

Route 666

*A Very MOROCCAN
Cycling Adventure*



“We left our expectations behind as the reality far surpassed them in every respect; this had been the Morocco of our youth, wild and unpredictable but with a beauty that can reduce you to tears; an emptiness and simplicity that is increasingly hard to find on our crowded planet Earth. A distant faint call to prayer in the early morning beneath a humbling blanket of stars”*

Trevor Rowell

MARRAKECH ATLAS ETAPE FOLLOWED BY ROUTE 666

APRIL 29 – 6 MAY 2017

Support and visit the Education For All houses.

Day 1 and 2 The Marrakech Atlas Etape

This tour starts with accommodation on a B&B basis in the four-star hotel **Kasbah Zalagh** (or similar), which is close to the start/finish of the MAE, for the nights of Saturday 29th and Sunday and 30th April.

Day 3 to 8: ROUTE 666

The five-night adventure starts on Monday 1st May and ends on Saturday the 6th, (either after breakfast if you are taking a flight or after arrival in Marrakech in the afternoon. Accommodation is not included for the night of 6th May). The tour is on a full board basis and the Kasbah du Toubkal team (logistical partner of the Marrakech Atlas Etape) will be taking great care of us with full back up services and fantastic picnics en route. Accommodation will be more basic (basically the best in the area) and might even include a night's camping in which case all equipment will be provided.

The total distance of the round trip from Marrakech is about 666 kms with a height gain of approximately 6666 metres (remember we have vehicle support, so do not be frightened away by this). We will reduce this a little by taking transport from Marrakech to the top of the Tizi n Tichka (2260 m) or perhaps to Taddert allowing those that wish to cycle the spectacular final 20km of the pass.

Day 3: Distance 68 km. Altitude: start 2260m, end 1340m

We transport ourselves and bikes to the top of the Tichka pass in the morning, ready to start with some serious downhill off the pass, quickly turning left onto a minor road that follows the old Canon Track described by Gavin Maxwell in Lords of the Atlas. The road is surfaced but is a little rough with some steep but short uphill

sections. Coffee break at Telouet where the remains of the famous Kasbah still exist. The route from here to Anemiter has lost most of its surface and tough tyres are strongly advised although you do not need an off road-bike. From Anemiter we follow the beautiful gorge-like valley south through desert mountain scenery to Ait Benhadou, where we will spend the night at a lovely small hotel within walking distance of the ruins of the ancient city, the backdrop to dozens of major feature films and television programmes.

Day 4: Distance 91km. Altitude: start 1340m dropping to 1200m in first 10km, End 2200m

We head off to re-join the main road where we head north for 45kms back towards the Tichka. At Agouim we turn west onto one of Morocco's road gems. Almost totally unused by any tourists, we skirt along the south of the High Atlas through stunning scenery, including views of Jbel Toubkal, North Africa's highest mountain, and friendly villages which have barely changed in the past century, other than for the recent arrival of electricity and this surfaced road.

The route is undulating with some very steep but short uphill and downhill sections, but overall we are gaining altitude until we cross the barren 2000 metre pass after about 36kms, where we may camp beneath a brilliant night sky or our team may take over a local house.

Day 5: Distance 95 km. Altitude: start 2200m, end 566m

Do not be fooled by the bare facts. Overall today we are losing a lot of altitude but especially towards the end of the day there are some uphill sections. This section has been described by the author of the definitive book on off road motorcycling in Morocco as very like the Hunza Valley on the Karakoram Highway, but prettier. Having cycled the KH Trevor Rowell (one of the tour organisers) can confirm this. We end the day at Aoulouz.



Day 6: Distance 71km. Altitude: start 566m, end 2092m

An initial ride of slightly more than 30kms on an almost flat road through the argan forests of the Sous Plain take us to the right turn towards Marrakech and the start of the famous Tizi n Test Pass(2092 m). This is a quiet road which winds up gradually through the foothills of the High Atlas. At times a bit full of potholes but suddenly the surface changes as we hit the new section of road. Eventually we come round a bend and see the full splendour of the final 17km zig-zags to the top of the pass. The gradient on all of this ascent is reasonable, rather like an Alpine pass. We spend the night at a small auberge on the top of the pass.



Day 7: Distance 78km. Altitude: start 2092m, end 872m

Again mostly downhill although there are a few uphill sections, one just after we start and a few towards the end of the day. This is another spectacular day of scenery and we pass two of the Education for All houses, one in Tlat-n-Yacoub after 40km, where we will have lunch, and the other just outside Ouirgane at the end of the day. We also pass the famous Berber mosque at Tin Mal. We spend our last night in comfort at the Bergerie auberge where there is a swimming pool and lovely gardens.

Day 8: Distance 80 km. Altitude: start 872m, end 453m

Finally back to Marrakech via the beautiful Kik Plateau. And once again the bare statistics are misleading. We start our day with an 11km pass rising to 1218m followed by a short descent into Asni, where we can have coffee in one of the EFA houses. From here we leave the main Marrakech road to climb up through the holy town of Moulay Brahim and onto the limestone Kik Plateau. If we have a clear day the views of the High Atlas are seriously spectacular. The road has a good surface and is very quiet but is a little undulating before



a lovely descent to the reservoir of Lalla Takerkoust. After lunch we follow a big smooth road all the way back to Marrakech.

Transport can be arranged for those who need to go direct to the airport for a return flight. For anyone wishing to cycle back Marrakech (where the tour ends), this is possible. Accommodation is not included for the night of the 6th but can be arranged at extra cost.

The tour works out about 80km per day and 800 metres per day. Challenging and exciting but not difficult or beyond the ability of any fit cyclist with determination and a sense of adventure, with the security of vehicle support and a great team to look after us.

Come and join us.

COST: £950 of which a minimum of £250 goes to support Education for All.

INCLUDED IN THE TOUR

- 2 Nights Marrakech on a B&B basis
- Entry to the Marrakech Atlas Etape
- 5 Nights on a full board basis as detailed above in Route 666
- Vehicle support throughout Route 666
- Water will be provided throughout the tour.

NOT INCLUDED

- Insurance – compulsory, you must have adequate travel insurance
- Bike hire and helmets. It is a condition of booking that participants agree to wear cycle helmets. Bikes and equipment can be arranged through **Argan Sports**.
- Personal spending money and drinks excluding water.

MARRAKECH
ATLAS ETAPE

+

Route 666

A MOROCCAN CYCLING ADVENTURE APRIL 29 – 6 MAY 2017

In support of

EDUCATION
for all
MOROCCO

Click logos for more information and entry form.

A Ride for Everyone

I first came to Morocco in the early 1970s, and instantly fell in love with this enigmatic country. I loved the exotic mix of cultures and the geographic extremes of high mountains, Atlantic coastline, sand dunes and snow-covered vistas. Above all I loved the people, their history and the way their colourful culture welcomes the visitor.

Being a keen cyclist, I've crossed the country on bike from the Mediterranean coast through the Rif mountains, on to Marrakech and then up into the High Atlas Mountains. From a cyclist's point of view the magnificent and varied terrain does not get much better.

With cycling coming of age in Morocco, and with Marrakech to Oukaïmeden as an ascent to rank with any of the climbs in the Tour de France, I believe the Marrakech Atlas Etape is the equal of any etape existing today.

While the Marrakech Atlas Etape is a challenging ride in one of the most beautiful regions of North Africa, the intention is that it will also generate income to help less fortunate members of the community—and what better charity to support than Education For All?

I hope you can join us in April 2017 for the Marrakech Atlas Etape and Route 666.

Mike McHugo
Kasbah du Toubkal



Two *Old* Boys on their Bikes

Thirty years ago Trevor Rowell and Mike McHugo travelled the backroads of the High Atlas Mountains, searching out routes for their fledgling tour company, Hobo Travel. They recently went back, but this time on bikes. Trevor reports.

Bicycling is the nearest approximation I know to the flight of birds. The airplane simply carries man on its back like an obedient Pegasus; it gives him no wings of his own. There are movements on a bicycle corresponding to almost all the variations in flight of the larger birds.

Louis J Halle

"Spring in Washington 1947/57"

Eight of them soared above us, silent and serene, turning and rising on the thermals in the clear blue sky, as we ploughed steadily up the final 12 kms of zig zags towards the top of the 2100 metre Tizi n Test, sweating, weary and saddle sore after four days in the High Atlas mountains, circumnavigating the Toubkal Massif on our beloved bicycles, totally self-sufficient, with all we needed to survive in our panniers.

The paragliders above us were pursuing their high adrenalin passion; they must have looked down on us and wondered why our chosen passion looked so much like masochism. Why, in a world of air conditioned 4x4's, always within a day's drive of a luxury hotel with clean beds and warm showers, did we choose to cover 400 kms of steep (often VERY steep) back roads through the mountains, eating processed cheese and date sandwiches, or omelettes when we passed roadside cafes, sleeping on the ground in a tiny tent or in 50 dhiram per night hotels in grubby towns?

As we careered down the north side of the pass on day five, flat out towards the final sting-in-the-tail hill out of Ouirgane, to cold beers at La Bergerie and a

rendezvous with Hajj Maurice from the Kasbah du Toubkal, we knew exactly why.

We had soared, we had glided, we had been eagles, using our own energy to conquer nature; rewarded with heart aching views across barren silent mountains, brief encounters with astonishingly friendly local people, many of whom probably rarely saw tourists, let alone two obviously elderly English men on bikes: we had laughed, sworn, ached, hallucinated about the next possible coffee stop. Not a quick walk to Starbucks or Costa for a cappuccino to wash down a chocolate muffin, but a hard rough road to a Nescafe, whitened with Nido (which in

Mike's case had to be drunk at thermo nuclear temperatures before the Nido formed a skin on the top). Yes my respect for this tough man whom I have often looked upon as an ascetic hero, faltered when he added boiled eggs to the list of unpalatable sustenance.

How can anything replace the joy of finding a Moroccan cafe advertising pizzas in Aoulouz on day three, only to be told the pizza cook had gone home sick and we had to settle for the sixth omelette of the trip: the laughter when offered a comprehensive menu in a





hard labour, co-operation and generations of handed down knowledge. To even begin to experience any of these things, you need to pass through the mountains slowly and engage with both the environment and the people face to face. What better way to do this than on a bicycle, the greatest achievement of man's ingenuity. I feel honoured to have been able to do this.

Would I do it again? Tomorrow! I already hope to cycle a similar route in April after the Marrakech Atlas Etape, and Discover intends to follow the route with a small supported group in April 2017 - don't miss it.



hotel in Ait Benhaddou, which we poured over making our choices, to be told we could have anything on the menu as long as it was couscous: the soul searching as we drank a cooling banana milkshake after a thoroughly enjoyable and hard earned 20 km downhill section, to find out we had overshot our turning by every one of those 20 kms.

We left our expectations behind as the reality far surpassed them in every respect; this had been the Morocco of our youth, wild and unpredictable but with a beauty that can reduce you to tears; an emptiness and simplicity that is increasingly hard to find on our crowded planet Earth. A distant faint call to prayer on a cold, dark early morning beneath a humbling blanket of stars, which many of our children will never experience because of our insatiable demand for electric light.

We rode down the old Canon Track from the Tizi n Tichka road, passing what remains of the infamous kasbah at Telouet, described in Gavin Maxwell's "Lords of the Atlas"; a route we had pioneered in our Land Rovers over thirty years ago and which has lost none of its stark beauty. On to cycle a track we have long looked at and wondered about but never had the time to explore, between Agouim on the Tichka road and Aoulouz on the Taroudant road; finally over the legendary Tizi n Test, built by the French Foreign Legion, and back to Marrakech. Four hundred kilometres of everything that makes Morocco special, even as we progress into the 21st Century and countries and towns become homogenised.

To float high above the mountains beneath a paraglider wing will undoubtedly give you rewarding views of the High Atlas, but these mountains are more than views; they are harsh and unforgiving and the people who live in them cling to a fragile lifestyle, which demands

Join the 'Two Old Boys' on
Route 666

Contact Mike McHugo on
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for an application form