

Morocco

A journey through the land of the lost kasbahs

Desperate for some sun? It's 25C in Ouarzazate. Lydia Bell sets off for adventure on the fringes of the Sahara

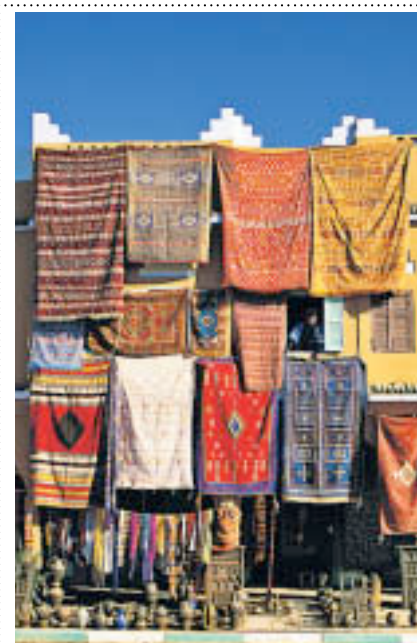
The last scrap of civilisation before the enveloping dunes, the town of Fom Zguid is pink-brown in colour, as if it could easily sink back into the sands from which it sprung. This is the brink of the great expanse of the Sahara. Here, we turn abruptly off road, where the tracks mingle and fade like snail trails, no one in sight but the odd nomad's goat or camel. Driving with the windows ajar, fine, rust-red sand has infiltrated my clothes and shoes; I can even feel it between my teeth; and my eyeballs feel as dry as a bone. We speed over a dry lake, and across its hazy expanse I see the minaret of an isolated village, like a mirage. It's almost sunset when we reach the dunes.

Morocco's southern reaches have always been its Wild West, the trade route that the camel trains used on their way through the Sahara — from Mali and Mauritania — to the great northerly souks. Before the French Foreign Legion started to build roads in the 1920s, it was little visited by Europeans. In fact, it remains tantalisingly so.

People argue that for a short, sharp blast of the exotic, Marrakesh will suffice; but you can plunge deeper, into these Saharan fringes, and still complete the trip in four days. The magic starts on the road from Marrakesh, through the epic Tizi n'Tichka Pass, the highest in Morocco which switchbacks south through the High Atlas to more than 2,260 metres, passing through tiny, dusty, mud-built Berber villages, concrete at their edges, splashed with white satellite dishes. It is spring; the skies are cornflower and the riverbanks rich with silver birch and almond, the latter in delicate, pink-white flower.

Slowly we descend into the endless vistas of the Dadès Valley, which runs all the way to the jagged Jebel Sahro to the south.

This is where you find Morocco's kasbahs; ochre palaces erected against invaders built from rammed earth and straw, many now melting back into the



landscape from which they came. Some are clustered together in ksars, fortified villages that guarded against pillaging nomads. Palms spring from the riverbed in lush profusion, contrasting with the lunar bleakness of the mountains; the air is quiet and dry.

At Ait Ben Haddou, we stop for lunch. This exotic ksar (just one of many fortified tribal villages, says Fettaf, a twinkly-eyed father figure of a guide) played a starring role in *Jesus of Nazareth*, *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Gladiator*. It would long have disintegrated were it not for the protection of Unesco. Instead, its reputation attracts a steady stream of visitors: on the wall of our ornately decorated restaurant they have mounted a photograph of a kebab-eating Hillary Clinton.

West of the gateway city Ouarzazate (which you can fly to via Paris with Air France if you don't want the overland journey), the Dadès Valley proper starts. This is the Land of a Thousand Kasbahs. At

Skoura, the westernmost point, the kasbah hotel Dar Ahlam, or "house of dreams", is sequestered in the immense *palmeraie*. Ten years ago, the Frenchman Thierry Teyssier perfectly repaired this fairytale building, assiduously remodelling its crenellated ramparts, towers and parapets carved with Berber symbols. Here he has transformed the traditional dark, plain austerity of a kasbah interior into something night-on mystical — rooms drift on to more rooms and staircases are softened with exquisite fabrics and lit by twinkling lanterns.

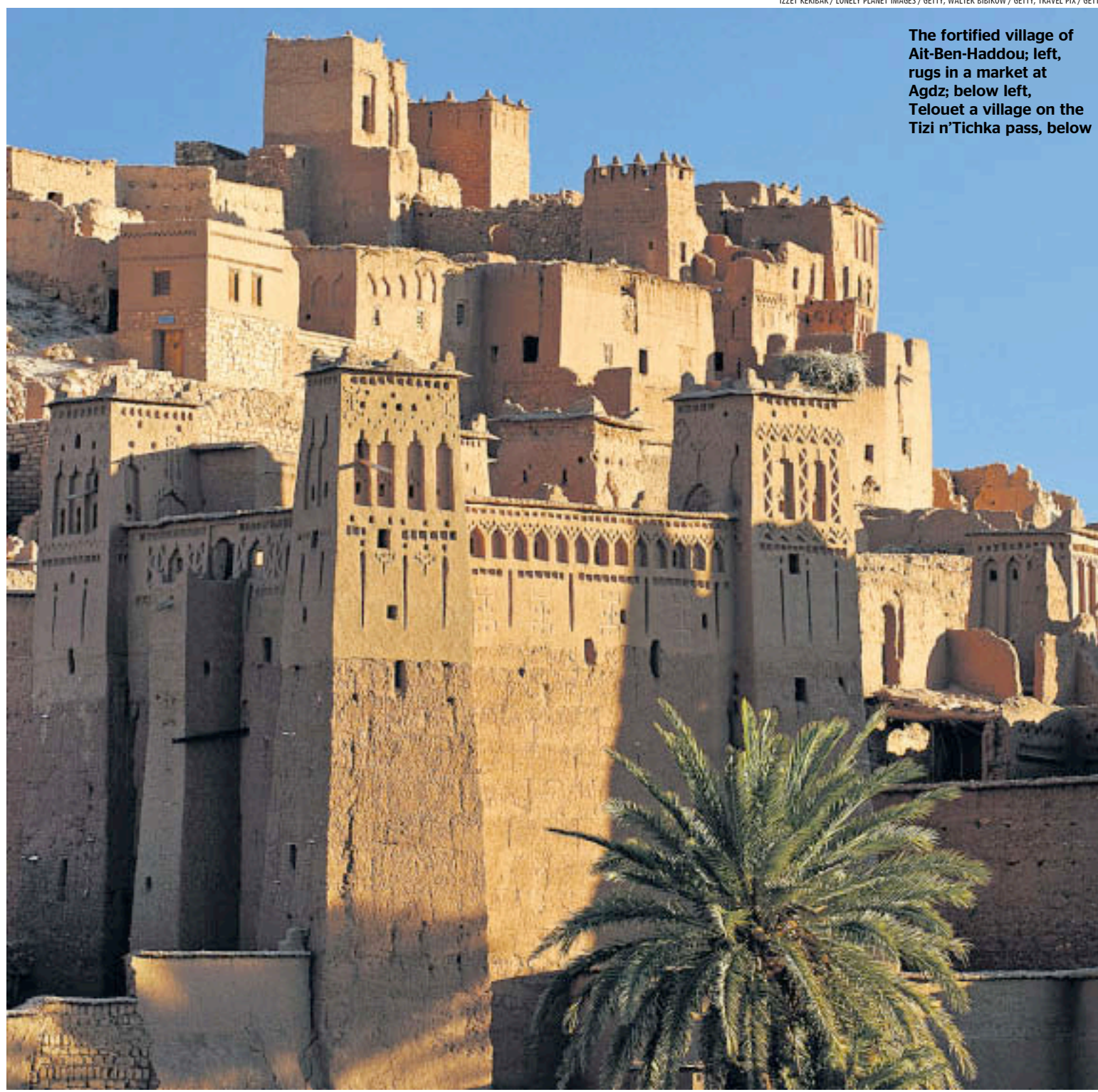
Finding your way is hard at first, but all part of the artful charm engineered by this former event planner with a magnified sense of theatre. No breakfast, lunch or supper takes place in the same place. The perfectly executed meals might be avocado and broad bean compote with pistachio salad served under the shade of an olive tree, or, in a tiny cubby hole lit with candles, a seven-vegetable tagine, savoury pastries, and spicy olives. After a bewitching night at Dar Ahlam, another adventure awaits. Teyssier has an isolated desert camp four hours south where the dunes run away into the Sahara, and where they send their guests for one glorious star-filled night. The dunes are more modest than the high dunes at Merzouga, but you will not see another living soul.

We take the road from Ouarzazate that edges through the Jebel Sahro mountain range. At Agdz we emerge into the raw landscape of the Drâa Valley, an expanse of flat, pink-brown rubble that follows a bone-dry river streaked with date palm oases interspersed with crumbling kasbahs and ringed by emerald fields thick with olive, lemon, orange and almond trees. The Moroccans say the date palms have their "heads in fire and their feet in water". We picnic on roasted vegetables, flat breads and chicken at a magnificent date palm grove, watched over from a distance by a group of local boys who wave goofily.

At Taznakht, 90km southwest of Ouarzazate, we admire Glaoui and Ouzgita rugs at the women's co-operative; the same vivid rugs you see hanging over the walls of every kasbah for airing. It's market day, so fruit and vegetable stalls are overflowing, and clusters of locals — their faces a jumble of Arab, Berber and black Mauritanian — lean together to shoot the breeze, their donkeys and motorbikes tethered in rows.

We stop for a stretch and pour water over the rocks at the side of the road, riddled with fossils. Artisans heave out great slabs of rock to polish and sell them in the boutiques of Marrakesh's Guéliz district. Then, at Fom Zguid we turn abruptly off road and on through past Iriqui, a dry lake, and arrive at the dunes just before sunset.

At this point, the surreal romance of our journey is ratcheted up a notch. After contemplating the beauty of the sands from the comfort of a Beduin rug at sunset, we are summoned for dinner, so clamber breathlessly over another dune — and gasp. The dunes are blanketed in what seems like a sea of lanterns, and in the middle is a table set for dinner, warmed by a flaming cauldron of fire. They bring us beef slow-cooked in a tangia, and earthy Moroccan red wine.



The fortified village of Ait-Ben-Haddou; left, rugs in a market at Agdz; below left, Telouet a village on the Tizi n'Tichka pass, below



The next morning we watch the dawn break over the dunes before our driver emerges yawning from behind a sand dune wearing a woolly hooded djellaba, in time to whisk us back to Dar Ahlam.

If this stretch of Morocco looks like a Hollywood set, that's because it is. Ouarzazate, the unprepossessing gateway town erected by the French Foreign Legion in the 1920s, moonlights as "Hollywood, Morocco". There are three large film studios and it's the location of choice for any film with a desert plot, ancient storyline, or even vaguely orientalist bent. Everything, from *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Black Hawk Down*, *The Mummy* and *Jewel of the Nile* to *Gladiator* and *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* has been filmed here, and large swaths of the population are accustomed to seasonal work toggled up as a Roman centurion or Egyptian slave.

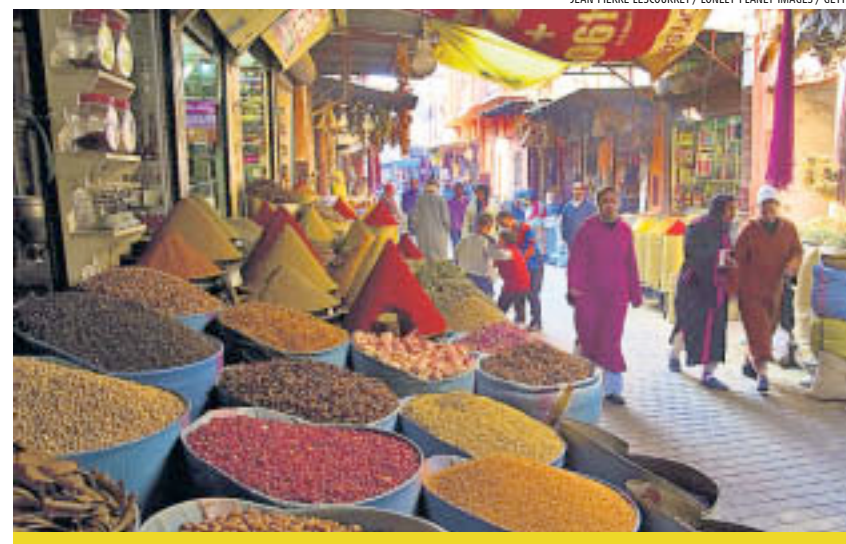
We ask to abandon our itinerary to visit the CLA studios, where giant pharaohs are mounted on the wall. Inside, the sets of yesterday are disintegrating. We join a half-hour tour, walking through countless sets, while our guide, in a tattered leather jacket with heavily gelled hair, shouts boiled-down plot descriptions. As we pass through the set of a Tibetan monastery built for the film *Kundun*, our guide explains that they had to bring 200 extras from Tibet because "there are not enough people in Ouarzazate who look Tibetan".

We are shown a generic medieval village where parts of the 2009 film *Pope Joan* were shot. Not familiar with the movie, we ask him the plot. He explains that it's the story of a female Pope who kept her identity secret. It was only when her house burnt down and her body was found that the cardinals realised she was a woman. The telltale signs, according to our guide? She "had long hair" and "was also pregnant". While I might demur slightly from my travelling companion's review ("That's half an hour of my life I'll never get back"), and think that teenage children would love the tour, it's the only element of these perfect days that jars a little.

That night, back at Dar Ahlam, the manager turns to us, and, with a smile, says: "I could have told you." Then he leads us to dinner in a screened dining room lit by a hundred candles, where they unveil the latest tender tagine. My friend turns to me. "My God," she says, "I wish I was in love with you."

Need to know

Lydia Bell was a guest of Abercrombie & Kent (0845 4851143, abercrombiekent.co.uk), which has a three-night itinerary to Morocco from £2,295pp based on two sharing including two nights at Dar Ahlam, one night at Dar Ahlam Camp (both full board), and return flights.



... or explore ancient Marrakesh

There are few places left in the Arab world where ancient cities still thrive. The Old City of Jerusalem is one. The anarchic Yemeni capital Sanaa another. Until they were dragged into Syria's bloody civil war, Damascus and Aleppo still retained their medieval beauty and charm.

But just three and a half hours after leaving Heathrow we were greeted by clear skies, 30C temperatures and a slice of old Arab culture that is becoming harder and harder to find.

Marrakesh's Medina (old city) and souk were far more exciting than I had imagined. We had been warned about being hassled by over-insistent stallholders and about the notorious groopers. In fact we found only polite and charming Moroccans eager to have visitors in their midst. The atmosphere was bustling but relaxed and the haggling was fun rather than annoying. I have been in enough dangerous places in the Middle East to know that Marrakesh is as safe as anywhere in the region these days. (Generally the Arab kingdoms such as Morocco seem to have emerged with far more stability from the Arab Spring than the more volatile republics like Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen.)

There is a visible tolerance: some women cover their heads, some their faces, others ride scooters in tight T-shirts and jeans. No one seemed to mind. Some of the Marrakesh traditions are clearly aimed at tourists, such as the forlorn Barbary apes and snake charmers who ambush tourists on Djemaa el-Fna. But the city still has tanneries, metal and glass workshops of every kind, spices that I have never seen or smelt and concoctions such as the thick dark olive oil soap for use in the city's famous hammams (steam baths).

You can walk for miles through the twisting streets of the souk (and you will, because everyone gets lost) and not see a single Chinese-made knock-off product. Even the ubiquitous Western fast-food chains are invisible. At night locals listen attentively to storytellers; others tuck in to the local delicacy — sheep's head. The buzz is entirely genuine.

At the end of a hard day pounding the streets of the Medina, visiting the stunning Bahia Palace and buying up carpets and souvenirs, I strongly recommend a drink at La Mamounia, it's the city's most venerable hotel and said to be a favourite with Winston Churchill, not to mention the Germans during the Second World War. After drinking mint tea and freshly squeezed orange juice all

day, this is the place to try something a little stronger on the terrace overlooking the magnificent gardens.

Many visitors opt to stay in Marrakesh's famous riads, the traditional hotels set around a garden courtyard inside the Medina. We were lucky to be staying outside the city walls at the Four Seasons, a new resort hotel which is designed for visitors like us looking to spend at least part of their holiday lying by a pool, playing tennis or being pampered in the spa, which has its own hammams and treatment rooms. By the end of our trip we found it harder and harder to drag ourselves away from the hotel's sprawling gardens and pools.

But if you are heading for Marrakesh make time to visit the High Atlas Mountains, only about an hour's drive to the south where Berber villages cling to the sides of steep gorges, donkeys are the main form of transport and the stillness is only punctuated by the muezzin's call to prayers five times a day.

The space, the light and dark red earth give off a strong sense that you are now in Africa. We went to Richard Branson's Kasbah Tamadot (below) where guests sleep beneath canvas. Although these are described as Berber tents, they are very luxurious, each with its own wooden deck perched above the valley below and some with a plunge pool to cool off in the heat of the day.

The highlight is exploring the mountains. We ended up at a nearby Berber village where we were served mint tea and freshly baked bread by a woman cooking over a wood-burning stove in a house made of mud bricks. But hurry. Modernity is catching up. The road we took into the Atlas was being widened. Electricity has arrived. Some of the houses had satellite dishes and local farmers were beginning to abandon mud for cement breeze blocks.

Our guide Rashid lamented the changes under way but also pointed out that he had lost five of his nine siblings to disease and poor healthcare, problems which were now easily treated in the local town's hospital.

Richard Beeston

Richard Beeston was a guest of Cox & Kings (0845 154 8941, coxandkings.co.uk), which can arrange escorted group and private tailor-made travel throughout the region. A seven-night trip to the Four Seasons Marrakesh and Kasbah Tamadot costs from £2,195pp including direct flights from London, and B&B accommodation.



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