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PEOPLE & SCIENCE

Doing the
right thing

Science in
feature films

Rothamsted:
Listen and learn

Engagement Moroccan-style

El Hassan Talbi describes
La Traversée de l'Oriental



Oriental Morocco, *Région de l'Oriental*, is a less developed region than the rest of Morocco. The association *Nature et Patrimoine* (Nature and Heritage) promotes environmental protection and sustainable development, and when we created our branch we wanted to promote the natural potential of Oriental Morocco through the culture of science.¹

We explored the potential of the region and decided to share our knowledge and pleasure with other nature lovers, and to make the heritage of the region known.

The result has been the creation, in partnership with the French Institute of the Oriental, a cultural and scientific festival called *La Traversée de l'Oriental* (Crossing the Oriental). Our guiding principles are solidarity, sustainable development and better access for isolated communities to scientific information.

Walk for a week

Once a year since 2007 we have formed a collection of 50 to 60 people: men and women of various ages. They come from many professions: scientists, students, musicians, artists, poets, journalists and so on, who enjoy walking together for a week through an area of the region. Half the group is Moroccan and half French, which makes for very interesting scientific and cultural exchanges within the group and with the inhabitants of the districts we cross. The local associations organise traditional dishes of food for us, and are paid to guide us on our 15-20 km-long daily hikes.

Participation costs €25 (£19.50) a day. Every day, bivouacs are organised near *douars* (rural villages) under canvass, and the group hikes from village to village.

The trek takes place in spring. In agreement with the local associations, the organisers choose the route thinking of the beauty of

sites, reception of the local populations, the presence of rare botanical or animal species, minerals, fossils, or archaeological objects which would interest the hikers. So far, we have crossed the dry zones of the South, oases (Figuig, Ich and Talsint) and mountainous zones (Béni Snassen and Debdou). Now we intend to go towards the coastal zones.

Cultural and scientific exchanges

Every participant makes a commitment to join in the activities during the festival. The scientists try to be creative, telling the hikers about local geology, archaeology, botany and ornithology. Every day, the walking tour finishes in a village where the participants meet the communities and talk with them about what interests them. This could be drought, water and health; but they also discuss the impact of human activity on the environment, the use of healing plants, astronomy and other general themes.

From the arrival in the *douar*, after a period of adaptation (and hesitation too), the talks begin with the 'tourists' asking questions about the local people's lives. Afterward, the villagers ask for information on the value of such-and-such local substance, or perhaps about whether a solar panel or water pump could be installed. After that, artistic activities are organised for both children and adults.

It is our way of making known our region, to contribute to the opening up of isolated zones, to promote scientific culture and to launch initiatives of awareness-raising campaigns for the protection of the environment, nature and heritage

Intense immersion

Such a cultural and scientific trek through the oriental region of Morocco isn't just good tourist activity; it's also a great way to meet hikers who come from various parts of Morocco and France and to meet people living in isolated areas of the region. We want to promote the role of science in society by encouraging the scientists to immerse themselves intensely in the cultural lives of the isolated communities of the rural world. We also want to promote a fuller understanding of the scientific culture of the areas we cross. It is our way of making our region known, to contribute to the opening up of isolated zones, to promote scientific culture and to launch initiatives of awareness-raising campaigns to protect the environment, nature and heritage.

¹ For more information on *Nature et Patrimoine* and the 2011 trek, see <http://tinyurl.com/ctgfmdm>



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