

Two days with IGO Adventures in the wilds of Morocco tested C&IT's

# Hiking and biking through the Atlas Mountains

The Atlas Mountains span 1,600 miles through



As a general rule of thumb, industry press or FAM trips don't tend to require a great deal of physical exertion. You arrive at a new destination, visit some hotels and venues, maybe take part in an activity or two and go to some nice restaurants. Lovely.

So when my editor asked "who wants to go to Morocco?", my hand went up straight away. Then when I looked more closely at the details of the trip, I saw that I had volunteered for something entirely different.

IGO Adventures, a company that specialises in weekend and week-long adventure travel, had invited me to join them for two days of biking and hiking through the Atlas Mountains. I could tell it was going to be serious exercise because there was a 'kit list'.

Still, I consider myself to be reasonably fit and a quick phone call with John at IGO reassured me that there would be a complete mixture of fitness levels within the group of around 20. It was time to pack my bag, stock up on Jelly Babies and head off to Marrakech.

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THERE WERE A COUPLE OF MARATHON RUNNERS AND ONE GUY WHO HAD COMPLETED MORE TOUGH MUDDER MILES LAST YEAR THAN ANYONE IN THE WORLD”



40%

The proportion of Morocco's population that are Berber



## Mark Williams' fitness and agility to the limit

Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia →

### Ultimate run

The fittest guests relished the challenge of running at altitude in the intense heat



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### DAY 1:

#### A bum-numbing bike ride

The trip began with a 6.25am flight from Gatwick to Marrakech Menara Airport, arriving at 10.05am local time, with only one-hour's time difference. Once through airport security, I had instructions to wait outside for the pick-up. On meeting the other people on the trip I noticed everyone was looking very athletic in their sports gear, and began to wonder what on earth I'd signed myself up for – could this be the first trip where I would return feeling fitter instead of fatter?

#### Thrills and spills

The minibus took us and our mountain bikes to the starting point just over an hour away near a town called Amizmiz at the foot of the Atlas Mountains. Talking to the other adventurers on the trip was a mixture of reassuring (about my own capability) and awe-inspiring – there were a couple of marathon runners and one guy who had completed more Tough Mudder miles last year than anyone in the world. I wouldn't be keeping up with him then.

After a briefing accompanied by the Moroccan staple – mint tea and biscuits – day one began for real, with a 12-mile mountain bike ride full of ascents, descents and sandy riverbeds, which required legs of steel to keep pushing through. Which I don't have.

While I was pushing my bike through one of these patches, one of our Moroccan guides (who →



Giorgio Fochesato/Getty Images







also happened to be a world-class ultra distance runner) merrily jogged past me, leaping across rocks and over riverbeds like a gazelle. His bike had got a puncture and so it was easier for him to run instead.

During the afternoon, we rode through mountain villages and down dusty roads, accompanied by the stunning scenery of the Atlas Mountains. After a very enjoyable, physically testing and slightly bum-numbing day, we did have a couple of injuries in our group from bike spills on the mountain descents. But they were taken care of by our medic and photographer, Johnny, a former Gurkha.

### Camping ban

On finishing the final bike climb and expecting to find our campsite, what we found instead was several members of the support team packing things into a van, while others were deep in negotiation with the local authorities. Despite our group having all the necessary permissions, this was not going to be our campsite for the night – we were being moved on.

However, as any good event planner knows, there's always a plan B. Ours was in the form of a local guest house in a nearby village, which could house some of us and let the rest camp on its land. Before heading off to our new home to eat and get an early night, it was time for a bit of warm-down yoga under the vast open sky, surrounded by the Atlas Mountains.



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### DAY2:

### An intense 12-mile hike

After an excellent night's sleep in my tent, we all rose early and got ready for a 12-mile run or hike, depending on how fit we were feeling. I was definitely in the hiking group – even if I could run that distance (which I can't), it was going to be close to 30°C and walking sounded a lot more enjoyable. Go slowly, enjoy the scenery, take a few photos along the way.

The route was marked, so the only time we took a wrong turn was when some local children changed the direction that an arrow was pointing. We quickly worked out our wrong turn with the help of IGO's Bobby and got back on track. Pesky kids! After stopping for lunch, we were given



Animal encounters

The sensible locals don't hike – they prefer to travel by donkey



Mount Toubkal: 4,167 metres

the option to take a longer route back to base, adding an extra six miles through a valley and up a mountain, or just walk the last couple of miles along a road to our guest house. Plenty of the group took the longer route, but I found the lure of a shower and a lie down just too great.

That was part of what made the weekend so good – the ability to set your own limits. For example, the super-fit yin to my yang was serial Tough Mudder competitor and long-distance runner Charlie, who finished the whole route (including the optional extra-long bit) in around two hours.

A day's hike in the heat and the thin mountain air is challenging enough – I can't imagine being able to run it. But just under half of our group did exactly that. It's what they came here for – to test themselves running at altitude and in high temperatures.

Berber dancing

Once back at base, it was time to shower off all the dust and sand I'd been gathering during the day and get into a clean set of clothes. A cold beer never tasted so good, and most people were glad to have second helpings of chicken, vegetables and couscous at dinner time.

I could feel every one of the miles my legs had covered in the past couple of days, but it was a very satisfying tiredness. Despite my initial worries in terms of fitness within our group, I felt I was actually somewhere in the middle. Not the fastest, not the slowest, but competent – and that's fine by me.

With dinner demolished and the campfire roaring, we were treated to some Berber music performed by men from the local villages. Encouraged to join in with the rhythmic clapping and dancing, I was invited to do my best impression of what the Berbers next to me were doing. They laughed a lot but I'm sure it was because of something else that was funny, definitely not my Berber dancing.

1,835<sub>km</sub>

Length of Morocco's coastline along the Mediterranean and Atlantic – much of it is great for surfing



CHECKLIST



Marrakech Menara Airport

FLIGHTS 61 daily

+212

CURRENCY 1 Moroccan Dirham (MAD) = 0.10 USD

VISA REQUIREMENTS No visa needed for stays up to 90 days for most countries



TEMPERATURE 5°C/41°F – 37°C/99°F

MUST-SEE The markets and souks of Marrakech



CONTACT John Haigh – john@igoadventures.com