

From Flights to Footsteps

Andrew Zionts Abrams explores the wider dimensions of the commons

Growing up, travel was the currency my family valued most. We learnt languages instead of buying new cars and travelled abroad rather than investing in a holiday home. That privilege opened my eyes to many different ways of living. But since COVID, boarding a plane for a quick escape has started to feel wrong – not just because of the carbon footprint but also because of what I might be missing by moving too fast. I've always enjoyed walking as a way of travelling, and now this resonates even more. Gradually, my journeys have shifted from flights to footsteps. Walking – especially on the Camino de Santiago or along mountain paths in Morocco's High Atlas – has become a way to feel the world under my feet and to carry permaculture's ethics of care and fair share into my travels. As I have slowed down, I have begun to wonder: what else have I been overlooking by moving too quickly?

Slow travel to the Atlas

From our town on Spain's southern tip we can see Africa across the strait, so Morocco is both a land of adventure and a neighbour. Almost every year a couple of friends and I hop on the ferry to Tangier, take the overnight sleeper train to Marrakech, and then ride with Omar – our guide and friend – into the High Atlas. That overland journey is itself a transition: the ferry's salt air gives way to the train's lullaby, then to winding roads climbing through red rock and alpine pastures. Travelling this way gives our bodies and minds time to catch up. We watch the landscape change and begin to feel part of it – before we've even taken a step. Crossing from one mode of transport to another becomes its own kind of edge – an invitation to notice, to breathe, to arrive.

Omar arranges the mules, the muleteers and our cook. On these trails

a mule is still the best engine; they often arrive at our destination before we do. We walk beside rivers, cross them again and again, and climb stone and log steps built into the rocky slopes. Omar knows every spring and tucked-away orchard; he shows us where to refill water bottles and where to rest in the shade of a walnut. Over years of hikes we've watched him greet cousins, friends and elders in each valley. His people live on steep slopes where only hands and hooves can farm; they harvest grain in small fields and thresh together on shared grounds. They work together because they must, but also because they choose to: collaboration isn't an ideal here, it's how you survive. Walking at their pace, I find myself asking: what must it mean to be an integral part of such a remote place rather than just someone passing through?

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To immerse ourselves fully in this slow travel, we also turn off our phones. For the ten days we spend in the mountains, we leave our smartphones at the bottom of our packs and live without notifications or news feeds. This intentional digital disconnection deepens our ability to observe and connect. Without a screen to distract us, we listen more carefully to the sound of water, notice the way light shifts on terraces, and engage more fully with the people we meet. For me, that decision to disconnect has become one of the highlights of the journey – it's a reminder that real presence often requires us to let go of digital chatter and trust the pace of our own footsteps.

A culture of care and collaboration

Hospitality is woven into daily life. Families in high pastures invite us in for tea and bread, dates and almonds. We sit on carpets, windswept and dusty, sipping sweet mint tea while children shyly peek from behind a door. This year during Eid we camped in a small hamlet in a poplar grove

outside a teacher's house; he was home to celebrate, but he still took time to make sure our mules had fresh grass and we had shade. As he shared stories about his former students from the time he worked in Omar's valley, I saw that education is a commons too – nurtured and sustained by the whole community.

The social web stretches across these valleys. One day we descended into Sremt, where Omar's mother was born. Every few hundred metres someone called his name. We met Ismail, a muleteer who travelled with us years ago; his children now played hide and seek with us under a walnut tree. Later, near Omar's home village, an eight-year-old named Hadija ran over from a nearby house. At first she hid behind her father and whispered in French, but soon she was tugging at my sleeve, wanting to show us her valley – guiding us through her world excitedly. Her curiosity and confidence reminded me that the commons are always renewed by younger generations. I couldn't help wondering: how would our own communities feel if such generosity and interdependence were the norm?

Why commons matter

During these hikes I have noticed that much of what sustains life here belongs to everyone and to no one. Indigenous peoples all over the planet have recognised this fact and have developed many different approaches to stewarding these shared resources. In Europe where I live and work, these natural resources are referred to as the 'commons' – a term rooted in history, when it referred to shared agricultural fields, grazing lands and forests that over time were stolen, enclosed as private property for private use. Today we use the term to describe a broad set of resources – natural and cultural – including forests, fisheries and groundwater, that are shared by many people; in recent years the concept has expanded to include knowledge commons, digital commons, urban commons and cultural commons. A resource becomes a commons when a community develops rules for how it is used and cared for.

In the High Atlas, *acequias* – off-contour irrigation channels – carry water from rivers to terraced fields and orchards.

Sremt is one of the villages on the journey, offering a glimpse into local life





On steep slopes, farmers line up stones on contour to slow water, catch silt and build soil and terraces. These systems embody the permaculture principle of catching and storing energy and the ethic of fair share. They're also a commons: not owned by one person but maintained by all. At the start of the dry season, everyone meets to decide who gets water first and for how long; elders mediate disputes. It's simple in concept but sophisticated in practice. And these practices persist: in Spain, the *acequias* that water our orchards have been governed by local councils since Moorish times.

As we've seen, the concept of the commons is not limited to water and land. Language, stories and songs are shared resources. The Amazigh (Berber) language carries ecological knowledge that isn't written down but is passed from grandmothers to grandchildren. The Camino de Santiago – a network

of trails and pilgrim hostels in Spain – is a cultural commons, sustained by countless acts of hospitality and maintenance. In the digital world, open-source software and freely shared information are another kind of commons: data, code and knowledge created and maintained online. Cultural commons can also include intangible resources such as knowledge, values, traditions, images and digital content. Recognising the existence of the commons invites us to see everyday things differently. Instead of taking a glass of water for granted, we might ask: who keeps this water flowing? Instead of assuming songs and stories just exist, we might wonder how they have travelled through time. By seeing the commons, we make visible the networks of care that sustain us. How might our sense of responsibility change if we were to view every path, every spring and every recipe as part of a shared inheritance?

LEFT TO RIGHT Ploughing; terraced valley; alfafa drying



What we stand to lose (and save)

The Atlas is changing. Drought makes water scarcer; wells drilled by those who can afford them lower the water table for others, drying up springs. Young people leave for the cities. Tourism brings money but also encourages businesses like the shiny, glass-walled café Omar recently opened, which can feel jarring in this landscape. In Spain, some *acequias* are abandoned as farmers age, and parts of the Camino risk becoming a commodity. Digital commons face their own kind of ‘enclosure’ when corporate platforms lock up what we create; languages shrink as younger generations switch to more ‘useful’ tongues. A commons thrives only when a community actively maintains it; when we withdraw, it withers. Every time I see a concrete building replace a vernacular home of adobe and stone, I feel a pang of grief for the loss of the knowledge needed to build and maintain these structures – a commons that may vanish within my lifetime – and a renewed determination to notice and support the structures that remain.

Carrying the commons home

By the end of the trip, I’m hesitant to go back to my phone, to the information overload that lately I feel I am drowning in. How to hold onto the preciousness of presence in my daily life back home? Permaculture teaches us to observe, to take care of the earth and each other and to share fairly. Slow travel gives us the opportunity to practise these ethics. Walking instead of flying reduces our footprint and opens our eyes. Meeting the people who steward the land teaches us what is worth protecting and helps us imagine ways of incorporating these attitudes at home.

You don’t have to live on a farm to nurture the commons. Join a community garden or allotment; learn about your local irrigation guild or water district and help maintain it. If you use open-source software or collaborative knowledge platforms, consider contributing. Share songs and stories from your culture with younger people. And when you travel, especially to places where you are a guest, ask about the commons you encounter: Who looks after this path? How does water reach these fields? What stories are told here? Listening is the first step toward care.



At Catalina, the project I help steward in Andalusia, we are already tending the commons in small, concrete ways. A centuries-old drovers’ road runs along one edge of our land; it’s a public footpath and a cultural commons. We maintain it so walkers can appreciate its beauty rather than trip over litter. We built a Life Cairn there – a memorial to species lost to extinction – and visitors are invited to lay a stone and share a memory. We’ve carved swales into our slopes to slow water and infiltrate it into the shared aquifer, and to build soil, and we share excess plants and vegetables with our larger community. We also contribute to open-source projects and publish our learning freely, understanding that knowledge is most alive when it circulates. Whether in a high mountain valley or a small Andalusian forest, the commons survive only when we choose to see them – and tend them.

Opening our eyes to the commons

For me, walking has become a way of seeing. It slows me down enough to notice the threads that weave landscapes and communities together. When I hear water running in a channel older than any living memory, or when a child leads me through her village explaining who does what, I feel part of something larger. Travel is still a privilege, but it doesn’t have to be extractive. When we walk lightly and pay attention, we honour the commons we enter, and we leave a little wiser, ready to nurture the commons around us in the place we call home.

Useful resources

How To Read The Landscape
by Patrick Whitefield



Andrew and friends share more on
Catalina in PM118-125



Andrew Zionts Abrams is part of a community restoring Catalina, a hillside sanctuary in southern Spain shaped into a zero-runoff landscape. Through their Almenara project, they explore how caring for land, water, and knowledge can renew the commons and nurture regenerative ways of living. www.almenara.online

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