Jbel Toubkal is the highest mountain in North Africa at 4165m. It is in the High Atlas mountain range and is a serious undertaking for any group. Discover Ltd recommends that all members of the group are prepared both mentally and physically for the climb. This should be done in the following ways:

- **Physical preparation.** Before coming to Morocco, teachers should ensure that all party members are physically fit and able to walk the long distance and climb the steep gradients that Toubkal represents. This may well involve some sort of assessment at school or as part of a preparation day/weekend organised by the school. At 4165m, Toubkal is high enough for some, all, or indeed none of the party members to experience altitude sickness. It is impossible to predict in a party who, if anyone, will be affected, but the effects are serious and potentially life threatening, requiring immediate descent. Physical fitness, prior experience at altitude and stamina do not guarantee making the summit, but these will all help and make the experience a pleasure rather than a torment. The descent is notoriously difficult – strenuous with long sections walking on unstable scree. If at all possible, participants should have some experience of walking in mountains before hand.

- **Mental preparation.** Jbel Toubkal is a serious undertaking. Even reaching the base camp at the Neltner hut is an amazing achievement! All participants need to be mentally prepared for a tough expedition involving carrying their own equipment (day sacks), physical fatigue and potentially the effects of altitude. A positive mind-set really helps reach the summit! Participants should also be mentally prepared for the very real possibility not to be able to make the final climb due to deteriorating weather conditions. It can be disappointing not to be able to complete the trek after so much preparation.

- **Equipment.** All participants must be well equipped for the ascent. This includes excellent, and well worn-in footwear (walking boots must be worn – trainers or similar are in no way adequate), waterproofs and warm clothing including a fleece jacket, hat and gloves. Sunglasses and a sunhat are advisable when there is snow around, as the glare of the sun on snow can be fierce. Walking poles are extremely useful for both the ascent and particularly for the descent. You will need to bring your own as we do not have supplies for everyone at the Kasbah, and participants should practise using them before the trip. Inadequately dressed participants will not be allowed to climb Toubkal. You should also bring some snacks such as chocolate or nuts, or even glucose energy tablets, to help get you to the top. You will need to
bring a good sleeping bag, as the hut where we stay before and after the ascent can be very cold.

The Dragon School Expedition on the Summit of Toubkal in 2008.

- **Time taken.** Fit adults undertake the climb in two days. The first day is the ascent to the Neltner hut, the second is the final push to the summit and the descent to Imlil. This can be a very long and exhausting day for well prepared adults. We therefore recommend that most groups should consider doing the route over **three days**, taking 2 days for the descent by spending a second night at the Neltner hut after attempting the summit, before returning to Imlil on day 3.

Here are some detailed notes on climbing Toubkal:

Pliny, the Roman geographer, described the Atlas peaks as the most fabulous mountains in all of Africa, whilst Louis Neltner (after whom the CAF hut at the base of Toubkal is named) described them as “neither more nor less beautiful than the Alps, but something different”.

The native inhabitants of these mountains are the Berbers, whose name for the High Atlas Mountains is Idraren Draren (Mountains of Mountains). The Toubkal Massif is made up largely of green volcanic rocks, Andesites and Rhyolites, which are fractured and bedded together, producing huge scree slopes. The Toubkal scree is used as a yardstick for comparing similar slopes on other mountains. Do not be put off, those who climb with open minds and unblinkered vision will love it. This highest summit was not assuredly identified until 1922, although Berber tribesmen probably climbed the Atlas long before recorded ascents began.
The first ‘official’ expedition to the Atlas was in 1871 when a small scientific expedition organised by J. D. Hooker was given permission to visit the Toubkal region. The first European to the top of Toubkal was the Marquis de Segonzac in June 1923, and the height of the mountain was determined in 1924, with a trigonometrical signal raised on the summit in 1931. The first British man to the summit was B. Beetham in 1926.

The route we are taking from Imlil to Toubkal is along one of the best used tracks in the High Atlas yet follows one of the most beautiful valleys in Morocco. After leaving the Kasbah, at just over 1800m, we follow a fairly steep zigzag path with a cemetery on our right. This is the path that features in Scorsese’s film Kundun, when the Tibetan monks are returning to the monastery. We fairly quickly join a vehicle track, which takes us through a small gorge, and past the village of Aremd (1920m), built on a peculiar geographical phenomenon called a rock glacier. Beyond the village we cross the ‘basin’ with its fields, orchards and outlying farmhouses to head off up the right hand side of the valley and through the last of the cultivation, as the altitude is now too high and the growing season too short for crops to grow. Beyond here we will see only sheep and goats as we wind up the zigzags towards Sidi Chamharouch (2320m) at about two and a half hours from Imlil.

At Sidi Chamarouch there are several small shops and cafes with quite high price, plus a white roofed mosque. This is a popular pilgrimage place for local inhabitants since the source of water, which emerges from the rocks here, is reputed to have healing powers. The waters are supposed to be particularly good for curing leg ailments so we may need to stop here on the way down! Leaving this small settlement, the last this side of the mountains, we follow a steep zigzag path up the right hand side of the valley with the bulk of Toubkal on our left.

About two hours later as the path levels off the Neltner Hut can be seen in the distance, tucked in well below the col on the skyline. Another twenty minutes and the hut should be reached (3207m). We will be staying in either the Neltner hut, or a new Refuge, Gite Camping les Mouflons, which has been built near by. Both places have fairly basic accommodation (dormitories and no hot showers!). The nights can be very cold, so a good sleeping bag is a must.

**Jbel Toubkal via the South Cwm**

Mules are not taken on the final ascent of Toubkal – you follow the guide on foot! The route starts directly behind the Neltner Hut, crossing the small river gorge of the Ait Mizane to find the first of the boulder slopes. A path of sorts, depending on the time of year and the recent weather conditions, ascends for about and hour to reach the large boulders which can be seen on the skyline from the hut. We then follow the path into the main cwm and head right, up a steep scree slope to more gently angled scree leading to Tizi-n-Toubkal (3940m, 2 hours 15 mins).

The worst is nearly over although, if you have rarely or never been at this sort of altitude before, you may be feeling a little nauseous and dizzy and will find it hard to believe how slowly you are able to walk. The key is to keep the pace very slow but steady; if you are getting out of breath, slow down even more, rather than stopping. We now follow the ridge to arrive at the summit (3 to 4 hours). At the summit is a large, iron, pyramidal structure and, haze and weather permitting, excellent views. The best view is probably towards the south, which is of layered distances of the Saharan Plateaux broken by the extinct volcano Siroua.
The descent of Toubkal is notoriously difficult, with long sections on rough, loose scree – extreme care must be taken to avoid dislodging rocks onto those below you, and to avoid slipping yourself. After the hut (where you may have decided to spend a second night if the group are very tired, rather than risk accidents on the descent back to Imlil) we retrace our steps back to Imlil for a well-earned hot shower!