

by Ihab Zaki

Morocco has always held a special place in my heart as I have always been intrigued by its natural beauty, its exotic flair and its architectural gems. After speaking with Professor David Lancy who voiced some concerns about the hotels we will be using for the group he's leading in May, I did not have to think twice and left to do a quick (6 day) country visit to inspect the properties and to meet the guide and the local staff who will be handling the group while they are on tour in Morocco. I also had the opportunity to inspect the vehicles the group will be using as I drove the same route that they will be taking. Of course I had to sample the various food venues too! Now that I am back in snowy and cold Michigan I realize how much Morocco is a land of discovery - brilliant and beautiful, secretive, mysterious and colorful!

I arrived mid-afternoon to a very clean and well organized airport. So it is was a bit of a letdown when I stepped onto the tarmac at Mohamed V Airport, and discovered that it's not Humphrey Bogart's Casablanca of romance and intrigue anymore. Instead it is a city where the traditional *tajine* goes down easily with Starbucks' latte that beckons through the door. I realized that I had entered a country that has embraced its legacies, not been torn apart by them. I was relieved when I was met by my capable local guide Idriss and a gentle, smiling driver called Abdou.

After some rest at the hotel, I ventured out to visit the city. Casablanca with its tall buildings, myriad avenues and teeming traffic, quietly lives up to its "big city" reputation and dismisses all stereotypes of what Africa is like. The crowning glory of the city is the Hassan II Mosque,



a vast edifice of delicate arches, exquisite patterns and a feeling of magnificence that is rarely seen today. It has a place in the record books as the third largest religious structure in the world, and so has its own pride of place among the sights of the city. The square minarets are the most interesting feature, as they are completely different from the smoothly rounded Islamic minarets that are seen in most other parts of the world.



Next day, I was feeling refreshed and ready to hit the capital city of Rabat, which is also the official administrative capital of the country. Glittering and visibly cosmopolitan, the European influence is felt as soon as you step onto the palm-lined avenue in front of the sprawling royal palace and suddenly the Mediterranean seems so much closer. Apart from the beautiful mausoleum of the late King Mohamed V and the museum which has some perfectly preserved bronze busts, what makes Rabat a worthwhile stopover are the ruins at Chellah. Originally the site of a Jupiter temple, the vestiges of a series of Roman baths still remain, as do faint traces of the magnificent triple-arch that was the gateway to the temple. A necropolis stretches away from the temple towards the top of the hill and once proud Doric columns are strewn around the crumbling remnants of a wide flagstone-lined avenue.

Heading south I continued to Meknes, the Versailles of Morocco and a lovely example of an Imperial city, Known for its monumental palace, granaries and stables as well as the most beautiful of Morocco's gates: Bab El-Mansour. Along the way I had lunch at a roadside restaurant that specialized in cooking meat (specifically whole mutton) in pits. My cholesterol over-indulgent meat feast was fantastic and I would now have the opportunity to work some of it off as I would next be exploring the magnificent ruins of Volubilis. It is difficult to comprehend the grandeur that was once the Roman Empire, but Volubilis, like the Colosseum of Rome and the ruins of Pompeii, brings you closer to understanding how progressive "Pax Romana" really was. The wide main street laid with flagstones, divided the city between the patricians and the plebeians. The olive presses; the intricate mosaics depicting myriad themes; the shaded courtyards; the drainage system that's a feat of engineering in itself and the triumphal arch looking out proudly over the hills beyond, all are the image of a civilization that was truly splendid in its mastery over culture and design. It makes one wonder whether we as a civilization have anything to leave behind which will make us worth discovering, worth knowing about, for the archaeologists of the future. Idriss and I arrived at the perfect time of day (sunset) and we had the



site to ourselves. I especially enjoyed the desolate atmosphere, a truly memorable experience. Then on to Fes for a good night's rest.



Next morning brought a full day of exploring the ancient town of Fes. The most intriguing part is the *souq*, a jumble of shops apportioned into a vast network of alleys, each plying a different trade. Jewels sparkle in one alley, silk flows through another; artisans shape bronze at one corner, and a little way ahead, the blacksmiths gather. Each pocket has its own sounds and smells that give it a distinct feel. Terrace restaurants are spread throughout, from where one can look out over the tangle of alleys and soak up the atmosphere and the sun. It is a lovely walk through the Old Medina with its many beautiful minarets dating to various Moroccan Berber dynasties and its maze of alleys and little roads filled with merchants selling all sorts of meats, fish and foodstuff, as well as artifacts such as brass and copper lamps, leatherwork and hand woven rugs. What makes Fes different is an energy that can only be found in a marketplace – where people are matching wits for bargains, judgment is an art and worth is measured by feel, not brand names. I behaved myself as my wife instructed me not to go crazy and splurge on shopping sprees!

Time for a few stops at some hotels and I fell in love with one of the old restored mansions/palaces that are currently converted to boutique hotels, named Riads. The drive after lunch was 9 hours as I would be spending the night in Marrakesh, the jewel city of Morocco and its most flavorful. Though long, it was a lovely and varied drive through many different landscapes. Frequent stops were made along the way including one in the Mid-Atlas Mountains in a small town that resembled an alpine village in Switzerland. It is a ski town with red-roofed homes, clean streets and expensive cars. Continuing through the mountains along winding roads dotted with pine trees and patches of snow the scenery changes to a typical desert, leaving the mountain range behind. The countryside is mostly farmland with little villages scattered on the sides of the roads. Finally I fell asleep and woke in time for dinner at which time I realized we had entered the ocher colored city of Marrakesh, the gateway to the Sahara desert. Checked in at my Riad, which was a lovely 11-room restored mansion once belonging to a wealthy 17th century merchant. I was so exhausted I ordered a pizza, went into my beautifully-decorated room and had a great night's sleep.



In Marrakesh I was greeted by roads lined with orange trees and my first glimpse of the medina (old city) and the famous Djemaa el Fnaa Square. Situated at the north end of the medina, the reality that is Djemaa el Fnaa seems like a fairytale. It's a fair of aromas, people, shows, activity, the glow of torches in the night sky, the bustle of generations of families walking by, the art of craftsmanship and the craft of salesmanship. As in any open market, there are people shouting to catch your attention and herd you to their stall. What's most remarkable is that this fair springs to life every single day of the year, summer or winter. People stream in and out till the early morning hours, with an expectation of merriment, all

caught up in an invisible air of festivity. The *souq* right behind the square is one of the biggest in Morocco. Walk around and you will find everything from silverware to prickly pear. It is a beehive of activity; the air is busy with haggling voices and the lamps light up faces intent on picking up “something for the alcove back home.” So of course I weakened and bought 2 lovely Berber-made side tables inlaid with colorful semi-precious stones after 2 hours of bargaining and haggling with the store staff! Not an item to carry, even in checked luggage, so I had them shipped. I will be spending an anxious two weeks until they arrive and I see my wife’s (hopefully positive!) reaction.

The end of my tour had arrived and I would be making my way back to Casablanca and from there to Spain for a travel show. I knew that I would come away from this visit with a new enthusiasm for this vibrant, exciting country. Morocco is a land that encourages you to dig deep, to immerse yourself in the smells and sounds that surround you. It changes you from a mere sightseer to an adventure-seeker and adds to your bounty of experiences, rather than just to your photo-album. The land of the Maghreb is all about the infectious zest that is the other side of Africa, the part that a travel brochure can never capture.

Call me with any questions you may have and hopefully you can join us in the future.



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