

CITY OF MYTHS, RIVER OF DREAMS

OVERLAND FROM THE BARBARY COAST TO THE GULF OF GUINEA

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FOREWORD

ALL GREAT JOURNEYS BEGIN WITH A HANGOVER

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A Baltic storm lashed the island. Inside the restaurant four bodies huddled round a table. Rain splattered the windows; thunder split the night sky. A thin bottle containing a fiery liquid made the rounds. We were determined in our quest; an adventure was in the offing. Glasses of schnapps clashed together. 'To Timbuktu!' we declared...

Timbuktu has long held a curious allure. From the late eighteenth century, this mythical city provoked a succession of outwardly sane men to abandon their families and the relative comforts of Europe, to board a sailing boat armed with a musket, a compass and a loud frock-coat, to step ashore on the disease-ridden shores of West Africa and, in the company of an interpreter and a couple of asses, vanish into a menacing land. They were called explorers, or adventurers, or geographical missionaries, and they were feted as heroes, dead or alive. When the illusive Saharan city was eventually discovered, they found the gates hanging off their hinges, sand piling up in the alleyways, the buildings crumbling to dust, and the promised gold long gone. That was the cruel irony of their quest. And yet it bore legends.

Thankfully, our travels through West Africa were not burdened by the responsibilities weighing those explorers of old. We were not searching for the route of a mighty river, or trying to locate a 'lost' City of Gold. Neither were we to fill in the blank spaces on maps that were the imaginings of ancient and medieval geographers. And in these days of internet, accessible travel and mobile telephones, the very idea of discovering and recording little known kingdoms is laughable. In truth, the overland journey we were embarking on, with our modern Toyota Hilux 4X4, was a breeze, especially after we'd loaded the false floor with an RPG 7 grenade launcher, a few Uzi sub-machine-guns, a pair of Desert Eagle .44 magnums and... Oh, okay...maybe not.

Nevertheless, what might we be up against on the road to Timbuktu? African law and order itself can be considered the definitive portrayal of the hold-up, and incidents of banditry and kidnappings were on the rise. Then what should we do?

Rather than a boxed pair of engraved flintlock pistols, fine amber, shiny beads and a bale or two of embroidered cloth, we'd barter our lives with a bundle of tatty clothes, a couple of defunct mobile telephones, five deflated footballs and one pump and, in my case, a British passport which declared: 'Her Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State Requests and requires in the Name of Her Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance, and to afford the bearer such assistance as may be necessary.' A quick flash of such a splendid document would surely repel the most determined of plunderers.

Our journey, from the bustling Tangier of Morocco's north coast, to Tema, a major seaport in southern Ghana, was a very different prospect from what the explorers faced. We had no sponsors to satisfy and no duties to perform. On the contrary, a touch of debauchery behind a distant dune held a certain appeal. And if we didn't find a nugget of gold...well...it really didn't matter. We were seeking treasure of an alternative type; adventure, companionship, the pleasure of the open road, unfamiliar cultures, and the magic of participating in arguably one of the world's most unusual music festivals: the Festival in the Desert.

Essakane is sixty kilometres to the west of Timbuktu and has become synonymous with the annually staged Festival in the Desert, an event originally organised by the Tuareg in January 2001. With the Tuareg spread over no fewer than five African countries, the first of these events was a traditional gathering, a celebration of their culture, dance and music, and an opportunity to discuss the challenges they faced. Since the festival's inception some of West Africa's leading music artists, including musicians from around the world, have come to play at Essakane. In addition to the music the festival promotes the values of hospitality and tolerance, and is a celebration of peace, even though peace in the Sahara is something of a paradox. Over the previous one hundred years the Tuareg themselves have staged a number of rebellions in their quest for autonomy and an independent state they call Azawad. The rebellious rumblings we experienced during our trip were to erupt into full-scale conflict in 2012, the situation made worse by Islamist insurgents determined to strengthen their grip on the region. All too soon the music in Timbuktu was silenced and the tourists fled. French military intervention dispersed the Tuareg rebels and pushed back the Islamist groups. Whilst stability of a sort has returned to the north of Mali, the country faces a humanitarian crisis and an uncertain future.

The eighteenth century explorers have been described as the first overlanders in West Africa. Today the term overland has been adapted to encompass long-distance, vehicle-based travel and applies equally to the lone cyclist, the individual traveller with their own vehicle, or companies offering multi-itinerary group tours using specially adapted trucks. Starting with the hippy trail in the 1960's, a global business has developed in its wake. Unquestionably, therefore, an overlander must be a person who participates in such a journey. Or so I imagined. But are they? If I was to adopt such a role for the foreseeable future, I felt I should at least acquaint myself with its definition. I reached for the Oxford English Reference Dictionary (second edition, revised), and this is what I found:

overlander: 1. a person who drives livestock overland (orig. one who drove stock from New South Wales to the colony of South Australia).

2. (*slang*) a tramp, a sundowner.

If the first definition had little relevance to what we were about to undertake, the second one seemed full of promise. A tramp, a sundowner: in other words, a wanderer who likes a stiff drink at the end of the day. The definition fitted the bill perfectly; I felt I could very happily embrace this life of an overlander.

So, to all those itinerant romantics out there – CHEERS!

Weaving our way from the cosy Bornholm restaurant in April 2008, our ‘Declaration’ suitably anointed, we ventured into the wet and thunderous night, our minds awash not only with an abundance of euphoria and Danish schnapps, but a catalogue of hugely important tasks, given we could still remember any of them by the morning.

A journey to the interior of Africa is to be planned most carefully, we pronounced, giggling when the puddles of rainwater sloshed up our legs. A profusion of lists would be called for. I rubbed my hands gleefully. I love a list; I like the orderliness a list confers. If one is to travel in Africa, one must always prepare a suitable list. And then, beyond the shadow of a doubt, all will be well.

SPAIN

BEYOND THE PILLARS OF HERCULES

This is how the story goes. Driven insane by the cruelty of his stepmother, Hera, Hercules slaughtered his wife and children. As penance for his crime, he was handed the task of completing twelve labours by King Eurystheus. By accomplishing them, not only could he earn forgiveness, he would attain immortality. It was no mean settlement, until you read what he had to do. Number ten of those twelve labours involved capturing all the cattle belonging to Geryon, a savage, three-bodied monster terrorising the western extremities of the known world, and herding the beasts safely back to Eurystheus.

The extremity of the western world, at least in the time of Greek mythology, existed in the region of the Rock of Gibraltar and various legends abound concerning the Pillars of Hercules, the promontories flanking the entrance to the Straits of Gibraltar. Diodorus Siculus, a Greek historian of the first Century BC, held that Hercules used his massive strength to narrow an already existing strait separating Spain and Africa, in order to prevent ferocious Atlantic sea-monsters from entering the Mediterranean, and wreaking havoc there. Others tell of him smashing through a mountain range that had once linked the continents of Europe and Africa. Whichever of the legends one chooses, the ocean beyond the Pillars of Hercules was truly feared. A large sign affixed to the Rock bore a message for all approaching sailors: '*Non plus ultra*' – nothing further beyond. At which point, anybody in their right mind made a brisk about-turn.

Arriving at the southern Spanish port of Algeciras, across the bay from Gibraltar, my wife Christine and I could have quite readily made a brisk about-turn ourselves. The foul autumn weather accompanying us the length of Europe steadfastly refused to budge. Snow had dogged us until Madrid. Along the Costa del Sol a cloudburst slashed the temperature to 6 degrees centigrade. Had those sailors of old wished to heed the ancient message pinned on the Rock, I doubt they could have even read it. The impressive outline of this enormous lump of rock bursting from the sea was lost to a torrent of rain. In such conditions, no doubt those poor fellows could have sailed unwittingly into the gnashing teeth of a hideous creature. Even gazing southwards provided us with no relief. The Straits of Gibraltar were the equivalent of a bar-room brawl. A true white-knuckled scrap between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean was in full swing.

I've always thought of this sea passage, leaving modern Europe for the exotic Maghreb, to be a milestone in previous journeys to Morocco. The occasion should be fully savoured out on deck, enjoying the warm, saline breeze and the blue sky, watching Gib slowly shrink beyond the ferry's wake, the Jebel Musa, supposedly the southern Pillar of Hercules, emerging steadily from out of the sea. But it was not to

be. It seemed even Helios was in no mood to illuminate our departure from the shores of Europe; it was without question the washday of the gods. Until further notice a view of Morocco remained an aspiration, nothing more than a five hundred and thirty page guide book reflecting off the rain-splattered windscreen of our Toyota Hilux. And if the unfolding drama at the port was any indication of things to come, then the lack of sight-seeing opportunities was the least of our concerns, for there was something about the travelling hordes clustered by the entrance to the ferry terminal that appeared at odds with progress. We slowed to take it in. Perhaps a clue lay in the raised voices, forlorn looks and abandoned luggage. Having already witnessed the white-tipped troughs out to sea, we feared the worst where boats were concerned. Even the ticket touts were missing. Their forest of arms sprouting bewildering wads of paper, much of it flapping angrily within millimetres of your nose, has always been the soft introduction to Morocco's quayside mayhem. By contrast, nobody gave us a sideways glance when we stopped by the barrier opposite the terminal's glass sliding doors.

Alarmed by the sight, I leapt from the Hilux, hurrying towards an identically dressed fellow dodging the luggage and the agitated crowd, an overlander twitching with nervous energy, intent on paying the ferryman and getting his African adventure underway. Seconds before we clashed, the automatic glass doors swished apart, dispelling my reflection. Once inside the terminal, I discovered the ticketing hall ominously still. And nothing of what unfolded featured in my painstakingly constructed list. Item number 510: Take ferry to Tangier. (Get good photos of Gibraltar from boat)

I pursed my lips, staring about me, releasing a growl deep in my throat. I marched to the line of ticket booths, working my way from one to the other, receiving nothing more than a chorus of '*Mañana!*' and doubtful expressions. At each ticket booth came the same reply: 'The sea is too rough. Today, it is not possible to get to Africa, señor.'

'Not possible,' I scoffed. Rubbish! I felt certain one of them must have a boat going to Africa.

At the very last booth I came to the fellow gave me a measured look. 'You have one option,' he divulged, the bushy right eyebrow arching. The Tarifa to Tangier ferry sails in an hour, he said.

'I can make you a ticket for this boat.'

'Tarifa?' I exclaimed.

Bushy eyebrows pushed up his glasses, confident of capitalising on the crazy glint in the eyes of the *hombre loco* before him. 'Tarifa,' he repeated.

'But...' I snatched a look at my watch. '...we haven't time to get there.'

'Yes! Yes!' he jabbered, bullying his keyboard with a rigid finger. 'If you go quickly...you can make it...no problem.'

We were due to meet our friends, Jean-Pierre and Susie, at Agadir in six days. Not only did we need that time to make a planned traverse of the Atlas Mountains, but I had a written schedule designed to maintain order amongst the African chaos – and

we hadn't even left Europe. How could we be diverted from our carefully laid plans so early in the trip? I plucked a fold of Euros from my shirt pocket.

'Go quickly!' Bushy eyebrows instructed, replacing my crisp money with a flaccid ticket.

I bolted from the terminal, still infused with that European folly of immediacy, expectation, intolerance. I'd boxed myself in with a list which said we should be in Tangier by the evening. And that wasn't the only consideration propelling me full tilt back to the car: who was to say if the ferries would be operating the next day, or the day after that? How quickly would they clear the backlog of passengers and vehicles waiting to get to Morocco? During the summer exodus of Moroccans departing for their holidays in the home country, I'd often witnessed the port of Algeciras plummeting into disorder. No way did I want us to get caught up in that.

'We could be stuck here for days,' I reasoned back in the car, tapping the ticket on the steering wheel; neither of us relished a ferry crossing in such foul weather.

'We should go for it.'

'We have to.'

I drove as rapidly as the regular squalls and the slick, hilly road permitted. Getting to the ferry on time was going to be tight. On reaching the summit of the hill, the Mirador del Estrecho, we passed a field of wind turbines, their enormous white propellers thrashing the air for as far as the eye could see. Their frenetic movement added urgency to our flight. It was a perfect day for creating electricity, I reflected, not so great for catching a ferry.

We began our descent to the coast, the Atlantic Ocean appearing unappealingly hostile, presenting itself as an undulating patchwork of greens and greys and blacks, slashed with streaks of white. From one side of the windscreen to the other not a ship could be seen. My stomach churned.

At the bottom of the hill, with five minutes to go before the ferry's departure, we took a wrong turn at the town of Tarifa, losing ourselves in a maze of alleys suitable only for a horse and cart.

On account of the constant winds blowing off the Atlantic the people of Tarifa are known to tolerate a level of insanity amongst their community. From October to May, when regular Atlantic storms ensure the swell is at its best, half the population of Tarifa are said to be migratory surf-dudes. Winter, then, is presumably when visitors are allowed the greatest degree of tolerance where madness is concerned, which was good, considering we were trying to force our pimped-up pickup down a series of right angles not much broader than a gutter. Whilst attempting to keep our bull bar from unhooking wooden shutters, ripping off door handles, crushing potted plants and flattening downpipes, we caught glimpses of the November rollers thundering toward the coast, topped with crouching surfers skimming the emerald sea. On a day like that, unquestionably those guys are the maddest of the mad.

Eventually popping free from the backstreets of old Tarifa, we tore through the entrance to the port, a damp, flapping ticket thrust in the direction of the girl bending to the wind.

'*Adelante!*' she screeched, pointing ahead.

Beyond the mesh fence the ferry breathed gently on its mooring ropes, the rise and fall of the yellow light flooding from its cargo deck a beacon in the gloom. We zigzagged round the kilometres of fencing, chased over the tarmac, bounced up the ramp and slid to halt in front of a seaman frantically flapping his arms. The ramp slammed closed immediately behind us. Crewmen shouted, ropes were hauled, chains rattled, engines roared and propeller blades bit the water. We were off.

I sat back, allowing myself a tight grin; a small victory had been achieved for the keeper of lists, even if I had more than a niggling feeling I was about to pay for it.

‘Made it!’ I declared, looking at Christine. ‘We’re on our way to Timbuktu.’

Before we’d even left the harbour the ferry made a gut-wrenching heave. We shared an anxious look before sliding from the car. Did we really have to cross the straits today? I had a flash vision of our adventure plummeting to a wet and salty end, of spitting mouthfuls of plankton whilst the rollers swilled us up a Tarifa beach. Before we knew it we would be joining those lunatic surf-dudes.

‘If we’re going to Africa,’ I muttered, ‘we have to be determined, resolute, tough-’

‘What did you say?’ Christine asked.

I looked across the bonnet. ‘Nothing. I was only talking to myself.’

I pressed the key fob to lock the car and strode to a stairway leading to the upper deck. A thought swirled through my mind as I clapped hold of the handrail: I hadn’t seen a seagull all day.

Three-quarters of the way up the stairway, in the time it took to grip the handrail, progress was held in check, our bodies weightless at the zenith of the ferryboat’s rise, then gravity returned, falling...falling... My foot went down on the step with a thud, followed by a bang as the bow thumped the sea. The ship’s hull shuddered, the vibration passing through the deck, the rail, to my hands, to my shoulders, round my head.

I swore silently and rushed the last few steps to the top.

In the lounge row after row of seats faced the oncoming sea through panoramic windows. This was interactive cinema at its best – “Today’s movie ladies and gents is *The Perfect Storm Part II*. And you’re in it. SMILE, PLEASE!” There was no popcorn, only sick bags scattered like ticker-tape across the deck. The man in the cafeteria twiddled his fingers waiting for a client. Nobody was buying. Car alarms sounded in the cargo deck. Steel banged against steel. Passengers huddled in subdued groups.

We were pitching and rolling even as we cleared the sea wall, punching toward open water. One moment there was a steel-grey sky, the next, a ruff of white above a wall of black water. It was not a view to gladden the heart. Not mine, anyway. Concentrate on the horizon, that’s the inspired advice I’ve always been given when caught in a rough sea. Except there was no horizon.

‘We’ll be on the other side in a jiffy,’ I mumbled with faux cheer to no one in particular.

A Moroccan man eyed me cautiously.

Before long an immigration officer arrived on the scene – one step forward, two back. He grappled his way to the front of the lounge, his cap at a rakish angle, and

settled himself at the desk. From his bag he conjured the tools of his trade – stamps, ink pads, immigration forms, a grumpy face, a comic moustache. His presence caused a flurry of activity. Ragged lines of passengers began filling the aisles. I held tight to the seatback and stiffened my legs as we joined the queue. Shoulder knocked against shoulder and foot stepped on foot in an awkward, sailors' jig. The man behind me turned distinctly pale. I tried to edge ahead of him, though he insisted on closing the gap, keeping me bang in line for whatever happened next.

Up we went again...up and up...stomachs in our mouths...and then all the way down. Bang went the bow against the sea.

The Muslim women formed their own queue in the parallel aisle to the men, their constant nattering seemingly undisturbed by the drama outside the windows. Every once in a while the immigration officer barked at their restlessness.

I gawped through the windows; no chance of even a glimpse of Gibraltar, never mind taking a photograph. We pitched into another emerald trough. I felt sure we were stuffed; this old tub would never make it.

MOROCCO

THE DEVIL'S HASTE

Ahead, through the ferry's sea-splattered windows, the sheets of rain briefly parted; an outline of land revealed itself. My pulse beat that bit faster as Africa loomed from the tumbling waves. Before long the ferry ceased its rolling and pitching. Warehouses and cranes replaced sky and sea. The passengers smiled, unfurled their limbs and turned up the volume. The weight of our plight lightened. Cheeriness was in the air. We had survived the voyage.

On the docks in Tangier, for a fee, a man with a laminated identity tag hanging from his neck will process your paperwork.

'How much do you charge?' Christine asked the fellow hovering by her window.

Tugging at a woollen jumper savaged by moths, he looked momentarily perplexed by the question. He had on his head a cap that in former times might have belonged to a British Rail stationmaster. He reached up and touched the peak with his left hand as he said, 'It's up to you.'

Our new friend was not alone in this game. Rushing to and fro between the rows of cars and campervans, many of his colleagues were already a blur of official papers and tangled identity tags. It seemed that it might just be easier to go with the flow. We filled out the forms the man gave us and handed them over.

'I need your passports,' he said.

Our brains whirred and clicked at this latest request. Are we being a tad naive? We both looked across to the immigration office, and then back to the man loitering beside our open window.

'I'll come with you,' Christine said.

I locked the car and walked in the opposite direction. At a small window in the side of a very large building an official took the car papers from my hand. 'Where are you going?' he asked, glancing at the documents.

'I'm going to Mauritania.'

'Mauritania,' the man repeated, sucking his teeth. He made a note in a book with a pencil. 'And you are not coming back?'

It was the manner in which the question was phrased that set me on my guard. Might I be crossing into a twilight world? I began to ponder if it was indeed a question at all. Did nobody ever return from a visit to Mauritania? I wanted to ask. And if not...why not? I'd read about recent attacks by a nascent al-Qaida offshoot. Of all the countries on our route Mauritania was the only one I was concerned about from a security point of view, not least because it has a big desert, and bad people can hide you there.

'No,' I replied a touch vigorously. 'I'm not coming back.'

After changing money at a Bureau de Change it was rush hour by the time we hit the streets of Tangier. I've only ever known Tangier as a slightly manic place; how

could a town so close to Europe be so very different? Light was already fading and the rain had forced everyone into a car, causing vast queues and a melody of horns. A white Rolls Royce with police outriders at each corner forced a passage through the mayhem and jumped the lights.

‘Look,’ I called to Christine, noting the Dubai registration plates, ‘a fellow overlander in a Roller.’”

‘I should think it arrived on the sheik’s private plane,’ she said.

‘I’m sure you’re right. Besides, he doesn’t seem to have any sand ladders.’

On the southern outskirts of Tangier, the green neon sign of an Ibis hotel sparkled like an emerald on the blisters of rain. We squeezed in the car park and retired for the night.

The motorway between Tangier and Casablanca is a toll road and as good as any we’d left behind in Europe. It was all but deserted. Despite the rain bouncing as high as the bonnet, we were soon abreast of the old pirate republics of Salé and Rabat. The latter, having by and large shed its eye patches, wooden stumps and shoulder parrot, is now the capital city of Morocco.

Over the years Salé has featured frequently on travellers’ itineraries. The Romans named Salé ‘Sala Colonia’, including it as part of their province of Mauritania Tingitane. Pliny the Elder described it as a desert town infested with elephants. Even Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe was incarcerated by pirates in Salé.

Ever since the days of the pirates, it’s said that Salé and Rabat have lived in a state of animosity. They continue to face each other down, like a couple of dishevelled gunslingers eyeing each other from opposite sides of the Bou-Regreg River.

By the early seventeenth century Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, on the southern Mediterranean coast, and Salé, on the Atlantic coast, had come to be known as the Barbary Coast states. Whilst Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli were all protectorates of the Ottoman Empire, Salé declared independence, calling itself ‘The Republic of Bou Regreg’.

Salé was divided into three separate republics; Old Salé, on the north bank of the river, fell under the spiritual and political authority of Muhammad al-Ayyashi, a young man distinguished for his piety. Legend tells of how the day came when he set aside his Koran, found himself a trusty horse, and rode off to make *jihad* with Spain and Portugal, becoming a great hero in Moroccan folklore.

Driven from Spain by Philip II, the Hornacheros arrived in Morocco around 1610 to establish the second republic of Salé. They came from Hornachos, in Estremadura. They were Moslems, spoke Arabic, and were said to have gained significant wealth in Spain from such ignoble pursuits as banditry and forgery. The religious leaders, poets and intellectual set of Old Salé considered the Hornacheros to be nothing more than a mob of ruffians, not worthy of settling in the city of shrines and verse. The outcome of this slight was to see the Hornacheros establish themselves in the Casbah, on the southern bank of the Bou-Regreg River.

The third group to arrive were the Moriscos, or Andalusians, who the higher echelons of Old Salé considered even less savoury than the Hornacheros, with their Hispano-Arabic language, alien-sounding names and general lack of means. They had to settle on land beyond the Casbah, in New Salé, an area that is today Rabat.

Whilst the three republics, which were each governed by a Divan (a council of corsair captains), engaged in regular quarrels with one another, and more than occasional exchange of cannon fire, it was the plunder of infidel shipping that inspired them most, and for which, particularly the Casbah/Rabat republics, gained significant notoriety as the Sallee Rovers.

The circumstances of many of the Barbary pirates were to prove obscure. A good number of them were Christians who'd converted to Islam, or 'turn'd Turk' (Turk then being a collective expression for all Muslims). Peter Easton (1570-1620), formerly a Somerset farm labourer, commanded a fleet of forty ships. In 1612 he was raiding as far north as the coast of Newfoundland. Later, he was to enter the employ of the Duke of Savoy, purchasing himself a title and marrying a lady from a noble family. Then there was Henry Mainwaring (1587-1653), under whose leadership the pirate republic of Mamora thrived, until the Spanish came along and overthrew him. In the end he took the Royal pardon, became a gentleman, and in the process of transforming from poacher to gamekeeper, he wrote a treatise on how to suppress piracy.

Even the aristocracy weren't above dabbling at the business of a corsair. Sir Francis Verney (1584-1615) is said to have lost an argument with his stepmother concerning his inheritance and, in a fit of pique, turned pirate. In 1609 a message winged its way to England from the English ambassador to Spain, telling of how Sir Francis had...*"taken three or four Poole ships and one of Plymouth"*. By 1615 he was said to have succumbed to a...*"truly bad end"*, the lot, naturally enough, of many a pirate.

One of the more infamous of the Sallee Rovers was Jan Janszoon Van Haarlem (1570-1641), from Holland. He converted to a Muslim in Algiers, called himself Murad Reis and married a Moroccan, despite the fact he already had a wife and family back in Europe.

Murad Reis sailed as mate for Suleiman Reis, though when the boss was killed in 1619, Murad settled in Salé, an excellent base due to its proximity to the Straits of Gibraltar, and from where they could intercept the East India and Guinea traders, and not forgetting...*"ye Spaniards returning from the Americas loaded with much gold"*.

When independence was declared in Salé, and the new republic formed, as a measure of the esteem in which Murad Reis was held he was elected the republic's first Admiral. As a result of his accumulated spoils, and the new lofty position, the Dutchman formerly known as Jan Janszoon Van Haarlem was to become a wealthy man. Nevertheless, such accomplishments were not to curb a worthy session of high seas pillage.

In 1627 Murad Reis engaged a Danish seaman who claimed to know the way to Iceland. With three ships and a crew of Moors they set forth to Reykjavik, the capital

of Iceland. Having only managed to plunder Reykjavik's local market of its supply of salted fish, Reis set about rounding up the local population, no doubt hoping the pale-skinned northerners would fetch a pretty penny on the slave markets of North Africa.

Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century the pirates captured an estimated one and a quarter million Christians, which they ransomed or sold into the slave trade. From 1618 to 1626 alone, the golden years for the Saltee Rovers, six thousand were taken.

In time, the reign of the Barbary corsairs dwindled as the strength of the European navies increased. And whilst the threat to the geographical missionaries of the African Association still existed during their passage from England to the west coast of Africa, it was to a much lesser extent than hitherto.

The French conquest of Algiers in 1830 is said to have been the terminal event for this colourful slice of history.

By the time we reached El Jadida, the former Portuguese fortified city of Mazagan, we were one hundred kilometres south of Casablanca. It was clear the crème de la crème of Morocco's highways were firmly behind us. From here we experienced life on the real road. And it wasn't pretty. The driver of every bus might as well have had horns, a pointed chin and filed teeth. And if all the cars were driven by escapees from an asylum, then the truckers were as spatially aware as a lurch at last orders. Cyclists, seemingly high on a cocktail of Rif marijuana and reckless abandon, happily meandered between exhaust-belching trucks and the copious potholes. Above all, though, it was the pedestrian who suffered the most perilous of existences. It was as if their lives ranked no higher than the traffic cones, and were all the more hazardous for being mobile. In Morocco, even donkeys appeared content to flirt with the afterlife.

Naturally, such hazards of the road all served to put a brake on our progress along the coast, a drive already made tiresome by the relentless rain. In his book, *Travels in the Interior of Africa*, the explorer Mungo Park makes reference to seeing the mountains beyond Mogador (better known today as Essaouira) as the brig *Endeavour* carried him south to the Gambia in May 1795. During Park's time Mogador/Essaouira had for hundreds of years been a major trading port for goods between Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe, and for a while was known as the port of Timbuktu. Originally a Phoenician trading settlement, in more recent years it has become a refuge for surfers and backpackers, whilst today a new era of high end tourism is being encouraged by the Moroccan government. By the time we neared Essaouira we'd been driving for an hour in darkness, something we'd promised ourselves not to do. The roads might be bad during the daylight, at night the chance of an accident increases one hundredfold.

As both of us scanned the silvery limits of our headlights with intent concentration, turning over in my mind was a snippet of advice I'd read in a book on travelling overland on the African continent: never stop if you hit someone with your car, it said, but go straight to a police station and report the incident. Why? Apparently

things can quickly get out of hand with the locals. If it came to it, I imagined it was a piece of advice that would be instinctively difficult to follow. But that's the thing about a trip like this; your head becomes a mental filing cabinet of advice. The key is remembering where you stuffed it all, so that you might actually recall it at the appropriate time: open the third drawer down in the right frontal lobe...shuffle a few brain cells...root about in the cerebellum and...ah...yes, there it is...a manila thought-file marked: WHAT TO DO AFTER TRAFFIC ACCIDENT TO AVOID BEING LYNCHED.

By seven o'clock in the evening, in desperate need of a refreshing beer, we were relieved to spot a neon hotel sign sparkling in the rain. Busily seeking the entrance to the car park, it was only at the last minute did we spy the policeman's reflective glove appear spookily from the roadside. After Christine had pulled up, a fulsome, glistening yellow and black raincoat waddled to the window. The policeman's partner remained under the cover of the trees, cradling his hand-held radar. It was obvious which one of them had drawn the short straw, and the man approaching us seemed all the more grumpy for it.

'Why are you doing 50 in a 40 zone?' he demanded, rainwater cascading from the peak of his cap.

There were no mitigating circumstances. We could hardly have told him we were hurrying to a cold beer and a warm bed. It was a straightforward case of *mea culpa*. There was nothing we could say in our defence. So, was this to be our first experience of the dash? I wondered.

'Yes officer, no officer. It will never happen again.'

There followed a lecture about the perils of speeding in general, and then another one, relating more specifically to the rain, breaking distances and poor visibility. During the whole of the policeman's lecture the road remained entirely deserted, absolutely nothing to distract his flow; which posed the question as to why they were there in the first place, on such a murky night. If nothing else you had to look at it as a heartening display of dedicated police work; by the time the policeman had talked himself out, he was thoroughly drenched.

We waited expectantly. In the next moment there would be a demand for recompense. To be perfectly honest, he'd earned it. He'd put on a magnificent performance in the most inclement of conditions. So, how much would it cost us, this little show?

'*Bon!*' the policeman concluded, dismissing us with a flick of his soggy glove.

The answer to our question was that it cost us absolutely nothing. We were free to proceed. It was a poke in the eye for my preconceived opinions.

The following day we reached Agadir.

A blue sky had at last forced the clouds to retreat inland and for the first time since leaving England our thoughts turned to the possibility of camping. Despite the persistent cold wind the time had come to give all the toys we'd fitted to our car their first, thorough test. Due to the usual grinding delays prior to the departure on such a big trip as this, there had been no time to test anything; not the most ideal of situations considering the places we were going to. The big challenge facing us right

at that moment was to find that perfect campsite, the one we'd been dreaming about for so many months, a place we could hole up for two or three days, enabling us to get to grips with the kit we'd brought along, hopefully without too much cursing.

This was to be a weighty moment for the simple reason I've never been an enthusiastic camper. I guess this might rank as a considerable flaw in an overlander. Try as I might I've always struggled to consider camping as anything other than a crude affair. For me it never ceases to conjure notions of Victorian privation: damp underclothes, leaking accommodation, cold showers and squatting in draughty wooden sheds – and that's if you're lucky. Alarmingly, there are a couple of other attributes I'd read should come easily to the overlander: the capacity to embrace uncertainty, and an ability to laugh in the face of adversity. Goodness knows what the person was thinking when they wrote this; neither of them fitted my idea of orderliness and expectation. Camping was a different matter; there was to be no avoiding it, and we'd invested enough thought and money into preparing the Hilux, so I felt confident of there being much less of the rough in the "roughing it". Everything would work out fine, I was sure. I'd dug deep in the last few months to set aside my prejudices. I was mentally prepared for any hurdles to come.

The last time Christine and I had gone camping together had also been in Morocco. As we trundled south in the direction of Agadir, the memory of it was at the forefront of my mind for the litany of disasters. Before setting off on that ill-fated trip I'd bought a tent from a supermarket without first checking if the poles and pegs were inside – they were not. On our first night in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains I'd been spared humiliation by stringing the tent between a tree and the jeep. That had worked fine. The second night I was not so fortunate (and most definitely in the doghouse). The second night was spent in a field, where there was no tree, and no possibility of using the tent in the manner it was designed. We'd placed our sleeping mats on the ground at the back of the jeep, the unfurled tent pulled up to our chins. In the morning our heads were soaked by the morning dew. After a third night spent in bushes on a roundabout outside Fez, we'd given up and gone back to Spain.

We stopped on the cliff-top overlooking the sea. Whilst surf-dudes skimmed the rollers beneath us I unearthed the guidebook, settling on a campsite beside the beach, a few kilometres to the north of Agadir. It was a promising start; a campsite beside the beach sounded ideal to kick off our adventure.

I flicked the gear lever to D and set off brimming with hope.

Shut your eyes, if you would, and imagine a sandy cove, the cover of a few trees, a starlit night, a fire to warm the soles of your feet and the sound of pebbles clicking in the surf. Just the job, you say. Certainly, it was a vision to melt the heart of the most pessimistic of campers. It was the dream. From then on I knew the weather would improve, the temperature rise, the rain become a distant memory. We would bivouac the length of the Atlantic coast, tucked between rolling dunes, swimming in the early-morning surf, grilling our fish over an open fire. It was a wonderful vision.

Following a half-hour cruise along the coastal road the sign for our campsite emerged boldly from the roadside: Camping Atlantica Parc. In two hundred metres we turned left off the road and swung into the entrance.

Now, if you will, open your eyes...behold a vast sea of white campervans bristling with an array of aerials and dishes and pop-up windows – plot after plot after plot. Our romantic cove had suddenly become a campervan metropolis, a Winnebago City. The guidebook had directed us to a place where the European caravan club shelter from the northern winter blues; French, Germans, Dutch, Scandinavians, they were all there, in their regimented plots, divided by trimmed hedges and electrical cabling, and variously including tethered dogs, potted plants, caged budgerigars, sagging clothes lines, bicycles, scooters, assorted garden furniture and the evidence of a bewildering range of hobbies at various stages of realization.

It was too late in the day to go elsewhere. The suburbs of Agadir certainly held no appeal. We were stuck.

We checked in at the office and were directed to our plot. I climbed the ladder to the roof of the car and set about unzipping and removing the waterproof cover from the roof-mounted tent. With the cover off it was simply a case of lifting one half of the base until it extended horizontally over the back of the car. Fully opened, the tent served a useful second function of creating a shelter over the kitchen arrangement at the back. Elastic guy ropes inside the tent did the work of springing the canvas upright, and an extendable ladder hinged to the base dropped down to enable access. It was perfect. Even two rank amateurs like us could achieve this exercise within a couple of minutes, and with much less effort than a conventional ground tent. For me it was the ideal solution, with no risk of having left the pegs on the supermarket shelf.

From the roof I had an unrestricted view of camping suburbia. The plot on our right was vacant. The other side was inhabited by a Belgian in a bulging T-shirt, his white, stick-like legs poking from a pair of shorts. He was watching me, appearing to fret over why his neighbour was intruding on his privacy in such a manner. He returned my greeting with a nod, shuffling out of sight beneath his awning. I eyed his campervan. 'You big softie,' I muttered.

With camp established Christine soon had a vegetable couscous chopped and prepared and the pot on the gas ring. By seven o'clock, with daylight long gone, the temperature dropped and the rain started to fall again. It sent a chill down my spine in more ways than one.

We pulled on extra jumpers beneath our waterproofs, retreating with our chairs and table to huddle beneath the base of the tent, exchanging disconsolate glances as the blobs of water bounced half way up the ladder.

'What's a little rain?' I said. 'It'll be over in a minute.'

Only, it wasn't. During the night the deluge was ceaseless. And yet, even the sound of the rain failed to mask the barking dogs or, at some un-godly hour, a group of Swedes drunkenly roaming from one camping car, located in a far corner, to another camping car, located in the corner diagonally opposite. By three o'clock in the morning my antipathy bubbled to the surface.

'I hate this camping lark!' I growled, turning over for what might well have been the millionth time. I pondered when the first drops of rain might penetrate the tent, resisting the temptation to reach up and touch the canvas. It didn't take long before

all the pondering and the dripping water got the better of me and I could no longer delay the inevitable. A multi-stage operation swung into motion: the zip had to be located and opened with the minimum of noise (not such an issue on account of the rain). The toes had to probe the cold night air to find the rungs of the ladder. The shoes had to be uncovered without the aid of a torch, because I'd forgotten it in the tent. The coat had to be found, the mud slopped in...

Partially clothed I plodded through the parallel lanes of this Winnebago City, executing a series of ninety degree turns, passed the rows of dripping hedges, growling dogs and half-finished hobbies, an eye on a distant, feeble light. It was right at that moment I hated our rather overweight Belgian neighbour, tucked up nice and cosy in his campervan, with its toilet and TV and shower. I wanted what he had. For a few seconds I loitered in the rain, toying with the idea of breaking in.

When the sun appeared by mid-morning the next day we snatched the opportunity to lay everything out to dry. Ten minutes later it rained again.

The previous day two motorcyclists had appeared in the campsite, their bikes laden with a remarkable quantity of luggage. I was intrigued and decided to amble to their plot and pay them a visit. I found them rolling up their mud-smeared tents and preparing to get underway. After they'd finished packing their kit their knees and elbows were caked in mud. They were a father and son team, the father explained, wiping mud from his face. They were on their way from the north coast of Norway to the Cape of Good Hope. Their theme was Cape to Cape. They'd been on the road for three months and appeared unconcerned as to how much longer it would take to go the rest of the way to South Africa. A wife/mother was back in England handling the logistics; they grinned a little sheepishly when they told me this. I found them in remarkably good spirits, all things considered. I wished them luck for the rest of their journey.

'Cheers,' the father uttered, strapping a muddy bag to the back of his bike.

The weather forecast pinned to the wall in the reception of the campsite promised more rain to come. There was no debate required; we were getting out of there. We packed away our damp equipment and went in search of a hotel in Agadir. Neither of us wished to experience a repeat performance of the previous night. In fact, I wasn't sure the tent could have withstood it.

On a warm, star-filled night in late February 1960, a devastating event shook the town of Agadir. A tourist staying in one of the town's hotels was reading his book in bed when, at twenty minutes to midnight, the room began to swirl, the walls caved in and the ceiling collapsed. He was lucky to survive the earthquake which struck at a point precisely where the town stood, and the destructive tsunami which followed quickly thereafter. Within mere seconds the majority of the town's buildings had been reduced to rubble; fifteen thousand people were dead and as many again lay injured and trapped. The region had never even been considered at risk from seismic activity and it seemed no one recalled the earlier tragedy of 1731, when the previous town to occupy the site, Santa Cruz de Aguer, had been similarly wiped out. The new Agadir, with a population of three hundred and fifty thousand, has been rebuilt two kilometres to the south of the earthquake's epicentre. As I plucked the room key

from the hotel concierge's outstretched hand we could only hope the gods of the inner earth were at peace

If one is to believe the Moroccan proverb, 'Slowness comes from God and haste from the Devil', then clearly we were possessed. Instead of exploring the Atlas Mountains, as we'd planned, and where the snow was already closing the higher passes, in our rain and wind-driven haste, we'd arrived in Agadir way ahead of my schedule. We were in definite need of an exorcist, an antidote, a balm, anything to slow us up. I scabbled about for my notebook and flicked open the section marked LISTS. Couldn't this bring a measure of order to our lives?

I ran my finger down the scored out items, flicking over several pages. We should have been at an unpronounceable place in the Atlas Mountains, and we would have been there had it not been for the foul weather. The weather was to blame for our dilemma – the devil's haste was in the wind.

I scored out 'Traverse of the Central Atlas' with two thick lines – we were never going to make it. The next item referred to collecting JP and Susie from the airport, except they were still forty eight hours away from arriving. There was nothing for it. We were caught in a yawning void that, quite frankly, Agadir was incapable of filling. It was time for some local exploring.

After checking out the location of Agadir airport, Tafraoute and the Ameln Valley were firmly in our sights. To get there we went south, along the N1 coastal road, searching for the track that supposedly led to the hills. Attempting to equate the information displayed on our Michelin map with our surroundings meant dismissing a series of goat paths in favour of a stony track that, after ten minutes of rough driving, delivered us at what looked to be an abandoned quarry.

'I don't think this is the right way to Tafraoute,' Christine said.

'No. I don't suppose it is,' I replied.

'This is a quarry.'

I hummed to myself, raising my eyes from the map to gaze at a hillside plundered by something extremely destructive. Yes, I had to agree with her: we'd definitely arrived at a quarry. Things were not going well. According to the Michelin 741 we had travelled little more than a pencil length into the African continent; Ghana was still a lot of pencil lengths to the south – plenty of room for error. And this wasn't the first of my navigational blunders. In northern Spain, after leaving the ferry in Santander, I'd taken us over a high pass in the Cordillera Cantábrica, during a particularly heavy snow storm. Up there in the mountains, we hadn't been the only ones with our heads in the clouds; a biker on a Harley had been making a brave job of slithering through the slush.

'I think we've missed the turning,' I concluded.

For some reason my head was feeling particularly woolly, hence all efforts at navigation lacked even the most fundamental skills of reading a signpost. We retraced our steps, stopping at a settlement to buy a loaf of bread. The road to Tafraoute couldn't have been more clearly indicated. We found the signpost at a very large roundabout several kilometres back up the road. We'd driven passed it an hour earlier.

On our way to the Ameln Valley we crested the Col de Kerdous at 1100 metres, by which time the drop in temperature had us reaching for our coats. Here we weaved along narrow roads, passing rust-coloured cliffs, tilled fields, picturesque villages, orchards of almond and argan trees. The people of the Ameln Valley are known throughout the country for being an enterprising bunch. Not content with hiding away in their dramatic surroundings, many a grocer in Morocco's busier city streets hails from the Valley of the Almonds. The production of argan oil, processed from the fruit of the argan tree, has become a valuable commodity in the semi-arid valleys of the Anti-Atlas. Its application in the food and cosmetics industries has flourished over recent years. Goats have also developed a taste for the argan fruit. A flock of goats scaling the upper branches of a tree makes for an incongruous sight.

By late afternoon a post on the roadside indicated the turning to Tafraoute, a village popular with tourists for being at the centre of what is judged to be some of the best trekking and climbing in the region. Enclosed within an ochre-coloured rock landscape, the place undoubtedly displays its full glory at sundown, when the last of the sun's rays turn the jagged ramparts into impressive, glowing spires, and the long, spiky shadows cloak the rest.

Making our way to the village, we wavered at the entrance to Tafraoute's campsite, observing an icy northern wind whip veils of dust in a vicious dance. A single tent pegged out in a far corner rippled under the onslaught. The door marked "Les Toilettes" creaked as it swung back and forth. We really did want to camp...but.

'This doesn't look great,' I muttered, the memory of our night at Camping Atlantica Parc all too raw.

'There's a hotel up there,' Christine said.

I followed her gaze to the rather monastic-looking building commanding a position on a hill overlooking the village.

'So there is,' I said.

Just then a young man appeared in front of the car; the manager of the campsite, we presumed. He stared at us, until a gust of wind swept the hood of his burnous clean from his head. We waved at him, turned the car round, and ventured up the hill.

After we'd lugged our bags through the front door of the hotel, it was soon apparent how the cloistered theme continued inside. For all intents and purposes the property was deserted, purged of life. A wave of gloom washed over me; I might as well have been a repenting monk returning to a life of bible-thumping, watery soup and dubious habits. The very moment we dropped our bags at the front desk the receptionist appeared. He bore a tremendous likeness to Lurch, manservant to the Adams Family. Should Lurch have handed our passports to a goblin perched on a monkey's skull, who then proceeded to copy the details with a quill plucked from the tail feathers of a Griffon vulture, I wouldn't have been in the least surprised – uneasy maybe, but not surprised.

We completed a form in exchange for the room key dangling from Lurch's bony finger. '*Bienvenue*,' escaped from between his taught lips.

After registering we mounted the steps to the first floor, the bitter wind I'd hoped to leave outside the front door burnishing our cheeks. At least carrying the bags up the stairs had warmed us up a little. Along the corridors we searched for our room. At each turning I imagined owls watching us, bats biding their time, arachnids eagerly awaiting nightfall, perhaps even the spirit of a ravishing Berber princess tapping to be freed from the walls.

The room, when we found it, had three beds.

'Maybe Lurch and the goblins are joining us,' I murmured.

The wind had the doors and windows rattling in their frames. We shivered and Christine retrieved a number of blankets from the cupboard and laid them on a bed. Thankfully, several flocks of sheep had gone into their manufacture. We were going to need them.

In Tafraoute, Maison Tuareg was lauded as something of an institution where rugs were concerned, even if their salesman, a warlock shrouded in a djellaba, needed to tweak his technique. We were heading for the village when the shadow broke from an alley – WHOOSH! – and there he was, as if popping from the spout of a genie's lantern, an odious bundle of verbose mutterings blocking our every move. With the odd curse and a mucus-clearing grate of the throat, he was not in the least dissuaded by our polite excuses. What we'd anticipated as being a pleasant stroll to the local bar for an aperitif quickly spiralled into a diplomatic spat. There was no way, we explained, that we were taking half a dozen of his rugs all the way to Ghana.

'Ship them!' he spat, striking like a viper. 'It's very cheap to ship them.'

I could tell from the smirk how he thought he had us against the ropes with that one. I squared my shoulders, attempting to stand a little taller. Get stuffed you f*****g a*****e, I was ready to tell him. Instead, I came out with: 'We've only come for a drink.'

'We have drink in the shop; very good tea. And Beeeuuootiful rugs.'

Drinking tea for an aperitif was hardly what we had in mind. But the warlock didn't want to hear that. I rked that a sale might slip from his claws, he changed tack.

'You foreigners never want to engage with the locals,' he snarled. 'You're not interested in our culture. You're rude...' Blah, blah, blah.

Despite his charmless performance we promised to call on the way back. Less than satisfied, he whirled and vanished, the hem of his djellaba leaving a flurry of dust.

Later, after a drink in the village, we stuck to our word. The man inside the shop was a much more polished affair than the sorcerer we'd fallen across earlier, though a practitioner of enchantment, none the less. He entertained us for the next hour or so with a fine display from their collection. For all that, we still departed from the establishment rug-less.

Back at the hotel, and with the last remnants of the sun's warmth having slipped beyond the mountains, we resorted to wearing thermals beneath our clothes when venturing to dinner. It wasn't long before a steady stream of guests joined us. Despite looking like hikers, and a hardy, ruddy-faced sort with it, most of our fellow diners sported thick jumpers and fleeces. Apparently we weren't the only ones

feeling the cold. I noticed one of the ladies even wore an anorak. I made a brief examination of the ceiling; it seemed in reasonable order. What did she know that we didn't? I reflected.

We studied the menu whilst the waiter bustled furiously between the tables, scratching orders on a notepad, which he tore off and sent fluttering through a doorway. Christine opted for the vegetable couscous. I went for the highly recommended 'Tagine Berber'. As the wind buffeted the windows we washed it all down with a Cabernet Sauvignon from Meknes, a town in northern Morocco. After dinner, and feeling suitably fortified, we huddled over a game of Scrabble in the bedroom, which I...almost won.

At breakfast the following morning we discovered the dining room devoid of guests. In the cold light of a new day it appeared even more frigid than the previous evening.

'We're either too early or too late,' Christine said.

With the words barely from her mouth the very same waiter who'd served dinner the previous evening crawled out from underneath a circular table, unfurled himself from a white linen tablecloth and clambered to his feet. After dabbing at his jacket and straightening a few creases, he snatched his pen and notebook from a sideboard. To this day I'm sure he must have spent the night there. When we recovered our voices, the vapour from our breath hung in the air.

'Are we too early?' we asked.

The waiter preened his moustache and arched his back. '*Mais non!*' he declared.

During our absence from Agadir both the weather and the temperature had thankfully improved. We spent some time driving around the southern suburbs, searching for a hotel not too far from the airport. The squawking flesh, throbbing metal, choking fumes and hooting horns of the metropolis all came as quite a shock after the peaceful Ameln valley. Almost abandoning any hope of finding a hotel, purely by chance we came upon a charming little place called Hotel La Pergola. With a roaring fire and plenty of chintz, the restaurant radiated an appealing, 'old-worldly' feel. The contents of the menu and wine list were equally rousing. Circumstances were improving, particularly as we'd learnt that the property was owned and run by a French family from the Loire valley. We felt quite certain they'd know a thing or two about eating. And they did.

As much as I hankered to indulge in the wonderfully seductive, come hither and get drunk feel the restaurant so warmly emitted, we did have a midnight rendezvous to keep.