

# Tafraoute: Giants' Playground

> Armin Gemmer

The view from the rocks towards the surrounding countryside reveals a picturesque landscape and imparts the feeling that this was created by giants tossing rocks around. They can be described as unreal and surreal at the same time – the gigantic and apparently haphazardly deposited sandstone monoliths. And as if this in itself were not enough, the huge blocks of stone are in the center of a green hallow in an awe-inspiring if inhospitable and monotone environment.

**A**mmeln Valley, with Tafraoute in the center, was given its name by the Ammeln part of a Berber tribe resident in the area prior to the spread of Islam. The oasis itself is 180 kilometers southwest of Agadir in the range of the foothills of the Anti-Atlas mountain range. The route to the valley is in itself a unique presentation of nature, as the only access is along a road that follows the barren slopes of the Anti-Atlas. Once there, we are greeted with an entirely different kind of nature. The soft green of the oasis in the river valley is in sharp contrast to the vegetationless but

brehtaking mountain region of the surroundings. In the fertile valley, almonds and fruit trees, dates and olives, fig cacti and even grains thrive.

All the villages in the valley are strung one after another along the fertile plain. "One after another" is to be taken literally – Tafraoute and the other villages are at the same altitude on the edge of the valley at the alluvial fan, directly above the intensively farmed valley floor. The slant of the slopes determines the cubic form of the houses which hug the mighty and bizarrely shaped sandstone formations. The colors of the huge rocks change with the position of the sun

from a golden yellow to pink. The houses match these colors, having been painted in tones of red-brown or ochre. ▶



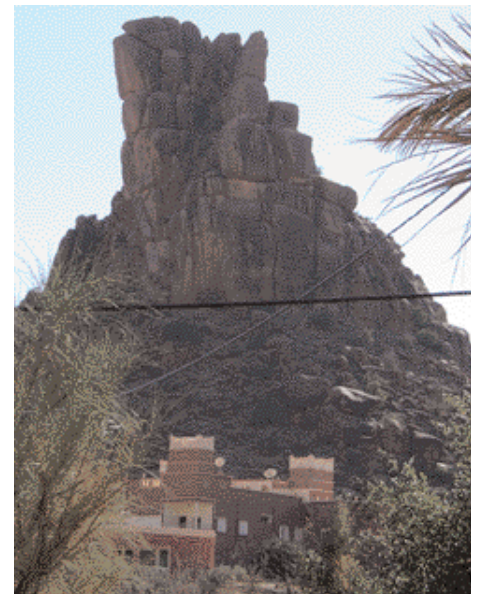
Edible fruit of the opuntia

ثمار الصبار (التين الهندي) التي تؤكل



House in the middle of opuntias

بيت محاط بالتين الهندي



Chapeau Napoleon from the east

قبة نابليون من جهة الشرق

For the Moroccan Berbers, the ornamentation on windows and doors is a traditional status symbol, which shows that the Ammeln have always been rich and successful traders.

### Chapeau de Napoleon

One of the most surreal of all the rock formations is at the same time the most famous sight of Tafraoutes and decorates the book cover of many Moroccan travel guides. Due to associations with Napoleon's hat, a rock in the shape of a hat is called "Chapeau Napoleon". To find Napoleon's hat, proceed to the village of Aguar Oudad, 2 kilometers south of Tafraoute. You can't miss the rock. And in any case, the locals know what you are looking for and will help you out even before you have a chance to ask for directions.

### Painted Rocks

An attraction that has drawn visitors for quite some time are rocks painted by the Belgium artist Jean Verame with more than 18 tones of paint in red, blue, black and violet. The artwork covers an area of approximately two square kilometers. The artist has produced similar works in the Sinai and in the mountains of Tibesti. Whether one finds the artwork appealing or tends to see it as an encroachment into nature is a matter of opinion. In the meantime, wind and weather have taken their toll and the colors have faded.

You can get to the painted stones by following the route from Tafraoute to Chapeau Napoleon and taking the road south after about 3 kilometers.

### Prehistoric Petroglyph

A really exciting sight is the prehistoric drawings on rocks not far from Tafraoute. Not much is known concerning their origins. It is assumed that hunters from the Neolithic Age demonstrated their hunting skills by drawing a gazelle. The drawing was made by scratching straight lines into the granite and shows a very impressive life-size gazelle. In order to get there, one must take the main road southwest to the tiny village of Tazekka.

From here it is a hike of only fifteen minutes to reach the foot of the hillside where the village is located. As it is difficult to find the gazelle, it is best to ask a local and you will gladly be accompanied to the site. The humor of the locals can be seen in their recreation of the

gazelle on a nearby rock. They enjoy testing the experts by showing them the copy first.

For many tourists, Tafraoute is a day trip with an overnight stop. Accommodation is offered in many hotels in all price ranges. Generally tourists visit Chapeau de Napoleon, the painted rocks, and the prehistoric drawing and then proceed to the next item on their agenda. I was lucky in that I arrived on Eid el-Kbir (the Moroccan Eid al-Adha), was able to celebrate with the residents and could see how a normally bustling Moroccan marketplace was suddenly deserted when everyone retired home for prayers. For days, there was no public

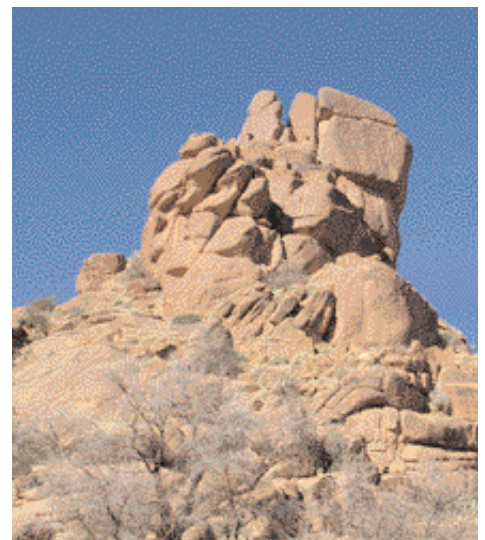
transport and I had enough time to explore the bizarre sandstone formations over an area of 30 square kilometers. The view from one of the cliffs led to the question: "How did this all come into being?"

The assumption is that the mountains were formed 550 million years ago when the continental blocks of Africa and Europe collided; molten rock came to the surface and formed the sandstone rocks. The characteristic variety of forms is a result of the wind and weather which over time broke the monoliths into many smaller segments and formed the individual rocks. ■



Old Gate in Tazekka

بوابة قديمة في تازكا



Chapeau Napoleon from the west

قبعة نابليون من جهة الغرب



Panoramic view towards the Ammeln Valley

منظر بانورامي لوادي أملمن