



PEAK PROGRESS

Luxury eco-tourism is taking hold in the High Atlas Mountains, which offer some of Morocco's most exclusive and evocative escapes. With extensive social development projects being funded behind the scenes, the High Atlas is becoming an unassuming epicentre of luxury with a conscience

IF NORTH AFRICA'S HOTELS WERE RANKED ON LOCATION alone, Morocco's Kasbah Tamadot would be a strong contender for the region's finest resort. There aren't many infinity pools in the Maghreb where blissed out bathers can enjoy a cosmic panorama of snow-clad mountains, pristine pine forests and charming adobe villages, whilst sipping on an arty cocktail worthy of Manhattan. Sir Richard Branson's mother fell in love with this utopian hideaway over a decade ago, and it's not hard to see why.

Bought by the British tycoon back in 1998 during one of his famous ballooning forays, the intimately decadent Kasbah Tamadot is no longer a closely guarded secret. The success of this majestic mountain retreat inspired other upmarket developers to pack their bags and follow suit, implanting a clutch of exclusive eco-escapes around these

celestial summits. Today, the High Atlas has become a success story of sustainable luxury eco-tourism.

Kasbah Tamadot doesn't rely on awe-inspiring views alone to enchant its well-heeled guests. Stepping through the antique doors, a bewildering complex of courtyards, intricately carved walls, winding staircases and floral terraces gradually reveals itself. Salmon-pink walls and crenellated battlements are more evocative of a fairytale palace than boutique hotel – a palace where guests are made to feel like royalty, for a few magical days at least.

Despite its lush landscaped gardens, avant garde cuisine, five-star spa and countless other high-end amenities, Kasbah Tamadot has thankfully retained its Berber character. Morocco may evoke images of bazaars, beaches and billowing Saharan dunes, but the Atlas Mountains are

Berber heartlands – the traditional home of Morocco's most fascinating and authentic culture.

"It was and remains extremely important to integrate Berber culture into Kasbah Tamadot," explains Jon Brown, managing director of Virgin Limited Edition. "With only 17 rooms, we aim to give guests a sense of staying in a real Moroccan home rather than in a hotel. Our Kanoun restaurant serves delicious local cuisine and combines local produce and flavors with continental ideas, all served with a great selection of international and Moroccan wines."

"The Spa at Kasbah Tamadot is named 'Asounfou' meaning 'relaxation' in Berber," he continues. "Many guests enjoy a hedonistic Moroccan-style hamam during their stay. Another popular activity with visitors is mule trekking. The Berbers preferred female mules as riding animals, so here at Kasbah Tamadot we have the most friendly and good-natured female mules in all of Morocco."

While no expense is spared laying on the ultimate High Atlas holiday for its patrons, Kasbah Tamadot is also doing its bit for Berber business and the community. Through the Eve Branson and Virgin Unite foundations, the resort has helped open a crèche for Berber children, as well as importing cashmere goats from England. Local Berber girls use the goat wool to produce high-end embroidery and knitwear that is sold at Tamadot and other properties.

"The Berbers are a proud people," says Eve Branson, Richard's mother. "We want to teach the girls lifelong

skills that remove the need to ask for charity in the future. Three villages adjoining Kasbah Tamadot are specialising in a unique craft that will enable them to become self supportive in the future."

"Kasbah Tamadot has always had strong connections with the local Berber people," adds Jon Brown. "The hotel staff are incredibly important and it was always Richard Branson's intention that they come from the surrounding villages. Prior to the hotel opening, Kasbah Tamadot built an English school and hospitality skills were introduced. Today, 95 percent of the staff are Berber and they continue to play a leading role in the hotel."

AS THE MUEZZIN'S CALL TO PRAYER ECHOES OFF THE steep valley walls, Imlil village comes to life. The first rays of sun warm the mighty peak of Mount Toubkal and its snow-

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BEAUTIFUL HAMAMS ALLOW PATRONS TO STEAM THEMSELVES INTO A HEAVENLY, HIGH-TEMPERATURE STUPOR.

clad massif, while plumes of smoke spiral lazily through the chill air. From the carpet-covered roof of the Kasbah du Toubkal, accompanied by a glass of sweet mint tea, this is another of the Maghreb's most memorable panoramas.

"The High Atlas offers a whole new experience," says Mike McHugo, English co-owner of the Kasbah du Toubkal, admiring the technicolour shades playing across the village. "The tranquility of Berber life here, which has changed little for centuries, coupled with truly dramatic scenery, provides the perfect contrast to modern city living."

Perched high on a rocky outcrop a stone's throw from the Kasbah Tamadot, the Kasbah du Toubkal dominates Imlil. The imposing fortress opened as a boutique hotel in 1995 – Martin Scorsese was so enamored with the property that he filmed his Dalai Lama epic *Kundun* here two years later. Today, thanks to the work of Mike and his brother Chris, the former home of a feudal *caid* (governor) has become a high-end resort overflowing with charm and character.

The Kasbah du Toubkal is the perfect synthesis of eco-conservancy and exclusivity. En suite rooms are rustically luxurious, with traditional decoration, locally crafted furniture, *tadelakt* (lime plaster) bathrooms, iPod docking stations, wireless internet, and, of course, fantastic views. The candle-lit dining room offers a superb range of local dishes, freshly prepared by a chef who welcomes guests into his kitchen to master the intricacies of Berber cuisine.

Nestled among soaring peaks, the Kasbah makes the ideal base for outdoor enthusiasts, who prefer to know they'll be well looked after at the end of a long day. Only 90 minutes' drive from Marrakech, Imlil is the gateway to the Toubkal National Park, a haven for flora and fauna, offering glorious opportunities for hiking, climbing and skiing.

Kasbah du Toubkal arranges popular treks along the trails and through the nearby villages. All are personally guided by qualified Berber mountain guides, from hour-long strolls and right up to a breathtaking, three-day ascent and descent of the 4,167-metre Mount Toubkal, the highest point in North Africa. Homemade food and tents are transported separately so guests won't miss out on the Kasbah's creature comforts, and there's even a strategically situated luxury trekking lodge for the ultimate in high altitude recuperation.

The Kasbah du Toubkal also offers a plethora of less strenuous diversions. Giant chess sets adorn one terrace, while a brace of beautiful hamams allow patrons to steam themselves into a heavenly, high-temperature stupor. Wood burning stoves, well-stocked libraries and 24-hour room service encourage further personal pampering.

THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT WHILST THE BERBERS OF THE High Atlas have always been reliant on agriculture, tourism is proving increasingly vital to the local economy. "We believe in the 'take only photographs, leave only footprints' ideal," explains Mike McHugo at the Kasbah du Toubkal. "We employ local people and buy local supplies and services. We're respectful of the local culture and economy and aim to do everything in the most sustainable and eco-friendly way possible."





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Thanks to ongoing environmental and community projects, the Kasbah has become Imlil’s beating heart, and patrons invariably end up feeling a welcome connection with village residents. Local Berbers run the hotel, and a five percent levy on guests’ bills goes into a charitable fund. So far the McHugo brothers have used the money to buy an ambulance, construct a free public bathhouse, initiate a recycling scheme and invest in local education projects.

“Initially there was some suspicion in Imlil as to why we wanted to help,” admits McHugo. “As the old expression runs: ‘beware foreigners bearing gifts’. But that ended once we finished our biggest project – the village hamam. Since then we’ve had praise and support. Our hotel manager, Hajj Maurice, is widely respected and he’s been instrumental in building trust and winning hearts and minds.”

One of the most significant contributions that Mike McHugo, the Kasbah du Toubkal, and eco-tourism ventures in general have made in the High Atlas has been in education. Thanks to Moroccan charity Education for All (EFA), set up by Mike McHugo and a group of friends in 2006, a growing number of Berber girls in the High Atlas now have access to precious secondary school education.

At the Dar Asni Secondary School for Girls, opened by EFA in 2007, 14-year-old Hafida Ouahan now enjoys free classes in Arabic, English, maths and computer studies.

“Dar Asni has given me a chance I never thought I’d have,” says Hafida. “My parents are very happy that I can stay here; everyone has been kind and helpful. Eventually I want to become a teacher so I can help other Berber girls. I still want to get married, of course, but a bit later.”

THE RISE IN THE NUMBERS OF HIGH NET WORTH

holidaymakers is also inspiring entrepreneurship amongst the High Atlas Berbers themselves. The Dar Tassa Luxury Guesthouse, opened by Berber Brahim Barkouche in 2005, sits high on the edge of the Toubkal National Park, overlooking the High Atlas village of Tassa Ouirgane.

“I have dreamed about building a house in the Atlas Mountains since I was a child,” says Barkouche, who grew up in Casablanca. “I spent childhood holidays here in a house my grandfather owned. Dar Tassa – which means ‘the home of motherly love’ – is a place to get away from the modern world; a place to re-connect with nature, relax and experience this beautiful Atlas landscape.”

Designed in traditional Berber style, with canopied beds and colourful, tadelakt walls, Dar Tassa’s sumptuous, en suite rooms are set away from the hotel’s main courtyard, giving guests their own private slice of High Atlas heaven. An exhaustive in-house menu offers a range of artisan dishes, whilst Franco-Moroccan Restaurant Au Sanglier Qui Fume also offers local cuisine with a European twist.

There’s no shortage of things to do at Dar Tassa. From slow-cooked *tajine* and couscous to Berber flatbreads, many guests conjure up culinary delicacies on the guesthouse’s one-on-one cooking courses. Walnut and apple orchards and burbling streams encourage local exploration, whilst the 850-year-old Tin Mal Mosque, endangered Barbary sheep of the Takkerkhort Reserve and serpentine trails of the Toubkal National Park are all within easy reach.

Like Mike McHugo, Barkouche believes sustainable tourism is about promoting cultural exchange and environmental protection, whilst allowing villagers to work locally and keep their dignity. “Everybody wants higher living standards,” he says. “The trick is to achieve this in harmony with the local culture and surroundings. For example, we’ve saved the only water mill in Ouirgane by paying the owner every time our guests visit.”

Thanks to its cosmic luxury and colourful culture, interest in High Atlas tourism is higher than ever. If this growth can be managed well, the long-term prospects for the Berber and their scenic surroundings look just as good as the views from its resorts and snow-dusted summits. ☺

WORDS & IMAGES DANIEL ALLEN