

Morocco

Redrawing the Atlas

A few hours from London, Anthony Sattin finds himself a trek away from a new mountain lodge. Photographs by Vanessa Berberian

View of the Imlil Valley
in the High Atlas
Mountains, with
Kasbah du Toubkal
in the foreground



Left, a traditional Moroccan lunch is served on the pass above the Imlil Valley. Below, one of the bedrooms at Toubkal Lodge

gateway to the Sahara and the French recognised it as the barrier to their domination of Morocco. Subsequently the region became a playground: Winston Churchill came here to breathe the air and paint the landscape, and mountaineers have long cherished the Atlas for their rugged, remote beauty. Cheap flights and a government intent on boosting visitor numbers have spoiled a little of the Morocco experience, but not here in Imlil.

When I first visited, in 1990, the road to Imlil was still unpaved. I rode in the back of a truck that had come to collect the early summer harvest, and then walked in the mountains. I slept on benches in village houses where putting out the light meant blowing out a candle, and woke to the sound of the cock-crow, not engine revs. It was a wonderful experience, but certainly not one that offered comfort, let alone luxury.

At that time, the kasbah at Imlil was still a wreck, the shell of a base from which a feudal chief had once run a relatively benign dictatorship, dispensing largesse and punishment. An unexpected alliance between a Briton and a local villager transformed the kasbah and led

On the cusp of the pass 2,450 metres above sea level, a rug had been spread out and a table laid with cloth and cutlery

THE FIRST RAYS OF SUNLIGHT caught the summit of Jbel Toubkal and turned it into a white beacon. From the roof of a Moorish kasbah, I craned my head to watch the spectacle. Everything around me was in shadow except this brilliant peak, the highest point in North Africa.

Within minutes, the sunlight dropped down the mountainside and lit up almond, apple and cherry trees, shadows fleeing back along the river, down through the winding valley. As the shadows went, I found myself on a threshold: behind me was London, life, a busy week; ahead, a moment of escape, a mountain pass to climb. I stepped into the light.

There is nothing new about wanting to walk in the High Atlas Mountains. The Romans considered it the roof of the world, the Arabs knew it as the



to the opening of a new trekking lodge, a day's walk away. For the first time ever, it is now possible to walk the mountains in luxury: three comfortable nights out, two good days' walking in some glorious landscape, and all just 90 minutes' drive from Marrakech.

The old kasbah sat on a rise at the head of the valley, a dominant spot that I remember seeing when I first came up the mountain. I didn't stop, but Mike McHugo did. McHugo was running tours taking school groups into France and Spain; Morocco seemed an obvious next step. In Imlil, he made friends with a man named Hajj Maurice. Hajj, Mike and Mike's brother Chris bought the kasbah, and over the past few years have turned it into one of the world's great mountain retreats, their work rewarded by a busy reservation book and a ➤



Rearing slopes dominate the view. This might be luxury, but the mountains are as demanding as ever

➤ wall full of awards, including one for sustainable tourism.

Their Kasbah du Toubkal is successful for many reasons, one of the most important of which is the owners' decision not to do anything without the approval of the people of Imlil. They also decided to use villagers, rather than outside contractors, to renovate and run the place, so returning some of the profit to the village. As a result, the kasbah still feels part of the community.

Its other close relationship is with the mountains. Rearing slopes dominate the view wherever you look, and the shining beacon of Jbel Toubkal's snowy peak towers over everything. This might be luxury, but the mountains are as demanding as ever.

We left the kasbah late by Berber standards, which means not at dawn. Hajj

Maurice came to see us off, hands deep in his jellaba pockets against the morning chill, warming himself by throwing jokes at Mohamed Aztat, my Berber guide.

Mohamed is simply the best guide with whom I have walked in Morocco – or anywhere else, for that matter. He is a modest man, looking at the ground while Hajj teases him about being away from his wife for a night, yet he has much to brag about. Remarkably fit and properly trained, he tells me what I want to know about the height of mountains and passes, the purpose of buildings, the traditional use of plants and herbs, and the ways of his people and of the mountains. He is also experienced enough to know that, although he seems not to notice, the ➤

Clockwise from top left: room 42 at Domaine de la Roseaie; Kasbah du Toubkal; the roof terrace of the kasbah; chef Omar Ait Idar and friend





Left, chef Omar Ait Idar pours mint tea in the dining room at Toubkal Lodge. Below, barley fields on the slopes around Toubkal Lodge

almond and walnut trees to a height where only the hardy juniper could flourish.

At midday, with the sun on my head and dust in my throat, I asked Mohamed about lunch. 'We will have it a little higher up,' he answered with an inscrutable smile. A group of Spanish walkers making their descent appeared above us. As we stood aside to let them pass, they seemed bothered by something. A few minutes later, I discovered why: on the cusp of the pass, on a level piece of ground 2,450 metres above sea level, my lunch had been prepared. A rug had been spread across the middle of the pass and a table set with cloth and cutlery. I ate salads, meatballs, couscous and fruit, washed down with two competing views: to one side, a long, clear drop towards the Imlil Valley and the Kasbah du Toubkal; to the other, an ocean of thick, swirling cloud.

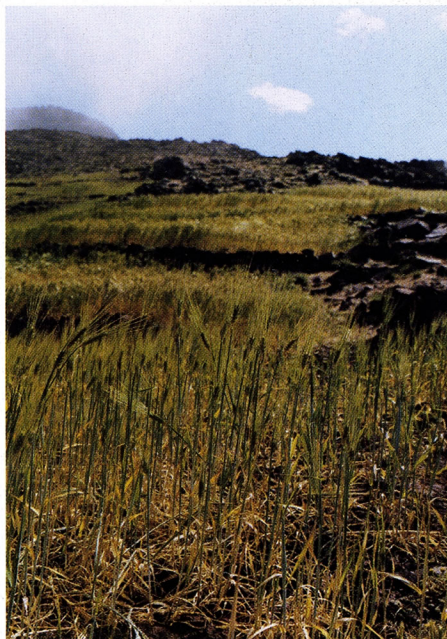
The sun had lit the morning; now cloud dominated the afternoon. After lunch, I lay on the rug watching great swirls of vapour jousting overhead. As we began our walk down, the clouds closed in and the world was reduced to purple rocks and alpine plants.

After an hour or more of steep descent, interrupted only by the occasional magpie

The cloud burned off, revealing a sight of such beauty that I had to sit and stare at it for some time, to be sure I'd remember it

► slopes around the kasbah are steep. So we went slowly, the muleteers moving ahead out of sight and earshot, until all I could hear was the crunch of boots on limestone and granite, the songs of girls herding goats high up in the mountains, and my lungs snatching at air.

Compared to other walks in the area, our morning walk was an easy one. Jbel Toubkal rises a sheer 2,000 metres above the kasbah (already 1,800 metres above sea level) and there are many other peaks 1,000 or 1,500 metres above us. Mohamed led the way towards a pass a mere 500 metres up. We followed a mule track out of Imlil, a gentle zigzag up the slope. As my heart raced, my spirits soared. Each step, each new scent, each puff of wind and bead of sweat was a treat. The higher we climbed, the better the views became, as we moved beyond apple and cherry,



or partridge flapping scared out of the bushes, the cloud burned off and revealed a sight of such beauty that I had to sit and stare for some time, to be sure I would hold it in my memory. To the right, all was red earth, a majestic slash of mountain. To the left a deep gorge dropped down, studded with junipers. Ahead of me was a valley, one side cut into terraces of electric green barley, the other dominated by a *bergerie* fronted by a line of low slabs on which the goatherds offer salt to their flocks before sending them into the mountains. Beyond lay the highest of the villages, Tizi Oussem, a place of stone and mud, of hot summers and snowy winters, of tight-knit families on tighter budgets, their hard life softened by extraordinary natural beauty.

The landscape was wrapped in a silence that was broken first by a child's ►



The real wonder lies in the knowledge that you walked here by a long, slow path over the mountain

► laughter, then a goat, and then a falcon high above us trying to scare up some food. This was what I had come for: a taste of something grand, wild, beautiful, remote.

The new Toubkal Lodge lay just beyond that first village. It is another collaboration between the McHugos and Hajj Maurice, an offshoot of the Kasbah du Toubkal. The formula is the same: local fabrics, local building materials, local people to build and run it. As in the kasbah, the luxury here is neither elaborate nor refined. There are no precious silks woven in Lyon or rare ingredients sourced in Dagestan. Instead, you have local life with European comforts. A long walk ends with a soak in a huge bathtub. A walker's appetite is sated by a good, thick soup served in front of a warming fire, an excellent lamb couscous or tagine of lemon and chicken, with whichever wine you have remembered

to bring (the lodge, like the kasbah, has a policy not to serve alcohol, but won't stop you enjoying it if you wish). In the rooms I found carved wood, tribal rugs, *tadelakt* plaster and, around the large bathtub, a fossil-rich black stone found on the other side of the Atlas and polished to brilliance.

The simple, two-storey structure is above the village, itself 100 metres above a river. The lodge has two bedrooms and a kitchen downstairs, another bedroom and a living/dining room upstairs. From a distance you might mistake it for one of the village houses, but there are differences – most obviously the lodge's large, empty terrace. Berbers use their flat roofs to dry grain, fruit or animal skins, but the lodge's terrace is used solely as a viewpoint. In the soft light of late afternoon, I watched as firewood and fodder were brought home. At night, with almost no light pollution,

I saw the stars playing overhead. And in the morning there was the drama of sunrise, of light tumbling from the peaks to bring life to the valley.

The real wonder of the lodge lies in the contrasts and combination that have made it possible, the collaboration between the McHugos and the villagers, the knowledge that you walked here by a long and slow path over the mountain (though they will drive you if you prefer), that you are just five hours from London and yet a long way from home: in remote Morocco, high up a mountain, soaking tired legs in a big, hot bath; close to the stars and yet tucked up in bed.

Most people who walk to the lodge return to the kasbah, but I carried ►

Clockwise from top left: suite 41 at Domaine de la Roseraie, in Ouirgane; rose garden at Domaine de la Roseraie; the lounge at Kasbah du Toubkal



View from the terrace at Toubkal Lodge, just above the village of Tizi Ousse

TIPS FOR TREKKERS

● You can book an organised three-night, two-day trek in the High Atlas with **Kasbah du Toubkal** (00 212 2448 5611; www.kasbahdu-toubkal.com), from £305 per person. The trek includes two nights at **Kasbah du Toubkal Lodge**, half board, and two days' supported trekking with mules and a guide.

● You can also book rooms-only at both the kasbah and lodge. Doubles at the Kasbah du Toubkal from €150; doubles at Toubkal Lodge from €200

● **Mohamed Aztat**, the multilingual Berber mountain guide, can be contacted directly (00 212 6876 0165; <http://toubkl.guide.free.fr>) or booked through the Kasbah du Toubkal.

● **Riad Farnatchi** (00 212 2438 4910; www.riadfarnatchi.com), in the heart of the Marrakech medina, is a perfect contrast to the remoteness of the

mountains. Doubles from £190, including airport transfers

● If you want to follow Anthony Sattin's route but don't want a night in Marrakech, you could stay at **Domaine de la Roseaie** in Ouirgane (00 212 2443 9128; www.laroseaiehotel.ma; doubles from £88) or return to Imlil for another night at the Kasbah du Toubkal

GETTING THERE

British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Marrakech from £130 return in December.

EasyJet (0871 244 2366; www.easyjet.com) flies from Gatwick from £102.

Atlas Blue (020 7307 5803; www.atlas-blue.com) flies from Gatwick from £86.

Royal Air Maroc (020 7307 5800; www.royalairmaroc.com) flies from Heathrow from £103

➤ on down the valley, a day's walk to Ouirgane and the main Marrakech road. It was another day of varied delights as the landscape shifted and the river wound its way down the terraced valley, cutting through rocky gorges to reach the plains. After an hour and a half, we had dropped down far enough to reach the first of the dwarf palms – a reminder of Marrakech and its ring of palm groves. Another couple of hours passed before we stopped at an idyllic spot beside the river, hemmed in by rocks and oleander, where, watched by goatherds, I found another table laid and a Berber omelette – a delicious mix of egg, garlic, onion and whatever else was to hand (in this case tomato and mince) – served with salad and tea.

We walked from the red earth on to the black tarmac as the sun was low over the collar of the mountains. The juniper

bushes gave way to fir trees, mules were outnumbered by four-wheel-drives and the organic Berber villages were replaced by breezeblock and concrete, and Ouirgane came into view.

Ouirgane is home to one of Morocco's well-established country retreats, *Domaine de la Roseaie*. While it may no longer be quite as perfect or exclusive as it once was, it is a great place to stop for a cold drink beside the cool pool. I might have been tempted to spend the night, but my thoughts were elsewhere. Before the shadows had settled across the valley, my two muleteers were riding back up the slopes and Mohamed Aztat had found himself a lift back to Imlil. And before those same shadows had wrapped the snowy peak of Toubkal in darkness, I was back in the Red City, Marrakech, having a very different sort of fun.

