

Laura Daniel embarks on a Moroccan adventure, encountering rocky pistes,

sandstorms and a spectacular mountain trail **Photos: Wayne Mitchelson**

# The gateway to Africa



White dust flies up from a Defender's rear tyres as it drives along sandy tracks



At Erg Chebbi, Hassan welcomes our convoy into an auberge owned by his family for 28 years



Make sure you're equipped with shovels to help dig when the going gets tough



**The Defender edges to the right,**

scattering a few rocks off the mountain track and spiralling towards the valley floor far below. Some disgruntled donkeys making their way towards us jolt their reined heads in protest as their side-saddled riders coolly pick the only route along the sheer edge of the cliff and past our convoy of vehicles. All around us red rocky outcrops point to the cloudless blue sky and it feels as if we are wheelin' in Utah or exploring the Grand Canyon in Arizona, but we are much closer to home in Morocco, north Africa, just a ferry ride from Spain to another culture and one of the most scenic off-road routes you can drive.

As I glance out of the window, the Land Rovers behind us on this mountain-hugging trail look like toy trucks on a staged backdrop, about to be squashed by the colossal boulders resting on ledges and overhangs. This route near Ait Benhaddou is a gem surrounded by sparse hamada and, although this isn't difficult off-road terrain, you need a steady approach in low range to deal with the incline and a rock-hard stomach to take the increasing heights.

**Hidden treasures**

Morocco has long been a favourite destination for off-roaders and offers changing terrain, from the lush Atlas Mountains with their cedar forests, river crossings and lakes to areas such as Erg Chebbi with its rolling sand dunes, wandering dromedaries – one-humped camels – and rocky pistes. We're here to experience what the gateway to Africa has

to offer, and make our way from the port at Cueta ready for our adventure south across this fascinating country.

Our convoy of Defenders and a Discovery is driven by a mixture of travellers: a couple on their honeymoon, an overland explorer testing his modified 110's new equipment and groups of friends on a holiday with a difference. Led by Atlas Overland, the trip is ideal for any off-roader's first long-distance overland journey and tests both driver and machine off-road.

Heading away from Marrakech's street performers, barbecue aromas and spice stalls, we take the N9 towards Ouarzazate, driving twisting mountain passes with dramatic views of black volcanic peaks. Small children and elderly men stand on each bend, running into the road to offer sparkling crystals or bags of herbs. When we stop for rest in a lay-by, an aged gentleman scuttles over and ushers me in the direction of his collection of fossils and egg-shaped marble statues, urging me to exchange the t-shirt I'm wearing for a tennis ball made to look like volcanic rock.

Arriving in Zagora as the sun filters through the kasbahs' turrets, we pass MAN trucks and crews working away on race-prepared trucks. The Rallye du Maroc is in town and we're lucky the mechanics at the local garage have time to sort out a few teething problems on some of our vehicles, checking the oils and giving them a once-over after days on testing Moroccan trails.

The garage is a 4x4 enthusiast's heaven. Evolving from a hole in the wall to a fully functional workshop it is the hub of the

**Essentials: what to take**

- Vehicles must have European breakdown and recovery insurance (this does not extend to north Africa so bear in mind that breakdowns can be costly)
- Passengers must have relevant medical insurance
- Vehicles travelling to north Africa require an insurance Green Card. If your insurance company won't issue one, you can buy insurance on the border
- Tent, sleeping bag, pillow and Thermarest (3/4 season bag suggested)
- Food, cooker and cooker fuel
- Cutlery and crockery
- Wash kit
- Water (20-litre capacity)
- Fuel capacity of 200 litres (petrol 250 litres)
- Recovery equipment should include: 3 or 4m strop; shackles; shovel; compressor and tyre gauge; and sand ladders/mats (not essential)
- Spares should include: Auxiliary drivebelts; coolant hoses; all oils; fuses; tool kit; two fire extinguishers; bulb kit; two warning triangles; headlight beam deflectors; tow rope; Jerrycans; hi-visibility vest and spare keys

Full list at: [www.atlasoverland.com](http://www.atlasoverland.com)

town, and we admire the stickers and plaques hanging proudly on the walls from events such as the Optique 2000 and Dakar Rally. Smiling faces stare out at us from a wall layered with photos of customers who have travelled here from all over the globe, while the mechanics pour us glasses full of mint tea and promise to work through the night to get the trucks finished.



A friendly neighbour at the Zagora campsite



Hamada pistes and corrugations make for a rough ride in the Land Rovers



ABOVE: The Camel Trophy 110's tyres are let down to 1.5bar



Equipped with a roofbox and snorkel, this 110 is ready for adventure



ABOVE: Laura and the team help push the Discovery out of a sand dune



Camping in the wilderness near the Algerian borderline

IT FEELS AS IF WE ARE WHEELIN' IN UTAH OR EXPLORING THE GRAND CANYON IN ARIZONA



**Before you leave**

- Your Land Rover must be reliable and in good mechanical order so have a thorough service before you travel.
- When kitting out your vehicle, think about how you can reach your kit easily and efficiently without unloading and repacking everything twice daily.
- Storage systems are a good idea, a fridge and cooker will help put together good meals and a CB radio is needed to communicate with the rest of the convoy.



The convoy runs into a spot of traffic congestion on the trail near Ait Benhaddou



Within the fortress walls at the auberge in Erg Chebbi



The narrow, mountain-hugging trail winds to the peak



Red, rocky outcrops point skywards



The mechanics at the garage in Zagora work through the night

We take advantage of this at Erg Chebbi, passing numerous auberges – inns – dotted along the edge of the sandy dunes before passing through the grand entrance of one of these giant sandcastles. The first in the area, this auberge has been owned for 28 years by a local Berber family.

We are shown to our rooms in the fortress walls, then led to a salon draped with colourful carpets and ornate mirrors and served Berber pizza topped with what looks like camel meat. Drums piled in the corner are laid out and a rhythmic beat grows to a crescendo. As the Qarqba – castanets – tap away, Berber men sing and later stand up to link arms and move backwards and forwards to the drumming. This dance, the Ait Bodar, symbolises ancient warriors who placed importance on fighting as one to create an unbreakable line of defence.

We leave the auberge as a new day dawns over the golden waves towering at more than 150m, and head north again via the Todra Gorge towards Ait Benhaddou's spectacular town built into the hills, which has featured in films such as *Gladiator*. Wandering towards it down cobbled streets, children help us across a stream before we are led around dark rooms and open rooftops by local inhabitants.

Back in our trucks, we drive the open highway towards the spectacular route nearby. As we begin to zigzag up the red, dusty ledges, we leave behind the villages and a charming church nestling the canyon floor. We clash with another convoy of 4x4 drivers coming towards us on this narrow trail and, after much negotiation and repositioning, they pass, the passengers choosing to get out of the vehicles for fear of toppling over the edge of the cliff. At the top of the trail we feel satisfied that our Defenders and Discovery have performed perfectly on the climb to the peak. This truly is what 4x4s are all about. As we take in the Grand Canyon-like views, with its shimmering river running through, we know we'll be back to drive this trail again and have worshipped every minute of off-road action Morocco has offered us. **LRW**

Our campsite is nearby and a friendly camel pokes its head over the wall to greet his new neighbours as we erect tents and sort the gear piled high in the backs of the vehicles. As the sun finally sets through the palm trees we walk to the local hotel restaurant and discuss the next day's route over spicy Moroccan soup, chicken tajine and meatballs topped with poached eggs and served with thick slabs of bread.

**Good vibrations**

Dawn breaks with the sound of the muezzin's calls playing like a film soundtrack over the town and, before collecting the Land Rovers, we visit the local souk where carpets and jewellery are laid out in endless attempts at starting a barter. Stocked up with water and fresh bread we're soon heading off into the desert, beeping to let the children on bikes know we're about to overtake and skirting around the outside of a village and past a school with tiny painted handprints on its walls.

Our convoy slows to 30mph as we reach the rocky pistes and corrugations ready to shake our souls. Dust flies up from the rear tyres, visibility is low and we keep a steady distance from the vehicle in front, peering through the billowing orange clouds so we don't miss any crucial turns on this rough



Morocco's bustling towns and villages boast numerous stunning landmarks to explore

hamada. The vibrating terrain is taking us towards the Algerian borderline and barefoot boys run across the sharp, stony ground out of nowhere in the blazing heat to wave us on our way. Climbing a crater-like mountain on this lunar landscape strains our convoy's engines and we engage second gear in low ratio to scale up the rock-strewn ascent and pick our way through jagged black outcrops.

In front of us stretches a long salt-flat and the Land Rovers pick up speed for the



Rear-mounted stoves get dinner started and tents spring to life

first time in days, leaving white streams of icing sugar-like clouds in our wake. We avoid the lines of spiky gorse that indicate a washout up ahead and follow a trail across the desert marked out by piles of stones acting as a gateway. Soon the ride gets even smoother as we traverse a dry lake bed, its crusty-looking top layer reminiscent of grooved rhino skin. Our guide tells us that it's hazardous to park too close together when it's raining as the crispy surface will cave in, but there seems no danger of this happening in today's sizzling temperatures.

As early evening approaches we decide to set up camp behind some hills, hidden from

Icing sugar-like dust is kicked up on the salt-flat

any desert wanderers who might disturb our group. Soon pans sit simmering on rear-door mounted cookers as we erect our tents, the moon an intense fiery red as it sinks into the inhospitable horizon.

**A line in the sand**

After breakfast in the wilderness we press on to our next off-road challenge. A wadi lies up ahead and it is the first chance for our group to get a taste of dune driving. We air the tyres down to 1.5bar on the edge of the wadi, which is now barely visible through the sandstorm whipping up grains of sand into a frenzy around us. The first to attempt this section is a Discovery that sinks as it loses momentum. After clearing sand from around the tyres, we snatch it out of trouble with our guide's support vehicle. The rest of our party engage diff lock and third gear to power up the dunes, and a warning light flashes on our 90's dash to indicate that it's taking a bashing.

On average, we spend six to eight hours a day behind the wheel on our Moroccan adventure, allowing us to see the country without it being too physically demanding. Rest days come at just the right time and, as Atlas Overland has run trips to Morocco for 10 years, the company has established many local contacts and connections.



**Want to go?**

The 14-day tour with Atlas Overland costs £695 per person and includes the ferry crossing from Algeciras to Ceuta, all campsite fees, a tour guide and a fully-equipped support vehicle. Call Peter Girling on: 07834 637355 or visit: [www.atlasoverland.com](http://www.atlasoverland.com)