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These under-visited Moroccan mountains are like nowhere else on the planet

Mule trekking across the other-worldly Atlas range, our writer discovers a destination as unique as it is overlooked

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Morocco's Atlas Mountains sits a short journey from the tourist-centre of Marrakech Credit: getty

Helen Atkinson Wood
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It's hard to believe that a mere three and a half hour flight from Gatwick could transport you back in time to a medieval world, but when landing in Marrakech – where African, Arabian and modern European cultures converge – that's exactly what happens.

This sun-baked terracotta sprawl nestles beneath the towering Toubkal peak and snow capped Atlas Mountains – all providing precious fresh water to a thirsty city.

An ancient irrigation system, modelled on the one that first brought water to the medina in the eleventh century, waters the city's famous Islamic Secret Garden; Yves Saint Laurent fashioned his cactus packed Majorelle Garden around tranquil carp ponds. Steaming hot hammams, petal-strewn plunge pools and cooling fountains, which serve as the centrepiece in many of the city's courtyard gardens, were conceived as an earthly reflection of paradise in the Koran.

I'd come to Morocco to wash away the European winter and reset for a North African experience. Jemma-El-Fna Square is at the beating heart of Marrakech. A riot of ravishingly coloured rugs, fragrant spices, argan oils, smoke rising from food stalls, acrobatic monkeys, snake charmers and belly dancers. It's like walking onto a living film set with all human life heaving around you.



Jemma-El-Fna: the beating heart of Marrakech Credit: alamy

Dusty paths through the souk eventually led me to the dark, discreet door of El Fenn, a palatial riad wrapped around an exquisite Middle Eastern garden – an oasis of peace and quiet protected from the outside world by high windowless walls. Galleries of iconic works of art line shadowy walkways,

which throw you into startlingly glamorous courtyards and out into blazing sunlight on the luxurious rooftop terrace. With a delicious date martini cocktail in hand, I felt as if I'd inadvertently walked onto the set of White Lotus.

But it was not the sumptuous delights of Marrakech which had drawn me here. Watching the sunset drench the Atlas Mountains – hovering on the horizon – and Toubkal, Morocco's highest peak, in fiery pink, I was reminded of my true purpose.

The following morning, we drove the 37 miles (60km) south, sweeping through property developments on the outskirts of Marrakech, into a rust-red desert landscape. Passing through the lush Asni valley we called in at Sir Richard Branson's luxury hotel Kasbah Tamalot for coffee (his sister Vanessa co-owns El Fenn) and up to our gateway to the mountains, in the village of Imlil.



A traditional way of life persists throughout the villages of the Atlas Mountains Credit: getty

I'd set my sights on the authentic Berber Hospitality Centre of The Kasbah du Toubkal – a far cry from the Ibiza chic of Marrakech, where every stick of furniture, forkful of food, cup of water had been transported by sure-footed mules and men up steep mountain tracks. It is a place where time stands still.

Martin Scorsese chose it as his “Himalayan” location for *Kundun*, his 1997 epic about the life of the Dalai Lama. And this is the thing about magical Morocco: it’s virtually on our doorstep and yet, culturally, a world away. On the covered rooftop terrace of the Kasbah, carved into a wooden plank, is a Dalai Lama saying. “There are many religions but only one God.”

This message reverberates around the seven Berber villages in the foothills of Mount Toubkal, where the predominantly Muslim inhabitants came to an agreement with The Walt Disney Company – all thanks to the owners of the Kasbah du Toubkal – that the Association of Villages of the Imlil Valley would receive a production fee and use it as a basis for funding future projects.



Berber hospitality centre Kasbah du Toubkal

Staying at the foot of majestic Toubkal is a spiritually humbling experience. The crisp mountain air, the physical challenge, the awe and wonderment of this magnificent landscape. My room up in an ancient stone tower – the sort from which Repunzel might let down her hair – caught that spectacular view, the dawn light and haunting call to morning prayer.

After breakfast, we set off with mountain guide Abdeslam, who slowly and surely led us up to the pass of Tizi ‘n’ Tamert, treading remote mule trails into the stunning natural beauty of pine forests, cherry orchards and walnut groves. It was a privilege to pass through the rigidly individual world of Berber villages along the way. Abdeslam leant down to kiss the head of a child

running past us. In Tamatert village, Berbers went about their everyday tasks. Our walking party fell into a reflective, almost monastic silence, onwards and ever upwards.



Writer Helen Atkinson Wood travelled to Morocco's Atlas Mountains

Then there, spread out on a rocky plateau, with stunning views into Imane and back down to the Ait Mizane Valleys, was a man and a mule and a feast of a picnic. Shakshouka, fragrant couscous, savoury kefta, fat olives, mouth watering tagine cooked with every vegetable in the market, butter bean casserole, crisp salads dressed with a pinch of cumin, succulent oranges, apricots, figs, dates and honeyed desserts, served with the ceremony of fresh mint tea from a silver pot.



Writer Helen enjoyed a hearty picnic lunch in Tamatert

And all this on top of a mountain, courtesy of a single small mule.

Prior to this visit I had no idea of the scale of the devastating earthquake that hit these mountains and valleys in September 2023. The repair and recovery work is everywhere around you, a visible testament to the tenacity and endurance of this community. On our return trek to the Kasbah du Toubkal, we were all the more thoughtful.



Mules remain the primary method of transporting people and goods inthe High Atlas

Tumbling into the newly renovated hammam, the hot steam eased our weary muscles. On our last night, after a nourishing Berber dinner we drifted up onto the roof terrace to gaze at the night sky. Back in the modern world, Elon Musk may well want to land on Mars, but even that distant planet could hardly be more other-worldly than this magnificent place. All I could wish for is a return to this serene Kasbah, and to trek, one foot in front of the other, to the Toubkal summit.

Essentials

British Airways flies from London Gatwick to Marrakech from £70 return.

Helen Atkinson Wood was a guest of Olivia Bardy Luxury Travel and Mr & Mrs Smith. El Fenn in Marrakech has doubles from £538 per night; Kasbah du Toubkal in Imlil has rooms from £168 per night.

Helen will be appearing at The INK Festival in Halesworth, Suffolk, from April 24-27.