

## **Diary of a Daring Hull Dentist from Somewhere in North East Morocco**

It was a hot sunny afternoon in El Jebah, Morocco and I was treating fifty Berber kids in a remote fishing village nestled in the hard to reach Rif Mountains. Make no mistake this was the most overwhelming experience of my dental career!

And on route we would meet the following adventurers; Abdul high up in the Rif mountains who served up real bee's honey combs for breakfast, a Belgian counsel who spoke like Rene from Allo Allo, a female Moroccan Professor of dentistry, a handsome maverick Moroccan missionary doctor... all with one purpose; to make a dental difference for fifty Berber children!

Never before been undertaken by a UK dentist, I set off with seven dynamic dental colleagues on a charity expedition I will never forget.

Hello, my name is Chris Branfield, from Castle Park Dental Care, Cottingham, Hull.

I had heard about the Moroccan people's struggles through a friend who went there for three days and was stunned by the sheer beauty of the unspoilt landscape and the friendly people. But on further inspection; he noticed their teeth were in a state of bad decay and they desperately needed help!

So with this insight I was duty-bound to finance my own charitable journey and treat the Berber people with a newly formed charitable group; Dental Mavericks.

Duty Calling Day 1 – Flying to Malaga we spent a night in Alora, Spain where we visited Spain's second oldest church but was locked when we arrived. Our flamboyant expedition guide Domien asked a few local gypsies who held the key and voila, we gained entry to a magnificent church!

Duty Calling Day 2 - Up eager and early the next morning and onto Algeciras to jump aboard the fastest ferry in the world to Tangier. According to history, the Moorish people were kicked out of Spain in 1609 as part of the Spanish Inquisition. Little did we know that many settled in a town in North East Morocco called Chechaouen (*pronounced Chef Chowan*). It's nick-named the '*Blue City*' in the hills.

En route we stopped at a very traditional Moroccan restaurant and were treated to meat balls and it was there that I avoided the first hole in the ground toilet. On arriving in Chechaouen at 5pm we were treated to a guided tour around the ancient city's small Medina by a small Arabic man, Mohammed. I was most surprised in this day and age that Berber women still washed clothes in the river. And to finish off our second day we scoffed a traditional Moroccan tagine of meat and vegetables.

Duty Calling Day 3 – Five times a day the Muslim locals are enticed to the Mosque by a loud speaker. The first call goes at 5 am ish and I eventually got use to it. We started early and after 6 hours of walking through the magnificent Rif mountains we arrived at *Albergue De Azilane*. It was the home of Abdul Karir. He is one of the most fascinating and happy characters I had ever met. Home made bread, sweet mint tea and cheese on arrival. Then dinner – Fruit of the Land – a traditional Moroccan Tagine consisting of a tiny piece of grisly meat (I don't know what it was and probably don't want to know) and fresh stewed vegetables.

Berber Tribe Day 4– After a local, traditional breakfast consisting of four different breads and bees honey comb. Our charity expedition continued towards 'God's Bridge' a natural arch built upon Farda River through the dorsal limestone grounds.

We were laden with honey and bread that was stored with our rucksacks on the hardy Donkey we named Geraldine. For the next day we trekked again through the Rif Mountains and various Berber settlements along easy shaded paths, winding their way between smallholdings and tiny farmhouses, numerous ancient but still working mills, green crops and fields.

Onwards through the now scary high Rif Mountains we glimpsed monkeys and continued along a one foot wide mountain path sometimes narrowing to only a few centimetres where it cascaded vertically hundreds of feet to the village of Akchour which was extremely scary!

Dental Difference Day 5 – Bab Beret is a small town that trades in one of Morocco's biggest exports, Hashish. Although we did not stop here, we drove through this cowboy town high up in to the mountains! And some of us then cycled 50 km downhill into El Jebah, a quaint little fishing village on the Mediterranean coast not yet ruined by tourism!

A fish dinner bought from the fishing boats was served by Foued the guest house owner on the spectacular roof terrace - overlooking the smelly fishing port! And at 9pm we were exhausted and eager to start the next day for the main reason why we were here; to make a dental difference for the Berber kids.

Dental Difference Day 6 - At 9am sharp we were taken to a school nestled in the Rif Mountains and met by Luke the Belgian counsel to Morocco who had been our go between with Morocco. A real gentle caring man who resembled Rene from Allo Allo. Next we were introduced to an extreme humanitarian Dr Banani: the founder of a group of international medics '*Ranks of Honour*.'

He and other medics travel to hard to reach villages in Africa and set up camp to treat all kinds of illnesses and disease. We were quickly introduced to Dental Professor Tiress from Morocco and her team of young dentists. Supplies were unloaded, courtesy of Henry Schein, Optident and GC and placed on an old wooden table. Small groups of excited children were assembled in a basic classroom.

And it was here they were educated on brushing and caring for their mostly rotten teeth. After an inspection by a Moroccan Paediatric dentist they were sent to get fillings or to have teeth extracted to alleviate constant daily pain. On further investigation we discovered about 20 percent had a toothbrush at home but how many of them actually used it was another question. The decay in some of the children was so bad there were just roots left which had to be extracted. This surprised me because I was led to believe that the major problem here was gum inflammation.

I was posted at the tooth extraction station. I will admit that I was very nervous first. We had to follow the lead of our Moroccan dental team. There was the obvious language barrier. However, after a while we found a way with a little broken French, a little Marcel Marceau and a lot of TLC. The kids were terrific. We had kids laughing and smiling even after they had their teeth out at times. It was exhausting, emotionally, but well worth it. It may sound a bit cliché but it was one of those trips that you learn things about yourself.

At the end of the most humbling of days, I presented a Hull City football shirt to Reduan 'Mr fix it' and former Mayor of El Jebah. I gave a flashlight to Mouad the roving, charity worker Pharmacist.

Dental Difference Day 7- We finally ended up in Marbella for a nice hotel, a hot bath and some serious memories to linger on forever.

This delightful dental difference was just the tip of the iceberg! In all fifty Moroccan kids some of them Berber were treated out of a school of six hundred. This means we had made just under a ten percent difference. Our next objective is to fund a nurse who will visit the school weekly educating children on tooth decay prevention and for serious in pain cases; bring in a dentist from Chechaouen every month. I plan to go back next year to make a further difference!

“I got from the charity day a sense of achievement, accomplishment and it was good. To be able to come away, to a foreign place, communication was all over the place, but it all came together and we all worked together and the kids were just superb. They were fantastic. They were absolutely beautiful people. And hopefully as a team, we’ve done them some good....well, we know we have and it’s been worth coming. Fantastic!”

This privilege does carry a responsibility. Because once the Morocco air had been absorbed into my lungs, there was no cure. Like me, I hope you have become fascinated by a people more commonly known as the Riffians who have been displaced for over 700yrs from as far away as Egypt and the River Nile - the possible meaning "*free people*" or "*free and noble men.*"

Please note that Dental Mavericks is a non profit organisation and all time, money and resources spent organising the Morocco Expedition, has been done so, for free, at our own expense. If you would like to help us make a dental difference for six hundred Rif Mountain children, you can do so here [www.castleparkdental.co.uk](http://www.castleparkdental.co.uk). Or if you are a local company and would like to find out about sponsorship and branding opportunities please visit the website.

If you have any further questions please email me at [cbranfield@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:cbranfield@yahoo.co.uk)

**Chris Branfield from Hull- Making a Dental Difference in Morocco.**