TRAVELOGUE • SPRING 2019

Six Wheels, Warped Cards, and One Loud Crack

Two months and roughly 10,000 kilometers in our 6x6 expedition truck Sixfoot—from Königswinter through France and Spain deep into the Moroccan Sahara, and back home via Portugal.

Dates: Feb 27 – Apr 26, 2019 | **Vehicle:** Sixfoot (Oberaigner 6x6, 7 tons) | **Route:** Ride to Agadir & Beyond

When you turn the ignition key in Königswinter under bright late-February sunshine, you have no idea how much improvisation, patience, and good humor the next ten thousand kilometers will demand. Our spring 2019 tour was supposed to be a relaxed overland journey down to Morocco and back. Instead, it delivered everything that makes an expedition unforgettable: warm croissants and deep-sand lessons in Spain, lawn-mowing sheep, a sun-warped credit card, a cinematic tow-truck ride across the High Atlas, and a narrow Portuguese bridge whose load capacity we personally certified.

1. Heading South: Baguettes, Smog, and Our First Sand Lesson

The start on February 27 could hardly have been better. After 558 kilometers we pulled up just outside Dijon, with temperatures climbing to a springlike 23 °C as soon as we crossed into France. Getting back into the rhythm of life on the road always takes a day or two—and there is no better place to ease into it than France, where fresh croissants and crusty baguettes make any transition effortless.

The very next day, however, Lyon reminded us why we prefer wide-open spaces: the entire metropolitan area sat beneath a massive dome of smog with dreadful air quality. We took the only sensible exit, left the motorway behind, and headed via Privas and Aubenas down into the Ardèche valley. In the picturesque village of Balazuc, basking in the afternoon sun, the world was right again.

On March 1, we wound our way through the Cévennes down to the Mediterranean, passing Montélimar, Narbonne, and Perpignan. Our last visit to this coastline had been thirty years earlier—and it showed. Holiday developments had spread everywhere, the roads felt narrower than memory served, and no-parking signs had sprouted like mushrooms. Piloting a seven-ton, three-axle truck through all that is a genuine test of patience. Still, Port-Vendres rewarded us with fresh fish at restaurant *L'Archipel* and a peaceful night, followed the next morning by a wonderful bike ride over to postcard-pretty Collioure.

From there we squeezed along the narrow coastal road into Spain—past Portbou, Llançà, and sunny Cadaqués—until we had enough of asphalt and turned onto a gravel track into the hills above Roses. Surrounded by wandering cows under a crystal-clear starry sky, Sixfoot was finally in its natural habitat. The next morning brought carnival celebrations in Roses, a nostalgic detour to Empuriabrava (which I had first visited a full half-century earlier, in 1969), and a string of coastal towns strictly closed to vehicles over 3.5 tons. So we engaged low range, climbed a lonely forest track with a punchy 25 percent incline, and camped high above the coast near Tossa de Mar.



High above the Spanish Mediterranean coast (near Tarragona): Far away from the crowds and 3.5-ton restrictions, Sixfoot sits tucked into the pine forest overlooking the sea.

After so much solitude, March 4 brought the ultimate contrast: Barcelona. Sixfoot sat safely in a quiet, guarded car park right inside a city park while we covered roughly 15 kilometers on foot exploring the city. Gaudí's architectural masterpieces are undeniably fascinating—yet as confirmed country folk, we once again discovered that big-city crowds are as exhausting as they are impressive.

Physics Beats Diff Locks: Stuck in the Ebro Delta

On March 5, the Ebro Delta served up the first major lesson of the trip. After taking advantage of the spotless water and waste service at a Spanish motorway rest stop, we turned into the delta to watch flamingos, herons, cranes, and cormorants. Ahead stretched a ten-kilometer drivable beach. Sensible people stick to the packed track. I, on the other hand, wanted to see what Sixfoot could really do. Center diff locks engaged, we turned straight into the deep sand.

The verdict arrived in less than five seconds: we were buried nearly up to the wheel hubs. I engaged two more locks—four out of five locks now active—and Sixfoot simply dug itself in with admirable determination. Only when I dropped the tire pressure from a firm 5 bar down to a relaxed 2.5 bar did our seven-tonner stroll effortlessly out of the soft sand. It is always the simple things: not the number of diff locks, but the right tire pressure makes all the difference. Since overnight beach camping was prohibited, we drove on—wiser than before—to a camper stop past El Poblenou.



Lesson one in the Ebro Delta (March 5, 2019): Four out of five diff locks weren't enough—only dropping tire pressure from 5 bar to 2.5 bar let Sixfoot cruise effortlessly out of the deep sand.

2. Through Andalusia to a 6x6 Reunion on the Costa de la Luz

On March 6, we put 450 kilometers behind us to reach the area around Alhama de Murcia, where 22 °C and a dreamlike camp spot with sweeping views awaited. Returning to the coast, we followed the scenic shoreline road from Águilas to Carboneras and set up camp high on the cliffs right beside the *Faro de la Mesa Roldán* lighthouse—complete with complimentary nighttime illumination from its sweeping beam.



A sweeping camp spot overlooking the Barrancos de Gebas near Alhama de Murcia (March 6, 2019).



High above the cliffs beside the historic Torreón de Mesa Roldán near Carboneras (March 7, 2019).

After a picture-perfect sunrise, we traded the sea for the mountains and abruptly stepped into the Wild West: near Tabernas stands *Fort Bravo*, the iconic Western film set where classics like *Once Upon a Time in the West* and *Der Schuh des Manitu* were shot. Seeing a frontier town in the middle of Andalusia feels wonderfully surreal, and the detour was well worth it. That night we followed a track through a dry riverbed and camped in a tiny grove in the middle of nowhere.

Skirting the northern edge of the Sierra Nevada, we rolled into Granada on March 9. With pre-booked online tickets, we walked straight into the Alhambra—magnificent, surprisingly uncrowded, and good for another 15-kilometer walking marathon by day's end. Passing Gibraltar the next day, we reached Tarifa on the Atlantic coast, where endless kitesurfers filled the beach and we treated ourselves to a quiet laundry and reading day on March 11.

March 12 was all about catching up with old friends: on the Costa de la Luz we reunited with Nadja, Michael, and their truck "Gorbi" (*www.beautifulplanet.info*). We had first met them back in June 2018 at Norway's Preikestolen—now we were holding a proper Oberaigner 6x6 rally under the Spanish sun. The next day we said our goodbyes, restocked provisions in Algeciras, and booked the morning ferry. Africa was calling.



Oberaigner 6x6 reunion in Spain (March 12, 2019): Catching up with Nadja, Michael, and "Gorbi" on the Costa de la Luz.

3. Welcome to Morocco: Eco-Friendly Lawnmowers and Endless Sand Tracks

After a smooth two-hour crossing on March 14, we arrived at the modern port of Tanger-Med. Sixfoot went straight through the giant vehicle scanner, the officials were remarkably friendly, and while formalities took their sweet time, entry into Morocco went without a hitch. Taking the empty, well-maintained motorway south, we stopped in Moulay Bousselham at the spacious *Atlantis Gate* campground. During our rest day in sunny 22–24 °C weather, we witnessed Moroccan groundskeeping at its finest: around midday, a flock of sheep strolled in to trim the grass—highly practical and far quieter than any lawnmower.

After oversleeping slightly on March 16—setting off at 10:45 a.m.—we covered 461 kilometers at 31 °C past Rabat and Casablanca (with the obligatory Casablanca traffic jam) down to Marrakech. At *Relais de Marrakech*, the campground pool provided instant relief. The following day we headed back toward the coast near Essaouira. Following a tip from Nadja, a short dirt track led us to the tucked-away *Camping Naturiste* in the Val d'Argan—lush, peaceful, and so tranquil it felt like Provence.

On March 18, smaller backroads gave us our first genuine taste of everyday Morocco—a warm, welcoming country. Thick coastal fog rolled in at the surf town of Imsouane, so we chased the sun south toward Agadir, marveling along the way at the sheer number of motorhomes lining the coast. After stocking up at a supermarket in Agadir on March 19, we finally left the N1 highway at Tifnit and turned onto the coastal sand track.

The off-road adventure opened with a brief halt: a friendly soldier stopped us because the track crossed a military firing range. We put the wait to good use, aired the tires down to 70 percent, and were soon waved through. Sixfoot handled the sand and undulations with ease—though side slopes past 20 percent still gave me butterflies behind the wheel. Even so, the next day was pure magic: it took us five leisurely hours to cover 41 kilometers along the coast. Deep sand, cliffs, dunes, and stretches where the wind had erased the track completely—Morocco at its absolute finest.



Finally off-road (March 19–20, 2019): With aired-down tires, Sixfoot carves through deep sand tracks along Morocco's Atlantic coast south of Agadir.

South of Mirleft and Sidi Ifni—where most travelers turn inland toward Guelmim—we stayed stubbornly on a southern heading. The tarmac emptied completely before we turned inland onto a 4x4-only track. Surrounded by chipmunks, birds, snakes, and mysterious little "Moroccan hamsters," we reached the old *Fort Bou Jerif* beside an oasis. Two kilometers farther lay the off-road camp with a small pool that we had entirely to ourselves on our rest day—following a full-moon night of a silence so profound you could almost hear it.

On March 23, the wind picked up. At 30 °C it blew like a giant hot hairdryer across gravel, rock, and sand tracks. The famous *Plage Blanche* felt decidedly inhospitable in the brewing sandstorm, so we pressed farther south to the desert oasis of *Ksar Tafnidilt*. It is a magnificent spot accessible only to off-road vehicles—though for spoiled Central Europeans, the relentless sand was starting to wear thin. Everything crunched, and even the front windows groaned in protest when rolled down.



Fort Bou Jerif oasis (March 21–22, 2019): Complete full-moon silence and a small pool almost entirely to ourselves.



Ksar Tafnidilt desert oasis (March 23, 2019): Far off the N1 and reachable only via off-road tracks.

4. The Week of Trials: Warped Card, Montezuma, and Erg Chegaga

Starting March 24, fate decided to test our composure in systematic fashion. Trial number one unfolded at a supermarket ATM in Guelmim. My credit card had spent the past few hot days resting beneath the dashboard and had acquired a subtle, artistic curve. The ATM found this shape so intriguing that it simply refused to give the card back. Because it was Sunday, all banks were closed, leaving us with an unplanned stopover at the pleasant *Aain Nakhla* campground in nearby Tighmert.

On Monday morning, helpful locals guided us to the right bank branch. An English-speaking clerk cheerfully informed me that of course I could collect my card—in about a week. Different country, different pace: we canceled the card and drove 231 kilometers through the Anti-Atlas via Assa and Foum el Hassane to Icht. Barely had we settled into another wonderful camp recommended by Nadja when trial number two struck hard: Montezuma's revenge knocked me flat for two full days. On March 26 and 27, my entire travel itinerary consisted of staying in bed and listening to an audiobook.



> An unplanned timeout in the Anti-Atlas (March 25–27, 2019): Recovering from two days of Montezuma's revenge at the lovely Borj Biramane camp in Icht.

By March 28, the worst was behind me. Having had our fill of washboard gravel for the moment, we stuck to tarmac through Akka, Tata, and Tissint all the way to Foum Zguid. The scenery was sweeping and the hospitality extraordinary—locals waved warmly in nearly every village we passed. Excitement was building: tomorrow we would tackle the classic desert run to Mhamid.

Across Lac Iriqui to the Dunes of Erg Chegaga

Promptly at 10 a.m. on March 29, we set off on the 170-kilometer track across the dry bed of Lac Iriqui and the dunes of Erg Chegaga. The first stretch was stony desert, comfortable at 80 percent tire pressure. Out on the dead-flat, kilometer-wide dry lakebed, our GPS proved indispensable: without a digital track, you face a thousand crisscrossing ruts with no clue which one leads anywhere. Right in the middle of absolute nowhere, small desert cafés popped up for passing travelers—we stopped for a cold drink while an eight-car desert rally and a few camels drifted past.

Then came the deep sand. We stopped, aired down to 60 percent, engaged the inter-axle locks—and Sixfoot glided through the soft sand as if on rails. Pure joy! After roughly seven hours for a hundred kilometers, the towering dunes of Erg Chegaga rose on the horizon just before 5 p.m. At *Nomad Camp* we were warmly welcomed. The camp was empty when we arrived, but at 6 p.m. a heavily laden caravan of six to eight dromedaries marched into the dune valley, followed by hikers and a 4x4 with a guide. We climbed the dune ridges to watch an unforgettable Sahara sunset.



> Crossing dry Lac Iriqui (March 29, 2019): Kilometer-wide tracks stretching to the horizon—without GPS, choosing the right rut would be pure guesswork.





Nomad Camp nestled in the Erg Chegaga dunes just before Mhamid (March 29, 2019).

Right at 6 p.m., a heavily laden dromedary caravan crests the dune ridge into camp.

5. One Loud Crack and 450 Kilometers on a Tow Truck

On March 30, a few raindrops fell while the wind freshened and wiped away every tire track in the sand. We passed a remarkable herd of roughly 200 dromedaries, enjoyed three more exhilarating hours in deep sand—and suddenly the desert spat us straight onto the asphalt of Mhamid. The town was buzzing ahead of the Nomad Festival, packed with pedestrians, mopeds, carts, and off-roaders. Just past the bridge we spotted a nice campground, drove slightly past to take a look, started to make a U-turn—and then it happened.

ONE LOUD CRACK.

The diff locks were still engaged. On high-grip asphalt. Too late. Sixfoot refused to budge another inch, and in that moment I would gladly have awarded myself the trophy for Biggest Fool in the Sahara. Stupidity is punished immediately. The kind guys from the campground towed us onto the lot, launching a frantic marathon of phone calls. Michael Bocklet stepped in with immediate expert advice: with the lock engaged, front-wheel drive still worked, so in theory I could remove the rear driveshaft. Still, driving 500 kilometers over the 2,000-meter High Atlas to Marrakech on front-wheel drive alone? No thank you. ADAC arranged a tow truck for Monday, leaving us with an enforced lazy Sunday strolling through Mhamid.



Forced pause under the palms in Mhamid (March 30–31, 2019): After the loud crack, a quiet Sunday before the tow truck arrives Monday morning.

What rolled up at 7 a.m. on April 1 was, sadly, no April Fools' joke: a flatbed tow truck rated for a 4.5-ton payload loaded our seven-ton Sixfoot onto its deck. The ensuing twelve and a half hours and 450 kilometers over the winding High Atlas passes were spent with permanently sweaty palms from my newly elevated vantage point in Sixfoot's cab.



No April Fools' joke (April 1, 2019): Seven tons of Sixfoot perched atop a flatbed rated for 4.5 tons.



Twelve and a half hours with sweaty palms: The panoramic view from our elevated cab across the High Atlas.

In Marrakech, good news finally arrived. Thanks to swift, expert remote diagnosis by Frank Schröder-Meister at Oberaigner in Rostock, the transfer case had survived—it was "only" the front right drive shaft that had snapped. A blessing in disguise! Within hours, Oberaigner dispatched the replacement part via UPS to *Mercedes Auto Nejma* in Marrakech—conveniently just 300 meters from our campground.



Made it! After 450 kilometers, the tow truck reaches our Marrakech campground after dark—time to unload Sixfoot at last.

Of course, no Moroccan workshop saga would be complete without a dash of bureaucracy: Auto Nejma matter-of-factly informed me they couldn't receive the UPS parcel because clearing customs was too much hassle—I would have to handle it myself. A Casablanca hotline with a recorded French message got me nowhere fast. Thank goodness for friends in need: our friend Anja, who works at UPS, stepped in, connected us with the wonderfully helpful team at UPS Maroc, and the shaft cleared customs in record time. At 9 a.m. on April 4, Sixfoot rolled onto the lift; two and a half hours later it was good as new, leaving my trusty socket set untouched. That very evening we reached Moulay Bousselham at sunset.

6. Back in Europe: Grilled Sea Bream, Border Ping-Pong, and the 7-Ton Bridge Test

April 5 served up one last burst of drama: gales and torrential downpours canceled our midday ferry at Tanger-Med. After six hours waiting at the port, we finally sailed at 6 p.m. under sudden, brilliant sunshine and returned to Europe. Our laundry day in Tarifa turned into a damp affair—with passing showers forcing clothes to dry inside Sixfoot, a second flat bicycle tire of the trip, and two enthusiastic visits to local tapas bars to make up for our involuntary culinary restraint in Morocco. Seville greeted us on April 7 with a dry walk across the *Plaza de España* before relentless rain drove us into cafés and ice cream parlors.

Crossing into Portugal on April 8, the clouds finally parted. Finding the eastern Algarve a bit too built-up, we headed west and stopped at the gorgeous *Praia da Marinha* cove on our daughter's recommendation. Off the beaten track we discovered a spectacular cliffside camp accessible only with ground clearance and all-wheel drive. Out came the grill: fresh sea bream, baguette, and grilled vegetables above the crashing Atlantic. Life really is good.



Sunset on the cliffs of the Algarve (April 8, 2019): Freshly grilled sea bream and total freedom.



Right above the roaring Atlantic at Ponta Ruiva Beach —blissfully offline along Portugal's southwest coast.

The following days unfolded at a wonderfully unhurried pace. We wound along dirt tracks through the Southwest Alentejo Atlantic Park to the *Cabo Sardão* lighthouse, happily growing accustomed to being offline. Turning inland through Portugal's blooming countryside, we camped beside quiet reservoirs before popping across into Spain's Extremadura to refuel, restock, and soak in the scenery. Amid circling vultures, nesting storks, Iberico pigs, UNESCO-listed Cáceres, and 17,000-year-old rock carvings at Siega Verde, we discovered our new favorite overnight category: lonely reservoirs—including one night practically atop the dam wall of *Embalse de Almendra*.



Our new favorite kind of camp spot: All alone beneath a starry sky right on the shore of a Portuguese reservoir.

On April 15, we couldn't seem to make up our minds geographically, crossing the Portugal–Spain border three separate times. From the Rabagão reservoir, our sat-nav sent us straight through Tourem—my eyes said "too narrow," we went anyway, and the next Spanish village was tighter still. We were almost certainly the talk of the town that evening. The finale came on a 400-meter reservoir bridge measuring barely 2.5 meters wide with no posted weight limit whatsoever. For the record: that bridge holds seven tons.

7. Express Pilgrimage, Pyrenean Fog, and One Final Fender-Bender

Our pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela on April 16 was remarkably effortless—we simply took the motorway. Visiting during Holy Week under bright sunshine, we soaked up the lively atmosphere of pilgrims from around the globe and singing youth groups marching into the cathedral square. Tracing the coasts of Galicia (A Coruña, Ribadeo) and Asturias, then skirting the narrow roads of the Picos de Europa, the skies turned gray once more. A spontaneous off-road detour in search of a camp spot ended in a muddy dead end—the motto of April 18: *much mud about nothing*.



A stunning cliffside pitch on the coast of Asturias (April 17–18, 2019), as the journey home slowly drew nearer.

After a rain-soaked night by the Aguilar reservoir, we chased dry weather into Aragon between Zaragoza and the Pyrenees, finding a wildflower-carpeted plateau before disappearing completely off the grid in the remote *Valle de Anso* beside the Río Veral—where even our satellite phone struggled for a signal. Overnight rain meant Sixfoot needed all its off-road muscle just to climb back out the next morning. Crossing the 1,745-meter Pyrenean pass into France inside thick clouds with 10 to 20 meters of visibility, we emerged in Eugénie-les-Bains to a joyous reunion with baguettes and croissants.

After roughly 10,000 kilometers on the road, we paused for two quiet recovery days on the Île de Ré away from the Easter holiday rush. April 24, however, turned out to be a day to forget: the Loire valley proved hostile to vehicles over 3.5 tons, and while reversing a little too quickly I managed to crunch a Volkswagen Golf behind me. Thankfully it was only sheet-metal damage, the remarkably calm driver was unhurt, and Sixfoot barely noticed. Still, the message was clear: it was time to head home.

After a 701-kilometer push past Reims in the Champagne region, we rolled back into everyday life on April 26. What lingers most is a deep love for Morocco—we will definitely be back, hopefully soon. First, though, May belongs to giving Sixfoot a well-earned spa treatment and a little TLC, before summer brings new plans and the upcoming shipment to Australia.

GOLDEN LESSONS FROM 10,000 KILOMETERS

- **Tire pressure beats hardware:** Four out of five diff locks won't save you in deep sand at 5 bar. Drop to 2.5 bar and Sixfoot walks right out.
- **Disengage locks before tarmac:** One forgotten switch on grippy asphalt buys you a very expensive crack and twelve and a half hours riding shotgun on a tow truck.
- **Dashboards are not wallets:** Credit cards hate the Moroccan sun behind a windshield—and ATMs love warped cards so much they keep them.
- **Good friends are priceless:** From Oberaigner's remote diagnosis out of Rostock to fellow travelers' camp tips and UPS customs rescue from home, a great network saves the day.

Stages & Highlights at a Glance

Dates	Region	Key Stops & Memorable Moments
Feb 27 – Mar 1	**France**	Departure from Königswinter (558 km to Dijon), escaping Lyon's smog into the Ardèche (Balazuc), Cévennes, Port-Vendres (fresh fish at *L'Archipel*).
Mar 2 – Mar 13	**Spain (Outbound)**	Collioure, Cadaqués, Pyrenees gravel track, 15 km walking tour of Barcelona, sand & tire-pressure lesson in the Ebro Delta, *Faro de la Mesa Roldán*, Fort Bravo, Granada's Alhambra, 6x6 reunion with Nadja, Michael & Gorbi near Tarifa.
Mar 14 – Mar 23	**Morocco (Coast & South)**	Ferry to Tanger-Med, lawn-mowing sheep in Moulay Bousselham, Marrakech, Val d'Argan, coastal sand tracks from Tifnit (41 km in 5 hours), Sidi Ifni, Fort Bou Jerif oasis, sandstorm at Plage Blanche and Ksar Tafnidilt.
Mar 24 – Apr 4	**Anti-Atlas, Sahara & Marrakech**	Swallowed credit card in Guelmim, two days of Montezuma's revenge in Icht, dream crossing of Lac Iriqui to Erg Chegaga, broken drive shaft in Mhamid, 450 km tow over the Atlas, repair at Auto Nejma thanks to Oberaigner & UPS.
Apr 5 – Apr 14	**Andalusia, Portugal & Extremadura**	Storm delay at Tanger-Med, rainy tapas in Tarifa & Seville, cliffside barbecue at Praia da Marinha, Cabo Sardão, inland reservoirs, Cáceres, Siega Verde rock art, overnight by Embalse de Almendra.
Apr 15 – Apr 26	**Northern Spain, France & Return**	Triple border crossing & 7-ton bridge test, Holy Week in Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Picos de Europa, off-road in Valle de Anso, 1,745 m Pyrenean pass in fog, Île de Ré, Loire fender-bender, return via Reims.