

SAILORS IN THE ATLAS

Kath McNulty

Roving Rear Commodore

(Franco and Kath joined the OCC following their 2010 qualifying trip to the Azores in Franco's Trintella 29 Firebird. The following year he sold Firebird and bought Caramor, a Rustler 36 built in 1988. In May 2014 they set off from Holyhead, North Wales for five years or more, to sail around the world via South Georgia. Follow their travels at www.caramor.co.uk.

Photos by Cordelia Molloy and Kath McNulty.)

Caramor will be our home and office for the next five years. She is also our playpen, with toys including full-length fibreglass sea kayaks (split into three parts) which fit in the pilot berth, folding bicycles under the forepeak berth, snorkelling gear, a lightweight mountaineering rack including crampons and ice axes, and a tent and other expedition equipment. We spent the four winters leading up to our departure in May 2014 giving *Caramor* a full face lift – new tinned electrical wiring, new cabin lining, new water and gas plumbing, new rigging, new sails and finally, just before setting off, a new BETA 30 engine. We headed for southern Ireland to put the engine through its paces before going further afield.

As all was working well, we set off from Castlehaven straight across the Bay of Biscay towards Gijon in Asturia, northern Spain. But ten hours into our crossing the wind backed and was heading us, and our first tack took us to Camaret in Brittany where the smell of good coffee and croissants lured us into temptation. A week later the wind changed direction so we set sail and enjoyed an idyllic 36 hours under spinnaker most of the way to Gijon, where we

*Kath and Franco with
Caramor in Rabat*





Rabat medina

arrived in time for *tapas* and wine. For the first time in my life I was hot sailing in a T-shirt, a thoroughly new experience and something I thought I could get used to.

We spent the summer cruising down the coasts of Spain and Portugal in mostly very light winds. By early September we had reached Rabat, Morocco, and as we motored up the Bouregreg river our senses filled with the colours, sounds and smells of Africa. Bouregreg Marina in Salé on the opposite bank of the river to Rabat is a pleasant and safe place to spend time or leave the boat for a week, as we did, or for longer. The King of Morocco keeps his boat there on a private pontoon. Although there aren't any pontoon security gates the guards on the quay keep a very keen look-out. There is of course the usual bureaucracy, with forms to complete in triplicate, but this is reserved for the male crew members only (sometimes I do enjoy male chauvinism!). All the staff were helpful and nobody asked for tips or *backsheesh*, and we considered the €16 per night berthing fee reasonable for a 36ft boat.



*The entrance to the
Bouregreg river*

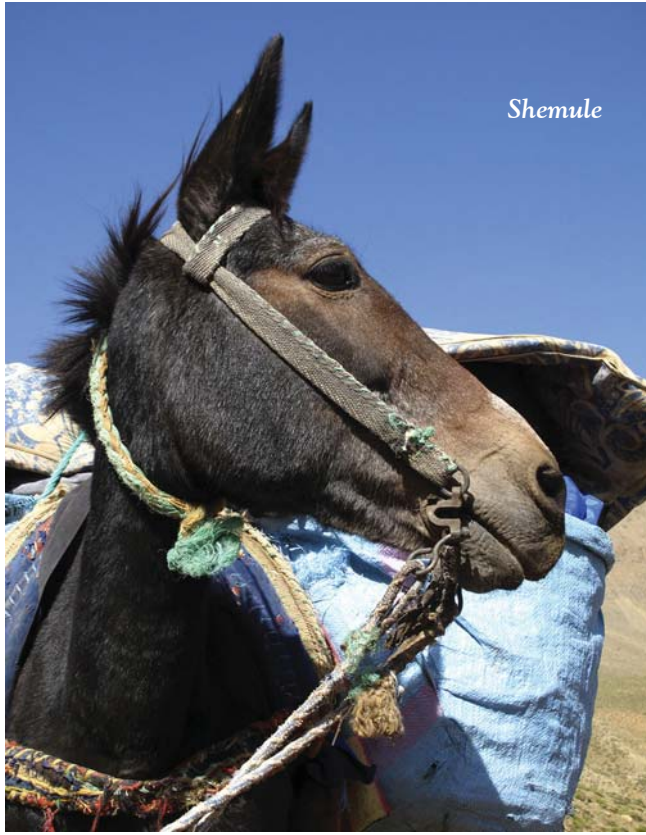
The river is dredged continuously, but at times it can be very shallow over the bar making arrival and departure tricky, and the harbour is closed if the swell is big – sometimes for days at a time. As we approached, Franco told me to keep 3m under the keel. We had been spotted on AIS some miles out and interrogated by VHF as to our intentions, the marina was duly informed of our imminent arrival and it kindly sent out a launch to escort us up the river. The pilot asked us what our draught was and invited us to follow closely in his wake. We crossed the bar with 0.4m under the keel – rather unnerving. The short stretch of river up to the marina was full of young men swimming in all directions, including across our bow.



Imelghas village

Departure involved more forms and a visit by an eager sniffer dog dragging his handler behind him. He walked around the deck but did not come down into the cabin. We preferred Salé to Rabat, it is more traditional and, as fewer tourists visit, there isn't any of the hassle usually associated with Morocco. I was able to wander round the *medina* both on my own and with Franco without any trouble.

We were joined by our friend Cordelia and set off for the M'Goun area in the High Atlas Mountains. I had read about the Wandras gorge on the Tessaout river and the Arous gorge, both of which sounded very beautiful and off the beaten track. Very little information was available, but we thought we might just have the skills to 'walk' through them. We arrived in Imelghas, the village which serves the M'Goun region and met Hussein, a local mountain guide who helped us find accommodation. He was keen to guide us until he heard of our plans, "I'm not a climber," he said. We hired Ali



Shemule

and his mule, Shemule (female mules are called 'Shemule' and males 'Hemule') and set off the following morning. The first two days took us up to the Tarkeddit plateau at 2920m. This part of the trek is well trodden as it leads to Ighil M'Goun, the second highest mountain in Morocco at 4068m, a favoured destination for many trekkers.

During the summer months, from April to the end of September, the Tarkeddit plateau is home to a thriving community of herdspeople. Whole families from the Tessaout villages move, lock stock and barrel, into simple dwellings in the uplands, a system very similar to the *hafod a hendre* which used to take place in Wales or the *alpage* in Switzerland. At the

fountain we would meet women and little children in colourful, often velvet, gowns and headscarves. As we walked through the landscape we chanced upon blankets

Trekking up to Tarkeddit: Shemule, Ali, Cordelia and Kath





Tarkeddit plateau herder

airing or laundry drying in the sun in the most unexpected places. At night the men wore their woolen *jelab*, a calf-length tunic with a hood, and often a turban as well.

The next morning we set off promptly for what looked, on the map, like an easy day. We crossed the Tarkeddit plateau to the source of the river Tessaout, and could see the upper reaches of the gorge from which we would emerge the next day. We met quite a few people, one lady with her small boy asked Franco for money, a young woman, laughing, ‘threatened’ Cordelia and me with her stone sling-shot, we laughed back.

After an easy ascent to the ridge we moved Shemule’s load further back for the descent. We rapidly dropped down into the Upper Tessaout gorge – steep, exposed and stunning. The map shows a steep but fairly even slope rather than the indented, craggy, vertical nature of the landscape – very misleading! We were concerned for Shemule but



Shemule descending the Upper Tessaout gorge



Cypress forest with Amezri fields in the background

she was fine, and in places the track has been built up so that the mules don't fall into the abyss below. Ancient, gnarly cypress trees dot the slopes, reflecting the lower grazing pressure on such steep terrain. We continued downhill to the Idromamem bivouac in a cypress 'forest' where we did some laundry and prepared our climbing gear for the Wandras gorge the following day.

On our fourth day we bade farewell to Ali and Shemule, who were heading back up the way we had come the previous day and would meet us back at the Tarkeddit plateau, and set off down the steep slope to the bottom of the Tessaout valley, where the river exits the Wandras gorge on its way to the villages of Tasgaïwalt and Amezri. As we headed upstream we enjoyed the lush riverside vegetation which included mint and other herbs – a refreshing change from the dry, thorny bushes to which we had become accustomed. Cordelia filled her pockets with mint to add to our *até* (very sweet green tea drunk on all occasions by the Berbers) while Franco reccied the route and I watched dippers skimming the water.

Idromamem bivouac



We arrived at a rickety bridge made out of branches laid across stepping stones, and the river sides steepened as we entered the Wandras gorge. According to the sparse information we had, we would encounter the first 'bad step' of climbing grade 'moderate' after four hours, then thirty minutes later the second 'bad step' of grade 'very difficult' with pitons in the rock to which to attach safety lines. All three of us are capable of leading 'very difficult', though both Cordelia and Franco can handle much harder climbing.

As we advanced we were awed by the towering golden cliffs on either side of the river, and had to cross and recross the watercourse repeatedly to avoid getting our feet wet. There were many signs that the valley is in frequent use – the occasional discarded sardine tin (the staple food among muleteers) as well as man-placed stepping stones. Increasingly we were having to scramble up and down the banks and over boulders, and eventually we reached a small waterfall. Here we climbed up on the right-hand side and wondered whether this was the first 'bad step', but it seemed a little too early as we had only been going for two and a half hours.



*Wandras gorge, the
Tessaout river before the first bad step*

Half an hour later we arrived at a second, more impressive, waterfall and found a bolt (rather than a piton) halfway up an obvious climb. It looked more difficult than 'very difficult' and very much more difficult than 'moderate' – the cliff was overhanging and to fall would be bad news. Franco led. The rocks above the overhang were rounded with no obvious hand-holes, and he was struggling to find a way to haul himself up. Above him a Lammergeier vulture soared and would occasionally land on a ledge on the cliff side. I wanted to watch this amazing bird but had to keep my eyes on Franco as I was belaying



*Wandras gorge, Franco
on the first bad step ...*

him. He succeeded in attaching a sling to the bolt while muttering to himself “when in doubt – cheat”, stuck his foot in the sling and up he went. Cordelia and I followed rapidly behind.

We rated this climb ‘very severe’ – much more serious than a moderate. It is plausible that a ledge has fallen off since the information we had was written, or that it had simply been mis-graded. We were still unsure whether we had just climbed the first or second ‘bad step’, but had reached it in three hours so neither times corresponded to the notes. How difficult would the next bad step

be? Would we be able to climb it? It would be a very long way to retrace our steps out of the gorge and back over the mountain to where Ali would be waiting for us. As always when in doubt, we stopped for lunch.

*... and Kath
climbing
the second*



The gorge was fabulous, golden rock formations, Berber summer cave dwellings, goats skipping around on the high cliffs above and higher still a Bonelli's eagle swooping for its prey. We walked for another 50 minutes and just round the corner was another waterfall, much taller this time and, a long way above it, the way out. A loud bang – thunder – followed by lightning and more thunder. We found the climbing route over on the right, and as we reached the top of the scree slope just below the climb the heavens opened and we were pounded by hail stones! *Inch'Allah*. If you are a climber you will know all about wet limestone.

Franco set to task and made short shrift of the 'very difficult' route, despite the wet rock. I swear I heard him muttering "good thing I'm more of a sailor really". Cordelia went next and I brought up the rear. Our 60m rope was only just long enough. We gingerly worked our way along the exposed ledge around to the waterfall, it looked worse than it was. Cordelia asked, "Is that the last of the climbing?". I wouldn't have liked to say. A few steps further on we came to a small man-made wall built to stop livestock from the top end of the gorge straying as far as the waterfall. Another short climb up the right bank and several more scree scrambles, and gradually the gorge widened to become a valley and we walked out of the head of the gorge into the familiar landscape of the Tarkeddit plateau.

We passed blankets drying in the sun after the heavy showers, donkeys peacefully grazing along the stream and ladies doing the laundry. We arrived back at the Tarkeddit camp at 1730, tired but elated. Ali saw us from a distance and fetched water from the fountain to make us well-deserved cups of *até*, to which Cordelia contributed the mint she had gathered along the way.

Our final day would be a long one for Ali and Shemule – they would be retracing the steps of our first and second days, while we dropped down below the Tarkeddit plateau to meet the Arous river and follow it downstream, avoiding the steep climb back up the pass. The trekking guidebook says of the Arous gorge '8 hours, moderate – an interesting gorge variation, involving an abseil'. About the abseil it says 'the waterfall is circumvented by an 18m abseil (piton belays)'. Ali said "don't bother taking lunch, I'll meet you at Café Atlas and we'll have lunch there". I stuffed my rucksack with muesli bars, regardless.

Where the path crosses the Arous river we turned off and followed its bed, but the helpful stepping stones soon ran out and we were faced by a big drop behind a large boulder ... we would have to get wet, there was nowhere else to go. We hesitated, this was hardly a 'moderate trekking route'. We looked at the alternatives – climb all the way back up to the plateau and follow the route taken by Ali, or follow the track to the foot of Ighil M'goun and cut back to the Arous valley over a col. Both would take hours and we had to get back down to the Ait Bougamez valley that night in order for Cordelia to catch her flight the following evening. We went for the gorge.

We were constantly wading knee-deep and sometimes higher in the river, we scrambled down boulders, down-climbed cracks in the rock, slithered through mud and bird faeces. The gorge was very narrow, a genuine canyon, and Cordelia remembered that she is claustrophobic! At last, the waterfall – we hoped for some bolts to which we could attach the rope, or at least the pitons mentioned in the book. We searched and searched, and eventually found the screwholes where the bolts used to be. We sacrificed one of our slings to set up a belay using a hole in a rock, and abseiled safely to the bottom.



***Arous gorge, Kath
on the first abseil***

The guidebook says that the gorge widens out after the waterfall ... only it didn't. On and on we went. It was raining now, not much, but here was not the place to be during a thunderstorm. We hurried on. Another waterfall, and two bolts right above it – we were going to have to abseil right down the middle of the waterfall, we would be absolutely soaking! Franco went first, a loud shout, then he appeared safe at the bottom, a big grin on his face. I helped

***A mule caravan
heading towards the
Arous gorge on their
way up M'Goun***



Cordelia clip into the rope and she quickly disappeared into the waterfall. My turn next, a couple of seconds in the water and then you break through and descend behind a curtain of water. Fantastic! We all had big grins on our faces, what a fabulous place!

Then another big step, 3m at most. We considered down-climbing it, but it was high enough to hurt if you fell and no helicopter at the end of the phone to come and collect you, so we set up an abseil. Each time we abseiled we had to leave a couple of bits of gear behind – we hoped there wouldn't be too many more difficult sections or we'd soon have no equipment left! At last the gorge widened and we were walking on shingle beds. We stopped for some food and to dry out our clothes before regaining civilisation. We were delighted – it had been difficult at times but we had made it safely. On the way out of the gorge we admired thin, airy waterfalls dropping into the river, met a shepherd, and passed a leat built by the Arous farmers to irrigate their fields.

It wasn't long before we were back at Café Atlas, a small shack with a sunbrella, plastic table and chairs, run by the Arous shepherd kids who serve soft drinks cooled in the stream. Ali and Shemule were waiting patiently. We gulped down the compulsory soft drink and a quick lunch, and set off down the valley as the storm broke, rain poured down, the path turned to mud, and villagers ran for shelter. We plodded on, glad we were no longer in the gorge. *Inch'Allah.*

