

Trekking in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco—Bernard Smith



What started as a low key family affair became a blockbuster event once the news broke. Walker expeditions entered the arena and the stage was set for a major trip. The cast expanded, if not to thousands, to at least a dozen. As most of us were no longer gainfully employed, any season was available to us. We chose to go at the end of September to avoid the heat of the summer months. The logistics were organised by Ali, a local guide, who

came highly recommended by various sources.

We flew into Marrakesh via Madrid courtesy of Easyjet where we were met by Ali. In order to avoid the crowds we transferred to Taroudent, travelled in Landcruisers up to the village of Tazoudot, and trekked across the Tichka plateau, climbing Jebel Imaradene (3351m), on the way. The weather was less than kind and we had rain almost every afternoon. Our gear was transported by mules and we camped where necessary but stayed in Berber houses when possible. It was quite cold at night and duvet jackets were much in evidence. The Berber houses were a great experience with good food but no alcohol as it was Ramadan. Our guide and muleteers went from dawn till dusk without even a drink of water! Five days of wonderful walking led us across the plateau and down the Ouid Nfis, A magnificent valley full of walnut groves and sandstone gorges. So far we had been in country not covered by the guide books and so unspoiled by tourism. In fact we had not seen another European. All this was to change.

As we emerged from the Ouid Nfis, at Agadir, we had arranged a pickup to avoid a section of road walking. A decrepit Ford Transit arrived and we all piled in, together with our baggage. Here we paid off the muleteers. As we hurtled down the rough track above the usual infinite drop we wondered why our driver steered with only one hand. It transpired that the other was needed to operate the throttle as the pedal was missing! I closed my eyes and the curtain and dreamed of England. Remarkably we emerged unscathed at the Tinmal Mosque. Huge and derelict, it is the only one in Morocco open to infidels.



We were transported over the Tizi Test to Ijoukak where we enjoyed a shower and a very tasty tagine. We also picked up a fresh team of muleteers. Over the following two days we crossed tizis, strolled through walnut groves, enjoyed a Hammam (bit like a sauna) at a Gite d'Etape, and eventually arrived at Aroumd.

We were now well and truly on the tourist trail. The upside was a stay in a comfortable hotel. The downside was the number of trekkers heading for Toubkal, at 4150m the highest mountain in the Atlas. We joined the crowds and headed up to the C.A.F. Toubkal refuge at 3205m. It was the familiar crowded hut scene but with showers. From here it is a fairly easy walk to the summit so we let the crowds disperse before setting off at about 7.00am. Moving steadily we wound our way through the field to arrive on top in about 3.5h. There was a cosmetic dusting of snow making the view superb, but making the descent a little more interesting. A second night was spent at the hut before walking up to the Tizi Ouanums for views to the Anti Atlas to the south. The trekking phase of the trip was rounded off with a stay of two days in Tamitert from where we explored the surrounding hills of about 2700m.

Phase 2 was a trip into the Sahara Desert. We enjoyed the drive south across mountain passes and through magnificent gorges. We explored some amazing old Kasbahs and stayed in some interesting hotels, one of which was underground. The first part of the safari was on camels. A more uncomfortable mode of transport cannot be imagined. As my hips became increasingly dislocated I followed the local custom and walked. Thankfully the second part was by Toyota Landcruiser, a far more civilised way to travel. We made it as far as Erg Chiggiga where the dunes are 150m high and very impressive. A sociable evening round the camp fire followed, entertained by our cameleers who claimed payment in the form of wine and whisky, a flexible interpretation of Islam. Little did we dream that we would be awakened next day by encroaching floods. After a hurried breakfast we beat a hasty retreat, just managing to beat the advancing toe of the river. Forging a river on saturated sand was not a pleasant prospect. Our drivers did a great job and we arrived safely back at the roadhead. It takes a Lancastrian group to get flooded out of the Sahara!



(cast; Jim Cunningham, Dave Fisher, Brian Guilfoyle Pete Melling, Iain Aitcheson, Graham Welch, Chris Walker, Dave Medcalf, Cathy Woodhead, Roger Finn, Bernard Smith, Josie Smith)

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For a detailed account of the itinerary see Dave Fisher.

