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Julie, Jay and Dave at Erg Chebbi

# Morocco in a Motorhome

You must be mad!

By Julie Buckley

On cold, wet winter mornings, I'd often dream about being on a faraway shore enjoying the sunshine. In October 2011, that dream became a reality. Bundled into the 2.2-metre by 5.5-metre space of our ageing Hymer B544 motorhome, affectionately known as Dave, my husband Jason, our pooch Charlie — a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel and our surrogate son — and I nervously set off. We had resigned from our jobs, rented our house and we were off on the adventure of a lifetime, exploring Europe.

By January, we were enjoying the sunshine in southern Portugal when we received an e-mail telling us DEFRA, the United Kingdom body responsible for the pet passport scheme (yes, Charlie needed his own passport to travel with us so he wouldn't have to go into quarantine when we returned to the UK), Morocco in Africa was open to us, and only nine miles across the water from nearby Spain. We got a tingling feeling. Africa, what an adventure! Then all the fears and doubts kicked in.

We did our research, checking and double-checking that Charlie could get into Morocco and back into Europe, and eventually the UK. After much deliberation, and a roller coaster of emotions, we decided to go for it. We drove across the bottom of Spain to Algeciras, bought ferry tickets and filled every crevice of our RV with food, as we had no idea what it would be like in Morocco. Could we buy dog food for Charlie? Could we buy wine? After all, it's an essential for any RV trip.

## You'll Either Love It or Hate It

It was late January 2012 when we nervously boarded the ferry to Tangier Med. Disembarking, we found ourselves in a clean and new port, filled with chaos. The ferry passengers were in two distinct groups: the gleaming white RVs of the Europeans, and the rusting cars and vans of the locals, with huge bundles of goods on their roofs, doubling the height of the vehicle. We aimlessly wandered around the port without a clue of what we needed to do to get ourselves, Charlie included, into the country. Signs were in unfathomable, curling Arabic and French (the country's second language) and following the cues of the many French RVs from our ferry, and with a smattering of school-learned French, in less than an hour we found ourselves being waved in.

With no vehicle green card from our UK insurance company, our first experience of haggling was at the assurance office in the port. An initial request for \$350 for 30 days had us gasping, and phone calls got it down to \$124. As we looked at the stamped piece of paper, we had no idea what level of coverage we had or even for what type of vehicle it was.

"You'll either love it or hate it" was the message we got from everyone we knew who had been to Morocco, and our initial reaction was, as we'd also been warned, to turn around and leave. We were suddenly rich. What we'd previously seen as our decrepit, yellowing motorhome had become a luxury rolling hotel. We became unwilling centres of attention. People, with no apparent purpose, stood along isolated sections of road and stared at us. It was unnerving.

Our skin and clothes marked us as foreigners, but mostly it was

Charlie that made people stare. The local children were fascinated by him. Some screamed and fell backwards as he padded around a corner. Braver boys demonstrated their courage with a quick grab of his tail or a stroke.

It took a couple of weeks to get used to the steady stream of requests to look at goods or buy some service or other. Also, over time, the distraught faces pulled by children when we refused their unending requests for Dirhams (money) or bonbons (sweets), hurt less. We knew we would see poverty, but it was still a shock to see men struggling in fields with donkeys and twisted wooden ploughs, and children shepherding tiny, bedraggled flocks of sheep and goats.

## Places to Go and Things to See

Armed with a fold-out paper map and a tempestuous satellite navigation system, whose incomplete maps sent us vaguely in the right direction but were useless on detail, we worked our way clockwise around Morocco. Campsites are only in the main cities, so each day was, for us, a long driving day of about three or four hours. The roads were like an extreme hazard perception test with people, donkeys, people on donkeys, unmarked potholes, mopeds, wobbling cyclists, livestock grazing on the grassy edge, taxis — which stop without warning — lorries and buses that like to use both sides of the road, and much more. We slowed right down, averaging 30 to 40 kilometres per hour on roads we would normally cruise along at 80 kilometres per hour, but we weren't in a hurry and enjoyed the spectacle playing out through our windscreen.

We knew it was possible to stay

overnight at either "guarded parking", where a man in a high-visibility vest would take a small payment to keep an eye on your van, or campsites. As we were nervous, our first stop was the pseudo-European beach resort of Martil and the known safe haven of a campsite. Entering through its gate into the high-walled compound was a very welcome feeling, giving us the chance to relax away from the hubbub and chaos outside. The facilities at the campsite were very basic, but it gave us an idea of what to expect elsewhere in the country. The ground was packed earth with very little grass, pitches were close together and unmarked, and the bathroom in our van was used in favour of campsite showers and other facilities. The electricity hook-up points were somewhat dubious in places, and the voltage would dip, causing our lights to dim. Grey water disposal options were few and far between, but then we were in Africa, where home comforts were exchanged for adventure.

In Martil, we purchased a month's worth of unlimited Internet connection for just \$24, so we could research places to go. We got our first look at the local markets, an abundance of fruit and vegetables, live chickens and others recently un-live, in stalls laid out on the ground, as the call to prayer was sung out via loud speakers from the local mosque's minaret.

As we climbed into the Rif mountains, heading for the cool blue medina of Chefchaouen, our wing mirror was clipped by a lorry. No damage was done, but a minute later, a 4x4 overtook us and indicated for us to pull in. A smiling chap jumped out of it and greeted us with the word "smokes?" As neither of us smoke, we explained we didn't have any for him. It was





Coca Cola Truck Fez Style

only later we realised he was a drug dealer trying to sell stuff to us — no wonder he looked surprised at our responses.

We spent a few days in Chefchaouen, trying to get used to the culture shock, as everything around us was so very different to home and Europe. Back on the road again, we stopped in a town and were unwittingly taken on a tour of the religious city of Moulay Idriss by a fake tour guide. He eventually accepted partial payment in wine after much haggling. When we arrived in the Imperial City of Fes, we made sure we joined a group with an official tour guide. It was worth it as we got to fully experience this amazing city, which hasn't changed for centuries.

### Breathtaking Mountains and Desert Vistas

Over the Middle Atlas Mountains, we got to feed wild Bar-



Camel Ride at Erg Chebbi

bary apes near an overly elaborate campsite at Azrou (which we nicknamed Walt Disney camping), and after a push from the local parking guardian to get Dave moving on the ice, we continued south. In Midelt, we toured a weaving and embroidery workshop run for the local women by Christian nuns before crossing the snow covered High Atlas Mountains, which lead to a vast desert plain. Hidden from view in a crack in the Earth, we spent the night at a campsite in the desert oasis of Source Bleu de Meski before finally reaching the edge of the Sahara desert at Erg Chebbi.

Fellow RVers Chris and Tina, who we'd first met in November at San Sebastian in Spain, were waiting for us at a luxury auberge, which allowed us to park our RVs between its buildings and the dunes — a lovely view for their guests to wake up to, but we weren't complaining. We filled our days with dune climbing, camel riding and getting scrubbed to within an inch of our lives in

a hammam — it was bliss. It was here the world seriously shrunk in size. We found out two other RV travel bloggers, whose sites we had read since we started to think about doing our own adventure, were parked just a few kilometres along the dune. Our final evening in the desert saw all of us gathered around a fire, hidden among the dunes, wrapped in camel blankets and sipping wine beneath the stars. It was magic.

We headed west in convoy with Chris and Tina to tackle Morocco's two most famous gorges, Todra and Dades, before reaching the town of Ouarzazate, where we turned south. We thought the scenery couldn't get any more spectacular, but we were wrong. We gazed out over mountains and valleys as we drove to Agdz, where we camped in a site next to a Kasbah, which we toured the following morning before continuing south to Zagora. We spent a few days relaxing at our most southerly point, making sure to track down the famous 52 days to Tombouctou painting, before

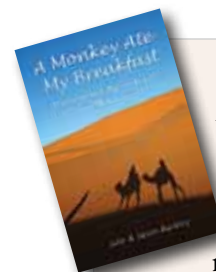
heading north again, retracing our tire tracks back to Ouarzazate in a day.

### Movies, Marrakech and Moving On

We joked around on the aging film sets from *Jewel of the Nile* and *Gladiator* at the Atlas film studios before stopping in the car park for the night of Ait-Benhaddou, a ksar often used as a replacement for Jerusalem in the movies. Then, it was our longest driving day, crossing the Tizi'n'Ticha pass to Marrakech. Our campsite was a few kilometres from the Imperial City, but a world away from anything else we had seen in the country. It's infinity pool, restaurant and designer showers had us hanging around for a few days, relaxing in a bit of luxury, and taking a trip into the bustling city.

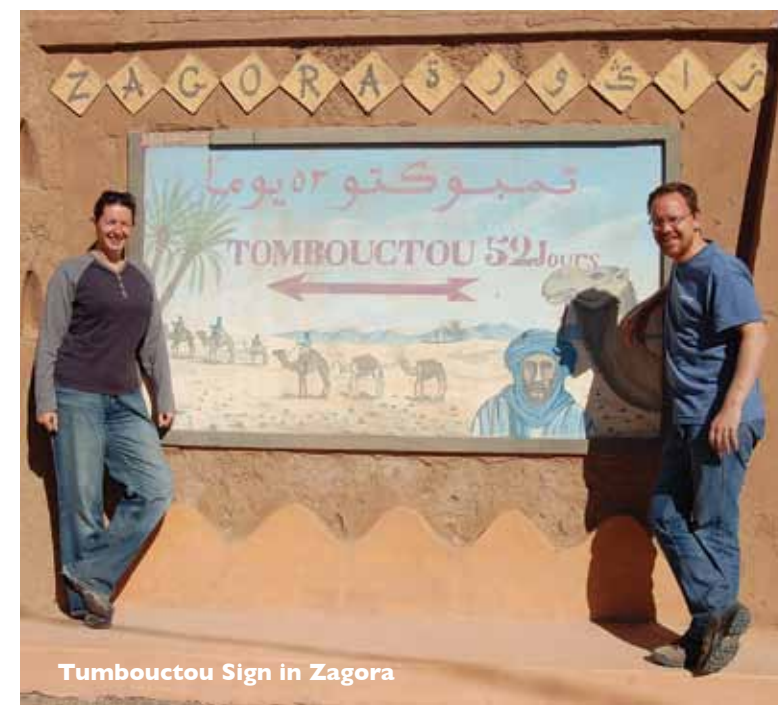
Eventually, we had to tear ourselves away from Marrakech to head to the chilled out coastal resort of Essaouria, and it was here we bid farewell to Chris and Tina, as our insurance time was ticking away. We followed the coast, stopping in a few places along the way to see the flamingos, which flock to the lagoons here in the winter. We arrived in Tangier with one day of insurance to spare and treated ourselves to a final tagine meal in the medina to round off our adventure, knowing how much we'd miss the cheap eating out options when we got back to Europe. All that was left to do was to fill up with diesel (\$82 cents per litre) and take the short drive along the north coast to Tangier Med port, and our ferry back to Europe.

We were only in Morocco for 30 days, but it was an amazing adventure that challenged us, and our way of thinking, and gave back so much more in rewards. We now realise how little you need to live with and be happy. And, of course, we're going to be haggling a lot more when buying stuff. And if you're wondering, Charlie got back into Europe without any problems and is still touring with us today.



In October 2011, Julie and Jason quit their well-paid nine to five jobs, sold most of their belongings, rented out their home, and have travelled nearly 20,000 miles around Europe, Morocco and Tunisia.

Their eBook *A Monkey Ate My Breakfast: Motorhome Adventures in Morocco* can be purchased from Amazon.ca for less than \$5.



Tombouctou Sign in Zagora

If you'd like to tour Morocco in an RV, the campsite we stopped in at Marrakech offers units for hire. You can contact Pascale and Andre at CampingCar-Maroc.com (the website is in French, but they both speak English). **RV**

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