



AFOOT IN FRENCH NORTH AFRICA

Adventures On A Moroccan Hike

(Written for "The Listener" by C.R.)



CASABLANCA, "a modern concrete little Paris in the midst of ancient primitive country"

IN search of the southern sunshine that they sorely missed in London two young New Zealanders went hiking over the French North African roads that British and American troops now know well. Here one of them describes their experiences with mountains, deserts, sheikhs, and the Foreign Legion

LIKE everyone else in New Zealand, I had always imagined the Sahara sand as coming right down to the Mediterranean waves. Then passing by sea I saw Oran and Algiers shining white and beautiful against a blue background of bush-clad ranges, and realised that Algeria is fertile and Frenchified—an integral part of France indeed—and that the Sahara lies far inland where the rivers from the further slopes of those mountains trickle into oblivion among the sand and sun-baked clay. As soon as I could, therefore, I was back with a friend and a rucksack for six weeks' freedom from foggy London into this blue land of home-like sunshine.

"Hades on Legs"

We crossed from Gibraltar to Ceuta in the "Spanish Zone" of Morocco. On the wharf two Germans in stained clothing and gigantic boots grinned, mistaking us for recruits for the Foreign Legion. "We haf chust escaped," explained one of them, Heinrich Becker, formerly a medical student at Heidelberg. "Legion-

naires are not solchers; they are chust schlaves. It is Hades on legs." When after three days' walking we reached the actual French border, however, the officials in turn mistook us for something else. "Ah, globe-trotters," they said. "You must not come in here." But at last, after involved warnings that we must not work, beg or sell picture-postcards of ourselves, they let us through.

Here was sunshine indeed, though snow lay on the high mountains round about. Red clay villages shone clear on the hill slopes, except when a light cloud passed, and they instantly vanished into their background.

In the valleys were date, fig, olive and citrus groves. Our roads were sometimes winding mountain tracks and sometimes straight tarred highways on which getting a 30-mile lorry lift was certain sooner or later. Big, bearded men in flowing cloaks strode along the tracks with their flocks, or rode donkeys so small that their feet nearly touched the ground. Camels, too, there were, carrying huge loads of straw or crushed grain to the weekly markets. "Don't leave the roads," we were advised. "These Arab folk are friendly enough. All the same, they might knife you for your money." We, carrying our packs as no Arab will do unless too poor to afford camel, donkey or wife, thought this advice far-fetched. But later, far inland, we were held up, several times; always escaping, however, by a show of confidence—in the would-be bandits, or in our own prowess, or in both.

Beds We Slept In

Nights were cold, and we needed shelter. Yet on our first night, when an Arab invited us to share his salt, we entered his ten-foot cube of a windowless, mud-baked house with considerable qualms. His odoriferous goat went with us. Meat-and-vegetable stew, with eucalyptus leaves for flavouring, was cooking in an earthen pot over a charcoal brazier. And a picture of a deer cut from a petrol advert, hung on the wall be-

side a very tattered newspaper portrait of Herr Hitler. (No political significance, I am sure). After drinking glass after glass of Moorish tea, made in a silver pot with much sugar and mint instead of milk, we slept on a pile of sheepskins on the floor. Other nights we were in the queer low tents of Bedouin. At Rabat we slept in a sort of dog-kennel stone cell on the flat roof of a larger building used by the Barbary pirates a hundred years ago, and never cleaned out since. At Casablanca we put in two nights on the concrete floor of an abandoned railway station, and only quit when labourers took off the roof.

Modern And Ancient

Casablanca, on the Atlantic, 300 miles from our starting-point, we found to be a modern concrete "Little Paris" in the midst of ancient, primitive country, with lines of electric railways beginning to run out in all directions. But mud-red, many-mosqued Marrakech, the capital and name-town of Morocco, baking amid date palms where Atlantic Plain and Atlas Mountains meet, was utterly different. Except for ox-cart lifts, we tramped the whole 180 miles there from the sea, going thirsty when, as often occurred, our 30-foot rope was far too short to reach down the occasional wells on the way. Dust rose and eddied from the pads of smooth-skinned, stinking camels coming in from the desert with deliberate, delicate step, tiny head swaying ludicrously on the long curved neck, underlip thrust out moodily, pig eyes gleaming redly. Arabs marched stolidly beside their trains in sandals, with heavy hooded cloaks to shade the sun, and dust matted thickly into their sweating, scraggy beards. Past the little canvas shelters of merchants in the open square they strode and disappeared down narrow winding clay streets, sometimes roofed with woven straw matting, dark as a cave, through which the animals could scarcely squeeze with their loads. When the sun's red ball sank suddenly under the distant sandy horizon, bright stars glowed in the deep blue sky, lights flared by the open market stalls, and hooded men and veiled women padded quietly through dim doorways to their sleeping-mats spread in tiny airless rooms. A bugle blew from the mosque's tall tower. Below, donkeys brayed. Outside, jackals and native dogs snarled and fought over the garbage piles.

Beyond Marrakech we left the last military post behind and climbed into the wild Atlas. And at last, cool and fresh on the highest point of our travels, quite close to the snowline, we looked over into the Sahara itself. Dull copper with the heat, level as the sea, and empty of house or tree, it stretched away south to Timbuktu. Our plan was to cut across a corner to the ocean. But we reckoned without its parched clay—it was not sand as in Egypt—cut by the winds and the winter torrents into huge folds and creases. Without shade or water we strode on for two whole days. Evening fell icy. By dawn we were shivering and sick. There was only a mouthful of liquid ice in our bottles. Heat descended again. We felt cooked in a pan, like eggs. Our packs had swollen to enormous size. Through the sizzling shimmer trees showed up, white city walls, a little lake—mirages all.

"Guests" of the Sheikh

Then surprisingly a broken tower appeared. And more surprisingly it proved real. But was there water within its lifeless walls? Yes, there was—a great stone tank dating from when the Foreign Legion had built and held the place. And at evening we stumbled into Tachguelt, an Arab town in the desert on a green oasis. But when, after the best meal I have ever tasted, we rose to go, a messenger from the sheikh stood before us. "You are my guests," he said.

Our "guest-room" was a cell. Wherever we went next day an armed guard followed us. And on the third day we were packed off on a sea-sickening camel-back ride to an unknown destination. But what did this sheikh want from us, his "guests"? Ransom was out of the question. But if not ransom—then what? Moreover French North Africa, even the Morocco end, is allegedly "pacified" these days. The Legionaries complain that they are roadmen, not soldiers. The village sheikh, unpicturesque headman of some little town, sometimes even drives a motorcar. . . .

Lurching, swaying through that oven of a plain, we saw at last the palms of Taroudant. Falling off we were marched into—of all places—a French military post! An officer glanced at our passports and handed them back. "Your sheikh will be disappointed," he said. "He will miss two hundred francs reward. He sent me word that he had two deserters from the Foreign Legion."



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