

THS Expedition 2015 - Morocco

On Wednesday 22nd July 2015 a small but intrepid group of Year 11 girls gathered at just after midnight at THS. We were joined by Mr Philp and our Leader Nicola – and so began our adventure to Morocco.

A night-time minibus journey saw us arrive at Gatwick in the early hours of the morning. An uneventful flight saw us arrive in the sweltering heat of mid-morning, just after 2 other 747s. Hence we were stuck at the end of a massive queue to get through security. Then, before we were half-way to the front of the queue, all the airport staff disappeared for morning prayers, giving us an extra half an hour to wait in the hot, stuffy lounge.

We arrived at our hotel, on the corner of the fabulous Jamaa al Fnaa – the main square in Marrakech. Whilst waiting for our dorm to be prepared we were provided with refreshments in the form of 'Berber whiskey' – black tea with mint leaves and masses of sugar, a beverage that would become very familiar to us all. Some of us then went to exchange our money into Moroccan Dirham. This was straight forward but the temperature in the shade was now 49° C – like walking into an oven; no wonder the square was virtually empty, apart from a few mad tourists.

We spent the rest of the day preparing for the next week, our project phase, when we would be helping a local charity for disabled children in the South-West of Morocco.

The minibus journey to Taroudant gave us fantastic views of the High Atlas Mountains and the parched countryside, as well as allowing us to get some idea of the agriculture and lifestyles of the local population. On arrival at our project we were met by Rashid, the Director of the Charity, who is also a P.E. instructor at the local teacher training college. He introduced us to his children: Sara Fatima (16) and Mohamed (MoMo! – 14) and his nephew Ayman (17). This delightful trio were to become our guides, friends and mentors throughout the week, and we spent many happy hours together. We were soon ensconced in a very pleasant traditional but modern dwelling, with all 'mod cons'.



Our project involved several different strands. Firstly we ripped out an old dilapidated toilet and partition wall to make way for two brand new toilets. Then we went and purchased the toilets – one of the traditional European type and one of the 'squat' type. We also purchased a whole variety of electrical items (fuse boards, wire, switches, etc – as well as a number of plumbing items – to make good the plumbing in the building). We then employed an electrician/plumber to do all the technical work to appropriate standards whilst we did the 'donkey work'.

After several days of hot, dusty work, including laying new concrete floors, not to mention chasing and squishing countless hapless cockroaches, the new toilets were ready. The electricity had been brought up to good standards, with the new fuse boards and purchases, and all the plumbing repairs were complete. We were also able to purchase brand new air conditioning for the physiotherapy room – though that had not been fitted by the time we left. We then decided to chip in



some of our own money – in addition to all we had paid for the project materials, professionals, etc. – in order to restock the supply cupboards which were literally empty. We purchased enough non-perishable foods, cleaning materials, etc. to last the charity a month.

During our stay we also scrubbed the whole building from top to bottom – even doing the physiotherapy room twice! At quiet times, when waiting for concrete to set and similar, we were able

to spend some good quality time with the users of the centre. These ranged from toddlers and young children to teens and even a few young adults. They had a wide range of disabilities and many of them came to the centre for their daily physiotherapy – which we were able to observe and support. We also helped out with teaching the youngsters some English words, helping them draw and colour, and playing games.

At the end of the project we decided to have a half-day trip to the coast at Agadir. This was a 3 hour journey and as our basic taxis got closer and closer to the coast, the cloud got thicker and thicker. We still enjoyed our morning on the beach, paddling in the Atlantic surf – quite warm, as you might expect – and generally enjoying ourselves.

Our last day in Taroudant saw us cook a traditional English meal for our hosts – toad-in-the-hole. We had planned to do a roast with Yorkshire puds but the cooking facilities did not allow for this. Our last day also coincided with the 10 year anniversary for the project. This involved most of the clients and staff plus many local dignitaries, a traditional Moroccan band and of course the local press. There was a huge buffet including many local delicacies; lots of singing and dancing; lots of speeches; and more certificates than you could imagine. The latter included certificates for our contribution to the project – a nice gesture.

After saying our farewells to the project; and out grateful thanks to Rashid, Sara Fatima, MoMo & Ayman – we boarded our minibus and headed back North-East towards the High Atlas Mountains. We passed through the plantations of trees from which the famous argan oil is harvested and witnessed large groups of tree-climbing goats as well as the odd camel. As we gradually climbed up and up into the High Atlas Mountains we traversed one of the highlights of our trip – Tizi n Tichna: a veritable switchback road with steep drop-offs on one side or the other, and occasionally on both sides. The views of the peaks and valleys were stunning. The mountainsides were studded with pretty flowers, wildlife and scattered, remote villages. We finally reached our destination where we were to start our trek. This was a small village just outside Asni and in the shadow of Mount Toubkal, the highest mountain in North Africa.



We set up camp for the night and enjoyed our first and, as it turned out to be, our last night under canvas. It was delightful to be in the cooler, fresh air of the mountains after our week of torpid heat. The scenery was much greener and dotted with streams, waterfalls and cascades. It was here that we met our trekking guide – another Mohammed, and our cook for the trek. We also had our ‘latrine’ tent perched on the hillside just above our camp site – who put it there? In reality it was little more than a scrape in the rocky ground surrounded by a large bit of tarpaulin which draped over you as you tried to use the loo.



The following morning dawned bright, clear and deliciously cool. We were joined by Geraldine our support mule and her muleteer. We wanted to call the mule Jerry but discovered he was a she! We had an early breakfast and struck camp whilst Nicola was trying to sort out Mr Philp who had gone down with a chest infection. Our trek finally got underway mid-morning sans Mr Philp – who went ahead to the village where we were going to spend the first night. At least there was some shade from the trees before we got above the tree line. We then climbed several

hundred feet to a mountain pass before following the valley East, deep into Mount Toubkal National Park. The route was undulating but followed a track for much of the way, so was not too steep and rocky. We

eventually got to our guest house late afternoon after a strenuous but enjoyable first day trekking – the longest day as it turned out.

The guest house had fabulous views over the valley with high peaks either side and eagles and alpine choughs floating over on the thermals. We had been expecting to camp – so get a proper bed, real toilets and showers was a bonus. Not only that but it sold chocolate and fizzy drinks! The next day we took it a little easier and trekked up to a prominent waterfall just below a coll on the South ridge. This was relatively gentle and allowed us to relax a bit more and enjoy the scenery.

It was at this stage that the dreaded tummy bug struck several people down and so we decided to make the guest house our base for the next few days. The following day we trekked north and over a high pass towards Oukameden, the main ski resort in Morocco. This was the day that Nicola claimed ownership of the trowel and Holly became closely acquainted with Geraldine. Our final day in the mountains was spent on a couple of leisurely walks, enjoying the local scenery and generally chilling.

Two days to go and we left the High Atlas Mountains behind and returned to Marrakech for our final full day. We spent some time exploring the amazing Souks and sights around Jamaa Al Fnaa. The architecture was so different to that we have at home. The square was thronged with people selling their wares and a whole range of entertainment from belly dancers and snake charmers to people trying to get you to pay to have your photo taken with some very sad looking monkeys. The Souks were crammed full of herbs and spices; local medicines; pierced metal works and leather, pottery and wooden crafts. They were absolutely crammed with people and just about everywhere seemed more or less the same. It would have been so easy to get lost.



Our journey home was uneventful. The tired but happy crew were met by excited family and friends back in Taverham. We thanked Nicola and Mr Philp for their help and support before the group dispersed. All that was left was to relive the experience with family and friends, have a bath and a full roast dinner, give the washing to mum; and reflect on a fabulous experience. Yes, there were ups and downs. Yes some of us got homesick, tired, poorly and grumpy. However, there was so many positive experiences to last for many years.