



KASBAH DU TOUBKAL

MOROCCO'S PREMIER
MOUNTAIN RETREAT

A New Beginning



Same, same - *but different!*

After passing through the main gate of Kasbah du Toubkal and strolling up the crazy-paved path, previous guests would see little difference from earlier visits. The flowers in front of the bedrooms, hammam, and 'room with a view' that add colour to the walk still bloom, the rosemary bushes edging the lawn still perfume the air, the white canvas deckchairs set out on the lawn itself continue to be just the place to read a book or doze in the afternoon sun. A new carved wooden door with its traditional stone horseshoe arched entry and the two new windows to the side replacing the previous mesh ones could be thought of as simply an upgrade to go with the rest of the beautiful architecture. But step through that door and a whole new world of Kasbah du Toubkal opens up before you, thanks to the earthquake that hit the High Atlas Mountains on September the 8th, 2023.

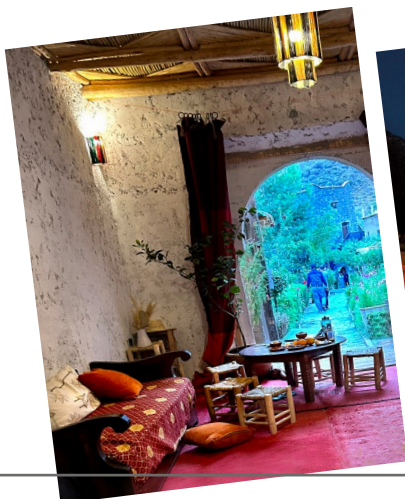
As brothers Mike and Chris McHugo stumbled over the debris of their mountaintop hotel, almost in the epicentre of the quake, as walls collapsed around them, their first thought was the safety of their guests. Fortunately, everyone was safe, and it wasn't until a while later they could take in the full situation – the reception, dining room, kitchens and most of the iconic belvedere were reduced to rubble in the matter of a few seconds.



"Obviously it was a horrible event, and for some people devastating, especially as earthquakes are almost unheard of here," says Mike, "but whilst we didn't appreciate it the next day, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise because it caused us to redevelop the Kasbah."

One of the main changes to the Kasbah that had been under discussion prior to the earthquake, was opening up the rear wall of the dining room to create an unobstructed view of the Ait Souka Valley. A major job, any planning for which became immaterial when the quake took the wall away and most of the building with it.

"The part of the Kasbah that was affected was originally developed for school groups, not as a boutique hotel, which is what we've become. We don't take any school groups now so it's allowed us to rebuild the dining rooms, the roof terrace, and the central areas without the dormitory-cum-family rooms that surrounded the old dining room that weren't appropriate any longer. So basically, all the rooms, the bedrooms, all the more recent developments were untouched, and that part is the same now as it was before the earthquake. The redevelopment was forced upon us by the earthquake, and in retrospect we are very pleased."



Same, same -
but different!

A Pool With A View



John Bothamley, an architect recognised for his understanding of vernacular architecture who's worked with the Kasbah almost from the very beginning, went out to Imlil the following week, beginning the process of understanding what had to be done, everything that had to be demolished, leaving a clean sheet to work with. Creating light and views from within that the old Kasbah didn't have was a major consideration.

The two most obvious external changes are at the back of the Kasbah, an oval swimming pool and a three-storey tower. From some angles the tower looks much taller than the previous one because it has three floors, but in fact, it isn't. The original tower was two floors on the roof terrace, with a kitchen to serve the terraces, topped by the belvedere. The new one is still only three floors but it looks higher because it's on the edge of the development now.

Archways on the ground floor beside the swimming pool are open, so the whole of the Kasbah is much airier, with views out to the pool and over the Ait Souka Valley. There are two reception rooms that have doors looking out onto the terrace and an open courtyard looking onto the swimming pool so you can eat downstairs in the restaurant or upstairs on the roof terrace adjacent to the tower. On the second floor is a private dining room or meeting room with

arched windows. The final level is the belvedere under the green tiled roof, much the same as before, with 360° views. The main dining room can sit forty plus people, and the roof terrace has been levelled and enlarged, with space for over one hundred for special functions.

As part of the rebuilding a number of reception rooms with log burning stoves were added for winter use. The spectacular roof terrace is still the favoured place for lunch, particularly in summer, and now there is a swimming pool with beautiful views of Ait Souka and the mountains it's even more enticing, especially as Marrakech can get pretty in summer.



Same, same -
but different!

Large groups and Exclusive Rental

Kasbah du Toubkal has a long history of providing accommodation for large groups; business meetings, residential courses such as yoga, trekking, and painting classes, as well as groups of families and friends looking for somewhere to celebrate a special occasion – and there are few places as special as the Kasbah! Often taken as an exclusive rental, with fifteen bedrooms there's plenty of space for up to thirty guests sharing them. But what happens when an international organisation is looking for somewhere of the Kasbah's quality to bring together sixty delegates, guest speakers and support staff from throughout Africa, Asia and Europe, arranging transport from Marrakech and airport pickups and drop-off from as far away as Casablanca, providing a single room per person and three meals a day for six days, including vegetarian options, as well as a fully equipped conference room and a selection of smaller rooms to



accommodate discussion groups? You think big and spread the load, which is what Mike McHugo did.

"The initial contact was made in February and then a first inspection by the organising agent in March, followed by a second in May. An important point was that Marrakech has very good international airlift, and we were easily able to transport delegates to the Kasbah. The fact that they had relatively easy ways of getting to Marrakesh was also part of the decision-making process. Because of the size of the group, and as it was



an exclusive booking with all the attendant planning and organisation, the earliest we could do it was in August. May and June are our busy months and we were fully booked, which is normal.

"Having a conference room that could take all sixty delegates in one go and areas they could split into small working groups was also important for them when choosing the location. There are plenty of areas to relax in, and some of the guests would do yoga and mindfulness early in the morning. We organized some walks, obviously all optional, but it was a nice option.

"The Kasbah's used to catering for this sort of number. We've catered for as many as 150 people at the same time, but that's mainly for guests coming for lunch, so it's one meal on one day. This time we had



to do it three times a day for six days in a row, so we had to tweak a few things to cater for sixty people at three meals a day. Our exclusive bookings prior to this were for twenty to thirty people, so this group was twice our largest to date.

"We have quite a lot of staff who normally work a shift system, but for this event everyone worked more-or-less a full day, sometimes coming in at different times, and we had mountain guides on call all the time to escort guests to their accommodation and look after them.

"We had food being brought in every day, obviously, but we've got cold stores, and large fridges at the Kasbah that can cater for most of our needs. Imlil has shops and obviously we could go further afield if needs be. We've always shopped as much as possible in the locality and employed local people, and because of that the local community benefitted from the event, as well as the Kasbah. It was all added income.

"For the extra accommodation we took over five properties in Achein, the village right beside us and Imlil, exclusively to cater for the guests, all en-suite with air conditioning, with all meals taken at the Kasbah, which worked well. The guesthouse owners were all very happy to be part of a large group booking, which means we can repeat the process again with the knowledge that both the property owners and guests were happy with the accommodation.

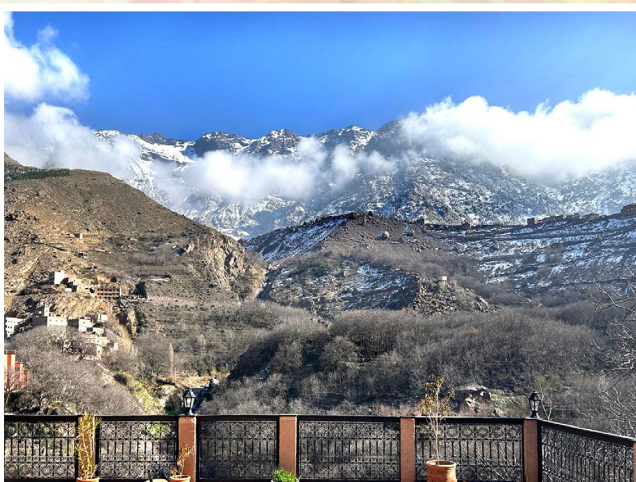
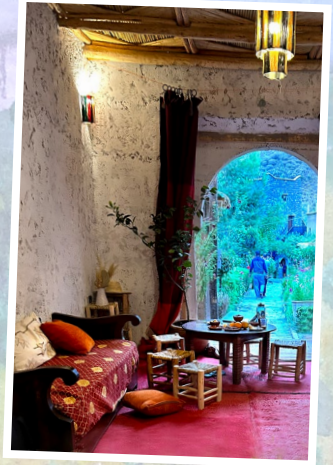
"All the organisation was done in house, led by Hajj, Lahcen, Hassan and myself. I worked with Samantha, the event planner, from beginning to end. She was in charge of what the group wanted and we facilitated. The organisers were there for the event itself, so the main event planner worked with us to say, well, we want lunch at one, can we change it to two etc? That sort of thing was going on all the time.

"Samantha was very pleasant and very competent, and the staff learned a lot, such as dressing the various areas they were using and helping her to get it how they wanted it. For example, instead of having ten people in one area, perhaps they wanted sixteen in a different area, so all the chairs and equipment had to be moved around accordingly. We would liaise on what needed to be done and she ended up building a relationship with the reception staff, Hassan and Lahcen, and the team at the Kasbah. But that's just normal for us. It all worked out really well, which helps with the confidence that we can repeat the process. She also ordered any extra equipment that was needed on top of what we can provide at the Kasbah.

"They obviously liked the Kasbah because they've re-booked for May this year. They liked the specialness of the Kasbah and the spaces to allow what they wanted to have happen, so they re-booked before they left because they knew that they had to try and get the dates they wanted because it's challenging to get space for such a large group. "They loved it, they loved it as a location. It's very difficult not to love. It was pretty idyllic temperatures, especially in the early morning and evening.

"It's always nice to see clients go away happy having re-booked. And then you breathe a sigh of relief that you've delivered what you said you'd deliver. It was a very good training exercise for us because we've never organised this sort of event for such a large group. What we can do now is show agents that we can deal with larger numbers, which we hadn't really fully taken on as a possibility until the organisers of this event asked us to look at it."





*For more information,
regarding accommodation,
services, corporate book-
ings or exclusive rentals,
please click on the logo to
contact us*



Cover image: Vivianne McGrath