



OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

There's so much more to Morocco than Marrakech. Head south to the dramatic Ouirgane region of the Atlas Mountains to explore astonishing scenery and the unique Berber culture, suggests **NICOLA GILL**

Heading south from Marrakech airport with the red peaks of the Grand Atlas Mountains in the distance, it's not long before you leave behind the heaving, dusty outskirts of the city and find yourself in a different world.

As you pass endless olive groves, weave around winding roads up into slopes dotted with Aleppo pines and green oaks and glimpse peaceful plateaus dotted with

goats, you feel your cares melt away. Within the hour you've climbed high into the mountains among sleepy Berber villages. Up here, with falcons wheeling above and songbirds teeming in the bushes, you are so far from the claustrophobic medina sprawling below.

The Berbers are the age-old inhabitants of the three Atlas Mountain ranges – the Middle Atlas, High Atlas and Anti-Atlas – which sprawl

2,500km across north-west Africa, spanning Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. They separate the Atlantic and Mediterranean coastline from the Sahara desert. With the highest peak at 4,167 metres tall (Jebel Toubkal), they even boast two small ski resorts, and the tops are snow-covered from November to April most years. But it's not skiing that is making these mountains become a popular travel destination,



it's the growing handful of low-key but luxurious boutique hotels opening in the last few years, especially in the Ouirgane region.

Here it's possible to indulge in extravagance (with a chef to cook you an in-villa dinner, for example) at reasonable prices. Combined with tranquillity, sunshine and the choice to be as active (or relaxed) as you like, the Atlas Mountains are fast becoming Morocco's worst-kept secret.



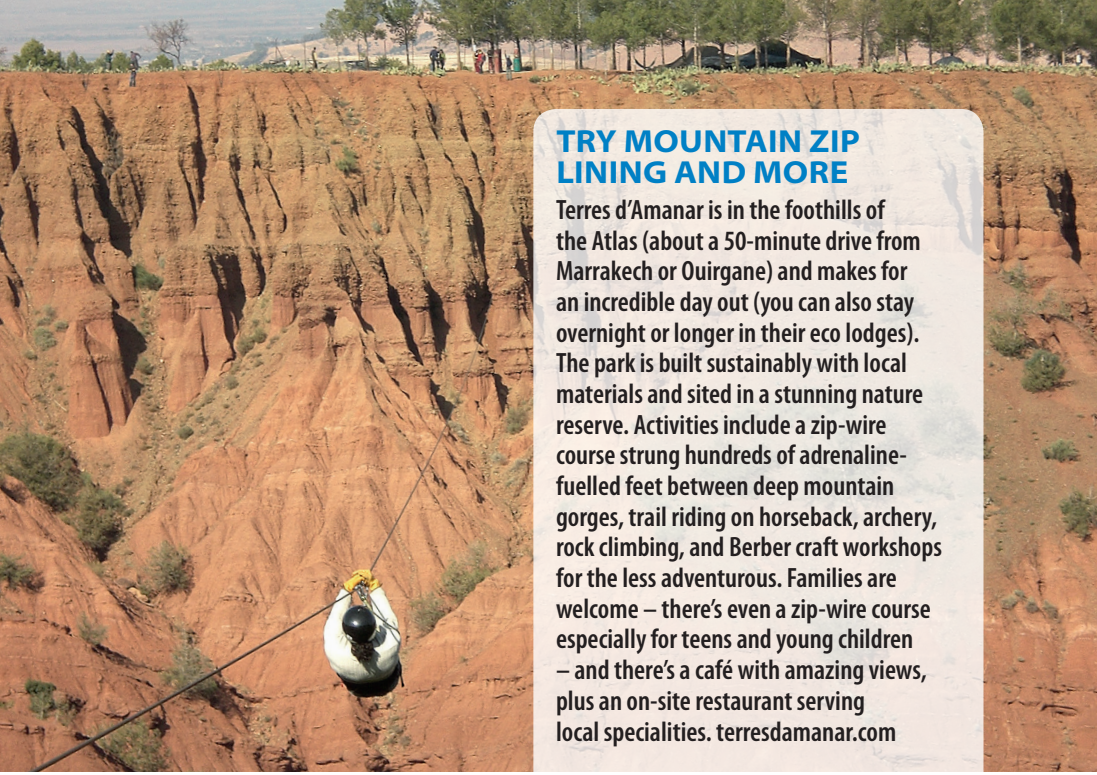
Explore Berber culture

The Berbers, made up of several tribes, have been around for at least 4,000 years and have fought against Roman, Arab and French invaders while successfully preserving their own language and customs. Not to be confused with the still-nomadic Bedouin tribes, Berbers today are farmers of the mountains and valleys, having largely stopped plying the trade routes they established between the West African and the Sub-Saharan region.

One thing that hasn't changed is the incredible friendliness of the Berber people, who will readily offer to share a glass of Moroccan mint tea or cook you a traditional meal. Visit the Berber markets of Asni (Saturdays), Talat n'Yacoub (Wednesdays) or Ouirgane itself (Thursdays) to find all sorts of wonderful Berber craftsmanship. Combine a market trip with a visit



to Moulay Brahim about 15km from Asni, and don't miss Tinmel Mosque. Built in 1156, Tinmel is a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of only two mosques in Morocco open to non-Muslims. It's well worth the visit.



TRY MOUNTAIN ZIP LINING AND MORE

Terres d'Amanar is in the foothills of the Atlas (about a 50-minute drive from Marrakech or Ouirgane) and makes for an incredible day out (you can also stay overnight or longer in their eco lodges). The park is built sustainably with local materials and sited in a stunning nature reserve. Activities include a zip-wire course strung hundreds of adrenaline-fuelled feet between deep mountain gorges, trail riding on horseback, archery, rock climbing, and Berber craft workshops for the less adventurous. Families are welcome – there's even a zip-wire course especially for teens and young children – and there's a café with amazing views, plus an on-site restaurant serving local specialities. terresdamanar.com

FIVE TO TRY

- 1 Learn to make Berber flatbread** in a traditional outdoor clay oven with chef Sarah at L'Amandier.
- 2 Spend ten minutes before bed on your roof terrace each night stargazing** in near zero light pollution, and wake up early at least once to catch sunrise.
- 3 Hire a beautiful Arab barb horse** and the help of a local guide from the delightfully traditional La Rosaie Hotel and explore the



mountains on horseback. Afterwards, stop for coffee or lunch on its terrace.

- 4 Pack a bird guidebook and see how many species you can spot** during your stay (it's not hard!).



- 5 Walk the grounds of L'Amandier** and linger over dozens of unusual plants and trees that grow in the area including peach, lime, avocado, bougainvillea, bottlebrush and pomegranate.

Feel on top of the world

The mountain-dwelling Berbers are the native inhabitants of the Atlas. They have their own way of life, cultures and traditions, which are quite distinct from their plains-dwelling Arab brothers in the rest of Morocco. They know every age-old track, pathway, pass and riverbed in these mountains, and the name of every tree and bird you'll see. There are trekking opportunities for every level of fitness, from an hour's stroll over easy terrain (you'll still need proper walking shoes) to three-day-plus expeditions around Toubkal (with a mule to carry your load optional!). You'll really feel you're on the roof of the world here. It's impossible not to be awestruck and reconnect with nature as you wend your way through eery natural salt plains, where white seeps up



through the rock and soil to coat the land in a snowy crystal blanket. You'll drop down into fertile red valleys with rivers running through, and rest under juniper trees on plateaus as you drink in the air and marvel at the ever-changing light play over the mountain vistas.

WHERE TO STAY



For unbeatably stylish luxury in splendid isolation, the newly opened **L'Amandier Hotel and Villas** has it all. Villa guests have their own plunge pool but can use

all the hotel facilities (infinity pool, bar and restaurant) and your own personal chef is optional. Prices for four sharing a spacious two-bedroom villa start at £350 per night (for the whole villa, minimum two-night stay) and a double room in the hotel starts from £210 per night. Superbly situated, you can trek from your door (with the hotel's own Berber guide, Said) eat produce grown in the grounds, and relax while gazing at the 360-degree panoramic mountain views.

See **lamandierhotel.com** for more information.



FACTFILE

CURRENCY Moroccan Dirham (MAD)

TIME DIFFERENCE None

GETTING THERE EasyJet fly to Marrakech from London Gatwick, Manchester, Bristol and Glasgow.

VISA Not required

CLIMATE Temperatures in the foothills rarely dip below 10°C in the daytime even in winter (but can dip to around freezing at night), from July-September they can soar to 45°C. For a sunny retreat go April-October.

TO FIND OUT MORE

As the region is still relatively undiscovered a guidebook is your best bet.