

## Top of the world:

### The day Mohammed (s) took us to North Africa's highest mountain

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There are some places so precious that you scarcely want to share them. The Kasbah du Toubkal retreat, located at the foot of the High Atlas Mountains, is one of these.

It's only a one-hour drive from the maddening medinas of Marrakech but it feels remote. Perhaps it's the winding drive up the lower foothills, or the mule that's waiting to carry your luggage when the road unexpectedly finishes, but by the time you push open the old large wooden doors to the Kasbah everything else feels a world away.

The product of a Berber and European partnership, the Kasbah is run solely by locals who believe the beauty of the Toubkal National Park should be accessible to all. To this end, the Kasbah, which funds local educational projects and has been awarded several environmental awards, has a range of rooms from their basic yet comfortable dorms to luxurious suites.



*Mountain high: Just one hour from Marrakech lies the little-known hideaway of Kasbah du Toubkal*

But whether you pay 40 euros or 400 euros, the highlight of the Kasbah is the shared space. On our first morning, we found ourselves drinking in the 360-degree panorama of the mountains from the roof terrace as we sipped our mint tea.

I had planned the week-long trip to celebrate my dad's 62nd birthday and we had set ourselves the challenge of climbing the highest peak in Northern Africa. The four-day trek was to take us from the arable low valleys to the summit of Jbel Toubkal, standing at 4,167 metres. With Mohammed the guide, Mohammed the cook, Mohammed the Muleteer and his trusty mule we set off.

All the arrangements were organised by the Kasbah and the logistics of the operation were flawless. The first day's venture to the Azzaden trekking lodge took us through green valleys, fields of fruit trees and past Berber villages.

Electricity has only come to some of the villages in the last fifteen years and there are visible remnants of the ancient, seemingly biblical past.

An easy four to five hour walk from the Kasbah, the lodge is a good day trip for families or those seeking a manageable trek with spectacular views.

On the second day we started to climb, passing through the scree-filled gorge to find a large, pillow-plumped carpet laid by Mohammed-the-chef beside a waterfall.

A delicious, three-course meal was miraculously rustled up and as my dad and I settled down to enjoy the sunlight reflecting off the snow-capped peaks, I began to think our fears about the ascent were somewhat exaggerated.



*The only way is up: Melanie's dad gazes at the summit from the comfort of the Kasbah*

Famous last words. As we passed the 2,500metre mark, the wind picked up and the mountain felt less hospitable. Mohammed-the-muleteer left as the path became too tricky for the mule and promised to meet us at Toubkal base camp.

It proved to be a long walk and we arrived at Refuge de la Tazarhart, perched at 3,000 metres, tired and hungry. With only one main room we found space on the floor for our sleeping bags and tried to rest amongst the snoring bodies.

My dad had developed a headache and could not sleep, which we hoped was just light altitude sickness that would rapidly disappear. We had left the well-provisioned hotels of our first two nights far behind and these communal lodges, high in the mountains, were to be our resting places for the next two.

We waited, listening to the deafening wind, for the sun to rise and at 6am we put on our crampons and grabbed our ice picks. Mohammed-the-guide gently warned us that this day would be long as we passed over the summit of Tazarhart at 3,900 metres in order to arrive at the Toubkal lodge.

We spent the day in silence, bent double, low to the ground as we ascended, trying to stay on our feet in the face of brutal winds. Crossing narrow, icy shelves over drops of hundreds of metres gave me the adrenaline kick I'd been secretly holding out for. We saw no fellow Gore-Tex-clad climbers all day and, crouching behind a rock for respite, the arable plains below seemed very far away.

Eight hours of trekking through great white peaks, deep gorges and striking changes in rock formation, and we finally arrived at Toubkal lodge - positioned at the foot of the highest mountain in Northern Africa.



*Mohammed (the guide) kept Melanie and her dad's spirits up through altitude sickness and high winds.*

For those keen on a shortcut, there is actually a six-hour walk from the village of Imlil, where our first night Kasbah was located, direct to the base camp, but why make things easy on yourself, the longer hike is well worth it.

The base camp has two large popular lodges with bunk beds to accommodate a couple of hundred people and it is less than 1,000 metres from the summit. But looking at the ant-sized silhouettes on the steep, white ridges, the top of North Africa still seemed a long way off.

My dad's altitude sickness was getting worse, but we both knew he would not sit it out. It started off disastrously. He was stopping every 20 steps and his crampons kept coming loose. He was increasingly uncommunicative and I began to fear my travel piece would turn into an obituary. But after a rest and a consultation with Mohammed-the-guide, dad's nausea eased and we began to make slow tracks upwards.

Four exhausting hours later, we reached the summit. It was all you could hope for - scattered clouds skidding along below with long vistas over the Atlas range and beyond.

We sat together, amongst the other climbers, soaking up the phenomenal view and enjoying the communal elation and relief that was in the air. Happy birthday dad, sorry there's no birthday cake. But his broad smile said it all. Neither of us wanted to descend to the plains and head back to the chaos of Marrakech, wishing we could stay in the wind-whipped mountains where the sun was bright and the air fresh.



*Worth the walk: Melanie takes in the view across the Atlas Mountains after a tough final day.*

**Kasbah du Toubkal:** Dormitories start at 40 euros (around £36) and doubles start at 160 euros (around £142). A standard package for a two-day ascent of Toubkal (including a guide, cook, mules, muleteers, overnight accommodation and food) costs 225 euros (around £200) per person.

More information can be found at [www.kasbahdutoubkal.com/home.html](http://www.kasbahdutoubkal.com/home.html)