

Peak practice

When work stress mounts, remember: there's another world a short-haul flight away... in Morocco's High Atlas Mountains

Words Nick Scott

Months of urban mayhem had seriously got to me. Traversing London's pavements had started to feel like driving a bus through an asteroid belt. The sirens, car horns and roadworks were conspiring to build a wall of sound to which I'd gladly have taken a sledgehammer. Meanwhile, so relentlessly was my phone buzzing – even at night, thanks to dealings with clients in the Far East – I began to understand the plight suffered by parents of colic infants.

I was spent, and needed to be transported, as quickly as possible, to somewhere that felt as far away as possible for as long (just four days) as I could spare. A big ask – or so I thought. And then I heard the closest thing the city-weary can get to teleportation is a jaunt just beyond the edge of Europe: the High Atlas Mountains, 40 miles south of Marrakech.

A three-hour 40-minute flight and two-hour drive to the High Atlas later, I found myself reclined on a kasbah terrace at dusk, the Islamic call to prayer from a nearby village mingling with the roar of thunder, and flashes of lightning illuminating the craggy, rain-lashed contours of the surrounding mountainscape. Not the most soothing scenario, but a million miles – figuratively speaking – from home.

My resting place, Kasbah du Toubkal, is the perfect haven for those needing a peace-and-seclusion fix. The main building itself is a 15-minute walk along a walnut grove dirt-track (mules carry your luggage) from its reception, in the village of Imlil, in the foothills of Jbel Toubkal, the highest mountain in north Africa.

Built using traditional methods and material – it was once the summer house of a local baron – the kasbah's 14 en suite rooms are blissfully rustic, with authentic Berber furnishings, wooden furniture and vast boulders in the middle of some rooms which, being too unwieldy to remove, were simply built around. There



Rock the kasbah: rest, relaxation and rejuvenation are on offer at this breathtaking mountain retreat, situated some 40 miles south of Marrakech

Recharge Adventure



Clockwise from main picture, the Kasbah dining room, terrace overlooking the High Atlas Mountains, and trekking in the foothills



are also three family rooms, a delightful garden and several unfussy but elegant terraces. Kasbah du Toubkal also boasts a hammam – a traditional cleansing room not unlike a Turkish bath – and local food cooked by locals, which somehow manages to pack the soul-bolstering nature of home-cooked fare as well as the nuance and sophistication of haute cuisine.

Rewarding trek

I awoke, following a deeper sleep than any other I can recall, to a silence permeated only by distant waterfalls and bird tweets – a word I'd forgotten even had another meaning. The plan for the day, for myself and a party of other urban exiles, was to take a 14-kilometre hike along the ancient footpaths and mule tracks that connect the region's tiny villages, along the way taking in apple orchards, walnut groves and dramatic, terraced mountainsides. Accompanied for the start of the trek by Kasbah du Toubkal's affable co-founder Chris McHugo (who, with his brother, restored

the once-derelict building to its present-day glory having stumbled upon it while trekking in 1989), we traverse our way down rickety steps carved into mountain foothills, vault across several small streams and small tiered fields, and make a beeline for the start of the mountain trail.

With the smell of primrose and camomile leaves in our nostrils, we pass rows of cherry trees to the sound of crowing cockerels and running water, and come across a huge unkempt field. It looks like a nature reserve, but turns out to be full of unmarked graves. In local culture, McHugo explains, death is not marked with pomp or ceremony. "Over here, once you're gone..." he muses.

Over the next three days, we spend every moment of daylight trekking this vast, majestic wilderness, our trusty mules following obediently, even when it means negotiating tiny, fig tree-lined mountain passes. Our journey is broken up by occasional villages with walls of non-cemented stones and houses built with sun-hardened mud,

their doors made of weathered, knot-holed planks tied together.

One highlight of our treks – besides the meal-stops, which include picnics of lamb steaks, Moroccan rice and traditional salads – sees hundreds of shabby goats, sneezing from the dust and bleating in unison, cross a dirt road in front of us before miraculously managing to clamber up a 10-metre-high, near-vertical rock face en masse, their hooves groping for footholds in the craggy rock. Remarkably, not a single creature falls.

Poets, photographers and artists come to the High Atlas Mountains not just for inspiration, but also for the total lack of distractions – something which has seen many a business leader book Kasbah du Toubkal for work seminars. It's a place that makes you realise the profundity – and, more importantly, the scarcity – of genuine silence. The space for life-appraisal, for constructive thinking, is restorative beyond belief: I came home not only soothed and rejuvenated, but with a better understanding of the peculiarities of my urban locus operandi, which made me better equipped to take them on in the longer term. I've genuinely encountered no place more therapeutic on the planet.

Getting there

British Airways flies to Marrakech once a day from Gatwick (except on 2 and 3 April).

britishairways.com

Accommodation

Kasbah du Toubkal offers standard bedrooms from €160 (£117) and apartment suites from €440.

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