

Cambridge University High Atlas Expedition 2021

By Joe McDermott

Expedition Aims

The main focus of our expedition was to explore the High Atlas regions, set new routes and develop our personal climbing skills. This included learning and practising basic mountaineering techniques such as moving together, rope skills and mountain safety. In the later part of the expedition we focused on climbing big walls (steep and over 300m per route). This was new to most of us, having mainly climbed UK based routes. This provided a great opportunity for big wall skills, such as hauling gear, making safe hanging belays and also learning to pace routes and exercise stamina.

Between climbing, we developed personal survival and medical skills to ensure safe living whilst moving around the mountains. We aimed to wild camp as much as possible and stayed at hostels or mountain huts in between. When climbing Toubkal and Angour we stayed at the mountain refuges. These are owned by the Club Alpin Francais, with whom we agreed to climb while staying in Oukaimeden. This was very beneficial to skill development, as one member of the team was a professional mountain guide.

Overall, the trip aimed to improve our independence and confidence while mountaineering, but also our ability to overcome issues whilst living in country. We developed personal resilience, problem solving and greater teamwork skills.

Locations

We started our trip in Marrakech for one night before moving into the mountains to a small village located high in the Atlas Range. This was called Oukaimeden and had limited infrastructure. The people living there are of Berber descent and reside in small wooden and stone huts, living a subsistence agricultural existence. Whilst here we camped outside some villagers' homes and brought food from Marrakech to sustain us for the period of our stay. We used water purification tablets to access clean water. The mountains climbed here were Angour (3600m), Mount Oukaimeden and a longer trek over several peaks that covered 25km. During our time here we covered over 300km of terrain on foot.

After a week here, we moved location to a town called Imlil. This was less intense in terms of daily living, with us spending the week in a lodge due to camping restrictions. Whilst here, we named and cleaned new routes for sport climbing in the local gorge and spent two days climbing Mount Toubkal at 4200m in altitude. The mountaineering here was easier than in Oukaimeden but did provide us with the experience of being at a substantial altitude.



Our final destination was located six hours from Marrakech in the middle Atlas Mountains. Our transport was through negotiation with local drivers and mule owners. Taghia was the small village located in this region. We stayed here for a week with a local family. Access to the village is a two hour walk on foot using mules to carry equipment. Here, we worked on big wall climbing and also went canyoning with the son of the family we were staying with.

Climbs and Mountaineering

A significant portion of our trip was spent mountaineering; climbing large peaks with sustained but less technical scrambles and climbs. The remainder was spent big wall climbing, which was more technical but for shorter durations.

Notable peaks were Toubkal and Angour- both around 4000m in altitude. Here we experienced mixed levels of altitude sickness, changes to conditions and weather, navigational challenges and a greater requirement on fitness and stamina. We covered large distances over around 12-13 hours of climbing a day. In between these large peaks we did some local bouldering and also traditional climbing on some of the smaller cliff faces. We established new routes here which have been logged for future expeditions.

Big wall climbs were all located in the Taghia region. As a team we attempted three long routes - 6a+, 6b, and 6b+ in grade. This was a great new experience for all of us, and after experiencing initial nerves we all managed to top out on at least one route. We feel this greatly enhanced our rope work skills and ability to remain safe, especially through the intimidating heights of big wall cliffs. Overall this was a very positive experience and fantastic for skills development.

Incidents

Whilst the trip was successful and all aims were achieved, we did encounter some issues and incidents that required attention. Meeting a rattlesnake halfway up a route required assessment of risk; the options were to abseil over 200m or try to work around the route to avoid it. We concluded that due to heat and time the safest option was to continue.

We also all experienced bouts of gastrointestinal illness at various times. This was mostly overcome through rest and fluids, but two members did require antibiotics, tapping into the supply that we brought with us. This was all assessed as a risk and therefore expected and accepted.

While walking into a climb, we encountered a dog who became overly playful and bit and scratched two team members. One member had received two rabies vaccines so decided to remain in Taghia, whilst the other travelled back to Marrakech to receive PEP (postexposure prophylaxis). Here, he was also placed on a drip as treatment for dehydration from *Campylobacter* and given antibiotics. He did not return to Taghia due to the time it takes to reach the mountain village.

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Culture

Some of the key experiences within the expedition were those gained through cultural immersion with the Berber people. The contrasting livelihoods to those in the UK showed clearly that there are different ways to live your life and still be happy, if not happier. Modern infrastructure was limited, especially in Taghia, yet this did not seem to reduce quality of life. If anything, greater emphasis and reliance was placed on community and networks of people that enabled survival.

Of course, issues did exist, and this way of life is not perfect. However, as a whole the communities seemed to be thriving in many aspects such as fitness, ability to overcome adverse situations, resilience, and an overall sense of belonging.

Acknowledgements

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Angour summit . 3616m.



'Melons and Mules'. Exploratory climbing in Some of the routes we documented in Imlil.

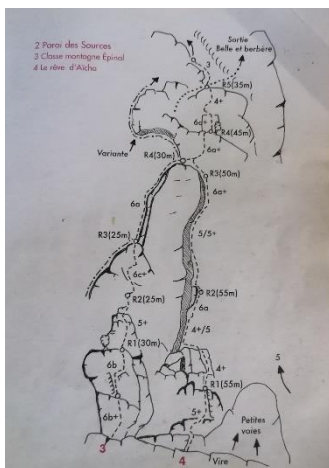




The stunning Taghia Gorge.



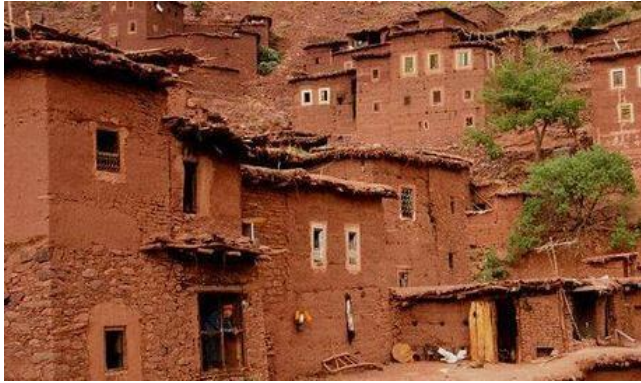
100m up on Le Reve d'Aicha, 6a+.



Guidebook topo for Le Reve d'Aicha, 6a+



Of course the medic had the first injury!



Traditional berber housing

*Haggling – who would win: Cambridge economist
or Jemaa el Fna hawker?*

