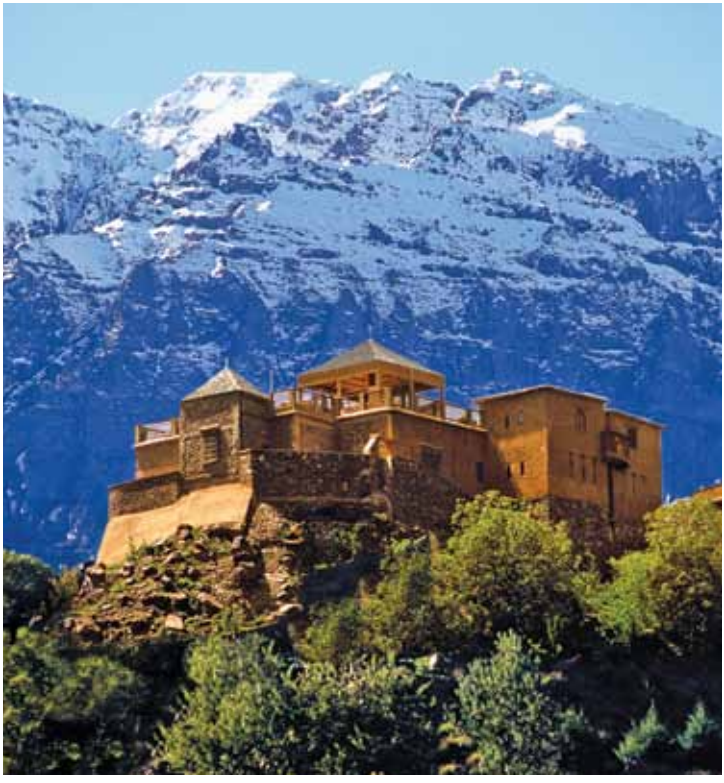
# Reasonable Plans

## The Story of the Kasbah du Toubkal

MARRAKECH • MOROCCO

DEREK WORKMAN



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Second edition (2014)



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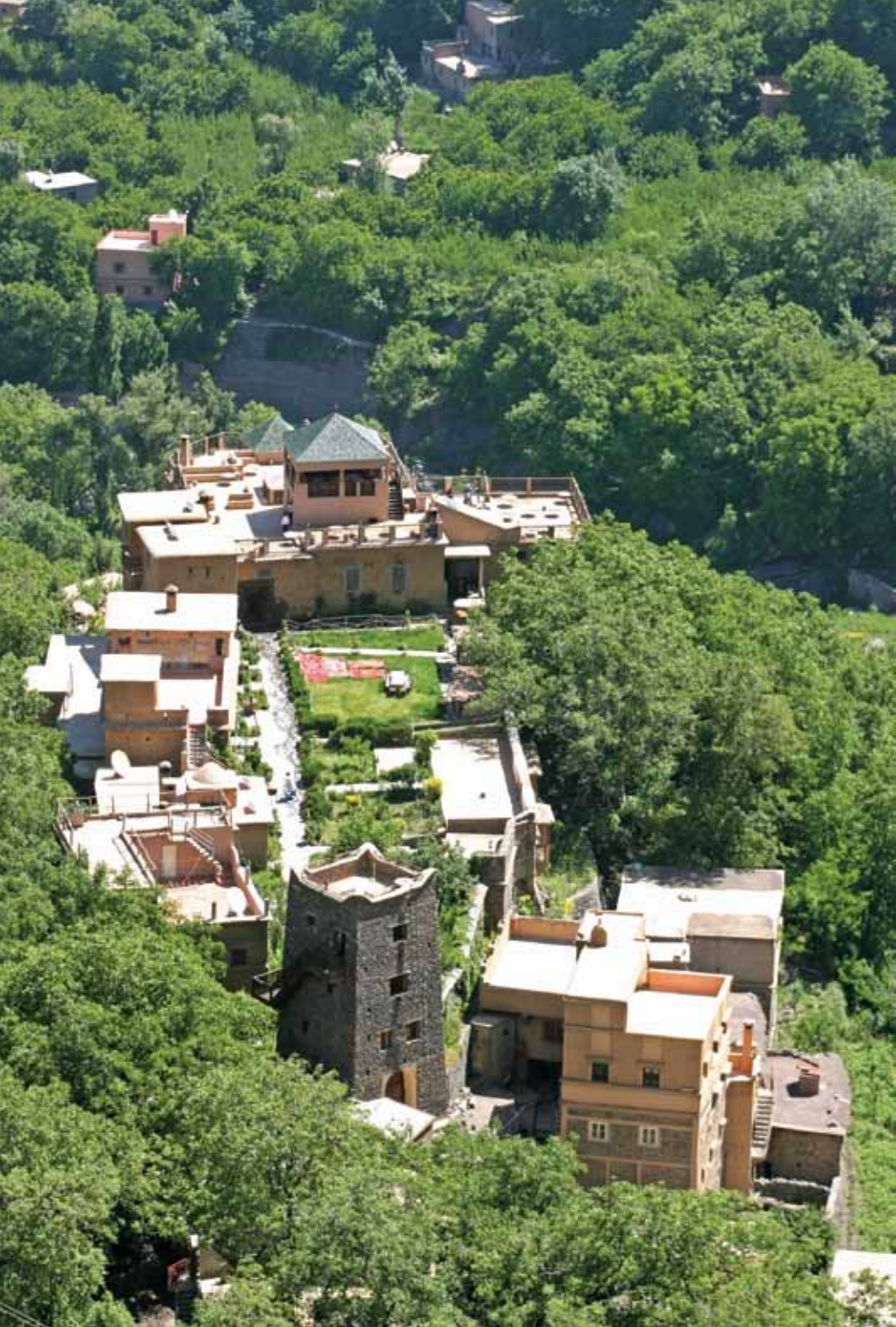
## Dedication

***Dreams are only the plans of the reasonable***
***– dreamt by Discover realised by Omar and the Worker of Imlil***


*(Inscription on a brass plaque at the entrance to the Kasbah du Toubkal)*

This booklet is dedicated to the people of Imlil, and to all those who helped bring the 'reasonable plans' to reality, whether through direct involvement with Discover Ltd. and the Kasbah du Toubkal, or by simply offering what they could along the way. Long may they continue to do so. And of course to all our guests who contribute through the five percent levy that makes our work in the community possible.

# Contents



# Introduction

As you sit at your table n the sun-drenched roof terrace of the Kasbah du Toubkal, with Jbel Toubkal, the highest mountain in North Africa forming a magnificently rugged backdrop, and the villages of the Imlil Valley spread out below you, it's unlikely that you will give much thought to your immediate surroundings, other than to delight in the Moroccan food on your plate. But the plate you eat off, the stool you sit on, the beautiful Moroccan rug beneath your feet and the straw hat on your head; the couscous on your plate and the dates and spicy olives in their small bowls decorated in *Tifnache* Berber script; the cups you drink the fresh mountain water from and the ornate kettle the waiter uses for *tasse*, the traditional ritual washing of hands before eating – none of it got there by chance.

Every single stick of furniture, every piece of linen, all the wood and stone used for construction and the food served at your table, was carried up the steep rough track you arrived on (long before there were steps to help you on your way) on the backs of mules – and sometimes even on the backs of men. The single largest item, an industrial washing machine, took forty eight men – three teams of sixteen, four at each corner of a specially constructed sling – to manhandle it up to the Kasbah, following the narrow mule path created over generations.

As a feat of endurance, imagination and sheer tenacity, the Kasbah du Toubkal is remarkable, and worthy of the awards that have been heaped upon it. But, from the moment of its inception as a Berber Hospitality Centre, it has contributed to the health, wealth and well-being of the people of the villages of the Imlil Valley and beyond.

When I first sat on the roof of the Kasbah, on a blazing hot day at the end of March 2011, safe under the shade of an enormous straw hat, and flexing my toes as I sat on a Moroccan rug, drinking fresh mountain water and waiting for a *couscous de poulet et citron*, with a side dish of *salade piquante* and a loaf of bread baked on the clay oven not ten metres from where I sat, I couldn't imagine anywhere else I'd rather be. That may well

have been because I'd just cycled twenty-odd kilometres to get there, and my aging and aching knees were glad of a rest. There again, it might equally have been because I was totally enchanted by my surroundings and the lovely Berber welcome I'd just received – or the fact that I'd just shared a hammam with six very sweaty cyclists!

A few days later I was back at the Kasbah, but by now the weather had taken an uncharacteristically bad turn. It was a grey day, rainy and cold, without much likelihood of the clouds moving on and giving me an unspoilt, sun-shimmering view of the snow caps of Jbel Toubkal. I sat in reception, reading and enjoying the ubiquitous cup of mint tea. Lahcen Igdem, a charming young man who welcomes everyone with a big smile (as does everyone there), looked up from his paperwork. "Do you fancy a walk?" Despite the heavy drizzle, I did, so he kitted me out in a hat and waterproof jacket and we took a back route down to Imlil. The walk was wet and muddy, and I loved every moment of it. Halfway round we took a break, and as I sat on a rock and looked up at Jbel Toubkal shrouded in mist, and then down on Imlil, soggy damp under a grey curtain of rain, I thought, "There's a story here." What follows isn't the whole story, but it's a beginning. I hope you enjoy it. More importantly, though, I hope it tempts you to want to find out more and, perhaps, help us spread the word about

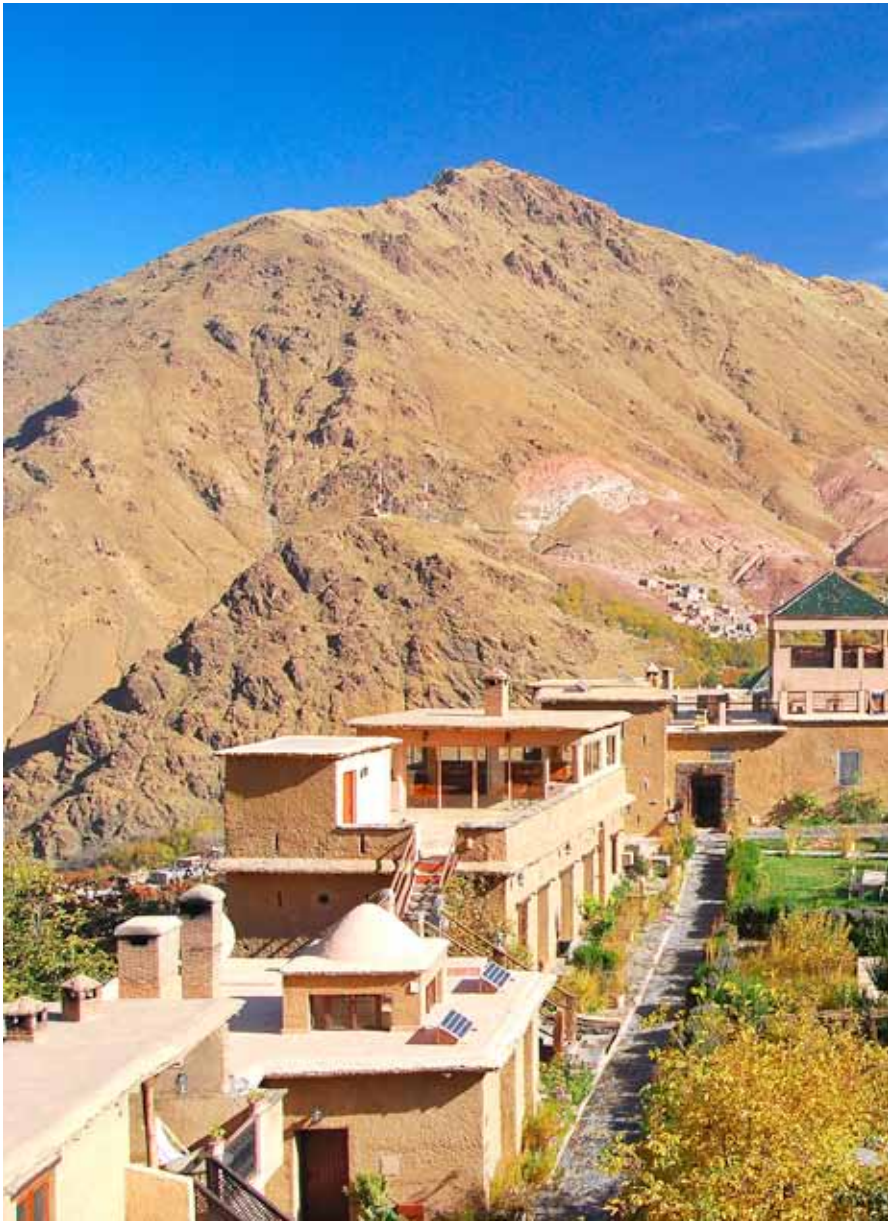
this small corner of Morocco, the good things that are happening here and, with your help, the even better things that can be done for the future.

– July 2011

Since my first visit to the Kasbah du Toubkal three years ago I've returned a number of times to bring myself up-to-date on all the projects that both the Kasbah and the Association Bassins d'Imlil have been developing (and, frankly, to wallow in the beauty of the High Atlas Mountains). Some projects were completed, some were on-going and others newly started. A few of the hopes and aspirations I encountered on my first visit have exceeded expectations; sadly, some have not. But nothing is looked on as a failure, simply as a work in progress.

With the help of Hajj Maurice and Mike and Chris McHugo, and everyone involved in the projects (unfortunately too many to mention them all by name), I was given the opportunity to return to Imlil and the Kasbah du Toubkal to update Reasonable Plans, and with the way current ideas and projects are going I'm looking forward to returning in three years to do it all again.

*Derek Workman*
Valencia, Spain – August 2014



CHAPTER 1

# The House on the Hill

In 1973 Mike McHugo, a mere slip of a nineteen-year-old boy, invited his school pal, Allen Hogan, to take a jaunt in the second-hand beige Volkswagen Beetle he'd just bought for £150. Not content with a wander around the juvenile fleshpots of England, he'd set his sights on Morocco, a mysterious land far enough away to be considered an 'adventure'. For four weeks they jollied around the country, and by the time they left Mike was hooked, although at the time he probably didn't realise just how great a part this enigmatic patch of North Africa would play in his future.

Mike found himself in the Imlil Valley in 1978, looking for trekking routes for his adventure holiday company, Hobo Travel, whose first clients subsisted on tomatoes, tinned sardines and bread, while travelling around Morocco in a beat-up ten-seater Land Rover – and loved every minute of it! One of the first people he met in the village was Omar Ait Bahmed, a young mountain guide and ski instructor. (Omar is more widely known as Hajj Maurice; the latter part of his name is a nickname given to him when he trained as a ski instructor in France, and 'Hajj' indicates that he has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.) Neither realised at the time that they would become lifelong friends and business partners, but over the next few years Mike often used his friend's small village house as accommodation for the trekking groups.

Trevor Rowell met Mike while they were driving buses in the UK, and decided to join him as a partner in Hobo Travel. (Hobo Travel in turn became Discover Ltd. when a group of family and friends, including Mike's brother, Chris, joined the company with a view to buying what was to become The Eagle's Nest Study Centre in the Cévennes National Park in France.) For the next five years they adventured together in Morocco, before Trevor returned to teaching, although he has remained closely involved with Discover ever since.

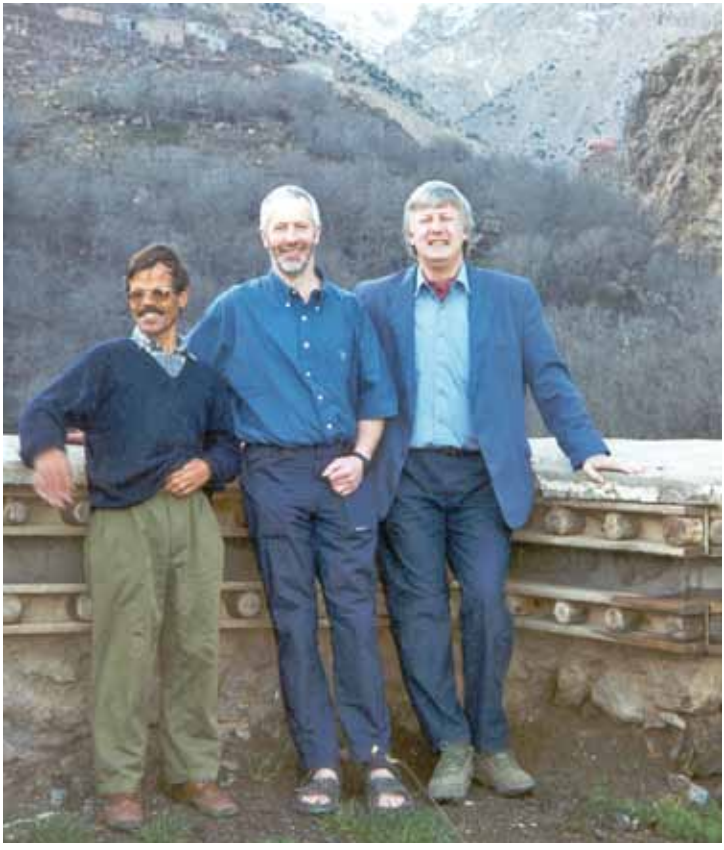
"Imlil isn't exactly a metropolis now," comments Trevor, "but it was pretty basic when we first went there. There was no road other than a very bumpy track that had been created by animals and vehicles travelling up and down the valley for decades. The only way you could get in or out was by four-wheel drive, or standing up in the back of a truck. It was almost twenty years before electricity arrived, so there was no lighting or refrigeration, and virtually no sanitation. Sleeping accommodation was as often as not on the floor, or on the roof in summer. Life was just one step above subsistence – in other words, it was a typical trail-head village for hardy trekkers who wanted to climb Jbel Toubkal."

## Building from scratch

HOVERING OVER IMLIL was the Kasbah, by the time of Mike's arrival little more than a ruin, with a couple of walls remaining of the original house, home to chickens scratching in the dirt and a few goats. It had been the summer home of Caid Souktani, a local chief during the time Morocco was a French protectorate. A colourful character (there's a photo of him in the dining room of the Kasbah, posing with his American Thunderbird car, his French wife and his children), he liked his comforts, and before electricity

*Caid Souktani and his family*

Photo: Hamish Brown



*Hajj Maurice with Mike and Chris McHugo*

arrived in the valley he had hydro-electric power, driven by a water wheel that still exists beside the entrance to the Kasbah. When Morocco gained its independence in 1956, the Caid left and the Kasbah fell into ruin.

"The Kasbah had always been a pretty iconic location," says Mike, "and I used to look at it from the roof terrace when I stayed with Hajj Maurice. We'd been taking treks to the area for years without really giving it a lot of thought, because at that time foreigners weren't allowed to own property in Morocco. When my father died in 1989, my brother Chris and I took our

mother to Imlil for a holiday. Chris had recently read in the *Financial Times* that the king, Hassan II, had decided to make inward investment much easier, particularly in the tourist industry."

The brothers couldn't be more different; Chris the pragmatic businessman, Mike the adventurer, but they both have a great love for Morocco and its people. Because of its situation they knew that someone would buy the Kasbah and quite possibly convert it into a fancy private house or expensive hotel. Chris thought that it would be as safe in their hands as anybody else's, so he suggested they try to buy it.

From the decision to buy the Kasbah to actually owning it was a convoluted process. It was almost six years before paperwork was completed, and in March 1995 work began to rebuild what little was left of the house, to convert it into accommodation for school groups on study courses, by then the mainstay of Discover's business in both Morocco and at their Eagle's Nest centre in France. It was a far cry from the grandeur you see now.

Before a stone was laid a Vision Document was drawn up to outline the objectives of the Kasbah du Toubkal, and even those few sentences show a sense of the scope of the project about to be undertaken. *(See Appendix.)*

"We didn't really know at first what we wanted, other than that we didn't want to build on the central flat section that gives you the view out toward Toubkal. We built in clusters around the central part, which are now gardens, and eventually it began to take on an almost fort-like appearance when seen from a distance." An image that is retained when you enter by the stout wooden front door set in the thick exterior walls, with a three-storey stone tower serving as the keep (although in reality it houses three en-suite bedrooms).

The building proceeded as time, money and ideas allowed. With no power (electricity didn't arrive in the valley until 1997), and building in the traditional way – even to the extent of sifting gravel from the river that tumbles through Imlil – the work was slow and back-breaking. By late 1995 the first stage was complete.

The Kasbah and the projects associated with it have somehow always attracted people just at the time they are needed, and shortly after construction began, John Bothamley, an architect highly regarded for his sensitive designs and understanding of vernacular architecture, came into the picture. Over the following years he produced countless sketches that enabled the organic development of the Kasbah du Toubkal, creating a design that is low on energy consumption with high levels of insulation, while appearing for all the world as if it had been there since Noah was a boy. It was at this time that the Kasbah was highly commended in the British Airways Tourism for Tomorrow awards in the Built Environment category.

## People as well as profits

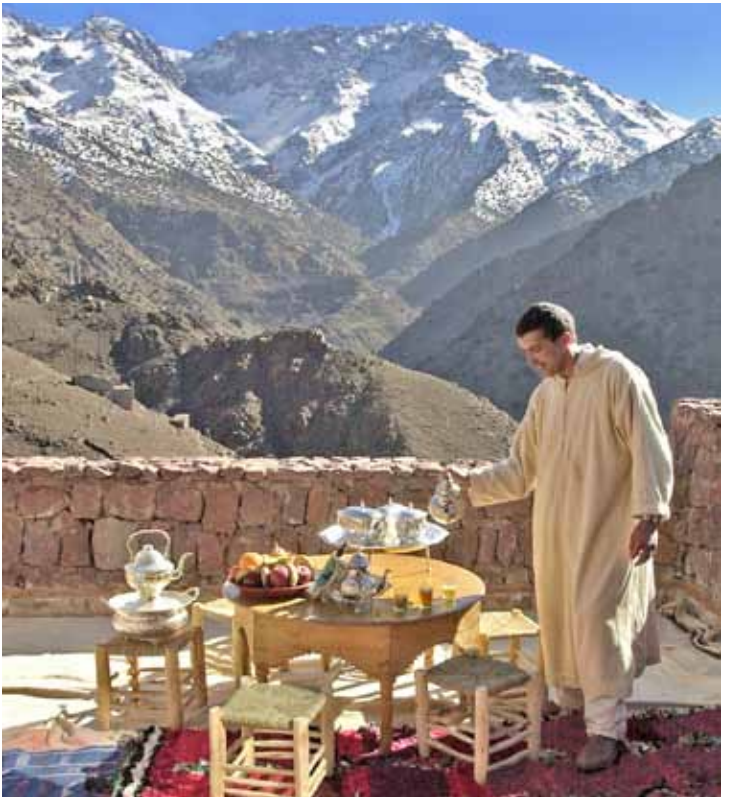
FROM THE VERY OUTSET the intention was that as much as was feasibly possible would be sourced locally; the labour to construct the building and the materials needed in the construction; the staff that look after the guests, and the food that appears on their plates; the carpets and cushions, pots and pans – if it was available locally it would be bought locally. And this ethos extends beyond the fortress-like walls of the Kasbah. The mules that carry the baggage – and sometimes guests – up to the hotel; the muleteers

and guides that take visitors on their treks into the mountains, and the equipment that needs to be hired, all of the work is shared throughout the valley. Almost no business in Imlil goes untouched by the hand of the Kasbah and the visitors to this Berber Hospitality Centre. Far from being just a philanthropic gesture, Discover saw this sharing as an integral part of the development of the Kasbah as a business. They felt that the Kasbah had to be of benefit to visitors and the local community if it was to be successful in a sustainable way.

"I often quote a saying by the Dalai Lama," says Mike McHugo, "that there are bad selfish and good selfish. I like to think we are good selfish. The Berber are a very proud race of mountain people, and nobody has ever really controlled them. If they didn't like what you were doing they could cause an awful lot of frustrations and problems, whereas the way we've done it they've also seen the benefits. They were probably a bit suspicious at the beginning, but we've got a track record now that shows that if we say we're going to do something we do it."

It isn't just through putting money into local people's pockets that the Kasbah has endeared itself to the community, it's also by respecting those who live there. The Kasbah is referred to as a Berber Hospitality Centre rather than a hotel, and at first glance this might sound pretentious. But from the moment you enter the door you become aware that the title really does reflect the ambience and the culture of the Berber people, who are known for their hospitality, consideration and respect for others. Even though the Kasbah is a commercial enterprise, out of respect for the people who work there and run the business, all of whom are Muslim, no alcohol is sold, although you can bring your own and you will be supplied with glasses.

"In any catering business one of the biggest money makers is alcohol, but the use of alcohol is against the Islamic faith, so we decided that we would forgo the income from alcohol sales out of respect for the culture and beliefs of the employees and the people of the villages." This apparently simple gesture shows that those involved with the Kasbah are as concerned about the beliefs of the community as they are about making a profit.



## Home sweet home

THE FIRST FACES you see from the Kasbah du Toubkal as your transport comes to a stop in Imlil, are those of Mohamed Astat and Rachid Souktan. They welcome you to the office in the village where you check in before your arrival at the Kasbah itself. Don't be surprised if one of the first things they do is look at your feet. It's not a fetish, they are just making sure that your footwear will carry you up the rough track that is the only way in to the Kasbah. If you aren't already wearing sensible shoes you'll be advised to change into them. If it's raining you will be offered an umbrella. If you are one of the many people who have come on a day trip from Marrakech to have lunch at the top of the world wearing something that is more suitable for an evening promenade in Jmaa el Fna, the ancient centre of the city, you might need a mule to do the legwork for you, and they're the chaps to arrange it.

Like many of the men in the village, Mohamed was a mountain guide before beginning work at the Kasbah, so he's seen the development of both the hotel and its relationship with the valley almost since the beginning. "Ten years ago there wasn't much work in the villages. There was some trekking tourism but that was seasonal, and for a few years I had to go to the desert during the winter to find work. I've lived all my life in this area and I didn't like having to leave my family, but I had no choice, I had to have an income. Obviously working with the Kasbah gives me a regular wage, but one of the most important things for me is that each day I return home to my family."

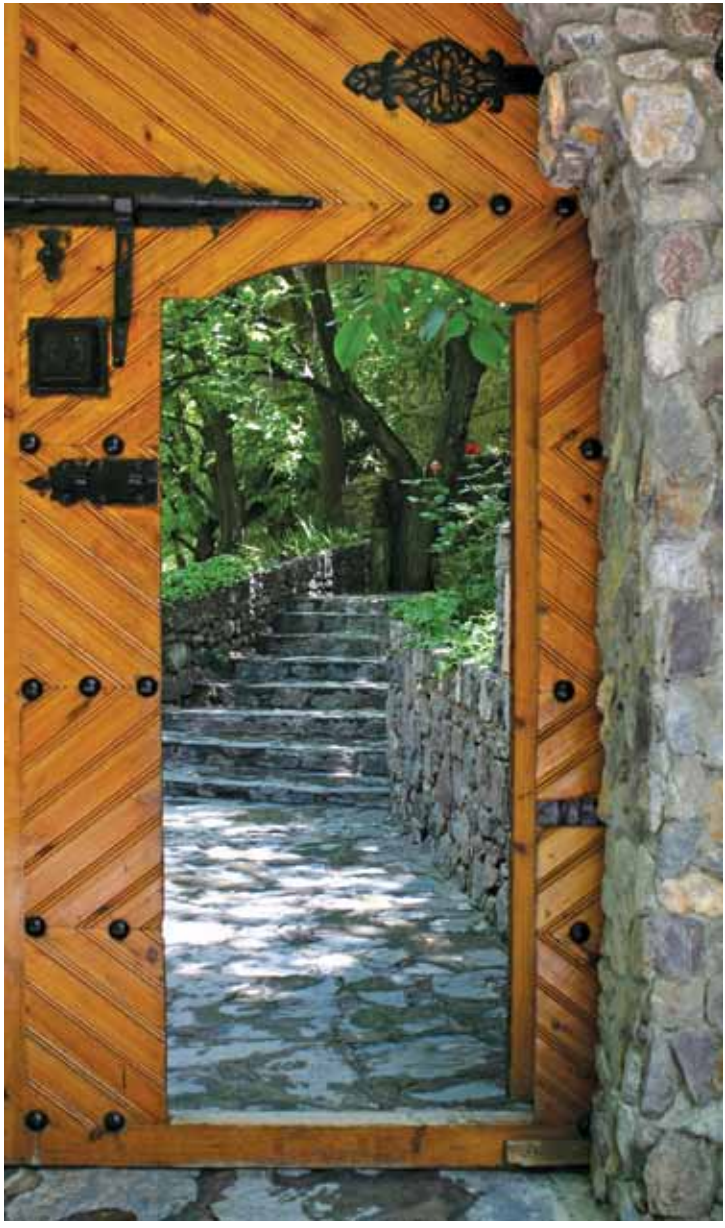
The same story is told over and over again. Men having to leave their families to find work in Agadir, Casablanca, Marrakech or further afield during the winter months just to make ends meet. Until recently a large percentage of the male population would join this winter exodus, but now no more than a handful continue to do so. The villages may be small, without all the thrills and entertainment larger cities offer, but almost without exception everyone you speak to loves their village and wouldn't want to live anywhere else. (This point is brought home to me when I'm coming back from Marrakech one evening with Ibrahim, one of the drivers. We'd been in the hot and sticky city for a few hours, and as we approached

Imlil, with the clouds hanging over Jbel Toubkal and the river tumbling fast with the day's rains, he lowered the window and took a deep breath. "Ah, beautiful Imlil," he said with a big grin, glad to be back home.)

With the coming of electricity and mobile telephones, and the growth of tourism in Morocco, the type of visitor to Imlil, and in particular to the Kasbah, began to change. "We were still getting a lot of trekkers," continues Mohammed, "some of them making long treks of six or eight days, and some of them coming just for the day or maybe staying overnight, but we also began to see quite a lot of people who came for a couple of days to relax at the Kasbah, perhaps take a short walk or maybe not even do that, just relax, take a hammam, and spend a peaceful time." It's not really surprising, because the world was getting to know more about the Kasbah du Toubkal, and not just as somewhere you brought a big pair of hiking boots to.

"It feels good to see people coming to the village, especially the Kasbah, because it provides work for so many people," chips in Rachid. (Of the forty-two staff eighty percent were born and live within two kilometres of Imlil.) "It isn't just the people who are directly employed by the hotel, but the guides and muleteers they hire, the shops the Kasbah buys from and that the visitors buy from. It's all income for the village. But what is very, very important is the work that the Association Bassins d'Imlil does in the area with the five percent levy the Kasbah adds to the client's bill. If there was no tourism that money wouldn't exist."

Mohamed echoes Rachid's comments. "Fifteen years ago life was pretty hard. If we wanted to take a hammam we had to go seventeen kilometres to Asni; if someone was ill or injured we had to try to contact the collective ambulance to take us to Asni or sixty kilometres to Marrakech, and we might have to wait a few hours before the ambulance came. That's a long time if you are in pain, a woman is in labour, or there has been an accident on the mountain. We didn't have a system for collecting rubbish or the money to create one. We have all those things now, and that's because of tourism and the money that the Kasbah puts into the hands of the Association Bassins d'Imlil to do these things. This makes a very big difference to our lives."



CHAPTER 2

# Taking Care of Business

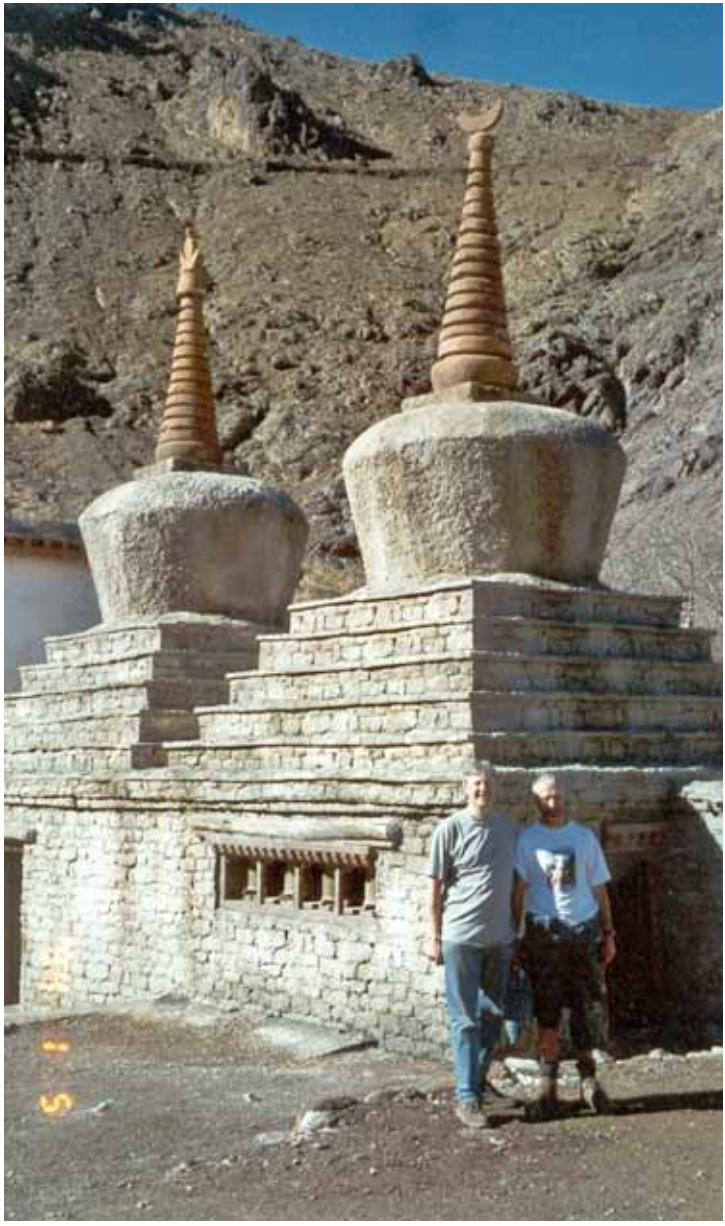
## The Association Bassins d'Imlil

Around the walls of the covered rooftop terrace of the Kasbah du Toubkal are four sayings carved into long wooden planks, one of which reads, *There are many religions but only one God.* It's a curious quirk of fate that in a valley whose inhabitants are almost all devout Muslims, and for a hotel with a large percentage of Christian visitors, if it hadn't been for the Dalai Lama the Association Bassins d'Imlil might never have existed. Although, to be fair, he wasn't directly involved and probably doesn't know anything about his connection with the hotel at the top of the world.

### Bringing the Himalayas to Imlil

WHEN SCOUTS for *Kundun*, Martin Scorsese's 1997 epic about the early life of the Dalai Lama, chanced across the recently finished first stage of the Kasbah du Toubkal, they thought it would be ideal for the scene in which the Dalai Lama escapes across the Himalayas from Tibet to India, the glowering peak of Jbel Toubkal being as near to the famous Tibetan mountains as they could get, visually as well as practically. Payment for services and extras is usually made on a person-by-person basis, with a fee going to the owners of the location, but before Discover agreed to allow the Kasbah to be used as a location they told the producers, The Walt Disney Company, that they would only do so if the villagers of Imlil agreed, and that the fee was to go to the villages in the valley to provide much needed services for the greater good of all. In discussions with representatives from the seven villages of the valley, it was decided to create the Association Bassins d'Imlil, the Association of Villages of the Imlil Valley, who would receive a fee and use it as a basis for funding future projects.

*The filming of Kundun, the life of the Dalai Lama, directed by Martin Scorsese, 1996*



Discover insisted that as a general principle, and following their own criteria, as much of the food and labour as possible would be sourced from the local area. The production provided work for thirty people as the film crew built the set, as well as the muleteers and their pack animals who carried everything that was needed up to the Kasbah's doorstep.

For six weeks between November and December 1996 the Kasbah was clad with stonework, prayer wheels, wooden doors and Tibetan domes to transform it temporarily into the Monastery of Dungkar, to which the Dalai Lama fled from Lhasa in Tibet. Tibetan actors, extras and film crew were flown to Morocco from Nepal, India and New York – they even brought in two yaks for authenticity. Each day the fleet of thirty-three 4x4 vehicles and ten lorries would cover the 120-kilometre round trip from Marrakech, bouncing up the 17-kilometre unpaved rocky road from Asni to Imlil village, with the cast and crew dragging themselves up the steep, knee-buckling slope for the last stretch from the village to the Kasbah. Everything the production needed was hauled up by local muleteers,

including generators to power the equipment – electricity didn't arrive in the valley until the following year. It's said that Martin Scorsese never emerged from behind his protective wall of monitors, and even though Jbel Toubkal with its glistening snow caps fulfilled its role perfectly, they had to use Epsom salts to create the snowy Himalayan scenes shot at the Kasbah. There are a few remnants of the Kasbah's time as a Tibetan monastery, most notably a model of a deer on its haunches, set above the main entrance to the building.

After filming, the location manager wrote a testimonial, saying that the people of Imlil worked harder than any one else he had ever worked with. But more importantly for the people of the Imlil valley, they now had the Association Bassins d'Imlil and funds in the bank to begin work.

## Working together

COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING is nothing new in Moroccan culture; they have a history of respected villagers being asked to act on behalf of their neighbours in deciding which projects would most benefit the village as a whole and how they would be implemented and funds raised. An example of this is the irrigation system that feeds the terraces to water the apple, cherry and walnut orchards that are the main cash crops of the Imlil valley. For generations, an annual meeting decides how much water each plot of land is to receive, according to its size and crop. But with the Association Bassins d'Imlil, the villages had an umbrella association, and more importantly, a source of funding separate from each independent village, giving the opportunity to help fund larger projects that would benefit the villages both individually and collectively.

The Association is made of up representatives from each of the seven villages in the valley, and even though it is predominantly devoted to projects within the Imlil Valley, it has also funded a number of projects in neighbouring villages and valleys.

***"He who has health has hope,***
***and he who has hope has everything." Anon.***

Ask Hajj Maurice, who has been involved with the Association since day one, what he thinks the most important projects the Association has been involved in are and he will reply, almost without pause for breath, the rubbish collection service and the ambulances.

The first major project that the Association undertook was the creation of a rubbish clearance system, with funds from the Kasbah du Toubkal and the fee from the making of Kundun. It later became self-financing through the shops, hotels and commercial businesses in Imlil. For more than a decade the detritus had been transported in a mule cart, but the animal was relieved of its duties in 2009, when the Association bought the tipper wagon that now does the rounds of the villages, and delivers the waste to a disposal point on the outskirts of Imlil.

## Getting my hands dirty

OMAR AUUZAL picks me up in his wagon at the bridge in Imlil for our day out collecting rubbish in the neighbouring villages. Mohamed Bokare, the second collector in the team, hangs onto his platform at the rear of the truck as we set off for our first stop, Tamatert.

We park at the side of the road and scramble down a rocky path into the village, armed with a couple of large nylon sacks. The tiny alleyways are steep and uneven, and the routine is to walk to the bottom of the village, turn around and clamber back up, picking up the rubbish as you go. This makes perfect sense; why start at the top and have to lug a heavy bag all the way back up the hill again to the truck? And it's not just the 'streets' we clean, but also the tiny cultivated terraces at the sides; everything collected and dropped into nylon bags.

For a couple of hours we traipse the village collecting the rubbish; worn-out trainers, odd socks, tattered plastic bags, weathered cardboard boxes; even the donkey dung heap gets picked over for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wind-blown waste. There's nothing much different to the basic detritus of anywhere in the world, but the age of double- and triple-wrapped everything hasn't arrived here yet, and despite the simplicity of the collection process, there's probably less litter here than you'd see in plenty of European villages. It's slow and laborious, but it works.

For the next part of the route we'll be tackling a new destination on Omar and Mohamed's collection run, and one infinitely more nerve-wracking for me.

Only a few weeks earlier a new road had been completed up to Arghen, a village on the opposite side of the valley to Tamatert, which until then had no access other than centuries-old mule tracks. To call it a 'road' is euphemistic at best; it's simply a one-vehicle-width track, bulldozed in a series of tight zigzags. This is definitely a road where you don't want to meet someone coming the other way.

In first gear Omar hauls the truck up the mountainside, following the tracks of other vehicles that have compacted the rough stone into something vaguely resembling a surface. Some of the bends are so tight that even our short wagon has to make three-point turns, which Omar manages with a lot more confidence than I feel. When we arrive at Arghen, he executes a nerve-wracking series of turns to face downhill. The road is little more than a metre wider than the wagon is long, with a terrifying tumble down the mountainside as reward for the slightest misjudgement. As he shuffles the vehicle around and the rear wheels begin to spin and dig holes in the loose surface, I jump out, under the pretence of taking photos.

We park on a cut-away above the village and meet Hassan Aitjetame, who is part of the Arghen Village Association (known as *Tagmatte*, The Family), and is responsible for rubbish collection. I watch the clouds come rolling down from Jbel Toubkal, bringing the rain with them. It's cold and wet, and I've forgotten to bring a jacket; this is going to be an uncomfortable experience. Fortunately, the

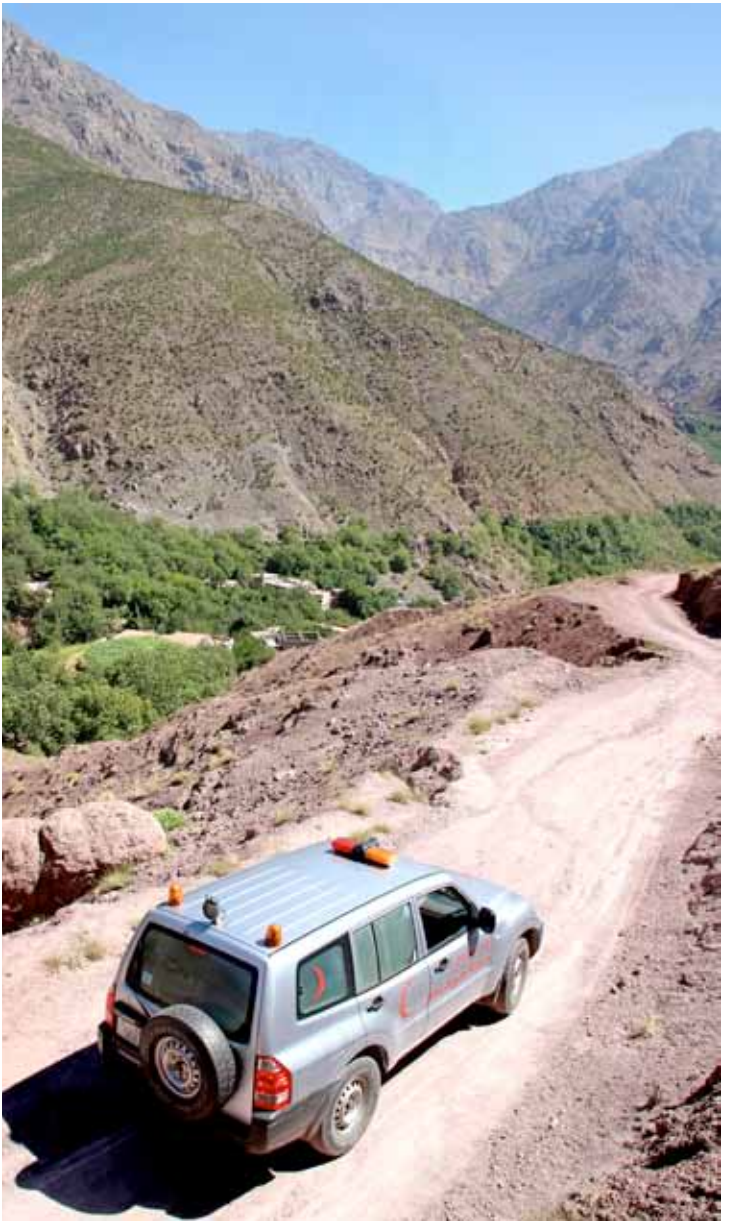
rains drift on down the valley, leaving only a light surface mud for us to slip around in, and soggy waste for us to pick up.

The routine is the same as in Tamatert, walking the village street by street, collecting discarded rubbish as we go along, but Arghen is much steeper than Tamatert, and at some points we are scrambling over scree that moves unsettlingly below my feet. Omar, Mohamed and Hassan, and the couple of young boys who have joined in the fun, walk this sort of ground on a daily basis so are used to it, and politely overlook my staggering. It occurs to me that refuse collectors from European countries who belly-ache about the difficulties of having to tow a wheelie-bin two metres to an automated lift on the back of their wagon should be forced to spend a week with Omar and Mohamed.

When we get back to the truck with our load, a crowd has gathered. It's almost a party atmosphere, and Omar is congratulated on his tenacity in getting the truck up to the village for the first time. He smiles, as if the skidding and sliding had been nothing.

As we begin our descent the rains return, leaving great splashes on the windscreen to obscure the view and wetting the rough stones of the road. At each tight turn, Mohamed jumps off his stand at the back and shepherds Omar as he makes his cautious three- and sometimes five-point turns. I don't comment, but a sideways glance at Omar tells me that he's only marginally less nervous than I am. With an almost audible sigh of relief – more on my part than Omar's because I only have to do it this once, whereas he will be making the trip weekly – we arrive back at the main road and scuttle off to the smouldering incineration area on the edge of Imlil.

Rubbish dumped, I thank them both, and leave. Ten minutes later, while I'm sat under the awning of a café taking a glass of mint tea, I see them driving up the main street, and wave.



## Help at hand

IN THE REMOTE, and even not so remote, villages of the High Atlas Mountains, medical assistance of any kind is rarely close to hand. As a result of this there have been a number of deaths over the years, particularly during childbirth, due to lack of transport to Asni, the nearest town with a maternity clinic, or on to Tahanoute or even Marrakech for more serious cases. One of the most important projects that the Association Bassins d'Imlil has instigated is the provision of an ambulance to reduce these all too avoidable mortalities. Discover Ltd. agreed to underwrite the purchase of a vehicle from England, and in December 1999 an ex-NATO Land Rover arrived in Imlil to serve the local community. Five years later, on 4 March 2004, a brand new ambulance, a converted Mitsubishi 4x4, was ceremoniously handed over, donated by a French Charity, Coeur du Monde, confirming that the Association Bassins d'Imlil could be trusted to deliver good value. The original ambulance moved on to a more remote village, where it continues to give good service.

The ambulance has been a life-line to many, particularly those in the most remote valleys who might otherwise have to wait many hours for medical assistance. But there is another 'ambulance' that receives scant publicity, and fulfils a role that most of us don't want to think too deeply about. It is a hearse, on call twenty-fours hours a day, seven days a week, just as the regular ambulance is, but by the nature of its occupants, it fulfils a more discreet service.

### Even the mules give way

THE WAY Abderrahim Ajdaà handles his ambulance as he tackles the hairpin bends of the rough track that zigzags precariously up from Imlil to Armed, the highest and largest of the villages that form the Association Bassins d'Imlil, you would think he was still driving a taxi around the roads of Asni, seventeen kilometres away. After eleven years driving over some of the roughest terrain in North

Africa's highest mountain range, his confidence is built on experience. As it's my first trip I spend a fair bit of my time concentrating on the Moroccan flag on its stand, taped to the dashboard, and try to ignore the sheer slope of the mountainside, so close that I can't even see the edge of the road from the passenger seat. Every pedestrian, mule, Jeep and truck gives way as the ambulance climbs the narrow road. After all, it may be someone in *their* family it's on its way to.

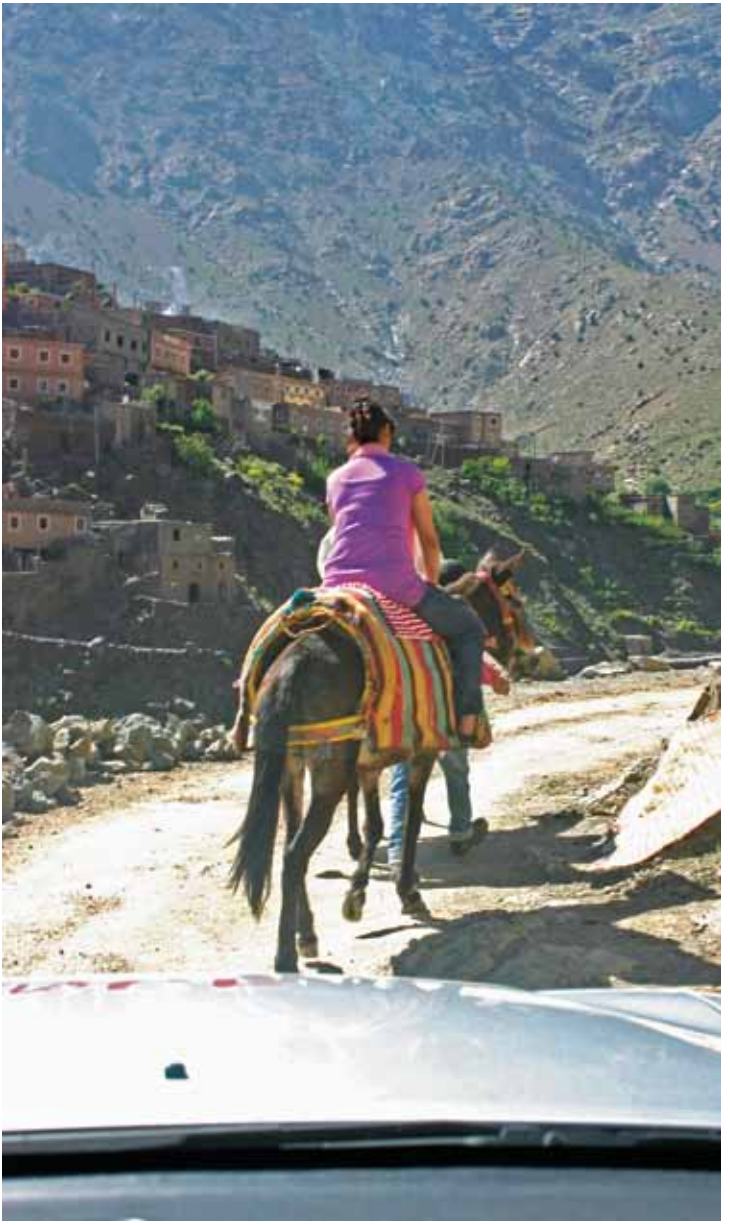
We're not on a house call or emergency today, but Abderrahim is demonstrating in a practical way his daily round. The road ends at a flat area of rough ground, where the Reyara River bubbles and sparkles languidly before picking up pace on its way down into the Imlil Valley below. Across an almost non-existent ford is Armed, a village of almost two thousand souls, and Abderrahim points out the pharmacy, closed for the last eight years due to lack of money.

If a helicopter is needed for a mountain rescue, this is where it lands, with the patient being transferred to Abderrahim's ambulance for the onward journey down the mountain to Asni or Marrakech. But 'flat' doesn't mean 'smooth'; the uneven surface makes for a rocky and tricky landing. When the river is in flood, and people shouldn't be on the mountain anyway, there is nowhere for the helicopter to land, and Abderrahim has to gather a team of villagers to bring the injured down by stretcher.

In more general situations Abderrahim takes the first call. His main work is ferrying expectant mothers to the maternity clinic in Asni, or the hospitals in Tahanoute or Marrakech to give birth. One person is allowed to travel with the patient in the rear of the ambulance. The next most common is attending accidents, mainly motor accidents, where he's often first on the scene, even before the police arrive. Abderrahim has been trained in first aid, but the ambulance has limited equipment and if he thinks the patient needs a nurse or doctor they will be taken to the clinic at Imlil. The resident

nurse, Hamid Asbayo, calls the doctor if necessary, and the patient can be treated there. If there are complications, Abderrahim makes the sixty kilometre drive to the hospital in Marrakech.

When the Association Bassins de Imlil put forward the idea of buying a hearse in 2010, Hassan Bouyenbaden volunteered to be its driver; on call day-in, day-out, just as Abderrahim is. When Abderrahim is unavailable to drive the regular ambulance, Hassan steps in, but most of his clients are at the opposite end of their life-cycle to those of his fellow driver. At fatal road accidents, he is required to attend with the police, bagging the body and removing it to the morgue in Marrakech. Fortunately this kind of situation is quite rare, and the majority of the people he transports have died of natural causes. For those from the villages of the valley who die in Marrakech, Hassan collects the body from the hospital so that the deceased can be buried in his or her homeland.



Most of the inhabitants of the locality are strict Muslims, which means that no male outside the family other than medical personnel may touch a woman. Dispensation is also given to Hassan, as he is required to handle the body in order to put it in his ambulance. Sometimes family members are too distraught to deal with the death, and Hassan has to quietly seek help from others for the removal, without overstepping the bounds of propriety. What helps in this situation is that he has lived in the valley all his life, and many of the people he is called to attend were his friends.

"At first it used to upset me, seeing my friends dead, but eventually I came to realise that we all die, and surely it's better to have a friend attend to you than a stranger. It's no problem for me now."

Women will be returned to the home to be ritually washed by their female family and friends, before being enshrouded in white cotton or linen cloth; men will go straight to the mosque, where their male family performs a similar service. Sharia law calls for the burial of the body, usually within twenty-four hours. After prayers at the mosque the deceased will be taken to a cemetery, although not one with headstones and mausoleums a westerner might recognise. In Imlil it is simply a square plot, only distinguished from the rest of the bare hillside by a fence to keep out wandering goats.

## Water water everywhere

ALLAH MIGHT DECIDE THE QUANTITY of water that falls during a storm, but it's in the power of man to direct where it goes.

On 17 August 1995, Lahcen Igdem, now a receptionist at the Kasbah du Toubkal, but then a boy of seven, watched the storm clouds gather from his home in Arhgen, a village on the slopes of the mountains above Imlil.

"Imlil was almost empty," he recalls, "because the people had been warned that there could be some serious storms coming, and that they

should go to the high ground. Most of them had gone to stay with family or friends higher up the valley because they were used to floods, although no one realised just how serious this one would be." For Lahcen it was all a great adventure, but for many families it was a fearful time that would end in the devastation of much that they held dear.

Floods and high water levels in the area are usually preceded by violent thunderstorms, and run-offs from the mountains can create roaring torrents in minutes.

By mid-afternoon the clouds had become black and dense, with thunder rolling through the valley. Almost at the stroke of four the rains began, and within two hours a torrential rainstorm dumped seventy millimetres of rain, most of it falling in the space of little more than thirty-five minutes, increasing the amount of water flooding down the Reyara River an inconceivable twenty-seven times its normal volume. A wall of water six metres high swept down the valley, carrying with it boulders the size of lorries. As it surged through Imlil it washed away almost forty cars and damaged many buildings, and while thousands died in the Ourika Valley, there were no fatalities in Imlil. By six o'clock the storm was over, and an hour later the river returned to its normal level. A flash flood of this severity is said to occur only once every two hundred years.

The Association Bassins d'Imlil came up with the idea of cement retaining walls to make sure that the villages never suffered this sort of devastation again. These walls would not only safeguard the land and buildings alongside the most susceptible sections of the river, but would also limit the speed of the flood and contain the most serious debris. It wasn't until 2006 that the project was completed, and while grey cement walls outside your window may not be the most beautiful view, when you've lost your home, your belongings, and even some of your nearest and dearest, they can take on an unexpected charm all their own.

One of the most important water-based projects was the building of a village hammam. The communal bath is central to life in Moroccan communities. Not only does it provide much needed bathing facilities, but is equally important as a place to relax, where villagers (particularly

women) can chat, share advice, and generally keep up with the news and local comings and goings. Before the hammam was opened on December 18, 2004, the inhabitants of the seven villages had to travel the seventeen kilometres to Asni to use a public bath. Some householders would construct a small one- or two-person hammam for family use, but this wasn't the same as being able to pass time with friends in the comfort of a communal steam room. Now over a thousand villagers are no more than a couple of kilometres walk from the public hammam in the centre of Imlil, and it gives employment to three local people as well providing a valuable service to the local community.

Very few villages in Morocco are as lucky as Imlil and the six other villages in the Imlil Valley. You only have to look at the other valleys to see the difference that these projects have made. Anyone has the right to put forward a project, all they have to do is take their idea to Hajj Maurice and the other members of the governing committee. If the Association thinks it's a worthwhile idea they will be given the money to do it. Local people recognise that the Association does a great deal of good for their villages and their lives, and they recognise also that it is through the five percent surcharge on client's bills made by the Kasbah, and other donations made by visitors, that they have a way of life denied to many other remote locations.

CHAPTER 3

# One Hand Clapping

Long before the Kasbah du Toubkal opened its doors in 1995, the High Atlas Mountains, and Jbel Toubkal in particular, had been a major draw to trekkers looking for mountain wilderness. Even today, many people still don't realise that the area is a National Park, and far from being a rugged adventure playground it is a fragile environment that will only survive for future visitors if those of today respect it. Sadly, they sometimes don't.

"There were times when the route up Jbel Toubkal was disgraceful," says Trevor Rowell, who has been trekking the High Atlas for almost thirty years. "It was the typical rubbish of sweet wrappers, paper bags and plastic water bottles, things that people should simply put back in their bags and bring down with them. Obviously, Discover and the Kasbah were part of the increase of visitors to the area, and we felt a responsibility to do what we could to respect the environment that was, to be honest, giving us an

income. We began by putting some large oil drums in place as rubbish bins, but they were often ignored, or no one emptied them on a regular basis."

The first point on the Vision Statement created by Discover Ltd. *(see Appendix)* for the Kasbah du Toubkal two decades ago was that it would become "a showcase/flagship development for sustainable tourism in a fragile mountain environment". Increasingly, the Kasbah is using the 5R Principle for its own immediate waste; Refuse, Reduce, Re-use, Re-cycle, but above all Re-think! – principles they plan to put into broader use throughout the villages of the Imlil Valley and, where possible, Jbel Toubkal itself.

As an example of this, the Kasbah no longer supplies water in plastic bottles, using instead the water from a spring five hundred meters away that is gravity fed to the building. The water source was studied soon after the Kasbah opened in 1995 by postgraduate students from the Department of Water Technology at Loughborough University in the UK, which confirmed that it was genuine spring water and that it surpassed EU drinking water quality standard (and has been tested every month since without ever failing).

Visitors are encouraged to use the jugs and special water bottles provided in the rooms for drinking on-site or to carry their water while trekking, and in a small way reduce the amount of non-degradable plastic, which is one of the main 'rubbish' culprits in the area.

## Planning for the future

OVER THE YEARS there have been plenty of trawls of the mountain to clean it up, just as there have been in mountainous areas worldwide, but what is needed is a concerted plan, focused not just on keeping the area clean, but also on disposing of the rubbish that is discarded, in a practical, and where possible, a commercial manner.

To create a sustainable plan for development, both for the environment and the community, The Kasbah du Toubkal and Association Bassins d'Imlil joined forces with Aniko Boehler, an anthropologist and expert in sustainable development, resident in Marrakech, to create Mountain Propre. Using their cumulative years of experience they began to look at


Opération de ramassage des déchets
Djebel Toubkal, Juillet 2011

*Cleaning Mount Toubkal*

ways to not only improve the locality, but to do so in a way that would benefit those who lived there, both commercially and environmentally.

For five days in May 2011, a Swiss-based eco organisation, the Summit Foundation, looked at the environment of the Imlil Valley and Jbel Toubkal (surprisingly enough, suffering from similar problems to the Alps). The Foundation aims to make daily life and sustainable development compatible. Working with the people of the valley they began to create a plan that would see the Imlil Valley become a pilot project that would hopefully be adopted by other areas throughout Morocco.

The essence of the Mountain Propre initiative was to re-cycle as much of the rubbish as possible and compost any vegetable waste matter, leaving a very small amount of residual waste. As Mike McHugo said, it wasn't complicated, but it was ambitious.

Each of the seven villages in the Imlil Valley would have at least one collection point where rubbish would be deposited into three separate

containers. The intention was to have wooden constructions decorated by local craftsmen that would not detract from the natural environment. The rubbish would be collected from each of the villages and brought to one central recycling point, probably on the edge of Imlil, where, at the time, an incinerator existed.

"We wanted the rubbish to generate an income, but also to use it in a way that would help the community," says Mike. "Traditionally, wood is burned, which has to be collected by women. We tested a small machine that crushes cardboard and makes it into briquettes for burning, which could provide a very good alternative to burning wood, and also save the back-breaking effort it takes to collect it. What the people didn't use they could sell. The whole point being that rubbish can actually earn money if handled correctly."

To be viable to the villages of the Imlil Valley, in both economic and employment terms, rubbish has to be 'mined', just as gold and coal has to

be. If the extraction of the seam of precious ore costs more than the value of the eventual refined product then the mine is abandoned. The basic collection of rubbish is only one element in the chain of re-cycling and income generation, and after in-depth research by the Summit Foundation using the simple expedient of sorting through plastic bags of rubbish from targeted businesses and households to give a representative 'value', it was found that no commercial 'rubbish mine' existed. Which is to say, that with not being able to complete the collection, recycling and disposal chain, the villages have to fall back on the local Moroccan administration for the final removal and disposal of the rubbish.

"I think it's fair to say that the hopes and aspirations we had a few years ago haven't worked out," says Mike. "But that doesn't mean to say that the overall project failed. We discovered that we don't have enough rubbish in Imlil to create employment, other than the staff of the collection vehicle – which I suppose, in some ways, you can say is good. But we're faced with the problem that whatever we do as an association or community to keep

our own villages clean, we still rely on the administration to get rid of it, and, sadly, currently this has not happened."

The success of Imlil as a day out from Marrakech has exacerbated the problem. During the summer heat there is a constant flow of visitors arriving by car, bringing everything they need to eat and drink for a picnic in the mountains. Almost nothing is bought in the village, but plenty is left behind; bags full of rubbish that can only be cleared away by the collection vehicle provided by the Associaton Bassins d'Imlil.

"Even if the administration can't collect the rubbish, at least they could help with a disposal system. We can only carry on as a lobbying group and do what we can ourselves to keep the environment of Jbel Toubkal and the villages rubbish free."

## Education is everything

PERHAPS THE BIGGEST MOUNTAIN of all to climb, except Jbel Toubkal, is that of education, not just of the people who live in the valley, but also of those who visit it. If they can carry the plastic bottles and wrapping paper with them when they come, it weighs a lot less to take it away with them when they leave.

Rachid Souktan works in the external office in Imlil, and was involved in the two attempted clean-ups of Jbel Toubkal. As a mountain guide who has lived his life in the village it saddens him to return to the mountain and see that nothing much has changed.

"I feel bad. It's difficult because when you go to the mountain and see the place you cleaned full of rubbish you feel a shame for it. You tell the people not to throw the garbage, but we need to have more education, put more signs asking people not to throw rubbish. It isn't just the people from the city, from Marrakech or Casablanca, it's also the people from the villages. Now they are starting to clean it a little bit. It will change little-by-little because it takes a long time. It's like climbing steps, you keep taking the steps until the last one arrives at a flat place. Yes it takes time, it takes time for people to help each other. They say that one hand never claps."

CHAPTER 4

# An Association of Ideas

The Association Bassins d'Imlil has been responsible for many major projects in the region, but it is not only as an Association that it can be effective but also by association. This equally applies to the Kasbah du Toubkal, and in their relatively short histories both have shown the communities of the Imlil Valley that they are committed to the welfare of those who live there.

Often the importance of the contribution isn't in the financial sense, at least no more than modest amounts of money to buy equipment or pay expenses. The greater importance is the confidence local communities have that whatever the Association and the Kasbah undertake it will be to the benefit of all, and that includes the welfare of the animal that is the absolute backbone of existence for many of the people working in the area.

## Helping those who can't help themselves

GLEN COUSQUER IS A VET and International Mountain Leader, and is currently a researcher in the Institute of Geography at the University of Edinburgh. On his first trip to Morocco, in 1995, while still a vet student, he witnessed at first-hand the suffering of a pack mule with an infected saddle sore. In 2008, he returned to Morocco with 5 fellow Outdoor Ed MSc students on a two-week trek. This time he decided he needed to be proactive in looking after the mules that he and his group would be using on the expedition. Since then, he has developed a pack animal care training course for Moroccan mountain guides and returns regularly to the High Atlas to work with the mules. In Imlil he has been greatly helped by his friend, Brahim Aït Tadrart, an experienced guide from Aremd, the highest village in the valley. Together they have supervised and facilitated a research project undertaken by a final year vet student from the Institut Agronomique et

Vétérinaire Hassan II in Rabat – specifically looking at the welfare of the mule population in Aremd (the first ever such survey).

"One of the things I've been very conscious about is not to be seen as being a puppet or having favourites, so I've deliberately gone and worked in different villages, I've worked with people who are not necessarily part of the Kasbah community. The great thing about the Kasbah is that it has very enlightened owners who have a sense of responsibility towards their communities and are very, very keen to actually reflect on some of these more difficult questions, and to try and improve the way that mules are actually worked."

Despite working with mules for decades, Mike McHugo admits that he hadn't really given a lot of thought to the condition of the animals who accompanied him on treks with Discover Ltd, and were hired by the Kasbah.

"Before I met Glen I thought most of the mules in Imlil were quite well looked after, and they are, compared to those used in the city, but you don't always know something is wrong until someone points it out. Once it's pointed out you can do something about it. We can tell a mule that's clearly very badly treated but we can't tell a mule that's perhaps beginning to lose weight through mouth sores because we just don't have the experience. Looking after the mules and muleteers is obviously very important to the economy of Imlil."

"I've been instructing at the Centre de Formation des Métiers de Montagne (the Moroccan Mountain Guide School) since 2009," explains Glen, "and the fact that I'm spending a lot of time within these communities means that I'm able to understand the problem from a number of different perspectives. If we ignore the fact that there are sociocultural and socio-economic contexts to these problems then we are really missing a big part of the story. Veterinary medicine is important, obviously, but it does not provide the answers needed when working with communities to tackle the root causes of welfare problems."

"It's very easy for a vet to say that an animal has to be rested for a few days after treatment for a fall," says Mike McHugo, "but these muleteers are at the bottom end of the economic scale, and those three

days could be the breaking point of whether he is able to feed his family or not."

Many of the decisions about projects that affect the valley and are funded by the five per cent levy all guests at the Kasbah pay, are made by the Association Bassins d'Imlil. But one important decision was made by the owners of the Kasbah themselves.

"Muleteers are usually paid 100 dirhams a day, sometimes less, and that has to cover everything, from the feeding and shoeing of the animal, buying a saddle, bridles etc, as well as providing an income to support himself and his family. We feel that a muleteer should at least earn a minimum wage of the country concerned, which in this case is 2200dhms. I calculated with Hajj how much it would be to feed a mule properly and buy equipment, working on it being realistic to expect a mule to work for between six and eight months of the year. Based on these calculations we believe it important that the Kasbah champions a minimum daily rate of 120dhms per day. We are hoping that, by taking the lead in this


WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE THE LIVES AND WELFARE OF MULES AND MULETEERS

and by working with other trekking companies in the UK and Europe, we can encourage the whole industry to follow suit. This will at least allow muleteers to get a living wage and will help protect the health and welfare of the mule."

So it isn't just a case of the muleteers taking proper care of their animal, all those involved in the tourism industry need to know where to draw the line. What constitutes good welfare for a working animal? What is acceptable and what is not? And what needs to change?

As Glen Cousquer sees it, tradition has a very important role in some of the mistreatment local mules endure. Sometimes the simplest change of custom can yield enormous benefits. Traditionally, a mule was given a long drink of water in the evening, and for the rest of the day they would often receive no other liquid. But a mule isn't a camel, and needs regular watering.

Glen firmly believes that free access to water and freedom from thirst is one of the 'five freedoms' that animals should be able to enjoy, and when, in a conversation with Hajj Maurice, he mentioned the benefits of watering mules regularly, Hajj went into action immediately. Within a week three water troughs were built in strategic locations around Imlil.

It's often apparently small changes like this – changes that improve the health of their animal – that builds confidence with the muleteers. This trust increases the likelihood of muleteers then listening to Glen when he advises them to take their mule to have their teeth rasped at the regular monthly visit to Imlil by the vets of SPANA Maroc, an animal welfare charity. Bad dental care can lead to severe mouth disorders that make it painful for the mule to eat, eventually leading to loss of weight and a variety of illnesses.

Plastic or nylon rope is readily available in Morocco; it's cheap, strong and durable. What might seem the perfect material to tether a pack mule to a tree or stake isn't so perfect as far as the animal is concerned. It is the cause of the scars seen on the legs of mules across Morocco – the result of severe and repeated friction burns.

Since 2010 Glen has been working to find a solution to the sometimes horrendous tethering injuries inflicted on mules in Morocco.

"We came up with a simple leather sheath, made by student guides prior to departure on treks. The sheath is placed over a loop of rope so that none of its strength is lost. The leather is kept supple with oiling and allows the pressure to be spread over a wider, smoother area."

The system is used willingly by the muleteers on trek, without any problems. Most significantly it spreads any load over a wider surface area and protects the mules from rope burns. Trials of the new tether have come to the point where it can now be rolled out as a potential humane tethering system for mules working in the High Atlas Mountains.

In the spirit of co-operation that permeates the area, the local women's co-operative in Imlil is already producing the sheaths. An on-going process of review and development will allow further improvements to be made to the design and manufacture of the tethering system.

Climbers and trekking groups heading out to Morocco were asked to donate their old rope, which are easier to cut and seal than local plastic ropes. The University of Edinburgh's Outdoor Education Department donated one hundred metres of rope, enough to supply many trekking mules with a comfortable tether.

Historically, mules have been bought and sold as 'work horses'. They have no names, no individuality per se. No one knows their story, where they were born, how many times they have been bought and sold. A well looked-after mule can have a working life of 20 to 30 years, but some of them are bought at the beginning of the tourist season and sold at the end, with not much consideration given to their health in the meantime. As Mike puts it, "It's a bit like hiring a car on holiday; you'd probably drive it harder than your own car at home."

"There is a huge lack of data about the mules in the region, and microchips offer us the opportunity to follow individual animals over time," says Glen. "The Kasbah bought two hundred chips and the machine that allows us to read the chip and track the information. This is unique because it means that their life story can be told and we can get to know the mule as an individual."

"Glen has done some excellent work on the ground," says Mike. "It's important to us that he's not only a vet but a mountain guide and teacher

as well. The fact that he's walked the mountains with the mules is quite different from a vet who gets out of his car suited and booted to look at an animal. It was because of this that we decided to use the mules and muleteers that we work with as a trial project. This is very much Glen's project, we just helped him with the practicalities of working and living in Imlil for a period of time so he could put his proposals into practise."

The Kasbah is adopting a form of good practice that will set out requirements that all muleteers must abide by if they wish to work with them and, it's eventually hoped, with all the tourism-related businesses in the area. But concern for the well-being of other flora and fauna that share the High Atlas is also important to Mike McHugo.

"We help where we can with other projects in the area because we believe that we as a tourist industry ought to be helping to preserve the flora and fauna of the region in which we work. But it isn't just to keep the area looking pretty and interesting. If we don't help where we can and work with others we could see so much of the natural life that we've been able to enjoy simply disappear."

## The Bearded Vulture Project

IN THE EARLY 1980s Fabrice Cuzin spent much of his spare time walking the mountains of the Atlas, where he saw his first bearded vultures. "I used to see them quite often when I was walking in the mountains, but young birds were quite rare. I even found a nest, but they seemed to be extremely rare in the Toubkal National Park at the end of the 1990's, and it wasn't until about 2000 that I saw them again."

Fabrice arrived in Morocco as a teacher in natural sciences and with a personal interest in botany. But his mountain walks developed a keen interest in birds, reptiles and mammals to the extent that he gave up teaching and established himself as an independent consultant for studies about wild animals, protected areas, biology and environmental impact assessments.

"I would call myself a mountaineer and naturalist, and I changed from being a teacher to being a full time naturalist because I find Morocco a very interesting and very stimulating country for studying nature."

Morocco has no shortage of species to study, so why focus on the bearded vulture?

"It is not an easy species to work with: it is rare, and often quite difficult to see. But if you see it once it's incredible, very impressive, a beautiful bird, but we created the Bearded Vulture Project with the help from the Kasbah du Toubkal because it is disappearing from Morocco. It appeared this year on the IUCN Red List (the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the world's main authority on the conservation status of species.) although it is still quite widespread in Asiatic mountains and in the Pyrénées. There used to be bearded vultures throughout the whole of the mountains of North Africa – Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco – from very low altitudes close to the coast up to the highest altitudes and as far as the edge of the Sahara. Now they are restricted to the high altitudes in Morocco, only in the High Atlas. They've disappeared from Tunisia, and we've found that there are still birds living in Algeria, but as it's not very safe there, we don't know much about what's happening with those birds."

The bearded vulture is the largest bird of prey throughout North Africa. As a vulture it's not killing or hunting, just eating only dead animals There are different species of vulture and each of them is specialised in one kind of 'dead food'.

"The bearded vulture is the only one adapted to eating bones specifically, which is a very rich food, at least the fresh ones are. They are able to swallow large bones then later digest them. If the bones are too large, they let them fall from up to 150 metres onto specific rocks to break them, and then eat the fragments. Other vultures can't do that."

Because there are flocks of sheep and goats everywhere, carcasses are not a problem and there is plenty of food for scavengers. But the image of a vulture feeding on a sheep or goat carcass creates a situation that can affect the survival of the species.

"The problem is that shepherds, not all of them in the Toubkal area specifically, are confusing the bearded vulture with the golden eagle, because it's very large, and some people are naturally thinking that they are preying on the lambs, like the golden eagle does. In fact, I discovered that the shepherds from Toubkal are two kinds of people. The older shepherds throughout the High Atlas know the bird quite well and know that they never kill any sheep or goats, but here in Toubkal it's difficult because most of the shepherds are young and think they are preying on their animals because they are seeing the bearded vulture feeding on dead goats and don't realise it was dead before the animal began to feed. Talking about these birds with the shepherds is a main activity for their understanding of about the bearded vulture."

A bearded vulture won't begin to reproduce until between eight-to-ten years old, but it is the years before that when the young birds can be in greatest danger.

"A few months after leaving the nest, the birds are feeding themselves. The problem is that they are covering very large distances to find food, and fly the whole of the High Atlas from the mountains to the plains. We suspect that it's in the plains that they will be poisoned. People are poisoning stray dogs, and the birds are feeding on the carcasses. While the birds aren't being poisoned specifically, they are dying as a knock-on effect,

so we try to give them some safe food in one specific safe place so they won't fly so far away."

The bearded vulture in the High Atlas Mountains is clearly endangered, and with only one chick per reproducing pair being born each year, and almost a decade before the young will reproduce, it will be a long time before anyone can say there is a viable population.

"We know for sure there is one couple reproducing and there are two young birds who are not reproducing, one at the beginning of his second year and one at the beginning of his fourth year, which will not begin breeding for at least another six years. In the case of a single mortality it affects the population enormously. There is a very good survival rate, but in the case of any adult mortality it could decrease very quickly. While working with the tiny population of the Toubkal birds, we are working at the same time with the whole Atlas population: one bird born in the

Toubkal could reproduce in Central High Atlas, and one born in Central High Atlas could reproduce here in the Toubkal."

## Making the most of what you've got

AS MUCH AS HELPING to fund projects, whether it be via the Association Bassins d'Imlil and the levy guests pay, or as smaller amounts to help projects that don't come specifically under the remit of the Association, the Kasbah du Toubkal's ethos is to use whatever facilities are available. To this end, Dar Toubkal, a building on the edge of Imlil that visitors pass on their way up to the Kasbah, is put to good use providing accommodation for people working on projects in the area.

"Originally it was used for student groups,' says Hajj Maurice, "but now they stay in the Kasbah or other properties. Working in association with Mountain Propre, we decided that instead of just leaving it empty we would make it available for people who are working on projects that will in some way benefit the community."

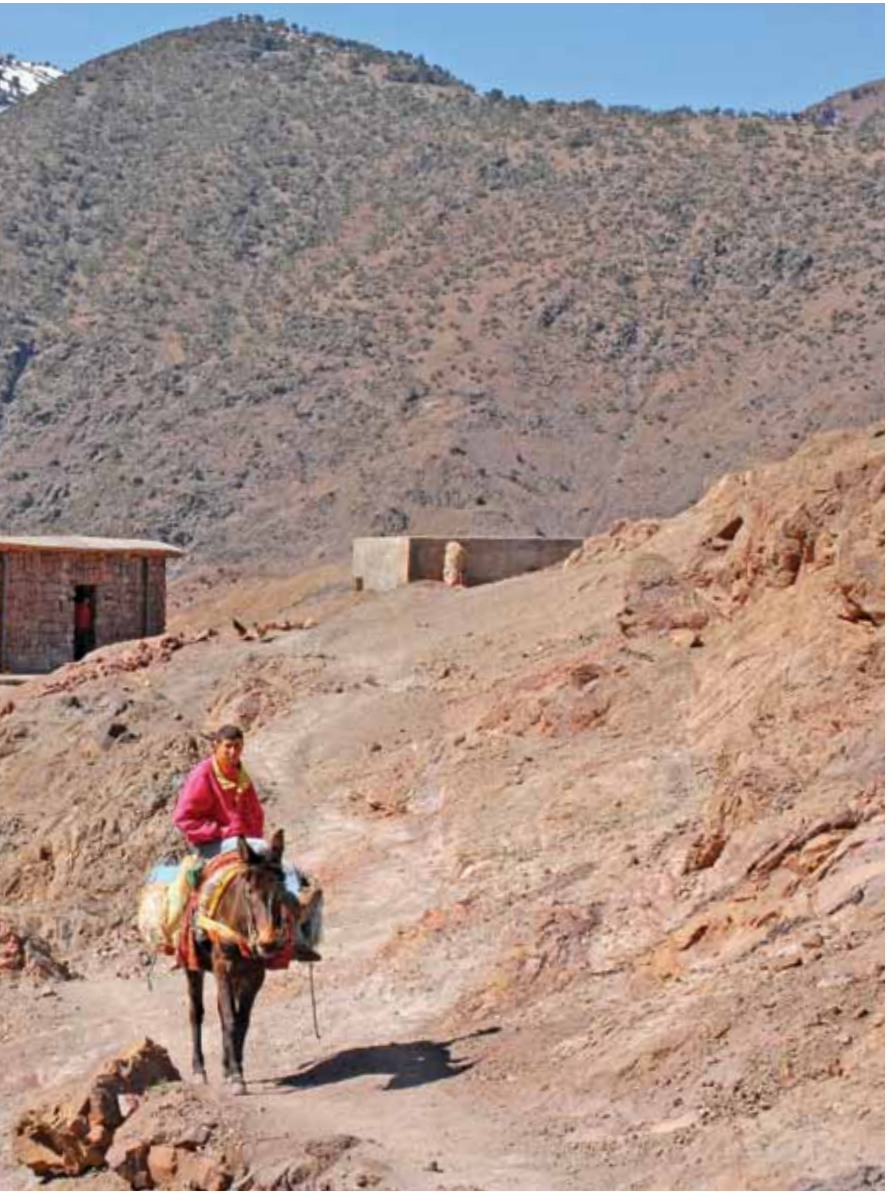
The accommodation and services – lighting, water etc. – are provided free, but anyone using Dar Toubkal must provide their own food and any extras.

"In the beginning we were very open about who stayed there, but after four years of experience we have become more selective," comments Mike McHugo. "So in keeping with everything we do, we decided that the projects of anyone who stays at Dar Toubkal had to be of benefit to the community and be approved by them. If they were to be long-term projects they also had to show that they had the backing and funding to cover the continuance of the project."

"We had someone staying who was researching the effects of tourism in the valleys, and that's important for us to know," continues Hajj. "We also have Glen Cousquer staying there on an on-going basis because he's doing invaluable work with the mules of the area, and that's very important to the livelihood of local people."

An apparently unlikely project for the Kasbah to support was Atla(s) now, a combined arts and skiing programme. Angelo Bellobono is an Italian artist and ski instructor. In 2013 he took a group of eight mountain guides from the villages of the Imlil valley to Oukaïmeden, a ski resort in the High

*Kasbah du Toukal Mountain Lodge, Azzaden Valley*



Atlas Mountains. Lahcen Igdem, a receptionist at the Kasbah, was one of Angelo's students.

"I was a total beginner, and when I went there it was very good. I loved it. He started with me from the beginning, how to wear skis and how to use them. He showed us the basics and then I started to ski by myself. Some of the local guides know how to ski, so Angelo separated us into three groups, showing more advanced techniques to the experienced skiers. We weren't trained as ski instructors, but to be competent to arrange everything for visitors and understand a skier's requirements."

There are three different levels of skiing in Oukaïmeden, including beginners' slopes and mountain pistes. You can also ski Jbel Toubkal if you are very good. It takes about four hours to go up with the equipment but only takes about 15-20 minutes to ski down. Hajj Maurice has done it many times.

## Opportunities for everyone

IN 2006 THREE ORGANISATIONS came together to discuss how they might jointly work in the locality; the Association Femenine Tamghart Noudrar, a women's organisation from the High Atlas, CERAI (Centro de Estudios Rurales y de Agricultura International), a Spainish organisation that funds rural initiatives internationally and is particularly interested in promoting the role of women in rural communities, and ABI.

Traditionally, decision making, whether it was at village or local level, was usually done by bringing all interested parties together for discussion. What was often lacking was a central meeting place, and this was what the three organisations decided to concentrate on. With funds from CERAI, the group added two floors to an existing building and created Maison des Associations.

Fatima Bouaddi was brought from Marrakech to act as the co-ordinator for the Maison, and emphasises that while a women's association was one of the originators of the project, the Maison goes beyond simply being a ladies meeting place.

"The Maison is for everyone, men and women alike, to use for meetings, whether they are from the locality, from Asni or from as far away as Marrakech. We see it as a regional meeting place, but our future plans are that we can

host meetings for people from other Moroccan cities and even from outside the country. We also encourage people to hold cultural activities here, and to cater for visitors we have two apartments we can rent, either for people attending meetings or just simply to spend a few days in the mountains."

But just to build somewhere to hold meetings would be a pointless gesture, something has to go back to the community.

"Many Moroccan girls don't go any further with their education than secondary level, and sometimes not even that. We offer training in weaving and sewing, amongst other things, so the girls can learn practical subjects and hopefully earn an income."

One of the most successful courses the Maison des Associations offers is teaching traditional Moroccan patisserie. If you have had a biscuit with your coffee at the Kasbah it will have been made by the girls at the Maison. Their products are mainly sold locally, but the girls also provide patisserie for many special family celebrations.

"I believe very much in this project, and I haven't seen anything like it in other valleys. It's very useful to have somewhere to hold meetings, but it is also very important that the ladies have somewhere to come together, perhaps to learn a new skill and earn some money. I'm happy with the way things are developing at the moment, but we aren't known enough yet. It's always very slow, but we intend to get the Maison better known and create more projects in the future."

## Toubkal Lodge

IT'S SIX IN THE EVENING, the time of the paseo in Spain, and 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 Oussem. One-way in, one-way out.

Much of the 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 the 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 the Kasbah over Tizi Oudid, 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.


دار أمنتي
للفتيات المتمدرسات
Dar Amni Pour Les Filles scolarisées

CHAPTER 5

# The Work of Education For All

***As a parent of teenage children myself, I am acutely aware that education to – and beyond – secondary level provides the key to the doors of professional opportunity and personal fulfilment. That is why the work of Education For All is so important: to give young girls from remote areas of Morocco the chance to realise their dreams and their full potential. I am proud and honoured to be Patron of Education For All.***

**His Excellency Mr Clive Alderton L.V.O.**
**Her Britannic Majesty's Ambassador to the Kingdom of Morocco**

To most of us access to an education beyond primary school never even enters into our consideration; it is simply there, almost by divine right. But what if it weren't? And almost worse still, what if it is on offer but you can't get to it because you live too far from the nearest school or your family is too poor to pay even the basic accommodation costs.

Think of yourself as the father of a young girl not yet even into her teens, and a group of foreigners come along to tell you that you should send her to a private boarding-house miles from home. "It's for her benefit," they say, but you possibly aren't too well educated yourself, and the idea of putting your daughter into the hands of foreigners who aren't part of your culture or religious beliefs might be something you are very wary of. Wouldn't you rather take the counsel of someone of your own faith, a father himself and, even if not a direct friend, someone who has earned the respect of those who know him well?

Hajj Maurice, a small man with a large moustache and a winning smile, is well known and highly respected throughout the villages of the High Atlas Mountains, not just because he has made the pilgrimage to

Mecca, which entitles him to the honorific 'Hajj', but for the work he has done as a mainstay of the Association Bassins d'Imlil. As the father of two daughters, he was aware of the importance of education for young women, especially following the sad loss of his eldest, who died of leukaemia while in her early twenties.

For weeks Hajj Maurice walked the mountains, talking to fathers and families, trying to convince them that allowing these young girls to live at Dar Asni while continuing their education was not only the best thing for them as individuals, but also for their families, their future children and their communities. Some families accepted with alacrity; the only thing that had stopped them doing it in the first place was that they simply had no money. But others were less convinced, and despite all his wiles and arguments, Hajj Maurice sometimes had to leave without even the concession of "we'll think about it."

Now put yourself in the place of an eleven year-old girl, eager for new sights, friends and experiences, despite never having been outside the confines of your village. You speak only Berber, a language so different from the national language of Arabic in both its spoken and written form that you may as well be going to another country to study, not a village thirty kilometres away, because Arabic is the language all your classes will be in. And then imagine that for the first time in your life you will have your own bed to sleep in, your own cupboard to put your clothes in and a washing machine to wash them – no more going down to the river to pound them on rocks. The boarding house might seem like a palace, but your new life still takes some getting used to!

## In the beginning...

TAKE A GROUP of friends who like a good meal out, throw in the feeling that they would like to do something to benefit the people of their adopted country – in this case Morocco – season with a bit of inventiveness and see what you get? Education For All (EFA).

Mike McHugo was one of this group, and has more than thirty-five years experience of bringing school groups to Morocco.


EDUCATION
for all

"We'd all lived in Morocco for a number of years and ate out together regularly. Most of us worked in tourism so we came up with the idea that we would go to a restaurant and get them to provide us with a meal at cost and we would promote them. We then charged ourselves the full rate and paid the balance into a fund, which we would use to support something, although at the time we weren't sure what."

Over a couple of years the account grew, but it was through a chance meeting with John Woods, who had created the charity Room To Read to build libraries in parts of the world where children might never get the chance to see the written word, that saw them focus on education.

"Originally we thought that we might just act as fund-raisers for Room To Read, but then we decided we'd like to do something specific to Morocco. It was quite obvious that girls didn't have the same educational opportunity as boys, and in addition to that, some of the villages in the High Atlas Mountains are very remote and aren't accessible by road. Children had to walk for hours to even get to the road-head before they might be able to hitch a ride to school."

## Homes, not just houses

GOVERNMENT BOARDING HOUSES have existed for children from outlying districts for many years, but these have to be paid for, and many families in remote villages are simply too poor to pay the fees. Unfortunately, these state boarding houses are often rather Dickensian, and many parents would never consider sending their daughters there. The result is a distressingly high percentage of illiterate women in rural areas, said to be as much as eighty percent in some places.

"We realised from the beginning that we had to be very careful with our approach, once we had decided what we wanted to do," says Maryk Stroonsnijder, who, with her husband Cees van den Berg, own Riads Siwan and Azzar in Marrakech, and have been part of Education For All from the beginning. "We couldn't suddenly start trying to educate children, especially girls, in a staunchly Islamic society, but what we could do was make it easier for some girls to continue their studies within the established school system."

The proposal was that Education For All would provide for the needs of a number of young girls from the poorest families from some of the remotest villages in the High Atlas for the three years it would take them to complete their secondary education. An apparently modest undertaking, but one that would affect the lives of an initial group of twelve girls, increasing by the same number each year, in ways that quite possibly no one had even considered.

In 2006 Education For All was officially recognised as a Moroccan NGO, with a sister charity set up in the UK, and began to raise funds in earnest for their first boarding house in Asni, in the foothills of the High Atlas, forty-five kilometres from Marrakech. This house, and those that were to follow, are all within a couple of minutes' walk of the schools, and take into account an anomaly of the Moroccan way of educational life for girls.

Many boys will cycle to school and take lunch with them. Sometimes a single class will be held in the morning and then another in the afternoon. Boys will simply stay at the school, but it's considered unsafe for girls to do that, so they are expected to return home, impossible if they live far away. Often they've walked considerable distances, and on occasions when time-tabling is particularly erratic they'll miss a day's schooling completely. For the girls at the EFA houses they can simply walk across the road.

Ideas are cheap, boarding houses aren't, but after a lot of work and hectic fund-raising, September 2007 saw the first twelve girls from remote mountain villages begin their education in Asni, living in rented accommodation until their purpose-built home was finished.

## Going places

AS MARYK HAS BEEN HEARD to comment, "Sometimes when you start something you have no idea where it's going to go," – and before they knew it EFA were a further fifty kilometres into the mountains, converting two apartments in the centre of Talaat-n-Yacoub into another boarding house, Dar Tinmel. Another twelve mouths to feed and energetic girls to look after, on top of the twenty by then living at Dar Asni.

"When we opened Dar Asni it was with the idea that we would take in twelve girls a year for the three-year cycle it took them to complete their studies to take them on to the lycée," says Cees. "To be honest, we needed the experience of the first year to see how the house would work, so we could adapt our plans for the next one."

One of the most important things about Education or All is that a very high percentage of the income and donations comes from people who have visited the houses and seen that they work. No one involved in the

administration takes a fee or charges expenses. Apart from the wages paid to the house mother and house staff, and the running costs for each house, the only charges made are bank charges – and there is almost no way in the world of avoiding those!

It's because of this confidence in a job well done that the house at Ouirgane came into being. When a regular benefactor sold his business and wanted to help in a major way, he asked Education For All how much it would cost to build and fit out a house from scratch. One hundred thousand euros was the answer, with the land being donated by the local authority. On 5 May 2011 Dar Ouirgane had its official opening party, thanks to the generosity of someone who had the confidence in EFA to know that the money would go directly towards those who most needed it.

This generosity is wonderful, but even with cash in the bank to build and equip a boarding house, nothing happens until a full year's funds are in hand to cover the running costs of the initial intake. It would be devastating if the girls had to return to their remote villages, barely having said goodbye to the friends and family, because there was no money in the coffers to feed them. Education for all is determined that will never happen.

## More than just bricks and mortar

HOUSES ARE IMPORTANT, but there are foundations other than those on which buildings sit which are of equal importance.

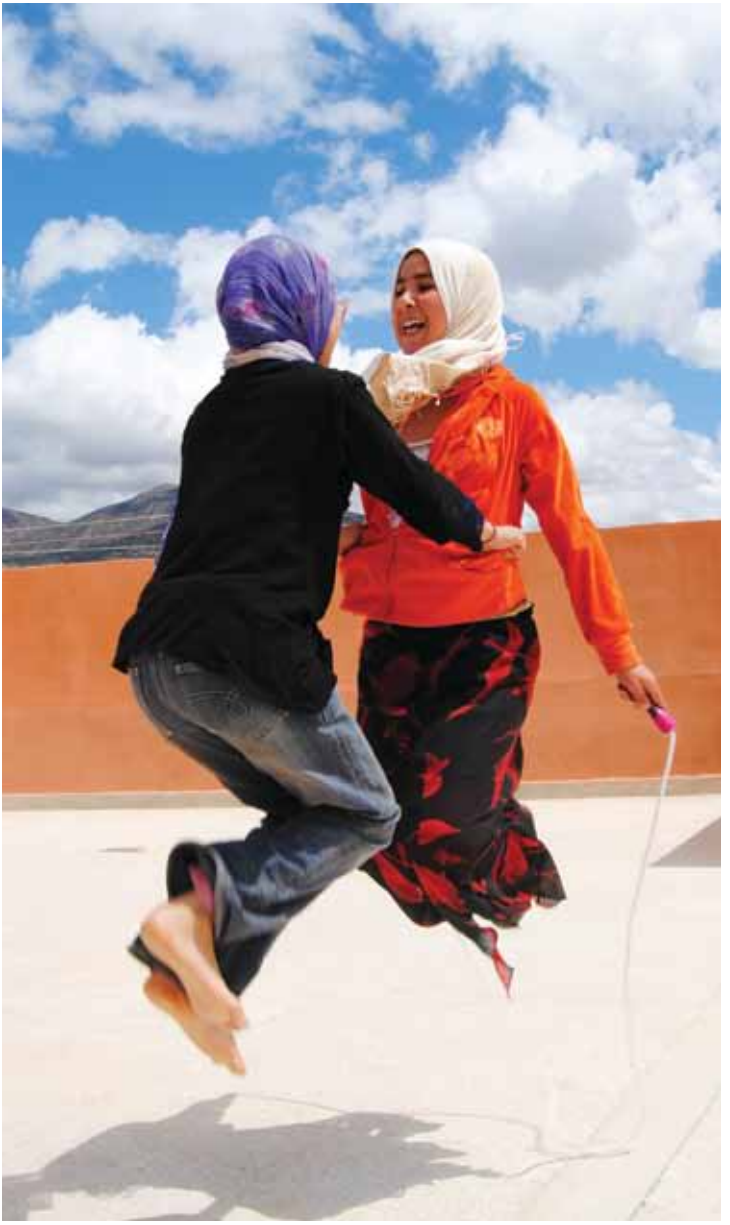
"The absolute rock on which everything else stands is the house mother," says Maryk, "and with Latifa Aliza, who was in at the very beginning of Dar Asni, when they were still living in rented accommodation while we waited for the house to be built, we found an absolute gem. She was one of only two educated girls from her village. She left home when she was six years old and, apart from going back for holidays, she was away for sixteen years. She has shown an incredible level of commitment, and it was through her that we found the other house mothers, Khadija Oukattouk and Mina Hadod, when we opened Dar Tinmel and Dar Oiugane, and they are equally as caring and encouraging with the girls in their charge."

While the house mothers are the bedrock of life at the boarding houses, the volunteers who spend up to four months, and occasionally longer,

helping the girls at the houses are crucial for the girls' development. Maryk stresses that a stay isn't just an easy ride or something to enhance their CV.

"The volunteers are here for the girls, not the other way around. It can be a bit difficult at first, mainly because of language differences, and particularly at the beginning of the school year when there are a lot of new girls, and the house mothers have to plan timetables for each of the girls and the programme for the house." And it's this careful planning, centred around the girls' education, that explains why eighty percent of the girls living at the EFA boarding house in Asni passed their exams to take them on to study at the lycée – more than double the national average.

Every single one of the girls living at Dar Asni, Dar Tinmel and Dar Ouirgane has an individual timetable of studies drawn up at the beginning of term to cover the time they are not studying at the college. It's at these times that the volunteers come into their own, supporting the girls as they work and also helping them learn English, one of the most popular classes. Each house has a specially equipped study room, complete with computers with internet connection, which the girls are encouraged to use to broaden their horizons.



*Latif Aliza with the British Ambassador, Clive Alderton*

# Beyond Four Walls

**WHEN MOUNTAIN PROPRE** did their clean-up of Jbel Toubkal in May 2011, the girls of Education for all were keen to play their part. Unfortunately they were too young, but that didn't stop them donning their Education For All T-shirts to do their bit for the environment. They discussed their idea with Latifa Aliza (sister Latifa, as all the girls call her).

"The girls said they would like to start it, to clean our class, our school, Asni, Ouirgane, because they see the need to clean their life. People see them and say these girls they learn a lot. They explained to the people in the villages that you need to sort rubbish, that you don't mix things, and it's good things to show the people in the village. Because these girls now have education they explained why they were doing it, rubbish does bad things for the environment, we need to respect it."

A bonus was that the villagers weren't seeing a foreigner picking up litter, they were seeing their village girls doing it, and when someone asked them why they did it they had a good answer, a green answer. "We do this because it is our village; rubbish is bad for our animals and the children, but mainly because we'd like our village to be the best place in the area.

"I'm very proud of them because they are our ambassadors for all of the villages," says Latifa. "When we visit the villages we find the best girls in all of them are the girls who have been to EFA. You find our girls are different. They speak Berber, Arabic, French and English. I feel very, very happy because these are girls from Education For All."

As far as Mike McHugo is concerned, the fact that the girls did it themselves is as important as the actual act of picking up litter.

"Once they begin to start doing things themselves that's hugely impressive, when they begin having the motivation, the confidence and the ideas. It was their idea. That's the only way the clean-ups work, when people want to do it themselves."

Which would indicate that one of the aims of EFA, to enable the girls to become confident, capable, compassionate young women, seems to be working.

But not everything is directed at education. Education For All makes sure that as often as possible the girls will be off on a jaunt; to paddle in the sea and wiggle their toes in the sand at Essaouira; to take a ride on a raft made of oil drums at the Cascades de Ouzoud, and even a tree-planting in Marrakech ended with a picnic and games – yet another first in the young mountain girls' catalogue of new experiences. As is the opportunity to learn about other cultures and countries from the international volunteers that arrive at the boarding house doors.

"I think this is so important, very, very important," comments Latifa. "Why? Because the girls in this house they meet volunteers. They know what the world is. EFA gives them all the world in their houses. When one of the volunteers came for the first time, they explained to the girls where they came from, what they eat, their religion, things like this. The girls didn't know about other countries. In the beginning they think all the people speak Arabic. But now they know that over all the world the religion is different, the language is different, the life is different. You can live in the United States, but the people from the north are very different from the people in the south. Now the girls know this."

And their first sight of the sea?

"They were so excited when we arrived to the beach. They thought that the water is just in the river. The never think that the beach is something very big. They see it on television, but they think it's another world, but now to find these things are here in Morocco is amazing for them. I started to talk to the girls about where we go. I show them photos on the internet. We let the girls know about the area we are going to before we leave. Before, when we said we'll go to the Cascades at Ouzoud, they said okay, but they didn't have any idea where we were going or what they could do, but now I talk with the girls a week before and say we need to do this, to take these shoes, water, now it's more organised."

## Five Years On

**OF THE TEN YOUNG GIRLS** who nervously snuggled up in their first 'own bed' seven years ago, five went on to pass their baccalaureate and win a place at university. They have become confident young women, aware that they have something to offer the world, even if that world should simply extend to the betterment of their own village. But when they finished their first three years with EFA they posed a quandary. How can you educate a girl and expand her horizons and then simply say goodbye when her three years are done? The answer is – you can't. But neither can they stay at the boarding house, taking up beds that other young girls need. So there really is only one answer – you build another house for the girls from the three houses who are moving on to the lycée. Up till now the existing houses have been able to cater for those girls, but their number is growing, with more girls each year getting high grades and wanting to continue their education. In September 2013, in time for the beginning of the new academic year, a second house was built in Asni, to accommodate the girls from Asni, Ouirgane and Talaat who had reached lycèe age. But with greater success comes greater demand for the limited number of places Education For All can offer.

"Leaving aside the fact that the girls from the EFA boarding houses have an exam pass rate of 80%, twice the national average," says Maryk, "we are receiving far more applications for places than beds exist, in complete contrast to seven years ago, when Hajj Maurice had to almost beg for girls to be allowed to continue their studies by staying in one of the houses."

You might imagine that the success rate of the girls from EFA might be the cause of envy and bad feeling from some of the schools in the area, but it's totally the opposite.

"We are receiving so many applications now that we are having to set quite strict criteria," comments Latifa Aliza. "The directors and teachers of the schools are a wonderful help because they know which of the girls really do come from poor families, but also those who have good exam results and the academic will to study. That's very important, because we can't afford to offer someone a place who isn't inclined to study. That could lose another young girl her chance in life."

And the growth goes on. A second lycèe house is being built in Asni, to be completed early in 2015. In the meantime, a house has been rented and fully equipped in time for the beginning of the academic year, to accommodate the next group of girls who have completed their college education.

When the group of friends who started Education For All seven years ago, it's highly unlikely that they thought that five of those shy young girls who walked through the door at Asni would move on to university, to study such diverse degrees as biology, French, Islamic Studies and Information Technology. An incredible fifty percent of the original intake. But just like when they came of 'educational age' when they completed college, and EFA had to make the decision to build another house to cater for their education at lycèe level, they are being supported while they continue their university studies.

Khadija Id Ahmed Ou Ali was one of those first ten girls, so shy that she barely spoke to anyone for the first couple of weeks. Now, at nineteen, she is a confident young lady, totally fluent in English, Arabic and Berber (although she admits she's a bit shaky in French), who has just completed her first year at Marrakech university.

"I arrived at Asni with my father and we didn't know where the house was. We didn't have our own Education For All house then, so we started asking people. We started knocking on doors for a long time and finally my sister Latifa heard us and opened the door. I was very scared. It was the first time I was going to another place to live without my family. But it was a great day for me, I felt like this is really the beginning for me, the beginning of my real life. Okay, I knew that I'm going to study, but I didn't think that I would go this far. I thought maybe I study for a while, for a year or two, then I maybe go home. I didn't expect that all these great things would happen to me with Education For All."

After four years of study Khadija was so convinced that she would go to university that she began preparing her family for her leaving well in advance.

"I always imagine the future, so I started telling my parents two years before I went to university that I would be going. I didn't know if I was going to succeed or not, but again something inside me told me I'm going to complete my studies. The first year has been difficult, but now I'm imagining myself being a doctor or a teacher of biology."

The girls currently at university in Marrakech regularly go back to the house in Asni and talk about university life, particularly how it might seem a target to

aim for but it is hard work and there are other directions the girls can go. One of the current final year girls will be taking up a place on a training course in patisserie in nearby Tahanout, and a French computer company has approach Education For All about sponsoring a trainee in information technology.

The reality is, though, that not all the girls will either want to go on to further studies or even be able to.

"We've got to be realistic," says Mike. "There is a drop-out rate, that's only to be expected, and thankfully it's very small, but at least the girls will go back to their villages and be able to offer something, even if it extends no further that making sure their own children get an education. We're looking at trying to provide some form of pre-school education in the villages, and this would be an ideal way for the girls to help their communities. Because surely that's what education is all about. It's not just to make you a clever person, it's to give you the skills and opportunity to help others."

Hard work and high ideals can carry you far, but it is the words of those who have been helped to achieve a life beyond their dreams that might carry you further still, as Khadija expresses so eloquently.

"There's something I really want say; we thank everyone because there are a lot of people helping, some people we know their faces, some their names, some we have heard about and some we don't know, so I really thank all of them. And I want to tell you that these girls haven't been just girls, they have been a whole family. When I started from my village I was the only girl to complete their studies but now there's six or eight girls completing their studies from my village. So there is a big change.

"So these people aren't just helping the girl, they are helping the whole family, and by helping this family they are helping a whole community and this community is going to give for us another generation and more people educated because I truly believe the education is everything in life.

"Thank you everyone, whether they are near to us or far away, because they have to know that we are very thankful. We know there are a lot of people helping, we know they are working for us, we know they are happy for us, we know they are doing a great thing for us, so they really deserve a big thank you."


GRANADA

CHAPTER 6

# By Bike Through The High Atlas Mountains

The riders assembled behind the ambulance; the more powerful who might see the day as a trial as to how they would cope with the 'Ouka Monster', one of the steepest étape in the cycling calendar, and those who simply wanted an exhilarating ride under the blue Moroccan skies. Organised as a fund-raising event for Education for All, the riders had the bonus of knowing they were raising funds to provide homes for girls from the poorest of Moroccan families so that they might continue their education and create a better future for themselves, their children, their families and their country.

The ambulance moved off, with almost two hundred riders jostling for position to get a good start to the day. It shepherded the cyclists along the perimeter fence of the Moulay El Hassan Grand Prix Circuit onto the main road to Ourika where, after a couple of hundred metres, its flashing lights and screeching siren signalled the beginning of the second Marrakech Atlas Etape.

For experienced riders the first thirty kilometres to the staging point at Ourika, (which for some reason is known as 'Scorpion City) is a warm up, a chance to stretch the legs in preparation for the thirty-five kilometres to the summit, an unrelenting climb to 2,624 metres without flats and dips to ease the legs from the interminable turning of the pedals. For others it's the turnaround point, and the slow, steady rise to 850 metre from the flat plains of Marrakech can feel equally as unrelenting, although with the comforting thought that once they've fed and watered at Scorpion City, it's downhill almost all the way home.

In total contrast to the first étape in 2013, when the day began in chilling mists and stayed that way all day, other than for those who reached Oukaimeden, where the skies were bright and sun warmed their arms – briefly – this year experienced glorious weather, more the kind to spend the day lounging on the beach than pedalling. The constant to-ing and fro-ing of the backup vehicles, provided by co-sponsors, Argan Extreme Sports, dispensing water, bananas and the occasional puncture repair made sure that no-one suffered from the affects of the heat, and it was with a sense of pride that everyone who set out returned under their own steam.

Timothy Madden is an experienced triathlete, and has been cycling in Morocco for years. This was his second Atlas Etape. "On the way out there's a peloton that's moving along pretty good. And then these strong guys got out in front. Those guys are really strong. Because you are riding out with these guys and you get your adrenaline going fast, you put so much in, but once you get away from the pack it's a lot harder. You are making a balance, do I slow down but if you do you have to work harder to stay in the pack. It's much easier because of the drafting, something like twenty to thirty per cent easier."

Sit at the table below the last snows on the mountains at the ski resort of Oukaimeden with Chris McHugo as he stamps the cards of arrivals and notes their time, and you realise just why the Marrakech Atlas Etape is so special. From fourteen-year-olds Abderahim, Yasin and Dejamal, who were so determined to finish the course that they pushed their bikes up the seemingly never-ending bends of the last two kilometres to the turning point, to Eddy (short for Edwina) Brocklesby, who completed her fourth Iron Man in 2013 – at the age of seventy! – the event is open to everyone, whatever their age, experience or energy level.

"That was really tough," says Eddy, not pulling her punches. "I think it's the consistency of just going up, up, up. I don't think climbing the actual hills is the issue. There are 2,300 metres climbing in Iron Man and that's about the same as this, but I think it's something about the consistency of it and you don't get any relief. It's tough, but fabulous, absolutely brilliant."

But while the going up might be gruelling, the coming down is another matter altogether.

Chris Gurney made the climb to Oukaimeden in the first étape in 2013, but all he saw on the way down where ghostly figures coming toward him

through the mist. The views were different this year. "The coming downhill was just awesome, absolutely amazing. You realise you were just climbing and climbing and climbing and you don't realise until you are coming down just what it was you were going up. And you can pick up some speed, we were going down at fifty-five kilometres an hour. It was a bit tougher than last year because of the heat, but I couldn't recommend it highly enough."

Every event needs a character, and the Brompton that James Tuffs completed his second Atlas Étape on appears to be filling the role. It might seem a bit masochistic to tackle the Ouka Monster on a folding bike with wheels not much bigger than a large dinner plate (which probably means that James' legs have to go around three times more than other cyclists') but despite having said he wouldn't be back at the end of last year's event he was there again at the starting gate this year. "The views are truly, truly stunning. I've actually seen it this time around, which is a bonus. It was fantastic, beautifully organised, great weather, but for us non-acclimatised people it was bloody hard work. Nice sense of achievement now though." And he still took time on the long ride into Marrakech to stop at the side of the road and phone his wife to assure her that yes dear, everything's fine.

When sixteen-year-old Chaouki Addad returned to the Grand Prix Circuit two hours and seventeen minutes since he waved goodbye to the ambulance, he was a bit surprised to see it almost totally devoid of human beings, until he realised he was the first one home – he'd won the sixty kilometre leg!

"It was a really strange feeling because I didn't even know that I was ahead of everyone. It was slightly hard at times, but I just kept going, and it was wonderful when I arrived back at the empty car park and suddenly realised I'd won my section."

Mike McHugo and Gareth Westacott came up with the idea of the Marrakech Etape on one of their long rides in Morocco. They teamed up with Saif Kovac from Argan Sports and Marrakech Atlas Etape was born. Mike was only a couple of years older than Chaouki when he first rode his bike through Morocco, and in the forty years since then has criss-crossed the country on two wheels many times. It was great to see how successful the ride itself was, but there were other things that stood out for him.

"I think it was excellent to see so many young riders this year because there were none last year. These are the up-and-coming riders that will help

put Morocco on the cycling map. It was great to see Chaouki, a sixteen-year-old Moroccan boy win the sixty kilometre leg, and the determination of the three fourteen- year-olds to get to the top was remarkable. We also had a father-and-son team, Hamoud and Youssef El Foukai, who's fifteen. Hamoud was a professional rider for Hamburg and he's now coaching Youssef, who competes all over Morocco and could well become a professional rider himself."

Probably more than any other event of its kind the Marrakech Atlas Etape stood out because of its inclusiveness. "That really impressed me,' says McHugo. "We had riders from their teens to their seventies, almost thirty per cent of whom were women. We had an enormous amount of individual and community support but also teams and individuals sponsored by Moroccan companies and non-Moroccan-owned businesses based in Marrakech, mainly in the tourism sector. There were a lot of riders from the UK and other parts of Europe, but it was great to see the number of Moroccan riders taking part and communicating with the other riders in whatever way they could."

Saif Kovac had trained hard for the event, but at the last minute gave up his hope of completing the ride to be part of the support team.

"I really wanted to be out there, but on an event like this it is so important to have full back-up available to cover any eventualities that I decided to ride with one of the support vehicles. It's a spectacular ride, and an event like this can only help develop Morocco as a cycling destination. The word spreads from this type of thing."

"Many of the riders were hugely complimentary about the friendliness of the event," adds Mike McHugo. "Not just the event, but the friendliness of the Moroccan people they passed on the road, the little kids giving them a high-five, people encouraging them from cars and mopeds, and I think the friendliness of the event comes from the friendliness of the people of the country. We intend to keep it relatively small, small enough to remain friendly, because it's not easy to have a friendly event when there are thousands competing. Obviously the number of Moroccan people and people who have never cycled before taking part will grow, mainly the 60km ride, I think, with all sorts of people doing it."

And James Tuffs, stretched out on a Moroccan rug at the end of the event, a roll-up cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other, will he be back next year? "At the moment, no," he says with a grin. "But I said that last year. It's amazing how time heals the pain of it all."

***The Marrakech Atlas Etape is in support of Education For All and takes place annually on the last Sunday in April. Come and join us.***

*Marrakech Atlas Etape, annual cyclosportif, last Sunday in April*

CHAPTER 6

# So Where Do We Go From Here?

The Kasbah du Toubkal has been the recipient of numerous international awards, including The Knight Frank Award, in association with Condé Nast Johansens for Excellence and Innovation in the Europe & Mediterranean category, for developing a thriving hotel and business in a foreign country, and for their work on behalf of the community; Fodor's Choice as one of the best 36 ecolodges worldwide; British Airways Tourism for Tomorrow, Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards and the Association of Independent Tour Operators 5* Sustainable Tourism Award.

While it is heartening to have one's achievements recognised at an international level, the focus of the Kasbah du Toubkal and Discover Ltd, is, and always has been, progress 'on the ground' and the improvement of services and opportunities for the residents of the villages of the Imlil Valley. To this end, we are happy to consider initiatives that fulfil the criteria of regional development and sustainability. For further information please contact kasbah@discover.ltd.uk.

Please feel free to keep this book, a pdf is downloadable from our website.

For further information visit:

**www.kasbahdutoubkal.com**

**www.efamorocco.org**

**www.marrakech-atlas-etape.com**

**www.facebook.com/kasbahdutoubkal**

**www.facebook.com/mountainpropre**

**www.facebook.com/KasbahMules**

**www.facebook.com/atlasnow**

We hope you have enjoyed this brief story of the Kasbah du Toubkal, the Association Bassins d'Imlil and Education For All, and that it has given you an insight into the important work that the five percent added to your bill does. Without this, the Imlil valley would be a very different place, and the people who live here would have to forgo many of the basic securities of life that we take for granted. If you would like us to keep you up to date with all the new developments that are taking place, please sign up for our on-line newsletters, details of which are on the last page.

***We look forward to seeing you again at the Kasbah du Toubkal.***

***Insha'Allah***

*From Mike and Chris McHugo, Hajj Maurice,*
*and everyone at the Kasbah du Toubkal and Education For All.*

## Discover Ltd

# Moroccan Objectives for The Kasbah du Toubkal

- To be a showcase/flagship development for sustainable tourism in a fragile mountain environment.
- To be a viable business involved in the development of the Moroccan economy and its growth.
- To contribute to the enhancement, viability and vitality of the life of the local community.
- To be a Centre of Excellence for academic work on the High Atlas Berbers and in Morocco.
- To be an exclusive mountain retreat providing exceptional privacy and entry to almost anyone.
- To continue to generate a change of attitude/thinking in our guests through exposure to something different.
- To modify our corporate behaviour by receiving feedback from the local community.
- To reward stakeholders and create a product that they are proud of.

# High Atlas Tourist code

We are all guests of the local inhabitants of this area. From before the Roman conquest of North Africa the Berbers were the original inhabitants. We owe it to them to respect their environment and culture. We will be the richer if we also learn from them and minimise our negative impact.

## Introduction

THE BERBERS of the High Atlas follow Islam and as such do not drink alcohol nor eat pork. They are tolerant of western habits and wish tourism to develop for the mutual benefit of themselves and visitors. We do not wish to see the area turn into an artificial playground but to develop in a sustainable way for our and future generations. Please be considerate during your stay. By following the Code of Conduct below we believe you will not inadvertently cause embarrassment or damage to yourselves or our hosts.

## Protect the natural environment

- Limit deforestation – make no open fires and discourage others from doing so on your behalf. Where water is heated by scarce firewood, use as little as possible. When possible choose accommodation that uses kerosene/gas or fuel-efficient wood stoves.
- Remove litter, burn or bury paper and carry out all non-degradable litter. Imlil has a rubbish collection system – please assist and show good example by depositing litter in the bins. Graffiti are permanent examples of environmental pollution.
- Keep local water clean and avoid using pollutants such as detergents in streams or springs. If no toilet facilities are available, make sure you are at least 30 metres away from water sources, and bury or cover wastes.
- Plants should be left to flourish in their natural environment – taking cuttings, seeds and roots is illegal in many parts of the High Atlas.
- Help your guides and porters to follow conservation measures.

## Respect local traditions, protect local cultures and maintain local pride

- When taking photographs, respect privacy – ask permission and use restraint.
- Respect religious and cultural places – preserve what you have come to see, never touch or remove religious objects.
- Giving to children encourages begging. A donation to a project, health centre or school is a more constructive way to help.
- You will be accepted and welcomed if you follow local customs. Use only your right hand for eating and greeting. It is polite to use both hands when giving and receiving gifts.
- Respect for local etiquette earns you respect – loose, lightweight clothes are preferable to revealing shorts, skimpy tops and tight fitting action wear. Hand holding or kissing in public is disliked by local people.
- Visitors who value local traditions encourage local pride and maintain local cultures, please help local people gain a realistic view of life in Western Countries.

***Based on Tourism Concerns Code of Conduct developed for the Himalayas***

This Code of Conduct has been endorsed by:
The Village Associations of the Imlil Valley, The Governor D'Al Haouz,
The Centre de Patrimoine de Haut Atlas, The Minister of Education,
The Minister of Tourism, The Mountain Guides Association,
The Association of High Atlas Tour Operators
and all with an interest in the area.

# Time Line: Building Kasbah du Toubkal

| Date | Details |
|---|---|
| 1937 | Caid Souktani builds a summer house in Imlil |
| 1942 | Club Alpine Français opens refuge in Imlil |
| 1954 | Mike McHugo born in Croydon, UK; Omar Ait Barmed born in Imlil, Morocco |
| 1956 | Moroccan independence from France. Caid Souktani leaves Imlil for the last time |
| 1969 | Chris McHugo firsts visits Morocco |
| 1974 | Mike McHugo first visits Morocco |
| 1978 | Mike McHugo and Omar Ait Barmed meet in Imlil on recce for Hobo Travel |
| 1978–88 | Hobo Travel camping expeditions to southern Morocco |
| 1986 | Hobo Travel becomes Discover Ltd |
| 1989 | King Hassan II publishes tombstone on Tourism Investment in Financial Times |
| 1989–92 | Omar in negotiations with owners (60+ individuals) over derelict building above |
| 1991 | Omar Ait Barmed trains in France as a mountain guide and becomes known as Maurice |
| 1992–96 | Sorting out Kasbah Du Toubkal paper work |
| 1995 | Rebuilding of Kasbah Du Toubkal by Omar and the workers of Imlil |
| Aug-95 | Flash flood in Imlil – deuxieme catastrophe |
| Oct-95 | Opening of the Kasbah Du Toubkal as a field study centre |
| 1996 | Martin Scorsese converts Kasbah Du Toubkal into a Tibetian monastery for his film *Kundun* based on the life of the Dalai Lama |
| 1997 | Association des Bassins d'Imlil (ABI) formed |
| 1997 | Local Rubbish Clearance initiative started |
| 1998 | Highly Commended Green Globe Award for sustainable tourism; Imlil connected to the national electrical grid |

| | |
|---|---|
| 1999 | Imlil reconnected to telephone landlines; first en-suite rooms built; Omar Ait Barmed goes to Mecca and becomes Hajj Maurice |
| 2000 | Grand Salle (conference/salle polyvalent) built; NATO ambulance given to ABI |
| 2001 | Six more en-suite rooms built |
| 2002 | Tourism for Tomorrow Award for the built environment |
| 2004 | Village hammam initiative; Responsible Travel Award for mountain environment |
| 2005 | Moroccan Ministry of Tourism Award for Sustainable Tourism |
| 2006 | Education for All (EFA) established |
| 2009 | First EFA boarding house opened |
| 2010 | ABI buys hearse; second EFA boarding house opened |
| 2011 | Third EFA boarding house opened; ABI buys rubbish truck |
| 2012 | Conde Nast Johanseen Award for outstanding excellence; fourth EFA boarding house opened |
| 2013 | Inaugural Marrakech Atlas Etape; first six EFA scholars pass their baccalaureates and go on to further education |
| 2014 | Second Marrakech Atlas etape; fifth EFA boarding house opened |

# Aphorisms in the Mirador

God shall know them by their deeds
Leave the world more beautiful than you found it
Dreams are only the plans of the reasonable
There are many religions but only one god

Please feel free to keep this book.

For further information visit:
**www.kasbahdutoubkal.com**
**www.efamorocco.org**
**www.marrakech-atlas-etape.com**

To read Derek Workman's light-hearted diary
about his fund-raising bike ride for Education For All,
visit **http://bit.ly/ridemorocco**

KASBAH DU TOUBKAL

EDUCATION for all

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MARRAKECH ATLAS ETAPE

MOUNTAIN PROPRE