A Very Moroccan Cycling Adventure

Route 666

Lights! Camera! Action!

Ouarzawood?

A very proud day for EFA!

Lighting Morocco

Dear Harry and Meghan...

Essaouira
A Once-in-a-Lifetime Day

The cold of winter is becoming a memory and we’re looking forward to the warmth of spring and summer to enjoy the beauty of the High Atlas.

We’re sure you will find plenty to enjoy in this issue of the magazine, but we can’t stop talking about one of the most important events of Education For All’s year – and probably one of the most exciting of its short life; a visit to the boarding houses in Asni by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, Harry and Megan. You can read about it on page 13, with a link to the full story, Dear Harry and Meghan, taken from the viewpoint of the girls themselves.

Morocco is modernising at an extraordinary rate, and Trevor Rowell takes us on a visit to NOOR, the biggest solar power station ever built. Essaouira is the country’s Windy City, renowned amongst wind and kite surfers, but it is also an ancient, fascinating place to explore in its own right. A Stroll Around Essaouira tells you the story in both words and video. And if you thought Hollywood was the granddaddy of studios, Atlas Studios in Ouarzazate is the biggest in the world.

Until next time

Mike and Chris McHugo
...and everyone at
KASBAH DU TOUBKAL

Page 4 • Lights, Camera, Action!  
Atlas Film Studios

Page 7 • Lighting Morocco  
Ouarzazate Solar Power Station

Page 9 • A Stroll Around Essaouira  
Morocco’s famous ‘Windy City’

Page 12 • A Blast from the Past  
Stories from the Archives

Page 13 • A Very Proud Day For EFA  
A Visit From The Duke and Duchess of Sussex

Page 14 • Route 666  
A Very Moroccan Cycling Adventure
If you’ve been enthralled by the romantic deserts and ancient, crumbling buildings of Gladiator, Game of Thrones, Aladdin or Kingdom of Heaven you might be equally enthralled to know that great chunks of them were filmed at Atlas Studios in Ouarzazate on the edge of the Sahara Desert. Or there again, you may be disappointed after you see that many of the apparent stout buildings of the imagination are actually built of wood, canvas and polystyrene. You need to suspend your belief when you pass through the gates of Atlas Studios.

For centuries Ouarzazate was the crossroads of southern Morocco, used by vast trains of up to twelve hundred camels to transport gold, slaves and luxury goods from Timbuktu in sub-Saharan Africa to Moroccan cities, mainly to the souks and traders of Marrakech, returning with that other precious commodity, salt. The camel trains may have disappeared, but you can still get the feel of life in pre-selfie times – a long, long way before – by wandering the lots and sets of Atlas Studios, at 322,000 square-foot said to be the largest film studio in the world.

Atlas was the brainchild of Mohamed Belghmi, who surmised that the dramatic landscapes and proximity to Aït Benhaddou would be just the place for the filming the 1985 blockbuster The Jewel of the Nile, in which Joan Wilder (played by Kathleen Turner) is abducted while on a trip along the Nile and her lantern-jawed boyfriend, Jack Colton (Michael Douglas), charges to her rescue and, as a sideline, retrieves a fabulous jewel. The idea and location took off, and over two hundred major films and television shows have been filmed at Atlas Studios, although Morocco has a history of being a destination for film makers, going as far back as 1897, with Louis Lumière’s Le chevalier Marocain. Marlene Dietrich starred in the 1930 Josef von Sternberg directed Morocco, and Orson Welles filmed scenes of his 1949 Othello in Essaouira, where his enterprise is celebrated with a carved stone plaque of his instantly recognisable features. Martin Scorsese so liked the location that after directing The Last Temptation of Christ in 1988 he was back again in 1997 with Kundun. The Tibetan house, a set created for Kundun and the biggest set in the studios, still stands. Unusually, it isn’t just a
façade, but has a fully-constructed interior used in the film. It now houses a small museum with displays of all the movies recorded in Atlas Studios. (And the story goes that during the scenes Scorsese directed at Kasbah du Toubkal, the nearest location that could be found to resemble the monastery the Dalai Lama stayed in on his long trek across the Himalayas from Tibet to India, almost no-one actually saw him. He was limo-ed in from Marrakech each day, sat hidden behind his camera while he was filming and limo-ed out again at the end of the day’s shoot.) It is also a big favourite with Ridley Scott, who filmed Black Hawk Down, Gladiator, and Body of Lies there.

Egypt is represented by a half-size, faithfully-reproduced replica of the Temple of Karnak, used in the series The Mummy and was the setting for Cleopatra’s court in Asterix and Obelix Meet Cleopatra starring Gerard Depardieu and Monica Bellucci, the most expensive French film ever made at the time of its production in 2002. The film also made use of an ornate Egyptian entrance, later used in The Passion of the Christ, Mel Gibson’s 2004 production of a movie set in Isreal biblical times. Ornate as the temple might be, and it is extremely ornate, the most used set is a full-sized Moroccan-style village that has served as a back-drop for dozens of biblical films.

Aït ben Haddou, an ancient walled town of mud and straw just up the road from Atlas Studios, has been used by many directors because of its massive walls and pink mud houses tumbling down the hillside – quite literally in some places. It was chosen as the location for the African village in Gladiator, where the disgraced general Maximus – played by Russell Crowe – is taken into slavery and trained as a gladiator, creating the scene where Oliver Reed, looking sufficiently Arab-ish, explains to the slaves, especially Russell Crowe, “I did not pay good money for you for your company. I paid it so that I could profit from your death”. (Cut to pile of corpses being picked over by vultures.) Fortunately for Ridley Scott, Gladiator’s director, a few rough poles to act as stockades and a couple of walls plastered with adobe, and his gladiatorial village was virtually there, given the presence of the majestic Aït ben Haddou and the desert landscape around it. A fan of A Game of Thrones would recognize the towered entrance to the town as the scene where Daenerys marches with her army up to the walls of the Yunkai, the Yellow City, where she is received by crowds shouting “Mysha, mysha!”

Aït ben Haddou is more than just a film set though; it is a fortified village whose history goes back almost a thousand years, although the maze of narrow streets and crenulated towers you see these days are mainly from the 17th century. As well private homes, everything from small palaces to modest one-room dwellings, there were communal areas including a public square, a mosque, a caravanserai to house those travelling with the caravans, grain threshing areas outside the ramparts, a fortified granary (agadir) at the top of the village, the last redoubt in time of invasion, and two cemeteries, Muslim and Jewish.

The village layers its way up the hillside, stopping just short of the wall that safeguards the granary, perched on the very top, like a nipple on a recumbent breast. But it’s only as you get closer that you see that so many of
the roofs have collapsed, walls are crumbling, arches fallen in, as the buildings degrade past the point of no return.
From across the dry river bed of the Oued Ounila, Aït ben Haddou looks magical, with its olive groves and date palms, and patchwork fields of vivid green. It’s hardly surprising that so directors have chosen to use it as a set – but there’s no guarantee that Daenerys’ dragons will flap down at you when you visit.
With joy in my heart and cynicism in my brain, Mike McHugo and I set out early from Marrakech on a stunning November day to cross the beautiful Tizi-n-Tichka road over the High Atlas. Destination – Ouarzazate Solar Power Station, otherwise known as NOOR.

Two years ago Penny, my wife, and I cycled the Tizi-n-Tichka pass just as they were completing the rebuilding of the top end of this magnificent route over the mountains beyond Taddert. How they ever built such a road in the first place is a wonder and for years this vertiginous winding route has mesmerised thousands of tourists, including the English musician and lead singer of Led Zeppelin, Robert Plant, who famously said it was the best road trip of his life and he returned time and again to wallow in its splendour.

But.....over-confident from their success on widening the last 10 kms to the col, the Moroccan road builders have embarked on a programme of taking out as many bends as they can on both sides of this 195 km route – and there are many bends. Millions of tonnes of material are being moved as mountainsides are demolished and valleys filled in. Men and machines are crawling over slopes fit only for serious mountaineers and already the recently completed section at the top is slipping away as nature reasserts its dominance.

Man and machine, briefly in control whilst nature sighs before sniggering, then laughing, at the insignificance of man.

So we wondered how puny man would fare trying to harness the sun; not a god to be trifled with. I had read about NOOR, which covers 3200 hectares (6,178 acres) and consumes 2.2 million cubic metres of water per year – in a desert. Heat is stored in wet and dry salt to continue driving turbines to generate electricity for up to seven hours after the sun has gone down. It claims to produce 200Gwh of electricity from a capacity of 720MW of potential generation, without the additional 80MW from the photovoltaics of NOOR IV.

I was ready to dig deep to expose its limitations and contradictions. Wind turbines that claim to produce 2MW do so only when the wind blows between 27 and 56 kph and even then are less than 30% efficient and never even pay off their construction carbon footprint in their thirty-year lifespan. Meanwhile they create noise and are an eyesore in some of the most pristine wildernesses in the world. Hydro Electric Power, is another lie of cheap, clean, endless power, as even the USA is demolishing dams faster than it built them to try and rectify some of the appalling environmental consequences.

Remember how nuclear power was going to be the salvation of the world? Some desperate or sad people still think it is, despite construction costs now spiralling beyond £30billion per unit and still no solutions to deal with radioactive waste or decommissioning.

So is solar energy just the latest excuse to avoid reducing the amount of energy our modern lives consume; a new technological fix from the men in white coats to enable us to light our motorways, manufacture more air-conditioning systems, build electric cars instead of public transport systems, spend yet more hours of our precious lives fixed to computer screens and smartphones? Maybe. That was certainly in my mind as we drove towards the acres and acres of mirrors that have covered the flat rocky desert near Ouarzazate.

We were met by a smiling security guard, then an even more friendly Mustapha Sellam, the site director. Nothing was out of bounds; we could ask anything and got straight answers, we were shown everything and could take any photos we wanted. We could go anywhere and everywhere. Facts and figures spewed forth as Mustapha and I juggled with statis-
tics. We were shown a superb film in a state of the art multimedia theatre that can seat three hundred. We went above the mirrors, underneath the mirrors, and like a latter-day Alice in wonderland, through the mirrors. CSP, HTF, 130 bars of pressure, parabolic mirrors, heliostats, dry cooling, wet cooling, hydraulic stress, CPV, DNR – a whole new technological language to get our heads around. NOOR 1, half a million German built mirrors; NOOR IV, at 243 metres, the highest tower in Africa, surrounded by

54 computer controlled sets of mirrors, each the size of a tennis court with 399 individual reflectors on each. The statistics are bewildering. So NOOR? A white elephant? A typical prestigious project to capture world attention and World Bank money? But take it in context. Morocco has no oil, natural gas or coal, yet as it develops, demand for electricity escalates. It is confidently on target for 42% renewables by 2020, with 40% of that coming from solar. Already a second mega solar site is being built at Midelt. Both sites are on non-agricultural land and non-personal or communal land. They provide employment, both male and female in technical and labouring; up to 7000 in the construction phase and 500 in operational mode. It has been completed not just on time but early and within budget. How often do we hear that these days?

And the water issue? Water comes from the nearby Mansour dam, built to capture irrigation water from the High Atlas to feed the Draa Valley. NOOR consumes 0.5% of the reservoir’s capacity. Compare this with 17% loss annually through evaporation. Its lifespan matches wind turbines at around thirty years but it has already become a world centre for solar research with installations by Japan, China, and South Korea. It is estimated that it will have paid for itself completely after 25 years, including interest on loans. Visual pollution is almost zero. Apart from the tower of NOOR IV, you simply cannot see it until you are next to it. There is no waste to dispose of, absolutely no noise, you cannot hear the turbines unless you are in the middle of the vast site, no air pollution or water pollution.

NOOR. Light. And it does what it says on the tin. It is lighting Morocco. Certainly impressive and it rather shames Britain’s continued refusal to invest in tidal power instead of covering our beautiful highlands with turbines and building yet more astronomically expensive and potentially lethal nuclear power stations. Compare the legacy of NOOR with Sellafield for our children’s, children’s, children’s children.

The peacefulness of the High Atlas Mountains is perfect for practicing yoga. Add to that quality local cuisine and a hammam to take away the kinks and Kasbah du Toukal is just place to either offer a course or take part in one. Click on the image to view this year’s programme.
avenue l‘Istiqlal is the major commercial thoroughfare of Essaouira, but more in the style of souks and cupboard-sized shops jam-packed with everything from kids’ plastic sandals to mounds of sheep innards and gizzards than the chi-chi boulevards of St. Tropez. And a darned sight more interesting.

The lower, port-side, end begins with the usual repetition of tourist shops but as you progress through the bustle and under a series of arches it quickly becomes shops and services for locals; small grocers with pulses and beans sold from big sacks, tins of tomatoes, puree and jars of jam; small teashops selling beghrir - pancakes cooked on a hotplate - with chickens cooking on spits at the side.

I fortify myself with a freshly squeezed sugar-cane juice, spiced with fresh ginger and lemon. ‘It’s great for the healthy’ the vendor tells me, ‘and gives you energy, like Red Bull, but this is 100% natural.’ And I’ve got to say, it’s good, even if it’s twice the price I see a Moroccan pay. There again, it’s still only 10 Dhms, and makes a refreshing change from the coffee I usually keep myself going with.

Through the first arch I pass a shop selling CDs, where I remember standing on my first visit four years ago, absorbing the music that became a perfect soundtrack to the movement on the evening street. But it’s early afternoon now and while the music is more subdued the crowds are still moving.

Just as you approach the second arch, about the halfway mark of your stroll, the Marché aux Grains, on the obviously-named Place Marché aux Grains, is a detour worth the effort. At a small herbalist, its wares displayed in containers painted in rich blue, their labels explaining the herbs usage, nip down the alley at the side, passing a small shop advertising massage des pieds (foot massage) and enter the fish market.

It’s a curious place, its interior a semi-dilapidated mix of awful 1970s excrescence architecture, the fish market itself, with the ancient arcaded outer walls surrounding it filled with herbalists and shops selling brightly coloured ceramics at do-able prices. Tucked in the corner to the left, an area of tables covered in gaudy plastic cloths has three cubby-hole kitchens. Buy your fish at the market, they’ll gut and clean it for you to take to one of the kitchens, where they will grill it for you for 10Dhms. Sit at the long tables and benches full of families and feel part of local life.
thing you see is an open-fronted butcher whose stock consists of unrecognisable bits of animals’ interiors and a couple of chickens. Other shops with something at least recognisable as meat sit next to a Technicolor veg shop sharing street space in perfect harmony with a vendor of ladies pyjamas and towels. Decorated mounds of glistening olives and preserved lemons, a small bowl to sample from; a big handful of spiced black olives costs me 50 Dhms. Handcarts piled with red onions, trolleys laden with khobz – small, flat round loaves – others with bundles of fresh herbs, shops with displays of brightly coloured biscuits and dates, the tantalizing aroma of mint perfuming the air. Drift onward with the trade and evening to find piles of knock-off football shirts and Nike caps; jeans and T-shirts by the thousand, nuts swirled in caramel, freshly steamed snails in a bowl, toothpick provided to wiggle them out. By the time you step through the double arch at Bab Doukkala, the end of the Avenue, the omnipresent Essaouiran wind forces you to lean into it to stay upright, but your senses will have been so bedazzled that it’s easy to turn around and do it all again, just to see what you missed. Which is what I do, but not before I take a short detour to Rue de Zair, a tiny alleyway just inside the wall near Bab Doukkala, where I find one of the most intriguing herbalists I’ve ever set eyes on. I step inside and the floor moves with the sound of walking on a stony beach; argen nut shells, tens of thousands of them. Back on Avenue l’Istiqlal, at 9 pm the street is as busy as at 9 am. Single-seat barber shops give a short back and sides, as much a place to have a jaw with pals as somewhere to get a haircut. Shops still open but now the middle of the street is laid out with ground-level sales set out on blankets, beginning with scattered piles of clothes and shoes, second-hand and end-of-line new. As you approach the entrance to the Marché aux Grains, fish laid out on boxes or on the ground glow under the yellow street lamps, their shiny scales gathering dust from the feet of passers-by. Butchers hope for a sale of freshly ground mince or a few merguez, the splendid tangy sausage. You can buy your khobz and a handful of olives to make a last minute supper. The fried-fish shop I lunched in is still doing good business, with a queue at the door waiting for a table or you can stand in line for a few minutes at the front counter for a paper-wrapped take-away packet of assorted deep-fried fish if you want to keep on the move. Grab yourself a cold bottle of Pommes sparkling apple juice from the shop next door and a couple of peaches from the stall next to that and you have a feast on the hoof. Add a small brown paper bag of almonds and dates in case you get the munchies later. I see the rotund, curly-headed man dressed in a bright yellow jacket mismatching with a pair of broad grey and black striped trousers, sat on a plastic crate behind his display of twenty assorted packets of Camel and Malboro in the same spot I saw him twelve hours earlier. Judging by the speed one of his stock disappears as he takes a deep inhalation, I’m surprised he has any left to sell by the end of the day. Maybe he’s an eccentric who likes the ambience of the Avenue. Running parallel with Avenue l’Istiqlal is Avenue Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, half the width of its neighbour, and while the street might be 90% tourist oriented, it still has a cluttered charm. Outside the Co-operative d’Argen et Femme Berbere a plump lady of indeterminate age put handfuls of almonds into a stone grinder, laboriously turning it to squeeze out the oil. I suspect she’s mainly there for decoration, given the tiny dribble the grinder produces. I offer her five dirhams to allow me to take a photo, which she agrees to, so long as I don’t include her face. Later I stop to take a photo of a small wall
mural when a young man jumps into the image with a big smile. An improvement on the original mural. When I wander home at ten the action still hasn’t abated and I wonder just how many chickens, scarves, sardines or gelabas will be sold before everyone calls it time to go home. The sugarcane juice vendors from earlier in the day have been replaced by stalls selling grilled meats slipped into a khobz to make a perfect take-away supper. I pass by...I’ve still got my small brown paper bag of almonds and dates, in case I get the munchies later.

Breakfast on the roof of Dar l'Oussia is delightful, with views to the left across the broad sweep of the beach as it curves into the distance and ahead over the stalwart towers of the 17th century walls that safeguard the port. The roof-top restaurant is glistening white with lots of open spaces to lounge under a vivid blue sky. The view across the beach tempts me to take a stroll. I live in mountain-locked Chiang Mai in the north of Thailand, 500 miles from the nearest beach. I haven’t seen sea or sand for three years, the temptation is irresistible.

In a city that is a delightful blend of French, Berber and Portuguese architecture, Hotel Dar l'Oussia has been a caravanserai, a grain warehouse and a range of commercial premises before it was bought in 1949 by the father of the current owner, Yves Péllissier, to create a family home. After the family’s return to France in 1955 the building was occupied until 1977, after which it fell into a bad state of repair, but in 2000 a restoration began under the guidance of Mr Péllissier to create the exquisite hotel you see now.

When I arrived the previous evening the weather had been unseasonably cold for April, but a hot shower and snuggle under a thick duvet in a room of warm reds and low lamps for a short nap set me up for dinner in an arcaded restaurant warmed by an open fireplace. Soft lighting, low conversation, attentive but not overwhelming service, with a small but varied menu settled me in. Had the weather been better I could have dined in the courtyard, but the ambience of the dining room suited my feeling of drowsy relaxation. I could do the walk-around and beach scene tomorrow.

Enjoy a summer escape in the High Atlas Mountains at Kasbah du Toubkal combined with a relaxing beach-side break at Dar l’Oussia. Click on the link for more information.
A Blast from the Past

If you are new to the Kasbah du Toubkal magazine you probably don’t know just how much ground we’ve covered - quite literally - in the last four-and-a-half-years. **It’s a lot!** Click on the archive link below to see what you have missed, but meanwhile here’s a glance at some good times to be had in Marrakech. Just click on the image to read the full article. But first...do you know how Discover and Kasbah came about? A hobo tells the tale.

Travels With A Hobo

*A black and white photo from the mid-1990’s shows a group posed in front of a Land Rover, dressed in the refined casual mode of the era – neat shorts or floral frocks, with a braveheart carefully balancing an ungainly Fes on her head. Slightly to the right are two bearded, dissolute looking characters, the original hobos of Hobo Travel.*

**Issue 4/Page 4**

24 Hours in Marrakech

**Issue 4/Page 4**

The Restaurant at the end of the World

**Jemaa el Fna**, The Place of the Dead, The Mosque at the End of the World, North Africa’s most vibrant and exotic square, the ancient heart of Marrakech, where snake charmers, storytellers and acrobats entertain the passing crowds. **Issue 1/Page 14**

A Life Interconnected

While it may be easy to snigger at the ignorance of modern children of some of the basics of life, it occurred to me that there are plenty of things that we take for granted, totally unaware of the story behind them. **Issue 7/Page 10**

Visit the Archives

There’s so much more to...
A very proud day for EFA!

Waking up today we wonder, did it really happen? Harry and Meghan, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, came to our small town in Morocco, visited our boarding houses where we come from our far away villages to access the schools; told us we were role models, and brought smiles and warmth into our hearts. It was a perfect day, a day we will never forget, a day when the empowerment of girls through education was celebrated and all those working towards it were honoured. Thank you Harry and Meghan and all who made this special day possible. We would love to see you again. Our door is always open to you.

On Sunday, February 24th, 2019, Their Royal Highnesses, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, visited Asni 1, the first boarding house opened by Education For All in 2007. As a bonus to an exciting day, Mike McHugo, the founder of EFA, was awarded the MBE for services to improving gender equality in education in Morocco.
After the great success of Route 666 on the hidden roads of the High Atlas Mountains last year, the Two Old Boys and Their Bikes* (Trevor Rowell and Mike McHugo) are on the road again. The seven-day jaunt includes participation in the Marrakech Atlas Etape before taking to the wilds of the High Atlas, all in support of Education For All. For more information and to reserve your place, click on the image. (*Read their story in Issue Five.)

In 2009 a group of cycling friends decided to combine the beauties of the High Atlas Mountains with the semi-decadence of luxury hotels, freshly prepared lunches pasha-style and a doze on Moroccan rugs out in the wide blue yonder to break their ride, rewarded by star-filled nights, tempting traditional cuisine and excellent local wines at the end of the day. But this wasn’t just a six-day jolly for the sake of it; each rider not only had to pay his way he also had to raise a fixed sum of money to donate to Education For All – no pay, no play.

One of the riders, as well as being one of the organisers, was Gareth Westacott, and while he and sidekick Mike McHugo loved the ride and the good it did to help girls from EFA they thought they could do better.

“We were driving through Spain on the way to Morocco just before the last six-day fund raiser in April 2012, Mike and I were thinking of ways to increase the revenue for Education for All and we had this mad idea of creating a cyclosportive starting from Marrakech and ascending the Atlas to the ski resort at Oukaimedan, which eventually became the Marrakech Atlas Etape.

To register for this year’s Marrakech Atlas Etape on April 27 visit out WEBSITE.

Bicycling is the nearest approximation I know to the flight of birds. The airplane simply carries man on its back like an obedient Pegasus; it gives him no wings of his own. There are movements on a bicycle corresponding to almost all the variations in flight of the larger birds.

Louis J Halle

“Spring in Washington 1947/57”

“We left our expectations behind as the reality far surpassed them in every respect; this had been the Morocco of our youth, wild and unpredictable but with a beauty that can reduce you to tears; an emptiness and simplicity that is increasingly hard to find on our crowded planet Earth. A distant faint call to prayer in the early morning beneath a humbling blanket of stars”

Trevor Rowell
Morocco in the Media

- **iescape**: Best of Morocco for families
- **Wanderlust Travel Magazine**: Video - Getting lost in Marrakech
- **WWD**: Inside La Mamounia
- **Business Insider**: Africa’s first superfast bullet train
- **Fodor’s**: Wandersleeps: 7 of the best stays in Morocco
- **Forbes**: World’s best Hotels - Africa
- **Dior to Stage Cruise Show in Marrakech**

Click on logos to read articles.

You can receive Kasbah du Toubkal’s magazine every quarter by clicking **HERE**.

For back issues click on the magazine covers.
MARRAKECH ATLAS ETAPE
MARRAKECH TO OUAKAÎMEDEN
CHARITY BIKE RIDE - SUNDAY APRIL 28 2019
Register online at
www.marrakech-atlas-etape.com

Click on the logos to follow us on
Pinterest and Instagram

Keep up to date with our
glorious corner of Morocco...
Click on the logo to receive
future issues of the
Kasbah du Toubkal’s
quarterly magazine.

www.kasbahdutoubkal.com   kasbah@discover.ltd.uk