



Fact file Atlas to Sahara

Distance: 252km in total; daily average 42km.

Route: Starting in Telouet, a village just outside Marrakech, we cycled through the High and Anti Atlas Mountains and the Draa Valley to the Sahara Desert.

Conditions: Mostly warm and bright, with daytime temperatures of around 30°C; mornings and evenings 5–10°C. One day was cooler and overcast. A mix of loose gravel and sand and quiet, tarmac mountain roads.

Bike used: Cannondale Lefty, hired from Saddle Skedaddle.

Maps/guides: We were following a guide, but Saddle Skedaddle also provided GPX files of each day's riding, which I had on my Garmin.

I'm glad I had... Padded shorts and chamois cream – the hire bike's saddle wasn't as comfortable as my own.

Next time I would... Tackle that 6km climb! And partake in the hammam.

Further information: skedaddle.com/uk

Opposite, clockwise from top: Fellow Brit Ritchie and Canadian Allan ride across the High Atlas plateau. Getting ready for a camel ride. The author taking a short break on the first day's riding. Ait Benhaddou, a former fortified village. Below: Lunch at an oasis in the Draa Valley. They kept us well fed!

The next day brought our first day of cycling. Following a three-hour transfer to Telouet, we were united with our bikes. This was one of the least challenging days to ease us in: just 46km with about 500m of climbing, with the first few kilometres on tarmac before heading onto gravel.

However, part of the track had been washed away and what should have been hard-packed gravel was loose stone and sand with several craters that we had to dismount and climb over. After quite a rough descent we found ourselves on a well-surfaced lane through rural villages.

We arrived at our hotel with just enough time for a shower and change of clothes before heading off for a walk across a very dusty dry riverbed to Ait Benhaddou, a ksar (fortified village) that sat on a former caravan route between Marrakech and the Sahara. Today it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site and considered a great example of Moroccan earthen clay architecture. It's also a location for several films, including *Jewel in the Nile* and *Prince of Persia*.

Across the Atlas

After breakfast on the terrace the next day, we climbed into 4x4s for a transfer to the start of three days of cycling through the remote Jebel Sirwa region of the Atlas Mountains. The terrain was a mix of winding tarmac roads and loose gravel and sandy trails.

We really were in the middle of nowhere. Lunch was eaten in a windswept field, sheltering behind boulders and our support vehicles. The food – here and at all lunchtimes – was impressive. Salads, roasted vegetables, pasta, plus skewers of chicken and lamb for the meat eaters, all prepared by our personal chef from the back of his 4x4.

The route ended with a 5km climb up to the plateau where we would be

camping for the night. At times the gradient was up to 12%, although the average was 7%. The surface was loose gravel and sand. Most of the group decided to take the support cars up to the top.

Three of us, plus Abdel, opted to cycle. There was a lot of walking, pushing our bikes through soft sand. It was hard, but riding into camp that evening to the cheers of the rest of the group felt triumphant.

After breakfast and breaking down camp the next morning, we set out across the plateau. Abdel described the grassy terrain as “undulating”. My legs and lungs disagreed. But I was starting to get used to the elevation.

“Abdel described the terrain as ‘undulating’. My legs and lungs disagreed”

A steep descent took us to a village where the main drag was a rocky dry riverbed populated by chickens and small children wanting high-fives. We stopped here for tea, served with bread and honey.

Then it was another climb. This one was 6km. While it wasn't as steep as the previous day's, the start looked practically perpendicular.

I took one look and lost my confidence. I took the car to the top. Once there, I was reunited with my bike and set off again. With hindsight I wish I'd tackled that climb. The day's cycling ended with those four ‘short, sharp climbs’ of Abdel's. →



Photos: Rebecca Armstrong