

HEAT AND DUST AND A MULE IS A MUST

Morocco is a country that has its roots in Africa but its leaves in Europe! How very true we found this to be when St Bede's Geography department visited this fascinating country in February.

Our journey started in the city of Marrakech. The city was hot, dusty, loud and rather frightening at times. On leaving the city the landscape quickly became very rural - the car replaced by the Mercedes of the mountains - the mule. The Atlas Mountains loomed ahead. Tiny mud-houses clung to the cliff-sides. Terraced fields and intricate irrigation systems attempted to tame the steep, bare-rock slopes. The Berber people had always been fiercely independent. They never succumbed to French rule. They spoke a different language here and led a totally different lifestyle. As we neared Imlil, we realised that we were seeing a different side to the urban Morocco we'd left behind.

Our hotel, Kasbah du Toubkal, was perched on a rocky outcrop 1800m up with snow-covered mountain peaks providing an impressive backdrop. Over the next few days the students tried to ascertain whether tourism had made a positive impact here in Imlil. The hotel itself certainly made us re-evaluate the many negatives of tourism perhaps seen in Tenerife. This hotel was set up with the intention of giving something back to the local community. A share of the profits returns to the villagers. The hotel uses renewable solar energy. It employs local people. It sources raw materials locally and supports the local school. This was a true example of sustainable tourism and we could not help but be impressed.

We crossed the Atlas mountain chain and descended to the edge of the Sahara and the town of Zagora. The people here battled with the sand, not always winning as seen at Tinfou. We expected the weather to be hotter in the desert but in fact found that we had brought good old English weather with us. Whilst camping in the desert we experienced the first rain that they had had here for 3 months! We learnt that camels were not as grumpy as they looked but that they were incredibly uncomfortable to ride. Our hosts in the desert sang, danced and played drums as the sun went down. Max, George, Alistair and Chris ran up and down dunes! The girls worked on their tans by the pool. The staff dressed up as Blue Men of the desert - it made a change from Monks in the Kasbah.

Back in Marrakech we all felt rather sad to be nearing the end of our holiday; but we still had some serious shopping to do. Miss Campbell had already perfected the technique of haggling and I'm sure would still be there had Mr Walker not dragged her out of the last shop! Shopping was certainly far more fun in the souks of Marrakech where every price is negotiable than the local supermarket back home. In fact, I am not sure that the Djmaa El Fnaa was ready for 29 students haggling to obtain the best prices to purchase poufs for the new boarding house. My return luggage weighed in at 39 kilos - somewhat over my baggage allowance - but what can you expect with over 30 poufs neatly packed into a bag the size of a small car.

I would like to thank all 29 students who travelled with the staff to Morocco. Mr Walker, Mr Hart, Miss Campbell and I all agreed that you made fine travelling companions on a trip that did seem like more of a holiday to us too!
Sarah Quinn, Director of Studies