

Mafi Mushkil

Dominic Oughton

Mafi mushkil is Berber for ‘no problem’ – one of the few phrases that Bill Deakin and I picked up on our recent trip to Taghia in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. It seems to sum up the warm, open and optimistic outlook on life that these marvellous people have, which is an abiding memory of a brilliant trip. This account tries to give a flavour of the climbing on offer in this amazing destination as well as endeavouring (and almost certainly failing) to communicate the magical combination of landscape, rock-architecture and people that make this so much more than ‘just another sun rock getaway’.

This article could equally have been titled ‘Parois de Legende; Autour du Monde’ as its inspiration came from the second volume of Arnaud Petit’s book (see *Journal* 2011:176 for an account of some fun and games prompted by Volume 1). Bill and I were searching for a destination for an October trip – squeezed in between dropping Tasha (my daughter) off for her first term at Uni and Bill’s Grandad duties for a special birthday. Too short for Yosemite; Spanish cragging too tame; potentially damp in France – the first four chapters of Monsieur Petit’s book promised the answer. The Cirque de Taghia, a wonderland of spectacular orange limestone, beckoned.

A bit of Googling and searching the usual climbing web forums only served to partially lift the veil of mystery over this magical land. Most posts on the web were “Has anyone been to Taghia, I’ve heard it’s brilliant”. The people who had been there seemed universally blown-away: “some of the greatest multi-pitch bolted routes anywhere.” Virgil Scott; “the finest multi-pitch routes in the world” Dave Pickford; “one of the best places I’ve been for multi-pitch sport climbing, if not climbing in general. And I will definitely go back.” Hazel Findlay. That settled it – Taghia, here we come! More Googling and we’d hooked up with the owner of a gîte in the village: Youseff Rezki, who, via the miracle of email and Babel Fish had arranged our accommodation and transport.

Arriving in Marrakesh on a charter flight, it was surprising to see how firmly established this North African destination is on the British holiday scene; though most of our fellow travellers seemed best equipped for pool-side lounging and exploring exotic markets. We checked into a swanky, but remarkably cheap, hotel and awaited a rendezvous with our taxi driver the following morning after breakfast. Ali turned out to be a very cheerful and obliging chauffeur and guide for our journey to Taghia – a five-hour drive for a couple of hundred kilometres eastwards, steadily rising into the foothills of the High Atlas, with the last two hours on twisting un-paved roads through increasingly spectacular scenery. This got us to the small town of Zaouia Ahanesal where the road ended and we were handed into the safe care of Abdul and a change of transport mode. The rest of the trip was to be on foot, with the welcome assistance of a donkey to carry the bags.

Entering the Taghia gorge it was evident why the road didn’t go any further – as we progressed the rocky side-walls gained in height and closed in, forcing us into narrow traversing paths, high above the water, following natural fault



Starting the walk into Taghia.

Photo Bill Deakin

lines occasionally supplemented by clever Berber constructions. The sun had long since set beneath the gorge rim and for the last half hour of the walk it was properly dark. Abdul and the mule were clearly operating on some sixth sense but Bill and I were regretting the fact that our head-torches were safely stowed in the mule's baskets, under about 100kg of assorted gear and baggage – my phone's torch app saved the day!

Distant lights grew nearer and the occasional low stone building came into view as it became clear we were approaching the end of our journey. The narrowing path meandered up steeply and we entered a small walled courtyard with a number of rooms opening off it and a narrow staircase heading upwards, which we followed to be shown to our room. Dumping our sacks, we were taken straight to the communal eating area where six fellow guests were waiting for us to join them to eat. We found during our stay that meal times had a charming randomness; somewhat determined by when the last team was down off the hill. It is remarkable how the combination of a shared passion for climbing and immersion in a strange land breaks down any barriers, and we quickly established a great rapport with our companions from Haute Savoie and Grenoble. We were famished after a long day and wolfed down the 'yellow soup', couscous and fruit that were served up, before heading for our pits.

There's something magical about arriving in a new place after dark (especially on foot and without the benefit of much in the way of lighting), and awaking to discover your whereabouts. Bright daylight greeted my befuddled brain as I stirred the following morning, and through the part-opened door I caught my first sight of towering golden walls and bright blue skies. Flinging the door open, the full cirque of Taghia came into view – huge walls and pyramidal towers pierced by deep canyons. Equally stunning was the view of the village itself – a few dozen low, squarish, flat-roofed stone houses set in a verdant oasis of small cultivated fields irrigated by a network of carefully constructed water channels.

By the time we'd got our bearings, breakfasted (bread, jam and cheese washed down by the ubiquitous sweet mint tea) and sorted our kit, much of the morning had slipped away, so we chose our itinerary accordingly. The 'entry grade' for climbing at Taghia is pretty steep: the shortest routes are 200m plus, with just one route of less than 6b and most having pitches of 6c and into the 7s. Somehow pride wouldn't allow us to do the easiest route in the area (Le Rêve d'Aïcha, 6a+) so we settled for the 300m 6b+ Belle et Berbère (a play on beauty and the beast, but also reassuringly close to 'Bill and Barbara' – a good omen, maybe?) This was situated on the Parois des Sources, a comfortable 15 minutes away from the gîte and the most convenient of the crags.

This turned out to be an excellent choice: ten outstanding pitches on highly-featured limestone, just off-vertical with holds alternating between sharp finger pockets and edges. The quality and difficulty of climbing were both sustained at a high level; every pitch a three-star 6b or 6b+ and topping out on a shoulder of Jbel Timghazine to give a fitting feel of accomplishment at the end of the day. Forty minutes walk down a well-cairned path, with the occasional 'Berberisation' to ease passage over a tricky section, led back to the gîte and another welcome surprise, as we were greeted by an ornate silver pot of sweet amber mint tea, and even some biccies – now that's service!

As well as being a hugely satisfying route in its own right, we were also greatly encouraged for the rest of our trip. You never quite know what you're getting into when you arrive in a new climbing area: grades can vary massively; bolting can be sparse, especially on mountain routes (and Michael Piola, the equipper of a number of Taghia's lines, has a reputation for big run-outs) and rock quality can be over-stated. Our first route of the trip had passed muster on every count, so emboldened by the relative ease of our ascent we decided to up the ante. It was time for Chapter One of 'P de L: Au Nom de la Réforme'.

This 300m route takes a steep line up the centre of the west face of Taoujdad – the smaller of the two pyramidal towers that dominate the view from Taghia. Starting a long way up the water-washed stone-chute that separates Taoujdad from the larger Oujdad, the approach takes a bit of finding on first acquaintance until the obvious twin ramps that mark this and the adjacent route appear. Again, the line is fairly sustained at 6b+/6c after a couple of entry pitches, and the 6c pitch is outstanding. After seven pitches the route deteriorates into a scrambly ridge, which leads to the top of the mountain and a straightforward walk-off. Having got to this point, Bill suggested that we rap and avoid the walk-off. With tired feet I readily agreed (I should have smelled a rat!)

Arriving back at our sacks I started to change into my approach shoes for the jog back to the gîte; just in time for an early tea. However, I spotted that butter-wouldn't-melt expression on Bill's face and knew I'd been conned when he suggested: "As we're all the way up here, why don't we just do this route to the right, to finish off?" This was À Boire ou Je Tue le Chien – roughly translated as: Bring me something to drink or I kill the dog! Well, I'm a sucker for a great route name and the guide did say "Très belle voie"; the only problem was that it also said "...en partie équipée; 3 ou 4 Friends petits et moyens." By now we'd come to trust the local bolting and weren't carrying any Friends, Camalots or anything else for that matter. "Don't worry", Bill assured me, "the cams are bound to be



Bill nearing the top of Au Nom de la Réforme.

Photo Dominic Oughton

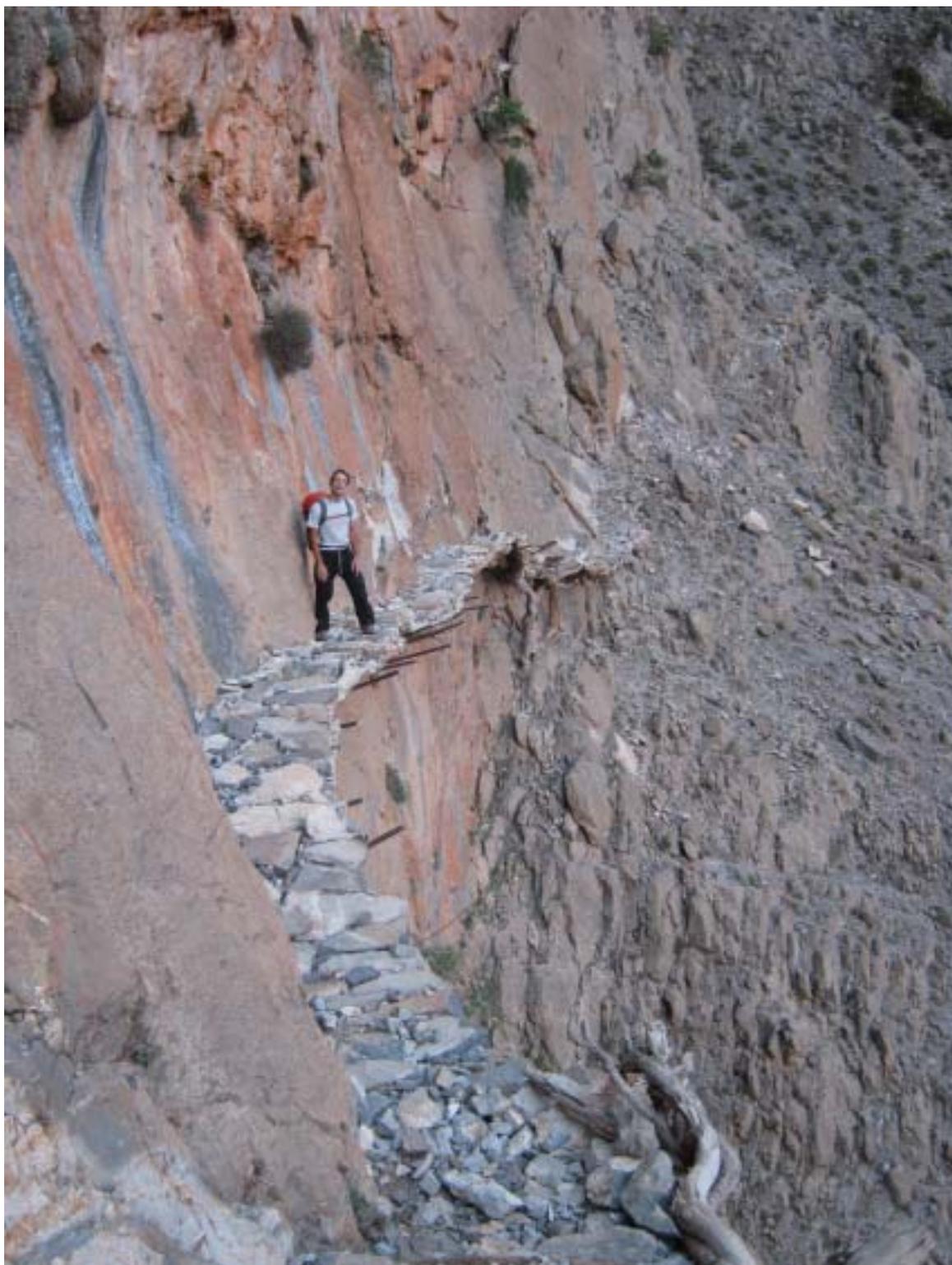
for my first 5+ pitch and it'll be well-bolted after that". So it was that I found myself about 10m up the 6c second pitch looking at an 8m run-out over a small roof (perfect Friend placement) and up a very steep crack (ditto) to get to the next bolt. I took a few deep breaths to settle the nerves and rationalised that, most likely, whoever graded the route hadn't even heard of Stanage, let alone the sacred art of jamming. A few stiff pulls saw me avoid the sixty-footer and instead clip into the next shiny bolt, and the rest was history. Sure enough, another awesome route in the bag.

Our next objective was Canyon Apache; an outstanding line on the Paroi d'Ifrig, put up in 2003 by the afore-mentioned A Petit (but not included in his book) and M Piola. The approach is exciting enough; scrambling on the walls of a narrow slot-canyon on mirror-smooth rock (think Stoney-esque polish) with a few aid moves to add a bit of spice. The climbing is steeper than elsewhere, with a few gently overhanging pitches mixed in with grooves and the occasional small roof to add variety. There are a couple of fun 6b+ pitches and an awesome, sustained 6c crux, which leads to within two pitches of the top. The weather, which had been threatening all morning, now took a turn for the worse and started spitting rain. Bill led off up the penultimate 6b+ pitch and had almost finished by the time the heavens opened. Wasting no time he took the rope in and I started following as the hail lashed down, filling the pockets with little white ball-bearings. Luckily the rock has amazing frictional qualities and I managed to reach Bill's stance, a rope-length beneath the top. Without a prolonged discussion, we decided to press on for the summit rather than rap. More rain and the occasional flash and thunder-clap accompanied the last easier pitch and a couple of bedraggled climbers arrived on the top. A slightly convoluted Berber path led us safe, but dripping, back to the dry and comfort of our temporary home, where yet more tea provided the necessary refreshment. We'd made good time and were off the hill by about 2pm, so spent the rest of the afternoon watching the weather system pass through.

The storm raged throughout the afternoon and evening, putting down a significant amount of rain. The gentle river that emerges from the confluence of the canyons beneath the crags swelled to flash-flood proportions and burst its banks, washing away walls, paths and livestock, not to mention a luckless villager who ended up with a badly broken leg when trying to rescue his flock. It was only then that we realised how lucky it had been that we'd decided to press on rather than retreat by abseil. We'd have ended up beneath 300m of steep, soaking limestone but in an inescapable slot canyon above a raging torrent – a pretty uncomfortable place to spend the night.

The next day we had a 'rest' day whilst we waited for the main crags to dry and in preparation for big plans the following day; restful in as much as we only did a 5-pitch 6c/7a, L'Ane Sale (this would rate three stars elsewhere, but by Taghia standards is probably one to skip). Afterwards, I jogged down to Zaouia for a whiff of phone reception so I could call home (no Bill, it wasn't to check my emails), whilst Bill recced the approach to Chapter Two of P de L: Baraka; a 680m 6c (assuming you frig the short 7b pitch) on the south-west face of Oujdad. Our French chums had come back from an ascent a couple of days before with rave reviews, and warnings not to tarry: their 5am start had seen them back at dusk around 5pm.

The walk in to the south-west face of Oujdad is an adventure in itself, following a 'Berberised' staircase up an improbably steep wall before traversing a featureless sloping plateau and a very exciting Berber bridge. As we topped-out onto the plateau our hearts sank, as we heard voices ahead of us. The last thing you want on a 16-pitch route is a party in front. The voices were not too far away, somewhere below and to the right of us – perhaps a sprint finish might still save the day. Arriving at the foot of the first pitch it was clear that our



Dominic on the Berber bridge leading to Baraka.

Photo Bill Deakin

unseen companions had taken a wrong turn somewhere; Bill's recce had paid off and we had a clear way ahead – green lights all the way! We'd geared up and flaked the ropes before the other team finally arrived. A challenging interrogation with a strong Spanish accent: "You climb fast?" was a clear invitation for us to cede pole position. "That's the plan," I politely declined. With a pair of scowling onlookers, frozen fingers and a barely digested breakfast (it was still only about 7am) Bill set off on what was one of the best leads of the trip – a very thin 6b+ right off the deck. He pulled it out of the bag in fine style,

and was taking in the rope in about 20mins. Meanwhile I'd managed to instil a bit more entente cordiale (or whatever the Spanish equivalent is) and struck up some banter with our new friends (not Spanish at all, but most definitely Basque!) They'd ridden overland on motorbikes from Bilbao and were on a mission do 5,000km biking and 5,000m climbing. They were clearly in a hurry as their leader set off as soon as I left the ground, and had a rather European outlook on the practice of pulling on the gear. Despite this, we were in a hurry too, and after a few pitches the Spanish team were distant dots below us.

With that sorted out, we could focus on the climbing – and what a feast of climbing there was. Most of the action is packed into the first half dozen pitches, with the finale to this section being a sumptuous balancy 6c following a slabby arête – subtle lay-aways and hoped-for edges on otherwise featureless rock. Marvellous! The next 400m give a contrasting series of grooves and cracks at a steady 5+/6a+ with spaced protection supplemented with the occasional poor cam placement. Moving fast we topped out via a 6b finale and were on top of Oujdad by about 1pm. The views from here are fantastic: down to the village surrounded by its neat patchwork of subsistence greenery; across to climbers on routes we'd done earlier in the trip on Taoujdad and Timghazine; and up deeper into the High Atlas where endless canyons, pinnacles and spires gave hint of a lifetime of exploration to come. After a bite to eat and a tortuous couple of hours' descent we were back home in time for a four o'clock tea – we were quite chuffed.

Thus, by Day 5, we'd ticked our two main objectives for the trip. Unfortunately 'wind-down' doesn't feature in the Oughton-Deakin dictionary, so it was 'foot to the floor' for the last three days we had available – Who knows when we'll get the chance to come back? The next day we decided to finally do Le Rêve d'Aïcha, but thought we'd 'warm up' on the adjacent Classe Montagne Epinal, a 'beau pilier' to the left at 6c+. After six pitches of highly enjoyable and sustained climbing (but never quite 6c+ – we must be getting strong...;) I arrived at a steepening and a blank section. Bad news: The only means of progress was to pinch on a pair of goutte d'eau (water-worn pockets to you and me) whilst smearing on the slab below. Good news: I knew exactly what to do. Bad news: Because I'd made the same move four days previously! We were six pitches up Belle et Berbère and had covered all of the preceding 200m just a few days before – perhaps the most embarrassing grey-point* in history. The only way to recover any kind of dignity was to jump straight on Classe Montagne Epinal (now identified by a process of elimination!) and then finish off with the long-awaited Le Rêve d'Aïcha. Fifteen pitches and over 500m of climbing made for a long day.

The last couple of days were a bit of a blur. There aren't that many fully-bolted routes in Taghia, and of the remaining options La Lumage de Rêve Berbere (a sister route to Canyon Apache) and Princess Msmir (on the same chunk of rock

* *Grey-point: a play on the term red-point which describes an ascent of a route with the benefit of prior-knowledge. A grey-point is an ascent with prior-knowledge that has been completely forgotten; also known as an Alzheimer-flash.*

but at a higher level) stood out. Unable to choose, we did both as an enchainment, linking the 9-pitch 6c with the 6-pitch 7a via a five-minute amble through goat-infested scree. Both were outstanding, but our efforts were beginning to take on a ‘route too far’ feel – fingers shaved of skin were wrapped in tape to avoid the worst of the pain; any excuse to avoid weighting them (a bridge, palm or even a jam) eagerly taken. We were shattered.

That left our final day, and for once we went for the wind-down option. All week we’d gazed out of our room at the continuation of the Taghia cirque over Tinik Fsin and on our last day we took the opportunity for a change of scene to climb Haben oder Sein, a 250m 6b+ on the Sector Cascade. An enjoyable but unremarkable route, this gave brilliant views back to the village and beyond onto Taoujdad and Oujdad where we’d been playing all week. The heavens opened at about 2pm, just as we topped-out, and for once there would be no chance of ‘...just one more, for the road.’ We’d have to call it quits after just ninety pitches and 3,200m of climbing at an average grade of 6b/6b+. That’s two miles of E3 in old money – perhaps it was time to go home, after all?

Haben oder Sein (meaning ‘to have or to be’ in German) was a fitting route to finish on in many ways. With spectacular views of our ‘happy hunting ground’ of the previous week backed by an unending vista of ‘more of the same’ hinting at future opportunities for exploration. It also summed up the tension that is faced by the villagers of Taghia. Tourism (and the income that even the small



Oujdad from Tinik Fsin with the line of Baraka visible on the sub-lit right arête. Taghia village is just off bottom left. Photo Dominic Oughton

number of visiting climbers and trekkers has brought into the village) has hugely changed the economy and culture. In many ways this is to be celebrated: a charitable foundation founded by a visiting trekker has already delivered schooling, university scholarships and work on sanitation and health. The Moroccan Government has a target to bring mains electricity to every household over the next years; there's even talk of a road. But what price 'progress' when so much that is unique about this peaceful oasis might be lost (you only have to look to nearby Todra to see the difference a conveyor-belt of tourist buses would make to a remote Berber community).

The abiding appeal of Taghia, for me anyway, was the feeling of remoteness and distance. You don't end up there by accident; you've got to really want to go. The Berber people have welcomed these strange foreign visitors into their community; and not just out of commercial self-interest. Bill and I genuinely felt we were treated as guests by the Rezki family, and everywhere we went people would smile warmly 'Salam Alikum', (peace be with you), whilst pondering us inquisitively. I had no hesitation in leaving my passport and wallet unguarded in an unlocked room – these people don't have much (in a material sense) but you feel that whatever they do have they would share. I write this article with mixed feelings: on the one hand I want to spread the word; to share the fantastic experience I have enjoyed so much and to encourage others to go (and surely the French have had this climbing nirvana to themselves for too long); and to help the Rezkis and the people of Taghia to build on their entrepreneurial venture. On the other hand I would hate to see it spoiled: either culturally or, from a nakedly self-interested climbing perspective, with crowds and polished routes. Haben oder sein indeed – who are we to choose?

Practicalities:

Travel and Accommodation.

Having got to Marrakesh (Thomson and easyJet fly direct from UK) you could get to Taghia by public transport, but you'd probably lose a day's climbing either end of the trip, and the web is littered with tales of rip-off drivers and missed connections. For about a hundred quid each way (for a taxi-full of up to four people) Youseff Rezki will arrange door-to-door connections by battered Merc (with 500,000km on the clock) and mule (slightly fresher!) Youseff's gîte sleeps about twenty in clean, simple three- or four-bed dorm rooms. Facilities are fairly basic, but completely adequate; the hospitality is exceptional and the views from high above the village are stunning. You can contact Youseff on aoujdade1966@yahoo.fr. There is another gîte lower down in the village run by Saïd Messaoudi, but I can't speak highly enough of the hospitality chez Youseff.

Food and Drink

For just £8 a night we were treated to dinner, bed and breakfast at the gîte. Dinner alternates between couscous and taghine (meat stew), both tasty and filling, preceded by the ubiquitous 'yellow soup' and followed by fruit. Breakfast is all-you-can-eat bread and jam and cheese, and we were indulged with fantastic pancakes on a couple of days. (One day we asked for an early breakfast as a special concession ahead of a big day on the hill – Abdul was completely obliging in getting up for 6am, so Bill jokingly suggested a repeat order for the



Bill in front of Youseff's gîte.

Photo Dominic Oughton

pancakes that we'd thoroughly enjoyed the previous day. Imagine our guilt when Abdul brought in a plate piled high with delicious fresh pancakes that he'd turfed his poor wife out of bed to make for us!) We brought a load of cereal bars and chocolate with us for hill food (though we could equally have got these in the village) and also a donkey-load of bottled water from a Marrakesh supermarket. Alternatively you can fill bottles at the gushing spring at the foot of the Paroi des Sources (15mins from the gîte) which our French friends did to no ill effect. On the subject of drink – forget it. Strictly speaking at least, Morocco is a 'dry' country in terms of alcohol. In reality, alcohol is served in hotels in tourist areas and a couple of the more enterprising guests even imported beer and wine to the gîte. Readers who know Mr Deakin will be impressed (surprised) to find that we eschewed all such temptation for the whole duration of the trip!

When to go?

As it says in the guidebook: 'Taghia est certes en Afrique, mais aussi en montagne.' Summer is far too hot and at an elevation of 2,000m to 2,800m, there is snow on the ground in the depths of winter. The consensus from the web seems to be April and May or September and October as the best months. We were there in early October and were blessed with largely clear sunny weather, temperatures in the mid to high 'teens (having left Marrakesh in a sweltering 36°C and only the couple of storms mentioned to interrupt the perfect climbing conditions. Whilst much of the climbing is on south-facing crags, these are often shaded by the opposing wall of steep and narrow gorges, and there's invariably a cool (sometimes chilly) wind blowing through these.

Hazards

We were pretty lucky in avoiding the worst of ‘African tummy’ syndrome, and amongst the group staying at the gîte I think only a couple of climbing-person-days were lost through illness. The usual precautions: care with water, peeling fruit and obsessive hand-washing seemed effective. The guide talks of vipers and scorpions, but the most dangerous fauna we encountered were the roaming goats at the top of the crags that would send fusillades of rocks down on unsuspecting climbers. Flash floods are a genuine hazard, and in the event of an accident there are no rescue services, no mobile phone coverage and limited communications out of the village. The nearest hospital would be a six-hour mule and 4x4 journey, and that’s once you’d got off the hill.

More information

The excellent French language guidebook ‘Taghia; Montagnes Berbères’ by Christian Ravier is available direct from the author at cravier@club-internet.fr. There is also a lot of information on these and more recent routes on the Internet and on photocopies in the two gîtes.



Dom and Bill enjoy a well-earned cuppa. L to R in background: Taoujdad, Oujdad and Tagoujimt n'Tsouiannt. Photo Oughton collection