High, ride and handsome

Derek Workman had a vague sort of plan that one day he’d take a long bike-ride through Morocco, but somehow never got around to doing it. Until, that is, he heard about the bike ride that takes place at the end of March every year in High Atlas Mountains to raise funds for Education For All, a Moroccan-based charity that builds boarding houses for girls from the poorest of families from remote mountain villages to help them continue their education.

He wrote a diary about the six-day ride, from which this excerpt is taken.

Day 1 – A gentle Sunday jaunt

It’s just after nine on a glorious Sunday morning as we set off for our first bike ride into the mountains, a blue sky hazy in the distance.

Six of us, with Ahmed the driver, take the road from Marrakech, turning off after almost thirty kilometers to begin our rise into the lower slopes of the High Atlas Mountains, a group of chains of a certain age, all tucked, in one degree of decay or another, into a set of slinky hills, covered with its Moroccan scar and Arab calligraphy written across our chest.

The road climbs upward to Moulay Brahim, a scattered village on a limestone plateau, where we unload our bikes. This is our first day, so it’s meant to be reasonably easy, just to warm us up.

We set off, and the upland plain dips and rises, but with any extremes. I’m cautious at first, but an hour into the ride I’m whizzing down a – fortunately – minor slope and I’m too busy looking at the view to notice a pot hole that suddenly appears below my wheel.

I clip the edge, which throws me into the rough ground at the side of the road, and the wheels skid from under me. I skitter down the road and slide to a stop with nothing worse than a grazed head sticking out the front, staring vacantly at the ground as more kindling is gathered.

Almost everyone we come across offers a ‘Bonjour. Ça va?’, or ‘Bon courage’, and a wave. Some of the braver young boys stick out their hand for a high-five and laugh as they do it.

I climb slowly from a village of no more than a couple of houses and the ubiquitous shed-cum-café selling Coca Cola and Technosolour Panta.

In the distance I see an old man wearing a straw hat with an enormous brim and a long faded grey jacket, apparently picking at a tall spiky bush. I ride closer and realise that below the spiky foliage are the legs of a donkey, hidden in the shadow of an enormous load of eucalyptus branches.

As I pass I see the donkey’s head sticking out the front, staring vacantly at the ground as more kindling is gathered.

A small dish of biscuits and a gleaming pot of mint tea is set on the table to refresh us as the final preparations for lunch are made.

We eat like sultans, and when the freshly-brewed coffee is drunk and the plates cleared away, we stretch out on the rugs for a siesta.

Andy and Gareth make the most of the shade provided by the table cloth, and lie with their heads under the table. I tilt the brim of my cap over my eyes, move a couple of stones to settle my back, and drift into a siesta.

When we leave the picnic spot, a short ride takes us away from the lake and the bustle of market day in Lalla Takeroust. For a couple of kilometers I leisurely peddle past a continuous wall of deep red adobe, interspersed with battered, ancient plank doors.

Behind the walls, clusters of white almond blossom mix with the grey-green of olive trees. occasional stands of eucalyptus cast dappled shadows over that road as I gently and contentedly kept turning the pedals.

As I casually free-wheel down a shallow slope I see a couple of young girls chatting under some eucalyptus trees. One of them has a stick and is keeping a watchful eye on a small herd of goats munching at the grass on the roadside.

She looks about fourteen, the same age as some of the girls who live in the Education For All community, and perhaps one day will be changed because of your efforts a young girl from a poor family in a remote village in the High Atlas, the name of which you have probably never heard of, never mind be able to pronounce, will be given the opportunity to study, to discover a life away from her community, and perhaps one day go to university, or even return to her village to develop the cycle of opportunity she has been fortunate to become part of.

A couple of hours later we drop down to a junction with the main road into Marrakech. Mike’s McFague’s cycle-meter clicks over to fifty-four kilometres of mountain March, and gasp off into the long views of the snow-capped Atlas Mountains hovering barely in the distance, this isn’t just a jolly cycling holiday to get into shape for the summer.

There is a very serious intent behind the Moroccan hospitality and modest luxury. The aching legs at the end of the day will be eased ever so slightly knowing that thanks to your efforts a young girl from a poor family in a remote village in the High Atlas, the name of which you have probably never heard of, never mind be able to pronounce, will be given the opportunity to study, to discover a life away from her community, and perhaps one day go to university, or even return to her village to develop the cycle of opportunity she has been fortunate to become part of.

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climbs, long plateau and high speed downhill whizzing, four kilometres short of my best ever daily ride, so I decide to better it. I ask Mike to signal me at 6km, where I’ll dismount and wait for the cavalry to ride me into town.

The sixty wave goes up just as we hit the fifteen kilometre marker. It’s not that much further to go really, is it? Just do couple of more kilometres. Fourteen becomes twelve. Let’s call it a day at ten.

By 8km the scratches on the palm and the twisted wrist from my tumble earlier make gripping the handlebars and changing gear painful.

At eight the buttocks in their padded shorts scream at every bump and pothole, so I straighten my legs to peddle, which creates a swaying movement on my forward motion and puts pressure on my aching arthritic knee. Approaching six kilometres my knees are burning and my mouth is so dry I feel as if my tongue is packing it with cotton wool.

Andy and Gareth, who I haven’t seen much in the last half hour are waiting for tail-end Charlie so we can go in together. The back-up van arrives, this is the deciding moment.

There will be other days when I can take the easy way out, but this is the first day and a personal record. Six kilometres is only a return ride to the beach from my home in the centre of Valencia, and I’ve done that hundreds of times. I sit my burning backside onto the saddle, my feet onto the peddles, and push off.

We enter the suburbs and pretty soon all I can see of Gareth and Andy are the white strips on the top of their shirts, although I get an occasional glimpse of Andy as he raises himself up off his saddle to ease his aching backside.

We arrive at an enormous traffic jam, the first I’ve ever seen that has camels in it, and I see the others disappear into the distance. I’m complete lost.

Suddenly I hear a horn blaring behind me and painfully turn around to see Ibrahim frantically gesturing to the right. I let him pass, and like an ailing chicken I follow mother hen home. Mike’s fancy little meter tells me that I’ve ridden 77.82 kilometres. That’s almost 80! In fact, we can practically call it eighties. I’m exhausted and achy... but elated!

I’m not too old and decrepit after all. Even with my aching bones I could take part, and the truth is that forcing myself to keep on was worth more than the idyllic idea of snooking the day away by the pool. I can do that at home in Spain.

Permit me to repeat myself; I’m not too old and decrepit after all!

And neither are you.

You can read the full story Derek’s bike ride for Education For All at http://bit.ly/bikemorocco. If you would like to know more about the ride in 2012 you can learn all about it at www.educationforallmorocco.org, as well as the wonderful work Education For All does to help young girls from impoverished families in the remote villages of the High Atlas Mountains to continue the education they so richly deserve. You can also contact Derek at derek@spainuncovered.net for more details.