

ULULA ACCOUNTS OF FOREIGN TREKS 1998 – 2003

2021 Note.

This file has accounts of just the Foreign Treks during this period. It concludes with 2003 Morocco Trek, the last one available when I did my research for the 2004 Trekking Centenary Brochure.

I leave it for others to continue the story from that time.

There was a parallel series of Scottish Treks organised by Alan McDonald.

Allan Witton 2021.

1998 FOREIGN TREK - PYRENEES

Simon Ashworth

The first three weeks of the summer holidays saw thirty five boys and staff embark on a Foreign Trek with a difference. This year we left MGS with only the minimum equipment required for an ultra-lightweight expedition in the French and Spanish Pyrenees. We were to travel entirely on foot from Cauterets to Bagnères-de-Luchon: a distance of over 150 miles with a total of 30,000 feet of climbing. From the moment of our departure from Old Hall Lane to our return we were reliant only on scheduled public services for our transportation, small local stores for our provisions and most importantly, the skills and resources within our group. Our courage, determination and innovation were certainly the main factors which contributed to the success of the expedition and to our overall enjoyment of Trek.

A late spring snow fall followed by the hottest summer temperatures since 1941 enhanced the spectacular mountain scenery of the Pyrenees. Walking conditions were almost perfect - only two cloudy days provided opportunities for low visibility navigation practice!

Along our route we climbed over high cols, traversed precipitous ridges, 'hopped' from cirque to cirque, and camped alongside secluded lakes and mountain streams. On our first morning in the mountains we awoke to see Vignemale (3298 m), the highest peak in the French Pyrenees, crowning the cirque above our bivouac site. Later in our trek we scrambled to the summits of Pimené (2801 m) in France and Pic de Barrosa (2746 m) in Spain.

The final jewel of the trek was a day in the glaciers, moraine boulders, and beautiful meltwater lakes of Posets (3375 m). Quiet contemplation was the usual result of these large climbs (although certain people always managed to summon up that little extra energy for a chat) and the feeling of relief and euphoria experienced whilst sitting on a peak overlooking the mountains of France and Spain, whilst eating the day's chocolate ration, will be a memory that will be hard to forget.

Self sufficiency was a central theme of our Pyrenean Trek. Each tent group was responsible for a new lightweight tent, a single stove, and for buying and carrying provisions for up to four days at a time. We spent most of our nights in the mountains, nearly always camping or bivouacking above 2000 m, and restocked on our rare days in the valleys. We made brief excursions for supplies into villages which sometimes consisted of nothing more than a small shop and six houses, and on occasions a prearranged delivery was brought up into the mountains to meet us.

We learned new skills quickly through necessity. We produced both culinary delights and disasters, sometimes after ten hours of walking, out of the provisions bought in the village a few days before. We used our rudimentary needlework skills to do on-the-spot tent repairs and we washed and dried ourselves and our clothes in icy mountain streams and pools. One great thing was that throughout all of our adventures and adversities others were always ready to help when needed. Tolerance and adaptability were vital.

The independence that we enjoyed on this year's Trek was a result of more planning and hard work than any boy could really imagine. The fact that everything ran so smoothly is a great credit to Mr. Cittanova and his staff. A single logistical error could have proved catastrophic - possibly no maps, no food, or no coach back to Manchester - but careful planning and confident execution ensured that all went so well.

The completion of this Trek has given us a great sense of achievement and a wonderful feeling of independence. To take part in everything that Trek entails, in the company of a group of close friends is a very rewarding experience. It is one which we hope will be repeated both within MGS and in future years.

1999 FOREIGN TREK - MOROCCO

Group A

As we arrived in Morocco we were made immediately aware of the importance of the monarchy, for it was the King's birthday and we were greeted by bands, flags and celebrating Moroccans. How ironic then, that the death of King Hassan II of Morocco took place during our visit. This could have caused problems for this year's itinerary but in practical terms, life went on and we were given an additional insight into Moroccan life in the mountains, in the desert, and in a major North African city.

For the first six days we were supported by mules to carry our packs, and by cooks who provided us with ample quantities of tajine or couscous, and who on their last evening cooked a fresh mutton stew. Our route began in the remote Berber village of Agouti, and after a couple of days in the valleys we camped at over 3000 m, but progress was slowed by an episode of upset stomachs which affected over half the party.

Those fit enough enjoyed the steep climb of Tignousti (3819 m) and the panoramic views from its summit. The ascent of Mgoun at 4068 m two days later, was the high point of the trip, and involved a spectacular walk along a narrow ridge to the summit.

From here, we descended the Mgoun gorges for five days, from the high mountains to semi-desert, carrying full backpacks and cooking our own food over wood fires. A French group were surprised, that we not only did this and carried our own tents, but then slept out under the stars too.

There were two days which we spent wading through the water as the gorge was too narrow to have a path alongside. The high, sheer cliffs on each side provided scenery that none of us will ever forget, and walking in a river provided welcome relief from the heat. We finished in the village of Ait Yule, where showers gave us a much needed opportunity to remove eleven days of accumulated dust and dirt!

Local transport in Morocco is very different from what we are used to. We experienced rides in battered minibuses on an unmade and treacherous mountain road, a ride in the back of a lorry, and two days travelling in shared taxis of seven people to Zagora, on the edge of the Sahara desert. One feature in common is that all the drivers appear to pay little attention to the safety of themselves or anyone else; the only part of the vehicle guaranteed to work is the horn.

No visit to the desert could be complete without a trip by camel! The discomforts of riding an animal with a huge hump in its back were more than made up for by the novelty of the ride out to a Bedouin style camp amongst some small sand dunes and by watching the stunning desert sunset.

Back in Marrakech, our city tour took us both to a foul smelling tannery, and to an apothecary's, where we were invited to smell and to buy spices and potions which the chemist claimed would cure most known illnesses. There was also the inevitable carpet show and a walk through the maze of the souks, where without a guide, it is all too easy to become totally lost. Everyone in Morocco is desperate to sell something, and now back in Manchester, it is a relief not to be pestered by shopkeepers jumping out to offer their goods and then, realising a lack of interest, offering a special lower 'student price'.

However, the fact that Foreign Trek exists to offer both this, and the many other new experiences I had on this trip, is a great advert for the school. Thanks also to the staff, Miss Renshaw, Dr. Willson and Mr. Witton as well as Mike Wynne from Walks Worldwide, who made all this possible.

Chris Bentley

Group B

In comparison with later sights, sounds, and impressions, the initial outward trip remains somewhat bland in the memory, even if, by the end, the ideas of planes and coaches, and their associated perks of free food and service stations, became unusually tantalising. From the windows of the plane we waved goodbye to Europe, and landed some two hours later at that most alluringly-named of destinations, Casablanca. A long coach drive through dark countryside later, and all were ensconced in, or usually due to the heat, on top of, their beds in the cavernous Hotel Foucauld.

The early morning light reveals an alien way of life going about its early morning rituals - streets contested by taxis buses, innumerable moped-riders, horse carts, man-pulled trolleys, and the occasional foolhardy pedestrian. Add to this the wave of smells which assail the nostrils, and your first sight of Marrakech is unforgettable.

Today, all 18 boys of group B venture out into the souk or market to try their hand at bargaining. It should be noted that the souk is a place for those with experience and guile - and on that first day, our inexperienced attempts at striking deals left all with something to rue - with most emerging with something that they have paid far too much for. Yet Marrakech leaves an indelible impression, and even if the buzz of the city can seem oppressive and often threatening, most manage to lose themselves (sometimes quite literally) in the excitement and bustle. In the evening with temperatures still high, we indulge ourselves in a huge banquet laid out for us and hunger sated, we retire, minds still awash with impressions.

The next morning sees a rapid departure in minibuses, bound for the lower reaches of the High Atlas, via the spectacular Uzd cascades and Agouti, where we will start our trek proper at some 1700 metres above sea level. The journey, a two stage marathon culminating in a ride in a battered old Mercedes bus over un-metalled tracks, is something of an ordeal, and all are glad to alight at the gîte d'étape intact. The appearance of a large frog in a dormitory is a timely reminder that all is not what it seems. Most of us sleep out under the stars and anticipation levels remain universally high for the morrow.

Julian Forbes

Waking up in the cramped rooms the next morning we presumed our day would be idly spent sipping mint tea, relaxing in the gîte, and nibbling on freshly baked bread. We were wrong. The morning was spent in sweltering heat struggling up a hill behind Agouti which finally rewarded us with a panoramic view of the Bou Guemés valley. In the afternoon some of us chose to go for a stroll to 'nearby' Tabant, a stroll which ended up being a five hour, ten mile hike. We returned from Tabant carrying half a goat - skinned before purchase - and several kilos of tomatoes for our supper.

Our first real day of Trek was mainly on the level, with very few ascents. The view behind us was spectacularly beautiful, and the irrigated farmland looked like a leafy green lost valley in contrast with the barren, rocky and steep valley sides. The best part of the day was spent during the three hour siesta which allowed us to escape the midday sun and have a nap in the shade.

We finally reached our destination - the village of Abachkou - by late evening, only to discover that our 'campsite' was a dusty platform normally used as a mule enclosure. Nevertheless we laid our Karrimats and sleeping bags out and fell asleep under the stars.

My first memory of the following day was waking up at two in the morning to the sound of every dog in the valley having a barking competition. The day's walking began falteringly along a dry river bed, but we soon warmed up as we began the ascent to the col of Tizi-n-Tigist. Although not in much shade, we once more enjoyed a long stop for lunch. After a seemingly endless walk the campsite finally hove into view. Unfortunately it was halfway up a looming mountain side in front of us.

With the last climb finally behind us, we found ourselves on the edge of some dramatic cliffs above the picturesque village of Tabat-n-Tirsal. Next day we started with a long steady climb whilst the temperature rose to well over 30°C. After a long haul we made it and sat eating our oranges and admiring the commanding views of the High Atlas. By lunchtime, we were extremely weary, but the afternoon brought more climbs and descents. Although some thought they would not make it, we all breathed a sigh of relief when the campsite finally came into view and our toughest day was brought to a close.

Rob Mullock

Day 8 saw us leaving the valley, and climbing for much of the morning, the result being a breathtaking view of the entire valley. We camped under the gaze of the Tarkeddid plateau, and a group of French trekkers (the first of many). On Day 9 we climbed up to the plateau and a flat stroll took us to Mgoun base camp and also to Group A, who presently came down the mountain, and were miffed to discover that we had missed the peaks of Jbel Rat and Tignousti on the way to catching them up.

A football match followed with some Berber internationals, where the weaknesses of our ramshackle side of rugby players, choirboys and dossers were woefully exposed, losing 6-3. Day 10 marked the halfway stage, and the ascent of Mgoun was nigh. A long climb and an awe-inspiring ridge-walk later saw us on the summit of the mountain and the trek.

Much back-slapping and general happiness ensued, but the cold and ECFC soon moved us on. The scree slope descent allowed some ski-piste-like antics, and much fun and falling over was had by everyone. Day 11 brought the search for the gorge and camping spaces free of French to a head - after two failed attempts at getting a site, we were finally able to stop.

Alastair Smith

Day 12 began cheerfully as we finally made a start on the food we brought from England - namely some tasty muesli for starters. After walking for a while beside the Mgoun river we finally descended into the river itself as the floodplain began to narrow into a spectacular gorge. The cooling water refreshed us and soothed our blistered feet. We camped in an idyllic location on a river bend which provided people with an opportunity to do some much-needed washing. It was also the first night of cooking our own dinner. After collecting firewood we built a rickety, very basic stove out of stones. The result was surprisingly effective, and the food was a welcome break from the usual and inevitable Moroccan staples, 'couscous', and 'tajine'.

The next couple of days were fairly short and relatively easy, walking along the river itself, at one point, between sheer walls of sandy-coloured cliffs - possibly the most awe-inspiring I have ever seen. Wading knee-deep in ice-cold water alleviated the soaring temperatures (35°C), but the hottest part of the day was spent in siesta. The river harboured a few deep spots where a quick swim could be had, but many people just could not take their eyes off the amazing scenery - with every view a photo opportunity. Gradually the gorge began to fade into smaller foothills, and we eventually branched off into a very parched landscape.

Phil Mosley

Day 15 saw an early morning start with most people willing to push on, knowing it was the last day of trek and we only had two hours (three and a half in the event) to go until we arrived at the gîte d'étape in Ait Youl. We were all packed and ready to go by 7.30, and started at the fastest pace possible without sprinting.

When we arrived at the gîte we all collapsed on the floor and one by one had our first shower for ten days. It was by far the most comfortable spot since Marrakech, and we lazily paid local kids to wash our clothes for about 15p each (extortion is alive and well). There was also a huge purchase of Coke and chocolate from the shop.

Day 16 started sadly as we were informed that the King, Hassan II, had died. Thankfully, this didn't affect our plans too much. We were still able to get a swim in a proper pool, but we did have to push on 260 km by taxis to Zagora, missing our stay in Ouarzazate. The travelling was quite an experience - 6/7 to a car with four seats - and three in the front. For me, sitting practically on the gear lever, it wasn't too bad when the driver was in third gear - I had some room at least - but when he went into fourth, I had to move to the side to make room for the gear stick. When we finally arrived we simply relaxed, doing as little as possible.

The following day was free until 4 pm when we set out on camels into the fringes of the Sahara desert. Riding a camel for the first time was, I admit, a great experience, but still one of the most uncomfortable ever - I had a huge hump to sit on, protected only by a bit of carpet. After two hours of this, we arrived at a Bedouin camp, and watched a quiet desert sunset.

Jonny Webster

Waking up in the Sahara desert proved to be yet another fresh experience with the array of camels idly chewing on their straps, and the pervasive smell of mint tea lingering in the air. We had stayed in a fairly modest but comfortable tent, and after devouring breakfast, we endeavoured to plough back to the camp site in Zagora, with Mr Pattison abandoning uncomfortable Cedric for slightly more roadworthy Cyril.

We triumphantly strolled back to camp, and eagerly awaited our Cokes and Fantas. Those who wished to, stayed in the moderate 40°C cool of the tree shade, whilst others paid a small fee to use the adjacent hotel's swimming pool - yet I don't think anyone made it there without the local boys bombarding us with requests for money or pens.

The Zagora region itself was fantastic with the vivid blue sky accompanied by a breezy hot wind. Afterwards, some found themselves walking into Zagora centre for our last Moroccan coke and chips. We returned for supper, spaghetti and vegetable sauce, and, of course, mint tea. By eight o'clock the next morning we were on the return road to Marrakech. The barren mountain scenery provided a dramatic backdrop to this long drive from the desert to the coastal plain via hairpin bends of awesome dimension.

Back in Marrakech, we either returned to the souk or lazed around - preparing for the 2 a.m. wake-up the next day for the journey to Casablanca and Mohammed V airport.

Peter Goves

Our travels culminated in a familiar sight - the School gates, and in contrast with Morocco's striking desolation, even Wilmslow Road can take on a luminous beauty when driving past in the evening sunshine.

This Trek has been, for all of us, an extraordinary event, possibly one of the defining events of our lives. Which we have been treated to extremes of a lifestyle and culture totally different from our own in nearly every respect. We have all climbed a mountain nearly half the height of Everest, have seen places which others could only dream of, and have experienced a trekking lifestyle in harsh conditions. Some of us may repeat such a venture. For others, Trek '99 may have been an excursion that will never be repeated. Yet all of us have enjoyed it immensely.

Thanking staff always seems to be the last word in many a Ulula article, and it should be here: Mr Cittanova's enigmatic leadership; Mr Hand's tales of Cameroon and past Treks; Mr Pattison's intrepid wearing of one set of clothes for three weeks; Mr Burin's quiet humour and football knowledge, all added to the group. Our thanks go to them, and, of course, to our Moroccan guide, Lahcen Bachki from the village of Imlil, for organising a journey that we will remember in years to come.

Julian Forbes

We are inching over a boulder strewn lunar landscape in a plateau region of the Sahara - seven people squashed like sardines into a 4WD vehicle designed for four. In the heat of the day, when most doze off, the boys take the opportunity to learn some Arabic in preparation for bargaining in the souk for souvenirs to take home from a trip that has been physically demanding but extraordinarily rewarding. This is the pilot for a new venture - a Desert Trek.

At the end of the 1999 Foreign Trek the party descended from the High Atlas mountains of Morocco to spend three days at Zagora on the edge of the desert. A brief camel ride and a bivouac in the desert whetted the appetite of a number of the party and the idea of a Desert Trek was born. So it is that two members of staff (ECFC & RLH) and three boys (Jonny Gorrie, Vaclav Paris and Will Stageman) assemble at Manchester airport one Friday evening in April to fly, via Paris, to Atar a small town in the centre of Mauritania.

Trekking in the desert is becoming popular with people who are looking for something unusual and challenging by way of a holiday and who are concerned also to help the people of the regions they visit through limited and controlled tourism that benefits the local economy without distorting it.

As we come in to land we see a dry, sandy plain with, in the distance, steep cliffs rising up to a plateau. There is scarcely a tree in sight and the sun is beating down from a cloudless sky. The airport terminal consists of two port-a-cabin size buildings, one for arrivals and one for departures. We are met by Salima who has made all the arrangements for us while we are in Mauritania. We are taken to his house for some refreshment. Then we visit the souk and each buy a haouli (head cover), sirwal (short, baggy trousers) and derara (loose-fitting overgarment), and we are ready for the desert!

We drive out of town for an hour, shoot up a large sand dune and unload our belongings. There are a few dwellings evident amidst the sparse vegetation. As is the pattern throughout the trip people begin appearing from nowhere and when darkness falls we are surrounded by quite a crowd of onlookers. They chat with our cook as he begins what becomes a daily ritual.

He makes a roaring wood fire and then mixes and kneads flour and water to make bread. The burning wood is pushed to one side and a hollow scraped in the hot sand. The dough, in the form of a disc some 25 cm diameter and 5 cm thick, is then placed in the hollow, covered with hot sand and the glowing charcoals replaced. Once the bread is cooked it is removed and a stick is used to remove the sand embedded in its surface. When fresh the outside of the loaf is tasty, if a little gritty, while the inside remains dense and slightly moist. After the people have finally drifted away sleep comes easily under a clear, starry sky. The following morning a dozen or more delightful, friendly, small children come to greet us on their way to the local school.

The next day we set off in the 4WD vehicle across the plain for El Bayed, an oasis some 150 miles away where we rendezvous with Mohammed Salim Ould Sleiman, our guide, and the camels and chameliers he has assembled. In this land that had only 1.5 mm of rain in 1999 it is difficult to imagine the many dry oueds (wadis) once flowing with water or the dry bleached land rich in vegetation and teeming with African wild life - elephant, deer, lion,The evidence is there however in the way the land has been sculptured, and the prehistoric rock paintings and the stone age arrow heads that are prevalent in the region.

Our guide is totally unconvinced of the ability of this motley-looking group to cover over 80 miles on foot in 6 days. The next day, determined to dispel his misgivings, we get up before dawn, eat a meagre breakfast of a handful of peanuts and a few small biscuits, load the camels and set off.

We are fortunate that the going is firm most of the way and a thin layer of cirrus cloud protects us from the worst of the sun. As is the pattern for the week we walk for 5 hours in the morning before searching for one of the occasional acacia trees in whose dappled shade we have lunch (rice or spaghetti, onion and some small pieces of camel meat or goat all cooked together in a large aluminium pot) and rest fitfully through the heat of the afternoon. As the shadows move with the sun so do we, anxiously trying to avoid the murderous, sharp, long acacia thorns strewn on the ground.

Shortly after 3 o'clock our Mauritanian friends stir and begin to brew tea. Green China tea, fresh mint and lots of sugar are heated in a small tea pot. An elaborate ritual ensues of pouring it from pot to small glass and back again then from one glass to another until a frothy head is built up in each glass. The small glasses, each containing about 25 ml, (one-fifth of a tea cup), are passed to each person in turn, and then the whole cycle is repeated twice more. Forty-five minutes later, the tea ritual over, the camels are rounded up from wherever they have wandered in their search for meagre grazing, sometimes as far as 2 km.

We help as best we can - loading them is an art and the chameliers are experts at securing the two 50 litre drums and various other jerrycans of precious water, our rucksacks and the thin mattresses on which we sleep. By 5 pm we are on our way once again as the heat of the sun begins to abate a little, and we walk for a further two hours. We reach our destination, covering just over 20 miles the first day, and win the respect of Mohammed Salim.

Each day our route takes us to a well where the water containers are refilled. We each carry two one litre bottles which we top-up at every opportunity drinking several litres a day. By and large the water is good although there are occasions when it is rich in salts, distinctly yellow from the very fine suspension of sand that simply never settles out and tastes as if the camels have urinated in it, but we are glad to have it! As the days pass we day-dream increasingly about fresh orange juice, fanta, coke, ice-cold beer and simple, pure water.

On the second day we leave the reg, firm, flat sand, and enter the erg, an immense area of slowly-moving sand dunes. Their sheer scale is awesome, while their shape, texture and changing colour through the day fascinate and enchant us. The wind blows predominantly and almost continuously from the east, firming the sand on the windward side but leaving soft sand on the leeward side.

The heavily-laden camels are nervous of the sand giving way under their feet as they descend the steep, soft sides of the dunes. To our uneducated eyes the view appears the same in all directions and we marvel at the skill of our guide who leads us unerringly on a winding route through the dunes to the next water point. He has no need of a compass or map, or the GPS System that we carry as a backup.

Emerging from the erg we pass up a gradually narrowing canyon several kilometres long and climb onto the stony plateau. As our train of 5 camels and 9 people moves slowly across this almost featureless and uninhabited waste the often drawn analogy between desert and sea takes on real meaning.

For several hours there is nothing to be seen but a perfectly level horizon for 360°, and the odd stunted shrub. Navigating purely by sight our guide eventually brings us to the far side of the plateau where we drop down to a guelta, an area of open water where we have the most delightful, refreshing swim and wash the sand from our hair. The guelta is overhung by vertical cliffs and we luxuriate in the first total shade for a week.

A short walk down a canyon, past palm groves and we arrive at our destination, Tin Labbé, where we are welcomed into the home of Mohammed Salim's parents. His father proudly shows us a signed photograph of himself with Théodore Monod, a renowned French desert explorer for whom he had acted as guide on several lengthy journeys spanning many years. On arriving at Mohammed's house, where we sleep overnight in the courtyard, our guide is overheard to say that, contrary to his initial fears, we are such fine walkers that we are in danger of seriously shortening the working life of the camels!

The second week we explore a wider area in a hired 4WD vehicle. We pass oases with rich palm groves and visit a meteor crater and the Guelb er Richât. The latter is a geological feature of uncertain origin consisting of a series of concentric rock outcrops with overall diameter 30 miles - so extensive that it cannot really be appreciated from the ground.

At intervals along the route we come across isolated dwellings, some made of dried grass, others canvas, where we are warmly welcomed and treated to tea and zrig (camel or goat milk mixed with sugar and water). We are overwhelmed by the hospitality of the people and left wondering how anyone can eke out an existence in such remote, arid, harsh surroundings, tending a few goats and camels, and with so few possessions.

Two of the highlights of the second week are the ancient towns of Ouadane and Chinguetti. Ouadane, perched like a coastal town on cliffs overlooking a vast expanse of sand, was formerly a strategic port at the end of a number of cross-Sahara trade routes. Despite recognition of its historical importance by UNESCO, the ancient buildings are slowly crumbling, and the stone is being raided to build the new town on the cliff top above.

Chinguetti, first founded in 700 AD and refounded in 1024, was once the seventh most important centre in the Islamic world. One of the original dwellings houses a small private museum which contains numerous, magnificent, ancient, decorated Islamic manuscripts that a small organisation is making heroic efforts to preserve from further attack by termites. Tragically the town is slowly being submerged by the advancing dunes.

The last hours of this unforgettable two weeks are spent in the souk in Atar buying tea pots, leather sugar bags and other souvenirs to take home. We also spend time with Hamdi, a relative of Salima who teaches English at the local secondary school, and who is keen to develop his conversational skills.

The abiding memories will be of the people, their friendliness, their generosity in sharing the little they have, their culture and way of life, the sand that blew everywhere (jamming cameras and playing havoc with the handset of the satellite phone), sleeping out in the dunes under the full majesty of the stars, and the return flights to the U.K..... but that's another story! Most of all we appreciate our enormous good fortune in being able, at home, simply to turn on a tap and get a limitless supply of safe, sparkling drinking water.

la ila illa Allah.
prayer beads and sunrise.
sweet, clear mornings.
playful skies, wide and real.
alert and spiritual.
waiting, grinning, for the doped and passive jamel.

hued shadows and true beauty in the sands.
soft, clumsy steps.
delicate winds, stroking clothes.
softer than sharp white down.
beauty becomes monotony.
the mind, and the art, becomes passive.
grit and heat, heat and grit.
I feel dry and worn.
the afternoon, dragged from midday,
is strained and crushing,
is dull and grinding.
then evening falls
like dew.

warm patchy wind washes the skin.
the evenings are too beautiful.
bitter sweet shots of frothy tea.
limbs melting deep into the soft mellow sands.
embers and bread,
charcoaled and damp.
magnesium moonlight,
cool, dawdling sleep
and rasping peace.

Will Stageman

This year's Foreign Trek took a group of seventeen able and enthusiastic walkers and six members of staff to the Tour du Mont Blanc. The Tour, lasting two weeks and passing through three countries, allowed the group to taste life outdoors in the shadow of Mont Blanc which, at 4807 m, is the highest peak in Europe.

Trek started the Tour at Chamonix (1037 m), a French town well known for the quality of its mountaineering. Unfortunately, low cloud and forecasts of rain meant that the group had to camp in the valley on the first night. However, a glimpse of the Massif du Mont Blanc through a break in the clouds that evening gave the group added impetus the following morning when the Brévent cable car took us up to Planpraz (2062 m) overlooking the Chamonix valley. A reasonably gentle walk took us to Lac Blanc where we stopped for one of many *chocolats chauds* in the warmth of a mountain café.

When the rain came in the afternoon, a steep descent took us back into the valley and to the warmth of another café next to a campsite. Although some felt that using such 'artificial' methods of staying dry was against the Trek ethos, I was more than happy to sneak my damp belongings into the bar whilst sympathising with the owner (in French) that some English miscreants were making his café look more like a second-rate launderette.

Despite nearly constant drizzle and sporadic downpours over the next few days, spirits always remained high, both with the boys and within the staff party. During the course of these rainy days, I grew to appreciate the true spirit of Trek. Whilst away with friends in trying conditions, a real community spirit develops whereby it is everyone's responsibility to keep everyone else happy. This year's Trekkers learnt to take a metaphorical step back from their sodden boots and to laugh at ourselves and each other. Leg-stops were frequently brightened by the subtle wit of Dave Lapidus and Martin Foster. We also became used to Martin Preston's surprisingly accurate impersonations and Jonny Webster's gifted storytelling. Mr Cittanova tried his hand at black humour, on one day assuring the group: "We'll be there by lunchtime". Suffice to say that we were still walking at 7 p.m.!

Trek progressed east through to Switzerland in less than perfect weather and encountered very humid conditions amongst the dense forests on the way to camp at Champex (1466 m), a relaxed Swiss village which lies around an almost transparent lake. At Champex we shared eating space with a French party and some young Americans who were intent on putting the English campers to shame. As we lifted our modest camping stoves from our bags, the Americans unveiled what seemed to be a set of industrial sized gasometers with matching cauldrons. After making certain that we had seen their matching towel sets, they struck the killer blow as from somewhere in the depths of their giant rucksacks emerged a handful of Californian girls.

Elsewhere, though, the popularity of the route meant that we could liven up the evenings by sharing experiences with walkers of other nationalities and spend time brushing up our French. On one evening, certain members of Tent Two became involved in an intimate discussion with a pair of Dutch girls. We are told that the necessity for the proximity of the two parties was owing to the fact that the girls were hard of hearing.

Thirteen kilometres further up the valley from Champex we found La Fouly (1600 m) and a campsite equipped with much needed washing machines, tumble dryers and a room with a fire. Although I was keen on the 'Total Trekking' experience, I was not heartbroken to have an easy-chair by the fire in an outhouse equipped with satellite television whilst the rain lashed down outside. The following day was declared a free day and the group explored the village which was now basking in bright sunshine. Little did I know that the following day would bring the best walking I had ever done.

The day started early with a 6.30 wake-up call from Mr Cittanova and we rose to find a valley filled with swirling clouds. Thankfully, they disappeared early in the morning, leaving us with excellent views to the south as we undertook the 937 m ascent to Col Ferret, which at 2537 m had received a sprinkling of fresh snow overnight.

Words cannot describe the quality of the view along Val Ferret in the direction of Courmayeur. The Pointe Walker (4208 m) to the right and undulating green pastures on the left sandwiched the Dora di Ferret river which wound its way through the Italian villages of La Vachey and Tronchey into the distance. The Col Ferret provided a suitable setting for the Trek group photograph on the Swiss-Italian border before we descended to Tronchey for the first of three nights on Italian soil.

As we were slightly ahead of schedule, the group set out on a day excursion to Tête de la Tronche (c 2570 m) with high hopes of views of Mont Blanc. Unfortunately though, a threatening sky and a flurry of snow left the MGS Trekkers sampling life as mountain sheep cooped up in the dark of a mountain hut.

The majority of the party who, seven days into the Tour had not yet seen the summit of Mont Blanc, remained slightly disappointed as we were forced to return to base camp prematurely. For my part, I will never forget my futile attempts to make lunch in this dark hut with numb fingers trying to spread week-old cheese paste onto soggy French Toast. As feet were beginning to ache, a free day in Courmayeur, the fashionable Italian ski-resort provided us with time to relax and recuperate in the sunshine before returning to France for the home leg of the journey.

By this point, two symbols of the good times of Trek 2000 were securely lodged in my mind. One of them, Charles Carroll's bare-chested approach to mountaineering ensured that we were never harassed by mountain animals. The other, David Lapidus's walking stick, is probably still being missed by the berger who had spent some considerable time seasoning and planing it for personal use.

Next stop on the Tour was Refuge Elisabetta (2150 m) where the party refuelled with hot drinks before ascending to the Col de la Seigne (2516 m) on the Italian-French border for lunch. Once again though, cloud at 3000 m prevented us from seeing the highest peaks. Another 1000 m descent in the afternoon sun took us to Les Chapieux (1552 m) where we camped in a field at the intersection of three valleys.

Thankfully, by this point Mr Witton had discovered that this year's Trekkers were more receptive to an 8.30 a.m. wake up call from a teacher bearing gifts of bread than to his more traditional offering: "Hello happy campers, the time is 6 a.m...." Thus we set off on a full stomach in the direction of Les Contamines primed for a difficult ascent.

A short distance up from the Refuge de la Croix du Bonhomme in knee-deep snow took us to the highest point of Trek on the Col des Fours, standing at 2665 m next to the Tête Sud des Fours (2716 m). After the Sixth-form had shown its maturity by individually and collectively diving head first into snow drifts, the group descended over the Col du Bonhomme (2329 m) and set up the first mountain camp at just under 2000 m. That night, several hardy Trekkers - including Adam Mercer, Simon Cox and Matt Turnbull - braved the cold to sleep outside under clear skies in temperatures which reached -4°C.

A gentle plod down to Les Contamines (1160 m) and the first of two brief encounters with Miss Renshaw allowed sore feet to be given a partial recovery before the final day's thigh-burning 18 km walk to Les Houches (1008 m) via Mont Vorassay (2237 m).

As bad weather had prevented such excursions to peaks before, the senior party were happy to drop their bags and march up to the peak at Dr. Willson's blistering pace. The view from the top rivalled that seen from Col Ferret as we looked down on the valley towns of St.Gervais-les-Bains, Sallanches, Les Contamines and Chamonix.

The feeling on arrival back in Chamonix was a curious mixture of satisfaction, relief and sadness that the trip had ended. A free day in the town before leaving for home allowed the group to reflect on the two intense weeks spent in the Alps and allowed us to finally view the summit of Mont Blanc. Reflecting on my personal experience of the trip, Trek 2000 was a voyage into uncharted territory.

The bad weather in the first week caused tough conditions which gave Trekkers the opportunity to pick up invaluable personal skills. In contrast, the second week yielded some excellent walking through glorious Alpine scenery. It would be false to give the impression that Trek is all plain sailing, but I feel that the occasional sore feet, damp sleeping bag and minor disputes made the high points of the Tour all the more enjoyable. In the words of Martin Foster uttered during the first week, "Trek is man-making".

Our thanks must go to the Staff Trekkers for organising the trip and remaining good-humoured throughout: Mr Cittanova, Mr Witton, Mr Burin, Mr Hand, Dr Willson and Mr Pattison.

This year's desert trek proved to be as great a success as ever, once again providing a unique and exotic once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for fourteen brave MGS boys, each from a variety of backgrounds and age groups, to explore the remote yet vast region of the African Republic of Mauritania and to experience first-hand a way of life alongside the nomads of the country. Accompanied by two members of staff (Mr. Cittanova and Mr. Hand), both experienced veterans from years of foreign trekking, we were assured that the 'holiday' lasting a fortnight, would be an experience we would never forget.

Flying over the breathtaking mountains of Morocco and the vast plains of the Saharan desert, where we would be living for the next two weeks, whetted our appetites in eager anticipation of our epic adventure ahead. Preparations had stretched back many months - countless immunisations, hours of practice walks and rigorous kit checks taught us to make the most out of this expedition as we could.

Upon arriving in the capital Nouakchott, we were quickly loaded in four-wheel-drive vehicles as we made for Ouadane, a small village in the heart of Mauritania, where our 160 km (as the crow flies) trek would begin. Travelling at night in cramped conditions for twelve hours across over 450 kilometres of dusty roads was not what we had in mind for a desert "trek"! Stopping off halfway at Atar, a small town located in the mountainous regions of Mauritania, we were keen to regain our strength and acclimatise to the scorching temperatures of the African desert climate.

Our experiences of Mauritanian cuisine had been somewhat unusual - camel-burgers and chips! Yet, despite our criticisms, we were completely oblivious to the horror that we would not taste food of anywhere near this quality again for the next fortnight, and we duly learnt not to take such luxuries for granted! Our tastes in fashion similarly underwent a drastic change during our stay in Atar, as we soon ditched our designer labels for sirwals and deraras (baggy togas and baggy trousers). Venturing outside in an attempt to fit in with the Mauritians only resulted in mockery - "How do you like your parachutes?" one local commented!

Leaving Atar behind, we made the final leg of our journey to Ouadane, a historic town located on the Adrar plateau, overlooking a vast ocean of sand thousands of square miles in size, over which we would be walking in the weeks to come. We met with our guides and cameliers who would be walking with us and set up camp for the night just outside the village. Our trek would start in earnest the following day. Camping in the desert required no tent, as the fresh night air was sufficient to keep us warm. However, we soon learnt to put aside all phobias of scorpions, beetles, snakes, and spiders if we wanted to get a good night's sleep!

The next morning we were up bright and early. Our breakfast was suitably European - French stick, jam and butter, tea and coffee. It was essential that we got off to a quick start each day in order to avoid the sun's scorching rays. Armed with a plentiful supply of water, we journeyed into the arid desert. Walking through the thick palm trees surrounding Ouadane, we savoured every inch of shade we could find until there was no more, when all we could see around us were pure white horizons, stretching miles into the distance.

Unhindered by these incredible landscapes, we walk on, the sun getting stronger by the minute, our water levels falling slowly. When would we find shelter? We spot a tree in the distance, and head for it. Another half hour passes. The tree seems to be moving further and further away from us, the sun getting higher and brighter still. Raiding the staff members, who have yet to work up a sweat, of their precious water, we collapse into thorn bushes. Exhausted. Alive.

That first morning of trek took us all by surprise. We now knew what real endurance was - driven on by pure determination until the end. Our efforts were rewarded by a refreshing three-hour siesta, shielded by trees during the hottest part of the day, when temperatures can reach 40 °C. Lunch provided by Min, our cook, was simple - cold pasta and bread, but it gave us the energy we needed to go on. In true English fashion, we drank Mauritanian tea several times a day, usually to complement meals. The tea, made from mint leaves and lots of sugar was thoroughly refreshing and quickly grew on us. Another traditional beverage, zrig, made from goat's milk and sugar, also went down well with the group.

Following our short nap, we were once again full of energy and ready to start our afternoon journey. Now that we were more aware of the importance of water, we learnt to ration our supplies as fully as we could. All our water had to be treated with iodine, giving it a disgusting antiseptic taste that, over the next fortnight we would learn to hate. We soon longed for fizzy drinks and pure water, but this only prolonged our torture. However, each night, fed up and exhausted from a long day of walking, when we had set up camp, we looked back on what we had accomplished and felt a tremendous sense of achievement.

At the end of each day the sky shone brilliantly, not with the blazing sun, but a carpet of bright stars that filled the sky. It is hard to describe the beauty of those night skies as the Milky Way - a streak of white lights casting bright shadows on the ground as if it was day. For many of us, the experience of sleeping under those constellations each night will be the one we remember most of all.

By the end of the second day we had reached Tenushert, a small oasis settlement. By now, the taste of the iodine was beginning to get to us. But, as though it were a miracle, the villagers produced a supply of fizzy drinks for sale! Sensing our serious needs, the locals were asking extortionate prices - £3 for a can of Coca-Cola! But, it was too much to resist as we bought their entire stock (staff members included!) and downed the warm drinks.

After five days, our feet were beginning to suffer as blisters began to appear. Those who suffered seriously were put on camels to relieve the symptoms. Mr. Hand soon opened an amateur foot clinic and catered for the wounds of many with lashings of iodine and accompanied by screams of pain. The food was beginning to drive us insane as well, as provisions were gradually getting staler each day. Occasionally we were treated with fruit such as oranges and apples, but generally the food was surprisingly uninspiring and monotonous as we were met with the same cold pasta each day, appropriately titled- "Min's Surprise!"

We soon reached our halfway point, Chinguetti. A small but interesting town, Chinguetti is the seventh holy city of Islam, but high dunes approaching from all sides heavily threaten its survival. Being one of the largest towns in the country, prices were much cheaper, and this gave us the opportunity to stock up on fizzy drinks (gallons of it!) as well as some souvenirs. We soon learnt to be ruthless in our haggling skills to get the cheapest bargains! Whilst in the town, we visited the museum and the library, features of Chinguetti of which the residents are particularly proud. The museum had a fascinating and rich collection of ancient artefacts, many of which are of common use in contemporary Mauritanian society. The impressive library featured hundreds of elegantly handwritten Islamic manuscripts dating back from the third century but incredibly well preserved and protected from sunlight.

After another couple of days of walking, we came to a small mountain region, El Ateg. After setting up camp at the base, the group decided a change of scenery was needed and chose to scale the mountain. Reaching the summit, several hundred metres high, we were treated with a breathtaking view of the setting sun over hundreds of miles of desert. For many, this was the highlight of Trek, and summarised the true sense of achievement we felt. Our descent was somewhat quicker - an incredible sand slope some few hundred metres high down the opposite side of the mountain, caused by the prevailing wind, functioning as a perfect slide!

The final days of walking were hard, but greatly rewarded when we reached the small village of Mharith, a beautiful isolated palm grove settlement located in the valleys surrounding Atar. As we approached the end of our trek, we felt it appropriate to say thank you to our guides and cameliers who had travelled with us by hosting a banquet for them with a roast goat. However, watching the slaughter of our goat prior to the meal did not strengthen our appetites! Nonetheless, the meal was a great experience for us. To round off the evening, we were taken to the outskirts of the city to participate in traditional song and dance, where our many hidden talents became quickly exposed!

The next day, we arrived at Terjit Pausing to savour the picturesque landscapes of the amazing valley, we journeyed down into the rockpool village at the bottom. This secluded paradise was the perfect end to the trek as we relaxed under the shade of the high cliffs and palm trees, drinking the clean and cold water we had missed so much. Communal water fights and sunbathing on the rocks got us quickly back into a lively spirit as we journeyed back into civilisation. An arduous drive took us back to the capital where we would spend some time before flying home.

Residing in a lavish, air-conditioned hotel seemed too good to be true, and a remarkable transition from living like nomads for the past two weeks! Our time in the city was mostly spent in the local markets where we spent our remaining Ouguiyas (Mauritanian Currency) on as much as we could - clothes, jewellery, and knives. We also visited the harbour, a bustling centre of activity in the capital - the sight of hundreds of fishing boats arriving, with the sounds of trading all around us was quite remarkable.

Flying back home, we were relieved yet sad to be at the end of this truly incredible expedition. We had all experienced something we will never forget, lived through two weeks of a richly satisfying trip, at some times tough, when the desire and determination to go on kept us moving, despite pain, illness, and exhaustion. Desert Trek was without a doubt one of the hardest things we will ever do, but also one of the most memorable and rewarding, and undoubtedly, one which all of us would gladly do all over again.

Most improved stick technique	Josh Singer
The Florence Nightingale Award	Dr Willson, who also gains his Angel-Delight-cum-Whirl badge.
Steady plodder	Danny Liu Yin
Master of Understatement	Robert Frazer, who, when asked what he thought about the superlative views from Tofana, managed: "I suppose it's alright, Sir." He also wins his Sockwasher Badge (half a packet of powder for three socks).
Pool trick shot specialist	Tom Rowland (without the aid of 'orthotic' insoles!).
Route planner and finder extraordinaire	Mr Witton

This last award is a very special one, given the state of Italian maps. To describe them as impressionistic would be charitable indeed.

I feel, quite seriously, that a final award should go to all twenty seven boys on this year's Trek. Few had trekked before; none, in this year of foot-and-mouth, had had the opportunity to get fully fit before leaving. I take my hat off to all of them. They were superb.

Well, it took twenty-eight years for them to invite me on Trek. It was worth the wait. If you are deterred by its 'hardman' image, do not be. The walking is, for the most part, perfectly straightforward on rattling good paths. The scenery is out of this world. Try it sometime - you will manage it. I did, and I'm past it, remember.

When I proudly informed my classmates that I intended to join the cohort of intrepid excursionists determined on an incursion into the reputedly most hostile and adverse environment of the Sahara Desert, the vast majority of my associates expressed incredulity and incomprehension of what had seized me with the passion to explore such barren terrain. They took inordinate pleasure in jeering at and mocking me, claiming that no profit could be obtained from embarking upon such a ludicrous enterprise - surely I would be buffeted by abrasive sandstorms, subject to poverty and famine, scoured by heat and depleted of water, and view nothing but bleak, incessant expanses of sterile sand for a fortnight?

However, many would retort that one is incapable of forming an opinion upon a subject until one has had the fortitude to experience it, and this philosophy was the most appropriate for the Sahara Desert Trek. In persevering with my endeavour to penetrate the aura of mystery that, for me, shrouded the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, I experienced an enlightening adventure that banished my preconceptions regarding the nature of life in the desert, and informed me of how a society may be rich and vibrant, heedless of its location or one's own preconceptions - certainly, Mauritania is an obscure nation of the Western Sahara that few would have encountered, yet this only accentuated the satisfaction that our group would derive from our journey through the country, for each discovery that we chanced upon was a novelty, and our enjoyment had not been degraded by over-familiar images from travel brochures and catalogues.

The trekking group was more compact than the previous year's company, comprising nine fourth and third formers overseen by two teachers, Mr. Travers and, obviously, the indomitable Mr. Cittanova. After a term of accelerating preparations, consisting of practice walks (including a rain-sodden hike around Kinder in the Pennines - 'Perfect weather for a desert trek' was the wry comment of Mr. Travers); informative lectures by our guardians; and a rigorous course of inoculations for an exhaustive list of potential maladies, we embarked on the lengthy journey to our destination: a flight to France, a night in an airport hotel (containing novel, two-tiered bedrooms - I lead a very secluded life, so such instances were enthralling!), a long plane journey across Africa, and in conclusion a lengthy car journey over 280 miles of gravelled plains along one of Mauritania's tarmac roads (only three of these routes exist outside the capital, emphasising the country's desperate poverty and sparse population), arriving at last in Atar, a conglomerate of squat, clay and sandstone hovels that would be the starting point of our trek.

The relatively recent media hysteria regarding Islam and the numerous novels we delve into present the desert nomads with whom we would integrate during the Trek as bands of vicious marauders wielding wicked scimitars, who would readily render us barren of all of our valuables and dismember those who resisted. The Mauritians, however, immediately neutralised this absurd notion, for they were cordial hosts who were not in any manner frigid. As our group encountered small hamlets and nomad caravans of desert dwellers, we would immediately be ushered into their tents or crude clay or straw huts, and be served the sweet concoction of traditional Mauritanian tea (a curious beverage, where tea leaves were dissolved with herbs and enormous amounts of sugar and given to us in three servings of small glasses - it was a potent, revitalising solution despite the small volumes consumed), heedless of the inconvenience that eleven ignorant tourists induced, or the duress that our visits placed on their limited resources.

One factor commonly associated with the desert is that of ruthless heat that would flay a body of all moisture - yet we passed long, languid siestas during the midday, when the sun unleashed its complete intensity, splayed in the scant shade afforded by the gnarled, arid, thorn-laden branches of acacia trees. (There was a brief competition during the trek to discover who could secure the longest of these cruel thorns!) Throughout the trek, many expressed bewilderment at how the camels bearing our equipment and provisions could devour these branches quite contentedly, while we perforated the soles of our feet upon shed branches.

The majority of us were also doubtful that the garments that we were encouraged to wear, with long robes (the 'gandura baladiya') covering our bodies and thick swathes of cloth (the 'haouli') engulfing our heads, were viable in the desert; and many denounced them as foolish and embarrassing contrivances when we were purchasing our desert equipment in Atar, as Mauritanian bystanders aided in enveloping our heads in the haouli cloth. Yet there was little opportunity to indulge in fashion during our procession through the desert, for this clothing was an invaluable asset - it provided us with insulation during the bitterly cold mornings (so that we could cover more terrain in relatively cool morning weather, Mr. Cittanova encouraged us all to rise before dawn, though his intentions were typically confounded by popular rebellions!); and provided shade for our bodies during the severe heat of the afternoon. It was immensely effective, and I was rarely uncomfortably hot throughout the entire fortnight of our travels in Mauritania. Alex Thornton, however, was a bewildering being, who proceeded throughout the majority of our trek in naught but an open shirt and shorts!

It also rained briefly on some occasions during the trek, which we feared would damage our equipment (we were not guarded from the elements by tents, for the warm nights rendered it possible to sleep in our sleeping bags exposed to the environment - unfortunately, although we had been assured that this would grant us an astounding stellar vista during the nights, the moon, whose glare was so pronounced on most nights I could write my journal in its glow, obliterated the majority of the stars!) Our guides and cameleers conversely pranced gaily about the campsite, ecstatically crying 'Il pleut! Il pleut!' This abruptly silenced our grumbles of dissent as we realised what such an event signified to those associated with enduring hardships incomparable to our sheltered lives.

The nature of this clothing was perhaps the encapsulation of one of the most attractive aspects of our trek - the ability to experience a wholly alien culture. Although the MGS Foreign Treks may visit more spectacular landscapes, the inhabitants of those regions are usually all Europeans, whose culture, practically, differs little from our own, and one is rarely compromised, for a mountain refuge where you may gorge upon an inexhaustible reservoir of chocolate is rarely more than a few miles distant. However, in Mauritania, one must discard the material illusions and distractions of our technological society. In contrast to the hulking rucksacks commonly associated with the Foreign Treks, your entire effects were contained in a single, small sack, and Mr. Cittanova and Mr. Travers were wholly ruthless in scouring our belongings of any object deemed unnecessary. Although some perpetually fantasised about the meals they would devour upon returning to England, trekking within the dunes was a liberating experience - by acclimatising oneself to mere subsistence, one could realise with a startling clarity how irrelevant all of our former preoccupations with acquiring possessions were, and how our minds could expand to incorporate fascinating aspects of the nomadic disciplines into our activities without being constrained by the irksome distractions of games, music and confectionery - the ability to be wholly unconcerned with previous social obligations was an enrapturing emotion. The conversations that ensued with the group of cameleers that accompanied us, spoken in the traditional, halting, error-ridden French of MGS boys, supplied us with valuable insights into facets of Mauritanian culture - whether touring through palm groves; engaging in brutally vicious barter for various trinkets and souvenirs when wandering traders encountered us; scribbling notes of the enthralling lectures on the ancient library of Chinguetti; aiding in the production of 'kasra' (a delicious form of bread which is baked whilst buried in the sand, providing an ingenious improvised oven); prowling the landscape to glimpse the evasive desert fauna (although Mr. Travers had a rather unfortunate encounter with a scorpion); or watching curious adaptations of Draughts, or even Noughts and Crosses. Such a spartan lifestyle also taught us the importance of maintaining our vital equipment, whose replacement might only be found in a town many dozens of miles away.

Despite all of these lofty notions, however, as we approached the various settlements, the majority of the trekkers succumbed to the enticing allure of chocolate biscuits, horrendously overpriced Coca-Cola and various other carbonated beverages, and they fought viciously to exhaust the local supplies of these luxuries. Happily, Min, the 'atrocious' cook whose monotonous offerings had embellished the accounts of the previous year's trekkers, had been usurped by a Mauritanian named Sid Ahmed, who possessed significantly greater culinary talent, and we never wanted for sustenance. I confess that my un-supple frame encountered severe difficulty in kneeling before the communal bowl of rice or pasta at lunchtimes, and I would spill as much as I ate. Being compelled to eat meals with my right hand (as the Mauritanians could be extremely unilateralist when aspects of their religious dogma are challenged) rather than my practised left, also compounded these faults.

Another rumour peddled by the ignorant is that the desert is merely an unvarying expanse of dunes, yet throughout the trek we encountered a veritable spectrum of mesmerising, enchanting terrain. We traversed vast plains of sand and gravel, flanked by massifs that were punctuated by towering mounds of riven crags; or scaled lustrous, golden dunes of an incalculable volume; or ambled pleasantly through the wide depressions of dried river-beds verdant with luscious vegetation. On several occasions we could lie and seek refuge beneath the

copious shelter of enormous palms, which drew succour from subterranean oases, soothed by the pleasant gurgle of a babbling brook, yet retreat into the sand which was but seventy feet away.

Clustering together during the lunchtime siesta, or as we extricated our sleeping bags whilst preparing to fall comatose for the night, also provided ample opportunity for debates, altercations, jesting, the frequent and pedantic descriptions of things best left undescribed by the gregarious Ed Jones, and the relation of amusing anecdotes.

Perhaps the hardest part of the trek was leaving the desert - if a voracious cancer does taint Northern Africa, it exists in the cities, and not in the sands of the desert. Mauritania's capital, Nouakchott, extends little beyond the confines of a town; and its markets, where we purchased final mementos of our journey and tea glasses, to replicate the authentic Mauritanian taste at home, consisted of narrow and oppressive arcades thronged with humanity. We were harried by a consort of pickpockets, whilst mutilated beggars at the capital's miniscule airport implored us to surrender the remainder of our Ougiyas, the Mauritanian currency.

The most poignant aspect of the Trek, however, was the knowledge that we were participating in a unique experience. Voyages across the Sahara Desert are rarely proclaimed in holiday brochures, and we could derive a large degree of pride and satisfaction in that we, mere teenagers, were undertaking an adventure that most of our English compatriots would not contemplate in an entire lifetime, and we could depart from Mauritania confident that we had evolved beyond many of those we would consort with when we returned home to England. The fragility of this culture when in contact with our own was emphasised by the unfortunate indications of the decline of the nomadic life - Sid Ahmed wore sunglasses and a 'Goretex' jacket rather than a gandura, and our hosts in Atar carried mobile telephones.

Although the Sahara Desert Trek is certainly not the most physically gruelling of treks offered by MGS (the terrain is quite gentle, and as the majority of our equipment was borne by the trains of camels that accompanied us, we were only lightly laden during the day), its other aspects - the outstanding terrain, the lifestyle we adopted, and the mental and physical skills that we developed - were infinitely more valuable, and the trek handsomely rewarded us in manners more profound and intimate than insignificant exertions.

R. J. Travers

As we touched down in Nouakchott, capital of Mauritania, Mr Cittanova remarked that we were the best-prepared Desert Trek of the three that he had led so far. Days spent on Kinder Scout and training outings to the dunes at Formby beach had ensured that we had some idea of what to expect. What we could not prepare for was the searing heat. Stepping out of the plane was literally like stepping into an oven. The temperature in the late afternoon was easily 40 °C and it felt much hotter as the sun was reflected off the tarmac.

Our contacts at the Mauritanian embassy in London ensured that we were ushered quickly through the passport formalities at the airport. We met up with our drivers and Mohammed Salima, in charge of organising our affairs in Atar. No time was lost in loading our luggage into a couple of 4-Wheel drive pick-ups and a car. The plan was to head out on one of the three major roads in Mauritania towards Atar. We needed to travel as far as possible during the day, hopefully travelling to within a reasonable distance of Atar and thereby avoiding a bivouac by the roadside. Travelling at night was best avoided in a country with few roads, little traffic and no street lighting. People, camels and livestock often wandered onto the roads at night; other dangers included vehicles with poor lighting. As the sun began to set, our drivers pulled off the road. We expected a hasty bivouac, but we had made reasonable progress, enough to make Atar that evening. The drivers were stopping for the evening prayer. They performed the ritual ablution with sand instead of water as is common in the desert. They knelt facing Mecca. This was a sight we would become accustomed to over the next two weeks.

We would be travelling to a number of important Islamic sites; the ruins of the great mosque at Tanouchert, where only the foundations of 48 pillars remain, each several metres across, a testament to its size. We were also visiting Chinguetti, the seventh holy city of Islam with its famous 13th century Mosque and library, home to a Qur'an written on Giraffe parchment as well as other significant texts.

We arrived at the home of Salima Ould Mohammed in Atar and were treated to a feast. We made the most of it, knowing that in the desert there would be little in terms of meat and fresh fruit. We slept in thatched rooms; this was the last time we would be inside for some time. We tried to avoid the mosquitoes that were around in the evening; only Alex Thornton was badly bitten, and fortunately he was taking Malaria prophylaxis.

The next morning we headed off to visit the local ruins at Azougui. Here the Almoravid Berber conquests began in 1054, reaching as far as North Africa and northern Spain. The ruins were not that impressive; however, we did attract some attention, and an enquiry about James Lui Yin from some local girls concerning a possible marriage match!

The next stop was the Souk, in order to kit us out with clothes more suitable for the desert and to help us appear less conspicuous. Mr Cittanova engaged in some fierce bargaining for 10 Howlis (a scarf that is wrapped around the head and face, providing fantastic protection from the sun and sand if the wind was strong). We also bought Sirwal (baggy shorts) worn beneath our Gandora (a type of tunic). Chris Tait and Kyle Bentwood created a bit of a stir changing into their clothes in the Souk: some local women got more than they bargained for on their shopping trip that day!!

After a bumpy 4-wheel drive trip along a gravel road we arrived at the ancient city of Oudane, where we met our cameleers and guide. We were placing the utmost trust in them. They would carry our water and food and guide us to the desert wells. There was a great deal of discussion of our proposed route and the suitability of the wells. Mr Cittanova acted as interpreter and intermediary at times between the different factions, a role he was going to play a great deal throughout the trip.

As we settled down for our first bivouac there was a commotion amongst the trinket sellers we had attracted. A 4 wheel drive had disturbed a snake, and it had slithered into the goods that they had laid out on the sand. As quick as a flash Ackili, one of the Cameleers, pinned it with a stick, shouting for a knife. It was quickly killed and buried with a warning not to disturb it. They can apparently strike you even when dead. It was one of three snakes we saw on trek, none of which we felt threatened by.

We spent the morning wandering around the ruins of Oudane, a UNESCO world heritage site, obviously at one time a large city, now mostly overrun by the encroaching sands. Some reconstruction was being carried out with help from the Portuguese government. We recorded our presence at the local police post. The officials were a little surprised to see a British school party!

We set off into the desert leaving Oudane at around 10.00 am, the cool of the day already gone. We were all a little apprehensive of what lay ahead. How would we cope in this extreme environment? We took things easy, stopping regularly and trying to drink as much as possible. This was not as easy as it might seem, with temperatures rising to around 44-50 degrees you needed to drink between 10 and 12 litres of water a day to avoid heat exhaustion. The water was carried in 4 Gerber bags made of Hessian that allowed the water to evaporate a little and helped to keep it cool. The water was treated with iodine to purify it, and a mixture of sugar and salt was added to make it isotonic and help replace salt lost through sweat.

The difficulty with drinking enough was that although it was very hot, it was rarely uncomfortable. The heat evaporated any sweat immediately so one rarely felt sticky. Because of this it was easy to think that you didn't need to drink and that you weren't thirsty. As a consequence two of our party Kyle Bentwood and Sam Dale, began to feel ill as we stopped that night. They simply had not drunk enough. They spent an uncomfortable night struggling to rehydrate, before the sun rose the next day and the process began again.

The days began to take on what became a familiar pattern. We began to find our rhythm, aiming to rise at 5.00 am but only ever-managing 5.30! In the coldest part of the day it was always a struggle to get out of the warmth of our sleeping bags. We then huddled around the remains of the fire to eat a breakfast of cassia, unleavened bread baked in the embers of the fire, washed down with cups of black tea or coffee. We would then walk until the heat began to be unbearable at around about 11.00 am. Then we had a siesta for several hours in whatever shade we could find, usually under a thorny Acacia tree. After resting in the heat of the day we set off again for a difficult couple of hours walking into the sun before setting up our bivouac.

The group began to take on various roles, as boys found the jobs that they were best suited to. Sam Dale became the most ardent bargainer; whenever there were trinket sellers Sam would strike the hardest bargain for himself or others who wanted to purchase mementos of their trip. James Lui Yin, Chris Tait and Tom Omerod helped out with the food preparation. Robert Frazer busied himself everywhere, unloading and even leading the camels at one point. Sam Shore and Kyle Bentwood became adept at filling and purifying the water containers. While Edward Jones amused us with various anecdotes about his Gandora.

There were many highlights. One of the funniest moments was surely the day Sam Dale lost his sunglasses (which did eventually turn up). In the blistering sun eye protection was vital, so we made him a pair of "Ray Mears" style slit glasses from a piece of card and some string!

The scenery, contrary to expectation, was varied. It ranged from massive desolate dunes, a classic desert scene, to wide plateaus and green date groves. We carried out the most ambitious dune crossing in MGS desert trek history scaling the huge dunes rising out of Chinguetti to arrive at a remote oasis. We climbed to the highest point in Mauritania, the mountain Ez Zerga, an enormous outcrop of sand and black rock. From the summit we were able to see some of the distance that we had walked. We also managed to see prehistoric cave paintings at Guelb Artag and found arrow and spear-heads, a testament to a time when the Sahara was more hospitable.

There were more difficult times; shaking out my sleeping bag on the seventh night I stepped on to the sand in my bare feet straight on to a scorpion! Three hours of agony followed, during which I was very grateful to Mr Cittanova interceding on my behalf, as the cook suggested he cauterise my foot with a stick from the fire by way of a cure! Some of our party struggled with sickness brought on by heat exhaustion, all credit to them that they carried on and walked every step of the trek.

Perhaps the best moment, though, was arriving on the penultimate day at the Oasis of Tergit. Water from the plateau collected in the shade of a cliff producing palm trees and incredibly, pools of water: as we rested in the shade and swam in the pools we reflected on the rigours of the trek.

No one who goes on desert trek can ever say it is easy; the difficult conditions, the heat, the extremes. For those who experience the Sahara, its fast disappearing culture, incredible isolation and scenery easily outweigh the discomfort entailed in getting there. Thanks must go to the boys, who were great company, and to Eric Cittanova for putting so much into this unique school trip.

2002 FOREIGN TREK - PYRENEES

This year foreign trek walked, climbed, scrambled, skied and crawled over the Pyrenees, a breathtaking range of ridges and summits straddling the French-Spanish border. Our enthusiastic, or was that unsuspecting, group of 32 boys and 10 teachers made the necessary preparation (food-hoarding, farewell notes, last wills and testament etc.) as we headed for Luchon on our first night from Pau airport, knowing that for the next three weeks would be living out of the contents of our 'light' rucksacks, replenishing en route to our destination with only water, food and fuel.

Most nights we camped in a wild location at around 10,000 feet, cooking our own simple meals, the speciality of the house consisting of pasta and tuna, and occasionally a smuggled chocolate bar. It was delicious for the first few days, even better after three weeks, but upon eating out at a restaurant, where we did not have to fight the wind and rain, we truly appreciated not having to pick earwigs, beetles and mosquitoes out of our food (though we could have done with the protein content).

We visited some of the most spectacular parts of the High Pyrenees. The highest summit we touched was the second highest in the range, Posets. Standing at the top of the mountain we felt on top of the world and considered our insignificance in the galactic scheme of things (The number of our group being 42 did not go without comment). We then made our way down the snowy glacier, using our backsides as sledges, with Mr. Williams leading the way with his spirited war cries.

The second week took us to Gavarnie, a small village where we stocked up on supplies, before venturing out on our four day expedition to the magnificent Ordesa Canyon in Spain. Nothing could dampen our spirits as we looked forward to exploring one of the most cherished parts of the Pyrenees, not even the group of donkeys eating our supplies from our tent porches in the middle of the night prior to our excursion. The next morning we climbed the many thousands of feet to the Brèche de Roland, a place of legend and mystery, encountering en route huge granite massifs, glaciers, beautiful mountain meadows and remote unspoilt lakes. Once there we were taken aback by the awesome views of the Pyrenees, looking out onto both France and Spain on either side. After appreciating the vista we scrambled our way down to our intended campsite, only hindered by my decision to test the quality of the pumice stone in Spain by painfully scraping down the slope onto a snow field. In the morning we managed to set off on the next leg of our excursion to the Ordesa Canyon, despite the Spanish Guardia Civil reimposing the Inquisition by interrogating Mr Cittanova over the camping habits of MGS boys, while agitated six formers tried to put out a roaring fire in the background without drawing attention to themselves.

The next day we set off for our day walk along the Ordesa Canyon, leaving our bags at the campsite in the hands of Mr. Hand, which was very handy. The twenty kilometre route led us to see some remarkable views, looking down the vertical walls of this fascinating deep canyon.

Eventually, and somewhat unfortunately, as we knew we would soon be returning home, we began to make our way back to Gavarnie, once more seeing the assortment of animals we had come across the previous week, from marmots and mountain deer to vultures and eagles, but no bears, although some of us managed to step on where they had been. As we made our way back into France we were once again confronted with the tempting view of a sloping snow glacier. Contrary to common sense, Edward Preston made his way down a snow-chute, surprisingly followed by Mr. Chandler, bumping and sliding across like a 12 year old on his first rollercoaster.

Later that day we were back in the campsite, exhausted from our final gruelling walk, but all of us feeling a sense of achievement never experienced before. It had been hard work, but the sights and scenery made everything worth it, although three weeks living out of your rucksack makes you appreciate simple home luxuries, from warm water to a home cooked meal. This is an experience not to be missed, and I would like to thank, on behalf of all the pupils, Mr Cittanova and the other teachers for all their hard work in making this a most memorable expedition.

This must be the worst Ulula account ever. It is badly written, concentrates on trivialities and is littered with important omissions and errors. How it got past the editor is beyond me. With apologies to the author, I felt compelled to correct a few of the most glaring mistakes. A copy is on the next page. Allan Witton 2021

This year Foreign Trek walked, climbed, scrambled, skied and crawled over the Pyrenees, a breathtaking range of ridges and summits straddling **[along]** the French-Spanish border. Our enthusiastic, or was that unsuspecting, group of 32 boys and 10 teachers made the necessary preparation (food-hoarding, farewell notes, last wills and testament etc.) as we headed for Luchon on our first night from Pau airport, knowing that for the next three weeks would be living out of the contents of our 'light' rucksacks, replenishing en route to our destination with only water, food and fuel.

Most nights we camped in a wild location at around 10,000 feet, **[in fact there was only one camp just over 9000 feet and only 3 others above 7000 feet]** cooking our own simple meals, the speciality of the house consisting of pasta and tuna, and occasionally a smuggled chocolate bar. It was delicious for the first few days, even better after three weeks, but upon eating out at a restaurant, where we did not have to fight the wind and rain, we truly appreciated not having to pick earwigs, beetles and mosquitoes out of our food (though we could have done with the protein content).

We visited some of the most spectacular parts of the High Pyrenees. The highest summit we touched was the second highest in the range, Posets. **[In fact the highest point reached was the col of Collado da la Paúl, which at 3057 m (10,030 ft) is 311 m (1020 ft) below the summit of Posets]** Standing at the top of the mountain we felt on top of the world and considered our insignificance in the galactic scheme of things (The number of our group being 42 did not go without comment). We then made our way down the snowy glacier **[it wasn't a glacier, but just hard-packed snow in a gully]**, using our backsides as sledges, with Mr. Williams leading the way with his spirited war cries.

The second week took us to Gavarnie, a small village where we stocked up on supplies, before venturing out on our four day expedition to the magnificent Ordesa Canyon in Spain. Nothing could dampen our spirits as we looked forward to exploring one of the most cherished parts of the Pyrenees, not even the group of donkeys eating our supplies from our tent porches in the middle of the night prior to our excursion. The next morning we climbed the many **[a few]** thousands of feet to the Brèche de Roland, **[the ascent from Garvarnie to the Brèch is 1427 m, 4680 ft, though it may have felt like many thousands to some]** a place of legend and mystery, encountering en route huge granite massifs, **[almost the whole of the Cirque de Gavarnie and surrounding peaks are limestone, not granite]** glaciers, **[there are no glaciers, but some medium-sized snowfields en route]** beautiful mountain meadows and remote unspoilt lakes **[there was not a single lake, unspoiled or otherwise, en route]**. Once there we were taken aback by the awesome views of the Pyrenees, looking out onto both France and Spain on either side. After appreciating the vista we scrambled our way down to our intended campsite, only hindered by my decision to test the quality of the pumice stone **[pumice is volcanic, this was limestone scree]** in Spain by painfully scraping down the slope onto a snow field. **[No mention of the morning excursion up Le Taillon, our only summit, and not only the highest point we reached but one of the real highlights for many]** In the morning we managed to set off on the next leg of our excursion to the Ordesa Canyon, despite the Spanish Guardia Civil reimposing the Inquisition by interrogating Mr Cittanova over the camping habits of MGS boys, while agitated six formers tried to put out a roaring fire in the background without drawing attention to themselves.

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Eventually, and somewhat unfortunately, as we knew we would soon be returning home, we began to make our way back to Gavarnie, once more seeing the assortment of animals we had come across the previous week, from marmots and mountain deer **[chamoix or ibex?]** to vultures and eagles **[really?]**, but no bears, although some of us managed to step on where they had been **[not in the last few centuries]**. As we made our way back into France we were once again confronted with the tempting view of a sloping snow glacier **[slope]**. Contrary to common sense, Edward Preston made his way down a snow-chute, surprisingly followed by Mr. Chandler, bumping and sliding across like a 12 year old on his first rollercoaster.

Later that day we were back in the campsite, exhausted from our final gruelling walk, but all of us feeling a sense of achievement never experienced before. It had been hard work, but the sights and scenery made everything worth it, although three weeks living out of your rucksack makes you appreciate simple home luxuries, from warm water to a home cooked meal. This is an experience not to be missed, and I would like to thank, on behalf of all the pupils, Mr Cittanova and the other teachers for all their hard work in making this a most memorable expedition.

The Moroccan experience, or on tour with the 'Berber Kings'

This year's Foreign Trek ventured out into the Dark Continent, our destination, Morocco. Although we had been alerted to the potential threat from International Terrorists, no one had warned us about the dangers of repeated ingestion of couscous and goat.

This year's trek has broken a number of records. We walked scrambled and were chased by mules for more continuous days than any previous trek (16 days in total). We walked further than any previous trek, approaching the 360 kilometre mark and for the first time achieved two ascents over the 4000 m mark, climbing the two highest peaks in North Africa - Mgun (Mgoo) and Toubkal (A hill too far?). Such a challenge in an austere landscape would ensure difficult times as well as memorable occasions.

[Note: Heights marked on Moroccan maps are uncertain, and they vary from map to map. The two highest peaks in Morocco are Toubkal, 4167 m, and Ouanoukrim, 4088 m, both climbed on each of the 1992 and 1996 Treks. Mgoun, at 4068 m, is the third highest peak.]

We began our acclimatisation with a little jaunt up to an 'agadir'. These fortified granaries were built to protect the grain harvest from raiding parties. Our Berber chef could have used such protection as he tried to defend his limited supplies from famished MGS trekkers. We will all fondly remember the flat bread that raised our spirits, the tagine that filled our stomachs and the aske if (spicy soup) that emptied them.

Our chef had other talents including being a blacksmith, extreme sport fanatic and song and dance man. He performed several concerts along with our muleteers in a drum ensemble that became affectionately known as "The Berber Kings". They entertained with traditional Berber songs such as "Thank God for women" before inviting us to join them in their traditional dances. Our lads introduced some new dance steps and then entertained the Berbers with the Queen classic "We will rock you".

Having experienced some Berber culture, we wanted to share some English culture. This started with the imaginatively named "lobbing rocks at bottles game". The Berbers caught on very quickly, easily defeating our lads due to their experienced practice of throwing rocks at their animals. So we tried the English game - football. Our first match against some local lads was a tightly fought match, with MGS scraping victory with 10 goals to 9. The return match against our muleteers was a crushing defeat, MGS losing by 8 goals to 0.

While the football matches and the local culture were enjoyable, we were there to walk, and boy did we walk. The 'high point' was the ascent of Mgun and Toubkal. Mgun at 4071 m was a welcome challenge. It was a difficult ascent with steep scree slopes and a narrow ridge to overcome. We toasted our success with oranges, stale bread and sardines. According to statistics, it never rains in Morocco in July. We reminded ourselves of this as we descended Mgun in the pouring rain. We reached Toubkal's base camp 12 days later, having covered the 180 km between (straight-line distance). Toubkal marked our highest point at 4170 m and the climax of trek.

The 12 days between were more difficult than the ascents. We walked on average 18 km a day. There were days when we struggled for water, and found it difficult to walk for 6 hours before lunch on stale bread and a small handful of nuts. Some of the campsites bore a striking resemblance to a council tip or had to be created from nothing by the MGS Ground Force Team. Despite the fact it shouldn't, it continued to rain, making it difficult to burn toilet paper, an increasing problem as dodgy stomachs set in.

However these lows were balanced out by the sense of achievement at being a record breaking walking team, and memories such as bivviing out under the night sky, watching shooting stars and satellites, trying to remember constellations other than the Plough and avoiding the mules that had broken loose again. We also had a run down a wonderful 150 foot scree slope, something that could not be achieved here in Britain anymore.

Trek was much like Morocco itself, a country of great contrasts, as demonstrated by our visit to the Kasbah, which had been left to go to ruin and was inhabited by storks, but still had four rooms beautifully decorated with fine tiles and silks. The people we met in the mountains often had very little, living in small houses, and the women walked miles each day gathering wood or bringing in the crops, but when we stayed nearby people brought us mint tea and the children came to stare. Like these people the young men involved in trek were determined and good humoured in the face of adversity, and each deserves a mention:

Will Smith; Tom Chadwick; Sam West; Phil Cowie; Ben Hampson; Daniel Bailey; Simon Neary; Max Hoffman; Joe Adams; Farooq Ahmed; Priam Heire; Alex Spyridoulis; Max Clayton-Smith; Jaimin Allen; Sam Black; Will Longhill; Tom West; Dave Mosley; Ollie Buxton; James Larmouth.

We would also like to thank ourselves for writing this report and the rest of the staff for their company:

Jonathan Coller (Morale raiser) and Jackie McMurray-Taylor (Token female); Eric Cittanova (Trek leader); Tim Pattison (Optimist); Roger Hand (Richest member of staff and aged 41 according to the muleteers); John Willson (The ultimate derrière); Nigel Burin (Football pundit extraordinaire).