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CLIMB IT: TOUBKAL

Moroccan mountaineering

You don't normally pack crampons for Africa, but a winter ascent of Morocco's highest mountain is an exception, as **Katy Dartford** discovers

A mobile phone sends out a shrill ring over the quiet chatter. Strange, I think, as there's no signal here at 3,200m in the Atlas Mountains. "Ah, it's actually an alarm... a call to prayer," says Houssain, our guide on this trip to climb Jebel Toubkal, North Africa's highest peak. "We're not as strict as five a day here," he continues. "Just two prayer calls a day."

It is a reminder that although North Africa is one of the most accessible 'exotic' destinations for Western Europeans, there are still many great contrasts to our way of life. Although you might not believe you were in North Africa if you looked out of the window right now. Big flakes of snow had finally started to fall, turning the dusty peaks white and shimmering – a moon-like landscape resembling the Alps, rather than the rocky red horizons I'd been getting used to.

I'm resting in the Neltner Refuge, a bunkhouse owned by the French Alpine Club, from where you can reach the summit of Toubkal in a few hours. At 4,167m, Toubkal can in summer be climbed in just a three-day round trip from Marrakesh. But tackling it in winter, as I am, adds an exciting extra dimension, with the chance of using ice axes and crampons.

The bunkhouse is a world away from the throb of Marrakesh. It's peaceful. Trekkers chat or read. We sit around the fire and Houssain tells us about different aspects of Moroccan culture,

Who's writing

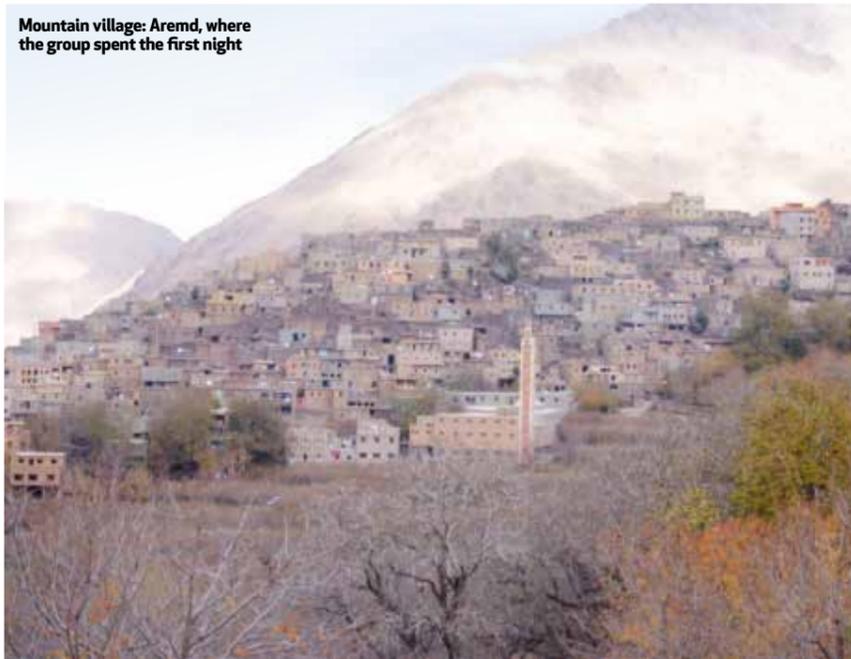


Katy Dartford is a journalist and travel writer based in Chamonix. Initially a broadcast journalist for the BBC, she decided to combine her love of writing with her love of the mountains. She enjoys trekking, mountaineering, rock climbing and trail running as well as skiing and mountain biking. Some of her favourite places for these activities are the Dolomites, Greece, Colorado and, of course, Chamonix. Her website is www.katydartford.com.

from Berber language and history to the recent troubles of the Arab Spring. He even plays us Berber music on his iPhone. It's interrupted by a loud bang and a shower of granules explodes over me... someone opened a jar of fresh coffee, forgetting the effects of altitude on air pressure!

A few days ago it couldn't have been more different. I was sipping sweet mint tea in the Red City, as Marrakesh is known. It's a place that dizzies the senses with its array of colours and scents. In the medina (the old part

Mountain village: Aremd, where the group spent the first night



Roof of Morocco: the summit of Toubkal

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of the city) there are endless souks, or markets, dedicated to woodwork, copper, leather, carpets and spices. Bartering for a good price on trinkets can be fun – or stressful, as you never know who has come out best. In the square, Berber musicians bang drums and blow flute-like *tabjas* in a bid to charm snakes. Don't look them in the eye or try to take a photo of them though, as you may be harassed into parting with a few diram.

But strangest of all was that it was late November and I was sweating from

the heat but had a duffel bag full of winter walking gear, crampons and an ice axe. Only the icing-dusted peaks of the High Atlas breaking through the haze in the distance told me that I was in the right place.

The next day we drove south along the Tizi-n-Test road to Asni, and then to the trekkers' gateway town of Imlil. The start of many treks in the Atlas Mountains, Imlil, at 1,740m, is the most important village in the Ait Mizane valley.

Porters loaded our luggage on to

mules and we set off with just our day packs, up a winding path lined with walnut trees and apple boxes. We passed a little shop full of trinkets, owned by a rotund Berber nicknamed Robin Hood. He gave us a large gappy grin and invited us in to view his colourful array of carpets. "Money not go to hashish and alcohol, but to tagine and couscous," he said.

After about 45 minutes we reached our accommodation for the evening, a Berber house in the village of Aremd, a jumble of dun houses with a rusty-red ▶



Atmospheric: views over the High Atlas Mountains

minaret towering over them. It was 4pm and the sun was already going down behind the mountains. On a lovely terrace decked out with cane shades we ate biscuits and drank mint tea, while Houssain gave us a briefing about the next day. He also said we had to 'tickle' the teapot to get the dregs out as we drained the silver pot. That evening we ate chicken tagine with prunes in the colourful dining room. Moroccan food isn't really spicy, but Houssain encouraged us to use harissa sauce as it's supposed to be good for altitude. Our food from now on would get more basic as it all had to be carried up the mountain.

The next morning we set off for the Neltner Refuge. The route is easy going at first, passing orchards and woolly goats and climbing gently south on the left side of the Ait Mizane valley. When mules carrying huge loads tried to pass us we stood on the mountain side of the path so they didn't knock us into the river below.

The valley then started to bend east to the tiny settlement of Sidi Chamharouch, with its Muslim shrine, at 2,310m. A huge whitewashed boulder stands behind the shrine, drawing pilgrims who come to visit the tomb of the local *marabout* (Muslim holy man). Non-Muslims are forbidden to cross

the bridge to the shrine, so instead we stopped for a Fanta and some sugared nuts and dates before following a steep zig-zagging path over the stream and into the Isougouane valley.

It was here that we half expected to meet the snowline but winter conditions hadn't arrived yet – just a little dusting of snow. We carried on, crampon-less, and finally reached the old Neltner Refuge, where we'd be staying, with the new Refuge du Toubkal just above it. It was a relief to get there as we'd had a big day of climbing. We were now well over 3,000m and surrounded by peaks on three out of four sides. ►

○ As is often the case, it was the little sister that proved more interesting than its bigger sibling. The next day we headed off Jébel Ouanoukrim ○

5 MORE... ACTIVITIES IN MOROCCO

Morocco is paradise for outdoorsy types. Here are a few more things to do there

1 Raft

Rafting the Ahansel River through the High Atlas Mountains offers adrenaline by day and peace and quiet by night. The rapids are exciting rather than terrifying, the river runs through magnificent gorges, and in the evenings you can camp in a Bedouin tent beside the river with incredible stars and no-one else around for miles. Water by Nature offers trips: www.waterbynature.com.



2 Ski

It's true. Not only can you winter mountaineer in Morocco, there's skiing too. You can ski tour in the High Atlas Mountains, including to the summit of Toubkal, or for downhill skiing there's the resort of Oukaïmeden, also in the High Atlas about 45 miles from Marrakesh. It will be more about the experience than the quality of the pistes – catch a donkey to the bottom of the chairlift and four drag lifts, expect the standard of rental gear to be somewhat different to that in Europe, and be prepared for all sorts of people offering to be your 'instructor.'

3 Climb

For lovers of sunny rock, Morocco's best climbing is in the Anti Atlas Mountains, not far from the city Agadir, with everything from exciting multi-pitch outings to roadside cragging. The guidebook *Morocco Rock* has around 1,000 routes on the north side of the Jebel el Kest and Jebel Taskra mountain ranges – see www.moroccorock.com.

4 Surf

The coastline north of Agadir is full of surf spots, featuring waves for surfers of all abilities, with the laid-back fishing village of Taghazout one of the country's top surf destinations. Surf Maroc offers accommodation, guiding, lessons, equipment hire and even yoga; see <http://surfmaroc.com>.

5 Pamper

After all that surfing, trekking, climbing and skiing, relax in the local Hammam, or steam room, similar to a Turkish bath. Locals visit at least once a week, to cleanse their bodies, and just to gossip. Scrubbing off the dirt with a black, jelly-like soap made from olive stones from nearby trees is surprisingly refreshing.

Once we'd found our bunks and unpacked our bags, we had some calorie-laden fried dough with fig jam before heading out to a patch of ice for an introduction to how to use our crampons and ice axes. We spent an amusing hour or so sliding down the solid ice as we struggled to stick an axe into it and make a successful ice axe arrest.

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Over a lentil-based dinner, Houssain told us he'd had an idea. Instead of going for the smaller peaks first to help us acclimatise, we'd go straight for Toubkal the next day. The weather looked nice, and he was confident in us.

Six o'clock the next morning was a flurry of activity, with a quick breakfast then a scramble to get our kit together before heading off at seven, as day began to break over the mountains. There was still no fresh snow, but we packed our winter kit nonetheless.

The next four hours were tough. The first haul was up an almost 40-degree incline via long zig-zags, heading southeast from the refuge. We dropped down to cross a stream, then climbed a steep scree slope to reach the



White stuff: the snow finally came for the last day

Tizi'n'Toubkal pass at 3,940m. From Tizi we went left and climbed again to reach a field of boulders. We passed the 'path of the plane,' so named because if you go this way you can see the remains of a 1960s Portuguese Army cargo plane scattered about the mountain side. Houssain told us you can take this path to Toubkal, but it's more dangerous.

As we progressed higher and higher we had more frequent breathers, leading to more calls of "Yalah!" from Houssain to encourage us on. We crossed some solid icy patches with intimidating drops below. Eventually we reached the final steep ridge, with an epic vista of the Anti-Atlas

Mountains in one direction, the Atlantic coast to the west, and the sands of the Sahara Desert to the east.

A few minutes later, and four and a half hours after leaving the refuge, we were standing on the summit, the highest people in North Africa. Apart from a few whoops of celebration, and attempting to climb the large pyramid-shaped iron structure on the top, it was utterly calm and quiet, just a few birds floating in the sky. We took photo after photo of the surrounding peaks: to the south, Jebel Sirwa; to the south east, Jebel Sahro with its flat peak; and Jebel Ouanoukrim, the second-highest mountain in North Africa, which looked like an appealing prospect for the next day.

It was biting cold and after quickly making sandwiches we began our descent to Neltner. We headed down on a scree path which we discovered was best tackled by running, and were back toasting our success with mugs of tea by the fire in about three and a half hours.

As is often the case, it was the little sister that proved more interesting than its bigger sibling. The next day we headed off in a more relaxed mood to attempt Toubkal's sister peak, Jebel Ouanoukrim, which is only 80m lower. Ouanoukrim has two summits, which are separated by a scree field: the north summit, Ras, at 4,083m, and the slightly higher southern summit, Timizguida, at 4,088m.

It was colder and windier today but ►



the snow that had been threatening still hadn't come – probably a good thing as these peaks are more technical than Toubkal, requiring some scrambling half way up, and a steep trudge to the top about six hours after leaving the refuge. The view from the summit cairn was again magnificent, especially as we could see Toubkal itself standing proudly above its peers on the other side of the valley. It was hard to believe we'd climbed it just a day earlier.

It isn't until that evening that the snow we have been promised starts to fall. The next morning dawns bright and crisp and we decide to have one last jaunt into the mountains before returning to the bustle of Marrakesh. Finally we don our crampons, heading towards the Tizi n' Ouanoums Pass. The only sounds are the scrunch of footsteps as we walk up a path I now barely recognise. Yet it actually feels easier underfoot and we seem to move quicker, as the snow has packed together all the loose rubble and scree. We keep out our ice axes in our hill-facing hand, just in case we need to push them into the snow if we slip... but fortunately our ice axe arrest training is never put to the test. **AT**



Going down: the rocky descent on Ouanoukrim

LET'S GO

Want to do what Katy did? Here's how you can...

Get there

Marrakesh is the best place to fly to for a Toubkal climb, and there are various flights from various UK airports, including with budget airlines. From there the trek starts from the lively village of Imlil. Organised treks will include transport there; if not the best way to get there is by shared taxi from the taxi rank at Baber Robb, a gate on the south-west edge of the medina. Or you could take a bus to the nearby town of Asni and then a taxi for the remaining 17km.



Staying in a Berber home



Bustling Marrakesh

Where to stay

In Marrakesh we stayed in the colourful and traditional Moroccan House Hotel (www.moroccanhousehotels.com). There are loads of hotels and riads (traditional houses with a courtyard) in the city.

On the way up to the mountain hut we stayed in a *gite d'etape*, or village house, in the village of Aremd. There were two or three people per bedroom and it was comfy, with electricity and lots of friendly cats.

There are two huts next to each other at the start of the most popular route up Toubkal, at about 3,200m. We stayed at the older of the two, officially called the Refuge du Toubkal but known as Neltner Refuge, built and run by the Alpine Club of France. Sleeping is in dorms, next to one another on bunk beds. There's a kitchen so groups can cook for themselves, and a small shop where you can buy water and snacks. It costs about €25 per night including breakfast and dinner; see www.refugedutoubkal.com.

The newer (and apparently grander)

refuge is called Les Mouflons de Toubkal. Contact +212 (0)524 449767 or +212 (0)661 213345.

When to go

You can climb Toubkal all year round, but for winter conditions go between November and April.

Experience and fitness

This trip involves climbing to over 4,000m and (hopefully) negotiating easy-angled snow slopes using an ice axe and crampons. If you plan to do it as part of an organised trip, as I did, they probably won't require any previous mountaineering experience – you'll be taught the skills on the way up. But it's recommended that you are in good physical shape and used to long days out in the hills.

What to take

You'll need crampons, crampon-friendly boots and an ice axe – most companies will be able to lend or hire you these if you're going with an organised trip. Take lots of layers to keep warm, including a hat and gloves, and a warm sleeping bag for the hut. Also pack waterproofs and a headtorch (for the early morning starts as well as in the hut), and a daysack. Bring sunscreen, sunglasses and a sun hat too. Trekking poles might make the ascent and descent easier on the knees.

Tour operators

I went on Intrepid Travel's eight-day Winter Toubkal trip. It costs from £510, including accommodation, most meals, local transport, a city tour in Marrakesh, a tour leader and experienced mountain guides, and runs from October to March. See www.intrepidtravel.com.

Other companies offering the trip include KE Adventure Travel (www.keadventure.com); Exodus (www.exodus.co.uk); Travel and Trek (www.travelandtrek.com); Peak Mountaineering (www.peakmountaineering.com) and Explore (www.explore.co.uk).

Other routes and guidebooks

We took the most popular route to the top of Toubkal, the Ikhibi Sud. Alternative routes are the North Cirque (Ikhibi Nord), where you get to pass a plane wreckage, which takes longer and is for more experienced climbers. Or try the Ouanoums Ridge, which is estimated to take eight to nine hours and involves an abseil. The guidebooks *Trekking in the Atlas Mountains* by Karl Smith and *Mountaineering in the Moroccan High Atlas* by Des Clark, both published by Cicerone (www.cicerone.co.uk) have more information.