Morocco 1989

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(Plates 82–84)

The mountains of Morocco are steadily growing in popularity with British climbers, walkers and ski-mountaineers. This is due both to the quality of the mountains themselves being better known, and to a combination of easy travel, cheapness and freedom from bureaucracy.

Half a dozen UK tour operators offer trekking holidays which cover not only the over-popular Toubkal area, but also the Central (M'Goun) Massif, the Jbel Saghro, the Anti-Atlas, Siroua and the Tichka Plateau above Taroudant. Most are sensitively run and as an introduction to an area can be useful. 'Knowing the ropes' is not easy in Morocco, and time-conscious visitors don't want to waste days over organization. The trekking offered there is as good as anywhere in the world, especially in the spring when the vivid colours and snowy mountains make life among the Berber hillmen a memorable experience.

The Moroccans themselves are now becoming well-organized (the Alps must have been like this 80 years ago), and several professional guides can set up everything required for trekking and climbing almost anywhere: booking hotels, laying on transport, providing mules, food, etc. (Some addresses are given below.) This can save a great deal of time, effort and hassle and in the end is little more expensive than doing one's own thing throughout.

The availability of mules facilitates ski-mountaineering, a side of the game neglected by the British and rather slavishly followed by continentals *en masse* only in the Toubkal area. A traverse of the Central Atlas, the big hills beyond Toubkal, peaks west of the Nfis like Erdouz and round the Tichka Plateau all offer good ski-mountaineering. A few days warm-up at the small resort of Oukaïmeden is recommended. The Middle Atlas (cedar forest country) offers good *langlauf* touring but the snowcover is unpredictable.

Jbel Toubkal (4167m), being the highest peak in all North Africa, is the great lure and the Marrakech-Asni-Imlil-Neltner-Toubkal trail is a busy one and provides the worst of hassles. This notoriety is superficial, however, and if one stays at Imlil rather than just bombing Toubkal then the charms soon come through. The other huts at Tachddirt and Lepiney offer far finer rock-climbing or winter climbing, yet are largely unvisited by British climbers. Rock-climbing on untouched faces is there for the picking in every area and, given the sunny climate even in winter, deserves far more attention. I'd be happy to advise on areas to visit.

Trekking below the snowline in spring in the Toubkal area is rewarding. In the last few years I have worked out a whole pattern of such walks using huts, bivouacs and local houses, and usually ending at one of the gourmet hotels on the Tizi n' Test road!

For some years we have used a house above Imlil as base. This gives greater freedom and the owner, Aït Idir Mohammed (address below), can organize mules etc., circumventing the Imlil hassle. *Ribat Tours* office at Imlil can also provide information.

The authorities have stopped the ready availability of maps on 'security' grounds. As they want to attract tourists, this seems a short-sighted restriction and one of considerable inconvenience to climbers and trekkers. To help a bit, I have prepared illustrated notes to climbing Toubkal and on the area's trekking (see below).

Mountaineers will find spring, March to May, the most rewarding period. Alpine gear is needed then. June to September can be very hot below the mountains but is the popular trekking period for the tour operators, as the high passes (*tizis*) are all open. (Burnt-up and snowless, with vast screes, the hills are, however, far less attractive.) From October to January the weather is very unstable, in February it begins to improve, and this is a good time for the Saghro or Anti-Atlas. West of the Tizi n' Tichka pass Atlantic weather applies and the hills are lived in year-round; east of the pass the weather is 'Tibetan' and transhumance occurs. Winters can produce fierce winds and cold.

The Toubkal Massif is well-enough described in Collomb (qv) and the non-Neltner-based areas are especially recommended. Those wanting things organized a bit could contact Asquarray Lahcen BP 5 or Aït Idir Mohammed, BP 26, Asni (par Marrakech). The guardians at Tachddirt or Lepiney can also help with mules etc from those villages; the latter lives at Tizi Oussem and has rooms for hire.

Local Guides: Asquarray Lahcen (and the *Ribat* Tourist Office at Imlil) or Aït Idir Mohammed (see above), and there are a dozen more listed on the notice board at Imlil. One can simply arrive and fix things on the spot. These guides also lead trips to the other ranges listed, and vice versa.

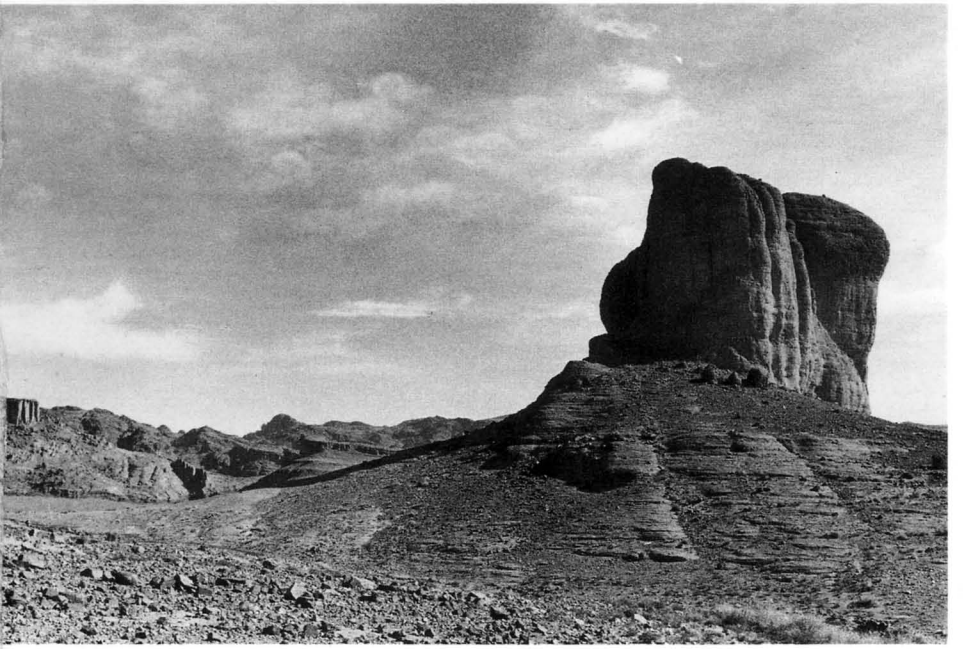
Central Atlas, culminating in Irghil M'Goun, the only 4000m summit outwith the Toubkal region, is frequently visited by British parties. March to April is best for skiing, May is good, June bearable, then it is arid and hot. Trekking parties operate into June and also in September–October. Easiest access points are the Bou Goumez valley, Demnate, Telo et-Anemiter. Traversing N to S to the Ourzazate-Errachida road is recommended. Winter can produce severe storms.

Local Guides: Mohammed Achari, Douar Iskatafen, Aït Bouguemez, Bureau Tabant (par Azilal).

Jbel Sarhro is never wet and in summer is desert, hot and best avoided. February to April and October to December are the best months. Nights can be frosty, even if days are hot. Dramatic rock towers and memorable trekking have seen this called 'the Hoggar of Morocco'. There are no reports of British climbs and only a few French ascents. Iknioun and east from Agdz are the easy approaches.

Siroua A remote, solitary extinct volcano south of the Toubkal Massif which is

82. *The classic view to Jbel Toubkal (4167m), the highest peak in North Africa, from above Imlil, Morocco.* (Hamish Brown) (p 225)



83. *'The Camel', in the harsh landscape of the Jbel Sarho, Morocco.* (Hamish Brown) (p 225)

seldom climbed by British parties. It has a unique atmosphere and deserves a visit. There are water problems in summer. It is usually reached from Taliouine or Aoulouz, and Lac d'Ifni and Toubkal can also be reached from these bases. The best times are February to May and September to November. It is desert hot in summer.

Local Guide: Jahid Ahmed, Auberge Souktana, Taliouine.

West of Nfis Some big peaks, snowy till late (ski options) with deep valleys, ragged crests and offering largely untouched rock-climbing. Entry from Tizi n' Test road: Ijoukak, Mzouzite or the pass itself. The area is seldom visited (even by Imlil guides) and demanding. Best information in Peyron. Avoid October to February.

Tichka Plateau A strange 'lost world' place with superb trekking and plenty of untouched climbing. Hot approaches in summer but modified at height. Best avoid July, August, October to January. Approaches from Imi n' Tanoute or Timesgadiouine on Agadir-Marrakech road (N) or via Taroudant (S).

Local Guide: Tali abdel Aziz, BP 132, Taroudant (or via the souvenir shop in NE corner of Place Assarag).

Anti Atlas The centre is Tafraoute. An area of fantastic granite formations and big rock peaks above the Ameln valley. There is wide scope for all interests. A few trekking companies alone operate regularly.

Middle Atlas An area of rolling cedar forests and extinct volcanoes, this is primarily an area for *langlauf* ski touring. Snow-cover is unpredictable. Two small ski resorts at Mischliffen and Bou Iblane. Spring trekking would be rewarding. It is little visited by foreigners. East again are ranges with no English references – but see Peyron.

Addresses of Tour Companies Trekking in Morocco
Pioneer Expeditions, 105 Hanover Street, Edinburgh EH2 1DJ.
Waymark Holidays, 295 Lillie Road, London SW6 7LL. (Treks include the area above Taroudant.)
Explore Worldwide, 7 High Street, Aldershot, Hants GU11 1BH.
Exodus Expeditions, All Saints Passage, 100 Wandsworth High Street, London SW18 4LE.
Sherpa Expeditions, 131A Heston Road, Hounslow, Middx.
Guerba Expeditions, 101 Eden Vale Road, Westbury, Wilts BA13 3YB.
Ribat Tours, 3 Ave Moulay Youssef, Esc B No 15, Rabat, Morocco. (Or BP 24, Imlil, Asni, par Marrakech.)

Marrakech to Imlil
Marrakech offers accommodation from the 5-star de luxe *Mamounia* to local hotels in the alleys off the Jemaa el Fna, youth hostel and camp-site. The *Hotel Ali*, Rue Mouley Ismael is much used by walkers and climbers, and the

Moroccan guides. Reliable hot water, good Moroccan food, usefully situated just off the Fna, facing the Place de Foucauld with town buses (No 1 to Gueliz – new town) and *petits/grands taxis* handy. *Hotel de Foucauld*, Rue El Mouahidine is just across the square and the *Tazi*, Rue Bab Agnaou round the corner.

Ten minutes walk from the *Ali* takes one to the Bab er Rob (gateway), outside which buses and communal taxis go to Asni, as and when they are full. A 'place' cost 10dh in 1989, you may be asked for more as a try-on. Taxis are faster and less hassle. A shuttle service (taxi, minibus, *camionette* or truck) operates from Asni to Imlil (10dh). Saturday is very busy due to the local *souk* (well worth a visit), other days you may have to wait an hour. *Grands taxis* can also be hired from the Fna but are much more expensive.

PERSONAL NOTE

I have spent several months at a time, most years since the early sixties, in Morocco; my enthusiasm grows, if anything, year by year. I have put together notes on Toubkal and the spring trekking almost in self-defence as I receive so many requests for information. These, and the Morocco chapter in *The Great Walking Adventure*, should help with the most popular area; the notes above hint at other areas. If further information is wanted I would be happy to help. Sometimes I have maps or publications available. More rarely I may be free to organize or lead small parties to specific areas or for specific interests: skiing, climbing, trekking, bird-watching, botanizing, etc. I also have an extensive Moroccan library and archive collection, a vast library of pictures, and can make study facilities available. Contact H M Brown/Atlas Information, 21 Carlin Craig, Kinghorn, Fife KY3 9RX, Scotland (Tel 0592–890422). The only comparable collection is held by the Alpine Club Library. Please enclose a SAE whenever writing to either.

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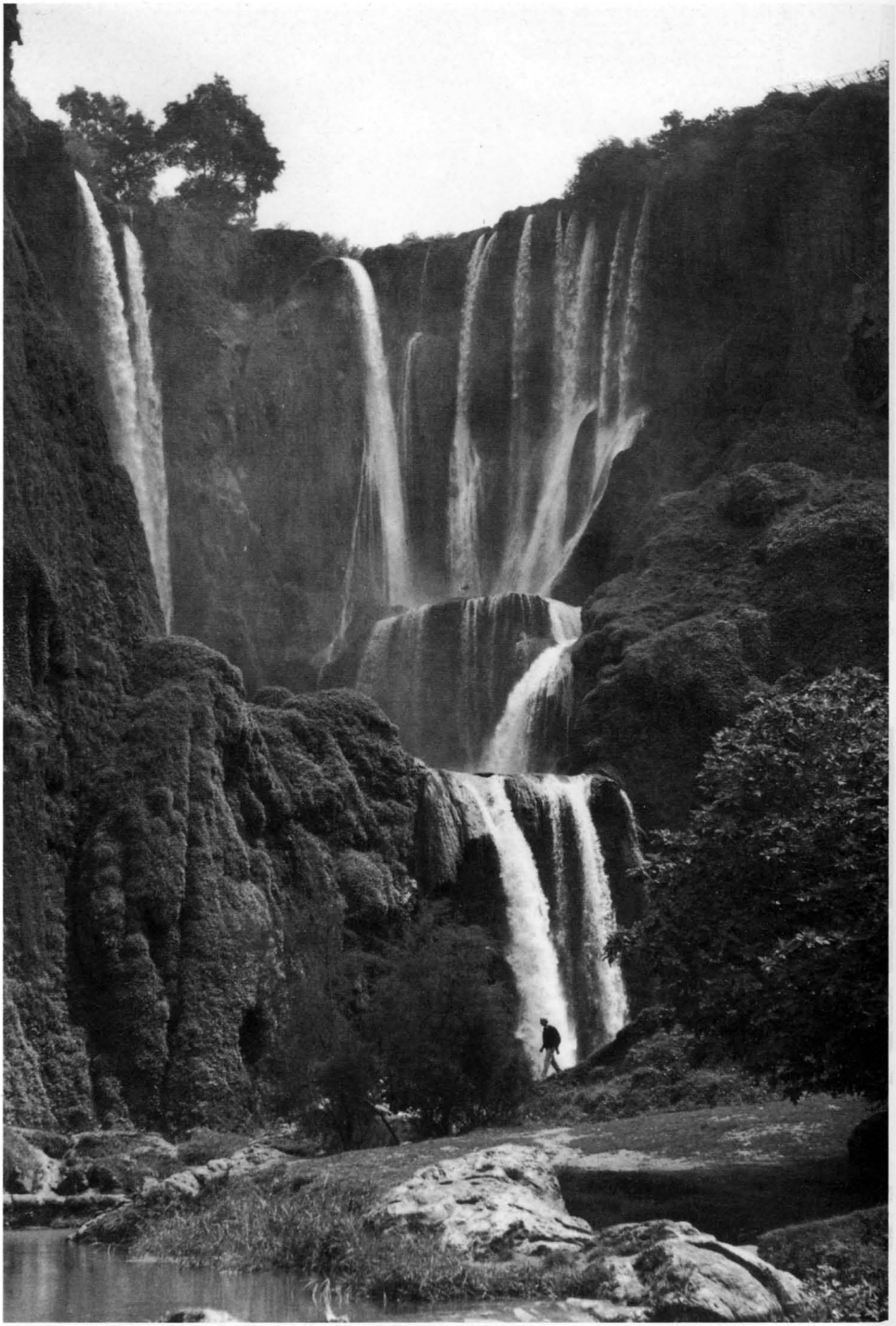

84. The Cascade d'Ouzzoud in the Central Atlas. (Hamish Brown) (p 225)

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