

# *JENNY'S BIRTHDAY ADVENTURE*



## **Morocco 2020**

What to do for my 70th birthday? As the eldest of four siblings, there was an expectation of something special, and a reputation to keep up. And, of course, although we would probably deny it, some competition amongst us. A party wasn't going to cut it, although a party would probably form part of my celebrations.

I remembered a place I had come across several years before, the Kasbah du Toubkal in the Atlas Mountains. Since retirement, I regularly visit the Destinations Travel Show at Olympia, and on my first visit there in 2010 or 2011, I had met Chris McHugo, one of the brothers who initiated the Kasbah project, on the Moroccan Tourist Board stand. It sounded just the sort of place I like (un-touristy, quirky, rooted in the community and in beautiful surroundings). I took their brochure and kept it for several years, but had ditched it in a clear-out, thinking it was unlikely I would go.

As a single traveller, I felt (almost certainly wrongly) that it wouldn't be a suitable venue for me, but for a group visit, it might fit the bill, if not too expensive. So in late 2018 I researched a bit online and raised

the subject tentatively with my siblings at Christmas. To my surprise, there was great enthusiasm. When I tried the idea out on my best and oldest friend later, there was also an encouraging response. In spring I began the planning.

The Discover team were very helpful, efficient and flexible. I was starting a year ahead but didn't know how many people we would be. I didn't want the party to get too big, or impersonal, so chose those I invited carefully. Amongst the seven friends who came many didn't know each other, but all were chosen for my feeling that they would 'fit in' and get on with each other, would enjoy the hotel ambience, and were walkers. My three siblings and two sisters-in-law all signed up enthusiastically, and we eventually ended up a party of thirteen, aged between sixty and eighty.

My sister and I had taken an 'adventure tour' to Morocco in 2014 which had taken us to many parts of the country, including a couple of nights in Aroumd, with a trek up the valley to the start of the Jebel Toubkal trail at the shrine of Sidi Chammharouch. Although we didn't notice the Kasbah on this trip,



we had loved the area and the weather had been wonderful in late March. So although I didn't know the hotel, I did know the area, which helped as I picked my 'team' and answered their questions. As the time for our visit neared, Discover put me in direct touch with Lahcen Igdem at the Kasbah to plan some trekking and a special meal for the evening of my birthday. He came up with some unusual, and what turned out to be winning ideas. I met Chris McHugo again at Destinations in February, and he gave me some useful practical information. This enabled me to make final plans, give the party instructions etc., but as the departure time arrived I became increasingly anxious. It was a big responsibility to take twelve people to a hotel I didn't know for a long weekend in a place where there was nothing to do except hike and enjoy the ambience. Not everyone was as fit as might be necessary to get the most from the High Atlas, nor was everyone widely travelled and used to compromising British standards for authentic experiences. Whilst fully understanding and supporting the Berber traditions that made the Kasbah a dry hotel, this was not very compatible with the celebratory atmosphere I wanted, and I worried that this would prove a problem, either of supply or usage. The responsibility weighed heavily, but of course, turned out to be a completely wasted emotion.

We all took the same flight except one couple, who had a night in Marrakesh and met us at the Airport. The Kasbah organised a minibus to meet us, and by prior arrangement, this visited a supermarket to buy provisions (wine, beer etc.) en route.

The family took the Garden House, a self-contained 'duplex flat' with three double bedrooms, a fully-appointed kitchen and lounge, with a private terrace looking up the valley towards Mount Toubkal. My idea was to use this as our base for evening

drinks together, and we did use it for this purpose but not as much as I expected. The weather was so brilliant all weekend, and there were so many beautiful terraces and covered seating areas around the hotel available for use, all with wonderful views, that we used public areas much of the time. My friends took standard rooms around the hotel which, while not as spacious as the Garden House, were all well-appointed and comfortable. All were decorated in local style using wood, marble, stone, carpets and weavings.

After a comfortable drive from the Airport of about an hour, increasingly snaking uphill alongside a tumbling river and into the mountains, we arrived at the small village of Imlil, the trailhead for access to hiking trails and Mt Toubkal. Lots of tourist shops selling outdoor gear and backpacker accommodation, with a lively hum about it. Discover have a reception office in the village, and had mules awaiting our arrival to take our baggage and lead us up the trail to the Kasbah.

Ascending a steep, dusty, winding path, well-trodden by generations of mules and their muleteers, we soon shed our travel tiredness and within twenty minutes or so, arrived at the massive wooden gates set in a high stone wall of the Kasbah. Once through these, the lush gardens, tinkling fountains and the quaint architecture of the hotel was a marked contrast to the dusty life of those outside, and our hearts rose. We were welcomed on arrival by friendly staff with a ceremonial hand-washing ceremony and Moroccan mint tea, whilst hotel admin was completed.

Our luggage was in our rooms before we were. A quick explore (so many steps and views – and that was just the Garden House!) and unpack before we convened for welcome G & Ts (other drinks were available) in our duplex, overlooking the stunning views. Tonic, and other mixers, were already in the fridge and buckets of ice and freshly squeezed





orange juice were soon delivered to our door. Because it was still winter (we arrived on 29 February) the many trees outside our windows and up the lower valley were still bare, enabling the wider view to be admired, and as the sun set, the bare hills across the valley took on a beautiful golden glow. A delicious three-course dinner was served in the hotel dining room, a charmingly local room of carved wood, columns, low lighting, Berber carpets and hangings with low stools and tables. Before turning in, we negotiated with the manager what would be the most suitable hiking experience for the next day – Lahcen cautioned against the long full day walk I had imagined from reading the online brochure (perhaps having seen the age and state of health of his clientele!) and we settled on a roughly three-hour walk, with lunch and guide provided. After a refreshing sleep, breakfast back in the dining room was a wonderful buffet of nuts and seeds, fruit, fresh bread, jam and honey, boiled eggs, local yoghurt and plenty of hot coffee. Delicious! Then eleven of us gathered for our trek, meeting our excellent and knowledgeable local guide and a mule and muleteer in case any stragglers had need of same as the day went on (they did!). The Kasbah provided walking poles for those who wanted them and hadn't brought them.

We set off through blossoming orchards and walnut groves, following little paths and irrigation waterways along the contours. Some of us were glad to have taken our binoculars, since we saw many birds as we walked, watching woodpeckers amongst the trees at the beginning. Our guide, Abdeslam Maachou, was able to tell us about the flora and fauna, the agricultural products husbanded, the climate and geology – he seemed to be able to answer knowledgeably any questions we had about the local environment and way of life. We came out onto the tarmac road to Tamatert and followed it for a while gently uphill along the side of a valley, then struck off steeply uphill along a small dusty and uneven path. Soon we were in a young pine plantation which provided some shelter from the burning sun, and lots of caterpillars to admire. Eventually, we

made it out onto a bare ridge at over 2,000 metres with a wonderful view of valleys in all directions, the High Atlas and the Kasbah nestling way down below. Descending slowly along open rocky land, on a well-marked path, we came to a flattened area (apparently a football pitch) and found a couple of chaps and their mules, sheltering under a huge rock, who had lit a fire and were preparing an amazing lunch for us. This was several courses, including hot food and drink, all laid out on a cloth with cushions for us to recline on. With the call of sheep and goats echoing off the surrounding hills, and lone shepherds calling to each other, it made for a magical and unforgettable experience.



After lunch we carried on downhill, passing through the village of Aroumd (much improved and with many new buildings since we visited in 2014) where we paused to watch the flocks of choughs tumbling in the air and landing in large numbers on nearby roofs and walls. We descended to the valley floor and climbed up to the road just above to make our way slowly down towards the Kasbah. We were out probably five hours or so, but the day passed really quickly, we saw a variety of habitats and views and returned elated. The two of our party who, for medical

reasons, had not accompanied us had much enjoyed their relaxing day, they assured us, sitting reading in the sun, exploring the local area, and generally absorbing the ambience. We gathered for tea and cake in the Garden House, and to reflect on what we had seen. The evening then followed the pattern of the night before, although we were more relaxed and full of the day's experiences.

The next day was my birthday. The family put up birthday banners around the lounge in the Garden House, and a birthday cake magically appeared out of my sister-in-law's suitcase! We had planned to have bucks fizz there after breakfast whilst I opened the pile of cards and presents that also materialised (and some of which I had brought from home myself), but in the end, we moved this to one of the covered roof terraces as it was another glorious sunny day, and it seemed a shame to be indoors, even with the sliding glass panels open along the

side of the Garden Room lounge. Copious amounts of the delicious fresh orange appeared and I had a jolly time opening cards and presents in the most spectacular location.

Another walk came up next for some of us, a two-hour exploration of another valley and village, for others a return to some of the interesting areas of the day before, or relaxation around the hotel. I much enjoyed being taken along irrigation ditches, through groves of trees and fields of crops, including beautiful blue irises, then into the backstreets of the villages of Mzikene and Arhrene and learning from our now familiar guide. We really went some way to understanding how the local community live and undertake their subsistence farming and met some friendly locals of all ages along the way. A fascinating walk, which also illustrated the reach of the community work funded by the Kasbah, from litter bins around the village and its associated collection to an ambulance service and clinic. It was clear the 5% levy on our bill was being well spent.

The party reassembled on the roof of the Kasbah for a late lunch. I had asked for something light, such as a salad, since we seemed to be eating almost too well, and was relieved when a delicious large salad was served. It was then followed by a platter of couscous! No complaints of course, and it mostly got eaten. We all relaxed in the afternoon, enjoying the sunshine and the ambience of the Kasbah. Some of us booked a slot in the hamman, and enjoyed a good scrub in the hot room and an excruciating plunge into the icy pool afterwards, emerging feeling very alive and ready for the evening.

At 5 pm or so some of us gathered to watch the staff setting up our dinner. At Lahcen's suggestion, I had ordered a roast lamb, known locally as mechoui, which is a whole lamb on a spit inserted into a large sealed clay oven like a tandoor, with a fire underneath. This is a local specialty and it was clearly quite an event since many of the staff gathered with us to watch the lamb being placed in the oven, with an old man (apparently The Expert) being given the honour of so doing. It boded well for the evening. Lahcen had set aside a private room for the party, another glass-sided room on the roof of one of the buildings. We gathered there later for champagne cocktails and to watch the sun go down and cast its beautiful glow over the surrounding valleys and mountains. Magical! The mechoui was served with due respect, reverentially carved by The Expert, and a long retinue of servers who brought the first slices to me. It was, of course, delicious. When we had eaten our fill, the rest was demolished, well deserv-

edly, by the staff and their visitors, which included Hajj Maurice and his wife. He is the key senior local who has been involved in the Kasbah project, both the hotel and the community support that it has generated, from the beginning. At one point, as the muezzin calls echoed up the valley, one of the staff covered our makeshift bar with a cloth – the only time that I felt unsure about whether we were being respectful enough in our use of alcohol. Once the food was finished, including a birthday cake from the Kasbah kitchen, the staff took off their formal uniforms and gathered together a wonderful array of drums and tambourines, which they proceeded to play sitting cross-legged on the floor, taking turns to accompany the rhythm with traditional singing. The atmosphere was wonderful with the inky darkness surrounding us, the lights dimmed and the clear night sky sparkling overhead. One couldn't help but respond to the music and dance. What a wonderful, memorable birthday celebration.

Sadly the next morning our sojourn in the mountains was over. It was sad to say goodbye to these generous, uncomplicated people who had made possible such a fabulous weekend. In the end, it was not expensive since the B&B prices included everything (from tonic and the delicious fresh orange to the hamman) and our one lunch and two dinners were charged at a flat rate. The day's hike including guide, mule and lunch was an all-in cost per head, and I funded the birthday celebration separately. All concerned agreed, that whatever it had cost, it had been worth it. A very special time, and a wonderful venue for a celebration, and in retrospect, all the more memorable because of the UK coronavirus lockdown that followed within a week of our return, and the consequent cancellation of my London party.

