

THE HIGH ATLAS IN WINTER

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(Four illustrations: nos. 15-18)

THE High Atlas are situated four or five hundred miles south of Tangier. Toubkal, 13,666 ft., is the highest mountain not only in Morocco, but in the whole sweep of North Africa. The peaks rise about fifty miles south of Marrakech, from whose red thousand-year-old walls and palm groves they appear as a glittering icy wall—when not hidden by the heat shimmer of the plains. They stretch for many hundreds of miles, but the central peaks by their greater height have attracted most attention. Here too is found the best climbing.

The spine of the Atlas runs roughly east-west with ribs, jagged ridges of peaks, running out northwards. In detail they are more complex, and few ranges can have a greater seasonal contrast: waterless, sun-smitten rock in summer and silver snow-towers in winter. Two motorable passes cut off the Massif Central, the Tizi n' Test in the west and the Tizi n'Techka in the east. An hour's drive on the former leads to Asni (with its spartan Youth Hostel and luxurious hotel), where the surfaced road is left for an eleven mile 'farm track' up the Imeneni valley to Imlil. It is motorable, just. There is a fine C.A.F. hut (calor, showers, etc.), which makes an excellent base. The warden is a useful man, if a bit of a rogue; he will fix up mule transport, fresh chapatti-like bread and anything else (he owns the biggest shop). One of the local 'guides', Bourgemar, became a great friend of ours. Our visit ended with a 'cous cous' in his house perched on the hillside above Imlil. The people are honest and friendly, though like any highlanders 'they're no' daft' and will certainly spoil the tourist. Yet on seeing their poverty, the climber, however hard up he may be, feels he is unjustly wealthy. You can travel with the cattle, literally, from Tangier to Marrakech for thirty shillings. Tacheddirt has been described as 'a dump'; but there is no shame in poverty, especially when it is generously shared by the have-nots. Incidentally, food and even paraffin could be bought in Tacheddirt and eggs, bread, and milk will appear anywhere.

With Imlil as a base, we went off on journeys for anything up to ten days—about the time it took for the next storm to arrive (in between endless sunshine). The valleys to east and west both contained primitive C.A.F. huts, and straight up from Imlil there was the Neltner hut at the foot of Toubkal itself. Westwards again, another Tizi (pass) led to Oukaïmeden, Morocco's ski resort, and further gentler ridges to the Tizi n' Techka road.

Mules can be used part of the way to the Neltner hut, 10,521 ft., for which the key is collected at Arround, the first village en route (where every male will declare himself a 'guardian' and be willing to help for a price). In winter, mules will not manage further than the cluster of huts called Sidi Chamarouch. Sidi means 'Saint', and one hut is a religious site. The plod from there can be killing, and has stopped many parties at the start. Using skis, we found it hard work but bearable. The valley runs up past the hut to two passes which cross the spine, the 'Tizi n' Ouanoums, 11,910 ft., which plunges down more than 5,000 ft. to the solitary lake, the Lac d' Ifni, and the 'Tizi n' Ouagane, 12,187 ft., which in winter looks an incredible ski-run to the middle of nowhere and is a 'must' for the future. From the former col, the well-known 'O.S.O. Arête' gives a fine route, first pioneered by Bentley Beetham, up Toubkal.

To the east of the valley, an enlarged Cuillin-like array of spikes gives endless routes and impossible names: Timesguida and Ras n' Ouanoukrim, 13,289 and 13,270 ft., the Clochetons, Biiguinnoussene, 13,006 ft., and Aguelzim, 11,862 ft.

Beyond them lies the Mizane valley. The 'Tizi n' Mzic leads over from Imlil, and the guardian of the Lépiney hut lives in 'Tizi Oussem below the col. In winter we got mules as far as Azib Tamsoult, 7,475 ft., where there is a small hut which is worth using, as to ascend the gorge to the Lépiney hut, 10,400 ft., proved a hard day's work itself. (Mules can go right up in summer, of course.) This is a splendid little hut, looking onto the North face of Tazarhart which would be impressive anywhere. Charlet and Contamine made some excellent routes on it a decade ago—since when little has been done anywhere. The summit is a vast, wind-swept, stone plateau rather like Ben Macdhui. The steel shutters in the hut are not for ornament or safety from thieves, as has been suggested, but simply for protection. The spindrift rising hundreds of feet off this plateau was only the warning of the worst mountain storm I have ever met.

Going east from Imlil over the 'Tizi n' Tamatert, 7,689 ft., one reaches Tacheddirt, a small Berber village with the C.A.F. hut on its outskirts. The head of the valley rises to the 'Tizi n' Tacheddirt, 10,497 ft., which looks down on the Ourika valley (fine trout fishing), where at Timichi we were told, too late, that there was another hut functioning. Further east again, the 'Tizi nou Addi leads to Oukaïmeden. The facilities are a bit bigger and better than in the Cairngorms, with perhaps three hundred skiers at busy weekends and twenty during the week using them. The prices for lifts and the hotel accommodation are half those of home or continent, and the weather is usually superb. There is now an adequate, if hair-raising, road to 'Ouka' from the Ourika valley which swings round from beyond Tacheddirt to break northwards to the Marrakech plains.

Tacheddirt is a fine centre. It is backed by Angour, 11,745 ft., with a



Photo: B.A.M.W.E.]

HIGH ATLAS: ANGOUR (11,745 FT.), UPPER PART OF THE SOUTH FACE FROM WEST RIDGE. SEVERAL ROUTES OF OVER 2,000 FT. WERE CLIMBED ON THIS FACE.

(No. 15)



Photo: B.A.M.W.E.]

ON THE TRAVERSE OF ANRHEMER (12,773 FT.), A FINE WINTER EXPEDITION. VIEW WEST TO THE HILLS BEYOND THE 'TIZI N' TEST ROAD, ONE OF THE TWO BREAKS IN THE HIGH ATLAS.

(No. 16)

face over 2,000 ft., and looks across to Aksoual, 12,828 ft., a dazzling snow wall which taught us the Atlas scale. We had looked at its Nevis-like ridges and planned a gay romp to traverse the mountain. Only gradually did it dawn on us that we were looking up 5,000 ft. of the peak, and that its ridge was several miles long. We tried it at our fittest and it repulsed us. (We left at 1.30 a.m. and happily cramponed up the first 2,000 ft., then gradually sank deeper and deeper until we were forced to give up at dawn.) Anrhemer, 12,773 ft., balanced Angour across the Tizi and gave a fine high-level traverse, reminiscent of Aonach Eagach, except for its 12,000 ft. altitude and the blaze of blue beyond.

It was on this peak that I had an unbearable toothache; and after skiing down to the village I set off right down the valley for Asni and civilisation. I slept under a walnut tree that night, with a full moon shining down the great gorges, and reached Asni at noon the next day. There was no treatment to be had there, and eventually the filling cost me £4 in Marrakech. The ornithologist in me was content, though: hoopoe, green woodpecker, crested lark, shore lark, red-rumped swallow, black wheatear, Moussier's redstart, crimson-winged finch and rock bunting being some of the delights of the walk.

As one looked down beyond the main ridge, the hills dropped to a multi-coloured firmament, golden cloud-seas and blue-robed ranges—all dimming into the haze that told of the edge of the Sahara. With the jellaba-clad natives, mud villages and Arab sights and sounds, it was a startlingly different place to be; yet in mountaineering ways so like the summer Alps—if one could imagine the Alps before the climbers came. Comparisons are odious. These eroded and naked masses of volcanic peaks rising out of desert, or pulling '... about their breasts the silver veils of snow' recall Neltner's remark about the Atlas—'Il n'est plus beau ni moins beau que les Alpes, il est autre'.

A few words of history. The Atlas are inhabited by the Hamitic Berbers, while the plains are occupied by Semitic Arabs. Their origins are unknown, but they have been largely indifferent to the succession of conquest and are still politically fairly independent. Religiously, they are rather non-professing Islamic. The French arrived in Morocco in 1912, and French is still the language of commerce and culture. Casablanca and Toulouse look very much alike. Marrakech and other ancient cities, like Meknès and Fez, have modern additions outside the city walls. The French were ousted and independence has had its effects. The country is still unsettled, and our return was enlivened with student riots, road-blocks and curfews. The natives of the plains are very poor and there is much trekking off to the cities. The Berbers live aloof in the hills, though they too collect their American gift parcels and one wonders how much longer their system will last in face of the surge of civilisation.



Photo: B.A.M.W.E.]

HIGH ATLAS: ANRHEMER (12,773 FT.), NORTH FACE. THE MAIN RIDGE GIVES A HIGH LEVEL TRAVERSE OF TWO MILES FROM THE 'TIZI N' TACHEDDIRT (OFF RIGHT).

(No. 17)



Photo: B.A.M.W.E.]

HIGH ATLAS: THE TAZARHART WALL, THE MOST IMPRESSIVE FACE IN THE AREA, FROM THE LEPINEY HUT. THE TSSOUKKINE ARÊTE (FURTHEST RIGHT) WAS CLIMBED BY THE 1965 WINTER PARTY.

(No. 18)

Mountaineering history is brief. The Berbers long ago hunted moufflons on the summits and left cairns to whatever gods there were. *Felis Leo Barbarus* has gone. On motor-tyre soled sandals the natives still cross the ranges, making excellent guides, porters and friends. Some were approaching proper 'guide' standard before political upheaval removed the clientèle.

The first Europeans came between 1820 and 1840, followed twenty years later by the scientists—Hooker, Ball and Maw,¹ Foucault, Bourguignon, Nain, Thomson, Harris. Thorough investigation came in with the twentieth century. Louis Gentil and the Marquis de Segonzac devoted their lifetimes to the area. The C.A.F. section was founded in 1922—the highest peak still unknown. In 1931 a hideous trig. point was set up on Toubkal. The peak is climbed dozens of times a year now and enjoys all the desecration of Snowdon, Nevis or Mont Blanc. Several well-known names appear: Heckmair, Kröner and Fedor in 1919, Rand Herron, 1927, and in 1929 and subsequent visits, Bentley Beetham—a really international history. The G.H.M. filled in the details, with the de Lépiney brothers living in the country and being joined by L. Neltner and A. Stofer. *La Montagne* for July, 1929, is wholly given up to their accounts,² and was virtually the guide-book until the C.A.F. produced *Le Massif du Toubkal*, 1938 (which is almost unobtainable and out of date, although not yet superseded). The war brought things to a standstill and the impetus of the Charlet-Contamine visit, which showed there was rock-climbing as fine as in the Alps, was lost in political upheaval.

In the last few years an increasing number of British climbers have gone out during Easter holidays and, faced with the peculiar difficulties of the end of winter, have been disappointed and have given poor reports—usually (unfairly) of the peaks rather than themselves. A few, from de Pollitzer-Pollenghi, with his high-level traverse, to Wilfrid Noyce, alone, and Tom Weir with his sharp eye, have given good pictures of the peaks.³ As far as I know, we were the first to winter there (January to March, 1965) and by the time this appears we shall have had a second winter in the Atlas. Throughout the winter we met only four parties in the mountains, three of them British. The initiative seems to have been passed to this overcrowded country. And it is only twenty-four hours to Marrakech.

Old popular routes are still done regularly—usually from the Neltner hut—to the neglect of the good things available from the Lépiney hut or Tacheddirt or more distant bivouacs. For better or worse we hope to produce an up to date guide-book to the area. Any notes would be welcome.

¹ *A. J.* 6. 220–31.

² See also *A. J.* 40. 221.

³ See *A. J.* 45. 96, *A. J.* 67. 65–72, and *S.M.C. J.* May, 1957.

Maps, which are by no means foolproof, can be bought from Messrs. Stanford, 12-14 Long Acre, W.C.2, and one or two additional recent articles which are worth reading are given on p. 50. Other articles in English we found misleading, with maps misnaming main ridges and making sweeping assertions about unvisited areas. Accuracy is difficult enough in any case, owing to the variety of heights and spellings.

We were a small party: two Scots (Leo Barclay and myself), one Englishman (Roger Whewell) and a New Zealander (Brian Salmon). We went under the high-sounding title of the British Atlas Mountains Winter Expedition (B.A.M.W.E.). Nothing deterred by reports of physical prostration, poor rock and appalling snow conditions, we set off in high hopes and found—eventually—the finest climbing of our various experiences.

I say 'eventually', for when we finally rounded each other up at Gibraltar we found the ferry to Africa was only just back from repairs (on the Clyde) and would not sail for three days—not that that mattered because a dock strike had delayed our gear anyway. It took three weeks for our 'luggage in advance' to catch up in Tangier, and by then one of the party had dysentery and we had spent the fares for the return trip on food. I then had my dental escapade. In future we shall read early chapters of books on mountaineering expeditions with a new sympathy. Riots and anti-British Spanish customs made the return almost as eventful.

The very shortness of many visits had led to misunderstanding; one cannot climb to 13,500 ft. in two days, having toiled up waist-deep snow in an extremely dry atmosphere, and expect it to be fun. We had the leisure to explore and choose. We had skis and skins, which are almost essential. We were fit when we went out and had little bother with acclimatisation after the first few sorties. In our first week, in addition to skiing, we did the West ridge of Angour, the two-mile traverse of Anrhemer, over 12,000 ft., for its whole distance, and a new climb of 3,500 ft. on the centre of the South wall of Angour. Towards the end, though, the two of us doing the climbing then suddenly seemed to lose all strength, and even gaining the Tizi Tacheddirt from the village was a struggle. The physiological side we want to explore more, and we also want to experience a second winter's weather before producing the statistics we gathered. While there we completed seventy or so peaks, passes and climbs. The peaks are all much of a height, with long ridges and several peculiar plateaux. Outside the central massif, the hills must be hot slag-heaps in summer, but when deep in snow might give strenuous ski traverses. In summer, too, all the peaks can be reached by easy routes (but so can Mont Blanc). In the winter the screes are buried. There are no crevasses. Steep faces clear quickly, making rock-climbing possible in mid-winter. Storms come every week or ten days, and are

violent and short and give clear signs of approach. Snow softens by midday, but freezes quickly when the sun dips. Easy summer routes could prove difficult in winter. Faces tend to be more broken up than expected, as so often they are only easily seen 'en face'.

We were a free and easy party. There was a typical day at the Neltner when our rock expert, Roger, took our ski expert, Leo, up the rocks opposite the hut. It proved to be a piton route, A2. I had gone off early alone and in the course of the day visited two major passes on skis, climbed two 4,000 m. peaks, one the second highest in the range, did two small easy climbs and, after a bad descent, had to climb to the 'Tizi n' Ouagane up a buttress carrying my skis on the sack before finishing with the grand run down to the hut. As I approached the hut I heard familiar comments on my ski technique being shouted down to me by Leo, dangling in étriers high above. The pair of them had made a fine and sustained route of over 400 ft., with two pitches of V sup. and one of VI; and the technical description of their climb (the Left Hand Route on the rock triangle opposite the hut) reads very like a description of a hard modern route at home. Yet it has been said that 'there is no rock worth climbing in the Atlas'.

The Lac d'Ifni is the only lake in the Atlas and well worth a visit. It gave us a memorable trip. We left the hut at 5.45 and were on the Tizi n' Ouanoums at 7.15, having cramponed up. Skis were carried and left below the col. A bitter, yellow dawn was squeezing up from the other side as we sat and glissaded 1,000 ft. down the gully. It eased off after that, but continued to twist down through a wilderness of rock faces and side gullies leading up to hoary heights. The whole place had been scoured with avalanches and was studded with rocks. We sped through 4,000 ft. to the flat where the snow gave out and the path running across the last miles of boulders appeared. The bright blue lake suddenly lay before us. We sat and brewed tea while a party of singing girls passed on the slopes above. Later they returned, bowed under 100 lb. loads of fodder for the goats and sheep. We set up camp on the north side of the lake and roasted in the sun while on the other side the icy slopes ran into the water, periodically calving mini-icebergs. The next day we had a delicious slow awakening—lying watching the sun creep over to our bivouac under the sky and preparing coffee and porridge and omelettes while still in bed. The morning was spent bartering matches for small trout which were grilled in oatmeal for lunch. A dog barked wildly at its echo across the glen. But by midday the sky had clouded over. We knew the signs too well. Our visit was over. Not the next dawn, but the immediate sunset must see us on our way. We walked up the glen, stopping for a last brew before the snow. The sun set, the snow steepened, the crampons began to squeak, all talking ceased. Every foot gained was an effort; and it was 5,000 ft. from lake to col. The

wind rose, and the rocks towered into the clouds and fitful moonlight. Brian and I drew ahead. He had no crampons and I had to cut endless steps up the last 1,000 ft. An icicle like a tree trunk tobogganed down the slope into the darkness, with us yelling after it. We stood still in the stormy silence, until a reassuring call of 'Missed!' came up from below. We crawled out onto the windy col, added our useless skis to our loads and plodded down endlessly to the hut. One of the party fell asleep at the supper table, and it was a night of blizzard, although hot and thirsty inside the hut.

These are the days one remembers; but it is the actual climbs rather than expeditions of this type which are normally recorded, and I should perhaps end with a typical route.

We had gone up to the foot of the Great Gully on Angour's South face to explore the Thin Buttress to the right of it, but it looked very hard so we opted for the buttress right of it again. Climbing out of the Great Gully was not easy. We broke out after one fruitless start by a corner where a bay joined the gully on the right. That gave 70 ft. of very loose rock with strenuous pull-ups and crumbling holds. The route then went left to climb a thin crack with little protection. I thought of Rannoch Wall. It was nice to find one runner and, 150 ft. up, a good spike belay below a tower with a tempting ledge going left. Roger went on to its end—it dropped into a snow couloir across which lay Thin Buttress, so we had found a way to it if nothing else. The tower itself was crumbling, so we moved along to the right and up a small couloir which narrowed to an icy gully with an awkward chockstone. Fifteen feet above it we found a 'classic nut belay', and Roger set off up a steep chimney out of which he dislodged an endless stream of rock and ice. It was 'thin', or strenuous, so Roger was in his element. He ran out 100 ft. on this pitch, and in following him I stuck ingloriously, with the cumbersome sack and axe so jammed that it looked as if I should be there permanently. At times one tip-toed on the left wall. I went on up the next 150 ft., of which the first 15 ft. was climbing and the rest an effort at not knocking down stones on the second man. We sat and ate oranges and sardines at the foot of the Central Buttress proper, with the Thin Buttress and Gully to our left. It had been hard work.

The climb suddenly became fiercer, and our note about the next section simply said, 'c. 960 ft. Climb straight up'. Our orange peel slowly shrank—but always lay directly below us; it looked as if we could spit on it. The climbing was about grade IV all the way, with some pitches of V. We moved quickly, sometimes together, sometimes singly. I seemed to spend timeless hours looking at the soles of Roger's boots, then climbing up to him, and wordlessly seeing him set off again. I think we used two pitons for protection, and runners where possible. The rock was nowhere really solid and demanded care. One climbed

like a cat between the broken bottles on top of a wall. I can recall one overhang where the pull-up came at the same time as the dissolution of the foothold below; but the best memory perhaps is of a classic chimney straddle above a slabby band which landed us grinning on the arête. There only remained 700 ft. of scrambling along the arête, like the western approach to Sgurr nan Gillean, complete with threading the needle, and then, by a turning movement to the left round a sandstone cap on the edge of the plateau, we were up. For the last hour we had been in a swirling cloud, and the clouds were still welling up out of the valley as we sat on the Tizi Tacheddirt to watch the sun set. An hour later we set the village dogs barking for the second time that day.

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