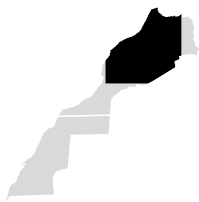


Trekking



Not so long ago, trekking in Morocco was the preserve of dedicated climbers and a few intrepid amateurs on their way to the top of **Jebel Toubkal**, which at 4167m is North Africa's highest peak. But things have changed and now there are treks for all times of year and all levels of fitness: treks to test the fittest athletes and others where you can have your bags carried, arrive to find your lunch laid out for you and sleep in luxury.

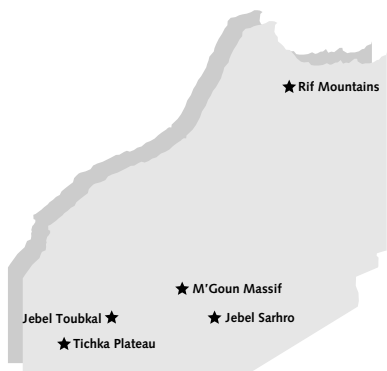
Morocco is blessed with some of the world's most dramatic and beautiful mountains, many of which only see a handful of travellers every year; others remain totally unexplored by foreigners. Morocco's broad range of climates is also a blessing for trekkers. When December snows make **Jebel Toubkal** impossible to trek, **Jebel Sarhro**, on the southern side of the Atlas and at the edge of the Sahara, is passable. When the summer sun makes the Rif too hot to trek, it also melts the snow off **Toubkal**, enticing crowds up to the summit.

Not every trekking area or mountain range is covered in this chapter. Instead we have selected some of what we think are the most exciting and interesting treks in a country overendowed with walking possibilities. Some are obvious – the ascent of **Toubkal**, for instance. Others, such as the **M'Goun** walk, are less so, but no less extraordinary.

As trekking in Morocco has grown in popularity, so have the options available to the walker. You could buy a package from home, including flights and transfers, guides and food. Or you could turn up at the trailhead, find a guide, hire mules and head off into the Berber heartland. Whichever you choose, trekking is often the highlight of any visit to Morocco.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Head for the heights and the summit of **Jebel Toubkal** (p431), the highest mountain in North Africa
- Opt for the gentler walking on offer in the little-visited cedar forests of the **Rif Mountains** (p440)
- In **Jebel Sarhro** (p446) you will find some of the most rugged and stunning scenery in Morocco, perfect for winter walking
- Get away from the crowds in the remote **M'Goun Massif** (p437) and be inspired by its spectacular valleys and beautiful villages
- Climb to the remote **Tichka Plateau** (p435) in spring and find yourself wading through meadows of wild flowers



and the four-sheet, 1:100,000 *Toubkal Massif* walking map is now also available online at Stanfords (www.stanfords.co.uk) and elsewhere. There is now also a free phone number for the Division de la Cartographie (French and Arabic only): ☎ 0800 02929.

If you get no joy in Rabat, you may find maps of the Toubkal area, the M'Goun Massif and Jebel Sarhro in shops in Marrakesh, Imlil and elsewhere. Photocopies of maps of some parts of the High Atlas are sometimes available at the reception of **Hôtel Ali** (☎ 024 444979; www.hotel-ali.hostel-marrakech.co.uk; Rue Moulay Ismail) in Marrakesh, at the marked-up price of Dh140 or more.

Several sources in the UK may be able to supply maps. **Stanfords** (☎ 020-7836 1321; www.stanfords.co.uk) has one of the world's largest collections of maps for sale. At the time of writing, they only had the four-sheet, 1:100,000 *Toubkal* map, but others are sometimes available. The map room of the **Royal Geographical Society** (☎ 020-7591 3050; www.rgs.org; 1 Kensington Gore, London SW7 2AR) has a considerable collection of maps of Morocco and is open to the public. Some maps can also be ordered online.

You can buy West Col's maps, including a Toubkal and a M'Goun Massif map, at several online sites including, at the time of writing, on **Amazon** (www.amazon.co.uk). This and the complete range of Soviet maps, some of which you can download, are available from **Omnimap** (www.omnimap.com).

Another trusted source for maps and information, as well as trekking tours, is **Atlas Mountains Information Services** (☎/fax 00 44 1592 873 546; 26 Kirkcaldy Rd, Burntisland, Fife, Scotland KY3 9HQ), run by Hamish Brown, a specialist author, lecturer, photographer and guide for the Atlas, who has been travelling in Morocco for more than 40 years. He's often away leading treks, so you are advised to contact him well in advance, preferably by fax.

BOOKS

The Moroccan tourist office, Office National Marocain du Tourisme (ONMT), publishes an extremely useful booklet called *Morocco: Mountain and Desert Tourism* (2005). A French edition should also be available. The booklet has a good introduction to trekking in Morocco and then lists car hire, *bureaux des guides* (guide offices), tourist offices, lists of *gîtes d'étape* (trekkers' hostels), huts, *refuges*, camp sites, *souq* (market) days and other useful information. You should be able to pick them up at the office of the Association of Guides in Imlil, at the ONMT office in Marrakesh or in other major cities, or at Moroccan tourist offices overseas.

Some trekking guidebooks are listed in the boxed text, opposite. The ONMT and the publishing house Edisud/Belvisi also publish *Gravures Rupestres du Haut Atlas*, which looks at the rock art of Plateau du Yagour, northeast of Setti Fatma, and *Randonnées Pédestres Dans le Massif du Mgoun*. These are only sporadically available at tourist offices, in bookshops in Rabat and Marrakesh, at the Club Alpin France (CAF) and at the *refuge* in Oukaimeden, but should be available online.

For atmosphere – and a good read – pick up a copy of Hamish Brown's *The Mountains Look on Marrakech*, an account of a 96-day trek across the mountains.

CLUBS

The Fédération Royale Marocaine de Ski et de Montagne (Royal Moroccan Ski & Mountaineering Federation) (☎ 022 203798; www.frmsm.ma; Le Ministère de la Jeunesse et Sport, Parc de la Ligue Arabe, PO Box 15899, Casablanca;) runs three basic *refuges* (see p421) and can provide information for trekkers.

Club Alpin Français (CAF; ☎ 022 270090; www.cafmaroc.co.ma, in French; 50 Blvd Moulay Abderrahman, Quartier Beauséjour, Casablanca) operates key *ref-*

INTERNATIONAL SPECIALIST TRAVEL MAP & BOOKSHOPS

Au Vieux Campeur (☎ 01 53 10 48 27; www.au-vieux-campeur.fr, in French; 2 Rue de Latran, Paris, France and branches)

Map Link (☎ 805-692 6777; www.maplink.com; Unit 5, 30 S La Patera Lane, Santa Barbara, CA 93117, USA)

Map Shop (☎ 016-8459 3146; www.themapshop.co.uk; 15 High St, Upton upon Severn, Worcestershire, UK)

Mapland (☎ 03-9670 4383; www.mapland.com.au; 372 Little Bourke St, Melbourne, Australia)

Rand McNally (☎ 847-329 8100; www.randmcnally.com; 8255 N Central Park, Skokie, IL 60076, USA)

Stanfords (☎ 020-7836 1321; www.stanfords.co.uk; 12-14 Long Acre, Covent Garden, London, UK)

TOP TREKKING GUIDEBOOKS

- *Great Atlas Traverse* by Michael Peyron. Peyron lived in Morocco for decades and his two-volume work is the definitive text (volume one covers the Toubkal region) for the great traverse. Less useful for the casual trekker.
- *Le Massif du Toubkal* by Jean Dresch and Jacques de Lépiney; published by Edisud/Belvisi in French, it is primarily of use to mountaineers concentrating on the high peaks around Toubkal.
- *Trekking in the Atlas Mountains: Toubkal, Mgoun Massif and Jebel Sahro* by Karl Smith. A guide from the walkers' guidebook publisher Cicerone, intended for experienced trekkers, with route descriptions and a weatherproof cover, but minimal mapping.
- *Trekking in the Moroccan Atlas* by Richard Knight. The most recent guide, with coverage of Jebel Sahro and Jebel Siroua, and detailed sketch maps of each part of the route. Likely to be the most useful of all for inexperienced trekkers, although also the bulkiest.

uges in the Toubkal area, particularly those in Imlil and Oukaïmeden and on Toubkal (see p430). The club website is a good source of trekking information, including links to recommended guides.

ORGANISED TREKS

For details of foreign and Moroccan operators offering trekking tours in Morocco, see p488.

CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

There are some essentials you are advised to attend to whatever the season: strong, well-broken-in walking boots are the key to happy trekking, as is a waterproof and windproof outer layer – it's amazing how quickly the weather can change. Light, baggy, cotton trousers and long-sleeved shirts are best in summer (June to August), but prepare for very cold weather during winter (November to March) wherever you trek in the country. Outside the height of summer, pack warm clothing, a woollen hat and gloves for trekking in the High Atlas. In summer, even at 1800m, it's cold enough at night to require a fleece or jumper. At the same time, you will need a sunhat, sunglasses and high-factor sunscreen year-round.

The key decision to make, when planning a route, is whether or not to sleep in tents. A good tent opens up endless trekking possibilities and will get you away from the crowds, but you don't necessarily have to bring your own, as most tour operators will rent one. It is also possible to rent them from some guides and from trailheads such as Imlil. If you would rather

not camp, in most regions you can choose to stay in villages, either in *gîtes d'étape* or *chez l'habitant* (in someone's home). In both of these and especially in remote areas, rooms may not even have a mattress on the floor, although in places such as Imlil they often come with the luxury of a bed.

Whether you are camping or staying in houses, from September to early April a four-season sleeping bag is essential for the High Atlas and Jebel Sahro – temperatures as low as -10°C are not unknown at this time. In lower mountain ranges, even in high summer, a bag comfortable at 0°C is recommended. A thick sleeping mat or thin foam mattress is a good idea since the ground is extremely rocky. These can usually be supplied by guides.

If you want to go above 3000m between November and May, you will need to have experience in winter mountaineering and be equipped with crampons, ice axes, snow shovels and other essential equipment. Again, this equipment is available for hire through most tour operators or in Imlil.

Many *gîtes* have cooking facilities, but you may want to bring a stove if you are camping. Multifuel stoves that burn anything from aviation fuel to diesel are ideal. Methylated spirits is very hard to get hold of, but kerosene is available. Pierce-type butane gas canisters are also available, but not recommended for environmental reasons. Your guide will be able to advise you on this.

Bring a basic medical kit and a supply of water-purification tablets or a mechanical purifier – all water should be treated unless you take it from the very source.

HAPPY FEET

Mountain Berbers manage to walk and often even run up and down mountains in sandals. How do they do it? Practice makes perfect and they have had a lifetime to achieve this happy state. Should you copy them? Not if you want to carry on walking. The most common difficulty that visitors experience on a trek is blisters from ill-fitting boots or ill-chosen footwear. If you want to do more than stroll across a valley, you will greatly enhance your pleasure by buying a pair of properly fitted, waterproof (preferably Gore-Tex) boots and give yourself time to break them in. Even then you may get blisters. Many trekkers carry 'second skin', a plastic layer that can be put over blisters and usually stops them hurting. Happy feet make for a happy walker.

If you are combining trekking with visits to urban areas, consider storing extra luggage before your trek rather than lugging around unwanted gear. Most hotels will let you leave luggage, sometimes for a small fee. Train stations in larger cities have secure left-luggage facilities, although many of these offices will only accept luggage that is locked, so make sure you have a lock for your suitcase.

GUIDES

However much experience you have at trekking and at map reading, we strongly recommend that you hire a qualified guide. Why? If for no other reason than to be your translator (how is your Berber?), your chaperrone (*faux guides* won't come near you if you are with a guide), deal-getter and vocal guidebook. A good guide will enhance your cultural experience. For one thing, they will know people throughout the area, which will undoubtedly result in invitations for tea and food, and richer experiences of Berber life. And then, if something does go wrong, a local guide will be the quickest route to getting help. Every year foreigners die in the Moroccan mountains. Whatever the cause – a freak storm, an unlucky slip, a rock slide – their chances of survival would invariably have increased with the presence of a guide. So however confident you feel, we recommend that you never walk into the mountains unguided.

Choosing a guide can be a problem. A flash-looking, English-speaking *faux guide* (unofficial guide) from Marrakesh is no substitute for a gnarled, old, local mountain guide who knows the area like the back of his hand. All official guides carry photo-identity cards. Guides should be authorised by the Fédération Royale Marocaine de Ski et Montagne (Royal Moroccan Ski & Mountaineer-

ing Federation) or l'Association Nationale des Guides et Accompagnateurs en Montagne du Maroc. They should be credited as *guides de montagnes* (mountain guides), which requires study for at least six months at the Centre de Formation aux Métiers de Montagne, a school for mountain guides at Tabant in the Aït Bou Goumez valley. Note that *accompagnateurs* (escorts) will have had only one week's training and will not be insured to lead mountain trips. It is also worth pointing out that a *guide de tourisme* (tourist guide) is not qualified to lead treks.

Official mountain guides, who can always show an identity card as proof of their status, have been trained in mountain craft, including first aid. In times of uncertain weather or in an emergency, they will be infinitely more efficient than a cheaper guide lacking proper training. If a guide you are thinking of engaging is reluctant to show their photo card, it probably means they either don't have one or it has expired (they should be renewed every three years).

There are more than four hundred accredited mountain guides working in Morocco and many of them can be found through the *bureaux des guides* in Imlil, Setti Fatma, Tabant (Aït Bou Goumez Valley) and El-Kelaâ M'Gouna.

Some *guides de montagne* will have additional training in rock climbing, canyoning and mountaineering. All guides speak French and some also speak English, Spanish or German. In the past few years several young Moroccan women have succeeded in breaking into the previously all-male world of mountain guiding. Their services are in high demand.

At the time of writing, the minimum rate for official guides was Dh300 per day (per group, not per person). This rate can vary according to season and location. Rates

do not include food and accommodation expenses. Guides generally get free accommodation in *refuges* and *gîtes*, but you may be asked to cover expenses for meals. If you embark on a linear route you'll also be expected to pay for their return journey.

Negotiate all fees before departure and count on giving at least a 10% tip at the end, unless you have been very unhappy with the service. If your guide is organising your trip (rather than a tour operator), be sure to go through all aspects of the trek ahead of time: discuss where each day will start and end, whether tents will be shared (most guides have a tent or sleeping bag), how many mules will be hired, who will be cooking (if there are enough of you, the guide may insist on hiring a cook, usually at Dh100 a day), food preferences, water provision, and the division of food and equipment between the group.

MULES

Mules (and the odd donkey) are widely used in Morocco for transporting goods through the mountains, and you can easily hire one to carry your gear. If you are relying on heavy local supplies, or are in a large group, hiring a mule (which can carry the gear of four people) makes especially good sense. As a rough guide, mules can carry up to 120kg, although, if the route is very steep or demanding, the muleteer may insist upon carrying less. He will have the well-being of his meal ticket in mind, although Moroccans are rarely sentimental about their pack animals.

Some trekking routes are not suitable for mules, although detours (for the mule) are often possible. If high passes are covered in snow, porters may have to be used instead of mules (one porter can carry up to 18kg). A mule and muleteer usually charge a standard Dh100 per day.

As with guides, if you embark on a linear route you'll also be expected to pay for the muleteer's return journey.

ON THE TREK

ACCOMMODATION

The bulk of trekking accommodation in the High and Middle Atlas are *gîtes*. In the Rif and little-walked Anti Atlas, *gîtes* are

uncommon, and accommodation is more often in local homes or in tents.

Gîtes provide basic accommodation, often offering little more than a foam mattress in an empty room, or on a roof terrace or balcony. They have basic bathrooms and toilets, although the better ones will have hot showers. Given notice, the proprietor can rustle up a tajine. The standard rate is now Dh50 per person per night, although prices can vary according to season and location. Meals are extra (usually Dh30 to Dh50 per person), as are hot showers (usually Dh10 to Dh15 per shower). The more upscale, privately owned *gîtes* charge as much as Dh100 for accommodation and the same for meals, while one luxury lodge charges Dh2000 a night for a double room (see p336).

CAF has five *refuges* in the Toubkal/Oukaïmeden area, and officially bookings should be made in advance through the **Oukaïmeden Refuge** (☎ 024 319036; ouka@cafmaroc.ma). However, in practice you can usually find out if space is available at the other *refuges* in the Toubkal region by asking in Imlil. Be warned, though, that *refuges* are often packed in July and August. Members of CAF and other affiliated and recognised alpine organisations (eg the Alpine Club in the UK) get the cheapest price for a bed, followed by HI members. Children aged between five and 15 years get a 50% reduction.

The Fédération Royale Marocaine de Ski et de Montagne has *refuges* (per person Dh50, Dh20 breakfast) at Oukaïmeden (well maintained and comfortable) and in the Jebel Bou Iblane (less comfortable, but with a guardian) in the Middle Atlas, 60km south of Taza. Their *refuge* at Ain Aflafal, on the southern face of Irhil M'Goun, was abandoned and it is now a summer shop selling water and soft drinks.

FOOD

The choice of dry rations is limited in rural Morocco and you cannot be sure of finding much beyond powdered milk, a range of dried fruit and sachets of soup, biscuits, some tinned fish and dates. Supermarkets in larger towns and cities are a much better option, and if you take a mule, you will be able to plan a more varied diet.

Bread, eggs, vegetables and some basic supplies (eg tea and tinned tuna) may be available in some mountain villages, but you

cannot count on it. Meals can also be arranged in some villages (Dh30 to Dh50 per person is standard), especially at *gites* and *refuges*, although they usually need to be ordered in advance. Again, do not rely on local suppliers as your only source of food unless you have made previous arrangements.

Change money in the nearest major town and ensure that you have plenty of small notes. If you do get stuck, euro notes may be accepted.

RESPONSIBLE TREKking

Morocco's potential as a walking destination is now being developed, but many regions remain remote and are extremely susceptible to the cultural and environmental impact of tourism. Many travellers return home warmed and heartened by the hospitality of the Berber people, but as visitor numbers

increase so too does the pressure on the inhabitants. In response, travellers should adopt an appropriate code of behaviour.

Cross-Cultural Considerations

The way you dress is very important, especially among remote mountain people, who remain conservative in their habits. In villages travellers should wear buttoned shirts or T-shirts and not sleeveless vests, which villagers use as underwear. Above all, trousers should be worn rather than shorts. This applies equally to men and women. The importance of dress in the villages cannot be overemphasised (as many a frustrated and embarrassed trekking tour leader will affirm). However much you might disagree with this conservatism, respecting local traditions will bring greater rewards, not least by way of contact, hospitality and assistance.

Invitations for tea and offers of food are common in the mountains. By taking a guide, who may have friends in many villages, you'll open yourself to even more offers of genuine hospitality. While these offers are unconditional, it is worth bearing in mind that the mountain economy is one of basic subsistence farming. No-one has large supplies and in outlying villages there may be no surplus food. Being able to offer your hosts some Chinese gunpowder tea and some sugar (preferably in cones) is a very welcome gesture. Dried fruits are also appreciated, as is a taste of any imported food you may have. For this reason, it is important to be generous when buying provisions for yourself and guides.

In remote areas, people along the way will often ask for medicine, from a disinfectant and bandages to painkillers or cream for dry skin (which many children have). Always make sure that the guide explains what to do with what you offer, and how and how often to take it.

For considerations on alcohol, taking photos and giving gifts to children see the boxed text, p456.

Environmental Considerations

RUBBISH

Carry out all your rubbish; never bury it or burn it (Western-style packaging never burns well). Your guide may be happy to bag up all your rubbish then hurl it over a cliff, but that approach is simply unsustain-

WORDS TO TREK BY

Even just a few words in a foreign language can make a big difference to your experience. The following words may be helpful on these treks – '(A)' indicates Arabic, '(B)' indicates Berber. Other useful Arabic and Berber words can be found in the Glossary, p513.

- adfel** (B) – snow
- adrar** (B) – mountain (plural *idraren*)
- afella** (B) – summit
- agdal** (B) – pasture (also *aougdal*)
- aghabal** (B) – water spring
- 'ain** (A) – water spring
- aman** (B) – water
- anzar** (B) – rain
- argaz** (B) – man
- asserdoun** (B) – mule
- assif** (B) – watercourse, river
- azaghar** (B) – plane, plateau (also *izwghar*)
- azib** (B) – seasonal shelter for shepherds
- brhel** (A) – mule
- châba** (B) – ravine
- iferd** (B) – lake
- ifri** (B) – cave
- jebel** (A) – mountain or hill
- kerkour** (B) – cairn
- taddart** (B) – house
- talat** (B) – dried-up ravine or watercourse
- tamada** (B) – lake
- tigm** (B) – house
- tizi** (B) – mountain pass

able, especially given that more and more people are now trekking in Morocco. So if you have carried it in, then you should carry it out. Minimise the waste you'll carry out by taking minimal packaging and by repackaging provisions into reusable containers when appropriate. If you want to make a gesture, think about making an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.

Don't rely on bought water in plastic bottles. Disposal of these bottles is creating a major problem in Morocco. Use iodine drops or purification tablets with locally sourced water.

HUMAN WASTE DISPOSAL

Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of hepatitis, typhoid and intestinal parasites. This is a particular problem in more populated trekking areas.

Where there is a toilet, it is a good idea to use it; where there is none, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm (six inches) deep and at least 100m from any watercourse – something important to remember, given how many trekking routes follow rivers and streams. Consider carrying a lightweight trowel for this purpose: in the arid Atlas Mountains, digging without one can be difficult. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. Use toilet paper sparingly, burn it when possible or bury it with the waste. In snow dig down to the soil; otherwise, your waste will be exposed when the snow melts.

WASHING

Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable. For personal washing use biodegradable soap and wash at least 50m away from any watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully before it finally makes its way back to the watercourse. Use a scourer, sand or snow to wash cooking utensils rather than detergent. Again, make sure you're at least 50m from any watercourse.

EROSION

Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing tracks and avoid short cuts that bypass a switchback. If you blaze a new trail straight down a slope, it will turn into a wa-

tercourse with the next heavy rainfall, eventually causing soil loss and deep scarring.

LOW-IMPACT COOKING & CAMPING

Don't depend on open fires for cooking. As you will see on your walk, the cutting of wood for fires in Morocco has caused widespread deforestation. Ideally, cook on a lightweight multifuel or kerosene stove and avoid those powered by disposable butane gas canisters. If you do make a fire, ensure it is fully extinguished after use by spreading the embers and dousing them with water. A fire is only truly safe to leave when you can comfortably place your hand in it.

Vegetation at high altitude is highly sensitive. When camping minimise your impact on the environment by not removing or disturbing the vegetation around your camp site. In order to avoid aggravating the persistent and serious problem of overgrazing in many of the regions, sufficient fodder (barley) for all baggage mules and donkeys should be brought in. It is a good idea to enquire carefully about this before setting off.

THE HIGH ATLAS

الأطلس الكبير

The highest mountain range in North Africa is a trekker's paradise. The High Atlas runs diagonally across Morocco, from the Atlantic coast northeast of Agadir all the way to northern Algeria. Running for almost 1000km, the range includes several summits higher than 4000m and more than 400 above 3000m. This makes a spectacular setting for walks and offers the possibility of bagging a few summits as you go. The Toubkal region contains all the highest peaks and is the most frequently visited area of the High Atlas, partly because it is only two hours from Marrakesh and easily accessible by public transport.

The Berbers call the High Atlas 'Idraren Draren' (Mountains of Mountains) and their presence here will be one of the most memorable aspects of a walk. Although wild and harsh, the area has long been inhabited by Berbers, whose flat-roofed, earthen villages seem to have grown out of the mountainsides, above terraced gardens and orchards of walnuts and fruit trees.

The first road, up the Tizi n'Test, was only cut through this remote region in the early 20th century. Before then, the only way to travel was via the well-worn mule trails that criss-cross the mountains and once carried trade caravans and pilgrims between the Sahara and the northern plains. Walking along them now often gives the sense of stepping back into an earlier time.

WILDLIFE

Spectacularly rugged and sparsely vegetated, these mountains contain terraced cliffs, enormous escarpments, deep gorges and flat-topped summits. Where the rock is exposed you can see a thick sequence of sedimentary and volcanic rocks, most often Jurassic limestone, cut through by layers of granite. The oldest rocks are the 610-million-year-old granites and granodiorites of the Ourika region (near Setti Fatma). Some minor glaciation also took place around 45,000 years ago.

The slopes and valleys have been transformed over centuries by the work of Berber farmers, who have cut terraces high up on the steep mountainsides and irrigated them with ingenious systems of small channels, called *targa* in Berber, which bring water from rivers and streams.

In spite of the harsh climate, icy in winter and scalding in summer, the Atlas Mountains are extremely fertile and productive. The lower valleys are full of almond and apricot orchards, as well as carob, quince, pomegranate, apple, cherry and fig trees. Vegetable plots include potatoes, carrots, turnips, onions, lentils and beans. In October much of the terraces is ploughed for a winter crop of barley, which is harvested in late May or June. Walnuts are also a major crop in higher villages, and are harvested in late September.

Overgrazing, agriculture and the collection of wood for fuel has had a tremendous impact on the High Atlas and much of its indigenous vegetation has disappeared. In the subalpine zone (2400m to 3200m) you'll see thickets of Spanish juniper (*Juniperus thurifer*). These thick, gnarled trees are often blasted into extraordinary shapes by the wind, their exposed roots clinging like fingers to the rock. Higher up, the main sight is 'hedgehog plants', spiny, domed bushes that burst into flower for a short time in

the spring. Wild herbs including lavender, rosemary and thyme are common – you will smell them underfoot as you walk.

Big mammals are not common in the High Atlas, though mouflons (mountain sheep with big horns), wild boars and gazelles are found in some areas. Other wildlife includes Moorish geckos, Iberian wall lizards and painted frogs. Small snakes are quite common, but will usually be dealt with by guides before you get a chance to look at them closely.

Birds of the subalpine zone include Moussier's redstarts, crimson-winged finches and, in wooded areas, Levallant's green woodpeckers. Crows are omnipresent, and you'll sometimes catch a glimpse of majestic raptors such as lammergeiers, Egyptian vultures and golden eagles.

PLANNING

When to Trek

You can trek throughout the year in the High Atlas, but different seasons offer some very different experiences. Above 2000m, temperatures often drop below freezing between November and May, when snow covers the higher peaks and passes. Only lower-valley walking is possible during this season, unless you are prepared to bring ropes and crampons. Late April to late June is one of the ideal times to visit because in April and May the alpine flowers will be in bloom and by June, when Marrakesh is already simmering, daytime temperatures are usually pleasantly warm.

Midsummer guarantees long daylight hours and snow-free passes (though not always a snow-free Toubkal), but in the lower valleys temperatures can be extremely hot and water nonexistent. Rivers have maximum flow in autumn (November) and in late spring (April or May), after the winter snows have melted. Though many rivers are reduced to a trickle by midsummer, the area can still be subject to flash flooding in summer after tremendous thunderstorms, something to bear in mind when deciding where to camp. Despite the heat, July and August are the busiest months for visitors to Marrakesh and the High Atlas: trekking at this time can be wonderful, but is best done early morning and later in the afternoon, leaving plenty of time for a shady lunch and rest in between.

Guides & Mules

Imlil is by far the best place to engage a guide and hire a mule if necessary. There is a **bureau des guides** (☎ /fax 024 485626) on the village square, which has a list of official guides, complete with mugshots, which eliminates the risk of impostors. Guides work in rotation, so if you have specific needs try to organise a guide in advance. Of the 60 official guides based in the Toubkal area, only 10 or so may be in Imlil at any one time. Some of the more successful guides are also attached to the Kasbah du Toubkal.

It's rarely a problem to organise mules, usually done once a guide has been hired and with the guide's help. Trekkers should be aware that mules have problems crossing Tizi n'Ouanoums, east of Lac d'Ifni, or Tizi n'Taddate, between the Toubkal and Tazaghart *refuge*, from November to May. As the mules will then have to take lengthy detours, you may need to carry one day's kit and food. Talk this through with your guide and muleteer. Allow a day or so to hire a guide and make the required trekking arrangements.

Accommodation

Imlil is the most convenient and best-equipped trailhead for the High Atlas and Toubkal. For accommodation and eating in Imlil see p335.

Three kilometres above Imlil, and now also accessible by a drivable *piste* (track), **Around** (or Armed), at 1960m, is a growing village surrounded by orchards and terraced fields at the beginning of a broad valley that leads up towards Toubkal. Several trekking companies use Around as a base for group treks around the Toubkal area and, with four *gîtes*, it makes a good stop on the Toubkal ascent.

Gîte Atlas Toubkal (☎ 024 485664, 068 882764; dm Dh30) A large *gîte* run by the family of veteran mountain guide Mohamed Id Balaïd, the clean, basic dorm rooms are a good deal. They can also cook you a good walker's breakfast or dinner. Hot showers are extra (Dh10).

Les Roches Armed/Chez Lahcen (☎ 067 644915; dm Dh30) Like all the places in Around, Lahcen's house, up at the top of the village, has grown and grown. It's a steep climb to get there, but worth it for the mountain views and the neat and clean rooms with

mattresses on the floor. A hot shower costs Dh10. Meals are available on request.

Hôtel Armed (☎ 024 485745; idbelaïd@menara.ma; s/d incl breakfast Dh150/300) Now in its second generation, this hotel-restaurant was the first officially to offer accommodation in Around and remains one of the best. Continued expansion means they now have a range of straightforward rooms, with mattresses, hot showers, a terrace with panoramic terrace and good solid Moroccan cooking in the restaurant. Highly recommended for family tours. The owners also arranges treks.

Camping-Auberge Atlas Toubkal/Chez Omar le Rouge (☎ 024 485750, 066 936488; omara_id_men sour@hotmail.com; s/d Dh50/100, camping per tent Dh10) Omar's Atlas Toubkal has basic rooms with mattresses and communal facilities, including hot showers (Dh10). He also runs a basic camp site across the road, with the possibility of using the showers. Meals are available (breakfast Dh15, tajine Dh30).

TOUBKAL CIRCUIT VIA LAC D'IFNI

جولة جبل توبقال
عبر دحيرة إفني

You get the best of both worlds on this circuit: the majestic peaks and fabulous views of the Jebel Toubkal and a fascinating glimpse into Berber life in some remote High Atlas villages. You will need tents and camping gear for this particular route, though with short detours you could use basic village accommodation and mountain *refuges*, a good option early or late in the season, when temperatures can plummet.

The trek is fairly strenuous so you might want to include an extra rest day, or consider the options for making the trek a little shorter. Indeed, if the following seems too much, there is always the simple and popular two-day ascent of Toubkal from Imlil (see p431).

Most of the route is above 2000m, with several high passes over 3000m. The ascent of Jebel Toubkal takes place on the sixth day, allowing five days of acclimatisation to altitude, which can be an issue over 3000m. The circuit detailed below is best done in late spring or summer. Numerous other trekking routes emanate from this outline.

Planning

The best place to organise this trek is in Imlil (p334). The walk described requires seven days, but the circuit can be shortened

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration seven to nine days

Distance 60.2km

Standard medium to hard

Start/Finish Imlil village

Highest Point Jebel Toubkal (4167m)

Nearest Large Town Marrakesh

Accommodation camping, village *gîtes* and mountain *refuges*

Public Transport yes

Summary Easily accessible from Marrakesh, this circuit around (and up) Jebel Toubkal passes through a variety of landscapes, ranging from lush, cultivated valleys and Berber villages to forbidding peaks and bleak high passes. This is a demanding trek, with long, gruelling climbs over rocky terrain. A guide is highly recommended, fitness essential.

ily water-resistant, but has misspellings and does not show all gullies and cliffs.

Day 1: Imlil to Tacheddirt

3½ to 4½ hours/9.5km/560m ascent

For much of this relatively gentle first day, the route follows the 4WD track that links Imlil (1740m) to the village of **Ouaneskra**, 2km west of Tacheddirt (2300m).

Follow the track up through the centre of Imlil and take the left-hand fork over the river, **Assif n'Ait Mizane**. The *piste* climbs gently eastwards through fields of barley and orchards of walnuts, apple and cherry trees before zigzagging up to **Aït Souka**.

After an hour or so, just past a stream known as Talat n'Ait Souka, a fairly well defined but rocky path heads east, skirting the village of **Tamatert**. The rocky path continues eastwards for about 15 minutes, passing through a small pine grove and crossing the road. It then climbs steeply northeast to the pass, **Tizi n'Tamatert** (2279m). The walk up takes 30 to 45 minutes. At the pass is Bivi Thé, a weather-beaten tin shed that sells soft drinks and mint tea only when there is enough business. To the northeast there are great views of **Tizi n'Eddi** (2928m), the pass that leads to the ski resort of Oukaïmeden, and **Tizi n'Tacheddirt** (3172m), northeast of which is the beautiful **Ourika Valley**.

The path rejoins the dirt road at Tizi n'Tamatert, from where it's an easy 45-

minute walk to the village of Ouaneskra. All along this stretch you will be treated to great views across the valley to the neat Berber houses and lush terraces of Talate n'Chaoute, Tamguist and Ouaneskra.

A little before reaching Ouaneskra, the path divides. The mule track to the right traverses the southern side of the valley. This is a short cut to the best camping place, near the track and close to **Irhzer n'Likemt**, a stream and reliable water source. This is the starting place for the next day's climb.

If you would rather take the longer route via Ouaneskra and Tacheddirt, then take the northern side of the valley after crossing Tizi n'Tamatert. There are three *gîtes* in Ouaneskra, and a pleasant little restaurant, so it is tempting to stop here for the night. But the second day's walk is fairly long, so it's best to have lunch here and then carry on. The village of **Tacheddirt** is 2km further along the well-defined mule trail or by the 4WD road that runs along the north side of the slope. In Tacheddirt, 50 people can sleep at **Tigmmi n Tacheddirt** (☎ 062 105 169; per person from Dh50), the new *gîte* from the owner of Hôtel Armed in Aroumd. You may also be able to stay at the CAF Refuge, *chez l'habitant* in the house of the *refuge gardien* (attendant) or elsewhere in the village (Dh30 to Dh50).

From Tacheddirt, the hiking track then loops south to the camp site near Irhzer n'Likemt.

Day 2: Tacheddirt to Azib Likemt

five to six hours/9km/1200m ascent/900m descent

There is a lot of climbing on this day, but the rewards are all around you. From Tacheddirt you can either head straight down and across the **Assif n'Imenane** and then up past the camp site, or wind around the head of the valley on a more gentle route to the start of the climb. Either way, you will want to leave Tacheddirt as early as possible to make the two- to three-hour walk up to **Tizi Likemt** (3550m). Though the majority of the walk should be shaded, it's still a hard climb, especially for the 'unacclimatised'. Halfway up it gets steeper and then turns into a very steep scree slope towards the top. The doyen of Atlas climbers Michael Peyron calls this 'the grandfather of all Atlas scree slopes'. He also points out that skiers would be challenged to manage skiing down it when the snow falls.

Close to the camp site, a well-defined rocky path heads up the centre of the gully on the east side of the river bed (though it crosses over twice). It climbs for about 50 minutes before bearing left (southeast) up to the col (pass). From the top of the Tizi Likemt there are great views of jagged peaks and verdant valleys, up to Oukaïmeden and, on clear days, as far as Jebel Toubkal.

The path leading down the other side (southeast) is quite rocky. You'll pass a semi-permanent water source on the left after 30 minutes, and the first of the irrigated pastures above **Azib Likemt** after another hour. An *azib* is a summer settlement and Azib Likemt (2650m) is occupied from the first week of May usually to the last week of October, during which time local people grow crops on the irrigated terraces and fatten their cattle in lush summer pastures. Their rudimentary stone dwellings, the well-worked terraces and sheer natural beauty of the valley provide an amazing vista.

You may be offered shelter or a place to pitch your tent in Azib Likemt, but if not then walk through the terraces down to the **Assif Ifni**, cross the river, turn right and then walk upstream to a group of large boulders, where you'll find some flat ground close to the river on which to pitch your tent.

Day 3: Azib Likemt to Amsouzert

six to 7½ hours/15.2km/470m ascent/1380m descent
This direct route south to **Amsouzert** is less demanding than yesterday's walk and is packed with contrasts, from precipitous valleys to stunning peaks and some good ridge walking too.

From Azib Likemt, the well-worn trail leads south from behind the camp site, up the mountainside and into the tremendous gorge formed by **Assif n'Tinzer**. Well above the river's eastern bank, the trail snakes above what at certain times of the year is the thundering **Tombe Asmine waterfall** and an alternative camp site, before descending close to the river. Follow the river for about two hours, past stunning cliffs and through wide pastures, until an obvious track leads up the side of the valley to **Tizi n'Ououraine** (3120m; also known as Tizi n'Ouarai).

From here you are treated to some brilliant views of the eastern face of Toubkal, as well as of **Dôme d'Ifni** (3876m) and the rest of the jagged Toubkal massif. By way of

contrast, **Agounss n'Tiniline** (3674m), 90 minutes away to the northwest, and other lesser peaks and ridges to the east are softer and rounded. (There's huge potential for sustained ridge walking or a long circuit back to Azib Likemt from Tizi n'Ououraine.)

Continue over the col, where the trail traverses around the head of the valley to a spur and the crossroads of trails. Heading southwest, a trail leads down the ridge to **Tagadirt** (after 50m there's a fantastic viewpoint looking south to **Jebel Siroua**), but turn left (southeast) and follow the mule track south. Traverse around the head of another valley and then along the side of a spur, finally gaining the ridge after about 90 minutes. **Lac d'Ifni** is visible to the west. After a further 15 minutes, just before two pointed outcrops, the path forks. Turn right and continue descending slowly southwards to a large cairn (another good viewpoint). Descend southwest, then west down the end of the spur to arrive in Amsouzert (1740m) in 30 minutes.

Amsouzert is a relatively large, prosperous village (with one mosque and a handful of satellite dishes at last count), spread on both sides of the river. If you're planning a rest day, this is an excellent place to take it. Next to the school you'll find an outdoor tearoom shaded by an enormous walnut tree. You may be able to **camp** (per tent Dh20) here or else stay at **Gîte Himmi Omar** (dm Dh40, tajine Dh30) or at the same family's new *gîte* just a little further down the road. Above the village, just below the track to Lac d'Ifni, is Hotel Igroute, closed at the time of writing.

There are a number of small shops in Amsouzert, and a couple of cafés near the village school, just west of the river. There's also early morning transport to the Taroüannt to Ouarzazate N10 road, with connections to Marrakesh and Ouarzazate. About 3km south of Amsouzert is another village called Imlil (not to be confused with the Imlil trailhead on the northern side of the range), which hosts a *souq* each Wednesday.

SIDE TRIP: AGOUNSS N'TINILINE

From Tizi n'Ououraine the easiest side trip is the straightforward 1½-hour trek up to **Agounss n'Tiniline** (3674m), which lies to the northwest. The summit is reached after

crossing a number of lesser peaks, and it affords tremendous views of the Toubkal ridge.

Day 4: Amsouzert to Azib Imi n'Ouassif 5½ to six hours/10.5km/1100m ascent

Unfortunately for those with mules, between November and May your beasts of burden will not be able to make it more than 2km west of Lac d'Ifni. The muleteer will have to take the animal around to the Toubkal Refuge via Sidi Chamharouch, which means you will have to carry your necessary kit to **Azib Imi n'Ouassif**, over **Tizi n'Ouanoums** (3600m) to Toubkal Refuge. But there are consolations, among them Lac d'Ifni, the largest lake in the Atlas and a welcome contrast to the barren landscape of the approach.

From Amsouzert follow the level, well-used 4WD track that continues northwest towards Lac d'Ifni above the north side of the river. The path takes you through the villages of **lbrouane**, **Takatert** and **Tisgouane** before reaching **Ait Igrane**, where there are a couple of cafés and, should you need it, basic accommodation at **Gîte Belaïde** (dm Dh40). There is also a shady **camp site** (Dh30) on a flat, stony site just beyond the Café Toubkal, with a rudimentary shower (cold) and toilet block.

Follow the 4WD track along the riverbed northwest out of Ait Igrane. Pick up the narrow rocky mule path at the end of the river valley, where the vegetation ends abruptly and the 4WD track crosses the river (there's a spring to the north) then turns sharp left. The mule path then leads around the north side of Lac d'Ifni (2295m), across an incredibly sharp, rocky, barren and inhospitable terrain. The climb is steep at first, but there is relief as it descends to the northeastern corner of Lac d'Ifni, a surprisingly large, and very inviting expanse of still, green water. The walk to the lake should take two to three hours. After you have seen the lake, but before you reach the shore, you will pass somewhere marked as a café. No coffee here, but if it is attended you should be able to buy water and soft drinks and, if no one else has ordered before you, a tajine.

On the small beach on the northern shore are a few stone shelters where you can seek shade – they make a good, if at times fly-filled, spot for a lakeside lunch. The ground

is rocky and there is no vegetation to speak of, but the lake is safe – and very refreshing – to swim in.

Every October, villagers from the surrounding area gather at Lac d'Ifni for a three-day *mousslem* (festival) in honour of a local *marabout* (saint), whose tomb sits in splendid isolation high above the southeastern corner of the lake. A track leads around from the northeast shore of the lake up to the tomb. At other times, anglers come to fish for the lake's celebrated trout.

From the northwestern side of the lake the track crosses the wide, dry part of Lac d'Ifni and then makes a long snaking trudge of more than 1km towards **Tizi n'Ouanoums**. Once clear of the lake, the path climbs through a rocky gorge, keeping to the south side of the river. It's a hot, sweaty climb in the afternoon sun, but relieved somewhat by the cooling sound of running water. About 3.5km from the lake, you'll reach **Azib Imi n'Ouassif** (2841m; marked on the 1:100,000 map by altitude only), situated at a crossing of dramatic gorges. Beyond this point the path climbs steeply to Tizi n'Ouanoums. There are some small waterfalls (freezing even in the height of summer) nearby. You'll find several flat but rocky areas for pitching tents, as well as natural shelters in the surrounding cliffs, which local shepherds have probably used for centuries.

Day 5: Azib Imi n'Ouassif to Toubkal Refuge

three to four hours/4km/759m ascent/393m descent
The path to Tizi n'Ouanoums (3600m) is immediately to the northwest of the camp site, leading up into a particularly rocky, rugged landscape. It's a steep, demanding climb for pretty much the entire way, but the views from the top over **Assif n'Moursaine**, which is hemmed in by the jagged ridges of **Adrar bou Ouzzal** and **Ouimeksane**, are spectacular. The path crosses the river several times after leaving the camp. A stone shelter and water source is reached after an hour. It can take another hour to get to the col from here. Even in midsummer it's likely to be cold and blustery at the top, and with a fair bit of snow in shady crevices.

Coming down the other side, there's lots of treacherous loose rock and snow until July. From here you can see Jebel Toubkal

and, to the west, the path up to **Tizi n'Melloul** (3850m). After the descent the track levels out and heads due north to the Toubkal Refuge (3207m), which is about two hours from Tizi n'Ouanoums.

The CAF's **Toubkal Refuge** (☎ 064 071838; dm CAF members/HL members/nonmembers Dh46/69/92), formerly known as Neltner, was completely rebuilt in the 1990s but suffers from overcrowding and damp, as well as a lack of facilities: queues for showers (Dh10) and toilets are unacceptable in busy periods. Meals are available and there's a small shop selling chocolate, cola, biscuits and other limited supplies. You can also make reservations through the **Oukaïmeden Refuge** (☎ 024 319036; ouka@cafmaroc.co.ma). The new privately owned **Refuge Mouflon** (☎ 061 213345; afoud@wanadoo.net.ma; dm Dh75), next to Toubkal Refuge, provides a welcome choice. The lounge can be chilly, but otherwise this is the preferable option, with more facilities (shower Dh10), a better-stocked shop and good meals (Dh50).

You can also camp downstream from the *refuge* or pick a spot 20 minutes south of the *refuge* on a flat area of pasture. The latter is preferable, but you won't have access to the *refuge's* facilities.

Assuming you reach the *refuge* before lunch, there are a number of trekking options to keep you busy in the afternoon, including the three- or four-hour descent directly north back to the starting point, Imlil, if you don't want to climb Jebel Toubkal. You might tackle the tough climb up and over Tizi n'Taddate to the Tazaghart *refuge*, which lies at the head of the Azza-dene Valley, or ascend Jebel Ouanoukrim, which is best attempted straight after descending from Tizi n'Ouanoums. However, the best option (especially if you've got three days of trekking ahead of you) is to rest all afternoon to prepare for the climb up Jebel Toubkal the following morning (see opposite).

If you intend to complete the Toubkal circuit with your mules via the Tazaghart *refuge*, you should send your mules ahead on the day that you climb Toubkal. However, you might consider releasing your mules once you've been resupplied at the Toubkal *refuge*, or even at Lac d'Ifni, as with two high passes ahead that mules cannot climb, and with supplies run down, this

may be the wiser course of action. You will have to pay for the time it takes your mules and muleteers to return to Imlil.

SIDE TRIP: JEBEL OUANOUKRIM ASCENT

The final stages of the circuit are fairly demanding, but if you still have itchy feet it's possible to spend the afternoon climbing Jebel Ouanoukrim (4088m, five to six hours return), the second-highest mountain in the region.

To do this, after descending from Tizi n'Ouanoums, turn left as you hit the river and head south up the valley. As ever, it is a good idea to take a guide, or at least get some advice before setting off for this peak. Take the valley path back beyond the turn-off to Tizi n'Ouanoums and continue to climb up to Tizi n'Ouagene (3750m); from there follow the ridge to the summit.

Day 6: Toubkal Refuge to Azib Tamsoult

5½ to six hours/6km/493m ascent/1300m descent

From the *refuge* pick up the mule track that heads northwest then gently climbs north across the slope. Pass the first jagged, narrow gully; then, from a position high above a stream, turn left along a ridge west into the second valley. Initially keep to the southern side of the gully. The rough trail soon switches to the northern side and the route becomes rougher, requiring considerable scrambling.

After about 80 minutes, and having passed a couple of flat areas and a spring, you'll reach a wide and rather difficult scree slope: it's an unpleasant climb with a heavy pack. Follow the rough, zigzagging trail up to a small cliff face to the northeast, then turn left and traverse across to the rocky and exposed **Tizi n'Taddate** (3700m). To the left of the col is **Biginoussen** (4008m), while straight ahead the trail traverses the head of **Assif n'Timellite** to another col. (This area is covered in snow until mid-June, and sometimes even later.) From this second col is a steep, tricky descent down the northern side of the narrow, rocky gully. Some scrambling is required for the first hour, until the cliffs part, leaving a simple descent to 3000m and the small but homy **CAF Tazaghart Refuge** (☎ 067 852754 or via the CAF Chalet in Oukaïmeden 024 319036; dm CAF/HL members/nonmembers Dh42/63/83), which sits beside a stunning waterfall.

An alternative route has recently been opened between the Toubkal and Tazaghart *refuges*. From the Toubkal *refuge*, head down the mule trail for about 15 minutes. You will come to a fork near a small rounded wall, used as a sheepfold. Turn left, westwards, up the zigzagging mule path, which will bring you to **Tizi n'Aguelzim** (3560m) after two hours. There are amazing views on all sides at the pass: east to the Toubkal summit, northeast to the Imlil valley, northwest to Azzadene and west to the Tazaghart plateau. From here the track drops down in some 72 hairpins bends, at the bottom of which it crosses a stream. Twenty minutes further on, at a fork, take the left-hand track, and again 15 minutes later. Here the track leads uphill for around 10 minutes to the Tazaghart *refuge*.

Booking at the *refuge* is made complicated by the fact that the *gardien* is based in Tizi Oussems. You need to phone ahead, or else try passing a message to him via the muleteers or shepherds who pass. This will be easier if you are coming from the north. You'll probably find the place closed unless you've made a reservation. There are mattresses for 22 people, gaslights and a basic kitchen (there is a charge for using their gas). Campers can pitch tents beside the *refuge*, or on flat ground above the falls.

The *refuge* is mostly used by climbers drawn to the cliffs of Tazaghart, whose summit (3845m) is accessible to trekkers, who also have the chance to explore the wonderful **Tazaghart plateau** to the west.

Tizi n'Melloul (3850m), southeast of Tazaghart *refuge*, not only offers a harder route to and from the Toubkal Refuge, but also provides access to **Afella** (4045m), to the southeast of the pass, and to the jagged ridge leading north to Biginoussen.

The route down to **Azib Tamsoult** (2400m) is straightforward. Shortly after passing the impressive **Cascades d'Irhoulidene**, vegetation and tree cover increase. A five-minute walk from the base of the falls brings you to a pleasant wooded area, ideal for camping. To reach the village walk north for 10 to 15 minutes.

Day 7: Azib Tamsoult to Imlil

4½ to five hours/6km/89m ascent/749m descent

If you have made good time and you have the legs, you could continue down to Imlil at the

end of day six. From the vegetable patches of Azib Tamsoult, with the **Assif n'Ouarzane** down to the left, a mule track traversing the forested slopes of the valley is visible to the north. Head towards it through the village and over the stream, and stay on it, avoiding left forks into the valley.

Climbing slightly and heading steadily northeast, with **Tizi Oussems** due west, you arrive at **Tizi n'Mzik** (2489m), where there's a possible camp site. Imlil is a 90-minute descent along a well-worn mule track; there's a spring to the right of the trail after 20 minutes.

JEBEL TOUBKAL ASCENT

تساق جبل توبقال

North Africa's highest mountain is a big crowd-puller and every year, summer and winter, thousands of people come to climb the big one. Part of the reason for its popularity is that in summer Jebel Toubkal does not require any climbing experience, and anyone in good physical condition can get to the summit. Mountain runners can jog up from Imlil in a few hours, while overnighters from Marrakesh will take longer to plod up in trainers. Although the ascent isn't technically difficult, it is made challenging by Toubkal's notoriously extreme and fast-changing climate and by its long, steep slopes of brooding deep-brown, red and almost black volcanic scree. The other issue here can be altitude sickness: at 4167m, Jebel Toubkal is high enough to make this a possibility, which means you should factor in sufficient time to ascend slowly and steadily.

The route described is the standard walk undertaken by most visitors to Jebel Toubkal, but there are plenty of variations. An ascent of Toubkal can be combined with satellite peaks, and many (very fit) people squeeze in an ascent of Ouanoukrim (4088m) as well. Alternatively, the ascent can be made more leisurely by spending a night en route between Imlil and the Toubkal Refuge, either camping or lodging the night at Sidi Chamharouch. As elsewhere, it is recommended that you hire a guide for the ascent.

Maps

The same maps are recommended for the ascent as for the Toubkal Circuit (p426).

THE TREK AT A GLANCE**Duration** two days**Distance** 22km**Standard** medium to hard**Start/Finish** Imlil village**Highest Point** Jebel Toubkal (4167m)**Nearest Large Town** Marrakesh**Accommodation** camping and mountain refuges**Public Transport** yes

Summary The ascent of Jebel Toubkal is the most popular walk in the High Atlas. The views are magnificent. The route is straightforward and, outside winter and spring, usually easily achieved without mountaineering experience or a guide. However, it should not be taken lightly as the trek up the scree slope is hard, trekkers can be struck down with altitude sickness and the mountain's climate can be extreme: there can be snow even in June.

Day 1: Imlil to Toubkal Refuge**four to six hours/10km/1467m ascent**

Toubkal rears above you when you leave the trailhead at Imlil (see p334). Try for a departure as early as possible for the walk up to the Toubkal refuges. It's not a particularly steep climb, but it is uphill all the way, there is little shade once past Aroumd and it can be very tiring, especially if you haven't done any previous warm-up walks or spent time acclimatising. Follow the dirt track that leads through Imlil towards **Aroumd (Armed)**. At the top of the village, a mule track on your left wends its way steeply through barley fields and apple and walnut trees and past the imposing Kasbah du Toubkal (see p336). Beyond the kasbah the path zigzags steeply upwards to rejoin the road at Aroumd, where the broad valley floor is hemmed in by towering slopes.

Once past Aroumd, heading up the valley, cross the broad, stony valley floor. On the other side follow the well-defined mule trail, which climbs up to a very large rock (you can see this from the valley floor) above the eastern side of the Assif Reraya, which leads to the hamlet and *marabout* (saint's mausoleum) of Sidi Chamharouch. The origins of **Sidi Chamharouch** (2310m) may be pre-Islamic, but the *marabout* is

now a place of pilgrimage for Muslims, so not everyone travelling this way is going to the summit. The number of pilgrims and peak-baggers has given birth to a hamlet, a cluster of stalls just under halfway between Imlil and the Toubkal *refuge* selling soft drinks, some food and sometimes jewellery and souvenirs. Just beyond the *marabout*, which is out of bounds to non-Muslims, and to the left of the track, there are a couple of nice cascades and pools that make a great place to have lunch, with shade in the overhang of the rocks.

After crossing the river by the bridge at Sidi Chamharouch, the rocky path veers away from the river for a couple of kilometres and zigzags above the valley floor. It then levels off a bit, before rejoining the course of the river. The *refuge* (p430) is visible for a good hour or so before you reach it, situated immediately below the western flank of Jebel Toubkal.

Day 2: The Ascent**seven to eight hours/12km/960m ascent & descent**

There is usually an air of excitement at the *refuge* as trekkers consider the prospects ahead. Two cwms (valleys formed by past glacial activity) run down the western flank of Toubkal, divided by the west-northwest ridge, which leads down from the summit. The southern cwm is the more usual route, and starts immediately below the refuge. Set off as early as possible to avoid climbing in the sun – there is no shade apart from the rocks – and be sure to have more than enough water and snacks. Warm clothing is also essential as a strong, bitter wind often blows across the summit.

If you have come up on a one-day trek from Imlil you may not be properly acclimatised, which means that altitude sickness is a real possibility. Be sure to walk at a steady, slow pace. If you do experience more than mild symptoms (serious symptoms may include a severe headache or vomiting) you should descend immediately. However tempting, do not lie down to sleep for a while on the slope.

The southern cwm track starts behind the *refuge*, where you need to cross the river and head eastwards to the clearly visible scree slope. Start to climb on the well-defined path that moves to the left of the slope. Cross the 'field' of boulders and then

follow the straightforward path that zigzags up to **Tizi n'Toubkal** (3940m), straight ahead on the skyline. From there the path turns left (northeast) and follows the ridge to the summit (4167m). Provided there is no heat haze, you should be rewarded by superb views in all directions, especially early in the morning. Allow up to four hours to reach the top, depending on your fitness and weather conditions.

Stick to the same route coming down, bearing left when the *refuge* comes into view. The descent to the *refuge* should only take an hour or two, after which you can return directly to Aroumd or Imlil. If you are planning on spending a second night at the *refuge*, you could come down the longer route via the Ihibi sud, or south circuit. It is a straightforward two- to three-hour walk down to the refuge.

IMLIL TO SETTI FATMA

إمليل إلى ستي فاطمة

You get a taste of just about everything the mountains have to offer on this walk: high, windswept passes, wild and rocky landscapes and lush valleys that support a way of life that seems to have changed little in centuries. The route crosses a widely varied terrain and passes through a dozen or more Berber villages, some of which have yet to be connected with electricity. What's more, the trailhead is only two hours from Marrakesh and is easily accessible by public transport.

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration three days

Distance 30km

Standard easy to medium

Start Imlil village

Finish Setti Fatma

Highest Point Tizi n'Tacheddirt (3172m)

Nearest Large Town Marrakesh

Accommodation camping and *gîtes*

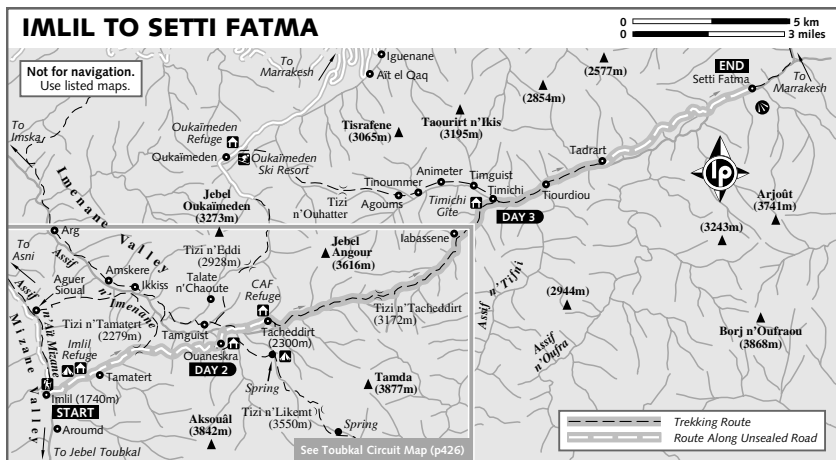
Public Transport yes

Summary A superb and relatively leisurely three-day walk through some of the most spectacular country in the High Atlas. The route leads over only one rocky high pass, which is followed by a long descent into the upper Ourika Valley, a heavily cultivated area where countless green terraces and shady walnut groves cascade down the steep mountainsides.

Planning

This walk can be done comfortably in three days and could feasibly be completed in two by a very fit walker, although they might prefer taking in some of the many possible side trips and variations, especially around Timichi. If you're planning a longer stay, you'll need to bring extra supplies. This area of the High Atlas is covered by the 1:100,000 *Oukaïmeden-Toubkal* government survey sheet.

Setti Fatma has a **bureaux des guides** (☎ / fax 024 426113), several small hotels (with hot



showers) and plenty of cafés; see p334. Buses and grands taxis (Dh30) travel pretty frequently between Setti Fatma and Bab er-Rob in Marrakesh (67km).

Day 1: Imliil to Ouaneskra

three to 3½ hours/7km/560m ascent

The first section of this trek is almost the same route as for the first day of the Toubkal Circuit (see p425), walking out of the trailhead and into the mountains. Once at **Tizi n'Tamatert** (2279m), it's an easy 45-minute walk to the village of **Ouaneskra** along a track that gives lovely views across the valley.

Ouaneskra now has three well-run **gîtes** (per person Dh50, meals Dh30, hot shower Dh10). You will pass the first one just before you cross the river, outside the village. The other two are at either end of the village. Where you stay will probably depend upon whom your guide has family connections with.

If you have walked to Ouaneskra in the morning, you could spend the afternoon in the **Imenane Valley**, which stretches from Ouaneskra and Tacheddirt northwest towards Asni. As the land is fertile and well watered and therefore heavily cultivated, the valley is dotted with Berber villages.

Alternatively, you could make a head start on the next day's walk by continuing another 2km to **Tacheddirt** (2300m), following the new road as it veers off to the right before Ouaneskra and crossing the Amag-doul plateau, which in summer is a popular place to bivouac. In Tacheddirt you can stay at the **CAF refuge** (dm CAF/Hi members/nonmembers Dh30/45/60) and *chez l'habitant*, in the house of one of the refuge operators (Dh40), but the best option is the new **Tigmmi n' Tacheddirt** (☎ 062 105 169; per person from Dh50).

Day 2: Ouaneskra to Timichi

six to seven hours/12km/900m ascent/1300m descent

Follow the well-used mule path out of Ouaneskra and on to the village of Tacheddirt, which is surrounded by huge swathes of beautifully terraced fields. On the far side of the village the track begins to climb steadily up some 850m to **Tizi n'Tacheddirt** (3172m), with the pass ahead of you visible the entire way. The rocky path keeps to the left-hand side of the riverbed, zigzagging steeply up towards the south face of **Jebel Angour** (3616m) for the last half-hour or

so. The pass is exposed and windy, but as ever has some stunning views. There is then an exhilarating and very long descent (at least three hours) down to **Timichi**. There is a welcome sheltered spot for lunch some 30 minutes' walk beyond Tizi n'Tacheddirt.

The path continues down past ancient, gnarled juniper trees and around the sloping eastern flank of Jebel Angour, where sheep and goats are brought to graze from early spring – you may not see the shepherds, but they will certainly see you. Though fairly well defined, this part of the trail is very rocky and at times clings precariously to the mountainside. The colour of the landscape gradually changes from a pale coffee colour to red and then to green. Finally, the cascading terraces of **labassene** village come into view. Head now for the huge old walnut tree that stands guard outside the village, and then follow the path that leads past the village houses. The path veers northeast from here and Timichi is just another 2km further on.

There are two *gîtes*, **Chez Ali Ouhyia** (dm Dh30) in Ibabassene and another, **Chez Oussalem Brahim**, in Timichi. The latter is outside the village proper, on the south side of the river, and has a great terrace from which to watch village activities. Basic meals are usually available at both places.

Day 3: Timichi to Setti Fatma

four to 4½ hours/11km/370m descent

Cross the river bed and turn right to follow the long, easy trail that runs east, high above the valley full of cornfields and walnut groves and passing through Tiourdiou and a string of other small villages: Tiwediwe, Anfli and Tadrart. There are fantastic, bird's-eye views down onto the intricate irrigation channels and village terraces. In late May and early June many of these terraces are crammed with golden barley, ready for summer harvest. As the valley gradually opens out, the path starts to climb higher, clinging to the bare mountain-sides.

As the path becomes increasingly rocky, at Tadrart you might prefer to follow the dirt road, which will bring you into **Setti Fatma** (p334) in an hour and a half. If you don't fancy the road, from Tiwediwe you can pick your way along the river's course.

WESTERN HIGH ATLAS

الأطلس الكبير الغربي

You don't have to go too far west of Jebel Toubkal to find a very different landscape and some very different trekking conditions. The lower ranges to the west, running down towards the Souss plains, are generally warmer and greener but can still offer great walking in a magical area where jagged mountains and deep gorges are mixed with considerable forests, fertile valleys of date, almond, olive and walnut trees, and distinctive Berber villages. The terrain may make for gentler trekking, but it still offers some challenges and plenty of rewards.

Highlights

The gem here is the Tichka plateau, a bewitching area of highland meadows that are particularly delightful in spring, when they are covered in wildflowers. Although much of the walking here is less demanding than in the Toubkal area, the Tichka is still cut through by hidden gorges, thick with forests, edged with peaks and studded with stunning Berber villages.

Information

This area has some of the most remote walking Morocco has to offer. Some of the villages are very isolated and will not have seen the number of foreigners who pass through the villages of the Toubkal area or even the M'Goun.

While being off the beaten track is its strength, it also presents difficulties. There are, for instance, very few places to stay here, no official *refuges*, and almost no hotels outside the two bases, Taliouine (see p391) and, nearer Taroudannt, Tioute, although there is a delightful riad-style place now in Afensou and it is possible to stay in houses in other mountain villages. For most treks in this area you will need to carry camping equipment as well as all your necessary supplies. Although there are Berber villages up in the mountains, travellers cannot rely on finding food, water or anything else.

While these issues can be problems for visiting trekkers, they are not for the local experts, so, as ever, we recommend you travel with a guide. Alternatively, consult the UK-based **Atlas Mountain Information Service** (☎/fax 00 44 1592-873546; 26 Kirkcaldy Rd, Burnt-

island, Fife, Scotland KY3 9HQ). As well as being able to offer advice and make recommendations, they are also experts at running treks right across the plateau.

The best map for this area is the 1:100,000 *Tizi n'Test and Igli*, available from the Division de la Cartographie in Rabat or try www.omnimap.com and Hotel Ali in Marrakesh.

Guides & Mules

There is no *bureau de guide* in Taroudannt or any of the other towns that you might visit in this area. If you are not travelling with an organised tour, you can arrange a trek with guides from the Imlil's **Bureau des Guides** (☎/fax 024 485626).

As elsewhere in the mountains of Morocco, mules and muleteers are often easy to find and happy to travel, usually with a day's notice. Your guide will be able to arrange this.

Routes

If you don't want to camp then your options are limited, but using Afensou as a trailhead (and taking advantage of its hotel), you can make several varied circular day walks – to Imoulas, for instance, which has a Sunday *souq* and is a 9km round trip. You can also make a two-day trek out of Afensou to the village of Zawyat Tafilalt, where you can sleep in village houses, returning the next day via Tazoudot.

The Tichka plateau can be crossed in a leisurely week on a route that starts at Afensou and could run like this: Day 1, walk to Tazoudot and sleep *chez l'habitant*; Day 2, walk to Imamarn, then up the Medlawa Valley to the plateau, where you camp; Day 3, cross the plateau and camp; Day 4, spend the day peak-bagging by walking up Jebel Amendach (3382m); Day 5, descend from the plateau down the spectacular Nfis Gorge, camping near the village of Imi n'Oksar; Day 6, walk down to Souq Sebte Talnakant, from where you should find transport out, especially after the weekly Saturday market.

The Tichka plateau is riven by the Oued Nfis, which can be followed all the way to Imlil and then on to Jebel Toubkal. This is a long trek (12 days), but five or six days will get you to Tin Mal and the Tizi n'Test road.

Transport

You can get into the west of the range via **Imi n'Tanoute**, **Timesgadiouine** or **Argana**, on the Agadir-to-Marrakesh road, and also from **Taroudannt** to the south.

If you come from the west, you can get along the dirt roads to **Afensou** (not to be mistaken with another village of the same name to the south) on transport heading for the nearby mines or, on Wednesday, heading for the Thursday *souq*. **Souq Sebt Talnakant**, which is closer to Timesgadiouine and Argana, is an alternative, more westerly, trailhead. Transports head up there on Friday for the Saturday *souq*.

Heading south from Taroudannt things are a little easier, as *camionettes* (pick-up trucks) ply the route beside the Oued Ouair up to **Tasguint** and **Imoulas** (with a Sunday *souq*) and up to **Tagmout** and **Souk Tnine-Tigouga** (with a Monday *souq*).

CENTRAL HIGH ATLAS – الأطلس الك - جبل المكون M'GOUN MASSIF

While the crowds flock to Jebel Toubkal, attracted by its 'highest mountain' tag and proximity to Marrakesh, a growing number of trekkers are moving over to the central High Atlas and the **M'Goun Massif**. The M'Goun offers great scope for trekkers, arguably more so than the Toubkal as it is remote and, so far, relatively unexploited. There is just as much drama here as around Toubkal: sedimentary rock forms, dramatic ridges and escarpments, tremendous gorges displaying deep-red and orange walls carved by erosion. These gorges are some of the highlights of the area and some can be walked and/or waded through (they're sometimes waist deep with water), making for a memorable, if chilling, experience. One of the great pleasures of this walk is the chance to follow one river up to its source, cross the mountain and then follow another river down into its valley.

Planning

MAPS

The 1:100,000 survey sheets *Azilal*, *Zawyat Ahansal*, *Qalat M'Gouna* and *Skoura* cover all of the major trekking areas. The government also produces the 1:100,000 *Carte des Randonnées de Zaouiat Ahancal* map, which covers everywhere from Agouti in the east to Zaouiat Ahansal in the west, but its scope is of limited use for most trekkers.

More easily found and more useful is West Col Productions' 1:100,000 *Mgoun Massif* (occasionally available in Morocco, but otherwise usually stocked by **Stanfords** (www.stanfords.co.uk) and **Omnimap** (www.omnimap.com), which, although devoid of contours, is a good trail reference and useful for planning.

The German-produced *Kultur Trekking im Zentralen Hohen Atlas* shows the trek from Ait Bou Goumez to El-Kelaâ M'Gouna, and usefully marks and grades the many *gîtes* throughout the range.

Randonnées Pédestres Dans le Massif du M'Goun is a French trekking guidebook to the region, usually available in major Moroccan cities.

EQUIPMENT & SUPPLIES

All basic food supplies (meat, fruit, vegetables and bottled water) are available in Tabant. For anything else, including gas canisters, the hypermarket in Marrakesh is the best bet; otherwise, petrol, diesel and kerosene can be bought in Azilal.

Bottled water is widely available, but purifying locally sourced water is a more responsible alternative (see Rubbish, p422).

There is no *gîte* in Rougoult, but there is excellent camping beside the river. Your guide should be able to arrange tents. But if not, you will need to spend the night in Sebt Ait Bou Wlli, making the second-day walk much longer.

If you are walking in spring, and perhaps at other times of the year, a stick or trekking pole will be useful to help you vault over the many streams and to balance as you skip stones across rivers. If the river is high you may need to wade and, as the riverbed is too stony to walk barefoot, you may need plastic or waterproof sandals, or be prepared to get your boots wet.

GUIDES & MULES

Perhaps because the Centre de Formation aux Métiers de Montagne, the guide school, is in Tabant, many guides have good knowledge of the M'Goun. Guides from the Dadès and Sarhro area to the south and from further west in Imlil and in Marrakesh are all likely to have the knowledge and the enthusiasm to lead a trip through the M'Goun.

All guides can sort out local muleteers and mules for you.

THE M'GOUN TRAVERSE

سلسلة جبال المكون

The M'Goun Massif has a reputation for being tough – it is home to some of Morocco's highest peaks and toughest trekking. But this walk will suit all grades of trekkers, including families, assuming children will enjoy riding the mules on the steeper section and through the rivers. The landscape is incredibly varied, with lush valleys and bare rock walls. Some of the Berber architecture styles you will see are found only in this valley, Yemen and Afghanistan.

Arrival Day

If you have come from Marrakesh the chances are you will be longing to stretch your legs and, if you have camping equipment, you could start by strolling down the valley to Agerssif, where there is an ideal camping spot beside the river, shaded by walnut trees, just near the bridge. Alternatively, you could make the hour-long walk along the quiet road from Agouti to Tabant, where you can stock up at the shops and where there is a basic café. If you have walked to Tabant, then continue on to the *marabout* and *agadir* (fortified communal granary) of Sidi Moussa, which sits on top of an unmistakable pyramid-shaped hill northwest of the village. Sidi Moussa is said to be effective in helping girls marry and bear children. The Aït Bougomez Valley (p329) is so beautiful here, especially in spring, and the views from the *marabout* so stunning that you will soon forget the long and winding drive to get here.

There are several gîtes in Agouti and neighbouring Talsnant village, the quietest being **Chez Daoud** (☎ 062 105183; Dh50), a short walk down from the road, beside barley fields, with rudimentary washing facilities. **Filou** (☎ 024 343796; tamsilt@menara.ma; dm/d Dh50/150), on the road, has clean dorms and considerably more expensive doubles in a neat Berber house with spotless washing facilities.

Day 1: Agouti to Rougoult

six to seven hours/17km/326m descent & ascent

Agouti sits at the head of the Aït Bou Goumez Valley and the walk out of the village along the road has delightful views of the Happy Valley, the reasons for its name soon becoming obvious. After a leisurely hour

and a half, a *piste* leads off left down from the road. A little further on there is a choice of following the *piste* or taking a steeper, shorter path that zigzags down into the valley, rejoining the *piste* at the village of **Agerssif** (1489m), which you should reach in less than three hours from Agouti. Agerssif sits at the confluence of the Lakhdar and Bou Goumez Rivers, where there is a bridge. The river here is a good place to rest and a great spot to camp.

The Lakhdar Valley narrows considerably as the *piste*, wide enough to be used by vehicles, climbs its south side. A half an hour or so upstream is the picturesque village of **Taghoulit** (1519m), surrounded by juniper trees, and with a simple **gîte** (per person Dh45). The *piste* continues up the gorge and then out into the broadening and more fertile upper valley, until it reaches **Sebt Aït Bou Wili**, (pronounced Aït Bouli), a sizeable village above the river with a school (marked by flags), a Saturday market and, since 2005, electricity. The **Gîte d'Etape Adrar** (☎ 023 458479; per person Dh50, half board Dh120) is on the main *piste* and if you don't want to camp this is one option, the other being a homestay in Rougoult.

Several valleys meet at this village: Jebel Rat heads straight up on another good walk past the village of Abachkou to Jebel Rat (3797m). Our *piste* heads left, south, the valley becoming ever more beautiful as it winds up above wheat and barley fields, and juniper, wild fig and almond trees. The

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration four days

Distance 57km

Standard medium

Start Agouti

Finish Aït Alla

Highest Point Tizi n'Rougoult (2860m)

Accommodation camping and gîtes

Public Transport yes

Summary This walk through the heart of the M'Goun will suit most grades of trekkers, even younger ones. There is one long day of walking, but this varied trek crosses some stunning mountain landscapes, passes through river gorges, and leads up one river and down another into valleys blessed by beauty and fertility.

village of **Tazougart**, on the opposite side of the valley, marks a more-than-halfway point between Sebt Aït Bou Wlli and the day's end. From here, the landscape becomes ever more fantastic, with a hint of Shangri-la about it, until after two to 2½ hours you reach **Rougout** (1893m). There is excellent camping just below the village beside the Tifra River. If you don't want to camp, there is the possibility of staying **chez l'habitant** (per person Dh30) in village houses, though you will need to ask around to see who has space.

Day 2: Rougout to Amezri

six to seven hours/14km/600m descent/970m ascent
For two hours, the morning walk follows the Tifra, the stony path criss-crossing the river. There are terraces wherever there is space on the banks, although in places the valley is simply too narrow to cultivate. As it climbs, so the landscape becomes more barren. The mule path is well trodden and although it occasionally is forced to climb above gorges, it does follow the course of the river, roughly due south.

The source of the Tifra, no more than a trickle at the best of times, sits just below the pass of **Tizi n'Rougout** (2860m). At this point, even the juniper trees are below you and only alpine plants and bushes above. From the broad saddle beneath the pass, a path leads left (east) to a ridge that climbs to over 3500m. The Rougout pass is well worn, straight ahead. From the pass, the summit of Ighil M'Goun – at 4068m, just under 100m lower than Jebel Toubkal – is due east. Ahead of you there are long views across the southern M'Goun Massif and, more immediately, across the **Tessaout River**, a vast primordial scene that looks as though it has just been formed, the mountain slopes showing great gashes of rust, green and grey rocks.

From the Rougout pass, the mule path is clearly marked, winding down in front of you and leading, after two hours to the first village, **Tasgaiwalt**. From here, keeping the river to your left, in all likelihood being followed by curious village children looking for entertainment, it is a gentle walk – 40 minutes, though you could easily spend longer – along the track to the village of **Amezri** (2250m). The 24-bed (mattress) **Gîte d'Etape Agnid Mohamed** (per person Dh50, breakfast Dh20, meals

Dh50) has several large sleeping rooms, some of which look down onto the valley, a rudimentary shower and toilets, and the possibility of camping (around Dh20).

Day 3: Amezri to Aït Ali n'Ito

six hours/18km/427m descent/150m ascent

The third day is one of gentle pleasures as the path follows the Tessaout River, shelving gently from 2250m to 1833m. The valley is hemmed in by some impressive cliffs, particularly by the Ichbbakene escarpment, which rises a sheer 1000m above the river.

The river has few or no fish since a large flood flushed them out a few years back, but it does irrigate some exceptionally fertile farmland which the Berbers, here of the Aït Atta tribe, use to grow a range of seasonal crops. In the spring, the valleys are carpeted with wildflowers, while the fruit and nut trees add their blossoms to the spectacle. In this part of its course, the Tessaout flows more or less due west and is fed by a series of smaller streams that bring melted snow off the higher mountains.

At several places along the day's walk, the path crosses the river. For much of the year, it should be possible to hop over stones. But in spring, when the valley is at its most beautiful, the river may be too high and you may have to wade, as at the village of **Imi n'Ikkis**, some 5km from Amezri. The village is no more than a cluster of houses, but does have a shop (no sign) that usually stocks water and soft drinks, may also have the lurid green plastic shoes villagers wear to wade in the rivers, and occasionally has some tinned food.

As the path passes beneath the larger village of **Ichbbakene**, an hour and a half further downstream and backed by the sheer escarpment, you will see the significant building of the Hotel Edare. Built by a villager who worked in France, it was not operating at the time of our visit.

Two and a half hours further on, having crossed the river at several places, the path narrows and squeezes itself beneath the stone and mud houses of the village of Aït Hamza. At the bottom of the village is a working **water mill**. Powered by water diverted from the river, it's used to grind the annual wheat crop. Another hour of delightful walking leads to the village of Aït Ali n'Ito. The **Gîte d'Etape Assounfou** (☎ 066

075060, 024 385747; fax 024 385744; per person Dh50, breakfast Dh25) is one of the best in the region, with great views over the valley, not to mention hot showers (Dh10), a boutique and electricity.

If you have time, there is a good side trip to the village of **Magdaz**, a three-hour round trip to the south of Aït Ali n'Ito, but well worth the effort as this is one of the most beautiful villages in the Atlas Mountains. Apart from the beauty of the place, check out the village's extraordinary architecture, where tower-houses have been built in steps using stone and wood, a technique only known here, in Fakhour (see tomorrow's walk), and in Yemen and Afghanistan.

Day 4: Aït Ali n'Ito to Aït Alla

2½ to three hours/8km/150m descent

A dirt road leads alongside the river on a gentle walk down to the end of the trek. Occasionally the route does climb a little before it reaches the beautiful little village of **Fakhour**, where the houses climb up the hillside. Fakhour is noted for its *agadir*, which can be visited. There's no entry fee, but the *gardien* should be tipped (Dh10 would be welcome).

Less than an hour beyond Fakhour, the village of Ifoulou sits on a bend of the river and the road. This village seems to sleep for most of the week, there being little other than a drinks stand open, but on Monday it is the site for a large *souq*, when villagers from along the valleys come to trade and talk. Half an hour beyond the village, the *piste* joins the main Demnate-Skoura road by the new road bridge over the Tessaout River, below the village of Aït Alla. From here it should be possible to find transport in either direction, although there is no certainty as to how long you will need to wait.

THE RIF MOUNTAINS

جبل اريف

Why don't more people come to walk in the Rif Mountains? The first and lowest of the mountain ranges that ripple south through Morocco, they make perfect trekking country, blessed as they are with magnificent ranges, gorges and valleys, clothed in forests of cedar, cork oak and fir. Being close to the

Mediterranean, the Rif are also the greenest of Morocco's mountains and springtime, with its riot of wildflowers, is one of the most delightful times to walk here.

One thing that does deter trekkers is the region's reputation as an area of drug production. But although kif (marijuana) production takes up over three quarters of cultivatable land east of Chefchaouen, trekkers have little reason to feel threatened, especially if travelling with a guide – villagers will be genuinely interested and surprised to see you. The trek detailed here, setting out from Chefchaouen, is well trodden and unproblematic in this respect.

The Rif Mountains rarely top more than 2500m in height, with most treks only occasionally venturing over 2000m, so altitude sickness isn't the worry it can be in other parts of Morocco.

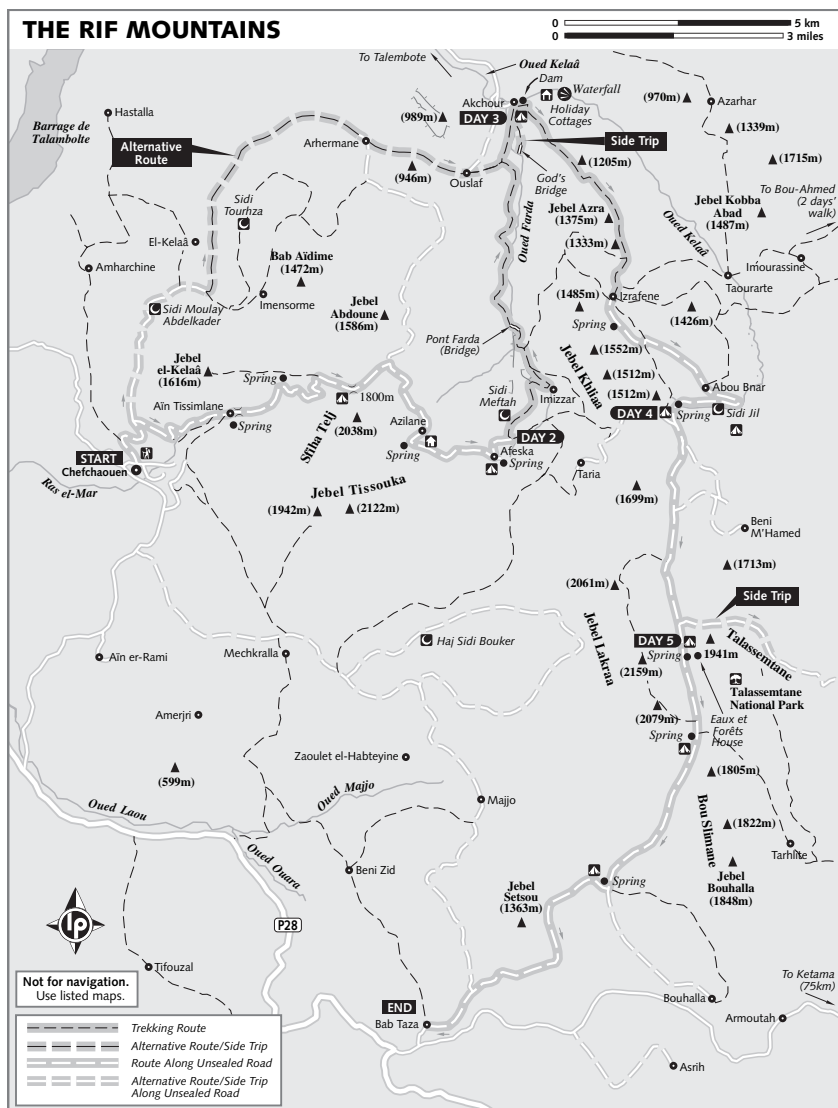
WILDLIFE

The Rif's climate and proximity to Europe endows it with a Mediterranean climate – the area closely resembles the sierras of southern Spain. Cedars make up the majority of tree species, including a rare local species *Abies maroccana*, a variant of the Spanish cedar that is only found above 1500m. It's a relict of an older, cooler period in Morocco's history. In addition, cork oak, holm pine and wild olive dot the limestone mountains. The stony land is hard to cultivate and thin in nutrients; deforestation is an issue here as in other parts of Morocco.

Locals may tell you that there are wolves in the mountains, but you shouldn't believe the stories – the closest you'll get is spotting a red fox or feral dog near a village. Wild boar are also native, but have a retiring nature that makes them hard to spot. The Rif's most famous mammals are the Barbary apes (known locally as *mgou*), whose range extends south into the Middle Atlas.

You'll have better luck with birdlife. Raptors easily spotted wheeling on thermals include black-shouldered kites, golden eagles and long-legged buzzards. Ravens can also be seen against the limestone cliffs.

Scorpions present a small risk in the Rif, although less so than further south. Be wary of the red scorpion; stings are extremely painful. The venomous *fer à cheval* viper (named for the horseshoe-like mark on its head) is more likely to flee from you than vice versa.



PLANNING

You can trek year-round in the Rif Mountains, though it can be bitterly cold between November and March, when snow is common. It rains frequently between late September and June, while during high summer it is fiercely hot, even on the peaks, and some water sources dry up.

Trekking is relatively undeveloped in the Rif, but in many villages there are simple *gîtes* where it's possible to sleep for the night. Otherwise, a tent is extremely worthwhile. A decent sleeping bag is essential whatever the season, as is a light waterproof jacket – rain showers are common. Most treks originate in Chefchaouen,

where it's possible to get food and fuel supplies.

Trekking guides can be organised through Abdeslam Moude, the head of the **Association des Guides du Tourisme** (☎ 062 113917; guide rando@yahoo.fr; day tour Dh350) in Chefchaouen. There's no office, so contact him directly. The Association charges Dh350 per day for a guide, and Dh200 per person for *gîte* accommodation including dinner and breakfast. It's also possible to arrange *gîtes* in person during the trek, though there is a risk that the *gardien* may not be around and the *gîte* may be closed – not uncommon.

Mules can be arranged to carry your luggage – not a bad idea if you're camping. They're more expensive than in other parts of Morocco (from Dh200 per day including muleteer) and must be organised in advance. From August to October, mules can be hard to organise as they're used for the kif harvest, and prices increase accordingly.

From the government 1:50,000 topographical series, survey sheets *Chaouen* and *Bab Taza* cover the Chefchaouen-to-Bab Taza trek.

CHEFCHAOUEN TO BAB TAZA

شفشاون إلى باب تازة

This is the best introductory walk to the Rif Mountains. Starting from Chefchaouen, it takes in some spectacular scenery, including the geologically improbable God's Bridge, a natural stone arc spanning the Oued Farda. You are also likely to meet troupes of Barbary apes around the edge of Talassemtane National Park.

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration four to five days

Distance 56km

Standard medium

Start Chefchaouen

Finish Bab Taza

Highest Point Sfiha Telj Pass (approximately 1800m)

Accommodation camping and *gîtes*

Public Transport yes

Summary The walking here is relatively undemanding but the mountain scenery is spectacular, the tiny Riffian villages worth a detour, and the gorges and weird geology fascinating.

The full trek takes five days, but there are plenty of ways to shorten the distance or duration. One option would be to arrange transport from Akchour back to Chefchaouen at the end of day two. Transport isn't too hard to find in Akchour, or you can arrange for a grand taxi from Chefchaouen to pick you up at a specified time. Alternatively, you may be able to hike back along an alternate route.

Day 1: Chefchaouen to Afeska

5½ to 6½ hours/14.5km/1200m ascent/600m descent

An early morning start is recommended for the first day, which starts on the 4WD track behind Camping Azilane (see Map p202), with an initially steep ascent climbing through the trees to give great views over Chefchaouen's medina. Skirting the southern slopes of **Jebel el-Kelaâ** (1616m), the track evens out to follow the stream passing through the hamlet of **Ain Tissimlane**, before once again rising in an arc to a high pass by the jagged limestone crags of **Sfiha Telj**. The views here are astounding in both directions, and on a clear day you can see the Mediterranean in the distance. There is cleared ground suitable for camping (no water source). The climb is a killer with a full pack – the hardest of the trek – which explains the necessity for a cool early morning start.

The track turns east before descending. Stopping regularly to enjoy the fine views, take the right (southern) fork where the track splits – this takes you down in an hour or so to the village of **Azilane**, where there's a *gîte*. If you don't want to stop here, continue for another hour along a mostly level path to **Aphasia**. There's a rough camp site cleared under the pines next to the football pitch.

Day 2: Afeska to Akchour

3½ to 4½ hours/10km/860m descent

From Afeska, the wide *piste* you've been following deteriorates to a smaller track. Heading north, you pass through more oak and pine woods to **Sidi Meftah**, where there's a *marabout* and spring, before leaving the woods and descending the switchbacks to **Imizzar** on the **Oued Farda**. Once beside the river, turn left (away from the village, northwest), then cross the river below some impressive overhanging cliffs and continue heading northwest. You'll join a well-worn mule track that eventually leads down to

Pont Farda, an ancient bridge over Oued Farda.

Cross to the west bank of the river and continue north, dwarfed by the surrounding scenery. After an hour, the trails bears left away from the river towards **Ouslaf**, which is overshadowed by a giant rock buttress, but keep on the same path while it bears right, descending to rejoin the river on the outskirts of **Akchour** (398m), which sits on the **Oued Kelaâ**.

Akchour is strung out along the river. As you approach it, you first come to a small café with very welcome river-cooled soft drinks, and a dam with a deep pool that seems made for swimming, although the water temperature means short dips only! Upstream from the dam is a pleasant camping spot at the confluence of the Oued Kelaâ and Oued Farda.

Akchour has a couple of other cafés that can throw together a basic tajine, and offer even more basic rooms for the night, for a negotiable Dh50.

From Akchour, it's usually possible to get transport back to Chefchaouen – most likely one of the rugged vans or 4WDs that battle it out on the *piste*. If there's nothing going from Akchour, try **Talembote**, 2km further north, which has a market on Tuesdays with regular transport to Chefchaouen (Dh15). Most passing vehicles will stop to pick you up if they have space – a case of paid hitchhiking. They may drop you at Dar Ackoubaa, the junction town 10km north of Chefchaouen on the P28 highway.

SIDE TRIP: GOD'S BRIDGE

With an early start from Afeska, you can reach Akchour by lunchtime, giving time for the short hike (1½ hours, 3km return) to **God's Bridge** – an unlikely geological structure that shouldn't be missed.

The path south from Akchour's dam up the Oued Farda is rough in places, but well worth any scrambling. You'll also have to cross the river twice but this is quite easy where it's not deep – if you don't mind the occasional splash. (However, if you're trekking in spring, check in Afeska that snow melt hasn't made the river impassable.) God's Bridge is about 45 minutes from Akchour. A huge red stone arch towers 25m above the river and it almost beggars belief that it was carved by nature and not by human hand.

Over countless millennia, the river flowed as an underground watercourse, eroding the rock and carving a path deeper and deeper, leaving the bridge high and dry.

Day 3: Akchour to Pastures above Abou Bnar

4½ to six hours/12km/977m ascent

An early morning start (with full water bottles, since there are no springs on the route until you reach Izrafene) sees you leaving Akchour by heading to the north, crossing the bridge over the Oued Kelaâ and then cutting right (southeast) along the track to Izrafene. It's a particularly picturesque walk as you climb up and around **Jebel Azra** (1375m). Your eyes lift from the steep gorges you've trekked through and out over the sweep of open mountains. If you're up for some scrambling, add half an hour to attain the peak, from where you can drink in further gorgeous views.

Having cut around the mountain, the countryside becomes gentler – rolling even – as the trail heads south. The village of **Izrafene** marks the halfway point of the day's trek. Just before the village, a track bears east at a col, tempting the adventurous to abandon the Bab Taza hike and walk to Taourarte and on to **Bou-Ahmed** on the coast, a further two days' walk.

From Izrafene, the track turns into a 4WD *piste* – the first since Afeska. It follows a narrow valley, gradually turning east up onto a ridge with gentle views. Where it forks, turn left, and then, just 25m later, turn right onto a trail that heads southeast to **Abou Bnar** through a pretty stretch of oak wood. There's little to detain you here, so continue alongside the river (not the 4WD track) through the open, grassy country to the *marabout* of **Sidi Jil**. This is a pretty area for camping, but if you continue for another 30 minutes, you'll come to an even more beautiful spot, set in wide pasture near a spring – an idyllic place for a night's rest.

ALTERNATIVE ROUTE: RETURN TO CHEFCHAOUEN

It's possible to trek back to Chefchaouen from Akchour in a day by an alternate route. The route goes via the villages of **Ouslaf**, **Arhermane** and **El-Kelaâ**. El-Kelaâ is the site of fascinating **Mosquée Sriffiyenne**, with

its strange leaning tower. This route takes a quick six hours and avoids any major climbs or descents.

Day 4: Pastures Above Abou Bnar to Talassemtane National Park

two to 2½ hours/6km/352m ascent

From the camp site southwest of Abou Bnar, walk back to the 4WD track. Turn left and cross the river, and walk south into the pine woodland. You will quickly come to a T-junction, where you should keep on the right (the left goes downhill to Beni M'Hamed) where the path starts to ascend again.

Keep on the main track, ignoring further side tracks and junctions. As you rise and go through several mini-passes, the views return. To the west, the huge mass of **Jebel Lakraa** (2159m) dominates the countryside.

By late morning you'll reach the edge of **Talassemtane National Park**. A small sign indicates that you should turn left off the 4WD track to the house of the park's *Eaux et Forêts gardien*. You can camp outside his house and draw water, and he can advise on short hikes into the park.

SIDE TRIPS

The short walking day allows plenty of time to explore the area and watch wildlife. Talassemtane National Park is where you are most likely to see Barbary apes.

Head north, back along the 4WD track above the *gardien's* house to a clearing and junction. Turn right and follow the track east into *mgou* country. Troops are relatively common here, although quickly retreat into the safety of the trees if you get too close. The track bends south, giving great views out across the valley to the long ridge of **Jebel Taloussisse** (2005m), before turning briefly east again. Here a trail on the right leads south over the spur of **Talassemtane** (1941m) to a football pitch – strange, but true! – on an area of flat land. From here it's possible to make a rocky traverse west, back to the camp site.

Climbing **Jebel Lakraa** is another alternative for gung-ho trekkers. The best approach is from the north of the mountain, trekking along the ridge to descend one of the stream gullies southeast of the summit. However, there's no fixed path and it's a scramble in places. Allow around 3½ hours return.

Day 5: Talassemtane National Park to Bab Taza

2½ to 3½ hours/13.5km/825m descent

The final day is a quick descent along the 4WD track to Bab Taza, where local kif cultivation is much in evidence. The trail swings through a wide pasture and on through the cork woodland of **Jebel Setsou** (1363m) before revealing the sprawl of **Bab Taza** (or so it seems after a few days in the mountains) below.

In Bab Taza, there are quite a few cafés and a couple of grotty-looking hotels strung along the main road. The main business seems to be in huge sacks of fertiliser used for growing kif. Grands taxis leave regularly throughout the day for Chefchaouen (Dh12, 30 minutes) from the western end of town.

THE ANTI ATLAS

الأطلس الصغير

The last significant mountains before the Sahara, the arid, pink-and-ochre-coloured chain of the Anti Atlas is less visited by trekkers and yet offers some wonderful trekking opportunities. **Tafraoute** is the ideal launching point, with the quartzite massif of **Jebel Lekst** (2359m, see p406), the 'amethyst mountain', lying about 10km to the north, and the twin peaks of **Adrar Mqorn** (2344m) 10km to the southeast. Beneath the arid, jagged mass of these peaks lie lush irrigated valleys and a string of oases.

At the eastern end of the Anti Atlas, almost due south of **Jebel Toubkal**, **Jebel Siroua** (3305m) raises its bleak bulk above the landscape. This dramatic volcano makes an excellent centrepiece to a varied long-distance trek. See Tafraoute (p402) for more general information on this region.

AROUND TAFRAOUTE

Morocco has such a wealth of trekking options that perhaps it is not surprising that an area with the potential of Tafraoute has not yet been fully exploited. The adventurous trekker will find here, as elsewhere in the Moroccan south, many challenging and rewarding treks because the Anti Atlas around Tafraoute has rugged, barren rocks and lush green valleys aplenty.

Jebel Lekst is the star attraction. The 'amethyst mountain' is a massive ridge that

stretches away northwest of Tafraoute. In spite of the harshness of the landscape, the Berbers who live in villages such as Tagoudiche still manage to grow the mountain staples of wheat, barley, olives, figs and almonds. The latest area to be trekked in this region is around Jebel Aklim (2531m), northeast of Tafraoute. Easily reached from Taroudannt and Agadir, Jebel Aklim has the advantage of sitting in an even more remote area than Jebel Lekst, yet still surrounded by Berber villages in valleys guarded by old kasbahs. From the top of Jebel Aklim, there are great views over to the High Atlas and to Jebel Siroua.

This is a tougher region than the M'Goun or Tichka plateau and trekkers need to cope with a lack of facilities and the harsh climate. This close to the Sahara, the summers are blisteringly hot, and winter sees the occasional snowfall on the high passes and peaks, so the area is best walked at the end of winter – late February is ideal. Daytime temperatures may be 20°C, but at night it can drop below freezing.

Other than the odd small store, you won't find many supplies in the area, so the great challenge is how to carry enough food and water to keep you going. As with other remote areas in Morocco, it is often possible to stay in village houses, but you still need to be prepared to camp and to carry food and water.

The best way of doing this is by hiring a guide and mules. There is no *bureau de guide* in Taliouine, or Taroudannt for that matter, although there are guides in town – and many more *faux guides*. As ever, insist on seeing a guide's ID card before you waste your time talking through possibilities. As a rule, trained mountain guides do not tout for business in the street. Mules are not commonly used in the Anti Atlas, but you may be able to arrange this through your guide.

Jebel Lekst and the approaches from Tafraoute are covered by the 1:50,000 map sheets *Had Tahala* and *Tanalt*, while the whole area is covered by 1:100,000 sheets *Anzi*, *Tafrawt*, *Foum al-Hisn* and *Taghijjt*.

There are some 26 villages neatly spaced out through the Ameln Valley, the valley that runs along the south side of **Jebel Lekst**, and they make for a great walk. You'd need weeks to do a full circuit, but a stunningly beautiful and suitably stretching five-day walk would start in **Oumesnate**, take in several villages,

and head up to the village of Tagdichte, the launching point for a day ascent of Jebel Lekst. It's a tough scramble, and the ascent is best seen as part of a gentle trek east through the valley from, say, Tirmatmat – where there are some excellent day walks – to Oumesnate (both villages lie just off the 7148 road). This is an enchanting area to trek.

Southeast of Tafraoute the possibilities are equally exciting. The scramble up **Adrar Mqorn** is hard but worthwhile. Due south of its twin peaks are the palm-filled gorges of **Ait Mansour** and **Timguilcht**, which make up the oasis of **Afella-Ighir**. There is plenty to explore.

Jebel Aklim makes a great focal point for a four or five-day walk out of Irgthem, with its copper mines. From here the route leads to the mountain, which dominates the landscape.

Transport is an issue throughout this part of the Anti Atlas. *Camionettes* provide a reliable though infrequent service to some villages and grands taxis will run on *souq* days, though at other times you may need to hire one to get you to the trailheads.

JEBEL SIROUA جبل السروة

Some way south of the High Atlas, at the eastern edge of Anti Atlas, the isolated volcanic peak of **Jebel Siroua** (3304m) offers unique and exciting trekking. Isolated villages, tremendous gorges, a tricky final ascent and some dramatic scenery all make this an excellent place for trekkers in search of solitude, stark beauty and a serious walk.

The ascent of Jebel Siroua is the most obvious walk to make, but, as ever in Morocco, lasting memories will be found elsewhere – in the beauty of lush valleys, in the hospitality shown in Berber homes, in the play of light on rock and the proximity of the Sahara. So if you don't fancy the climb to the summit, the mountain circuit will still make a wonderful trek.

The **Auberge Souktana** (p391), a couple of kilometres east of Taliouine on the main road, is the best place to seek advice. Owned by a Franco-Moroccan couple, it has become the trailhead – here you can arrange guides, mules and gear for the circuit. The 1:100,000 *Taliwine* and 1:50,000 *Sirwa* maps cover the route. In winter it can be fiercely cold in the region, so the best time to trek is spring. See Taliouine (p391) for further general information.

If you need supplies, regional markets take place at Taliouine and Aoulouz on Wednesday, Askaouan on Thursday and Tazenakht and Igli on Sunday.

Mules, as ever, can be hired at short notice (often the next day) at villages around the mountain

There's a challenging, weeklong trek which allows you to walk out of Taliouine along a gentle dirt trail that heads eastward up the **Zagmouzine Valley to Tagmout**. It then heads northeast through **Atougha**, from where it is a six-hour trek to the summit of Jebel Siroua. Walking at a regular pace, you'll be ascending the summit on the morning of the fourth day. After descending into the gorges for the night, you'll pass the extraordinary cliff village of **Tisgui** before reaching **Tagouyamt** on the fifth day. Tagouyamt has limited supplies and, in case you can't find a room, a good place to camp in the amazing **Tislit Gorge**. From Tagouyamt, the valley continues to **lhokarn** from where you can either head south to the Taliouine–Ouarzazate road at Tizi n'Taghatine (you'll be able to pick up passing transport here) or else complete the circuit by walking west back to Taliouine.

An alternative circuit that is even less trekked starts at the village of Tamlakout, where there is a classified *gîte*, and takes in Ait Tigga, the Assif Mdist and the foot of Jebel Siroua. It then ascends the mountain, continues to Aziouane and exits via the Amassines. Some of the trek is strenuous but no one day should involve more than six hours' walking.

Taliouine and Anezale (for Tamlakout) are both on the main Agadir–Taroudannt–Ouarzazate road and are regularly served by grands taxis and buses.

JEBEL SARHRO

جبل صغرو

The starkly beautiful **Jebel Sarhro** range of mountains continues the line of the Anti Atlas, rising up between the High Atlas and Dadès Valley to the north, with the Sahara stretching away to the south.

Little-visited and relatively undeveloped for the tourist market, it offers a landscape of flat-topped mesas, deep gorges and

twisted volcanic pinnacles softened by date palms and almond groves. This wild, arid, isolated country is inhabited by the Ait Atta tribe, great warriors famous for their last stand against the French here, on **Jebel Bou Gafer**, in 1933.

PLANNING

Jebel Sarhro throws up so many options that it can be hard to settle on a route. Wherever you go is likely to be eye-poppingly gorgeous, but be sure to choose a route that touches the heart of the range, between **Igli** and **Bab n'Ali**. The Sarhro is a winter trekking destination, although don't let that fool you: it can still freeze, and snow falls as low as 1400m. But unlike some of the higher Atlas treks, it doesn't always snow in winter and even when it does, it is usually possible to trek. In spring there is still water around and night-time temperatures no longer fall well below zero. In late autumn you might see Berber clans moving their camps down from the higher mountains. Summer is scorchingly hot (above 35°C), water sources disappear, and snakes and scorpions are two a penny. Dehydration is common at any time of the year.

Jebel Sarhro has three trekking centres, the towns of **Kelaâ M'Gouna** (p355) and **Boumalne du Dadès** (p356) on the north side of the range, and the southern village of **N'Kob** (p353). A number of foreign tour operators (such as Explore, Exodus and Walks Worldwide) run good-value trips here, but all three of the Sarhro trekking centres have **bureaux des guides** (☎ /fax El-Kelaâ 061796101/062132192, ☎ Boumalne 067 593292, ☎ N'Kob 067 487 509) which charge around Dh300 a day for a guide and Dh100 for a mule.

Supplies should be bought beforehand in Ouarzazate or Marrakesh, although you will find tea, tinned fish, biscuits and bread in these three towns and may find eggs, dates, almonds, bread and tinned fish in some villages. In this environment, and with the amount of water that must often be carried, mules are a worthwhile investment and are usually easy to find.

The 1:100,000 *Boumalne* and *Tazzarine* maps cover the region, but the most useful trekking map is the 1:100,000 *Randonnée culturelle dans le Djebel Sarhro* by Mohamed Ait Hamza and Herbert Popp, published in Germany, written in French and available

possibility of a daily *camionette* from Boumalne. The river here hasn't flowed in any meaningful way for years, but in the valley above the village there are almond, apple, fig and plum trees. For at least two and a half hours, you could follow the *piste*, used by the vans that cross the mountain to N'Kob, or the track that occasionally strays off to the side, only to rejoin the *piste* further up the slope. At **Imi n'Ouarg**, the third village above Tagdilt, the path leaves the road (which continues, along with the electric cables, to the nearby mines at Tiouit). The path turns to the right (southwest) beside the village school, which is topped with a Moroccan flag. There is a nice lunch stop, to the right of the path, just beyond the village.

The path follows the right-hand side of the winding Assif Ouarg valley, beneath the summit of **Jebel Kouaouch** (2592m). After an hour and just over 3km, above terraced fields, there is a neat farm where it is possible to stay **chez l'habitant** (☎ 061 082321; per person Dh30-50). The sons of the family can be hired as muleteers and meals may be available.

Day 2: Assif Ouarg Valley to Igli

six to seven hours/19km/620m ascent/860m descent
The most memorable and also most difficult day's walk starts with a climb, after 35 minutes, to what looks like the head of the valley, with a scattering of stone houses, and rocks ahead. Here a path leads left (south). Jebel Kouaouch dominates the landscape straight ahead, the highest of a row of peaks.

THE TREK AT A GLANCE

Duration five days

Distance 56km

Standard medium to hard

Start Boumalne du Dadès

Finish El-Kelaâ M'Gouna

Highest Point Tizi n'Ouarg (approximately 2300m)

Accommodation camping and *gîtes*

Public Transport yes

Summary This is a great alternative to the classic Sarhro traverse and gives a taste of the staggering and varied beauty of the range. There are some demanding climbs and long days of walking, so there is the option of adding another night to the route.

The path zigzags over a stream, up towards Kouaouch and to a single, large old juniper tree – a good place for a breather. Depending on fitness and the weather, it could take another hour to slog up to the pass, at first with good views back towards Tagdilt; and then, once over the ridge, the High Atlas and most of Jebel Sarhro come into view.

From here a path drops steeply down ahead, but our track veers right (southwest) across the valley's shoulder and over another ridge, with great views south over the whole range to **N'Kob**. From here, **Igli** is more or less due south, over a series of slopes and edged in by some brilliant bare rock formations, the famous **Tête de Chameau** (Camel's Head) cliffs appearing as you walk down towards the settlement. The **gîte** (Dh30), three low buildings with sleeping room, toilet and shower with wood-fired hot water (Dh10), is basic (no mats to sleep on, no electricity), but the *gardien* is welcoming and runs a shop selling trekkers' necessities, including mule shoes. There are breathtaking views of the mountains at sunset.

SIDE TRIP

There is an option to do a round trip to Bab n'Ali, one of the most spectacular rock formations in the Sarhro, and return to Igli for another night, or to then walk on to sleep at the Irhazzoun n'Imlas **gîte** (Dh30), making the following day's walk a little easier.

Day 3: Igli to Tajalajt

seven to 7½ hours/24km/350m ascent/400m descent
The Camel's Head is the main feature of the first part of the walk, looming on the right-hand side, the peak of **Jebel Amlal**, sacred to the Aït Atta Berbers, some of whom meet there each August. The morning's walk is gentler than the previous day's, leading through wide, rocky valleys. After some 1½ hours, beneath a small village (Taouinte), the path curves around an Aït Atta cemetery, the graves marked with piles of stone. Beyond here, the path leads below the **Needles of Sarhro**, a long dramatic cliff that slopes down after another 1½ hours to the Amguis River. Several valleys meet in this beautiful spot, which would be a great place to camp, with palms and oleander. Half an hour southwards down the valley takes you to **Ighazoun**, a small village above

well-tended fields with a good lunch place beside the river.

At Ighazoun the path joins a motor *piste* which runs left to N’Kob, right towards the Dadès. Take the right track (northwest) towards a sheer cliff on the left, the rocky path leading beneath it and up to a broadening valley. The *piste* loops around the north side of Jebel Tassigdel Si el-Haj (1722m) and then south again towards Tiguiza, where there is a basic **gîte** (☎ 071 728006; Dh 30). Before you reach Tiguiza, another *piste* leads right (west) to Akerkour village and then into a narrowing fertile valley dotted with palms and up an increasing incline to the beautifully sited village of **Tajalajt**, where it is possible to stay **chez l’habitant** (per person Dh30-40) and obtain basic meals if there is food.

Day 4: Tajalajt to Achmrah

eight to 8½ hours/26km/200m ascent/300m descent

A long day, but another day walking in splendour, starting up the valley *piste* from Tajalajt, above the terraced fields of corn, and palm and almond groves. Less than 1½ hours brings you to **Assaka n’Aït Ouzzine** (1584m), which has a large ruined kasbah just above the beautiful valley. From here the *piste* leads out of the valley into a very different landscape, a rocky steppe that might have been lifted out of Central Asia, often complete with howling wind. One and a half hours from Assaka, wedged between 2000m ridges, brings you to **Tagmout**, also sometimes called Amgroud after one of the mountains overlooking you, where there is a well-kept **gîte** (per person Dh30, breakfast Dh25) with electricity, mattresses and blankets. A simple lunch is usually available (Dh25 to Dh30).

From Tagmout the motor *piste* leads northwest to the Dadès Valley and south to

N’Kob, and you may find transport moving along it to Boumalne’s Wednesday *souq* and N’Kob’s on Sunday. The trek heads due north, climbing for more than an hour to the top of the Tizi n’Tagmout (1754m). There are stunning views from here to the M’Goun, Jebel Siroua and Toubkal. The track leads in another hour to **El-Mersse**, where there are the twin essentials of shade and a year-round spring.

The track continues due north, mostly a gentle descent, but with the occasional climb. Under 1½ hours after El Mersse, there is another camp site at **Tidkit**, set beside a river and with shade trees. There are a couple of houses here, so it may be possible to sleep *chez l’habitant*, or in **Achmrah**, another hour down the track. However, the Berbers on this side of Jebel Sarhro are seminomadic and may be absent. If the houses are empty, the animal shelters will be as well, a less glamorous but still effective place to sleep.

Day 5: Achmrah to the Dadès Valley

four hours/14km/slight ascent/450m descent

The best parts of this morning walk are at the beginning and the end. The track runs north of Achmrah in a short climb that suddenly reveals more views of the M’Goun and Siroua. Less than half an hour later, it crosses a well-made motor track, which leads to an anthracite mine and should not be followed. Instead continue north, occasionally north-west, on a well-worn track that leads down a gully towards the Dadès valley. As you get closer, you will see the villages of Aït Youl on your left, and Aït Haroun on the right. The valley here is studded with old kasbahs. Head for Aït Haroun, where there is a bridge over the Dadès River. The Boumalne-El-Kelaâ M’Gouna road is nearby.

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