

Ski Mountaineering in the High Atlas ***by Stewart Carrie***



Approach to High Atlas - Stewart Carrie

It was not the ideal start to a ski mountaineering trip: half past seven in the evening and my skis on a different continent. Unfortunately, the airline had somehow managed to mislay my skis and all other kit transferring through London.

In March 2017 Sam and I had decided to head for Morocco and the High Atlas Mountains for our annual Explorer Skiing Trip. Over the years the balance has shifted back and forth between “Exploring” (in Transylvania) and “Skiing” (in the Pyrenees). Morocco held the promise of both, with high, hopefully snowy mountains in an exotic country.

We spent the first night in the village of Imlil (1740m), at the Dar Atlas Guest House, which is in walnut groves above the main village. Our host Jamal welcomed us with sweet, mint tea, over which I explained my ski-less predicament. He told me he knew a mountain guide who might have spare skis and that there was an outdoor shop in the village where I could rent the other things I needed.

Sure enough, in the morning I was fitted out with boots, skis, two poles (rather than a pair) and climbing skins that almost fitted. This was more than could be said for the ski trousers and clothes available for hire. The shop turned out to be a glory hole of climbing equipment left behind by European visitors and now being recycled. Unfortunately most of them seemed to have been a few sizes bigger than me.

Once kitted out, we loaded our skis and rucksacks on to the mule that Jamal had arranged for us and headed south, into the mountains. The landscape was hot and dry, and the snow-capped peaks seemed a long way off. 4 hours later we reached the first snow and so bid farewell to the mule and muleteer. The snow was patchy and so necessitated carrying skis for a while, before we were able to skin to the Mouflon Refuge (3207m). Having walked all day under a hot Moroccan sun, it was surprising how quickly the temperature dropped after sunset and we were glad of the wood-burning stove. Dinner was Moroccan soup, followed by a hearty chicken tagine, then orange segments and the ubiquitous mint tea.

Our first day's target was Raz N'Ouanoukrim (4083m), the northerly of Ouanoukrim's two summits. It was a straightforward easy ski up to the head of the valley to the saddle. The only issue was on the steeper final section where we had to zig-zag. My borrowed skins were frozen and slid off my skis and I had to resort to climbing the last 50m on foot. However, above the saddle it is necessary to remove skis anyway to scramble up the rocky ridge to the summit dome. Once back on the snow, I found that the sun had thawed out my skins and we were both able to ski the last 200m to the summit. We had clear blue skies and stunning views of the snow covered peaks on three sides and the Sahara Desert stretching out to the south.



From Summit of Raz N'Ouanoukrim - Stewart Carrie

Our descent was the NE couloir, which cleaves the north face of the mountain. The couloir is in shade for much of the day and so the snow had not been subject to freeze-thaw, making it firm but not icy. This was fortunate as the top section is heart-racingly steep and it narrows at one point to only just wide enough for a 180cm ski. Once through, it opened out into a wide bowl where the snow turned crusty, then into perfect spring snow, and finally into heavy sugar snow.

That night in the refuge we were promoted from tagine to pasta – there was a suggestion that for a third night there would be a mixed grill, but as this was our last we would never know.

Next day it was again clear and sunny for our ascent of Mount Toubkal (4167m). Our route was up the south col “tourist” route, over the summit, and down via the north col, descending to lower down the main valley than the refuges, and then heading back to Imlil.

There were a fair number of people cramponing up Toubkal that day, many leaving before 6am to be up and down while the snow was still frozen hard. A side benefit of skiing mountaineering in Morocco is that waiting for the snow to soften for the descent, affords an extra hour in bed.

For most of the ascent the route was in the shade and hard enough to need ski-crampons. Overnight I had managed to acquire duct-tape which successfully held the skins onto my skis. Climbing up into the sunshine and eventually onto the summit ridge, the wind had blown all the snow off the crest and so we had to carry skis for the final 200m. At the top there was a band of cheery, flag-waving Moroccans, who had never met anyone from Scotland, let alone on the top of a mountain. They insisted on posing for photos.



The author and new Moroccan friends on Toubkals Summit - Stewart Carrie

The ridge to the north col was skiable from Toubkal’s summit and, although narrow in places, the snow was firm. There were none of the tourist route crowds and the bowl below the col was filled with perfect spring snow, striped yellow where sand had blown in off the desert and accumulated in surface ripples. Below the lip of the corrie, a wide snowy chute took us down the valley back towards the snowline and our waiting muleteer.

Back at Jamal’s guesthouse we drank tea and watched the sun set from the rooftop terrace, before tucking in to an excellent home cooked dinner. Next day it was back to Marrakesh airport, where my skis were waiting to be checked back in again.