

Uncharted territory

Isabel Choat embarks on a walk with a difference - following a nomad family through a part of Morocco few tourists get to see.

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A walk on the wild side ... members of the semi-nomadic Ait Atta tribe. Photograph: Isabel Choat

I admit, it sounds too worthy to be fun. If you respond to the usual "where are you going on holiday this year" question with "Oh, I'm walking with nomads", you either sound like a Bruce Parry wannabe trying to create your own version of Tribe or - more likely - a smug do-gooder. Yet there was nothing po-faced or forced about our trek in southern Morocco.

The plan was to walk with a family from the semi-nomadic Ait Atta tribe as they migrated from their base in the wild and breathtakingly beautiful Jebel Sarhro mountains to the High Atlas range. For nine months of the year, Zaid, his wife, mother and three children live in basic stone shelters surrounded by the steep, arid slopes of the Sarhro. But in early summer, they leave their homeland and head north into the Atlas to find grazing for their flocks. Around 40 families make the two-week journey on foot, with their sheep, goats, donkeys, mules and camels in tow, returning again in September.

Charlie Shepherd, an adventure tour operator based in Marrakech who organised the trek, assured us that it was Zaid who came up with the idea of tourists joining the migration, not the other way round. We would simply be tagging along with the family for a week, walking when they walked, setting up camp where they chose. When we left, they would continue their journey into the Atlas. The aim was simply to get a glimpse of an ancient way of life. As for my fellow trekkers, they weren't, as I had feared, fitness freaks or yoghurt-knitters. Like me, they'd been attracted by the prospect of adventure.

Most coverage of Morocco centres on fashionable Marrakech - its designer riads and trendy shops. The June issue of *Vogue* featured Vanessa (sister of Richard) Branson's Marrakech riad and her top tips on the city which boil down to hopping from one little oasis of contemporary chic to the next - preferably dressed in an expensive kaftan - with as little time in the dusty, smelly, hurly burly of the streets as possible.

This trip was the antithesis of all that. Life was pared down to the basics. No showers, no shops, no music, no mobile signal, no washing. The toilet "facilities" consisted of a shovel, loo

roll and a long walk to find a sheltered spot, though you were always guaranteed a mesmerising view.

Not that we were roughing it. As well as Zaid's family, we were accompanied by an entourage of mule handlers who packed and unpacked the gear every day. Abdellah, the cook, plied us with home-made doughnuts for breakfast, fresh salads at lunch and rich, spicy tagines at dinner, which we ate by candlelight in the communal tent; at night, we sat round the campfire on deckchairs, the smell of burning juniper wood wafting through the still air. We had beers and surprisingly drinkable Moroccan red wine. We were spoilt - not just in terms of the stunning campsite locations but because we didn't have to do anything apart from putting up our own tents. The afternoons were spent dozing, chatting, watching Abdellah make bread, baking it for an hour under hot stones - it emerged covered in ash and pitted with the marks of the stones.

On the fourth day, there was a departure from Abdellah's signature tagine dish - sheep's stomach kebab. Knowing the provenance of your food is all well and good, but looking your dinner in the eye before it's killed for your benefit is quite different from being told that your lamb came from a farm down the road. I felt morally obliged not just to tuck in but to do so with relish; I also felt pretty queasy when the kebabs were offered round. Every last scrap of offal was sizzling on the open fire. Fortunately, our berber hosts were happy to polish off the stomach, liver, testicles, neck and kidneys. We wimps dined on barbecued rib and shank.

We felt like pioneers, and in a sense we were - this was an exploratory adventure, the first time Charlie had run such a trip. In five days, we saw one lone trekker with a mule handler.

At times, it felt a little unreal following this troop of nomads and their animals as they zig-zagged up rocky mountain paths, along ridges that provided stupendous views of that day's route, but it never felt staged in the way that some "cross-cultural experiences" can. The only staged-managed part of the entire trip was brought about by one of the trekkers who wanted a group photo, a scene that descended into farce as mule handlers and shepherds tried to herd the animals into the frame and we laughed at the chaos, shouting unhelpful instructions - "sheep to the front" and "bring on the goats" - as he struggled to capture the moment in the failing light.

The sense of adventure was there from the start. A six-hour drive from Marrakech took us through lush farmland, over the highest paved road in north Africa, Tizi'n'Tichka pass, along the barren mountain road used in the film *Babel* (the bit where the shepherd boy shoots at the tourist bus, injuring Cate Blanchett) and down into the Draa valley, an oasis of eight million date palms dotted with the crumbling, impossibly romantic remnants of deserted kasbahs.

Finally, we arrived at Hamdor, a cluster of flat-roofed adobe houses and our base for the night before starting the trek the following day. It was here that we were introduced to Zaid and his team of mule handlers and our local guides Rachid and Abdellah - the latter a sort of straight man-funny man double act, Rachid the quiet, serious one, Abdellah, the larger-than-life joker. The next day, they loaded up seven camels and six mules with what looked like enough food to last a month, and off we set.

The first day was fairly easy - we walked along a dry river bed bordered on each side by fields of wheat and barley, date palms, almond and pomegranate trees and oleander. We passed through tiny settlements and met locals on the mountains, among them an old man, dressed in a brown djellaba, orange headscarf and pink plastic sandals, who turned out to be Zaid's father, the first of many relatives we would encounter en route.

Mid-morning and time for tea - out came a blackened pot, tea glasses and a lump of sugar the size of a brick. Massive chunks were hacked off to make super-sweet mint tea, a ritual that would be repeated many times. We arrived at the campsite around lunchtime, a grassy plateau surrounded by rocky slopes covered in wild thyme and mint. Somehow, the afternoon disappeared - some of us set off on mini exploratory trips, others slept in the "berber tent", a camel-hair rug held up by wooden poles. At dusk, Charlie disappeared over a hill behind the camp and came back clutching a bag full of beers that had been cooling in a well. Later, after

dinner, someone produced a bottle of whisky, not something I usually drink but somehow, sitting by the fire under a sky thick with twinkling stars, it seemed appropriate.

On the first night, we were serenaded by 300 bleating, farting, snorting sheep and goats - not to mention 30 or so crying kids (of the goat variety) that had been separated from their mothers. I barely slept and I woke grumpy and bleary eyed to find a camel munching on the shrubs outside our tent. But sitting in the hazy early morning sunshine, listening to Abdellah singing as he fried doughnuts, it was impossible to stay grouchy - I did make a mental note to pitch our tent as far away from the animals as possible.

The next four days followed the same leisurely pattern. Up at 6.30am or so, breakfast, pack up, leave by eight. We walked for four or five hours at a mule's pace, covering no more than 10 miles a day, slow enough to stop and take in the scenery; as we climbed higher rivers appeared like silver ribbons along the valley floor, wheat and barley fields tiny squares of green so bright they seemed almost luminous against the otherwise barren land. It was like being in a John Ford film - a volcanic moonscape of undulating, sun-bleached peaks and valleys with the occasional dramatic outcrop, where wind and water had eroded the rock into organ pipes or ragged giant's teeth. But instead of cowboys and Indians, friendly berbers would appear over the horizon, and invite us to stop for tea.

On day four, we reached 2,800 metres - behind us was the Jebel Sarhro in all its barren, rugged glory, ahead the Atlas dusted in snow. In between, on the plain separating the two ranges, was the village of Tagoudilt where we were spending the night at a refuge. We should have been thrilled at the prospect of a hot shower, yet it was a huge anticlimax to return to "civilisation" after being in the wilderness for five days. Even more so when a day later we arrived in Essaouira, on the Atlantic coast.

We had booked into Madada Mogador, a boutique hotel on the beachfront for some post-trek R&R. Don't get me wrong, Essaouira is gorgeous, a higgledy-piggledy maze of blue and white houses surrounded by honey-coloured ramparts with a huge sweep of sandy beach and great seafood restaurants. And the hotel was perfect - small, friendly and terribly tasteful. The other guests were young glamorous Londoners, the girls dressed in a hippy-chic uniform of long white skirts and over-sized sunglasses, whereas we were still in trekking mode. Breakfast on the terrace, overlooking the sea, was the best of the entire holiday - freshly squeezed juice, vanilla yogurt, pancakes and proper coffee - but of course, it didn't taste anywhere near as good as Abdellah's breakfast in the mountains.