

AN OLD WORLD

NEW DATA



# A journey into Morocco's Berber territory, where tradition and modern life meet

By

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CANDACE FEIT

AT

FIRST, the shepherd wasn't visible, just his flock of sheep. Trekking along the side of a hill with three companions, I lost my balance and put a hand into a patch of tumbleweed with savage needles. My expletive triggered an avalanche of white fleece over stones and moss.

The shepherd was standing by a boulder, watching us. We waved, and he smiled, and we all moved toward one another.

He was a Berber, a descendant of Morocco's original inhabitants. He stood a little more than five feet tall. He had wizened skin and carried a staff and a satchel. A black turban covered his head, and he wore two pairs of tattered pants and a pale blue robe beneath a faded fleece jacket.

"Salaam aleikem!" Peace be upon you.

"Aleikem salaam," he answered quietly. He put out a hand to shake and then touched it to his lips, a Moroccan custom.

"Tea?" he asked, a smile in his deep-set dark eyes.

He spoke Berber and some words of Arabic, the Berbers' second language, used for pleasantries and for studying the Koran. My companions, Jean-Yves Brizot, Elise Poncet, and Hervé Landeau, were French. My contribution, English, was as useful in southern Morocco's Anti-Atlas Mountains as Zulu in Liechtenstein.

But here, tea was itself a form of communication, or a way of communing, anyway.

The shepherd showed us a bit of flat ground, and we put down



The stone architecture of some Berber villages, such as the one pictured at left and right, reminded writer Todd Pitcock of the cliff dwellings of the Anasazi in the American Southwest. In Guelmim, below, the Saturday market attracts deal-makers from all over the region; a camel fair is held there in July. Guided by Jean-Yves's instincts, a good map, and a GPS device, the travelers, at bottom, usually found water and shelter for the night, even far off the road.



our packs. He started off to harvest snow to melt in a well-used black kettle, but we called him back to show that we had water. He arranged three stones and gathered some of that vicious tumbleweed, which he subdued for kindling, then unwrapped a kit that included chunks of sugar and a piece of paper with loose tea folded into it. He lit the kindling, boiled the water, and put the tea leaves in the kettle. Then he poured a glass of tea, emptied it back into the pot, and repeated—a ritual that aerated the tea and created a frothy top.

We said our names, patting our chests. He was amused by the popping sound he made trying to articulate mine, and he covered his mouth when he laughed. I couldn't master his name, either.

We took out disks of Moroccan bread, opened tins of sardines and tuna, peeled oranges. Then we pressed food on one another. He kept the tea coming, one glass at a time.

The shepherd wasn't the first Berber we had encountered. We'd met many in the past two weeks, as we slept in villages or outdoors by wells and tiny oases of palm trees and almond groves. We'd seen Berber life in all its forms. But now, having trekked for hours past the village of Tizgui, through miles of terraced fields that stretched implausibly high, up over mountains and into this recess of solitude, we had come to the end of our quest to find some pure expression of ancient Berber culture. We had arrived.

Just in time for tea.

**THE JOURNEY WAS JEAN-YVES'S IDEA.** Since 1992, the Frenchman had spent most of his time in Niger, where he runs a guild of Tuareg artisans who create silver jewelry for the French retailer Hermès, and where he'd worked as an expedition guide, finding daring routes for travel outfitters. That's what he was doing when we met several years ago in Libya, and later I had gone to Niger to write about the guild and the Tuareg, nomads who are the cultural cousins of the Berbers. But for more than a year, a Tuareg-led rebellion over land and profits from uranium mining had roiled Niger, and the government had banned foreigners, leaving Jean-Yves uprooted and hungry for contact with North Africa's traditional life.



He admired the Tuaregs for what he saw as an innate generosity of spirit, and he believed that globalization and the demand for resources, along with the agendas of governments, were snuffing out that way of life. "It is all vanishing," he told me. He knew he would find that same warm spirit—and, he feared, the same cultural threats—among Morocco's Berbers.

Jean-Yves also thirsted for adventure, and he had asked Elise and Hervé to join him. Elise, a painter from the South of France, didn't mind roughing it. Soft-spoken Hervé, from the same region as Elise, once lived in a commune in France, then drove a truck until he bought the trucking company and became wealthy. "I see this journey as a break in my life," he said. "I wanted something to fill the space between what was before and what will be next." Offered a seat in the 1995 Toyota Land Cruiser, I knew the trip wasn't going to be comfortable. I also didn't need to be asked twice. The idea was to trace a route through Berber life, from the most modern and accessible to the most traditional. To work our way, in a sense, back through time.



Our group gathered in Marrakech and we drove quickly south to the Atlantic and the coastal city of Agadir, where we packed the Land Cruiser with supermarket supplies at a mall that could have been in suburban Cleveland. Then we continued south until we entered a nature reserve, the Souss-Massa National Park, home to the endangered Northern bald ibis.

There, Jean-Yves sought out Ahmed, a Berber he had met while fishing years before. Ahmed invited us to stay in his pied-à-terre, a cave dwelling he had chiseled into the side of a cliff, and that's where we set up for the first couple of days. There was no electricity, but there was a well; we used a goat bladder rigged to a long rope to retrieve water. Beyond the cliff was a beach where the susurrations of waves measured out the nights, while during the days Berber fishermen cast lines or mined submerged boulders for mussels, which they loaded onto small donkeys saddled with straw mats, baskets, and plastic containers.

Ahmed came to eat with us the first evening, and the next night he invited us to his home, built in a meadow several miles inland. His wife prepared couscous mixed with yogurt, and he talked about his own family's hundred years of solitude. His people had lived in the eastern mountains until the early 1800s, when a drought had forced his grandfather's grandfather to come to the coast. The man had found a wife and settled with her by a well dug by Portuguese shipwreck survivors. Ahmed had hardly known his own father, who in the 1950s had been pressed into

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service to build roads in France, the colonial power until Moroccan independence in 1956, and had spent his life sending money to his wife and sons. The father had left a modest inheritance that Ahmed and his brother still relied on.

Ahmed lived with his wife and two young sons and spent his time building cave homes using only basic tools. Building by hand gave him pleasure. But he had another agenda: to stake land claims that would stave off what he believed was the next wave of colonizers—wealthy Saudis and Kuwaitis, Western tourism developers, and other outsiders who would come, as they have in Agadir and elsewhere in

Morocco, for pleasure and profit. "We know change is coming," he said. "But this is our land, our memory, our environment, and we want to know there is a place for us."

It seemed to me an archetypal Berber story.

Throughout the Berbers' 5,000-year history in North Africa, trade and invasions have meant dealing with outsiders, including the Romans who gave them the name "Berber," which is, as the guidebooks all point out, the root of "barbarian." They call themselves the Imazighen, or Free People. As many as 60 percent of Morocco's 34.8 million people are Berber, and tens of millions more Berbers live across North Africa and in diaspora communities, especially in France and Spain.

Though they have been Muslim since the Islamic Conquest in the 7th century, Berbers have retained parts of their own polytheistic religion

and incorporated Sudanese animism as well as Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. They are bound by language, their lives in the mountains of North Africa, their artistry in rugs, and their meditative music, a mixture of song-poems, percussion, and strings. "Arabs," one Berber told me, "are restrictive. They value discipline and following the religious rule. For a Berber, what's most important is tradition—families and the ways of the elders."

Threats to their way of life are myriad. In Morocco the Berbers are ruled by an Arab minority that, at least in the past, has tended to reserve the power and positions of authority, from the monarchy on down, for its own. Morocco's official language is Arabic, as is the language of instruction, despite the fact that, in general, Berber communities don't speak it among themselves and most Berber children don't know it when they enter school. In 1996, Morocco passed a law requiring that all children be registered with Arabic names—a de facto ban on Berber names. In addition, a decade-long drought has dried up the wells throughout Berber territory at the same time the outside world has flowed in via satellite dishes, often making tradition seem obsolete. All this has accelerated a trend of young Berbers leaving villages for work in cities and abroad.



Berber rugs, seen at left and right, combine geometric symbols to tell a story. The weaver Mbarka, right, said to the writer, "There is a Berber proverb: A carpet speaks but it takes time to hear what it says."

Berber resistance has manifested itself in big ways and small, from protests and international conferences to giving children Berber names, even if the names are not official. In part because of such resistance, the Berbers' lot is slowly improving, according to some experts. In 2000, for example, in response to prominent activist Mohamed Chafik's "Berber Manifesto," the Moroccan government established a royal institute for preserving Berber culture.

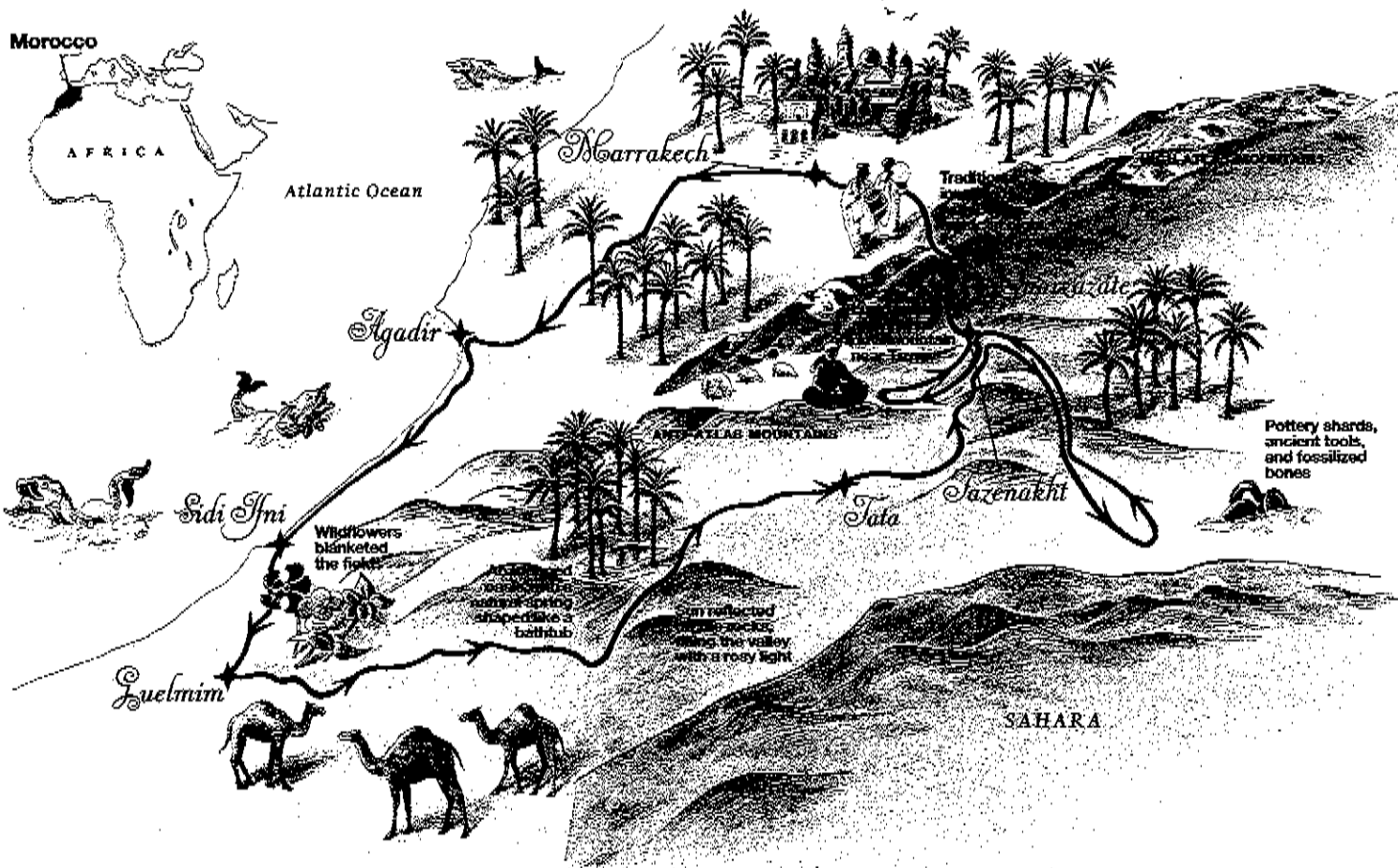
At the end of our evening at Ahmed's home, he commended us for wanting to find traditional Berber life and suggested that, rather than continuing south, we should turn east.

"The true Berber life," he said, "is still in the mountains."

The next morning, then, we headed east, onto barely navigable dirt roads. A few miles inland, wildflowers bloomed, turning the landscape into a palette of lavender, mustard green, pink, rose, and white. After those bright colors, we ran into caravans of European retirees in well-equipped

## On the Road in Morocco

The writer and his companions began their 15-day driving trip in Marrakech, then headed south on a loop that eventually took them deep into Berber territory in the Anti-Atlas and High Atlas mountains.





RVs and came to dusty spots such as a one-time camel market near the town of Guelmim, which now draws Mauritians, Saharwis, Berbers, assorted nomads, international businessmen, and a few hardscrabble smugglers of cigarettes and other contraband who do deals out of the backs of old Land Rovers and Datsun pickups.

For the next few days we zigzagged east along little-used roads that Jean-Yves found using a detailed map, a global positioning satellite device, and a good deal of intuition. He had a talent for finding paradise-like spots with wells and palm trees where we could set up camp. Hervé would climb onto the Land Cruiser's roof and pass down our packs; we would gather wood to cook meals flavored with sage and thyme that Hervé and Elise had picked and left to dry on the car's dash. Night after night, we'd drink from a box of wine brought from Provence. Considering we were in the bush, it was five-star dining.

We began to see the many lives of contemporary Berbers—townspeople and villagers, herders and nomads. The villages were sometimes empty ruins and sometimes just tumbledown places where people still lived. Sometimes a new town abutted a half-abandoned ancient one. Occasionally, we'd see palatial homes with plastered white walls trimmed in pink, and satellite dishes that no doubt fed flat-screen televisions inside.

The Berbers were usually cordial to us, but at times our encounters were distant or worse. On the seventh day, we made camp within sight of three nomad tents. We were somewhere in the Anti-Atlas Mountains, the range between the Sahara and the High Atlas Mountains. A few hundred yards away, men divided flocks of sheep, sending black sheep to one side

*At the end of our evening at Ahmed's home, he recommended that we drive east toward the Atlas. "True Berber life," he said, "is still in the mountains."*

and white to the other. As we got ourselves situated, two young women and several children came to greet us.

"Perhaps we'll get an invitation to eat in their tent!" Jean-Yves said. Elise would have been happy to find new subjects to sketch.

The women smiled and ordered the toddlers to shake our hands, but then they got down to business, rubbing their thumbs and fingers together. "Money, money," they said in English, and on being told no, they turned on their heels. We debated whether one had given us the finger.

The next day, east of Tata, a city of 40,000, we drove through rocky terrain into a fertile valley between two villages. We entered one of the villages, and children ran to the car to meet us. A village elder joined them and waved for us to

follow as he walked ahead of the car to his house. There, he invited us to spend the night. We stepped past a wooden door into a courtyard surrounded by six chambers that he shared with his wife, daughters, and grandchildren. The women set about preparing dinner from our supplies, which included couscous, vegetables, and lamb we'd bought in Tata.

His name was Abderrahman, and this place, he said in broken French as he prepared tea, was the "Village of the Blacks"—as distinct from the place across the valley where the "white people" lived. The village's ancient fortress, its *agadir*, was almost wholly intact, and it had a fine mosque with a minaret. Some of the houses had extraordinary antique doors.

At dinnertime, Abderrahman invited the village's teachers to join us.



They were two kindhearted and profoundly lonely Arab men from Casablanca and Rabat. One had been in the village for four years, the other for one, and they regarded their time there as a kind of exile, earning salaries so pitiful they could barely afford to visit their wives and children once a year.

After we ate, one of the teachers, Mohamed, showed me the school. The classroom had three rows of desks. There were no books or materials, only a blackboard. A light fixture in the ceiling had no bulbs. The Moroccan government had assigned teachers like Mohamed to every village to teach Berber children to speak Arabic. "Teaching" consisted of memorizing verses of the Koran.

Mohamed was starkly pessimistic about the village and its people. "It will never develop here," he said. "These children will grow up and go off to clean bathhouses in Marrakech." The cycle of doom had been set in motion, he suggested: The old folk would die, and when the children were old enough they would leave for the cities to work menial jobs. The place would become a ruin.

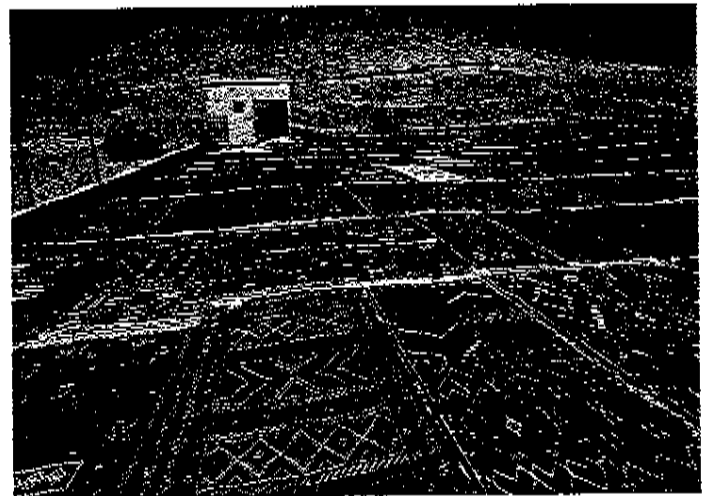
That bleak underside belied the warmth and hospitality. The next day, we bought oil and bags of rice and pasta to leave with Abderrahman as a thank-you, and he hugged us. But then, as we were leaving, one of the women approached and rubbed her fingers.

"Money?" she said.

FROM THE VILLAGE OF THE BLACKS we passed into a valley filled with groves of towering pines. As if to contradict the Arab teacher's prediction, here there were more homes, more buildings painted pink with

This page: The villages around Tazenakht are known for their rugs, which are often seen spread across the hillsides. The carpets' colors carry traditional messages: green for fertility or hope, yellow for happiness, red for life and warmth.

Opposite page: Terraced fields of saffron and almond trees surround the town of Tizgui.



white trim, and more satellite dishes. Yet this sort of development, we soon saw, was discouraging in a different way.

We reached a paved road and pulled into a hotel. The proprietor came out to greet us, his short-sleeved shirt open to reveal his chest. Together, we went to the hotel's rooftop deck and drank espresso and colas, gazing at a hillside village across the valley. He was a Berber who had spent his life in Grenoble, France. When he retired, the hotel owners here had offered him a 30 percent stake to manage the place. He wanted to build a road so more tour buses would come. But he had only contempt for the local people. They steal, he said. They don't work. He had internalized all the negative stereotypes of a French colonialist. He was here for one reason, he said: to make money.

On the patio below us a brightly colored café umbrella advertised beer. The sign sent two opposite messages: It told the local residents, Muslims who would not drink alcohol, to keep out, and it told passing tourists, who



were deprived of alcohol elsewhere in the region, to come in. We returned to the car and carried on.

**ELEVEN DAYS INTO THE JOURNEY**, we rolled into Tazenakht, a town of 3,000 and a hub for surrounding villages famous for Berber rugs and saffron. Its wide, dusty streets had hotels, Internet cafés, and street-side restaurants where men pulled pieces of chicken from clay tagines.

We stopped at a hotel and, after much-needed showers, convened for dinner in the first-floor café. We were tired from long stretches of driving over rough terrain, and we'd begun to feel dispirited about our quest to find Berber life with vitality.

"Maybe what we want does not still exist," Elise said. When we'd take breaks from the car, she'd get out and do yoga, and when there was more time, she'd take out her sketchbook and palette. "I do not know the word. In French it is *chimère*."

"Same in English: chimera."

The next morning, Jean-Yves went off to review the route. Hervé set off to plumb his thoughts in his journal, I headed to an Internet café, and Elise went to sketch. Her sketchbook made people curious, and they were receptive to being drawn. That morning as she began drawing, a man named Boubkou Tajoiti introduced himself and admired her work, and he invited us to join him later for lunch.

He had been an artist for 30 years in Denmark, he told us as we shared tea and almonds in his tribal village not far from Tazenakht. Then a vivid dream had awakened in him a spiritual quest. He destroyed his paintings, divorced his European wife—who was a nonobservant Muslim—and went to Mecca to make Hajj. Afterward he moved back to Morocco, married a Berber woman, and became a father. He believed he understood the socio-economic afflictions that threatened to unravel the fabric of Berber society.

"The elders are dying without transmitting knowledge and values," he said. "We are losing our way, but it is not about making a choice between either globalization or tradition. You must find what is good in both."

He gave the example of producing saffron. The traditional method is labor-intensive, requiring long cultivation until harvesting the red,

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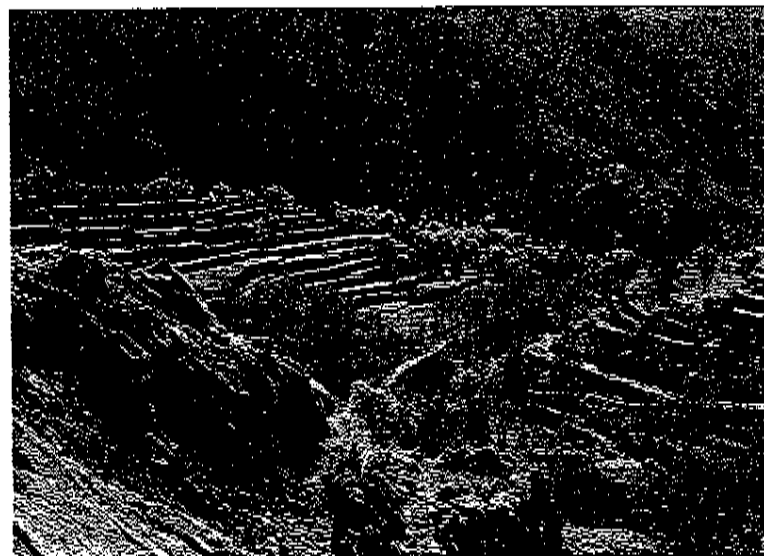
thread-like stigma of the crocus immediately after the flower blooms, before the sun can damage the delicate threads. To maximize profit—at about \$3.50 per gram, saffron is the world's most expensive spice—the modern, industrial method is simply to cut off the whole flower. That is more efficient but results in saffron of poorer quality, much the way grocery-store tomatoes never taste as good as the ones grown in your garden. Eventually, the compromised quality would undercut demand and prices. With a market willing to pay for quality, Boubkou believed that hewing to tradition was not only right—for tradition provided all kinds of moral guideposts—but also profitable. He had proof in the success of his own saffron exports, which he sold in Saudi Arabia and Europe. The key to revivifying Berber life, he said, was "to create opportunities so that young people have a reason to stay."

Boubkou loved holding court, to talk about himself, or to declaim the tenets of Islam, or to quote the Koran in classical Arabic. Or to talk about himself. Still, he was a man of action as well as words and ideas. Although as a devout Muslim he believed in clear gender roles, he also believed women should be educated, and he showed us a school he'd founded where 30 women from their teens to their 40s were learning to read. In the next room his niece, a 23-year-old who loved American movies and was working hard to improve her French, ran a nursery for the women's children.

He was also, he said, trying to bring back Tifnagh, the Berber alphabet that in the previous generation had been all but lost. This caught my attention. I'd met Moroccan Arabs and even some Berbers who insisted that because Moroccans were all Muslim, language was but a minor

difference between Arabs and Berbers. "Language and culture are the richness of humanity," Boubkou said. "God made it this way because it is an expression of his own diversity. Yes, we are all Muslims, and we are part of one Morocco, but we are different cultures."

He also believed that to be fully Berber it was essential to live in Berber



territory. "There is no identity outside of territory," he said. Jean-Yves had made this point a few times, but I wasn't convinced identity could be reduced so easily and absolutely. Hadn't Boubkou's own path to rediscovering his Berberness been circuitous and global? But there was a certain logic: Berbers live in mountains, so they raise sheep, which are mountain animals; the sheep provide wool; Berbers use the wool to make carpets that express their cultural beliefs.

THE CARPETS HAD BEEN IN PLAIN SIGHT all around Tazenakht. After the weavers finished, they laid the rugs on the mountainsides—whether to attract buyers, or fade the colors, we never found out. The designs were geometric, like carpets throughout the Muslim world, but Berber rugs were distinctive in that they mixed styles and textile patterns. A rug with a thick pile, for example, might have some panels as thin as a kilim.

Jean-Yves and Elise had begun buying rugs with an enthusiasm that showed signs of mania, and soon Hervé and I began acquiring as well. The Land Cruiser was filling up, and we began dumping supplies, like sailors saving a ship.

Now, though, I wanted to understand what those rugs meant.

Back in Tazenakht, Elise's sketches attracted another fan, Mohamed, and he took us to a rug cooperative called the Association Iklane, located near some villages just outside Tazenakht. We entered through a wooden door with iron bolts and stepped through a courtyard into a room stacked with carpets. At six in the evening, a lone woman sat on a cushion on the concrete floor, pulling wool—prep work for the next day.

Her name was Mbarka. Her fingers were stained with dye. At 78, she had dark eyes and fine features on a smooth face. The rug she had been working on had pyramidal forms around the edges and a diamond-shaped space in the middle, colored a creamy white.

Mohamed sat down with his back against a wall. He talked about the meanings of the colors: blue attracted happiness, which was why door and window trim was often the color of lapis lazuli; red was for warmth and closeness; green for hope; black an expression of unhappiness. "Carpets have a social meaning," he said, "but they can be personal, too. The weavers use certain common symbols and patterns, but how they fit the motifs together gives a carpet a particular weaver's signature."

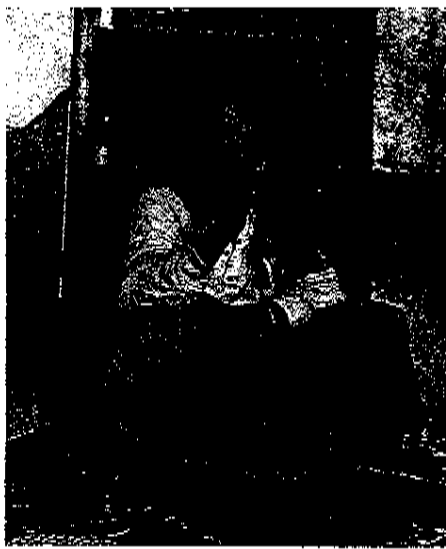
Then Mbarka said, "There is a Berber proverb: 'A carpet speaks, but it takes time to hear what it says.'" She pointed to a carpet that depicted birds flying out of an inverted crown. Where did she get the images? She smiled and tapped her temple.

Mbarka had a kind of radiance that I had seen in certain scholars and holy men. Before, when I saw women working at looms, I would think of carpal tunnel syndrome. Now I saw the art. She was a kind of writer, and the loom was her page.

"But do the symbols have particular meaning? What is this one, for example?" I asked, pointing to a four-sided figure, a common image.

"That is a mirror," she said. "On each side, it reveals a person from a different angle. It reflects the entire person."

One of Mbarka's sons had taken a seat by Mohamed. His name was Hamid and he had two daughters, ages 3 and 8. He admired his mother and saw that what she did was a vital expression of Berber life.



The residents of Tizgui (above, the wife of the president of the village) rely on time-consuming, traditional methods to raise their main cash crop, saffron, but turn to the Internet to find people to teach their children the Berber alphabet.

"So will your daughters grow up to do what she does?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I want them to be educated."

THAT EVENING, Mohamed looked over Jean-Yves's map and pointed us to a village about two hours southwest of Tazenakht. "You will find what you're looking for there," he said.

The next day, we followed a tarred road until it became a dirt one and snaked through mountains specked with villages, each with its own minaret. Mud houses with flat stepped roofs jutted from the hillsides. Finally, we came to a valley of terraced fields held in place by stone walls; almond trees bloomed on each landing, fluffing up the valley with white and grayish-pink blossoms. The road dead-ended at a boulder.

"This must be it," Jean-Yves said.

Latin and Arabic script on the big rock said TIZGUI. Beyond the boulder, a fortified house with tiny windows protruded from a steep rock face. Opposite, a switchback trail led up to a vil-

lage of adobe and stone houses. By the time we set up the tent near the Tizgui marker and organized the food, it was late afternoon and the slanting sunlight set aglitter the stone terraces and their deep-green shoots. Roosters crowed, donkeys brayed. We didn't enter the village, but could see its focused bustle.

Children came to see us. They smiled and took a seat on the boulder. We offered them fruit. Then the president of the local council, Abdellah Bousiyd Ben Ahmed, came to investigate. He led us to the village and his house, a solid structure of wood beams and stone, and seated us on carpets. Through a window we saw farm parcels and stone platforms that looked like stages. Those, he explained, were places for working the harvest. It was obvious that every space had a clear function, and that there was a sophisticated social order. Everyone had a job, and unlike other places we'd passed through, we saw people of all ages. Men built and repaired houses. Boys were in school or helping in fields of saffron—the highest quality in Morocco, said Abdellah. Women made rugs or gathered loads of kindling. The village of 600 had a feeling of industry and purpose, though at the same time, people napped here or there on flat roofs or drank tea, and children played all about.

"What do the children learn in school?" I asked. Abdellah answered, "The Koran." When they reach high school age, he said, they go away for a broader education. And though many do not return, many do, bringing new expertise and knowledge, money, health care, and even satellite dishes for news and entertainment. Using the Internet, for example, the village had connected with outsiders to teach the children Tifnagh, the Berber alphabet. Looking forward, the village had also reclaimed the past.

This was a revelation, the final reflection of the mirror in Mbarka's rug. Modernity and tradition were not necessarily in a death fight; indeed, modernity could preserve tradition. Jean-Yves pointed out, as he frequently had, that it was a two-way exchange: "We wind up sending scientists to relearn what the Berbers have been doing all along."

We went off into the hills, a little ebullient and keen on a long walk. We explored caves, and hiked carefully through cultivated areas high on a mountain plain, and then we arrived at a splendid area where we might have been the only people in the world.

And that was when we met the shepherd. ▲