

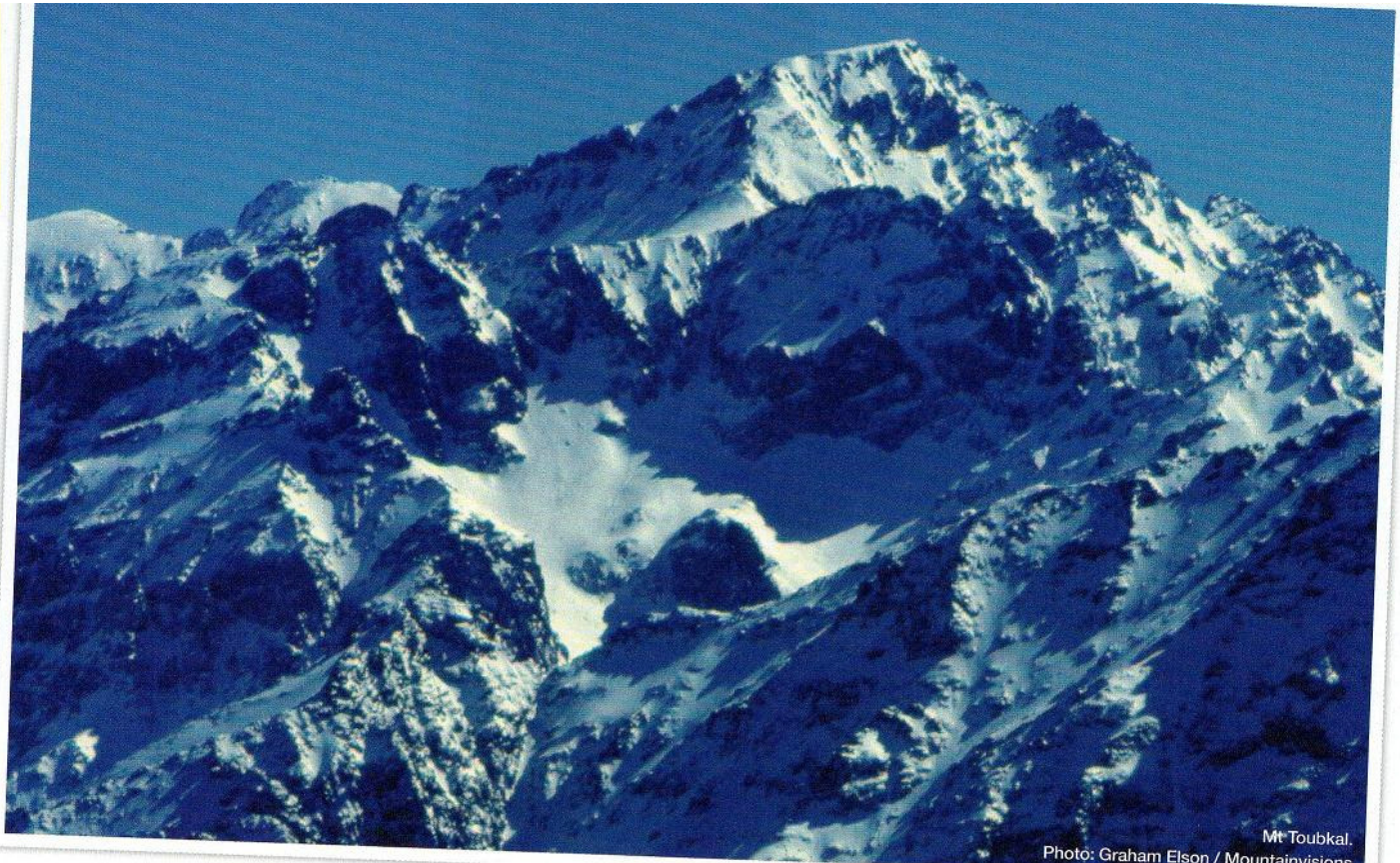
SUMMIT57

For climbers, hill walkers and mountaineers

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Mt Toubkal.
Photo: Graham Elson / Mountainvisions

My mountain: Mount Toubkal (4,167m)

A mountain of advice – straight from an expert

“ As the plane starts its descent to Marrakech, you pass over deserts, scrubland and, finally, the minarets and walled medina of the old city. Across the plains, 63km to the south, the Atlas Mountains soar into the deep blue African sky, with the glittering jewel of Jebel Toubkal standing proud at the head of the Imlil valley.

Most trekkers ascend Mount Toubkal over two days, staying overnight in the Neltner refuge (run by Club Alpin Français). The approach on the normal route is made from Imlil up the valley towards the Muslim shrine at Sidi Chamharouch, marked by the huge white rock (where the faithful make their pilgrimage from all over Morocco in the hope that their illness is cured). Here the path steepens and narrows as it ascends the Isougouane valley to reach the two Neltner huts (old and new) at 3,207m; 5-7 hours.

The huts are basic, clean and fairly spacious but at over 3,000m they aren't the warmest; a duvet jacket definitely merits space in your sac. Take a warm (3 or 4 season) sleeping bag. Mules can be hired from Imlil (or arranged in Marrakech)

to transport your extra baggage to the Neltner refuge – meaning you only need carry a light day bag.

A fairly leisurely alpine start of around 5am is usual for the summit day. Setting off by head torch you ascend the scree slopes towards the Tizi'n'Toubkal col at 3,940m, where the track turns hard left and you follow the ridge up to the famous summit pyramid at 4,167m; 4-6 hours. The descent is made by the same route; most reach Neltner for lunch and Marrakech by early evening.

Ascents can be made throughout the year, though it's normal for the ground to be snow covered from November until May (crampons and axes advisable). In summer an ascent should still not be underestimated as it can be well below freezing above 3,500m. Good boots and waterproofs are required throughout the year and trekking poles invaluable for scree.

Climbing the mountain dates back to 12th June 1923, when it was first ascended by the French team of the Marquis de Segonzac – accompanied by Hubert Dolbeau and Vincent Berger. The height of the mountain was first recorded in 1924, and the summit pyramid (which is actually a

trigonometrical signal) built in 1931.

As well as its rising popularity with trekkers, the mountain has become more popular with ski tourers (between February and April) and ultra-trail and mountain marathon runners (autumn). Needless to say, trail races are usually won by one of the local guides from Imlil.

The local Berber population adds a real flavour to the experience – from their cooking and mountain songs to their hardiness and pride in the region. Travellers will have already seen many Berber people in the souks of Marrakech, which boasts Djemma el Fna – the largest market square in Africa.

For those returning to Marrakech to celebrate their climb, remember that you are in a Muslim country: there are very few places where alcohol is available. Toast your success with a cup of the great Moroccan mint tea instead. Don Whillans would turn in his grave at the thought. ”

By Kingsley Jones, International Mountain Leader. Thanks to Icicle Guides: www.icicleUK.com