

Morocco Part 1: Casablanca to the Sahara

Morocco

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February 17-18, 2014

Dateline: Casablanca

Latitude at Casablanca, 33.32 degrees North, Longitude 7.35 degrees West

We had booked our tour with Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT) which specializes in small groups and extensive immersion into local cultures and exposure to a large cross-section of local people. This trip would be a deep dive, whereas many other tours we have taken were just a mere snorkel. Or as our guide would put it: "the goal is to put a destination in your heart, not just on your camera".

We left Atlanta at 3:25 on an overnight flight to Paris, and our flight took an interesting route with the clouds clearing as the sun was setting on the East Coast. We could see the coast of North Carolina, the barrier islands of Virginia, the Delmarva Peninsula, the Jersey Shore, Long Island, Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket and Cape Cod.

We connected in Paris the next morning for a 3 hour flight to Casablanca. Morocco is on Greenwich time, the same as England, an hour behind Paris. We arrived with images of Bogey and Bacall and Rick's Café Americaine (from the movie, Casablanca featuring the lines "play it again, Sam and "we'll always have Paris") in our heads, but that was quickly dispelled as we landed in a light rain instead of the famously Hollywood

created fog, and we found it sadly lacking in the exotic aura we were expecting – but that would come later – with the rest of Morocco. We were met at the airport by our guide, Jaafar. (Pronounced Zhah-fer with the accent on “Zhah”). He tells us that his name means “little stream” in Arabic and that in contrast to Western names, most Arabic names mean something in their language. We then met our driver Samir and his assistant Abdrahim, which I think is a different spelling of Abraham. Before we left the airport, we exchanged some dollars for dirhams, the local currency here. The exchange rate is 12 dirhams to the dollar.

The weather was overcast and cool for the 16 mile ride into the city from the airport and we learned a few key facts. Casablanca is Morocco’s largest city with 8 of Morocco’s 33 million people. Of that 33, 40% are under the age of 15. Casablanca has the largest port, airport and is also the technological center of the country – and thus is in direct opposition to the exotic scenes we were seeking. In fact the huge satellite dishes on every rooftop, didn’t add much to the enchantment. They have planted groves of eucalyptus trees hoping to dial back the air pollution that technological advances seem to bring along. Although the city dates back to the time of the Phoenicians, progress has cast much of the historic architecture aside, although the occasional donkey cart here or a traditional headdress there give hints of what used to be. The French are responsible for most of this commercial success including building the port, where today ships haul phosphate (Morocco’s chief mineral export) brought in by the trainload, to the rest of the world. Since Morocco has 75% of the world’s phosphate, it is understandably big business. We were charmed by the orange trees laden with fruit lining the streets, but were told they are only good for marmalade, not snacking, which is probably why the trees are still laden.

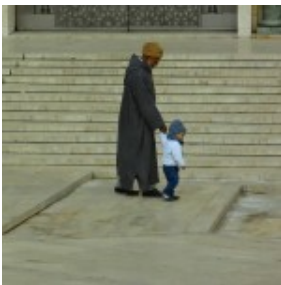
Casablanca translates as white house in Spanish, and indeed

the Spaniards once ruled here, along with just about every other country in Western Europe and the Middle East. The notable exception was that Morocco was the only Arab country that did not fall to the Ottomans, possibly because it is so remote from Istanbul, they didn't think it worth the effort. The architecture is predominately Art Deco with a strong French Influence, but many modern more non-descript buildings dominate the city today

We only had a few short hours in Casablanca and did a quick drive through the city. We drove through the historic Anfa neighborhood where Churchill and Roosevelt had met in January of 1943 at the Hotel d'Anfa and made decisions regarding the invasion at Normandy. It is believed that the Germans got wind of the conference, but interpreted Casablanca to mean the White House in Washington DC and missed the opportunity to either spy or kill the leaders of the Allies. The actual building where they met has been torn down, but there are many from that era lining the quiet residential streets. This is where the upper class of Casablanca live, or at least have houses. The list includes a prince of Kuwait and the King of Saudi Arabia, whose palace has its own mosque and whose walls span blocks and blocks. This neighborhood is a pretty sharp contrast to the crumbling and weathered neighborhoods in much of the city that look like they could use a new paint job. There is a lot of new residential construction, but much of it appears to be projects that are making very slow progress. In addition to palavering with Churchill, Roosevelt pledged to sultan of Morocco at the time, Mohammed V, that the US would back Morocco in their quest for independence from France if Morocco would support the Allies. The movement for independence led by Mohammed V came to be known as the Istiqlal, but this idea took some getting used to on many fronts and in many ways.

The Treaty of Algeciras in 1906 cooked up by the European Super Powers of the day had divided up North Africa – an area

that the conquering Arabs centuries ago called the Maghreb (which means west in Arabic. The area that is Morocco today was called Maghreb el-Aqsa , which translates as the Far West). England got Egypt, Spain and France got what is today Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Morocco. The Germans got a few meager pieces here and there as well. The treaty called for a sultan to remain in place in Morocco, but he would be controlled mostly by France. The sultan was actually deposed in 1953 and his son prudently went into exile. But in 1956, the French Protectorate ceased to exist and Independence came to Morocco. They have been a staunch American ally ever since.



A Grandpa and
Grandson in
Casablanca

Archeology suggests that this area has been inhabited for 40,000 years and has been a crossroads between Egypt, Africa and the Middle East for centuries. The people here are of Berber, Arab and African descent and became Muslim during the 7th Century. There were a whole host of sultans or moulays (a title meaning Prince or Lord) and ruling families that came and went, but when a particularly weak one named Moulay Abdel Aziz came to the throne in 1894, he managed to generate a great deal of debt with France (who already had a presence in neighboring Algeria and Tunisia). And so in 1906 the Treaty of



Western Fashion Meets Traditional in Casablanca

Algeciras was signed, Morocco was opened to International trade, and all sorts of squabbles ensued. The bottom line was that France declared the country a protectorate in 1912, although it took over 20 years to get everyone under control – and thus the many stories of the French Foreign Legion were born. France kept up the “protection” up until 1956. Today the king is Mohammed VI, who is a very modern king. He is the grandson of Mohammed V and the son of Hassan II. He reportedly married for love, and was the first monarch in Moroccan history whose wife appeared in public. And while multiple wives are legal here, almost no one observes that particular custom any more, including the king.

We drove along what is termed the Corniche d’ Ain Diab, which parallels the ocean and had a quick walk along a boardwalk that had been a booming tourist destination with clubs and restaurants, but it had recently been hit by a severe North Atlantic storm that some termed a tsunami and was mostly in ruins. They hoped to get it back together for the summer season, but there wasn’t a lot going on to make that happen while we were there. We had a glass of wine and learned that a toast in Arabic – the equivalent to “cheers”, is Bisaha, Pronounced Bee-sah-ha with the accent on “sah”.



The Hassan II
Mosque

In the distance we could see the enormous King Hassan II Mosque which is the third largest in the world, and as we drew closer it did indeed loom large. This mosque is the only one in Morocco which non-Muslims can enter. It was completed in 1993 and is a marvelous structure of marble, bronze, tile, cedar, onyx and granite. Thirty-five thousand craftsmen worked on the structure. They have the highest minaret in the world, at 656 feet high, which can send a laser beam toward Mecca that can be seen for 18 miles. Per Islamic law, a mosque is strictly for prayers, and a sermons based on the Koran. There are no



An Entrance to
the Hassan II
Mosque

weddings or funerals or other ceremonies as found in Christian churches. This mosque has a retractable roof and was built at a cost of \$80 million, for which the king asked all Moroccans to donate. We suspect there were a lot of takers since it was the king who was "asking". The prayer hall can hold 25,000 men, the women's gallery can hold another 5,000

more and the square outside can hold another 40,000. It is built on the seawall, but sustained no damage from the recent storm. The El Hank lighthouse, built by the French in 1916, is visible on a distant point which dims (literally and figuratively) by comparison to the minaret and mosque.

Today religion is taught in school as a subject, but not as a mandatory brainwashing class. The country is 98% Muslim, with Christians and Jews making up the other 2%. There is a madrasa (aka medersa) attached to the mosque, intended as a center for Koranic study, but with the interests of young people growing increasingly Westernized, it is used very little.



The OAT Bus

We drove to Rabat, one of 4 ancient Imperial Cities (a place where the king establishes his official capital) in Morocco. The other 3 are Meknes, Fes and Marrakech. Like Casablanca, it is a seaport and is also the financial and intellectual center of the country. On our way we learned another phrase that we would hear daily as our guide told us the plan for the day or the next day, which is Ensha Allah (pronounced as one word In-shah-lah with the accent on "shah" which means God willing. Muslim people are always humble in this regard. I.E. God can change your plans at any time without notice, so don't go getting too sure of yourself.

We checked into the hotel – the Belere Urban Rabat, and had a few hours of free time. Gary and I took a walk to explore a bit. We rapidly came to the conclusion that we had best wait

for the guided tour since we saw very little that was interesting or exotic. Our first clue should have been the Urban in the hotel's name. We did comment that Rabat's buildings, like those in Casablanca, could benefit from a good coat of paint. We met our fellow travelers – 14 others, all Americans and had an orientation and dinner.

February 19, 2014

Dateline: Rabat

We started our day with breakfast, one of the highlights being freshly squeezed orange juice, but of course this being a Muslim country, we had to forgo the bacon, but this being a former French protectorate, the pastries were excellent. We had a brief Arabic lesson in a few basics: good morning is *sabah el kheer*, and good evening is *massa el kheer*. Hello is *salam aleekum*, to which one should reply *aleekum salam*, which is sort of "hello back at you". We also learned to say thank you which is *shukran*, which along with a warm smile goes a long way here.



The Medina
Walls Rabat

Rabat is now the capital of Morocco, moved here from Fes by the French when they arrived. The other three of the four Imperial Cities (places where the reigning king has declared his capital) are Fes, Meknes and Marrakech, which we will also visit. An imperial city is an architectural complex to house and protect the king, his courtiers and members of the royal household. The city of Rabat takes its name from the word

“ribat” which is a fortified monastery.



The Andalusian
Wall – Rabat

Rabat is an ancient city, dating back to the 10th Century when it was established by Berbers from the Atlas Mountains. The Berbers are more or less like Native Americans before the Europeans came, but in the case of Morocco the “newcomers” were the Arabs and Central Africans, such as the Tuaregs from Mali. Unlike in America, the original people, the Berbers, are still a large portion of the population. There was much more assimilation than annihilation here in Morocco. Berber is still spoken, but the official languages are Arabic and French.



The Gate of
the Royal
Palace

Our first stop was Rabat's Royal Palace, where entered the grounds via the Gate of the Ambassadors. This palace is one of the current king's (Mohammed VI), but is used more for ceremonies than as a residence. We did not get to go inside, in fact Morocco is not geared up for Palace tours for the most part, but we did admire it from outside. In perhaps a small concession to tourism, we were able to photograph the guards to the palace, but were cautioned this is *verboden* at other palaces and government buildings and we were further cautioned to keep our distance, so as not to be confused with extremist tourist/terrorists. They still refer to their local policemen as "gendarmes", a hold-over from the days of the French Protectorate. We also saw a few of the "King's Men" who were not guards, but could be distinguished as employees by their clothing. They wear a white *jellaba*, which is a long (like between mid-calf and ankle), loose fitting robe/shirt over white trousers with a yellow fez and yellow Aladdin-type slippers.

Rabat is a walled city at least three times over, with walls built by a series of conquerors. The first was around the kasbah (which is a fortified residence whether a simple house or palace).



The Moroccan
Treasury

There are walls around the city center called the medina (pronounced Mah-deen-ah) and what is termed the Andalusian Wall since it was built by Spanish Muslim refugees. It was built to better defend the medina and it separates the newer

part of town from the old medina. We also did a drive-by of the treasury their version of the Pentagon which is called the Ministry of Defense, and we saw one of the most impressive gates in the city called the Gate of the Winds (*Bab ar Rouah*). *Bab* is the Arabic word for gate.



Ruins of the
Chellah
Necropolis

From there we traveled a short distance to Chellah, a 14th Century necropolis (a.k.a. mausoleum), used by the ruling dynasty at the time called the Merinids, but Chellah was built on the ruins of a First Century Roman town called Sala Colonia, whose scant ruins can be seen if you know (or are told) just where to look. The first Merinid Caliph (king), started a mosque here along with a burial site for his wife which more or less got the necropolis started, but the mosque was never completed and began to deteriorate over the years. It was further damaged with a catastrophic earthquake in 1755 (the same one that



Ruins of the
Roman Baths at
Chellah

destroyed Lisbon). There were ablution facilities here for the ritual washing required before the 5 times a day prayers. The ritual is to dip your right hand into the water and wash your face and hands 3 times, head and ears 1 time and feet one time. The left hand is never used since it is reserved for other things sometimes not so sanitary, so dipping this hand is not allowed. Strict Muslims also only eat with the right hand as well.

The necropolis is also the site of several marabouts which are shrines to holy men that are scattered about the gardens. It was abandoned at the end of the Merinid era and was ransacked



A Marabout in
the Chellah

several times over the centuries and the ablution pond morphed into a Fertility Pond of sorts. Legend had it that barren women could bathe in this pool and feed eggs to the eels who had somehow taken up residence there and it would somehow make

them fertile. If you should have found yourself at the fountain with no eggs, they could be purchased from young boys selling them nearby. We decided there might be something to that fertility business since it was certainly working for the cats. There were kittens and pregnant cats everywhere.



The Fertility
Pool at the
Chellah

There was also a medersa a (religious school for Koranic studies) here, also now in ruins. Chellah is a beautiful site, built on a terrace of land on the Bou Regreg Wadi (a wadi is a river) with vegetation running riot among the ruins, some wild, some cultivated and now gone wild, including an interesting plant called Jewish Myrtle, also known as Butcher's Broom.

The highlight of this stop for us was seeing and hearing the nesting storks, which come down here for the winter from Europe. As we walked the grounds we heard a tremendous clacking that



Nesting Storks

we soon ascertained came from the storks banging their bills together as part of their mating ritual. It was apparent from the noise that “love was in the air”. Looking up, we saw there were hundreds of pairs mating and nesting in every nook and cranny among the ruins.



The Mausoleum
of Mohammed V

We visited the very elaborate Mausoleum of Mohammed V, the grandfather of the current king. He is considered the Father of Independence for Morocco, sort of a Moroccan George Washington. It includes a solid marble sarcophagus, a tile work fountain, stained glass windows and intricate designs and calligraphy in marble and plaster. The 12 sided carved mahogany dome is one of the highlights, featuring painted *muquarnas*, which are carved appendages that hang down from the ceiling like stalactites.



the Ruins of the Hassan Mosque and Prayer Hall

On the same stop we visited the Hassan Tower dating from 1196. It was intended to serve as the minaret to a huge mosque, but was never finished and everything but the minaret was destroyed in the earthquake of 1755. It was from this tower that Mohammed V conducted the first prayers after independence was declared.

We went back along the city walls to the medina, through the Bab Oudaia and to the Kasbah of the same name (which is pronounced Owe-dye-yah). This one was built in the 12th Century to garrison troops to defend the city against rebel tribes.



The Lighthouse
at Rabat from
the Oudaia

Signal Station

We took in the sweeping view of the Atlantic at the Oudaia Signal station, built by the ruling sultan in the 18th Century and then took a stroll in the kasbah. The houses of the kasbah today are from the 17th Century and are all lime-washed in blue and white. We spent a few minutes exploring the narrow lanes, where walking two abreast takes up the whole street and then we had wonderful fish-kebabs at a beach front restaurant called Borj Eddar.



The Streets of
the Ribat
Casbah

We had the afternoon on our own and so we headed to the medina, now that we knew where to find it, and this was much more rewarding than our stroll from yesterday. We were seeking the exotic and we found it in spades. We found a rather mild protest in progress across from the Moroccan Parliament, and the subject, we gathered, was the lack of jobs. Leaving the civil disobedience behind, we stopped at a *patisserie*, another holdover from the French, and bought some excellent cookies.

Once in the medina we found the narrow streets of the souk

(market) filled with life. We stopped to marvel at an orange seller



A doorway in Rabat's Medina

who had a small pickup bed attached to his motorcycle. We asked to buy a few oranges and he put a dozen in our bag for approximately 40 cents. We would find that souks thrive in every city and town throughout Morocco. Everything imaginable was for sale here – both goods and services. There were spices, olives, sunglasses, pastries, shoe repairs, haircuts and all manner of household goods. Gary bought a baseball cap with the Moroccan flag on it with a red background with a green 5 pointed star – and began wearing it, and this gesture seemed to generate an endless stream of smiles and welcomes. One young man we met, whom we assumed did not speak English merely touched the hat and touched his heart and smiled, letting us know, or so we assumed, that he appreciated our embrace of his country. We found this warmth and gracious welcome repeatedly in the days that followed.

There was an elderly blind man walking along chanting what we took to be Koranic verses and taking donations, which we would assume would be readily given since charity to the poor is one of the 5 “Pillars” of the Muslim faith. Many of the men in the souk were wearing jellabas, and with the late afternoon turning chilly, we noticed for the first time a particular feature of the Moroccan *jellaba* and that is the hood. We suddenly saw hooded men everywhere, and not just any hood, but a pointed Ku Klux Klan kind of hood. Fortunately they were not

white, faces were not covered and there were no burning torches at hand, but seeing the silhouette did give us pause. The fabrics ranged from very rough brown nubby cloth to fine wool in the more upscale hoodies.

On the way back to the hotel we met a group of Maroc Telecom employees selling mobile phone service out on the sidewalk of their building. Again the Moroccan hat started the conversation. Finding out we were Americans, they all came over to practice their English and to welcome us to Morocco. To a person they all said they love Americans and their dream is to go there someday, and they gave us all sorts of tips on what to see and do in their country.

We met Jaafar for drinks at a local bar before our Welcome Dinner. A bar is an oddity in Morocco since most Muslims don't drink for religious reasons, but it is not against the law. This wasn't really a cocktails kind of bar – there was mostly beer and wine. The wine was Moroccan, all red or rose and it was quite good – again we see the hand of the French at work. Wine vineyards were here during the French Protectorate and have been brought back, given the more relaxed laws regarding wine consumption that exist today. The beer was also local, with a choice of Casablanca or Speciale, and the beer drinkers in our group pronounced it tasty. Jaafar told us that women in a bar such as this would be assumed to be “loose”, but we assumed that because we were so obviously foreign, we might just be considered odd. We also stopped at liquor store (another oddity in a Muslim country) to buy some wine to have for the Saharan part of our journey. The way it was explained to us, it is not illegal for Moroccans to drink, but wine shops and liquor stores cannot sell wine to Moroccans 3 days before Ramadan or during the 40 days of Ramadan. They can sell to non-Muslims at any time.



A Colorful Display of Olives at a Local Souk

We had another walk through the souk to go to dinner and we noticed there was even more activity than we saw that afternoon with hundreds of people thronging the narrow passageways. There were rolling carts mounded with fresh strawberries, artichokes, eggplant, pastries, and dates. Makeshift shops sold clothes, shoes, toys and cell phones. Butcher shop business had really picked up since the afternoon with fresh sides of beef and lamb quarters hanging in open doorways amid a flurry of slicing and chopping.

Our welcome dinner was a four course extravaganza at a restaurant in the medina. It started with a vegetable appetizer featuring carrots, eggplant, pumpkin and zucchini. The second course was a giant calzone sort of thing filled with chicken seasoned with honey and cinnamon. The third course was lamb served with apricots and plums and then the grand finale was a baklava type pastry, liberally laced with honey. We waddled back to the hotel and more or less collapsed under our own weight.

February 20, 2014

Dateline Volubilis, Meknes and Fes

Latitude at Fes 34.16 Degrees North, 5.0 degrees West



The Countryside Near Meknes

We left Rabat right after breakfast driving east toward Meknes, another of the Imperial Cities. We made a stop to see a grove of cork trees and had a brief tutorial on the product. The cork is taken only from the bark which is cut off the trunk in slices and corks are cut out much like cookies. The cuts are made parallel to the length of the strip of bark since they need to be much longer than wide in diameter. Trees are harvested in 9 to 12 year intervals. They only use the lower part of the tree since the cork (bark) gets thinner the higher up the trunk you go. We re-boarded the bus and passed one of the king's country residences, one where he actually lives at least part of the time. There was not much to see except miles of wall. The countryside was beautiful with the Rif Mountains to the north. In the valleys we saw sheep herders with grazing flocks amid yellow and orange wild flowers. We travelled through eucalyptus forests, vineyards, olive groves and apricot, almond and plum orchards in bloom as we approached the foothills of the Middle Atlas Mountains. Four major rivers flow north from these mountains that keep this area verdant.



Yemena, Our New Berber Friend

We made a stop at a roadside stand selling eggs, jujuba beans, and olive oil with live chickens and turkeys milling about. We visited with the proprietor, a local woman named Yemena, who invited us into her house just across the road, where she made, along with a helper from our group, an omelet from fresh eggs, seasoned with thyme for us to sample. It was beyond delicious. We also met her granddaughter who is in college studying to be a lawyer. One of the things we like about OAT is that they make arrangements for us to meet so many local people and really do expose us to the culture. Jaafar said he wants us to use our 5



Yemena's Kitchen

senses to explore Morocco – and we certainly did that here. Yemena's house was understandably modest, but impeccably clean. She was recently widowed and had sold her cow because it was too much work for her alone. When we left she hugged each of us and waved to us from her roadside stand until we were out of sight. We felt this sort of warmth and hospitality of the Moroccan people everywhere we went.



Ancient Walls of Meknes

We drove to Meknes, the center of agriculture in Morocco, a UNESCO site, through the Thursday Gate, one several huge gates that control access to the walled city (the medina) finding streets lined with orange trees and awash with activity, one of many scenes we would see in the coming days that could have come right out of the movie, *Beau Geste* . This city was established in the 10th Century and was only an insignificant village until Moulay Ismail came into power in the 17th Century. He built it into a magnificent royal complex, now called the Dar el-Kebira Quarter. The term quarter (hawma in Arabic) describes a loosely defined area within the medina, similar to a neighborhood, most often with either an ethnic or nationality designation. Here the moulay had double defensive walls, gates, cisterns, ramparts, mosques and his own walled kasbah within the city walls. Despite his his 55 year reign, it still was not completed. His casbah was 4 times the size of the medina, but today it is in ruins and shanties have taken over where the sultans reception rooms, harems, kitchens, mosques and living quarters once stood.



Gates of the
old Medina in
Meknes

The sultan allied himself with King Louis XIV of France in hopes of help with getting Spain out of Morocco, although the French King declined to get involved. Ismail also requested the hand in marriage of Louis XIV's cousin, but that request was denied as well. Perhaps sensing this alliance might not prove useful, Ismail also maintained a large and powerful army recruited from native tribesmen, Christian renegades and black slaves and mercenaries called *abid*. The latter were formed into a regiment called the Black Guard whose only duty was to protect the sultan. The English word, "blackguard" meaning a scoundrel or disreputable persons comes from Ismail's special guard. Ismail also brought in 16,000 black African slaves and married them to local Berber women. The sons of these unions provided soldiers for Ismail once they reached 15 years of age. There was once a large population of Jews here, but according to Jaafar, many of them emigrated to Israel once it was established. There remains an old school and cemetery, but there are not many Jews left here.



The Stables of
Ismail Moulay

Our first stop was to visit Heri es-Souani, the huge granary with 29 aisles and thick walls, and the 12,000 horse stables built by the sultan Moulay Ismail, as part of his fortified capital complex. Granaries were the prime site for pillaging in those days, since often attackers were looking for food. Ismail's intention was to store enough grain for a 35 year siege. Construction was on a huge scale requiring the labor of thousands of slaves and Ismail's brutal tyranny was legendary. It was said that he vigilantly monitored workers and if he perceived any to be lazy slackers, he would personally lop off their heads and have them sealed up in the walls. Sometimes when he wanted to send a message, he would have the lopped head of his latest offender hung at the gates of the city. His architect, Mansour, who designed the beautiful city gates met this particular fate when Ismail asked him if it were possible for him to build a more beautiful gate than the ones at Meknes. When Mansour answered yes (wrong answer), Ismail lopped off his head to ensure that there would be no gates more beautiful than his. The granary and stables suffered extensive damage in the 1755 earthquake, but have been restored.



Tagines for
Sale at the
Meknes Souk

We enjoyed a short walk through the souk, prior to which we were warned against "teeves", which we eventually worked out to mean thieves or pickpockets. While we had no criminal encounters, the souk was anything but dull. We figured this walk would do little to work up our appetite since we noticed

that at the butcher shops, there are no parts that go to waste and nothing is too grotesque to display. There is something about seeing a skinned cows head that you would think would suppress the appetite; on the other hand, there were some very artfully displayed spices and the fruit and vegetables looked very



Spice Art at
the Meknes
Souk

appetizing so we were able to put aside the less tasteful images and enjoy our lunch in local restaurant called the Hotel Salma and ate heartily of soup, kebabs and mint tea. Tea was introduced in Morocco by the British in 1854 and is now ubiquitous, even in the most remote areas of the country.

Walking back to our bus, we noticed a lot of maintenance work going on about the walls of the city, but in a very low tech way. Concrete is mixed by hand with not even the benefit of a wheel barrow. Instead the workers made a depression in a sand pile, added water to create a pool and mixed in a little lime and combined all ingredients with a shovel. Then they carried it to the spot where it was needed in the shovel and spread it around with that same shovel. It looks like job security will not be an issue for these workers –this project could last their entire lifetime.



Asphodel in Bloom at Volubilis

Leaving Meknes we drove north to Volubilis, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the best preserved Roman archaeological sites in North Africa, despite looting of building materials by Moulay Ismael to build Meknes. The name "volubilis" means morning glory in Latin, and while we did not see any of those in bloom, we did see acres of blooming asphodel which gave the ruins a quite pastoral look. We met our guide for this site, Rashid, who gave us an extensive and very interesting tour.



The countryside Around Volubilis

The Romans called this area Mauretania Tingitana and found it to be a veritable Garden of Eden and proceeded to set about farming to provide massive amounts of food for the Empire.

Volubilis was first built and settled in the Third Century BC, and was occupied for the next several hundred years. In 45 A.D. Emperor Claudius granted the Volubilis the status of *municipia* (free town) and it thrived until Rome withdrew from the area in the Third Century A.D. We set out on foot to explore the extensive ruins. Volubilis was built in the classic style with a forum, a basilica, temples, a covered marketplace called the *macellum*



Among the
Ancient Ruins
of Volubilis

and capitol with a wide main boulevard called the *decumanus maximus*, linking the Tangier gate to a huge triumphal arch built in 21 A.D. to honor Emperor Caracalla. It beautifully frames the fertile fields and olive groves beyond. The forum was the center of public life and a meeting place to conduct business. The basilica was the meeting place for the Senate, known as the *curia*. In the capitol public rites were performed to honor the Roman gods.



Mosaic at a
Well-to-do
Roman's
Residence

The large number of elegant residences with intact mosaics of classical scenes are indicative of a wealthy and aristocratic populace. The houses are named for the most prominent existing feature, most often a mosaic on the floor, such as the House of the Bathing Nymphs or The house of the Labors of Hercules. There is also much evidence of daily life such as bakeries, an oil press, aqueducts and public baths and toilets. The walls of the city encompass a huge area, 4.3 million square feet, but only the center of the city has been excavated.



Village of
Moulay Idriss

There were panoramic views in every direction and we particularly liked seeing in the distance the holy city of Moulay Idriss, with its pure white buildings spilling down the hillside to the south and the Rif Mountains and Mount Zerhoun to the north.

Leaving Volubilis we continued driving east to Fes (a.k.a Fez like the hat). It was dark when we arrived to check into our hotel which is called a riad, which is a style of building constructed around a courtyard with a fountain. Our riad had been a Moroccan home refurbished into a hotel, comparable to a B&B.



Tea at the
Riad

Our riad was not handy to any main roads and so we walked up, significantly up, to it along narrow lanes, twisting and turning several times. Once we found it, the Hotel Riad Fes Bali was thoroughly charming. It was a 72 year old house which at one time housed 31 people, back in the days when multiple generations live together, and those 31 shared two bathrooms. It has since been remodeled into 24 guest rooms, each with its own bathroom. Each room had its own name – ours was called Zorah. We had dinner at the riad and had an interesting conversation with the owner's daughter and 2 other young girls about to graduate from high school – all very proficient in English.

February 21, 2014

Dateline: Fes



Hauling
Propane in Fes

We left the hotel to walk to our bus for the day's activities – the same path we followed last night, but in the morning light there we could see far more details. The directions would be "Proceed through charming narrow stone streets downhill through various twists and turns to the overloaded dumpster and turn right at the dead cat. Can't miss it – just follow your nose." Our mission was to explore Fes (we pronounced it "Fez", but Jaafar pronounced is "Fess") and, dead cat notwithstanding, the city was charming.



Mohammed at
the Souk

We met our local city guide, a gentleman named Mohammed, one of countless Mohammeds we would meet in Morocco, dressed in the ubiquitous jellaba of Morocco with the pointy KKK hood. However, since the morning was warm and sunny, the ominous hood remained folded in the "harmless person" position. We did see several non-hoodie garments, more like tunics for sale in the markets and were told these are called caftans. They

are generally worn by women, the plain ones for wearing at home and the fancier ones with lots of embroidery or bling for wearing on feast days. The kaftan may be accessorized with velvet slippers called



Local Ladies
Shopping at
the Souk

cherbils embroidered with gold thread, and with the curved and pointy Aladdin toes. The lady might further accessorize with a mansourya, a light transparent garment to be worn over the caftan (a scarf-like effect). Feast days are usually religious, such as the Muslim New Year or Mouloud, the anniversary of the birth of Mohammed. The Muslim calendar is 11 days shorter than ours and thus the celebrations are not on a fixed date.



The Medina
Walls of Fes

The center of the city is the ancient medina – another UNESCO World Heritage site and the religious center of Morocco, dating from medieval times and it is very well preserved. This, however, is not the oldest part of the city. That honor goes to two separate towns built on the hills above the current medina in 789 A.D. These towns later united under the name Karaouiyine and grew rapidly by taking in hundreds of Muslim families expelled from Cordoba, Spain, thus becoming the center for the “ Arabization” of Morocco. In 1250 Fes became an Imperial City when the ruling sultan chose it to be his capital. It kept this honor until 1666 when the infamous Moulay Ismail came to power and decided to move the whole royalty gig to Meknes.



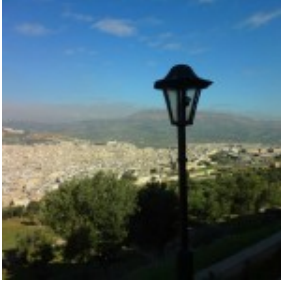
The Souk in
the Medina –
Fes

The medina is densely packed and has a maze of narrow streets and alleyways, reportedly numbering 9,000. It is one of the largest car-free urban areas in the world and would be a challenge even for a Smart Car. Every one of the 9,000 streets are full of unusual shops, bizarre bazaars, tiny cafes and fascinating people. Every inch of space is utilized for something. It is laid out in the typical medina pattern which calls for protective walls, gates and watchtowers encircling it, a few relatively wide avenues leading from the gates to the heart of the medina where the most important mosque is located. Houses and workplaces are not co-located



The Doors to the Royal Palace at Fes

We first strolled to Fes el-Jedid which was primarily a Kasbah (fortified residence) in its day, built in 1276. We stopped at the Royal Palace to admire the ornate doors, but there are no tourists allowed inside and so we moved on to the endlessly fascinating sights, sounds and smells of the medina. Jaafar treated us to Moroccan doughnuts called sfenj at a stand just outside the city wall. They were delicious – a fried dough with an egg (sort of an Egg McDonut) , more like the fried dough at the State Fair than Krispy Kreme. We explored the Jewish quarter called the Mellah which is filled with Andalusian architecture dating back to the 14th Century, and what is termed the New Quarter, even though it dates back to the 13th Century. We noticed an array of colorful djellabas here, not just the drab colors we observed in Rabat, often worn with the hood back replaced by a baseball cap for headwear. For footwear, the women in particular don colorful to downright garish socks worn with chunky, Croc sort of shoes. Not much Prada or Jimmy Choo can be seen on the streets of this Moroccan city. We would return later this afternoon for a more intensive exploration.



Above Fes

We took a drive on a road up above the city to get a panoramic view of the city sprawled out in the narrow valley below us and the old ruins of the ancient cities and tombs up on the hill tops across the valley. Fes has two million people, 25% of which live in the old medina amid the souks and 320 mosques.

We then visited a local ceramics workshop –where everything is done by hand from the potter’s wheel to the painting to the firing and they also make hand-cut and hand-laid mosaics. We bought



Craftsmen
Making Mosaics

a modest size piece of pottery for our library at home and then it was back to the medina for more exploration of the souks and lunch. We walked a circuitous path through the various souks, grouped by products or services, and located with a particular hierarchy determined by the value placed on their craft and/or goods for sale. The most prestigious is the *kissaria* which is at the exact center of the souk which

offers high quality jewelry, fine silks and brocades and other luxury items. Many of the shops are highly specialized selling, for example, only slippers or henna or spices. None of them would you mistake for an American mall store.



The Karaouiyine
Mosque

We also got a peek at one of the most iconic mosques in Fes, the Karaouiyine, just the faithful were answering the call to prayer. Well actually we saw the courtyard and ablutions fountain. The doorways to the interior are protected by mashrabiyyas (wooden screens) to protect those praying from the prying eye of the gawking tourists. The mosque is located in the very heart of the medina and was established in 859 A.D. with funds provided by a wealthy Muslim woman. It is considered to be one of the chief centers for spiritual and intellectual learning and is the site of the Muslim University of Fes. Mosques as a rule are both civic and social structures and can serve as a center for learning, a tribunal, a place of asylum or simply a meeting place. This mosque is quite large in that its prayer hall has 14 entrances can hold 20,000 with 16 aisles lit by 12th Century candelabras, but they are often much smaller and more humble.



Fondouk el
Nejjarine

From the mosque we had a quick look at the Fondouk el-Nejjarine and its elegant fountain out front. A *fondouk* is a structure also known as a caravanserai which provided food, rest and shelter to caravans of traders and their animals passing through. Since the traders frequently had both money and expensive goods, the *fondouks* provided a secure place to spend the night. We did not visit, but were told of a place now called the American Fondouk which is now a veterinary hospital. It was an old fondouk bought by a wealthy American woman in the 1920's who loved donkeys (the much over-worked beast of burden of choice in the medina), and decided to set up a free clinic to take care of them. Her clinic still serves the medina today.



Leather Goods
at the Souk

We stopped for lunch in the medina at the Nejjarine restaurant and had an excellent *tagine* (the name of the contents and the serving dish) of a stew made of meat and vegetables along with mint tea and fresh fruit. We would grow tired of *tagine* in the coming days, but at this point, we still found it

wonderful. After such a large meal, a nap would have been good, but we still had more souks to see and so we pressed on to the Chouara, the Tanners' Quarter. Our first stop was a fabulous leather shop with the most wonderful jackets, purses and other leather work imaginable.



The Tannery in
the Fes Medina

We were to go see the tanneries next, which we understood would have the most awful smell imaginable and so the thoughtful shopkeeper gave each of us a large sprig of mint to hold up to our noses. Our tannery host told us that they call them Moroccan Gas Masks. We initially thought that was really unnecessary, but it proved to be entirely necessary. We climbed probably 4 steep flights of stairs which took us to a vantage point to see down into the tannery below. Here animal hides underwent the process of removal of hair and flesh and a softening soak,



Drying Hides

at the Tannery

followed by drying, rinsing and dyeing (all natural from plants and minerals, mind you) before being handed over to leatherworkers. We saw it all – a series of stone vats full of colorful dyes and series of pits full of something malodorous that we were told involves pigeon poop where the skins soak to soften them. (Although the guide books simply refer to a “fatty solution” and mention the use of tree bark in the tanning process – which sounds at little more appealing). There were piles and piles of all manner of corpses skinned and ready to be skinned – camel, cow, sheep, goat – alongside stacks of hides stripped of fur ready for the vats. The drying areas can be anything from rooftops to hillsides to cemeteries – anywhere there is a surface large enough. It was amazing to behold and quite an eye-opener for those of us who love our luxurious leather. It is not something you want to think about while you are fondling a butter soft leather jacket.



Souk Teamster
in Fes

From the tannery we had a quick stop at the El-Attarine Medersa, built in the 1300's by the ruling sultan at the time. It is a typical Muslim school with a courtyard, an ablutions fountain, a prayer hall and student rooms looking onto the courtyard. The medersa was primarily a religious college, which at one time was restricted to religious learning, but was later expanded to include law, science and the arts. The medersas of Fes were considered to be the Ivy League of

Morocco, whose alumni include the greatest scholars of the country.



Weaving with
Agave Silk

Our last stop was a weaver's shop. Rather than using silkworms, they derive silk from the aloe plant and make beautiful scarves and fabric for clothing. It makes a lighter silk than silkworms and takes color beautifully and our group made a flurry of purchases.

At this point we felt we had been drinking from a fire hose with entirely too much to take in and so we were looking forward to a relaxed dinner. We had a home hosted dinner where we split up into groups of 4. Our host (another Mohammed) was a farmer with 300 acres who raised cattle grew several crops including olives. He gave us samples of his own olive oil from his trees. We are accustomed to tasting olive oil with a chunk of bread, but he gave us spoons and we downed it like cough syrup, but it was much more tasty. We thought it interesting that his wife did not join us – she was very cordial and served us, but did not eat with us. For dinner we had a tasty soup with noodles, rice with beef meatballs and flan, which is also called junket. We learned that OAT provides the menu and the grocery money so the guests can be assured of getting a meal they can deal with (e.g. sheep brains might send us running for the exits).

It appeared almost all of the artwork on the walls of our

hosts was Arabic Calligraphy. There was a verse from the Koran which Mohammed translated for us (it is amazing how Biblical it sounded) . In another frame was the nation's motto: God, Country, Family. Islam forbids all figurative representation (e.g. humans, animals, anything created by God) and so calligraphy is employed for decorative purposes, as well as for Koranic manuscripts. A popular calligraphy project is to undertake the writing of the 99 different names of Allah. Calligraphy, as opposed to more common handwriting is considered to be in keeping with the stature of Allah.

February 22, 2014

Dateline Erfoud

Latitude 31.26 degrees North, Longitude 5.0 degrees West

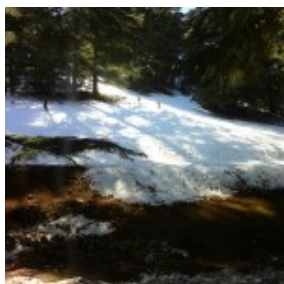


The Sanitation
Donkey

We are leaving Fes today with some regret, having found it charming in every respect, even at the overflowing dumpster that has assaulted our nostrils each morning when we boarded our bus. Today we saw a donkey laden with baskets of garbage, being led forward to the trash heap to unload. The garbage would have been tossed into the dumpster had it been empty, but since this was not the case, it was tossed more or less at the dumpster. The garbage men had bright orange and yellow jumpsuits so they are easily visible, but the poor donkey has no such protection.

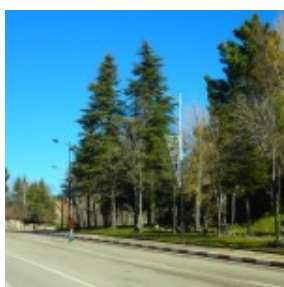
One of the things we had noticed about the cities we had seen

so far is the abundance of partially finished houses. Jaafar told us that many people here do not get home loans, and so they build as they can afford it. Many people work in Europe and come back with money to continue building, but they are only allowed 5 tax-free years to complete their homes – after that they are taxed.



Snow in the
Middle Atlas
Mountains

We left Fes for our 9 hour trip, heading south to Erfoud, billed as the Gateway to the Sahara through rolling hills filled with apple orchards. A note here: many refer to it as the Sahara Desert, but this is redundant since the word “sahara” means desert already. The road ran across the Middle Atlas Mountain range, (there is also a High and a Low Atlas Range) where we were amazed to see local kids sledding and having snowball fights as we wound through densely wooded groves of pine and cedar. While we were not expecting mountains comparable to the Rockies, this beautiful scenery was not at all expected in our musings on



Ifrane – the Bavarian Village

Morocco. We crossed over a pass at 6,000 feet to descend to the edge of the Sahara. The scenery on this route is really breathtaking. We made a brief comfort stop in the town of Ifrane which was built by a Frenchman in 1929. It was designed to look and feel like a Swiss village– another unexpected sight in Morocco. Ifrane appeared to us to be spotless, and we decided this must be something introduced by the Swiss, since the Moroccans seems to have a rather laissez-faire attitude about litter.

In the center of the village there is a park with a sculpture of a Barbary Lion, now extinct in the wild since the last one was killed in 1922. There is also a royal palace here and a large university, but on this day, they both had to be vastly outnumbered by tourists, all wanting to take a “selfie” by the Barbary Lion. This is also a popular destination for hunters, who cannot bag a lion, but can perhaps get a Barbary sheep, a Barbary stag, a wild boar or a partridge. This area is also where the Barbary macaques (monkeys) are found, although they are



Berber
Shepherds in
the Middle
Atlas
Mountains

captured to amuse tourists, rather than being killed. We had noticed a number of small flocks of sheep with nomads in attendance. We were told the nomads do not own the sheep, but they are generally owned by wealthy people, Typically a herdsman will get 2.5% of the newborn males. This is just enough for them to have something to eat and perhaps sell at little wool and mutton for a few dirham here and there. The donkeys here seemed to be much furrer than their city-dwelling counterparts, seriously increasing their adorability factor.



A Berber Home
with a Ski
Slope Nearby

We stopped to visit the home of a Berber nomadic family on the high plateaus of the Middle Atlas, with patches of snow still on the ground, but the morning was crisp and clear. There were two women at home, sisters-in-law, each with a 3 year old toddler, and their husbands were out with the sheep or perhaps in town for a haircut and a *hammam* (steam bath). We weren't clear on this. Home for them was a lean-to of sort,s built with a seemingly disorganized amalgamation of stone, wood, plastic and rugs. There were turkeys and chickens milling about, and a scrawny dog with new puppies in one corner of the yard. In stark



Our Berber
Hostess and
Her Child

contrast, it was directly across the road from a ski resort with a rather modest hill, but with a parking lot full of expensive cars. It was only 17 miles (and about 500 years) away from the Alpine Village of Ifrane. Some of the shepherds here are semi-nomadic, meaning they only live here part of the year and live in a house the rest of the year.

Two out of three Moroccans are Berber or part Berber, but they do not make up a homogeneous race. They have in years past retreated to the Atlas Mountains to escape a succession of invasions. There are many tribes and many dialects and the



In the Berber
Tent Getting
Dressed to go
Outside

various tribes wear distinctive clothing and jewelry and have their own beliefs and customs. The dress of the women in the villages in each place we travel often reveals their ethnicity. For example in this area, the hendira, a

distinctive woven striped cape woven or black worn with bright colors signifies a Berber woman of a certain tribe. A woman wearing all black signifies an Arab woman. Despite varying customs, many Berber women use henna tattoos to ward off evil spirits. Another custom of Berber women is the attendance at a religious Moussem, which is held as sort of a retreat for women to travel to be with other women and get away for a few days (a girls' weekend of sort, .) Moussems are often held in conjunction with other festivals such as a Camel Fair or a Marriage Fair, where many betrothals are made.



The Kasbah
Restaurarant –
Our Lunch Stop
in Midelt

We stopped for lunch in the village of Midelt, which started out as a ksar, a self-contained fortified quarter, somewhat comparable to the series of forts built in the Old West to fight the Indians. Ksars were originally community strongholds built near an oasis to protect people and their harvests from bandits and nomads. Over time ksars expanded to become a village with a mosque, a medersa and granaries. The Ziz River valley is full of old ksour (which is the plural of ksar).

Midelt became a French garrison town in the early 20th century during the French Protectorate. Here we had the most delicious trout we have ever eaten, very simply baked in aluminum foil, but give the dearth of refrigeration, they were likely swimming in the river only a few hours before.



The Dry Side of the Middle Atlas Mountains

From Midelt we crossed the Tizi-n-Talrhemt Pass at 6,259 feet and followed the path of the Ziz River as the landscape became more arid. The scenery changed to look remarkably like the Big Bend area of Texas with hot springs all along the river below massive cliffs of red sandstone, with a major difference being that along the river gorges there were a series of oases with thousands and thousands of date palms growing in profusion for miles. As many dates as Morocco produces, they still import from other countries due to high demand, particularly during Ramadan.



The Oasis in the Ziz Valley

Below the canopy of dates, other crops are grown as well. Every palm is owned and harvested by a person, family or corporation. The Phoenicians introduced dates into Morocco in the 6th and 7th Centuries. The average tree can live around 150

years and they are harvested October through December. They are cut and laid on the ground on drying terraces that are cut into the hillsides to complete ripening which takes about two weeks. Each terrace is marked by rock borders to delineate which terrace belongs to whom. Alongside the drying terraces, were old cemeteries marked with small markers and stone cairns.



A River in the
Almohada
Desert

In the Sahara, the river goes underground for miles, but it remains close enough to the surface for use in irrigation and thus many farms appear along its course until it disappears into the sands of the Sahara. The road seemed a little perilous in places, ripe for a rockslide or plummet off the narrow winding road. We also noticed bamboo sand fences along the road which are intended to keep blowing sand off the highway. We were amazed to see assorted individual meandering all along our journey, no matter how remote and wondered, who are these people – shepherd, a crazed nomad, a tourist who missed the bus? We did discover at one scenic overlook a series of caves which appeared to be inhabited so the answer might be just a local resident commuting home after a day's work.



The Hotel Pool
at Erfoud

We learned that there are 127 dams for hydroelectric power in Morocco. The country is attempting to go green in so much as they can get independent of foreign oil, particularly Algerian oil. They have had long running disputes, up to and including wars, with Algeria, their neighbor to the east over border disputes and some issues still exist today. Algeria for their part would like to have an Atlantic seaport and are often accused of encouraging separatists that want to be independent of the part of the country north of the Atlas Mountains. We passed through a large military town called El-Rachidia, with a tank base whose sole purpose is to deal with any Algerian incursions. It has little claim to the exotic flair of our other destinations, but it does have the symbolic gates at the entrances to the city.



Sunset at
Erfoud

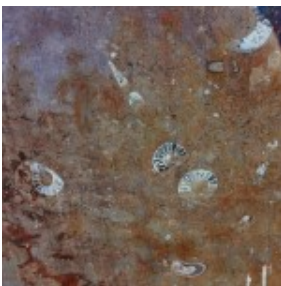
In the late afternoon we arrived at the village or Erfoud (pronounced Err-Food with the accent on "food") which bills itself as the gateway to the Sahara. The hotel, the Belere Erfoud, was lovely with beautiful landscaping and a great

looking infinity pool, but it was only slightly warmer than a bucket of ice cubes, so we satisfied ourselves with a glass of wine to watch the sun set on the far horizon silhouetted by date palms. We had a nice change of pace at dinner tonight with Italian food.

February 23, 2014

Dateline: Rissani and the Sahara

Latitude at Rissani 31. 26 Degrees North, Longitude 4.16 Degrees West



Sahara Fossils
Embedded in
Granite

Before we left Erfoud, which also bills itself as the Fossil Capital of the World, we had a brief stop at the Usine de Marmar workshop across the road from our hotel where slabs of marble with fossils embedded are cut, polished and shipped all over the world. This region is very well known for a wealth of a wide range of fossil specimens, originating back to the days when the whole region was a sea bed. In addition to marble slabs, they also have thousands of smaller pieces (trilobites and the like) and we brought a few mementos home. The joke on the bus was that Erfoud has more fossils than the average tour group. Erfoud is also host to the annual date

festival (the edible kind), which gave rise to many jokes along the lines of "Morocco is the easiest place in the world to get a date".



Getting Suited Up for the Camel Adventure

We travelled to the town of Rissani , a former ksar (fortified quarter) which is literally where the road (or at least the paved road) ends, just west of the Hammada de Guir, a stony desert with notorious sand storms. There are still some of the ruins from the old ksar which we saw briefly before a visit to the mausoleum of Moulay (Prince) Ali Cherif. It was built in the 1600's at his death, but had to be rebuilt in 1955 after a flood. We had a shopping opportunity to buy the special turbans called *tagelmust* that are worn by the Tuareg people in the desert for a modest 50 dirham (about \$6) and our guide and the salesman got



The Hanging Post for a

Beast at the Feast

everyone properly attired. From there we visited the home of a local Berber family for tea. We were hosted by Zahra, the mother, Fatima, the daughter and Mohammed the son. The son and daughter both spoke English so they did the majority of the translating. We all sat on low benches in what would be their equivalent of a living room and asked questions about their daily life. One of the most interesting tidbits was the purpose of a large beam in the center of the room with a drain below it. We were told this is for the traditional once a year slaughter of a lamb or goat for a feast at Ramadan. We were a little squeamish about the idea, but traditions are traditions all over the world, so we try to be broad minded.



Our Home in the Sahara

Here in Rissani, we traded our bus in on four 4x4 vehicles and with our driver, Ali, we literally drove on the desert floor, weaving our way among the Erg Chubbi Dunes which are approximately 19 miles long and achieve heights of over 800 feet. We then proceeded to our personal camel train where we each boarded our own hump backed beast for an hour long ride to lunch – a tent in the desert. A note on camel humps: The camel in North Africa and the Middle East are one-humpers called Dromedaries. The two humpers are found in Mongolia's Gobi Desert and are called Bactrian Camels. The Dromedaries have



Saddling Up

broad soft feet so they won't sink into the sand, but the Bactrians have hard feet for their rocky desert environment and they also grow thick coats for their frigid winters. It is said that the two may mate and their offspring would have something like a single mega-hump, but this could be desert legend. And speaking of humps they are made of fat and tissue to store food and water. You can always tell a hungry or thirsty camel because his hump goes flat. It firms up when he fills up. They can drink 26 gallons of water in 10 minutes so they fill up quickly at the watering hole. Our camels were well fed and hydrated and their humps were a



The Camel Trek in the Sahara

little hard to sit on for an hour, though the ride is very smooth though and there is no jolting in their gait. We ambled over the desert sands with wide vistas of dunes in shades ranging from honey and terra cotta and a bright blue sky with the merest hint of clouds in every direction. The horizon seemed limitless with the occasional camel train appearing from time to time. We envisioned the intrepid Silk Road traders and caravanserai coming north from Timbuktu as in

days gone but, in truth, these were probably other tourists doing what we were doing. Nevertheless, the ride provided what we like to call a “defining



Dunes in the Sahara

moment”, something so exotic, so iconic, so extraordinary, the memory of it will stay with you for your lifetime. We are always looking to find defining moments in our travels.

Lunch was in a ceremonial Berber Tent facing some of the highest dunes in Morocco. Here I learned a new phrase which was Berber, not Arabic. Instead of *shukran*, you can say “*saha*” to thank someone in the Berber language. From lunch we went to our tented campsite near the village of Merzouga. We were so impressed by the silence of the place. There were no roads, no



A Camel Lot

people, except an occasional nomad and course, no cell service or wi-fi either. We arrived late in the afternoon and claimed

our tents and gathered for tea. The tents, roughly 12 feet x 12 feet, have nice soft beds in them and rugs on the floor. The toilet, while en suite so to speak, was a little rustic. It was like an outhouse, but with a toilet seat and we were to flush with a scoop of fresh water out of the bucket. Shower accommodations were equally rustic with a series of tents with plastic containers on top, supposedly providing water heated by the sun. In reality – it never got that hot this time of year. We also visited the kitchen



Some Sunset
Wine in the
Sahara

tent and met Hamid, the chef and an array of Mohammeds (the chef's 4 helpers really were all named Mohammed) and had time for tea and nap before dinner. Just before sunset, we took a walk to the top of a nearby dune and enjoyed a glass of wine as we watched the sunset.

At dinner Hamid gave a talk on specialties of the Sahara including couscous – crushed semolina or durum wheat typically cooked by steaming and *harissa* – a fiery red sauce made from hot peppers, garlic and olive oil. He showed us his collection of tagines – a skillet like bottom and a domed top with a little knob



Hamid and the
Mohammeds
Welcome Gary

for lifting and anything you cook in it. He described a b'stila which is a squab (pigeon) pie made with 100 layers of flaky dough, plus eggs, almonds, lemon, sugar cinnamon and saffron. We had b'stila for desert, but it tasted too good to have pigeons in it so Hamid might have omitted that ingredient. Once the sun went down it got cold and really, really dark. We had to use flashlights to get back to our tent, but that darkness allowed us to really appreciate the stars here which are every bit as spectacular as we imagined them to be.

February 24, 2014

Dateline: Sahara near Merzouga

Latitude 31.55 North, Longitude 4.00 West



Tea with the
Tuaregs

Today we explored the Sahara around our camp in the 4x4's and on foot. The people in this area include Tuareg nomads. We visited the home of a Tuareg family which was actually a camel hair tent. The lady of the house was carding wool to spin into yarn to make the famous Berber rugs that we saw for sale in the various souks we visited. Jaafar was explaining the carding, spinning weaving process when we looked out the tent flap to see a fully loaded donkey peering in and went outside to investigate. There we met a 26 year old Spaniard who was walking the Sahara (for fun so he said) with Chico the donkey,



Chico the
Rental Donkey

which he had rented in Rissani several days ago and was doing what the Australians call a "walkabout". He had loaded up with water and supplies and planned to spend several weeks exploring including a stop in Erfoud to buy some food. However he said Chico is not a one-way rental and he had to turn him back in at the donkey rental counter in Rissani in 6 more days so his schedule might have been a little ambitious. He says Chico is quite lazy and likes to stop a lot and it slows him down quite a bit. He said the hardest part is running out of good things to eat so we loaded him up with M&M's and granola bars we had in our backpack.



The Village of Ghaoua Khamlia – Home of the Blue Men

We learned about the famous Blue Men of the Sahara, a very dark skinned people in contrast to the Moroccans, who look much more Mediterranean or Arabic than African. The Blue Men are descendents of a group of nomadic Tuareg camel herders who originated in Timbuktu which is in the current day country of Mali. Locals will tell you they come from Sudan which is not Sudan as we know it, but they refer to everything south of here as “Sudan”. There are several theories of where the name originated – the indigo dyes they use for their robes seems to be the source. As the story goes, the dye from their blue robes



The Blue Men Drummers

wore off on their skin as they sweated and tinted them blue. In another version they rubbed indigo on their skins to act as sunscreen as they rode in caravans across the desert. We also

stopped that the village of Khamlia where we listened to and danced with the local Gnawa Gnaoua musicians. We could have bought their CD, but passed on that opportunity. One of the purposes of their music, in addition to entertaining is to exorcize demons (or jinns as they call them). They reportedly do a brisk business in this endeavor and probably make more money at that than on their CD's. The music is very rhythmic, heavy on percussion, but it does make you tap your foot whether you intended to or not.



A Memento and
Headstone at
the Muslim
Cemetery

We had lunch at camp and we visited an old Muslim cemetery. The place is quite desolate, not much fanfare here, with the only sound the cooing of doves, who find nests anywhere they can. The families sometimes place something valued by the deceased or an otherwise meaningful object on the graves by the head stone (using the term loosely) which is more like a jagged rock sticking up. There are no names and all are buried on their sides in a plain shroud, facing Mecca. With our free time we elected to go to a hotel and have a hot shower and sit by the pool. The shower only got hot if you let the water run a really



A Tented Camp
in the Sahara

long time and the towels were more like a loofah, so we didn't spend much time luxuriating in the particular amenity. The pool was absolutely frigid so there was no refreshing plunge there. So we mostly relaxed and poked around the hotel. It was interesting to see a pair of old Kneissel snow skis on the porch, just like we had back in the 70's. We always wondered what happened to those skis. And now we will wonder what anyone is going to do with them there – sand skiing perhaps.

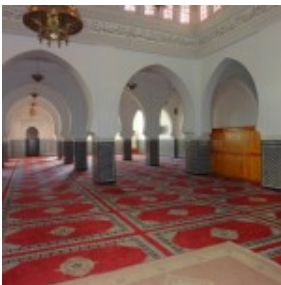
We aren't sure that the cold shower was to blame but Gary came down with a fever and took to his bed. He missed not only



The View from
the Terrace at
the Hotel
Yasmina

dinner, but an interesting talk at dinner about Islam and the life of the prophet Mohammed. We learned that the word "Islam" in Arabic means "submission", meaning the true believers are to submit to the will of Allah. There are 5 Pillars of Wisdom that are the core of the Muslim religion that were given to

Mohammed by Allah (seemingly parallel to the Ten Commandments of Christians and Jews). The Pillars are (1) Chahada – the profession of faith and belief that there is only one God (2) Salat – the faithful shall pray 5 times a day at prescribed intervals (3) Zakat – Each person shall give alms to the poor (4) Ramadan – the observation of the holy days with fasting and prayer (5) Haj – each person shall make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Some pillars, e.g. 3 and 5 are based on the ability of the individual to do so. E.G. the very poor do not have alms to give, but can still be holy.



Prayer Hall at
a Mosque

The faithful are called to prayer by the muezzin (pronounced moo-eh-zin with the accent on “eh”) from the minaret by the mosque. Men kneel in rows, with no assigned places and recite a series of prayers prostrating themselves at prescribed points in the prayers. Women have a separate sanctuary. All face toward Mecca, which is called quibla. (which means “direction” in Arabic). In the mosques there is a niche called the mihrab which shows the correct direction of Mecca. If it is time for prayer and you are not in a mosque, yes there is a Smart Phone App for that. In the mosque the imam leads the prayers kneeling in front of the group, also facing Mecca. Muslims have prayer beads(33 to touch 3 times each or 99 to be touched 1 time each) to use in reciting the 99 names of Allah. Friday is the holy day and Muslims gather at midday to hear a sermon called the khutbah, delivered by the iman in addition to the regular prayers. However, unlike Christians, they close their businesses for the hour or so that it takes

for the service, rather than taking the whole day off.



Waves on the
Sahara

That night the haboob struck. Well maybe not a haboob, but definitely high winds and a lot of blowing sand. A haboob is a wall of dust that can stand hundreds or even thousands of feet high. It is the result of high winds that blow down and agitate sand and dust, which causes the debris to blow up into a tall stacked wall. An average time span of a haboob generally ranges from 10 to 30 minutes. Haboobs typically occur in dry areas, particularly the Middle East, the Sahara, North Africa and the US state of Arizona, where there are large amounts of sand and high temperatures.