Kasbah du Toubkal
~ The Toubkal Ascent ~
JBEL TOUBKAL - 4167m





Pliny, the Roman geographer, described the Atlas peaks as the most fabulous mountains in all of Africa, whilst Louis Neltner (after whom the CAF hut at the base of Toubkal is named) described them as neither more nor less beautiful than the Alps, but something different". The native inhabitants of these mountains are the Berbers whose name for the High Atlas Mountains is Idraren Draren (Mountains of Mountains). The Toubkal Massif is made up largely of green volcanic rocks, Andesites and Rhyolites, which are fractured and bedded together, producing huge scree slopes. The Toubkal screes are internationally notorious and are used as a yardstick for comparing similar slopes on other mountains. Don't be put off, those who climb with open minds and un-blinkered vision will love it.





This highest summit was not assuredly identified until 1922 although the Atlas were probably climbed by Berber tribesmen long before recorded ascents began. The first "official" expedition to the Atlas was in 1871 when a small scientific expedition organised by J. D. Hooker was given permission to visit the Toubkal region. The first European to the top of Toubkal was the Marquis de Segonzac in June 1923, and the height of the mountain was determined in 1924, with a trigonometrical signal raised on the summit in 1931. The first British man to the summit was B. Beetham in 1926; I have no record of the first American!

Climbing and walking in the High Atlas requires an open mind.. It is important to keep a sense of perspective and take a gentle pace. If the weather is hot it is also vital to drink plenty. It is not uncommon to find that your appetite fades at the Neltner Hut; this is quite common at this sort of altitude. If you have not walked at heights of 4000 metres before do not be surprised at the slow pace, which is certainly the best way to get to the top no matter how fit you are.









The route we are taking from Imlil to Toubkal is along one of the best-used tracks in the High atlas but in my opinion, follows one of the most beautiful valleys in Morocco. After leaving the Kasbah, at just over 1800m, we follow a fairly steep zig-zag path with a cemetery on our right. This is the path that features in Scorsese's film "Kundun", when the Tibetan monks are returning to the monastery. We fairly quickly join a vehicle track which takes us through a small gorge and past the village of Aremdt (1920m), built on a peculiar geographical phenomenon called a rock glacier.

Beyond the village we cross the "basin" with its fields, orchards and outlying farmhouses to head off up the right hand side of the valley and through the last of the cultivation, as the altitude is now too high and the growing season too short for crops to grow. Beyond here we will see only sheep and goats as we wind up the zigzags towards Sidi Chamharouch (2320) at about two and a half hours from Imlil.






At Sidi Chamharouch there are several small shops and cafes, plus a white roofed mosque. This is a popular place of pilgrimage by Muslims both within Morocco and further a field, as the source of water, which emerges from the rocks here, is reputed to have healing powers. The waters are supposed to be particularly good for curing leg ailments (so we may need to stop here on the way down!) Leaving this small settlement, the last this side of the mountains, we follow a steep zigzag path up the right hand side of the valley with the bulk of Toubkal on our left. About two hours later as the path levels off the Neltner Hut and the new private one (see below) can be seen in the distance, tucked in well below the col on the skyline. Another twenty minutes and the hut should be reached (3207m).

As a guideline during the months October to April, due to weather conditions and thus for safety reasons, we typically use the Neltner Hut. This is a modern mountain hut and for those that have stayed at similar facilities there will be few major surprises. For those that have not it means sleeping in bunk bedded communal rooms. Usually the Kasbah du Toubkal is able to secure a separate room for their group but this cannot always be guaranteed. There are basic toilet facilities "à la Turk" which are flushed by using a bucket filled from a tap. Toilet paper if used (the locals would use water) is put in a bin for disposal later. There are (very) cold showers and sometimes some hot ones. At peak times the facilities would be considered less than adequate by most western standards. Inshallah, in September 2006 a new privately owned hut will be completed. This is next door to the Neltner Hut.

At our suggestion the owner has built some smaller rooms (not en-suite) which will be much nicer for couples to use. When complete we intend to offer this type of accommodation as an option (supplement would apply)

TOUBKAL via the SOUTH CWM (4167M)





This route starts directly behind the Neltner Hut, crossing the small river gorge of the Ait Mizane to find the first of the boulder slopes. A path of sorts, depending on the time of year and the recent weather conditions, ascends for about an hour to reach the large boulders which can be seen on the skyline from the hut. We then follow the path in to the main cwm and head right, up a steep scree to a more easy angled scree leading to Tisi-n-Toubkal (3940m, 2 hours 15 mins). The worst is nearly over although, if you have rarely or never been at this sort of altitude before, you may be feeling a little nauseous and dizzy and will find it hard to believe how slowly you are able to walk. The key is to keep the pace very slow but steady; if you are getting out of breath, (there is a bit less Oxygen at this altitude) slow down even more, rather than stopping.





We now follow the ridge to arrive at the summit (3 to 4 hours). At the summit is a large, iron, pyramidal structure and, haze and weather permitting, excellent views. The best view is probably towards the south, which is of layered distances of the Saharan Plateaux broken by the extinct volcano Siroua. The return to the hut takes about half the time of the ascent, or even less if you are a good scree runner. We will then be returning directly back down (ask the Kasbah for a trekking pole before you leave the Kasbah to aid your descent on the scree) to the Kasbah for a well-earned shower or Hammam.







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For reservations or if you wish to discuss any matters please contact:
Kerrie Wrigley
(based at our French Reservations Office)
Kerrie@discover.ltd.uk
Tel +44 (0)1883 744667
www.kasbahdutoubkal.com
Discover Ltd ABTA No V4335 ATOL 3274

Discover Ltd 8-10 South Street, Epsom, Surrey, KT18 7PF