

Moroccan roll

It might not be the first place you'd expect to find a sportive, but take your bike to Marrakech and you'll discover that the city plays host to one of the finest

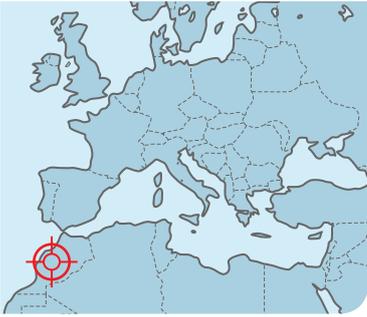
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The details

Ride the sportive that's nothing like the ones in Europe



What Marrakech Atlas Etape
Where Marrakech, Morocco
Profile 140km, 2,129m ascent or 60km, 365m ascent
Next one April 2017, day TBC
Price TBC
More information
marrakech-atlas-etape.com,
argansports.com

If Mont Ventoux is the Moon, the Atlas Mountains are like Mars. The air is thin, flitting between cold, heavy chunks and stifling blankets of heat, and the ground is the ruddy-red hue of Moroccan clay. It looks like a prehistoric desert that's part oasis, part monolithic quarry, at once alluring and inhospitable. For anyone driving a 4x4, these mountains are inviting, but a 70km climb on a skinny-wheeled road bike is an altogether different prospect.

Health and safety

Whenever I've travelled anywhere by bike, no matter what the country, there's always one familiar sound that greets me: the buzz of a zip opening followed by a sharp intake of breath.

Usually that breath is mine alone, but today it's got company. Saif, his brother Farouq and stepfather Timothy are gathered around my oversized luggage to see what bicycle the large bag conceals, and if it has made it in one piece.

As the canvas side flaps onto the tiled floor of Timothy's riad – a multi-mezzanine house with semi-open roof – a collective sigh temporarily drowns the cheeping of the birds in the rafters.

It's followed by agreeable murmurs, which it turns out aren't just because the bike is intact.



Farouq runs a local bike tour company – Argan Xtreme Sports, based just outside the Medina – and although he's proudly Marrakech's sole Giant bikes importer and hirer, he's impressed by my Canyon. Tomorrow is going to be one steep day out, he tells me, so thank goodness I've brought a light bike. I'll need all the help I can get.

Steep, though, is a little misleading. Presented with my race pack I get to studying the course. Usually I'd expect to see a jagged line running adjacent to an x-axis marked distance and a y-axis labelled ascent, and though the axes of the Marrakech Atlas Etape profile are indeed familiar, the line printed upon it is not.

If you were a managing director presenting year-on-year company growth you'd be mighty ▶



There's Coca-Cola if you forget to bring a drinks bottle, and plenty of pots if you fancy a spot of shopping

The kits don't lie – in fact they are proof that this sportive attracts some seriously good riders



which hold the quiet stillness of a village town but all the promise of a bustling city.

It turns out the start is in the car park of the Circuit Moulat El Hassan, a popular stop in the World Touring Car Championship calendar but otherwise largely bereft of souls bar today's swelling group of cyclists and a team of gardeners, who seem to have gathered up all the hosepipes in Morocco in a bid to defend their impeccable lawns from the sun. At one end is a traditional Bedouin-style tent serving as race sign-on. It's large, open faced, covered in cushions and wonderfully, wonderfully cool.

Sadly, no sooner have I made myself comfortable on a particularly well-embroidered divan than Atlas Etape organiser, ex-pat Mike McHugo, comes wheeling through the gathered throng like an excited town mayor, crying, 'Get behind the ambulance, we're ready!' over the din of whoops and whistles. There can't be more than 300 entrants, but it seems the Atlas Etape has garnered a cult following in the few years it has existed.

I've been to lots of sportive start lines, but today's takes the biscuit for pure spectacle. With

the siren slowly winding up to a crescendo, the riders slide in behind an actual ambulance to be escorted out to the main road. And what a sight we are. Up front are the serious men and women, lithe, tanned and already lock-jawed. A couple wear team kit and have the look of pros, which I'll later find out they are, while tell-tale tattoos of a red dot over an 'M' distinguish two other chaps as Ironman finishers.

I slot in somewhere behind this bunch, keen to grab a fast wheel, as judging by the headwind an early bunch split looks inevitable. And while today I'll just be happy to finish in good time, a glance over my shoulder tells me I might take rather longer if I slip back too soon. Bringing up the rear are riders on hybrids, touring bikes, mountain bikes and even a 20-inch wheeled tandem. I mentally salute them all, but can't quell the somewhat uncharitable thought 'rather you than me'.

Ourika steep edge

Fifteen kilometres in and my earlier anxiety proves well founded. Four riders split from the group, which starts a fractious chain of events ▶

Up front are serious men and women, lithe, tanned and lock-jawed. A couple wear team kit and have the look of pros, which I'll later find out they are

happy with the trajectory of the graph's line, but as a cyclist all I can see is one of the longest climbs I've ever encountered – a 70km ascent from the outskirts of Marrakech, at 495m, to the Oukaimeden ski resort at 2,624m. Little wonder the climb is nicknamed the 'Ouka Monster'.

Farouq explains that the first 30 clicks are a relatively straightforward, well-surfaced ride that averages around 1.5%. However, it's the next 35km where it gets tough. By Alpine standards it's a sedate 5%, but I'm told this isn't anything like the Alps. The roads are often uneven, there are no flat sections on the way up, the weather can swing from sun to storm in minutes and the uppermost slopes are at the mercy of the Chergui wind that blows from the Sahara Desert.

Finally, to compound the issue, there's the return descent that follows the same road. It won't be timed so as to discourage riders from racing downhill, but nevertheless my brevet card for collecting checkpoint stamps on the up comes littered with friendly warnings for the way back down: 'Beware of falling rocks. Beware

of animals on road. Technical descent with sheer drops. Exercise extreme caution.' It also helpfully lists police and ambulance telephone numbers, and the number for the fire service, presumably for extinguishing burning quads.

Searching wheels

I'm awoken at 5am by the call to prayer. I have no idea how many mosques are in Marrakech, but judging by the volume I can only imagine there are at least five next door to Timothy's riad.

Yet there is something incredibly soothing about this unfamiliar sound – somewhere between an Auto-Tuned monastic chant and Dean Martin singing a lullaby in Arabic – and before I know it I reawaken to the tinny chimes of my alarm clock, clearly having been lulled back to sleep by the muezzins' dulcet tones. (Muezzins are responsible for the call, and likely hold majority shares in loudspeaker companies).

Breakfast is swift, and within an hour of waking Timothy and I are pedalling softly through the early dawn streets of Marrakech,





With competitive types at the front and touring bikes and even a tandem (below) bringing up the rear, the field spreads out quickly once the action gets underway

I'm welcomed into the breakaway with a nod, and a pointed finger swished in a circular motion indicates that I'd better make myself useful in the chaingang



◻ in the bunch, some riders clearly happy to admit defeat, others incensed at being dropped so early. The first feed station-cum-checkpoint is 30km in, so I reckon on having the beans for an early chase in expectation of a swift refuel. Manoeuvring into the gutter I push hard on the pedals and pass up the inside of a dozen riders to latch on to a small chase group at the front.

Initially things are working well, our speed regaining the high thirties, but soon even these guys ease off, so with heroism in my head and stupidity in my legs (or perhaps the other way around), I put my nose into the wind, hunker deep into the drops and pedal like fury.

The road is arrow-straight save for the occasional illusory wobble of heat haze from the simmering bitumen. To the left and right the landscape is pan flat, but deep in the distance loom the Atlas Mountains, like a watercolour backdrop on a film set into which the bright yellow road markings and lurid-coloured pin pricks of the breakaway are disappearing.

With no company and time on my side, I muse that if this *were* a film it would be

an Ingmar Bergman-esque affair about the existential loneliness of a cyclist setting about an apparently infinite ride. For no matter how hard I try, the breakaway doesn't seem to be getting any closer, and the road still looks the same. Looking back I realise I'm a fair distance from the main bunch, so not wanting to lose face I opt to plug on.

In time it proves to have been the right move. I'm welcomed into the breakaway with a friendly nod, and a pointed finger swished in a circular motion indicates that if I'm here to stay I'd better make myself useful in the chaingang.

Having this task of carefully rotating order and taking turns alleviates the tightening sensation in my legs, my mind having new things to concentrate on beyond the visceral, and before long I realise our group is slowing to negotiate a roundabout that marks the outskirts of Ourika, a small town nestled at the feet of the mountains and home to the next feed station.

Sadly, respite is swift. I just have time to get my already sweat-sodden brevet card stamped before my comrades remount their bikes and ◻



We're joined by groups of kids, who run along next to us, unable to decide if they want a high-five or the jersey off my back

▷ whizz off up the road. I attempt the chase once more, but as the road swings right and up a more substantial gradient, I'm finally forced to accept defeat. If I see that group again it will be at the finish.

How long?

Within a few kilometres things take a turn for the otherworldly. The market sellers and their million-strong regiments of clay pots and rugs that once lined the road are fading memories, replaced by dusty, spartan hillsides whose only guest is the occasional wandering goat.

In the lee of the mountains the wind has dropped to a whimper, and all of a sudden I'm hit by that intangible wave of jubilation and dread – jubilation at the wonderful sensation of glorious, crisp-aired freedom; dread at the unknown severity of the climb that awaits.

Thus far I've not failed at a *Cyclist* assignment, but there's always a first time.

The rise of the road is steady and I drop into what feels like a manageable rhythm, just in time to hear the snap of shifting gears behind. A diminutive man momentarily appears at my shoulder before floating past me as if attached to an invisible towline. Unable to compartmentalise that annoying thing called pride, I dump a few sprockets and give chase.

By the time I catch up I realise that his pass was a deliberate goad. With a shout of 'Come on, let's go!' he kicks again and waits for me to catch his wheel before settling into a slightly slower pace, albeit quicker than I'd like. For several kilometres we're silent but for the occasional crunch of the gravel under our wheels, but eventually it seems he's satisfied his own pride parade and drops back for a chat.

Above: The scorched landscape is as awe-inspiring as it is intimidating for a lone rider



He introduces himself as Faissal, and to my consternation explains he's 37 and has only been cycling for three years. Before that he played basketball to a high level in Germany, which is telling from his fitness if not from his small, wiry frame.

In part I'm sad to have lost my contemplative, un-coerced cycling state, but as we forge ahead, Faissal chatting away chirpily, I decide I'm glad of the company. I've not seen another soul, man nor beast, for at least half an hour, and although the sun is shining there's a certain portent to the surrounding mountains that indicates a companion is a wise move.

With Faissal I begin to make some good time. Kilometres tick by, and even at our low climbing speed a turn on his wheel is relief enough to pull up my head and wonder at these great mountains. Some more arable valleys have opened up, along with clusters of terracotta-coloured dwellings hewn from the clay abundant in these parts. The feeling of desolation has subsided, and intermittently we're joined by groups of kids, who run along next to us, unable to decide if they want a high-five or the jersey off my back. But again, as seems the pattern, the road swings up and around to once again cast off any signs of civilisation.

Whether he's frustrated or just bored into silence, Faissal is now quiet, reduced to a grave look behind his sunglasses. His intent is clear ▷

The rider's ride

Canyon Ultimate CF SLX 9.0 Aero, £5,399, canyon.com

Canyon seems to be doing everything right at the moment. Its direct sales model has slashed costs and forced other companies to follow suit, and its current top-tier bikes are highly desirable. The Ultimate CF SLX Aero edition is one such example – an accomplished machine that manages to cram in Dura-Ace Di2 and Zipp 303 Firecrest wheels into a package that weighs just 6.66kg (size medium). Canyon's integrated bar/stem combo completes the 'Aero' suffix, making an exceptional climbing bike even faster up long, draggy ascents and like a blade down descents. Steering is pin sharp, and thanks to the clever seatpost assembly – a silicone sleeve and lower clamp point that allows the carbon post extra room and length to flex – the Ultimate CF SLX is extremely comfortable. As such I can think of no better companion for a ride like the the Atlas Etape.





What goes up must come down, and pretty fast too: 3h 7mins up, 1h 38mins down

By the roadside is a table heaving under soft drinks so luminous they'd likely be banned in most countries

➤ even if he's too kind to say it, so I do it for him and wish him every success to the top.

The ski resort in the desert

I'm left to ponder my loss in a sudden mass of cold air under a forest of pines flanking the road. Compared to the previous heat this feels like an ice bath but, in yet another fickle mountain trick, no sooner do I begin to enjoy the cold sensation than I'm spat out the other side and onto the last of the Ouka Monster's barren slopes.

Switchback follows switchback as the road coils atop itself like a basking snake, its rocky cradle taking on a whole new palette of unearthly reds and lunar greys. I toy with the idea of stopping for photographs, but then the crevice-like passage I've been negotiating flares out to unveil a vast pasture of green. It's as lush a field as you can imagine, the very definition of an oasis in the desert, even replete with a vast plate-glass body of water. In the middle of this field is a cluster of brightly coloured tents and the unmistakable shapes of people and bicycles.

Perched by the roadside is a smiling girl sat beside a table heaving under soft drinks



so luminous they'd likely be banned in most countries. I toy with reciting Peter O'Toole's famous line in *Lawrence Of Arabia* - 'We want two glasses of lemonade!' - but she interrupts me before I make a fool of myself.

'Card?' she says quietly. I scabble around my jersey pocket and locate a disintegrated mass of inky fibres. She nods knowingly, writes down my time on her clipboard and simply says, 'Well done. You can go back down whenever you're ready.' ❁

James Spender is Cyclist's features editor and proud new owner of a set of tagine pots

Do it yourself

TRAVEL

We flew to Marrakech with BA, as the ticket included a bike bag as part of the 23kg baggage allowance. Prices in April are around £140 return.

ACCOMMODATION

Marrakech isn't short on places to stay, from traditional riads at around £70 for a double room, to supremely opulent hotels such as the Mandarin Oriental, where a night in a private villa is a mere £1,300 for two. We were lucky enough to be hosted by Timothy and wife Sylvia, who does the most excellent impromptu city tours.

WHAT TO DO

Marrakech is a city like no other so it's worth taking a few non-riding days to explore. Highlights include the 12th century Koutoubia Mosque, the Jardin Majorelle botanical gardens and the walled 'medina', a maze of alleys and souks that is captivating in every sense - expect to get lost, but to have great fun doing so.

THANKS

We couldn't have made this trip without the help and hospitality of Timothy and Sylvia Madden and their sons Saif and Farouq. The family runs Argan Xtreme Sports, which hires bikes and organises tours of Marrakech. See argansports.com for more details.