation.



Through the pebble desert

Having passed the last houses of the village we found ourselves in the middle of a huge almost completely flat gravel desert spotted with larger boulders. There was barely any plant life and the occasional wind-torn plastic bag appeared to be the only moving things. The strong winds blow these small dark shopping bags into the most remote places. I tend to agree wholeheartedly with the author of my guide book in that it would be the most effective measure of environmental protection if the Moroccan supermarkets would stop to provide these bags for free. After lunch in a deeply cut riverbed we passed a rather run-down village which, however, housed no less than 3 large and formerly magnificent Kasbahs. Long ago the area must have been quite rich but now the buildings behind their splendid facades were almost completely dilapidated.



Delapidated Kasbah

Later the terrain became hillier when we slowly approached the foothill of the mountains. We crossed some remarkable table mountains and slowly gained height. In the far distance we even had a view down onto Ouarzazate and the adjacent lake. After a long ride, many ups and downs and surprising turns through steep slopes we finally arrived at an old well, a former important stop for caravans travelling through the mountains.



The biblical well

The well was still functional and contained an antique construction for scooping water out from the depth. It looked like the ones described in the bible where Jacob met his wife Ruth. We watered the horses and camped not far from the well. The wind had not abated and we had to deposit large stones on our tent pegs to keep the small tents from flying away. Moreover the temperature had dropped quite appreciably and for dinner we were forced to put on long-sleeved anoraks.



Camp at the well site

During the night the wind died down almost completely and we were greeted by a clear, crisp morning. While we had breakfast a shepherd with his flock and dogs arrived at the biblical well and started to water his animals, a really archaic scene.



Sheperd watering his sheep at the desert well

Suddenly there was a big excitement among the staff members. They had captured one of the elegant and surprisingly large jerboas (Wüstenspringmaus) which had succeeded to enter one of the sacs that contained the grain for the horses. Now the rare animal sat on the bottom of a bucket ready to be photographed with his beautiful tail that carries a bunch of black hairs right on the tip.



Desert jumping mouse. During the catching it unfortunately lost its beautiful black tuft at the end of the tail. The rest of the tuft is now laying in front of her!

When the pictures were taken it was released and hopped quickly in the direction of his whole. In the meantime one of the dogs of the shepherd picked up a bag with old bread, a present for the shepherd and his animals. The dog carried it to a small hill in a distance where he guarded it carefully but did not touch it even though he looked quite hungry.

We first crossed the same type of gravel desert that we had already experienced yesterday until we arrived at a kilometre-long wire-mesh fence which enclosed a protected area for gazelles. Although we did not spot any of them, it was obvious that only within the fenced area had there remained any vegetation. Wildlife seems to have all but vanished on this side of the mountains maybe not even due to over-hunting but rather due to the loss of food resources to the many (too many) goats and sheep roaming the area.



Lunch break at the filmset.

Finally we arrived at a small green valley with running water in a tiny creek. At the upper end the valley was closed by an impressive looking building that could have been an old fortress although it lacked the typical Berber architecture. I was quite surprised to learn that the whole building was merely part of a movie set constructed entirely from plaster on a wooden scaffold. Apparently, the heroic empty landscape of mountains and desert had repeatedly attracted producers of movies set in the time of the Roman Empire (The Gladiators) or of Alexander the Great requiring lots of battling and the absence of all traces of modern civilization. A single lonesome keeper living in a tiny hut nearby was charged with guarding the ensemble waiting for the next film crew to arrive.

Later we reached the wide and green river valley of the Oued Mellah and a little further into the valley we stood in front of the beautiful old Ksar Ait Benhaddou that takes the better part of steep hillside. This is a perfectly maintained example of a fortified Berber village in its traditional architecture that has been declared world cultural heritage by the UNESCO in 1987. The river did not carry much of its slightly salty water (mellah means salt) and hence, we could move with the horses in the riverbed between the old Ksar on the right and the modern village on the opposite west bank. Apparently it hosts several hotels, guest houses and restaurants for the tourists that want to visit the old castle. Indeed, tourists kept constantly crossing the riverbed between the old and the new village. Unfortunately we did not have a chance to visit the interior of the Ksar, a labyrinth of small lanes with narrow living quarters, towers and communal storehouses; all constructed from mud bricks or rammed earth.



Ait BenHaddou

After photographing everything from the outside we rode further upriver sometimes through thick tamarisk growth until we reached our campsite right at the northernmost edge of the Ait Benhaddou river oasis. Again we had to fight against the storm which tried to keep us from pitching our tents.

The next morning started warm and sunny. The wind had calmed down and we moved further up the valley through a breathtaking landscape with ever more towering mountains on both sides of the river. Along the valley of Waounila we definitely moved into the high Atlas. The bottom of the valley with its deep green orchards and small fields formed a striking contrast

to the bone-dry and vegetation-free broken stone walls on both sides. The many Berber villages nestled to their rocky yellow and brown surroundings making little contrast to the stones. They were all situated outside the irrigated area that is much too precious to be used for construction.



River oasis with
Berber village in the
background

Although the mountains get higher and higher they still keep their appearance of huge heaps of rubble. Big stone chippings seem to rest loose on the steep hillsides ready to dart down as soon as the next rain makes everything slippery.



Boulders ready to be
swept on our path in
the next thunderstorm

Finally we end up on a small unpaved road that should lead us to the top of the first of the mountain ranges that we are about to cross. In spite of its precarious state our 'road' was also

used by big offroaders ('4by4 through the desert') that took the whole width of the street. I wondered what would have happened if two of these cars would have had to bypass each other. Anyway, we had a hard time to keep our horses from bouncing in one of the cars. From the height of the road there was a fascinating view down into the river bed with its green banks getting smaller and smaller. There were still villages often with ruined Kasbahs from the time of the pashas. All the houses had flat roofs that rest on wooden scaffolds. Fortunately the age of the corrugated plates that spoil the local architecture in other parts of the world has not yet reached this country. Decidedly less archaic were the dish antennas that decorated most of the houses. According to our guides the Moroccan Government has a policy to bring electricity in even the remotest villages as a measure to reduce migration into the cities.



People and plants fighting against a harsh environment

After a while the street became so steep that we had to dismount and to lead the horses until we reached the windy and cool summit of the pass with a beautiful view and a collection of market stands selling minerals and other curios. Paul the amateur geologist was highly fascinated by some of the minerals and fossilisations on sale but at the end could not settle on buying something. While we followed our road gently sloping through a bare rocky landscape into the next valley we met two young female teachers in the middle of nowhere walking by foot to their home village for the weekend.

It was close to sunset when we finally reached our windy campsite on a terrace above a small river oasis. Paul's Arabian stallion that had made a somewhat apathetic impression during the past two days and had not eaten sufficiently was to be exchanged for another horse. Hence, in the falling darkness one of our guides took an additional ride of two hours to reach the big road where he would meet the horse truck. The new horse arrived in the middle of the night together with an exchange guide called Ibrahim. Ibrahim was nice though not quite as sympathetic as his predecessor whose name I never learned correctly. It sounded like Martin but that had definitely not been his true name. Ibrahim's English was practically nonexistent while his French was ok. That left Abdi as the main communication channel.

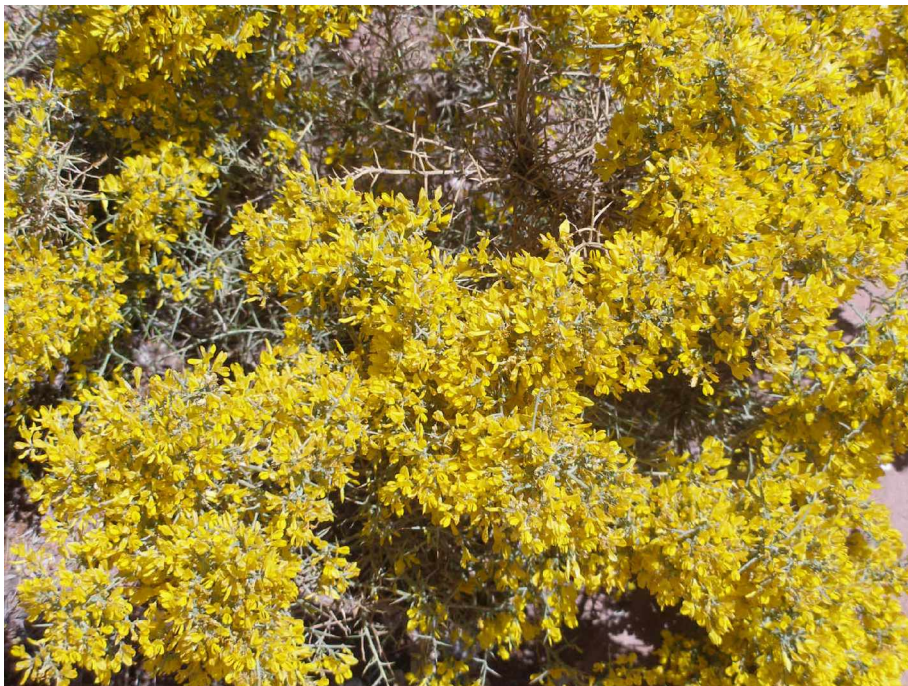
The next day we penetrated deeper into the mountains mostly using dry riverbeds as pathways. The walls on both sides looked like made from sediments that had been thrust

into different angles by tectonic forces. The vegetation remained extremely scarce but nevertheless children with flocks of goats or sheep climbed the mountainsides.



Coming down into a new valley

After passing a watershed we walked down into a valley that presented almost alpine scenery. Pine trees on the mountain sides formed small woods when we descended and flowering brushes gave the impression of springtime. We spent a comfortable lunchtime among the pine trees that protected from the cool wind. The sun was so warm that we had to seek the shadow.



Flowering shrub on the way into the valley of Telouet

During the afternoon we reached the valley of Telouet, a large irrigated alluvial plain surrounded by bare mountains. The plain was covered with unusually large grain fields and

olive groves. While we rode through a broad tributary valley the wind grew stronger and colder. The continuous grass carpet dotted by sheep and even cattle together with their youthful shepherds appeared quite unusual by Moroccan standards and were reminiscent to a Tibetan or Mongolian landscape.



View from our campsite onto the pastures in Telouet

Our camp for the next two nights was situated not far from the end of the valley. Tomorrow there would be a day of rest for the horses while we would visit a famous huge Kasbah in the neighbouring small town of Telouët. Meanwhile the wind had changed into a full-blown storm that made it impossible to pitch our small sleeping tents and even to pitch the large and strong mess tent was hard work for the support staff. Paul cited the report of a former participant of this ride whose party had been caught in a snow storm. We did not have problems imagining that the present weather might be the first step in the same direction. During the night the storm did not abate and unfortunately succeeded to collapse our toilet tent.



First view onto Dar-el Glaoui, the Kasbah of Telouet

We reached the Kasbah after a walk through the small town that possesses a few guest houses and shops but tourists seemed to be scarce at that time of the year. The main building was reached after passing through the former military quarters and the guest houses and stables for the passing caravans. Most of this is now collapsed and stork nests decorated the isolated walls.



A stork's nest on the crumbling walls of Dar Glaoui

In one of the inner courtyards we met a guard/guide who was happy to lead us through the rooms. The Kasbah Dar Glaoui in Telouët was formerly the feudal seat of the immensely rich and influential pashas of Marrakesh of the El Glaoui family. However they had cooperated with the French during the time of the protectorate favoured by a decree that had stipulated a separate development of Berber and Arab populations. When the family of the present king assumed power after the end of the protectorate the El Glaoui lost their influence and power and had to give up their castle.



In the former living quarters of the Glaoui Pashas

The Kasbah had been in use for more than 200 years and had been populated, in its best times, by more than 1000 people including slaves and military. It is now largely in ruins but some of the living quarters still have retained impressive remains of the old luxury. They contain magnificent stuccos, carved and painted cedar wood ceilings and colourful faience decorations. The windows carried beautifully made window grills through which there was a wide view into the surrounding country side.



Part of the Telouet valley as seen from the Kasbah

On the way back we stopped at a small shop that sold very nice Berber carpets. It was much larger inside than could be suspected from the outside and we went through the whole business of a peppermint tea ceremony and a long bargaining session until I finally settled on a pretty piece that had been made, allegedly, by members of a women's cooperative that was to help widowed or divorced women. Although the story sounded a little too touching to be true, I was quite happy with my acquisition.



On the way to the Tizi-n-Tichka mountain pass with a view back into the valley of Telouet

The next day brought the most impressive highlight of the whole trail: the crossing of the highest mountain pass, Tizi-n-Tichka at about 2300 m and a long descent down the northern slopes. It required quite some climbing through the rocks and rubble on both sides. Fortunately the strong wind had calmed down overnight and initially the temperature in the early sun was quite comfortable. Our path started in a small Berber village with 'streets' so narrow that barely a loaded ass would be able to pass. The higher we climbed the more beautiful became the view back into the wide valleys behind us with the green patches of agriculture and the Kasbah right in the middle. The only remaining sign of civilisation was the power line that used the same mountain pass to connect the isolated villages with each other.



Resting the horses
on the height of
Tizi-n-Tichka

On the highest point a cold wind convinced us to look for shelter and, after a short rest to proceed rather quickly on the downward path. We had a wide view into the bare valleys to the north and could follow our path with the eye for an almost endless distance.



A steep way down from Tizi-n-Tichka

In general the descent proved to be slightly less steep than the ascent from the south. Nevertheless the horses had to show their climbing talents more than once. They are enormously sure-footed and almost never hesitate even in situations where the rider does not dare to look downwards. After some time I gave up looking downhill and imagining how it would feel to tumble down the rocks together with the horse. It made life much easier.



The other side of
Tizi-n-Tichka

Later we met some locals who were about walk across the mountain pass in the opposite direction. After the lengthy greeting ceremony they, sure enough, also asked for some drugs against their ailments. It struck me as a rather haphazardly arranged medical consultation.

After a long downward ride across a landscape that did not yet differ much from the one on the south side we arrived at the level of a small river where we found a place for lunch underneath large walnut trees. The type and construction of the houses had changed from the clay-type architecture to one that used mainly rubble stones. Also the terraced fields seemed to climb up higher on the mountain slopes perhaps reflecting a slightly higher level of precipitation. Compared to the south, a more elaborate irrigation system resulted in larger cultivated areas around the villages.

Continuing our ride in the afternoon, we did pursue a course along the river but soon started to climb again towards a further mountain pass. The way was not only steep but also exceedingly small, winding along slippery slopes with deeply eroded crevasses. Gradually the vegetation on the hillsides got somewhat denser. First juniper trees show up followed by small indeciduous shrubs and much further down conifers. Occasionally we meet half dilapidated houses or stables and thinly grown barley fields on adventurously steep hillsides. After a kind of plateau at the watershed followed again a long descent that even led us through something like a pine forest populated by black goats that very successfully climbed the deep hanging branches of the trees. I was so amazed and also so concentrated on the slippery path that I failed to document the scene with a photograph. After a further hour we finally reached the village of Zerkten close to the great street from Marrakech to Ouarzazate.

As a special treat on the way we had an impressive view on one of the highest mountains of the Atlas with some small snowfields.



View onto Djebel Ounzal one of the highest peaks of the Atlas Mountains. Note the traces of snow remaining close to the top.

Our camp was built on an old terrace above the village and immediately formed the centre of interest for the young people of the village who tried their sparse French vocabulary on us. I was very easy to confuse them by answering in French.



A steep descent onto the village of Zerkten

Later in the evening two members of the local administration appeared and wanted to see our passports. After this official part of their visit they joined our cook and the other staff

members for an extended tea sipping and talking session. According to Abdi they also had been asked about the most impressive new building close to our campsite that was dominating the village. Apparently, this had been intended to serve as a district high school for girls associated with a college. But by the time the building was finished, the educational planning for the district had changed, the girls were supposed to visit a school in another place and the brand-new building had remained functionless and empty.



View from our campsite onto the valley of Zerkten



Spectators in Zerkten

After a warm night without the usual storm we set about to cross more mountain ridges and valleys, although the distance would be significantly shorter than yesterday. After crossing the big street with its busy traffic we used a small and exposed street that appeared

predisposed to be overwhelmed with rock and earth after the next strong rain. The mountain pass at the end of the valley was less steep the previous one and led us into another valley full of old walnut trees. First it seemed as if the big old trees had grown in a very hostile environment. The upper part of the valley was filled with rubble and rocks without any signs of agriculture. However, it turned out that a few years ago during a horrible thunderstorm an avalanche of earth and stones had buried part of the arable land and also part of the village only sparing some of the old trees. A little further down at the end of the avalanche-covered land we arrived at the lunch site, a grassy place underneath even more walnut trees, surrounded by little irrigated fields.



In the valley of the walnut-trees

We were already expected by a friendly villager, apparently the owner of the land and an old acquaintance of our guides. He joined us for the lunch and later returned with his wife who had brewed a good and enormously strong tea and served it together with fresh bread and home-made butter that was specially seasoned with herbs. She brought her grandchild with her, made a very nice, open impression and conversed without any signs of shyness but unfortunately spoke only Arabian while her husband at least mastered some French. Meanwhile some pretty young girls which seemed also to belong to the family collected grass for our horses.

From this hospitable place, we followed this long valley of Oued Zat, eventually descending to the river at its bottom. On the way we met a constant stream of totally overcharged cars and caravans of donkey riders which all returned from the market in the small town further down the valley that always takes place on Wednesday. Finally we crossed the narrow streets of the market town on our wildly neighing horses and reached our campsite after a short distance outside the urban area in the middle of harvested barley fields.

On the following day we had to cross a further mountain ridge prior to reaching the lowlands. Although the pass was not terribly high, we had a long ascent on small roads and paths through a rather narrow valley. Shortly before we reached the watershed a landslide had blocked the road. An excavator was busy to clear the road but had not yet achieved much. The driver initiated some risky manoeuvres to free some space for us to go through. Overall

the valley looked rather bare and devoid of agriculture. From afar the small village on the height of the pass looked poor and almost deserted.



On the way to Yagour

However, as soon as we reached the highest point of the road we were surprised to look down into the wide and beautifully green and fertile high plateau of Yagour with all kinds of fruit trees and grain fields. Upon closer inspection the houses and villages did not look poor at all. Almost all the farmers seemed to possess cows or even horses in addition to goat, sheep and donkeys.



The high plateau of Yagour

After crossing the bountiful plain we arrived at another small pass behind of which the rich vegetation stopped as suddenly as it had started. We moved down into a very steep and

rocky valley where the only sign of life consisted of a few children shepherding some small flocks of sheep and goat searching for the few edible plants hidden between the rocks. At lunchtime we arrived at the bottom of the valley where an almost dried-out little creek had left a few small pools of water thankfully welcomed by the horses. The water also supported some grassy spots and shrubs that made for a comfortable rest. Paul, the geologist, promptly found ochre suitable for painting his horse. Unfortunately the chestnut coloured horse that he rode since his white one had to be replaced proved to provide a much poorer painting background.



Ibrahim talking to a boy shepherd during lunch in the last steep valley of our ride

Later the small path along the creek eventually led us into a village where several valleys met. We crossed a small river and up it goes to the next pass. However the height of these passes constantly decreased and occasionally we had a view into the plain of Marrakech. Everywhere was harvesting time. The small individual bundles of straw can be seen heaped up on the thrashing places in the villages. Often our appearance formed the attraction of the day and in no time a crowd of children was following us screaming on the top of their voices.



Through the foothills of the Atlas Mountains

At one occasion we passed a school just in time to collect all the children on their way home. Unlike in the high Atlas only few of the girls carried a headscarf and all of them started screaming like the boys. It almost felt like Southern Africa except that the children seem somewhat more manageable. As soon as they were admonished by our guides, they would fall quiet and disperse. Between the villages there was a lively traffic of carriages and donkeys. Unfortunately two of our stallions felt compelled to display rather noisily their capacities to each and every ass. The poor donkeys and their drivers were completely perplexed when the snorting, neighing and prancing horses approached them and could be restrained only by brute force. We tried to alert the drivers advising them to keep a large distance prior to any confrontation. Once we barely avoided an accident when, in the midst of a narrow passage, one unfortunate guy apparently did not believe us or did not understand and, coming close was so frightened that he fled uphill abandoning his donkey who promptly lost part of his load. However, after we passed he quietly collected his belongings and the donkey and did not give us a bad word.



The last
campsite of the
ride in the
Ourika Valley
area

Finally we reached our last camp after a pretty wild gallop on a terrace close to a small street. The tents were pitched on a harvested field under the patient and quiet observation of a group of boys. The thought that this would be our last night with the horses made us a little sad and I, for my part, was not terribly keen to return into civilization.

The last leg of our trail over the last foothills of the Atlas led us into the broad valley of the Ourika River where we moved through wild vegetation and beautiful garden areas until we reached the small town of Et-Tnine. The ride ended with another fast gallop through the winding roads leaving slightly frightened pedestrians on both sides. Above the town in a small pine grove our cook prepared the last of his tasty lunches. This time all of the leftovers were collected in a great pan and offered to the group of small children that had attentively observed our packing up and our meal. This was a resounding success in that all the children immediately assembled around the pan and lost all interest in their surroundings. Shortly afterwards the horse transporters arrived and our warlike stallions were packed so closely onto the lorry that it seemed physically impossible for them to bite or to kick each other.

Ibrahim would accompany the horses back to Skoura, while Abdi came with us by car to Marrakech. We also had to bid farewell to the gorgeous cook and the driver of the support car both of which had cared for us marvellously.



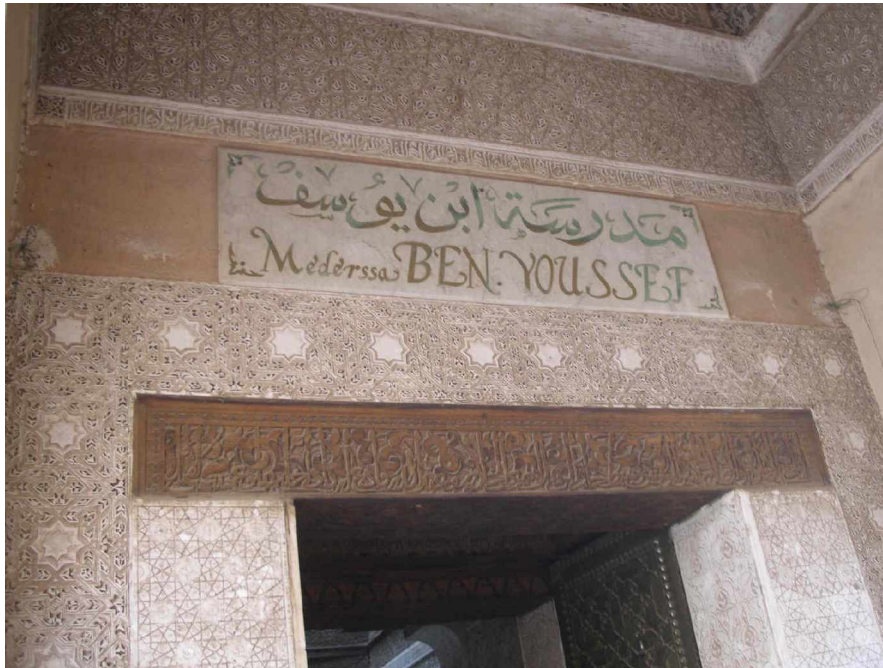
Children in Et-Tnine with the leftovers of our last joint meal

In the early afternoon we were back to our old hotel Ryad Marrakech. In the evening we concluded our adventure with a festive dinner in one of the typical restaurants of the old town that Abdi had selected. Initially I suspected it might be the worst place in town because it was completely empty when we arrived. But Moroccans eat as late as the Spanish and after a while quite a few Moroccan families appeared, musicians took the small stage and a pretty woman started a dance performance. After the meal we had still time to pass once again over the huge Djamaa al-Fna full of cook shops and all kinds of performers, musicians, snake charmers and storytellers. We really looked forward to the next day in Marrakech that we would spend free of any obligations or fixed programs with all the marvels of this fascinating city prior to flying back home.

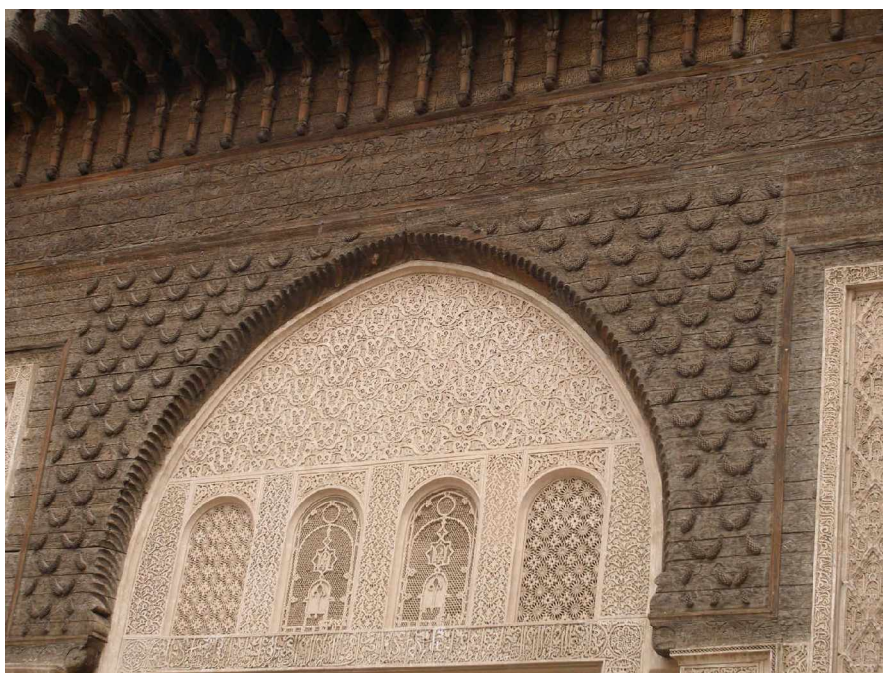


A Painting in the Marrakech Museum

I spent most of this day in a particularly beautiful part of the old town that centres on the Medersa ben Jussef, a large and famous theological high school from the 14th century. In the neighbourhood one finds the Musée de Marrakech located within a beautiful palace from the 19th century called Dar M'Nebhi and the Dar Bellarj (House of the storks), a carefully renovated large private town house of a rich Moroccan that now belongs to a Swiss lady and harbours the 'Fondation pour la culture au Maroc' with interesting exhibitions. Also close to the Ben Jussef one can visit the oldest remaining building of medieval Marrakech dating from the time of the Almoravid dynasty in the 11th century, the Qubba Almoravide an artfully decorated structure that played a central role in the urban water management.



Entrance to the
Medersa Ben Joussef



Front wall of the inner courtyard of the Medersa

Among these sights the Madersa is certainly the most impressive one. It was a central Institution for theological and law studies with the living quarters for 130 students. The original building from the 14th century had been beautifully renovated in 1563 and is now a museum.



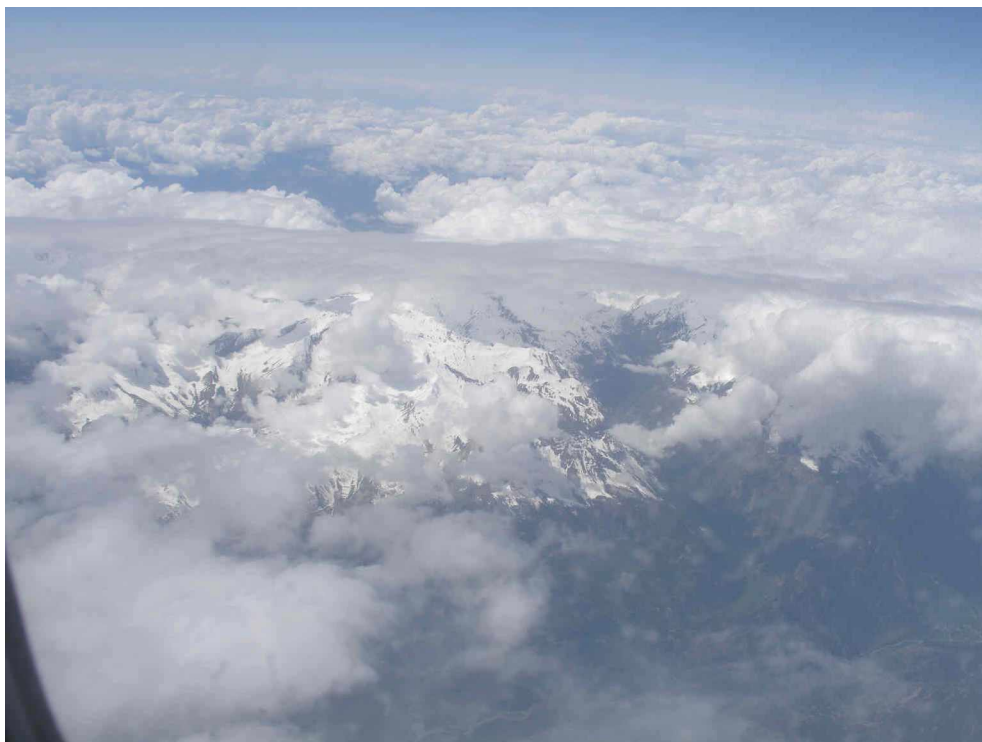
Fully equipped student apartment in the Medersa Ben Youssef

The rooms of the students, some of which fully furnished and looking very much like the cells of monks in a monastery, are arranged around an aesthetically highly pleasing central court richly decorated with cedar wood carvings and stuccos. The students lived and worked in this 'college' for more than 10 years, preparing themselves for taking office in the civil service or in religious organisations.



On the market of the lamp makers in Marrakech

In the afternoon walking through the various parts of the souk, I was surprised by a tremendous and long lasting thunderstorm that thoroughly wetted each and everything in Marrakech. The water stood in all streets and also poured into part of the shops with their light roofs. A friendly antiques dealer asked me to sit in his shop during the heaviest rain. But when I saw the water running across all his treasures and carpets and followed passively his and his people's desperate attempts to protect his merchandise, I preferred to leave. Marrakech tried to ease our farewell!



Flying back
home over the
snow-covered
Alps

THE END