
HAMISH M BROWN

The Middle Atlas: Jbel bou Iblane and Jbel bou Naceur

(Plates 51, 52)

Mentioning these ranges to even the most experienced guides and climbers based on the Toubkal area will simply draw looks of puzzlement or admissions of ignorance. A few will have heard of them. But the Middle Atlas is all rolling cedar forests surely? Nothing for the mountaineer? Having motored various routes through Ifrane, Azrou, Imouzzar du Kandar and other romantic-sounding places among the forests, cross-country skied at the minute resort of Mischliffen or up Jbel Hebri and bird-watched at the many *dayets* (lochans), this was very much my own feeling about the Middle Atlas.

But a few years ago a friend and I made a sort of far-eastern perimeter tour of Morocco, and from Figuig oasis up to Oudja by bus and from Oudja to Fes by train we were constantly looking leftwards to far and distant snowy mountains. That had to mean big, both in geographical spread and in altitude. The map showed a stippling of 3000m summits and a discouraging lack of roads leading anywhere near them. 'Something lost behind the ranges . . . lost and waiting . . . Go!', as Kipling's 'Explorer' had it.

The only practical information we gleaned was in Michael Peyron's *Great Atlas Traverse, Morocco*, volume 2. We chose May so that there might still be snow-melt to produce essential water and we took a gifted young Moroccan friend, Ali, from Taroudant (the other end of the country) to be our chief communicator in remote areas where even a knowledge of French would be rare. Both were wise moves. Ali is an aspirant guide and trek organiser of rare talent, his great delight is taking English-speaking groups, he can charm anyone he meets, he is a gifted cook and baker, a fit and cheery lad o' pairs.

The 'normal' approach to the range is from the north-west, probably starting in Fes and from Birtam-tam, 40km on the Oudja road, heading up 32km to Ribat el Kheyr (clearing things with the authorities there) before another 60km of spectacular driving lands one at Taffert forestry hut. The book there showed nothing of mountain doings and few visits of any kind. Yet a tarred road led to its door; that alone was a memorable experience. This entry leads to the Jbel bou Iblane range – a long swoop of crest, streaky-bacon marked with snow in May and having a certain past history of visits by mountain skiers. In fact an incipient ski resort was built under the slopes only there was no water for the hotel and, if there was snow enough for the tows, then the snow blocked all access! Echoes of Mar Lodge. Nomad tents and vast flocks of sheep and goats surround this pink-elephant site now.

Haj Mohammed, the hut guardian, is a tall, imposing figure, his austerity not quite hiding a warm heart. His son gave us a lift out at the end of our

wanderings, which was just as well as the 60km to the Ribat was scarcely backpacking country on the minimal rations we had remaining. But we had left this 'more known' entry as our exit for this very reason and chose to go in from the south and tackle Jbel bou Naceur first. Very few people ever made it to bou Naceur from bou Iblane, despite it being the highest spot in all the Middle Atlas (3326m to 3340m or some such: maps and landscape are both confusing to put it mildly).

Ait Idir Mohammed, with whom we base our gangs when in the Toubkal/Imlil area, fixed up a Land Rover for three days – our major expense – and came with us too for those days. The first day took us from the expedition-popular Hotel Ali in Marrakech to Midelt on the Fes–Tafilelt road that separates High and Middle Atlas. We arrived in early afternoon and for the rest of the day and night the rain poured down. Glen Coe could not have done better. Miraculously the next day was fine for our run down the great Oued Moulouya that moats the Middle Atlas on the south – a big river in a big desert landscape. At Outat Oulad El Haj we took to the *piste* and, with some miscasting, eventually reached the village of Tirnest, its houses on bold brows above green cultivation and backed by raw barren hills. Of bou Naceur we saw nothing. The hills were still steam-drying from the rain. The *piste* was so stony that we had no worries about being bogged down in the Land Rover. Officialdom tried, however.

The headman very grudgingly let us go on but refused to help with mules to carry our gear because we didn't have authorisation from back at El Haj. We were fed and given mint tea, however, and in the afternoon three of us and Ali shouldered heavy rucksacks (a week's food, bivvy gear, ice-axe and crampons) and set off for the invisible mountain. In the blazing heat this was no treat and our crossing of a ridge to gain the long access valley (the Taouchguelt Srhir) was hard graft. Luckily we met a nomad camp and a man with a donkey laden with plastic bottles who led us to the only *source*, a spring where we camped after five hours of steady uphill toil. Bou Naceur only lay a Ben Nevis in height above and holes in the cloud revealed intimidating crags and snowfields.

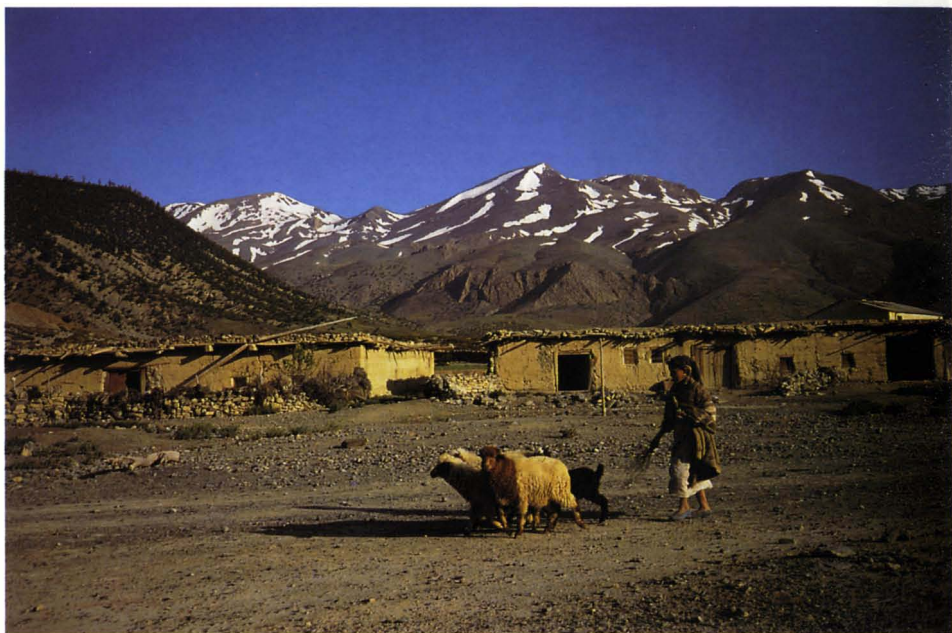
Jbel bou Naceur has a layered plateau so it is very difficult to tell the bump which is the highest. We were not pleased to wander round finding that each seemed higher than the last (and vice versa!) as, by then, we were desperately dehydrated, having done the equivalent of Fort William to Ben Nevis summit via Tower Gully. One gush of water alone appeared all day, and that low down. Originally we planned to traverse NE to bag another 'Munro', the 3128m Adrar n' Siouane, bivvying at the col between. But the col was obviously waterless and day was vanishing fast as we floundered over the porridge of new snow on the plateau. We had our bivvy at 3100m and ironically watched the sunrise glitter on the distant Oued Moulouya while we melted snow for a freezing breakfast brew. We needed pints not cuppas and Siouane ('bloody slag heap anyway') was abandoned in a desperate downward quest for water.

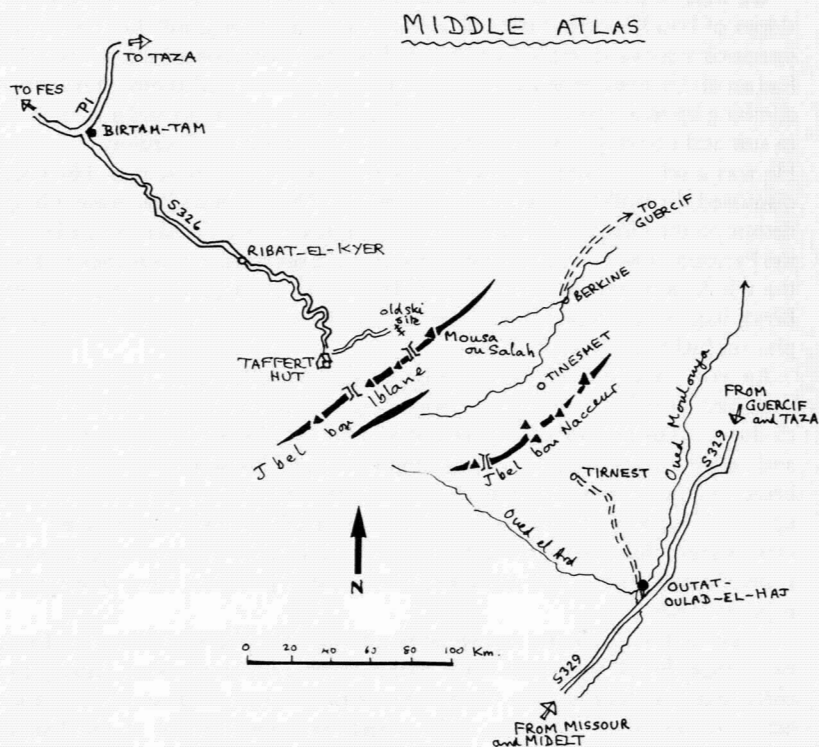
Snow here just didn't produce melt enough of its own accord – it ablates – and the limestone landscape swallowed all else, only spewing it out in seem-



51. *Above Middle Atlas: Jbel bou Iblane from Jbel bou Naceur.*
(*Hamish Brown*) (p165)

52. *Below Beni Smint with Jbel bou Iblane behind.* (*Hamish Brown*) (p165)





ingly random fashion. The green oasis village of Tinesmet obviously had water but before then we came on a fine river, a crystal flow suddenly after a dozen dry gorge river beds. We drank the water, we splashed in the water, we washed smelly socks in the water, we worshipped the marvellous fluid!

On our way down the gorge to Tinesmet we caught up with an old Berber leading a donkey laden with firewood. Ali got chatting and soon had the local situation studied. I wonder what that man thought later? 'Mektoub', no doubt ('it is written'), but this random meeting led to his going with us for the rest of our route. On entering Tinesmet he whacked his donkey with 'Home, beast!' and left it in order to take us to the *cheik* (headman) where we – and he – had tea and food, as hospitality demands, and he became one of two muleteers to assist us. No one had taken visitors before, so it was an adventure for them too. They were great characters; the headman was kindness and hospitality in genial guise and we stayed in his house overnight. His sons took us on a ramble to show us their great pride – a triple *source*, from which they had year-round drinking water. A three-mile *segua* (water channel) from our picnic gorge/river irrigated the fields.

We were late off and underestimated time and distance so did not make the slopes of bou Iblane as planned. The day was still a long, full, hot one as we swooped westwards on a path dictated by the curvaceous shale stratas. We had an idyllic hour brewing over cedar fires (elevenses) and another brew after climbing up to a pass on 2000m. Another mule caught us up and a gentleman in suit and carrying a briefcase greeted us – an utterly incongruous spectacle. He was a schools' director and had been visiting a remote school. His mule dismissed, he walked down the pass with us. The mules had to make a huge detour on the *piste* to avoid a scarp (miles of towering cliffs like the Ordesa in the Pyrenees) but our city gent bombed down a pedestrian *directissima*, talking the whole way and then rushing off for home, a village called Beni Smint. Bivvy bags snug among the boxwood, we lay watching the eerie moonlight play on Jbel bou Iblane ahead.

An easier day, made memorable by the flowers growing on the roadside in that verdant valley, and a spring which allowed us to wash (selves and some clothes), led us up to the hanging valley under bou Iblane. Watered meadows and cedar forests faced its barren slopes. A poor house produced mint tea, bread and buttermilk (Ali made his usual contacts!) before we crossed to toil up another 2000ft to a bivouac site. Remarkably quickly the brilliant day turned grey, thunder rolled and it rained periodically. The muleteers erected stone shelters and roofed them with their mules' panniers. They wove grass ropes to order.

At dawn it was still grey but we went anyway. The Jbel bou Iblane is a long, easy range, for all the world like a coal bing (that is being polite), lacking the cliffs and grandeur of bou Naceur but more known because of the easier access on its other, northern, side, where we hoped to end at the Taffert refuge. It is split in two by a gap, with the eastern, higher part bearing the name Mousa ou Salah, 3172m. This gave a huge view after an easy plod but once across the gap, the Tizi n' Tzirouch, 2865m, the weather again began to fail and grey storms trailed across with grumbling thunder. We reached Peyron's 3103m summit and looked along a couple of miles of Grey Corries ridge to the 3081m top which the map gives as its highest. We raced along, expecting to have to bale off at any time, but bou Iblane bore a charmed existence. Storms passed on all sides but we were left untouched. We still baled off as soon as the summit was bagged, losing 2000ft in rapid standing glissades or escalator-smooth scree-runs (remember when Scotland had screes that ran?).

Five miles of valley led to the start of the finest cedar forest I have ever seen. The flowers on the verges were dazzling too. It is this mix of the utterly desolate (vertical and horizontal) and the verdant and habitable that gives the Moroccan mountains much of their attraction. Only the thirsty really appreciate water; only the lonely really lay on such open hospitality. A journey like this has almost a mystical purifying element. It is also a rebuke to our soft, wasteful, selfish western society. The gracious people of the Atlas are the salt of the earth.

Ali had romped off back from ou Salah to our bivvy site to join the muleteers and they had a long tramp along and round a pass at the far end of bou Iblane. Both parties reached the refuge at the same time, which was perhaps symbolic too. In just a few days we had become a good team. Ali had made contacts at every stage and dreams of taking others back to this country lying beyond the plastic world we think of as civilisation. It is too remote and hard ever to be 'popular', as is the soiled 'Toubkal trail', and Ali, as in his own Western Atlas, will guide with respect and understanding. The muleteers rode off, richer, I hope, not just in cash but in meeting us (as we were in having known them). Kipling's poem ends something like 'Lost and waiting. Anyone might have found it. But God's whisper came to me.' In Morocco, everything planned ahead has the words *Insh 'Allah* (God willing) appended. Going into this remarkably unknown range (when one thinks of the Toubkal mobs) we were saying *Insh 'Allah* constantly. But, in the end, it was written, it was done. *Mektoub. Hamadullah.* (Thanks be to God.)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

One of the great snags of wandering in Morocco's remoter areas is the lack of maps. I can perhaps help here – and for most mountain areas of Morocco – and can also put anyone in touch with people like Ali and Mohammed who contribute so much to making Atlas ventures special. Western Atlas, Anti-Atlas, Jbel Sarho, Sirwa, Central Atlas, Middle Atlas, all offer trekking and climbing of the highest calibre, at bargain cheapness, best in the winter, spring and autumn seasons. If interested, send a SAE please to: Atlas Information, 21 Carlin Craig, Kinghorn, Fife KY3 9RX, or contact El Aouad Ali, BP132, Taroudant, Morocco.