



Clockwise from the top: Simona on the road to Agdz from Ouarzazate, our fifth day of riding. The Saharan camp at sunrise. At the oasis in the Draa Valley are (from left to right) Ian, Murray, Ritchie, Allan, Jim, me and Abdel

Dates at the casbah

The next day was the second-longest ride of the trip but with significantly less climbing than the previous two. We covered just under 50km, but 16km of that was an epic and steep descent to the Draa Valley.

For a mountain-biking newbie with a fear of heights, this was challenging: a fast, twisty downhill on soft sand, gravel chips and rocks, often with a sheer drop to one side. I had my brakes covered at all times and was concentrating hard on avoiding the biggest rocks and finding the smoothest path down.

After about 8km off road, we got onto tarmac, with switchbacks and blind corners. "Keep to the right, there might be cars coming," Abdel warned us. With a sheer drop on the right, I found this advice hard to follow. There were times when the road straightened up enough to let

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go: 40km/h with a sheer drop to one side was certainly exhilarating.

The final kilometres were cycling through a vast oasis that's home to millions of date palms. This offered up some stunning riding to the hotel. That night we enjoyed a stay in a luxury former casbah, complete with hammam, a Moroccan steam bath, where some of our party treated their tired muscles. We had a late start the next day to make the most of the hotel. I sipped Moroccan tea on the balcony while watching the sun rise over the date palms.

Sundown in the dunes

We were nearing the Sahara Desert now, with just two days left of riding through the Draa Valley's extensive date palm groves. The palms were heavy with fruit and Abdel informed us that each one could produce up to 10,000 dates. They're a key source of income for the area.

The last day on bikes had just 27km of riding on the clock, then we transferred to the 4x4s for the final leg to the Sahara. The journey was delayed somewhat when we stopped and piled out of the cars for encounters with a Common Ostrich



Get away for less

The remote nature of this ride would have made it difficult – and potentially dangerous – to undertake self-guided. I booked the 'Atlas to Desert' tour with Saddle Skedaddle, Cycling UK's official tour partner, to take advantage of a 5% discount. The company offers Cycling UK members a variety of regularly changing discounts and special deals. Check the website to see what's currently available: cyclinguk.org/saddle-skedaddle.

I was impressed with the organisation. Everything went without a hitch, and the staff at Skedaddle handled all my questions with aplomb. I booked my travel insurance through Bikmo (cyclinguk.org/bikmo-travel), as a member saving 10%.

and an Addax. We also saw our first camels.

The camp, when we arrived, was amazing. Huge tents with proper beds, electric lights and even charging points for our phones; a shower block with hot running water; a comfortable seating area; and a restaurant. We had an hour or two to relax with glasses of Moroccan tea before being introduced to our camels for a ride up the sand dunes to watch the sun set over the desert.

The next day we drove back to Marrakech for a final dinner together before going our separate ways the following morning. ●