



THE Road TO Morocco

Driving the backroads of North Africa is nothing less than a total immersion in the exotic—all casbahs and teeming markets—and it's a prime opportunity to test the latest in spring gear

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE CASIMIRO

DAYS

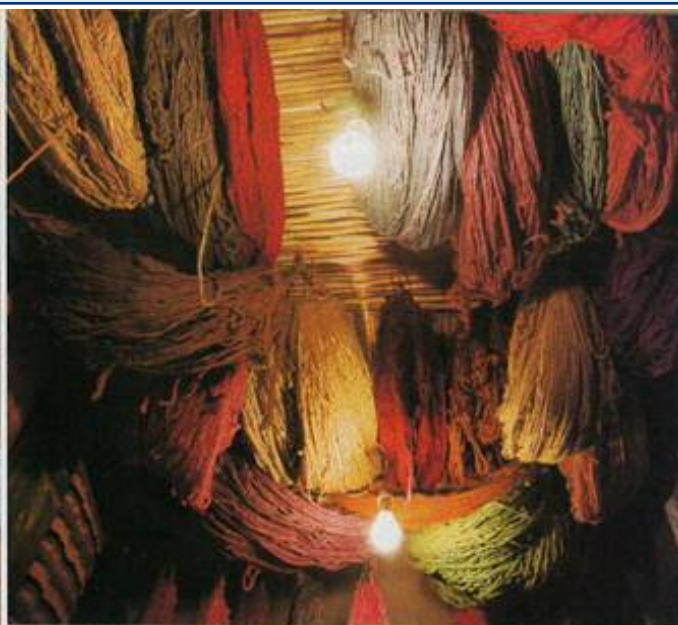
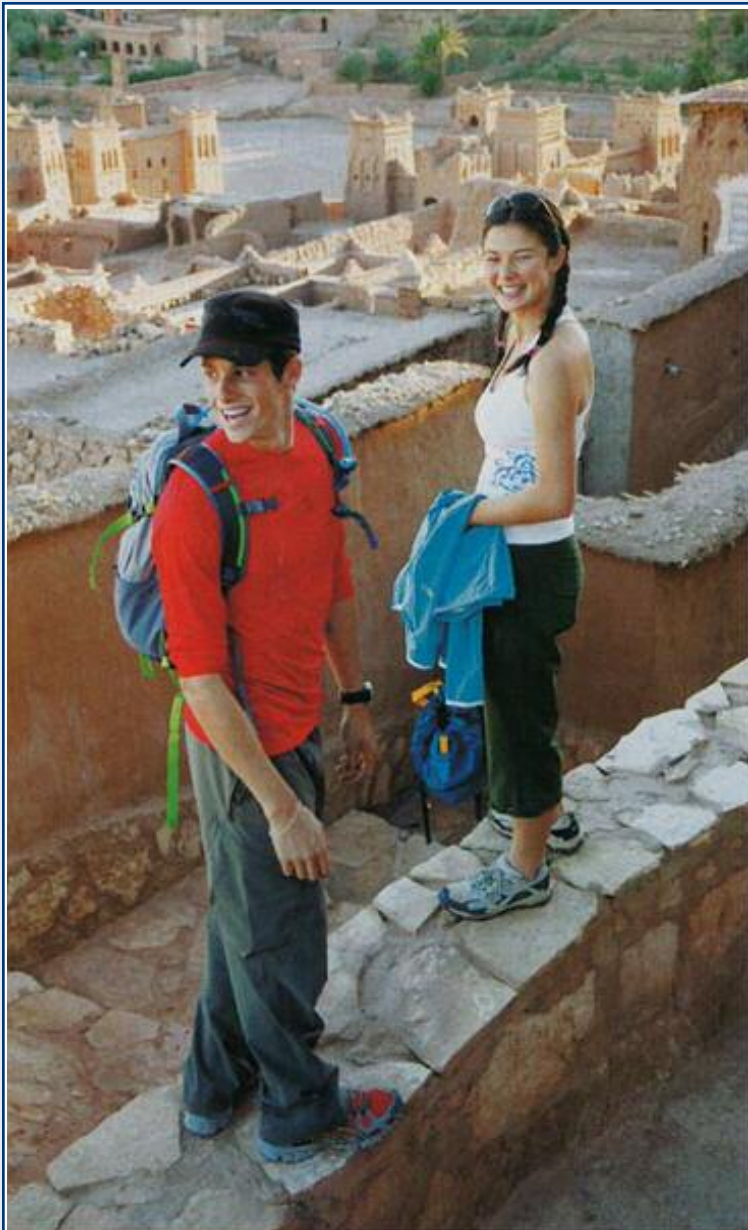
1&2

Marrakech and Ait Ben Haddou

There is a place in the center of the old city of Marrakech where the snake charmers gather, along with the storytellers, the meat sellers, the water pourers, and the con men. It is the Djemaa el-Fna, the "square of the dead," and at two parts Scheherazade, one part modern metropolis, it is the ideal introduction to the crossroads of North Africa. From there, wander through the labyrinth of cramped alleyways, carpet souks, and tea shops that have defined Marrakech for generations of travelers. When you tire of the vendors' polyglot pitches—and you will—escape three hours east across the Atlas Mountains to the mudbrick city of Ait Ben Haddou, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The collection of fortress-like casbahs just outside Ouarzazate has made cameos in both *Gladiator* and *The Mummy* and sits like a city outside time.

The souk in Marrakech

Left: Roxy Tina top (\$40); Mountain Hardwear Laurel jeans (\$60); Patagonia Alkali sandals (\$80); REI Erin City bag (\$29). Right: Arc'teryx Motive Polo SS (\$65); Melly Hansen Voyage pants (\$75); Timberland Factor Lace shoes (\$75); Dakine fedora (\$27); Freestyle Cnote watch (\$110).



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Afternoon in the walled city of Ait Ben Haddou

Left: Arc'teryx Rho SL crew (\$55); Westcomb Synchro cargo pants (\$200); Asics Gel-Trail Attack 4WR shoes (\$80); Mission Playground Strand hat (\$30); The North Face Bosque backpack (\$89); Origo Traverse Peak Multi-Sensor watch (\$150). Right: The North Face Convertible Vedder jacket (\$99); Marmot Moonstruck sport tank (\$42); Merrell Pedal capris (\$55); New Balance 850 Multi-Sport shoes (\$85); Smith Optics Amelia sunglasses (\$119); Arc'teryx Cierzo 18 backpack (\$49)

Rounds of freshly dyed wool in Marrakech

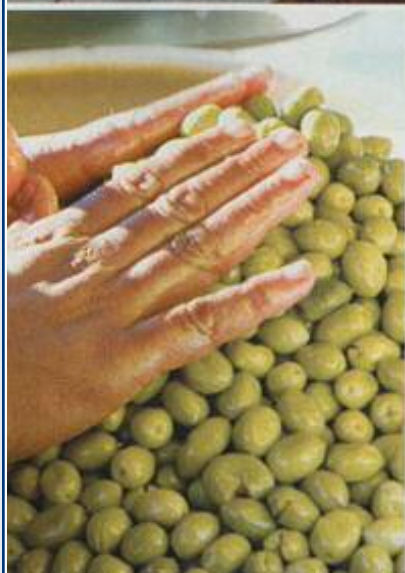
Mint tea, made almost sickly sweet, is a mainstay of Moroccan life

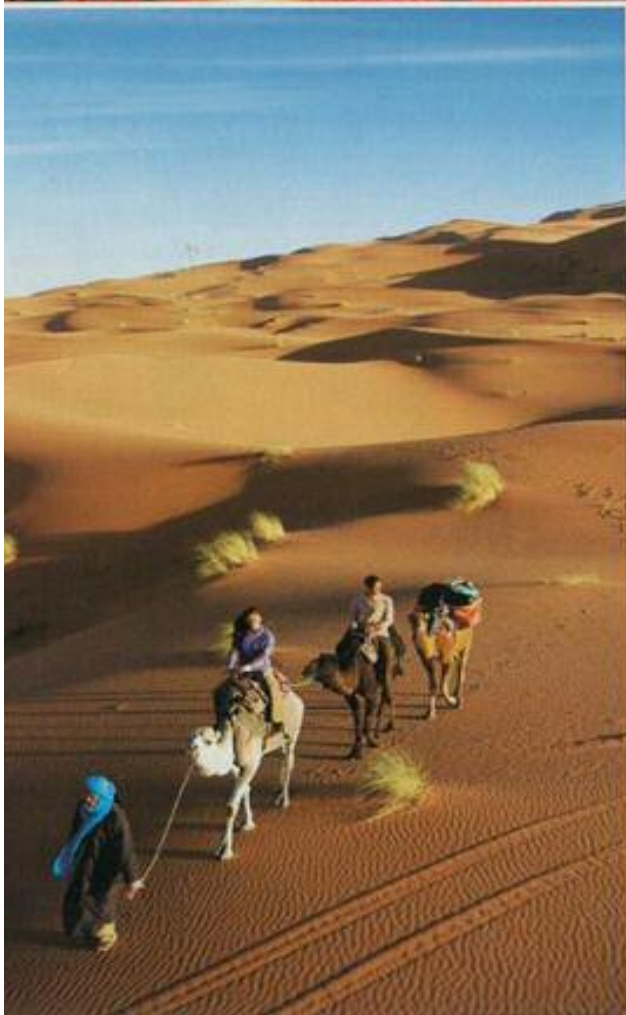
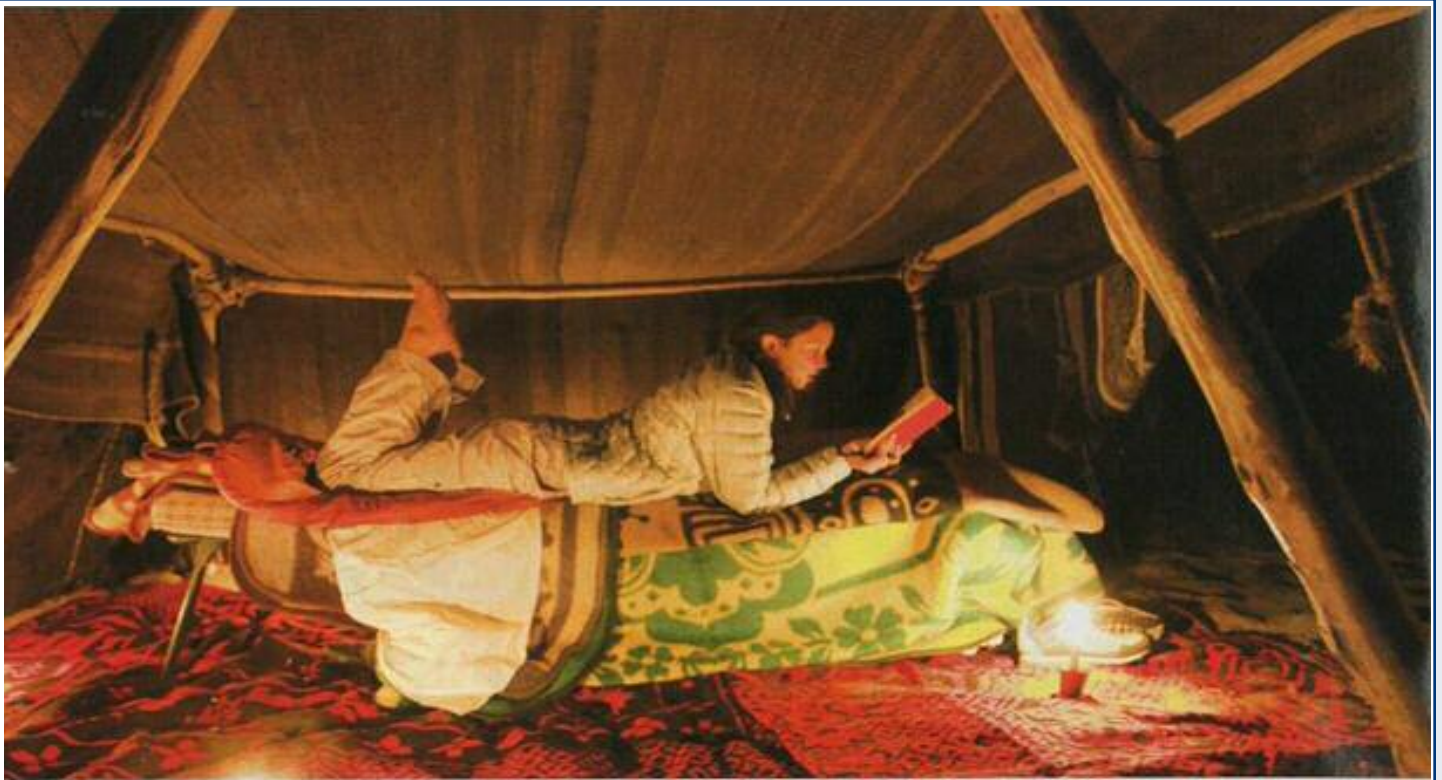
Mountain Hardware Beaten Path hoodie (\$140)

The night market of Marrakech

Left: Patagonia Down Sweater (\$199); Royal Robbins crochet flower cap (\$18). Right: Merrell Summit jacket (\$69)

Fresh olives, one variety of dozens found in Morocco





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Evening at a tent camp in the dunes of the western Sahara

Patagonia Down Sweater (\$199); Arc'teryx Witness pants (\$89); La Sportiva Habanero shoes (\$85)

A camel herder places candles in the desert, the only light other than stars

In Merzouga, the usual point of departure for camel treks

Nau Lightbeam shirt (\$110); Loomstate Mission in Lagoon jeans (\$160); Anon Informant sunglasses (\$125)

A blessedly familiar stop sign on the road east to the Sahara

Trekking in the sand sea outside Merzouga

Left: Westcomb Bravo hoodie (\$135); Merrell Ready pants (\$69); La Sportiva Habanero shoes (\$85). Right: Schott Polican sweater (\$120); Elwood Kenny long-sleeve shirt (\$65); Kuhl Cragrunner pants (\$65); Filson Uplander field boots (\$328)

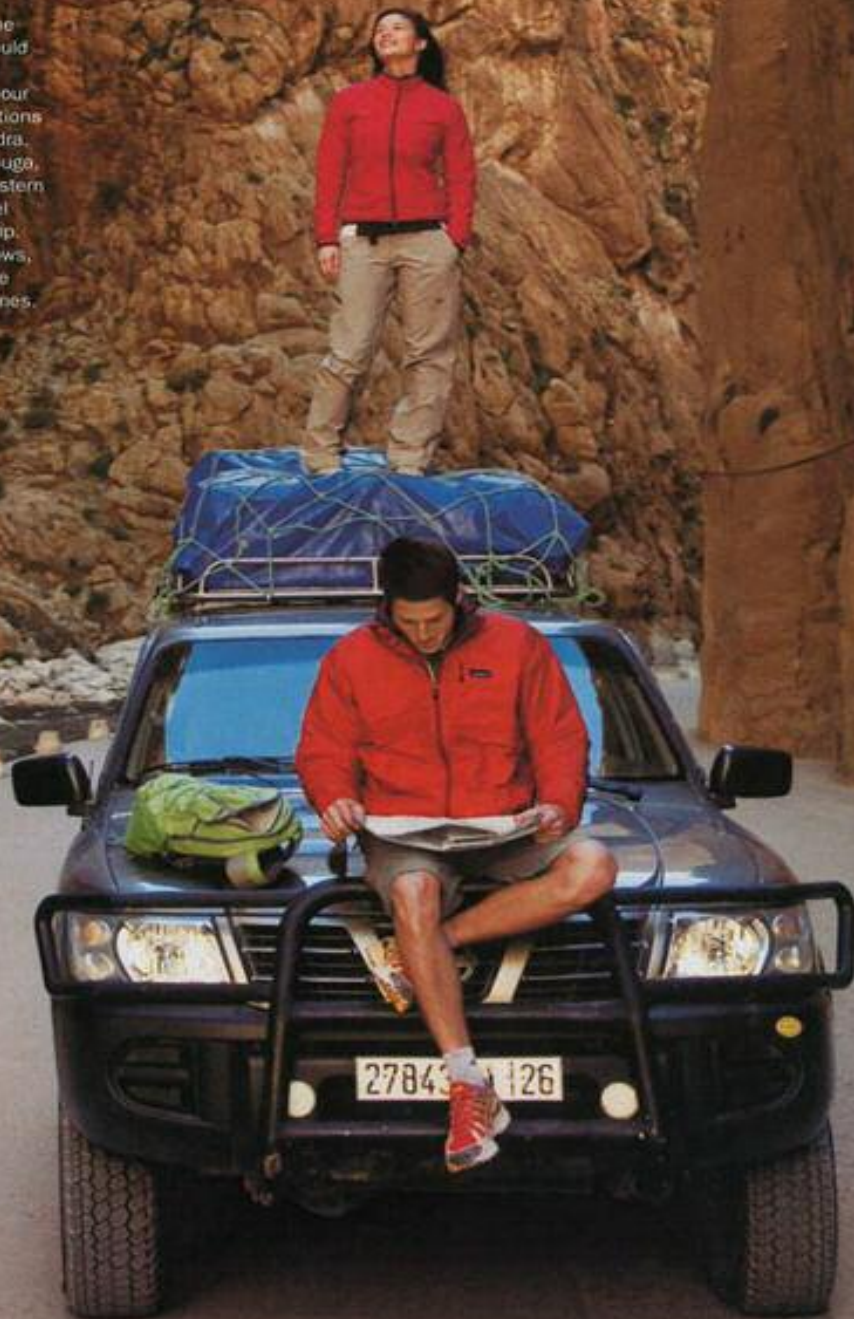


DAYS

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Todra Gorge and The Sahara Desert

Picture the Zion Narrows plunked down in North Africa and you've got Todra Gorge. Here, three hours east of Ait Ben Haddjou, hulking limestone walls tighten to a few dozen yards. Climbers could spend weeks scaling the hundreds of bolted routes, while hikers should make the epic two-hour scramble to the top of the cliffs (ask for directions at the hotels near the gorge's mouth). From Todra, it's a four-hour drive to the settlement of Merzouga, where a plain of black rock gives way to the western Sahara. To venture into the desert, hire a camel and guide and arrange for a night at a tent camp. After dinner, while the campfire casts its shadows, pull the bedding from your tent, settle under the stars, and listen to the sand slide down the dunes.



The narrows of Todra Gorge

Top: Arc'teryx Handler jacket (\$129); Westcomb Synchro LT pants (\$190). Bottom: Patagonia Micro Puff hooded jacket (\$215); Mountain Hardware Matterhorn trunk shorts (\$65); Asics Gel-Trail Attack 4WR shoes (\$80); Adidas Ultra Tech trail quarter socks (\$8); Macpac Tustara 20 backpack (\$100)

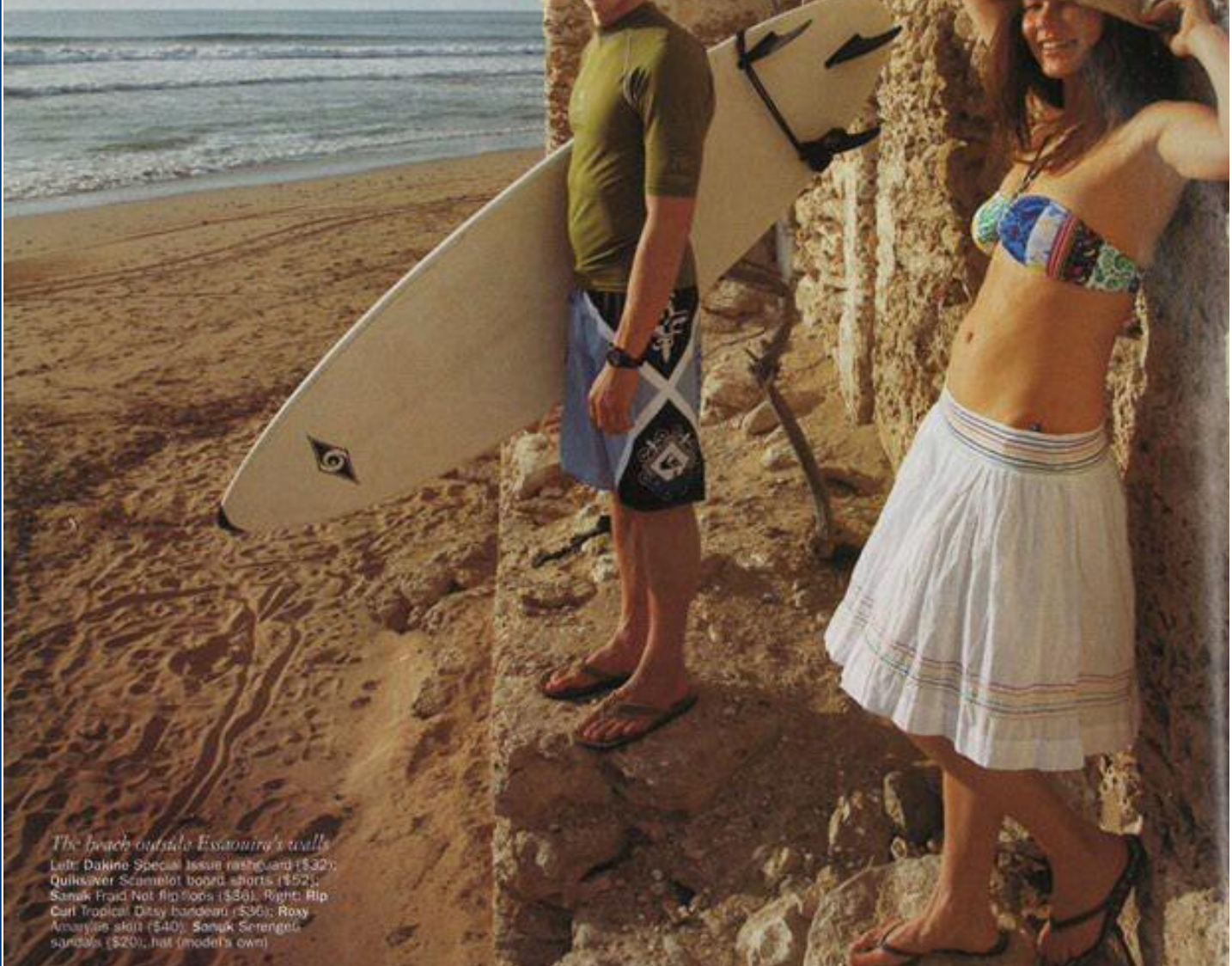
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DAYS

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Essaouira and The Atlas Mountains

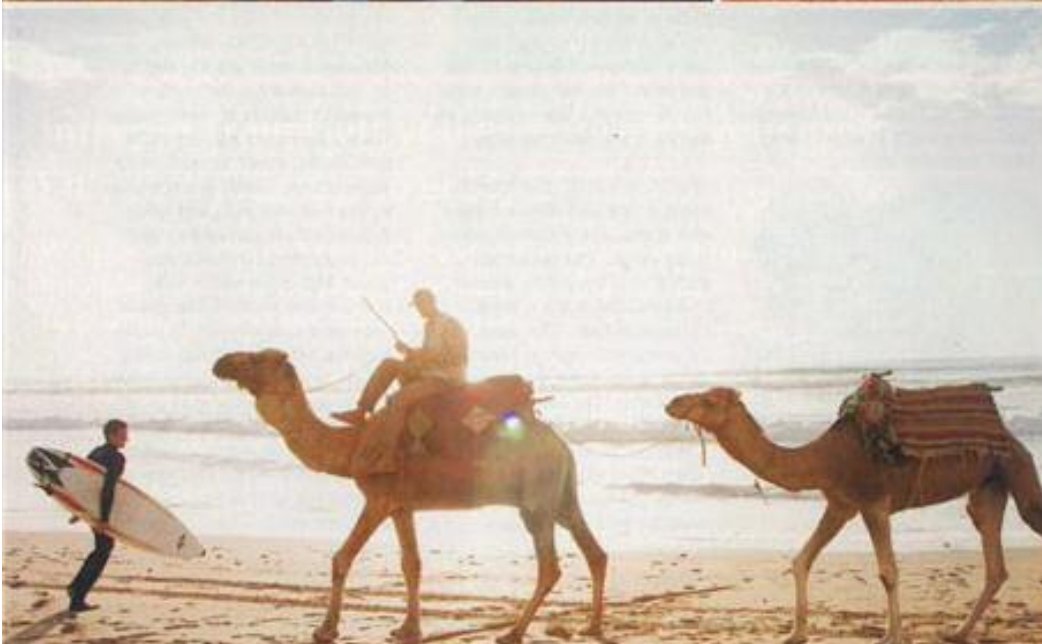
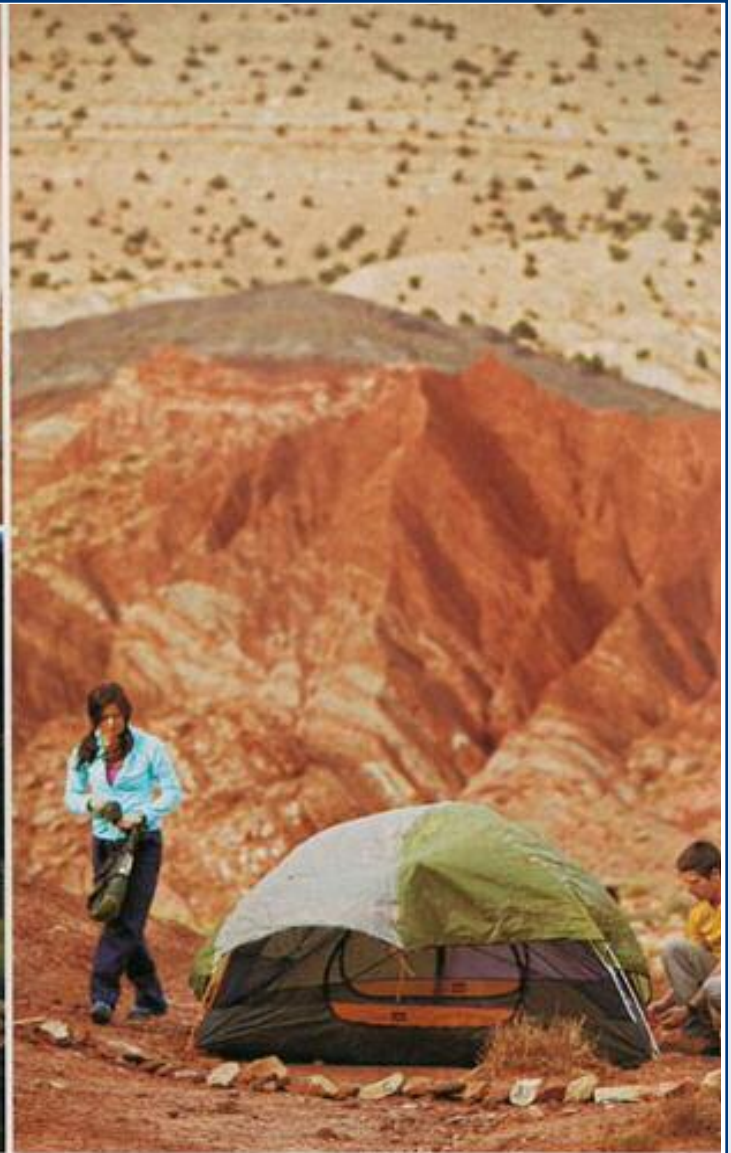
After the desert it only makes sense to head for water, so turn back to the Atlas Mountains and the Atlantic coast. At the 7,438-foot Tichka Pass, you'll wonder whether Moroccan road builders got paid by the curve. Take a break in nearby Telouet, where you can camp in the badlands outside of town or, if it's Thursday, mingle in the bustling village market. Then follow the road down—way down—to Essaouira, a fortified city at the ocean's edge. Between the winding, whitewashed walls you'll find a funky mix of fishermen, artists, backpackers, and a handful of ripping windsurfers. The laid-back town might also be the best place in all of Morocco to sit at dusk, sweet mint tea in hand, and watch the sun race home from Africa.



The beach outside Essaouira's walls

Left: Dakine Special Issue rash guard (\$32); Quiksilver Scambot board shorts (\$52); Sanuk Froid Not flip-flops (\$36). Right: Rip Curl Tropical Ditsy bandeau (\$36); Roxy Amaylis akili (\$40); Sanuk Serengeti sandals (\$20); hat (model's own)


SPRING O'BRIEN



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Goats search for nuts in argan trees just east of the Atlantic coast

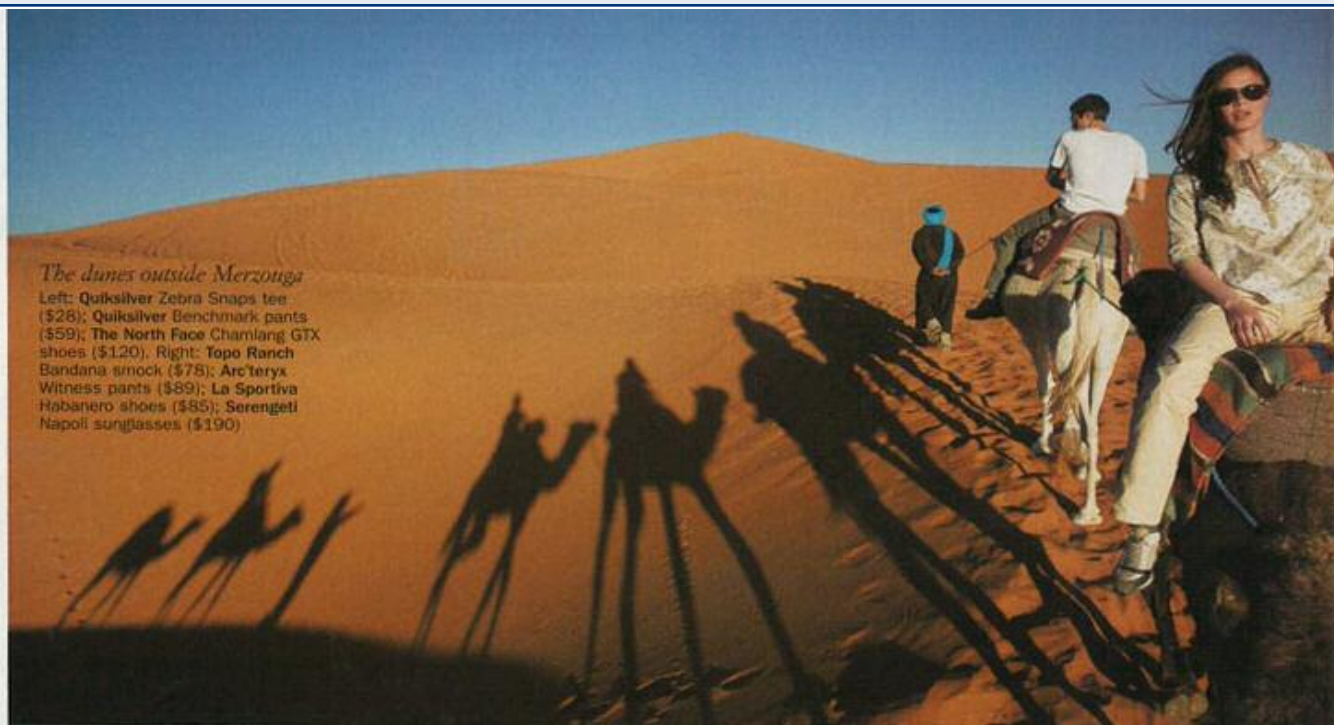
Morning stop en route to Essaouira
 Lucky Brand Mermaid Crest tee (\$38);
 Roxy Rosie jeans (\$44); El Naturalista eggdasil
 N102 shoes (\$150)

*Camping in the badlands outside
 Telouet in the Atlas Mountains*
 Left: Cloudveil Track jacket (\$75); Westcomb
 Trailblazer LT pants (\$185); Teva Wraptor Stability
 eVent shoes (\$110). Center: REI Quarter Dome
 T2 tent (\$259). Right: Prana Flow crew (\$40);
 Columbia Omni-Dry Limitless convertible pants
 (\$70); The North Face Chamling GTX shoes (\$120)

*The surfing south of Essaouira is
 like nowhere else on the planet*
 O'Neill Mutant 4/3 wetsuit (\$310)

*Filling up at a date palm oasis east
 of the Atlas Mountains*
 Helly Hansen Universal shirt (\$55);
 Loomstate Mission in Lagoon jeans (\$160);
 El Naturalista Macabuca N370 shoes (\$180);
 Deuter Hydro EXP 65L backpack (\$85);
 Camelbak Better Bottle (\$12)

SEE MORE MOROCCO PHOTOS by
 Steve Casimiro at ngadventure.com



The dunes outside Merzouga

Left: Quiksilver Zebra Snaps tee (\$26); Quiksilver Benchmark pants (\$59); The North Face Chamlang GTX shoes (\$120). Right: Topo Ranch Bandana smock (\$75); Arc'teryx Witness pants (\$89); La Sportiva Habanero shoes (\$85); Serengeti Napoli sunglasses (\$190)

ADVENTURE GUIDE

EXPLORING MOROCCO

Modern and medieval sit side by side in Morocco, and the contrast conspires to make the country every bit as foreign, dizzying, and dreamlike as you imagine. Traveling is not without its challenges, but with a sense of humor you'll quickly fall for the crossroads of North Africa.

GETTING THERE: Royal Air Maroc flies from New York to Marrakech (about \$1,000; royalairmaroc.com). British Airways typically costs more—around \$2,300 from New York—but has flights from dozens of U.S. cities (ba.com).

WHERE TO STAY: Marrakech is ground zero for *riads* (refurbished Moorish town houses), which are so much more comfortable than other lodging options. The hands-down favorite was **Riad Farnatchi** (\$400; riadfarnatchi.com), run by a Canadian expat who can arrange just about anything. In Ouarzazate, the gateway to Ait Ben Haddou and Todra Gorge, **Le Berbere Palace** is a lesson in Moroccan opulence (\$260; ouarzazate.com/leberberepalace). In Merzouga, the staging ground for camel treks, the **Hotel Kanz Erremal** is minimal but pleasant (\$31, including breakfast;

kanzerremal.com). In Essaouira try **Riad Mimouna**, which overlooks the beach, harbor, and town (\$100; riad-mimouna.com).

CAMELS: Your one must-do in Morocco: Get to the village of Merzouga and arrange a 90-minute sunset camel ride through the 500-foot sand dunes of **Erg Chebbis**. The **Hotel Kanz Erremal** can plan a night at a tent camp (\$60; kanzerremal.com).



CASBAHS: There are more than a thousand crumbling casbahs—the walled, mud-brick forts famously rocked by the Clash—in the Atlas Mountains near Ouarzazate, but the most impressive collection by far is **Ait Ben Haddou**. The UNESCO World Heritage site easily ranks with Machu Picchu and other “life list” destinations. Plan to spend a day exploring its narrow, eerily deserted alleys.

BOARD SPORTS: The Atlantic coast is rich with beach breaks, rock reefs, and, in certain spots, heavy winds. The best known surfing is in the south around **Agadir**, but that's a large, touristy town. The more relaxed little port of **Essaouira** is a haven for wind- and kite-surfers. For paddle surfers, we found head-high sets at a beach just nine miles south of town. **Club Mistral** rents beater boards (\$74 for three hours; morocco@club-mistral.com).



Riad Farnatchi

GETTING AROUND: Within Marrakech, taxis are the way to go, but buses are the primary transport outside of town. **Supra-Tours** (supratours.ma) and **CTM** (ctm.co.ma) travel to most major destinations. Roads are passable in much of Morocco, and most U.S. rental car companies operate in-country; compacts run about \$50 a day with a U.S. license. One caution: The police are notoriously difficult. To avoid hassles, consider a guide and a driver. **Jamal Boularhbar** is knowledgeable and multilingual (\$78 a day; j_boularhbar@hotmail.com); he often works with driver **Marwane Ahmed** (m.aventures@gmail.com), who seems to know everyone in Morocco. —S.C.

MAP BY KURT HOLLOWAY