



MOROCCAN MYSTIQUE

High up in Morocco's Atlas Mountains, the untamed wilderness and traditional Berber culture make for an inspiring escape, finds **Lisa Kjellsson**



Above:
*Kasbah Bab
Ourika.*

Right:
*calls to prayer echo
through the valley*

Only an hour ago I was pushing through the bustle of Marrakech airport, and now, standing at the edge of a hilltop garden gazing out over a deep-red canyon in the Atlas Mountains, my early-morning flight from London is already a distant memory. The sun is bright and the air is pure. A peregrine falcon sweeps the cloudless sky. Relaxing into the stillness, I take in my surroundings: a seemingly endless landscape of rugged hillsides covered in juniper, pine and cypress trees, cacti and aloe vera.

The idyllic setting for my newfound serenity is fortress-like Kasbah Bab Ourika, perched high up on a hill with panoramic views of the Ourika Valley's fruit orchards and olive groves. The building is traditionally designed with peach-coloured limestone and mud walls and palm trunk ceilings, while the cosy and eclectic interiors fuse Berber pompom blankets in natural colours with antique painted doorframes from India and carefully curated quirky artefacts including vintage radios. Each of the 26 rooms have views of the wilderness, and in the evening I watch the sunset from my private terrace as the call to prayer from a nearby village mosque echoes through the valley.



MOROCCAN HOSPITALITY

The villages in the Atlas Mountains, which span some 2,500km across Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia and separate the Atlantic and Mediterranean coastline from the Sahara desert, are home to the Amazigh people, commonly known as Berbers. I catch a glimpse of their customs the next day, on a guided hike during which we pass the village of Tagadirt, a few hours' walk east of the kasbah. Life in this remote part of Morocco revolves around farming – the first thing I spot is a large herd of goats roaming the hillside – and most families seem to keep donkeys and chickens in their yards.



Wandering through the little community I am welcomed into the traditional mudbrick home of a friendly woman and her grown-up daughters and offered mint tea and biscuits. As one of them pours me a glass of the sweet brew I notice her hands, covered in swirling, blood-red henna tattoos. Did she have them done for a special occasion, I ask, but she says not. I learn that tattooing has been a rite of passage for Amazigh girls since pre-Islamic times and historically allowed different nomadic tribes to identify each other by the designs.

I am also shown their hammam, a small wood-fired sauna used for a twice-weekly wash with savon beldi, olive and eucalyptus soap, followed by ghassoul, a body mask made with mineral-rich clay from the Atlas Mountains that purifies and softens the skin. Inspired by this insight into an age-old self-care ritual, on my return to the kasbah I head straight to the hammam to refresh myself the traditional way after my trek. Following a relaxing stint in the steam room, I am soaped up and scrubbed clean by a spa therapist, and then enjoy an al fresco massage as the sun begins to set.



GLAMPING HEAVEN

My foray into Berber beauty rites continues at the next stop on my adventure in the High Atlas – Kasbah Tamadot, Richard Branson’s Moroccan retreat overlooking the Asni Valley. Originally built in the 1920s and previously owned by an antiques dealer, it is filled with decorative items from all over the world, including ornate Chinese trunks and Balinese wall tapestries. Branson spent five years renovating the property before launching it as a hotel, and as part of the revamp added luxury tents in the gardens – the kind that include a comfortable lounge, spacious bathroom, and sun terrace with a Jacuzzi. Having checked into my little corner of glamping heaven, I pop down to the spa where I’m pampered from head to toe with a body wrap and facial that drench my skin in locally sourced damask rose, renowned for its hydrating and healing effect.

Clockwise from bottom left: henna tattoos symbolise rites of passage for Amazigh girls; swimming pool at Kasbah Bab Ourika; the writer admires the views

Tattooing has been a rite of passage for Amazigh girls since pre-Islamic times and historically allowed different nomadic tribes to identify each other by the designs



Day trip: Exploring the High Atlas

The highest village in North Africa, Arned, is full of rustic charm

A guided hike around the Imlil Valley, 14km from Kasbah Tamadot, is a chance to explore the rugged beauty of the High Atlas and visit the little communities dotted around it. Here you’ll find shops selling traditional Berber handicrafts including silver jewellery and carpets, and in the village of Arned, the highest in North Africa, you can stop for lunch and enjoy views of Mount Toubkal, which at 4,167m high is the tallest peak in the region. Arranged through Kasbah Tamadot, the four-hour excursion, which includes a moderate 3km trek, costs HK\$2,104 for two people.

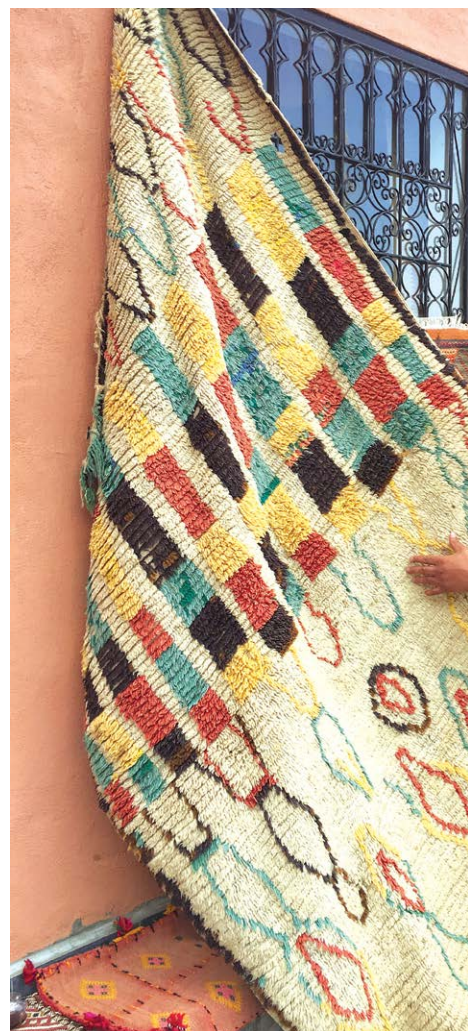


Clockwise from top left: interiors, tents and Moroccan spices at Kasbah Tamadot; a Berber carpet seller displays his wares

The treatment, Eve's Rose Delight, is named after Sir Richard's mother and later I discover another of her legacies as I visit the Eve Branson Foundation Craft Centres, where local young men train in carpentry and women practise hand embroidery and weaving on traditional looms. Their handicrafts, including plush carpets, are found throughout the hotel, and I'm intrigued to learn that there is more to Berber rugs than meets the eye.

Even the most basic pattern tends to have hidden meanings, a carpet seller in the nearby village of Imlil tells me. Holding up a sheep-wool and camel hair creation dyed with saffron, cherry and indigo as an example, he explains that the colourful geometric shapes convey messages about the weaver's life – how many children she has, whether she's happy with her husband – sometimes even advice for her daughter, as carpets would traditionally form part of a woman's dowry.

I think back to the women I met in Tagadirt, and wonder what they would express in a carpet design. Like countless generations before them,





they are devoted to their family and local community, a simple but meaningful existence, and they seemed happy. In some respects, life may be changing for the people of the Atlas Mountains – I spotted mobile phones and satellite dishes attached to mudbrick houses – but what I noticed everywhere I went in the region was its deeply rooted cultural identity. Proudly celebrated at both Kasbah Bab Ourika and Kasbah Tamadot, whether with tea-making and bread-baking classes or in the efforts to preserve traditional crafts, it made for an unforgettable stay. The Atlas Mountains and Berber people made their way into my heart, and I know I'll return.

Rooms at Kasbah Bab Ourika are priced from HK\$1,387; kasbahbabourika.com

Rooms at Kasbah Tamadot are priced from HK\$5,000, tents from HK\$8,275; kasbahtamadot.virgin.com

