



REASONABLE PLANS

The Story of the Kasbah du Toubkal



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MARRAKECH • MOROCCO

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Dedication

***Dreams are only the plans of the reasonable
– dreamt by Discover realised by Omar and the Worker of Imlil***



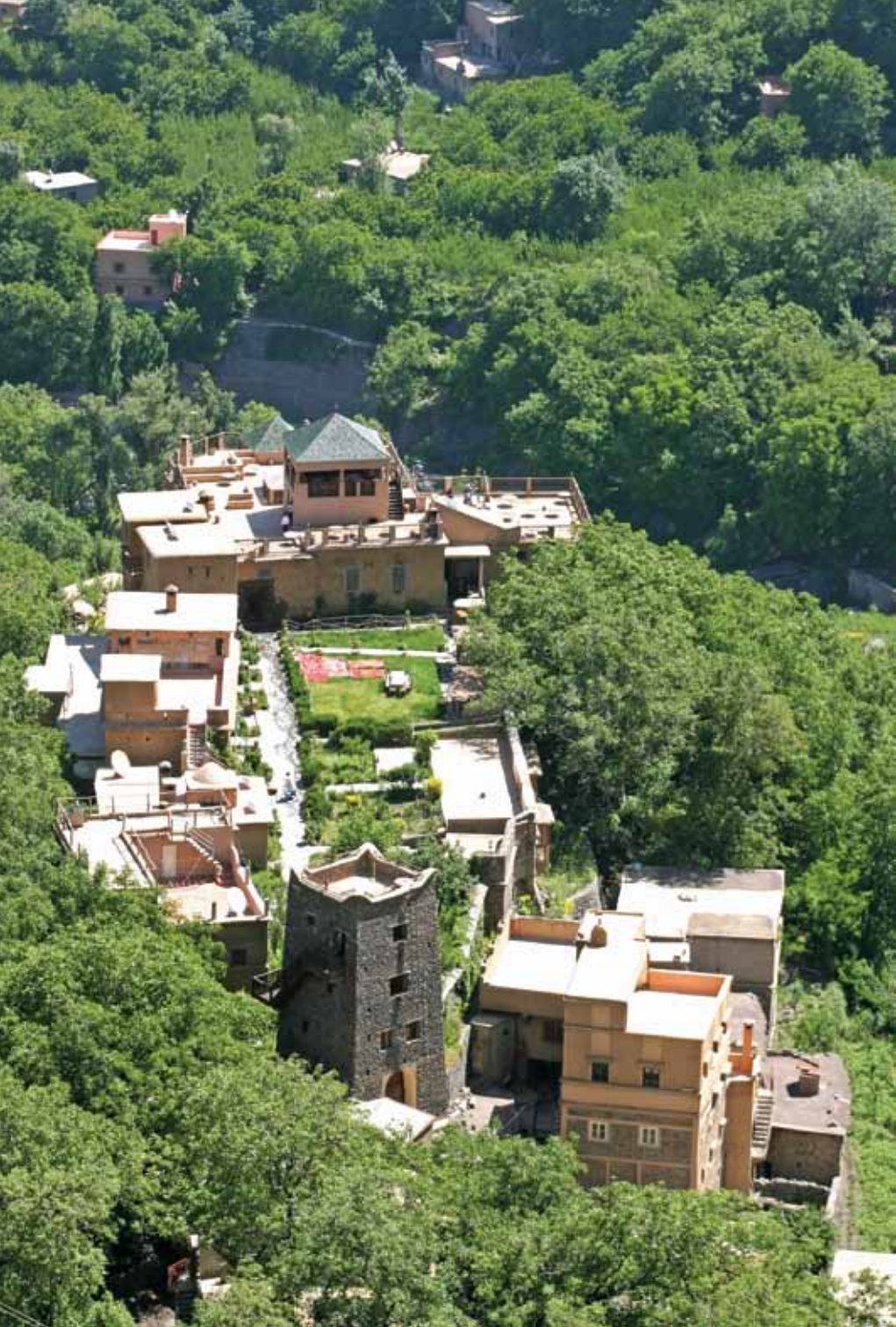
(Inscription on a brass plaque at the entrance to the Kasbah du Toubkal)

This booklet is dedicated to the people of Imlil, and to all those who helped bring the 'reasonable plans' to reality, whether through direct involvement with Discover Ltd. and the Kasbah du Toubkal, or by simply offering what they could along the way. Long may they continue to do so.



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INTRODUCTION

As you sit at your table on the sun-drenched roof terrace of the Kasbah du Toubkal, with Jbel Toubkal, the highest mountain in North Africa forming a magnificently rugged backdrop, and the villages of the Imlil Valley spread out below you, it's unlikely that you will give much thought to your immediate surroundings, other than to delight in the Moroccan food on your plate. But the plate you eat off, the stool you sit on, the beautiful Moroccan rug beneath your feet and the straw hat on your head; the couscous on your plate and the dates and spicy olives in their small bowls decorated in *Tifnache* Berber script; the cups you drink the fresh mountain water from and the ornate kettle the waiter uses for *tasse*, the traditional ritual washing of hands before eating – none of it got there by chance.

Cast your eye a little further, to take in the metalwork of the stairways and the stout wood of the upper shaded terrace; the floor tiles and trees, the seed for the lawn and glass for the windows. In your room are toilets, sinks, showers and beds; *djellabas* and *babouches*, the traditional robes and slippers you are invited to wear during your stay. Every single stick of furniture, every piece of linen, all the wood and stone used for construction and the food served at your table, was carried up the steep rough track you arrived on (long before there were steps to help you on your way) on the backs of mules – and sometimes even on the backs of men. The single largest item, an industrial washing machine, took sixteen men – four at each corner of a specially constructed sling – to manhandle it up to the Kasbah, following the narrow mule path created over generations.

As a feat of endurance, imagination and sheer tenacity, the Kasbah du Toubkal is remarkable, and worthy of the awards that have been heaped upon it. But, from the moment of its inception as a Berber Hospitality Centre, it has contributed to the health, wealth and well-being of the people of the villages of the Imlil Valley and beyond.

When I first sat on the roof of the Kasbah, on a blazing hot day at the end of March, safe under the shade of an enormous straw hat, and

flexing my toes as I sat on a Moroccan rug, drinking fresh mountain water and waiting for a *couscous de poulet et citron*, with a side dish of *salade piquante* and a loaf of bread baked on the clay oven not ten metres from where I sat, I couldn't imagine anywhere else I'd rather be. That may well have been because I'd just cycled twenty-odd kilometres to get there, and my aging and aching knees were glad of a rest. There again, it might equally have been because I was totally enchanted by my surroundings and the lovely Berber welcome I'd just received – or the fact that I'd just shared a hammam with six very sweaty cyclists!

I'm not a Natural Born Cyclist, but I'd jumped at the opportunity to take part in a bike ride in the High Atlas Mountains to raise money for Education For All (more about them later). It also helped that, far from having to lug tents, water bottles and a spare set of underwear around in panniers on the back of the bike, we'd be staying in gorgeous hotels, lunching on freshly-made Moroccan cuisine while reclining, pasha-like, on thick rugs and gilded cushions, and that when our legs ran out of steam there wasn't just one back-up vehicle hovering behind us, but two, a pick-up truck for the bikes and an air-conditioned mini-bus for the lazy old lethargics such as myself, who were just that little bit too worn out to face the steeper climbs.

A few days later I was back at the Kasbah, but by now the weather





had taken an uncharacteristically bad turn. It was a grey day, rainy and cold, without much likelihood of the clouds moving on and giving me an unspoilt, sun-shimmering view of the snow caps of Jbel Toubkal. I sat in reception, reading and enjoying the ubiquitous cup of mint tea. Lahcen Igdem, a charming young man who welcomes everyone with a big smile (as does everyone there), looked up from his paperwork. "Do you fancy a walk?" Despite the heavy drizzle, I did, so he kitted me out in a hat and waterproof jacket and we took a back route down to Imlil. The walk was wet and muddy, and I loved every moment of it. Halfway round we took a break, and as I sat on a rock and looked up at Jbel Toubkal shrouded in mist, and then down on Imlil, soggy damp under a grey curtain of rain, I thought, "There's a story here." What follows isn't the whole story, but it's a beginning. I hope you enjoy it. More importantly, though, I hope it tempts you to want to find out more and, perhaps, help us spread the word about this small corner of Morocco, the good things that are happening here and, with your help, the even better things that can be done for the future.

Derek Workman
Valencia, Spain
July, 2011



THE HOUSE ON THE HILL

In 1973 Mike McHugo, a mere slip of a nineteen-year-old boy, invited his school pal, Allen Hogan, to take a jaunt in the second-hand beige Volkswagen Beetle he'd just bought for £150. Not content with a wander around the juvenile fleshpots of England, he'd set his sights on Morocco, a mysterious land far enough away to be considered an 'adventure'. For four weeks they jollied around the country, and by the time they left Mike was hooked, although at the time he probably didn't realise just how great a part this enigmatic patch of North Africa would play in his future.

Mike found himself in the Imlil Valley in 1978, looking for trekking routes for his adventure holiday company, Hobo Travel, whose first clients subsisted on tomatoes, tinned sardines and bread, while travelling around Morocco in a beat-up ten-seater Land Rover – and loved every minute of it! One of the first people he met in the village was Omar Ait Bahmed, a young mountain guide and ski instructor. (Omar is more widely known as Hajj Maurice; the latter part of his name is a nickname given to him when he trained as a ski instructor in France, and 'Hajj' indicates that he has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.) Neither realised at the time that they would become lifelong friends and business partners, but over the next few years Mike often used his friend's small village house as accommodation for the trekking groups.

Trevor Rowell met Mike while they were driving buses in the UK, and decided to join him as a partner in Hobo Travel. (Hobo Travel in turn became Discover Ltd. when a group of family and friends, including Mike's brother, Chris, joined the company with a view to buying what was to become The Eagle's Nest Study Centre in the Cévennes National Park in France.) For the next five years they adventured together in Morocco, before Trevor returned to teaching, although he has remained closely involved with Discover ever since.

“Imlil isn’t exactly a metropolis now,” comments Trevor, “but it was pretty basic when we first went there. There was no road other than a very bumpy track that had been created by animals and vehicles travelling up and down the valley for decades. The only way you could get in or out was by four-wheel drive, or standing up in the back of a truck. It was almost twenty years before electricity arrived, so there was no lighting or refrigeration, and virtually no sanitation. Sleeping accommodation was as often as not on the floor, or on the roof in summer. Life was just one step above subsistence – in other words, it was a typical trail-head village for hardy trekkers who wanted to climb Jbel Toubkal.”

Building from scratch

HOVERING OVER IMLIL was the Kasbah, by the time of Mike’s arrival little more than a ruin, with a couple of walls remaining of the original house, home to chickens scratching in the dirt and a few goats. It had been the summer home of Caid Souktani, a local chief during the time Morocco was a French protectorate. A colourful character (there’s a photo of him in the dining room of the Kasbah, posing with his American Thunderbird car, his French wife and his children), he liked his comforts, and before electricity arrived in the valley he had hydro-electric power, driven by a water wheel





that still exists beside the entrance to the Kasbah. When Morocco gained its independence in 1956, the Caid left and the Kasbah fell into ruin.

“The Kasbah had always been a pretty iconic location,” says Mike, “and I used to look at it from the roof terrace when I stayed with Hajj Maurice. We’d been taking treks to the area for years without really giving it a lot of thought, because at that time foreigners weren’t allowed to own property in Morocco. When my father died in 1989, my brother Chris and I took our mother to Imlil for a holiday. Chris had recently read in the *Financial Times* that the king, Hassan II, had decided to make inward investment much easier, particularly in the tourist industry.”

The brothers couldn't be more different; Chris the pragmatic businessman, Mike the adventurer, but they both have a great love for Morocco and its people. Because of its situation they knew that someone would buy the Kasbah and quite possibly convert it into a fancy private house or expensive hotel. Chris thought that it would be as safe in their hands as anybody else's, so he suggested they try to buy it.

From the decision to buy the Kasbah to actually owning it was a convoluted process. It was almost six years before paperwork was completed, and in March 1995 work began to rebuild what little was left of the house, to convert it into accommodation for school groups on study courses, by then the mainstay of Discover's business in both Morocco and at their Eagle's Nest centre in France. It was a far cry from the grandeur you see now.

Before a stone was laid a Vision Document was drawn up to outline the objectives of the Kasbah du Toubkal, and even those few sentences show a sense of the scope of the project about to be undertaken. (*See appendix.*)

"We didn't really know at first what we wanted, other than that we didn't want to build on the central flat section that gives you the view out toward Toubkal. We built in clusters around the central part, which are now gardens, and eventually it began to take on an almost fort-like appearance when seen from a distance." An image that is retained when you enter by the stout wooden front door set in the thick exterior walls, with a three-storey stone tower serving as the keep (although in reality it houses three en-suite bedrooms).

The building proceeded as time, money and ideas allowed. With no power (electricity didn't arrive in the valley until 1997), and building in the traditional way – even to the extent of sifting gravel from the river that tumbles through Imlil – the work was slow and back-breaking. By late 1995 the first stage was complete.

The Kasbah and the projects associated with it have somehow always attracted people just at the time they are needed, and shortly after construction began, John Bothamley, an architect highly regarded for his sensitive designs and understanding of vernacular architecture, came into





the picture. Over the following years he produced countless sketches that enabled the organic development of the Kasbah du Toukkal, creating a design that is low on energy consumption with high levels of insulation, while appearing for all the world as if it had been there since Noah was a boy. It was at this time that the Kasbah was highly commended in the British Airways *Tourism for Tomorrow* awards in the Built Environment category.

People as well as profits

FROM THE VERY OUTSET the intention was that as much as was feasibly possible would be sourced locally; the labour to construct the building and the materials needed in the construction; the staff that look after the guests, and the food that appears on their plates; the carpets and cushions, pots and pans – if it was available locally it would be bought locally. And this ethos extends beyond the fortress-like walls of the Kasbah. The mules that carry the baggage – and sometimes guests – up to the hotel; the muleteers

and guides that take visitors on their treks into the mountains, and the equipment that needs to be hired, all of the work is shared throughout the valley. Almost no business in Imlil goes untouched by the hand of the Kasbah and the visitors to this Berber Hospitality Centre. Far from being just a philanthropic gesture, Discover saw this sharing as an integral part of the development of the Kasbah as a business. They felt that the Kasbah had to be of benefit to visitors and the local community if it was to be successful in a sustainable way.

“I often quote a saying by the Dalai Lama,” says Mike McHugo, “that there are bad selfish and good selfish. I like to think we are good selfish. The Berber are a very proud race of mountain people, and nobody has ever really controlled them. If they didn’t like what you were doing they could cause an awful lot of frustrations and problems, whereas the way we’ve done it they’ve also seen the benefits. They were probably a bit suspicious at the beginning, but we’ve got a track record now that shows that if we say we’re going to do something we do it.”

It isn’t just through putting money into local people’s pockets that the Kasbah has endeared itself to the community, it’s also by respecting those who live there. The Kasbah is referred to as a Berber Hospitality Centre rather than a hotel, and at first glance this might sound pretentious. But from the moment you enter the door you become aware that the title really does reflect the ambience and the culture of the Berber people, who are known for their hospitality, consideration and respect for others. Even though the Kasbah is a commercial enterprise, out of respect for the people who work there and run the business, all of whom are Muslim, no alcohol is sold, although you can bring your own and you will be supplied with glasses.

“In any catering business one of the biggest money makers is alcohol, but the use of alcohol is against the Islamic faith, so we decided that we would forgo the income from alcohol sales out of respect for the culture and beliefs of the employees and the people of the villages.” This apparently simple gesture shows that those involved with the Kasbah are as concerned about the beliefs of the community as they are about making a profit.

Home sweet home.

The first faces you see from the Kasbah du Toubkal as your transport comes to a stop in Imlil, are those of Mohamed Astat and Hassan Asnaq. They welcome you to the office in the village where you check in before your arrival at the Kasbah itself. Don't be surprised if one of the first things they do is look at your feet. It's not a fetish, they are just making sure that your footwear will carry you up the rough track that is the only way in to the Kasbah. If you aren't already wearing sensible shoes you'll be advised to change into them. If it's raining you will be offered an umbrella. If you are one of the many people who have come on a day trip from Marrakech to have lunch at the top of the world wearing something that is more suitable for an evening promenade in Jmaa el Fna, the ancient centre of the city, you might need a mule to do the legwork for you, and they're the chaps to arrange it.

Like many of the men in the village, Mohamed was a mountain guide before beginning work at the Kasbah, so he's seen the development of both the hotel and its relationship with the valley almost since the beginning. "Ten years ago there wasn't much work in the villages. There was some trekking tourism but that was seasonal, and for a few years I had to go to the desert during the winter to find work. I've lived all my life in this area and I didn't like having to leave my family, but I had no choice, I had to have an income. Obviously working with the Kasbah gives me a regular wage, but one of the most important things for me is that each day I return home to my family."

The same story is told over and over again. Men having to leave their families to find work in Agadir, Casablanca, Marrakech or further afield during the winter months just to make ends meet. Until recently a large percentage of the male population would join this winter exodus, but now no more than a handful continue to do so. The villages may be small, without all the thrills and entertainment larger cities offer, but almost without exception everyone you speak to loves their village and wouldn't want to live anywhere else. (This point is brought home to me when I'm coming back from Marrakech one evening with Ibrahim, one of the drivers.





We'd been in the hot and sticky city for a few hours, and as we approached Imlil, with the clouds hanging over Jbel Toubkal and the river tumbling fast with the day's rains, he lowered the window and took a deep breath. "Ah, beautiful Imlil," he said with a big grin, glad to be back home.)

With the coming of electricity and mobile telephones, and the growth of tourism in Morocco, the type of visitor to Imlil, and in particular to the Kasbah, began to change. "We were still getting a lot of trekkers," continues Mohammed, "some of them making long treks of six or eight days, and some of them coming just for the day or maybe staying overnight, but we also began to see quite a lot of people who came for a couple of days to relax at the Kasbah, perhaps take a short walk or maybe not even do that, just relax, take a hammam, and spend a peaceful time." It's not really surprising, because the world was getting to know more about the Kasbah du Toubkal, and not just as somewhere you brought a big pair of hiking boots to.

"It feels good to see people coming to the village, especially the Kasbah, because it provides work for so many people," chips in Hassan. "It isn't just the people who are directly employed by the hotel, but the guides and muleteers they hire, the shops the Kasbah buys from and that the visitors buy from. It's all income for the village. But what is very, very important is the work that the Association Bassins d'Imlil does in the area with the five percent levy the Kasbah adds to the client's bill. If there was no tourism that money wouldn't exist."

Mohamed echoes Hassan's comments. "Fifteen years ago life was pretty hard. If we wanted to take a hammam we had to go seventeen kilometres to Asni; if someone was ill or injured we had to try to contact the collective ambulance to take us to Asni or sixty kilometres to Marrakech, and we might have to wait a few hours before the ambulance came. That's a long time if you are in pain, a woman is in labour, or there has been an accident on the mountain. We didn't have a system for collecting rubbish or the money to create one. We have all those things now, and that's because of tourism and the money that the Kasbah puts into the hands of the Association Bassins d'Imlil to do these things. This makes a very big difference to our lives."



TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

The Association Bassins d'Imlil

Around the walls of the covered rooftop terrace of the Kasbah du Toubkal are four sayings carved into long wooden planks, one of which reads, *There are many religions but only one God.* It's a curious quirk of fate that in a valley whose inhabitants are almost all devout Muslims, and for a hotel with a large percentage of Christian visitors, if it hadn't been for the Dalai Lama the Association Bassins d'Imlil might never have existed. Although, to be fair, he wasn't directly involved and probably doesn't know anything about his connection with the hotel at the top of the world.

Bringing the Himalayas to Imlil

WHEN SCOUTS for *Kundun*, Martin Scorsese's 1997 epic about the early life of the Dalai Lama, chanced across the recently finished first stage of the Kasbah du Toubkal, they thought it would be ideal for the scene in which the Dalai Lama escapes across the Himalayas from Tibet to India, the glowering peak of Jbel Toubkal being as near to the famous Tibetan mountains as they could get, visually as well as practically. Payment for services and extras is usually made on a person-by-person basis, with a fee going to the owners of the location, but before Discover agreed to allow the Kasbah to be used as a location they told the producers, The Walt Disney Company, that they would only do so if the villagers of Imlil agreed, and that the fee was to go to the villages in the valley to provide much needed services for the greater good of all. In discussions with representatives from the seven villages of the valley, it was decided to create the Association Bassins d'Imlil, the Association of Villages of the Imlil Valley, who would receive a fee and use it as a basis for funding future projects.

Discover insisted that as a general principle, and following their own criteria, as much of the food and labour as possible would be sourced from the local area. The production provided work for thirty people as the film crew built the set, as well as the muleteers and their pack animals who carried everything that was needed up to the Kasbah's doorstep.

For six weeks between November and December 1996 the Kasbah was clad with stonework, prayer wheels, wooden doors and Tibetan domes to transform it temporarily into the Monastery of Dungkar, to which the Dalai Lama fled from Lhasa in Tibet. Tibetan actors, extras and film crew were flown to Morocco from Nepal, India and New York – they even brought in two yaks for authenticity. Each day the fleet of thirty-three 4x4 vehicles and ten lorries would cover the 120-kilometre round trip from Marrakech, bouncing up the 17-kilometre unpaved rocky road from Asni to Imlil village, with the cast and crew dragging themselves up the steep, knee-buckling slope for the last stretch from the village to the Kasbah. Everything the production needed was hauled up by local muleteers, including generators to power the equipment – electricity didn't arrive in the valley until the following year. It's said that Martin Scorsese never emerged from behind his protective wall of monitors, and even though Jbel Toubkal with its glistening snow caps fulfilled its role perfectly, they had to use Epsom salts to create the snowy Himalayan scenes shot at the Kasbah. There are a few remnants of the Kasbah's time as a Tibetan monastery, most notably a model of a deer on its haunches, set above the main entrance to the building.

After filming, the location manager wrote a testimonial, saying that the people of Imlil worked harder than any one else he had ever worked with. But more importantly for the people of the Imlil valley, they now had the Association Bassins d'Imlil and funds in the bank to begin work.

Working together

COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING is nothing new in Moroccan culture; they have a history of respected villagers being asked to act on behalf of their neighbours in deciding which projects would most benefit the village as a

whole and how they would be implemented and funds raised. An example of this is the irrigation system that feeds the terraces to water the apple, cherry and walnut orchards that are the main cash crops of the Imlil valley. For generations, an annual meeting decides how much water each plot of land is to receive, according to its size and crop. But with the Association Bassins d'Imlil, the villages had an umbrella association, and more importantly, a source of funding separate from each independent village, giving the opportunity to help fund larger projects that would benefit the villages both individually and collectively.

The Association is made of up representatives from each of the seven villages in the valley, and even though it is predominantly devoted to projects within the Imlil Valley, it has also funded a number of projects in neighbouring villages and valleys.



***“He who has health has hope,
and he who has hope has everything.” Anon.***

Ask Hajj Maurice, who has been involved with the Association since day one, what he thinks the most important projects the Association has been involved in are and he will reply, almost without pause for breath, the rubbish collection service and the ambulances.

The first major project that the Association undertook was the creation of a rubbish clearance system, with funds from the Kasbah du Toubkal and the fee from the making of *Kundun*. It later became self-financing through the shops, hotels and commercial businesses in Imlil. For more than a decade the detritus had been transported in a mule cart, but the animal was relieved of its duties in 2009, when the Association bought the tipper wagon that now does the rounds of the villages, and delivers the waste to a disposal point on the outskirts of Imlil.

Getting my hands dirty.

Omar Auuzal picks me up in his wagon at the bridge in Imlil for our day out collecting rubbish in the neighbouring villages. Mohamed Bokare, the second collector in the team, hangs onto his platform at the rear of the truck as we set off for our first stop, Tamatert.

We park at the side of the road and scramble down a rocky path into the village, armed with a couple of large nylon sacks. The tiny alleyways are steep and uneven, and the routine is to walk to the bottom of the village, turn around and clamber back up, picking up the rubbish as you go. This makes perfect sense; why start at the top and have to lug a heavy bag all the way back up the hill again to the truck? And it's not just the 'streets' we clean, but also the tiny cultivated terraces at the sides; everything collected and dropped into nylon bags.

For a couple of hours we traipse the village collecting the rubbish; worn-out trainers, odd socks, tattered plastic bags, weathered cardboard boxes; even the donkey dung heap gets picked over for wind-blown waste.





There's nothing much different to the basic detritus of anywhere in the world, but the age of double- and triple-wrapped everything hasn't arrived here yet, and despite the simplicity of the collection process, there's probably less litter here than you'd see in plenty of European villages. It's slow and laborious, but it works.

For the next part of the route we'll be tackling a new destination on Omar and Mohamed's collection run, and one infinitely more nerve-racking for me.

Only a few weeks earlier a new road had been completed up to Arghen, a village on the opposite side of the valley to Tamatert, which until then had no access other than centuries-old mule tracks. To call it a 'road' is euphemistic at best; it's simply a one-vehicle-width track, bulldozed in a series of tight zigzags. This is definitely a road where you don't want to meet someone coming the other way.

In first gear Omar hauls the truck up the mountainside, following the tracks of other vehicles that have compacted the rough stone into something vaguely resembling a surface. Some of the bends are so tight that even our short wagon has to make three-point turns, which Omar

manages with a lot more confidence than I feel. When we arrive at Arghen, he executes a nerve-wracking series of turns to face downhill. The road is little more than a metre wider than the wagon is long, with a terrifying tumble down the mountainside as reward for the slightest misjudgement. As he shuffles the vehicle around and the rear wheels begin to spin and dig holes in the loose surface, I jump out, under the pretence of taking photos.

We park on a cut-away above the village and meet Hassan Aitjetame, who is part of the Arghen Village Association (known as Tagmatte, The Family), and is responsible for rubbish collection. I watch the clouds come rolling down from Jbel Toubkal, bringing the rain with them. It's cold and wet, and I've forgotten to bring a jacket; this is going to be an uncomfortable experience. Fortunately, the rains drift on down the valley, leaving only a light surface mud for us to slip around in, and soggy waste for us to pick up.

The routine is the same as in Tamatert, walking the village street by street, collecting discarded rubbish as we go along, but Arghen is much steeper than Tamatert, and at some points we are scrambling over scree that moves unsettlingly below my feet. Omar, Mohamed and Hassan, and the couple of young boys who have joined in the fun, walk this sort of ground on a daily basis so are used to it, and politely overlook my staggering. It occurs to me that refuse collectors from European countries who belly-ache about the difficulties of having to tow a wheelie-bin two metres to an automated lift on the back of their wagon should be forced to spend a week with Omar and Mohamed.

When we get back to the truck with our load, a crowd has gathered. It's almost a party atmosphere, and Omar is congratulated on his tenacity in getting the truck up to the village for the first time. He smiles, as if the skidding and sliding had been nothing.

As we begin our descent the rains return, leaving great splashes on the windscreen to obscure the view and wetting the rough stones of the road. At each tight turn, Mohamed jumps off his stand at the back and shepherds Omar as he makes his cautious three- and sometimes five-point turns. I don't comment, but a sideways glance at Omar tells me that

he's only marginally less nervous than I am. With an almost audible sigh of relief – more on my part than Omar's because I only have to do it this once, whereas he will be making the trip weekly – we arrive back at the main road and scuttle off to the smouldering incineration area on the edge of Imlil.

Rubbish dumped, I thank them both, and leave. Ten minutes later, while I'm sat under the awning of a café taking a glass of mint tea, I see them driving up the main street, and wave.

Help at hand

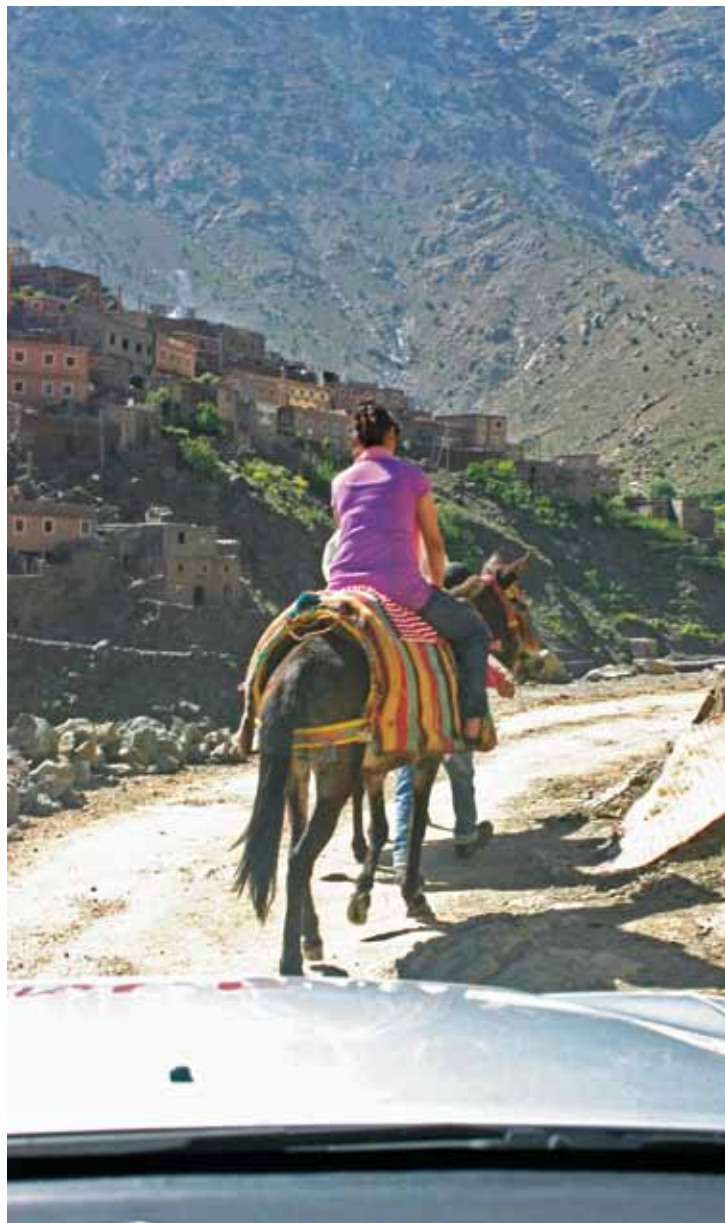
IN THE REMOTE, and even not so remote, villages of the High Atlas Mountains, medical assistance of any kind is rarely close to hand. As a result of this there have been a number of deaths over the years, particularly during childbirth, due to lack of transport to Asni, the nearest town with a maternity clinic, or on to Tahanoute or even Marrakech for more serious cases. One of the most important projects that the Association Bassins d'Imlil has instigated is the provision of an ambulance to reduce these all too avoidable mortalities. Discover Ltd. agreed to underwrite the purchase of a vehicle from England, and in December 1999 an ex-NATO Land Rover arrived in Imlil to serve the local community. Five years later, on 4 March 2004, a brand new ambulance, a converted Mitsubishi 4x4, was ceremoniously handed over, donated by a French Charity, Coeur du Monde, confirming that the Association Bassins d'Imlil could be trusted to deliver good value. The original ambulance moved on to a more remote village, where it continues to give good service.

The ambulance has been a life-line to many, particularly those in the most remote valleys who might otherwise have to wait many hours for medical assistance. But there is another 'ambulance' that receives scant publicity, and fulfils a role that most of us don't want to think too deeply about. It is a hearse, on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, just as the regular ambulance is, but by the nature of its occupants, it fulfils a more discreet service.

Even the mules give way.

The way Abderrahim Ajdaà handles his ambulance as he tackles the hairpin bends of the rough track that zigzags precariously up from Imlil to Armed, the highest and largest of the villages that form the Association Bassins d'Imlil, you would think he was still driving a taxi around the roads of Asni, seventeen kilometres away. After eleven years driving over some of the roughest terrain in North Africa's highest mountain range, his confidence is built on experience. As it's my first trip I spend a fair bit of my time concentrating on the Moroccan flag on its stand, taped to the dashboard, and try to ignore the sheer slope of the mountainside, so close that I can't even see the edge of the road from the passenger seat. Every pedestrian, mule, Jeep and truck gives way as the ambulance climbs the narrow road. After all, it may be someone in *their* family it's on its way to.





We're not on a house call or emergency today, but Abderrahim is demonstrating in a practical way his daily round. The road ends at a flat area of rough ground, where the Reyara River bubbles and sparkles languidly before picking up pace on its way down into the Imlil Valley below. Across an almost non-existent ford is Armed, a village of almost two thousand souls, and Abderrahim points out the pharmacy, closed for the last eight years due to lack of money.

If a helicopter is needed for a mountain rescue, this is where it lands, with the patient being transferred to Abderrahim's ambulance for the onward journey down the mountain to Asni or Marrakech. But 'flat' doesn't mean 'smooth'; the uneven surface makes for a rocky and tricky landing. When the river is in flood, and people shouldn't be on the mountain anyway, there is nowhere for the helicopter to land, and Abderrahim has to gather a team of villagers to bring the injured down by stretcher.

In more general situations Abderrahim takes the first call. His main work is ferrying expectant mothers to the maternity clinic in Asni, or the hospitals in Tahanoute or Marrakech to give birth. One person is allowed to travel with the patient in the rear of the ambulance. The next most common is attending accidents, mainly motor accidents, where he's often first on the scene, even before the police arrive. Abderrahim has been trained in first aid, but the ambulance has limited equipment and if he thinks the patient needs a nurse or doctor they will be taken to the clinic at Imlil. The resident nurse, Hamid Asbayo, calls the doctor if necessary, and the patient can be treated there. If there are complications, Abderrahim makes the sixty kilometre drive to the hospital in Marrakech.

When the Association Bassins de Imlil put forward the idea of buying a hearse in 2010, Hassan Bouyenbaden volunteered to be its driver; on call day-in, day-out, just as Abderrahim is. When Abderrahim is unavailable to drive the regular ambulance, Hassan steps in, but most of his clients are at the opposite end of their life-cycle to those of his fellow driver. At fatal road accidents, he is required to attend with the police, bagging the body and removing it to the morgue in Marrakech. Fortunately this kind of situation is quite rare, and the majority of the people he transports have

died of natural causes. For those from the villages of the valley who die in Marrakech, Hassan collects the body from the hospital so that the deceased can be buried in his or her homeland.

Most of the inhabitants of the locality are strict Muslims, which means that no male outside the family other than medical personnel may touch a woman. Dispensation is also given to Hassan, as he is required to handle the body in order to put it in his ambulance. Sometimes family members are too distraught to deal with the death, and Hassan has to quietly seek help from others for the removal, without overstepping the bounds of propriety. What helps in this situation is that he has lived in the valley all his life, and many of the people he is called to attend were his friends.

“At first it used to upset me, seeing my friends dead, but eventually I came to realise that we all die, and surely it’s better to have a friend attend to you than a stranger. It’s no problem for me now.”

Women will be returned to the home to be ritually washed by their female family and friends, before being enshrouded in white cotton or linen cloth; men will go straight to the mosque, where their male family performs a similar service. Sharia law calls for the burial of the body, usually within twenty-four hours. After prayers at the mosque the deceased will be taken to a cemetery, although not one with headstones and mausoleums a westerner might recognise. In Imlil it is simply a square plot, only distinguished from the rest of the bare hillside by a fence to keep out wandering goats.

Water water everywhere.

ALLAH MIGHT DECIDE THE QUANTITY of water that falls during a storm, but it’s in the power of man to direct where it goes.

On 17 August 1995, Lahcen Igdem, now a receptionist at the Kasbah du Toubkal, but then a boy of seven, watched the storm clouds gather from his home in Arhgen, a village on the slopes of the mountains above Imlil.

“Imlil was almost empty,” he recalls, “because the people had been warned that there could be some serious storms coming, and that they



should go to the high ground. Most of them had gone to stay with family or friends higher up the valley because they were used to floods, although no one realised just how serious this one would be.” For Lahcen it was all a great adventure, but for many families it was a fearful time that would end in the devastation of much that they held dear.

Floods and high water levels in the area are usually preceded by violent thunderstorms, and run-offs from the mountains can create roaring torrents in minutes.

By mid-afternoon the clouds had become black and dense, with thunder rolling through the valley. Almost at the stroke of four the rains began, and within two hours a torrential rainstorm dumped seventy millimetres of rain, most of it falling in the space of little more than thirty-five minutes, increasing the amount of water flooding down the Reyara River an inconceivable twenty-seven times its normal volume. A wall of water six metres high swept down the valley, carrying with it boulders the size of lorries. As it surged through Imlil it washed away almost forty cars and damaged many buildings, and while thousands died in the Ourika Valley, there were no fatalities in Imlil. By six o'clock the storm was over, and an hour later the river returned to its normal level. A flash flood of this severity is said to occur only once every two hundred years.



The Association Bassins d'Imlil came up with the idea of cement retaining walls to make sure that the villages never suffered this sort of devastation again. These walls would not only safeguard the land and buildings alongside the most susceptible sections of the river, but would also limit the speed of the flood and contain the most serious debris. It wasn't until 2006 that the project was completed, and while grey cement walls outside your window may not be the most beautiful view, when you've lost your home, your belongings, and even some of your nearest and dearest, they can take on an unexpected charm all their own.

One of the most important water-based projects was the building of a village hammam. The communal bath is central to life in Moroccan communities. Not only does it provide much needed bathing facilities, but is equally important as a place to relax, where villagers (particularly women) can chat, share advice, and generally keep up with the news and local comings and goings. Before the hammam was opened on December 18, 2004, the inhabitants of the seven villages had to travel the seventeen kilometres to Asni to use a public bath. Some householders would construct a small one- or two-person hammam for family use, but this wasn't the same as being able to pass time with friends in the comfort of a communal steam room. Now over a thousand villagers are no more than a couple of kilometres walk from the public hammam in the centre of Imlil, and it gives employment to three local people as well providing a valuable service to the local community.

Very few villages in Morocco are as lucky as Imlil and the six other villages in the Association Bassins d'Imlil. You only have to look at the other valleys to see the difference that these projects have made. Anyone has the right to put forward a project, all they have to do is take their idea to Hajj Maurice and the other members of the governing committee. If the Association thinks it's a worthwhile idea they will be given the money to do it. Local people recognise that the Association does a great deal of good for their villages and their lives, and they recognise also that it is through the five percent surcharge on client's bills made by the Kasbah, and other donations made by visitors, that they have a way of life denied to many other remote locations.



WHERE THERE'S MUCK THERE'S MONEY

Ecology equals employment – the next step.

Long before the Kasbah du Toubkal opened its doors in 1995, the High Atlas Mountains, and Jbel Toubkal in particular, had been a major draw to trekkers looking for mountain wilderness. Even today, many people still don't realise that the area is a National Park, and far from being a rugged adventure playground it is a fragile environment that will only survive for future visitors if those of today respect it. Sadly, they sometimes don't.

"There were times when the route up Jbel Toubkal was disgraceful," says Trevor Rowell, who has been trekking the High Atlas for almost thirty years. "It was the typical rubbish of sweet wrappers, paper bags and plastic water bottles, things that people should simply put back in their bags and bring down with them. Obviously, Discover and the Kasbah were part of the increase of visitors to the area, and we felt a responsibility to do what we could to respect the environment that was, to be honest, giving us an income. We began by putting some large oil drums in place as rubbish bins, but they were often ignored, or no one emptied them on a regular basis."

The first point on the Vision Statement created by Discover Ltd. for the Kasbah du Toubkal more than sixteen years ago was that it would become "a showcase/flagship development for sustainable tourism in a fragile mountain environment". Increasingly, the Kasbah is using the 5R Principle for its own immediate waste; Refuse, Reduce, Re-use, Re-cycle, but above all Re-think! – principles they plan to put into broader use throughout the villages of the Imlil Valley and, where possible, Jbel Toubkal itself.

As an example of this, the Kasbah no longer supplies water in plastic bottles, using instead the water from a spring five hundred meters away that is gravity fed to the building. The water source was studied soon after the

Kasbah opened in 1995 by postgraduate students from the Department of Water Technology at Loughborough University in the UK, which confirmed that it was genuine spring water and that it surpassed EU drinking water quality standard (and has been tested every month since without ever failing).

Visitors are encouraged to use the jugs and special water bottles provided in the rooms to carry their water while trekking, and in a small way reduce the amount of non-degradable plastic, which is one of the main 'rubbish' culprits in the area.

Planning for the future

OVER THE YEARS there have been plenty of trawls of the mountain to clean it up, just as there have been in mountainous areas worldwide, but what is needed is a concerted plan, focused not just on keeping the area clean, but also on disposing of the rubbish that is discarded, in a practical, and where possible, a commercial manner.

To create a sustainable plan for development, both for the environment and the community, The Kasbah du Toubkal and Association Bassins d'Imlil joined forces with Aniko Boehler, an anthropologist and expert in sustainable development, resident in Marrakech, to create *Mountain Propre*. Using their cumulative years of experience they began to look at ways to not only





improve the locality, but to do so in a way that would benefit those who lived there, both commercially and environmentally.

For five days in May 2011, a Swiss-based eco organisation, the Summit Foundation, looked at the environment of the Imlil Valley and Jbel Toubkal (surprisingly enough, suffering from similar problems to the Alps). The Foundation aims to make daily life and sustainable development compatible. Working with the people of the valley they began to create a plan that would see the Imlil Valley become a pilot project that will hopefully be adopted by other areas throughout Morocco.

The essence of the *Mountain Propre* initiative is to re-cycle as much of the rubbish as possible and compost any vegetable waste matter, leaving a very small amount of residual waste. As Aniko says, it's not complicated, but it is ambitious.

Each of the seven villages in the Association will have at least one collection point, where rubbish will be deposited into three separate containers. The intention is to have wooden constructions, decorated by local craftsmen, that will not detract from the natural environment. The

rubbish will be collected from each of the villages and brought to one central recycling point, probably on the edge of Imlil, where the disposal point is currently situated.

“We want the rubbish to generate an income, but also to use it in a way that will help the community,” says Aniko. “An enormous amount of wood is burned, which has to be collected by women. We’ve tested a small machine that crushes cardboard and makes it into briquettes for burning, and this could provide a very good alternative to burning wood, and also save the back-breaking effort it takes to collect it. What the people don’t use they can sell.”

This is just one of a wide range of ideas that *Mountain Propre* is looking at, including a composting machine and a compactor for crushing bulky material into blocks, each of which will provide full-time employment for at least one person. The whole point being that rubbish can actually earn money if handled correctly.

Education is everything

ANIKO IS PRETTY FORTHRIGHT in her approach to environmental development. “You don’t just walk into a place, hand over a plan and tell everyone to get on with it. That would never work. You have to spend time with the population, people of all levels, and really listen to what they have to say. Everyone has to be involved, and it’s no good just picking on one specific problem, the rubbish collection for example. You have to look at the situation in a holistic way. As much as anything else, you have to think of how you are going to educate people to understand that the way they’ve been doing things for generations may not actually be the best way, and how any new ideas you introduce will benefit them personally, their family and their village as a whole.”

But the biggest mountain of all to climb, except Jbel Toubkal, is that of education, not just of the people who live in the valley, but also of those who visit it. If they can carry the plastic bottles and wrapping paper with them when they come, it weighs a lot less to take it away with them when they leave.





THE WORK OF EDUCATION FOR ALL

***Educate a boy and you educate the man;
educate a girl and you educate a family, a community, a nation.***

To most of us access to an education beyond primary school never even enters into our consideration; it is simply there, almost by divine right. But what if it weren't? And almost worse still, what if it is on offer but you can't get to it because you live too far from the nearest school or your family is too poor to pay even the basic accommodation costs.

Take a group of friends who like a good meal out, throw in the feeling that they would like to do something to benefit the people of their adopted country – in this case Morocco – season with a bit of inventiveness and see what you get? Education For All.

Mike McHugo was one of this group, and he now has more than thirty years experience of bringing school groups to Morocco.

“We'd all lived in Morocco for a number of years and ate out together regularly. Most of us worked in tourism so we came up with the idea that we would go to a restaurant and get them to provide us with a meal at cost and we would promote them. We then charged ourselves the full rate and paid the balance into a fund, which we would use to support something, although at the time we weren't sure what.”

Over a couple of years the account grew, but it was through a chance meeting with John Woods, who had created the charity Room To Read to build libraries in parts of the world where children might never get the chance to see the written word, that saw them focus on education.

“Originally we thought that we might just act as fund-raisers for Room To Read, but then we decided we'd like to do something specific to Morocco. It was quite obvious that girls didn't have the same educational

opportunity as boys, and in addition to that, some of the villages in the High Atlas Mountains are very remote and aren't accessible by road. Children had to walk for hours to even get to the road-head before they might be able to hitch a ride to school."

Homes, not just houses.

GOVERNMENT BOARDING HOUSES have existed for children from outlying districts for many years, but these have to be paid for, and many families in remote villages are simply too poor to pay the fees. Unfortunately, these state boarding houses are often rather Dickensian, and many parents would never consider sending their daughters there. The result is a distressingly high percentage of illiterate women in rural areas, said to be as much as eighty percent in some places.

"We realised from the beginning that we had to be very careful with our approach, once we had decided what we wanted to do," says Maryk Stroonsnijder, who, with her husband Cees van den Berg, has been part of Education For All from the beginning. "We couldn't suddenly start trying to educate children, especially girls, in a staunchly Islamic society, but what we could do was make it easier for some girls to continue their studies within the established school system."

The proposal was that Education For All would provide for the needs of a number of young girls from the poorest families from some of the remotest villages in the High Atlas for the three years it would take them to complete their secondary education. An apparently modest undertaking, but one that would affect the lives of an initial group of twelve girls, increasing by the same number each year, in ways that quite possibly no one had even considered.

In 2006 Education For All was officially recognised as a Moroccan NGO, with a sister charity set up in the UK, and began to raise funds in earnest for their first boarding house in Asni, in the foothills of the High Atlas, forty-five kilometres from Marrakech. This house, and those that were to follow, are all within a couple of minutes' walk of the schools, and take into account an anomaly of the Moroccan way of educational life for girls.





Many boys will cycle to school and take lunch with them. Sometimes a single class will be held in the morning and then another in the afternoon. Boys will simply stay at the school, but it's considered unsafe for girls to do that, so they are expected to return home, impossible if they live far away. Often they've walked considerable distances, and on occasions when time-tabling is particularly erratic they'll miss a day's schooling completely. For the girls at the EFA houses they can simply walk across the road.

Ideas are cheap, boarding houses aren't, but after a lot of work and hectic fund-raising, September 2007 saw the first twelve girls from remote mountain villages begin their education in Asni, living in rented accommodation until their purpose-built home was completed.

In the beginning...

IT'S VERY SIMPLE TO MAKE a fleeting comment about someone starting school in a new town, but behind that simple statement is a world of cultural and emotional complexity.

Think of yourself as the father of a young girl not yet even into her teens, and a group of foreigners come along to tell you that you should send her to a private boarding-house miles from home. "It's for her benefit," they say, but you possibly aren't too well educated yourself, and the idea of putting your daughter into the hands of foreigners who aren't part of your culture or religious beliefs might be something you are very wary of. Wouldn't you rather take the counsel of someone of your own faith, a father himself and, even if not a direct friend, someone who has earned the respect of those who know him well?

Hajj Maurice, a small man with a large moustache and a winning smile, is well known and highly respected throughout the villages of the High Atlas Mountains, not just because he has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, which entitles him to the honorific 'Hajj', but for the work he has done as a mainstay of the Association Bassins d'Imlil. As the father of two daughters, he was aware of the importance of education for young women, especially following the sad loss of his eldest, who died of leukaemia while in her early twenties. For weeks Hajj Maurice walked the mountains, talking to



fathers and families, trying to convince them that allowing these young girls to live at Dar Asni while continuing their education was not only the best thing for them as individuals, but also for their families, their future children and their communities. Some families accepted with alacrity; the only thing that had stopped them doing it in the first place was that they simply had no money. But others were less convinced, and despite all his wiles and arguments, Hajj Maurice sometimes had to leave without even the concession of “we’ll think about it.”

Now put yourself in the place of an eleven year-old girl, eager for new sights, friends and experiences, despite never having been outside the confines of your village. You speak only Berber, a language so different from the national language of Arabic in both its spoken and written form that you may as well be going to another country to study, not a village thirty kilometres away, because Arabic is the language all your classes will be in. And then imagine that for the first time in your life you will have your own bed to sleep in, your own cupboard to put your clothes in and a washing machine to wash them – no more going down to the river to pound them on rocks. The boarding house might seem like a palace, but your new life still takes some getting used to!



Going places

AS MARYK HAS BEEN HEARD to comment, “Sometimes when you start something you have no idea where it’s going to go,” – and before they knew it EFA were a further fifty kilometres into the mountains, converting two apartments in the centre of Talaat-n-Yacoub into another boarding house, Dar Tinmel. Another twelve mouths to feed and energetic girls to look after, on top of the twenty by then living at Dar Asni.

“When we opened Dar Asni it was with the idea that we would take in twelve girls a year for the three-year cycle it took them to complete their studies to take them on to the lycée,” says Cees. “To be honest, we needed the experience of the first year to see how the house would work, so we could adapt our plans for the next one.”

One of the most important things about Education or All is that a very high percentage of the income and donations comes from people who have visited the houses and seen that they work. No one involved in the administration takes a fee or charges expenses. Apart from the wages paid to the house mother and house staff, and the running costs for each house, the only charges made are bank charges – and there is almost no way in the world of avoiding those!

It's because of this that the house at Ouirgane came into being. When a regular benefactor sold his business and wanted to help in a major way, he asked Education For All how much it would cost to build and fit out a house from scratch. One hundred thousand euros was the answer, with the land being donated by the local authority. On 5 May 2011 Dar Ouirgane had its official opening party, thanks to the generosity of someone who had the confidence in EFA to know that the money would go directly towards those who most needed it.

More than just bricks and mortar

HOUSES ARE IMPORTANT, but there are foundations other than those on which buildings sit which are of equal importance.

"The absolute rock on which everything else stands is the house mother," says Maryk, "and with Latifa Aliza, who was in at the very beginning of Dar Asni, when they were still living in rented accommodation while we waited for the house to be built, we found an absolute gem. She was one of only two educated girls from her village. She left home when she was six years old and, apart from going back for holidays, she was away for sixteen years. She has shown an incredible level of commitment, and it was through her that we found the other house mothers, Khadija Oukattouk and Mina Hadod, when we opened Dar Tinmel and Dar Ouirgane, and they are equally as caring and encouraging with the girls in their charge."

While the house mothers are the bedrock of life at the boarding houses, the volunteers who spend up to four months, and occasionally longer, helping the girls at the houses are crucial for the girls' development. Maryk stresses that a stay isn't just an easy ride or something to enhance their CV.

"The volunteers are here for the girls, not the other way around. It can be a bit difficult at first, mainly because of language differences, and particularly at the beginning of the school year when there are a lot of new girls, and the house mothers have to plan timetables for each of the girls and the programme for the house." And it's this careful planning, centred around the girls' education, that explains why eighty percent – more than double the national average – of the girls living at the EFA boarding house





in Asni passed their exams to take them on to study at the lycée.

Every single one of the girls living at Dar Asni, Dar Tinmel and Dar Ouirgane has an individual timetable of studies drawn up at the beginning of term to cover the time they are not studying at the college. It's at these times that the volunteers come into their own, supporting the girls as they work and also helping them learn English, one of the most popular classes. Each house has a specially equipped study room, complete with computers with internet connection, which the girls are encouraged to use to broaden their horizons. And their horizons are broadened more than by simply looking at a computer screen. EFA ensures that as often as possible the girls will be off on a jaunt; to Marrakech to take part in a tree-planting, followed by a picnic and games; to paddle in the sea and wiggle their toes in the sand at Essaouira; or to take a ride on a raft made of oil drums at the Cascades de Ouzoud.

Those girls who nervously snuggled up in their first 'own bed' four years ago have just finished their first year at the lycée. They have become confident young women, aware that they have something to offer the world, even if that world should simply extend to the betterment of

their own village. But they pose a quandary. How can you educate a girl and expand her horizons and then simply say goodbye when her three years are done? The answer is, you can't. But neither can they stay at the boarding house, taking up beds that other young girls need. So there really is only one answer – you build another house for the girls from the three houses who are moving on to the lycée. And what about those who want to go on to university? EFA will worry about that in a couple of years' time, meanwhile plans are afoot for that next house in Asni, and quite probably another one after that.

But the reality is that not all the girls will either want to go on to further studies or even be able to.

"We've got to be realistic," says Mike. "There is a drop-out rate, and that's only to be expected, but at least the girls will go back to their villages and be able to offer something, even if it extends no further than making sure their own children get an education. We're looking at trying to provide some form of pre-school education in the villages, and this would be an ideal way for the girls to help their communities. Because surely that's what education is all about. It's not just to make you a clever person, it's to give you the skills and opportunity to help others."





CHAPTER 5

SO WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

I hope you have enjoyed this brief story of the Kasbah du Toubkal, the Association Bassins d'Imlil and Education For All, and that it has given you an insight into the important work that the five percent added to your bill does. Without this, the Imlil valley would be a very different place, and the people who live here would have to forgo many of the basic securities of life that you and I take for granted. If you would like us to keep you up to date with all the new developments that are taking place, please sign up for our on-line newsletters, details of which are on the last page.

Over the coming months we will be delving deeper into the story of Education For All; the stories of the young girls, the house mothers and volunteers – their fun and frolics, as well as the serious side of EFA's work – so if you would like to keep in touch, or simply because you would like to know what's going on in our corner of Morocco, please do register for our newsletters.

We look forward to seeing you again at the Kasbah du Toubkal.

Insha'Allah

*From Mike and Chris McHugo, Hajj Maurice,
and everyone at the Kasbah du Toubkal and Education for All.*

APPENDIX

Discover Ltd

MOROCCAN OBJECTIVES FOR THE KASBAH DU TOUBKAL

- To be a showcase/flagship development for sustainable tourism in a fragile mountain environment.
- To be a viable business involved in the development of the Moroccan economy and its growth.
- To contribute to the enhancement, viability and vitality of the life of the local community.
- To be a Centre of Excellence for academic work on the High Atlas Berbers and in Morocco.
- To be an exclusive mountain retreat providing exceptional privacy and entry to almost anyone.
- To continue to generate a change of attitude/thinking in our guests through exposure to something different.
- To modify our corporate behaviour by receiving feedback from the local community.
- To reward stakeholders and create a product that they are proud of.



Please feel free to keep this book.

For further information visit:

www.kasbahdutoubkal.com

www.efamorocco.org

www.facebook.com/MountainPropre

To read Derek Workman's light-hearted diary about his fund-raising bike ride for Education For All, visit <http://bikemorocco.wordpress.com>

Why not join us next year?

The EFA charity bike ride starts on the last Saturday in March.

For more information visit the Education For All website.



Education for all

An educated girl educates the next generation.
Help provide a college education for girls in rural Morocco



www.efamorocco.org