

★ ★★★★★ **I am reborn! Simply the best holiday I have ever been on**
Reviewed 14 May 2010 by Holly Foat



1. What was the most memorable or exciting part of your holiday?

I went on the special volunteer departure of the usual walking holiday, which meant three days of volunteering in Tjihza instead of hiking. This was my first trip as a solo traveller and it really took me out of my comfort zone but I had nothing to worry about as Andy (Tour Leader) was great and all the other travellers were lovely and looked after me. The most memorable part of the week was the Hamman in Marrakech, mostly because it involved being thoroughly scrubbed by a rather large woman whilst lying naked on a tiled floor in a dark steamy room down one of the back alleys of Marrakech – it was so far removed from my normal life!

On the volunteering side of things, the best part is knowing how much we achieved in three days – we painted three classrooms in the local school, the tour operator paid for windows to be fitted to two of the school classrooms (which we painted), we planted 220 trees with the forestry commission, painted a house in the village, one of the other travellers helped advise the villagers on bee keeping, four of the group ran a health clinic (apparently saw over 100 patients) at the school and gave out toothbrushes showing the children how to clean their teeth, Matt (the tour operator's building expert) fixed loads of water pipes leading to the water tank the tour operator had funded and I bought a carpet which was part of the village community enterprise scheme! Oh and that's not to mention the mountain of clothes, toys and light bulbs we took over there too!

2. What tips would you give other travellers booking this holiday?

Do it! I never expected it to be so much fun or so rewarding. As this was the volunteer departure everyone was there to make a difference. It's inspiring to see so many people who really care. Pack lots of old clothes and leave as much as you can behind for the villagers – they really appreciate it. Don't worry about the food, its amazing! I keep dreaming about lamb Tagine! It was hot and sunny when I went so take a hat and



drink lots of water if you're prone to heat stroke like me! Take clothes that cover your shoulders and knees – it is a Muslim country so you don't want to offend. Don't be afraid of Marrakech – it is mental and busy, full of scooters, bikes, donkeys, noise, smells and people trying to sell you stuff but just take a deep breath and dive in! Finally, take a bikini as Riad Bledna has a pool in the beautiful garden!

3. Did you feel that your holiday benefited local people, and minimized impacts on the environment?

Definitely! The accommodation was locally owned, the food was all local, the mint tea came straight from the fields (whole mint leaves in the tea pot, not packaged stuff), we had local

drivers and a local guide (in addition to the English tour leader) and the plastic water bottles were given to the villagers to reuse. We visited local restaurants, a woman's cooperative selling organic creams from argon oil, the spice shop in Marrakech and the souks. This trip was all about the people. It's sad to see litter in these beautiful mountains; we were planning to do a litter pick but we ran out of time but I know its next on the operator's agenda to address.

For me, the community benefits were highlighted by one woman Andy took me to see. Fatima had a tooth infection which spread into a large abscess on the side of her face. Her husband left her because of the growth, leaving her to bring up her daughter on her own. The tour operator paid for Fatima to have the surgery to remove the abscess. One of the previous volunteer groups painted and tiled Fatima's kitchen and she now has a loom and is starting to make carpets and jewellery to sell to tourists. This isn't about token efforts to be 'green' or 'sustainable', this is about real, life changing benefits.

4. Finally, how would you rate your holiday overall?

Amazing, brilliant, inspiring... I can really see why it's so hard not to go back! In a time when so many of us have charity donations whizzing out of our bank accounts by direct debit to some far off land where we never know who benefits, it's so good to actually be able to say 'this is what we achieved'. This trip goes beyond good intentions, you can see real, tangible benefits and it leaves you feeling proud that you were apart of it. Fantastic!

