

Days Out From  
**KASBAH DU  
TOUBKAL**

MOROCCO'S PREMIER MOUNTAIN RETREAT

# CONTENTS

**More than just majestic mountains**  
Page 3 Kasbah du Toubkal is the perfect place to discover life in the High Atlas Mountains.

**La Retour de Paradis**  
Page 4 'Plants do not grow merely to satisfy ambitions or to fulfill good intentions. They thrive because someone expended effort on them.' Welcome to Anima Garden.

**A Stroll Around The Souk**  
Page 6 As the largest weekly market in the area, Asni souk drops you with a bump into local life in the High Atlas Mountains.

**Creating a Sanctuary**  
Page 8 There can't be many sanctuaries where you see a group of mules and donkeys casually munching away at the lawn. surrounding someone's home.

**Tin-Mel**  
Page 10 One of only two mosques in Morocco non-Muslims can enter, Tinmel Mosque is a reminder of the founding the Almohad dynasty.

**A Desert of Stones**  
Page 12 Driving on the roads of the Agafay Desert is like riding on over-sized corrugated sheets, which is probably why only all-terrain vehicles and camels venture there.

**Behind the Wheel**  
Page 14 The tiny village of Infgane has a population of about three hundred, their income totally dependent on hand-made pottery.

**A Family Affair**  
Page 18 Robert Hoffrock lost two toes to frost bite in the Himalayas. This time he took the family to the relative safety of the High Atlas.

**The Tale of a Lonesome Hound**  
Page 20 When Bob Parker made his first ascent of Jbel Toubkal he came back with the tale of a lonesome hound.

Cover image: Val Hendy



*Welcome to Kasbah du Toubkal*

## MUCH MORE THAN JUST MAJESTIC MOUNTAINS

From its origins as study centre for students from the UK, Kasbah du Toubkal has become widely known as a place to relax, to enjoy the peace of the mountains, the excellent local mountain cuisine and its range of accommodation, from simple shared family rooms and cosy bedrooms to a luxury apartment, as well as being one of the foremost trekking bases in the majestic mountains of the High Atlas.

As we step into the roaring twenties of the 21st century, the opportunity to discover the beauty and culture of this vibrant country have grown exponentially, whether it's through specifically designed quality tourist venues or the opening up of villages inaccessible only a few years ago.

Over the past two years, our quarterly magazine has included visits to attractions that visitors to the Kasbah can enjoy as either part of their stay, or as a break in their transfer between Marrakech and Imlil. In this small brochure we bring a few of those articles together to help you plan your next – or perhaps first – visit, any of which can be booked either directly through the Kasbah booking service or with reception at Kasbah du Toubkal and its associate riads, Dar Doukkala and Les Yeux Bleus in Marrakech. More information on page twenty-one. We also offer a variety of regular courses, especially in yoga, using highly experienced, professional coaches and trainers, so it's worth subscribing to our free quarterly magazine to keep up to date.

We look forward to welcoming you to the Kasbah very soon.

*Mike and Chris McHugo*

and everyone at KASBAH DU TOUBKAL

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# LE RETOUR DE PARADIS

## ANIMA GARDEN



Liberty Hyde Bailey, an American horticulturist and botanist, and co-founder of the American Society for Horticultural Science, knew what he was about when he said, "A garden requires patient labor and attention. Plants do not grow merely to satisfy ambitions or to fulfill good intentions. They thrive because someone expended effort on them."

Just as Kasbah du Toubkal rose from a ruin on the top of a hill to become the Berber Hospitality Centre you see today, when André Heller, creator of some of the world's foremost multi-media projects decide to give something back to Morocco, a country that has given him spiritual and emotional succour for almost five decades, he bought eight hectares of

barren land in the Ourika Valley, thirty kilometres south of Marrakech, with beautiful views of Jbel Toubkal and its almost perennial dusting of snow off in the distance. He bought the land in 2009 with the aim to create jobs by "establishing a curative, highly energetic and botanical area of sensual beauty and comprehensive high quality for people of all age groups and all levels of education from both near and far." Six years of 'expended effort' later, Anima Garden opened; Liberty Hyde Bailey would have been proud.

### *In a garden mood*

I enter through a shady alley of ivy-covered palm trees, almost artworks in themselves, and my first intimation of the beauty of

the garden is a glimpse through a traditional horseshoe arch of a trio of African sculptures, mother, father, child, set in a dappled clearing in front of a stand of slim bamboo. I follow the path and suddenly I'm on a humpback wooden bridge over a stream, leading into a beautiful garden, with a long, multi-coloured gallery and *petit museu*, and Café Paul Bowles, one of the foremost writers on Morocco, and author of the quote, "There are certain places on the surface of the earth that possess more magic than others. One of those places is Marrakech."

I'm in a garden mood at the moment so decide to view the exhibitions and take tea when I end my tour. Passing through a narrow

walk of carved stone pedestals I suddenly realise that the animals topping them are the signs of the Chinese zodiac. I make my abeyance to the rat, my birth animal, and move on.

Despite the beauty of the gardens themselves, they create beautiful backdrops to the artworks. Bursts of orange are seen over the top of purple bougainvillea, and a twist in the footpath reveals it to be a large head, an African mask covered in green and orange mosaic, a gentle mist spraying from its mouth every few seconds.

What appears to be a patch of rusted metal partially obscured by bushes behind a sculpture of *The Thinker* by Auguste Rodin (one of the twenty-eight full-size castings worldwide) becomes the hull of a boat, possibly the Ark, captained by a camel of patchwork colours rather than Noah. Twisting, meandering footpaths lead you to shady areas with wooden seats for a quiet sit down to contemplate such imagination. Shady arbors, tinkling fountains

in marble bowls with rose petals taken from the gardens floating on the surface, it may not be a maze in the truest sense, but it certainly feels that way, and in a long list of future plans there will be an actual maze in the shape of a heart.

With works by such renowned artists as Keith Haring, Pablo Picasso, Auguste Rodin, American pop-art artist Andy Warhol, and many unknown and local artists, the emphasis in publicity could easily be placed on the artworks, but the gardens themselves have such an ebullience and vivacity that it's easy to follow André Heller's idea, that the gardens are seen as a whole, to take from it what you will and whatever your age or ethnicity. I happily spend a couple of hours just walking the winding paths and sitting in the dappled sunlight, drifting away with the bubbles of conversation of passersby and relaxed by the sound of birdsong floating on the soft breeze.



# A STROLL AROUND THE SOUK

Even before you pass through the horse-shoe-arched gate of Asni souk you are assailed by noise and bustle, a hive of activity and a cacophony of colour, a hectic introduction to what lies inside.



Read stalls piled high with *khobz* (flat, round loaves), fruit and veg spread out on barrows, mobile phones displayed in glass cases, *gelabas* and *gandoras* hanging from chains draped across a canopied stall. This is the main weekly market for the area, supplying all household needs and more.

Historically it was the man of the house who did the shopping, often walking many kilometres to buy, sell and barter, although these days he's as likely to ride in one of the battered old vans that ply their trade as mountain buses as arrive on the back of a mule or donkey. The latter will be parked on the edge of the souk, where an itinerant farrier takes care of their shoeing needs while the owner does his weekly shop. Next to the mule park bright yellow saddles are for sale or repaired by an elderly man who stuffs straw into ancient, much used versions.

## Snake oil salesmen

A circle of men often indicates someone selling pills and potions, the ubiquitous snake-oil salesman, sat cross-legged in front of a blanket on the ground where his products are displayed. Like the storytellers of Jmaa el Fna in Marrakech, he will weave his tale of vicious skin ailments cured, marital difficulties remedied and youthful energy brought back to ancient bones. Every one of his potions guaranteed to cure a multitude ailments or your money back.

A major business worldwide is secondhand clothing and shoes, and there are plenty here to kit out your wardrobe. The trick for checking the size of a pair of trousers, at least for men, is by zipping up the fly and trying the waistband around the neck. If the ends touch, they will fit. Surprisingly, it usually works.

Mounds of shoes, bundles of herbs, piles of brightly-coloured knickers and bras, legs of lamb and piles of chicken wrapped at speed, plastic toys to keep the kids happy for hours, baskets of mint, dates and biscuits, mounds of olives glistening in the sun, big bunches of purple onions. Most of the vegetables are recognisable from any western supermarket but here they have the vividness of the real McCoy, not the plastic-wrapped and bagged versions we are used to.



## Food, food, food

There's not much in the way of daily necessities that you can't find at Asni souk, but a major part of the sales activity involves food, either in the raw, take-home-for-dinner state or cooked in one of the small food shops around the outer wall.

In wire cages chickens and pigeons cluck and coo. Choose a chicken from its cage at the back of a shop; dispatched with a sharp blade and dumped in a big pan of boiling water, the worker holds it by its legs as he swirls it around to make plucking easier. He hands it over to a young man who plucks and guts it, and it will be in your hands by the time you have picked up your bag of veg to accompany it in a tajine. Crude it might appear, but can anything better be said about the vast factory farming businesses in Europe and elsewhere or the time spent in transporting it to a supermarket where it will sit on a shelf slowly deteriorating? At least you know that what you are eating for dinner was alive and kicking as you thought about its preparation.

The meat and fish section is a revelation for anyone used to the sterile butchery departments of supermarkets. Halves and quarters of beef are suspended on hooks hung from wooden poles, while whole lambs dangle in rows. This may appear unwholesome to a foreign eye but the meat is all stamped to show that it has been inspected for quality and provenance. Select your joint and the butcher will cleave it for you there and then.

(As I'm leaving the meat market I see a man wiping down a pile of cows' livers with what I take to be a bundle of cloth. It slips out of his hands and lands at my feet. I bend down to pick it up and realise it's a sheep's heart. Too late to turn back, I gingerly pick it up with three fingers and hand it back to him. He gives me a big grin and a thumbs-up, probably not expecting a westerner to do such a thing.)



## Smell of the grill

The smoke and smell of grilled foods fills the air; sardines, the livers and small slices of chicken, slivers of lamb and an assortment of offal create a mixed plate of meats. Cooked on small griddles and served with salad



and a *khobz*, it makes an excellent lunch, if you are lucky enough to find a space on the elbow-to-elbow tables.

At the back of the market, tiny, dark and narrow food-shops display ancient tajines slowly cooking at open windows. Fish is deep fried in blackened pans, stews of various meats of indeterminate origin simmer in beat-up five-gallon aluminium pans.

Every country seems to have a version of this stew, a cheap filler, although in some parts of Greece

**Select your joint and it will be cleaved for you there and then.**

it's served in the early hours of the morning to soak up the alcohol after a late night's over-indulgence. Narrow tables are fixed the length of the walls with small stools to sit on, or a thin table running down the centre of the arms-width room, it's a communal dining experience of a

basic level but definitely worth trying.

Complete a circuit of the souk by the northern wall, where shoe repairers and makers work at their lasts; on past a row of shops selling simple earthenware tajines and into the metalworkers section where a small boy turns a wall-mounted bicycle wheel attached to a belt that connects to a bellows that keeps the forge of an ironsmith burning brightly as he does small repairs on household implements.

Leaving the hectic clamour of the souk you pass pick-up trucks and chunky tuk-tuks, a hefty motor-bike with a small truck attachment at the rear, used equally for carrying people as goods, piled with aromatic yellow melons, bright oranges, curvaceous bananas and lusciously-red strawberries, set off against a bright blue sky pocked with fluffy white clouds. Perfect representations of the vivid colours and aromas of Asni souk.

*Asni souk is open from 08:00 to 16:00 every Saturday. Transport to visit the souk can be arranged with Kasbah du Toubkal reception.*

# CREATING A SANCTUARY

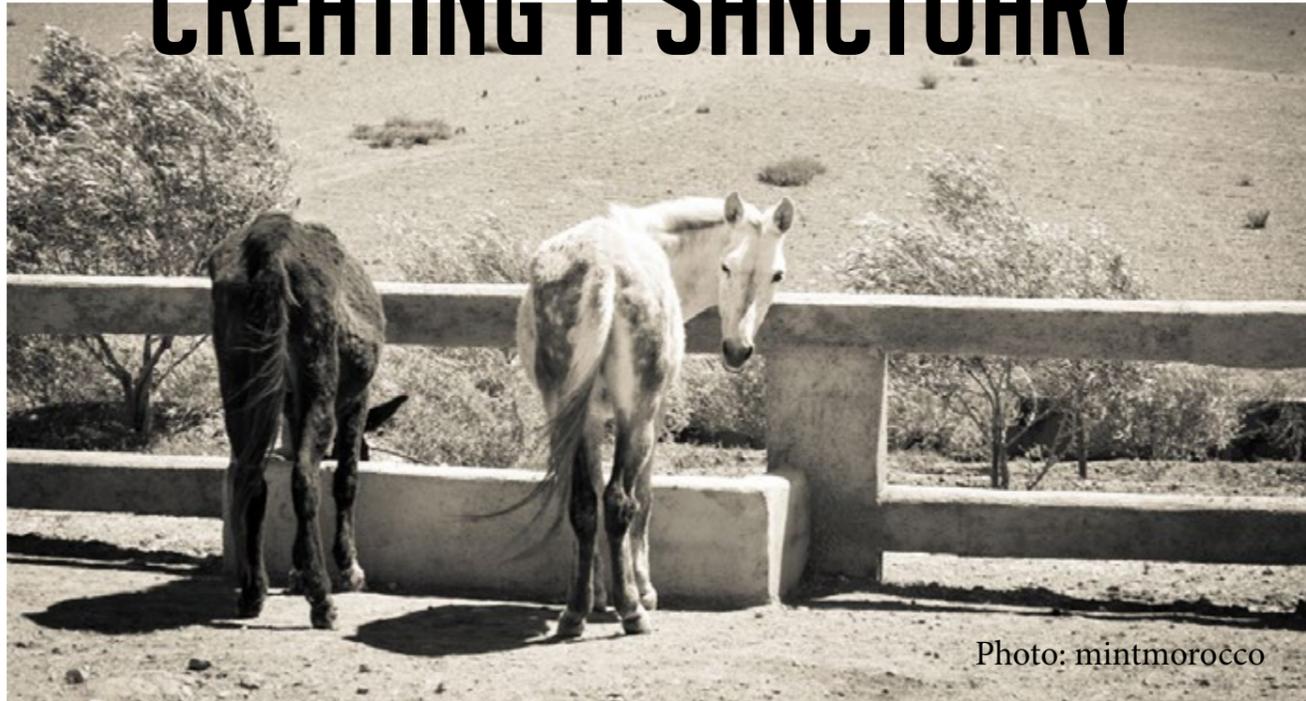


Photo: mintmorocco



Set on a low hill in an undulating landscape, a forty-minute drive south from Marrakech is a beautiful modern house, the home of Susan Machin and Charles Hantom, retired barrister and solicitor respectively. Their original intention for a relaxed retirement was to build a few elegant bungalows as holiday

rentals...and then along came Tommy.

"About four years ago I was visiting SPANA (Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad), and a donkey was brought in dying of tetanus," recalls Susan. "The vet realised she was pregnant and performed a Cesarean right there on the grass, with Professor Kottenburg from Liverpool University on the telephone guiding them through it. Tommy was born and he was given an immediate blood transfusion from a healthy donkey to give him antibodies to avoid him getting tetanus. Eventually he became quite famous and was used to being taken to classrooms for children to see and stroke, but of course he didn't learn to be a donkey, so when he reached adolescence at about a year old he started biting the children. We had plenty of land so SPANA asked us if we could take him to work on the land, although he'd never done a day's work in his life." Tommy became very difficult to handle, and while

the normal approach is castration, although in reality this doesn't usually make much difference. Susan didn't want to take this drastic step so she was back on the phone to Professor Kottenburg in Liverpool. "He said don't put up with bad behaviour. The best thing I could do was get a strong female to knock Tommy into shape. And it worked." And so began Jarjeer Mule and Donkey Sanctuary, now home to sixty-four retired or incapacitated equines, the name Jarjeer coming from a herb that grows rampantly in the locality.

Little by little local villagers saw that Susan and her staff had managed this very difficult donkey, so other mules and donkeys started arriving.

"How could we sit here and watch these poor creatures just turned away at the gate? That was quite contrary to the way I'd always lived and everything I believe in. Once you get here and you look at the plight of the working animals and their families it's not a big step to take. So I see our job here as very much supporting and fighting for the rights of these



working animals so they have a decent retirement before they go and meet their maker."

While the safe and comfortable care of her equine charges is paramount, in a land where these beasts of burden have no rights and very little protection under the law, Susan sees her skills garnered from decades as a barrister fighting for the rights of others as one of the strongest points in both the creating of Jarjeer and its continued success. "When you retire you bring your skills with you, and the skills I could bring were, advocacy skills, political skills, networking, knowing how to get people on board, dealing with authorities, that's all part of running a place like this, whereas people tend to think it's just looking after donkeys." As important as Susan's skills are in the organisation and running of Jarjeer, the moment you walk up the steep entrance drive you begin to sense something special about the place. There can't be that many sanctuaries where you see a group of mules and donkeys casually munching away at the lawn surrounding someone's home.

## Each donkey is given a name

One of the most important things in Susan's eyes is that every equine is given a name (the norm in Morocco is to give it a number, if any identity is given at all) because once it is named the men learn to call that animal by it and they develop an emotional bond. They bring the skills of knowing how to look after the animals but then learn that they can have a relationship with an animal they that haven't had before.



No equine is too old or infirm to be turned away from Jarjeer – in fact none is turned away at all. "There's a donkey in the clinic called Peter who's had a broken leg for two years, and local people asked us to take him. Without a shadow of a doubt all the European vets would have advised me to have him euthenized they'd say it's not a life worth having. If I just euthenized that donkey when local people had been feeding him for two years I was just coming with my values and taking a life unnecessarily.

"Something I've learned from here, which has been incredibly valuable, is how arrogant we are in the west with animals when we say the wonder of looking after animals is you can relieve their suffering. Peter staggers around with his deformed leg very much as humans do, but I'm assured by the vets he's not in pain. I've several really old ones down there and they've got arthritis but they hobble around and are perfectly happy. Western vets would say arthritis is painful, well I've got arthritis but I don't want to be put down. There's plenty of other things to enjoy, even just the relaxation of being here. And we're finding it's such a joy looking after the really old ones and seeing them enjoy sunshine,



good food and not having to work. There's never any unpleasantness, they don't bite or kick, they love to be stroked, they love to be groomed, and children coming here can groom them and stroke them. Children learn a lot from that relationship." And when their time comes, no-matter how hard and painful their life has been, each is allowed to die in peace and dignity.

"We had an old donkey here called Pablo who died peacefully. The men knew he was dying. I saw one of them go into the stable just before he left one evening and kiss Pablo on the forehead. Pablo died at eight the next morning, just when the men came back and they all believed he'd waited for them to arrive.

"We have a graveyard on a hillside and each mule and donkey is buried with dignity, they all face Mecca, they all have herbs on their eyes. That's Moroccan Islamic culture, that's not my culture. We're guests in this country."

To arrange a visit to Jarjeer please contact  
Susan Machin +212 602 866013,  
email: [contact@jarjeer.org](mailto:contact@jarjeer.org)

# TIN- MEL

The turquoise water of Lake Ouirgane, in reality a reservoir feeding the thirsty of Marrakech, sits placidly against the shores of rust-red earth and sparse vegetation of the gently undulating hills that are its perimeter. All the land from the village to the high pass of Tizi n'Test, seventy-two miles away, was once owned by one man, Caid Ssi Taib, the last chieftain of the Lgandafi family, whose father had spent his whole life warring against the sultans of Morocco.

Travelling the twisting road that snakes through the mountains in their climb to the pass, following in reverse the course of the river as it feeds into the reservoir you see the stereotype small villages of the region, flat roofed, mud walls, huddled together around the minaret of the mosque, often the only painted building in the village. On the lower slopes bordering the river, small corrals provide winter sanctuary for shepherds who will pass the worst of the snows caring for their flocks before returning with spring into the High Atlas Mountains.

As you take the road that drops to the right at

Talaat n'Yacoub you see sat on a hilltop what appears to be a small castle, but far from being a fortification, the building shows that the caid cared far more for his animals than his human flock.

In 1906 Taib returned from a visit to parlay with the sultan of Fez to find that he had been attacked by the infamous T'hami el-Glaoui. El-Glaoui, son of the caid of Telouet and his Ethiopian concubine, rose to fame when he and his brother saved the sultan during a blizzard in 1893 and were rewarded with a powerful 77-mm Krupp canon, which they immediately put to good use by subduing their rival warlords. By nefarious means, Glaoui became Pasha of Marrakech, pocketing plenty of lucre from supporting the French in their encroachment into the kingdom.

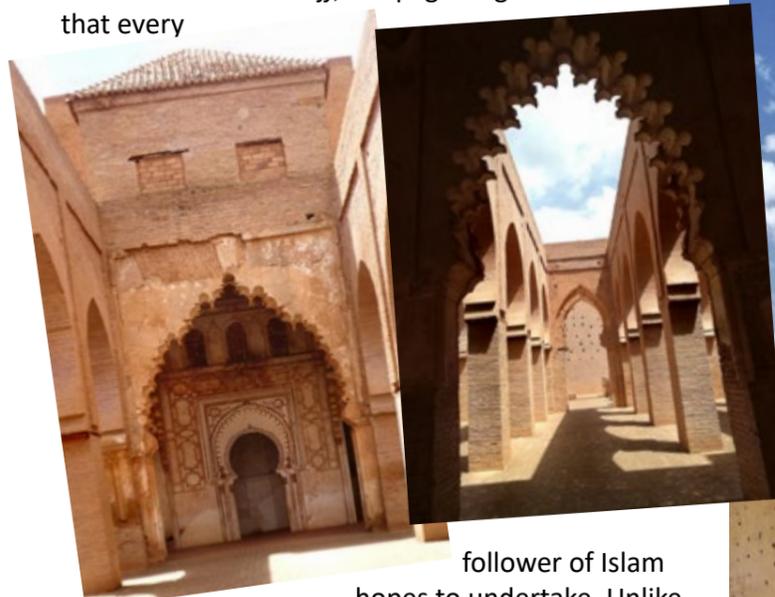
Despite being powerful in his own right, said to be able to raise an army of five thousand men in only two days, Ssi Taib, afraid that Glaoui would return, built the 'castle' in 1906 to safeguard his treasured horses, in other words, a posh stable, which would seem to show his preference for horses over humans.



Owing to Taib's early death, the building was never finished and was left as a shell until bought by a Marrakshi in 2006, intent on creating a hotel. Restoration had barely begun when the buyer followed in Taib's footsteps by premature death, but as his children had no interest in continuing the project it once again sits as an empty shell on a hilltop, with beautiful views over what was once one man's domain. Rumour has it that Sir Richard Branson is considering buying it, but if every rumour of him buying some fancy property were true he would own half the Kingdom of Morocco by now.

A few kilometres on you see a corner of crumbling stones, all that is left of what was once a walled city of more than 17,000 people, apart, that is, from the majestic Tinmel Mosque.

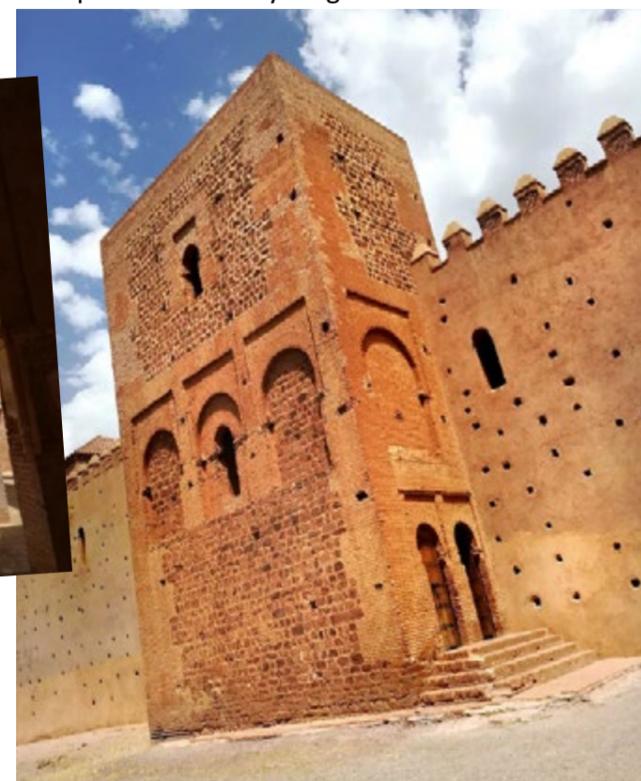
At some time in the 10th century, Mohamed Ibn Tumart undertook *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca that every



follower of Islam hopes to undertake. Unlike most muslims, who consider hajj to be one of, if not *the*, most important event of their life, Ibn Tumart came back convinced that the Almoravids, the then most powerful and widespread dynasty, were too decadent and should be overthrown, which led to Ibn Tumart founding the Almohad dynasty. Having declared himself Mahdi (spiritual leader), Ibn Tumart and his followers decamped from Marrakech to the village of Tinmel, high in the Atlas Mountains, where they created a religious and scholastic centre that spread their beliefs and doctrine throughout the country, only to have every man, woman and child wiped out and the city destroyed in 1276 by conquering Merenids, leaving only the mosque, a tribute to the dynasty's founder, that had taken thirty years to complete from its inception in 1153, as a reminder of what was one of the most thriving community and cultural centres of its time.

Tinmel mosque retained much of its importance as a centre of Islamic studies for at least two centuries, but slowly began to fall into disrepair. Renovation began in 1995, and while most of the outer walls and cloister-like first section remained, the roof that covered the middle section and the ranks of interior arches were long gone. The reconstruction is based on the original design and while there is still a long way to go, including a roof and interior decoration, any worshipper time-travelling from its glory days would be convinced the beautiful arcaded arches of the interior were original.

One of only two mosques in Morocco that non-Muslims can enter (the other being the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca) it is unlikely that Tinmel Mosque will fulfill any religious function in the



future, being far too big for the tiny village that is Tinmel today. One of those curious twists of fate is that centuries after the death of the man who was one of Morocco's greatest Islamic spiritual reformers, who tried to create an ultra-orthodox Islamic community, the small village of Arghen, almost in the shadow of the mosque, became one of the most important Jewish enclaves in the area, populated by those escaping religious persecution in France and other European countries.

***A visit to Tinmel Mosque is one of a selection of days out offered by Kasbah du Toubkal that can be booked directly with the hotel on arrival.***

# A DESERT OF STONES

**Driving on the roads of the Agafay Desert, thirty miles southwest of Marrakech, is like riding on over-sized corrugated sheets, which is probably why only all-terrain vehicles and camels venture there.**

Despite the name, Agafay Desert is not the sand desert of Sahara and Lawrence of Arabia fame, the dunes replaced by a vast, undulating, stony landscape crisscrossed with tracks and dusty roads, cut through with dried riverbeds and pockmarked with small oases of stunted trees, watched over by the snow-capped peaks of the High Atlas Mountains. In spring it is decorated with bursts of colourful wildflowers, and pocket handkerchief-sized fields of wheat provide animal feed and a small income for a few hardy families, but its seeding and harvesting on the uneven slopes is no mean feat. Small groups of goats pick at the rough scrub and abandoned villages, sometimes simply a walled compound once shared by generations of the same family, show the result of the severe water shortage that has plagued this area for decades.

These villages would slowly move over time because the buildings are made of mud brick with a lifetime of around ten years. As the buildings crumble it's much easier to simply build a new one than to repair the old. Now the few remaining are more static since the invention of the breeze-block, but anyone who has lived in a mud-brick building will tell you

the difference is noticeable. The mud-brick is cool during summer and retains heat in the winter, but there's a feel to the building that can't be put into words – it's just different.

As you pass through the barren terrain, you see dark shapes flapping in the distance; small tents for



day visitors to take tea in and listen to the silence. It's a formidable landscape, but a fascinating one, as evocative in its own way as the rolling dunes of the Sahara.

I take a stroll around Agafay village and watch a group of young boys playing football on one of the few flat areas around the small settlement. Even in the desert the pitch is still fully equipped with goalposts and nets, although if the ball misses them it goes straight down a shallow ravine to a dried up water-course. There seems to be a debate over who has to retrieve it, the kicker or the goalie.

I watch an elderly lady, bent at almost a right-angle, brushing outside her house with a short twig broom. Why? We're in the desert and there's dust everywhere. As I get closer I see she's sweeping away sheep droppings, and with the amount she's collecting it must be a large herd. Beside her a dog and a donkey share lunch from a trough made from a worn-out tractor tyre.

Wandering on, I come across one of those curious sites that raise questions, but it's perhaps more intriguing not to have an answer.

Six fishing boats painted the rich blue of those found in the fleet at Essaouira, 200 km west, lie holed and dilapidated beyond repair at what looks like the village woodpile. There seems no earthly reason for them being there other than for burning, given the sparsity of trees as far as the eye can see, but who went to the effort of getting them there and how they did it never gets an answer that really



makes any sense. Even elderly villagers are reticent to give a definitive answer. Some say they were brought by film-makers, others that a group of men travelled with them from the Sahara on their way to Essouaira to become fishermen but gave up when they arrived at Agafay, which seems even less likely than the film-maker story, and begs the question, why have them in the Sahara desert when they are going to Essaouira where they are built? Another has them going in the opposite direction, from the fishing port to some distant lake, but whatever the reason, there they lie.



**Comfort with an eye to the environment**

I'm on my way to Agafay Desert Camp, a small tented 'village' that blends with its surroundings but is enlivened by brightly painted metal cacti of varying sizes and the rich browns of Bedouin *jaimas*, traditional tents woven from goat and camel hair. The apparent simplicity of the camp and its situation is perfectly in keeping with the ethos of Kasbah du Toubkal; comfort but with an eye to the environment. I'm welcomed by Muhammed Monou, dressed in a gelaba and turban of Toureg blue and a smile that says welcome in any tribe. He is attentive and knowledgeable, especially when it comes to describing the superb meal served by candle-light later, but for the moment I'm offered the ubiquitous mint tea and shown my home for the night. Footpaths marked out by low stone walls lead to tents set on raised terraces. The tents look small as you approach, but like Dr Who's Tardis they are deceptively large when you stoop through the low canvas doorway and step inside. A king-size double bed, comfortable sofa, a desk and stool, a low round coffee table and two bedside tables with cane lamps still leave a spacious feeling, and the peaked ceiling of cream and beige panels and wall linings of woolen panels with a key-hole motif over cream create a cosy atmosphere. Furnishings and decoration

*I've ridden a camel before, so I make a joke and decline*

are simple but comfortable, and to add a touch of home comforts in the wilderness, I'm immeasurably pleased to find that each tent has a bathroom with a toilet and hot shower.

I take a short walk from the camp and drop into a dried-up river bed, the curious shade of the stone as if it has been painted in camouflage colours by some gigantic hand. With no other signs of life you could be back to the time the world began.

Back at the camp, a pair of camels arrive for two young French ladies to take a sunset ride. One of them asks if I'd like to take a ride, as her friend is a bit nervous and doesn't want to do it. I've ridden a camel before so I make a joke and decline, but the banter is light-hearted, and between us, Mohammed and I convince the recalcitrant rider that she should really try it as she may not get the chance again. The look on her face as the beast begins its

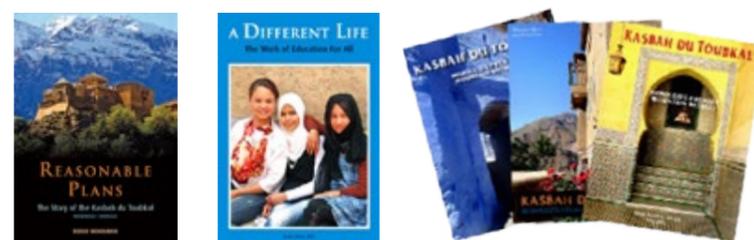
ungainly rise seems to indicate she wished she'd stuck to her original idea, but when she returns an hour later she admits that once they got going it wasn't as bad as she had expected; a once-in-a-lifetime experience but they were glad to have done it anyway.

Evening drifts slowly in, a fire is lit in the centre of the camp, a place to chat and exchange tales before dinner. The flickering light of oil lamps and white oval globes strategically placed in front of the tents, begin to glow almost magically as night falls. The murmur of voices as staff prepare dinner and the twitter of birds is almost all that can be heard. As the cool of the desert night approaches, guests wrap themselves in hooded robes – white for women, black for men – to keep out the evening chill.



The quality of food served at Agafay Desert Camp is exceptional, equal to any found in some of the best restaurants in Marrakech. We begin with five small bowls of warm salads, from slightly tart to a sweet salad of beetroot (simmered with orange zest, cardamom, and a soupçon of sugar), by way of soft cauliflower, al dente courgette, a mix of sweet peppers and tomatoes, and eggplant cooked with tomato, onion, parsley, coriander and olive oil. Everything is delicious, with independent flavours enhanced with a variety of sweet and spicy herbs and spices. The ingredients of each dish and its preparation is lovingly described by Muhammed. Two tajine dishes arrive. One of the things about travelling in Morocco is that you can be served a few too many chicken tajines, but when the conical lids are lifted I'm delighted to see that in fact one is a *tangia*, one of my favourite Moroccan dishes, beef

cooked with olive oil, pepper, garlic, preserved lemon, ghee, saffron, pepper, salt and cumin, slowly and softly for around four hours so that merely by resting a fork against the meat, it separates. The other is a tajine of vegetables cooked in a herb sauce. I make my goodnights to the other guests and Muhammed and follow the ground-level candle lanterns lit along the footpaths to the occupied tents, the safer to guide yourself home. Pockets of light from the lanterns twinkle like stars low on the horizon, while the glow of the globe lighting the terrace of my tent is like a pale moon drawing me home. After a night's sleep in almost total silence, the day begins with a washed blue sky spotted with cloud, the makings of a lovely day to come. The warmth of the morning sun and blue sky bring a soft relaxation to the start of the day, accompanied by a wonderful glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, pips and all.



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Robert Benholt loves the High Atlas Mountains, but never really got off the beaten track...until he was invited to visit a village devoted to pottery

# BEHIND THE WHEEL

I'm not much of a walker but on the two previous times I've stayed at the Kasbah I've been a bit jealous of those who do even the short treks, hearing about the small villages they pass through and seeing a different way of life. I was sitting in the foyer chatting to Said Id Ahmed, who works in the Kasbah office and sometimes acts as a receptionist, talking about this when he said he was going home for the weekend and if I wished he could show me a village that most people never see. He didn't need to ask twice! We drove through Asni, and on any other Saturday I'd have been into the souk, probably my favourite because it's the biggest one in the area and totally traditional, but instead we took the road to Ouirgane – and that's about the only directions I can give because the wandering road seemed to take us all over the place! Infgane has a population of about three hundred, and apart from those who work away, their income is totally dependent on pottery. Generations have made the same three products; simple tajines, the charcoal burners to rest them on and a pot shaped like a miniature of the famous man-size versions that Alibaba and his forty thieves hid themselves in, but is, in fact a bread oven. Each small pottery is independent, usually not much more than small building of mud and stone with a split bamboo roof, sometimes with plastic sheeting to keep the rain out. It may look a bit ramshackle to our eyes but it does the job. The potter's wheel is a simple



structure that has a circular platform at the bottom that the potter pushes with his foot. I couldn't help thinking that if the potter uses the same foot all the time one of legs must be a lot more muscular than the other!

Said introduced me to Mohammed Ben Ali who has sat at a similar wheel in a similar rickety workshop for over sixty years, while his son Ibrahim, a



school friend of Said's, turned his first pot when he was seven, before taking up his place alongside his father when his education ended.

The pots are built in stages, leaving each to dry before continuing with the next. With the tajines the bases are made first and when they are dry the tops are made, each one trimmed to fit perfectly and only allow steam to come out of the opening of the conical top. Each cycle of completing the pot takes around four days and then they are placed into the kiln, not much more than a shallow circular dug-out in the ground where the products are fired. Small pieces of wood are packed around each individual pot, covered over with the broken pieces of pottery from previous firings and set for a slow burn and cooling overnight.

I thought the pots were water jars, but I was as far wrong as it was possible to be. They are bread ovens, just like the oven Madame Fatima bakes the bread in to accompany the meals at the Kasbah. It may look ancient, but it's regularly replaced. The bread oven is made like a pot then an elongated hole is cut out before firing, with score marks to the rim from the sides of the hole to knock out a section later. The finished oven will last about six months



with daily use, but the clay that's packed around it dries out and needs to be replaced about every two weeks.

There are two main types of Berber bread cooked with this oven. The top is left open to place a flat dish on to bake *arkhisse*, round loaves of fluffy bread cooked daily. (In some villages, when the bread is cooked, butter and honey are melted in the dish and the bread returned to it to warm and soak up the sweet mixture.) The other style is crisp *tannourte*, an oval flat bread baked by layering the pizza-like dough on the inner curve of the oven, where you get a more uneven texture because it's closer to the flame, giving it the lovely crispy burnt bits like the crust of a good thin pizza. The oven is also used for making the charcoal that is used in the tagine cooker and boiling water for the inevitable mint tea. I'd had a really good few hours out, at last seeing something of life in a small mountain village, but Said had another surprise for me. He took me to his home in the village of Outakherri, a few kilometres from Infgane, and introduced me to his aunty Kaftoum and his mum, Kabira, who had made a lamb tajine with figs and walnuts for me, accompanied by a tagine of vegetables and a loaf of *tannourte*. I can honestly say that it was the best tajine I've ever eaten and can now understand why any man in Morocco will tell you that the food cooked at home by the women is better than you would find in any restaurant.

As it was Ramadan, Said couldn't join me for lunch, but it was a special treat to be invited into the home of such charming people, one I definitely intend to try again when I'm next in Morocco.



# TREKking JBEL TOUBKAL

## *A family affair*

Tackling Jbel Toubkal, at 4,167 metres the highest mountain in North Africa, might seem limited to the hardy trekker. The Hoffrock family prove otherwise.

Ticket number 408. Not an exceptional number in the great scheme of things, but one that sticks in Robert Hoffrock's mind as the winning number in a Brecon Beacons Mountain Rescue lottery draw, the prize - a three-night stay at Kasbah du Toubkal for two people.

"It was quite funny, really, because for years I'd been wanting to come to Morocco and trek Jbel Toubkal but never got around to it, and suddenly there it was." No mean walker, Rob has trekked the Himalayas five times, losing two toes on Mera Peak to frostbite in the process. ("When dad is on the beach he winds people up by saying "be careful, there's a shark out there!"" jokes Jake, his thirteen year-old son.)

A walking family, wife Harriet, Jake and, eleven-year-old Joe, when Robert celebrated his fiftieth birthday he offered his sons a choice - a trip to Disneyland Florida or to Everest base camp. The base camp won.

"Jbel Toubkal was the first big mountain we could tackle as a family, so I spoke to the people at the Kasbah and asked if we could bring the boys and trek Jbel Toubkal. They set the whole thing up brilliantly."

"As soon as Rob won the prize we went online to do some research," says Harriet, "but I was quite surprised when we first saw Imlil. None of us have ever been to Morocco, but Imlil is beautiful, really picturesque the way the buildings blend into the hillside, how green the valley is because of the irrigation."

Having experienced Everest base camp, what had the family expected with Jbel Toubkal?



"I knew it was going to be hard because it goes up really quick, from 1,800mtr to 4,200mtr in two days which means you can get altitude sickness," says Jake. "I was sick on the way up. It was six hours on the first day from the Kasbah to the refuge and then four hours from the refuge to the summit, with a six hour trek back down to the Kasbah on the second day. On the second day I felt fine. I actually felt quite joyful."

Not so for Joe. "For me it was a different story because as we went up I felt it harder and harder to breathe and harder to walk but when we got to the top I felt better." So why keep going?

"I wanted to do it, not just for me but also for the family. It was a really good trek and I didn't want to let anyone down. Once you get to the summit it's amazing. You're on top of North Africa and can see everything for miles around." How did Harriet feel as a mother, watching over her sons? "I was anxious before we came in terms of the altitude and how quickly we had to go up. We've been at that altitude before, but never gone up so quickly. I was concerned about that but we all coped better than I thought we would, although at times I tried not to cry because that's one of the strange things the altitude can do, it can make you quite emotional."

"It was very exciting on the second day because we were up at 3.30. I was glad it was in the dark. I was worried about the first bit because it was scree and I had no idea how we would get up it, although obviously we did. The early start helped Mohammed, though, because we did the trek during Ramadan and he was able to eat before we started walking."

"I was impressed by Mohammed," says Joe. "He was faithful to his religion and when we were going up the mountain he told us to keep going while he

prayed. Observing Ramadan must have been very difficult. We walked almost twelve hours on the second day which must have been really hard because he couldn't even take a drink of water."

"Mohammed was really good in describing the area and the flora and fauna," comments Robert.

"That's everything, really, because what's the point of going somewhere and not learning about the area you are in and the culture." Harriet chips in, "That's what we love about coming to somewhere different, immersing yourself in the culture of the place, the religion, the people. When we talk about our guide, the muleteer and the cook were amazing. How they put together such wonderful meals while on the move I honestly don't know," a point Joe stresses. "Everyone is so approachable, they do so much for you, and even though they were in Ramadan they made sure we weren't hungry. I'm really thankful to everyone, especially Muhammed who deserves all the credit for getting us up the mountain." Dad, who drew ticket 408 that got them there, has the penultimate word. "We've done many walks together but to reach the summit of a big mountain as a family was fantastic for me, and to see these lads and Harriet

really push themselves, to struggle but push on, as a father I feel really proud. Our first big mountain."

And the final word, an interesting observation from the youngest member of the family, eleven-year-old Joe. "When you are doing a hike, if you feel you need to stop, just stop, because you need those little rests to get up the mountain."

"You need to refuel and keep going again," adds Jake.



Click on the link to read Catherine Mack's story of a trek to the Azzaden Valley

**THE IRISH TIMES**  
A glimpse of Berber life  
- trekking in Morocco's  
Atlas Mountains

# The Tale of a Lonesome Hound

By Bob Parker

As I left the Kasbah with Omar, a local with twelve years' experience as a guide in the High Atlas, there was a good foot of snow in the courtyard and I began to ponder what it would be like further up the mountain, where broken cloud revealed a gorgeous blue sky.

The going wasn't too difficult to start, but as we got higher the snow became deeper, knee deep in places. The path was completely hidden so having a guide who has probably walked the route a hundred times or more was invaluable. We made steady progress, stopping at a shack-cum-café where I had the best freshly-squeezed orange juice I've ever tasted.

The route to the refuge was beautiful. The cloud had cleared, leaving a brilliant blue sky, but a very hot sun. I'd brought everything for cold weather but no sun hat, so despite a lot of regularly applied sun block I could really feel the heat.

It took a little over six hours to reach the refuge and with the depth of snow making walking difficult I was exhausted. All I wanted was my bunk, but Omar had the kitchen rustle-up an omelette. Some caffeine, some water and then my sleeping bag. It was just seven-thirty as I drifted off to sleep, worrying if I could do that similar level of walk to reach the summit the next day. It had been difficult both physically and mentally.

I woke in a much better frame of mind – and more importantly, completely rested. We set off at six-thirty, with crampons fitted by Omar. What had been soft snow the previous day was now frozen - no more sinking a foot or more with the exaggerated 'lift foot out of the hole' from yesterday. Again it was a beautiful blue sky and hot sun, but a borrowed sun hat from the refuge was a marked improvement on the previous day.

Three hours later we arrived at a ridge and quite unexpectedly the most breath-taking view. The ridge fell steeply away south to reveal red-brown hillocks and desert. A few kilometres in the distance was another snow-capped mountain with more desert beyond. The clarity of the air allowed me to see for miles - what an amazing view!

Around forty minutes later, after two false summits, the steel triangular frame marking the peak of Jbel Toubkal came into view. No, I didn't run to it, but the



sight certainly lifted me and made all that had gone before very, very worthwhile indeed.

The views from the summit were tremendous; 360 degrees with nothing blocking my view. There were a dozen or so fellow trekkers who greeted us with smiles and congratulations. Also waiting for us was a lone, un-accompanied hound. Apparently owned by someone in Imlil he does the trek on his own most weeks, sleeping under a ledge at the refuge. He loves digestive biscuits and Mars bars, so take extra for Gron - my name for him.

Forty minutes at the top and we head downwards. While the trek up had been a slow one - partly to help avoid altitude sickness but also due to physical and oxygen limitations – the downhill pace picked up. Unlike the zigzag up, we made a bee-line straight down. Obviously the crampons allowed us to do this, but once we reached the refuge, had lunch and ditched the crampons, it became difficult to maintain balance at this faster speed. Like the sun hat, I'd not given poles a thought. I've tried them in the past but didn't get on with them. However, in deep, soft snow and some ice they would have been a godsend.

After eleven hours we arrived back at the Kasbah. So ended the longest, highest, most rewarding day trek of my life. I'm a so-so fit 60-year-old who didn't train for the trek, forgot sun hat and disregarded poles. Should you go? Yes, but do hire a guide and do stay at the Kasbah. The rooms, the food and the hospitality are all tremendous. And do take a sun hat and poles. And a Mars bar for Gron.

## TOUBKAL LODGE - AÏT AÏSSA



It's six in the evening, the time of the evening promenade. I sit on a rock on the edge of Aït Aïssa, a mud-brick village clinging to the hillside, the next but last in the Azzaden Valley before the road comes to a dead end at Tizi Oussemm. One way in, one way out. Kids play a game, posing with huge smiles until I raise my camera, then instantly drop into a huddle and hide their faces.

Much of the fruit and vegetables sold in local markets are grown here; potatoes, onions, cherries, apples, and it's said that the rich red earth on the west side of the valley adds a sweetness to the flavour that the grey soil on the other side

doesn't have. Some of the produce will appear in the meal I'll be eating at the trekking lodge, a mini version of the Berber comfort of Kasbah du Toubkal.

Behind me is a five-hour trek from the Kasbah, during which my guide, Abdeslam Maachou, a young man who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the flora and fauna of the area despite his age, has kept me entertained and informed, everything from how the locals trap squirrels with walnuts (although you need a few of them

to make a passable meal), to helping me recognise the lemon thyme, wild sage and juniper that I can cook them with.

On our climb we were accompanied by the insistent clatter of cicadas, that retreated into a stony silence as we approached. The air was so crystal clear that I felt as if I could touch the other side of the valley. Stoically climbing with us was Brahim and his mule, and when I ask why he sometimes rides cowboy style, legs either side of the animal, and sometimes side-saddle, he explains that he rides side-saddle on the rockier slopes so that if his mule takes an unexpected tumble he can get off quicker. Good thinking when your livelihood depends on a good pair of legs.

Tomorrow we return to Kasbah over Tizi Oud id, at 2219 metres, but before that I have the pleasure of a chicken tajine to look forward to and a night of silence and twinkling stars.



## So much to discover....

Trips to venues, or days out mentioned here can be booked through reception at your hotel, either in Marrakech or at Kasbah du Toubkal, other than a visit to Jarjeer Mule and Donkey Sanctuary, which needs to be arranged directly with the owner. If visits are to form part of your transfer between the Kasbah and Marrakech (in either direction) please liaise direct with the Kasbah, as most likely they will be organising the transfer and will need to inform your driver. (Charges may apply.)

Each of these venues is worth a visit in its own right, but if you would like a full-day discovery of rural life in the High Atlas Mountains, we highly recommend an early start to the day at either Asni souk (Saturday) or Ouirgane souk (Thursday); from there you follow the route to Tinmel (P10), lunch with a local family followed by an introduction to the potters in the village of Infgane (P16), before a mountain drive to Imlil and Kasbah du Toubkal. This delightful tour can be taken as either a loop from the Kasbah during your stay or as a full-day transfer between Marrakech and the Kasbah, or in reverse.

More information: +212 (0)5244 85611 / [contactkasbah@discover.ltd.uk](mailto:contactkasbah@discover.ltd.uk) / [bookings@discover.ltd.uk](mailto:bookings@discover.ltd.uk)

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