

## ON THE ROAD TO MARRAKECH

As a print salesman I always endeavoured to sell creatively, and a specialist area I concentrated on was to secure contracts for printing foreign holiday brochures. Much of the photography used in early 1950s and 1960s productions was of a very poor standard, examples often showed hotels angled like the leaning tower of Pisa, and landscapes with unattractive features like building cranes in the background that did nothing to inspire the prospective holidaymaker. I was interested in photography and had excellent equipment that I was able to put to good use.

One of the contracts I negotiated was with Blands of Gibraltar, who through Cadogan Travel, a company they owned, produced their sales brochures. The commission was to photograph hotels in Gibraltar, Tangier and Marrakech in Morocco in February 1971 for inclusion in their summer brochure. My wife Alice and I flew to Gibraltar by GibAir, a subsidiary of BEA, stayed at the Rock Hotel, transferred by ferry to Tangier and motored down to Marrakech in a Ford Cortina provided by Blands, and returned home via Gibraltar. Most of the facilities in Gibraltar were owned by Blands including the Rock Hotel, the dockyard, car hire, ferry, the cable lift to the top of the Rock, as well as having a financial interest in GibAir.

We stopped two nights at the Rif Hotel in Tangier before setting out to drive to Marrakech, approximately 400 miles with the last 100 miles as straight as a die. The French built macadam roads were very good and free of traffic for the most part so we made good progress until we reached a point some 50 odd miles from Marrakech. We were motoring at 70mph with no other traffic or other life in sight when an almighty bang suddenly occurred. I screeched to a halt and got out of the car to discover that the exhaust was broken and red hot. It hit the road causing the impact to buckle and make a large dent in the rear bumper. Then, from nowhere we were suddenly surrounded with about a dozen young arab children with a herd of goats. This must have been the event of the day for them as their excitement showed with their grinning faces, wild chatter and prancing around.

I opened the boot to find the toolkit that should have been in the car under our luggage and camera equipment. Oh no, there were no tools except for a wheel brace! I had placed the key to open the boot, which was attached to the ignition key on top of the cases in the boot, and left the boot open. One of the arab boys tried to be helpful by pulling at the very hot broken exhaust with his bare hands and I had to dissuade him from doing so. In the meantime Alice was seated in the front passenger seat and decided to hand out sugar lumps she had in her handbag to the children around. Alice did not take sugar with drinks but saved the lumps from occasions when they were served with drinks at cafes and restaurants. When her stock was exhausted and a few of the children had not shared with her 'gifts' she realised that the open boot could become an attraction for the children to help themselves to its contents

and called out to me to close the boot-lid. I responded immediately and slammed the lid closed. Oh no, the keys were still on top of the cases! I returned to the driving seat on realising the implications of what I had done and where we were. We just burst out laughing. It was like a Peter Sellers film! What do we do now? The children and their goats disappeared as swiftly as they had appeared and here we were unaware how far the nearest town or village was away, and no sign of any other vehicle on the road that we could stop for assistance. We decided we would have to wait for a vehicle to come our way and after about half an hour a Citroen car approached from the direction of Rabat. Happily it stopped. The driver was an Arab who could speak Arabic and French whilst his passenger was a Frenchman who spoke French and English. They were en route to Marrakech for a business meeting arranged for three o'clock in the afternoon. I explained to the Frenchman what had happened and said that I believed we could recover the ignition key by removing the rear seats with a spanner and pull the contents of the boot forward into the body of the car. Brilliant! But there was a snag, the Citroen's toolkit was metric, the Ford Cortina's fixtures and fittings were imperial. As the spanner would not fit the nuts that held the back seats in place the solution lay in using a larger spanner with a screwdriver together. It worked, but was painfully slow as the spanner often slipped when in contact with the nuts. Removing the back seat revealed a layer of horsehair glued to the car frame, installed to provide insulation. The Frenchman insisted in helping and took the tools in hand. He wore a smart black baratheia jacket but kept it on and when he laid on the floor of the Ford Cortina the horsehair naturally stuck to the back of his jacket!

In the distance I spotted a hazy image of a lorry thundering along towards us from the direction of Rabat and called out to our new found friends of the approach. The Frenchman ordered his Arab driver to stop the lorry by standing in the middle of the road in the hope of getting extra help. I watched as the lorry loomed into focus and it seemed that the driver was never going to stop. I closed my eyes and thought 'Oh God he will be killed' but he stopped – within about twelve inches! 'Thank God'.

The lorry driver spoke Arabic and French so the Frenchman asked if he had more tools and found an adjustable spanner. They were able to remove the holding nuts more easily with this spanner and released the back swab that enabled me to pull the cases in the boot forward and so recovered the ignition key. By this time the broken exhaust had cooled but required removal so that we had to travel on to Marrakech without an exhaust. I paid the lorry driver with all the loose change I had as a thank you and suggested to the Frenchman that we should meet up in Marrakech and would treat him to a meal. He was very gracious and said we would meet, but in fact we never saw him again. I felt most embarrassed about his smart baratheia jacket that was still covered in horsehair when he left. On arrival in Marrakech we arranged for a new

exhaust to be fitted and learned from Blands that car exhausts have a very short lifespan in Gibraltar as a result of the practice of spraying the roads there every day with sea water.

Why there was no toolkit in the car we never had an answer but a new set was placed in the boot at the time of the repair. Our stay at the Esaadi Hotel in Marrakech was most comfortable but very expensive, and was our base from where I photographed the hotels and the surroundings, including the Atlas Mountains and the foothills that formed a wonderful backdrop. We were provided with an excellent guide, a strapping 21-year old Berber named Mohammed, who could speak six languages, yet had only had one year's formal education. We learned that the Berbers were regarded as good linguists and picked up languages very quickly. This lad proved most invaluable and saved us a lot of time, especially when it came to buying anything.

Shopkeepers in the souks (markets) expect customers to haggle on purchases but as we were short of time our guide acted on our behalf in agreeing rock-bottom prices.

What a wonderful and exciting experience this was, a city of colourful contrasts, the souks, snake charmers, soothsayers, water sellers, open air tanneries, etc, and one could imagine this was how life was some 2,000 years ago.

The return journey to Tangier had another odd twist. We were stopped by a plain clothes policeman when we reached Rabat and asked if we were bound for Tangier. He then demanded that we give him a lift and before we could answer him he jumped in the car. It turned out that he was no trouble as he sat in silence until we arrived in Tangier, but we were both uneasy with his presence and wondered what it was all about. We learned later this was common practice for police to act in this way.