Maverick dentists making a difference
Dentist Michael Oliver details his experiences in North East Morocco

My name is Michael Oliver, from Oliver’s Dental Studio, Sunderland. 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.

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 Alo Alo, a female Moroccan Professor of dentistry, and a handsome maverick Moroccan missionary doctor… all of them had one purpose - to make a dental difference for 50 Berber children.

Never had this been undertaken by a UK dentist and so I set off with seven dynamic dental colleagues on a charity expedition I will never forget.

It was a hot sunny afternoon in El Jebah, Morocco and I was treating 50 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!

Duty Calling Day 1
Flying to Malaga we spent a night in Alora, Spain, where we visited Spain’s second oldest church. It was locked, but 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
We got up eager and early next morning and headed 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 Chefchaouen (pronounced Chef Chowan): It’s nick named the ‘Blue City’ in the hills.

En route we stopped at a very traditional Moroccan restaurant where we were treated to meat balls; it was there that I avoided the first hole in the ground toilet. On arriving in Chefchaouen we were treated to a guided tour around the ancient city’s small Medina; I was most surprised to see that in this day and age Berber women still washed clothes in the river. 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 lo-
cals are enticed to the Mosque by a loud speaker. The first call goes at five am (ish) and I eventually got use to it. We started our day early and after six hours of walking through the magnificent Rif Mountains we arrived at Alberge De Azilane. It was the home of Abdul Carear, one of the most fascinating and happy characters I had ever met. We had home-made bread, sweet mint tea and cheese on arrival and Fruit of the Land – a traditional Moroccan Tagine consisting of a tiny piece of grisly meat and fresh stewed vegetables for dinner.

Berber Tribe Day 4

After a traditional breakfast consisting of four different breads and bees honeycomb, our charity expedition continued towards ‘God’s Bridge’; a natural arch built upon the Farda River through the dorsal limestone grounds. We were laden with honey and bread (well, actually it was stored in our rucksacks on the hardy Donkey we named Josephine). We continued trekking through the Rif Mountains and various Berber settlements along easy shaded paths, which wound their way between small-holdings, tiny farmhouses, and numerous ancient mills that were still working amongst green fields and treelines. As we got higher in the mountains, we glimpsed monkeys and various Berber settlements along easy shaded paths, which wound their way between small-holdings, tiny farmhouses, and numerous ancient mills that were still working amongst green fields and treelines.

Dental Difference Day 5

Bah Ieret is a small town that trades in one of Morocco's biggest exports, Hashish. We didn’t stop here, we drove through a cowboy town high up into the mountains, where some of us cycled 50km downhill into El Jabeth, a little fishing village on the Mediterranean coast not yet ruined by tourism. A fish dinner bought from the fishing boats was served by Fred, the guest house owner, on the spectacular roof terrace overlooking the smelly fishing port. At 9pm we were exhausted and eager to start the next day: we were even closer to making 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 by Luc, the Belgian counsel to Morocco, who had been our go-between. He was a real gentle caring man who resembled Rene from Ali. We were next introduced to an extreme humanitarian Dr Banani, the founder of a group of international medics ‘Ranks of Honour’, who travel to hard to reach villages in Africa to set up camp to treat all kinds of illnesses and disease.

We were introduced to Dental Professor Tress from Morocco and her team of young dentists, as supplies were unloaded courtesy of Henry Schein Dental, and placed on an old wooden table. Around us small groups of excited but scared children assembled in the classroom. It was here where they were educated on brushing and caring for their teeth, which were mostly rotten. After a diagnosis with urgent dental treatment they were sent get fillings or to have teeth pulled to prevent further dental damage. On further investigation we discovered about 20 per cent had a toothbrush at home; but how many of them actually used it was another question. The delay in some of the children was so bad there were just roots left which had to be extracted.

I wanted to speak English to reassure the scared and in pain kids and put them at ease, but I found it difficult and often distressing with the language barrier even though we had translation. It was very upsetting for all of us, including the children, but we served our purpose.

At the end of the most humbling of days, I presented a Sunderland football shirt to Dr Banani and to Luc a signed book.

Dental Difference Day 7

We finally ended up in Marhella in a nice hotel; we had a hot bath and some serious memories to linger on forever.

This delightful dental difference trip was the tip of the iceberg. Overall, fifty Moroccans, kids, some of them Berber, were treated out of a school of six hundred; we had made just under a ten per cent difference. Our next objective was to fund a nurse who would visit the school weekly, educating the children on tooth decay prevention; for serious cases where children were in pain, we aimed to bring in a dentist from Checaousen every month.

I plan to go back next year to make a further difference.

I got an awful lot from being able to help some beautiful, beautiful children with their dental problems. To come to a country that doesn’t have any dental care at all and to do just a little bit, which to these people, probably felt a lot, means a lot to me. Hopefully for those children who’ve had the treatment, they will feel better from our efforts.

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 the people more commonly known as the Rifians, who have been displaced for more than 700 years 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 just for free, at our own expense. If you would like to help us make a dental difference for 600 Rif Mountain children, you can do so here www.castleparkdental.co.uk.

If you have any further questions please email me at mjolivet@sky.com.