



Tackling the mountains

# 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 the 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 chaps of a certain age, all tucked, in one degree of decency or another, into a set of slinky cycle kit, but all proudly wearing the Education For All red, white and black shirt, with its Moroccan star 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 without 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 palm and twisted wrist.

The countryside passes lethargically; men of all ages, from early school age to wrinkled, wizened-faced ancients, tend small flocks of sheep and goats, slowly chomping through the scrub.

Heads appear at darkened doorways to silently watch these peculiar men in their figure-hugging shorts, brightly decorated shirts and strange hats ride through their village.

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 Technicolour Fanta.

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 piled high on its back.

We arrive at Lalla Takeroust, a small town bustling with the weekly market, beside an artificial lake where we're to have lunch – and I'm ready for it!

The slow drag up a rough track from the main road is about all I can manage, but when we arrive we find rich Moroccan rugs and gold embroidered cushions set out under a shade tree.

Brahim has been there for



Volunteer Karima on a day out with the girls



Leaving Ansi



Promo shot

a couple of hours cooking lunch, and serves us freshly cooked pasta with meatballs and an enormous salad. As we kick off our shoes Ahmed brings over an ornate metal kettle and dish, and pours warm water over our hands, handing us a soft white towel on which to dry them.

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, interspaced 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 keep 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 boarding houses, and I can't help thinking that there but for the grace of God and hundreds of strangers, go the hundred or so young girls whose lives will be changed because of the chance to continue their schooling.

As lovely as it is to feel the sun on your back in mid-

March, and gaze off into the long views of the snow-capped Atlas Mountains hovering hazily 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.

A couple of hours later we drop down to a junction with the main road into Marrakech. Mike's McHugo's cyclo-meter clicks over to fifty-four kilometres of mountain

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 60km, 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 10km 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 Brahim 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 78! In fact, we can practically call it eighty! I'm exhausted and aching... 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

keeping on was worth more than the idyllic idea of snoozing 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](http://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](mailto:derek@spainuncovered.net) for more details.



A mountain 'taxi'



Getting ready for the off

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