

A desert of stones

Driving on the roads of the Agafay Desert, thirty miles southwest of Marrakech, is like riding on over-sized corrugated sheets, which is probably why only all-terrain vehicles and camels venture

Despite the name, the Agafay Desert is not the sand desert of Sahara and Lawrence of Arabia fame, the dunes replaced by a vast, undulating, stony landscape crisscrossed with tracks and dusty roads, cut through with dried riverbeds and pockmarked with small oases of stunted trees, watched over by the snow-capped peaks of the High Atlas Mountains. In Spring it is decorated with bursts of colourful wildflowers, and pocket handkerchief-sized fields of wheat provide animal feed and a small income for a few hardy families, but its seeding and harvesting on the uneven slopes is no mean feat. Small groups of goats pick at the rough scrub and abandoned villages, sometimes simply a walled compound once shared by generations of the same family, show the result of the severe water shortage that has plagued this area for decades.

These villages would slowly move over time because the buildings are made of mud brick with a lifetime of around ten years. As the buildings crumble it's much easier to simply build a new one than to repair the old. Now the few remaining are more static since

the invention of the breeze-block, but anyone who has lived in a mud-brick building will tell you the difference is noticeable. The mud-brick is cool during summer and retains the heat in the winter, but there's a feel to the building that can't be put into words – it's just different.



As you pass through the barren terrain you see dark shapes flapping in the distance; small tents for day visitors to take tea in and listen to the silence. It's a formidable landscape, but a fascinating one, as evocative in its own way as the rolling dunes of the Sahara.

I take a stroll around Agafay village and watch a group of young boys playing football on one of the few flat areas around the small settlement. Even in the desert the pitch is still fully equipped with goal-posts and nets, although if the ball misses them it goes straight down a shallow ravine to a dried up water-course. There seems to be a debate over who has to retrieve it, the kicker or the goalie.

I watch an elderly lady, bent at almost a right-angle, brushing outside her house with a short twig broom. Why? We're in the desert and there's dust everywhere. As I get closer I see she's sweeping away sheep droppings, and with the amount she's collecting it must be a large herd. Beside her a dog and a donkey share lunch from a trough made from a worn-out tractor tyre.

Wandering on I come across one of those curious sites that raise questions, but it's perhaps more intriguing not to have an answer.

Six fishing boats painted the rich blue of those found in the fleet at Essaouira, 200 km west, lie holed and dilapidated beyond repair at what looks like the





village woodpile. There seems no earthly reason for them being there other than for burning, given the sparsity of trees as far as the eye can see, but who went to the effort of getting them there and how they did it never gets an answer that really makes any sense. Even elderly villagers are reticent to give a definitive answer. Some say they were brought by film-makers, others that a group of men travelled with them from the Sahara on their way to Essouaira to become fishermen but gave up when they arrived at Agafay, which seems even less likely than the film-maker story, and begs the question, why have them in the Sahara desert when they are going to Essaouira where they are built? Another has them going in the opposite direction, from the fishing port to some distant lake, but whatever the reason, there they lie.



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 comforts 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 to the time 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-life-time 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, 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 *soupcçon* 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 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. 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 bring a soft relaxation to the start of the day, accompanied by a wonderful glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, pips and all.

For more information please
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