

Moroccan magic

Orange dunes, blue skies and forward-going Barb stallions make for an unforgettable trip says *Catherine Austen*, as she explores the Sahara from the best seat in the house



The 'vast scope of sand and rock, the sense of space' of the Sahara makes for a life-affirming experience



'Fit as a flea' — Ossmane the Barb stallion proves a perfect companion in the Sahara

AS we descend a stone-strewn path down an outcrop of sharp black rocks, the horses start jig-jogging. The little dappled grey stallion I am riding, Ossmane, begins to bounce, his pricked ears flicking in anticipation.

In front of us is a vast, ancient, dried-up lake bed, bleached bone-white by the desert sun. We are new to the route we are taking through the Moroccan part of the Sahara, but the horses are not. Abdel, our tour guide, says we can spread out but that we are not to overtake him. I shorten my reins and link a couple of fingers through the martingale.

We trot for a few strides, then break into canter. Ossmane shoots forward with the explosive power of a sprinter. Within seconds we are going flat out, and I realise I am going faster than I ever have before on a horse, and I include galloping up Warren Hill in Newmarket on a fit Flat horse in that.

There is only one horse ahead and it isn't Abdel's. Laurent, a French diplomat, is about three lengths in front on a rangy roan. Ossmane's little ears are flat back; he is really

racing. He is a Barb stallion, and his breed's genes provided some of the foundations for racehorses the world over. It is thrilling and slightly terrifying, this flat-out charge with blinding sun beating down.

After a while, I become aware of shouting behind us, and use all my strength to slow Ossmane down. He complies; we drop back to a trot, and Abdel catches up with us. He doesn't look pleased and I slink towards the back of the pack of 10 riders, leaving Laurent to receive the telling-off.

Laurent's diplomatic skills are proven: he listens for half a minute, and then changes the subject.

We weren't really out of control, just a little drunk on the sheer speed of these sure-footed, sharp little horses in this breathtakingly dramatic and vast landscape. I don't blame Abdel in the slightest — having responsibility for 10 strangers, all riding Barb stallions, for six days in the Sahara is a daunting task, and one he does with great efficiency, charm and (usually) a sense of humour.

But I'd risk the dressing-down again for an unforgettable adrenalin rush like that.



'What I shall remember the longest are the colours — the saturated blue of the sky, the orange of the dunes'

Main and insets: impeccable and considerate horse care, high adrenalin bursts of speed and the odd 'sardonic' camel make for a memorable trip



I SHOULD confess I've always been slightly sniffy about riding holidays. "If I want to spend six hours a day on a horse, I'll go hunting." "I go on holiday to get away from horses..." and so on.

So, like a spoilt brat, when *H&H* suggested I went to Morocco, I agreed, but not with the vast levels of enthusiasm you might understandably expect.

At least it would be sunny, I supposed. I had little idea of what to expect from my North African sojourn, but did wonder how I would get on spending a week away with a bunch of strangers riding nose to tail on some tired old nag.

Stupid girl. Given the amount of hunting I have done, I should know that the best way to see countryside, be it the Cotswolds or the Sahara, is on the back of a horse. Somehow you don't feel as though you are intruding on the landscape; it feels right to be there. You have time to observe, to drink in the detail of your surroundings, almost entirely unaltered by man, yet you can pass through it fairly quickly when needed.

WE flew into Ouarzazate, south of Morocco's High Atlas Mountains, and spent most of the first day driving south through the starkly beautiful Anti-Atlas mountain range and along the Draa valley. Eventually we turned off down a dusty road, finally arriving at Mcissi (apparently — it looked as though we were in the middle of nowhere) where our horses were snoozing in the hot sun, waiting for us.

We were an eclectic group, ranging in age from Maria, 30, an Austrian surgeon in a Swiss hospital, to Michael, a Devon farmer in his late 70s. Half of the group were French; four of us were from the UK; one Austro-Swiss; and Saadia, a management consultant from Wyoming, managed to represent two continents by having been born in Australia.

We were each assigned a horse, and I knew quickly that I had struck lucky with Ossmane. He was around 14.2hh, well-muscled, fit as a flea and quite feisty. But he didn't put a foot wrong all week. He liked being at the front — so did I — and strode along happily; I didn't once have to use my legs to ask him to go

forward, only to guide him through difficult terrain. He would have made a brilliant hunter somewhere like Exmoor or Northumberland; he was fast and clever.

The tack was European and in good nick, and we were soon tacking up and untacking efficiently, folding the thick blankets that served as saddlepads correctly and knotting the ropes they wore round their necks so they could be tethered at lunchtime and overnight.

Abdel — who is educated to degree level, speaks several languages and used to train racehorses — and Mohammed look after these horses immaculately, and they were in excellent condition.

IN all, we rode around 100 miles over six days, to Tafraout, Foug Mharech, to Ouzina, Jdaid and Merzouga, where we stayed at the base of Erg Chebbi, the highest and most spectacular sand dunes in Morocco.

Each day was different; we rode for between five and seven hours most days through landscape that changed constantly. Sometimes we were negotiating pale orange sand dunes reminiscent of *Lawrence of Arabia* (I know, wrong desert). At other times we were on rocky moonscapes that resembled Dartmoor but with sand; we ascended and

descended shale paths up and down basalt-covered crags, rode along pancake-flat plateaus and wound our way through arid valleys dotted with desiccated desert plants.

The food for our lunch — and all the water, food and hay for the horses, along with our luggage — was crammed into an old truck. At lunchtime each day, delicious tagines and chopped salads were produced from scratch and we ate in the shadow of acacia or tamarisk trees, and the horses watered, fed and rested. There was even a pile of mattresses tied on to the roof of the truck so we could have a quick kip after lunch if desired.

As for the bunch of random strangers — I soon realised I spend far too much of my life with people who ride horses for a living. How often do I meet people who have "real" jobs in the real world? Not very often, I tell you.

We discovered that Michael had spent 25 years working on agricultural projects in Africa and India. Marie-Laure is a doctor in a psychiatric hospital near Lille; Laurent is the second-in-command at the French embassy in Tunisia.

Gérard used to run the tourism side of ski resorts and is clearly a bit of an old raver; one night Abdel and Mohammed and one of the men working in the riad in which we were staying started playing Berber drums, and Gérard danced like he was at an acid house party.

Maria, my funny and sweet roommate, revealed her next trip was diving in Antarctica. I felt terribly insular — my next trip will almost certainly be to report an equestrian event in a field.

The two British women, Hermione and Jo, were very amusing: "No gates," pointed out Hermione as we discussed the advantages of riding in Morocco as opposed to the Midlands.

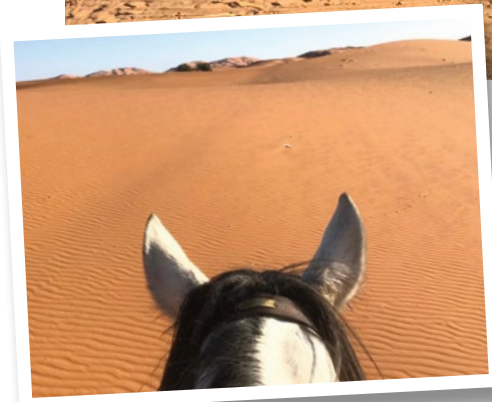
No gates, no dog-walkers, no cars. Plenty of camels, though, with their sardonic faces and great leathery feet making unmistakable prints in the sand. Not much other wildlife... Abdel said there were desert foxes, but, unsurprisingly, they weren't trotting about in the day time, and he pointed out the signs of several species of wild gerbils.

Most of the sparse vegetation is scrub and thorns, although there were a few succulents and a strange, poisonous kind of inedible melon that Jo named "death melons". One day we rode along a valley bottom and Abdel pointed out some bright green, broad-leaved little plants that he said was rocket — nothing like the stuff you find in supermarkets here.



'A bunch of strangers' become convivial companions over simple but delicious meals

The horses are tethered in the shade to feed, drink and rest. Below: a spectacular 'through the ears' view with Ossmane's furry lugs



up gritty, stony tracks — you needed your sunglasses to act as windshields as little bits of rock pebble-dashed your face.

Abdel insisted we walked beside our horses for the first half-mile and the last half-mile each morning and evening to warm up or cool down their muscles. The first time we did this my jodhpur boots rubbed my heels raw, and from then on I wore an unusual combination of turquoise trainers and brown leather gaiters, which was actually the perfect get-up.

I borrowed plasters and Compeed from everyone in the group, and gave Maria my little pot of Sudocrem in return, for her sore bottom.

Talking of Maria, her only fault was a propensity for exercise and fitness. While most of us flopped about, drinking the refreshing, sweetened herbal tea presented to us at the end of the day, she went for a run or did her training regime of squats and star jumps.

The value of this was clear on the last night in the desert, when she, Laurent and I climbed a vast sand dune near the hotel. She skipped up in bare feet and a sarong; I nearly killed myself puffing up, in my breeches and trainers.

Then she waltzed back down like a Swiss chamois, long-legged Laurent galloped down like an Arc winner and I stumbled through the sand like a short-striding cob needing a wind operation. More star jumps, less pasta, I fear.

PERHAPS what I shall remember the longest are the colours; the saturated blue of the sky, the orange of the dunes, the red and black of the rocky mountains, the off-white of the dry lake beds. The midnight blue of the desert night and the quick flash of a shooting star.

One night a couple of us climbed a small sand dune to watch the sunset. Turning 360° as the dusky night enveloped us, we could see a few weak lights from a distant village. Nothing else. I fell in love with the emptiness, the vast scope of sand and rock, the sense of space.

I long to be there now, with Ossmane's furry ears pricked in front of me. **H&H**

BOOKING DETAILS

MOROCCO — Horses, Dunes and Nomads (Equus Journeys), from £1,090 (subject to exchange rate fluctuations). Flights to Ouarzazate not included but available from Royal Air Maroc or Ryanair. equus-journeys.com