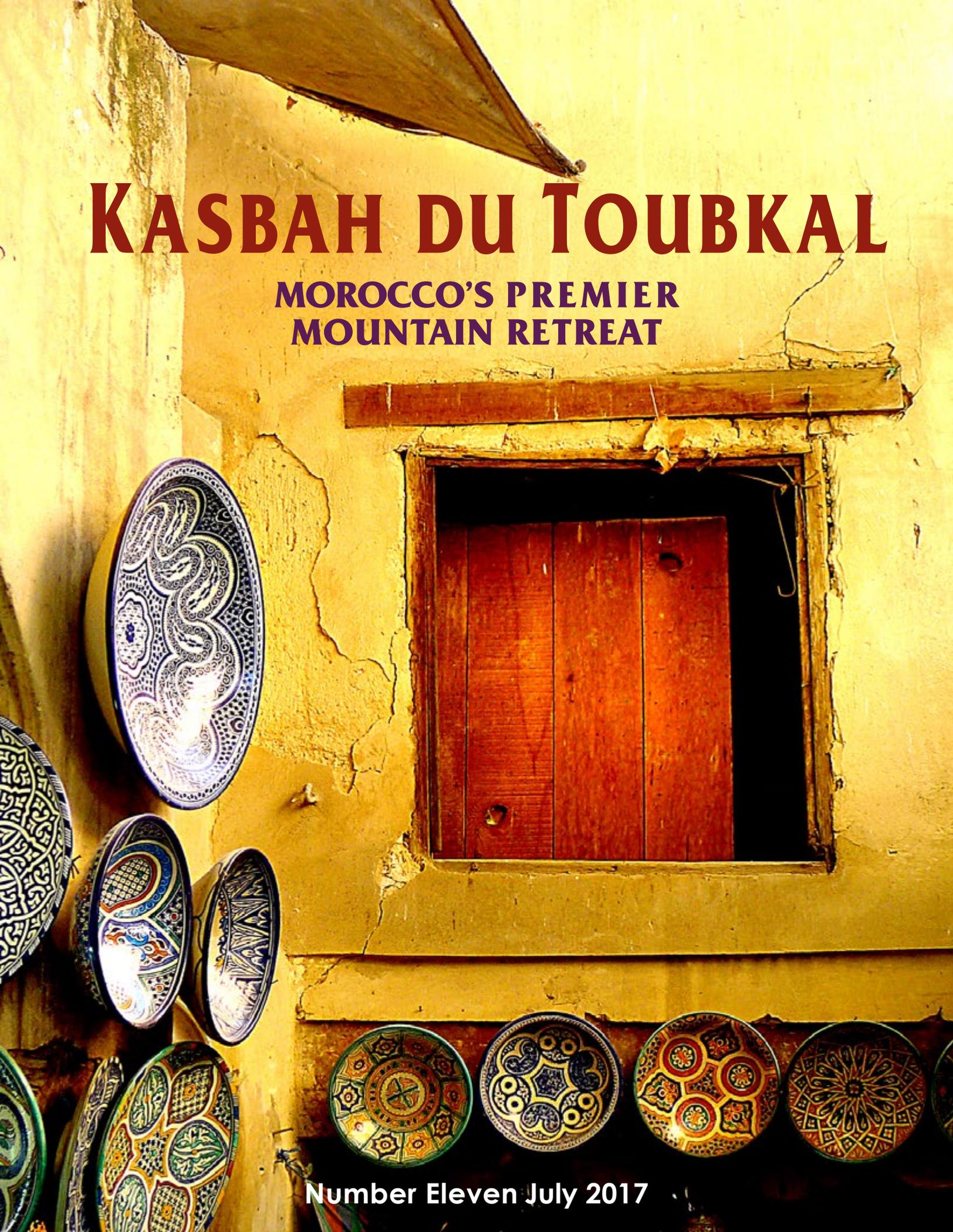


KASBAH DU TOUBKAL

MOROCCO'S PREMIER
MOUNTAIN RETREAT



Number Eleven July 2017

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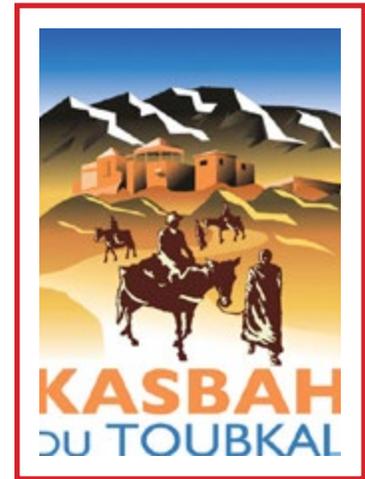


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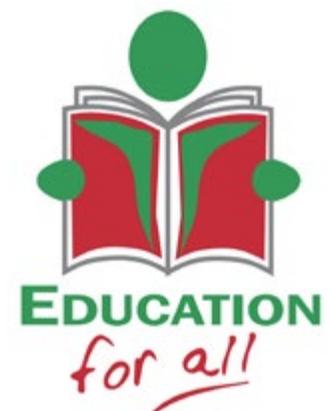
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Summer is a'comin'

It's already here! Long days and blue skies, the time when Marrakshis make their way up from the heat of the city to enjoy the mountain breeze. Strolls through the walnut groves around the Kasbah are the order of the day, with a star-spangled dinner on the roof terrace.

To begin Issue 11 we take a step from the High Atlas Mountains to the Rif Mountains in the north of Morocco to visit an ancient town where it's okay to feel a little blue; discover that not all shopping is done in the tiny shops of the medina or large supermarkets – there's plenty can be bought at the side of Morocco's highways; and are entertained by the ladies of the Raq Sharqi, the butterfly belly dancers of Marrakech.

We feature two walks; a 500km trek from the High Atlas to the Sahara Desert to fulfil a twelve-year-old dream, and a stroll through the small villages surrounding the Kasbah du Toubkal on a wet, cloudy day. Two totally different experiences, but

each rewarding in their own way.

And if you think the Kasbah is just a base for trekking, think again! We are in the process of preparing our new brochure, so click on the link on page 8 to make sure you receive a copy when it hits the digital bookshelves at the end of August.

We are grateful to Colleene Eidlitz for her story about a walk through the villages surrounding the Kasbah - and look forward to hearing yours!

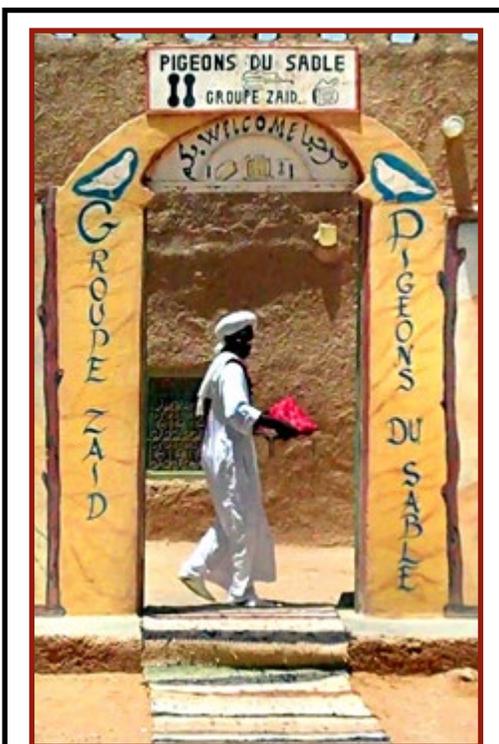
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Editor

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Dreams are only the plans of the reasonable.

What's your story?

We all have a Moroccan story, whether it's an unexpected meeting in the mountains, a magical moment wandering the souks of one of the majestic Imperial Cities, something that made you laugh or even, perhaps, shed a tear. Then again it might simply be your experience of the Kasbah du Toubkal or the wondrous country that is Morocco. We'd love to hear yours. Please send us an email for more information.



Just as Henry Ford was famous for saying you could have his Model T in any colour you wanted so long as it was black, in Chefchaouen in northern Morocco's Rif Mountains you can paint your home in any colour you choose - just so long as it's blue

Take a morning coffee on the Plaza Utan el-Hamman, the 'watch the world go by' main square of Chefchaouen medina. The waiter spends more time hustling people into his café than serving them. He seems to take it as a personal insult if they don't come inside, throwing insults after those that walk away.

Chefchaouen in the Rif mountains takes its name from the Berber word for horns, *ichawen*, reflecting the shape of the mountains above the town that have the appearance of the horns of a goat. Known simply as 'Chaouen' locally it has also picked up the soubriquet of 'The Blue Town', hardly surprising given that almost every available square metre is painted in a shade of blue, from the startling Majorelle Blue of Marrakech garden fame to the washed out shade of a winter's sky.

As ever with these curiosities, you have a Pandora's box overflowing with theories to choose from. Many locals say the blue keeps the mosquitoes away, as it makes the streets look like cool

flowing waters, another that it was introduced by Jews who took refuge from Hitler's *pogroms* in the 1930s, although as it was supposedly founded in 1471 by Moors and Jews who fled Spain you might wonder why they waited so long to give it a coat of blue. Still others will tell you with conviction that the blue is said to symbolize the sky and heaven and serves as a reminder to lead a spiritual life, but there again you may like to believe those that are adamant that it's because the nearby Mediterranean Sea is blue, although commenting that 'nearby' is at least twenty miles away and Chefchaouen can hardly be considered a seaside resort doesn't seem to dent their conviction. Frankly, it doesn't really matter, it's a delightful town whose meandering alleyways bear little of the frenetic that invades other Moroccan cities, and rumour has it that the local government provides all the necessary paint and brushes to the townsfolk to keep up appearances.



I walk into the upper levels of the medina and the higher I go the streets become less tourism orientated and more directed at village way of life.

Small grocers, furniture makers, bakers and artisans fill the tiny shops. Tailors at their sewing machines making kaftans of rich fabrics, sellers of cactus thread with spools of bright colours, sacks of coloured dyes. On the terrace above a grocer's shop a young man fixes the cactus filaments to a hook in the wall before twirling them with a tiny model airplane engine to make the fine threads for hand embroidery. Broad embroidered strips hang from a line displaying his wares. Laid out on the ground in front of a tiny shop are dozens of small frames, representations of the symbol of Chef, a blue door set into a section of wall, waiting for small mirrors. Nearby a young man paints them by hand.

Cast an eye to the sides as you walk to see the alleyways that climb the mountain, some barely a metre wide, where neighbours could simply hand a bunch of mint from window to window if they needed to borrow one for their glass of tea.

At the Librairie El Dai Ben Maymouna piles of second-hand magazines going back decades form a low wall outside the shop. To pass the time the owner reads something from his stock, sat on a small rickety stool in the morning sunlight. In his cluttered shop bundles of tied up magazines share shelf space with dog-eared paperbacks and faded black and white photos pinned to the door show Chefchaouen as it was generations ago. A couple of postcard stands display out-of-date cards, some of them almost curled double by exposure to the sun. Next door is Janine Internet, with its stock of computer necessities, and a place to send modern day versions of the postcards, the photos you took yourself a couple of hours ago with an iphone, but lacking the charm of the stock in the Librairie's worn-out display stands next door. It's a curious contrast, the ultra-modern next to the outdated, but a commonplace sight in Morocco.

This ancient *quartier* is a place of corners shaded by hanging vines, a dispute as a builder blocks a shop doorway with bags of cement before he hoists them above, boys on bikes dodging the pedestrians as they scramble downhill, a father hand-in-hand with his small son, entering a barber shop that has outmoded photos of models with dense lacquered hair taped to his window.

A mini-moment of drama occurs as a man tries to raise a wire supporting a large grapevine that crosses the narrow street. The wire has settled on a telephone cable, which looks as if it is about to be torn from the wall by the weight of the grapes. Mr. Cable is

concentrating so much on poking with his pole that he doesn't notice that the wire has dropped under one of the tiles on his roof. With a mighty heft he pushes the vines up over the phone cable and at the same time dislodges the tile. With a crash, the roof tile hits the ground, scattering shards into the street. He looks around bemused, realizing that he has just created himself another repair job.

The crash makes a baker jump as he steps out his shop. He's carrying a tray of baked round loaves covered in tea towel-sized cloths that he lays on the low frame of a banquette, without the mattress, waiting for the owners to collect them. At one end two metal trays of baked peppers show what someone is having for lunch. At the end of the day, when all the bread has been baked, he will slide trays of honey and rose-water pastries into the oven to cook by the cooling embers of the oven fire.



Stumbling Over Eden

From the High Atlas Mountains to the sands of the Sahara Desert.

In 2005 Steve Bonham found himself on top of Jbel Toubkal, the highest point in North Africa, where the idea came to him that he could walk from the mountain peak into the Sahara Desert. It wasn't until twelve years later, on April 29, 2017 that he set out on his momentous trek of 500 kilometres, in part to fulfill his dream but also to raise funds for **Education For All** and support the education of girls from some of the remote villages his trek would take him through.

Toubkal isn't a difficult climb, it just needs decent shoes and decent lungs. But it is a 'highest spot', and though I like to ramble and explore, getting to the top of things is usually beyond what I do. So perhaps that's why, as I sat there looking out over the High Atlas through air as clear as the day it was made, I had the notion that I might travel over these ancient time-shattered peaks all the way to the desert. And it was immediately obvious that it was one of those ideas that must be nurtured and adapted to, like an unplanned child. To walk from this 'highest spot' into the great, sprawling wilderness of the Sahara Desert was an offer from the gods which I could not turn down. Twelve years passed, until this year I decided the time was right to accept it. I am an obsessive note-taker and the following are excerpts from the Moleskine notebook I carry with me on every journey.

April 29th 2017

Maybe it's me or maybe it's Berber culture, but establishing a specific itinerary and timetable is always elusive and I have found it more my style to embrace the ambiguity and happenstance that seems to go so easily with my time in Morocco. So it was after a good breakfast, some decent coffee, and well-wishes of friends at the Kasbah du Toubkal, I set off down the hillside into Imlil, to drive to Telouet where we would visit the remains of the Kasbah of the 'Lords of the Atlas', the fearsome but compelling Glaoui family.

My guide, Mohammed, known to all as Moha, and I would also rendezvous with two mules and possibly one or more muleteers before setting off on the 500 km trek.

May 4th

Seventy-five miles in the first four days – so much for my planned gentle start! The journey though the western side of the High Atlas was though a joyous outpouring of early summer exuberance, even the toxic oleanda joining in the fun. Moha tells me the Lords and Pashas used to keep it in their bedrooms to kill insects. The eastern, desert side, is much drier and getting unexpectedly very hot much earlier than anticipated. The soil and grit is tinted by the minerals within it and I have become obsessed with trying to name the colours of the mountains. I can spend ages plodding along thinking of the best description – late-apple russet, copper bloom, olive green, dirty saffron, old-soldier beige. The



ground, too, sometimes glistens as if covered by tiny, shy diamonds – specks of sodium chloride washed down from the salt mountains behind us. From the High Atlas we are heading to the Anti-Atlas. We've got about two days to cross this plain - very hot. I walked down a long river bed today, surrounded by hot dry mud and rock canyons - amazing wildlife in the green, including a large turtle hanging around a rock pool.

May 11th - Agdz

Just over half-way there - about 160 miles. Crossing the Anti-Atlas won't go on my Tripadvisor recommended list ! It was a never-ending black basalt moonscape of steep tracks and long, flat, high plain - no water, no vegetation, no people except for the occasional trucker battling through in low gear. The first night was too windy to erect my tent on the high, stony plateau so I made a style of open sarcophagus with my bags to minimise dust and slept in the open air with Black, the big golden dog who has decided to adopt us. A pack of wild dogs roamed around outside, presumably once attracted by the temporarily abandoned road makers' camp down the road . Black sat upright staring into the darkness as they growled their challenges from the gloom. Every so often he would decide they were too close and disappear into the night; there would be a sharp bark or even a yelp and he would trot back and sit down again. Bloody hero! All the same I slept with a Bushcraft knife beside me and tried to recall a drunken conversation with an old tough friend about killing coyotes. It was a gorgeous moonlit night, though, and I fell asleep listening to *Dark Side of the Moon* on my iPod, which is about as spiritual as this old dude gets.

May 15th - Zagora

Made it to Zagora - seventy miles in four days. Tough going and feet in bits but really pleased to be here. Zagora was my original planned destination and is held to be in the middle of the Moroccan desert, approximately 250 miles from where I started. I want to try and get to M'Hammid near the Algerian border, which is where the dunes really get going, but definitely need a rest day first . Also we have to bid farewell to the mules, Hassan and Mohammed, and find ourselves some camels, as mules aren't designed for sand.

There were some really great discoveries getting here, alongside the usual on-going police discussions, being trailed for three days by mysterious older men in white djellabas who took it in turns to ride past us on an ancient Velocette, and an altercation with a juvenile delinquent Egyptian cobra. The highlight, which we came across shortly after we set off from Agdz, was finding the Palmerie.

We followed as far as possible the Draa valley, sometimes across the volcanic escarpment at the top, sometimes along the dirt roads through extraordinary villages containing ancient and decaying Kasbahs

made of mud bricks, and sometimes through the wonderful patchwork of little irrigated fields surrounded by shoulder-height mud walls and shaded by great date palms. Each of the fields is no bigger than a suburban garden but growing an abundance of wheat, alfalfa, barley, or with small orchards of pomegranate, almonds, figs, or apricots . In the flickering sunlight, low volume tropical bird song, serenade of frogs and tinkling streams it was likely stumbling over Eden.

May 19th - M'Hammid

At 12.45 today, N 29 51.474 W 005 38.566, I achieved an ambition held for over twelve years; to trek from the High Atlas Mountains into the Sahara Desert . I had actually been in the desert for about ten days but in my mind's eye it began at the start of the sand dunes. The last four days have been pretty horrible because of the heat - over 40 degrees today - and I was in a sorry state when I sat under a scrubby Acacia tree and marked the final way point.

Of all the tough things - heat, wild dogs, the never-ending scrambling over scree, police harassment, altitude, Egyptian cobras, sleeping habits of camels, a more-or-less three week teetotal vegetarian diet - the unexpected one was, when was I there? When does this, any, journey stop? It was the sight of the sand dunes, beautiful, curved, carved by shadows that made it plain and simple. I was there. Job done!

*Steve Bonham's trek raised over £3,000 for Education For All Morocco, ensuring that three girls will have all their needs met to continue their education for a full year. You can learn more about the work of EFA [HERE](#). His last book, **A Little Nostalgia for Freedom**, is available from [Amazon](#) and steve@stevebonham.net. His new book based on this trip, **Stumbling Over Eden**, will be available in 2018.*



KASBAH DU TOUBKAL

SO much more than just trekking

Kasbah du Toubkal is an extraordinary venture, a transformation from the ancient home of a feudal baron – ‘a ruin with one building that stood out like a rotten tooth in an otherwise empty mouth’ when bought by Discover Ltd in 1989 – into a multi-award-winning Berber Hospitality Centre.

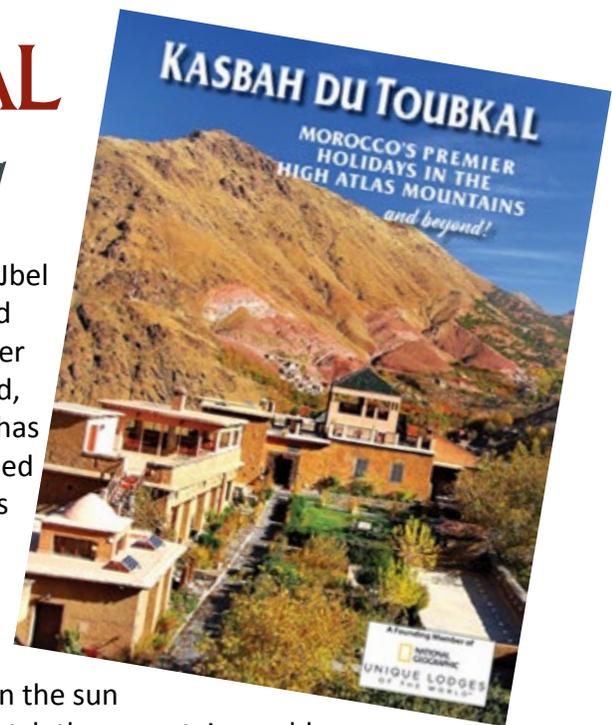
In the mind of most people the Kasbah is the base for some of the best trekking in North Africa. While that’s true, Kasbah du Toubkal is so much more and provides a variety of accommodation and event possibilities to meet everyone’s requirements, from bunk-beds for student groups to the glorious three-bedroomed Garden House with its beautiful lounge, kitchen, an open fire and a twelve-metre plate glass wall looking up towards the mountains and

the peak of Jbel Toubkal. And you will never feel crowded, the Kasbah has been designed with pockets of privacy where you can sit quietly with a book, bask in the sun or simply watch the mountain world go by from rooftop terraces.

For the best of both worlds, the beauty and serenity of mountain landscapes and the exoticness of Marrakech, the Red Rose City, we have created a series of holidays in association with **Riad Les Yeux Bleus**, a glorious restoration of two traditional riads made as one. We can also whisk you away to Essaouira, a magical fortified coastal town on the Atlantic Ocean, built by the Portuguese in the 16th century – a total contrast to the bustle of Marrakech.

We are preparing our new brochure to bring you details of **Kasbah du Toubkal**-linked holidays, which will be ready by the end of August. If you would like to receive it hot off the digital-press and aren’t a subscriber to the **Kasbah magazine**, **click on the brochure cover to subscribe**. If you *are* a subscriber to the magazine, all you need to do is anticipate its arrival!

*And of course you can also create your own, private, Moroccan memory of a lifetime through **Discover Ltd**.*



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Roadside Marketing

I first became aware of roadside marketing (although not in its strictest sense, that of selling something), in the foothills of the High Atlas Mountains when I saw a small boy of about four sat on a rock beside four large blue metal gas bottles. His job, and that of many other small boys, was to wait for the gas-bottle wagon. If he was big enough he might be entrusted to hold the money to pay for the refills, but if he was only a little'un, as soon as he saw the wagon he would run to get his mama. Sometimes there was no-one guarding the empty bottles, and the wagon driver would blare his horn to attract attention. But if you didn't get your refills, especially in winter time when wood was hard to come by in more remote regions, you would be having cold meals for the next couple of weeks until the bottle man came around again.

There always seems to be something for sale at the side of the road, depending on the season and the region: roses, olives, eggs, chicken, figs, prunes, apricots. Fruit in plastic buckets, olive oil in yellow plastic containers, everything re-cycled. Whole families sit by the side of the road under a shade tree, and if you don't see anyone, as soon as you stop someone appears. In bee-keeping areas you might be tempted to wonder why you see so many large bottles of Coca Cola and Pepsi for sale by the side of the road. These aren't wayside cafés, there to slake your thirst on a hot Moroccan day; the bottles are full of honey, which deteriorates in plastic, so the glass coke bottles are perfect for storing the precious – and expensive – miracle food. At around four hundred dirhams for a 1.5ltr bottle it doesn't come cheap, but it will be some of the best you have ever tasted and will have more health-giving properties than you could shake a medical dictionary at.

As you leave Casablanca heading north or south on the coast road you see fishermen doing their best to cast their lines from the few rocky outcrops not pounded by the blustery Atlantic waves. If they are successful with their catch it may well end up on the family plate, but before that the fishermen will try to sell it to the drivers passing by at speed, laid over a frame or holding it up on sticks to catch attention.

Around Chefchouen they take their marketing seriously, with shaded stalls selling all manner of local produce, but also traditional local headwear, conical

straw hats with brightly coloured pompoms hanging from a wide brim, reminiscent of those worn by the water-sellers of almost any ancient medina. Dates from the Ziz Valley, some of the most delicious in Morocco; Cherries from Safrou near Fez; the best quality hena from Tazine, used in the intricate hand decorations created throughout Morocco; walnuts from Imlil in the High Atlas Mountains, the base village from where ascents of Jbel Toubkal, North Africa's highest peak begin; saffron from Taliouine, Agadir and Ouarzazarte (where you will also find the largest film studio on the world, Atlas studios).

You occasionally see food stalls set up by the roadside catering to the traveller, and when I'm tempted to stop to sample a bowl of couscous with a strange sauce made with unpasteurised local milk poured over it, my friend suggests it might be safer to stick to the wrapped sandwiches we bought at a petrol station earlier in the day. Long hours of driving on twisting country roads are not conducive to gurgling stomachs, and while locals may happily consume milk-covered couscous it might not be the best of things for a tender foreigner to try. I bow to his greater knowledge and his unspoken wish that he probably doesn't want to be driving someone who would be seeking a toilet every few kilometres.



Readers Write

A Walk on the Wet Side

On a grey, miserable day in the High Atlas Mountains **Colleene Eidlitz** had expected nothing more interesting than to cozy up in front of the fire with a book and a glass of mint tea. Instead she experienced a brief moment of unexpected pleasure, stumbling through the wet, rocky streets of the villages of the Imlil Valley

The morning began with clouds hanging over the peak of Mount Toubkal. As the day progressed the few patches of blue became heavy mist and light rain, descending over the mountains ringing Kasbah du Toubkal. I went into the Kasbah's reception area to take mint tea, and bask in the warmth of the wood-burning stove.

Beautiful choral music played in the background, almost like Gregorian plainsong. When I said to Lahcen Igdem, receptionist and mountain guide, that the music is lovely he told me that it was the *Koran* being sung, and for him it's much more beautiful than any music. I didn't understand a word, but the musicality of the voices was captivating.

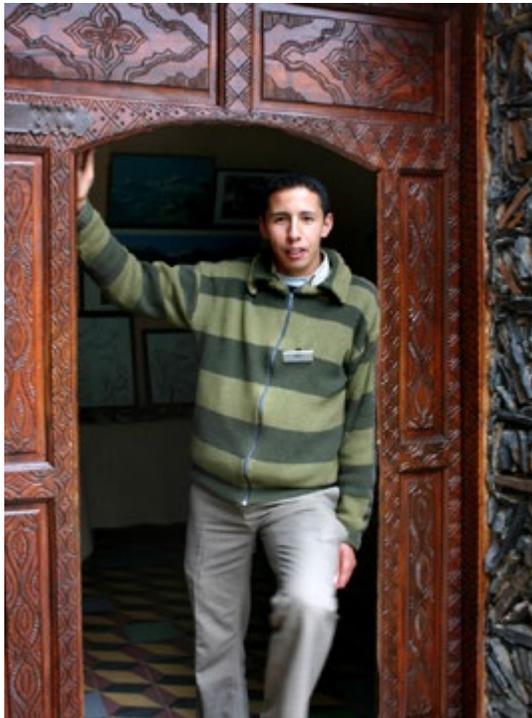
When Lahcen finished his shift he asked if I'd like to take a walk, and despite the heavy drizzle, I did, so he kitted me out in a hat and waterproof jacket and we took a back route down to Imlil.

When we reached the river he showed me where it had been partially re-routed to create irrigation channels after the fearsome flood on 17th August, 1995. Then a boy of seven, he 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. "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.

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.



We walked along worn, uneven paths through tiny villages, most little more than a cluster of houses. Two young girls dashed out from behind a wall in front of a village mosque, almost knocking us over. Their shock at seeing us turned to giggles and they rushed away. We looked over the wall and saw a group of children playing, their grubby cheeks glowing when they looked up and saw Lahcen as he called out hello.

A bearded face appeared at a small window aperture and broke into a smile. It was the village imam, he'd just finished giving the girls a class in the *Koran*.

"Hello. How are you?" he asked in English.

"I'm very well, thank you. And how are you?" We seemed to have reached the end of his command of

English because he didn't answer, but the beatific smile continued. More heads appeared beside the imam's, the whole smiling scene picture perfect.

To western eyes the mosque barely warrants the name, nothing more than a bare-walled box hardly the size of a small cattle shed, but to the village it is an important part of their life. The imam lives in a small room beside the mosque and is fed by the village families on a rotation basis. Many imams will have left their own families in their home village and will only see them rarely. (When I returned a year later a beautiful new mosque had been built, paid for by public subscription, with local people helping in its construction.)

We continued our way down the pot-holed track into Imlil and passed the *hammam*. Apart from being a very important part of Islamic culture, the village hammam is also one of the few places that women can gather to socialise.

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 gossip. Before the hammam in Imlil was opened on December 18, 2004, the inhabitants of the seven villages of the Imlil Valley had to travel seventeen kilometres to Asni to use a public bath. 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 an important service to the local community.

Passing through Imlil we stop at a small shop so I can buy some glasses for mint tea. My purchase is

carefully wrapped in newspaper and put in a small cardboard box. Before they go in the box I say that it would probably be best to leave them in the paper so that they will fit into the pockets of my jacket but I'm told that they will be delivered to the Kasbah. That's what I call service; a steep, twenty-minute slog up a rocky footpath in a slow and consistent downpour, just to deliver six glasses, which didn't even cost the price of a couple of cups of coffee in a café elsewhere.

We left Imlil and took a steep track up the hill on the opposite side of the valley to Arghen, crossing over the new road which had recently been cut in a tight zig-zag up the mountainside. Its rock-strewn surface only usable by mules, 4x4's and trucks, but a life-line to Arghen and the villages higher up the mountain. As we walked Lahcen explained the agriculture of the valley; walnuts are the main crop, lillies, apples, plums, cherries, peaches, wheat and grass to feed the animals.

The streets between the houses are a rocky clam-ber, sometimes recognisable as a path but mostly just rocks of various sizes. As we climbed I heard the sound of the *muezzin* calling the faithful to prayer, his call mingling with that from each of the other mosques in the valley.

Making our way back to the Kasbah evening set in, lights appeared in windows and the heavy mist that accompanied us most of the way turned once again to rain. As we said our goodbyes at the arched wooden gates of the Kasbah it began to rain heavily. Lahcen turned and began his twenty-minute trek home through the dark and pouring rain. I, on the other hand, was rewarded with a steamy soak in the Kasbah's hammam and a candle-lit dinner.





The Ladies of the *Raq Sharqi*

After the wonderful exhaustion of conquering the Ouka Monster in the fifth Marrakech Atlas Etape it's time to relax and celebrate at dark and decadent Comptoir Darna, wonderful in its sparkling exoticness, famed for the delights of its shimmering, sashaying floor show.

Lights fade, vibrant music, four tall men in white robes and turbans descend the stairs with a palanquin shouldered between them. On the small platform a curved figure is sheeted in white. Behind the palanquin sway two women in shimmering floor-length dresses, silver trays, glistening with lighted candles, balanced on their heads. As they shimmy and sway down the stairs the candle flames perform their own iridescent sparkling dance.

A burst of music, and a flurry of red and white butterflies in slit-sided silk pantaloons clasped at the ankle twirl and swirl diaphanous shawls, broad sparklingly embroidered waistbands paired with lustrously beaded and shimmering bra tops; the belly dancers, the luscious ladies of the *raqs sharqi*, enter the room with a fanfare and sensual exuberance. They weave between the tables, their hips gyrating and flicking in a staccato rhythm. It is a thing of beauty and a joy to behold.

Kohl outlined eyes, seductive finger, wrist and pelvic gyrations, with tiny toe-to-heel steps they sashay around the room. Most of the attention is focussed on the young beauties, but I'm captivated by the two older ladies balancing the trays of candles on their heads. Broader of beam and stouter of girth, their movements, nonetheless, have refrains of a more mature sensuality. Were they the belly dancers of twenty years ago?

I watch their dominance of the restricted floor space. When a svelte young ingénue parades her

comehitherance as she passes too closely to a candle dancer, the latter extends her arm in what appears to be part of her dance routine, and carefully but surely moves the belly dance aside. She is, after all, carrying a potential fire hazard on her head, whereas the young girl is merely exhibiting a strategically sexy control over her hips.

As a table of seven men, one of whom has tucked a fair few dirhams into the lingerie of various young ladies, we eventually share the spotlight of which the dancer is the sparkling star. Glasses and plates on our table are moved aside and a gorgeous young thing with flaxen hair, abundant cleavage and a mock-leopard-skin outfit is assisted onto the table by one of the waitresses. After some eye raising shimmering she bends over backwards and executes a perfect arch, her well-filled top directly in front of the gentleman with the an equally well-padded bill-fold. Under the gaze of everyone who can get close enough to the table, he ostentatiously folds a 200 dirham note under each strap of her leopard-skin top.

I'm sitting directly opposite the centre of attention, and my view is of a pair of beautifully formed feet with toenails painted in a devilish shade of crimson. I may not have had the best view in the house, but it consoles me to think that there will be an awful lot of photos of a beautiful upside-down Moroccan darling with bank notes sticking out of her costume, with face of a tired old man in the background, wondering if it's time to go home yet.

People as well as profits

“I often quote a saying by the Dalai Lama,” says Chris McHugo, “that there are bad selfish and good selfish. I like to think we are good selfish.”

From the very outset of construction the intention of Kasbah du Toubkal 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.

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 High Atlas 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 both visitors and the local community if it was to be successful in a sustainable way.

“The Berber are a very proud race of mountain people, and nobody has ever really controlled them,” continues Chris. “The way we’ve done it they have also seen the benefit and although they were probably a bit suspicious at the beginning, 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. From the moment you enter the door you become aware that the title Berber Hospitality Centre really does reflect the ambience and the culture of the Berber people, who are known for their hospitality, consideration and respect for others. The Kasbah may be a commercial enterprise but out of respect for the people who work there, 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 mon-

ey makers is alcohol, but 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.

The first faces you see from the Kasbah du Toubkal as your transport comes to a stop in Imlil, are those of Rachid Isouktan and Hassan Asnaq. 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 will be advised to change into them. If it’s raining you will be offered an umbrella.

Like many of the men in the village, Hassan 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. “Fifteen 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.”

“It feels good to see people coming to the village,” chips in Rachid. “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.”

Promoting awareness of mule welfare issues and standards across the Moroccan Mountain Tourism Industry

The mule welfare initiative supported by the Kasbah du Toubkal has developed since its inception in 2013. For the pack mule of the High Atlas working in mountain tourism, the most significant set of guidelines produced to date are those of the Expedition Provider's Association (EPA), published in 2014 and designed for companies taking British school children on expedition to Morocco.

In March 2015, the Kasbah du Toubkal generously hosted a two-day conference for the ground handlers of the EPA companies and other interested companies. This brought together muleteers, guides, agency managers and owners for a series of workshops, which helped develop awareness of the many welfare issues and abuses that mules are subject to.

EPA members and many other companies have taken the development and implementation of comprehensive mule welfare policies very seriously. EPA's guidance notes on policy development recognise that:

- remote mountain communities are often poor and isolated.
- the arrival of mountain tourism has resulted in an influx of mules and the growth and development of muleteering.
- this has happened without the provision of appropriate training and equipment.
- consequently, there are many serious welfare concerns arising from a poor understanding of animal behaviour, husbandry, health and welfare.



There is much work still to be done, but that is a good thing because there is now an awareness of the problem and an appetite for change. The Kasbah has thus helped transform the landscape by supporting this work and promoting awareness of the importance of mules and of mule welfare locally.

Companies across the mountain tourism sector need to ensure they provide training, equipment and encouragement to those who work the mules. Clients, tourists and other visitors also have a responsibility and an important role to play. By only travelling with companies who work to the EPA standard, by asking to see welfare policies, by asking to see the mule's back before accepting that she is fit to work, by ensuring the mule you take with you is in good body condition, has no wounds and is not lame, by photographing and reporting any abuses to the company you are travelling with, by doing all these things, it is possible to eradicate the unacceptable practices that have unfortunately characterised this industry.

Conclusion

Thanks to the support of the Kasbah and other partners, there is now greater awareness of the key welfare issues that mules are subject to. There is also greater awareness across the sector of what each actor can do to improve welfare. We can now look forward to seeing steady improvements in mule welfare as more and more companies develop and implement policies to ensure that it is not compromised.

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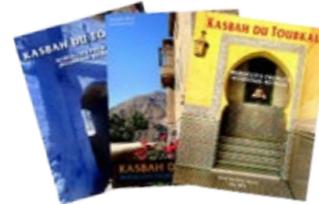
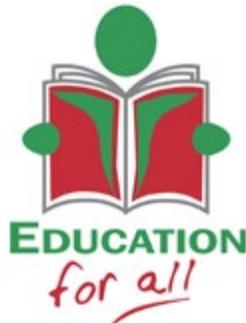


Cindy Ko, aka Cinddidy Travel visits Kasbah du Toubkal

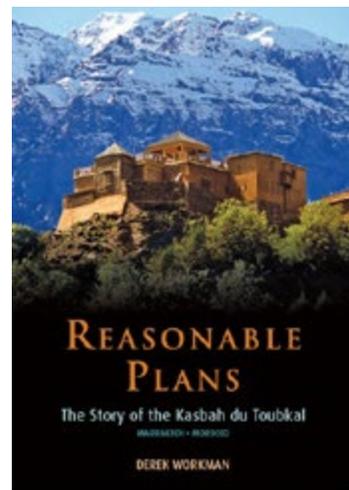
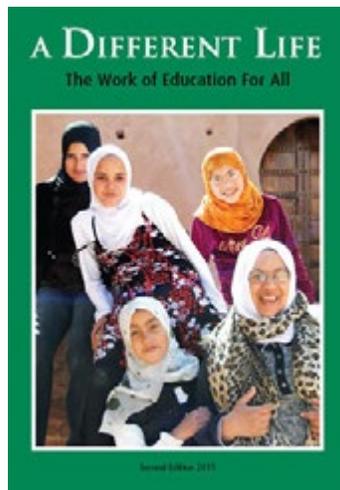
Excellent video from Polish TV in English of Kasbah du Toubkal



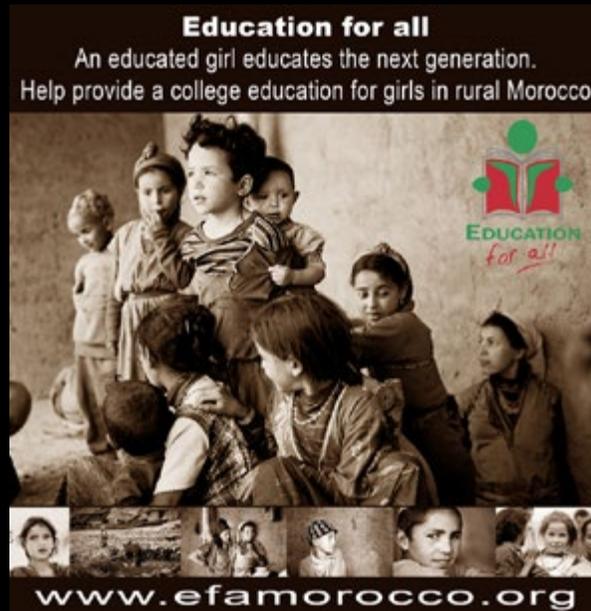
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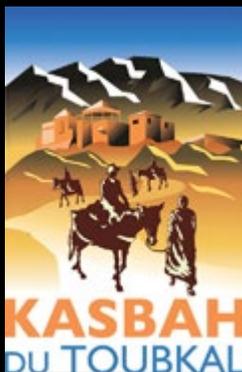
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