

Following in the footsteps of the caravans through the Sahara

Dunes & Oases in Southern Morocco

The sun peeks down at us through the palm trees. To the left and right of the path stand mud-brick walls, protecting the palm groves and gardens from drifting sand. We zigzag our way through the vast oases. Dotted amongst them are a few mud-brick houses that blend beautifully into the landscape. Yes, this is exactly how I'd imagined my holiday in Morocco! Chams ("Sun"), an Arab-Berber stallion, strides briskly ahead; he prefers to lead the way, as his pace is quicker than that of the other stallions. He's allowed to, as he knows the route anyway, whether it's straight through the sand dunes or across an endless plain. It's only at the picnic spots that he's not quite sure, as these can vary from time to time.



We pass through several oases on our ride through the Sahara. The people here live mainly off their dates. The long main road, the region's main thoroughfare, takes us through Ouled Driss. I've never seen a more beautiful main road. There's very little traffic, the ground is sandy, and it's a delight to ride through the palm trees and mud-brick buildings. The village is bustling; lots of boys are running about in a square playing football. Women are chatting in front of the houses and in the fields. The men, it seems to us, are going about their main occupation: they are lying on the ground in front of the houses, leaning against the walls, chatting or simply watching the goings-on in the village together. We come across just one horse on the way; the Berbers in the desert

generally have small donkeys, which they ride and use to transport goods. These are considerably less demanding than their larger relatives.

Of course, there are dromedaries too. The odd caravan passes us by in the desert. As we ride on horseback, the village children escort us; we say 'Bonjour' and wave to them, and in doing so we almost feel like queens on a procession through the people – a somewhat strange feeling.

The sand dunes are just as beautiful as the palm groves and Berber villages. Twice we ride through a veritable sea of dunes. Our guide Mohammed tells us that he only got lost here once, right at the very beginning. Now, however, he knows the dune landscape inside out. It's tiring for the horses to walk through the sand, which is quite deep in places, so we 'dune surf' at a walk. In the endless sandy plains, however, we're treated to fantastic gallops across perfect ground. An XXL-sized riding arena, it seems to us. Alongside palm trees, dunes and sandy plains, high rock faces also characterise the Sahara in many places. Steep, grey table mountains stretch for kilometres across the desert here. On the penultimate day, the going gets rocky: we ride steadily uphill through a narrow, rocky gorge. When it does rain, a stream flows down into the valley here, though this happens very rarely, so the riverbed is now completely dry and nothing mars the brilliant sunshine. Two chipmunks are also enjoying the sunshine; we spot them in the rocks thanks to our riding guide. At the end of the long ascent, a magnificent view awaits us over the vast, glowing red Draa Plain on the other side of Djebel Bani. We take in the sweeping panorama for a while before setting off on the descent. The route over the mountain is one of the few links between the desert valleys and has been used by caravans for centuries. To enjoy the view into the Draa Valley – and also for the descent on foot – it's best not to be afraid of heights. The mountain drops steeply down to the plain here, and the path along the mountainside hasn't been cut very wide. It's better if there's no oncoming traffic. Outside the oases and villages, you hardly meet anyone; only at the foot of Jebel Bani do we come across a solitary Berber resting with his two dromedaries after crossing the mountain. Time for a picnic and to water the horses! The horses get their water from the springs, which also guide our route through the desert. Bucket after bucket is drawn from the water.



We can hardly imagine a better place to spend New Year's Eve than this remote desert. We enjoy the sunset in the dunes and then sit together around the campfire. The fire is essential, though, as it gets freezing cold once darkness falls. Literally, as the next morning we find a thick layer of ice in the water bucket! It's a good thing we bought some Berber rugs in Ouarzazate at the start of our trip. We're now rather grateful to the old Berber man who, with his charm, lured us into his cellar and made sure that all three of us came out with one of his gorgeous rugs. With a Berber rug in our sleeping bags, the cold desert nights are quite bearable. The accommodation arrangements here are well thought out: the large tent where we have dinner easily sleeps six people. Another tent, about half the size but still tall enough to stand up in, sleeps at least two people, as does an igloo tent. And then there's the endless canopy of stars, which serves as a place to sleep for some of our fellow travellers. Everyone chooses their sleeping spot according to their preference, although the igloo tent always remains empty in our group of six... Photo. Our culinary needs are also well catered for; chef Mohammed (a name as common here as 'Julia' is in Germany) treats us to fresh salads and flatbread at lunchtime, which we take with us in our saddlebags. In the evening, we're served the traditional 'taschine' – dishes cooked in a pointed earthenware pot. As I don't eat meat, I'm given my own taschine, which turns out to be far too generous every time. I try to 'resist', but in Morocco they're apparently not used to preparing portions for just one person, so I do my best to finish my vegetables...



After six days on the backs of our trusty Berber and Arabian stallions, it's time to say goodbye to the horses and the desert. Our guides, Mohammed and Hassan, accompany us as far as nearby Zagora, where we make a brief stop at a typical craft shop. After successfully haggling for some rings, we leave the desert for good and head up through endless palm groves to Ouarzazate at the foot of the Atlas Mountains. Our fellow riders from Belgium and France fly back early the next morning, whilst we Swiss and Germans continue on to Marrakesh. Thanks to the excellent and very affordable bus service between cities in Morocco, a riding holiday near Agadir or Ouarzazate can be perfectly combined with a visit to enchanting Marrakesh. The journey from Ouarzazate takes around 4 hours and passes through the beautiful High Atlas Mountains. There's even a bit of snow at the very top; otherwise, the mountains are predominantly characterised by red, barren rocks. As we approach Marrakech, however, a vast pine forest stretches out before us. Morocco is such a diverse country, with mountains, deserts and coastline, that it has something to offer for everyone. In Marrakech, following our desert ride, we now immerse ourselves in the hustle and bustle of this oriental metropolis. We've booked two nights in a lovely little riad tucked away in a winding side street in the old town, and it's from here that we set off on our shopping trips to the souk. As we're already laden with Berber rugs, our luggage doesn't leave much room for further purchases, but there's still space for a few scarves, oils, spices and even shoes and lamps. The shrewd traders assure us that they don't take hand luggage too seriously at Marrakech airport. And they're right – alongside my wheeled suitcase, I get my riding helmet, a handbag and a large, crammed handbag through check-in without any problems. There are so many beautiful countries, but this is my second time in Morocco; the diversity of the landscape, the wonderful horses and the exotic atmosphere have captivated me once again. In just three hours, you can travel from wet and cold Switzerland to winter-warm Marrakech and immerse yourself in a completely different world; it's quite possible that I'll find myself back here a third time...

Jessica Kiefer, 28 January 2014

Link to the programme: <http://www.equitour.com/mom008.htm>