

SAND DUNE EXTREME

AN OFF-ROAD NOVICE RIDES A KTM 450
13,000KM ACROSS MIGHTY MOROCCO
AND LIVES TO TELL THE TALE OF THE
DAKAR-STYLE PUMMELING

WORDS GARY INMAN PHOTOGRAPHY SAM CHRISTMAS

The name Mini Mountain and Desert Tour makes this Moroccan fly-ride sound like we're retirees on a geology coach trip. 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 the Sahara. If, like me, you've had fantasies of taking a bite-sized chomp on the Dakar, but without all that riding with broken ankles and being timed and run over by Russian racing trucks and stuff, Dakar-Light if you like, this is for you.

There are two back-up vehicles for the group that is made up of a dozen bikes. Each rider on the tour is supplied with their own Garmin GPS. We stop for leisurely lunches and sleep in hotels and, for one night, in a

desert bivouac. There is no need to bring our own bedding, tents or cooking equipment. We ride light – camera, waterpack, lip balm – our bags delivered to the next night's accommodation, before or soon after we arrive. After only a few minutes on the Moto Aventures website (motoaventures.com – no 'd' in adventures) all my motorcycle tour boxes are ticked. I admit it, if someone wants to garnish my two-wheeled adventure with more than a soupçon of luxury, I won't dig my heels in. I'll let the others wear the hair shirts, being all self-sufficient and holier than thou. I'll wonder how they're coping in their expedition tent while I'm having a scalding hot shower and a cold lager from the mini-bar.

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

EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

Due to a date clash, I join the tour a day later than everyone else and discover all my companions regularly compete in amateur enduros – long, punishing, off-road races. Ninety percent of the tour is off-road and while the riders – all but one of this group are from Portugal – 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 zip enduro or motocross background. I have ridden a BMW F 800 GS on a few thousand kilometres of South African dirt tracks over 16 days (after writing off a



BMW R 1200 GS on the second day) on one of Moto Aventures 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.

Moto Aventures don't aim this tour at people who have never ridden off-road before (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 John Griffiths, one of the company's founders. "If you've survived an off-road riding school, 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, held in the car park, next to our squadron of KTM 450 EXCs.

Moto Aventures 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 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. You witness a lot of sketchy stuff in that time. Broken bikes, broken backs. 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. There are no incidents to speak of in what must add up to a cumulative 13,000km of this tour.

"Watch for the wash-outs today. Don't overstretch yourself or you will f*** 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 chinos, I now have the butterflies 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 to use as a step in sight, 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 hutch across. It's completed with the grace of a walrus mating.

I see Joao, Moto Aventures' Portuguese agent, tackle the problem (710mm inside leg, 970mm unloaded seat height) with more panache. He starts the 450 single, snicks it into gear while standing 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 practice in solitude.

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 Rental bars, is a unique selling point for the tour and thought

Main: This has got to be on every rider's Bucket List

1. Each morning starts with a safety briefing
2. Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore!
3. Colourful locals at every turn
4. The KTM's built for this
5. Garmin sat nav came in handy
6. Cooling off after a hard day's ride (the lucky bugger!)



"Watch out for the wash-outs today. Don't overstretch yourself or you will f*** up"





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

of as crucial by some of my fellow punters. Veteran Morocco tour-taker Paul Webb explains: "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, so one is out of their comfort zone to keep up."

John says his company used to do just that, in the early days, and since they swapped 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 in to 80m, less than the size of a football field, in a desert often covered with zig-zagging faint trails. At times I'm reaching 130km/h. When I'm riding that quickly, I'm reluctant to look at the tiny screen. But at that speed 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 that the route would take in, then stopping to zoom back in.

A previous client got as far as the Algerian border, 80km away, before admitting he might be lost. When I finally get the feel for riding and glancing down, I 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 can get messy. The morning's stern warning is lodged in my brain and I never do. 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. There are dry lake beds that allow me to stick the bike in top and get the throttle on the stop. There are squeaky-bum mountain passes that make me want to take up smoking and 65km of black volcanic rock that leave my hands so battered I wince when I wash them at the end of the day. Then there is fesh-fesh. A double-barrelled description to fire fear and doubt into an off-road novice's noggin. Even the experienced guys furrow their brows when it's mentioned. It's the finest, powdery, bone-white sand, eroded down to a talcum powder-like dust that often collects in the form of front wheel-swallowing



Main: Talcum powder-like dust is much to be feared: it's like quicksand without water

1. Hands so sore they could hardly wash them
2. One bloke got so lost he almost ended up in Algeria
3. Morocco's Got Talent
4. The difference between luxury and roughing it can make a huge difference
5. Getting the feel for glancing down at the sat nav takes some time
6. It hasn't rained in these parts for two years. Gulp





- Main:** You'll scare yourself witless on some sections
1. There's a special technique for getting up the dunes
 2. Go over the side and you're a speck in just five seconds
 3. Who's the joker who brought alcohol-free beer?
 4. Now, which one is mine?
 5. You make friends and share tales very quickly
 6. Washing the dust down 'round the campfire eases the sorest of muscles

Every nerve ending seems to be tingling. There's so much adrenalin I don't think I've blinked for 20 minutes

WANNA DO IT, TOO?

Moto Aventures offers four Moroccan tours. The Mini Desert and Mountain comprises four days' riding and five nights' accommodation. The following is included:

- 🏍️ bike rental
- 📶 sat nav rental
- 🍽️ main meals
- ⛽ fuel
- 🏠 accommodation



The following is not included:

- 🚗 travel and transfers to Ourzazate
- 🍹 drinks
- 🛡️ personal insurance (including repatriation cover).

A \$1000 deposit is taken when you sign for the bike and returned if the bike arrives back without breakages or significant damage. (dollar sign) The price of the tour is \$A2150 (mouse) www.motoaventures.com

THE MACHINERY

Moto Aventures runs its own fleet of KTM 450 EXCs, maintained by a full-time mechanic, Hussein. It took one of the Portuguese enduro racers to point out to me the bikes have been tweaked to make them ideal for this use.

Front and rear suspension has been softened and the gearing raised to make them much less snappy and aggressive. Not only does it make them easier to handle for novices like me, but also less susceptible to full-throttle abuse from those who have raced off-road all their lives.



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. Though the description speed is relative. I'm probably doing 50km/h or less, but it feels reckless. The bike is going where it wants, hitting the dry river's banks, sending me close enough to the thorny bushes to be whipped by their branches.

It's all going well till I catch another rider, all of 30m 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 to have developed a fear of dunes. Still, the opportunity to ride in huge North African dunes was one of the main attractions of this tour. While 10 of the Portuguese 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 which is so pristine it looks like it's never seen a 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, but to take a slightly wider line, not tighter, as I have been doing. It clicks. And suddenly I feel an almost religious level of enlightenment. Every nerve ending seems to be tingling. There's so much adrenalin coursing I don't think I've blinked for 20 minutes. We're in Erg Chebbi, the 50km-long, 8km-wide range of wind-blown dunes, and John pulls up on a gently rolling hump of sand, then points to a mountain of sand, the biggest in sight.

"We're going up there." With English Paul, who has kindly acted as my unpaid minder on the trip, and Miguel, one of the less experienced Portuguese, I follow up the shallowest side of the 125m dune. It doesn't sound high, but it's 40 storeys above our accommodation for the night, the campsite

less than two kilometres away as the crow flies. The flat on top is as wide as a single-car parking space at a supermarket. My emotional state is flicking: like a puppy's tail, from exhilarated to intimidated.

Then John informs us we have to go down the steepest face. He says goodbye and as he rides off the end of the world, he disappears. 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 garbage truck. 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... 🍺

