

By Sophie Smith

Travel Writing: Berber Village in the Atlas Mountains

Day three

From the bustling city life of Marrakesh we journeyed into the Atlas Mountains, immersing ourselves in the wilderness and renouncing all third-worldly luxuries (first-world necessities). It was tiring, but that felt like a petty sacrifice in exchange for the rewarding sensation to be conquering one of nature's immovable summits... for the first 10 minutes. After a short while the immovable summit became like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The more trekking we did, the steeper the sheer face became and the higher into the clouds the peak grew. Over our rasped breaths our guide Abdul was trying to educate us on the mountains' astounding history, which was not graciously received. Due to the sheer gradient, the mountain had to be hurdled using zigzagged paths that meandered across its face, which only seemed to elongate our hike. At around midday under the unrelenting sunshine, it was easy to mistake the snow-sprinkled mountain peaks for a fatigue-hazed illusion.

Despite the complaints, accompanied by the chirpy whistled marching tune of Abdul, we made it up the unsurpassable mountain. Whether or not it was intensified by my light-headedness from the air pressure, I did experience an overwhelming sense of self-gratifying euphoria when I finally collapsed on the mountaintop.

This elated bubble was swiftly burst when Abdul broadcast that our journey was less than half over. As I warily peered down the other side of the mountain, I found – to my disdain – a long and winding path running in the familiar zigzag pattern down the sheer cliff and through three villages to reach our upcoming accommodation. Before this expedition, we were treated to a picnic feast on the summit. It doesn't get much better than that!

After half a day of devoted mountaineering under the African sun my friends and I had instinctively consumed at least 1 litre of water each. When we politely asked to be directed to the toilet, a man - as a cruel attempt at humour, I imagined - pointed to a door, behind which was something that fell far from my definition of 'toilet'. Staring blankly at the cricket-ball-sized hole in the floor, my squirming friends and I failed to see the humour. It turns out, that *was* the toilet.

In Morocco, to go to the toilet one squats over this hole in the floor with their feet placed on the carefully positioned foot pads. Toilet paper is not a commonly used appliance and thus the holes were not accustomed to disposing of it. As a solution people had stuffed their tissue into cracks in the wall after using it. Though I choose to remember this as an eye-opening experience it is not one I am eager to repeat!

That evening, after a walk of approximately 10 miles (though many claim it to be much further) we finally arrived at our eagerly awaited accommodation in the Berber village. Exhausted, we dumped our bags on the cobbled street outside and rushed in to find our beds.

By Sophie Smith

As the door swung open we stood dumbstruck outside, wearing expressions contorted by abhorrence. Our lodgings for the night consisted of a dark room with three narrow, iron-wrought beds cramped together and another three mattresses on the stony floor. One of these we later found to be gilded with a rather suspicious, white stain. The room was illuminated with whatever natural light spilt in through the one, tiny window, which – by the time we arrived at 6pm – amounted to a dingy room bathed in shadows. The darkness did not help in our attempted elimination of our most dire problem.

The flies.

Acting on instinct we all pulled off our sweaty walking boots ready to catapult at the clandestine buzzing targets. After an hour we had successfully exterminated around 20 of the wily pests but sadly the many survivors tormented us through the long night.

There had been a recent death in the village in which we were staying and for this reason we had been instructed to keep quiet throughout the night out of respect. The locals, however, had entered into no such agreement as their alleged mourning took the form of clamorous festivities. Much like in the city, the party did not cease with the setting sun either. Fortunately, we were so exhausted from the trek that even the screeching of adhān (call to prayer) in our ears could not keep us awake.