

Morocco: Jbel Sahro

Remote trekking in the Lower Atlas Mountains

Tour code: MJS

Revised: October 08

On the northern edge of the great tracts of the Sahara, rises a range of jagged peaks and rocky plateaux tableland with deep canyons sheltering rive beds, springs and palm shaded pools of clear water. This is a semi-desert mountain landscape, though not the vast sands of popular imagination. It supports a far lower density of population than the areas of the High Atlas, but there are still a surprising number of sedentary and nomadic people around. In many cases a well supports just one family with almond trees shading their crops. The occasional oasis or stream supports a Berber village and nomadic Berbers come down from the Atlas Mountains to seek winter grazing for their flocks. The nomads have simple tent arrangements with dark cloth, and are normally keen to offer mint tea! This is an ancient landscape, featuring volcanic rocks that go back over 300 million years!! It is a geologist's dream. There are also some inspirational well weathered conglomerate and mudstone geomorphic features including mesas. From some high passes you will get great views of these peculiar landscapes. This is a wild and desolate region with the occasional green haven where we make our camp or have lunch and makes an interesting winter alternative to our two high mountain Moroccan itineraries.



Grade

The trek is graded easy – moderate and is well within the capabilities of any normally healthy and active individual who takes part in regular hill walking. The route is not difficult and even the 2600 m highpoint is optional, but you should be used to walking in fairly loose rubbly terrain, and be prepared for little vegetation cover. It can be pretty hot on the lower parts of the trek especially on autumn departures, although it is a dry heat. On the Christmas trek, there may be snow in the mountains and overnight temperatures can be cold at any altitude. There are times when you have to cross streams and the water level varies depending on rainfall and snow melt but will not in normal circumstances be deep. Water resistant boots are advised for these reasons. Most days are fairly short and our main baggage is carried by mules. Campsites can be dusty and sometimes low river and well water reserves may not permit full washing, some people bring alcohol based washing gels or 'wet wipes'. On this tour it is important to have the attitude of mind to accept and appreciate a culture very different from our own.

Climate

The best time to go trekking in the Jbel Sahro region is between October and April; outside these months it is uncomfortably hot. Expect average daytime temperatures to vary between 10-25 C during December and January. And between 18-35 C in October/November and February-March. There can, however, be some grey skies, rain and even snow at the highest altitudes of the trek (Dec/Feb). Night time temperatures can vary from pleasantly cool to cold. You may experience some frosty mornings during December and the highest camps will probably drop way below freezing overnight.

Outline Itinerary (land arrangements only)

The following itinerary is intended as a working guide only and is subject to variation as a result of weather, local conditions and group progress.

We reserve the right to alter (lengthen or shorten) any trek at any time if necessary.

Local time: GMT-1 BST & GMT as British winter time.

- **Day 1:** Sunday flight to Marrakech (450 m). Transfer to the Hotel Foucauld. You can make use of Easyjet, Thompson or Ryan Air flights (lower cost) as a 'LandOnly' Customer. You will need to make your own way to hotel (15 mins by taxi around 100 Dh, or by public Bus No: 41, 20 Dh) you will have time to look around the vibrant central square near the hotel: the 'Djemaa el Fna'. There are plenty of good restaurants around there to enjoy a good tagine or even a pizza.
- **Day 2:** We make an early start for the long drive over the magnificent Tichka pass (2220m), one of only two main passes through the High Atlas chain. We have lunch in Ouarzazate overlooking the Kasbah (at own expense, around 120 Dh), and then drive past the Barrage El Mansour Eddahb Lake along the Route des Kasbahs in the Dades Valley, arriving via Qalaat Mgouna at Ait Boubker – Ait Youl village mid-afternoon to stay the night in a simple Berber gite. Dormitory style sleeping on mats, all in the same lounge. Usually cold water washing.
- **Day 3:** We begin our walk by heading south towards the heart of the Sahro range. A half-days walk will bring us through hot dry riverbeds to our campsite on a terrace at Titkit (1800 m), which affords views to the north, and the Mgoun Massif - spectacular if snowcapped. (4 hours walking. Total Ascent: 519m / Descent: 223m)

□ **Day 4:** We continue to walk South, up and over a low pass, entering a delightful gorge then heading up to a baked-dry plateau where we lunch by a well head and stream. In the afternoon we climb up to the Tagmout Pass (2000m) again giving wonderful views of the huge Mgoun mountains to the North, then descend to the east of the village of Tagmout to camp on a plateau (1825m). (5-6 hours walking. Total Ascent: 606m / Descent 543m).

□ **Day 5:** Some of the great contrasts in scenery of the Sahro are seen today. Our morning-only walk takes us East along a (often dry) river valley, and then we enter a small gorge with clear rock pools, and soon a classic Kasbah appears between birches and palms; although this one, long abandoned, is slowly dissolving back into the river bank. We continue to our camp near a Kasbah in Assaka-n-Ait-Ouizzine (1650m/4 hours. Total Ascent: 180m / Descent 325m) much to the amusement of the locals!! This is the biggest village that you will visit on the trek (except Ait - Youl, where you started) and it offers good opportunities for photography and observing local life as the locals take time to observe you! You might go out and visit a local house in the afternoon. Perhaps women will be washing clothes in the river, or someone will be preparing almonds or dates. Maybe the little children will want to practice their English or French on you!

□ **Day 6:** A wonderful walk full of interest and scenic contrast. We descend along a river valley into an ever-deepening gorge of rock pools full of fish and frogs. You will need to cross the stream many times, but it is normally shallow enough to rock-hop. Just after the gorge opens out we have lunch. In the afternoon we head into scenery like that of a Western movie across a hot dusty plain, peppered with little settlements, towards some amazing rock formations. Nomads and perhaps their camels observe our progress inscrutably. After a small col beneath a giant rock-face we descend to camp by the small village of Ihazzoun-n-Imcas. (1330 m) (7 hours walking. Total Ascent: 381m / Descent 667m).

□ **Day 7:** We head up towards the dramatic Mesa of Bab-n-Ali. We may camp at our lunch stop - a truly memorable spot near Bab-n-Ali, surrounded by strange volcanic rock shapes. Our camp is at around 1425m (5 hours walking. Total Ascent: 343m / Descent 154 m). The location of the campsite today will perhaps vary depending upon other groups in the area and your guide's knowledge and preference. During the afternoon you will have plenty of opportunities to wander and take photos and explore the 'badlands' etc. Note that the conglomerates around here are loose / brittle and dangerous for scrambling.

□ **Day 8:** A lovely walk to the beautiful spot of Igli to camp. Lunch maybe a rock pool, where there maybe a possibility of a bathe (but not in December - too cold!) You are surrounded by beautiful rock formations today and children may try to sell you crystals that they have scraped out of the strata hereabouts! Igli is a farm at the bottom of the Tassigdelt escarpment, and across from the rocky formation known as the Camel. At certain times of day and at certain angles, you can see why! The rock looks like a Camel squatting on its haunches, with a sleepy eye! The entrepreneurial owner of the Igli 'farm' may be offering soft drinks, souvenirs and warm showers for a few Dirhams. Once you are settled at Igli there are opportunities for additional short walks if you want to (Igli 1750 m) (3 1/2 hours walking. Total Ascent: 645m / Descent 374 m).

□ **Day 9: Today is the toughest day of the tour, but perhaps also the most beautiful:** An early start takes us behind and perhaps up onto the rocky escarpment of Tassigdelt-Tamajgalt. Look out for a rock Mesa known as The Camel. We climb on to Tizi-n-Ouarg for lunch. We then ascend Kouaouch, with a short scramble up to the summit. This at 2600m is our trek high point. Views in all directions are breathtaking if it is clear. We then head west for about 6

kms, passing a couple of cols to arrive at our 2100m camp in the almond terraces at Almoue-nouareul. (6 hours walking, total Ascent: 1183m / Descent 797m).

□ **Day 10:** There are a couple of steep passes ahead today! The walk is different from anything so far as we head West into sharply folded igneous and metamorphic rocks similar to the High Atlas with steeper ascents and descents. Fine views again ensue. The very high pass is called Tizi-n-Timircht 2200m, and this brings us back to the extensive views northerly again. A long descent along a river valley brings us to camp at 1960m, at the tiny settlement at Irhioui. (7 hours walking. Total ascent: 542m / Descent: 747m).

□ **Day 11:** A gentle morning's walk West takes us via some tiny settlements long the 'Tizqui' River bank, with several stream crosses once again assisted by boulder hopping. We soon arrive at an attractive farm by the river and a large cistern and well complex. The self-sufficiency of the family living near our campsite is amazing in terms of crop diversity, animal husbandry and irrigation. They even have beehives. At dusk you may notice one of the young girls bringing all the goats in to be corralled. They will have spent the whole day out seeking grazing pastures, and you may notice her going out with them again in the morning. You may also notice in the evening other daughters driving donkeys into the 'farm' laden with cut grass feed. You may then see the girls making bread in the external bread oven. The family appear to be constantly challenging the harsh environment in which they live (3-4 hours walking. Total Ascent: 88m / Descent: 399m).

□ **Day 12:** Another gentle riverbed crossing walk brings us back along the last few desert kilometers to the gite in Ait Boubka - Ait Youl for lunch. It is quite a shock to leave the quiet Sahro and see so many people and hear traffic. Depending upon its state, you will either wade across the Dades River or use strategically placed tree trunks! The walk up into the Ait villages is very interesting, passing by dissolving Kasbahs of families who have moved into more modern housing in the town. There are beautiful birch trees lining the river bank, which gleam silver in the bright sunlight. Traditional Berber singing in the courtyard of our house is possible in the evening...bring Aspirin but not because of any alcohol! (4 hours walking. Total Ascent: 62 m / Descent 172m).

□ **Day 13:** We drive back to Marrakech, stopping en route near Tizi n' Tika near where we have lunch (Included). We return to Marrakech and the Hotel Foucauld late afternoon. End of trek buffet dinner at the hotel (included). This may be provided tomorrow night instead.

□ **Day 14:** Morning tour of the souks (markets) of Marrakech for those last minute presents. Particularly good are the products that are made of wood and leather, but you will find plenty of interesting items including dates and walnuts. The leader will be able to help you find items that you may want, but we leave the haggling up to you... it is all, too stressful! As an alternative, go early by bus or taxi to the beautiful Marjorelle Gardens soon after breakfast and before the crowds arrive! A beautiful relaxing and cool place for photography and pondering. You could then walk back into the Medina and find the Ben Youssef Medressa, a 16th century Islamic teaching college, next visit the Marrakech Museum and the 11th Century Koubba next door: the oldest remaining structure in the city, and the source of its distinctive architecture. In the afternoon we recommend that you go to the Saadian tombs and maybe if you still have clothes to look smart (ish) in, attempt to get into the famous Mamoumia Hotel for a drink...at a price This was the hotel that Sir Winston Churchill often stayed in and is still, by World standards, excellent.

Lunch and dinner today is at your expense. You may like to eat in the Djemaa El Fna, the central square in the city, which

at night takes on vibrance and personality that is unique in the World, (just watch your pockets though). Quite a few Westerners eat actually in the square, where there are many barbecues lighting up (and smoking up) the place. Here you can eat for around 50 dirhams (including a soft drink) fish and chips, kebabs, and chicken. The advantage of the place is that you can actually see how your food is being cooked and get them to redo it if necessary. On the other hand the meat may be a bit ropey to start with!

□ **Day 15:** Transfer to the airport (15 minutes) and fly Marrakech to London normally an early morning flight. (Note that most of the duty free shops sell items in Euros/Pounds /Dollars only, although if you do have a few Dirhams left some airport cafes will serve you drinks for them).

Equipment & Clothing

In addition to a good pair of broken in (but not breaking down) walking boots, a 2-3 season sleeping bag (3-4 season for December departures), a fleece, sunglasses a hat and a couple of water bottles (with water purification) are essential. The sun can be excessively strong, and cotton long sleeved shirts and Sunbloc are very important. Bring more cold weather clothing for December departures as it can be particularly cold over night. A detailed list of recommended clothing and equipment is included in our pre-departure booklet, which is sent with confirmation of your reservation.

Food

All food is included once on trek. In Marrakech you will be staying on a Bed and Breakfast basis, although there is one evening meal included at the hotel on your return. Lunch on the drive out at Quarzazate is not included, but lunch on the return drive is.

The food that you will eat is very healthy on trek, including Couscous, Tagine, olives nuts and fruit. Please decide as soon as possible once you arrive on trek whether you are going to be a vegetarian etc. This is not a problem for our Berber cook crew, as apart from the fish (Tuna and Sardine) often served at lunch time with vegetable salad; there is not normally a lot of meat and when meat is available separate dishes such as vegetarian tagine, can always be prepared. Many people bring their own treats and food supplements if they have special dietary requirements. It is very difficult or impossible to get a lot of common western items actually once on trek, but things have improved slightly over the years.

Average lunch or dinner costs are about 60-120 Dirhams without drinks. Soft drinks cost between 4 Dirhams and

about 10 Dirhams for a Coke. Freshly squeezed orange juice is also highly recommended 3 D - 7D when available. Berber tea varies between 2 - 9 D.

Music

Berbers love their rhythm driven music and chanting repetitive choruses, and a good crew will bang on pans, water bottles and plates for percussion. Some walkers soon get tired of this, others love it and get involved. Western music is more melody driven and is hard to reconcile with the Berber style, but if you are good with music or if you can hammer out a song like 'Taxman' then you are in good company!

Tipping

Rather like in Nepal (if you have been) the Berbers expect a tip for good service. We do stress this is voluntary, but more and more they see it as part of their income. On the last night on trek your leader will quietly encourage you to make some kind of presentation; any monies or material items will be gratefully received and shared between them.

Local customs and laws

In Morocco, access to Mosques and holy places is forbidden to non-Muslims. A few exceptions are the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, the Mohammed V Mausoleum in Rabat, The Moulay Ismail mausoleum at Meknes and the Moulay Ali Cherif Mausoleum at Rissani.

Homosexuality is considered a criminal offence in Morocco. Sexual relations outside marriage are also punishable by law and there have been a number of arrests in 2007.

Avoid provocative clothing

Accept mint tea when offered, it is a sign of hospitality

Avoid drinking, eating and smoking in public in daytime during the period of Ramadan

If you want to photograph somebody, don't forget to ask for permission.

Escorted departures 2009

Sun 05 April – Sun 19 April

Sun 11 October – Sun 25 October

Sun 13 December – Sun 27 December

Sun 04 April – Sun 18 April