

# DAKAR FOR

If the Dakar rally were a road race, this would be a trackday – a chance to taste the real thing without having to be an expert racer. At least that's the theory...

By Gary Inman

**T**he name 'Mini Desert and Mountain Tour' makes this Moroccan fly-ride sound as much like a geology coach trip as it does a bike tour. The online itinerary talks of beautiful, winding trails and Jacuzzis, of towering dunes and remote villages. It takes place south of the high Atlas, on the northern edge of the Sahara.

And if, like me, you love the idea of the Dakar-type desert rallies but have neither the desire or ability to compete in one, it also sounds like a perfect dune taster.

There are two back-up vehicles for a group made up of a dozen bikes. Each rider on the tour is supplied with their own Garmin Montana 600 sat-nav. We stop for leisurely lunches and sleep in hotels and, for one night, in a desert bivouac. There is no need to bring our

## WHAT'S THE STORY?

■ If you've held fantasies of taking on the Dakar, but without being run over by trucks, MotoAventures' Mini Desert and Mountain Tour might be for you.

own bedding, tents or cooking equipment. We ride light – camera, water-pack, lip salve – our bags delivered to the next night's accommodation, before or soon after we arrive. After only a few minutes on the MotoAventures website ([motoaventures.com](http://motoaventures.com)) all my motorcycle tour boxes are ticked.

Yes, the Mini Desert and Mountain Tour sounds civilised. Hell, it is civilised. Or it would be if it weren't for the eight hours of Dakar-style pum-

melling between the buffet breakfast and the weary, Robocop walk into the hotel in the early evening.

## Some experience necessary

Due to a date clash, I join the tour a day later than everyone else and discover that all my companions regularly compete in amateur enduros – long, punishing, off-road races. Ninety per cent of the tour is off-road and



# DUMMMIES

while the riders range in age from mid-30s to 60, they are all, to a man, more experienced and quicker on this terrain than me.

I have minimal green lane experience, but absolutely no enduro or motocross background. I have ridden a BMW 800GS on a few thousand kilometres of South African dirt tracks over 16 days (after writing off a BMW R1200GS on the second day...) on one of MotoAventures other tours, and I have done lots of laps of nice, flat speedway ovals. So I'm not a complete knobbly newbie, just not in the same league as most of these desert rats.

MotoAventures don't aim this tour

at complete off-road novices, though they have had clients with much less experience than my patchy dirt riding résumé. It's not a race, and they don't appreciate hardcore motocross racers ragging the bejesus out of their fleet of loyal rental bikes. They're happy to accommodate desert virgins though.

"We want riders who would like to see Morocco from a different perspective," explains co-founder John Griffiths. "If you've survived an off-road riding school, like Patsy Quick's Adventure Riding Academy or Simon Pavey's BMW Off-Road Skills course, you're good enough."

And I agree with him. Still, it doesn't

mean you're going to survive, just that you have a good chance. And the dangers are sledgehammered into the riders' brains with stern warnings that come at every morning briefing as we stand next to our squadron of KTM 450 EXCs.

MotoAventures is John Griffiths and Su Downham. Both have an unflappable, almost colonial air from bygone decades. They speak with a clipped BBC foreign correspondent's lack of accent, Su alternating between English and French at will. It puts me at ease. They've been running off-road tours in Morocco since 1998 and have had a permanent base in the country since

1996. I've seen them deal with situations that would have other people royally freaking out as calmly as a matron administering headache pills. In motorcycle touring terms, they've been at the frontline for nearly two decades. From broken bikes to broken bones, you witness a lot of sketchy stuff in that time. If you keep coming back for more, and others line up to follow you, you're clearly made of The Right Stuff.

Every day begins with one of John's short and to-the-point briefings. If your blood doesn't run a little cold, you're not listening. But it works.

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The freedom of the desert. Eyes on the sat-nav, or there could be an international border to worry about



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There are no incidents to speak of in what must add up to a cumulative 8000 miles of this tour.

'Watch for the wash-outs today. Don't overstretch yourself or you will f\*k up,' barks John, like the father I never wanted. He then gives details of the map we must select from the Garmin's menu for the morning's ride, and the briefest details of where we'll reconvene – an auberge for coffee.

The bike I've been assigned is at the end of the line, my name, spelt incorrectly, in marker pen is on the front screen. Joining the tour a day later, flagged as a journalist and wearing a long-sleeve T-shirt and non-biking trousers, I now have the butterflies and am wondering if I can actually swing my leg high enough to get over the towering rear fender of the orange enduro bike in front of the old hands. John has already warned everyone

not to even think about getting on their KTM with its stand down, as the bracket could crack. So, with no raised kerb in sight to use as a step, I attack the towering seat like Jackie Chan would an evil henchman, releasing a grunt mid-roundhouse, then hop on my standing foot, till my nuts near the skinny saddle and I can slide across. It's completed with the grace of a mating walrus.

I see Joao, MotoAventures' Portuguese agent and a man of Corbett-esque stature tackle the problem (710mm inside leg, 970mm unloaded seat height) with more panache. He starts the 450 single, snicks it into gear while stood on the left side – leaving his left foot on the footpeg, then releases the clutch and pulls himself up as the bike starts its journey. I make a mental note to practise in solitude.



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'My brain is chapped, my eyeballs need Loctiting in place and every screw in my head has vibrated loose'

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### The purple line

I soon realise the Garmin is the centre of my world. Each rider follows it like a greyhound follows a hare. We are its slaves. Sometimes the line is as easy to follow as the plot of Scooby Doo. At other times it's Ingmar Bergman's Seventh Seal with Cantonese subtitles. Still, having our own navigation device, clipped and tied to the Renthal bars, is a unique selling point for the tour and thought of as crucial by some of my fellow punters.

'I've been on desert tours where they pair off the riders to share one sat-nav between them and one rider is always faster than the other,' explains veteran Morocco tour-taker, Paul Webb. 'So one is out of their comfort zone to keep up.'

MotoAventures' John adds that his company used to do just that, in the early days, and since they swapped

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to one sat-nav each, accidents have dropped dramatically.

I can see why. I hate riding in the dust thrown up by the bike in front. As visibility drops, anxiety rises. I

can't imagine having to keep up with someone else all day.

Due to the intricacy of the route the screen is zoomed into 80m, less than the size of a football field, in a desert often covered with zig-zagging faint trails. At times I'm reaching 80mph. When I'm riding that quickly, I'm reluctant to look at the tiny screen. But at 80mph it doesn't take long to ride off the edge of the screen, so, for the first day, until I begin to read the terrain and get into the rhythm of looking at the Garmin, I'm riding slowly and checking, or riding quicker and losing the line. Going off the purple means stopping, zooming out on the screen, then riding back to it at a tangent, often across much rougher ground than the route would take in, then stopping to zoom back in.

A previous client got as far as the *Continued over*



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Algerian border, 50 miles away, before admitting he might be lost. When I get a feel for the riding, glancing down makes me feel like Marc Coma (yes, I know he doesn't use a sat-nav, but this is my fantasy).

### Fast enough

It takes about an hour of day one to realise that while I'm not comfortable riding as fast as the others, I'm still fast enough to get into serious trouble and nowhere near experienced enough to get out of it. John, who lives in Ourzazate (pronounced Wa-Za-Zat-Ay) where the tour starts and ends, says this region hasn't had rain for two years. But when it does rain the rivers rage and cut through the desert floor. They cause wash-outs - deep trenches perpendicular to the trail you're on. Hit one at speed and things get messy. The morning's stern warn-

ing is lodged in my brain and I never see one. The quickest guys react in a blink and jump them.

### Fear of the fesh-fesh

My brain is chapped, my eyeballs need Loctiting in place and every screw in my head has vibrated loose. The variety of the terrain I ride in three days is incredible. Dry lakebeds allow me to stick the bike in top and get the throttle on the stop, squeaky-bum mountain passes make me want to take up smoking and 40 miles of black volcanic rock leave my hands so battered I wince when I wash them. Then there is fesh-fesh. A double-barrelled term to fire fear and doubt into a novice's noggin. Even the experienced guys furrow brows when it's mentioned. It's bone-white sand, eroded down to a talcum powder-like dust that collects in the form of front wheel-swallowing dry rivers. I've seen

it described as quicksand without the water. Through fesh-fesh, I reckon, speed is my friend. Lean back to get weight off the front wheel and power through. I'm probably doing 30mph or less, but it feels reckless. The bike goes where it wants, hitting the dry river's banks, sending me close enough to bushes to be whipped by their branches.

It's all going well till I catch another rider, all of 30 metres into the section. I hesitate then crash. Inevitable. Fortunately, this 2km is the only dreaded fesh-fesh we meet.

### Dune loons

I've seen enough Dakar coverage on TV to have developed a fear of dunes. If you grew up in West Yorkshire they're as alien as Cybermen. Still, the opportunity to ride in huge North African dunes was one of the main attractions of this *Continued over*

## How the tour works

### PRICES AND CONTACTS

MotoAventures offers four different Moroccan tours. The Mini Desert and Mountain comprises four days riding and five nights hotel. Included is: bike rental, sat-nav rental, main meals, bike fuel and accommodation. Not included: travel and transfers to Ourzazate; drinks; personal insurance (including repatriation cover). We got ours from UK specialist HC Travel ([www.hctravel.com](http://www.hctravel.com)).

**The price of the tour is €1450 (£1200).** MotoAventures run a number of tours in spring and autumn. A €700 (£580) deposit is taken when you sign for the bike

and returned if the bike arrives back in without breakages or significant damage.

■ [www.motoaventures.com](http://www.motoaventures.com)

### THE MACHINERY

MotoAventures run 450 EXCs, maintained by their own full-time mechanic. The bikes have been tweaked to make them ideal for this use. Front and rear suspension is softened, and the gearing raised to make them much less snappy and aggressive. It makes them easier to handle, for novices like me, and less susceptible to full-throttle abuse from those who have raced off-road all their lives.

### WHAT WE WORE

#### The kit Gary Inman used for his desert riding adventure

- 1 TCX PRO 2.1 Boots £230**  
Compared to road boots these felt as unforgiving as a Taliban divorce court. By the end of the trip I loved them.
- 2 AGV AX-8 EVO £240**  
Brand new before the trip, it's the lightest helmet I've ever worn, weighing just 1150g. It is comfortable for hard eight-hour days, from day one.
- 3 Oakley O-Frames £25**  
Eight years old, cheap, now scratched, adequate.
- 4 Knox Cross Shirt, £200**  
Back, shoulder and elbow armour stitched to a mesh jacket, then worn under a long-sleeve shirt. Light, unrestricted and confidence-inspiring.
- 5 Knox Cross Shorts, £60**  
Literally saved my ass when I crashed a BMW in cotton trousers. All-day comfortable (superseded by Guerilla shorts)

**6 Fox Launch knee pads, £22**  
I use these for mountain biking, but they're ideal for desert riding too.

**7 Dainese Huge Air gloves, £52**  
These gloves, aimed at the off-road market, didn't bunch up, didn't stick to sweaty hands, and were always easy to pull on and off. My hands blistered, but I've never used a glove that would've helped considering my death grip in the desert.

**8 Palmsavers, £6**  
MotoAventures sell these neoprene layers designed to be worn under gloves, but I didn't realise they were available until my soft, office-boy palms were already blistered to hell.

**9 Long socks, £8**  
I prefer to wear trousers over boots (it keeps the sand out), but the top of tough motocross boots can chafe. These are the simple solution.

**10 Generic hydration pack, £15**  
Bought from a cheap outdoors outlet at an edge of town mall to let me take on water while riding. Nothing fancy.



How to wisely spend £858 on desert survival. And no camouflage in sight

tour. While 10 of the mainly Portuguese clients on my trip shoot off fearlessly, I wait to be led in by John. The first thing I'm told is to sit down for the dunes. It instantly makes me relax. John's nickname is Johnny Maroc and he's the king of the dunes. He picks the perfect line, carving beautiful beginner's arcs for me to follow through sand so pristine it looks like it's never seen another human. I still crash, three or four times, when trying to traverse a steep dune. I quickly get good at picking the bike up. I'm glad it's not a fully-laden rally beast with 30 litres of fuel on board.

The dune strategy is to just miss John's wheel tracks by taking a slightly wider line, not a tighter one, as I have been doing. Suddenly it clicks and I feel an almost religious level of enlightenment. Every nerve ending seems to be tingling. We're in Erg Chebbi, a 30-mile long, five-mile wide range of wind-blown dunes, and John pulls up and points to a mountain of sand, the biggest in sight. 'We're going up there.' With English Paul, who has kindly acted as my minder on the trip, and Miguel, one of the less experienced Portuguese, I follow up the shallowest side of the 125-metre dune. It doesn't sound high, but it's 40 storeys above our campsite for the night. The flat area on top is as wide as a single car parking space. My emotional state is flicking like a puppy's tail, from exhilarated to intimidated.

Then John informs us we have to go



**'My emotional state is flicking like a puppy's tail, from exhilarated to intimidated'**

down the steepest face. He says goodbye and rides off the end of the world. From the top, there's no sound and no sight of him for four or five seconds, then he appears, as a dot below. Now it's my turn. I'm as scared as I've been on a motorcycle in years. Miguel barks some encouragement and I go. Five seconds later I'm the speck, still on its wheels, exhaling an f-bomb.

Tonight I'm going to drink a beer at the top of another dune with new friends, then sleep under the stars (till it becomes too windy and I drag my mattress into the nearest Bedouin tent). Tomorrow I'll wake and feel like I've been run over by a dustbin lorry. After checking my boots for camel spiders and scorpions, I'll climb onto the borrowed KTM 450 – like Jackie Chan attacking an evil henchman – and do it all again. Life does not get any better.



One day of practice on sand and this Yorkshireman is tackling dunes as high as tower blocks