

Morocco OVERLAND

**ROUTE GUIDE – SOUTHERN MOROCCO
FROM THE ATLAS TO THE SAHARA**

4x4 – MOTORCYCLE – VAN – MOUNTAIN BIKE

CHRIS SCOTT



Morocco Overland – Route guide: from the Atlas to the Sahara

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A request

Every effort has been made by the author and the publisher to ensure that the information contained in this book is as up to date and accurate as possible. Nevertheless things are certain to change, even before the ink is dry. If you notice any changes or omissions that you think should be included in the second edition of this book or have any other feedback, please email the author at the website below or via Trailblazer (address above).

Warning

Mountain and desert travel is unpredictable and can be dangerous.

Every effort has been made by the author, contributors and the publisher to ensure that the information contained herein is as accurate as possible. However, they are unable to accept responsibility for any inconvenience, loss or injury sustained by anyone as a result of the advice and information given in this guide.

Additional online content:

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This page: Near Oulad Mrah on MS13

Overleaf: Tea time in Assaragh **Back cover – Land Rover:** © Toby Savage

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Among other things CHRIS SCOTT is an adventure travel writer for whom good transportation is just a means to an end. He's cycled in the Himalaya and Hindu Kush, kayaked off the West Australian coast, packrafted in Scotland, France and Utah, and motorcycled across the Sahara where he's also travelled by bush taxi, truck, 4x4 and camel caravan. Occasionally, he runs tours in the Sahara.

His other titles for Trailblazer are the *Adventure Motorcycling Handbook* and *Overlanders' Handbook*. His other books include the original editions of *The Rough Guide to Australia*, as well as *Desert Travels* and *The Street Riding Years*.

INTRODUCTION

'...had to get away to see what we could find.' Marrakech Express

As a tourist destination Morocco is well established. Long before Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young sang their carefree Sixties hit, and half a century before Bergman turned away from Bogart on that foggy airstrip in *Casablanca*, European tourists had lifted the veil on the 'African Orient'. They crossed the Straits of Gibraltar, intrigued by the mysterious medieval allure of cities like Tangier, Fès and Marrakech – a traditional Islamic culture still fiercely resisting French colonisation – and the promise of the mountains and desert beyond.

Today our fascination with Morocco, so close and yet so different, shows no sign of abating. 'Sand, sea and souks' coach tours continue to ply the well-worn tourist tramlines, while cheap air fares have popularised weekend city breaks to upmarket Marrakech *riads* or villas.

Morocco Overland shows you another side to Morocco, where the adventurous driver, rider or cyclist can explore the passes of the High Atlas or the dusty *pistes* of the Sahara. In between visiting the well-known highlights, the sites, cities and beachside resorts, you can trace a network of easily navigable routes far from the hassle-prone, trinket-clad tourist hotspots.

In doing so you have a chance to experience the wilderness of southern Morocco at your own pace and on your own terms. Explore the jebels, palmeries and ruined kasbahs of canyon-bound Berber villages lost in time, and by doing so encounter a traditional and hospitable people, light years from the populated, Europeanised north.

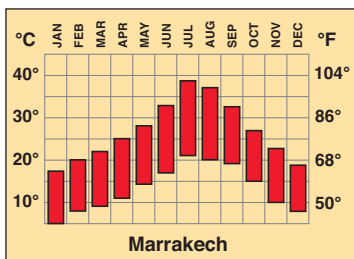
Along the way you'll also learn the capabilities of your own machine and acquire many other new skills, all while lunching on a grassy meadow by a mountain stream or overnighing at the base of a dune with little more than the wind, sand and stars between you and Timbuktu.



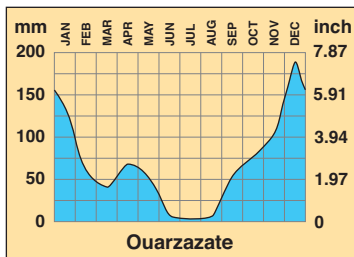
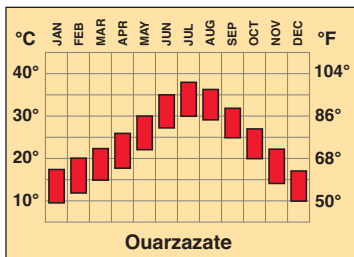
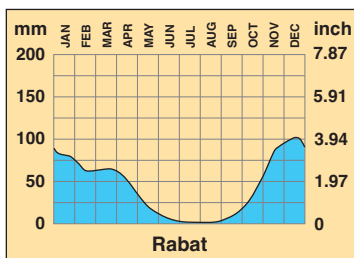
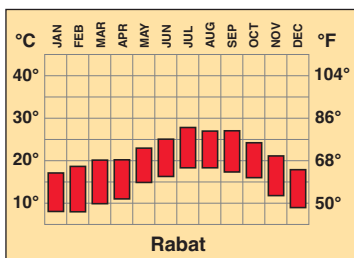
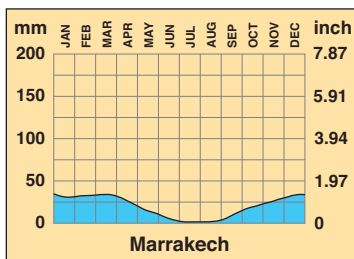
When to go

Morocco is a **year-round destination** but, depending on the season, some regions will be more agreeable or accessible than others. The short version is this: in summer the desert south of the Atlas will be enervating; in winter tracks over the High Atlas occasionally get snowed over, and at **any time of year** heavy

AVERAGE MAX/MIN TEMPS



AVERAGE RAINFALL



rain can render roads and tracks impassable. Flooding and its consequent damage is the least predictable but most likely cause of blocked tracks and briefly closed main roads in southern Morocco.

Some guidebooks suggest the spring thaw sees a high risk of floods across the Atlas. In fact there's not that much snow in Morocco and, anywhere in the world, mountain snow melts steadily. Just a few days of **heavy rain** will have a much greater impact, and this happens most commonly in late summer and early autumn.

There's not much you can do about flooding, but unless you know better or are habituated to high temperatures, certainly on a bike you'd do well to **avoid Morocco in mid-summer**, or at least plan to stay at higher elevations or by the cooler coast.

Climate patterns

The Moroccan climate is pulled one way and the other by the Atlas mountains, the Sahara, and the Atlantic and Mediterranean. The snow-bound summit of Jebel Toubkal (at 4167m, North Africa's highest peak) is just 200km from the dunes of Chegaga and many routes in this book can take you from 2500m (8000ft-plus) passes down to the baking desert in a couple of hours. On one trip in April I experienced scorching 40°C winds south of Fougou Zguid and met some bikers a few days later who were riding through snow over the Rif Mountains at around the same time. In a car with air-con, heating and wipers, the weather isn't a huge deal, but on a bike – with or without an engine – it certainly is.

North of the High Atlas the country experiences a predominantly Mediterranean climate of hot, dry summers and cool, wet winters. Snowfall is likely in the Middle Atlas with winter rainfall most prominent north of Casablanca and particularly in the Rif.

Heading south from the Mediterranean ports, from November to March there's a one-in-three chance you'll get rain on any one day. By the time you get to Marrakech it's less than one-in-five and over the Atlas in Ouarzazate the chances of getting wet are negligible. Ouarzazate is Morocco's **driest and hottest** big town and can experience a temperature range of over 50°C (though not necessarily in the same year) and an



Hot day near the Oued Rheris (MS12).

The snow-bound summit of Jebel Toubkal (at 4167m, North Africa's highest peak) is just 200km from the dunes of Chegaga



Fresh springtime snows on the 3600m Jebel Ayachi. Snow rarely blocks the main High Atlas pistes for long.

What can I do in...

These suggestions assume you're UK-based. If you're in Portugal or Spain you can do a bit more; if you live in a burrow on the tip of Kamchatka peninsula your options are more limited – a rental may be your best option. Even then, many admit once they get back that they planned over-ambitiously and tried to do too much in too short a time.

For ideas of what can be done in a **two-day rental** see p69. For suggestions on combining many of these routes into two dozen **day trips** by returning to the same place in the evening – particularly aimed at motorbikers looking to ride without carting full baggage – see pp76-7.

... a week or less

Quite a lot actually, but you'll need to **fly in and rent** out of Agadir, Ouarzazate or Marrakech (see p68). All three cities are well placed to give you up to five great days exploring. Doing it this way will be hectic of course, and the costs may well be the same as trying to cram a fortnight in with your own vehicle. A more relaxed alternative is having a normal week's holiday and just renting for a couple of days to try some routes. It's a great way to dip your toe in the sand and see if you like the idea of overlanding in Morocco.

... two weeks

This is the practical limit for a visit in your own vehicle from northern Europe. Falling within a typical holiday allocation, it's what many people try, usually just once. You'll need to get cracking and have a good plan; from Dover to Algeciras is 2250km or nearly 1400 miles. To squeeze every last hour from what can be 16 days away, if the ferries line up and by leaving work on a Friday night, you could be in Morocco by Monday lunchtime and in the desert



Fly-and-renting saves money and time.

a day or two later. This could give you, at the very best, nine days in the Atlas and the Sahara, or more reasonably a week on the piste with a rest day or two or a visit to a big city or a resort. Although this is an intense schedule, a week on the piste is actually a pretty satisfying immersion as long as the weather remains good and you have no vehicle problems.

Two weeks ... is the practical limit for a visit in your own vehicle from northern Europe

Renting a decent 4x4 for two weeks gets pretty pricey unless you have a car full of people to share the cost, or if you choose to hire a well-used and inexpensive 4x4 you must accept the risks entailed in driving in remote regions. The 650 motorbike rental out of Marrakech adds up to around €600 or so a week, still pretty good compared to riding down in mid-winter, but sometimes frustrating when it comes to additional gear.

... a month

With up to four weeks at your disposal you need not dash from work to the ferry port like a lunatic and so can enjoy a relaxing tour, ticking off your pick of the routes in this book as well as taking the chance to visit some other places in Morocco, Spain and France. Between Figuié and the Atlantic you could easily explore a dozen routes as well as a few of your own, highlighting the full potential of the region and without needing a holiday afterwards to get over it. Or of course you could make a dash to Mauritania.

... more than a month

By choosing the right season and using your typical three-month Moroccan visa to the limit, you can slowly explore the Atlas ranges and the Saharan plains, park up in remote spots or villages that take your fancy, get to know some locals, go trekking with them or go mountain biking and generally immerse yourself in the Moroccan experience. Or head off to West Africa for the winter. All you need is the time, the money and the inclination.

... AND WHERE YOU MIGHT NOT WANT TO GO: THE RIF

Although no one will stop you going there, one region worth being aware of is the cannabis cultivation area in the Rif mountains, centred around the town of **Ketama** on the N2 junction, east of Chefchaouen.

Following a post-independence Berber rebellion in the 1950s (and a brief 'Republic' in the 1920s, crushed by France and Spain), the government turned its back on the Rif, stifling economic development in the area. As a result cannabis, once grown all over Morocco, flourishes here, making it the biggest source of hash in the world, with cannabis pollen recorded on the Spanish mainland and the ever-expanding cultivation threatening local forests.

Despite EU pressure, the state turns a blind eye to the illegal enterprise, but deprivation has led to poverty, crumbling roads and neglected and sometimes hostile towns. It may be a lucrative business, but the peasants who do all the work are as poor as any in Morocco.

There are no armed drug gangs terrorising each other as elsewhere in the world, but those travellers who don't blunder in naively regularly report that their initial curiosity soon vanishes on being chased by youths in an aggressively-driven Mercedes trying to sell a brick of hash, or vigorously insisting you come on over for a smoke.

Maps



You've got the book but a **map** is still indispensable in Morocco. We're now all used to using sat-navs to get from A to B but only a paper map can give you the **big picture** in the planning stage or seeing where to go next, while on the piste a GPS map will locate your position with precision. And where there's internet you have Google maps and similar. Google's 'map' mode is full of

inaccuracies in Morocco but in the WYSIWYG '**satellite**' or 'aerial' mode you can trace actual routes to make your own tracklog. Fuller reviews and links to all these maps can be found on sahara-overland.com/morocco-maps.

BEST PAPER MAPS

There are a dozen paper maps of Morocco, but taking into account scale, price, clarity, availability and frequency of updates, only a couple (below) are worthwhile for overland travel in the area covered by this book. For **planning and navigating** along the main 'N' highways these paper maps are fine, but once on the tracks the digital options will be better.



Michelin and RK-H; best maps for Morocco.

Michelin 742 1:1 million

The Michelin's intuitive 1:1m scale (1mm = 1km) as well as the great Michelin design makes it easy to read, and at over 1.5m wide, it goes right down to Laayoune which means you can view just about all of this book's routes at once.

As for accuracy, it's no worse than the rest, but the **thin paper** doesn't lend itself to regular use. Discounted to around a fiver in the UK, while it


lasts a 742 is also the cheapest Morocco map. Scrutinise the map's key carefully to distinguish the hierarchy of secondary roads and pistes: 'road surfaced' or 'tarred'. Some of these 'white roads' are major two-lane highways and, as on other maps, a few pistes and roads don't exist, while of course many more are missing. In places this data is up to a decade out of date.

So-called 'new editions' come out every few years but behind a new cover feature the legal minimum of actual updates and corrections, so in my experience the 742 isn't significantly better for back-country use than a more robust RK-H.

Reise Know-How 1:1 million

I find the RK-H practical because, unlike the better Michelin, it won't fall apart after less than an hour's accumulated use. Cartographically the RK-H isn't the clearest design, but the double-sided printing makes it compact and easy to use inside a car, tent or on a bike or out in a gale. Again, the 1:1m scale is intuitive for quick distance estimates and the grid lines help with rough positioning. They even manage to squeeze an index round the edges.

The RK-H's biggest flaw is the vague alignment of roads and tracks and assumptions about which pistes may have been sealed or even their correct designation. Heading for a sealed road on the map that's a piste is irritating. But if necessary you can eat your lunch off an RK-H, use it as an umbrella and generally treat it roughly without it ending up like the fragile Michelin.

You can also download a pre-calibrated digital version of this map from  reise-know-how.de to import into a computer and track your movements using GPS software.

DIGITAL MAPS

These maps should easily install into your regular satnav, providing an excellent level of live navigation to use with this book. Whether riding or in a car, if you use a device like a GPS, satnav, phablet, schmablet or smartphone, get one with a **usefully large screen**. For the difference between all the above gadgets, see the map page on the book's website.



A used Nuvi plus Olaf and you're sorted.

GPS maps

These maps import into your satnav (above) or phone and, to cut a long story short, boil down to three choices: the free **Open Street Map**; the **Marokko Topo** (nicknamed 'Olaf') also free, and **Garmin's North Africa Topo Light**. This now costs only £20 for which you'll need a couple of Garmin's free apps to install and run. The Garmin and OSM maps include a level of routability.

Even though **Olaf's** last update was in 2009, by that time enough pistes had been added to make a comprehensive map which shows tracks (including most of this book's routes) which later maps miss. It installs easily into a Garmin Nuvi (from £50 used on ebay) and you'll even be able to navigate through big Moroccan cities.

Installing free maps like Olaf into a proper GPS, like an expensive but weather proof Garmin Montana, benefits from a degree in electronic witchcraft. Once you've no hair left to pull out you won't regret simply spending £20 for Garmin's North Africa Topo Light which I found more readable than the latest OSMs.



All these maps are reviewed on the website.

2

VEHICLE CHOICE AND PREPARATION

Chances are you'll already know whether you want to tour the Moroccan outback with a motorcycle, a 4x4, motorhome or a mountain bike; the appeal and practicality of each is quite distinct. It's worth noting that many of the routes in this book can also be managed in a **regular car** or van, as you'll soon discover when you get there; all this book's routes are regular access roads used by local people. By the same token, only some well-watered and less rough routes are doable on a self-sufficient mountain bike (see the list on p45) or a regular motorcycle.

Realistically though, driving regular road cars or motorcycles, as well as scooters and bicycles on the piste is an unconventional choice – unless of course you live in Morocco! Most visitors are looking for a genuine reason to explore the off-road capabilities of their 4x4s or trail bikes and Morocco has plenty of great places to do just that.

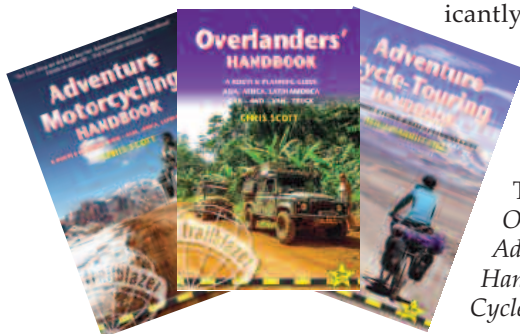
In case it's not obvious, the motorcycle and bicycle travel addressed here is unsupported and self-sufficient with the concomitant results in handling and effort when riding off-road. Both forms of two-wheel travel become much more light-hearted, as well as less risky, when supported by a load-carrying van or 4x4 – see p30.

If you have a long-term overland journey in mind or lined up, particularly across Africa, for Western European-based travellers Morocco also happens to be a geographically-convenient location for testing both yourself in a significant

alien culture and

your vehicle in an off-road setting.

Car, motorcycle or bicycle, there's a whole lot more in *Trailblazer's Overlanders' Handbook*, *Adventure Motorcycling Handbook* and *Adventure Cycle Touring Handbook*.



Motorcycles

Four-wheel drives are two a penny in southern Morocco, but huge import taxes mean anything bigger than a clapped-out Chinese 125 is rarely seen. It's probable that many riders of big adventure bikes come with grand plans to carve the pistes until they discover two things: how heavy a bike can feel on a track; and what great roads there are for riding in the south.

Compared to the north, the riding here can be pure heaven. The weather is drier and warmer, the traffic is lighter, there are no big cities to deal with, the scenery's spectacular, the little-used tarmac is in great shape, the relief makes for some great mountain roads plus basic, inexpensive accommodation is plentiful. So don't be disappointed if you find your well-meant dirt plans get truncated. You'll come back with an idea of how your bike handles in the dirt – good for next time – and you'll have a fantastic road ride.

Little or large?

That is the question that torments the Morocco-bound biker. Will the chore of riding the typical 3000-mile European leg on a TTR250 be worth the responsive ride at the sharp end of the trip? Or does the smooth, cruising comfort of a big flat-, parallel- or V-twin add up to a nagging regret of doing less off-road exploring than you'd hoped? Up to a point it depends on your priorities and experience. Do you just want to get a feel for your abilities and your machine on a couple of routes and lap up the many other wonderful aspects of the Morocco experience? Older riders or those on heavier machines are satisfied simply to slow down – which you have to do anyway. One way round it is to consider a **bike transportation service**: I worked out I'd save both time *and* money by getting my WR trucked to Malaga and Easyjetting in after it.

The good thing is that sand – the bane of fully-loaded big bikes – is rare or easily avoidable in Morocco. What you get instead are **rocks and stones** that puts the 'roc' in 'Morocco' and will work your tyres and suspension into a lather. As I found on a GS650 twin, ridden with a steady hand it's amazing how far you can get with a machine that exceeds a quarter of a ton. That's until the going gets especially muddy, sandy or the bike falls over. All you have to do is pick the right route, take it easy and, if conditions become too much for you, be smart enough to turn back.



Big bike to get there; small bike once there.

... the popularity of big adventure bikes can exceed the off-roading abilities of many Moroccan novices

BIKE PREPARATION

For the whole nine yards on outfitting anything to go anywhere, see my *Adventure Motorcycling Handbook* or its website. There you'll find advice on everything from ways of carrying baggage to tyre choice. This section crams that into four pages because riding Morocco is comparatively simple.

Part of the problem is that you may be riding across Western Europe in a less-than-ideal season then following it with off-road riding in some remote desert and mountains. In a car these issues merely add up to more stuff in the back; on a bike bound for the piste weight is the enemy of control and therefore riding confidence, so you need to ascertain your priorities.

Much depends on what sort of trip you plan to have in Morocco. Maybe you've never ridden off-road but wonder whether your do-it-all Africa Twin lives up to the hype. Others will want nothing less than to pack each day with dirt-track excursions where a light dirt bike with the right tyres and minimal payload will respond much better to the hammering.

Essentials

It goes without saying that your bike wants to be in good shape as getting any sort of spares or repairs out there is tricky. There are virtually no bike dealers down south. Make sure your brakes and **chain and sprockets** will have at least 5000 miles left in them.

The same goes for **tyres**, some of which may not last that distance. Better to fit new and hope for fewer problems with punctures. As long as it stays dry and you avoid sand, the best do-it-all tyres like Heidenau K60s (below), Mitas E07s, Pirelli's MT21, Michelin's T63 will last a full trip on a bigger bike while something like Continental's ever-popular TKC80 will probably be all but finished by the time you get back. A K60 or E07 may not look so purposeful but won't even be half worn. And when it comes to punctures you better have the skill and means to **repair your tyre** by the trackside.

All the above and a few others besides, make both the ride across Europe and off-roading in Morocco predictable by having a shallow and relatively dense pattern of knobs that gives a good footprint and profile on the tarmac with enough space in between to get a bit of a bite on the dirt. Using these sorts of tyres also means you don't need to mess around **dropping air pressures** on the dirt to get the most out of them which means less risk of punctures when you inadvertently slam a rock step too hard.



Heidenau K60 or Mitas E-07; great on road and hard dirt; last for ages. Road tyres: surprisingly good.



A tailpack; all you need for a week's hotelling. **Right:** Kriega Overlanders keep the weight low.

Carrying the load

Moroccan pistes are generally rough, stony tracks where the elegant, plastic, click-on baggage suited to European road touring won't work so well. Much depends on how you ride, how light the load and the mounting mechanism. Such boxes will survive much longer if you load heavy items across the back of the seat and also consider adding support by strapping them up.

It's one reason why **alloy boxes** from the likes of Metal Mule or Touratech are so popular (the other being that they look secure). But while some crash better than most plastic touring cases, they get in the way when you need to take a dab to steady yourself with your foot. This is why **soft baggage** has become increasingly popular for this kind of riding in recent years. If you're planning on relying on southern Morocco's inexpensive and under-used hotels, you could easily make do with a daypack and roll bag, as above.

Protection

Chances are your bike will fall over, most probably at speeds little greater than walking pace. Especially with heavy bikes, fit proper **lever guards** with a metal frame on the end of the handlebars and forget about the need to carry spare levers which can easily bend or snap, even in a static fall. (An **enlarged sidestand foot** can reduce this occurrence on soft ground.)

The underside of the engine is also vulnerable and the rocky nature of most Moroccan tracks means some sort of protection is a good idea, whatever you ride. Many new adventure bikes come with a skimpy plastic guard; some-



Between them, a proper crashbar, bash plate and handguards are no-brainers for Morocco.

Four-by-fours

As you'll find out for yourself, with care it's possible to explore the back tracks of Morocco in a regular car but let's face it, you have a 4x4 and you want to use it before some eco-terrorist sets it on fire. Morocco is a relatively undemanding destination in terms of payload and range, but in terms of all-terrain ruggedness it can get challenging, not least because of the variety of conditions you can expect, from sub-alpine snow to mud, flooded tracks and dunes.

If you're new to genuine off-roading in 4x4s it's important to know how to operate your machine correctly to avoid damaging your car as well as getting stuck and unnecessarily chewing up the landscape. Modern, cutting edge 4x4s have an impressive electronically-controlled array of suspension-, traction- and throttle-controlling systems to enable this, but in the real world driver input still requires more than turning a dial from 'grass' to 'sand'. Learning how to do this is part of the satisfaction of driving on southern Morocco's pistes. There's more on off-roading in Morocco on p78. For the long version see my *Overlanders' Handbook* (OLH).

WHICH 4x4?

Petrol or diesel, long- or short-wheelbase, manual or auto and even models without 'Land' in the title will all work fine in Morocco where distances are relatively short and so vehicle recovery – and repatriation where necessary – is comparatively simple. You don't need the full-on, all-terrain ruggedness of a Land Cruiser or Defender but these are among the most common vehicles out there. Other popular models include Toyota's Prado, Mitsubishi Pajero and Shogun, Nissan Patrol; all big 4x4s comfortably capable of carrying four people and their gear anywhere in Morocco.

Not all 4x4s with 4WD capability will work on the mountain pistes of Morocco; a good way of distinguishing a potentially functional, all-terrain 4x4 from SUVs or what are now called Crossovers is the presence of a separate **low-range gearbox**. If the vehicle of your choice has one you can be fairly sure that it's been built to handle genuine off-roading and not just look like it might. There's more on the efficacy of low range on p78.

In Morocco the only thing that may limit a vehicle on some mountain tracks is its size. A small truck like a Unimog, MAN or an Iveco will struggle or even not fit on routes like MA1, 3, 6 and 7 and MH5 and 15. For them the pistes in the desert and the east or far west will save too much inching around hairpins with wheels hanging over the edge.

A **short-wheelbase 4x4** with just two people can work very well on Moroccan pistes. Fuel stages are short and food stops frequent so there's no need to carry post-apocalyptic payloads. Camping gear can be for occasional use only as there's usually a hotel to be found. More significantly, there'll be many occasions on washed-out pistes where a SWB's minimal body overhangs will help you get through without mashing your bumpers.

Other factors

Although the available range in 4x4s can be limited (VX Land Cruisers are an exception), an **automatic gearbox** is a great choice for some of Morocco's steep, rocky trails. Very often in the mountains it's difficult to be smooth with manual transmission as you lurch between first and second gears turning the steering from lock to lock; on some routes you'll be driving like this for hours. Automatics make this sort of work much smoother on the transmission and tyres as well as the occupants, allowing you to concentrate on positioning the car and its tyres carefully and, heck, even have a chance to look around.

Traditionalists often comment that it's impossible to push start an automatic with a flat battery, but for any overlander, manual or auto and especially if travelling alone, a **second battery** as well as a set of jump start cables are an inexpensive and wise precaution. If the starter's gone and you're alone, you'd be lucky to bump start any car, manual or otherwise unless you happened to park on a nice, firm slope.

Within reason, **wheel and tyre size** and rim metal aren't critical. The norm for 4x4 rim sizes is either 15- or 16-inch and both tyre sizes will be found in Morocco, though not necessarily in your exact width or profile. What is important is a relatively **tall tyre wall** rather than a wide tread and definitely not the low-profile trend of blacked-out urban SUVs. Tall tyres give more ground clearance at the axle, maintain that clearance at lower pressures while also creating a longer tyre print for better traction, and they add suspension (albeit undamped). Tyres in the larger, 16-inch rim size as found on Defenders usually have these bouncy characteristics.

The **suspension systems** on the types of vehicles listed will all work well in Morocco, be they leaf springs, coil or torsion bar on solid axles or the now prevalent independent front suspension (IFS) or even fully independent, cross-linked air suspension which you can control from your smartphone (you think I'm joking...). The reason flagship 4x4s feature such suspension is a much-improved ride and handling *on the road* where most of them are used. In my experience, providing you fit firmer springs, the traditionalists' ground clearance issues with IFS, as on the Mazda **below**, don't exist at non-rallying speeds.





Slightly lifted Merc 190, with slightly taller tyres and a long bashplate.

uncommon for coil springs to break but it's also usual not to notice this for months; another advantage of coil suspension.

Torsion bar suspension is also adjustable by repositioning the pivots in the spline. This increases the pre-tension (so raising the car) but on a hard hit can also twist it beyond the point it was designed to go which can lead to a complicated repair.

It's worth reiterating that, just as with 4x4s, the easiest way of maintain-

ing your car's ground clearance is by **driving slowly and not overloading it**. Position heavy loads centrally, between the axles. Once you've made the best of your ground clearance and underbody protection, all that really remains is to ensure things like the exhaust pipe and fuel tank fittings are solid as they commonly come loose or fall off on corrugated pistes.

OFF-ROADING IN A 2WD

You may have made the most of your ground clearance but in a car you're still missing two 4x4 attributes: all-wheel drive and a low-range gearbox. What this means is that when you hit rough ground you must rely on **momentum** – also known as 'speed' – to get you through. Knowing exactly when to accelerate and when to back off is crucial to successful off-roading in a car, as are a pair of **bridging planks** to smooth out the creases in the Moroccan landscape.

The problem is that sometimes you have to drive a 2WD fast across sandy creek beds or up the banks just to maintain that momentum to avoid losing traction. Crawling along in low second, as you can do with a 4x4 can't be done and the faster you go the more the suspension compresses, and there goes your ground clearance. It's at such times that a bash plate earns its keep.

Reducing tyre pressures to gain traction gives you a bit more leeway before you get stuck and is essential when you're stuck in sand. As with 4x4s, one bar or 14.5 psi is the optimum 'get-out-of-jail' pressure, but in stony Morocco it's best to leave tyres at road pressures until there's no choice.



Airbag jack easily lifts car without damage.

Note that regular cars may not have **towing points** strong enough to withstand dragging a car out of mud or sand. The loops or rings you often see protruding on the back are for locating a car on a car transporter. Pick attachment points carefully; close to a suspension pivot is a good idea, but certainly not bumpers. For more advice see p78.

Bicycle touring in Morocco

Within the limits of the extreme seasons Morocco offers self-sufficient cycle-tourers some fantastic opportunities. Distances aren't too great, services (including transportation over dull stages) are close at hand and there's enough variety of landscape to find something you like.

Linking the pistes of the south are also some great **road rides**, nearly all on good surfaces and with very little traffic. Unless you have the bike for it, you may find the pistes give you and your bike simply too much of a beating. Take to the roads with the odd off-road excursion and you'll still have a great time in southern Morocco. And would you believe it, Trailblazer Guides have the *Adventure Cycle-Touring Handbook* for the full story on long-range bike touring.



All downhill from the Tizi n'Test pass.

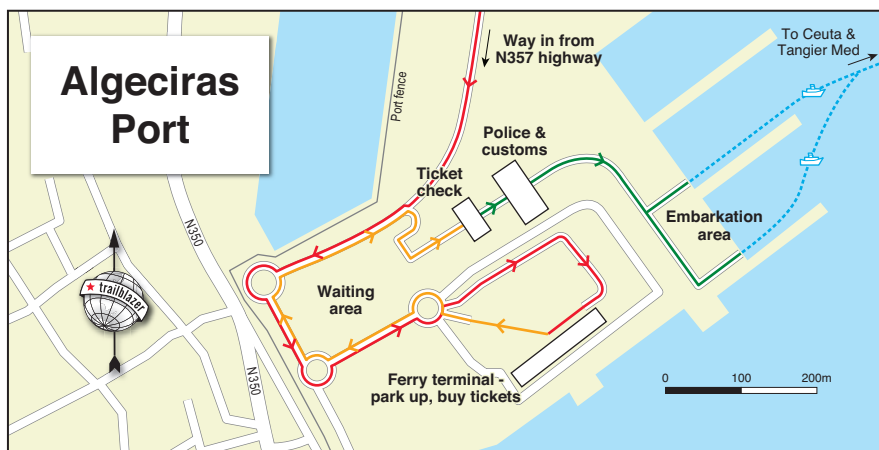
A bike for Morocco

These days it doesn't really matter whether your frame is made from widely-used aluminium or less fashionable steel. Aluminium frames have advanced enough to be reliable in the short term and suspension or fat tyres help disguise alloy's inherent harshness. Aim for a handlebar set-up that doesn't put too much weight on your wrists; a common failing with racier MTBs – easily fixed by a more upright or adjustable stem. Select simple, solid, well-proven components which are easy to repair and use Loctite on all bolts that fix important components like racks.

Eight gears on the freewheel means the chain can be wider and so stronger; don't expect to be cycling every last inch of the routes. I've found 24-speed gearing composed of a 12–32 cassette with 22/32/44 chainrings, was ideally matched for a 16-kg light payload on thin 26" tyres. By the time I was panting up steep tracks in 32–22 I could barely balance anyway.

Tyres and wheels

Large 2.2" tyres will absorb shocks and so spare your rims and spokes (the weak link on all bikes carrying a load off-road) – especially important if you're not running suspension on the front. They may slow you on the highway, especially if they're less than smooth like the Schwalbe XR Marathon, but will give you more comfort on the tracks. Use robust touring tyres rather than lightweight off-road racing items: anything by Schwalbe is good as they seem immune to punctures; you can pretty much leave a spare tyre and even a spare inner tube at home. The Marathon series are the heavy tourers' choice; else-



Leaving Algeciras; no turning back now.

From the more modern and streamlined facility at Tan Med you virtually drive straight out onto a motorway.

Algeciras has become a highly secure port facility which makes buying a ticket much easier now; the odd tout may try and attract your attention. Wind your way in past the cargo facility and park up at the ferry terminal, walk indoors to the line of adjacent counters for each ferry service and choose your timing. Long before

you approach Algeciras you'll see countless places selling ferry tickets. The price is pretty much the same wherever you go and all will be kosher, but these days I just head to the port, wander from kiosk to kiosk and pick one.

Much depends on how you handle yourself, but for your first taste of Africa, Tan Med could not be easier. There's something to be said for taking crossings to the less busy ports of **Nador** (see p54) or the adjacent Spanish enclave of **Melilla** (p54). Nador costs more (Melilla can be half the price) and takes longer, but if you've just set a land speed record across France and Spain you'll be due for a rest. With no queues and barely two touts to rub together, at Nador you can be on your way in 30 minutes.



It's hard to come up with a good reason to ferry to **Tangier city** (see p52) once you read about the antics befalling drivers unfamiliar to that city. Getting through the port can be very slow, and then you have to battle your way out of the city. Although the Moroccan arrival procedure is not as bad as imagined, Tan Med is as easy as it gets.

For most first-timers entry into Morocco can add up to a tense hour or two as their nose gets pushed right into the crack between Europe and Africa. Arriving via Ceuta, Tangier city or especially Melilla merely prolongs the agony, something that puts many people off driving to Morocco in the first place. Your xenophobia meter swings into the red as your vehicle becomes a conspicuous emblem of your otherness. At busier crossings it's hard to tell who's in authority as guys wave you down to 'guide' you into a parking space 40 feet wide, or sell you an immigration card you got free with your ferry ticket.

This attention can disorient you as you worry about wasting time in the wrong queue, having someone run off with your passport, or leaving without the correct papers. As always, at these sorts of borders it pays to be prepared, put on a brave face, keep your cool and be polite, but also to stand your ground. While there's nothing to pay for apart from motor insurance (where available), at somewhere like Ceuta it's not the end of the world to get a helper to submit your forms for you. He'll know where to go and what to do and even if you don't stick with him, he'll be back soon and all for a couple of euros tip.

The good news is the border is better than it used to be, if for no other reason than strict EU regulations trying to stem the north-bound flow of migrants. Here in Africa these informal helpers are commonplace and are tolerated as merely trying to grab a few crumbs falling from the big cake. In other North African ports like Tunis these guys appear to work with the authorities to share the spoils of scamming you; in Morocco it's much more informal and small-time. It's rare for a uniformed official to demand or expect a tip from a tourist (local chancers may be another matter).

For most first-timers entry into Morocco can add up to a tense hour or two as their nose gets pushed right into the crack between Europe and Africa

Joining the queue

If you arrive at Ceuta or Melilla from Spain you're still in Spain with no formalities to go through as you leave the boat. In both cases the actual Moroccan border, Fnideq or Beni Enzar near Nador respectively, is a couple of miles down the road (see map on p54).

Your first days in Morocco can be critical. Once out of the port some travellers wonder what all the fuss was about, others get off on the wrong foot, get ripped off or intimidated and flee back to Spain before they've given the place a chance.

Experience, attitude and expectations add up to much of it, but so does planning. Getting off the boat and blundering into Tangier city looking for a cheap hotel with secure parking can end in tears. On this side of Morocco (as opposed to Melilla/Nador), for your first night it's best to head for somewhere **specific** and **easy**. Plan to arrive in Morocco early, factor in a couple of hours for time differences and to get out of the port, and have most of the rest of the day to get to somewhere manageable like Asilah on the Atlantic (88km from Tan Med), Fnideq just over the hill (27km) or Chefchaouen in the Rif (130km) **well before dark**, or any out-of-town campsite or motel with fewer parking issues. Knowing where you're going that first night is one less thing to worry about.

DANGERS ON THE ROAD

Local **driving standards** in Morocco are no worse than in southern or eastern Europe, adding up to a certain macho flair that can sometimes be interpreted as aggression. In the east and south of Morocco traffic is light, trucks are few and roads well-surfaced with fuel, food and lodging never too far away.

Along with beaten-up cars, you'll see many **pedestrians**, **cyclists** and **animals** on the rural roads, usually near towns and villages. Schoolchildren released from class seem to wander right across the road without a care in the world. Slow right down as you pass through these villages or any crowd.

On the road the most intimidating encounters will be with the **intercity coaches** which seem to run to a timetable that the driver can barely maintain. Give way to these coaches and other similarly pushy drivers. Don't be angered by flashing or hooting as they overtake; this is a local custom for 'attention, coming through' rather than 'get out of my way'. Drivers will also flash you as they come towards you, day and night; it's hard to know why unless they want confirmation you're awake. The most dangerous places at **night** are rural towns, especially around dusk when a place becomes mobilised by the evening *promenade*. At this time a tractor or a bicycle with lights is as rare as a moped rider with a helmet and a high-viz vest. Again, slow down.

Single-width roads that vary from definitely one-car wide to two-cars-at-a-push can also get tense. Ideally, converging vehicles drive their nearside wheels off the asphalt onto the dirt as they pass, but not always. Usually, a game of chicken ensues with drivers waiting until the very last minute before edging slightly towards the shoulder, their mirrors whooshing just inches apart. In a right-hand drive car judging this distance can be tricky so it's best to just head for the dirt to be sure you won't get whacked; chances are you're in a 4x4 that can handle a few metres of rubble. Bikes have a better time of it; oncoming vehicles often pull to the right, but just as you get used to this there's always one who won't and gives you a fright. Always be ready to brake hard and take to the shoulder.



Out of Marrakech en route for the Tizi n'Test.

Next are single-width **mountain roads** which, if sealed, have a higher chance of traffic big enough to block the road. The Tizi n'Test and MH12 is like this in places and, along with the landslides and steep drops, you really must approach each bend with the possibility that someone is doing the same from the other side. See box p119.

Checkpoints and police

At most temporary checkpoints it's common for a tourist vehicle to be waved through, but don't assume this. Slow down and watch the guy until he invariably gives you a signal to move on. Occasionally they may stop you (more so in the deep south), but chances are it'll only be for a chat. In the north it's rare to have to show your papers, but be ready and amenable to this. Despite many people's anxieties, unprompted **bribery** is unknown. If you've broken a law such as overtaking on a solid line, that's another matter.

Only in **Western Sahara**, south of Tan-Tan, will the **permanent checkpoints**, very often on each side of a town, require full details right down to your mother's name. Here it speeds things up to hand over a home-made, pre-filled out form (*fiche* in French) with all your details. A Word template is downloadable off the 'Documents' page on the website. This form can also be handed over at hotels which like to take your passport to copy its details.

Police **speed traps** are common in the north, especially on the N1 along the Atlantic coast and even minor coastal routes. If the car ahead seems to be dawdling and isn't just a clapped-out Peugeot 205, chances are they know what's around the bend. On the N1 and parallel A1 motorway speed limits are high enough to make good progress, but if you get caught you'll have to pay an on-the-spot fine of at least 700dh or try and talk your way out of it.

Accidents and breakdowns

For most overland travellers, dealing with **minor vehicle problems** – or for bikers, minor injuries as well – will be as bad as things can get in Morocco. For a much smaller minority a road traffic accident or a heavy fall while riding may also involve injury.

swoop down on their prey to see if they can get a bite. While far from unique to this country, these people are the bane of Morocco and are as despised by honest, hardworking locals.

While you're on the move, village kids are easy to deal with. Not so harmless in some tourist towns are the more malicious, misguiding and mischief-making touts, or the incessant pestering for any number of services from mechanics to guides, camel rides and accommodation. Some of course could be genuine, but with experience it's easy to read from the tone used, appearance or dress which ones are not, just as they too can probably spot a gullible target. Across the world these hustlers are attracted to places where tourists congregate and the best are extremely adept at persuading the credulous, in five major languages, that a carpet is *ancien*, a bargain and for the right price will probably fly itself home. Morocco is no different and, hard though you may think it to believe, fifty years ago was even worse. Attempts at outlawing the practice have worked to an extent, but with current levels of unemployment, working with or on tourists is seen as a short cut to riches.

As bad as getting had can be, the danger is of becoming suspicious of all encounters, so that you stomp about in a snarl in every town. When on foot, shuffling around purposelessly while clutching a map upside down is bound to attract the wrong sort of attention. Even if you don't know where you're going, look as if you do.

My **advice** is this: pursue engagements beyond a quick smile, a shake of the head and a '*non merci*' at your peril. Don't even return a greeting, just smile and keep moving without provoking any antagonism. Leave them to focus on another target. Once you verbally engage in answering inane enquiries about your name or provenance, a relationship, however slight, has been established and it's much harder to break away – at worst requiring rudeness which is something you don't want to resort to. Ignoring them totally is mildly antagonistic – they will keep at you until you respond in some way – while gamely playing along eventually sees you drawn into a pitch.

Under pressure, or after too many instances of unremitting hassle, you might be tempted to shame or ridicule your tormentors. Don't waste your time; they've heard it all before and have skins as thick as the city walls of Taroudant. And even then, acting like this usually leaves a bad taste. Far better not to let things get that far. These hot spots are well known and without trying to tell you where not to go: in the south it's pretty much the line between Marrakech and Merzouga.

If you find you don't have the temperament to deal with it, there's much to be said for avoiding these places and spending your money and time elsewhere. Your memory of Morocco will be all the sweeter.

WILD CAMPING

Wild camping can be part of the appeal of overlanding in southern Morocco. In the north, if you're considering camping on arable land or in orchards,

either ask permission first or be discreet. Even down south, wild camping in total solitude is often difficult to achieve. It's not uncommon to think you're alone under the stars only to have a nomad come out of nowhere to sit and watch you, or hang around to see if anything's going spare.

For your own peace of mind it's good practice to camp **out of sight** of the highway or at least a kilometre from the tarmac, as well as a good distance from any settlement or encampment unless you're looking for interaction. This will dissuade chancers from stopping and coming over to nose around. Alone, your first night out off the road or out by the piste can be rather unnerving. It's common to feel vulnerable and exposed, but after a few nights you'll have the feel for finding a good spot (many are recommended in the route descriptions) and have organised your gear efficiently to make the whole process easier.

Desert lore suggests you should **never camp in a river bed** for fear of flash floods. In fact the soft sand, vegetation, windbreaks and possible tree shade make creeks great places to camp compared to an exposed, stony plain. Use your common sense if the weather looks stormy and you're in the mountains.

In the back of a car, in a roof tent or on the ground by your bike, before you go to sleep it's good practice to tidy up and put things away; more against the possibility of a dust storm or rain shower than any chance of pilfering. And of course, in the morning don't leave anything other than tracks and footprints. **Burn** what will reduce to ash, throw out or bury organic matter and pack anything else like empty jars or tins to dispose of in the next town. This can be more easily said than done in some places, but at the very least it's better to centralise refuse in one place rather than leave it all over the desert.

When not using roadside lavatories, bury your toilet waste in sand or under a rock where it'll dry harmlessly and get into the habit of **burning your toilet paper** (keep a lighter with the toilet paper). Many tourist sites in the Sahara have been despoiled by grubby white tufts of used Andrex.

RENTING VEHICLES LOCALLY

In Morocco there are a few places offering motorcycles and many more offering 4x4s to rent, all of which are capable of doing most of the routes in this book. Combined with budget airline flights from under €100 (see p13), rental fees can work out low enough to make a week or two's exploring viable when compared to the time and expense of driving or riding down.

The drawbacks are that you don't quite know what you'll get and whatever it is, it'll have no camping gear, adequate tools or recovery equipment. Unless you know what you're getting into or are renting from the internationally-known rental agencies like Avis, it would be best not to plan too much of your holiday in Morocco around it.

You should be fine with a Toyota Prado – a 3.5 TD that's become known



Bush camping; finding a quiet spot is tricky.

Off-highway riding

Many bikers dream of riding the desert sands but in Morocco tracks are predominantly **rocky** with sand filling some creek-crossings; for most riders that'll be more than enough sand. To an experienced dirt biker, rocky terrain doesn't hold too many surprises, but to a beginner far from home on a loaded bike, inching off the blacktop for the first time can be unnerving.

In Morocco's mountains and desert it's not so much the actual riding as the relentless concentration demanded by riding and navigating that'll wear you out. Although you'll often be riding through spectacular scenery, the only chance you'll get to appreciate this splendour is by stopping, either by choice or by accident.

Your goal is to conserve energy, keep track of your position and preserve your machine from damage and yourself from injury; most biking trips to Morocco will include one and possibly the other. Having all this dropped in your lap after days of tranquil highway cruising can be quite daunting, especially if you're alone. Suddenly your sure-footed sled skitters about from rock to rock and feels as heavy as it actually is.

Expect to fall off in the early days when you're still getting the feel for your machine, and then again later should you become over-confident. Only then will you have acquired the right balance of caution and confidence. It's the inverse of a rodeo rider: your bike breaks you in after a few hard days and within a week you finally loosen up. But push your luck and get too tired and you'll simply fall off through fatigue. You need to pace yourself.

Fifty miles an hour or **80kph** is the safe maximum speed on any dirt surface. Any faster and it's not possible to react quickly enough to the ever-changing terrain.

... conserve energy, keep track of your position and preserve your machine from damage and yourself from injury.

'Ride light'

First-timers on the dirt tend to tense up and grip the bars. Aspire to be fluid, as being too rigid has a detrimental effect on handling, like stiff suspension. On rough terrain hold the bars loosely in your palms, guiding the front end.

By responding fluidly to the impacts, you'll preserve yourself and your bike from tiring shocks. Riding light includes standing up or just weighting the footrests (see below), and steering with body weight rather than bars. **Anticipate, then react** to changing surfaces, just as you do with dozy car drivers in a busy city. Alert, smooth riding is the key and learning to do so is part of the satisfaction of dirt riding in Morocco.

Stand up on the footrests

One thing that transforms the control of a bike on rough ground is standing up on the footrests. When you stand up and grip the bike between your knees:

- Impacts are absorbed through your slightly-bent legs, not directly through your back, or the seat
- With weight pressing low on the footrests, balance and control are improved
- Your forward visibility improves too

It's one reason why enduro bikes have narrow seats and trials bikes have no seat to speak of. Now is the time to see if it's a posture you can comfortably sustain. Chances are taller riders may stoop so install **bar risers**. When standing up for more than a few seconds – for example to get a good look ahead – it's OK to lock your knees out to save fatigue, but as you approach a hit, always **bend your knees**, just as you would when making a jump.



Stand when you must; sit when you can.

When standing it also helps to press in on the tank or seat lightly with your knees to brace the bike. With three points of contact – feet, knees and hands – the bike is effectively triangulated to your flexible body giving much better control over rough surfaces. Ensure your standing knee-bike interface is comfortable. You may also find regular riding boots lacking a tough, steel shank are uncomfortable on your instep after a short period of standing, and that normal rubber footrests are fine until they get wet.

It's not always necessary to stand right up. Sometimes just pulling on the bars, leaning forward and taking the weight off your backside onto the footrests will be enough to reduce shocks.

As you get the hang of dirt riding standing or briefly unloading the saddle becomes instinctive. In a nutshell: **stand up when you must – sit down when you can**. The key is to preserve energy with smooth, efficient riding.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN TRACKS

Some of the best rides in Morocco are the mountain tracks in the High- and especially the Anti-Atlas. In a car you crawl along at walking pace and watch the scenery inch by. A light bike is faster and smoother. On these tracks as much as anywhere, you must ride within the limits of your visibility and the terrain. Read the ground constantly. A steep ascent rarely continues over the crest in the same direction, so keep your hands over the levers and be ready for anything: grazing goats, landslides, other vehicles, bends.

Off-road driving

In a cushy fourbie with the air-con humming, it's possible to feel immune to the hammering your vehicle is getting. There's a tendency to assume 4x4s are indestructible but unlike bikes, the risk of personal injury is small, but the risk of damaging your two-ton wagon while off-roading is not, and it's this which ought to limit your speed on the tracks of southern Morocco. On many rocky mountain routes you'll drive for hours at little more than walking pace; any faster and something may break. Along with punctures, **suspension** commonly fails in Moroccan conditions, even when driving at a moderate pace. Flood-damaged tracks apart, the need for good axle articulation or 'twisting' is rarely needed, except on routes like MH3 and MH5. Most other routes are passable in a 2WD with care. There's more on everything in the *Overlanders Handbook* and the *Desert Driving* DVD.



© TOBY SAVAGE

Crossing ditches diagonally maintains ground clearance.

Ditches and creeks

What you will be in for is a lot of crawling in and out of ditches and oueds, such as on Route ME3. Here, long body overhangs (usually the rear) combined with low suspension can be a liability. All such obstacles should be taken slowly to avoid compressing the suspension and so reducing ground clearance. Use the low-range gearbox to keep control rather than relying on momentum, as a 2WD or a moto must do. If it looks like the

back bumper might dig in, cross a bank **at a 45° angle** very slowly in low first. Know too when to use a central diff lock, if you have this feature; avoid locking it unless stuck in soft sand or mud (more on p36).

If you have to inch around a fallen boulder or rockfall, get someone ahead to guide you with clearly agreed hand signals to spare unnecessary contact with the vulnerable tyre sidewalls or undercarriage, or falling off the edge.

Getting stuck

It's all so easy in a 4x4 until you become stuck, and in Morocco it could be snow, mud, a landslide, rockfall, a flooded creek or sand that brings you to a halt. Unless you and your mates are dying to try out your recovery gear and techniques, it's better knowing **when to turn back**; something a solo driver or a single vehicle will readily recognise. With more than one vehicle and the equipment outlined on p69 you can be a bit more adventurous and explore your car's abilities. Initially, there can be a thrill about cranking a hi-lift or laying sand tracks, and until you get a feel for how your machine responds, they may be actually needed.



A better skill to master is reading the terrain. If you're unsure, get out and look around. Are there other recent tracks to one side? If you do get stuck will it be an easy recovery? One reason people tend to push their luck and even play around on dunes is that getting unstuck is relatively easy (though so too is rolling a vehicle). Dry sand doesn't stick like mud or waterlogged sand, and doesn't soak like water, hurt like rocks or chill like snow. Scooping with your hands is actually quite pleasant as long as it's not 42°C.

Particularly in sand, **stop before you get deeply bogged**. Recognise that the vehicle is losing speed and soon you'll be sinking quicker than you're going forward. If you do this in time, simply reversing out will do the trick.

Whatever loose surface you're stuck in, **reducing tyre pressures** is the first step, if it's not been done already. It doesn't have to be much; 70% of normal road pressure is a start and will elongate the tyre's footprint enough to improve traction in all the above scenarios. If you're not being towed out (or if you are because you're deeply bogged) take the time to **clear the wheels** in whichever direction you're going. Now is the time to engage low range. In most vehicles this automatically engages the front axle or locks the central diff, though on bare rock it's not a state you want to be in for long (see p36).

Flooded tracks

Take heed of the flooding box on p73. Lately, each year the Oued Rheris on Route MS6 at Remlia gets blocked for a few days. Elsewhere, on clay pans such as the normally dry Lake Iriki on MS77 and MS8, the surface can appear dry, but beneath is a soggy mush through which a heavy 4x4 will readily sink and require hauling out.



At low pressures the contact area becomes up to four times longer, replicating a tracked vehicle. Result: dramatically improved traction but at the risk of sidewall damage.

© ROB FORD

Introduction to the routes

Know this: many first-time visitors to southern Morocco **take on too much**, misjudging the distances that can be easily covered in a day, as well as the appeal of slowing down.

It's understandable: you may only be here once and so want to make the most of your time. Better to accept that you can't see it all and that it's not all about ticking off routes; they're just a way of revealing the essence of the country. It can help to view a first visit to southern Morocco as a *recce* to establish what's actually possible and what you might like to see or do more of next time, should you return.

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| 11. | Two Rivers Loop | [R] road | 306KM | p127 |
| 12. | Trans Atlas: Demnate – Ouarzazate | [R] road | 158KM | p129 |
| 13. | Goulmima – Tagountsa Tunnel (loop) | | 187KM | p130 |
| 14. | Nekob – Kelaa – 'Sarhro West 1' | | 94KM | p132 |
| 15. | Agdz – Kelaa – 'Sarhro West 2' | | 126KM | p133 |
| 16. | Azilal – Zaouiât Ahansal – Ouaouizeght | | 187KM | p135 |
| 17. | Demnate – Tamernout – Azilal | | 144KM | p137 |
| 18. | Ouaouizeght – Aït Bouguemaze – Demnate | | 240KM | p138 |
| MS | SAHARA | | Region Map | p142-3 |
| 1. | Agdz – Zagora | | 123KM | p144 |
| 2. | Zagora – Aït Ouazik – Tazzarine | | 98KM | p145 |
| 3. | Tazzarine – Oum Jrane – Merzouga | | 228KM | p146 |
| 4. | Zagora – Oum Jrane – Alnif | | 184KM | p148 |

Route descriptions

Take the time to **read the entire route through** in advance to get a feel for what lies ahead. It can help to mark key points or places where your itinerary differs. Once on the route you'll probably barely refer to the description, except maybe to confirm you've reached a certain point

'Off road' is a summary of track conditions for vehicles *other than 4x4s* which can manage just about anything, but these conditions can change after storms or over time. The same goes for a light motorcycle of less than 450cc – very little will faze it off-road compared to a 1200cc adventure bike weighing up to three times as much. Most riders of such big bikes can manage rough sections if they're brief. It's when difficulties are sustained or frequent – and that can be just a couple of hundred metres of soft sand or rubble – that such bikes become exhausting to ride.

With MTBs it's more the range between water points and the hammering the rider can sustain; some routes are better than others.

| | | | | |
|-----------|--|----------|-------------------|---------------|
| 5. | Zagora – Fom Zguid | [R] road | 122KM | P152 |
| 6. | Merzouga – Tagounite | | 244KM | P152 |
| 7. | Fom Zguid – Mhamid – Tagounite | | 163KM | P156 |
| 77. | Tagounite – Chegaga – Fom Zguid | | 168KM | P157 |
| 8. | Tagounite – Chegaga South – Tata | | 314KM | P159 |
| 9 | Ouarzazate – Tazenacht | | 77KM | P162 |
| 10. | Figuig to Atlantic: 'The Desert Highway' | [R] road | 1450KM | P163 |
| 11. | Aoufous – Merzouga | | 134KM | P164 |
| 12. | Merzouga – 'Black Rock Desert' – Mecissi | | 138KM | P170 |
| 13. | Agdz – Bleida – Fom Zguid | | 168KM | P172 |
| 14. | Tazenacht – El Borj – Ouarzazate | | 64KM | P173 |
| MA | ANTI ATLAS | | Region Map | P176-7 |
| 1. | Tafraoute – Tizerkine Gorge – Aït Herbil | | 106KM | P175 |
| 2. | Aït Herbil – Igmir – Tafraoute | [R] road | 97KM | P178 |
| 3. | Akka – Timkyet – Tafraoute | | 184KM | P179 |
| 4. | Taliouine – Igherm – Guelmim | [R] road | 380KM | P181 |
| 5. | Ousemlal – Amtoudi – Aït Herbil | | 119KM | P182 |
| 6. | Tazenacht – Jebel Timouka – Tata | | 162KM | P183 |
| 7. | Fom Zguid – Issil – Kourkouda | | 104KM | P187 |
| 8. | Tafraoute – Tazalaght – Igherm | | 135KM | P191 |
| 9. | Tata – Akka Ighern – Fom Zguid | | 171KM | P193 |
| 10. | Ousemlal – Aït Herbil | | 95KM | P196 |
| 11. | Taliouine – Tata – Igherm | [R] road | 266KM | P197 |
| 12. | Fom Zguid – Assaragh – Taliouine | | 190KM | P198 |
| 13. | Taliouine – Agadir Melloul – Tata | | 252KM | P200 |
| 14. | Igherm – Afella – Ousemlal | | 156KM | P202 |
| MW | WEST | | Region Map | P206-7 |
| 1. | Tan-Tan – Jebel Ouarkaziz – Assa | | 268KM | P204 |
| 2. | Tan-Tan – Oued Draa – Assa | | 242KM | P208 |
| 3. | Assa – Tiglite – Tan-Tan | | 195KM | P211 |
| 4. | Fask – Aouinet Lahna – Assa | | 121KM | P213 |
| 5. | Fask – El Borj – Assa | | 161KM | P216 |
| 6. | Assa – Smara | | 405KM | P217 |
| 7. | Tan-Tan – Mseid – Smara | | 326KM | P221 |
| 8. | Sidi Ifni – Plage Blanche – Tan-Tan | | 197KM | P223 |

'Route finding' assumes you may not have a GPS and adds to the route description. If you don't have a **metric odometer** to record distance, to convert kilometres to miles 'halve it and add a quarter'; eg: '40km = 25 miles'.

Unambiguous cardinal points ('north', 'southeast' or 'SE', etc) are used as well as the more intuitive 'turn left at ...' so the description needs a little less re-interpreting when done in reverse. To help clarity, **route maps** only show main settlements.

'Recommended maps' show the usefulness or otherwise of the two best paper maps and three best GPS maps (see p23), as well as whether the route is routable on Google Maps, so eliminating the need for proprietary GPS maps. Of course this information will only be up to date pending the next map update: with the 'Olaf' that will be never, but with the OSM it can be every few weeks (and is something which you can contribute to, too).


Each of the five regions (ME, MH, etc) is colour coded to make it easier to locate in the book. In any region, **road routes** (where present) have headings in a full-width column and an **[R]** prefix. All routes which include **tracks** (most of them) are in twin column format and all piste stages are shown in **red-brown text**.







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Most Moroccan pistes like MS6 are easy to follow.

Additional online content

Nearly all routes have a corresponding online .gpx file, a stripped-down list of key waypoints (see  sahara-overland.com/morocco-overland – otherwise referred to as '**the website**' in this book) with an option to edit them yourself and then import into any GPS device. These files work well with the GPS mapping described on p23. Don't get over-excited about these .gpx files – you'll soon find that most routes are navigable with barely a glance at a GPS, but it can sure save time when the way ahead is not clear.

Map key

-  Motorway
-  Main road
-  Other road
-  Piste

NOTE: Not all roads are shown on the maps



Route number and direction



Route along road



Route shown on another map



International border



River



Dunes

Outline of the East region

Between the coast and Algeria's desert border sprawls the bleak **Rekkam Plateau** where the Atlas ranges deflate into a barely populated tableland of uncultivable scrub, low escarpments and shallow creeks. Arriving from Spain or France at the ports Melilla or Nador, this corner of Morocco lacks the drama of imperial cities or palm-fringed kasbahs found elsewhere so travellers usually head for Fès or directly south towards Erg Chebbi.

The northern plateau has little going for it although the few sealed roads like ME9 are deserted. It's in the south where the Rekkam crumples into lateral ranges that things can get more interesting. You could string together ME9, 1, 7, 2 and MS11 for a great **back route to Erg Chebbi**, or if the weather's fine just see where some of the many unlogged pistes lead you; it's all part of the adventure.

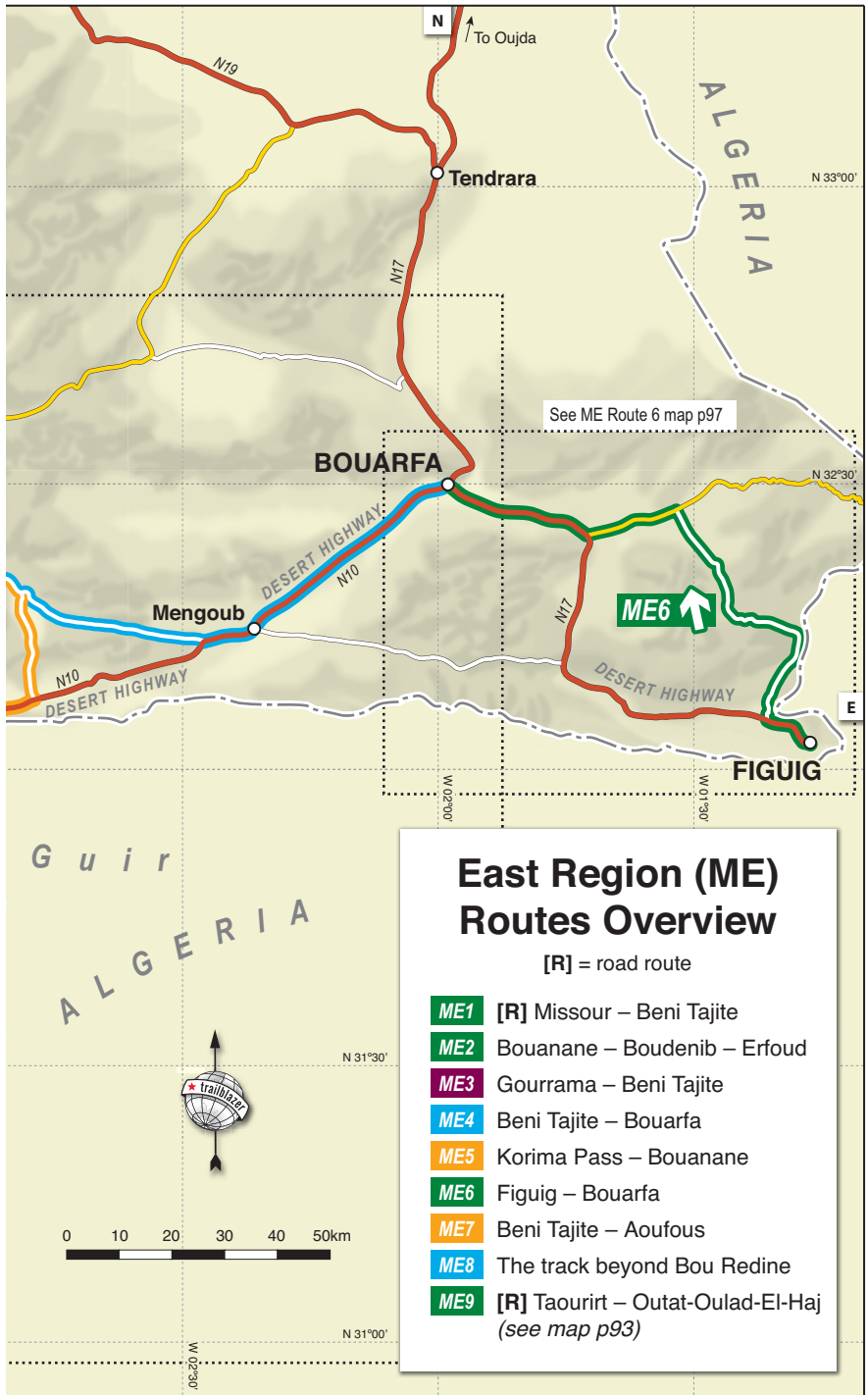
This region may not be top of the list for first-timers in Morocco looking for the sand seas and dates but as in the far west, tourist infrastructure is minimal if not non-existent here. This means the negative effects of tourism are limited – reason enough to spend some time exploring the Moroccan east.

ME Routes

| | | | |
|---------|------------------------------|-------|-----|
| ME1 [R] | Missour – Beni Tajite | 163KM | p86 |
| ME2 | Bouanane – Boudenib – Erfoud | 155KM | p87 |
| ME3 | Gourrama – Beni Tajite | 74KM | p88 |
| ME4 | Beni Tajite – Bouarfa | 165KM | p91 |
| ME5 | Korima Pass – Bouanane | 53KM | p95 |
| ME6 | Figuig – Bouarfa | 110KM | p96 |
| ME7 | Beni Tajite – Aoufous | 119KM | p98 |
| ME8 | The track beyond Bou Redine | 65KM+ | p99 |
| ME9 [R] | Taurirt – Outat-Oulad-El-Haj | 184KM | p99 |

[R] = road route





ME6 FIGUIG – BOUARFA

110KM

April 2008 ~ Mazda pickup

Description

Figuig has a curious 'Land's End' appeal, stuck as it is in Morocco's south-easternmost corner and within sight of Beni Ounif in Algeria whose different-coloured street lighting highlights its separation at night. Up to 1994 Moroccan borders with Algeria were open and following the Arab Spring there was talk of rapprochement, but it's not likely to happen while Algeria gets its way.

Having made the effort of getting here, many travellers choose to spend the night. A contributing factor is the *Hotel Figuig*, the town's only worthwhile hotel and **camping** spot. Situated on a bluff overlooking the palmeries below, the *Figuig* is no pimped-up faux-kasbah serving tour groups by the coachload. But nor is it a neglected roach palace.

If you're set on knocking out the Grand Moroccan Traverse stringing this book's off-road routes together, or are setting off to follow the **Desert Highway** (see p163), there's no certificate without a visit to Figuig.

Scenically this track is just a novel way of arriving in or leaving Figuig. It sets off right along the Algerian border, but there's usually no problem with tourists driving this route. Entering a pass between the Jebel Maïz and the Jebel Amour you drive round the **dam** and emerge into the broad, *raïma*-dotted plain and the road running east to Iche or west to the N17 and Bouarfa.

If you want more off-roading, at KM82, head back south for 28km to where a tarmac side road leads to a telecom tower. Here a piste sets off west along the Algerian frontier for 65km, passing the remains of **Mengoub station** (about 52km from the tower) on the former French colonial railway to what was Colomb-Bechar in present day Algeria. The nearby 'General Leclerc Monument' on the Michelin map is over the undefined border and commemorates a commander of the Free French Forces who distinguished himself in Chad and Libya in WWII. His plane crashed here in 1947. After the station, the track rejoins the N10 highway close to ME4 KM109.

Mapping ME6

Michelin ★★★

RK-H ★★☆☆

Olaf ★★☆☆

Garmin Topo ★★★

OSM ★★☆☆

Google Routable ✕

MAP P97, OVERVIEW P85

Off road

In fair weather, at least, there are no problems whatever your vehicle.

Route finding

You'll see many side routes so keep an eye out for the key waypoints. Although many maps seem to show **Iche** as just over the border in Algeria, the small oasis is actually in Morocco and may be worth a visit. You won't see much traffic on this route.

Possibly because it's so close to Algeria, **petrol** may be in short supply in Figuig. Diesel seems OK. There are a couple of wells on the piste.

Suggested duration

Allow three hours to do this trip with a car or a motorbike. It's not especially worth camping out here, but a visit to Iche may be interesting.

0km **N32° 07.20' W01° 13.93'**
SHELL in *Figui*. Head N out of town.

8.2 (101.8) **N32° 09.15' W01° 18.19'**
 A couple of kilometres after a checkpoint, by a post indicating 'Bouarfa 99' turn N onto the piste and towards the jebel. In 1500m cross a wide, shallow oued.

20 (90) **N32° 15.08' W01° 16.11'**
 Pass a small fort and head into the Jebel Amour pass.

25 (85) **N32° 17.42' W01° 14.77'**
 Head past another bigger fort on the right. About 2km later you pass a tomb.

31.5 (78.5)
 You'll notice buildings and a water tower right of the piste with a big fort and some greenery 1km to the NE.

36.5 (73.5) **N32° 19.46' W01° 20.29'**
 Cross a wide oued with a broken ford and turn W up over the jebel.

Rise over the jebel and pass to the S and W of the reservoir

42 (68) **N32° 19.95' W01° 22.97'**
 West of the reservoir, pass some buildings on the right.

45 (65) **N32° 21.22' W01° 23.53'**
 Join a service road for the dam at a corner.

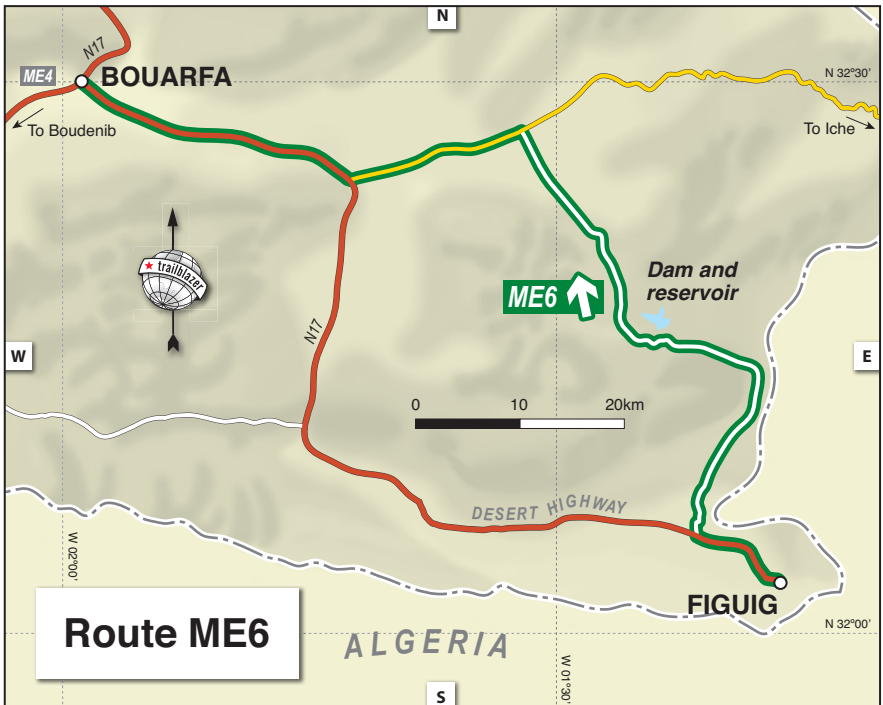
50 (60) **N32° 24.15' W01° 24.76'**
 Cross the Oued Moulay El Harrane. Soon the track turns to the NW.

58 (52) **N32° 27.42' W01° 27.65'**
 Well and some buildings on the left just before another crossing of the Safsaf. Leave Olaf and strike out NW.

68 (42) **N32° 29.45' W01° 32.87'**
 Join the road to Iche and turn W.

82 (28) **N32° 27.45' W01° 40.91'**
 Rejoin the N17 near a radio tower and turn NW for Bouarfa.

110km **N32° 31.91' W01° 57.70'**
AFRIQUIA fuel in *Bouarfa* town centre. There is another fuel station on the Oujda road, N out of town.



Berber culture sum up the appeal of the south. Certainly you'd want to attempt either **Trans Atlas Routes** MH1 or -2, as well as a couple of tracks in the Sirwa and more arid Sarhro massifs.

I find the High Atlas not always as dramatic as the name suggests. To the south the Sirwa and especially the Sarhro massifs tend to be more impressive and a little warmer.

TRANS ATLAS: MH1 TOUNFIT – AGOUDAL – DADÈS 261KM

March 2017 ~ Yamaha WR250R

Description

Often preceded by MH21 – this is a popular crossing of the High Atlas. Early on, the **P7319** road has been rerouted around the wrecked gorge just north of Agoudim. This is now a permanent deviation at KM13.5 which, at the update, wasn't signed and won't be on paper maps for a while, so can lead to blundering into the old route with consequent gnashing of teeth. Now, notwithstanding further storm damage, it's all sealed right up to Agoudal, KM134.

From here starts the 40-km off-road section over the 2906m Tizi n'Ouano to the Dadès valley. In good conditions it's a little over an hour on a fast bike – if it's been raining don't bother, backtrack to Agoudal and carry on down MH2. Once over the Atlas the upper Dadès descent via Msemrir grows ripe with the rich fruits of tour-bus tourism with, at times, a near-continuous string of gorge-side *auberges*. If you've enjoyed the wilds, Boumalne Dadès is not such a propitious spot to end up. If the timing's right, head into the Jebel Sarhro massif along MH4, -10, -14 or MH15.

Off road

Over the top from Agoudal is well worth avoiding in mud and snow, but if you get to the pass, the south side is much drier. When I did it, a **regular car** or a **mountain bike** could have managed fine; a month earlier some digging was required – see p104.

Route finding

As easy as it gets providing you take all the turns in the correct order. On the **P7319** hooves (**photo right**) will outnumber wheels but down in the heart of the Dadès you're in tourist central.

If you get short on **fuel**, head for Imilchil, 9km north of KM107.

Suggested duration

Doable in a day, but more fun to lodge around Agoudim or Agoudal, or camp high if you find a flat spot.

Mapping MH1

Michelin ★★★

RK-H ★★★

Olaf ★★☆☆

Garmin Topo ★★★

OSM ★★★

Google Rutable ✓

MAP P111, OVERVIEW P102



Outline of the Sahara region

Though occupying a slither of the world's largest hot desert, the Moroccan Sahara has a strong appeal, a chance to explore the fringe of an iconic wilderness. Come late April, you won't be quibbling over geographical nuances as to whether it's the 'real Sahara' or not, but we're in Morocco so distances are short. Only a few routes demand an overnight stop, but a night out in the desert is why you're here; if you don't know that yet, you will the morning after.

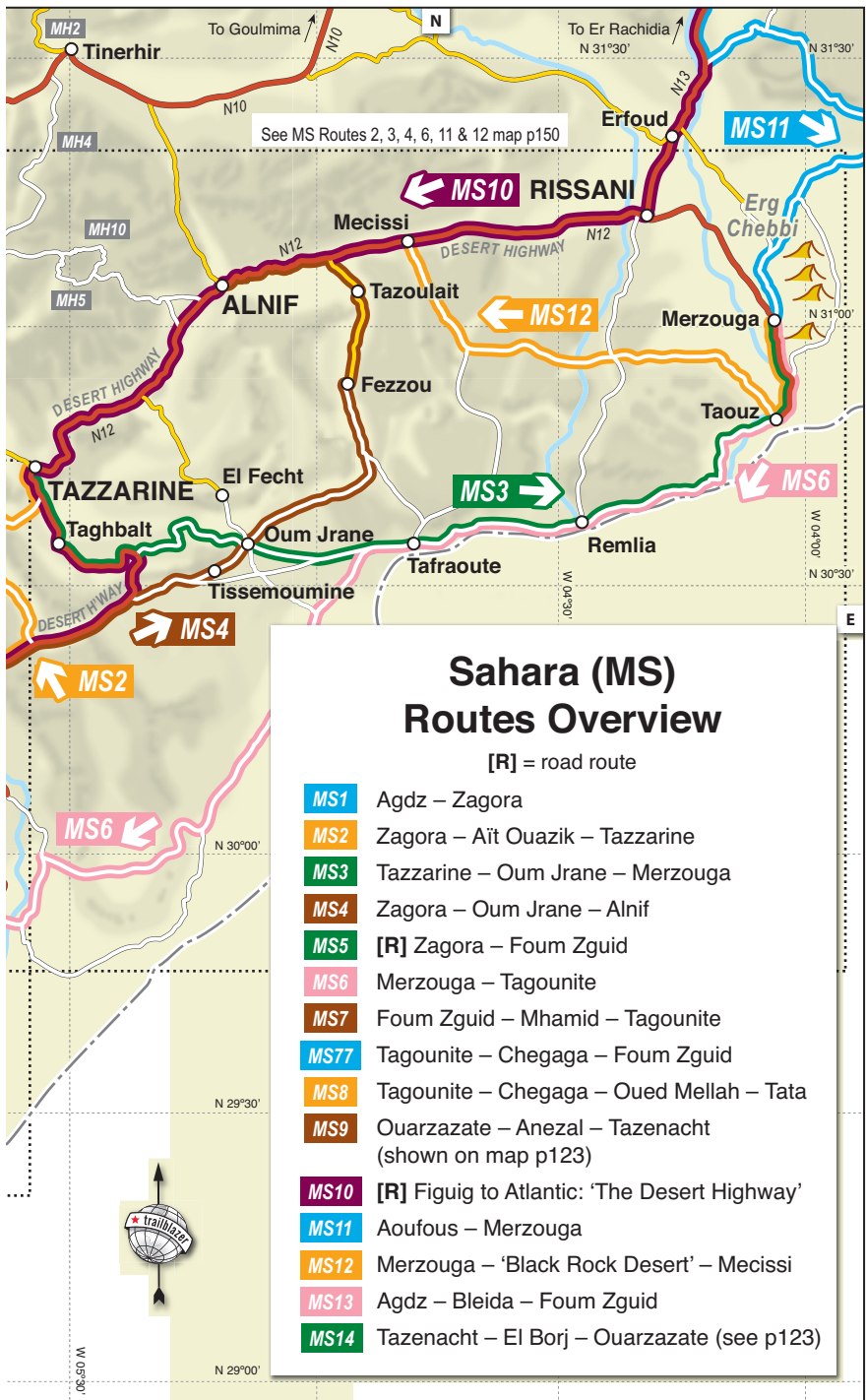
In the high season outside of summer you won't be alone. Jeeps shuffle tour groups daily between Zagora and Merzouga so it's worth remembering the less visited Anti Atlas and Moroccan West are also largely arid and full of wonder, even without sand seas like Erg Chebbi.

MS Routes

| | | | |
|-----------------|---|---------------|-------------|
| MS1 | Agdz – Zagora | 123KM | p144 |
| MS2 | Zagora – Aït Ouazik – Tazzarine | 98KM | p145 |
| MS3 | Tazzarine – Oum Jrane – Merzouga | 228KM | p146 |
| MS4 | Zagora – Oum Jrane – Alnif | 184KM | p148 |
| MS5 [R] | Zagora – Fom Zguid | 122KM | p152 |
| MS6 | Merzouga – Tagounite | 244KM | p152 |
| MS7 | Fom Zguid – Mhamid – Tagounite | 163KM | p156 |
| MS77 | Tagounite – Chegaga – Fom Zguid | 168KM | p157 |
| MS8 | Tagounite – Chegaga South – Tata | 314KM | p159 |
| MS9 | Ouarzazate – Tazenacht | 77KM | p162 |
| MS10 [R] | The Desert Highway | 1450KM | p163 |
| MS11 | Aoufous – Merzouga | 134KM | p164 |
| MS12 | Merzouga – Mecissi | 138KM | p170 |
| MS13 | Agdz – Bleida – Fom Zguid | 168KM | p172 |
| MS14 | Tazenacht – El Borj – Ouarzazate | 64KM | p173 |

[R] = ROAD ROUTE





MA14 IGHerm – AFELLA – OUSEMLAL

156KM

March 2017 ~ Yamaha WR250R

Description

This route strings together a series of quiet back roads and an easy 38-km section of piste. What, as they say, is not to like?

Mapping MA14

Michelin ★☆☆

RK-H ★★☆☆

Olaf ★☆☆

Garmin Topo ★★☆☆

OSM ★★☆☆

Google Rutable ✓

MAP P184, OVERVIEW P176

Off road

In the state I rode it, the dirt over the plateau could be driven by anything. You get the feeling that, as on Jebel Sarhro, such tracks are improved or put in by the mining companies as part of their concession (Akka, east of KM93, is Morocco's biggest gold mine). If these **haul roads** happen to serve local communities as well as provide scenic byways, so much the better.

Route finding

Missing or skimpy on all maps bar Google, but clear.

Suggested duration

Half a day.

0KM N30° 05.26' W08° 27.67'
Igherm *SHELL*. Head S.

33 (123) N29° 51.00' W08° 31.80'
Just after Issafn turn right, SW and follow the road along a oued and then up onto the bare hills of the Tizkhait plateau, passing a couple of isolated villages.

55 (101) N29° 44.26' W08° 43.02'
Just before Tazalaght copper mine **leave the road** and turn left onto the haul road. Follow the piste S, stopping periodically to admire views, such as KM79 **below**.

93 (63) N29° 29.69' W08° 45.97'
Dropping from the Tizkhait you reach a tarmac junction. Left is down to the Akka

mine and pistes through to Tata (see MA1 KM49). You turn right, uphill.

101 (55)
At the Timkyet road turn left and continue through Afella and other villages as the road turns W and climbs over a range.

132 (24)
Junction just N of Izerbi. Turn right (N) and in 2km make a left, W, past Igli.

145 (11)
At this crossroads where other MA routes come and go, turn right, W.

156km N29° 31.57' W09° 14.73'
PETROMIN fuel W side of Ousemlal.



Outline of the West region

This region north of the Mauritanian border adds up to half a dozen routes either side of the **Oued Draa**. Being a long way to go, it's the least-visited region in this book; a place where experienced Moroccan hands venture in search of wide open spaces once they've done it all up north.

This is actually a flat, drab and militarised corner of the Sahara, without the elevation of the Anti Atlas or the ergs further east. Chances are you'll see no one on these pistes apart from ancient Land Rover 'mules' transporting the Saharawi nomads (**pictured below**) now relegated to tending flocks of camels and goats for the army garrisons and burgeoning coastal settlements.

South of the **Jebel Ouarkaziz** you may meet military patrols, as well as a small risk of landmines (see box p205); it's best not to stray off tracks. The R103 /N14 border road from Assa to Smara is closed to tourists beyond Zag.



MW Routes

| | | | |
|------------|--|--------------|-------------|
| MW1 | Tan-Tan – Jebel Ouarkaziz – Assa | 268KM | P204 |
| MW2 | Tan-Tan – Oued Draa – Assa | 242KM | P208 |
| MW3 | Assa – Tiglite – Tan-Tan | 195KM | P211 |
| MW4 | Fask – Aouinet Lahna – Assa | 121KM | P213 |
| MW5 | Fask – El Borj – Assa | 161KM | P216 |
| MW6 | Assa – Smara | 405KM | P217 |
| MW7 | Tan-Tan – Smara | 326KM | P221 |
| MW8 | Sidi Ifni – Plage Blanche – Tan-Tan | 197KM | P223 |

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