

IN THE LAND OF THE BERBERS

A week's horse riding with a mini trail in southern Morocco

My trip to Morocco in February 2019 was meant to be a little winter getaway. Sun, beach and mountains await riders at our equestrian centre by the sea, south of Tiznit.

Before we set off on our riding adventure, however, my girlfriend and I pay a visit to the famous city of Marrakesh. A day in this unique city with its vast, winding souk flies by in no time. Our riad cost just 30 EUR – for a double room with breakfast included. Riads are the name given to the typical guesthouses here. They're usually small guesthouses in old buildings with a romantic courtyard and a roof terrace. Ours is tucked away in an alley in the old town, the 'Medina'. We take a taxi from the airport to the main square in the city centre. Here, we're warmly welcomed by our host and guided through the winding alleys to the riad. He also takes us out for dinner, and the restaurant is really good. Couscous, olives and tea immediately put you in the Moroccan mood. The next morning, we get up early to visit the souk. In a slightly quieter side street, we first spend some time browsing at a leisurely pace in small shops, buying spices, tea and ceramics, before plunging into the colourful hustle and bustle of the market. At some point, we have to ask for directions to find our way out again. Everywhere, someone wants to sell their wares, and we practise haggling and fending off the salespeople. The many gardens are lovely too, and a glass of fresh orange juice is always a treat. However, if you don't want to buy anything and don't want to be pressured into guided tours, henna tattoos or the like, it's best to give Marrakech a wide berth... After finding our way out of the maze of alleyways, we set off for Agadir by bus in the afternoon. We're pretty much the only tourists on the well-filled bus. Buses run several times a day in all directions. You can buy a ticket just before departure if you arrive 45 minutes beforehand. The three-hour journey to Agadir takes us through the red mountains of the High Atlas; you can even still see some snow-capped peaks. The area is almost uninhabited, but every now and then you spot a shepherd with a flock of sheep and goats.

At last we arrive in Agadir, where our transfer is already waiting. After a further two hours, we finally arrive. Our fellow travellers have already eaten, but the manageress greets us warmly and explains everything we need to know over dinner. The estate is beautiful. The rooms are charmingly furnished in Moroccan style, and many



cosy terraces offer lovely views of the courtyard with the riding arena and the horse stalls, or even of the sea. A gardener looks after the many plants. The next morning, we meet the other guests: three Germans and two French people. Two of them are also taking part in our riding programme. After a short warm-up ride in the arena

the four of us set off on our first ride with our guide, Yussef. First, we ride briefly across the plain, then we trot up the hill for a good 20 minutes and through a village. Villages often provide good trotting routes, as the paths are wide and sandy. Nobody here minds. You just shouldn't trot straight past the donkeys, as they might get scared. When we finally come to a halt, I check with Yussef again, just to be on the safe side, to see if we've accidentally been booked onto the endurance programme, but no, we're in the right group. Well then, I suppose this is going to be quite a strenuous affair, at least when you're out with Yussef... Soon we're heading down a narrow donkey track through low bushes and cacti, back down to the plain and through the dunes to the beach. The horses are immediately full of beans,



because the beach usually means a gallop. It's advisable to keep to the order and maintain distances so that these little tenacious 'Ferraris' don't get any wild ideas. When the last horse in the group gets spooked and lurches forward, the others follow suit straight away and my horse performs a hearty buck. Once the riders' ability to stay in the saddle has been tested and everyone has found a suitable horse, however, things go smoothly over the next few days. For nervous riders, the

spirited Arabians aren't necessarily suitable. Anyone not doing the beginners' programme should have plenty of experience for the rides and trails. The terrain is quite challenging in places, and there are long stretches of trotting and cantering. For me and my horse Badrel ('Full Moon'), it works very well apart from a few little jumps at the start. She's a real sweetheart to handle and responds well to the aids, so we can keep plenty of distance between us. The guides ride the horses regularly themselves, and you can tell.

The rides from the ranch take you across the sandy plains, through small villages, through the mountains and, of course, time and again along the beach. To the south of the ranch, the coastline is steeper, with colourful rocky landscapes. Here you ride along narrow paths high above the coast, with views of the roaring Atlantic. To the north, on the other hand, there are sandy plains and huge sand dunes. At low tide, you can enjoy a wonderful gallop along the endless, wide sandy beaches here. In the wet sand



, horse and rider are accompanied by their reflection on one side and their shadow on the other – a magical sight! Empty sea snail shells lie scattered everywhere and numerous seagulls populate the coast. The beaches are completely deserted; in most places

swimming is not advisable and is often prohibited, as the Atlantic crashes against the bays with huge waves. Only a few fishermen are out in the shallower water, along with a couple of wild dogs living out in small groups. They clearly find plenty of food on the coast, as they look well-fed and content – unless, of course, you happen to be riding right through the middle of their territory. The Moroccan beaches are therefore an absolute paradise for riders; no restrictions and no bathers spoil the riding experience here.

After a few rides, we finally set off on the mini-trail, which takes us inland and along the coast for three days. There are four German women and one Frenchman in the group. Everyone is a confident rider and easy-going, so we can enjoy the trail to the full. The ride first takes us southwards along the rocky coast. Soon, however, we head into the mountains. We ride through a beautiful, green valley up to a few villages, past gardens and cacti.



Around the villages, you often come across the typical donkeys. During the day, the women take them out into the fields to harvest fodder and other crops. Then the little donkeys are tethered and forage for food in the barren landscape. It's incredible how they, along with the goats and sheep, manage to find anything to eat here. Cattle in Morocco, on the other hand, live in stables, as they would never be able to feed themselves outdoors and, moreover, do not cope well with the hot weather. In the Berber villages, families keep only sheep and goats.

Horses are hardly to be seen, as donkeys are simply much more undemanding, hardy and practical. People are therefore delighted to see our horses, and we're always greeted warmly in French; they wish us a safe journey and wave to us.

After a wonderful ride through the red mountains full of cacti, argan trees and low shrubs, we reach our tented camp, which has already been fully set up by our ever-cheerful cook and driver. After an excellent dinner, we gather wood for a campfire and round off the evening in cosy company. The full moon illuminates the starry sky above the cacti and argan trees.



The next day, we head down from the mountains into a vast, barren plain. We ride through several villages and idyllic gardens. In the fields, we come across herds of goats and sheep and their herders. There are also plenty of tortoises here. Today's destination is a village on a barren hill. This time, the horses spend the night right by the village square near the mosque, and we are invited to stay with a Berber family next door

. For me, this is an absolute highlight. The family consists of the grandparents, their son with his wife and two children. It's fascinating to see the inside of one of these houses for a change. Behind the ornate door, we first enter a wide, long corridor, from which several doors lead off. One of them leads into a small courtyard. Here, the grandmother is baking a traditional flatbread for us in the wood-fired oven. The family's donkey lives here too. He looks well-looked-after and seems quite content. From the courtyard, we head into the sheep and goat pen. Two rooms next to the large living room have been prepared for us as guests. The rooms are large, though everything is a bit dark as the windows are quite small. This means it stays pleasantly cool inside, even in summer. The house is still being extended; part of it is still a shell – grey concrete walls are a typical sight in the villages as well as the suburbs. Construction is evidently taking place everywhere; in other words, they simply carry on building

whenever money becomes available again. Nobody here seems to mind these half-finished buildings. The most important part of the house seems to be the front door. Often, magnificent, colourful doors with a bit of plasterwork and a huge doorbell are already fitted, whilst the rest is still a shell.

We enjoy our Berber bread with peanut butter, honey and so on. Outside, all the local children have now gathered to

inspect the horses and the European guests. Cheerful and noisy, they ride their bikes across the village square. A few women are sitting together outside their doors, whilst the men are at the mosque. Later, a huge feast of couscous and tagine awaits us. The lady of the house must have spent hours cooking. We are served by the men. The family's son, who is about eight years old, stays with us for a long time, even though we don't speak a common language. Exhausted, full and content, we finally fall into our beds.

The next morning, the muezzin's call rings out at 7 o'clock. We say goodbye to our



lovely hosts and the village of Anfoud and ride at a brisk pace along a wide sandy track towards the sea. It's low tide here and an endless sandy beach lies before us, ideal for a really long gallop. Riding nicely in single file and keeping a safe distance, we can really enjoy this with the spirited Arab horses. We gallop for so long that at some point I cautiously ask the rider at the front

if we might like to ride at a walk again, for which I later receive puzzled reactions from my fellow riders...

We enjoy our lunch above the beach. The horses have a good roll in the sand and the men actually go for a swim in the sea. The waves are too rough for us women, so we just dip our feet in the water and then have our siesta in the dunes. We continue riding along the beach back to the farm, though by now it's high tide and the sand is too deep for a gallop. Scattered amongst the sand are large pink boulders; seagulls take flight; fishermen search for mussels and squid. We also spot the odd camper from Europe. To finish off, we cross a huge sand dune – here we have to stay on the track, as the slopes on either side drop quite steeply. Now, sadly, our trail has come to an end and we let our much-loved horses enjoy their well-deserved evening rest. The riding holiday and the mini-trail definitely leave us wanting more; for sporty riders, there are various long-distance programmes along the coast, whilst for trail riders, the red mountains of the Anti-Atlas offer exciting riding routes.

For my girlfriend and me, the next day means saying goodbye. As we've booked our flight to and from Marrakech, we take a taxi back to Agadir – a two-hour journey – and then a three-hour CTM bus ride through the High Atlas to Marrakech. Here, we're immediately spotted by a taxi driver who wants to take us to the airport. It's a good thing we'd allowed plenty of time, as his Fiat Uno only starts once two grinning colleagues have pushed it out of the car park and a short way across the road. You really should only use public taxis for shorter journeys. When our driver realises we're German, he shows us his Bayern Munich and Dortmund stickers. Unfortunately, we're not at all interested in football, but we tell him that he might want to choose one of the two clubs in future. Finally, we're seated on our flight and take off at sunset for our return journey. The week came to an end far too quickly. It was already my third visit to Morocco, and there's still so much to see in this lively, diverse country.

Jessica Kiefer, February 2019

Link to the programme: www.reiterreisen.com/mmesta.htm

