

Mike Hayes - Marrakesh or Bust on a Norton Comando



Hi everyone, this is Mike or Scouse here, I always tend to think I was a camel in a previous life, I've always had this thing for the desert, when I was 22 back in 1974 I had a Norton 850 Comando and put together in my mind a bit of a trip out to the Sahara. I had 4 weeks annual leave and managed another 2 months off as unpaid leave, so I had a 3 month window to try and make this happen. My friend George was going pillion, we bought a ferry ticket from Southampton to Bilbao and a Calais to Dover ticket for our return, I had £70 cash in my pocket and my mate George had £80 in his. Just to put things into perspective I think it used to cost around £2:50 to fill the 5 gallon tank on the Comando, so in early August we set off from Liverpool to see where the roads would take us.



Heading south we caught our ferry ok at Southampton and arrived in Bilbao as planned, I'd been to southern Spain several times before but can remember being surprised at how green Northern Spain seemed to be. We headed south and like on our rideouts we took a quiet scenic route, rather than the main roads, it took us several days to reach our destination Algeciras, we had just been sleeping at the side of the road wherever we stopped on our journey so far, but decided to splash out and get a campsite for the night.

We caught a ferry next morning to Ceuta, this is Spanish owned territory on the North African coast and from there crossed the border into Morocco, heading south still we passed through Rabat, Casablanca, Marrakesh and Agadir. The roads were all tarmac that we were on and very welcoming compared to what lay ahead of us, I can always remember every time we stopped for a breather all you could see around you was scrub land yet within ten minutes several kids appeared to check you out and they absolutely fascinated by the motorbike.

Leaving Agadir heading southeast, we crossed into Algeria and all of a sudden that feeling of being 'in the middle of nowhere' really hits home. There was no sat nav or mobile phones back then, all we had was a paper map which in reality was a bit like looking at a piece of sandpaper, it showed the few roads that existed, mainly stone tracks, petrol stations and minefields! The few tarmac roads we encountered were as straight as anything and surprisingly enough certain areas do have wet periods, so what they do is undulate the road to channel the flow of water, trouble is out the wet season these undulations fill with soft sand so you can have a nice straight road or track and every several miles you'll come to a 75 yard section that's filled with sand and trying to drive a fully laden Norton across it was like having two flat tyres. We slowly headed east and as in Spain we just slept wherever we stopped. We carried as much water and food as we could carry, what you could buy in the small villages we passed through was very limited, there was always bread in some form, cheese, onions, tomatoes and fruit was usually available so most of our meals were sandwiches, cheese and onion, cheese and tomato or cheese surprise (that's cheese without onion or tomato).



mightn't sound very appealing but when there's very little else on offer, its very welcome.

After a couple of weeks being down there we met up with a couple of ex army trucks doing a London to Kenya safari, these guys knew the roads down here, so we stayed with them for several days, there are plenty of camels wandering around everywhere and I think one of the trucks exhausts spooked a youngster which ran right in front of me, I had to swerve and the bike went down on the stone surface. Escaped pretty lightly except for the handlebars, one side was about 6 inches higher than the other, I took the handlebars off the next morning and the trucks had big towing hooks on their front bumpers, used these while levering the bars back to their usual shape.



We parted from the trucks and we started our journey North back towards home, after a couple more days we were about 40 miles from the Algerias northern coast, we pulled into a small town to stock up on food and when we parked up, a voice in English shouted to us. We went across and met up, there was 4 of them and they were installing the big tower cranes on a building site nearby, they were staying in a big hotel overlooking the Mediterranean and each of them had a suite each, with a spare bedroom, we had several nights there with them for free, beds, proper toilet and shower, absolute luxury!

Leaving there we headed east on the coast road and crossed into Tunisia, the customs guards made us take all the luggage off the bike to check, buggers, I think they were just a bit bored! We caught the ferry from Tunis to Sicily and travelled back up the leg of Italy, then through France to Calais to catch our ferry, then the Motorway back to Liverpool. I'd guess this sort of journey isn't everyones cup of tea, some rough times and plenty of good times and memories that'll last a lifetime, but overall, I wouldn't have missed doing it for the world!



SCOUSE

