

Diary of a Therapist

Here is a journal, the first of three journeys by a massage therapist taking time out from London.

1) Christmas with Camels

I stood in the camping shop, a camping-shop-owners dream. "And this....and this...and two of these...and that...and one of those..." I piled the counter high with water bottles, two sleeping bags, insect repellent, thermal hats, gloves, long socks and a money belt, reading all the time from a list supplied by the tour company.

"Do you have any of these items?" asked the owner, politely scanning my list.

"No."

"Been camping before?"

I shook my head. Later, the woman in the chemist sucked through her teeth, "The Sahara? Shshshshsh. What part?"

"I don't know. I just know its desert."

"Where are you flying to?"

"Haven't looked."

"What's the hotel like?"

"There's no hotel, we're camping." The woman with burgundy varnish looked sorrowfully at my 7 year old who was jumping his toy car across the Channel No.5 boxes on the counter. We left with a medical kit which took up more room in the luggage than the luggage.

"Do you feel stressed?" asked little Jake as I heaved our two enormous bags around the airport.

"No.....I feel challenged."

"What's challenged?"

"Its what therapists say" I panted, " when they want a better word for stressed."

"So you are stressed."

"Ok I'm stressed."

"Why are you stressed?"

"Because I'm carrying two 15kilogram bags and my arms hurt." I didn't tell my son that I was also stressed because a Christmas holiday trekking in the desert had seemed like a fun idea back in the summer when I booked it for us both, but now that I was actually en route I was getting anxious.

"Can I ride a trolley?"

"You-find-trolley-you-ride-trolley," I gestured. A moment later he returned with an uncooperative vehicle, circling like a water beetle.

December 18th 2007. I've spent the last 5 years working and studying and working and studying. Now its time for a holiday. We have come to the end of the road, literally, at a place called Mohamed in Morocco, a 3-hour drive south of Zagora, the nearest town. The minibus stops. Five families, with kids aged 8-15, thrown together for 5 days. I look back. Behind me is a dirt road. In front is sand. The kids are sensitively helped onto camels by our five Arabic guides. The adults stand by apprehensively and the Sahara stretches in front of us, hazy in the heat. So this is The Desert. I'm a long way from a quite room with white towels and nice music and almond oil. Now I can't go back. Now it's real. I wished I had managed to squeeze the Ray Mears survival book into our bags.

"Don't wash it together" advised one of the female travellers as I attempted to fix my "Shesh", a long length of dyed fabric which we were wearing like a turban in respect for travelling in a Muslim country. "I had one before and it turned all my knickers blue", she said with raised eyebrows. With a mess of tangled fabric on my head I looked more like Jane-of-the-laundrette than Jane-of-the-Sahara.

Each day we trekked for an hour and a half then stopped to be given powdery skinned tangerines still with their leaves on. The camels ate the skins, taking them gently from our palms with soft whiskery lips. I was cautious. My hands were my tools. Would my massage insurance cover me for having a finger bitten off by a camel? Unlikely.



We stopped for leisurely lunches and with help from the children I dug up camel bones, great for teaching anatomy if only I could get them back to the UK. Adults went off to pee; wrote journals; changed sandy socks. Jake took photos of his camel, of camel bottoms, camel feet and camel mouths.

At night we set camp an hour before sunset and I struggled to put up a tent, hands icy on the metal poles. I teach advanced anatomy for goodness sake, why was this simple task so hard!? Suddenly it was dark. The sky was black, jet black, the stars more plentiful and the moon more real. And it didn't matter if I was rubbish at fixing tents.

The guides busied themselves making our dinner which we ate huddled together, all 20 of us, in a communal tent which the girls later chose to sleep in together, giggling and chatting. After walking all day it hurt to sit cross legged. I noticed it most in my quadriceps and tried to stretch them out, difficult to do on your stomach inside a tight sleeping bag. Children became sleepy. Adults chatted. I was experimenting with Feng Shui, reorganizing the flat with small crystal ornaments and candles in order to bring romance and prosperity into my life. "Does it work?" asked one of the trekkers, genuinely interested.

"I'm not sure," I replied, "It seems a bit slow to start."

"Did you put the ducks out?" piped in Jake, an advocate since the rearrangement of his bedroom had brought him some much coveted football cards.

"I put the ducks out."

"And they're not working?"

"Don't seem to be."

"Why not?"

"Maybe I need bigger ducks?"

Riding, I watched the huge camel feet make lily pad like prints, stepping equally well over stones and sand and rather enjoyed their lolling gait despite knowing that riding was making my hip flexors even tighter. Sometimes walking was hard and trying to get over dunes filled our boots with sand and we constantly slid backwards, one step up, three steps back.

The nights were freezing and we slept in clothes and sleeping bags and heavy blankets and I gave up doing my quad stretches. The camels slept close to the tents at night, huge furry dunes in the dark, their chins flat to the floor.

At dawn we woke and with matted hair and no running water gave up wondering what we looked like because we all looked pretty bad. Women complained of having sand in their nails, but being a massage therapist I had no nails so there was no problem there. Breakfast was bread freshly baked in the sand, with jam and coffee and hot chocolate. There was butter but it tasted of garlic. The bread was gritty but we got used to it. We ate kneeling in our puffa jackets and woolly hats. On bent knees I noticed how much my legs were aching and resolved to resume my stretching routine. Around us the Berbers looked stylish in their long wool coats, belted at the waist. We were led by Khalid, un homme bleu (a blue man). Born into the Berber life he lived mostly in the desert, and learned the routes from his grandfather.

"Why do camels pooh when they're walking?" asked Jake, leaning back on his camel to talk to me once we set off.

"I don't know. One of lifes mysteries. Like whether dogs know when they're dying and do crocodiles have ears". He fell silent, bobbing along on his own camel as we trotted through the empty desert. It felt good to be away from London, a city with tense energy. I began to relax.

On Christmas Eve the kids made fires and we marvelled at a meteorite as it raced across the sky, bright with white fire. Jake and I thought perhaps it was Santa's Sleigh, coming to Earth. One of the parents had brought glow sticks and the kids wore them on their wrists to prevent being lost in the total blackness. I thought they'd be great a great alternative to candlelight when massaging. One was given to Khalid and he wore it until it stopped glowing and refused to take it off.

On day 3 of the trek Jake got a blister. I was able to use the one and only item from the kit which was needed, a single plaster. "Perhaps I should wrap it in some gauze?" I said, "or an elastic stocking?" The Berbers were chopping tomatoes into exact cubes on a wooden board over a large saucepan.



"Its ok" said Jake, cross at my fussing. "What's gauze?"

"I think I should at least wipe it with antiseptic?" keen to open a packet of something more medical than a sticking plaster. A camel nuzzled someone's rucksack "shoo!" they shouted, and zipped away a packet of boiled sweets.

"What's that?" He asked, pointing to a packet with a big black insect on it.

"Child friendly mosquito repellent wipes."

"What are they for?"

"Keeping mosquitoes away."

"Insects?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"There aren't any."

"What are the wipes for then?"

"In case we get any mosquitoes."

"Maybe there'll be some later?" he said optimistically.

"Maybe".

Then he scrambled up a dune to see a soft skinned lizard the others had found. Maybe I needed something from the kit. I thought for a moment. No blisters. No headache. No bruises, cuts, nor grazes. It wasn't hot enough for sun cream. No, I was fine. I put on some Lipsil. At least that was getting used.

At dusk on the last day, we climbed the largest sand dune in southern Morocco. It was like traversing an escalator the wrong way, with no hand- or foot-holds. It felt vertical and moved constantly so by the time I was half way up my heart was pounding and my clothes sweaty. I met two girls, on their hands and knees, unable to climb for laughing, moving but getting nowhere like flies stuck in toffee. It reminded me of those dreams you have, where you're wading through water or mud but never seem to get to where you're going. There was a metaphore in that thought but the sun was setting so I let it go. Then the sand instantly turned cold and we headed back toward camp.

Someone had brought Christmas puddings and wine and balloons. The kids were ecstatic to have sponge pudding, limited to a half portion each. We slept on metal beds for the first time, in mud huts roofed with camel hair canvas. There were metal lanterns on our tents, lit with candles. They soon burned low and we were left in complete darkness again.

In the pale morning sunshine in four jeeps we raced across the Sahara, plumes of dust in our wake. Within 3 hours we had driven the 60 miles it had taken us 4 full days to walk. The walk was better. As we clawed our way over larger dunes we all tried to remember that black and white film where a jeep gets stuck at the foot of a dune and has to be winched uphill by some exhausted British soldiers with posh voices.

Dirty, with sandy faces and unbrushed hair we waited in the large doorway of our desert hotel as men lifted down the sand-covered kit bags from the roof of the jeeps and we dragged them to our tented rooms. Mohamed, the hotel owner, wafted out in a plume of blue and gold robes, welcoming us to his home which we were instructed to treat as our home. The kids ran off to explore the maze of little gardens and pathways and climbed to the roof garden and hid under stairwells and later lay on their stomachs floating things in the channel that ran all around the outside of the small swimming pool. The adults somehow emerged at the same time and congregated around the pool, lying in the sun on velvet cushions under canopied tents, gazing at the palm trees or watching the builders who silently trundled mud bricks down thin lanes to where they were stacked. A waiter appeared and poured us mint tea from an ornate silver pot into tiny glasses decorated with gold leaves. He politely ignored me doing hip flexor stretches on his patio.

At dinner there were thick, crimson-coloured rose petals scattered on the tables. A large fire was lit and soup served from a huge terrine. We sat back on cushions, pulling apart the warm bread while the kids talked about football and school and who was the best teacher. Adults asked me about what it was like to be a massage therapist and said they were envious of someone who was self employed. One had tennis elbow and seemed very impressed at the advice of some simple stretches and pressure point work that alleviated it almost immediately.



The following day we walked to the nearest village and were taken into the kazbar, a huge fortress of mud, cool and dark in shadow, with tiny crooked doors in the walls from which people occasionally emerged. A guide, the local English teacher, took pride in taking us round the “museum”. He showed us the way they cooked and the herbs they prepared. I loved the mini pharmacy and the wooden device used for splinting fractures. Downstairs in the dark we knelt on carpets and were served sweet mint tea. Six large dough patties had been prepared and were torn into sections. They were warm and oily and tasted of caramelized onion. Sparrows chirruped behind the mud walls as we laughed and compared our aches and pains. We still couldn’t remember the name of that film.

“What are you doing?” asked one of the travellers incredulously back at base.

“I’m unpacking my bag and putting in the camel bones.”

“You’re not really going to take them home are you?”

“Of course, my students will love them.”

“We’re not standing behind you in customs!” chipped in two others. I was busy trying to squeeze a huge femur into the sack. “Where’s my trainers?” asked Jake in an accusing voice.

“On the side, I had to leave them out to get the bones in.”

“You’re leaving them?”

“Uh huh.” He looked crestfallen. “You remember the English guide suggested we leave some of our clothes for the children here who don’t have everything?” Jake nodded, “Well I thought we’d leave all of our clothes, and the CD player and the books and the medical stuff and everything.”

“And what do I get” he demanded, as seven year old do when they think they’re missing out on something.

“You get...” I panted, trying to zip up an 18 kilogram bag, “....an entire camel skeleton which, even the kids at school with those X-boxes and light sabers and all those flash toys certainly *won’t* have”, and I handed him the padlock with a fixed stare. Jake looked at the bulging bag and looked at the pile of sandy clothes. Then he looked back at me. “I think we should keep the bones” he nodded acceptingly. Smart kid. Only seven and already thinking like an anatomist.

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p.s The film was called *Ice Cold in Alex* and the camel bones are in an enormous box on top of my fridge.