

Morocco 2001

Considering how easy it is to get to, it is surprising that the Atlas is not crawling with people. The central, and more spectacular massif, is becoming busy, but the western end is still rarely visited and has a remote and timeless feel to it.



We met up with Hamish Brown at Marrakech Airport and spent the first night at a busy trekkers' hotel, crowded and basic but at six pounds a night entirely adequate. To pay any more would have been a waste anyway as the muezzin put paid to any ideas of sleep at about 4:30 am. After breakfast, we loaded the Landrovers and set off on a long journey west, then south, then east

around the Atlas mountains to the fine walled city of Taroudant. Here we met up with Ali, our Moroccan version of a Sirdar and Mohammed, our compulsory guide. Mohammed



had never visited the Western Atlas before, but once we got through his initial reserve, he proved to be a cheerful and able companion on the hills.

Next day saw us away on dirt tracks through wilder and wilder scenery as we approached the mountains. We stopped to watch the spectacle of flocks of goats populating the spiky argan trees that dot the countryside hereabouts. The argan tree is unique to this area and produces a highly prized oil. Because the tree is very spiny, and the goats love the fruit, the farmers let the goats climb the trees and eat their fill. They then collect the droppings, crush the nuts and extract the oil. I wonder if the London foodies really know what they are paying £25 a half litre for?





Following a lunch stop in a valley covered in brilliant pink oleander bushes, some of us walked up to a village, where we were met by the schoolteacher, who proudly invited us to look around. Schools are obvious as the only concrete buildings among the mud brick and adobe of the villages. Everyone seemed pleased to see us. Indeed, friendliness was a characteristic of all the Berber people we met. One had to feel sorry for the two teachers though. They were city-bred men who, on finishing their training, had been posted up here indefinitely. They seemed happy enough with their lot, and evidence showed a surprisingly good level of education for the children. They all speak Berber of course, Arabic so they can read the Koran, and by the time they are 10 or 11, French as well.

I never mastered three languages at all.

In the late afternoon we reached the roadhead at a soukh- a market where all the nearby villages do their trading, and met up with our mules and their drivers. Whilst they argued over the distribution of loads, we went on a short way to set up camp in a walnut grove. Next day was short in order to acclimatise and we camped near a village, by a small stream – a charming spot. Some went off to explore the village and the intricate irrigation systems which make best use of the very limited water supply, whilst two others climbed a rocky gully to the summit of Adj Taddart, 2573m. Beyond the summit, they met two shepherds, who brewed them mint tea over a tiny fire. They shared dates and chocolate and parted best of





friends. On the way down, they descended the pass that the mules would take on the morrow. They couldn't believe that mules could climb such terrain, let alone heavily laden, but they did. It was good to see that although the animals were worked hard, they were healthy and very well looked after by their owners. I for one, however, always managed to be somewhere else whenever they were crossing the passes!

Next day, some climbed the Tizi (pass) Wadder with the mules, whilst others climbed the unpronounceable Adj Wawsaghmelt, 2926m. on the way to our campsite on a green meadow – our first camp on the Tichka Plateau itself. Normally a mass of daffodils in spring, it was already turning brown, a victim of the drought which has been affecting this area for about 5 years. Indeed, the spring was only a trickle – water was to be in short supply for the whole trip. Most people walked over to the north side of the plateau to look down into the northern valleys where we were to have come up had there been more water available. One

climbed Azrou Azdim, 3143m and got spectacular views of Imaradene and Moulay Ali.

Up early, as we were every day in order to get the hard work done before the heat became excessive, the mules moved camp up to the west end of the plateau. Most of us followed the south rim over Awlim, 3043m and Askam, 3078m, some interesting scrambling and fine views south towards the Anti Atlas and the Sahara. The campsite was in a narrow valley at the head of



the River Nfis, which should have been a brisk bubbling stream. In fact, it was barely a trickle. The lack of water may have led to a laxity (bad word!) in hygiene as regards washing of cooking pots etc. as most of us suffered stomach upsets, one very badly.

Despite all this, however, we decided to celebrate Roger Dix's 70th birthday by climbing Imaradene, 3351m. We climbed to the northern rim and followed it with spectacular views to the fine summit. There can't be too many people who climb to over 11000ft on such an anniversary. On the way back, two people found a splendid swimming hole fed by a trickle in the bed of the Nfis, half an hour from the camp. It was a welcome discovery and did much for the atmosphere around the camp.

For the next ascent, Moulay Ali, 3349m, we split into two parties. Most went with Hamish (see accounts by Derek Bush and Richard Kirby), whilst the other five attempted the unclimbed south ridge. This is a really spectacular mountain, jutting out from

the north wall of the plateau, surrounded by magnificent scenery. The main problems with the south ridge were time and water – not enough of either. However they passed the main difficulty, a breche about 100ft deep, by abseil and went far enough to see that the rest of the ridge presented no major difficulties, so it was a moral victory – almost!

The ridge team had a rest day, swimming and lazing, then the following day took the main Atlas ridge westwards to Aqelmoun, 3251m, an amazing peak made of marble. From a distance it looked problematical, but ledges ran across the south side, and the ascent was quite easy.

With everyone back in camp, it was time to prepare for the descent. Ian Crowther had been very ill and it was thought he might have to be evacuated by mule down the precipitous Tizi-n-Tissel. With one notable exception, everybody was looking forward to this, but sadly he managed to revive sufficiently to walk. The trek out was the hardest day of the trip, with



extreme heat and basically desert conditions. (We heard later that the temperature in Marrakech had hit fifty degrees and it can't have been much different where we were). Salvation came in the form of a tiny shop in a small village. We sat under a walnut tree in the dusty square and drank litres of warm coke, watched with interest by sundry small children and dogs. That night we enjoyed the hospitality of a Berber house, including a banquet consisting for the meat course of a pair of chickens that had been cheerfully scratching around the floor minutes earlier.

We finally returned to Taroudant in two small lorries, following dirt tracks down spectacular valleys then across an endless dusty plain dotted with olive groves. Civilisation, with hot baths and soft beds was never more welcome.

It was a good trip, with the usual YRC facility for everyone to get on with everyone else. I was a little disappointed with the mountains, which were easier than I had hoped, but the area, with its remoteness, ancient villages and the friendly Berber people, left nothing to be desired. I would go again.

Attendance:

Albert Chapman
Derek Bush
Arthur Salmon
Ian Crowther
Roger Dix
Richard Kirby
Kjetil Tveranger
Kolbjorn Nesje Nybo (G)
David Hick
George Burfitt
Tim Josephy
Hamish Brown



Albert, Roger and Hamish on the transport.

Seeing shade at a rest stop



As an alternative to the ascent of Moulay Ali, two of the party descended the valley to the village of Assif Lahion. Highlights of the day were the meetings with the friendly and hospitable Berber people.

The colourfully dressed young Berber women we passed on our descent were climbing 1300m up to the plateau. We met them again on their return journey when they were carrying one metre square bales of fodder back to the village. They make this trip most days during the growing season.

On the approach to the village we accepted the offer of a drink from Hasan, who was returning from work in the fields, only to be treated to a meal with the men of the house whilst Hasan's wife and daughters looked on. Water for washing and many glasses of mint tea were followed by rice with goat's milk butter, a huge plate of nuts, caramel with sesame seeds, pitta bread and more mint tea.

The rest of the party who had returned from Moulay Ali waited patiently for us at the bivouac site. We neither needed nor relished the evening meal of tinned sardines. Descent rather than ascent had given us a memorable day.

Richard Kirby



Goats in a tree

The Ascent of Moulay Ali and Other Stories

Moulay Ali is an impressive cone shaped peak, whose southern face, when viewed from the northern rim of the Tichka Plateau looks almost vertical.

Our base for the ascent was a bivouac half way down a steep pass (tizi), which linked several Berber villages around the plateau. One of these villages was the birthplace of our head guide Ali.

The walk to the bivi site, carrying full gear, was a good hard day in itself but it had to be made into a minor epic for Arthur Salmon and the writer by a deliberately circuitous traverse of the hills at the top of the pass. We had reached the top of the tizi well before midday and then all it required was a straightforward descent to the bivi site. However as members will know, the YRC like to make things difficult for themselves, so Arthur and I decided to add a few more tops before we went down.

The president accompanied us to the first top to assess the progress of the climbing party who were attempting the south ridge. Having reassured himself that all was well he wisely returned to the pass. Our afternoon's adventure is another story and suffice to say that by the time we arrived back at the tizi, it was past five pm. We had walked through the heat of the afternoon, run out of water, traversed some horrible ground and to say the least, tempers were somewhat frayed.

Mohammed and Ali, who had been somewhat concerned about our whereabouts met us at the tizi and replenished our water supplies. Arthur very sensibly took the well-graded

path down. I decided to follow Mohammed and Ali on a more direct route (will I ever learn!). I ended up in terrible trouble over a dried up waterfall trying to follow instructions from the main party below. Eventually, Hussain, one of the porters, came up to help and took my rucksack from me. It was all rather ignominious but I was extremely grateful. Arthur was waiting with the rest of the party at the bivi site. Hamish made no comment, which was probably just as well.

The one redeeming feature was that whilst this was going on a group of young Berber girls were coming over the pass in the late evening sun, carrying huge bales of hay on their heads and singing with great clarity and sweetness. They were answered by the calls of two shepherd boys on the opposite side of the valley who were rounding up their flocks for the night. The scene was part biblical and part truly memorable mountain experience. It made my self inflicted sufferings all worthwhile.

The bivi site was an old sheep pen. We all opted to sleep outside the pen and after one of Hamish's Spartan meals we retired for the night as darkness set in at about 8pm. I was too tired to sleep immediately but lay on my bag watching the satellites pass overhead, and the late evening flights into Marrakech

We were awake by 5:20am and by ten past six our party, consisting of the President, Hamish, Arthur and myself, accompanied by Mohammed and Ali was away. The route took an interesting line with some good scrambling and was perhaps no more difficult than a typical Skye rock peak. The two Berbers left us at a col some 500ft below the summit to go exploring on their own. We were on

top by 9:30am. Hamish said this was about standard time – praise indeed! He also told us this was only the fifth or sixth European ascent. We were quite impressed by this until on reaching the summit a casual glance around revealed that the locals must have been dragging their unfortunate animals to the summit for sacrificial purposes for centuries!

We spent half an hour on the summit in pleasant sunshine before returning to the col by a slightly easier route. We then had some very interesting slabs to negotiate on the way down. It's funny how you don't notice the difficulties on the way up, but we were back in camp by 12:30pm just as it was getting really hot. We drank pints of tea and spent the afternoon under a huge rock in the shade, reminiscing about previous treks, boring only ourselves because there was no one else to listen. Hamish took himself off out of earshot. A very wise man!

We again listened to the girls as they came down the pass. This time I was in a more relaxed mood and it was even more enchanting. I can only make comparison with the sound of Sherpanis singing in the high Nepalese settlements. Two mountain races making divine music.

Later that evening, Roger and Richard met the girls as they ascended from the village after an afternoon of genuine Berber hospitality, but that is another story!

Derek Bush



Imaradene – Seventy One

As I awoke on 23 May 2001, I gradually became aware that this was my birthday and I had reached the grand old age of 71! If anybody had told me, before I became a Yorkshire Rambler, that I would be spending my 71st birthday in the Western Atlas of Morocco, I would have found it highly unbelievable. We were camped on the Tichka Plateau at 3,000 metres and today were to climb Imaradene, 3,351m, the highest peak on the plateau by some two metres from adjoining Moulay All.

During breakfast the rest of the group formed a circle and regaled me with “Happy Birthday”. This caused some amusement to our muleteers, unaccustomed to Western ways.

After breakfast we were led out on our ascent by Hamish. The route commenced up a wide but rocky and steep gully. At the top of this, the more adventurous ascended a large rock somewhat resembling the Cioch. We also discovered why Hamish was carrying a short-handled ice axe. This was to enable him to dig up some bulbs of wild daffodils which thrive in wet areas locally. Apparently, he has a licence to export these.

We continued over a small plateau and climbed to a bealach giving us

our first views of both Imaradene, Moulay Ali and surrounding peaks. Of particular note was Djebel Tingwert which still had patches of snow. At this point Tim Josephy, David Hick, George Burfitt and the two Norwegians went on ahead as it was their intention to continue beyond Imaradene to a further peak. Hamish also left us, to return to camp. As we followed the ridge to the summit, we were treated to views of impressive granite rock walls descending for several thousand feet. The ridge gave scrambling of varying standards, depending on the route taken. After about eleven hours we reached the summit which, whilst not being particularly impressive in itself, gave us extremely good views over the surrounding mountains.

In true YRC fashion, arguments took place over the best route to return to base and the party split into three, all eventually returning safely.

At the end of the evening meal, I had a pleasant surprise when I was presented with a delicious birthday cake, courtesy of Sammie Chapman. The cake sported three candles (some 68 short!), one of which played “Happy Birthday” persistently! All, our cook and head man, wished me “Happy Birthday” and was surprised to learn my age. After this I was known by our muleteers as “71”!

A memorable birthday. What more can one wish than a first-class day on the hills in good company?

Roger Dix

Roger between
Albert and Hamish





David Hick

Tim Josephy

