

## High Atlas Traverse



**A week's off-road bike traverse of the High Atlas Mountains for the charity Headway Devon.**



The dramatic High Atlas Mountains are the setting for this six-day off-road biking traverse of the most accessible region of the range. Its proximity to Marrakech means we spend less time in a transfer vehicle and more time in the saddle as we ride some challenging climbs and some thrilling descents en route from Ouirgane to the Tichka Pass. It's a ruggedly beautiful region of stark limestone peaks and verdant valleys criss-crossed by rough jeep tracks and mule trails used by villagers. It's also a region that throws up plenty of encounters with locals as we pass through numerous adobe and stone villages where life has hardly changed in centuries. It's a rough, but largely non-technical, route, but nonetheless a good level of biking fitness is recommended to cope with some challenging climbs. In order to complete the route without vehicle transfers we have to tackle some unrideable climbs, so on these occasions we hike, using mules to carry our bikes – a uniquely *Moroccan* way to travel.

Dates: Week 1 16<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2010  
Week 2 23<sup>rd</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> October 2010

### Trip Highlights

**The Marrakech experience; once seen, never forgotten**

**The Ourika and Zat Valleys; classic High Atlas scenery and friendly folk**

**The incredible landscapes of the Toubkal National Park home of North Africa's highest peaks**

**Some of the best day rides in Morocco as we make a spectacular traverse of the High Atlas**

## Itinerary

### Day 1: Arrival Marrakech

On arrival in Marrakech you will be met by your tour leader and taken to our hotel in the centre of Marrakech. Flights often arrive in the evening, giving us just enough time to assemble our bikes and head out for a get-together meal and short briefing.

Overnight hotel

### Day 2: Marrakech | Ouirgane

After breakfast we are met by our transfer vehicle to take us into the foothills of the High Atlas. The journey only takes an hour and a half or so, so we can make a leisurely start today. Our destination is the village of Marigha where we turn off down a dirt road, or "piste" (as we refer to jeep roads in Morocco), to take us to our accommodation for the night, a charming Berber guest house offering superb views over the Ouirgane valley.

Today is billed as a warm-up day to get riders used to riding conditions in Morocco. After lunch at the lodge we'll take a ride around the area, along a mixture of pistes and single track routes. Today's riding distance depends on the preferences of the group but will total around 15 – 20km.

The evening is spent at the guest house where we will enjoy some of the local cuisine.

Overnight guest house (B,L,D = breakfast, lunch, dinner included)



### Day 3: Ouirgane | Tamatert 30km+

After breakfast we don our hiking gear for what's locally described as a "mule-assisted ascent" – the first of three such climbs on the tour. The Traverse is a demanding route to complete on bikes alone so we have opted for a blend of hiking and biking to complete the challenge. Rather than carrying our bikes on our shoulders we employ a team of local mules to do the job for us, thus gaining some altitude and setting up some nice downhill for later in the day. The hike, following a wild valley eastwards, takes three to four hours and comfortable hiking shoes/boots are required as the surface is rocky.

On arrival in the village of Ikoublyn we'll stop for a cup or two of the national drink – mint tea – before we saddle up for our ride into the heart of the Toubkal National Park. Ikoublyn is situated at the end of the piste from the Ait Mizane Valley and the first (short) section takes us up to a pass at over 2000m above sea level before a 14km descent down a rough track, flanked by holm oaks and juniper trees, rejoins the valley below. Once in the Ait Mizane Valley, we have a 7km section of tarmac then a short off-road climb up to the Berber hamlet of Tamatert.

On arrival in the village of Tamatert we settle into another charming local guest house overlooking Imlil, the High Atlas's main trailhead, and departure point for the punishing climb up to the top of North Africa's highest mountain, Jebel Toubkal.

Dinner and overnight at the guest house (B, L, D)



### Day 4: Tamatert | Oukaimeden 30 km

After a good night's sleep in the cool mountain air we set off on a 6km climb out of Tamatert and up to the pass of the same name. It's a tough start to a day which involves a fair amount of climbing! The piste, which is normally in good condition, winds its way through pine forest up from 1800m to 2400m above sea level and at the top we'll stop for the obligatory mint-tea and admire the view over the Tacheddirt Valley, home to the highest village in the High Atlas. Here we have a couple of options to explore the valley either on piste or by taking some singletrack trails through the villages on the north side of the valley. Passing through the villages one feels the full impact of rural Morocco, a land where little has changed over the last few hundred years and a place where rural culture is every bit as absorbing as in the medinas of the major Islamic cities of Morocco.

At the far (eastern) end of the valley lies the village of Tacheddirt, at the foot of the Tacheddirt and Eddi Passes. The Tizi-n-Eddi is our pass of choice as it takes us into the ski resort of Oukaimeden, our destination today. The Tizi-n-Eddi is unrideable by ordinary mortals so we'll load up our mules and hike up the 3000m pass, a climb which takes a couple of hours. At the top we join a piste which takes us down into the ski resort, the highest of its kind in North Africa.

Once in Oukaimeden we settle into our guest house – a quirky French-style alpine chalet – or there are further cycling possibilities for those who are interested.

Dinner and overnight mountain guest house (B, L, D)



### Day 5: Oukaimeden | Ourika Valley 50 km

Starting the day at 2700m above sea level, you will be sensing that you are due some “payback” for all of the effort put into getting up this high. Today offers this reward in no uncertain terms!



Starting out from Oukaimeden, a rough and winding piste snakes its way down the south side of Jebel Oukaimeden and marks the start of a 1700m descent to the verdant Ourika Valley, the closest High Atlas valley to Marrakech. The majority of today's riding is downhill but beware of some cheeky uphill sections thrown in for good measure! Our route takes up towards Asni before we join a recently surfaced road up to Sidi Fars (where we will break for lunch) before a long section of piste winds through a forested region down towards the Ourika Valley. Although the route is along rough pistes there are a couple of short singletrack sections for any interested parties. Before arriving in the Ourika Valley another piste strikes southward and allows us to continue off-road to our destination, a guest house in the village of Aghbalou.

The Ourika Valley, a strip of bright cultivation set against a backdrop of sparsely-forested mountains offers some nice possibilities for walking, so a late afternoon stroll down to the river is recommended (time permitting).

Dinner and overnight guest house (B,L,D)

### Day 6: Ourika Valley | Tichki 35 km

After breakfast we cross the Ourika River and join a track which passes through olive groves and small villages, descending parallel to the river. The first section of today's ride in the valley offers a mix of piste and trails used by villagers and their livestock. When we arrive at the village of Tnine Ourika, the most important village in the region where a Berber market is held every Monday, we climb into region of rolling hills where a 20km section (which is largely uphill in a variety of grades) takes us through numerous traditional villages which live off the cultivation of olives, barley, wheat and root vegetables. It is in many ways a classic cross-country day with rolling ups and downs before our arrival at the village of Ourir.

As there is no accommodation in the area we will set up a wild camp close to the village where we sleep in two-man mountain tents and enjoy a barbecue meal and a campfire. Prepare for a cold night's camping as we're now back to around 1500m above sea level! For your comfort and to guard against the cold we set up a mess tent in which we'll eat our evening meal.

Dinner and overnight wild camp (B, L,D)



### Day 7: Tichki | Tichka Pass | Marrakech 35km

After a solid camp breakfast, once again, we tackle a tricky climb with the help of our four-legged friends, to take us up to the wild and remote village of Tichki. A short climb out of Tichki leads us into a stunning descent across a high plateau and down into the Zat Valley, one of the most scenic in the Central High Atlas. The downhill is about 15km long and is, at times, a real boneshaker! At the foot of the descent we arrive near the (unremarkable!) town of Arba Tighdouine, where we'll stop for lunch before we pack our trusty machines onto the transfer vehicle and complete the 70km back to Marrakech by car.

The drive takes about an hour and a half and on arrival we'll have time to see Marrakech in the early evening as the main square, the Jemaa el Fna, is converted into a huge open air restaurant serving anything from sheep's heads to tasty brochettes and bean soup. It's one of the world's most animated night time displays and not one to miss even if you do choose to pass on the sheep's heads.

In the evening we'll eat in one of the city's best restaurants and explore what Marrakech has to offer in the way of nightlife.

Overnight hotel (B, L).



## General Information

### Passports and visas

British and Irish nationals do not require a visa to travel to Morocco, just a valid passport. Be advised that if your date of exit from Morocco is less than six months before the expiry of your passport you may be refused entry into the country. Similar rules apply to most EC countries, but please check with the relevant Consulate well in advance of your holiday as it is your responsibility to ensure that you have the correct documentation to enter the country.

### Health and vaccinations

You should have a dental and medical check-up before the holiday. On all our trips each guide is a qualified First-Aider and a comprehensive medical kit is carried at all times. There are currently no compulsory inoculations required for Morocco although we recommend vaccinations against Hepatitis A, Tetanus, Polio and Typhoid as standards of hygiene are generally lower than those you are used to. The water in the major cities of Morocco is said to be potable but we recommend you drink mineral water to be on the safe side.

### Money

The local currency is the Dirham which is not available outside Morocco. Change facilities are widely available in Marrakech and cashpoint cards & credit cards such as Visa & MasterCard are accepted for buying goods and paying for food, as well as for withdrawing cash. Since our holidays include accommodation and most meals, we suggest that approximately £100 will be enough to cover extra meals/bar bills and any tips. Any additional personal expenditure (eg for souvenirs) depends very much on the individual.

### Climate

This special October departure of the High Atlas Traverse coincides with the end of the autumn season, before the region's harsh winter period. At this time of year Marrakech can still be

### Day 8: Depart Marrakech

For those not leaving too early, there's time to explore the medina of Marrakech, one of the highlights of the trip. The ancient centre, a UNESCO Heritage Site is said to be the second largest medieval Islamic complex in the world, after Cairo. Guides are available for those who wish to be guided but we recommend seeing the city at your own pace, taking time to wander through the beguiling labyrinth of tiny alleys and passageways in the ancient medina. You might like to visit the ancient Badi and Bahia Palaces, the museum of Marrakech, or a short taxi ride will take you to the Majorelle Botanical Garden, owned by Yves Saint Laurent. There are also the famous souqs (markets) of Marrakech - ideal for devotees of ethnic fashion and decoration, but worth a look for the sights, sounds and smells of this most exotic of markets. But the real Marrakech experience is more about enjoying its unique atmosphere. (B)

pleasantly warm but in the Atlas foothills, temperatures drop significantly, averaging around 12-15°C in the valleys and less on higher ground. It can feel very chilly at high altitude and at night so please be prepared by bringing adequate warm clothing. Morocco is generally a dry country, but the High Atlas, like all high mountain ranges, are subject to variable weather conditions, so wet and windy weather, is a possibility. Nighttime temperatures vary significantly with altitude and can drop below freezing during the period in which we operate the tour.

### **Flights**

Flights do not form part of our tour packages with Epic Morocco, however they do form part of the sponsorship package with Headway Devon. **Please check with Headway Devon that your schedules fit with the tour itinerary.** Anyone who fails to meet the group at the designated rendezvous will be responsible for their own transfer costs to meet up with the group. Please pack strategically (with important items in hand luggage) in case your luggage fails to arrive with you.

### **Extending your holiday**

If you would like to stay on, either in Marrakech or elsewhere in Morocco, we would be pleased to help with any post-tour travel arrangements; please enquire for details.

### **Insurance**

It is a condition of our trip that you are covered by a medical and personal accident insurance policy that includes repatriation to your home country and covers you for biking and hiking in a remote and mountainous region.

### **Included in the price**

- Tour leader and/or Moroccan biking guide
- 4x4 support vehicle carrying spares and repair equipment
- Meals as indicated
- All accommodation (twin-share camping in good quality mountain tents)
- Transport as indicated
- Airport transfers from group flight

### **Not included in the price**

- Meals not specified in itinerary
- Alcohol & additional bottled water
- Bar bills/meals/excursions in Marrakech
- Flights to and from Morocco (included in sponsorship package with Headway Devon – see above)
- Tips
- Travel insurance

## **Bike Tour Information**

### **Staff**

For the duration of your holiday you will be accompanied by a tour leader and/or registered Moroccan mountain guide during the ride.

Our team for the tour usually includes a cook who prepares lunches for the group and assists with the loading and unloading of vehicles. The guides are first aid trained and can assist with on the repair of bikes.

### **Food and accommodation**

We recognise the importance of good food on trek and work hard with our team to constantly improve recipes and the standard of catering. We try to play to the strengths of what's available in Morocco, by cooking mainly Moroccan dishes with fresh vegetables, couscous, local spices and good quality locally-produced meat. We take along plenty of fresh fruit and lunches are served picnic-style in beautifully remote places. On this tour we stay in comfortable and stylish maison d'hotes (guest houses). On our camping night we camp in modern mountain tents for two people and comfortable foam Berber sleeping mats are provided. Those who favour modern technology should bring their own mats! Our evening meal is eaten in our mess tent or in the open air. Our hotel in Marrakech is a simple 3-star hotel chosen on the basis of convenience, efficiency of service and ease of loading/unloading vehicles. It is not a hotel with any particular local charm.

### **Alcohol**

Alcohol is not generally available in rural Morocco, so should be purchased in advance in Marrakech. Requirements can be discussed in your pre-trip briefing in Marrakech.

### **The nature of the trip and pre-trip preparation**

The High Atlas Traverse is designed to be a challenging way to see some beautiful and unspoilt parts of rural Morocco. As the dossier itinerary indicates, there are some strenuous climbs, and the routes that we take, although generally along well-maintained jeep tracks are at times rough and uncomfortable. This is very much the nature of mountain biking in Morocco and at times it bears little relation to biking in parts of Europe. For these reasons, please be prepared for some hardships in terms of the riding conditions. It is also important to prepare physically for the trip by doing some riding before coming out. Some longish off-road day rides would be adequate preparation and will stand you in good stead for the challenges presented by this itinerary. We consistently find that those with an adequate level of fitness enjoy the experience more than those who arrive totally unprepared.

That said, this is holiday to be enjoyed and not endured, and has therefore been designed to be well within the reach of any active person with a reasonable level of aerobic fitness.

## Equipment

The following is a list of recommended equipment.

Items marked with \* are to be considered essential.

### Bike\*

- You will need to bring a mountain bike with front suspension (minimum requirement) and at least 24 gears.

### Luggage

- Holdall or backpack\*
- Compact bag if you wish to store excess travelling clothes in Marrakech
- Day-pack\* (small comfortable sack for camera, sunscreen, snacks, waterproof etc)

### Clothing

- Waterproof & windproof outer garment (eg Gortex)\*
- Walking shoes/boots (or multi-activity cycling shoes)
- Fleece or similar underlayer\*
- Old trainers or sandals for evenings
- Sunglasses\*
- Padded cycling shorts\*
- Cycle helmet\*
- Shoes for cycling (cleats or otherwise)\*
- Small personal tool kit with puncture repair gear\*
- Spare rear hanger specific to your bike\*
- Swimming gear
- Sun hat\*
- Woolly hat
- Cycling mits\*
- Thermals for cold nights camping
- Comfortable evening wear (eg tracksuit)

### Camping gear

- 3-4-season sleeping bag\*
- Torch (head torch recommended)\*

### Miscellaneous

- High-factor sunscreen and lip protection\*
- Toiletries as required
- Basic personal mountain first-aid kit\*
- Water bottle/camelbak\*
- Travel wipes
- Toilet paper
- Camera
- Binoculars
- Energy drink mix

Please note that as Morocco is a Muslim country it is important to dress conservatively at all times. That means that shorts well above the knee and vest-type tops are not recommended (as this attire is regarded as underwear by villagers). Women should be particularly cautious in their choice of clothing, being careful not to reveal bare shoulders.

## How to make a booking

In order to book on this trip you will have to contact:  
Holly Keatings of

Headway Devon  
1 Wrentham Place  
Prospect Park  
Exeter  
EX4 6NA

Tel: 01392 211822

Email: [holly@headwaydevon.org.uk](mailto:holly@headwaydevon.org.uk)

Website: <http://www.headwaydevon.org.uk>

An application can be downloaded from [www.veloventures.co.uk](http://www.veloventures.co.uk)

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch with either Holly or Alistair. Our contact details can be found above and below.

### Important note

Morocco is one of the world's most rapidly changing countries and at times one of the least predictable! Tourist services are constantly changing as hotels close down unexpectedly and new, often better, options appear just as fast. We try to move with the times and as a result there may be occasional deviations from the publicised itinerary. Similarly, weather conditions in the High Atlas Mountains are unpredictable; snow falls can block high passes, and flash floods can fill normally dry river beds. We therefore reserve the right, at the discretion of the guide, to make on the spot changes where appropriate, with the group's safety our absolute priority.

In addition to this dossier please ensure that you read the Booking Conditions and the Morocco General Information factsheet.

### EPIC MOROCCO LTD

20 High Street, Hurstpierpoint, West Sussex, BN6 9TY  
TEL (44) 20 8150 6131 | email: [escape@epicmorocco.co.uk](mailto:escape@epicmorocco.co.uk)

Alistair Cope

UK Tour Director

TEL: 01297 625 375

Email: [alistair.cope@btinternet.com](mailto:alistair.cope@btinternet.com)