A Pilgrim in the Atlas

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They say you shouldn't go back. That, if you care sufficiently about a region, it's best to remember it as it once was; that only a fool will attempt to recapture a place out of time. For nothing remains unchanged, least of all ourselves, and our perception of that place depends so much on what we once were and, even with maturity, memory plays tricks. Regret and disappointment are bound to be the price paid for misplaced nostalgia put to the test.

It was in the summer of '65 that I was in the High Atlas mountains of Morocco; a young man's first big mountains, they rose as a challenge and an enchantment. I gazed at them then with a childlike sense of wonder and took their loose pitches and crumbling gullies as part of the game. In their valleys I viewed the Berber with curiosity and distant respect; on their summits I sniffed the breezes and thrilled to huge horizons. On Atlas peaks and ridges the tentative hold that Britain's mountains had begun to clasp on me became permanently fixed. From that trip, mountains had captured me for good.

So for 21 years the Atlas retained a special place in my heart, no matter how often I visited the Alps, no matter how deep and lasting my love for the Pyrenees. As with a young man's first love affair, though not seriously tempted to infidelity, I wondered how they would be today, for I viewed them with tender affection. As the years rolled by no opportunity came to revisit Morocco, for I staggered from one financial crisis to another, cheating mountain trips abroad on less than a shoestring and at the expense of what my contemporaries considered essentials to everyday existence. There was never money to spare for a flight to Marrakech and a crafty fortnight of mountain adultery. The Atlas became a memory and a wistful dream.

Then, out of the blue, my life changed almost overnight. A fresh challenge arose, fresh fields and pastures new, fresh horizons and a vision full of enticement. The future took on a new shape, uncertain yet exciting. Then came a 'phone call; again, out of the blue and quite unexpected. It was an editor whose voice I recognised instantly. 'Could you do me a favour?' came the voice. 'Could you fly out to Morocco for me and spend a couple of weeks trekking in the Atlas Mountains? I need an article for the magazine.'

I um'd and ah'd for a full two seconds before allowing myself to be talked into it. All expenses paid; arrangements via Sherpa Expeditions.

Then came the doubts and uncertainties. How would it be after all this time? How much would the mountains and valleys have changed? I'd read a number of articles in recent years about trekking and climbing in the Atlas, whereas in '65 there had been very little to read, other than a couple of pieces in the *AJ*. With increased popularity there were bound to be changes, and almost certainly they'd not be for the better. On top of this, I'd broadened my

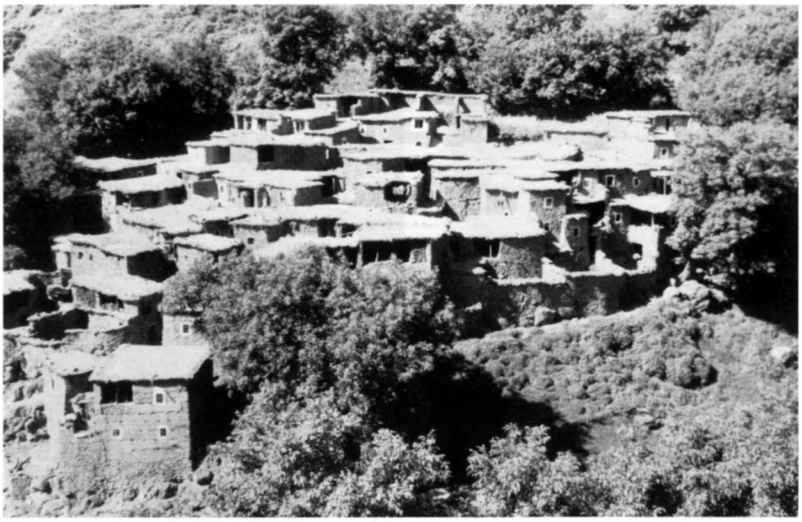
experience in the years between, and even in my wildest moments of prejudice had to admit to myself that the Atlas could not compare in scenic grandeur with the Alps or Pyrenees; they would not display the same contrasts of colour and fragrance, the same degree of vegetation or snow cover. How then would they strike me now? Would they seem perhaps drab and lifeless? But this is nonsense, I told myself, it's about as pointless to compare one mountain range with another as it is to hold a rose against an orchid; each has its own loveliness, its own character. Go with a clear mind and absorb all the Atlas have to offer. Be as a sponge and soak it all in. So I did.

The dirt road to Imlil had a stretch of tarmac that hadn't been there 21 years before. Gone too the pool at the foot of a waterfall in which I'd bathed when the truck boiled over. But other than these small changes it was much as I remembered. Imlil, too. A few minor alterations, but otherwise little different. Overhead hung the mountains; barren, dusty, with scrub covering like freckles the northern slopes. I stood in the square at Imlil and felt the drawing power of distant valleys; felt also the presence of mountains out of memory, and knew a great sense of privilege in being here again. It was great to be back.

For two weeks we – the group I was assigned to accompany – wandered over a number of passes and visited remote yet hospitable villages. We trekked in a wide circuit of the Toubkal massif and experienced the magical qualities of these totally non-European mountains. Before, I had been here simply to climb. Now, and for the first time in my mountain career, I was trekking; wandering day after day from one valley system to another in the shadow of high mountains, carrying on my back the lightest of day-sacks containing waterproofs and cameras instead of lumbering under a huge rucksack in which all food, camping and climbing gear was kept. Now mules took the strain of rucksacks, food, drinks; everything, in fact, to make life easier for us. It took a while to get used to. About five minutes in all. And I discovered a day-sack to be a great improvement on a half-hundredweight rucksack, and, in acknowledging the ease with which I could become pampered if given the chance, I wondered how on earth I'd coped in the past.

As a sponge I soaked in all the experiences on offer without falling into the trap of comparing these with other mountains I knew well. Neither did I find that time had devalued the Atlas in any way. Or had I not yet grown out of that childlike sense of wonder with which I first saw them?

Trekking I soon discovered to be a marvellous way to explore a remote landscape. Gone were any preconceived ideas about package tours on foot; gone the fear that parties of trekkers would combine to create a locust effect on a carefully balanced environment, stretching the resources of Berber agriculture to the limit. If Sherpa Expeditions were typical of today's trekking companies, then I am confident that their effect on a delicate mountain environment will be minimal. Our leader was conscientious and caring in dealings with local people; practically all food consumed by the group had been brought from home or purchased in the *souks* of Marrakech; no wood fires were burned; all bivvy sites were chosen after consultation with nearby villagers, where there were villages in the neighbourhood. There was a



67. *Ouaneskra – mint tea stop for thirsty travellers.*



68. *Nautadalur rock glacier.*

constant, yet unspoken, awareness of the responsibilities we each bore in our role as guests in another land. Another world. It was another world, indeed.

On dry, sun-baked passes we peered into shafts of narrow valleys where patches of greenery betrayed the existence of simple villages. We wound down into those valleys on mule trails probably hundreds of years old, and then traversed along mountainsides, sometimes above, sometimes below, sometimes between terraces of maize, potatoes or courgettes. Around villages grew clusters of walnut trees. Irrigation channels ran in a complex maze from one terraced field to another; on rare hillsides stood gnarled and ancient juniper trees – where they'd been spared the voracious appetite of goats.

In the villages we were greeted by children, some of whom walked with us for a while, conducting us along the way, holding our hands or chatting to us in an impossible language that could best be understood by recognizing the same impish pleading that all children wear in their eyes. Women were bent double in the maize fields; dressed in bright colours they tended crops or carried water in large pots on their shoulders. They were invariably slim, graceful, shyly inquisitive with eyes that flashed and held back laughter. Their menfolk wore drab brown or cream-coloured *djellabahs* with rough sandals on their feet. They too worked among the crops or passed us by on laden mules. Now and again we would see a Berber hanging in a walnut tree, harvesting, or stripping the leaves. Village elders congregated in the shade and discussed the appalling state of the world, no doubt, and regretted the wayward youth of today. Characters all from the Old Testament; today, in the 20th century.

Sometimes we spent nights in those villages, spreading sleeping bags on the bare roof-tops under a coverlet of stars, hearing around us the life of the neighbouring houses with their hens and cows and goats, their laughing children, shrill-voiced women, wheezing mules; a distant splash of water. Dark nights lit briefly with dancing shadows as someone moved silently through an alley, a stub of candle cupped in the palm of a hand; the sound then of a door latch, the creak of a ladder step. Then silence once more. Sometimes across a village roofscape came the sound of singing; hands clapping, hollow drums beating, the shuffle of sandalled feet on bare earth. In one village I explored with one of the trekkers a water mill in operation, its base simplicity a throwback quite a thousand years. Inside the air was white with milling flour. White dusted walls, white dusted floor, white dusted ceiling. The miller, a quiet woman with long fingers and bangled wrists, was at first uncertain of us, but then, seeing we were harmless, showed her work with an obvious pride. My admiration for the industrious nature of the Berber grew.

Sometimes we were invited into Berber houses for mint tea halfway through the day's journey. Into a dark windowless room where cows and hens fed in their own dank warmth, then up a rough ladder and through a hole in the ceiling to an upper room, half open to the sky, where a heap of cinders showed where cooking was done. Sometimes we'd sit cramped in an airless room that doubled as sitting room and sleeping quarters, while on other occasions we'd move on to the roof where tea was served in the time-honoured ritualistic way; poured from a silver pot into thin glasses and drunk piping hot and extremely sweet. And overhead reared the mountains.

Our muleteers were a ragged bunch under the leadership of Mohammed. He was tall, quiet, competent. The others had their own characteristics. Most were young, in their late teens or early twenties; sometimes playful, mostly cheerful and ready to break into song. One, however, was a somewhat sallow individual who had an unfortunate habit of sitting quietly by at lunch-times studiously picking his nose. Ibrahim, at 15, was the youngest. A lad with laughter in his eyes, but with a quick temper that fired especially when he was losing at cards. When he is 18 he'll be big trouble on trek; at the moment he is controllable. Then there was Abdullah, ever-cheerful Abdullah who loved to sing and dance. Sometimes I'd walk with him and his mule, and winding up the mountainside on a dusty trail he'd begin a loud chant to catch echoes across a corrie. Encouraged, I'd join in, and he would lead me in longer and more complex rhythms, hanging on to the notes with the power of an operatic tenor that I failed to emulate, running out of breath until I jogged gasping to catch up. He would then slap me on the back and laugh, delighted at my discomfort.

When not staying overnight on a rooftop, we'd bivouac in a boulder field or in a valley by a stream, spreading out wherever a corner attracted. Sometimes it rained, then out came bivvy-bags to keep the worst of the rain off sleeping bags. One night we found that rarity in the Atlas, a grassy meadow with two streams flowing by. Earlier a storm had rumbled overhead and evening brought a steady rainfall. As darkness took the valley I slid into my bivvy-bag and lay there, 18 inches from a stream, with just my face unprotected from the rain. It was cool and refreshing and not at all unwelcome. But as I was drifting to sleep there came a 'plop' and a frog landed on my forehead. Sherpa Expeditions failed to mention this possibility in their brochure.

After some days of trekking in a devious, clockwise circuit, we came up a narrowing valley and past the uppermost village, which would be our last Berber community for some time, for we would be crossing the high ridge in the distance tomorrow, to spend a few days at the Neltner hut in order to do a little scrambling around Toubkal's neighbours. As we came past the village I suddenly recognized it from '65. Below it I had spent a truly magical evening on a patch of grass under a walnut tree while villagers brought food and sat around us in the darkness, their faces lit momentarily as they drew deeply on the cigarettes we'd passed round. Now I was back again, and it appeared not to have altered one bit. Leaving the remainder of the party and the muleteers to continue up-valley, I found myself drawn to a boulder with a view, and there sat gazing for nearly an hour at a scene from my past. In that view was encompassed a kaleidoscope of emotions tied up with a ribbon of 21 years. Floods of emotions poured over me; the memories not only of youthful days that had changed the pattern of my life, but the years between, faces and places that make us what we are. And in that I recognized the privilege that brought me back; not just to see and to do, but to feel and absorb; acknowledging the good fortune of health and strength and fitness in mind and body that has lasted long enough to make this possible, and which we tend to take for granted – until it's lost. How many friends had shared those distant times with me and have since given up for more leisurely activities – or no activity at all? Yet here was I, rejoicing not only in memory, but in the sheer vigour of reliving that memory

once more. This Atlas pilgrimage was becoming a profound and moving experience.

Neltner was a busy place. Before, the night spent there had been spent alone. Now there was hardly a spare place to be had. I was glad to be active on the mountains, for there we could find space and air to breathe. It was good, too, to spend time away from the mules and to scramble for hour after hour on warm, sun-kissed rock. It may have been loose and crumbling; it may have been a case of short pitches between slopes of scree; but it was good to be again on ridges and peaks instead of passes and valleys. It made a change, and with the group split our smaller party went up on to ridges with multi-hued vistas and looked off to other valleys that started my dreams working once more. There are always fresh horizons to tease and entice. On bald summits that ought to wear snow but didn't, we lazed in contented relaxation under a Saharan sky. From those summits my eyes were led into panoramas that contained other peaks and ridges on which I'd scrambled in days of innocence. Each one held a memory; each one a personal possession. They became, for a while, my mountains.

And we had the screes; the 2000ft scree-runs that were the steepest, fastest, most exhilarating descents of any mountains I'd known, other than in winter, on ski. Now in dust and clatter and hollow gully-gulping echoes we swooped down, leaping from one shifting slide to the next, risking battered boots and broken ankles in a delight of irresponsible speed. It was so good to be utterly foolish again.

Of course it was necessary to 'do' Toubkal again. I remembered it with no great rejoicing, but others wanted to go and so I went with them. There are finer mountains with more exacting routes on them, but no one who truly loves mountains need ever be above the occasional steep walk to reach a summit with friends, and Toubkal has its rewards too; simply being there once more, gazing on cliffs and gorges and far-off hills that I had once been more than grateful to see and was now in the flush of privilege to witness with new friends under fresh circumstances. Perhaps this summit would be a symbol for them in years to come, as it had been once for me.

There was one day left. For most it would be a short downhill trek to the village of Aroumd with the muleteers, but four of us rose early and set out on a sharp haul up a band of cliffs and a deceptively steep strip of scree as day beamed over Toubkal's shoulder, and reached the little pass of Tizi n'Tadat (3730m) on the Biguinoussene ridge along which I'd had a day's excitement long ago. Over we went on the western side, crossed another col and dropped to the head of that fine valley where the huge cliffs of Tazaghârt set my fingers itching. The valley stretched long and inviting before us, a delight all the way. A goodly stream accompanied us. There were grassy meadowlands, then a gorge down which ribbon cascades poured in puffs of spray and swifts screeched to and fro. Goats somehow secured their footing on the almost vertical cliffs while their herders – a young Berber couple with their tiny baby – squatted under an overhanging rock and brewed mint tea.

We passed among juniper trees, disturbed the fragrance of mint as we brushed wild clumps growing beside streams, crossed hillsides of scrub and

came to a hideously basic summer village. But the terraces fanning before it were the very essence of good husbandry and a real credit to those who worked them. We sat overlooking the fields and the village, filled with admiration for the obvious skills and hard work of the Berber people, a people I had learned increasingly to respect during the days of our trek. Every levelling of terrace was the result of intensive labour. Every channel of irrigation the product of careful thought and ingenious activity. These Berber people, I realized, lived in harmony with their environment, and I feared what might happen in the future when our Western form of civilization encroaches on their world, as it has elsewhere, to the extent of luring them from their roots with a false taste of our 'other-worldliness'. I felt then that we had more to learn from them than they from us.

Two more passes, more dry hillsides and a long uphill plod in the late afternoon, and we rejoined the main party on a roof-top with a view. It was a view of Toubkal up-valley and below to the rich greenery of Berber agriculture. In the contrasting views were symbolized the riches gained in our short sojourn in the Atlas. I had found trekking to be delightfully rewarding on so many counts. But maybe I had been additionally fortunate, for I had not only enjoyed the physical journey, the mixing with the Berbers and fraternizing daily with our muleteers, not only the friendship of the rest of our party in whose company much of the pleasure had come. I had had something special. For me it had been a pilgrimage. A gift to savour.