

# Morocco's mini rockets

Gambra partridges, shown from the slopes of the Atlas Mountains, provide testing sport – and an escape from the British weather

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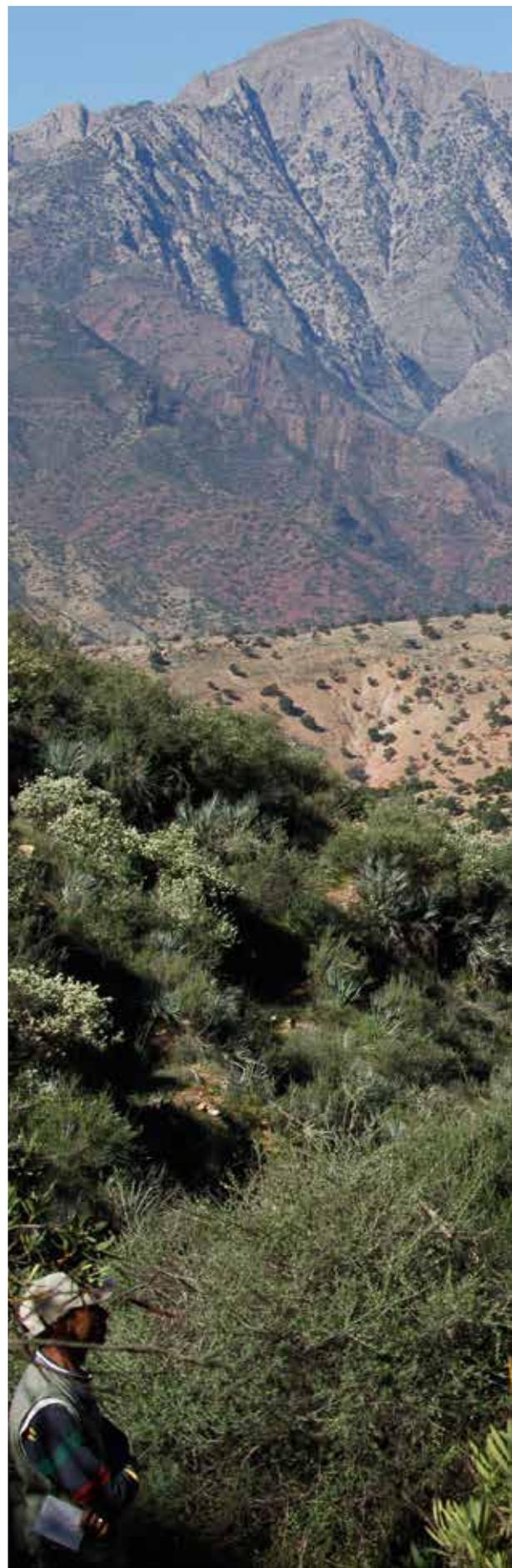


**T**rying to explain to two excitable Moroccans, one armed, that I was definitely not going to shoot the single partridge heading straight for my neighbour was tough. Their English was limited so I tried indicating where “my” slice of sky was and pointing at the neighbouring gun while miming slitting my throat. Needless to say, they didn’t get it and carried on urging me to have a crack at every bird regardless of where it was headed. We were standing below a steep incline, 1,250 feet high, at the foot of the Atlas Mountains in late February. The bird in question had been 40 yards high and heading straight for my generous host, Philipp Harmer. Harmer is Austrian and a good friend of mine from Cambridge days. He has shot just about every type of game

species all over the world. A great fan of bird shooting in North Africa, his latest addiction is driven gambra, or rock partridge. We were lucky that he had invited us to shoot with him for two days at Morocco’s first – and only – driven shoot, founded by Abdelmalek Larāichi and Spanish driven-shooting expert Carlos Rúa Palaez (who also owns shooting agency Diana Campo).

My husband and I had never been to Morocco, so didn’t know what to expect. The rest of the team, made up of Austrians, Belgians, Germans and Russians, had brought their WAGs but there was one other shooting couple. A group of 15, we stayed at Villa Talaa, a guesthouse, or *riad*, near Taroudant. It looked like a fortress but was extremely comfortable, the huge wooden doors enclosing a series of buildings and courtyards where oranges grew and pink-flowering jacaranda clambered over ancient walls. The staff were attentive, the team lining up in traditional robes to welcome us.

**The spectacular terrain of the Atlas Mountains provided challenging drives**







On the first day, we had a light, speedy breakfast and left for the shoot at 8.15am. The team split between three mini-vans for our journey into the mountains, which reminded me of shooting in Spain in the early 1980s: pot-holed roads; mule carts and donkeys dwarfed by their huge cargoes of greenery; sides of beef hanging out in the sun by the side of the road. We passed miles and miles of orange groves, spreading like a tapestry into the distance.

After an hour and a half we hit a dirt track and, after some terrifying hairpin bends, arrived to find ourselves on a plateau at the foot of the Atlas Mountains, with snow still clinging to their highest peaks. It was 10am and the sun was already high in the sky, the temperature almost 70 degrees. We were miles from anywhere, with no human habitation in sight, not even a telegraph wire.

On the first drive I was placed between our host, to my left, and my husband. We were standing on the side of a steep incline, thickly wooded with native argan trees, the distinctive prickles of which protect the

partridges from predators. My peg was surrounded by cistus bushes and the clumps of wild lavender, thyme and marjoram made me feel as if I was standing in a herb garden.

It soon became clear that we had precious little time to see the birds before they burst over us – this was snap-shooting in the extreme with barely any horizon. The first few partridges hurtled over us so high that it took a few failed attempts and puffs of tail feathers before we got the hang of the speed and swing required to hit them properly. Shouts of “Bravo!” from the loaders echoed down the line whenever a gun performed a great shot, adding to the excitement. When the beaters came closer, their loud cries of “hup, hup, hup” and my loader’s shouts for my attention meant that full concentration was required to keep calm and stay focused.

Gambra partridge are slightly larger than red-legs and these were strong fliers, seeming to spring up high off the sides of the mountain like rockets. In flight, their wingspan is almost as large as a hen pheasant’s yet on the ground they appear only a bit

**From left: the quarry; a Hungarian braque retriever; inside La Gazelle D’or, where some guns stayed; the buffet lunch; taking a high bird; argan trees leading to snow-capped mountains; the Bedouin lunch tent; the bag**

larger than their Spanish counterpart, about the size of a grouse. The birds are bred in Morocco and released in July. Head keeper Hadj Ahmed and his team of six have 20 drives to choose from, so there was plenty of variety over the two days. After the 20 or so driven partridge days are over towards the end of March there are around 20 walked-up partridge days. These continue until the end of March, when Laraïchi and his team take some time off before the dove-shooting season from from 8 July until 29 August.

Laraïchi – or Malik, as he’s known – has been running shooting trips for the past 35 years, first for snipe and, since the 1980s, for turtle doves. A quietly spoken gentleman with excellent English, Laraïchi, who is in his late seventies, oversees each of the 20 driven shoot days of the season. He tells me: “I attended partridge shooting for many years in Spain, where this kind of sport is conducted with great success. It was for me a dream to introduce it in Morocco and I did.”

His operation, Hajal Atlas, shoots over an area called Domain Chafarni, located at

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the base of the mountains some 65km from Taroudant. Its 3,000 hectares offer some spectacularly varied and challenging driven shooting, which has only been permitted in Morocco since 2007. Laraïchi likes to follow the shoot vehicles in his Mercedes saloon, which copes surprisingly well with the rugged terrain. On the two days we were there, he watched proceedings from a prominent viewing spot behind the line, on a foldable camping chair, noticing every bird shot.

Each drive brought new neighbours and fresh challenges. Sometimes we were in a narrow gully, at others on the edge of a steep drop. Each drive, the birds came out in small flushes, soaring skywards. Over the two days, I don't think I fired less than 20 shots per drive and, on occasion, as many as 50. We had no "swoopers" or ground creepers and even at the end of the line there was plenty to shoot at. The only dogs I saw picking-up belonged to Frédérique Hébrard,

Laraïchi's highly efficient PA, who has worked for him for more than 40 years. She enjoys coming out on shoot days with her Hungarian braque dogs, which she refers to as "*mes filles*".

My loader, Abdnour, spoke French and some German but Ahmed, my young *secrétario*, could only beam huge smiles. However, he recorded every bird shot in a specially printed notebook with "X" denoting a kill and a circle for a wounded bird. Temperatures were exceeding 80 degrees by noon but I couldn't risk stripping to my shirt sleeves as I needed the extra layer of padding provided by my waistcoat. This was fast-paced, challenging double gunning and we had another day to go.

On both days, after the third drive, we stopped for a snack sitting under an ancient olive tree where a table had been laid out with nibbles. Only soft drinks were served as Laraïchi does not offer alcohol until the end

of the day but as it was extremely hot and we were very thirsty, it hardly mattered.

Two more drives and, at 3.30pm, it was time for a late lunch back on the picturesque plateau, where a formal garden of trimmed rosemary bushes was laid out outside a Bedouin tent. Here, a traditional Moroccan buffet lunch awaited us. With carpets on the floor and sofas at one end, it was so comfortable that, after the second day, Laraïchi put his feet up and dozed off briefly while we sipped our pre-lunch drinks.

After our feast of local delicacies, we clambered back into the mini-vans, sun-burned, exhausted and exhilarated. We all felt we'd enjoyed some of the best sport in one of the most unspoilt and scenic locations in the world. ■

*The writer shot as a private guest. For those interested, Diana Campo organises driven partridge shooting in Morocco. Go to [www.dianacampo.net](http://www.dianacampo.net) for details.*