

# A WORLD APART

**Wayne Mitchelson's unforgettable overland adventure recce to Morocco with World's Apart Adventures in his Defender 90 Td5 proved an experience of a lifetime, even for a much-travelled and seasoned off-roader**

One grey October afternoon, I watched the Shropshire rain run down the glass of my living room window. The thought of another damp winter approaching filled me with dread. I had a Defender outside my door and a few weeks to spare. I needed to feel the sun on my back and taste the dust again.

Somewhere in the world the sun would be shining and my Land Rover was the perfect tool to take me there. It had to be somewhere with colour and somewhere far away from the imminent British winter.

South was the obvious choice, the mystique of North Africa drew me like no other country could and with the time allowed I could just

about fit in a trip to Morocco. With very little prep time for both vehicle and itinerary I hit the World Wide Web and looked for a little help in finding a good circular route. Within minutes help came in the form of Worlds Apart Adventures, an overland company that caters for both the discerning traveller who wants fine quality accommodation and for the more adventurous types who feel canvas and campfires are more appropriate. Proprietor Barry Lyons promptly responded to my email with good news, he was himself on his way to Morocco for the first two weeks in November, putting in new routes for his '09 itineraries. Barry kindly invited me to join Worlds Apart on an '09 pre-scout adventure.

A trip into the Sahara is only a pipedream for many. Talking to Barry, however, fills you with the confidence you need to take on a trip like this. He advised me on what to take and what not to take and listened to what I wanted from the trip. He is clearly a desert fox with masses of experience in the harsh conditions of Morocco.

## LESS IS MORE

For some overland travellers, bolting as many shiny bits onto their vehicle is half the fun, but Barry Lyons recommended the less is more direction. He says a heavily-laden and modified 4x4 has no place in the Sahara. In fact, he recommends and encourages



standard vehicles on his tours. Land Rover has spent over 60 years perfecting a vehicle that will go anywhere on earth, so Morocco with some careful driving poses no problem for a standard Land Rover.

Now convinced my standard Td5 90 was probably the perfect tool for the job, I went to KTC 4X4 for its major pre-desert health check and service. Rather than take all the spare parts that are likely to go wrong on a Td5, KTC recommended we change them in the comfort of the workshop rather than on the dusty road side. All this sensible preparation took my mind of the incoming winter and focused all my attention on the imminent trip to the Dark Continent.

The ferry to Bilbao was booked and the trip was cast in stone. We were going! The sun was just a ferry ride away and the anticipation of two weeks of grit below my wheels filled me with excitement. The departure date came all too soon as I was still working on my 90 at the eleventh hour. Meanwhile, Barry had sent me the itinerary for our Extreme Adventure. We arranged to meet up at the ferry and it was clear we were not the only Brits heading south to the sun.

One of the major benefits of booking a trip with Worlds Apart Adventures is you get two support vehicles on the tour. At the dockside we found Barry's standard-looking Discovery 300Tdi along with his second support car,

a standard Td5 Discovery. I felt a little over embellished in my roof-tented 90, but the guys from Worlds Apart made us very welcome.

The Bay of Biscay is as good a place to get to know your new trail buddies. France glided by as we dined in style, it seemed our dinner guests, including Barry were all part-time Land Rover Experience instructors. If your confidence was lacking before, you could be reassured you were among some of the most highly-trained off-road drivers the world has to offer. Refreshed from a good sleep we found ourselves cruising down Spain, destination Algeciras. A grim dockside greets you but you know just a 20-minute ferry ride away is Africa. We opted to spend the night in Spain

Entering the foot hills of Erg Chebby



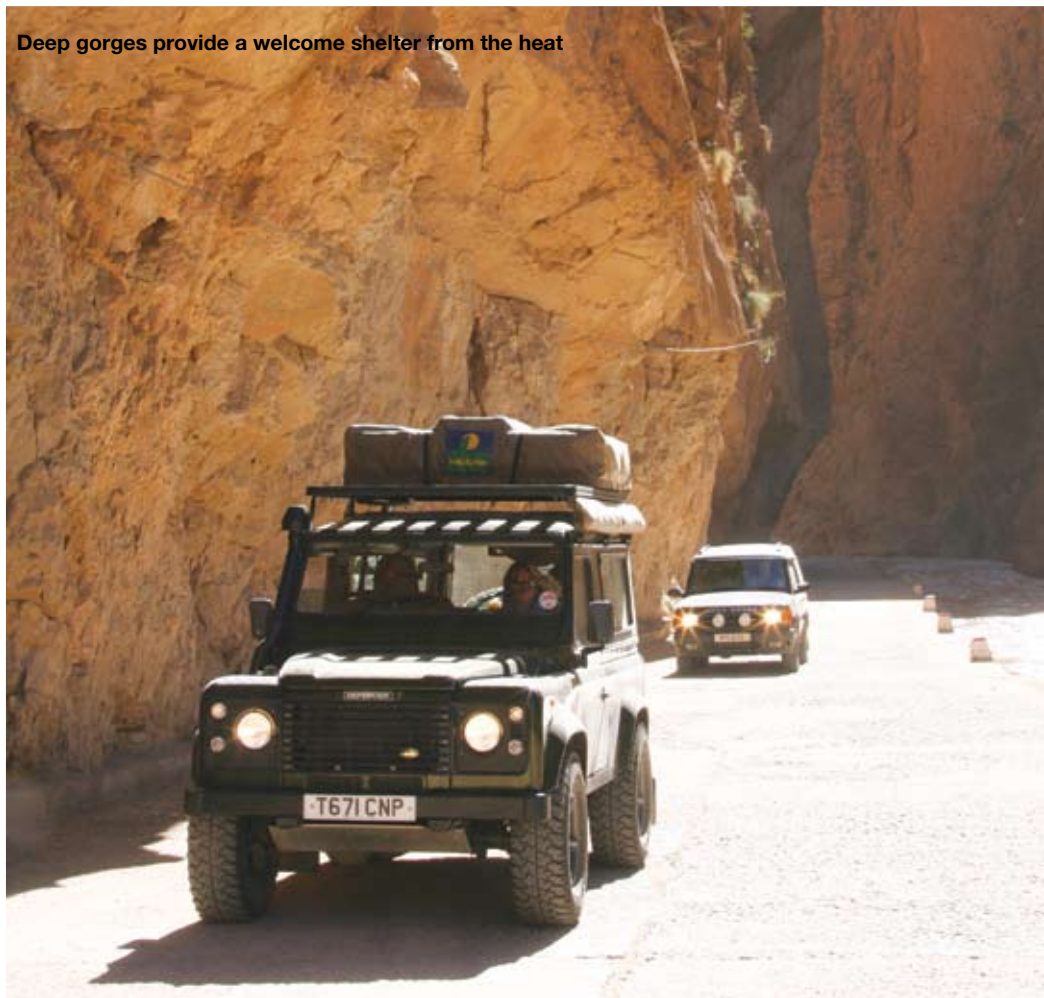
and catch the early crossing to Ceuta. Filled with anticipation we boarded the new super cat car ferry that catapults you across the straits of Gibraltar.

### GATES OF HELL

Before I could finish my cup of tea we were tying up at Ceuta – no passports needed yet as Spain still maintains a strong foothold in Ceuta. We wound our Land Rovers through narrow eclectic streets; Arab Berber and European faces gazed as we passed through the gateway between Europe and Africa. Within minutes we were confronted with the gates of Hell. Illegal trafficking and immigration are rife here, and to the average European this border could be very uncomfortable without a guide. Barry took it all in his stride and met his border fixer man Mohammed. He is a local official whose job is to aid travellers smoothly and efficiently as possible through this seemingly impossible situation. On the far side of the border we met our local fixer Hamid, who would accompany us throughout our adventure.

Within 40 minutes Morocco's frontier was behind us and we were climbing through the green lush landscape. Almond trees lined the winding minor roads that commanded magnificent vistas of cedar,

Deep gorges provide a welcome shelter from the heat





The Discovery 2 makes light work of the Moroccan roads



fir and oak that lay below us. Isolated houses with pitched tin roofs are scattered across this fertile land. Pre-school children ran from their open doorways to wave and cheer. We started our drive south towards our first wilderness camp on the bank of one of Morocco's largest lakes. The previous week's rains had made the tracks very greasy, so driving the last few miles to the camp was akin to a Camel Trophy type exercise.

From the roof tent window the clearing morning clouds revealed the beautiful Rif Mountains. Hamid greeted us with his special mint tea, while Barry briefed us on the day's plan and goals. Worlds Apart trips are a lot less pressured than its competitors and the average daily mileage is a lot lower, making our adventure less stressful. Barry advised us to keep speeds low on our second day, as we would be travelling on winding gravel tracks that pass through small towns and villages. Once again, we felt like royalty, as every person we passed waved enthusiastically. We stopped in one small village where Hamid urged us to follow him through a low doorway. With a huge smile on his face he welcomed us to the first of several coffee shops that day. The



Hard to believe it was November



scent of fresh ground coffee and mint tea filled the air and provided a very welcome break from the Land Rovers. As we were wild camping again tonight the village was the perfect place to stock up with fresh bread and provisions.

## CHEAP AS CHIPS

The next morning we headed east to the eighth century town of Taza, located in the lower foothills of the Rif and the Middle Atlas. Barry explained that Taza is a stopping-place that seldom figures on the tourist route. I filled the Defender's tank for £17 including tea – result – then we headed into the national park of Jbel Tazzeka – a truly jaw-dropping region, but definitely not the Morocco I had experienced on previous trips. I never could have imagined just how green and fertile parts of this country could be. Cedar

and shaded cork forests passed by as the perfume of wild herbs scented the 90's cabin. A little grubby and looking the worse for wear, the Land Rovers now looked like they belonged in this fantastic landscape.

Sharon, my travelling companion, and I looked like we had crawled from under a dusty rock, so we were glad to hear that night's official campsite had the option of roof tenting or a small clean bungalow with hot showers. We left the campsite the following day clean and promptly, as we had a long day ahead. Heading south once again, our destination was Midelt. Before we left town the trucks were checked over and fuelled up. Climbing for a few hours up a dusty trail we made our way across the middle Atlas, reaching 2000 metres of altitude. We drove down endless ribbons of straight black top with a huge blue sky



A Berber man watches our slow progress

Heading south from northern rain



A very blue sky welcome's us to the south





overhead. Barry's Tdi turned left onto a sandy desert track, and I felt like we were now truly locked into the adventure. Winding slowly down the dirt tracks the dust settled thick on the Defender's dash top. I was glad to see and smell the north of Morocco, but I was ecstatic to taste the dust of the south.

Children ran behind the Land Rovers as we passed down the narrow streets of a typical rural village. Faster gravel tracks led us to a dry lakebed that left white powder clouds in the 90's wake. On days like this you appreciate the freedom the Land Rover and overland travel can give. Multiple Wadi crossings and rock fields slowed progress to a low-range crawl. After climbing a large sandy crest, the awesome High Atlas towered before us – it was snow-capped and breathtakingly magnificent. Another hour of dust and the three Land Rovers descended into a red rock gorge where we discovered an abandoned French mining town. Our tiny vehicles passed by the immense ghostly



Joyfull stall holders love to practice their English

Wildcamp on the Sahara plain



## Wheezing our way up to 2000 metres



remains of what was once a major industry. A young man on board a bicycle, clearly made up from several bicycles, stopped in the dusty track ahead to welcome us to this forgotten gorge. Sharon drove the 90 down the single track while I explored on foot. The long journey south was worth it for this one day alone.

We arrived at our Auberge in the dusk where a fantastic traditional Moroccan meal and an open fire awaited us. We needed a good rest, as the next day would take us onto the pre-Saharan plain where we would feel the real heat of the desert. The next day's drive was across gravel fields and sand rivers. I knew what was coming, but nothing prepares you for the magnificence of Erg Chebbi – the Sahara's largest sand dunes and our evening's destination. As we approach, the pink sand dunes slowly grow into gigantic mountains. The option once more of camping or a beautiful hotel room was the choice. With a glass of wine in our hands we watched the sun set over the pink dunes and reflected on the day's adventure.

We were halfway through Worlds Apart Adventure's Extreme Tour and I felt like I had seen a huge chunk of this varied colourful country I had never seen before. In next month's 4x4 we journey north where plummeting temperatures and deep mountain snow tested us to freezing point. ■

For prices and availability visit [www.worldsapartadventures.co.uk](http://www.worldsapartadventures.co.uk)



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