

→ THIS WAY OUT





★ **ESCAPE** ★

Berber **RISING**

MOROCCO'S MOUNTAIN PEOPLE LOOK TO PARTNERSHIPS AND PROGRESS AS WELL AS TOURIST DOLLARS

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIEL ALLEN

At the age of fourteen, Hafid Ouahan is surprised to find herself unmarried. Growing up in Tizi Oussems, a remote village in the High Atlas mountains of Morocco, her options for early womanhood were distinctly limited. The income from her father's small walnut tree business was enough to provide food for a family of seven and maintain a modest adobe house, but not to pay for daily lodging beside the closest secondary school, over twenty kilometres away by rough mountain track.

"I'm a Berber," explains Hafida. "Berber girls usually get married before they're fifteen. My parents have my brothers and sisters to take care of. More study was impossible."

Today, thanks to a group of dedicated expats and Moroccans, Hafida's expectations have been turned upside down. At the Dar Asni Secondary School for Girls, built in 2007 by local charity Education for All, she now enjoys classes in Arabic, English, maths and computer studies. She sleeps in a purpose-built dormitory with seventeen other girls, and returns to see her family every other weekend. There are no fees.

"Dar Asni has given me an opportunity I never thought I'd have," says Hafida. "When I finish my education I want to become a teacher so I can help other Berber girls. I still want to get married, of course, but a bit later."

"There's still a big problem with gender inequality in Moroccan education," explains Mike McHugo, a British expat who helped establish Education for All with a group of friends in 2006. "For a number of reasons – cultural, financial and linguistic – very few girls from rural communities in the High Atlas get the opportunity of continuing their education after primary school. This has led to a female illiteracy rate of over eighty percent in some places."

News of Dar Asni's success spread quickly. With ever-increasing demand, and relying entirely on charitable donations, Education for All is now in the process of building a third boarding school in the mountain village of Ouirgane.

Our mission is to give as many Berber girls as possible the chance of a college education," says McHugo. "As Gandhi said, educate a boy, you educate an individual; educate a girl, you educate a woman, a wife, a mother, a country."

Mike McHugo's charitable work goes way beyond the field of education. Farther up the valley from Asni stands the village of Imlil, an increasingly popular destination for overseas visitors looking to explore the High Atlas range, which extends across central Morocco from the Atlantic coast to the Algerian border. Perched at the base of mighty Mount Toubkal, dominating Imlil, stands the Kasbah du Toubkal. This imposing feudal fortress, renovated by Mike and his brother Chris, opened as a hotel in 1995, and now boasts a reputation as one of Morocco's most authentic and spectacularly located mountain resorts.

"Through the centuries, Berbers have mixed with many other ethnic groups, but those in the High Atlas have sustained a largely independent culture, with their own set of languages," explains McHugo. "They also have a reputation for incredible hospitality, which means hikers and climbers typically have a great experience in these mountains." →



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With its picture postcard panoramas it's little surprise that Hollywood movie director Martin Scorsese was so enamored of the Kasbah du Toubkal that he filmed his 1997 Dalai Lama epic Kundun here. But it's not just the scenery and long list of amenities that keep guests coming back for more. Thanks to a range of ongoing environmental and community projects, the Kasbah has become the beating heart of Imlil, and guests invariably feel a strong connection with the Berber way of life. Local Berbers run the hotel, and a five per cent levy on guests' bills goes into a village fund.

"Initially there was some suspicion in Imlil as to why we wanted to help," admits Mike McHugo. "As the expression goes, 'beware foreigners bearing gifts'. However this really ended once we completed our biggest single project - the building of the village hamam. Since then we have been judged positively by our actions."

Moustafa Belkasse has been working as a mountain guide for Kasbah du Toubkal for seven years. The thirty-six-year old Berber wants to see more visitors coming to Imlil and the surrounding area. "If I wasn't guiding I'd be farming," he says. "Tourists bring a better livelihood for my family. The Kasbah has also helped a lot of villages by investing money in water supplies, and the rubbish collection scheme means fewer people are burning or dumping refuse."

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Belkasse admits the tourist influx has caused a few problems. "Some village elders have been unhappy about female visitors wearing revealing clothing," he says. "But as long as outsiders are sensitive to cultural issues it's not a big issue."

Depopulation is a more serious challenge facing some Berber villages. "The current king, Mohammed VI, who is actually half Berber, has brought roads and electricity to many villages," explains Belkasse. "In itself this is great, but it means many young Berbers are leaving to find jobs in Marrakech and Casablanca. They want the lifestyle that they see on television, not that of a farmer. We need to find more ways of providing jobs in rural areas to stop this trend."

Fortunately, growth in the number of High Atlas holidaymakers is now leading to a rise in beneficial entrepreneurship amongst the Berber. "Of course everybody wants higher living standards," says Brahim Barkouche, a Berber who opened a luxury guesthouse in Ouirgane in 2005. "The trick is to achieve this in harmony with the local culture. For example, we've saved the only water mill and olive press left in Ouirgane from demolition by paying the owner some money every time our guests visit. We also have tree-planting and rubbish collection schemes, buy our food locally, sell locally made produce and handicrafts, employ local muleteers, and are helping to improve the Ouirgane primary school."

Lower down the Imlil valley, Richard Branson's exclusive Kasbah Tamadot is also doing its bit for Berber business. As well as helping to open a Berber creche, the Eve Branson and Virgin Unite foundations have recently imported a herd of cashmere goats from England. Local Berber girls use the goat wool to produce embroidery and knitwear that is then sold at Tamadot and other Virgin properties. "The Berbers are a proud people," says Eve Branson. "We want to teach the girls lifelong skills that remove the need to ask for charity in the future."

"In their language many Berbers call themselves 'Imazighen', which means 'free and noble men,'" says Mike McHugo. "Many of those living in the High Atlas may be poor, but I'm often struck by how gracious and hardworking they are. If small-scale projects in these mountains can make a difference, then they're absolutely worth doing. Knowledge and opportunity will bring with them a new kind of freedom." ☺