

Seeking Shelter in the Fortresses of Southern Morocco

by Eve Kahn September 16, 2015

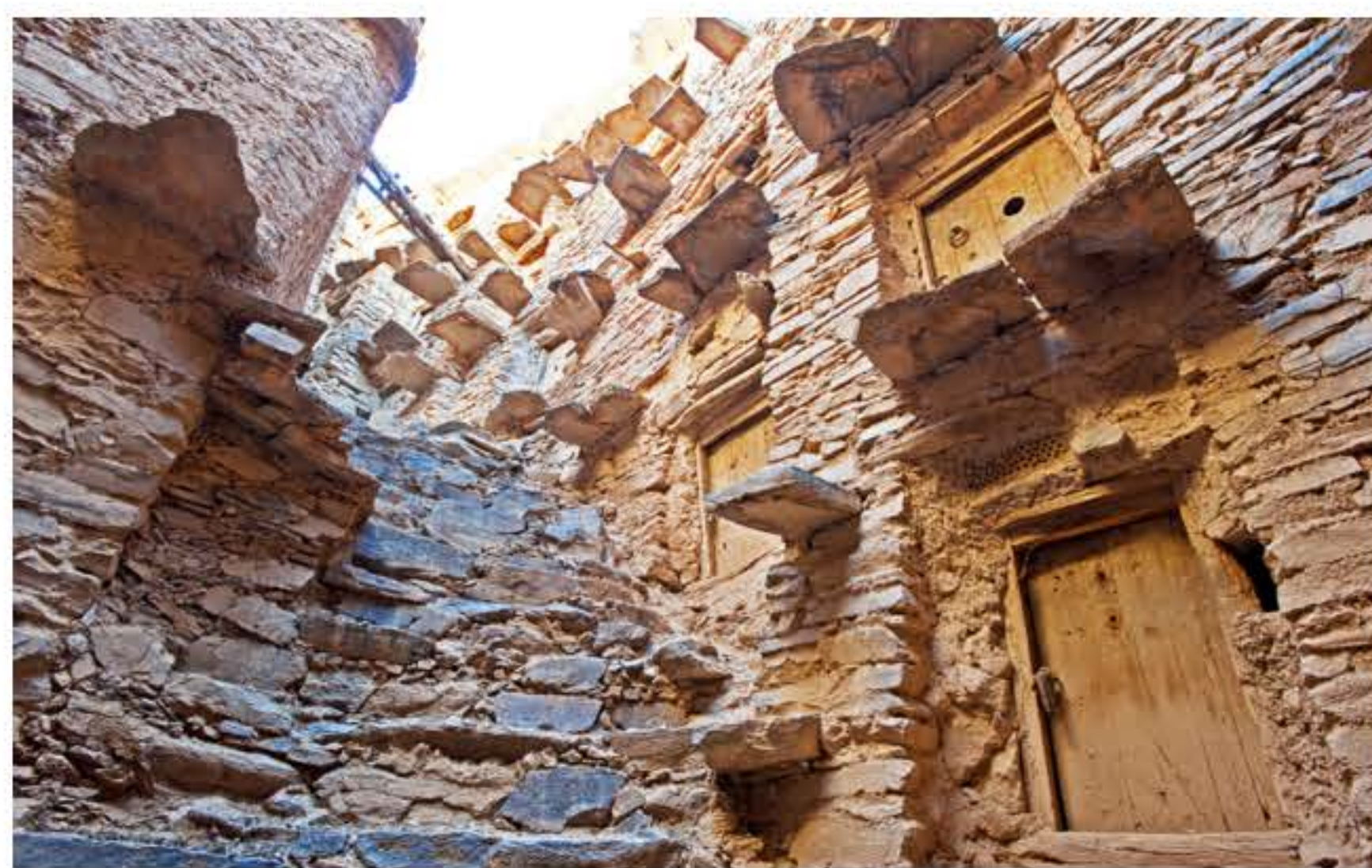


Amar Grover

On a tour of ancient granaries in the landscape of southern Morocco, Eve Kahn discovers the picturesque history of these architectural marvels—and the plan to rescue them from ruin.

The zigzagging path led to a stone fortification on a cliff. Its curved, monolithic walls faced a towering mountain range, almost disappearing into the landscape. For centuries, ancient Berber tribes and nomads locked up food and other valuables here and fought off any marauders who made it to this remote spot. As I maneuvered along the loose-rock trail, I was far outpaced by the fortress's aged caretaker, Mohamed Amarir, who led my family and our guide, Hassan Idfath. Inside the entry gate, we ducked through hobbit doorways into mazes of storerooms. Crouching along the sandy floors, we found ourselves in a cool, tall cavern, with storage jars half-sunken into the earth. Slit windows overhead reduced the Moroccan sun to dusty gold rectangles. At eye level, I glimpsed an oasis, an improbable blaze of green palms, carob, and oleander in a rust-colored canyon.

The building, called Agadir Aguelluy, is one of Morocco's hundreds of communal granaries, known as *igoudar* in a Berber dialect (the singular is *agadir*). Communal granaries exist elsewhere in North Africa, but the Moroccan structures are the most attractive. They've also become a cause célèbre among philanthropists and travelers, offering a fascinating glimpse into a quickly disappearing North African culture. Donors, including the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation and Moroccan royal agencies, are financing *agadir* restorations to boost tourism and create jobs.



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This spring, I visited half a dozen *igoudar* in a three-day whirlwind. Many still serve as storage spaces for provisions, but most are abandoned. They range in shape and height, some honeycombed into hillsides, others surrounded by villages or perched on hilltops. I based my itinerary on suggestions from Salima Naji, a charismatic architect and anthropologist working to preserve *igoudar*, and Zhor Rehilil, the brilliant and feisty curator of the Moroccan Jewish Museum, which is helping document traces of vanished rural Jewish communities.

I began in Idfath's coastal-resort hometown, also called Agadir. From there, the drive inland to Aguelluy takes about 2½ hours—often on newly paved highways—and there are granaries scattered across the hills for hundreds of miles around. Imagine a road trip across a sunbaked landscape, with no souvenir stands and hardly any signs or tourists. Wherever we stopped, even just to ask directions, the locals invited us to share mint tea with them. The Moroccan government is a stable American ally, and the people are endlessly hospitable. Though most old customs remain, a little modernity has crept into these parts. Nomads install solar panels outside their tents. Teenage girls, in billowing robes called haiks, ride donkeys while chatting on cell phones.

Standing within the fortress at Aguelluy, Idfath translated as caretakers explained the repairs under way and the traditional uses of the compartments. Locals still lock hewn-plank doors with wooden keys the size of spatulas to safeguard grain, honey, oils, and jewelry. Long ago, sentinels would have kept a lookout, which allowed nomadic families to roam for weeks on end. After harvesting the land, they would have lugged their stockpiles back to the cool, dark *agadir*. I imagined them feeling safe and secure as they left the stronghold, heading back into the Moroccan sun.