

*Part IIa: Michael Peyron's  
working papers and book reviews*

**“Tour Operators and Atlas mountain tourism :  
a critical view”**

*Papers in English*

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**1/ Introduction**

Michael Peyron has devoted a lifetime to the Atlas mountains of Morocco, through which he has travelled extensively. While this has enabled him to learn the Amazigh language and develop close ties with the local inhabitants, it has also made him fully aware that organised mountain tourism or adventure trekking, as practiced by **Tour Operators** (TO) has, from the mere nuisance status that it enjoyed in the 1970-1995 period, now become **the area's worst enemy**.

Year after year, the TOs and their droves of camera-wielding, Peeping Tom customers have land-roved their way through the foothills, **trampled on Amazigh susceptibilities** with scant regard for anybody's feelings; tramped up the valleys and over the *tizi*; dumped their garbage as conspicuously as possible; indulged in mobile telephone orgies on Toubkal summit; distributed candy, ball-point pens and tennis balls to eager kids at Toubkal base camp; got the local Atlas villagers to stage 'genuine' folklore evenings for them; ended their stay with a day in the bazaar cornering phoney souvenirs; finally, decked out as 'Blue men' in flowing robes, just for the 'feel-good factor', lifted off from Marrakech airport in a low-cost charter jet.

As for the latest wave of **responsible tourism** advocates – mere wolves in sheep’s clothing – they, too, have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. The reason for their virtuous declarations of intent is that they have suddenly discovered (after a couple of decades or so of the game) that tourist destinations visited year-in year-out are a rapidly eroding resource. Unless they attempt to put something back in for everything they take out, in terms of culture shock, environmental pollution, social disruption and camera bombardment, our TO friends are going to wake up one morning and find that they’ve achieved a self-destruct of Toubkal, Mgoun, Sirwa, or some other destination on their programme. Result: one empty page in the brochure. Look bad for business wouldn’t it?

Even **eco-tourist devotees** who sign up with an ornithological agent whose Web page they have perused on the Internet, are contributing to the commercial scramble for the High Atlas. Well, in that case, fair enough; at least, eco-tourism may ultimately contribute to greater awareness among the locals vis-à-vis environmental protection – so that should be an acceptable trade-off!

Whereas the author has always back-packed for leisure, or for cultural reasons (collecting items of Berber oral literature, for example) he contends that the basic flaw with these intrusive actors on the Moroccan mountain scene is that their travel motivations inevitably hinge on **commercial considerations**. The bottom line is that somebody back home is making a fast buck, and the TO customer who blithely treks the Atlas mountains is getting more or less ripped off !

Inspired by Eric Shipton’s travel philosophy, the author’s guide-books have always been written for the small, lightweight party, humping their own backpacks. For people prepared to experience genuine encounters, while refusing the less savoury aspects of to-day’s consumer society. It is, in his opinion, the most user-friendly way to approach the Atlas hills, generating beneficial contact with and **minimal negative impact** on Berber village communities. Not so the heavily mule-supported, commercial caravans; those user-unfriendly cohorts are in a different ball-game, with thrills and spills laid on (for a consideration!), and – relax, mate! – everything taken care of, in conformity with the namby-pamby ethics of today!

Michael Peyron fails to see why the Berbers should become yet another item of mass consumption. The following collection of papers, herewith published together for the first time, attempts to reflect the author’s concern over the manner in which the Atlas mountains have been **exploited by absentee salesmen and ham-fisted trekkers**. More significantly, it reflects the various stages of his unwavering, 20-year struggle against the market economy strangle-hold on organised Atlas mountain travel. Although well aware that he stands as much chance as a snow-ball in hell in the face of big money, he is sold on the small travel group doctrine. Peyron plans to remain on course; the more so as he has often received encouraging testimonials from people apparently sympathetic to his particular way of enjoying the Atlas hills and visiting their inhabitants.

Michael PEYRON  
Grenoble, August 2006

## 2/ Introduction to the original G.T.A.M.

This little volume deals with the 'Grand Traverse of the Moroccan Atlas' (later changed to 'Great Atlas Traverse'), a project that has occupied most of the author's waking hours over the past dozen years or so, and has entailed numerous reconnaissance trips in the 7/14-day bracket. Based on an existing network of long-distance foot-paths used by the local inhabitants since long bygone times, it takes the mountain-walker on a journey of well over 400 miles from Imi n-Tanout in the SW to Taza in the NE. One main, generally medium-altitude route is described, together with various alternatives, side-trips, circuits like the 'Jbel Toubkal Tour', plus some high-altitude sections. Complementary info is given on easy routes up most of the main summits of the range. Likewise, ski-touring potential, including some of the classic routes, has not been neglected.

First, however, the reader must labour under no illusions as to the exact nature of this book. It has been written for the seasoned, **discerning, non-comfort-loving backpacker**. If you are expecting useful tips on how to follow well-marked routes leading to cosy hotels and campsites with all modern conveniences, you might as well put this book down right away, because we just do not believe in that molly-coddling kind of approach!

Presumably, our backpacker will come to Morocco fresh from his experiences on the Annapurna Base Camp Trek, Pacific Crest Trail, John o'Groats to Land's End or, more modestly, the Pennine Way. Being of **an adequately Spartan frame of mind**, he will be bringing with him well-proven gear (lightweight backpack, tent, boots, sleeping-bag, foam pad and anti-condensation outer shell clothing) specially designed for lovers of the 'Great Outdoors', not to mention hard-won experience from previous trips. He will be prepared to alternate between draughty ridge-top 'bivvies' and more comfortable nights in hospitable Berber houses. Contrary to what he may have been used to in Europe, or in the U.S. of A., he should not expect such route-finding aids as way-marks and signposts lining well-blazed trails. As he will soon discover, the Moroccan Atlas is 'Big Country', requiring he newcomer to develop a certain feel for the lie of the land.

Being relatively close to Europe, the Moroccan Atlas is just the sort of area one can visit on a shoe-string budget with a carefully-selected little band of companions. Try and obtain as much info as you can about the area. When you get there, adopt an open-minded approach; come prepared to **take the rough with the smooth**. Respect the local inhabitants, even though some of their customs may, at first, baffle you. These are the ideal ingredients for the really rewarding kind of trip we would like you to enjoy.

This kind of party ('small is beautiful', remember!?) of three or four friends, visiting the Atlas at random, keeps **a far lower profile** than the cumbersome groups of Tour Operators that regularly ply the trade routes. All other things being equal, environmental fall-out is obvious far lower. They can contact the local population on a more friendly footing and, if invited to spend the night in a house, constitute a much lighter burden. Naturally, they are expected to provide compensation for the food served. With the big battalions, on the other hand, such a privileged rapport with villagers is a non-starter, as the crowd mentality rapidly leads to **camera-clicking heavy-handedness** and general lack of respect. But, of course, if you feel tempted to visit the Atlas mountains with one of these Tour Operators, we do not intend to stop you.

So, if you are on the lookout for a pre-digested, fail-safe, adventure package, then you had better put this little volume away at once and contact your local travel agent. He will be delighted to book you on a 15-day tour to the High Atlas with 'Mini-Trek', 'Overland

Adventurers', 'Ultimate Travel', or some suchlike outfit. But think of the conditions, the company, the **'herd' rather than 'scene'** aspect of the venture.

'Follow the mules up to the Neltner Hut', says the TO brochure. Picture yourself, one of a party of 15 trekkers, all strangers to each other, with about 20 mules (each with its muleteer) lined out along the path like a string of sausages. Relish the **'gathering of the clans'** atmosphere, the more so if you have come to the Atlas for some peace and quiet. Try to make your fellow-trekkers' acquaintance. If you are a girl, start up a mild flirtation with one of the male trekkers, or one of the muleteers (why not?). 'In our groups', the brochure continues, 'we require a good mix of the sexes: 40% male and 60% female, all in the 20-35 age-bracket. Applicants of 40 or over are requested to contact us by phone before booking.' In other words, non-free-wheeling grey-beards not wanted! What kind of discrimination is that?

A detailed discourse analysis of a score or so of brochures, all couched in similar terms, leads to further edifying discoveries concerning the marketing strategy and general philosophy of these big operators. One example, typical of the **contradictions that abound in such literature**, will suffice. 'We are anxious to preserve the areas we visit from the encroachments of modern civilisation', says our TO, suddenly waxing pious like some starry-eyed environmentalist. A few lines further on, however, we are left in no doubt as to where his priorities lie: 'Hurry up and book on our trek so as to witness this fast-disappearing culture – before it's too late!'

Among the actual repercussions from TO activity in the Alas, **culture shock** is not one of the least. With a highly resilient population like the Atlas Berbers, luckily, its medium-term effects may be more apparent than real. As it is, in the worst-hit areas, walkers are grossly over-charged for baggage mules, mobbed by children and generally singled out for attention. The contrast is marked in valleys uncontaminated by mass tourism, the locals remaining their usual cheerful, friendly and hospitable selves.

The only positive aspect of these operations seems to be that a little ready-money is earned by such muleteers as are fortunate enough to be hired by a specific TO. Yet this only represents a ridiculously low percentage of the total package, as paid by each trekker to the travel agent in his country of origin. **Morocco derives little financial gain from TO traffic**. Hopefully, in the near future, local organisations will take over (as in Nepal, for example) and the foreign TO will go into well-deserved decline.

Thankfully, some have already fallen by the wayside. A friend of mine, and former Tour Leader (who has since mended his ways) well recalls coming down off Tazaghart in the early 1970s to be greeted at Imlil with the news that his agency had gone bankrupt! Getting his party back to the U.K., by courtesy of H.M. Consulate in Casablanca, proved a fairly exacting task. May all other Atlas-polluting foreign Tour Operators suffer a similar fate!

*Publishing history:*

Slightly edited text; first appeared as 'An introduction for English-speaking readers' to the French-language edition, *La Grande Traversée de l'Atlas Marocain, G.T.A.M.*, Rabat: Imprimatlas: 1984, (pp.5-7).

### **3/ Epilogue to the original G.T.A.M.**

All right, then, you big walkers, what about it? Consider the options available along the G.T.A.M. itinerary for multi-purpose adventure on a shoe-string budget.

If you call on your travel agent (who will rightly have spotted in you the wilderness-seeking conservationist) he'll probably bend over backwards trying to sell you an exciting, all-inclusive, value for money, High Atlas trek with some big-name Tour Operator. Well, that's what 'freedom of the hills' is all about, isn't it? If you know which side you want your bead buttered, you pay for what you get..., and all that stuff. Very much a case of leaping before you look.

Consider, for one moment, the tougher option: doing your homework, setting yourself up with a few chosen companions (one or two of whom may cut out on you before departure), organising small-scale expedition finance (including food kitty), providing a vehicle, then over-landing through France and Spain. Barring mishap and/or mismanagement the arrangement is likely to pay off in the end. Makes sense, doesn't it?

However, before you leave Britain, or wherever, sort out your equipment. Don't let it sort you out half way along the Great Atlas Traverse; it'll be too late in the day to turn back! If you take your fun seriously, kit up for the Atlas mountains with all due care. You'll find that classic, heavy-duty weather-beaters and other Ben Nevis gear is less useful than floppy hats, sun-glasses and sun-tan lotion, jeans and bush shirts, some sort of polar wear and a cagoule.

So don't be fooled by all those ads. Do not overload yourself with mail-order purchased, comfortably-priced, special offer, expedition-tested, ultra-lightweight gear stowed in a body-hugging, aggressively-performing backpack! Or, as you top the first *tizi*, you'll sink exhausted to the ground, thinking of all the money you've spent, and muttering to yourself: 'That was the ultimate shell-out, that was!'

Of course, before your Morocco trip, as a normally indoctrinated, fashion-conscious consumer, you must have said to yourself: 'Well, at this moment in time, I'd better be getting in on this on-going hi-tech revolution.' A racket, my dear sir!

Never mind, in a fit of obsolescence blues, you will have fallen for it. First to go was 'Old Faithful', your outdated waterproof purchased at Harrod's in the mid-sixties. In its place a stylish Gore-Tex jacket; want to look good, don't you? Then, as one of those newly liberated, happy trekkers, you invested in a pair of imitation KSB lightweight boots with fabric uppers and cleated Skywalk soles. Yet, before getting that bouncy, let's-get-walking feeling, you should have remembered that when the chips are down and you're getting clobbered by raspberry-size hailstones on unstable boulders, there's nothing to beat classic, vibram-soled footwear that takes 500 miles to break in properly – but well worth it in the long walk! Also bear in mind to cut down on road-bashing, while its near-cousin, scree-bashing, can be murder on your toes when coming down off Toubkal.

Toubkal, which tops the popularity polls among organised trekkers, with its arguably positive 'honey-pot effect' that attracts the very crowds that would otherwise go on the rampage elsewhere. The crowds you want to get away from as an unpleasant reminder of the super-market mentality and 'argie-bargie' in the car-park.

So, without necessarily wanting to upstage anybody, or get into the *Guinness Book of Records*, (you might find yourself playing in the wrong League!) have a sensible go at the

Great Atlas Traverse, select your route, preferably the least publicised one. Then you might be on to a winner.

A little further advice *à propos* of the locals. Ultra-short shorts are just not on with the Berbers. So, if your girl-friend looks anything like that dame in the ad on thermal underwear in *Climber & Rambler*, make sure she's not revealing too much exposed coastline! This is just the kind of thing that can get us backpackers a bad name. Likewise, if undergoing harassment from village dogs that yap at your heels, make sure you have clear fields of fire before you start heaving rocks. It wouldn't do if one of your projectiles were to hit a tiny tot in someone's back-yard. A clear case of over-reaction. Nor should you go bananas if you feel your guide or muleteer is trying to rip you off in a mild way. Initial attempts at over-charging, preparatory to a good old haggle, are meat and drink to the locals. So, fall in with the spirit of things and keep smiling. It usually works out in the end, anyway.

Don't stay out in the cold. Enjoy your contacts with the Atlas Berbers and discover what a likeable lot they are. Appreciate the unsurpassable quality of their hospitality and it will contribute to the success of your Morocco journey. Provided you can last the distance, drop us a line from Taza...

*Publishing history:*

Slightly edited version; first appeared as epilogue to the French edition, *La Grande Traversée de l'Atlas Marocain*, G.T.A.M., Rabat: Imprimatlas, 1984, (pp.239-240). Understandably, due to the somewhat drastic views expressed on Tour Operators, most of the material contained in introduction and epilogue was axed from the two-volume English edition of *Great Atlas Traverse*, as ultimately published by West Col. As for 'dropping us a line from Taza', quite a few end-to-enders did so, once they'd done their thing along the G.T.A.M....

#### **4/ Long-distance backpacking in the Atlas mountains: the way ahead**

As the reader may have gathered, the proposed 'Great Atlas Traverse, Morocco' (G.T.A.M. in French) consists of an integrated network of unmarked, currently-used, long-distance footpaths spanning the entire range. The idea originated in the early 1970s as a natural by-product of the Pennine Way, Pacific Crest Trail and Grand Traverse of the French Alps. Just who conceived the idea and pioneered it is, at the present time, a moot point. Be that as it may, this writer bases his claim to have invented the G.T.A.M. on the fact that since 1972 he has spent considerable time surveying the main route throughout the principal hill-walking areas of the High and Middle Atlas, together with alternative routes and some ski-trails. It must also be stressed that this survey work has been undertaken entirely at the author's initiative, without any official encouragement or backing.

As the proposed G.T.A.M. itinerary now stands, there is undoubtedly room for improvement, flexibility being the watchword. The basic principle is that there should be a single natural walking route of uniform scenic and aesthetic value from one end of the Atlas to the other. Apart from two or three stages involving some inescapable, hard-surface walking, due to the proximity of metalled roads, this requirement has been complied with. Another proviso is that there should be relatively good accessibility without making access too easy, so as to preclude footpath erosion and other environmental damage.

Understandably, an intended major development project of this magnitude, extending as it does over a length of some 480 miles, has aroused controversy. Our global Imi n-Tanout > Taza concept has been criticised by those who would like to see more emphasis on short-distance weekend backpacking routes than on multi-day trips taking in all or part of the proposed G.T.A.M. trail. Others, high-level exponents who won't look at anything beneath the 2500-meter contour, cast ridicule on the very idea of adding a Middle Atlas leg to the High Atlas traverse. One self-appointed authority, who is fond of pulling rank on his mountaineering colleagues, has made some unsympathetic statements questioning our competence to hold forth on the subject at all, and has suggested that a Central High Atlas traverse be set up as a test project. Yet others have expressed reservations about the 'let's-go-there' syndrome that the official designation of an official 'way' may spark off. These fairly fundamental conflicts of interest need, of course, to be rationalised, if any kind of harmony is to be achieved. But as they are confined to French Alpine Club (C.A.F.) mountaineering circles in Morocco, they are largely irrelevant to the central issue, which is the Moroccans' concern over what they want to do with their own mountains.

That it is now time for the host country to step in, if there is to be any effective local follow-up of the Great Atlas traverse proposal as an integrated project in conjunction with development of less favoured rural areas, is a statement of the obvious. Hitherto, for a number of reasons, the Atlas range has figured fairly low on the list of priorities, with little in the way of official policy statements. There seems, at present to be some reversal of this trend, if only to reduce the scale of rural exodus by creating local job-opportunities, as is apparent from a current project in the High Atlas. In this connection, a pilot scheme in High Mountain Rural Economy has recently got under way in one of the valleys. Following its inception last year, a considerable amount of speculation and interest, both official and unofficial, have been aroused. However, severe financial stringency bids fair to hamstring the whole project (including a subsidiary project to implement further survey work on a long-distance route) before it can really get off the ground. A pity, as the idea, whatever its shortcomings, is at least a step in the right direction, and would possibly fill in a useful transition period before pressing ahead with the overall project.

If and when the local authorities eventually implement concrete measures, it is to be hoped that some limitations will be placed on development proposals in connection with this Atlas mountain project so as to avoid erosion eyesores in particular, and environmental fall-out in general. In the broadest sense that is why, in describing G.T.A.M. routes, together with the country and people they pass through, the emphasis in this guide-book has been on the qualitative aspect of the Moroccan Atlas.

Conservationists should not feel unduly worried. There is a major difference between setting up long-distance footpaths in the Atlas and opening similar routes in, say, Wales, as with the abortive Cambrian Way. Not only are access roads and available accommodation far less developed, but the sheer size of the Atlas mountains is quite sufficient to absorb the relatively small numbers of backpackers likely to undertake such a venture. Seen in this light, saturation point is still a long way off and, at best, improbable. Moreover, there is no need to re-open disused paths, as in Europe, the whole range being literally criss-crossed by a maze of traditional tracks, paths and trails in frequent daily use, a factor that also precludes such headaches as trail caring and way-marking. This last-named item is frowned upon by most serious backpackers who don't want it all handed to them on a platter, and still consider route-planning and orienteering as suitable tests of their hill craft.

Ideally, then, plans for long-distance footpaths based on some sort of officially integrated G.T.A.M. project, should aim at keeping a fairly low profile. This would be consistent with the need to balance even modest tourist development with the capacity of the land to absorb such types of recreational use as may be required. Otherwise, an over-ambitious project might get out of hand, in which case the whole exercise would become self-defeating.

In keeping with environmental criteria, such a project would provide for the construction of small, purpose-built hostels in key villages, together with a huts in certain high-level backpacking areas. In some villages, existing houses, given a minor overhaul and run by the local owners, could well be used to provide adequate board and lodging without any frills, rather than de luxe accommodation.. This would both avoid unsightly visual scars on the landscape and disqualify pampered guests of a certain category. Such establishments would cater for small, unobtrusive, self-supporting, private parties of 5-6 people. Guests would pay their hosts on a bed-and-breakfast basis, would possibly hire local guides and/or muleteers, and make on-the-spot purchases of food, as and when wanted. This would serve the admirable purpose of taking a sizeable amount of business away from intrusive Tour Operators, as proportionally larger sums of cash – compared to the situation which prevails today – would be injected directly into the local economy.

Once statements of intent have been issued and management plans finalised (including finance), and the whole business becomes an on-going project, the need arises for some sort of local monitoring, chiefly with regard to the rural development side of the operation. The appointment of specially trained rural advisers might be contemplated at this stage. Such staff, recruited among young Moroccans presenting the necessary qualifications, would have a multi-mission capability. Among other jobs, they would help strengthen the tenuous relationships that exists in some areas between mountain-dwellers and the Forestry Department, so as to prevent further irreversible damage to tree cover. They would also impress upon local inhabitants the need to safeguard vital activities such as local handicraft, agriculture and animal husbandry. For example advice would be given on how to tend fruit-trees, while suggestions would be formulated for remedial action in cases where over-grazing has become critical.

It may all sound rather paradoxical, but it could work. Long-distance backpacking, together with the minimal facilities required, and provided things are kept within manageable proportions, could well become instrumental in providing enough jobs to stem the flow of rural exodus from the Atlas mountains to the big cities. But only as an integral part of an overall strategy aiming at rationalising agriculture, forestry and other traditional activities in such a way as to make rural life sufficiently attractive to deter mountain-dwellers from emigrating.

*Publishing history:*

First printed as an appendix to *La Grande Traversée de l'Atlas Marocain (G.T.A.M.)*, Rabat : Imprimatlas,1984, (pp.245-247). At the time caused something of a furore in CAF circles in Morocco, author being accused of washing dirty linen in public!

## 5/ Book review:

COURTNEY-WEAVER, M. & BROOKS, G., 1996, *Imazighen, the vanishing traditions of Berber women*, New York: Clarkton Potter.

This, the latest production in a long line of similar picture essays devoted to the Berbers of North Africa, is no better or no worse than any of its predecessors in that its authors suffer from the usual lop-sided credentials. While Courtney-Clarke's photographic expertise is practically unimpeachable, it is patently obvious that she is a non-specialist in things Berber, a failing she shares with Brooks (who penned the back-up text), whatever the latter's skills as a writer and reporter. Given these shortcomings, the book was an undertaking fraught with peril.

The philosophy behind their approach – a kind of latter-day *veni, vidi, vici* – is characteristic of those who practise a sport akin to big-game hunting. Says Brooks, sounding not unlike Selous on the spore of the last white rhino, 'Margaret has already made many trips to visit Berber women..., so that spring she was my guide on this, her last shoot there' (p.xiv). True to form, this particular coffee-table effort appears to have been based on some photo excursions with vehicle support, making friends with Berber women through well-meaning body and sign language, rather like commercial adventure trekkers, or through male interpreters, which is hardly better. Throw in a dash of bibliographical research and some rapid editing, and you have it all.

Given the undoubted iconographic qualities of the end-product, the book admittedly qualifies as a suitably pleasing Christmas gift. As a serious work of reference, however, it failed to convince this reviewer, despite the fact that the authors appear, at times, to have got 'into the culture'. Brooks makes some commendably shrewd comments on the Berber genius for symmetry (p.xvii) and on cultural erosion, especially around Imilchil (p.xxi), in connection with the intrusion of tarred roads and *musuem*-related tourist pressure. She also rightly regrets the impact of modernisation, especially on weaving, and presents some interesting material on women's living conditions (p.xxiii). Meanwhile, in Courtney-Weaver's pleasing picture portfolio, the scenes depicting women spinning, weaving or winding spun yarn (pp.41-9, 54-5, 64-5, 72-5) are excellent. Other successful 'human interest' shots appear on p.106 (Beni Fassen woman), p.153 (Ayt Hadiddou) and p.180 (Dades), while top marks for a landscape study would go to the bottom right-hand picture on p.23, apparently of Sountat (Ayt Hadiddou).

Predictably, though, the superficial nature of the album comes across somewhat forcibly in the captions to the photographs and in Brook's supporting essays, which fairly bristle with inaccuracies. To say the least, some pronouncements are unfortunate. The following is typical: 'Berbers no longer speak the same language [and are] fractured into at least five mutually incomprehensible dialects.' (p.xv) As anyone closely connected with the language will tell you, this is a blatant half-truth, displaying a woefully inadequate knowledge of Tamazight, or of recent efforts to further inter-dialectal comprehension, as borne out by a single glance at the exceedingly elementary and inconsistent glossary published at the end of the volume. The same applies to the amateurish bibliography, fielding only 28 references, of which a bare half a dozen are specialised works on the Berbers. The others are of marginal relevance, not to mention that five authors, including Lawrence of Arabia, quoted in Brook's introductory essay (pp.xvi-xvii), fail to appear in the bibliography.

A further instance of clumsy lexicon appears in a reference to 'the last Berber rebellions put down' in 1933, as Brooks resorts to Vietnam or Gulf War terminology when describing primitive bombing raids in unwieldy biplanes on dissident villages as 'air strikes on remote mountain outposts' (p.xvii), the term outpost conveying the impression that that the French may have been subjecting their own troops to 'friendly fire'.

Place-names, ever the bug-bear of the first-time Maghreb traveller, also come in for mild abuse. Thus we find Tilimi (Tilmi), Moutazali (Moutzeli), Tamtatouch (Tamttetoucht), Ihoudiene (Iahodigen), while Abachkou village is placed firmly in Ayt Bougemmaz, whereas it lies in neighbouring Ayt Bou Wlli (p.72). Curiously, in a book devoted to the vanishing traditions of Imazighen, the authors inappropriately refer to the Ayt Abdelhamid of El Boudris (NE of Middle Atlas) as the Beni Abdelhamid (p.84). Like wise, the Beni Yenni of Kabylia should be the At Yenni (p.xvii). The authors also speak of the Ayt Brahim and Ayt Hadiddou as if they were two different tribes, the former actually being a sub-group, or clan of the latter (pp.12, 82). Similarly, the top-right picture on p.55, purportedly showing an Ayt 'Atta tent, really shows an Ayt Merghad family, if the *tahandirt* in the foreground is anything to go by.

To cap the shortcomings, some of the pictures, taken in heavily-photographed tract of country, are painful to the eye, especially when depicting women heavily veiled or shrouded in a most 'un-Berber' fashion (Ayt 'Atta pp.56-61, Alemgho p.67, Djerba pp.70-1, Tilmi p.132 etc.). All these are a far cry from photographs depicting smiling Berber women which this reviewer took between 1975 and 1988 in the Atlas. In other shots, Berber women and/or girls are visibly reluctant participants in the photo-fest (Beni Frassen, p.105, Blida pp.114-15, southern Tunisia p.160). Possibly the most shocking picture comes on p.178, where a woman, no doubt a former victim of camera-clicking heavy-handedness, holds up rages and plastic to veil her head from the prying eye of Courtney-Weaver's lens. Perhaps this is a measure of the cultural erosion that these areas have undergone thanks to the unflagging attention of commercial caravans.

Thus, if the album constitutes an excellent pictorial record of the Berbers of the Rif, Atlas, Kabylia and southern Tunisia, at a time of great cultural change, the back-up texts do not conform to the same high standards. The end result is that the whole project, rather sadly, fails to come up to expectations.

*Publishing history:*

Appeared in *Morocco, JSMS*, n°2/1997: 92-93.

## **6/ Culture shock and mountain tourism in the Moroccan Atlas**

### *Introduction*

During the last twenty years the Moroccan Atlas has witnessed the arrival of ever-increasing numbers of tourists, operating either individually or in groups, thus exposing its inhabitants to outside life-styles and endangering their cultural identity. The visitors range from adventure trekkers who tramp through the valleys, and ski-tourers tempted by exhilarating runs on spring snow, to latter-day conquistadors in off-road vehicles. This paper aims at exposing the main problems involved with a view to further discussion and a search for possible solutions.

### *Intrusion of alien life-styles*

When foreign visitors enter these valleys, the culture shock works both ways. Tempted by an abundance of promising photo occasions, camera-toting tourists apply the maxim: 'If it moves, shoot it!' Hence, attempts to secure human interest views of faggot-bearing women, or of young ladies drawing water at the well, none of which may be actually pleasing to the persons concerned, nor to their husbands and fathers! Likewise, the locals, especially youngsters, are puzzled by the visitors' strange behaviour and style of dress, especially if the latter start handing out goodies, or money!<sup>1</sup> The odds are that, henceforth, any visitor may be expected to distribute gifts, failure to do so invariably attracting verbal abuse.

As a result, brochure talk about 'getting into the Berber culture', in typical Tour Operator style, has become an empty phrase. Originally, guest-houses could boast of *logement chez l'habitant*. Not any more. After their women-folk had taken unkindly to being photographed at close range in their own kitchens, local landlords tended to relegate foreign visitors to separate accommodation, well away from the traditional household, as if to preserve its cultural integrity from potentially 'subversive' influences.<sup>2</sup> Understandably, the impact on traditional Moroccan hospitality has been disastrous. As a genuine institution, it simply cannot survive in these conditions.

Tourist quarters in Berber villages now constitute tiny, dedicated enclaves complete with foam-rubber mattresses, shower baths and other mod cons, the walls adorned with posters showing 'typical' Moroccan scenes. The phoney side of the arrangement is further highlighted by the organisation of 'Berber evenings', in which specially-groomed locals will perform folk dances by moonlight and invite some of the guests to join in, preferably disguised as pseudo-Saharans!

As if this were not bad enough, tourist behaviour, in general, especially the wearing of shorts and stripping to the waist, has a negative impact on the locals, being seen as shameful (*heshuma*). Tour leaders try to lecture their clients on this, but your average adventure trekker usually considers that, having shelled out a sizeable sum, he is entitled to behave as he sees fit and can conveniently ignore such recommendations.

And so the game goes on, with Berbers subjected to further visits, as if they were animals in a zoo, contact between the two parties being limited to an occasional smile, a hand wave, and an unrelenting photographic barrage, eventually giving rise to defensive reflexes,<sup>3</sup> or demands for money.

### *Erosion of traditional Moroccan hospitality*

Formerly, many Middle Atlas Berbers lived in tents. This style of habitation, with side-flaps that can be rolled up, making it open to the outside world and readily accessible to the passing traveller, lent itself to traditional hospitality. Not so the brick-built suburban house that has often replaced it. Influenced by modern ways and town fashions, families now rend to barricade themselves in, viewing any passer-by as an intruder, as a potential aggressor.<sup>4</sup>

There is further fall-out in tourist-affected areas; even when the locals invited them to drink tea in a rural village, this may hide some ulterior motive: selling a carpet or similar trinket, asking for their home address, a sum of money, or a *pirjma* certificate so that someone in the family can eventually find work in Europe.<sup>5</sup> All of which represents a total corruption of the

traditional bread and tea (*aghrum d wattay*) that any traveller could expect to obtain free of charge.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding the on-going debate about whether to go for individual or collective guest-houses in villages, planners should do well to bear in mind that, formerly, Imazighen had a tradition, called *afalis*, whereby passing travellers were made welcome in a specific person's house, according to a roster system; failing this, accommodation could be provided in the local mosque, a form of hospitality this writer sampled once at Zawit Asker, near Waouizaght, in March 1986.

#### *Fall-out from off-road tourism*

Off-road vehicles having become fashionable in western countries, the Atlas has become a not-so-happy hunting-ground for this 'sport'. However, repeated visits by motorcades of 4-WD and trail-bike exponents, known as *ayt lkurs* in Tamazight, fail woefully to fit in with the environment they cross, at best contributing nothing but clouds of dust, at worst causing accidents.<sup>7</sup> That they are hardly popular with the local inhabitants is an understatement. The main areas concerned by these stunts are the Eastern High Atlas between Tounfit and Imilchil,<sup>8</sup> and especially the track from Agoudal down to Ayt Hani, scene of a yearly, and highly debatable contest, known as *La Transatlasienne*, for 4-WD, mountain-bike and fell-running stalwarts. Morocco has so far been spared the 'Camel trophy', but landed the 1999 'Eco-Challenge' instead! Fortunately, in sectors where no 'jeepable' tracks cross the range, 4-WD activity is limited.

#### *Toubkal/Mgoun and the 'honey-pot effect'*

For the past dozen years, successive promotions from mountain-training centre (CFAMM) in Ayt Bouguemmez have been disgorging scores of guides onto a market close to saturation point. The more successful ones now form an emerging class of 'haves', wealthy enough to hire crop-sharing farm labourers from the ranks of local 'have-nots' to till their fields when they are away with clients. However, one is tempted to ask the following question: have the requirements of the mountain tourism market been sufficiently evaluated in order to guarantee jobs for all CFAMM graduates? The indications are to the contrary.

Given the amount of hype that has gone into promoting Toubkal and Mgoun, the two highest massifs in the Atlas, it is fairly obvious that guides from those areas have an unfair advantage over their colleagues hailing from less crowd-pulling parts of the range. They are definitely getting the lion's share of the market (the 'honey-pot effect'), if alone because their proximity to Marrakech airport means that they suit the requirements of 7-day tours. However, a fair proportion of CFAMM graduates appear to be working part-time,<sup>9</sup> when they are not chronically under-employed, as happens to those of the Eastern High Atlas and Middle Atlas.

Actually, in the spring of 1998, guides from this last-named region announced that they were setting up their own association, the better to defend their interests. As one Tounfit-based guide told me in May 1998, 'Toubkal and Mgoun have cornered the market!'<sup>10</sup> Others, driven by boredom, take to drink, while yet others marry one of their lady-clients to escape from the country.<sup>11</sup> Matters are made even worse by certain local organisations, operating out of Midelt, that use unofficial guides and uninsured Land Rovers, thus effectively taking business away from CFAMM-approved guides. In fact, guides from this part of the Atlas lament the number in numbers of mountaineering and trekking parties, whereas intrusive off-road

tourism has become a growth industry, forcing many to diversify into this sector of the market.

### *Development-related problems*

The market economy has had noticeable repercussions on the mountaineers' environment, especially in the area of stock-breeding, absentee herd-owners instructing their kinsmen to maintain animals on the heights. This leads to permanent occupation of highland areas, especially around Timhadit, Beqrit and Jbel Tichoukt (Middle Atlas), with former transhumants rapidly becoming sedentarized.<sup>12</sup> As a result, over-grazing has caused irreversible degradation of meadows, making nonsense of traditional pasture access routes which used to preserve ecological balance. This has so adversely affected such famed pastures as the Lakes Plateau *igudlan*, not to mention those of Tingerft and Kousser, that traditional regulations have, in places, been reinstated.

There has also been a perceptible decline in traditional arts and crafts such as weaving and spinning wool. Formerly, a man's turban or a woman's cloak acted as a recognition sign, immediately informing you as to which they came from. Nowadays, distinctive garments tend to give way to 'western'-style jackets and trousers for men, printed cotton dresses and nylon dressing-gowns for women, all of which may be purchased at the local weekly *ssuq*.<sup>13</sup> A deplorable side-effect has been the gradual disappearance from most homes of the loom, together with the know-how that went with it, that used to produce healthy woollen garments adapted to life in a rural environment. As regards handicraft targeting the tourist market, in certain regions, a fall-off in quality, especially with carpets, may also be observed.<sup>14</sup>

Many people of mountain origin who have moved to the suburban districts of foothill towns such as Zaouit Ech Cheikh, Ayt Ishaq, Tighessaline, Mrirt, Tounfit, Buomia and Midelt, lured by the prospect of jobs, or pending a move to Europe or the Gulf, are now residing in uncomfortable, often insalubrious, apartment blocks. This is hardly a positive element, the more so as the phenomenon of urbanization usually gives rise to appalling waste-disposal problems, as regards a profusion of un-decorative plastic, whereas these same people were, up till then, living in mountain villages in far cleaner, neater accommodation.

Two well-known mountain venues suffer from dramatic accumulation of garbage: the Oukaimeden ski resort and Toubkal Hut.<sup>15</sup> If those two particular cases merely reflect increasing frequentation by tourists (day-trippers, skiers, trekkers, and so forth), there is no doubt that the problems of rubbish-tips and all-pervading litter, probably linked to the population explosion in Morocco, remains an outstanding issue that needs to be addressed urgently.

While most backwoods areas are now linked to the rest of the country by roads, telephone and TV, the local population sometimes complain of being neglected by the government. Some communes use grass-roots associations to get things done, resorting to self-financing and *easabiya*-type solidarity, as in the case of Abadou in the Central High Atlas,<sup>16</sup> where people are supplied with water and electricity at reasonable prices. This reminds me of a conversation I had near Zaouit Ahansal in 1986, with an Ou-Abdi tribesman from Tafraout, who said he expected nothing of the authorities, the latter providing none of the following services: school, hospital, weekly market. In 1994, I heard something similar from an Ou-Hadiddou of Imilchil, who complained of the absence of electricity, hospital, or a proper road.<sup>17</sup> Whereas roads and electricity now penetrate the remotest areas, medical services have not always kept up.<sup>18</sup> One

cannot whole-heartedly endorse 'folklore' occasions such as the Imilchil brides' fair, the Marrakech festival, or 'put-on' performances staged by Club Med organisers for the benefit of trekkers, insofar as this song and dance is divorced from the agricultural environment in which it had its origin. There has been a noticeable decline in traditional *ahidus* dancing in the Imilchil area, with cigarettes and drink sometimes becoming involved when teenagers perform.

Fortunately, however, one may observe a healthy reaction in the Ifrane/Azrou area with the planned survival of old-time ballads (*timdyazin*); troops of well turned-out Ayt Seghrouchen, Ayt Ndhir and Ayt Myill dancers who practice regularly; even an *ahidus* school on the Tigrigra plateau that emphasizes tambourine-playing and a 'new look' choreography pioneered by the irrepressible 'Maestro' from the Ichqern region.

Hand-in-glove with this there still remains massive residual orality in the Atlas range, despite some erosion due to radio and TV programmes. However, the existence of portable radios with built-in tape-decks, means that mini-cassettes of Berber music reach out to much wider audiences than before. Threatened with the onset of modernity, classic genres of Amazigh music are reacting by adapting and innovating to avoid sclerosis, this being arguably the only way to guarantee their survival.

### *Vanishing forests*

Previously tribal and collective, forests became state-owned with the French Protectorate, a situation mountain Berbers have never really accepted. They continue fetching wood from the forests, for nothing can match cooking on embers (*tirgin*), the use of gas-cylinders offering a poor substitute. Some Ayt Yahya clans, situated close to small urban centres (like Sidi Yahya in the Tounfit area), complain that their woodland environment is suffering unduly from this proximity. Thus does the population explosion expose the forest to repeated encroachments, despite existing regulations, which some unscrupulous loggers are only too keen to flout. Cedar groves have been hacked down indiscriminately, chiefly south of Maasker, on Ayyachi, and between Bou Iblane and Bou Nasser. This leads to a punitive backlash, rather than pedagogical action, on the part of the Forestry Department, whose agents are visualised as enemies by the local population.

From a positive angle, however, one must record the somewhat tardy, yet apparently effective, action undertaken to protect cedar and oak forests by fencing whole areas by fencing off whole sectors of Tichoukt, Ayyachi, the hills near the Zad pass and between Dayet Achlaf and Aïn Leuh. These have become no-go areas for shepherds, and there are encouraging signs that these measures are working. Surveys have also been conducted on the allegedly adverse effects on cedars of the Barbary Ape (*macaca sylvanus*); on re-introducing Barbary Deer (a cousin of the European Red Deer, or *cervus elaphus*) from Tunisia into Azrou forest;<sup>19</sup> on protecting Barbary Sheep and Mountain Gazelle in the planned Eastern High Atlas national park between Tirghist and Imilchil, not to mention those already protected in the Tachaokht sanctuary, Marrakech High Atlas.

## NOTES

1 This was the fault of some well-meaning idiots back in the late-1980s, who suggested in their guide-books that the least things tourists could do was to give children useful presents, like tennis-balls, pencils, exercise-books

and sweets, rather than money. Luckily, the current, quaintly-worded English translation of the official GTAM brochure strongly advises against any such practices, but only after numerous complaints of uninhibited harassment by hordes of kids screaming, 'Stylo, bonbon, M'siw!!'

2 Pezlet, 1997: 375

3 Courtney-Clarke 1996: 178

4 We now even have an *izli*, circulating in the Middle Atlas, which warns house-owners against taking in anybody claiming to be 'God's guest' (*anebyi rebbi*)!

5 *pirjma* < Fr. *certificat d'hébergement*, a document whereby a French national accepts responsibility for a would-be foreign guest-worker posing as a casual holiday visitor.

6 An old-time Berber proverb even warns the traveller against this, saying: 'Before breaking bread with your host, examine his face attentively!' (so as to divine his intentions); (*qbel a teččed aḡrum n bab n taddart, raea udem nnes!*)

7 Dogs and poultry are frequently run over, muleteers injured through falling off frightened steeds. A bystander was killed near Imilchil, on May 15, 1998, during the *Rallye de l'Atlas*.

8 Following two visits in 1998, however, the good news is that the *piste* between Midelt and the Cirque of Ja'far is now impracticable beyond Bou Admam, even for 4-Wd vehicles. In a complete change of style, visitors now go in through Ayt Ayyach and the gorges leading up to Sidi Ja'far.

9 Berriane, M., "Tourisme & développement local", 1993, p.398

10 His exact words in French were: '*Le Toubkal et le Mgoun nous ont gagnés!*' (Incidentally the guide in question emigrated to Spain, *circa* 2002, after marrying a Spanish woman).

11 Boumaza, N., "Crise, action & mutations", 1996, p.31.

12 Benchérifa, A., & Johnson, L., "Environment & resource use strategies in the Middle Atlas", 1993, p.108.

13 Kasriel, M., *Libres les femmes du Haut Atlas ?*, 1989, pp.86-87; Peyron, M., « Mutation en cours, pays Ayt Yafelman », 1992, p.91.

14 Mernissi, F., *Les Aït Débrouille*, 1997, p.116.

15 Berriane, M., *op. cit.*, p.401

16 Amahan, A., *op. cit.*, 1983, p.; Mernissi, F., *op. cit.*, p.136

17 This last grievance was addressed in the autumn of 1998, when the Imilchil-Rich road-link was finally established.

18 Medical care is apparently satisfactory around Immouzzar-Marmoucha (spring 1999), but defective at Tounfit (May 1998).

19 Colleague Paul Hosken, of the Ifrane School, claims to have spotted a small herd in a clearing near Agelmam Wiouane (spring 1999).

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## 7/ Rural tourism in the Atlas mountains

*Introduction*

Various factors have affected mountain tourism in Morocco. In the late 1970s backpacking (the in-word is trekking, of course!), hitherto limited to small, individual parties, a trend to which I had contributed with my *G.T.A.M.* guide-books in French and English, really took off in the Atlas, with commercial caravans concentrating on the Toubkal, Mgoun, Sirwa and Sahgro mountain areas. Off-road expeditions took over in the 1990s, to some extent supplanting trekking in the eastern parts of the range. Recently, off-road activity, combined with brief walking excursions, has become increasingly popular, and is on the way to becoming a growth industry. In this context, the Moroccan Atlas has **numerous available natural assets**. These include:

- semi-arid, Mediterranean-style alpine environment, snow-clad 5-7 months a year;
- high-altitude pastures and flora;
- forest of cedar, oak, juniper, thuya and pine;
- trout-fishing streams and lakes;
- rich avifauna occupying various ecosystems;
- certain species of animals (gazelle, panther, mouflon,, caracal, etc.) most of them seriously depleted
- numerous species of amphibians, butterflies and reptiles.

*The problem stated*

Most of the above assets, however, are at risk. It has yet to be fully taken on board in this country (i.e. Morocco), that certain wild, remote areas of the Atlas, with their specific flora, fauna, and avifauna (much of it endemic) have become a resource in their own right., and, as such, deserve energetic protection. Unless firm action is taken on the ground, however, **irreversible damage will be sustained** in this field. Deeds, not words, are required at this stage. This presentation will concentrate on existing national parks (excluding Toubkal and Tazekka) and some units of the PAMP (Protected Areas Management project) of which I have extensive field experience.

a) *Tamga area, Azilal province*

An area of relatively difficult access, it boasts two of the finest trout-streams in the Atlas – Asif Melloul and Asif n-Ouhansal; also the country's thickest tangle of pine forests, home to the crossbill and several other bird species, together with stands of oak and juniper. It is one of the last strongholds of the Atlas panther – a highly endangered species. Activities: walking, whiter-water sports.

b) *Parc National du haut Atlas Oriental (PNHAO)*

A wilderness area situated between Tounfit and Imilchil, centred on sanctuary near Tirghist and Jbel Fazaz for mouflon (Barbary Sheep) and mountain gazelle. Other assets: residual cedar forest, high-altitude juniper steppe with a scattering of ash, yew and evergreen oak. Mammals: fox, ground squirrel, hare, jackal, wild boar are fairly plentiful; caracal, panther, striped hyena only as rare visitors. Reptiles: puff adder, leaping viper (*amendew*). Avifauna: Long-legged buzzard, Bonelli's and golden eagle, to mention Barbary partridge, gull, coot, Shelduck and three varieties of grebe on Lake Isli. Activities: walking, rock-climbing, ski-touring, fishing.

c) *Ifrane national park*

Based on country's so-called 'environmental capital': includes planned AUI Natural, Cultural Educational and Recreational 'village', though actual park **project had yet to materialise**. Area ideal for picnics and forest walks (AUI). Assets: surviving stands of cedar forest (*gabt al-bhar*), yew, weeping willow, Holm and Zeen oak with undergrowth, numerous pastures, thickly forested banks and river-side meadows, especially along Asif Tizguit (*Val d'Ifrane*), an area under threat due to **massive weekend pollution** (empty cans, plastic bags and miscellaneous garbage). There are also several lakes (*igulmann*) serving useful role for watershed conservation; lake Afennourir, above Azrou, is an important sanctuary for wetland avifauna, especially migratory waders. Some reservoirs (Lake Zerrouqa, Amghas, etc.) given over to trout-fishing. Mammals: Barbary ape, Barbary stag, wild cat (*felix libyca*), etc. Activities: ornithology, angling, bouldering (*Vallée des Roches*), walking, X-country skiing, downhill skiing, snow-shoeing, etc.

d) *Jbel Tichoukt*

Small, rugged massif containing fine walking, easily accessible from Boulmane and RP 20 main road. Forest of Holm oak with boxwood undergrowth, thuya, common juniper, and some highly threatened residual cedars. Several species of birds including endemic Moussier's redstart. Could be converted into nature reserve at minimum cost.

e) *Jbel Bou Iblane*

As yet relatively unspoiled, little-frequented massif, exposed to reasonably extensive snowfall, featuring upland pastures (Tisserwine, Meskeddal), spectacular gorges, forests of pine, thuya, cedar, three species of oak, and juniper. Endemic avifauna comprises local subspecies of blackbird and great spotted woodpecker. Also numerous spring, including those of Aïn Sbou, Aïn Amellal, Aïn Llaz, and Oued Berd, the latter a cold, fast-flowing trout-stream. Fauna includes fox, hare, and an occasional panther. Access fairly arduous but great potential for walking, skiing and caving.

f) *Jbel Bou Nasser*

Bleak, rugged, remote and under-populated high mountain area in NE corner of Middle Atlas. Caracal, Barbary sheep, fox, griffon vulture and other birds of prey. Some surviving cedars in a very poor condition, juniper steppe and numerous xerophytes. Good back-packing country. Given its isolation, probably the ideal area to select for natural reserve test project.

#### *Necessary remedial action*

Two areas adjoining above-mentioned PAMP list could be added:-

- residual cedar groves on N side of Jbel el 'Ayyachi between Ja'far and Mitqane Forestry Hut;
- somewhat degraded, yet still extensive area of cedar forest W of Tounfit, that the locals call *tibulxeirin*, with its wild boar, fire-crest, nuthatch, tree-creeper and many other birds; also one of the last hide-outs of the Atlas panther. (Could be linked up with nearby Tirghist.Fazaz Barbary sheep sanctuary to become the Jbel Tazizaout National Park (JTNP)).

Be that as it may, all of the **above-mentioned areas are threatened** by a similar catalogue of man-made factors. These include over-grazing, treetop- and branch-cutting, firewood collection, absence of forest regeneration, soil degradation and erosion, destruction of birds of prey through thoughtless use of pesticides and/or poison against jackals; also hunting and poaching, not to mention garbage disposal and plastic bag pollution.

What is needed at this stage is a **sea change in the local mindset** of both rural and urban populations. This can only be achieved through **education**; creating environmental awareness from Primary School onwards, through systematic inculcation of respect for birds, mammals, plants and trees. Some elementary remedies to address some of the above problems:

- 1/ Teach school-children not to throw garbage out of car-windows or over garden-wall; not to swing on tree-branches till they bust.
- 2/ Make Butagaz low-priced cylinders available to urban and rural populations to avoid branch-cutting for firewood.
- 3/ Use some of the vegetable fibre widely available in Morocco to revive basket-weaving so that throughout the land super-market consumers need no longer resort to plastic bags to carry their groceries home.

A further oft-repeated truism: in and around National Parks and PAMP areas, locals should be made to realise that they **stand to gain more from preserving their environment** than from destroying it.

The January/February 2002 edition of *Medina* magazine purports to address the issue of environmental protection in Morocco. Some admirable theories are put forward, together with solemn declarations of intent. Not till page 52, however, do we find that, in practical terms, somebody has at last seen the light. Says Abdeljalil Belkamel of Marrakech:

‘Man belongs to an ecosystem. He has begun to destroy it, thus forgetting that he is destroying himself. (...) That’s why I organise workshops for school-children to create awareness about botany.’

Let us hope that there are scores of Belkamels throughout Morocco, and that their message will not fall on deaf ears!

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*Médina*, janvier-février 2002

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*Publishing history :*

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## 8/ Book review:

Richard KNIGHT, *Trekking in the Moroccan Atlas (includes Marrakesh city guide)*, Hindhead (Surrey): Trailblazers, 2001.

This work is typical of a new breed of intensely user-friendly, consumer-oriented guide-book, with reams of spoon-fed info, that very much emphasises the pre-digested, molly-coddling approach to trekking now popular in the west. The following comments target specific paragraphs and chapters.

**Planning your trip.** While agreeing that whether to trek alone or with a crowd is up to the individual, the author appears to be loading the dice a little too heavily in favour of mule and guide hiring (cf. **Enjoyment**, p.10). An approach that takes all the fun, certainly the adventure, out of Atlas travel. Let the profits of the operation accrue to the locals – a line I have been pushing for years – by all means. Ultimately, though, if someone good at orienteering wants to trek alone, well, let him. At least he/she will have been cautioned (p.241).

The author should also disabuse himself on five accounts:-

1/ Atlas Berbers have been welcoming ‘visitors to their previously hidden world’ (p.10) over the past half century at least, rather than ‘only recently’!

2/ Though having never asked a guide to carry my pack (p.10), a request to be made under no circumstances according to Knight, one of them (an old friend of the reviewer’s – possibly explains it) agreed to do just that!

3/ Humping one’s own pack was certainly not bizarre (p.10) back in the 1960s when this reviewer and his Belgian friend, equipped with 1933-vintage maps, made their pioneering Atlas trips, but then they must have been fairly hard blokes in those days.

4/ The present reviewer claims there is no need to push for all the hassle of the camping option (p.11). When there was no mountain hut available he has either bivvied, or slept in a Berber house or sheep-enclosure. A tent is both rarely necessary, and unnecessarily heavy!

5/ Ditto for the mule option. This writer’s back-up was always in his back-pack, an item originally designed, by the way, to be carried on one’s back! A mule, did you say? OK! On certain days, perhaps, if one wants to take it easy, or for a MEDEVAC operation. Otherwise, mule-hire is very much a hit-or-miss affair. On average, one muleteer in two somehow fails to come up to the mark.

**Getting to Morocco, etc.** No doubt this is the section Knight failed to find in Peyron’s *Great Atlas Traverse*, for which reason he takes that work directly to task for not containing ‘useful detail’ (p.36); the other criticism was that it was out-of-date, a rather facile statement when referring to a book published in 1989!

Explanation: Peyron included plenty of back-up material in his original *Grande Traversée de l’Atlas Marocain* (1984), complete with English chapter summaries – presumably Knight never laid his hands on that 280-page volume – and Robin Collomb deleted much of that through lack of space, as Peyron’s two-volume GTA guide in English was, in a way, a companion volume to Collomb’s own *Atlas Mountains Morocco* (1987 reprint) which contains plenty of relevant extra info.

One can, however, question the wisdom of trying to outdo general guides such as the *Cadogan*, the *Blue*, the *Rough*, the *Routard* (not to mention the dear old *LPG*) on their own territory. They are the people to give your would-be walker the list of trekking agencies, a potted history of Morocco and the Berbers, when to use your right hand, when to use your left... Because, admirable though Knight’s coverage of Marrakesh may be, and however much the reader will agree that visitors to Morocco should be patient and not haggle too keenly (pp.21 & 23), his trekking guide proper fails to kick in till p.125.

**What to take.** Again, and while the info is certainly useful, there’s nothing in this section that one won’t find in *Walker*, *Summit*, or some suchlike specialist monthly. **Trainers** (p.29), let it be said, are invaluable on the walk-in, and, as your travel-consumers won’t be carrying packs anyway (as per the debatable mule-option), they are also ideal for paths encountered in the course of a straight foothill bash. Might be a bit border-line higher up, though this reviewer recalls once making it in summer up to the Lépiney Hut without undue stress in a pair of common-or-garden gym shoes.

Contrary to Knight’s advice, attempting to go native (p.31, 2<sup>nd</sup> §) by pretending to be ‘blue men’ and indulging in similar antics (**clothes**, p.79), may be unwise, as visitors thus bedecked will become the laughing-stock of any village they traverse.

And what about trekking-poles? Surely it would be useful to have a pair handy for some of that horrendous tread-mill scree (also useful for **knee problems**, p.244). Strange that Knight should pass this over...

**Toiletries.** Some of the items Knight recommends, such as shampoo and shower gel, short-wave radio, or trekker's toilet-roll requirements (pp.32-33), beg the question: 'Are these guys travelling light, or are they a real bunch of softies?!' What about the honest-to-goodness bar of soap usually supplied gratis by your Marrakesh hotel? It should see them right for a few days in the Atlas. Let them also cut down on toilet paper (p.78) and make more use of smooth pebbles from dry river-beds, then perhaps there'd be a wee bit less trash around Toubkal and the Neltner *refuge*! (By the way, at the time of writing, a general clean-up was being planned by McHugo and Kasbah Toubkal team for end-September 2002, a rerun of the autumn 2000 effort).

**Books** (p.36). Strangely, there is no mention of Gavin Maxwell's inaccurate but 'unputdownable' bestseller *Lords of the Atlas* (1966), which is still around in paperback, having been through several reprints;

**Maps** (p.37). Again, at the end of the paragraph, Knight is pushing hard for guide-dependent travel. The answer to that one: do your own thing, certainly, but no need to become totally guide- or muleteer-dependent!

**The people** (pp.56-60) Some indication should be given as to how to reciprocate Berber hospitality. 'Berber' is actually a linguistic, not a racial definition, referring to people speaking one of the vernacular tongues. Berbers, incidentally, prefer to call themselves Ishelhiyn or Imazighen. While stories of being charged for tea (p.57) in homes often crop up, this practice is uncommon, though locals are random cadgers (as an excuse, some of them do live in straitened circumstances). The Tashelhit term *agadir* (pl. *igudar*, 'fortified storehouse', or 'granary') gives way, from Ayt Bougemmaz onwards, to *igrem* (pl. *igerman*), more usual in Tamazight-speaking territory. Thus, the near-circular, non-traditional format fort (p.165) near Tabant is Ighrem n-Ayt Moussa. In that area, small wood and stone kasbahs with corner-turrets are called *tigerman*, or *tigermatin*, according to the valley one happens to be in. 'Ksar', from Arabic *qser* (pl. *qsar*) means 'fortified hamlet', with defensive wall, gates closed from sundown to sunup.

**Fauna & flora** (pp.60-64). Birds should be arranged per type rather than in alphabetic order to avoid duplication (like when the author separates the Alpine from the Common Chough, both gregarious and occurring at altitude in the Atlas). Some typical Atlas species are conspicuous by their absence: Alpine Accentor, Crimson-winged Finch, Rock Bunting, Rock Sparrow, Pale Crag Martin, Coal Tit, Wheatear, Shore-Lark, Raven, Green & Great Spotted Woodpecker, Bee-eater, Long-legged Buzzard, etc. (cf. H. Heinzel & al., *The Birds of Britain and Europe with North Africa and the Middle East*). Reference to cedars (p.61) is irrelevant as there are none in the areas described, except for plantations on Oukaimeden road and near Sidi Fares Forestry Hut.

**Holidays & festivals.** The 'Aïd al'Arch' (Feast of the Throne, p.69) an institution going back to King Hassan II, is no longer observed on March 3, but some time in summer. A reference to Imilchil *mousse*m (p.71), which lies well outside areas described in Knight's book, just doesn't fit in as. Regarding postal services, the traveller may forget about receiving parcels, unless by registered delivery, and even then...

**Women in Islam** (p.74). It should be emphasised to the Christian visitor that having sex with a non-prostitute Moroccan girl or woman is an offence punishable by prison; or else defendant must be prepared for marriage involving conversion to Islam and foreskin removal.

**Wine** (p.78). Knight should sample reds such as S de Siroua, Cabernet Médaille, Beni Mtir Beauvallon, Guerrouane Cuvée Spéciale Aït Yazem, to name but a few; he might then revise his negative judgment on the local vino.

**Carpets** (p.79). New-fangled term *kilim* (p.239), is a 1990s invention to try and hoodwink tourists into believing that local carpets can hold a candle to Turkish, Persian or Pakistani production. It must be stressed that Moroccan carpets, while handsome enough, have little or no value on the international market. The author should print a similar caveat concerning semi-precious stones (p.80), especially recommending that the brightly-coloured ones be tested with a wet finger for possible ink (a well-known trick).

Knight's excellent section on cultural impact does insufficient justice to problem of tourist harassment by small boys of the 'stylo-bonbon' brigade (p.83). Perhaps unrealistic of him to assume that, should a traveller wish to give a present, 'village leaders will apply your gift to where it's most useful' (p.84).

**Marrakesh.** In French touring circles now often referred to as 'Arnakech' (lit. 'Ripoffville' < verb *arnaquer*, 'to rip off', and that item definitely deserves to figure in Appendix A!), a nickname that unfortunately applies to so many aspects of local tourist-oriented activities, that it is a wonder Knight still finds so much to marvel at. This reviewer must be getting very *blasé* indeed; that said, he certainly never got the impression that the High Atlas 'curled around the city' (p.85). Most unromantically, the peaks of the High Atlas (p.98) are very often invisible due to mist or dust.

Although the Moroccan authorities did a good job of cracking down on faux guides in the mid-nineties, travellers still have to tangle with hustlers and touts of various types and denominations (p.86, mid-page). A possibility hinted at by Knight's expression 'non-threatening environment' (p.88, when describing Marrakesh station). Incidentally, only low-fare night-trains accept such pets as cats and dogs, the latter especially being much abused (almost on a par with donkeys) in the local culture. As for *kuskus* (p.101), usually excellent in homes, do not eat it in restaurants (p.101) on days other than Friday, when it often features as *plat du jour*. You might live to regret it!

**Ouarzazate.** Local police do well to keep their eyes skinned for con men. Part of government's anti-harassment policy aimed at improving Morocco's abysmally low 'tourist return rate', which was down to approx. 5-6% in the mid-nineties.

Please, though, no Frog-bashing unless strictly necessary. What Knight describes as 'unimaginative French planners' (p.116) were certainly not responsible for Ouarzazate's present boom town lay-out. A sleepy, fly-blown, one-horse staging-post and military garrison, Ouarzazate mushroomed as a tourist centre in the 1970s, therefore well after independence; the Frogs had nothing to do with it! By the way, *Hôtel Berbère Palace* is definitely for the up-market trekker; if running a shoe-string operation you would be better advised to put up at the fairly basic, yet reasonable *Bab Sahara*.

**What to see.** One shot (p.123) provides the only real hint in the whole book as to a possible 'blue men', or 'Tuareg' mystique, a theme much-exploited by guides, *faux* or otherwise. Apart from Taourirt, both Tifoultout and Aït Ben Haddou (reference, p.117) kasbahs could be mentioned. Knight proves that tourist harassment is a fact of life when candidly stating 'you will be set upon by guides' (3<sup>rd</sup> §, p.123). Without becoming paranoid about it, discussion of this very real problem would be a welcome adjunct to a new edition of the guide-book under discussion.

**Toubkal region** (16 pages). Because of frequent flooding and landslides on the Asni-Imlil road, a sizeable contingent of would-be trekkers and 'peak-baggers' use the well-kept road from Ourika to access Oukaimeden, a place not mentioned in Knight's book, with its alternative accommodation (hotels, CAF chalet-refuge, camping facilities) and relatively easy trails to Tacheddirt. N.B. Hôtel du Toubkal in Azni was closed in mid-June 2002, though not clear at the time whether definite or seasonal closure. But there's a handy B & B place on the left, about one kilometre up the Imlil road.

Choice of illustrations in this section is uninspiring. Admiring the haze and heat-shimmer in these prints (probably taken in summer – the worst period for photography) one might be forgiven for forgetting how blue Atlas skies can be.

**Accommodation.** Price of DH 50,- quoted for *Kasbah du Toubkal* (p.129), a luxury hotel above Imlil, requires closer researching if Knight wants to avoid giving inaccurate info. Perhaps by checking their website? When this viewer inquired there in March 2000, the rates were DH 300,- for a night in a dormitory; DH1200 for full en-suite, honeymoon-couple accommodation!

33 pages are devoted to **Mgoun region**. Satisfactory description. Query, however, concerning hotel in Azilal: at the *Tanout*, did they give Knight breakfast? Peyron couldn't get any there in 1989, nor in 1998! Rather sadly, Saïd El Ouakhoumi, doyen of the Ayt Bougemmaz guides, died recently, but one of his sons is carrying on the good work. Knight's route maps, one of the outstanding features of the book; except when one tries to crowd in too many items (Map 8, p.146). One might hesitate, however, to describe a lemonade-vendor as a permanent landmark, as Knight does in one of his sketch-maps. For reasons related to Berber phonology, Asif Arous more likely than Asif n-Arous (or else Asif n-Ourous, but that's in a different place).

Small confusion about '**Azib Ikkis** (p.149), which needs clarification in new edition. Just after these bothies there is a small, mountain hut in a fertile, well-watered location. Peyron slept there with four companions in May 1993 after skiing down Ighil Aghwri. Has it been dismantled?

Talking of huts, Knight's **Tarkeddid refuge** (p.151), is often referred to as Tilibit n-Trkeddit ('small pasture of Tarkeddit'). This *refuge*, like the ones at Tizi n-Ait Ahmed and Lake Izoughar, were built rather hurriedly in 1988-89 under a Franco-Moroccan pilot scheme without the thorny problem of custodianship having been satisfactorily solved. Left to function as *refuges non-gardés*, they soon became derelict shells, with Berber shepherds and western trekkers blaming each other for having caused the original damage.

**Tassawt** area. Spelling error > Amezri, not Amerzi. Map 19A & pp.168-170 perpetuate well-known error on 1/1000.000 map as to location of Ichebaken, actually situated where map is

marked Talat n-Tazat ('fig-tree ravine'). Pity, as this typical Atlas village, with its characteristic caste-like buildings, is a worthy rival of more famous Megdaz (notional home to Mririda n-Aït Attik, a famous local poetess), but somehow glossed over in Knight's description. N.B/ The Fakhour granary is being restored.

**Sirwa region.** Excellent section, courtesy of Knight's co-author, Paddy. Only suggestion of tourists-oriented rip-off in entire book appears on p.177 where it is suggested that 'driver tends to demand ridiculous fees from non-Moroccan passengers'. Spelling Akhfamane, (not Ahkfmame, pp. 179 & 192), 'head of waters'. Use of ropes on Sirwa's terminal ridge only for those who feel giddy or hesitant. This reviewer didn't use them when he climbed to the top on Whitmonday (1966). Full marks, however, for tip about looking for animal droppings when uncertain as to where path is heading. Applies all over the Atlas;

Jbel Sahro, actually **Saghro**. (29 pages) Some inaccurate statements:-

1/ One of Peyron's Ifrane colleagues is a young woman from Aït Atta who would probably be hardly flattered to hear her home-tribe referred to as 'infamous'! Possibly in eyes of French military, but responsible for epic defence of Bou Gafr *aiguilles* in early 1933, for which now justly famous in Morocco.

2/ Statement that 'tourism has hardly begun' in Saghro totally up the creek. On Peyron's second visit in 1969, near Ikniwn, they already knew how to say, in French: '*Tu prends pas la photo, sinon tu donnes le flous!*' Speaks volumes, doesn't it?

Choice of pictures unfortunate: interesting but un-contrasted landscape shots (p.224); whatever happened to that blue sky? Some blued void opposite p.225, but sheer emptiness is flat and unremarkable.

**Appendix C.** Full marks, however, for tip about not frightening pack-mule met on narrow path. However section on MAS is a bit 'over the top'; this writer has never experienced it nor heard of instances where companions or acquaintances have suffered from this affliction in the Atlas. Heat lassitude, but definitely not AMS.

To conclude, the Knight guide contains plenty of useful, though at times incomplete and slightly inaccurate info on the 'honey-pot' areas (Toubkal, Mgoun, Sirwa, Saghro). As an introduction for the first-time trekker to Morocco, it pushes hard for guide- and mule-hire, plus resorting to camping or *gîte* accommodation. Definitely not for the far roving, old Atlas hand, being too limited in scope.

*Publishing history:*

Edited version of letter, as sent to Richard Knight, September 2002. Unpublished.