

World Challenge review - Morocco

2014

After nearly 18 months of preparation, anticipation and excitement, our expedition was nearly upon us. On 10th July we all hauled our kit into school for our build up day. We were introduced to our expedition leader, Mark (often referred to as Gary; very long story). He explained to us what he expected of us on the trip, and quoted "I'm a freelancer, I work for whoever pays me" which was a pretty cool thing to say. He had a vast amount of experience, having conquered Aconcagua in Argentina and also attempted our trek before, although he had never actually summited. Either way he was everything we expected from our leader, being very vigilant in his safety procedures and always putting us first, whilst allowing us to thoroughly enjoy ourselves simultaneously. We then split into our 'tent groups' and set up our brand new tents for the first time with our fresh new pegs. Who doesn't love new pegs when camping? After wrestling with our poles and assembling the tents, they were taken down and we assigned whom would be the leaders for each day. Cobey was leader on build up day, with Casey as his assistant, and then Casey took over as assistant for day 1. Scott was assigned to be leader on day 11; summit day. After lunch, it was time for the kit check, and to be told which items we'd have to rush out for that night. We were then sent home at around 5pm to get a good night's kip ready for the long day we had ahead the following day.

After a quick haircut in the morning, it was time for Casey to step up as leader as we travelled from Connah's Quay to Gatwick Airport, and then on to Marrakech. We were in school for 10am to distribute the team kit between us and for some safety talks from Mark. The bus then came at 12:30 (half an hour late!) for us to quickly board and make ourselves comfy for the five hour journey. After some lengthy delays on the M25, we got to Gatwick. Once we passed security, without any problems may I add, we were allowed to roam the airport and duty free for a few hours before our flight. Scott and Chloe had been voted as the group accountants for the journey, and here they were given the €2400 which we had been budgeted to last us the duration of the expedition. The budget sheet they were given told them how many euros (which they converted into Dirhams, D) we could spend each day. A saving was managed to be made straight away by not spending any for food in the airport, as we were given a free meal on the flight. After a relatively smooth flight, we landed in Marrakech late at night. We were escorted to the mini buses, which took us on the 20 minute drive to Hotel Ali, right on the main square in the city centre.

Due to us arriving so late, we were only able to grab a few hours' sleep before we were up bright and early for our eight hour drive to Goulmima. We drove past some amazing sights on the way, such as the film studios where TV series such as Game of Thrones and films like Gladiator were filmed, as well as some magnificent mountain scenery. Following four hot, sweaty hours crammed in a mini bus, we stopped for lunch in a nice little café for lunch. However, we encountered a problem with the budget; the D50 we had been budgeted for lunch that day was no where near enough, however we decided to compromise with the money we had saved the day before by allowing people D85 for food and a drink. We then had a straight drive to the guest house we were staying at for six nights whilst we worked on the project. The owner of the house was called Tarik, a very nice man who spoke excellent English and did his best to make us feel at home. Even though it was the month of Ramadan, he always made sure we were well fed at every meal (which his mother, wife and sister cooked every morning, afternoon and night). The food cooked was always superb and it was amazing to try so many different foods. That night we were treated to a feast, starting with some amazing Moroccan soup, and then a concoction of potatoes and other vegetables. After chilling for a few hours, bed time was

upon us. The boys had been given one big room to all pitch in on the floor, and the girls likewise. However, these rooms were far too hot and sweaty, and everyone ended up sleeping on the floor in the outdoor courtyard Tarik had in the middle of the house. Sleeping under the stars was very relaxing and a great way to chill every night after a hard day working. However we were awoken at 3am by the call to prayer coming from the mosque!

We had to get up early the next day to wolf down a heavy breakfast of thick bread with a choice of spreads, so we could finish working before the heat of the day. We had to prepare and purify our water supply for that day, and sort out our kit and sun cream ready for the day's work. At 8am, a builder called Abdullah turned up, and he would be working with us for the duration of the project. He was an extremely nice man, however spoke very little English. This did not prevent him trying to speak it though, and he was always trying to improve it; Scott donated his Arabic translation book to him after he had been taught a few useful Arabic phrases. He was very funny, often winding us up and playing around with us, and he seemed to know everyone as we walked for half hour to the school we were working at. Upon arrival at the Al Babat school, we were introduced to the other worker, Braheem, who spoke absolutely no English, but was nice none the less. Our first day of work was very much for us to find our feet and adjust to working in the heat. We pick axed and dug out a ditch around the toilet block and filled it with rocks, then proceeded to begin concreting over the yard. We were showed how to mix the cement and aggregate (without a mixer!) and then loaded it into a wheelbarrow and dumped it by Braheem who would flatten it out and make it look like pavement. When the workers wanted a barrow load, they would just shout "BARROW!", a shout which was used a lot over the five days we worked. We also had our first casualty to 'the trots' that day, when someone didn't purify their water correctly. Gross. We had been given a budget of 400 euros to spend on work materials for the project, such as cement, spades, axes, barrows and chalk, and by the end of the week all of this money had been spent. That night, Tarik organised with his friend who owned a local café for us to go there and watch the World Cup Final, and it was amazing how quickly the whole place emptied once Ramadan had ended for the day; we were the only people left there.

Day 4 saw us finish off the concreting of the toilet block, and the beginning of the rock garden. Preferring the manual labour, Scott and Casey mainly worked on the rock garden. Firstly, Abdullah marked out a circle using chalk which we had to pick and dig out, and then fill it with rocks. Then, over the course of the next few days the layers of the garden were gradually built up, having filled one layer we would begin the next one. By around day 6 three layers were almost complete, along with a water spout which had been installed up through the centre, and plants had also been planted into the bottom two layers of the garden. By this time, Cobey had begun work on his painting of the Welsh dragon, so that our school could leave their mark on the community and would be remembered. Our school also donated exercise books and pencils to the school which we had brought from the UK, and presented them to the deputy headmistress in front of the school. We had also taught some Moroccans a few Welsh words by now, with Abdullah constantly shouting "wedi blino(tired)" and Tarik taking an extreme liking to "bendigedig(fantastic)".

After many days of hard work on the rock garden and toilet block, day 7 came about. This was our last day of project, and Cobey finally managed to finish his painting on the school wall. The toilet block had also been painted green by other members of the group, and the rock garden had been finished, after lots of team work. Before we said goodbye to the school for the last time, we donated a D500 tip to both Abdullah and Braheem for being so kind, welcoming and hard working. Scott then donated a football shirt to Abdullah, Braheem and Mustapha (a bricklayer) for them to give to their sons. Casey shared his wrestling title belt with the local children and allowed them to have photos with it, which

they thoroughly enjoyed whilst singing wrestling chants! We then packed up, said farewell to the children, and left. After one last feast of mounds of spaghetti, prepared astoundingly as always by the ladies, we gave each of them a tip of D150 each as a thank you for their tireless work. Some of the lads then went out to a barbers to have a traditional cut throat shave in the heart of the town, before getting back and going to bed, ready to be up early for our long drive back to the Atlas mountains, and begin our trek!

2am soon came about, and after a slow rise, we were in the bus ready for an eight hour drive to Imlil. Upon arrival, we met Mohammed, who would be our guide for the next few days as we attempted to summit the highest mountain in North Africa, Mount Toubkal. The peak is at 4167m. We then had a short walk up to Hotel Armed, where we would be based for a few days at around 2200m. This hotel was very nice and we were greeted with a lunch of tasty sardines, pasta and salad. We then relaxed for the day, enjoying the fantastic views of the mountains and the amazingly engineered buildings placed on the slopes of mountains, saving our energy for our acclimatisation trek the next day.

Our wake up call the next day was at 6:30, and we were delighted to find we had a change for breakfast! We had been given bread every morning up until now, but in Armed we were given porridge, which was delicious. This provided us with a good release of energy for when we trekked up to the waterfall. The views on the way up to 2500m were fantastic, however I must say the waterfall wasn't very exciting. None the less we enjoyed the day and the water was refreshing. After cooling off by the fall, we headed back down to Armed, where again we were welcomed with a huge lunch. After pottering around for a few hours whilst relaxing, showering and doing our washing, we sat outside gazing at the stars before getting off to bed.

Another early start the next day meant it was time for us to head up to base camp. The walk took us around 5 hours, and we passed many shops selling chocolate and drinks along the way. We later found out none of these shops were legal as we were in a national park, however they make so much money from the tourists they just pay the fines and stay open. They did however provide an outlet for us from the sun for a few minute's rest every once in a while. With Hussain on the mule behind us supporting us, we finally reached 3207m. We pitched up our tents with great difficulty due to the fact was near enough solid. In the end the pegs were ditched and we used rocks instead. The guide ropes were also ingeniously used as a washing line. We all dined inside a big tent that night, with the chef who had come with us cooking some amazing Moroccan soup followed by spaghetti. We all found eating in the tent very cramped and uncomfortable really. That night we were zipped up in our tents very early ready for our summit attempt.

The next morning was particularly difficult, as we had to get ready in the pitch black. We began walking around 3am, with our headtorches on. It was freezing, however it soon warmed up once the Sun started to rise, and the fleeces were soon off again. We faced many different challenges on this day, varying to climbing over huge boulders to having to scramble up steep shingle which fell under your feet. After around four hours, we made it. We summited as a team in a line so that no one was left behind. The views from the peak were absolutely fantastic, and we could actually see Algeria to the East! We stayed for around half hour, taking lots of photos and feeding on the bread and nuts Mohammed had brought for us. After posing with our Welsh flag, we began our descent. This was indeed more difficult than climbing the mountain, and the loose shingle under foot made it very hard to keep steady. Many people opted for the "keep going as fast as you can" method of trying to not slide. The lower levels of our trek looked extremely different to how they had done in the pitch black of the morning, and we reached base camp again in around 3 hours. We were then allowed to chill and relax for the day whilst recharging, ready to go back down to Hotel Armed, a journey which took us around four hours the next day.

Getting here and being able to shower and wash our clothes properly was a huge relief, after the disgusting conditions of the washing facilities at base camp.

Having finished our trek, you would have thought we would get a lie in the next morning. But no. Mohammed was at the hotel bright and early to walk us down through Imlil to our minibus, where we were to be transported back to Marrakech for a day of rest and relaxation. After paying Mohammed a tip of D500, for just in general being one of the coolest guys any of us had ever met, the bus drove us back the hour long journey to Hotel Ali. Marrakech looked very different to how we had seen it the first time on our first day in Morocco, as we had only seen it in the pitch black. It was alive with sound and car and the general hustle and bustle of the city. There were snake charmers around, orange juice stalls and people selling souvenirs all around the main city square. We found a small bakery around the corner from our hotel, and purchased a cake for Miss Edwards, whose birthday it was that day. After a quick meet up, we then dived into the souks of Marrakech; what an experience. Everything was so crowded and cramped. You had people left, right and centre trying to haul you into their shop and get you to buy their merchandise. The things on sale here were much more authentic than those out in the main square. The labyrinth of shops would've taken years to learn, and we all managed to get lost several times trying to find a way out. We regrouped around 7pm, washed, changed, and headed out for tea as a team after we had presented Miss with her cake, which she was thoroughly grateful for. The whole team ate in the town square, with our expedition leader and the leader going out earlier to arrange a table for all seventeen of us; however they seemed to have double booked, and told just about everyone they would eat there, in order to see which deal they could offer them. Those who were not chosen seemed most displeased with us all. After tea, we were allowed to roam again, only this time requiring a member of staff with us. We passed a mass prayer on the street, which was very surreal. Unfortunately we had to turn in early that night, ready to be up at 3am for our trip back to the airport, and back home.

After two weeks in Morocco, all three of us have had our eyes widened to what the real world is like out there. We feel privileged to have the education facilities we do in this country after repairing the school, and also realised how unimportant wealth actually is, with Abdullah being the cheeriest person any of us had ever met. We were also opened to the concept of a new religion, with almost the whole country being Muslim. Ramadan was a particularly strange thing to experience, as people gave us seething looks if we were to eat in public. We would like to take the opportunity to thank Evergreen Partners for giving us the one final push needed to make over a years worth of hard work finally worthwhile. Thank you, and God Bless.