

# HIGH, RIDE AND HANDSOME

By bike through the High Atlas Mountains



*Also by Derek Workman*

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# Hooked and Reeled In

In February of 2012 I went to Fitur, Spain's main tourism fair, held in Madrid. As I walked through the Morocco section I saw a poster for a beautiful mountain-top hotel, the Kasbah du Toubkal, in the High Atlas Mountains, and when I stopped to have a look a delightful lady called Aziza began talking to me. I'm a travel journalist, and, to be honest, a beautiful hotel is a beautiful hotel (although as I was to find out later, very few are quite as enchanting as the Kasbah du Toubkal), but then Aziza handed me a black-and-white postcard of a group of laughing young girls, and told me the story of Education For All. I was hooked.... all she had to do was reel me in.

When I got back to my home in Valencia, I contacted Mike McHugo, who is one of the moving forces behind EFA, and he told me more about the charity. He mentioned that their annual fund-raising bike ride was taking place in a few weeks. What he didn't know was that one of my ambitions had been to take a bike ride in Morocco, but, for one reason or another, it had still to be done. Suddenly, I had the chance of doing it.

This is my diary of the six-day ride; a fascinating trip through the High Atlas Mountains. In itself it was one of the most entertaining and interesting jaunts I've ever taken, but knowing that it was also helping young girls to fulfil their potential and create a different life added an extra bonus.

Please visit the Education For All site to get an idea of the wonderful work this charity does to help young girls from impoverished families in the remote villages of the High Atlas Mountains to continue the education they so richly deserve.

# The Riders

## Mike McHugo, 57 years old

Organiser of the ride and one of the guiding lights in Education For All. Despite having severed a tendon in his right leg four years ago and being told it was time he gave up long distance bike rides it hasn't stopped him cycling from his home in Pont de Montvert in the heart the Parc National des Cévennes in France (which makes him a Montvertipontain), to his home a half-hour drive from Marrakech (although done in three stages, he hastens to point out), and Land's End to John O'Groats – Le Jog, as it's known to aficionados. A master of understatement when describing cycling routes, although this might also be seen as a sign of encouragement to those who might give up before even starting an uphill climb of fifteen kilometers over a rock-strewn track had he not described it as 'just a bit of a climb before a nice long down hill'. Mike's cycling style is head down and knock off the kilometers; views is for wimps.

## Andy Philips, 54 years old

It was on a ride with Mike from Tangiers to Marrakech to celebrate his fiftieth year that they cooked up the idea of an annual Education For All bike ride. Since then he's ridden on all of them. With a background in education, he first met Mike in 1982 when he took a group of six school kids on one of Mike's educational study holidays in Morocco, (which went under the name of Hobo Travel and consisted of everyone riding in a beat up old Land Rover, sleeping in tents, or on top of them if Mike couldn't be bothered to put them up, and eating nothing but canned sardines and dates for two weeks – the kids loved it). A delicate operation (which we will be very discreet about) causes him discomfort if he spends too long in the saddle, and has led him to design a style of forward projection that involves a lot of bobbing up and down. The group's blogger and kitty holder (and we all hope he finally got his carpets home to the UK from Marrakech).

## Gareth Westacott, 59 years old

Back-up driver on all Mike's long distance rides, this time it was his turn to put feet on't peddles and leave the roadside tea making to someone else. Lives in the Auvergne, a couple of hours from Mike, and rides his bike in the mountains every other day, but admits that they are pretty namby-pamby when compared to the High Atlas, which he describes as 'pretty tough going sometimes', which shows that long association with Mike has led him to use a similar, if not quite so well honed, form of understatement. A hip replacement two years ago kept him from last year's ride, but this year he was up the front with the best of them. His style is to stop occasionally to enjoy his natural surroundings (and not at all as a way of taking a breather!) He then makes up for it and goes at a pace that even has Mike shaking his head.

## George Wallace, 64 years old

The granddad of the group, but you would never have thought it by the way he got stuck into them there hills. It was touch-and-go whether he would be on the ride as he was rushed into hospital with an unknown virus that laid him flat just before the start date. After five days of no-



one getting any the wiser he was sent home. He decided to do the ride to get his energy back for his weekly five-a-side football games with a group of friends two decades his junior. He enthralled us all at dinner on the first night with his encyclopedic knowledge of larch cladding and property boundaries in a discussion with Gareth about them building their own houses. Fortunately they grew out of it by the first day's ride. Says there was never a moment when he thought he would quit, and as far as he was concerned he included his periods of walking as part of the complete the ride on the premise that he was pushing with his hands instead of his feet. Did more miles during the week than in the whole of his life. Unlikely to sling his leg over a crossbar ever again.

### Mick Taylor, 50 years old

The youth element. Tri-athlete, long-distance walker, runner and cyclist. Found the pace strenuous at times (which goes to show what it was like for the rest of us!) and found the last day's ride to the ski-resort something of an endurance test and had to concentrate above average because of the road conditions. After the grueling 18km up-hill grind he arrived 'knackered but not ill', for which he seemed rather glad. Thinks it's probably one of the top cycle rides in the world if you take in terrain, scenery and general interest. The only one of the six not to have had some recent medical condition. Will do it again.

### Derek Workman, 62 years old

Spent more time in the back-up mini bus on the pretext that he was there to report on the trip and, as he was tail-end-Charlie due to his age and physical condition, was only getting photos of lycra-clad rear ends and shots taken of the others through a 300mm zoom lens. His cycle style was to ride, push, ride, push, supposedly to give his arthritic knee a rest. It fooled no-one. He usually arrived at the rest stops just as the others were chewing at the bit to get on the road again.





### Ahmed Id Bouker and Brahim Talaoul

The mother hens that kept a watchful eye on the chicks. Replenishers of water, orange juice and chocolate bars, cooks and picnic prepares par excellence, experts at driving at ten km an hour for hours on end, ever solicitous, courteous and smiling. It was knowing they were behind us in the blue pick-up and mini bus that gave some of us the courage to go just that couple of kilometres further before saying, 'Sod this for a game of soldiers!'



DAY ONE

# A Gentle Sunday Jaunt

It's just after nine on a glorious Sunday morning as we set off for our first bike ride into the mountains, a blue sky hazy in the distance. Six of us, with Ahmed the driver, take the road from Marrakech, turning off after almost thirty kilometers to begin our rise into the lower slopes of the High Atlas; a group of chaps of a certain age, all tucked, in one degree of decency or another, into a set of slinky cycle kit, but all proudly wearing the Education For All red, white and black shirt, with its Moroccan star and Arab calligraphy written across our chest.

The road climbs upward to Moulay Brahim, a scattered village on a limestone plateau, where we unload our bikes. This is our first day, so it's meant to be reasonably easy, just to warm us up. But 'easy', just like 'gentle', 'short' and 'just a couple of kilometers more' are relative terms when voiced by Mike McHugo, the owner of Kasbah du Toubkal and Discover Limited, who set the bike ride up to raise money to provide houses for girls from poor homes in outlying villages to help them continue their education.

The mountain landscape is beautiful, but anyone who knows the Valencian region in Spain, where I live, would be totally at home in these surroundings. The same rolling landscape, red and cream striated earth, pine covered hills and olive groves as you would see if you took a ride inland to Requena, but the architectural geography of low, boxy, one-storey villages of hill stone and cement block, plastered over with dull pink adobe made from the local soil, and the literal high point of the village being the minaret, is in total contrast to a Spanish village. But above all, it is the people, their animals and the way of life that create such a striking image.

We set off, and the upland plain dips and rises, but without any extremes, mainly because we've been bussed to a departure point of over

800 metres. Even so, climbs over the next four hours will take us higher than Ben Nevis.

I'm cautious at first. The others are wearing helmets (which I find extremely uncomfortable so stick to my M&S baseball cap) and sunglasses to protect them not only from the glaring sun but also from the wind on the downward stretches. I have a silver wrap-around pair that I bought for skiing years ago but don't wear them because I find sunglasses very disorientating. I'd rather squint into the sun and put up with tears than wear them, so I hand them over to Andy, who's forgotten his.

Whizzing down a – fortunately – minor slope an hour into the ride I'm too busy looking at the view to notice a pot hole that suddenly appears below my wheel. I clip the edge, which throws me into the rough ground at the side of the road, and the wheels skid from under me. Years ago, as I was driving on a long down-hill slope in torrential rain in northern France I got into a skid that I couldn't control. As the car slowly circled and circled all I remember was thinking, "Don't roll over! Don't roll over!" As I skittered down the road in the High Atlas, all I could think was, "Keep your head up! Keep your head up!" I slid to a stop with nothing worse than a grazed palm and twisted wrist.

The pleasure of the ride was exactly as I hoped it would be. In some ways being 'tail-end-Charlie' takes any pressure off the need to keep up with the pack, but this isn't the Tour de France, or even the Tour de Maroc; you do as much as you want at the speed that you want, always knowing that when you want to call it a day the cavalry, in the shape of Ahmed or Brahim in the blue pick-up, will come riding over the hill behind you.

The long, low corrals we pass surprise me. No more than a metre tall, often up to a couple of hundred metres square, with walls made of stones hauled from the barren fields (and a lot of this land is both very stony and very barren) plastered over with mud, they seem to serve no purpose, as they are almost all empty. But they are still being built, as a group of men manhandling stones on top of each other to create a wall and mixing soil with mud prove, and who wave to me as I pass.

The countryside passes lethargically; men of all ages, from early school age to wrinkled, wizen-faced ancients, tend small flocks of sheep

and goats, slowly chomping through the scrub. Heads appear at darkened doorways to silently watch these peculiar men in their figure-hugging shorts, brightly decorated shirts and strange hats ride through their village. Almost everyone we come across offers a “Bonjour. Ca va?”, or “Bon courage”, and a wave. Some of the braver young boys stick out their hand for a high-five and laugh as they do it.

I climb slowly from a village of no more than a couple of houses and the ubiquitous shed-cum-café selling Coca Cola and Technicolour Fanta. In the distance I see an old man wearing a straw hat with an enormous brim and a long faded grey jacket, apparently picking at a tall spiky bush. I ride closer and realize that below the spiky foliage are the legs of a donkey, hidden in the shadow of an enormous load of eucalyptus branches. As I pass I see the donkey’s head sticking out the front, staring vacantly at the ground as more kindling is piled high on its back.

Suddenly I spot a solitary bright red hang glider off in the distance. In moments it’s joined by four more vivid spots of colour against a bright blue sky, as they circle above a small village. A ‘picture moment’ presents itself; Gareth and George in their black, red and white cycling shirts bottom right, the hang gliders with their brightly coloured wings at top left, and in the middle the pale rose and white of a minaret, struck





against a translucent blue sky. But from experience I know that by the time the camera gets out of the pouch on my hip the image will be totally dispersed, so I just free-wheel down the hill and enjoy the view.

As I continue my stately glide downhill I drift around a bend and see Mike by the side of the road, looking at the ground. I stop, and look in the same direction, to see the hind legs of a tortoise disappearing into the undergrowth. He'd seen it in the middle of the road and had stopped to pick it up so it didn't get crushed by a lorry. Isn't that nice!

We arrive at Lalla Takeroust, a small town bustling with the weekly market, beside an artificial lake where we're to have lunch – and I'm ready for it! The slow drag up a rough track from the main road is about all I can manage, but when we arrive we find rich Moroccan rugs and gold embroidered cushions set out under a shade tree. Brahim has been there for a couple of hours cooking lunch, and serves us freshly cooked pasta with meatballs and an enormous salad. As we kick off our shoes Ahmed brings over an ornate metal kettle and dish, and pours warm water over our hands, handing us a soft white towel on which to dry them. A small dish of biscuits and a gleaming pot of mint tea is set on the table to refresh us as the final preparations for lunch are made.





We eat like sultans, and when the freshly-brewed coffee is drunk and the plates cleared away, we stretch out on the rugs for a siesta. Andy and Gareth make the most of the shade provided by the table cloth, and lie with their heads under the table. I tilt the brim of my cap over my eyes, move a couple of stones to settle my back, and drift into a siesta.

When we leave the picnic spot, a short ride takes us away from the lake and the bustle of market day in Lalla Takeroust. For a couple of kilometers I leisurely peddle past a continuous wall of deep red adobe, interspaced with battered, ancient plank doors. Behind the walls, clusters of white almond blossom mix with the grey-green of olive trees. Occasional stands of eucalyptus cast dappled shadows over the road as I gently and contentedly keep turning the pedals.

A couple of hours later we drop down to a junction with the main road into Marrakech. Mike's cyclometer clicks over to fifty-four kilometers of mountain climbs, long plateau and high speed downhill whizzing, four kilometers short of my best ever daily ride, so I decide to better it. A white and yellow market indicates twenty kilometers to Marrakech on a long, straight road, a fair part of it with a slow gradual incline. (I really don't like these, give me a short, sharp rise any day of the week.) And besides, Andy



has promised us that there's an ice-cream stand just around the corner, so I can't give up yet. But there isn't, and nor do they sell ice-creams at the next kiosk a couple of kilometers further on. Such small temptations keep you going; not the fancy hotel with the deep bath a ways down the road, but an ice-cream just around the next bend.

When we finally realize that the only ice-cream we'll get is in Marrakech, by which time a cold beer will hit the spot better, we've done 59.3km. I ask Mike to signal me at 60km, where I'll dismount and wait for the cavalry to ride me into town.

The sixty wave goes up just as we hit the fifteen kilometer marker. It's not that much further to go really, is it? Just do couple of more kilometers. Fourteen becomes twelve. Let's call it a day at ten.

The road is excruciating; patched tarmac, potholes and scattered grit. Just after 11km I pass a train of eight camels, ridden by three boys dressed in traditional Taureg robes. "You wouldn't see that in Basingstoke." I tell myself.

By 10km the scratches on the palm and the twisted wrist from my tumble earlier make gripping the handlebars and changing gear painful. At eight the buttocks in their padded shorts scream at every bump and pothole, so I straighten my legs to peddle, which creates a swaying



movement on my forward motion and puts pressure on my aching arthritic knee. Approaching six kilometers my knees are burning and my mouth is so dry I feel as if my tongue is packing it with cotton wool.

Andy and Gareth, who I haven't seen much in the last half-hour are waiting for tail-end-Charlie so we can go in together. The back-up van arrives, and this is the deciding point. There will be other days when I can take the easy way out, but this is the first day and a personal record. Six kilometers is only a return ride to the beach from my home in the centre of Valencia, and I've done that hundreds of times. I sit my burning backside onto the saddle, my feet onto the peddles, and push off.

We enter the suburbs and pretty soon all I can see of Gareth and Andy are the white strips on the top of their shirts, although I get an occasional glimpse of Andy as he raises himself up off his saddle to ease his aching backside.

We arrive at an enormous traffic jam, the first I've ever seen that has camels in it, and I see the others disappear into the distance. I'm complete lost. Suddenly I hear a horn blaring behind me and painfully turn around to see Brahim frantically gesturing to the right. I let him pass, and like an ailing chicken I follow mother hen home. But Andy and Gareth's misdirection means that I'm home before them (although they later try to lessen their embarrassment by saying that they rode further), and Mike's fancy little meter tells me that I've ridden 77.82 kilometres. That's almost 78! In fact, we can practically call it eighty!

I'm exhausted and aching... but elated.

Sunday 27 March	Marrakech-Marrakech
Total time:	3':55"
Distance:	77.82k
Average speed:	19.8kph
Maximum speed:	55kph
Ascent:	451m
Descent:	1298m



# For Every Zig There's a Zag

We spent the last couple of nights in a gorgeous riad on the edge of the Medina in Marrakech, but this morning we leave the city for pastures new. After yesterday's record-breaking ride – for me anyway – I'm feeling ready for another day back in the saddle. Isn't it amazing how easily we fool ourselves!

We return to Lalla-Takerkoust, where we had lunch yesterday, in the comfort of our fancy little bus, and full of the joys of spring we unload the bikes and set off, with me envisaging a stately ride through the cherry blossom and olive groves. But this time it's a different route, and the dips and rises of the second part of yesterday's ride turn into a hideous zig-zag that slowly – ever so slowly – climbs a mountainside in the vague direction of Amizmiz, where, thirty-two kilometres later we'll have lunch, though my aching knees made me feel as if something was definitely going amiss-miss.

Taking my *reportage* role seriously – in the long run it turned out to be a wonderful excuse for walking or riding in the back-up bus – I stop and watch the rest of the team passing over the top of each other as they gamely tackle the different levels, highlighted from the red earth by their professional-looking cycling gear. As I photograph George, head down over his handlebars bravely keeping the peddles turning, another cyclist passes across the lower section of my zoom lens. This time it isn't someone in our distinctive black, red and white tops, but a young chap on an ancient bone shaker casually climbing the steep rise without raising a sweat, with a pal striding along behind him. I've no idea where they came from, because I hadn't seen them pass me, but there they are, jolly along as if it was something they did every day. As, indeed, it

might well be.

Back on the bike, and miles behind everyone else, I half ride, half push my way up the steep zig-zag. In the distance I can hear a deep motor groan, and turn to see an overloaded wagon piled high with bright yellow plastic bags slowly straining up the mountainside. On top are a group of young men, reclining as if they had all the time in the world to get anywhere, which they probably do, and in the cab two others crushed into the passenger seat. The ones on top laugh and wave at me, but one of the younger ones inside looks at me with a grimace and raises his hands to shoulder height in a gesture that says, "What's this gormless old bloke in a weird outfit doing alone at the side of the road in the middle of nowhere taking photos?" And, quite frankly, I'd probably have thought the same myself.

But at least it shows that hitch-hiking is still alive and well in Morocco, where it's a regular form of transport for many people. In fact, for those living off the beaten track high in the mountains it's often the *only* means of transport.

Mike told us at the beginning that cars and lorries have little respect for bikes, so in stretches where the road washes away at the sides its best to hold the middle where the surface is good. Sound advice, and a short time later I hear the deep guttural roar of a heavily laden truck grinding up behind me. I 'hold the road' for as long as I can and try to judge when the truck is virtually on top of me before I drop to the rough surface at the side. Instead of a truck, a huge Volvo road builder slowly crawls alongside, so big that it takes almost thirty seconds to pass, an eternity when you are on a rough mountain road with a rock strewn tumble at your side.

When I finally crest the rise I see a sight that I only really thought I'd see in a desert, should I ever visit one, not on the top of a mountain – which goes to show that I've been reading the wrong sort of story books. In front of a long, low-walled mud compound were hobbled a group of about eight camels, all saddled up and ready to go. At the side, under the shade of a tent with its sides rolled up, sits a man in the rich blue robes of the Taureg. No-one and nothing else around, just him and his







camels. I suppose he could be waiting for a busload of tourists on the off-chance that they might fancy a humpty-backed ride into the wilderness, but who's to know. He may well be considering a big investment in camel futures, I couldn't say. But there he peacefully sits as his herd slowly chews. So I peddle on.

But not for long. In a gallant gesture of selflessness so as not to keep everyone waiting for me for too long, I hail Ahmed in the pick-up. We drop down the other side of the mountain to one of those views that add drama to any photo album, and illustrates that what might be picturesque for us when captured through a lens is all part of the daily grind of many people throughout the world.

A grey-green river splashes and gurgles its way through a narrow valley below a squat, ancient-looking village of red earth. On the rocky shore, women use big plastic bowls to do their washing in, and scattered over the rocks is a patchwork of brightly colour blankets, shirt, blouses, trousers and other personal and household linen. Above the water line tiny patches of bright green mint, corn, and grass for animal feed gave a vivid backdrop to the almost Medieval scene. A lady on a donkey with bulging panniers rides a narrow pathway between the crops, while other pack mules stand with their heads in sacks of feed, waiting for their turn to be loaded up. A stunning contrast of colour and texture – but back-breaking toil for those who live this way of life.

As we are about to ford the river the local taxi arrives – or at least that's what Ahmed jokingly calls it. A beaten up old Isuzu pick-up with raised sides to stop anyone falling out, is jam-packed with men, standing room only. It stops at a building at the entrance to the village and everyone scrambles out, calling their salaams to their cronies sat in plastic patio chairs outside the door. A few minutes earlier the truck with the yellow plastic bags had splashed its way through the ford, and was busily unloading both young men and cargo.

Heavily loaded wagons, often with people sat on top of their loads, bounce and rattle up the mountain roads. It's only later, as you ride further on your bike dodging fallen debris and jagged potholes that you begin

to imagine the wagons following you a couple of kilometers down the mountainside. It's frightening enough meeting a vehicle coming toward you when you are on your bike, but bouncing around on the top of some plastic sacks roped to the metal slats of the wagon side must be terrifying.

When I saw the state of the road later, as it deteriorated to nothing more than an excruciatingly bad, rubble strewn steep track, I thought that if I'd had to go any further on the truck I'd rather have risked a long walk home than the terror of coming across a similarly loaded vehicle coming in the opposite direction half-way up the mountainside. Somehow, though, they seem to pass each other.

Later, after lunch and a siesta, as I casually free-wheel down a shallow slope I see a couple of young girls chatting under some eucalyptus trees. One of them has a stick and is keeping a watchful eye on a small herd of goats munching at the grass on the roadside. She looks about fourteen, the same age as some of the girls who live in the Education For All boarding houses, and I can't help but think that there but for the grace of God and hundreds of strangers, go the hundred or so young girls whose lives will be changed because of the chance to continue their schooling. Because as lovely as it is to feel the sun on your back in mid-







March, and gaze off into the long views of the snow-capped Atlas Mountains hovering hazily in the distance, this isn't just a jolly cycling holiday to get into shape for the summer. There is a very serious intent behind the Moroccan hospitality and modest luxury. The aching legs at the end of the day will be eased ever so slightly knowing that thanks to your efforts a young girl from a poor family in a remote village in the High Atlas, the name of which you have probably never heard of, never mind be able to pronounce, will be given the opportunity to study, to discover a life away from her community, and perhaps one day go to university, or even return to her village to develop the cycle of opportunity she has been fortunate to become part of.

Monday 28 March	Marakech-Ouirgane (via Amizmiz)
Total time:	4':12"
Distance:	62.12km
Average speed:	14.7kph
Maximum speed:	60.5kph
Ascent:	1057m
Descent:	932m



## DAY THREE

# Lunch at the Top of the World

**A**ching bones, gurgling stomach, not feeling I can do it, but the moment we get into the saddle for a rapid descent of a couple of kilometers, the aches and pains ease and the chill wakes me up. I'm usually one of the first off, not because I need to be in the lead but because I know that some time soon everyone will pass me - and that's okay.

We begin the climb to Asni, where we are going to make a quick visit to one of the houses that Education for All have built. In the slow nine kilometre climb the distance markers seem to grow further and further apart. I don't mind being tail-end-Charlie, I'm used to cycling alone and I simply put my head down and carry on, the legs rotating the best they can. Not looking at the steep rise up to the next bend, I adopt the ostrich effect, keep my head down, look no more than a few metres ahead and it will pass. At the times when I feel myself really flagging and the wheels are simply going round in a lethargic fashion, I get into the lowest gear I can, get my legs straight and peddle ferociously. A rapid couple of minutes of doing this seems to get the energy back and the legs moving rhythmically again. And I'm not averse to getting off and pushing either. A gentle stroll for a couple of hundred metres works wonders.

We're all looking forward to meeting the girls who live at Dar Asni, but as luck would have it, the teachers at their schools are on strike and the girls have all gone home. Apparently this isn't an unusual event and highlights one of the anomalies of the Moroccan way of educational life for girls. Many boys will cycle to school and take lunch with them. Sometimes a single class will be held in the morning and then another in the afternoon. Boys will simply stay at the school, but it's considered unsafe for girls to do that, so they are expected to return home. Often they've walked considerable distances and on occasions when time-



tabling is particularly erratic they will miss a day's schooling completely. For the girls at the EFA houses they simply walk across the road, as the three houses are all built within a couple of minutes walk of the schools.

We chat for a while with the house mother Latifa, and volunteers Emma Clayton, Jenny Hitchcock and Angela Cooper. Even though we finished a large breakfast only half an hour ago we take a glass of mint tea with sweet biscuits so as not to offend Moroccan hospitality – and the Moroccans are extremely hospitable people.

We begin the seventeen kilometre climb up to the Kasbah du Toubkal, the Berber Hospitality Centre whose five percent surcharge on clients bills funds a series of projects in the village of the Imlil Valley, as well as substantial amount of the costs of running EFA. They don't call it a hotel, as it's based on traditional Berber design, way of life and hospitality. I'll find out what the difference is in a few days time, because I'm spending the weekend there.

I'm taking a ride in the pick-up for the first few kilometers of this stage so I can get ahead of the group to take photos. So far most of the team photos I've taken have been long shots or Lycra clad bums and cycling

shirts with the Education For All logo emblazoned on the back, as I've yet to get myself far enough in front to take approaching shots. It also gives me a chance to look at the countryside, which I wouldn't get with my head bent over the handlebars.

The blaring of car horns as we climb what passes for the road leaving Asni gives a fair indication of the number of vehicles behind us, with Ahmed blocking their path as he shepherds the riders until they clear the town through a series of steep, tight bends.

The bends gradual even out, revealing a patchwork of tiny fields, brilliant green with the early growth of corn, and small cherry orchards, a mixture of fluffy white and deep pink blossom. Sparkling water gurgles over rocks at the side of a narrow stream, which can turn into a raging torrent when the snows melt, as happened in 1995, when Imlil was





devastated as floods washed away forty parked cars and a large part of the ancient village of Taouririt, the oldest in the valley, leaving only five houses hanging on an eroded mound.

Some of the tiny villages higher up the mountain are very isolated; no busses, with the only regular traffic being deliveries of vegetables from the Saturday market in Asni. You might be able to hitch a ride on the delivery wagon, but otherwise it's simply having the patience to sit by the side of the road hoping that a vehicle will pass to take you on your way – and there's not a lot of traffic passing on those dilapidated roads.

It's gas re-fill day, and at various points along the roadside blue metal gas bottles stand, sometimes guarded by a small boy sat in the shade, waiting for the wagon to come along and exchange their empty bottles for full ones. Forget, and you could be cooking over an open fire for a week. Many of the tiniest villages high up in the mountains are little more than stone and adobe shacks, and it surprises me to see so many parabolic dishes to receive television signals. I'm told that some of these





houses won't even have a tap in the house for running water, with the wife or children having to make regular visits to a stream to collect fresh water.

We pass Richard Branson's much acclaimed Kasbah Tamarot, and I'm surprised to see that it's sat right by the side of the road. Given the amount of land around I would have assumed it would have had acres of gardens. (We stop on our way down for tea, and I've got to admit that the interior is pretty chi-chi.)

On my bike again, I'm aware that at my casual pace the rest of the team are going to have plenty of time to enjoy their orange juice when they arrive at Imlil. But I'm enjoying the ride, slowly turning the peddles at a comfortable speed and taking a walk now and then to savour the view.

When I finally arrive at Imlil, the village below the Kasbah, I see a group of about thirty young boys having a hectic game of football on a





scrubby pitch. The goals are marked out by a series of stones piled on top of each other, painted white. I've seen this everywhere over the last few days, a small stone on top of a bigger one marking road works, pavements, gate entrances and fields, and almost always with a blob of white paint on the top and runs trickling down the sides.

The legs are aching and the idea of sitting on something that doesn't burn the buttocks is a joy. But the climb isn't over yet! Our lunch is waiting for us five hundred metres higher, on a knee-crunching walk that Mike McHugo describes, in his ever understated way, as a 'walk that gains altitude'.

After an exhausting ride and a tiring climb up to the Kasbah, all I feel like is a stretch out on a firm Moroccan sofa before I eat, but a delight is in store. The Kasbah has its own hammam, the traditional steam bath, and we all pile in, throw off our sweaty cycling gear and languor in the steamy heat before scrubbing ourselves down and heading off to the roof terrace for lunch. We eat a tajine on top of the world – or at least that's how it seems. Above us is Toubkal, the highest mountain in North Africa, still covered in snow.

As much as I'd love to have spent the rest of the day soaking up the sun, it's back down the rocky road to Imlil to pick up the bikes and an incredibly exhilarating whiz down the mountain.

Tuesday 29 March	Ouirgane-Imlil (via Asni)
Total time:	2':39"
Distance:	50.29km
Average speed:	16kph
Maximum speed:	N/A
Ascent:	830
Descent:	820



## DAY FOUR

# Home Away From Home

What's that old country and western song? 'You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em.' Well, today I folded 'em, at least temporarily. The idea of the bike ride is a holiday to raise money for the Education For All boarding houses, but I'm conscious that I'm getting way, way behind with my notes – it's a bit iffy trying to scribble on a notepad or take photos when you are careering down a rocky slope, or, in my case, pushing a bike lazily uphill. And while I'm enjoying the rides, I'm here to report on the bike ride as a fundraising scheme, so I decide to take a day off to catch up with my notes and get my first blog on-line. I don't allow the fact that we are staying at La Bergerie, a darling little oasis of swimming pool, terraced gardens, tinkling fountains and taste-bud tantalising cuisine, all perfumed by the sensual aroma of orange blossom to sway me. Not at all. I'm a professional! (Raucous laughter and catcalls off-stage left.)

Today is the ideal day to skip what turns out to be the longest ride of the week, because we're cocooned in semi-luxury between two of the boarding houses Education For All have built, so I can walk to one and hitch a ride to the other in normal clothes, without looking like I've been shoe-horned into a slinky S&M outfit designed for someone half my size and a quarter my age.

Breakfasted and ready for the off, I clamber into the bus to Dar Ouirgane (which always sounds like Wigan to me – probably a bit of a cultural throw-back), a couple of kilometres up the road from La Bergerie. Estate agents would describe it as a 'tranquil, desirable residence set on a secluded private estate amongst pine trees, with extensive views over mountains, pastures and secluded villages'. And gosh – it really is! But take away the estate agent-speak, add a delightfully smiling house mother, a tall happily grinning cook and a radiantly enthusiastic young English volunteer, and you have a loving home for thirty nervous young



girls who have never been away from their families or the basics of village life. A bed of their own, a cupboard to hang their clothes in, a proper toilet and shower... and, most importantly, girls of their own age to chatter and giggle with.

Mina Hadod left home when she was only twelve years old. Her mountain village, Moulay Brahim, high up in the Atlas mountains, couldn't offer her any possibility of further education, despite being only fifty kilometers from Marrakech. She stayed with family and friends, the only way children can leave their villages other than to live in crowded government boarding houses, returning to her home when time and holidays allowed. She completed her studies in English literature at Marrakech University before eventually returning to her village to help children who would never see a life other than the basic round of village subsistence.

We sit on the roof terrace on a glorious blue-sky day, drinking outrageously sweet mint tea and nibbling on crusty almond biscuits. She wears the customary hijab, but shows her style with a lovely satiny waistcoat with a high cut peplum. Obviously a lady of modern mode.

"You know, this is a wonderful privilege for me, to be chosen as a house

mother," she says with a grin. "It's a great responsibility, but it also means that I can help the girls change their lives. I always wanted to work for the improvement of the Moroccan woman's life, because some of them still don't have access to their own rights, and education is one of them. EFA and I have the same goal." Mina is reticent about her influence over the girls, but Kitty, a volunteer from Bristol Grammar School, who have supported Education for All since it began in 2007, gently embarrasses her by saying they look up to Mina with enormous caring. She's a living example of what they can achieve. And she's not averse to a game of football with them in the back yard, either.

The house has only been open for a few weeks and has yet to acquire the 'lived-in' patina of paintings fixed to walls, coats hanging from bed ends, and plants in the garden. But that will come, and in the meantime the ten girls that call Dar Ouigane home during term time will have smiling Samira to cook for them, but will be expected to pull their weight within the home, as Berber culture expects, and make sure it's kept ship-shape and (in a nod to their benefactors) Bristol fashion.

I arrive at Dar Asni, the first boarding house built by EFA, just as some plants are being unloaded from the boot of a car. The girls are allowed a break from their homework to lend a hand, because a garden is important, and where plants aren't growing coloured stones are laid in



patterns in the barren earth.

Once they are all settled in the study room again I have a quick chat with Jenny Hitchcock, one of the volunteers we met a couple of days ago. The usual age of volunteers is between twenty-five to thirty-five, and



it's stressed that this isn't really gap year work because Education For All want people who can bring life skills and experience to the girls. Jenny is forty-six, and works for the NHS as a paediatric occupational therapist with children with co-ordination disorders and physical disabilities. When she decided to take a sabbatical she spent time working with conservation organisations in Swaziland and Namibia before coming to Asni, but it wasn't just by accident she came here. She spent time trekking in the High Atlas Mountains in 2008 and again in 2009, but it was while she was taking tea at the Kasbal du Toubkal with a group of girls over for a jolly, that she picked up a leaflet for EFA, and that, as the story goes, was that.

"You really need to be spontaneous with the girls, because there are thirty of them, all with different free times from school, so you have to organise them with their homework and revision as well as the classes we teach. They love to learn English, and that's one of the things that I try to help with." But it's not all hard slog, they have plenty of time to enjoy themselves as well. "I was taken by surprise a bit, so I emailed my friends and asked them for ideas for games with pens and paper. We started making picture bingo and picture consequences and then began to make our own study aids. But they absolutely love Pick-Up Sticks and Happy Families." And as a highly organised person, Jenny has had to learn to be more flexible and simply go with the flow.

And I gently flow off, kindly chauffeured by the chap who delivered the plants. There's a notepad and laptop awaiting me, not to say a swimming pool, lunch and a comfy double bed for a siesta. As the old saying goes, 'all work and no play..'

Wednesday 30 March	Ouirgane-Tinmel
Total time:	5':06"
Distance:	87.52km
Average speed:	17kph
Maximum speed:	51kph
Ascent:	1104
Descent:	1247





## DAY FIVE

# You Take the High Road

**T**oday will be the hardest day of all; we'll be tackling the highest asphalt road in North Africa, up to the ski resort of Oukaimeden. When I say 'we' I assume by now that you read 'them, with me in the bus'; and yes, there actually is a ski resort in Morocco, and very popular it is. In fact, Hajj Maurice, Mike Hugo's partner at the Kasbah du Toubkal, a diminutive and thoroughly charming chap, used to be a ski instructor there, as well as one of the top mountain guides in the region.

At the beginning of the trip Mike was pretty disparaging of the gel-filled saddle cover that my friend Mike in Valencia had loaned me, so of course I listen to someone who regularly does one thousand kilometre rides – although as a self-described 'plodder' who covers an average of a hundred and ten kilometers a day on his little jollies, 'plodding' isn't a word I'd associate with 'head down, backside up and peddle like hell' that seems to be his usual forward motion. But even after yesterday's buttock respite I'm inclined to give it a go. Apart from a bit of gel-like slip-sliding it was saddle heaven. (It was a couple of hours later that I discovered that Mike sat his rear end on a Brookes, the saddle equivalent of a Saville Row suit.)

After a chipper start to the day on my part, mainly because I'd not done the exhausting climb up Tizi-n-Test yesterday, we are bussed into Asni, where, after a quick chat and mint tea and biscuits with the giggling girls, we saddle-up for the first part of the ride, what Mike describes as 'a steady, reasonably easy climb', before he adds, "well, let's say it's not difficult". Words that make me look behind to make sure Ahmed and minibus are nearby.

And yes, it does begin as a steady climb, but after about six kilometres I realise that I'm going no faster peddling than I would be walking, so I dismount. Push, ride, push, ride for a couple of k, and I come across Andy

and George taking a breather. Above us the road zig-zags up to a bright blue sky, but we have no idea how far a zig left and a zag right is, so we can't judge just how steep the climb is to the top before we get to the quick free-wheel down that Mike has promised us.

We chat for a while, and suddenly a car comes downhill. A bewildered German asks Andy how far it is to somewhere or other. Andy's done this route before, and saddens the driver by telling him he's actually facing the wrong direction, so will have to turn around and go back up the steep hill. I'm all for hitching a lift, but the tiny car won't take three bikes and their accompanying bikers. But it does turn out useful. When it passes us on its return journey we watch it expectantly, waiting to see how long it takes to get to the point where the road disappears way above us. If it's only a couple of minutes, then at least we know that our huffing and puffing won't be for too long. So we wait...and wait...until a long five minutes later we see the tiny black dot reappear. We make a unified decision to call up the cavalry. And frankly, I'm pretty damned glad we do, because the bend at the top isn't the bend at the top, and nor is the next one, nor the one after that. For another seven kilometres the road climbs and climbs, with the occasional teasing dip, until we arrive at the point where it's all downhill from here on – figuratively if not emotionally speaking.

When we pull off the road for lunch we set up camp on a bit of rough ground. That's the royal we, of course, I do nothing more than set my throbbing backside on a stool.

Today is what Brahim calls a 'sweet lunch' as it mainly consists of fruit and chocolate bars. Ahead of those who have the energy and leg muscles is a sharpish downhill glide for about six km with the very devil of a crippling 18km uphill after it, with gradients that test every muscle in the lower half of the body, and the lungs, heart and knuckles, so really, it's not something you want to do on a full stomach, hence the energy giving 'sweet' lunch.

As we set up camp a couple of men appear as if from nowhere and stand under the trees on the other side of the road. Another on an ancient moped comes downhill, does a U-turn below us and pulls up alongside





the others, who he obviously knows. They exchange a few comments, and then just watch us. There are no buildings that I can see, but later we get used to seeing these appearances from out of nowhere, or passing a patch of land by the roadside miles from anywhere and seeing someone casually strolling up and down as if waiting for a bus. But that's not what they are doing.

Dangling from their fingers are necklaces of stones of all colours and sizes; on their fingers they have bundles of (supposedly) silver rings, with coils of bracelets going half-way up their arms. Some will have mock antique decorative daggers and most carry beautifully coloured amethyst quartz and a handful of fossils. This is their day job, hanging around trying to sell the same stock that we later discover is being sold by the world and his mountain brother. And they're not even local artifacts; Brahim tells me that most of it comes from hundreds of kilometres to the south. Occasionally one of the vendors wanders over and tries to interest us in one of his rarities. The quality is pretty good and there are some very attractive pieces at a very attractive price, but I've no-one to buy a necklace for, and don't fancy hauling a rock back home and paying Ryanair for the privilege of charging me excess baggage.

Two young boys arrive and hover on the sidelines, simply watching. In our gaudy cycling outfits we're probably the best entertainment they've had for months, but I suspect what entrances them most are the plates of biscuits on the table. Worldly-wise travellers tell us that we shouldn't give things to local people, but I suspect handing over a few biscuits on the top of a mountain in Morocco isn't going to divert a six-year old from his cultural path. Gareth waves them over, gives them a handful of plain biscuits each, and they return to their posts where they continue to watch us, not eating their biscuits, but guarding their treasure trove for later.

We're soon back on the road, and I've got to admit it's pretty damned good, whizzing downhill. After 8km, with hardly a sweat raised through peddling, we arrive at a T-junction. Left is the road to Marrakech, the direction we'll be going tomorrow; to the right the road passes through

a cleft in the rock, onward and upward – very upward – to Oukaimeden. Just to the side of a road is a tin shack with a log outside it, where I fully intend to park myself and wait for the back-up bus. I feel no shame as I watch five bikes gamely take the road upwards. I sit quietly and watch the world go by.

A young boy walks past and disappears down a gully to a stream, carrying two plastic containers. A few minutes later, as I continue my musing he walks past me to another shack, this one with its door open to show the tiny café-cum-shop that appears in even the most deserted of spots. He disappears inside for a few moments, presumably topping the kettle up for any passer-by in desperate need of a reviving cup of mint tea, before coming back out and leaning nonchalantly against a battered Coca-Cola sign, (equally as ubiquitous as the café-cum-shop). The door to what looks like an old mud and stone shed opens, and a curly headed girl of about five sticks her head out, has a look around, and then sits herself on a rock beside the door, fiddling with the hem of her long dress. An older girl comes out, presumably her sister, and leans against the wall. She hasn't noticed me, but then she spots my bike leaning against a tree so looks around and sees me sitting on my log in the shade – and proceeds to ignore me completely.

A few quiet moments pass when there's a commotion at the entrance to the gully, and a man nearing Methuselah's age, with the pointed hood of his djellabah pulled up, drags a disgruntled cow into the road, followed by a woman who I take to be the missus, towing a mule, with an apron so long it polishes the tarmac. The cow is hobbled, and takes truncated steps to the other side of the road, where it wanders into the greenery at the side and starts munching. Missus hands the rope of the mule to hubby who, in a surprisingly sprightly manner for his age, climbs on its back and heads off in the direction of Marrakech without a backward glance. She does an about turn and wanders back down the gully. I get the feeling that I've just witnessed the most exciting events of the day at that particular point on God's green acre.

After 4km of bus ride we come across George, leaning against his bike, contentedly gazing over the mountains to the haze of Marrakech way off in the distance. Another 2km and we reach Gareth, just as he dismounts,

five metres short from a stream that gushes out of a rock at chest height. "I was going to stick my head under that!" he says, but gulps from his water bottle instead. A couple of km further on Andy thrusts a bottle of weak orange squash out the window as we pass Mike, and in true Tour de France style he grabs it, takes a great swig, most of which pours across the Arabic inscription on the front of his shirt, hands it back and pushes on. Mick refuses the drink with a brief smile and a shake of the head, and we head onward to Oukaimeden.

Since the coming of the ski-lift, trade on the otherwise abandoned road has picked up, and now small ramshackle cafes line the road, each one with a row of small tajines set on the counter, offering lunch to passing travellers. Some of these are no more than a rag-bag of slatted pieces of wood, but others have gone the whole hog; terrace, plastic chairs and tables, potted plants. I've tried these small tajines in Marrakech, and they are the perfect size for one. Add a bowl of olives, a small salad and one of the wonderful round flat Moroccan bread loaves and you have a delicious lunch.

We are as high as a road in North Africa will take us. As we drive into







Oukaimeden we pass a small lake, created from snow melt, rich with the raucous croaking of thousands of frogs. It's a curious sensation to see the snow, but I'm equally surprised to see a full-sized football pitch, which, at that moment is being used as grazing for a couple of flocks of sheep. It looks verdantly green, but as George discovers later when he goes for a walk, it's sodden, and he sinks ankle deep into icy water.

Despite the height and the snow still on the slopes, the evening is warm and sunny, and we relax with a beer before going to our rooms in Chez Lulu, a small hotel more reminiscent of the Tyrol than the High Atlas. I wander outside to try and take some photos of a couple of young girls, sisters of about seven and eleven, judging by the way they interact, who are looking after the sheep. Scarved heads, pinafore dresses, ruddy cheeks and bright flower-patterned wellies. Even with a zoom I can't get close enough for a decent shot, so content myself with watching them play, the younger one skipping and jumping in the watery patches, just like someone her age in soggy England.

There are the by now usual necklace and rock sellers hovering around,



these a bit more persistent than the others we've come across so far. I see George sitting on a large rock, where he's apparently made a 'friend', mainly because he speaks to them instead of blankly ignoring them, as most of us do, and besides he's an amateur geologist who probably knows more about the rocks and fossils than all the sellers combined. He sits there, patiently waiting to congratulate Mike and Mick when they arrive, on their wonderful, if sometimes breathless, effort.

Thursday 31 March	Oirgane-Oukaimeden
Total time:	5':7"
Distance:	49.28
Average speed:	9.6kph
Maximum speed:	39kph
Ascent:	N/A
Descent:	N/A



DAY SIX

# The Home Stretch

I tumble out of bed at 7.30 on a bright, crisp morning, under a blue sky with the sun glistening off the snow. This is our last day on the bikes, with 80km ahead of us. Fortunately almost half of that is down hill, but apparently one of the steepest and fastest descents in the whole of Africa.

The weather during the trip has been wonderful, and today is no exception. But Mike has warned us to dress warmly because no matter how blue the sky might be we are still very high in the mountains in early Spring, and the wind on the descent is going to chill us to the marrow. At times on the way down I remember his skill at understatement.

Throwing sartorial elegance to the wind I climb into as many layers as I can that will still allow me to turn the peddles (although as it turns out that doesn't come in to it). I begin with a thick T-shirt followed by my cycling shirt, over-shirt, high-necked sailing fleece and a sturdy waterproof jacket that Mike has spare. On the bottom half I encase myself in undies, figure-hugging lycra shorts, cotton shorts and thick tracksuit bottoms. My hands are protected by thick leather winter gloves and on top of the lot are my beat-up baseball cap under a cycling helmet (the only time I wear it, heeding Mike's advice that it's better to look foolish than take a risk with some of the more dangerous sections of the downhill charge).

For a kilometre we take a casual ride, saying goodbye to the croaking frogs on the lake and leaving the sodden football pitch and its herds of grazing sheep behind. And then the descent begins.

I tentatively apply the brakes to keep my pace steady. Within a kilometre I'm gripping them so tight that if I wasn't wearing gloves I'd probably be looking at white knuckles. It's cold, very cold, but as exhilarating as all get go! The bends on the upward journey in the mini-



bus had seemed tight, but when you are just sitting and watching the world pass by you don't really notice just how tight they are or how steep the road is. It seems that no sooner have I've scarily eased myself around one tight V than I'm into another, taking the time between to flex my fingers to ease the tension that quickly builds up. Loose stones and small rocks scatter the road; at some points, particularly on bends, the winter rains and melting snow have washed the road away almost entirely so that I have to break hard while splashing through shallow icy streams cascading over hidden potholes and damaged asphalt. But it's wonderful! The views go on and on; mountains, valleys, tiny mud villages, pine forests and water rushing down the mountainside, the colours heightened by the crystal air. It's one of the reasons I never wear sunglasses; I don't want a bit of plastic dimming the radiance of such a view.

I suddenly realise that no-one is behind me – and as I was first off they definitely haven't passed. I pull off the road to wait. Nothing happens for five minutes and I began to get nervous in case someone has had a serious tumble. Five more minutes and still no-one has whizzed by. I'm beginning to get worried now. A couple of minutes later, Mick hoves into

view. It seems that Gareth had lost a bit of his bike technology so they'd all stopped to try and help him find it. He's already lost his mobile phone, so it seemed the chivalrous thing to do.

I see them all coming around the next bend and let them pass before mounting up and setting off again. I find that I feel more comfortable at the back of the queue, I know that if someone's having a problem I'll come across them eventually and don't have to worry that something has happened behind me.

The road drops and curves, curves and drops and I stop now and then to take a layer of clothing off and tie the arms around my waist. I get the occasional glimpse of the others against the rock of the mountainside or passing through the pine trees, but most of the time I concentrate on the road just ahead of my front wheel. It takes us twenty minutes to get to the junction where I saw the old man mount the mule yesterday, a ride that took Mike and Mick two and a half hours of sweating effort going upwards. We re-group, peel off any excess clothing and take the road to Marrakech, a short, slower descent until a long 40km flat ride into the city.

This last downhill stretch is lovely because the concentration is now





more on enjoying the ride than making sure I don't go base over apex over some fallen rocks. We seem to be in a ceramics producing area and I pass tiny potteries by the roadside with mounds of the enormous Ali Baba-style pots, called tinajas in Spain, that I'd love to have on the terrace of my flat in Valencia. But I don't see them fitting on the back of my bike or going in my case, so I drool and ride on. One of the things I like about Morocco is that you see all sorts of small manufacturers along the road, all mixed in and going about their business.

The weather gets warmer, the villages get closer, and soon we are down on the level, having a coffee before a steady ride to take us to lunch in Marrakech. Just as we are about to leave, Brahim and Ahmed give each of us a gift, a pair of small ceramic pots in the shape of a tajine. What a lovely gesture, and it's typical of the Berber people to show such kindness. They've been considerate and watchful for the whole trip, and I think that personally I've made greater efforts to keep going at times I'd liked to have gotten off and dumped the bike by simply knowing they were there keeping an eye on me.

The road home is in much better condition than the one we rode on into Marrakech last Sunday, but that still doesn't mean it's a super





highway. I want to make sure that I don't get too far behind so get my head down and legs pumping to try and keep me in sight of the others. But before long Mike, Mick and Gareth are little more than red and white blobs in the distance. I keep up what is for me a cracking pace, knowing that I can't maintain it for the full 40km but seeing how far it will get me. I glance behind and see a cyclist's shadow on the road right behind me, but I don't know if it's Andy or George. I keep expecting whoever it is to overtake, but nothing happens, so I keep peddling as hard as I can. Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes...the shadow's still there, but I know that I'm going to have to slow down. As I ease my pace Andy passes me, but the shadow is still there, so it obviously wasn't him. Immediately, George scoots past and drops right in behind Andy, as close to his rear wheel as he had been to mine – and I realise what he's been doing; he's been slipstreaming, staying as close behind me as he can so I reduce the wind resistance on him and make his ride enormously easier. "You bugger!" I thought. "I'm sweating like a pig and my legs are like jelly and there you are, shooting off into the distance!" But I had to laugh.

With the pressure off I begin to take it easy again and simply enjoy the ride. On long straight stretches a patch of bright colour tells you that





someone is sitting by the side of the road, waiting for a bus. There are bus stops, but the drivers seem to treat them with a certain amount of disdain, and at times I have to dodge around the back of a bus as it comes to a sharp stop to drop someone off or pick someone up.

A taxi stops ahead of me; three women climb out with big bags and bundles and a wheelie suitcase. They set off up a dirt track. All I can see in the distance are a huddle of low, mud coloured rooftops. As they walk the wheelie case bounces along behind them. From the boot of his taxi the driver takes two plastic animal feed bags jammed with hay and hands them to a young man standing by the side of the road who loads them onto the seat of his moped, tying them on with some bits of twine. Earlier I'd seen an old man strolling along the side of the road with a donkey in tow, with about a dozen of the same bags precariously balanced on its back. Which just goes to show that, size for size, modern technology can't create the same carrying capacity as a good old-fashioned donkey.

I come up behind Andy, who had to stop to adjust his brakes, and

we jolly along for a while. Hearing the rattle of a large engine behind, he calls to me over his shoulder, "That must be the school bus." He's obviously not spent enough time at the back end to recognise the sound of safety – Ahmed and his blue pick-up truck.

The morning advances and the numbers on the kilometre markers decrease. I pass garden centres with deep red bougainvillea, jasmine with its tiny white flower perfuming the air, grey-green olive, narrow tapered cypress and a host of plants I don't recognise growing in pots. Metalworkers, furniture makers, miniscule motorbike repair shops, cafes and restaurants all catch my eye for a moment as I slowly trundle by. Half-built housing estates mark the outskirts of Marrakech, and I join a throng of school kids cycling home for lunch. (I give one a shock as I ride by in my cycling kit, but he smiles and passes me, not letting granddad get the upper hand.) As I get almost into the city I see the others standing in the shade of some spindly jacaranda trees by the side of the road. I'd imagined they'd be sat somewhere downing the first of a few cold beers, but they'd waited for me. We're all going in together, although heaven alone knows how long Mike, Mick and Gareth had been standing there.

Fifteen minutes later, as we shuffle through the hectic traffic to pull up beside our hotel... that's it, the ride's over, ended with the last words on the subject by George, "I'll never get on a bike again!" Now it's a quick shower, chicken and chips at a local caff and the afternoon off to relax for our celebration dinner, where Andy has promised us a floor show of beautiful belly dancers. That's if I can force myself to stay awake.

Friday 1 April	Oukaimeden-Marrakech
Total time:	2':37"
Distance:	78.18
Average speed:	29kph
Maximum speed:	54kph
Ascent:	102m
Descent:	2085m
Total Kms:	405.21

# There's Life in the Old Dog Yet

When I turned sixty in 2008 I had the idea of celebrating my entry into what could be my ultimate decade by making a one thousand-kilometre ride through Morocco; alone, without fancy kit and crash helmet. I bought a map and planned a route, but then the world transpired against me (and a few million other people) and the ride was put on the back-burner, never totally forgotten, but becoming more and more unlikely as time passed and a world depression developed.

And then I was invited on the Education For All fund-raising bike ride.

Hand on heart, I can honestly say that this was one of the best experiences I've ever had, and despite journalistic license (we've got to make it sound as if we're struggling for our cause, haven't we!) it is so well organised that anyone who is reasonably fit can enjoy the ride.



But as much as I loved the mountains, the pasha-like lunches, and the splendid camaraderie, (not to mention the superb hotels), one of the loveliest moments was when I giggled with some of the girls at Dar Asni over a cup of mint tea, and chatted with house mothers Latifa and Mina. I didn't meet Khadija until a couple of months later, when I returned to write the stories of the Kasbah du Toubkal and Education For All, and found someone equally as dedicated and enthusiastic... and thoroughly damned likeable... as her co-conspirators.

The ride was marvellous, but it made me realise a few things.

- No way would I attempt a one thousand kilometer ride through Morocco accompanied by nothing more than a baseball cap and hope. I'm too old and too accustomed to at least a modicum of comfort to spend my nights in a soggy tent half way up a mountain.
- What you see, do and experience is great, but sometimes seeing, doing, experiencing and afterwards talking about what you see, do and experience, over a glass of wine and excellent food, beats the hell out of looking at photos later to remind yourself that it wasn't that bad a day after all.
- It's not a competition. At least the EFA bike ride isn't. Do what you want when you want – and if that includes taking a day off to lounge by the pool, good for you.
- I'm not too old and decrepit after all. Even with my aching bones I could take part, and the truth is that forcing myself to keep on keeping on was worth more than the idyllic idea of snoozing the day away by the pool. I can do that at home in Spain. Permit me to repeat myself; I'm not too old and decrepit after all!

And neither are you.

Derek Workman

Valencia, Spain

18 July, 2014





# The Wheels Keep Turning

On the last Sunday in April 2013, around 170 cyclists took part in the first ever Marrakech Atlas Etape, climbing from the plains of Marrakech to the ski resort of Oukaïmeden, aptly nicknamed the 'Ouka Monster'! The ride took place in unseasonably cold temperatures, creating difficulties on the long descent. Those who reached the turnaround point were welcomed by gloriously sunny skies, but at 15.00, with the weather worsening, the organisers called a halt to any further people starting the descent back to Marrakech. However, several riders had already made or started the descent, and managed to complete the entire 140km, the quickest returning to rapturous applause in just under five-and-a-half hours.

On the same day a year later, over 200 people took part in the Etape, under conditions completely contrary to those of a year earlier. Their enthusiasm has ensured that the Marrakech Atlas Etape will take its place as a major event in the cycling calendar worldwide.







# Marrakech Atlas Etape 2014

The riders assembled behind the ambulance; the more powerful who might see the day as a trial as to how they would cope with the 'Ouka Monster', the steepest étape in the cycling calendar, and those who simply wanted an exhilarating ride under the blue Moroccan skies, with the bonus of raising funds to provide homes for girls from the poorest of Moroccan families so that they might continue their education and create a better future for themselves, their children, their families and their country.

The ambulance moved off, with almost two hundred riders jostling for position to get a good start to the day. It shepherded the cyclists along the perimeter fence of the Moulay El Hassan Grand Prix Circuit onto the main road to Ourika where, after a couple of hundred metres, its flashing lights and screeching siren signalled the beginning of the second Marrakech Atlas Etape.

For experienced riders the first thirty kilometres to the staging point at Ourika, (which for some reason is known as Scorpion City) is a warm up, a chance to stretch the legs in preparation for the thirty-five kilometres to the summit, an unrelenting climb to 2,624 metres without flats and dips to ease the legs from the interminable turning of the pedals. For others it's the turnaround point, and the slow, steady rise to 850 metre from the flat plains of Marrakech can feel equally as unrelenting, although with the comforting thought that once they've fed and watered at Scorpion City, it's downhill almost all the way home.

In total contrast to the first étape in 2013, when the day began in chilling mists and stayed that way all day, other than for those who reached

Oukaimeden, where the skies were bright and sun warmed their arms - briefly - this year experienced glorious weather, more the kind to spend the day lounging on the beach than pedalling. The constant to-ing and fro-ing of the backup vehicles, provided by co-sponsors, Argan Extreme Sports, dispensing water, bananas and the occasional puncture repair made sure that no-one suffered from the affects of the heat, and it was with a sense of pride that everyone who set out returned under their own steam.

Timothy Madden is an experienced triathlete, and has been cycling in Morocco for years. This was his second Atlas Etape. "On the way out there's a peloton that's moving along pretty good. And then these strong guys got out in front. Those guys are really strong. Because you are riding out with these guys and you get your adrenaline going fast, you put so much in, but once you get away from the pack it's a lot harder. You are making a balance, do I slow down but if you do you have to work harder to stay in the pack. It's much easier because of the drafting, something like twenty to thirty per cent easier."



Sit at the table below the last snows on the mountains at the ski resort of Oukaïmeden with Chris McHugo as he stamps the cards of arrivals and notes their time, and you realise just why the Marrakech Atlas Etape is so special. From fourteen-year-olds Abderahim, Yasin and Dejamal, who were so determined to finish the course that they pushed their bikes up the seemingly never-ending bends of the last two kilometres to the turning point, to Eddy (short for Edwina) Brocklesby, who completed her fourth Iron Man in 2013 – at the age of seventy! – the event is open to everyone, whatever their age, experience or energy level.

“That was really tough,” says Eddy, not pulling her punches. “I think it’s the consistency of just going up, up, up. I don’t think climbing the actual hills is the issue. There are 2,300 metres climbing in Iron Man and that’s about the same as this, but I think it’s something about the consistency of it and you don’t get any relief. It’s tough, but fabulous, absolutely brilliant.”

But while the going up might be gruelling, the coming down is another matter altogether.

Chris Gurney made the climb to Oukaïmeden last year, but all he saw on the way down were ghostly figures coming toward him through the mist. The views were different this year. “The coming downhill was just awesome, absolutely amazing. You realise you were just climbing and climbing and climbing and you don’t realise until you are coming down just what it was you were going up. And you can pick up some speed, we were going down at fifty-five kilometres an hour. It was a bit tougher than last year because of the heat, but I can’t recommend it highly enough.”

Every event needs a character, and the Brompton that James Tuffs completed his second Atlas Étape on appears to be filling the role. It might seem a bit masochistic to tackle the Ouka Monster on a folding bike with wheels not much bigger than a large dinner plate (which probably means that James’ legs have to go around three times more

than other cyclists') but despite having said he wouldn't be back at the end of last year's event he was there again at the starting gate this year. "The views are truly, truly stunning. I've actually seen it this time around, which is a bonus. It was fantastic, beautifully organised, great weather, but for us non-acclimatised people it was bloody hard work. Nice sense of achievement now though." And he still took time on the long ride into Marrakech to stop at the side of the road and phone his wife to assure her that yes dear, everything's fine.

When sixteen-year-old Chaouki Addad returned to the Grand Prix Circuit two hours and seventeen minutes since he waved goodbye to the ambulance, he was a bit surprised to see it almost totally devoid of human beings, until he realised he was the first one home – he'd won the sixty kilometre leg!

"It was a really strange feeling because I didn't even know that I was ahead of everyone. It was slightly hard at times, but I just kept going, and it was wonderful when I arrived back at the empty car park and suddenly realised I'd won my section."

Mike McHugo, of Discover Ltd, who, with Argan Extreme Sports' Saif Kovac came up with the idea of the Marrakech Atlas Etape, was only a couple of years older than Chaouki when he first rode his bike through Morocco, and in the forty years since then has criss-crossed the country on two wheels many times. It was great to see how successful the ride itself was, but there were other things that stood out for him.

"I think it was excellent to see so many young riders this year because there were none last year. These are the up-and-coming riders that will help put Morocco on the cycling map. It was great to see Chaouki, a sixteen-year-old Moroccan boy win the sixty kilometre leg, and the determination of the three fourteen-year-olds to get to the top was remarkable. We also had a father-and-son team, Hamoud and Youssef



El Foukai, who's fifteen. Hamoud was a professional rider for Hamburg and he's now coaching Youssef, who competes all over Morocco and could well become a professional rider himself."

Probably more than any other event of its kind the Marrakech Atlas Etape stood out because of its inclusiveness. "That really impressed me," says McHugo. "We had riders from their teens to their seventies, almost thirty per cent of whom were women. We had an enormous amount of individual and community support but also teams and individuals sponsored by Moroccan companies and non-Moroccan-owned businesses based in Marrakech, mainly in the tourism sector. There were a lot of riders from the UK and other parts of Europe, but it was great to see the number of Moroccan riders taking part and communicating with the other riders in whatever way they could."

Saif Kovac had trained hard for the event, but at the last minute gave up his hope of completing the ride to be part of the support team.

“I really wanted to be out there, but on an event like this it is so important to have full back-up available to cover any eventualities that I decided to ride with one of the support vehicles. It’s a spectacular ride, and an event like this can only help develop Morocco as a cycling destination. The word spreads from this type of thing.”

“Many of the riders were hugely complimentary about the friendliness of the event,” adds Mike McHugo. “Not just the event, but the friendliness of the Moroccan people they passed on the road, the little kids giving them a high-five, people encouraging them from cars and mopeds. We intend to keep it relatively small, small enough to remain friendly, because it’s not easy to have a friendly event when there are thousands competing. Obviously the number of Moroccan people and people who have never cycled before taking part will grow, mainly the 60km ride, I think, with all sorts of people doing it.”

And James Tuffs, stretched out on a Moroccan rug at the end of the event, a roll-up cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other, will he be back next year? “At the moment, no,” he says with a grin. “But I said that last year. It’s amazing how time heals the pain of it all.”

The third Marrakech Atlas Etape will take place on 26th April 2015. Registration at [www.marrakech-atlas-etape.com](http://www.marrakech-atlas-etape.com) begins on 1st September 2014.





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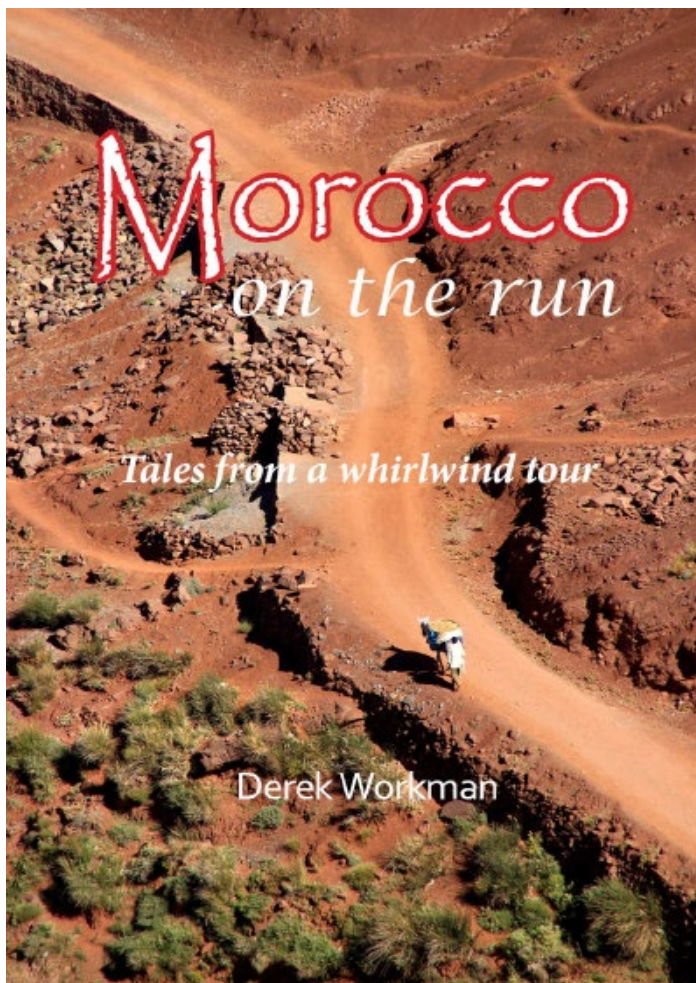
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