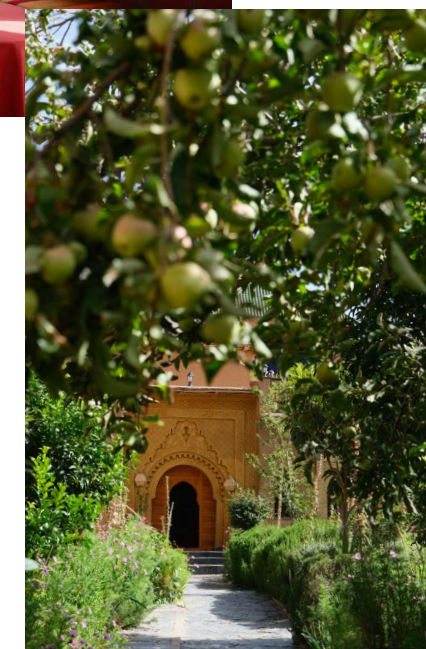




**CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:** Spaces at Kasbah du Toubkal are Berber in style; An apple-framed garden offers space for contemplation; Mountain guide, Abdeslam Maachou; The Kasbah's new infinity pool. **OPPOSITE** (from top): Kasbah du Toubkal is set in the High Atlas Mountains; The retreat first opened in 1995.



## Grass Routes

# KASBAH DU TOUBKAL

A PIONEERING mountain retreat in *MOROCCO* embraces a NEW ERA while remaining a *SANCTUARY* for travellers, finds **Imogen Eveson**.

**T**he walnut trees have been here as long as the aqueducts," says my guide Abdeslam Maachou. We are twisting up through the irrigated terraces of the Imlil Valley in the High Atlas, shaded by a canopy of leaves. I hadn't expected the mountains to be so green but each Berber village here is fed by an aqueduct that channels water from the river that threads through the valley. There are fig and cherry trees, too. And apples.

We create our own symbols when someone we love dies. And while it felt strange at first to be in Morocco just a week after my dad passed away, as soon as I saw the orchards – so entwined with my childhood memories of him – I knew I was in the right place.

On that crisp autumn morning, I'd set out from Kasbah du Toubkal with Abdeslam. Other guests of the mountain retreat departed at the same time: their sights set on Jbel Toubkal, North

Africa's highest peak. The hike takes two days direct, or four days with a night at sister property Azzaden Trekking Lodge along the way. Abdeslam and I will only be gone two hours, but our loop provides a vivid snapshot of life in the valley. Sheep bleat, cockerels crow and lines of mules trace mountain switchbacks.

We skirt past waterfalls and through villages, where Roman chamomile grows wild on the roadside, before cutting back down a mountain path where silver sage and Spanish juniper lie low in the scrub. Abdeslam hovers by a rosehip bush, its jewel-bright buds that gleam in the sun traditionally used to treat coughs, and points out lemon verbena; if we were on an overnight hike he'd steep it in tea for a calming pre-sleep ritual.

A keen birdwatcher, Abdeslam cries a cheery "good morning" to a kestrel that soars overhead. We're walking in Morocco's oldest national park, established in 1942, where the Atlas lion

roamed before it became extinct in the wild mid-last century. Today it's a habitat for the golden jackal, red fox, mongoose and curled-horn barbary sheep.

Reaching a panoramic lookout, our eyes track across the valley to where Kasbah du Toubkal stands 1800 metres above sea level in the foothills of Jbel Toubkal. Originally the summer palace of a local feudal chief, the Kasbah was a crumbling ruin when British brothers Mike and Chris McHugo set eyes on it in 1989. It was, and remains, accessible only by foot or mule from the nearby village of Imlil: 60 kilometres from Marrakech, but a world apart. The brothers would go on to buy and restore the property, transforming it into a mountain retreat in partnership with mountain guide and respected leader of the local community, Hajj Maurice. Kasbah du Toubkal opened in 1995 and, 30 years later, is still run by the same trio. It set the

standard for sustainable travel and authentic cultural immersion before these ideas became commonplace and its core principles, including a meaningful partnership with the local Berber community, hold strong. Today the Kasbah employs 34 staff, of whom 80 per cent or more were born within two kilometres, and a five per cent charge added to each guest's bill is invested in Village Association community projects.

Two years ago, almost to the day, a magnitude 6.8 earthquake struck Morocco, its epicentre in the High Atlas Mountains. The quake killed thousands and reduced many villages across the region to rubble. The Imlil Valley laid out before me now sustained damage, but fortunately no large-scale casualties were reported here.

Among the losses were five of six boarding houses run by Education For All Morocco (EFAM), the initiative founded in 2007 by Mike McHugo. A father of two girls, Mike is committed to giving young women from remote mountain communities access to secondary education and opportunities beyond the valley. More than 600 students have

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PHOTOGRAPHY ANTHONY MAKEPEACE (POOL); IMOGEN EVESON (REMAINING)



since completed the full six-year curriculum, with 90 per cent passing their Baccalaureate exams and 170 continuing to university. Today, five rental houses provide temporary accommodation in addition to the surviving property, while reconstruction of the damaged buildings is underway.

The Kasbah itself sustained damage that led to the renovated retreat I visit today, with a new dining room and rooftop, plus three additional bedrooms to complement 12 existing rooms and a three-bedroom house. The new jewel in its crown shimmers aqua blue at me from across the valley – the highest infinity pool in North Africa.

Later, as the sun sets, I sit on the pool terrace gazing out to where I'd been walking. The *adhan* (Islamic call to prayer) rings out across the valley and light slices across the slopes.

The Kasbah is rustic and lovely. Its spaces are furnished with Moroccan rugs and fabrics in earthy shades of red, and terracotta crockery is painted with distinctive Tifinagh Berber script. I find solace and stillness in the cosy sleeping quarters of my Garden House suite – with its simple wooden writing desk – and on my small private patio looking up at the mountains.

Lunch is served on the roof terrace: tagine mopped up with couscous, olives and rounds of



warm *khobz* (Moroccan flatbread). My visit coincides with the presence of both Mike and Chris, and I find comfort in their tales of travel in the 1970s – stories not unlike my dad's own from that era. Mike was a young adventurer who first fell under the spell of the High Atlas Mountains while trekking here in 1978, while Chris wandered the hippie trail as far as Iran, Afghanistan and India.

When I thank them for creating such a peaceful sanctuary, they tell me they first found the old Kasbah while introducing their mother to the country they loved, following their own father's death. "So there's a connection there too," Chris offers gently.

On my final morning, I follow the garden path framed by ripe apples out the arched doorway of the Kasbah to where a mule waits to carry my suitcase down to Imlil. A car will soon take me back to Marrakech, but I hold that connection close. ■

## A Traveller's Checklist

From Marrakech, KASBAH DU TOUBKAL is around a 75-minute drive and a 15-minute uphill walk. Rates start at \$355 per night in a standard room with an en suite based on two people sharing and includes access to roof terraces, use of the hammam, pool, guided afternoon walks, mule transfer of luggage and breakfast. Trekking packages are also available. [kasbahdutoubkal.com](http://kasbahdutoubkal.com)



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Brothers Mike and Chris McHugo and Hajj Maurice founded the Kasbah; The breathtaking Imlil Valley; A sunny spot on the terrace; Feast on olives and flatbread; The retreat's interiors are clad in dark woods and traditional textiles.

PHOTOGRAPHY IMAGEN EVESON