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Diary of the Djebel Sagro

“Jalleh, jalleh.” Let’s go. The gentle call from guide Ibrahim stirred us from our lunch siesta. We moved on, our little caravan of guide, mules, muleteers, two Brits and me trekking through Morocco’s Djebel Sagro mountains.

The Berbers call this place the hammada – the land between – as in between the High Atlas Mountains we can see towering to 4000 metres to the west and the Sahara, unseen to the east; three striking, harsh, yet distinctive regions. The Djebel Sagro is also the land of the Ait Atta Berbers, semi-nomadic, independent people still proud that they resisted French rule long after the rest of Morocco had capitulated.

Sweat ran as we climbed the rocky trail, passing spindly juniper bushes to the 2500 metre plateau where we were to camp. Considering walking options during a trip to Europe last November, I’d looked south to warmer climes. Morocco fit the bill, in particular this organised trek run by British/Moroccan company Trek Atlas, with dates to suit, to mountains hitherto unheard of.

Thursday: It was a Spanair 747 no Crosby, Stills and Nash Marrakech Express that carried me to the former Imperial capital, famous for its old medina (walled city),

massive souk (market) and Djemaa el Fna, described as the world’s most amazing city square.

I had booked into traditional riad accommodation in the heart of the medina. Fortunately Brahim, my host, met me at the medina entrance or I might still be there, lost in the myriad alleyways. He led me through narrow lanes, their paving worn from centuries of footsteps, under archways, past tiny shops selling live chickens and dead bigger animals, then ushered me into the calm of Riad El Arsa, with its tiled courtyard, palms, thick mud walls, sofas and cushions – and brought me mint tea.

Now rested, and armed with a map to ensure my safe return through the medina maze, I ventured out to explore Djemaa el Fna, just ten minute’s walk and an entire world away. The square is a total assault on the senses; India plus ten. The stalls; oranges, dates, apricots, almonds – and carpets, I expected. What amazed were the snake charmers, performing monkeys, dancing men, acrobats, actors, drummers, the violin-playing dwarf, the tooth pullers, henna tattooists, fortune tellers and all of them watching the tourists watching them, performing, touting, “dirham for a photo madam”.

More tourists watched from the balconies of cafes around the square, sipping iced coffees or the ubiquitous mint tea. I visited Koutoubia Mosque and photographed its famous minaret, built by ruler Almohad in the 1100s then ventured into the souk, the largest in Morocco. On and on it went, crowds of stalls, people, colours, noise, bedlam. By the time I emerged it was dusk in the square, and aromas from food stalls opening for the night further assailed the

senses. It was time for the sanctuary of my riad. And time for the mountains.

Friday: Crammed into a 4WD with guide Ibrahim, our driver, fellow trekkers, packs and food we headed east. To reach the Djebel Sagro we had to cross the High Atlas via the steep, perilous switchbacks of the 2200 metre Tichka Pass. For tourists this road showcases the striking mountain landscape, Berber villages and engineering achievement. For our driver it presented a speed challenge. We caught up with ourselves on a rooftop restaurant in Ouarzazate, a former French foreign legion post and backdrop for many movies, including Lawrence of Arabia, then headed into the broad, bleak but beautiful Dades, the “Valley of a thousand Kasbahs”.

The kasbahs, or fortified villages, are not so prolific now as when the valley was a caravan route for gold, salt and slaves through North Africa. We traded in more genteel products; coffee and rose water as we passed the tributary Valley of the Roses, then continued further east until the road ended at Tagdilt Village, our home for the night at the base of the Djebel Sagro.

Wallu, said Ibrahim, as the engine stopped. Wallu? Nothing, he smiled. No noise, no people, no trees, just mountains. Ibrahim a Berber from the High Atlas, was also happy to have left the crowds of Marrakech.

Saturday: We watched the loading of our mules while the village kids watched us. Everyone seemed equally fascinated. Three mules for six people; tents, rugs, mattresses, pots and pans, cooker and gas canister, our packs, food, mule food, all packed with the practise of centuries. Mules are the four wheel drives of these mountains.





The only people we passed all day were nomads, their mules carting juniper firewood. We also passed their spartan camps; low rock walls and sacking roof for shelter, goats, chickens and cats roaming, and little oases of green juxtaposing the mountain browns. They know where the springs are, said Ibrahim, they return to the same place every year and grow small gardens, including grass for their animals.

Our camp was more salubrious. Two nomad women rounded up a herd of a hundred or so goats and disappeared over the ridge line while we pitched our little tent city, Ibrahim brewed yet another mint tea, Zaid turned from muleteer to cook of a mighty fine and spicy tagine and Hussein fed and watered the mules, the water procured from a tiny spring hidden in the rocks. As the sun dropped the temperature followed suite, from 30 plus by day to sub zero on this high plateau.

Sunday: It was worth the long cold night, the landscape today was memorable. First Zaid and Hussein took the mules ahead and Ibrahim sang about life (well that's what he said) while we climbed Kouaouch, at 2600m the highest point of our trip. United with the mules we enjoyed another long lunch, fresh vegetable salad and pomegranates produced from the panniers, then continued into a magic land of sheer rock buttresses and flat topped mesas, standing like castles against the clear blue sky.

We camped at a lower, warmer altitude by a small gite, family-owned accommodation in the middle of rocky nowhere but for a huge, irrigated garden. A tiny shop sold jelababs, or scarves, the kind locals use to keep out the sun and sand. I couldn't resist and my purchase gave Zaid and Ibrahim much enjoyment, as they vied to show me the most innovative ways to wear it.

Monday: Civilisation! Well, in the form of a tiny village, where kids came running out to sell us home-crafted charms and fossil rocks, and old men paused to talk. The younger men, Ibrahim said, were away working in the cities. There was a drought here, and times were hard. The women were out tending the goat herds.

We camped on a desolate, rocky river flat. The upside was engaging with the local boys, the flat was also their football pitch. It seems the girls are not part of village social life, the only one I met was herding her goats home past my tent. We smiled, nodded and waved, language and cultures apart. The boys didn't seem to mind the foreign lady joining their football game, even less so once I figured which side I was on. No language or cultural issues in the universal game.

Tuesday: Today's trail followed the Ambuis valley to Nekob, a larger village on

the edge of the vast valley Draa, where elaborate irrigation channels fed orchards of oranges, almonds and date palms. Sadly, this was our last day in the Djebel Sagro. It was time to wash my dusty mountain clothes. Brahmin, the teenage son from our Nekob gite, produced soap, a mule's water bucket and an irrigation hose. I scrubbed, he practised his English, we worked together to hand wring the clothes. When I produced my fancy camping clothesline he look puzzled, spread my clothes over low growing bushes, pointed to the sun and shrugged. It worked.

Four days later I returned to Marrakech, after exploring Toubkal in the High Atlas mountains en route from the Djebel Sagro. This is Morocco's most popular trekking region, closer to Marrakech with the non-technical climb of 4167m Mt Toubkal a major drawcard. But I'd been spoiled. After the "wallu" of the Djebel Sagro, just the Berbers' songs of life to break the mountain silence Toubkal, with its shops and cafes and swarms of trekking tourists, felt crowded. Next time, perhaps I'll go there first.

Trek Atlas is managed by Englishman Chris James on behalf of the English-speaking Berber guides who impressed him during his own, first trekking experience in Morocco.
www.trekatlas.com

