The Ridge of Dreams

Hamish M. Brown
Plates 61–66

The colours, as one looks out from the ramparts of Marrakech, are vivid greens and reds, echoing the national colours, but the surprise, the shock is to see, beyond the palms, beyond the bustle of this 1000-year-old Berber city, a horizon of snowy mountains.

They are 40 miles away, forming a frieze along the skyline, and the detail only becomes clear as one speeds across the Haouz Plain towards them. The highest summit of Morocco is there: Djbel Toubkal (4167m), and it is the highest summit in all North Africa. Near it are a cluster of other 4000m summits, an area of some popularity for trekking in summer and climbing and ski-mountaineering in winter and spring. Most years I migrate to Marrakech and the mountains beyond, for the months of February, March and April. (May is also excellent.) It is a winter touched with wonder. Somewhere between Marrakech and the snowline bright spring will be painting its colours on the landscape in a flurry of blossom. Whatever one's interest: climbing, skiing, trekking, flora, bird-watching—Morocco is a country of many attractions.

British parties seldom venture outwith the Toubkal Massif, but even here there is a bewildering range of opportunities, and the normal classic routes and summits need not be the end. Whatever the interests, I find everyone relishes just travelling in these ranges. Cross a few cols from the beaten track of Marrakech-Asni-Imlil-Toubkal, and you are in an untravelled medieval world. Following valleys or ridges off into the blue has often given the best of memories. One year recently we rather took this to extremes.

In these winter-into-spring months the weather is usually reasonable, with sun for a while, and periods of snow and storm to replace what has been removed. Storms can be violent, but they never last long. I have seen one snowless winter (disastrous—the plains rely on melting snow for a continuous irrigation), and I have seen weather which has deposited clouds on the tops with Irish persistence. In high summer Marrakech temperatures run at 120°F and the snowless Atlas are heaps of rubble, good for treks with mules or rock-climbing, but missing the beauty of the snow. Rock-climbing is possible in winter; faces, if steep enough for that, will shed their snow and dry out—and the superb setting remains. Most of the major summits can be climbed on skis, using skins, and there is one quiet resort, at Oukaïmeden. Ice for climbing does not really exist, but early starts (to avoid the afternoon sun blaze) will give plenty of crampon use. Some references for further reading are given later. I really want to describe one of the bigger multi-day traverses which I look back on as being about the best of its type.

One year we took the familiar road from Marrakech to Asni to Imlil (hut), then with a mule for baggage we went up the next valley to Tachddirt (hut), and on to its col which drops into the beautiful Ourika valley. This was descended

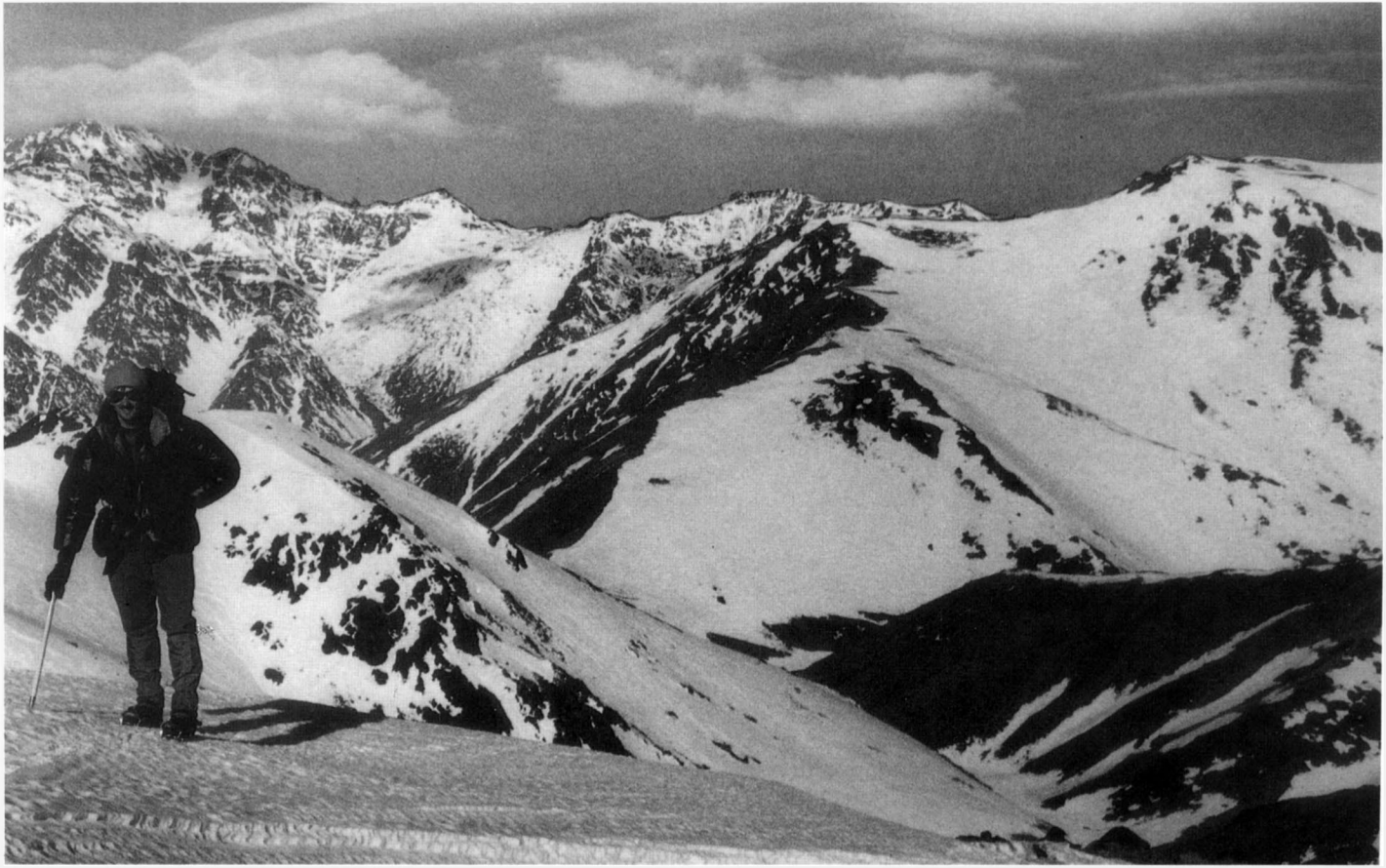


Photo: Hamish Brown

61 At the start of the 'Ridge of Dreams'.

before branching off, first to find, and then to climb, Adrar Meltzen (3597m), a tent-shaped peak that stands out in the view of the Atlas from Marrakech. It gave a three-day escapade with a heavy snowfall for our bivouac, and no detailed map to help. The Atlas is a complex landscape, deeply-cut by gorges and with a bewildering array of ridges. The clarity itself can confuse by merging peak upon peak—as photographers have discovered. What is clear is that there is plenty of overlapping of ridges making up this chain of mountains that divides Marrakech from the desert south. Woven into this is the main ridge, the spine of the Atlas, and traversing this in the Toubkal massif gives classic days. Meltzen was an outlier and gave a clear view of the spine at its most remote: a huge wall of sharp peaks never dropping below 3200 metres as far as the eye could see. What a dream of a ridge to traverse!

By the time I was home and thinking up ploys for the following year it had become the 'Ridge of Dreams'. The best of it faced Meltzen, a jagged trio of summits making up Taska-n-Zat (3912m). Towards the Toubkal end lay Iferouane which older maps gave as 4001 metres. It has since been demoted to 3996m, but not before our friend Eric Roberts had toiled through to reach it, and then gone on to traverse Irhil M'Goun, 160km further east, the only 4000er outside the Toubkal massif. (See *SMCJXXX*, 130, 1973.) An Eagle Ski Club traverse of the M'Goun range delayed the Ridge of Dreams for a couple of years. Every trip tends to spawn ideas for many more—a queue of dreams—and for Taska-n-Zat we would have to be a strong party.

Atlas storms usually give fair warning, but when text-book frontal clouds appear you start abseiling off fast. Though technically not serious, the Ridge of Dreams wends above some of the roughest and remotest areas, and escape routes are both difficult and long—days of effort that would certainly make any re-ascent impossible. There is a complete lack of information in English, and even the French sources at that time barely mentioned it. Iferouane alone was an occasional goal for a multi-day ski sortie. A few of the easy cols were summer passes, linking the desert south with the immensely deep and almost impassable gorges and valleys all draining into the Ourika. I had no illusions about my Ridge of Dreams.

Our team came together almost casually. Patrick, only 23, was a lithe lad with considerable Scottish experience. His two weeks between engineering ploys in the North Sea set our time-limits. Peter, a friend of his, had recently given up regular employ to climb and instruct, and Patrick's older brother Tom, a doctor, though not so experienced a climber, was also roped in. I must have been like Methuselah in their eyes. The ridge would need both their drive and my guile! We chose March to ensure a real *winter* traverse, yet it was hopefully a period when we might avoid being caught by a storm.

Marrakech was quite an advent to adventuring abroad, and the lads were punch-drunk on impressions by the time we were heading for Asni in an overcrowded local bus. At Asni we swopped to an overcrowded local taxi for the 11 miles up to Imlil and the CAF hut that is the starting point for most things in the Toubkal massif. Haj Brahim the guardian, Mohammed his son, and Llacem his brother-in-law run it efficiently and will fix anything and everything for visitors. Llacem speaks English and is a useful chap. The packing was hectic,



Photo: Hamish Brown

62 *During the second day of the traverse.*

for we would carry every ounce for days on end—quite how many days it was difficult to estimate—and we needed enough food to give us the required energy. We juggled the packs down to 18kg for a possible week away.

Many parties suffer from rushing up to the high huts and the summits without any pause. The heat and lack of humidity increase this problem in Morocco, and we usually have a couple of days skiing and go higher gradually; thus we enjoy every minute of the Atlas. On this trip there was no time to acclimatize, and as our first day up on to the ridge was one of 1800m we hired four porters from Imlil to do an initial carry. We owe them a great deal and, years later, they still mention that hefty day.

We left Imlil an hour before dawn, with the weather doubtful, but time nagging at us and driving us on. It was the familiar Neltner trail up to the shrine of Sidi Chamarouch, the usual snow-line in winter, and there we branched off for the Tizi-n-Tagharat (3456m). We managed to gain about 600m without going on snow, and whilst we were donning crampons the porters, who had stopped for mint tea, caught us up. They borrowed our ice-axes which made us feel a bit naked, but as they were romping up in *djellabas* and wellies, we had to follow. They seemed to have no fear. It may only have been Grade I, but we cramponned up the gully for 900m.

On the *tizi* (col) we took one look at the snow-filled basin beyond and a 150m rise to another col—and promptly bribed the lads to carry there. We were all weary and ready for brews then—but they had carried 18kg, we, nothing. Cloud had kept the sun off the gully, so it did not soften, and on the way back (*sans* ice-axe or crampons) one of the porters had a long slide. They never would tell us the story in full. . .

Patrick was feeling sick with the altitude, but packs were shouldered and we went through the gap and down a ridge to the Tizi n'Terhaline (3327m), a draughty, gravelly saddle with a view across a valley to Toubkal, the side of Toubkal few ever see. We were on the crest of the High Atlas. Tom later confessed to being rather overwhelmed by his first bivouac. We scraped out ledges down the lee side (ice-axes have many uses) and had our one and only meal with fresh fruit and vegetables. I had sneaked up a bottle of *Vieux Pâpes*, so there was an incongruous mix of roughing it and living it up. Patrick was still feeling rough, but we happily drank his share of the wine. We had *Mogadons* for sweet and the 12 hours of darkness soon swung the stars and culled out a new day.

The pattern was there from the start: we rose just before dawn and melted snow or boiled up prepared water for a brew, then, after a couple of hours exercise (to warm up!), we had breakfast (a plate of muesli and more tea). We'd brew every few hours as melted snow was the only water available. By mid-afternoon we would be digging out or walling up some stony plot to create our bedshelves. For four days the weather played cat-and-mouse with us, but the sunsets were always spectacular and the nights a chilly extravaganza of stars. Obadiah was not the only one with a 'nest among the stars'.

This first bit of ridge I had studied from Toubkal a few weeks earlier, so it went enjoyably, with some scrambling on rocky crests and ribs, to Adrar Tinilim (3670m), the high point and a long descent to the Tizi n'Ououraï

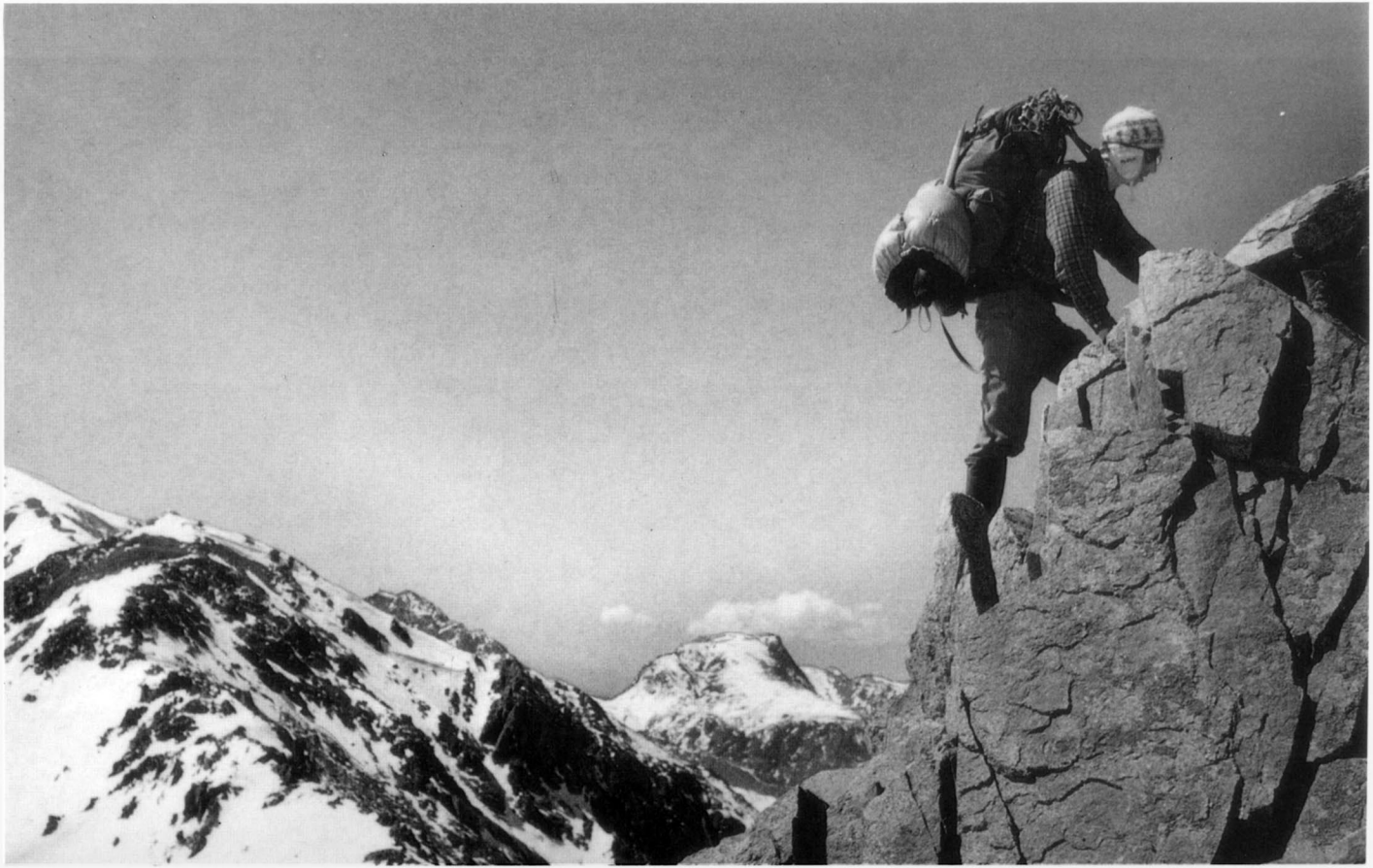


Photo: Hamish Brown

63 *On the traverse; day three.*



Photo: Hamish Brown

64 The Taska-n-Zat ridges (the distant peak is Adrar Meltzen).

(3200m), the lowest point of the whole trip. We cramponned to a flanking valley hoping to find a useable *azib* (summer goat shelter), but they were full of snow. A day of wind, with a threat of snow, had had us worried, but the night switched on the usual Atlas illuminations (you don't have stars like that in Europe!).

It took time to adjust to the scale. Two hours vanished just cramponning up to the crest which was then tramped up to Adrar-n-Dern (3853m). If the unsettled weather broke, our retreat from now on was down southwards to the desert, days from anywhere, but safe. We outflanked Iferouane and left our packs before heading up it. Lunch was salami and *biscottes* which had the unfortunate trade name of GRIM. Snow showers swept by yet somehow never caught us. The poor snow and long ridge up Iferouane were exhausting. It *felt* 4001. Or maybe that was the number of false summits!

With the west black behind us we scurried back to our gear and down to bivouac on the col beyond at 3543m, another windy site. South across the desert plateau Djbel Siroua (an old volcanic plug) was plastered with new snow, northwards a big storm grumbled over the near peaks. The wind drove us inside plastic bivvy bags and in the morning they were lined with ice. The Ridge of Dreams was proving a bit of a nightmare—but we had escaped so far.

The grey morning passed in flanking or climbing several rather gravelly bumps down to the Tizi-n-Tighremt, about 3400m and one of the few summer passes. Beyond, the ridge rose to about 3700m and stayed that height for the real Ridge of Dreams itself. It was only one o'clock but we had not brewed, so this was a priority while we could decide what to do. If we aborted we should do it now. We decided to stop there for the night and give it a last chance. The wind blew both ways over the col, it snowed, but the sunset burnt off the grey again and over the desert we could see the lights of Ourzazate—our planned haven at the finish.

Faith was rewarded: the next day was clear and the barometer rising. With regular discipline we traversed peaks and brewed on the cols between. A twist on the ridge took us northwards all day, and that night it was the lights of Marrakech we viewed from 3728 metres. Valley cloud dispersed for a cold, clear sunset, full of promise for the crux-day ahead. I wrote my log until it was too dark to see, and at that instant the full moon rose as if a light had switched on. 'Absolutely superb, whatever the bivvy brings', I wrote.

The bivouac brought intense cold and my sleeping bag was inadequate. Thoroughly chilled, on rising my innards just emptied and I launched on the big day with virtually no fuel-intake. 'It began with a bang and kept on banging' I wrote (the next day), and the bangs seemed to hit me right in the gut. We were now on the three major peaks we had looked at from Meltzen: Borj-n-Oufraou (3868m), a nameless one of similar height and Taska-n-Zat (3912m). It was from Borj that a ridge curved off to run out eventually to Meltzen; it thus filled our view all day. The climbing began on the ridge to Borj, so we had an abrupt waking as we moved on exposed but impeccable rock. One rooftop gave a classic *à cheval* section which reminded me of the Bietschhorn.

Peter was in his element, searching out 'good bits' and grinning down at our less graceful efforts. The thought of salami made me retch, so I wandered on



Photo: Hamish Brown

65 *The Taska-n-Zat peaks — still a day's progress ahead.*

alone to the col before the Central Peak. The traverse of it just about whacked me. I was probably a bit strained from having borne the long uncertainties of the previous days and all the planning and preparing before the others arrived, so, in cycling terms, 'the knock' left me feeble indeed. We had a long break before Taska-n-Zat. I could still appreciate the buttress of pink granite we climbed before it angled back to an almost flat summit. Peter had a brew on below the last pull. The half mouthful I managed to keep down was bliss and the energy from it quite noticeable.

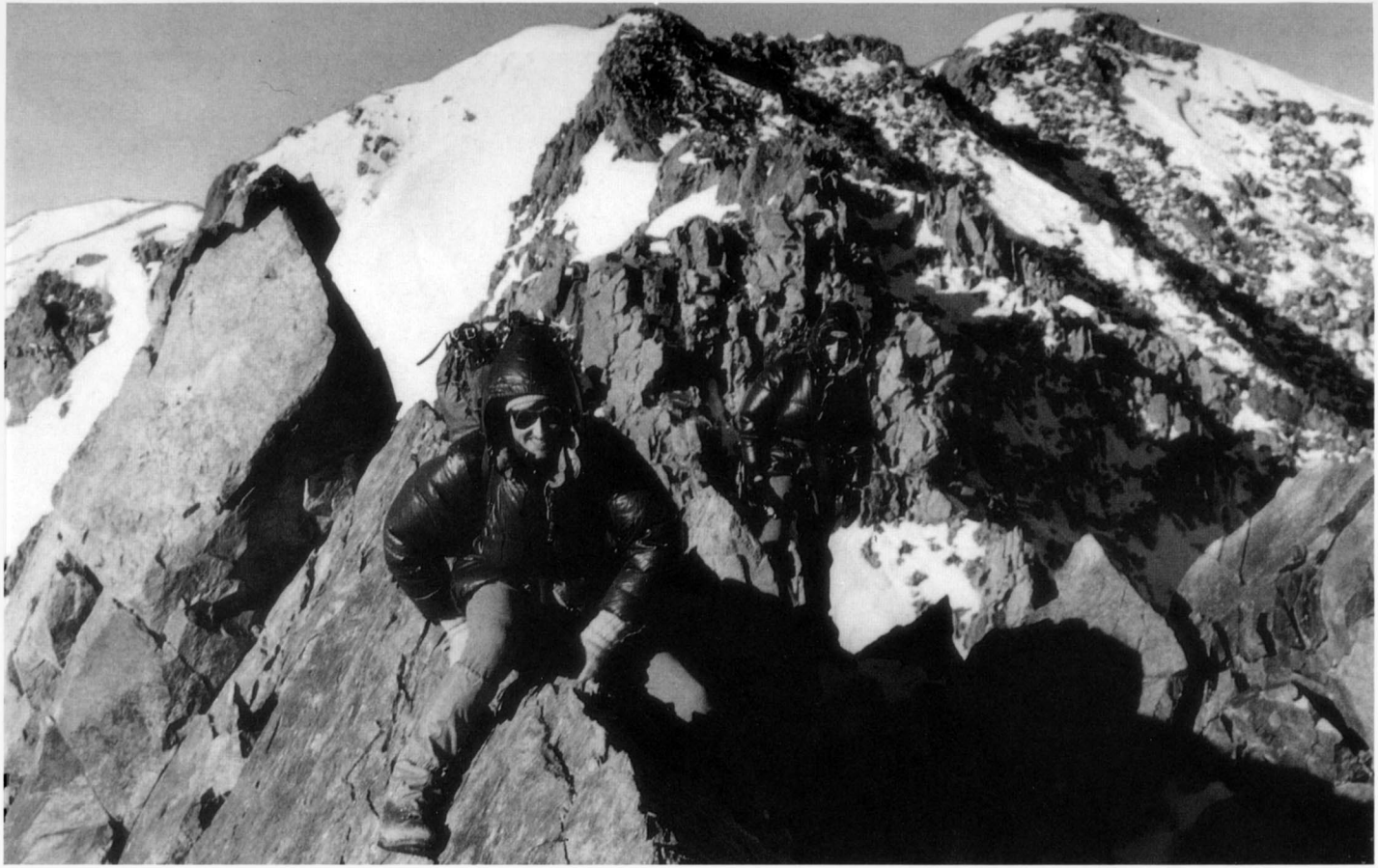
Another peak at 3818m lay beyond Zat and we felt it advisable to push on beyond it, just in case we had to descend quickly. We gained it in the last of the daylight but the ground beyond was not easier but harder. We bivouacked where we were, at 3800 metres. Peter gave me his better bag and we snuggled together for warmth. I ate nothing but a double dose of pills—and slept very well. We all did.

As I was a bit wobbly to start, and Tom had not climbed much, we roped up for the descent while the others made light of the drop. It was very photogenic so all the cameras ran out of film. By the foot of that descent I was feeling fit enough to devour salami again, but now it was Peter's turn to be crocked. He had managed to tear a knee ligament. Tom hoped it would reduce him to a more human speed. Patrick's altitude sickness, my collywobbles, Peter's knee—novice Tom was the only one who sailed through!

The barometer was plummeting and the west turning black. Ahead the succession of summits was without challenge, so we decided enough was enough and relished another breakfast. Flanking the ridge on the desert south was a *piste* leading to a hamlet, Agouim, on the main road over the Atlas. This was our objective anyway. We set off down.

After 300m of cramponning the angle eased sufficiently to give us the confidence to glissade on our bottoms for nearly 900m. It certainly saved Peter's knee. Once the snow ended we followed down by a steep gorge, using tracings of path. Later this became a mule track (the mules must be articulated!) which eventually led to an *azib* beside an irresistible gush of clear water. Tea without melting snow. A paddle. Food. We had an early main meal just to savour the spot. Somehow we did not want, really, to go on back to a world of people. The first people were met two miles down the gorge—shepherd lads who were much more shy of us than we of them. We picked up a tail of children at the first village on the road, but the pied-piper procession dwindled and vanished as dusk found us a new solitude, the more relished for being on 'the edge of cultivation'. In a hollow, fed by a trickle of snow-melt, we levelled out our last stony beds. The ridge above was hidden in cloud, but our canopy was the desert stars and a trio of intrusive satellites. From Imlil to hitting the road this afternoon was about 60km. This was our seventh bivouac.

To avoid a grilling we were up and off soon after 4am. We bound long johns and thick mitts round Peter's knee, and he hobbled along the 16km to Agouim. Patrick and I had settled with litre bottles of 'Fanta' when Tom and his patient arrived. They only had a mouthful before we were bundled into a communal taxi and roared off to the *Beau Geste* setting of Ourzazate. A swimming pool and dinner in a luxury hotel really wrote the end of our Dream symphony, though



66 *À cheval on the Taska-n-Zat ridge.*

Photo: Hamish Brown

there was a coda as we crossed the 2260m Tizi n'Tichka by bus next day. It was sheeted with ice and the spindrift was blowing wildly. The weather stormed on for many days thereafter. It had been a close-run trip after all, our Ridge of Dreams.

Bibliography

There are several guidebooks covering the High Atlas, all but one being in French. Articles have appeared in most journals and magazines over the years, the most useful being in *La Montagne*. The Alpine Club Library has the following:

J Dresch & J de Lepiney, *Le Massif du Toubkal*. 1938.
R Mailly, *Villes et Montagnes Marocaines*. 1964.
(These are both out of print.)
R G Collomb, *Atlas Mountains, West Col*. 1980.
C Cominelli, *Ski Dans le Haut Atlas de Marrakech*.
A Fougerolles, *Le Haut Atlas Central. Guide Alpin*.
M Peyron, *La Grande Traversée de l'Atlas Marocain*.
(West Col stock these as available, sometimes on sale at Imlil. Maps may be available from the same sources, or from Hamish Brown.)

Of current general books on Morocco, the Michelin *Maroc* is popular and the *Guide Bleu* authoritative, though the English translation is out of print. The *Rough Guide to Morocco* is practical and C Kininmonth: *The Traveller's Guide, Morocco* has a good historical section. S Kay's *Morocco* as well as being a fine collection of photographs has an interesting text. Neville Barbour's *Morocco* (1965) is still the best history, and Gavin Maxwell's *Lord of the Atlas* is available in paperback. B Clarke's *Berber Village* (1959) can usually be found second-hand and describes village life, while Richard Hughes wrote a collection of stories *In the Lap of Atlas* (1979). Walter Harris, Rom Landau, E Geller, B Meakin, Hooker and Ball are among some of the classic writers for the more interested readers. A Barea's second volume of *The Forging of a Rebel—The Track* is now available again in paperback. Whilst the historical background is fascinating, Morocco is now a bustling modern country—perhaps the nearest land to Europe that is excitingly foreign. It is well worth exploration, both on and below its mountain ranges.