

FIRST PERSON

Being Berber

Each year Morocco's nomadic Berbers migrate up into the High Atlas mountains, much as they have for centuries. **Andrea Wren** was lucky enough to join them – just don't mention the goats

Out in the remotest of the high Atlas Mountains, I expected the deafening sound of silence: an expectation soon trampled as I realised my camp companions – 230 bleating, snorting goats plus 20 or so spitting camels – just couldn't keep schtum.

They were all owned by nomadic Berber Zaid, a small, life-weathered man in his 40s, who wore a heavy cloth turban and even heavier ankle-length tunic. I was to be accompanying Zaid and his family – a group of ten relatives including mother Aisha (*far right*), wife Izha and three young children – as they migrated to escape the summer heat of the lower Dadès Valley and find relief and pastures new amid the peaks.

Trekking between four and six hours a day, upwards and across arid, ochre-dusted land, this journey was to take a week, and was part of a mass exodus involving other nomadic Berber tribes – each family travelling independently, though occasionally crossing paths along the way.

"We do not go where we want to go," explained our guide Lahcen on the first evening at our start point, Ait Youl in the Dadès Gorge. "We have to go where the nomadic family takes us." The trek wasn't about us tourists. Camp each night would be whichever rocky outcrop on the mountainside was deemed suitable feeding ground for the animals.

Nomadic Berbers make up about 10% of Morocco's

population; twice a year they migrate up and down the valley, to escape extremes of weather. The families are reasonably self-sustaining, trading their animals for the extras they need. A camel is worth around €2,000, so breeding the herds is a priority. Goats are also commodities.

In Zaid's family the women had it toughest. Aisha – her eyes thickly painted in blue, and of an age hard to tell – and Izha, always clad in bulky tunic and scarf, were the ones rising at 4am to make their way with the goats across a far more perilous route on the loose mountainsides instead of the tracks.

The women would return at dusk, having spent the whole day travelling in the heat, hurling stones at the goats to herd them.

(Even little Zara, just five years old, could throw a mean rock and easily equalled the menfolk in her over-arm capabilities.)

For our group and the men, life was less of a toil: a 5am start after sleep interrupted by baas and brays, followed by a simple breakfast of bread and jams. Then we'd pack our tents and load up the animals for a six-hour trek upwards (and downwards, and upwards...) toward our next rest point, stopping when the sun reached its highest.

At each camp, large Berber tents were erected for shade and a kitchen, and sticky-sweet mint tea was prepared to refresh us after the journey. (The women, of course, had another seven hours before they could enjoy this luxury.) We would lunch on fresh



salad and sardines then nap a while, looking out over the barren, sun-parched land.

We waited for the sun to go down before we set about our evening meal: tasty vegetable and meat tagines, couscous, chickpea soups plus flat, unleavened bread made by Zaid. Dinner conversations covered Berber traditions: Zaid explained that it was usual for nomadic Berbers to have more than one wife – and semi-joked that it was likely our partners were doing the same back in the UK; we just didn't know it!

At dinner on our third night, the goats became 229... Freshly slaughtered goat certainly tastes, well, goaty (they taste how they smell). Still, the herd minus one did not reduce the noise levels, and being sleepless at altitude

meant I'd have gladly eaten them all for a decent night's kip.

On our fourth evening we indulged in nomadic singing around the fire. Zaid, nephew Abrahm and cousin Hussein clapped and sang in time, while friend Ali did his own thing but looked like he was enjoying himself regardless.

As the week continued we moved deeper and higher through the central High Atlas (many camel-days away from a mobile phone signal) and I wondered if 'civilisation' was just a figment of my imagination. I welcomed the cooler breezes as we ascended, which assisted with sweat control. Over prickly bushes and crumbling scree, the nomads and their herds picked their way forwards with a far greater ease than we did.

On our final night, Abrahm and Hussein were nowhere to be seen. "They have gone to look for Aisha," Zaid told us. "She has not been able to make it to camp."

Concerned looks were exchanged; we didn't know if grandmother Aisha was alive. The young men had gone into the night on horseback for news.

It transpired that the final stretch of the journey had been too exhausting for Aisha; falling ill and unable to reach camp, she'd taken refuge with another family along the way. This meant Zaid's group would complete this migration a day later than usual, waiting till Aisha was well again.

It was a sad way to say goodbye, but I was incredibly thankful to have gained such a privileged insight into a life so different from my own. >

The trip

The author travelled with On The Go Tours (020 7371 1113, www.onthegotours.com) on its 11-day *Migration of The Berbers* trip. Tours depart from Marrakesh twice yearly in May and September. The trip costs £599 (excluding flights) plus a local payment of €300. Accommodation is in two-berth tents. Moderate fitness is required.