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Red Tape and White  
Knuckles

Lois Pryce

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## About the Book

Unafraid of a challenge - having already ridden her motorbike from Alaska to the southernmost tip of South America - Lois Pryce began the kind of adventure most of us could only ever dream of. She put on her sparkly crash helmet, armed herself with maps and a baffling array of visas, and got on her bike.

Destination: Cape Town - and the small matter of tackling the Sahara, war-torn Angola and the Congo Basin along the way - this feisty independent woman's grand trek through the Dark Continent of Africa is the definitive motorcycling adventure.

Colourful and hilarious, *Red Tape and White Knuckles* is an action-packed tale about following your dreams that will have you packing your bags and jetting off into the sunset on your own adventure before you know it.

## About the Author

Torn between the career paths of two illustrious relatives, Max Born, the Nobel Prize Winner in Physics and his granddaughter, Olivia Newton-John, Lois Pryce abandoned her interest in Quantum Theory at the age of 16, left school and spent the next couple of years as a carrot picker, painter and decorator and failing an audition as a kiss-o-gram before bowing to the inevitable and going into rock 'n roll. After various underpaid jobs in record shops and as a product manager in the Beeb, she decided to jack it all in and ride her trail bike from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. Her on-line diary of her journey became a cult hit and led to her first book, *Lois on the Loose*. When not on her bike she is at home on her houseboat with husband Austin.

*Also by Lois Pryce*

*Lois on the Loose*

To Austin, the unsung hero of this journey

# Red Tape and White Knuckles

Lois Pryce



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## Acknowledgements

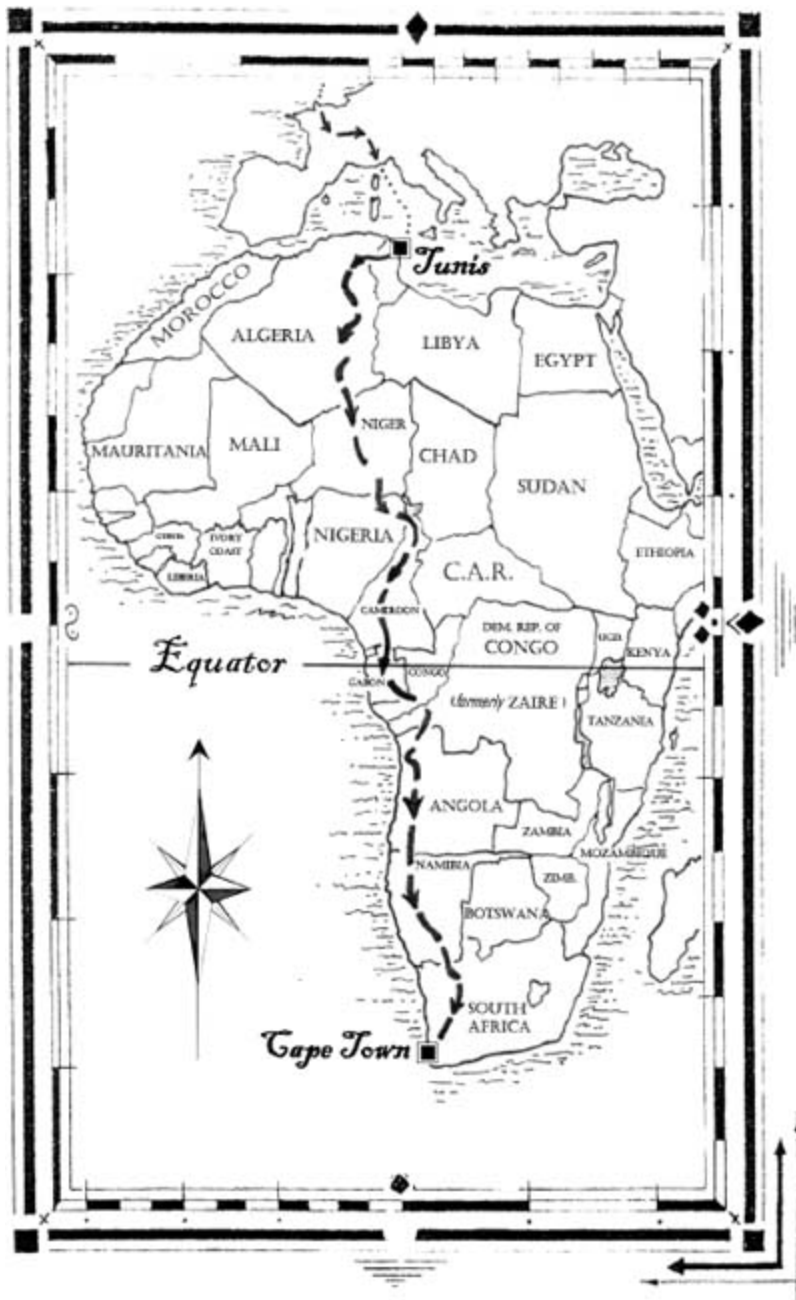
A solo trip relies on others for its success, and my journey was enhanced in many ways by the following people, to whom I am extremely grateful

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## Prologue

IF EVER THERE was a continent I wasn't cut out for, it's Africa, and my first visit to its shores almost put me off for good. The problem is that I am whiter than white, not morally I'm afraid, but quite literally. Where some women blossom in the heat, I wilt; and while those other ladies might drape a sarong around their tanned bodies and throw on a stylish sunhat and designer shades, I'm the one with the frizzy hair and the bright pink face. Tennyson may have dreamed of fair women and Milton may have waxed lyrical about the 'divinely fair', but the pasty reality is far from poetic - less English rose, more Romanian vampire, and you don't see many of them in Africa.

I am also troubled by extremely itchy feet, although in this case, not literally (rest assured, this book is not the misery memoir of an albino woman's battle with athlete's foot). For as long as I can remember I've fantasised about grand adventures, and I remain unashamedly seduced by images of khaki-clad explorers, parchment maps and the hopelessly quixotic notion of 'wayfaring'. Aged twenty-two I bought myself a narrow-boat to live on in London, hoping that as well as providing me with a cheap home, a life afloat would inject a dash of romanticism into my daily grind. This it did in spades; I discovered a hidden world of fascinating characters, of self-sufficiency and beautiful decay; a veritable soap opera tucked away from London's rat runs, and for many happy years the Regent's Canal was my oyster, allowing me to live in postcodes that would under normal circumstances have laughed me out of town. (Although, while the great and the good of NW1 or W9 were

quaffing fine wines on a Sunday lunchtime, I was more likely to be found emptying my chemical toilet.)

But I relished every moment of my watery life; it sprinkled my workaday existence with happy holiday dust; even the tedium of the 9 to 5 was made bearable by the potential of ever-changing surroundings, but by my late twenties my feet were itching worse than ever and the 9 to 5 had become the 9.30-ish to when can I go home? Even the convoluted system of transporting my motorcycle aboard my boat (thus enabling me to wake up in different places and ride to work) couldn't stave off the urge to hit the road.

So I jacked in my dreary office job at the BBC and rode my 225cc trail bike from Alaska to the tip of South America, a 20,000 mile journey. Rather than curing my itch, this most excellent adventure only made it worse, and as soon as I returned home I dug out my map of the world and started dreaming about the Next Trip - that life support system of all house- (or even boat-) bound travellers.

Africa called to me for some reason, not in any concrete, explainable way, but in a way that summoned the heart, not the head. It wasn't about following in the footsteps of some famous explorer or tracing my ancestry; I wasn't even running away from anything, or trying to 'find myself'. It just seemed to me that Africa might be the last place on earth where I could still have a real, proper, old-fashioned adventure. And it had to be real: just me and my bike, no support trucks or organised tours or satellite phones or any of that malarkey. I'm not a foreign correspondent, or a Dakar racer, or a hard-bitten war reporter. I'm a thirty-three-year-old fair-skinned English woman who's five foot and four inches tall, reasonably fit (but could probably do with losing a couple of pounds), and, quite simply, I wanted to see what would happen if I jumped on my dirt bike and potted my way down the African continent.

I wasn't fooling myself, though. Compared to my ride through the Americas, I knew Africa was going to be a whole

lot trickier, especially as the route I was planning took me straight through the heart of the Sahara, and then further south, across the seething pit of jungle madness that is the Congo Basin, followed by Angola, a nation whose recently ended civil war has left the country in ruins and littered with landmines. There were easier routes, true, but I was intrigued by these places, where the only news is bad news and the bad news never seems to end. Could it really be so terrible? I wanted to find out for myself.

With stupendously poor timing, I had managed to fall in love just before I set off on my trip of the Americas, but upon returning home, Austin, the object of my desires, proposed and we were married a year later, prompting us to trade in my small boat for a larger, marital vessel. Thankfully my new husband was a fellow globetrotting motorcyclist and a man for whom the expression gung-ho was invented, so when, in the spring of 2006, I suggested we escape the dregs of the English winter and dip our toes into Africa by riding our bikes to the Moroccan Sahara for a three-week jolly, he agreed without hesitation.

We rode through Spain to catch a boat to Melilla, with dreams of palm trees, sand dunes and lush oases awaiting us on the other, exotic, side of the Mediterranean. Two days later we were deep in the desert, and I was lying in a nomad encampment, delirious, hallucinating and vomiting. We hadn't had much of a plan, but this was definitely not part of it.

The idea had been a three-week holiday of desert biking, but in forty-five-degree heat, with a pale-and-interesting complexion, it seemed that I might not be up to the job, a thought that had not even crossed my mind until it was too late. We had ridden through the desert all day, along sandy pistes and rocky trails, but it wasn't until late afternoon, when we took a break under the straggly shade of a thorn tree, that I noticed I felt slightly woozy. But with nothing but miles upon miles of empty sand stretching out in every

direction, all we could do was keep going. We had set off late and ridden through the hottest part of the day, and now we were ploughing on towards sunset, aiming for a small village marked on the map where we could replenish our waning supplies of water and food.

Darkness was almost upon us, and I was feeling increasingly queasy and light-headed when the bikes' headlights picked out a camp of Berber nomads. They were an arresting sight: a group of dark-skinned men, dressed in flowing robes and elaborately wrapped blue turbans that covered their entire face except the eyes. We stopped to greet them, and as soon as I dismounted from the bike I knew there was something very wrong. I was staggering around, blathering and bewildered, until Austin decided I was dehydrated and poured a bottle of Coke down my neck. I promptly threw up all over him and then, for the first time in my life, I fainted.

When I came round, I was lying on the dusty ground staring up at several sets of kindly brown eyes peering out from folds of indigo cloth, and one pair of twinkly blue ones belonging to a worried husband. I was thoroughly disorientated, but I have a vague recollection of being carried into a fly-infested hut where I spent a long feverish night, convinced, in my confused state, that if I fell asleep I would never wake up again.

This Saharan sickbed seems an unlikely place in which to come up with the idea of motorcycling from London to Cape Town on my own. Africa had a very clear message for me: *You're not made for this continent! You're not meant to be here!* But once I started to recover, I knew I had to conquer the demons that had been spawned in Morocco. Back home, as the memory of delirium, vomit and squalor metamorphosed from humiliation and misery into amusing dinner-party yarns, my urge to tackle the Sahara returned stronger than ever (although this probably says more about the kind of dinner parties I get invited to than anything

else). I was determined to go back for another go, and once I'd decided to return to the Sahara, well, I thought, why not go the whole hog and keep going, right down to the bottom?

When I shared these far-fetched plans of mine with Austin he didn't waver (well, he did, but he only told me many months later).

'You've got to go!' he declared immediately. We both knew that he wouldn't be able to come with me due to the demon Work, but there was no doubt in his mind that I should go for it, and on the odd occasion that I did make doubtful noises he was the last person who was going to let me off.

'What about the heat, what about malaria, what about the landmines . . .?' I was fretting one night, in the dark hours, when the cold grip of fear sneaks in, twisting and churning your innards.

'The thing is,' he pointed out, 'you're never really ready to do a trip like this until you've done it.'

He was right; there was only way to prepare for a ride across Africa, and that was to ride across Africa.

What with the bike and the visas and the luggage and all the other things that take over one's life in the run-up to a long motorcycle journey, I had plenty to get on with, but my ill-fated Moroccan trip still loomed large in my memory. I spent most of my time worrying about the brutal African heat and eventually I came up with a novel way to prepare my pallid skin for the African sun: I would book a session on a sun-bed. I had never entertained such a notion before, it had always seemed, well, slightly trashy, but I was willing to try anything.

After ten minutes of UV glare I was pink as a fillet of farmed salmon, and by late afternoon I was back home in bed, reliving my Moroccan experience in full Technicolor glory, although minus the flies and nomads on this occasion. At this point I decided to give up on getting a tan, but why, oh why (after getting heatstroke from a sun-bed for



crissake!) did I still feel compelled to return to the Sahara and then continue all the way to Cape Town, alone?

Well, I guess that's the lure of Africa. Like so many Europeans before me, the Dark Continent had got well and truly under my pasty skin.

## ONE



I HAD SET my departure date as 14 October 2006 in order to be crossing the Sahara during the northern hemisphere winter, when the desert was at its coolest. As the date loomed, everything was in place: my bike was ready, my luggage was packed, my paperwork was as ready as it ever would be, having spent several days traipsing around posh, and not so posh parts of London, gathering as many visas as possible from the African embassies. But / still didn't feel ready, and I didn't think I ever would.

To ease my ragged nerves I often found myself turning to a book I had discovered a few months earlier, entitled *The Rugged Road*, by a British woman named Theresa Wallach. It told the incredible story of a trans-African motorcycle trip made in 1935 by Miss Wallach and her splendidly named friend Florence Blenkiron. Together they rode a 600cc Panther motorcycle and sidecar combination, pulling a trailer, from London to Cape Town, straight across the Sahara, through equatorial Africa and then down the eastern coast to the Cape. As the book declared merrily on the back cover, 'no roads, no back-up, not even a compass!' It made

for an inspiring read, and I was mightily impressed by the spirit and skill of the two women as they tackled the kind of hurdles I have nightmares about: rebuilding the engine in the middle of the Sahara, raiding wrecked vehicles for nuts and bolts to fix their bike and surviving on stale bread and lashings of good ol' Blighty spirit.

In comparison to my imminent journey, I had the clear advantage over them when it came to the motorcycle itself, thanks to the giant leaps in engineering and technology over the last seventy years. Environmentally, not much has changed for the motorbike traveller in Africa; it's still insufferably hot and physically gruelling. But it was interesting to see that culturally and logistically, African travel was an easier business back in the colonial heyday of 1935. Britannia not only ruled the waves, but a big chunk of the Dark Continent too, and the remainder of Africa was governed by the other European empires. Theresa and Florence's route took them through French, Belgian and English controlled colonies, where Foreign Legion soldiers and safari-suited colonels saluted them at every border post. The indigenous natives, although treated with great respect by the ladies, were merely an anthropological curiosity. However, seven decades later, despite the collapse of the British Empire and the improvements in motorcycle design, there was one theme that united our respective journeys, as relevant now as when it was written by Theresa Wallach on New Year's Eve, 1934, as she listened to the chimes of Big Ben resonating from a Foreign Legion wireless post in Algeria: 'In my mind I could picture the crowds, culture, cuisine, concrete and the folk at home, secure in a challenging world . . . I would rather grapple with the sands of the Sahara than the sands of contemporary society.'

You and me both, sister!

Contemporary society probably breathed a sigh of relief on 14 October 2006 as I boarded a Brittany-bound ferry

from Portsmouth. I had been given a royal send-off from home by friends and family, many of whom had braved chilly motorways on all manner of bikes, from every corner of Britain. Austin had even made button badges for everyone, with a cartoon of me on my bike, waving cheerily – but that cheerful, happy-go-lucky image couldn't have been further from how I was feeling. As I made a few final checks and buckled up my crash helmet, I was riddled with nerves and choked-up emotions. Why was I leaving all this behind: Austin, my wonderful husband, truest companion and favourite person in the world, my dear friends, my cosy floating home, the gentle climes of southern England? Why on earth? To ride a motorcycle alone across a dangerous, inhospitable, friendless continent. At that moment, I don't know if I could have explained it even to myself. My mouth was as dry as the desert that awaited me as I made a short, croaky speech and kissed Austin an unbearable farewell. As I mounted my bike and fired up the engine, two friends unfurled a giant hand-sewn banner bearing the missive 'CAPE TOWN OR BUST!' I had to go now; they'd brought it all the way from Walthamstow on the Tube, it was the least I could do.

Motorway riding in England is not the finest of motorcycling experiences, and is generally to be avoided on a loaded 250cc trail bike, but it does give one the opportunity for contemplation, and on this occasion the slow lane provided me with a place to gather my thoughts about the adventure that lay ahead. The old adage that a journey begins with a single step was never truer as I headed for Portsmouth on that cool October evening. The best way to view my impending expedition, I decided, was to think of the whole thing as a series of single steps. For now, I was just going to Portsmouth. Tonight I was taking a boat to St Malo, the next day I was visiting some friends in Brittany, after that I was off to Marseille, and so it went on. As I set

off on my trans-African journey, Cape Town had never been further from my mind.

As a linguistic warm-up, it was useful that the first leg of my trip took me through France. Most of the African countries on my itinerary were Francophone territories and these first few days would give me an opportunity to practise my sub-GCSE French. It would be the language of the trip until I got to Angola, a nation of Portuguese-speakers, and Lord only knew how that would work out. But like the miniature Portuguese phrase book that I had buried at the bottom of my panniers, I shoved these qualms to the back of my mind, to be dealt with at a later date, and decided to put my efforts into brushing up my Franglais.

It is almost compulsory as an English person that you have to nail your colours to the mast on the subject of our Gallic neighbours. There is no middle ground; you either love 'em or loathe 'em. For members of the latter category, it usually seems to have something to do with Paris not being bombed in the war, rude waiters and an aversion to garlic. I am most definitely in the opposite camp, and, were it not for their lame attempts at pop music, could quite happily adopt France as my spiritual homeland. I can only attribute this fondness to nostalgic recollections of school trips and family holidays, for like many folk of my age growing up in southern England in the 1970s and 80s, a childhood trip to France was our first taste of foreign travel. The food was weird, the toilets were even weirder, people went to sleep in the afternoon; it was all very strange and exciting.

Although these outings were filled with plenty of traipsing around the palace of Versailles and brass-rubbing at Notre Dame, twenty years on, the passage of time and rose-tinted pince-nez have worked their magic, and these dreary events have faded away to leave the more significant memories of buying flick-knives and Mace in Parisian street markets or sneaking out of the Louvre to smoke soft-pack Lucky Strikes.

I can't quite believe that my school trips were really this much fun, but it does go some way to explaining why France holds such a place in my heart - it's where adventures start. And as I rode off the ferry, it seemed fitting that here I was again, setting off on the biggest one yet.

I was heading for the town of Nantes in Brittany, where I was visiting my friends Rachel and Simon. Like the Argentinian sheepskin on my bike's saddle, our lives had entwined on the road in South America. Rachel and I had first met in Los Angeles when we were both about to head south into Mexico. She too was travelling on a dirt bike, and together we set off on a Thelma-and-Louise-on-motorbikes adventure south of the border (although sadly without the Brad Pitt scene). We met up again in Chile a few months later, from where we made a testing 2,000-mile ride across Patagonia to the tip of South America. Little did Rachel know, as we bumped and crashed our way across the wilderness, that she was in fact pregnant by her boyfriend, Simon, with their son, Patrick. Fast forward to the present, and Patrick, Rachel and Simon are all happily ensconced in Rachel's home town of Nantes, where the family transport is, naturally, a motorcycle and sidecar.

During these early days of my journey it was reassuring to be among people who knew what it meant to be setting off on such a venture. Between them, Rachel and Simon had covered most of the world on their bikes, although neither of them had ticked Africa off the list yet.

'It's never really appealed to me,' admitted Simon, as we pored over my map, spread out on the floor, while Patrick crawled and dribbled over Kenya and Sudan.

'Nor me,' agreed Rachel. 'It's pretty scary.'

I was a bit knocked back. These two were no *Daily Mail*-waving scaremongers. They were well-travelled, intelligent, educated, level-headed folk.

'So what is it exactly about Africa that scares you?'

‘Big black men with guns,’ said Rachel simply, with a Gallic shrug.

‘The mud!’ declared Simon, speaking from a motorcyclist’s perspective. ‘Oh, the mud! You must have seen the pictures?’

I knew what he was talking about. There were a few photos in motorcycle travel books of riders covered head to toe in thick red mud, pushing their bikes through knee-deep swamps or sinking up to the axles on the churned-up ‘mud motorways’ of central Africa. With tarmac roads thin on the ground in this part of the world, the rainy season turns every other highway and byway into a sticky quagmire and makes many routes impassable. I had to admit it wasn’t very appealing, but as usual I was taking the ostrich approach – I would worry about it when the time came. As for the big black men with guns? Well, it wasn’t really the people that scared me either; when it came to my fellow human beings I have found that old-fashioned politeness and lots of smiling will diffuse all sorts of tricky situations, and if that doesn’t work, then hard cash will certainly do the job.

‘It’s not the mud or the natives that worry me,’ I said, ‘it’s the heat, the sun, it’s so fierce, and I’m not very good in extreme heat.’

‘Oh well, that’s the problem with being an English rose!’ said Rachel, being kind.

‘Hmm, I think pasty is probably a more accurate description of my complexion.’

‘You’ll get used to the heat after a while.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ I said, and I filled them on the details of my Moroccan disaster.

‘Lois, are you sure this trip across Africa is a good idea?’ asked Simon after I had finished. He said this in a slightly sardonic manner, but his question was serious.

‘Well, I don’t know if it’s what you’d call a good idea exactly, but for some reason, I still want to do it.’ It wasn’t

much of an explanation but it was the only one I could give.

Rachel and Simon made a good show of being supportive and positive about my African adventure, and I made a good show of being confident and upbeat. But after a few days I knew I had to move on, as it would be all too easy to linger here, enjoying their hospitality and the genial banter in my mother tongue, all the time putting off the inevitable. No, it was time to get out there and start talking the lingo.

This turned out to be harder than I expected, not just because of my linguistic ineptitude but because I kept meeting my fellow countrymen. Somewhere in central France, near Lyon, it was raining hard, and towards the end of the day I followed one of those promising signs bearing the words 'Chambres d'Hôtes'. A winding, poplar-lined track led me to an old farmhouse of grey stone, where Jeff and Angela of Worcester were, like many other disillusioned English folk, making a new life as proprietors of a guesthouse in rural France. All the rustic ingredients were in place - chickens clucked around the courtyard, the breakfast consisted of local organic produce, the plaster walls were peeling just enough to be charming rather than decrepit, and all was well in this brave old world. Jeff and Angela were more than pleased with themselves and wasted no time in describing their escape from the horror that is twenty-first-century Britain.

'It was the immigrants,' said Angela.

'And the speed cameras,' added Jeff.

'Yes,' they cried together, 'the immigrants and the speed cameras!'

'Too bloody many of both of them,' confirmed Jeff, in case there had been any confusion.

'So are you enjoying your new life in France?'

There was lots of cooing and gushing from Angela about good schools and cheap wine before she warmed to her favourite subject.



'But, the French driving is TERRIBLE! They drive round the town as if it was a racetrack, they go through red lights all the time, it's outrageous - I mean, there was one day I was driving to the airport and this car pulled out on me, it must have been doing a-hundred-and-fifty . . . er, kilometres, that is,' she added with a pitying smile for the non-metric guest.

'Sounds like you could do with a few speed cameras,' I suggested, but she was already on to another tale of dastardly French driving. Jeff, who had clearly heard it many times before, began talking over her with his own French driving story and for a while I sat there in silence while the two of them battled it out in stereo. Jeff had the louder voice, so he won.

' . . . But, I don't care what you say, you couldn't pay me to go back to England. Couldn't pay me,' he concluded.

'Well, they're all coming over here, aren't they?' twittered Angela.

'Oh yes, that's the only problem really.'

'Apart from the driving . . .'

'What's the only problem?' I asked quickly, before another episode of French driving unfolded.

'The English, they're all moving over here. When we first came out we were the only ones in this area, now they're everywhere. You go to the airport and it's all English cars in the car park, they're buying up all the properties, they're all over the place.'

'There's a delicatessen in town that's started selling Marmite!' added Jeff, his voice rising in indignation.

'Tch!' I tutted. 'Imagine that? Foreigners trying to make a better life in another country, outrageous! Darn immigrants.'

But Jeff and Angela weren't listening; they were telling me about the couple from Kent who had bought a nearby château for far too much money. Much more than it was worth, more than they should have paid for it, but they're making a TV show about it - we were on the TV, weren't we,

love? When we first came out here, we were the first ones here, you see . . .

I made for my bedroom with excuses about being tired and having wet feet, and slipped off to sleep among crisp cotton sheets, aromatherapy candles and second thoughts about adopting France as my spiritual home.

Marseille was just one day away now, and as I rode through the south of France warm air blasted my face, reminding me of the joyous fact that I was escaping the gloom and drudgery of another northern hemisphere winter. Southern Europe had been scorched by a fiercely hot summer that year, leaving the land parched, pale yellow. The sun-bleached buildings and faded paintwork of the little towns along the way, with their pavement cafés and Gauloise-scented *tabacs*, spoke of warmth, civilisation and familiarity, even to a displaced Brit like me. I wallowed in the comfort and ease of it all, for in a couple of days I would be leaving the safe confines of Europe, the mores and culture I knew so well, for the alien world of Muslim North Africa, where white girls on motorbikes were about as common as a well-thumbed copy of *The Female Eunuch*.

In Marseille I pitched up at a pleasingly shabby hotel on the Corniche, the road that runs along the Mediterranean coast, with a top-floor view over what E. M. Forster so accurately described as 'that exquisite lake'. I had fond memories of my last visit to this melting-pot city on the edge of Europe. Austin and I had come here as part of our motorcycling honeymoon, to catch the ferry to Corsica. Full of outdated fears about a city splintered by racial tension, we had approached with caution, but were pleasantly surprised to discover what was in fact, the French San Francisco - a hilly city buzzing with life, music and sunshine. When we found an entire street devoted to motorcycle shops, our love affair with Marseille deepened, and upon mentioning to one of the shop's staff that we were on our

honeymoon, we were presented with complementary inner tubes. Our romance was sealed.

As I lugged my bags up five floors of hotel stairs, the friendly and slightly fey chap on the reception loped along behind me, inquisitive about travel plans that involved a crash helmet and two bulging pannier bags. His English was almost as bad as my French but we bumbled our way through something resembling a conversation.

‘You come from England, all zee way on zee moto?’

‘Yes,’ I panted as I turned the final twist of the staircase.

‘And where do you go from Marseille?’

‘I’m taking the ferry tomorrow morning to Tunis.’

‘Oh!’ He threw up his hands in horror and pushed his floppy hair aside to reveal a pale, worried face.

‘Alone? You go alone to Tunisie?’

‘Er, yes.’

‘Oh, *non!* But Madame, Tunisie is not a good place for a . . . for a . . .’ He struggled to remember the right word. ‘For a wife!’

I tried not to laugh, but his rusty translation of the word ‘*femme*’, meaning both wife and woman in French, had come out sounding like a dire warning to all married women. I assured him that it would be fine, while I fiddled nervously with my wedding ring, hoping he wasn’t right.

Early the next morning, with his words still ringing in my ears, I made my way to the port to discover a scene of African-style mayhem being played out in Marseille docks. Despite arriving with hours to spare, I couldn’t even make it as far as the gates due to the gridlock of cars, vans and trucks that were jamming up the entrance. Some of the vehicles seemed to have been driven backwards and were mounted on the pavement at all sorts of unlikely angles. People were shouting and honking their horns, someone was driving the wrong way round a roundabout, the port officials were flapping their arms and blowing their whistles, but nobody was taking any notice. Fortunately, as a

motorcyclist, there was no need for me to join this unholy rabble and I squeezed my way through the gaps, into the port, and followed the smell of burning clutches and exhaust fumes to find hundreds of vehicles in a giant, slow-moving queue, all waiting to sail to Tunisia.

I went to collect my ticket from the port office, where I was unwittingly launched into another indecorous scrum. The punters were pushing and shoving and yelling, and Tunisian men swapped effortlessly between French and Arabic insults, depending on who they were shouting at. The office was hot, dirty and airless, and behind two glass windows marked 'Tunis' were two weary clerks, issuing tickets with exaggerated slothful ness, occasionally pausing to scream in a chillingly controlled manner at the mob that banged on the glass and literally fought each other for their attention.

'A queue! A queue!' I bemoaned silently. 'It works, I promise you, we do it all the time in England.'

It was only a week ago that I had left London and I was still in polite British mode, so I took my place at the back of the rabble and waited patiently. But after a steady stream of Tunisian men had pushed in front of me or, in some cases, literally shoved me out of the way, I realised it was a case of 'when in Rome . . .' Sure enough, as my turn at the window finally came around, a middle-aged man sporting a greasy moustache and a shell-suit came hurtling in from the side and, with a smile that somehow managed to be both sleazy and threatening, shouldered his way in front of me, clutching a handful of crumpled Euros, which he threw down on the counter.

'*Excusez-MOI!*' I said, giving him a similar shoulder-budge back to regain my rightful place. He stared at me, surprised for a moment, and then broke into what he thought was a charming plea. But when I stood my ground, the niceties were abruptly switched off and he grabbed my arm, shouting at me in Arabic. I had no idea what he was saying

but his tone of voice was enough for me to get the message, and by now his mates had gathered round to back him up. As he made a final bid for the front of the queue it occurred to me that I probably didn't want to spend twenty-two hours on the ferry with these chaps, but at this rate I was never going to get my ticket at all.

Then a booming French voice startled us all. We turned round to find a tall, immaculately dressed elderly gentleman, complete with overcoat, hat and walking cane, who put his arm round my shoulder in a protective manner and roared at the Tunisian men, waving his cane at them until they backed away hissing and muttering. I was steered back to the ticket window by my saviour.

*'Merci monsieur, merci beaucoup,'* I said gratefully.

*'De rien! You travel by motorcycle?'* he asked, pointing at my crash helmet.

I nodded.

*'And where do you go after Tunisia?'*

*'I am riding to South Africa.'*

*'Non! Mon Dieu! On a moto, all alone?'*

The rest of the punters, who had witnessed my dramatic rescue, were listening to every word and gave a collective 'Oooh!' As soon as I got my ticket, the old man swept me out from the crowd, twirled me round on the ticket office floor, grasped my shoulders and planted a continental kiss on each cheek.

*'Bonne chance, ma chérie, bonne chance!'* he bellowed, to the delight of the other customers, who began clapping and cheering. He gave me a giant bear hug, and with that, he was gone. I wished he was coming to Cape Town with me.

It had taken so long to get my ticket that I was worried the boat would be leaving without me, so I pegged it out of the office towards my waiting bike, almost knocking over a port official.

*'Have I missed the boat to Tunis?'* I asked him in a panic.

He gave a short jaded laugh.

‘Mademoiselle, the boat is five hours late.’

I breathed a huge sigh of relief and surprise.

‘Five hours late!’

‘This boat is always late. It runs on African time,’ he added with a very French raise of the eyebrows.

Although it was only mid-morning, the day was already sweltering, so I left my bike in the queue of sizzling, frustrated vehicles and cowered in the shade of a nearby building from where I could observe my fellow passengers. The majority of them were Tunisian men returning to the motherland in unfeasibly tatty vehicles, all of them straining under the load of luxury goods from the free West. With just a quick scan I spotted several fridge freezers, a three-piece suite, an electric oven, an exercise bike (broken) and countless Chinese laundry bags strapped on the roof, bulging with Allah knows what. The remainder of the passengers were French rally drivers, heading off into the Sahara for a desert adventure in their immaculate 4 × 4s, complete with sand ladders, winches and support crews. The rallyists all had a certain look – well-heeled but rugged, wearing quasi-military, sand-coloured desert outfits with lots of functional pockets. I noticed there was even a rally equivalent of the WAG – tough blonde women, trim and tanned but a little weatherbeaten; an outdoor version of the footballer’s wife.

The five-hour delay raised the hackles of the more lively passengers further, which culminated in a mass horn-honking protest that made no difference to anything, except to make the participants feel better. As the impatient Tunisians around me blasted their horns, yelling and complaining in Arabic, I noticed that the French rally drivers were just sitting it out in patient, resigned silence. Maybe they had made this journey many times before. I sat it out too, chatting to the rally teams to pass the time, until eventually by mid-afternoon everyone was on board. My bike was squeezed in and strapped down among the shiny