

All about Morocco

May 2011

An 8-page Olive Press insiders guide

Donkey route south

Jon Clarke bundled the kids in the car and took the 1000km journey south to the town which inspired Jimi Hendrix to write his hit Castles in the Sand

It was two hours into the journey south and the kids were getting restless in the back. The iPod had run out of batteries and there was still an hour of driving to go.

There was only one solution... it was time for a game of 'Spot the Donkey'.

It had soon become something of a theme of our journey south from Ronda to Essaouira, a spectacular 2000 kilometre round trip that incredibly took just under nine hours of driving each way.

The idea was to visit the charming seaside town of Essaouira, which I hadn't visited for nearly 20 years, and to test the highly-rated Moroccan motorways in the process.

The main problem was going to be a five-year-old and a toddler in the back.... but I am pleased to report that they all passed with flying colours. And much of that was thanks to the donkeys!

Rather like Spain of 30 years ago, everyone in Morocco has a donkey or mule.

These wonderful animals are the chosen beast of burden, the multi-purpose tool for transportation and a regular fixture of the largely rural economy of Morocco, ploughing the fields and carrying all sorts of merchandise.

They line the streets, the fields and - luckily - also the main motorway south, the extremely well maintained and good value A1 toll road.

Our mission was to get to Essaouira as painlessly and cheaply as possible. We considered the plane from Malaga to Marrakech, but by the time we had factored a rental car into the equation, the cost was well over 1,000 euros.

Much better to take our own car, we figured, pay the 350 euro fee on the ferry and motor it south.

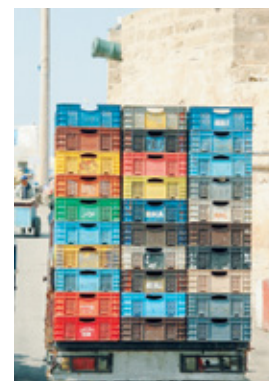
The best news is the cost of petrol, which weighed in at around 30 per cent cheaper than in Spain, not to mention the motorway tolls, which were under 50 eu-

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TRANSPORT: On a mule in Chefchaouen and daddy's back (top)

CAPTION:



EVOCATIVE: Taking a boat ride in Moulay Boussalem, a spice store in Essaouira, gutting fish and a delivery lorry in Essaouira port

Pictures by Jon Clarke

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ros return. And don't forget you can still drive 120kp/h in Morocco!

Best of all, we could take as much stuff as we wanted, avoid the stresses of air travel and get to see some of the world's best scenery as part of the bargain.

It is certainly a picturesque journey largely following Morocco's western coastline and there are a string of pretty towns en-route, not to mention the important cities of Tangier and Rabat and perhaps, less so, Casablanca, if you fancy a spot of sightseeing.

It had been remarkably easy getting the FRS fast ferry from Tarifa to Tangier (they go every couple of hours and you get your passport stamped onboard) and, these days, it is so much easier bringing your own car.

Things have improved dramatically with the arrival in Tangier. While this used to be a fraught process as 'officials' vied for your custom with tussles, even punch ups between them, nowadays much of the flotsam and jetsam has been removed from the port.

A long road south



SERENE: Lagoon at Moulay Bousseham and (right) Essaouira port

It still pays to tip everyone – a five-euro note normally does the trick – and, above all, keep your sense of humour. This time, within just 20 minutes we had got the forms stamped (most Spanish insurance policies include a 'greencard' for travel to Morocco) and were heading through Tangier's southern suburbs.

We had decided to make two stop-offs en-route to our rented home in the heart of

the Essaouira medina. Breaking up the journey allowed us to visit two little-known beauty spots Moulay Bousseham and Oualidia and gave the kids a chance to let off steam.

The lagoon is fast becoming one of Morocco's best spots for birdwatching

We had arrived at our first port of call after about an hour of driving. Turning off the motorway, we

were soon weaving around the side of a huge lagoon, which is fast becoming known as one of Morocco's best spots for birdwatching. As well as a healthy population of flamingos, the stunning expanse which sits next to the small town of Moulay Bousseham, is full of rare waders, terns and enormous ibis.

While our first night's accommodation was a bit rough and ready, its location by the water in its own tranquil grounds, made up for it.

We dined under the stars and the following morning hired a boat for 15 euros to putt putt around the lagoon to visit the



Pictures by Jon Clarke

allusive flamingos, who had alas decided to spend their day feeding in the most inaccessible part.

The kids loved it nonetheless, and by noon we were cheerfully off on the next leg of our journey past the sprawling slums of Casablanca, some irritating roadworks around Rabat, and the mother of all petrochemical plants at Douar Oulad. Here

we joined a smaller coastal road south to Oualidia, which held the biggest surprise of our holiday.

For not only is this one of the most beautiful seaside towns around, but it now has the most amazing boutique hotel.

With just a dozen rooms, the five-star La Sultana hotel sits in acres of grounds beside the protected estuary, has a

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beautiful underground spa fed with sea water and a legion of fawning staff that number around four to every guest.

Particularly commendable is its approach to sustainability with the architecture and landscaping having minimal impact on the environment and its clever use of grey water and sewage to irrigate its gardens. You really get a sense of nature here, whether strolling around the lagoon or just paddling around in the rock pools at low tide.

And best of all, for gourmets the hotel has its own oyster farm, not to mention a dozen tanks full of fresh seafood, from razor shells to crayfish and lobsters to spider crabs. It is no surprise to learn that the king owns the neighbouring estate and with a rack rate of around 450 euros you'll need a king's ransom to stay here.

We could hardly bear to drag ourselves away, but thankfully the two hour drive south to Essaouira on the N1 was to prove to be the most beautiful part of the journey.

Why nobody seems to have set up a hotel here – around Khemis Takate, for example – is a mystery, as this is truly lovely scenery, hardly mentioned in any guidebook.

By 6pm we were entering the fabled walled city of Essaouira, a southern gem, famous for its stylish hotels and fishing port.

COMMENDABLE: Hotel Sultana has a strong green ethos



Suddenly we had found the true flavour of Morocco. A bustling market town, our garret for the weekend was right in the heart of the medina, where donkeys were two a penny and, at first glance, chaos seemed to prevail.

Staying in a wonderful riad Dar Beida, owned by a former antiques dealer from Islington, we had the perfect place to seek solace from the scum outside.

Beautifully restored, its ancient arches were complimented with a tasteful array of antiques and furniture and you got a real sense of privilege staying there.

Not even a bomb going off in Marrakech could put a dampener on our stay, as we strolled around the amazing port, choosing fish for supper, with a friend, a chef, who raved about the quality.

The following day we took a walk up the beach towards Diabat, where legend has it Jimi Hendrix had been suitably inspired to write his hit *Castles in the Sand*.

It was certainly an atmospheric place, and the kids loved exploring a string of old fortifications hidden in the dunes, plus the famous ruined castle, now literally crumbling into the sand on the shoreline.

We decided to make a beeline all the way back to Tangier for the return journey, stopping just once for lunch at a surprisingly good motorway service station.

The 'Spot the Donkey' game came in very useful, and for our last night we stayed in one of the most historic hotels in Morocco, the El Minzah, where countless celebrities including Rock Hudson, Winston Churchill and Rita Hayworth once stayed.

A grand old dame, it was in the perfect location above the medina and had a splendid restaurant, replete with belly dancer, appropriate for our last night in Morocco. The next morning we were at breakfast at 8.30am, checking out at 9.00am and on the ferry on our way home by 10am.

All in all it was a road trip to remember.

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Journeys of discovery

Following in his parents footsteps Hughie Arbutnott is now taking upmarket walking trips through Morocco, writes James Bryce

AFTER leaving behind the leafy streets of Fulham and spending six months managing a farm in Argentina, Hughie Arbutnott and his wife Clare (above) decided to bite the bullet and set up walking holidays in Andalucia and Morocco.

"My family have been running holidays in southern Spain for over 20 years, while Clare is no stranger to the tourism industry," explains Arbutnott, a former army officer, now based in Gaucin.

The sleepy white village is where his parents' business Arbutnott Holidays is based and where a young Hughie went to school. "So it seemed logical to base ourselves here," he continues.

Their operation is based out of the 500 acre Almuña estate, which has wonderful views stretching to the distant Pillars of Hercules, on the coast of Morocco, near Tangier.

It is this close connection to Morocco that inspired the couple to start a series of walks in north Africa. Aiming to bring rural tourism to the Rif

Mountains as a means of sustainable employment through various programs and education, they are working with local guide Abdelslam Mouden, from the pretty hillside town of Chefchaoen.

"He has the dry wit and generous nature of the Berber people and is a wonderful historian, botanist, ornithologist and raconteur and between us we try and work out the names of butterflies and flowers in Latin, Spanish, French, English and my Arabic is slowly improving...inshallah," jokes Hughie.

Between them they have developed two magical weeks of walking next year, including the *Cross Continent Walk* (September 16 - 23), which goes from Ronda south to Chefchaoen through the Serrania and ending back at Almuña for the final night.

Their second trip, *The Rif Mountain Walk* (April 14 - 21) explores everything from Phoenician to Roman Morocco and on into modern Islamic Morocco.

It goes via Tangier, Asilah, Volubilis, Moulay Idriss, Fez and back into the heart of the Rif to Mechkrala, Jebel Tisouka and Chefchaoen.

"It is truly a journey of discovery and one that awakens all of the senses," explains Hughie. "The 20 year tried and tested formula of comfort, sensational food, physical exercise and good humour is the template for our trips."

He continues: "We stay in lovely private homes, boutique hotels, a simple gîte in a hamlet in the mountains and elegant family run riads."

"We are accompanied by pack animals where possible, carrying supplies and our day bags. We get off the beaten track and see a different Morocco to the well trodden regions further south."

Both trips include around 55 miles of walking and a good level of fitness is required. The couple also offer tailor-made trips



GREAT OUTDOORS: Walking trips

around Spain and are leading walking holidays to Chile and Argentina in January to March next year.

"We are passionate about what we do and the changes we have made to our lives. We have energy and enthusiasm and thoroughly enjoy taking the responsibility away from our guests and letting them put their faith in us," concludes Hughie.

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INSPIRATION: Jimi Hendrix's Castle in the Sand

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SITUATED just 15 kilometres apart, it is not surprising that there are so many ties between Morocco and Spain.

No more is this felt than in Andalucía, where the Moorish influence on the local cuisine dates back 1,300 years.

The Moors were here from 711 until 1492 and so unsurprisingly left an indelible mark on the area and in the kitchen.

Many of Andalucía's signature dishes have their origins in Moorish culture, best known being the summer delicacy gazpacho.

The refreshing cold soup, made principally from tomato, garlic, vinegar and olive oil, emerged out of the nearly 800 years of Arabic rule in the region.

Curiously however, the tomato part of the dish, was actually introduced later when they first arrived from the Americas in the 15th century.

The Moroccan dish most people are familiar with, of course, is couscous, a delicacy of Berber origin. But Moroccan cuisine is actually extremely diverse,



BREADS: Morocco has heavily influenced Spanish cuisine

Very Moorish!

The best of Spanish food has a big dash of Morocco, discovers Wendy Williams, with the Moors introducing everything from rice to oranges and sugar to artichokes

thanks to the country's interaction with other cultures and nations. In turn, the Moroccan influence on Andalu-

cian cooking is widespread and not just limited to a few dishes.

Few people know that it was the Moors who first introduced many of the fruits, nuts and spices that thrive today in Spain. The best example is the vast almond groves that were planted by the Moorish invaders when they settled here.

Today there are dozens of almond or marzipan-based cakes (or *dulces*) sold in *pastelerías* in Andalucía which compare to very similar products in Morocco.

One of the best known is a *polvoron*, while the marzipan-based *yemas de San Leandro* are a Moroccan recipe.

Moreover sugar cane and the use of sugar to preserve fruit also came from the Moors. And they also imported rice, lemons, limes, oranges, figs, dates, artichokes, spinach, sugar, sherbet, marzipan, and aubergines

to the peninsula.

Of the many popular *tapas*, fried aubergines with honey is a fantastic example of how these ingredients have been adapted into local recipes and have cemented their place in the Andalusian diet (see recipe below).

Indeed, many of the dishes considered quintessentially Spanish would never have existed if the Moors had not lived here for so long.

Spain not only has the Moors to thank for many of its celebrated dishes, but also for bringing cumin, caraway, nutmeg, sesame, coriander, aniseed, mint and cinnamon to season them.

It is difficult to draw the line between Spanish cuisine and its Moroccan origins

But finally, no article on the Moroccan influence on Spanish cuisine would be complete without a mention of the queen of all spices - saffron - which was introduced by the Arabs over a thousand years ago and still reign's supreme over here.

In fact Spain is now the second largest saffron producer in the world, after Iran, and the spice - said to be worth its weight



CHOICES: Numerous spices, including saffron, caraway, nutmeg and coriander came to Spain from Morocco

in gold - remains a popular flavouring and colour, especially in rice dishes such as paella. While most commonly associated with Valencia, paella itself would be a very different dish without the rice and saffron that came from across the Straits.

In fact in many cases it is difficult to see where to draw the line between Spanish cuisine and its Moroccan origins.

One crucial separation however is the abundance of pork that is eaten in Andalucía in its many forms from *jamon iberico* to *chorizo*. In stark contrast, in Morocco the consumption of pork is a religious taboo.

And in fact for centuries eating pork was actually a statement of Christian ethnicity or 'cleanliness of blood', because it was not eaten by Jews or Muslims.

This however makes the very popular *pincho morunos* an interesting melting pot of the two cultures combining pork with Moorish spices.

The dish consists of small cubes of meat threaded onto a skewer (or *pincho*) which are traditionally cooked over charcoal braziers.

Similar dishes exist in Morocco but for obvious reasons tend to be lamb or beef based.

So if you visit Morocco and Spain you may not immediately feel like you are eating the same things, but if you take a closer look at the main ingredients you might just find a surprising overlap.

While no-one is denying that Spain has come on leaps and bounds in recent years in the culinary world, the best of Spain - quite clearly - nearly always has a dash of Morocco.

Pincho Morunos

Ingredients:

- Sea salt
- 6 tablespoons of olive oil
- 1/2 teaspoon thyme
- 3/4 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon Spanish smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon crushed red pepper
- 1 bay leaf, crumbled
- 4 cloves garlic finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon minced parsley
- Freshly ground pepper
- 1 kg lean pork, cut into 3/4 to 1 inch cubes

Instructions:

1. Mix all of the ingredients in a large bowl except the pork.
2. Add the meat cubes and stir to coat well.
3. Cover and refrigerate for several hours, stirring occasionally.
4. Thread the meat onto small skewers.
5. Grill (ideally over coals), until well browned but still juicy, basting with the marinade.



Deep-fried aubergine with honey



Ingredients:

- Aubergines cut width-ways into 1cm slices - You will need one large fruit per two people.
- 3 to 4 units' plain flour
- 1 unit cumin powder
- 1 unit baking powder
- Cold water
- Salt and pepper
- Olive or sunflower oil for frying
- A good clear honey for pouring

Instructions:

1. To make the batter, mix the flour, cumin and baking powder.
2. Add the salt and pepper then just enough water to make a very stiff batter.
3. Coat the slices of aubergine well and drop them straight into very hot oil.
4. Cook for a few minutes until golden brown and crisp, then remove with a slotted spoon and drain on some kitchen roll.
5. Serve on a plate straight away with a generous coating of the honey.



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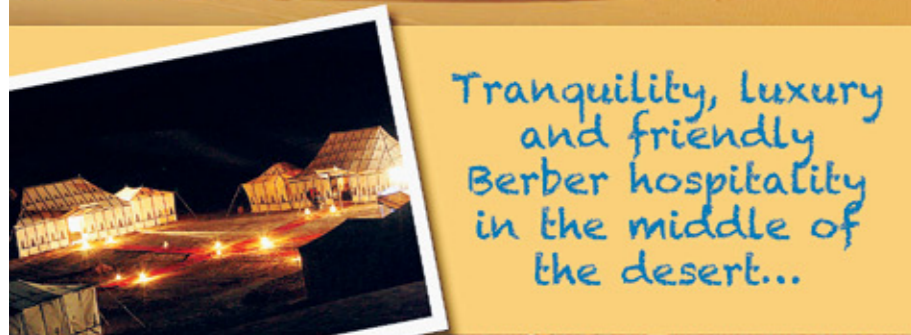
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I was sitting on the sand dune, looking south over the endless sands of the Sahara, that I finally 'got' why people come to the desert. From my sandy perch near Erg Chigaga, the largest dune in Morocco and only an hour from the border with Algeria, hundreds of smaller dunes stretched to the horizon. The silence was total. The only sound that I could hear was the blood pumping in my ears and my breathing, a little heavy after my climb up the newly christened 'Dune GB'. This is why people come to the desert, I mused. This is why so many of the great religions talk about periods in the wilderness. So their followers can find themselves. The solitude. The silence. To look deeply into themselves. Simply, as Hamlet would put it, 'To be'. But then I paused from my reverie, turned my baseball cap backwards, adjusted my straps and with an ungainly bunny hop, thundered uncontrollably down the side of Dune GB on a snowboard. Dinner at Camp was waiting and I wanted to be on time. I was on the edge of the Sahara as the guest of two old friends Nick Garsten and Diane Taylor of Desert Camp Morocco.

Both accomplished travellers, the couple had sold their hotel in Cape Town and were looking at setting up a riad in Marrakech as a new adventure. All that changed when Diane met Mohamed - whose nickname is Bobo - trekking in the Atlas Mountains. Bobo told Diane about the dunes of Erg Chigaga and the backpacker camps in the area and Diane came up with her own unique concept: a luxury up-market camp in the desert. You will, of course, be familiar with the old travellers' adage that 'getting there is half the fun'. Well with any trip that involves Morocco, getting there is all the fun.

To describe the adventures that befell photographer Kevin and myself on the first part of our journey would take an extra couple of articles. The shortened tale involves avoiding a car crashing outside Algeciras, cancelled ferries in Tarifa, torrential rain, catching the last ferry to Ceuta, crossing the border into Morocco in scenes from a Terry Gilliam movie, a terrifying 90 minute cab ride from Ceuta to Tangier courtesy of the Maghreb's answer to Fernando Alonso, rocking up at the Gare du Tanger to be told that the sleeping compartment had been derailed, a

10-hour overnight train to Marrakech in a compartment with no door or heating. Yes, and then there was the teenager next to me playing a mixture of Lady Gaga and French rap on her mobile. Oh dear. It would be somewhat of an understatement to say that we were relieved to arrive in Marrakech, although even that wasn't without its problems. Events were unfolding in Cairo and neighbouring Tunisia, and we had been warned to 'look out for riots and general unrest in the city'. Hmmmm.

The route through the fertile Draa Valley with its palms and kasbahs is stunning

Although if you have ever driven through Marrakech, you'll soon realise that general unrest is the normal order of things. Our home for the night was the Zamzam Riad, located in the middle of the Medina and run by English couple Marcus and Emma. Named after a source of water that the Prophet Mohamed found the Zamzam really is an oasis away from the hustle and bustle of the medina. The heated plunge pool, library with fireplace, a rooftop spa with traditional hammam and views over the medina to the minarets made all the difference.

With atmospheric lighting and a beautiful central courtyard with a large palm, Zamzam is very romantic, but alas I was sharing my twin room with Kev. No stay in Marrakech would be complete without a guided tour of the medina, and for two hours he led us through the maze-like streets, pointing out hidden gems such as the Museum Dar Bel-lar, a private house



OASIS: Desert Camp is stylish, while (top) local guide Bobo

Morocco special



Giles Brown (left) mostly feels like an extra in a Monty Python movie as he takes an adventurous trip into the desert via Marrakech

Dinner that evening was at the Casino du Marrakech - if you fancy great food and a night at the tables I would recommend it (and they filmed Sex and the City 2 in the adjacent hotel) but we had an early start the next morning and so Kev dragged me away before I could do myself too much damage in the poker room. At five the next morning I was woken by the call from the muezzin, calling the faithful for prayer. The crisp clear sound on the predawn air across the city stripped back the centuries, and I could have been standing in the medina hundreds of years ago, was it not for the air-conditioned 4x4 waiting to take us to Chigaga.

lages dotted on the hillsides remind you strongly of the *pueblos blancos* in Andalucia. This really is Wild West territory and the route through the fertile Draa Valley with its palms and kasbahs is stunning. We took stop over for lunch at the Dar Qamar, a guest-house with a pool run by a French couple that Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchet stayed in when they filmed Babel. We stopped to swap to a new car, a pickup, which was loaded up with supplies. Our driver introduced himself as Bobo's brother, and after a mint tea we were off into the desert. Half way through the trip we stopped for more mint tea in a cafe located in a dry lake. "I don't speed over the lake" he explained. "A couple of years ago four tourists were killed racing their jeeps across here when they collided and rolled." Soon we were among the dunes, skirting the hulking shape of Chigaga and then we pulled up at the camp. It was spectacular. Rather than tents, our sleeping quarters were more like comfortable and stylish mini marquees, with an ensuite bathing tent (if you were wondering about such things each bathing tent has an antique wash basin, 'desert shower' and hand-painted chemical toilet) And then we met Bobo - without doubt the coolest Berber on the planet - who greeted us with perfect English. If you were looking for a Berber version of Bob Marley, then Bobo would certainly fit the bill. An accomplished musician, Bobo runs the camp with an efficient charm (a charm that was evident when he introduced us to his young Belgian girlfriend later in our stay). One of the things that had bothered me when I arrived at the camp was 'what on Earth am I going to do?' Well, if you are looking for activities then there is chess, backgammon and scrabble, as well as a well-stocked bar - sadly no longer my cup of tea - in the lounge tent. If you are feeling more ener-

If you were looking for a Berber version of Bob Marley, then Bobo would certainly fit the bill

The thought of a nine-hour drive south east of Marrakech might fill you full of dread (the same as driving from Marbella to Barcelona) but that's without factoring in the fantastic scenery that you encounter on the way. The journey to the camp is a film location manager's wet dream and takes you climbing up through the magnificent Atlas Mountains, where the vil-



SILENCE: The peace of the Sahara desert and (top) Marrakech

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I MILCHIL, once visited, is a place that comes away with you, breathing into your imagination. Its mountain – oasis trade route feel, coupled with its remoteness lends one a glow of achievement just to have arrived.

The drama of Imilchil's big country geology is charged with some sort of frozen rhythm. By contrast the valley floor – the village hinterland – is intimate. Green pastures are grazed by sheep and watered by streams, by which stands of bone white poplar grow – elliptical green in summer, skeletal, like vertical fish spines in winter.

Imilchil is both a gateway and High Atlas junction. To the south are the heads of the Dades and Todra Gorges; east, the badlands of Altemoussa, while west, beyond the snows of Djebel Mourik, lies a network of paths that lead the intrepid all the way to the Cascades D'ouzoud.

The village sits high at 2,000 metres, an arrangement of box shape grey and brown pipe houses, flat roofs decked with unwieldy tin can chimneys and satellite dishes uniformly facing their signal, like some direction of prayer. Imilchil feels like a steppe. It tastes of central Asia. In fact,

Marriage prospects in the High Atlas



Kit Hogg watches the Royal Wedding from the 2,000m high Berber village of Imilchil

it is tribal Berber. Arabic is hardly spoken here.

The rain had set upon Imilchil in a grey shroud on the morning of April 29, rather like the mucus of the flu that was clouding my head.

The owner of the Hotel Energie served me a breakfast of leathery crepe with jam, margarine and a

beige liquid that could have been coffee.

A big flat screen was blaring Al-Jazeera, its usual mix of pounding, frothing dictators spitting litanies of fury into the camera; the troubles

in Libya and then, much closer to home, footage of bodies being bagged outside

the bomb-wreck that was the Argana restaurant in Marrakech.

Then a strange thing happened. The mayhem was suddenly replaced by images of pale people waving bunting-sized union jacks. Under tupperware skies, an orderly procession of black limousines filed down leafy avenues... and oddly, I found myself watching the Royal Wedding.

The pain of Misrata had changed into a different kind of demonstration. Here in England was a society so sufficiently at ease that thousands had turned out in light drizzle in an expression of benign and eccentric affection for the royals.

Abdul met us in the souk, a muddy affair of over-ripe fruit, bicycle parts and desert dates sold from the shelter of flapping black tents.

At his compound we met his mother, a beautiful caged bird of a woman in her forties, wearing a mix of tradition and crimpeline. She was excited to see us, talking high volume in Berber, shaking our hands, a wide expressive mouth, bright dancing eyes looking directly into ours from beneath her slightly dishevelled head dress. Abdul pointed her to the kitchen to make tea, and she turned on clacky shoes.

Without exception, the rugs and blankets which Abdul wanted to show us were her work, and all of home spun wool. There were 'ahandirhs', thick close woven striped blankets in purple, black and white to wrap around the body like a shawl.

Abdul's father died three years ago. The prospects of a second marriage for his mother could be classed as something from remote to nonexistent, so bound is she by the mud walls of her house, not to mention a social stigma loaded to the perpetual disadvantage of women.

Apart from being mother, housekeeper, agricultural worker, and beast of burden, a woman in the High Atlas apparently has no say in her marriage. As young as sixteen – the legal age is 18 – she can be married off by her father to one of any visiting unknown men who come to remote villages enquiring as to the whereabouts of a good looking girl, like prospectors looking for a property.

By good fortune though, Imilchil is also famous for its September 'Moussem', a three day tribal marriage market where potential brides and grooms are selected and dowries bartered. And conversely, here, at the 'Moussem' it is the women who get to choose.

As we left Imilchil I also wondered if Abdul's mother might try her luck there.

Kit Hogg is co-owner of hotel Dar Gabriel in Chefchaouen. This extract comes from his new book 'Places Inbetween'

Abdul pointed her to the kitchen to make tea, and she turned on clacky shoes



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