

The intricate paintwork of the Blue Rocks is well worth exploring in some detail, as Verame didn't only paint the outside faces of the outcrops. Caves, boulders, and even the inside of the cracks have all been meticulously coloured.

Once you're done, head back the way you came, past the Red and Black 'T' to the junction in the track in front of a prominent granite tor ahead.

As you walk this way you may notice a large number of small holes in the earth. These burrows are made by Ground Squirrels - harmless but relentless rodents ready to pop out at any moment and snatch your lunch! Unfortunately for the squirrels, however, their excavations also make ideal homes for snakes, and evictions are common. It's therefore advised not to go poking around in there!



Ground-Squirrel burrows at the Blue Rocks

7 At the junction bear left, following a good path to the left of the prominent tor. This path becomes rather indistinct, but there are a number of cairns to help you find your way to the col above Tazekka.



Junction, returning from the Painted Rocks

8 From the Col above Tazekka the path winds its way steeply down into the village.

This path is popular with off-road bikers, who relish the challenging descent back to Tafraoute.

9 The first building you reach at the bottom of the descent is a large walled residence. Go to the left of this, then bear right to regain the road that leads through Tazekka and onwards to Tafraoute.

Tazekka itself is a very picturesque and ancient village, where a traditional Berber house provides another curiosity for tourists. It's well signposted from the main Tafraoute road, and a visit can easily be tacked on to this very enjoyable walk.



Argan tree at Tazekka



Gaining the start of the Tafraoute Road at Tazekka

Tafraoute Back-country

Time: 3-5 hours

Distance: 10km

Difficulty: Easy. The walk is mostly on flat ground with good tracks throughout.

Seriousness: Low. Despite a remote feeling the walk never strays far from civilisation, and there are usually other people around.

Navigation: Easy. Although there are a myriad of tracks through this back-country, most of them go to the same places, so it's difficult to go far wrong!

Look Out For:

Animal Tracks - Considering the proximity to Tafraoute this region is home to a surprising variety of wildlife, so keep your eyes peeled for tracks. Snakes, chipmunks, wild dogs, wild boar, goats and donkeys often leave their mark, and the lucky walker may even find evidence of mountain lion...

Argan trees - The precious Argan tree is one of the most economically important species to the people of Tafraoute, providing not only food for the incredible tree-climbing goats, but also the highly sought-after Argan oil, which is sold throughout Morocco. Be sure to visit the Argan shop during your stay in Tafraoute.

Tree-climbing goats - For much of the year there is little, if any, ground vegetation around the Tafraoute back-country, so the herds of domestic goats frequently graze on the leaves of the Argan tree. For this daring meal the entire herd will often clamber into the same tree - a sight which has to be seen to be believed!

The peculiar granite scenery around Tafraoute has been the catalyst for a growing tourist trade for Tafraoute during recent decades. Although many travellers spend only a short time here, a visit to Agard Oudad and the Painted Rocks is usually high on the agenda, with jeep tours, walking tours, and bus tours all making the most of these roadside attractions. For those who have a little bit more time on their hands, however, a walk through the Tafraoute back-country is an experience not to be missed.

This straightforward walk takes in the

main tourist sights as well as the wonderful countryside right on the doorstep of Tafraoute, and due to its low altitude and low level of commitment it provides a perfect way to acclimatise to the region. Indeed there are few better ways to start a walking holiday in Tafraoute than this.

1 The walk starts in the picturesque village of Agard Oudad, 2.5km south of Tafraoute, though this point can easily be reached on foot if you can't arrange transport (add 45 minutes to the total time). The spectacular 'Napoleon's Hat' towers above this affluent village and visitors come here from across the country to marvel at the unique natural architecture - indeed this formation features on just about every postcard and guidebook in town. For most, a few photographs and a stroll through the remarkable streets of Agard Oudad will satisfy, but for the more adventurous an ascent of Napoleon's Hat provides stunning views over Tafraoute and the surrounding area. Our walk, however, features nothing so strenuous.

Follow the main street through the village to its southwestern end, where the track heads off into the back-country.

Within the space of a few hundred yards the scene changes from one of affluence to the simple way of life that epitomises this part of Morocco. The Berbers are proud people, and the care and attention to detail that has clearly been afforded to Agard Oudad is not unusual. Beyond it, however, the basic requirements of every-day living are clearly evident, and the sight of people collecting water and washing clothes at the local well is not uncommon.





2 Continue along the good track, heading Southwest down the valley. This track is used by the adventure company jeeps as an access road for the Blue Rocks, so don't be surprised to see vehicles passing this way.

Along the way you may notice coloured rocks or concrete blocks on the ground either side of the track, marking out private plots of land. These sometimes feature arrows or markings indicating the area to which they refer, or may just be crudely splashed with coloured paint on one side.

You may also spot disused underground water-tanks which in wetter periods of Taфраoute's recent history would have maintained a reliable and cool supply of water. Whilst those around us tend to be constructed with concrete, more ancient examples can be found in some of the more rural regions of the Anti Atlas.



3 As you head along the valley into the back-country keep an eye out for a lone white building on the hillside to the left. This is a tomb to an unknown saint, although details of exactly who is buried here remain unclear. The door to the tomb is left unlocked, so those undeterred by such things might like to poke their heads inside to ponder this rather strange curiosity.



4 Just after a prominent granite tor on the right of the track we come to a junction in the track. Keep bearing left at this point.

The network of paths and tracks that crisscrosses this area can be rather daunting, but fortunately it's difficult to go far wrong. Despite a feeling of being in the middle of the desert, this is little more than a playground for Taфраoute's off-road drivers, cyclists, and walkers, and almost all of the paths eventually go to the same place!

5 Shortly after the junction the first of the infamous Painted Rocks comes into view on the left-hand side, including the distinctive red & black 'T' - one of Jean Verame's most photographed creations. The prominent summit dominating the backdrop is Adrar Mgorn, which translates literally as 'the Big Mountain'.

Keep following the track towards the main part of the Painted Rocks.



6 The Painted Rocks are perhaps the most famous element of Taфраoute's granite landscape. They were created in 1984 by Belgian artist Jean Verame with the help of the Taфраoute fire brigade and 18 tonnes of blue, pink, red, and black paint. This peculiar and controversial work of art is still both marvelled, questioned and deplored today, but 25 years ago they were an even more striking sight in the barren semi-desert.



Adrar Mgorn provides a backdrop to the Painted Rocks.