

The High Atlas exposed

Renowned wildlife photographer and pilot Alan Graham takes a battered C210 to the edge of civilisation



Captain Chourak struggled hopelessly with the fourth passenger of our ageing Cessna 210 as we reached cruising altitude: FL120. The annoying passenger would not co-operate, perhaps due to some effect of hypoxia, as the cabin was unpressured. Personally I was feeling no discomfort; then again, this fellow passenger was a little smaller than I. Finally, the Captain was able to pin him up against his window. With a flick of the latch, the window flew up, and a vacuous exhale of cabin air sucked the pesky passenger clean out of the window.

The Captain slammed the window shut and turned to me with a sheepish grin. Then depressed the PTT. "Quarzazate Tower, bonjour. Sharlie, Novembre - Tongo, Kilo, Tongo," he mumbled in a lyrical sort of Arabic Franglais.

I was still wondering about the fly... Would it be able to survive up here? Or would it be freeze-dried as it spun about in a death roll before dropping comatose into someone's vat of goat's cheese away down there in the valley below? And then I realized where I was, and why I was up here – and, in that instant, the sheer majesty of the scenery all around me simply took my breath away.

20 minutes earlier CN-TKT had been holding for runway 28 at Menara International Airport, Marrakech, with a one-hour flight time ahead. It was a clearish day, a little hazy, depressed by a high stratus cloud base of around 13,000ft. Not ideal for photography, but I was hardly about to cancel; the forecast was only getting worse over the coming days, so it was now or never. Sitting beside me up front was our Captain, Mostafa Chourak, a 38-year veteran of the Moroccan Royal Air Force, and a man for whom I grew to have enormous

Left: 'visually stunning', but unwelcoming forced-landing territory

Inset, left: Captain Chourak, 27 years a military flight instructor

Inset, below: our Cessna 210, with that comforting well-used look about it

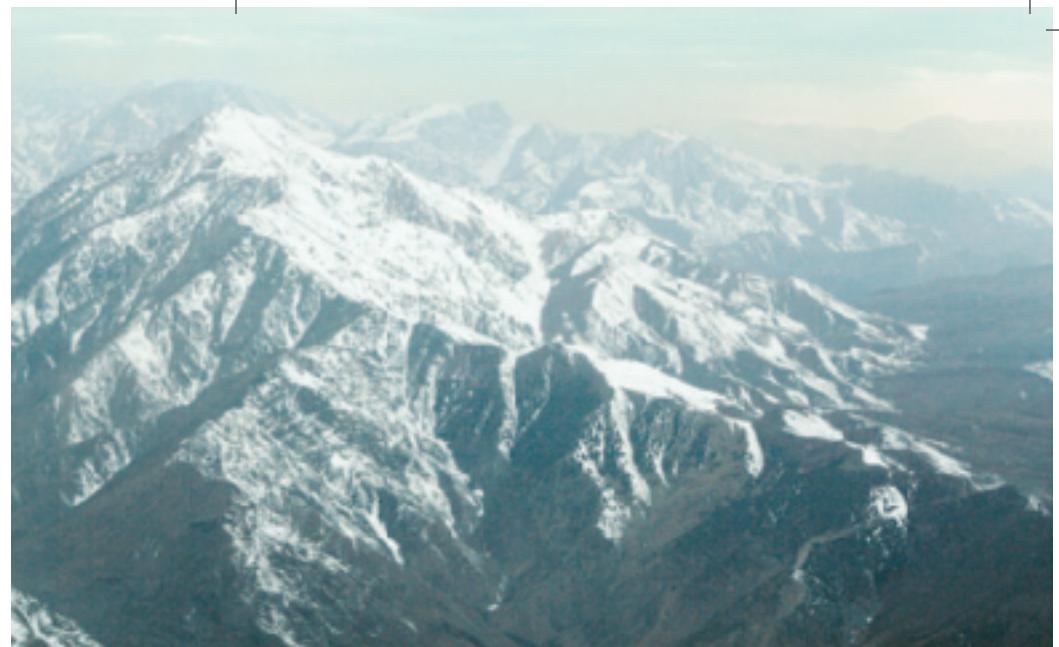
Top right: the High Atlas, with mountains rising to 12,500 feet

Right: the Moroccan government is building a tarmac runway at Zagora

respect. He'd been their military flight instructor for 27 years – now retired. We were in good hands. My other half, Dolly, sat behind us surrounded by cameras, cables, cases and all sorts of lenses. She was in her element. Me, too. This old ship was from the 70s and looked much like those Cessna 152s in which I'd learned to fly. All the usual bits were either loose, missing or about to be; the odd strip of gaffer tape here and there – all very comforting.

Apparently, Menara Airport is operated by the military. I would never have guessed as the radio traffic was complete gobbledegook to me, until I heard familiar language from a commercial airliner inbound from Europe. It seemed inappropriate to be communicating in a language that others might not understand, especially around a large airport (even though it was not particularly busy that Wednesday morning in January). Still, I was not about to complain. The Captain had handed partial control to me for take off and we'd just got our clearance. We were rolling...

500ft up and I was asked to bank left on a heading of 120 – only another 10,000ft to go. It was a slow, steady climb out of the Valley of Marrakech, and before long we were rising up like an eagle over the foothills of the mighty



Atlas Mountains. Highest peak: Toubkal, 12,500ft, and we were going to pass within sight of her. At 6,000ft the Captain engaged the autopilot, so there was nothing left to do but look out of the window. And it was just about then when that pesky fourth passenger made his presence known. Dolly was too busy to notice; nose stuck to her window in awe as she struggled with her equipment. I, on the other hand, was just starting to relax into my seat and hadn't even removed a lens cap. At first, Captain Chourak tried to deal with the fly without drawing attention to himself, so I pretended not to notice and looked away and down into the chasms of the Vallee de l'Ourika, where we had been just the day before, and the high reaches of the infamous Tizi-n-Test pass beyond. Very soon, however, the Captain's task turned into all out war.

Presumably, the fly had no idea he was travelling at well over 180kts every time he flew forwards and bumped into the windscreens. I was just wondering if in this thin air the fly would suddenly explode in a puff of green slime (like you see in the movies when an alien astronaut inadvertently falls out of a spacecraft without his suit on) when the Captain made his move and the window flipped up and war was won.

"Tongo, Kilo, Tongo, es un Cessna cent

ving... garble, garble, garble... Menara, garble, garble... QueNeAsh un, zero, garble, garble..." and so it went on. Then: "Mais non! Trois, sept, huit..." He started scribbling furiously on his kneepad. "Trois, deux, deux, neuf." Then, what seemed like a slight argument, and some numbers repeated. It was slowly dawning on me that he was trying to get someone's phone number from ATC in Quarzazate. He obviously knew whoever it was in the Tower and he was plying his buddy for information. Once we had landed beyond the mountains on the edge of the Sahara, we would be leaving the Captain to himself for the day while we set off in search of wildlife in a 4x4 (incidentally, driven by none other than the inimitable Vin Diesel).

Wildlife photography is my profession, and aerial landscapes are important in establishing the environment and habitats of the critters we film; something I had almost forgotten, what with all that jolly, in-flight entertainment. It was 'get to work' for me – lens cap off – as the immense Draa Valley crawled towards us like a lizard from the far horizon. And there below: an ancient, tortured landscape, where precipitous escarpments rose like huge, Gothic fortresses from the bowels of the Earth. All around, undulating layers and dizzy mosaics, strewn about in random mayhem, severed in





places by serpentine valleys whose tendrils of dried up wadis crept eerily out into vast, pancake plains. Astonishing! Visually stunning; it was no wonder all the most famous desert movies had been filmed right here, beneath our wings. From Lawrence of Arabia to The Mummy Returns, this was indeed the place to shoot an epic. Understandably, it remains the most important and cherished valley in all of Morocco for so many people and for so many reasons.

Our descent began half way down The Draa Valley. We were heading for Zagora, the last outpost before desert took hold. Somewhere up ahead there was reported to be a tiny dirt airstrip, maintained by a 15 year old boy whose father had recently passed away. His job was to keep the strip clear of stones and occasionally repaint some white rocks marking the touch-down area. He was a goat-herd, and a good lad; looking after his two young sisters and his mother in a rustic, mud enclosure a few hundred yards off the runway.

What runway?

Captain Chourak was using a portable GPS. "There," he said, pointing at a tree in the desert. "Let's fly low over the runway so we can get an idea of the wind."

"How?" I enquired, bemused. There were no animals to kick up dust. Not a living thing to be seen for miles.

"There's a windsock – see?"

Well, OK. Yes, I did see what appeared to be a might-have-been windsock, though it was only half the length of the ones I was used to seeing in the UK; this one beaten into rags and shredded by vicious Sahara sandstorms over the decades. Then there was that all-important mention of a runway...?

Captain Chourak was in control. As a comparative novice, I remember well sitting with many fine instructors at Sussex Flying Club, on my way to getting my PPL; none more so than the Don himself, my examiner,

Above: the best-adapted trees struggle to survive in the arid desert
Below: tendrils of dried-up wadis spill out onto the plains
Bottom: even the fittest fight to survive in the Moroccan Sahara



James Crabbe. You just know when you are in the company of a seasoned pro: the calm, uncluttered mind; the precision of duties; the absolute clarity of purpose. Captain Chourak exemplified all these traits, and I was truly humbled.

He was not impressed with his landing. But I was... The visual impairment associated with a barren, monotone landscape, with no reference points or perspective, must have made judgment of altitude and distance a challenge. And yet, he plopped us on the desert like he was landing a feather on a windless pond.

Instantly, out of a cloud of dust on the distant horizon – as if Omar Sharif on a camel – appeared Vin Diesel's 4x4. He was not actually the famous actor, but he was so alike as to be an exact clone, right down to the wrap-around shades on his bald head. An uncanny resemblance. He even had the profession to suit. He had, he said, driven the Dakar Rally in a Nissan the year before. And within minutes of being whisked away from the airstrip east towards M'hamid, where civilisation runs out, it became painfully obvious that he might have been telling the truth.

For those of you who fancy yourselves a bit of an 'Indiana Jones', and wish to attempt a swashbuckled landing in the desert, sadly Zagora is not going to be the place for you, any more. The Moroccan Government is building a smart asphalt runway and terminal nearby, preparing no doubt for a tourist push in the area. So what of the little boy and the pittance of a landing fee he charges to keep the strip clear? Though only a handful of planes visit over the year, it seems he will be hard-pressed to find an alternative income. The future looks grim for his family: his proud mother and those two adorable

little girls. However, he is a shrewd young man, and will no doubt attempt to prosper on the back of the coming tourist boom. Perhaps he will sell his goats cheese, or become a local guide.

So it was time to take off, a tiny plane in a huge desert, as insignificant as a fly on a camel's back. "This is Tongo, Kilo, Tongo, out of nowhere, requesting flight information service." Hmm... was it just a dream? The airstrip – was it ever really there? Maybe we were all under the effects of hypoxia. Needless to say, the desert will make sure in future you can only take my word for it. ■

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