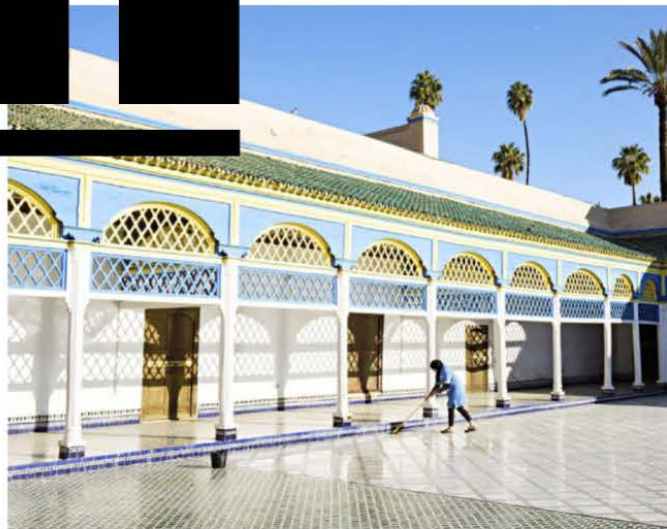




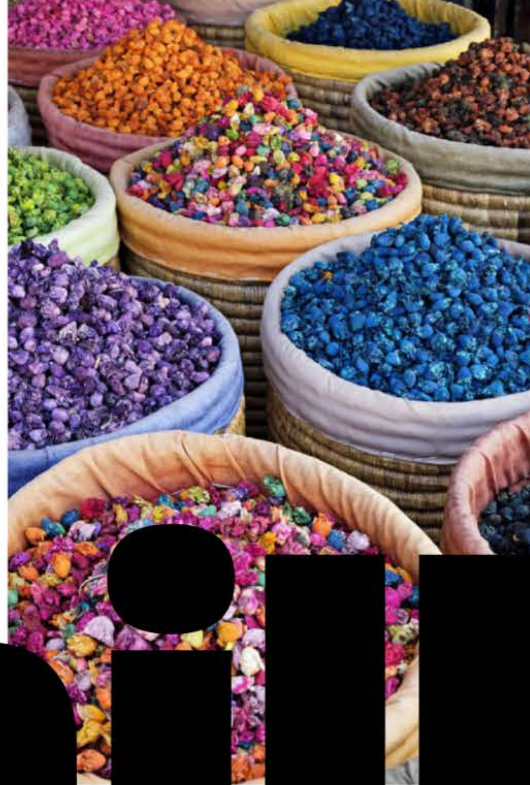
an



climb



by Celia Hoffman
photographs by Peter Bohler



uphill

A bike trip through Morocco shows a pair of travelers the complex dynamics of hospitality.





It was early, but the day already promised to be warm. We had thought that by this hour we'd be on our bicycles, climbing away from these barren brown hills, heading farther south to a valley filled with oases and dates. But as we were loading up, Pete noticed that one of his brakes wasn't working. We tightened and fiddled, but our efforts managed only to attract the attention of two men who were now crouching with us next to Pete's overturned bike in the gravelly yard of an empty café, in a tiny town off a long desert highway in the middle of Morocco. But in a way, this was part of the plan.

In the previous few months, Pete and I had gotten engaged, nearly bought a house, and started talking in earnest about having kids. We had also decided that, before we jumped headlong into every single adult responsibility possible, we should cut loose from our lives for four weeks and do something completely different. Do something that we might never be able to do again. I had never bike trekked before, and Pete had only done it once in college, by mistake, when a cross-country ski trip traversing Finland went awry. Neither of us had ever been to Africa.

Not only would we do a new activity in a foreign place, we'd do it on our own. With several weeks, maybe we could avoid seeing all the touristy things in all the touristy ways with all the tourists. Maybe we'd have the time to travel more organically, to meet people and let an adventure unfold. To slow down and get to know the *real life* that outsiders are often insulated from by tourist infrastructure. We wanted it

all, we wanted it now, and we wanted it to happen perfectly. Was that too much to ask?

Five days and 150 miles ago, we had picked up our rented bikes and left the narrow alleys of Marrakech's walled medina. As I dodged mopeds and donkey carts, my panniers weighted with camping equipment, rain gear, a down jacket, sunblock, and a first-aid kit fit for a zombie apocalypse, I wondered to myself—could I really do this?

But the days through the Atlas Mountains had boosted my confidence. As we wended our way around towering jagged hills, I fortified myself with a mantra I said aloud and silently over and over: *one foot in front of the other*. In my lowest gear and standing up on my bike, I moved at the same pace I might walk, and slowly, slowly, I climbed. Around each switch-back there came another, and the smell of new asphalt and exhaust mingled with the dust.

We passed mud-brick homes that blended seamlessly with the rock they were built into, their brightly colored doors giving their presence away and offering hints at the life within. Each evening, as the sun set, we'd start thinking about where to sleep. On nights when we could see our breath, we rented cold little rooms from innkeepers who had no other guests. On warmer nights, we set up the tent and relished the freedom of not needing anyone or anything else.

On the day we finally made our way over the Tizi-n-Tichka, the highest point we would pass, it took us six hours to creep 30 miles, but the men on the roadside selling geodes to tour-

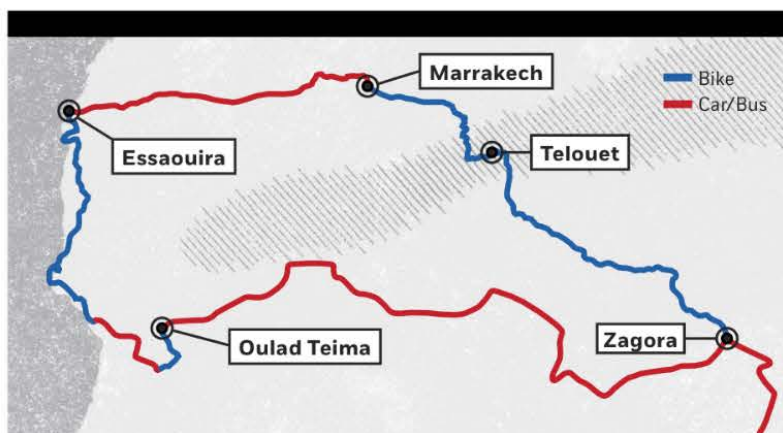
ists yelled "Bravo! Bravo!" as we passed, and when we summited at sunset, I felt like we had just finished the Tour de France.

As the physical challenge of the trip weighed less heavily on me, a problem with the bikes felt like the next logical demon to battle on our quest. But we didn't have to face this demon alone. The two strangers that peered over our shoulders, we soon learned, were the café owner, Ismail, and his neighbor, Ichou. Ismail was in his early twenties, and though he spoke no English, he radiated a somber kindness. Ichou, on the other hand, spoke very good English and moved with a kind of buoyant intensity that inspired confidence.

After more than an hour of tinkering, all four of us had bicycle grease on our hands and agreed that Pete needed a new brake pad. Ichou told us that our best bet for getting the part was in a big town about 40 miles back. He offered to go with Pete, and within minutes, they were on their way in a passing desert taxi with Pete's bike strapped to the roof.

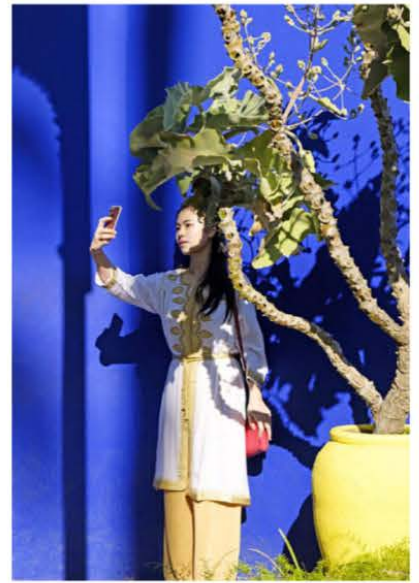
Ismail and I walked back to the café. I sat down at a table on the patio and was excited when he joined me. Because of my nonexistent Arabic and very limited French, we determined the best way to communicate was through Google Translate. For several hours we passed our phones back and forth, typing in questions and answers and hoping that the Internet wouldn't butcher the meanings of our words too terribly. He told me his family was from the nearby hills, that his sister had moved to Canada, his brother to Holland, but

Below: The route Celia Hoffman and Peter Bohler took through Morocco. Right: Fellow bicyclists in Oulad Edriss, south of Zagora, near where the N9 road ends in the Sahara.



**Maybe we could
avoid seeing all the
touristy things in all
the touristy ways.**





since he was the baby, he had stayed nearby to look after his parents. I told him my sister and brother and I all lived in California, but I still wished I saw them more. Our attempts to discuss more complicated topics, such as his efforts to attract business to the café, revealed the limits of our technology. Our conversation might have taken us an hour if we had been speaking directly to one another, but because we were texting, it sustained us through the morning and into the afternoon. The café had no other customers.

"Want to come to the butcher?" the text in Ismail's phone asked. I nodded and then left Pete a note at the table, not sure how long this excursion might take. We left the café and walked for two minutes before we reached a squat little structure with a couple of carcasses hanging near the doorway. Entering the fully tiled interior, we found ourselves in a room divided in half by a large chrome table with a few fresh goat heads sitting on one side. Almost as soon as we stepped in, a heavyset man jogged in from behind us, rolled over the countertop, and stood facing us from the other side. Ismail ordered a kilo of lamb from him. On a wooden cutting board, the butcher hacked a lamb carcass into big even cubes, measuring each until the scale with the kilo weight reached equilibrium.

Back at the café we stood in the kitchen chopping onions. We used the only word the other would recognize, respectively, as a stand-in for all other words—*Ismail*, I said when I finished chopping my pile of onions. *Celia*, he said when he lifted the top of the tagine to indicate that it was time to add the meat. There was something about the tender way he said my name that made me feel as though I had a true friend all the way over here on the other side of the world. We went back to the sunny patio and waited. Our text marathon had left us both exhausted, and as I sketched in my notebook and he read on his phone, we were content to sit in silence. After a while we added vegetables to the tagine. Then we waited some more. Just as I started to get worried that Pete had been kidnapped, he and Ichō returned, having gone on their own odyssey. It had taken the efforts of more than one mechanic, but after six hours, a makeshift brake pad was finally fashioned and the bike was fixed.

The four of us sat down to eat, using pieces of bread to scoop up the stewed lamb and vegetables from the tagine. Ichō asked us about our plans. How would we be going into the desert? Days before, we had met our first fellow bike trekker, who was coming from the opposite direction. He had talked glowingly

about riding, then pushing, then dragging his bike through the Saharan sand and about the dunes in the moonlight, how they had looked like a moonscape. When we told Ichō we were considering riding out to the dunes on our own, his eyes widened. He did not think this was a good idea. He had heard of people needing to be rescued. People who don't know the land, he said, should be careful about going out there without people who do. His family was Berber—his grandfather had made his living shepherding livestock across the desert, and Ichō had grown up in a little village near the dunes. Some of his family was still there. Would we like to meet his family? Would we like to stay with them, get a sense for this nomadic life and see the dunes?

Before coming to Morocco, I had read a lot about unauthorized "guides" selling trips to tourists that turned out to be less than promised. And in my short time here, particularly in Marrakech, I had become reflexively suspicious of unsolicited human contact. Most people vying for my attention, whether they were giving directions, selling carpets, or simply standing with outstretched arms, seemed to have the same goal: to separate me from my dirhams. The first Arabic word I had picked up was *la*: "no." But in this little town, *we* had needed something, and Ichō had come. Could I trust him? If I kept saying no, would we miss out on the adventure we had come here for?

We said yes.

We arranged to meet Ichō's brother in a town about 100 miles away in three days' time. We discussed payment: They would need

money for food and transport for us. It was much less expensive than the desert trips that took tourists into villages to meet the locals, and better than that, it was the real thing—a person we had met welcoming us into his family's home. We happily agreed to pay. It was the least we could do.

The next day, our plans laid, we got back on the road. Ichō gave us what he called a "Berber GPS," a map he'd drawn on a paper bag that showed where to get off the main highway and onto a dirt road that went through small villages—the path of the old trading caravans.

We climbed our last series of mountains and went down our last dramatic descents, crossing over into an utterly new landscape: a sea of palm trees. I finally grasped the meaning of a word that had been in my vocabulary since our Morocco research had begun: *palmeraie*. I had expected some sort of palm oasis, a cluster of trees popping up out of the sand, but what I saw before me were palm *groves*—highly cultivated agricultural plots with rows of palm trees of every size stretching across an endless expanse of land. The dusty road was shaded by the dense weave of trees planted on either side of it, and the rustling of the trees provided a soundtrack as we biked. Occasionally a farmworker appeared, cutting brush away or walking amongst the grid. Every few miles, we'd pass a small village where people lived in ancient crumbling kasbahs and paid us little mind. Children played soccer in the street, and bright-colored clothing hung on lines.

The day before we were to meet Ichō's brother, Ichō called to inform us that he, too, would be joining us in the desert. I was a little surprised that he would make the trek all the way out here, but when I saw him again, lean-

Opposite page: Traveling by bike, Peter and Celia experienced moments many other travelers miss. Below: The new Yves St. Laurent Museum in Marrakech displays the fashion designer's sketches and garments and hosts temporary exhibitions.



See Morocco by Bike

With a sense of adventure and diligent research, it's possible to plan an independent bicycle trip in Morocco (which writer Celia Hoffman and photographer Peter Bohler did). But guided tours make a Moroccan spin possible for anyone who can ride a bike. Here are a few of our favorites.

Climb the Atlas Mountains, Pedal the Atlantic Coast

Peter and Celia's trip took them over the Atlas Mountains and along Morocco's Atlantic coast. Argan Xtreme Sports' seven-day **Atlantic Atlas Loop** covers some of the same ground, following the coast from the fishing village of Taghazout to the city of Essaouira before tackling the mountains. *From \$1,975.* If you want to focus on the mountains, Argan also leads an eight-day, 300-mile tour, **Peaks and Valleys of the High Atlas**, that begins and ends in Marrakech and climbs the 6,867-foot Tizi-n-Test pass. *From \$2,400.* argansports.com

Cross the Sahara Desert

The Sahara is not easily explored by bike. (Celia and Peter swapped their road bikes for a Land Rover to traverse this tricky terrain.) But cycling over sand dunes isn't impossible if you have the right equipment. Maroc Nature's 12-day **Fat Bike Desert Tour** begins and ends in Marrakech and includes eight days of riding the golden dunes on a bike built for sand.

From \$1,500. bike-morocco.com

Do It All

DuVine Cycling + Adventure Co. is known for its luxury bike tours in destinations all over the world. On the six-day **Morocco Bike and Adventure Tour**, you'll stay in five-star hotels and enjoy post-ride cocktails and gourmet dinners. And after cycling through Berber villages in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains, and traversing parts of the Agafay Desert, that's exactly what you'll deserve.

From \$7,995. duvine.com





The fishing village of Taghazout has become a popular surfing destination.