

TWMC ATLAS MOUNTAINS TRIP, 2023

“...and a side order of sheep’s brain to share please” Jeremy gleefully asked the waiter.

We sat perched on the rooftop of *Chez Lamin Hadj Mustapha*, overlooking downtown Marrakesh beneath us. This was our grand, celebratory blow-out meal after a hard earned trip into the High Atlas Mountains, and we all had eyes far bigger than our stomachs.

A few days earlier we had convened, sleepy eyed, at the airport for an early morning flight out to Marrakesh, Morocco. From there, we planned to travel into the High Atlas Mountains in search of ice climbing and North Africa’s highest peak; Mount Toubkal.

The six of us; Tom, Stu, James, Lewis, Jeremy and myself, somehow managed to find ourselves racing for the gate with only minutes to spare, but thankfully all boarded the flight and a few hours later, touched down in the low winter sun of Saharan Africa.

After cramming ourselves and our mass of kit into the back of an airport taxi, we took the short ride to our Riad on the edge of Djemaa el Fna (the sprawling central square at the heart of Marrakesh). Mint tea on the rooftop led on to an afternoon exploring the many souks and back alleys around the huge square; the air, thick with smoke from food stalls and the smell of spices, mingling with the sounds of snake charmers, drummers and dancers. We weaved our way through the throngs of people, exploring the maze of alleyways. Traders selling everything from sheep’s heads to tacky plastic camels. The whole place was a chaotic mess of sights and sounds.

In the evening, we went out for dinner on the square, and on hearing our accents were treated to a never ending tirade of nicknames and national catchphrases from the traders; “Fish and chips, mister?”, “Wha, gwan geezer?”, “Hey, Bruce



Willis!” (that would be me and my obviously Bruce Willis inspired hairstyle), “Hey, two Bruce Willis!” (That would be Lewis and me). We bought dates and spiced nuts from the market stalls, finally uncovered a place that sold beer, bumped into a gang of monkeys wearing nappies (don’t ask), and finally found our way back to the riad, and bed.

The next morning, we left early in another taxi for the village of Imlil, at the foot of the Atlas Mountains. Urban sprawl soon gave way to vast stretches of nothingness as the landscape grew

barren, and the temperature steadily began to drop.

Arriving in Imlil, we piled our gear beside the road and somehow found ourselves ordering a breakfast feast of fried eggs and flatbread from a roadside vendor.

A recent change to the law meant that all foreigners must now be accompanied by a guide into the mountains, so while we filled our stomachs, I managed to track down Mohamed, a young local guide, and we began the slightly chaotic task of



trying to secure mules to carry our gear up to the Refuge du Toubkal. It soon became clear that the animals would not go above the snow line, and since no one quite knew where that now was, it was uncertain if we would manage to get our gear all the way up to the hut. We enquired whether this was more a matter of simply bribing the gendarmerie at the various mountain checkpoints along the trail, but were assured it really was just down to the conditions.

About an hour later, and with fingers crossed, we were off.

The hike up took several hours, during which time the weather steadily began to deteriorate. We managed to stop around the half way point at a makeshift little tea house, but not soon after that a blizzard rolled in and the trail became icy and draining. Everyone managed to hit the deck at least once, I got cramp in both legs, the temperature plummeted to around -17°C , and yet somehow the mules managed to make it to the hut ahead of us.

Cold, hungry, and decidedly done for the day, we were all pleasantly surprised to find the hut warm and inviting. We wasted no time in bagging our



bunks, and settling down for a much appreciated meal of tagine, rice and bread. Oh, and some more mint tea of course.

Thankfully, the next morning the weather had cleared up and blue skies hung over our first proper view of the High Atlas. So we headed out in search of ice.

Just a few minutes behind the refuge we found the perfect little frozen waterfall for everyone to play on. Half the group had never ice climbed before, so this was ideal. We dropped a top-rope down and

everyone had a chance to get to grips with things. After lunch, we headed back out, but this time a little further afield. At the base of the south cwm, we found a series of cascading frozen waterfalls, and traversed across the untouched snow to investigate. Feeling a little exposed, it soon became clear that the upper section was just too large for us to climb safely, so we set up a temporary anchor and abseiled down to the lower section. This proved perfect, so we spent the rest of the afternoon climbing the various sections along the ice wall until the sun began to dip behind the peaks. Inspired by our friends in Djemaa el Fna,



we even decided to dub all the routes with *Die Hard* monikers, like; ‘*Two Bruce Willis*’, ‘*Hans Gruber*’, and ‘*Nakatomi Plaza*’ (all mostly in the WI3 and WI4 range).

The following day we set aside for Djebel Toubkal, the highest point in Northern Africa.

Skipping the alpine start, we decided to head out a little later to avoid the others who had arrived in the hut the previous evening. This worked out great for us as we barely saw another soul the whole day.

We headed up via the south cwm, opting to take a more interesting variant of the standard route, with the intention of potentially traversing across to another peak, before descending via the north cwm.

The air was icy cold, and soon became thinner with each breath. Before long, talking became too tiring with the altitude, and our boots crunching against the frozen ground became the only sound besides the stillness. Everyone just pushing upwards.

At the base of the final col before the summit, we



veered off via the variant and ended up following beside a ridge right up to the peak.

Reaching the summit, we were greeted with truly breathtaking views across the whole Atlas range, and right out to the dunes of the Sahara desert beyond.

For some reason everyone suddenly decided this was the perfect moment for some high altitude pull-ups, so we all took turns hauling ourselves up on the large metal pyramid structure which marks the summit. (Altitude clearly does some

strange things to people.)

Despite our grander plans, in the end, the altitude had begun to prove a little too much for a couple of our party, so we decided one 4000m peak was enough for the day and headed off back down the standard south cwm route (the north cwm appeared waist deep in snow, and we were all just a bit too tired to break trail at this point).

The air grew thicker with each step we took back down towards the hut, but nonetheless, by the time we made it back, I for one had only one thing



on my mind; tagine. Oh, and yet more mint tea, obviously.

We all slept well that night.

The following day we took the trail back down to Imlil in much better conditions, and were back in the village in a matter of hours. By the early afternoon we were in Marrakesh again, where Mohamed had tipped us off to a local restaurant run by the Kings former chef (and apparently frequented by ‘Golden Ramsey’ and ‘Mary Berries’!). So, bellies stuffed with sheep’s

brain and tagine, we headed off through a much less visited part of town, in search of a Hammam (the traditional Turkish bath, so popular in the Islamic world). Suffice it to say, the whole thing was something of a ‘bonding experience’ (“what happens in Marrakesh, stays in Marrakesh”), and we all left feeling thankfully clean and refreshed, ready for our flight home and the promise of proper beds, proper tea, and some proper sleep.

All in all, a ‘proper’ little adventure.

Alex Yeo, 2023



Team TWMC, summit of Jebel Toubkal (4167m).