

November, 2005

Morocco

We bid a tearful goodbye to Senegal, a life we had come to know and love, and jumped into the very "other" world of Morocco. By "other" I mean the people, their customs, their way of dress, way of life, cuisine, topography - all so deliciously different from our normal experience.

We landed outside of Rabat and had two good people experiences right off the bat. First, the car rental manager gave us a free upgrade to a bigger car and, for an extra \$5.00, gave us full insurance coverage for the two week rental. Second, Anzie exchanged some \$US for some dirums at a currency exchange shop. One half hour later the money changer tracked us down to give us an envelope that Anzie had left at his window. The envelope contained \$80US.

The car was no great shakes - a Renault Clio with 134,000 kms on it, several dings and scratches and a radio that didn't work. It might have been the only car he had to rent. One good thing: all of our big suitcases fit in the trunk. This was good news, since we had reserved a Clio for our trip through Europe. Most places we didn't have guarded parking. So it was safer to carry our small backpacks packed with our necessary clothing, etc. into the hotel for the night and leave our big stuff out of sight in the trunk.

Morocco possesses good roads. Of course we were comparing them to those of Senegal where most roads are disasters. We drove on four-lane for 375 kms north and east to Assila, a seaside town just south of Tangiers. After a light lunch of kefta, spicy lamb meat balls, we headed east into the Rif mountains. Here the roads were serpentine and slow-going, up one mountain and around another. We bypassed **Tetouane**. Our guidebook said that it was the center of the drug trade (marijuana and hashish) but that too many tourists have been subject to robbery and mugging. An American we met later in Fez told of his bad experience there when he was traveling solo some years before. He was robbed and mugged.

Chefchouan

We reached our destination, **Chefchouan**, around 5 PM. Built on a steep mountainside, the road snakes back and forth with room for one row of houses between each level. Asked a policeman how to get to our hotel. He pointed to what looked like a pedestrian-only lane. "Are you sure?" He nodded his head affirmatively. Up, up, up we went to the parking lot of the Hotel Parador.

We were greeted by Moustapha, who stood no more than 4'10", but stockily built. We hadn't organized our bags as yet, so we needed them all. Moustapha hoisted our two biggest bags onto his back, about 80 lbs. worth, and proceeded to guide us up the steep lanes through the medina (market area) to our inn. We had trouble keeping up with him. After about ten minutes we arrived at Dar Terrae, a four-story inn in the old town that appears to have been designed by Gaudi and Escher in partnership, but was in reality the traditional way the Spanish had built years before. The walls are painted either sky blue or pristine white. Many curvilinear walls and roof lines with plenty of multi-colored inlaid tiles. Several terraces and balconies are located at each level and even between floors. Our room contained a built-in bed that one entered by crawling from the side.

We tried to communicate in French, and were amazed that English worked better. We discovered that in this region north to Tangiers Spanish is the first language after Arabic. The region is considered part of Andalusia. It was under Spanish rule for many years.

Chefchouan is absolutely magical. We took a walk further up into the old town. Narrow alleys broke off from the main lane and meandered off into the distance, either up or downhill. As the buildings were predominately painted sky blue, these alleys were suffused with a blaze of that color. Eventually, the lane we followed reached a summit and began to descend. We came upon a kind of terrace that overlooked a fast-flowing stream, which rushed down from a nearby mountain. We could see where the stream had been diverted into a small hydroelectric power station. It was also routed into two other courses onto which were constructed pavilions for washing clothes. It was the hour of the evening walk, so everyone was out enjoying the slightly chilly, yet invigorating evening air. We could pick out the Berber women wearing their distinctive red striped skirts and straw hats with pom poms. The scene struck us as so peaceful and beautiful, it brought on a sense of euphoria along with moist eyes.

We walked back to our inn; then, following the recommendation of the manager, we walked downhill to the Magic Lantern, a.k.a. Aladdin. An ancient restaurant that faces onto the main square of the old town, the interior bespeaks of many years, even centuries, of drinking and eating. The lighting is subdued through multi-colored glass shades. The air is redolent with Arabic spices. The food is exquisite and a perfect example of the "other-ness" I mentioned earlier. Anzie started with a bowl of *harrera*, a tomato-based soup with small pasta and I shared a *tajine*, a clay pot with an enameled conical top, of kefta - lamb patties - in a tomato-based sauce, topped with fried eggs. It's eaten with bread. We also shared a *pastilla*, which can be either a main course or a dessert. It consists of ground pigeon meat interspersed with layers of phylo dough, spiced with a mixture of sweet and salty flavors, including raisins, cinnamon and powdered sugar. We couldn't get enough, even though the portions were adequate.

We meandered back to our inn, stopping at various shops along the way. A chill was in the air, so we asked that a fire be built in our fireplace. We then lounged in front of the fire sipping an apres-diner of Captain Morgan's Spiced Rum.

It was the weekend of *Eid*, the holiday that ends the month long *Ramadan*, a time of day-long fasting. So everyone was in a festive mood. The hotel was full, families with children who stayed up playing noisily past midnight. The next day, we wandered through the town, then hired a taxi to take us up the mountain to a big resort hotel - Hotel Asmaa Atlas, owned by Ramada - that overlooked the valley. The hotel was almost deserted; they were closing it for the winter during which it was to undergo major renovations. Bought refreshments from the hotel bar, and sat out near the pool overlooking the magnificent view and listening to our taximan-cum-guide who gave us an interesting rundown on local history.

We noted that prickly pear was everywhere, and the pears were ripe. They make a tasty jelly, but watch out for the all but invisible star-shaped seeds. They can get caught in your throat, and cause serious problems. It happened to Anzie once in Senegal. It wasn't pretty. The cactus is used in combination with cotton to make an iridescent cloth (silk-like) used for dresses and scarves.

Since marijuana is a legal product in these parts, we decided to partake. We asked the

hotel manager to procure a small bag for us. He accomplished the task within the hour. That night we assembled a hash pipe that we had carried with us for three years without using it. We smoked before the fire, giggled a lot, and went to bed for a deep, wonderful slumber. We partook of the weed practically every night of our sojourn in Morocco. On the eve of our departure we discussed what to do with the remainder. Our fear of the worse case scenario won out. We elected to throw it away rather than risk detection as we entered France. Turns out our fears were unfounded. Customs in Nice was lax.

Fez

The next day we drove to Fes, a scenic three-hour drive through mountains and valleys. Further south the land became rolling, with vast vistas of tilled land, orange groves, cork and olive trees. I vowed to do my best to eat as many olives as I could in order to help maintain the economy of all these olive farmers. Finally we passed through the phosphate-mining region dotted with huge mounds of white and raw sienna red.

As soon as we entered the outskirts of Fes we were accosted by *moto guides*. These men on mopeds pulled up next to us at stoplights and offered to guide us to our destination. We declined their invitations until we arrived in the middle of town and got lost, despite Anzie's valiant attempts as navigator. Our moto guide took us right to the square where we were to meet someone from our hotel. While we waited for our hotel person to show up, our moto guide tried in vain to convince us to use him as guide to the medina. We put him off, and gave him a dollar or two for guiding us. Since our hotel was located in the medina where no motor vehicles were allowed, I parked our car in an underground lot about a ten-minute walk from our lodgings.

Our hotel, **Riad Louna**, was actually a former palace. Constructed in 1369, it consisted of three floors built around a central courtyard. All houses in Morocco are built around a central courtyard, because women are not allowed to go outside unveiled - so the inner courtyard was their only chance to be outside unveiled. The dining room was located in the roof, which also sported a terrace garden. It was a very tranquil spot amidst the noise and commotion of the busy medina. The only sound during the day came from the elementary school next door - the voices of the students reciting their lessons together. Our room was on the second floor with our own private staircase giving access to the rooftop terrace. The ground floor courtyard had four magnificent doors, one on each wall. They were 15 feet high by eight feet wide. Each was inset with a regular-sized door. The size of these doors indicated the wealth of the house. The courtyard had a central splashing fountain surrounded by lemon trees.

We had dinner on the rooftop - lamb with quince. We met two young American architects, a married couple who were spending a year traveling around the world carrying only small backpacks. She was absolutely darling with enough personality for the two of them. Her features were Asian, although she was born and raised in California. They had worked in London for several years for an American firm on a major project when they decided to take a year off. Future plans? Uncertain. Perhaps they may start their own architectural firm.

The next day we went on a guided walking tour of the **medina**. Our guide, Sahwed, was very knowledgeable. He explained that the medina consists of many neighborhoods. Each neighborhood has the following five necessities: mosque, water fountain, koranic school, bakery and public oven and a hammam. The latter is a bath house. The medina is the old town of Fes, a maze of alleys - some covered, some not - that covers more than a mile in

either direction - a UNESCO heritage site. It's a fun place to get lost in. Many of the trades are relegated to a specific area: metal smiths, silver and goldsmiths, jewelry, leather goods, cloth, shoes, spices, meats, olives, tanneries.

Just follow your nose to find the **tanneries**. A leather goods shop will allow you to climb to their second floor balcony to view a tannery. Because of the stench, we were all given jasmine bouquets to hold under our noses. It covers an area of about 100 by 50 yards, filled with built-in cement basins. Part is reserved for the tanning of the leather - men stomping on the raw leather in acid-filled basins to cure the hides. Other basins are each filled with a different colored dye. The workers, wearing nothing but shorts, throw either leather or cloth into the basins. They then climb in and knead the material with their feet. Talk about a medieval scene, you just know that nothing has changed about this process in centuries. It's a don't-miss photo-op with all those colors. Too bad our camera was stolen - more about that later.

We bid adieu to Sahwed just before lunchtime. He was a good guide, even though he went against our express wishes not to visit a carpet factory. We explained that we had seen enough of those and that we already owned enough carpets to start our own shop. Nonetheless we found ourselves in a huge carpet store/factory. We endured about 1/2 of a presentation before I said, "Thanks, but no thanks." We got up and left. We had to wait several minutes for Sahwed to realize we were no longer inside. We understood that a good portion of a guide's income is derived from commissions generated from purchases made by their tourists. The only purchase we made was a silver Hand of Fatima pendant for Anzie. Fatima was the daughter of Muhammed.

We ate lunch at Dar Saada, a palace located in the center of the medina. The decor was so byzantine, it was difficult to take it all in -- intricate design on top of more intricate design. We sat down on the ground floor. Shortly, the maitre d' invited us to move to the second floor "...so that we might view the spectacle." So we moved up and waited ... and waited. Meantime we were served a fixed menu of eight cold appetizers, followed by four hot. Then a great couscous. Delicious! An hour later a procession began, drummers followed by players of long, thin brass horns that sounded only one note - like a semi-sonorous Bronx cheer crooned by a duck. These were followed by others in costume, who were followed by about 50 tourists whose ultimate quest, so it appeared, was finding a bathroom.

The entertainment consisted of a man balancing a tray with glasses filled with some flaming liquid, while performing a slow break-dance. He completed his contortions without dropping a thing. He was followed by a belly dancer. She was blessed with a nice figure; however, I've seen better dancing from first-year students at Madame Sophie's School of Aerobic Belly dancing in Revere Beach.

We returned to our Riad to rest and read in the rooftop garden. At five o'clock we listened to a rondo of chanting from the various mosques as the faithful were called to prayer.

The next day we left Fes to drive to Meknes. On the way we detoured a bit to **Ifrane**, a university town located in the mountains surrounded by cedar forests. It looked like Switzerland. All of the buildings resembled chalets. The story is that King Hassan built the University and hired American faculty to teach Math, Science and IT. Looks like it would be good duty, especially if you were a skier. There's a ski resort close by. We stopped at a restaurant/shopping center in the middle of town, and had a delightful lunch. It's so different from anything we saw anywhere else in Morocco.

After lunch we continued on to **Meknes**. We descended through more beautiful cedar forests until we reached rolling hills and farmland. A UNESCO heritage site, it was founded in the 11th century by the Almoravids as a military settlement, Meknes became a capital under Sultan Moulay Ismaïl (1672–1727), the founder of the Alawite dynasty. The sultan turned it into an impressive city in Spanish-Moorish style, surrounded by high walls with great doors, where the harmonious blending of the Islamic and European styles of the 17th century Maghreb are still evident today.

We decided to press on to Beni Allil. We arrived in Beni Allil around 5:00 PM. It looked very uninteresting. We decided that we could make it to Alzilah by nightfall. Our map showed two ways to get there: one, a long boring drive over the flatlands; the other seemed shorter and more interesting. It involved traversing a mountain range. We could see it in the distance. Sure, it looked high, but once over the summit it would be all downhill, right? Wrong. We climbed the mountain via a seemingly never ending series of switchbacks. We watched a beautiful sunset, and watched the light turn from orange to purple to dark blue. And we had yet to reach the summit! We could look back and see the lights of Beni Allil way below us. We began to wish we hadn't been so ambitious. Anzie was so afraid she was just glad that all was black and she couldn't see how far down the drop-offs were!

We finally reached the summit, or so we thought. We began a steep descent down a curvy road. I could see the road in my headlights and my white knuckles on the wheel. That was all. Then we were climbing again, even higher than before, it seemed. For the next hour we climbed and descended with no sign of civilization. Eventually we began a long descent. Finally we saw signs advertising campgrounds and a hunting lodge. Should we go on or stay? Go on! "Engage!", as Patrick Stewart, the commander on Star Trek, often commands. We crossed over a large dam. On the other side we came upon soldiers. We stopped and asked them how far it was to Alzilah. "About an hour," they replied. That settled it. Rather than venture further into the unknown we decided to find that hunting lodge.

Before we left the soldiers asked us if we were French. "No. We're American." They gave us a thumbs-up sign accompanied by big smiles. That happened often to us. Most people seemed to like Americans. Sometimes they expressed a dislike for American politics, a dislike with which we often commiserated. But they always differentiated. They never treated us as symbols of "Yankee Imperialism" or "warmongers". They always considered us as American tourists, and as good people. I had a long discussion with one Moroccan man, after which he thanked me, saying "This is the first time I have ever spoken with an American". Of course, part of the reason was that not too many American tourists speak French.

We backtracked to the sign for the hunting lodge, the **Auberge du Lac**, offering lodging, restaurant and bar. We took the steep entrance road to the banks of a river and discovered that the place was indeed open! They had a room available, and dinner was being served. The dinner was quite good. We had roast wild boar in a wine gravy, and several beers. We got into a conversation with a couple - he was Moroccan, she was Dutch - who had come to this lodge every year for the past 16 years. They had honeymooned there. The lodge was separated from the restaurant by a good 70 yards, so we drove there. Our room was spartan - a double bed, chair, desk, small armoire and a hunting scene from a calendar as wall decoration. It was cold and we had only one blanket. So we had to steal a blanket from another room. The common bathroom was quite a walk, and there was no hot water. So, what can you expect for \$16.00 a night?

Oussoud Cascades

Everyone recommended that we visit Oussoud Falls. They lay about one hour's drive from the dam. The government office of tourism can't be that taken with them. The signage to guide one there was either absent or scant. We had to stop a few times to ask directions.

When we arrived we were guided to a parking place, and a courtly old gentleman asked if we needed a guide. Anzie decided to pass on this event, so I went on the tour alone with the guide. We descended this trail for a quarter mile, which ended at a promontory overlooking the falls. The falls were absolutely underwhelming. They consisted of one rather thin stream of water that fell about 150 feet. We gazed upon this "true miracle of nature", as it was described by my guide, for about three minutes, and then returned to the car. I paid the guide the pre-arranged sum. He then hit me with a pretty good scam: "I'm also collecting for the "Poor Children's Fund". Anything you can give would be appreciated." How could I resist? Was it a legitimate charity? We will never know.

Back on the road I tried to convince Anzie that she had missed "one of the true miracles of nature". She saw right through my bombast.

Cascades d'Oussoud - Worth the trip? Not really.

Marrakech

Everything we ever heard about the town is true: exotic, magical, exciting We had reserved a room in a Riad in the medina, which meant that we had the hassle of hooking up with someone from the hotel outside the medina, finding a place to park, and carrying our luggage a good distance through the medina to the hotel. It was a hassle, yes, but it was worth it. The **Riad Jamilah** consists of no more than 6-8 rooms on two stories around a courtyard complete with garden, fruit trees and a fountain. Our room included a working fireplace. They also have a common room which included a large TV with 500 channels. We ate dinner there the first night, in the kitchen.

Immediately after we had settled in, we took off to explore the medina. After stopping several times to ask directions, we finally found the **Plaza Djemaa El-Fna**, "the Big Place". It is huge! Probably covers 30 football fields. The perimeter consists of shops and restaurants. The real action lies in the Plaza itself. Everywhere you look there's something interesting going on: vendors of fresh-squeezed orange juice - a commodity we really missed in Africa - snake charmers, belly dancers - they danced with veils, showing no belly - jugglers and buskers performing all manner of feats. We would come upon a large group of Moroccans surrounding a man who was talking and gesticulating excitedly. These were the story-tellers, who practiced an age-old and popular tradition. We were just sorry that we couldn't understand the language.

The medina ran off from the Plaza in all directions. We discovered that different trades were segregated into different sections of the medina. Here we could actually see the artisans at work, making ceramic tiles, painting furniture with intricate Arabic designs, writing calligraphy, cutting famous religious phrases from the Koran in calligraphy out of brass, making leather camel saddles, carving plaster wall tiles. I could have spent hours at each of these souks, just watching and learning.

Then there was the silversmith souk, the goldsmith souk, the spice souk, the footwear

souk, the leather goods souk, the food souk. It went on and on. The place throws a party for all six senses.

Essaouira

After two days all of our senses were sated. Our car was repaired, too. The rental guy at the airport told us to contact their Marrakesh office if we had any problems. We did. Neither the windshield wipers nor the CD player worked. The Marrakesh office gave us directions. When we arrived, the manager drove us to a nearby hotel where we agreed to meet him in one hour, in the rooftop bar. The man showed up at the specified time and took us to the car. In that short time they had replaced the wipers. They also replaced the radio. They also changed the oil. Unbelievable service! The best we've seen in three years, or more.

Off to Essaouira on the West coast. On the way out of Marrakesh we were pulled over by the police. The charge? Speeding. I swear that we were just following the traffic. Nonetheless, the policeman politely informed us that we could take care of the fine right there. How much? The equivalent of \$60.00US. I protested that the fine was excessive. The policeman excused himself and, within minutes, showed up with his superior officer. Said officer asked to see our passports and driver's license. He then said that they did not wish to leave a bad taste in our mouths for Marrakesh. So the fine would be reduced to \$20.00. We paid it happily, and went on our way. Later we discovered that just about every tourist driver gets stopped on that road.

Essaouira is a gem. Sitting on the edge of the Atlantic the old city is protected by ramparts that face a rocky coastline. Each night we went to sleep with the sound of crashing waves. We stayed on the top floor of **Jack's Apartments** (67 steps). Our suite overlooked the ocean and the ramparts. Each evening the ramparts became very busy as people gathered to watch the sunset. We could watch both the sunset and the people from our balcony. A family lived beneath the ramparts and ran a shop atop same. They had four mixed breed puppies that they let out each evening as the tourists gathered. They were so cute that the sunset took a backseat to their antics in the eyes of the gathered multitude.

Even though it's a Muslim country, you can still buy booze. But the vendors are tough to find. We searched for close to an hour before we found the liquor store. It was so non-descript - no sign - that we had passed it before without recognizing it for what it was. They sell only to foreigners.

That evening we returned to our tower retreat, started a fire, made drinks, opened the balcony window overlooking the ramparts and the ocean, put some music on the CD player, and settled down to watch the sunset. Life doesn't get much better than this!

More than one Moroccan proudly informed us that Jimmy Hendrix had stayed there. It still is a haven for hippies. The difference is that now they're our age.

One problem with traveling is the difficulty in getting enough exercise. We walked a lot. But it was too cold to swim. We were either driving or sitting in restaurants or cafes drinking and eating. My pants were getting tighter. I did rent a bike one day, and biked along the beach road for about 7-10 miles. I stopped from time to time to watch the fisherman, the surfers, especially the kite surfers. Essaouira is known for its winds and

wide, flat beaches. The kite surfers were truly amazing as they launched themselves from a wave high into the air. I would have biked further but I had a flat tire. It was flat when I rented the bike. The shop inflated it. After 7-10 miles it was flat again, so I turned it in.

Besides seafood, which is excellent, the most important trade is **marquetry** - inlaid wood. Boxes, cabinets, assorted pieces of furniture - decorated with intricate patterns of varied woods. One of the most popular woods is *tuya*. After several inquiries we determined that it is juniper wood. It's dense as mahogany and resembles burl walnut. I bought my first cane there, a pistol-grip model. The handle was made of tuya. The handle separated from the shaft to reveal a foot-long sword. Unfortunately, the fact that the connection between the handle and the shaft was hollow created a weak joint that soon broke.

Essaouira is a fishing port. Visiting the port is an absolute don't miss. Several large ships were in various phases of construction, all in wood. Scattered about the port, both in and out of the water, were hundreds of wooden dories, all painted turquoise. Plenty of photo ops.

The "Grand Place" is an excellent place to hang out. Take your pick of any of the cafes that guard the perimeter. Order a drink, and watch the stream of humanity flow by. We would often partake of a continental breakfast here and linger for the better part of an hour.

Most of the restaurants sported a rooftop terrace, which meant climbing three flights of stairs. All of this climbing began to aggravate my hip condition. But the cuisine and the view made it all worthwhile.

We left Essaouira and headed for Rabat and the airport. We found a cheap hotel in Settat, a University town. We enjoyed our first and last Moroccan pizza. It was only a half hour journey to the airport, which was good since we had to be there at 6:30 AM. Everything went smoothly, and our plane departed on time for Nice and our next adventure.

A la prochaine

Chuck