



Comfort with an eye to the environment

I'm on my way to Agafay Desert Camp, a small tented 'village' that blends with its surroundings but is enlivened by brightly painted metal cacti of varying sizes and the rich browns of Bedouin jaimas, traditional tents woven from goat and camel hair. The apparent simplicity of the camp and its situation is perfectly in keeping with the ethos of Kasbah du Toubkal; comfort but with an eye to the environment.

I'm welcomed by Muhammed Monou, dressed in a gelaba and turban of Toureg blue and a smile that is welcome in any tribe. He is attentive and knowledgeable, especially when it comes to describing the



superb meal served by candle light later, but for the moment I'm offered the ubiquitous mint tea and shown my home for the night.

Footpaths marked out by low stone walls lead to tents set on raised terraces. The tents look small as you approach, but like Dr Who's Tardis they are deceptively large when you stoop through the low canvas doorway and step inside. A king-size double bed, comfortable sofa, a desk and stool, a low round coffee table and two bedside tables with cane lamps still leave a spacious feeling, and the peaked ceiling of cream and beige panels and wall linings of woollen panels with a key-hole motif over cream create a cosy atmosphere. Furnishings and decoration are simple but comfortable, and to add a touch of home com-

forts in the wilderness, I'm immeasurably pleased to find that each tent has a bathroom with a toilet and hot shower.

I take a short walk from the camp and drop into a dried-up river bed, the curious shade of the stone as if it has been painted in camouflage colours by some gigantic hand. With no other signs of life you could be back in the time when the world began.

A pair of camels arrive for two young French ladies to take a sunset ride. One of them asks if I'd like to take a ride as her friend is a bit nervous and doesn't want to do it. I've ridden a camel before and decline jokingly, but the banter is light-hearted and between us Mohammed and I convince the recalcitrant rider that she should really try it as she may not get the chance again. The look on her face as the beast begins its ungainly rise seems to indicate she wished she'd stuck to her original idea, but when she returns an hour later she admits that once they got going it wasn't as bad as she had expected; a once-in-a-lifetime experience but they were glad to have done it anyway.

As evening drifts slowly in a fire is lit in the centre of the camp, a place to chat and exchange tales before dinner. The flickering light of oil lamps and white oval globes strategically placed in front of the tents begin to glow almost magically as night falls. The murmur of voices as staff prepare dinner and the twitter of birds is almost all that can be heard. As the cool of the desert night approaches, guests wrap themselves in hooded robes – white for women, black for men – to keep out the evening chill.

After a slightly overcast evening the sky suddenly begins to clear and a narrow rainbow appears, arching over the tents. Dinner is served, and as my table is directly in line with the tent entrance I'm rewarded with the coming of night, with the shimmering flames of the open fire outside and the glitter of the candles decorating my table reflecting off my glass.

The quality of food served at Agafay Desert Camp is exceptional, equal to any found in some of the best restaurants in Marrakech.

We begin with five small bowls of warm salads, from slightly tart to a sweet salad of beetroot (simmered with orange zest, cardamom, and a soupcon of sugar), by way of soft cauliflower, al dente courgette, a mix of sweet peppers and tomatoes, and eggplant cooked





with tomato, onion, parsley, coriander and olive oil. Everything is delicious, with independent flavours enhanced with a variety of sweet and spicy herbs and spices. The ingredients of each dish and its preparation is lovingly described by Muhammed.

Two tajine dishes arrive. One of the things about travelling in Morocco is that you can be served a few too many chicken tajines, but when the conical lids are lifted off I'm delighted to see that in fact one is a tangia, one of my favourite Moroccan dishes, beef cooked with olive oil, pepper, garlic, preserved lemon, ghee, saffron, pepper, salt and cumin, slowly and softly for around four hours so that merely by resting a fork against the meat it separates. The other is a tajine of vegetables cooked in a herb sauce.

I make my goodnights to the other guests and Muhammed and follow the ground level candle lanterns lit along the footpaths to the occupied tents, the safer to guide yourself home by. Pockets of light from the lanterns twinkle like stars low on the horizon, while the glow of the globe lighting the terrace of my tent is

like a pale moon drawing me home.

After a night's sleep in almost total silence, the day begins with a washed blue sky spotted with cloud, the makings of a lovely day to come. The warmth of the morning sun and blue sky ring a soft relaxation to the start of the day, accompanied by a wonderful glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, pips and all.

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