

# TOURING MOROCCO

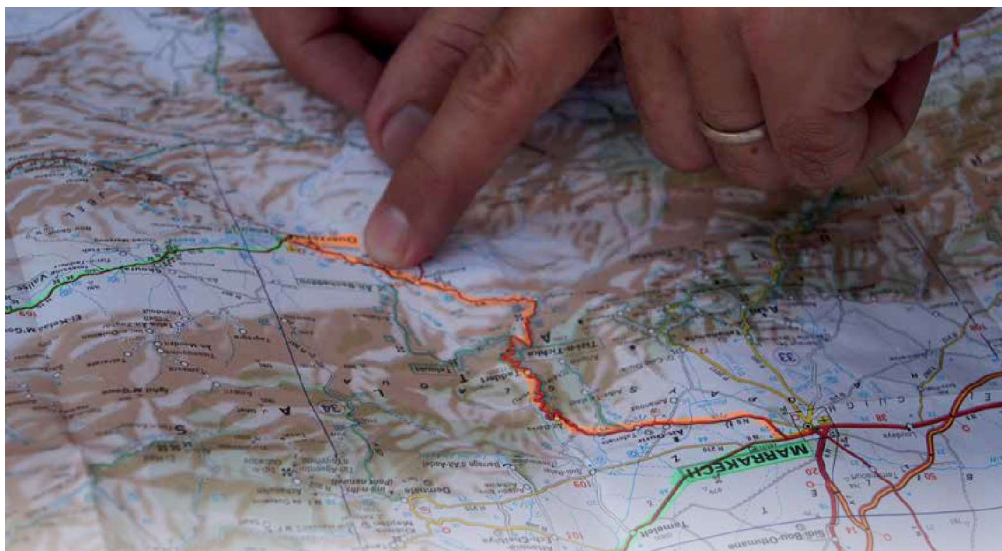
WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE CENTURIES AGO



BY VICTOR CRUZ #91428







On the road from Rabat to Marrakech, a well-fed Moroccan beetle hit me in the face. Getting hit by bugs is nothing new, but this was an entirely new creature. After wiping the beetle's liquidity from my face shield the stench was horrific. Worse than fermented dung the stink stayed inside my helmet for at least a quarter hour. Three days later I would be

riding a camel in the Sahara and climbing a dune while a wind storm that darkened the sky swept in to sandblast my legs.

Where water meets the desert, Morocco becomes a land of contrast amid the sameness. Vast swaths of scrub and desert cake the land in monotone beige, giving rise to storied buildings in the same color hue. Rare signs of water from feeble rivers in the

valleys create a profusion of green palm trees hemmed in by three bands of the Atlas mountain chain that towers to 13,000 feet.

To say Morocco and its bustling medinas gave me culture shock says little and a lot. It's not every day you see slabs of chopped, unrefrigerated meat buzzing with African flies or a camel's severed head dangling in an 11th century food market. I saw my first



Kilometer marker Marrakech.

donkey parking lot. These pack mules are used for carrying everything from mint leaves to pelts, for pulling carts and for riding. You can draw comparisons to our own culture by what you don't see. You don't see strip malls or the mega chains that have homogenized America. You don't see men wearing shorts, dogs on a leash, or obesity. I was surprised not to see more wildlife, such as turkey vultures, lizards, snakes or any roadkill, despite riding 2300 km under a blaze of sun. We saw stork nests perched high on minarets. Most women wear the Muslim head covering called a *hijab*, while the men dress in a mix of West-

ern and traditional *djellabas*; they sit quietly in cafés smoking cigarettes and drinking glasses of sweetened mint tea. Mosques are beautifully inlaid with colorful tiles and mosaic. Armed police set up checkpoints about every 40-50 miles. They waved us through without hassle. Tourists in Morocco are treated with a hands-off policy, in support of the King's directive to attract tourism. Everywhere, people wave hello. Locals speak French, Spanish, Arabic and Berber.

Large displacement bikes are rare in Morocco, so our group of mostly



Camel head at largest medina in Fez.

Canadians riding 15 BMWs (mostly F 700 GSs) was a hoot to young boys sharply dressed in school uniforms who would run up and make the universal throttle-rev motion. School is not mandatory. Educated at Harvard and married to an engineer, current King Mohammed VI issued reforms such as giving women the right to file divorce. Yet there's still no free press (criticism of the King is forbidden) or tolerance for LGBTQ; violations have led to prison. Every hotel lobby features posters of the King: the King sipping tea, the King skiing, the cheerful King smiling.

Like that dung beetle, colorful impressions made an impact every day. Riding through a town, you see a man carrying a cow's leg over his shoulder. A half-dozen denuded chickens swing from a cart. I came to Morocco to take a break from our Western culture, bending the arm of my friend Moe to join me. On the third night while visiting Jemaa el-Fnaa main square in Marrakech, Moe was run over by a reckless moped. We were in an enclosed tunnel-like alley dating back centuries, filled with vendors hawking wares of every sort.



Donkey parking lot on market day near Erfoud.







An old woman in a kerchief extended her palm, reciting a jumble of words; a coin makes her flee. A beggar sat with two sleeping babies, their feet blackened. Luckily, Moe didn't require a hospital. The moped kid took off. A group of men gave chase as news of my befallen buddy traveled up the alley. "Do you want money for this?" someone asked.

The road over Tizi-n-Tichka Pass in the High Atlas Mountains from Marrakech to Ouarzazate was full of twisties not for the squeamish. By New England standards, roads are well paved, narrow and in great condition. We rode past a market where men loaded up cars with live sheep. A man walked a black goat by its horn. Ouarzazate is the Hollywood of Morocco, with studios that have produced movies such as *Gladiator*, *Babel*, and *Lawrence of Arabia*. It was here where my pal Moe got blindsided again, this time by some nasty bacteria shipped directly to his gut via the tap water. It left him comatose for 48 hours, missing a



Friendly Tinerhir Berber with author.



Casbah Ait-Ben-Haddou restaurant. 11th century Casbah Ait-Ben-Haddou is the site of much Hollywood filming.



Spice seller near Erfoud.



Above: Kasbah Hotel Xaluca Erfoud. Below: Gov licensed artisan at clay works Fez.



ride into Todra Gorge, a narrow canyon in Tinerhir with walls that jet up 500 feet. We lunched in a Berber home with a family of three generations. Every meal featured tagine, an earthenware cone-shaped pot used to cook everything. Vegetables, lentils, olives, couscous and chicken with cumin were common. Moe also missed a visit to the fossil fields the next day in Erfoud and tea time with a nomadic family living under tents in the middle of nowhere. In Erfoud we stayed two nights at Kasbah Hotel Xaluca, a motorcycle mecca and training grounds for Paris-Dakar racers. The dining room buffet was abuzz with KTM, Yamaha and BMW teams towed in from Spain.

Near the tail end of the week we traversed the Rif Mountains on roads tailor-made for motorcycles, where conifers and deciduous trees appeared for the first time. It was strange to encounter Barbary apes in the cedar forest at Azrou. A highlight was the stunning blue city of Chefchaouen where buildings are painted blue to ward off mosquitos, as local lore claims. (The area supplies Europe with 80 percent of its hashish.) The ride north from there to Tangier was spectacular, a road on a high ridge like many others in Morocco, but this one left you stupefied with 180-degree mountain valley views.

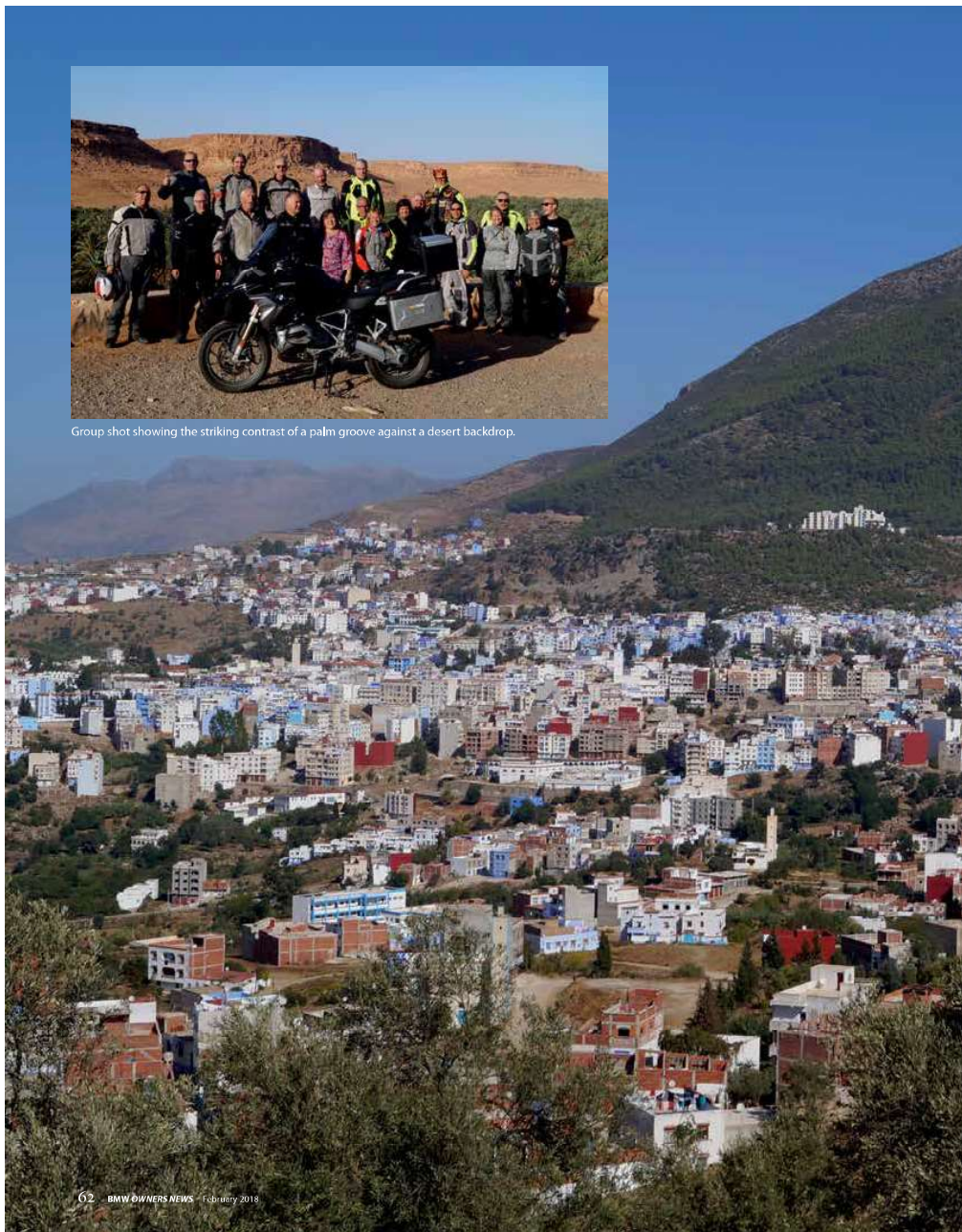
The tour begins and ends in pedestrian-perfect Málaga, Spain, with overnight stays in Rabat, Marrakech, Ouarzazate, Erfoud and Fez. IMT Bike lived up to its tagline, "passion for motorcycling." Most days were long in the saddle. Clutches out at 8 a.m., we'd clock 250-mile days at top speeds of 75 mph, rolling us in around 5 p.m., ready for a Casablanca pilsner. Morocco is cheap. Bountiful, family-style meals never topped \$15. Haggling is commonplace and annoying if you don't find humor in it. IMT did an excellent job with itinerary, restaurants, hotels, pre-ride briefings and attentive service. The only fault I can cite is that head guide Roger Falgàs didn't stop for roadside apples(!) More than 1.8 billion people or 24 percent of the earth's population identify themselves as Muslim. It was a real privilege to get a peek into this friendly Arab culture and to come away changed for the better.

Victor Cruz is a 16-year member of the Yankee Beemers, serving as Secretary and Editor. A long-time contributor to BMW ON, he is principal of MediaPR.net, a tech marketing firm in Boston. Contact him at [vcruz@mediapr.net](mailto:vcruz@mediapr.net).





Group shot showing the striking contrast of a palm grove against a desert backdrop.



Heading toward the blue city of Chefchaouen nestled in the Rif Mountains.