

## My Trip to Morocco

I hadn't planned on going to Morocco this year. My original choice was a joint tour of Israel and Jordan, but Helene Halperin and Noelani Musicaro, two women I met on a previous trip to Turkey, convinced me to go. I normally travel solo (within a guided tour). However, over the years I've learned it is far better to see the world with like-minded travelers. Helene, a retired educator, and Noelani, an online entrepreneur, were a good mix for me. Not only did we embrace the same free-spirited curiosity about our planet, we also shared a similar sense of humor, which never hurts. Our tour company of choice was Gate 1 Travel; we selected an escorted tour called the *13-Day Kaleidoscope of Morocco* at a very affordable price. I travel twice a year on my letter carrier's salary and need to keep the costs of most trips to under \$250 a day (including airfare), so this trip fit my budget perfectly.

Although I write detailed journals of all my travels I seldom do any research on the countries I visit prior to the actual trips. This tour was no exception. Perhaps this sounds like an asinine way of seeing the world, but I often tell myself the *true* adventure comes from experiencing the culture and unknown wonders of a new place, and not just crossing off a checklist. Besides, I had Helene with me, a walking encyclopedia who eats travel books for breakfast, possessing an uncanny sense of direction as if she was born with a GPS device implanted in her brain. Whenever we explored a Moroccan city on our own, she would say, "follow me" while I fumbled with my map trying to get our bearings. By the time I pinpointed our location she had already led us to our destination. I suspect she may have been a tour guide in a previous life. Helene also speaks several languages, including French, which *really* came in handy on this trip. Noelani, on the other hand, was more like me; we saw the world by the seat of our pants...*which probably explains why my butt is so flat.*

Preparing for this tour was easy. I didn't need any inoculations, and a visa was not necessary for stays less than 90 days. Basically, I just focused on my packing list. Over the years I've developed what is now a long list of items I bring on all my journeys. Initially, the list was concise, just a simple reminder of the type of clothing I needed to pack. But with each passing trip, my experiences necessitated adding more and more items. For example, a very bad case of sinus congestion while in Peru convinced me to bring extra cold medication, while a loose bowel situation in Guatemala reminded me to stock probiotic supplements in addition to my anti-diarrhea pills. Live and learn, right? Just prior to my trip I also Googled the weather in Morocco and downloaded the two-week forecast. The mean temperatures seemed pleasant enough, averaging between 50 and 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Living in Miami I do not have a large selection of winter wear, and thank goodness I decided to bring my padded hoodie (the warmest thing I own) because the forecasts were way off. It was actually very cold in the Atlas Mountain valleys.

One thing I never fail to do before each trip is register with the State Department's S.T.E.P. program (Smart Traveler Enrollment Program). This informs the U.S. government and the corresponding embassies and consulates that I'll be traveling abroad. In case of an emergency (an earthquake, civil unrest, zombie plague, etc) they will know to come get me. *Hopefully*. Once you are enrolled in S.T.E.P. you will also receive constant travel advisory alerts via email about the country you intend to visit. I always caution my readers these advisories are not for the faint of heart. In addition to useful tips and information, they also include a safety review that will often make the hairs on the back of your neck stand at attention. Granted, one must always be cautious when traveling in a foreign land (especially where law enforcement standards are lower or the potential for social unrest is higher), but my own recent experiences abroad – I have visited fifteen countries in the past six years – have led me to believe these safety concerns can be either misleading or overblown. Common sense is the key word. For example, I wouldn't sightsee in a high-crime area of Cairo any more than I would in Chicago. If a tour guide tells me an area is safe for strolling I will take their word for it. And, conversely, if they say to avoid an area, I will.

A bigger safety concern is the potential threat of terrorism or civil unrest. I was in Egypt just months before the Arab Spring uprisings engulfed several Muslim countries in Africa and the Middle East. In these cases, I pay close attention to the news coming over the Internet to gauge the overall stability of the country I am visiting, especially those countries prone to political violence. Nothing ruins a vacation more than an unannounced rebellion. As a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines I got caught up in the People's Power revolution that toppled the brutal dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos back in the 1980's. Those were some wild and chaotic times, exciting *only* because of the ignorance of my youth. I'm in my fifties now, and my staid sensibilities require as much peace and tranquility as I can latch onto. In other words, I prefer that my traveling 'surprises' do not include large crowds of angry people. Keeping up with current events can be a lifesaver.

In Morocco, the current social or political tensions seem to center around economics (primarily the high unemployment rate among young people) and the future role of the king. The Arab Spring uprisings have put Muslim monarchs and tyrannical regimes on notice. As more and more citizens take to the streets in protest across the region, changes appear inevitable. In 2011, following the violent public revolts in Tunisia and Egypt – and some incredibly damning Wikileaks documents alleging high-level corruption within the royal house – Morocco's King Mohammed VI (a young, *reasonably* well-liked ruler who came to power in 1999) sought to head off a potential crisis by announcing political reforms that included some power sharing with the elected parliament. Since then, there has been some tapering off on political reforms and a small but growing number of protestors have been pressing the king for more democratic and economic changes. In recent years, Morocco's Human Rights record in dealing with dissidents has not been too bad. Although, based on the current political climate throughout much of the Muslim world, that situation could change dramatically. Over the past decade, radical Islamists from Casablanca's largest shantytown (many trained in Afghanistan) have periodically carried out or planned suicide bombings in public places, necessitating a crackdown by

government forces. The fact these young men all hailed from very poor neighborhoods speaks to the need for urgent economic reform. Before I continue, let me just state that my visit to Morocco was without incident. I felt not only safe, but extremely welcomed by Moroccans, who are very friendly by nature. The country relies heavily on the tourism trade (especially from Europe) and foreigners are very well treated.

On March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, I took a taxi to Miami International Airport to begin my Moroccan adventure...

## **Days One and Two**

I had scheduled a taxi pick-up for 9:30am. Just before the cab arrived I did my last minute check around my apartment (I rent half of a small duplex) to make sure I had turned off the water, shut down the central AC unit, closed all the windows, etc. I also placed the sunshield visor in my Toyota and soon discovered that my car wouldn't start. I had inadvertently left my headlights on and drained the battery overnight. Normally, this wouldn't pose a problem, a simple call to AAA for a jump start (or a tow if the situation warranted a mechanic), but occurring on the morning of my big trip I couldn't shake the nagging superstitious feeling that somehow this was an omen of sorts. I said an extra prayer just in case.

I live just minutes from the airport and by 10:00am I was already checked in and browsing the terminal gate bookstores for a travel guide on Morocco. I could not find one. Somehow, this added to my overall unease. My American Airlines flight to JFK was scheduled to begin boarding at 11:15am, but, sure enough, the flight was delayed. Our plane was coming in from Venezuela (and continuing on to New York City) and as the routine maintenance, customs and safety checks were being performed, something was discovered onboard that required further investigation. An hour later the airline decided to use another plane and all the passengers had to hastily trek through the entire terminal building to our new departure gate. We arrived at JFK almost two hours late, further exasperated by an unusually long wait time for our luggage. I now had just over an hour and a half to catch my Alitalia flight to Rome, which departed from Terminal Building 1; meanwhile, I was still stuck in Terminal Building 8 wondering where my luggage was. I remember thinking: *Why the heck did I forget to turn off my headlights!*

I reached the Alitalia counter by 4:30pm and found no lines. *Thankfully*. But the security protocol was slow going and I barely made it to the departure gate as the boarding process was being announced. I ran into Helene and Noelani, who were sitting in the lounge area waiting to board. They, too, looked harried and frustrated. En route to the airport, Noelani remembered she did not have her credit card and they had to return to New Jersey to retrieve it. Also, Helene had flown in from California (where she lives) and had spent several days with Noelani in New Jersey, but the incredibly cold winter

bracing the Northeast had made her stay very uncomfortable. Neither one had their 'Happy Camper' faces on. We hugged briefly (I had not seen Helene in over two years; Noelani and I had traveled to India and Nepal the previous winter) and quickly got on line to board the plane.

The flight lasted just over eight hours. This was an Airbus jet, which I prefer over Boeing's because of the added legroom in coach. Due to my claustrophobia I always sit in an aisle seat, allowing me more room to stretch out. I sat next to a couple of young lawyers from Denver who were on their way to Sicily to do some rock-climbing. We shared stories about our travels. During the pleasant flight I watched the mildly amusing movie, *The Millers*, and managed to sleep for a few hours with the aid of Ambien.

We arrived in Rome at 7:00am on Day Two of our trip, ahead of schedule. And thank goodness, too, because we had to go through security again to catch our connecting flight to Casablanca and the wait time was ridiculous. Apparently, the Italians have never heard of cordoning off an area for crowd control, and hundreds of international passengers just massed in front of two check points, proceeding forward without forming a discernible line. I couldn't believe how poorly organized and chaotic this security screening process was. It made me doubt the safety of their flights. When we finally cleared security, we walked to the very end of the terminal building where our tiny departure gate was located. Noelani and I had time to savor the espresso and share a pastry before boarding the tarmac shuttle bus that whisked us to our awaiting plane. The boarding process was like something out of a *Three Stooges* movie. For some *stupid* reason Alitalia allowed passengers to enter from both the front and rear of the plane, which led to a gridlock of bodies in the aisles as people in the back (with their cumbersome carry-ons) tried to reach their seats in the front and vice-versa! Adding to the confusion, a group of loud Moroccan women – with several children in tow – kept changing seats to the annoyance of the crew. The entire process was so unprofessional (and unintentionally hilarious) it wouldn't have surprised me if the captain's name was Bozo the Clown. Once we were actually in the air, though, the three-hour flight was pleasant and uneventful.

Twenty-one hours after leaving Miami I was finally in Morocco, touching down at the Mohammed V International Airport in Casablanca at 12:00pm (their time). Clearing immigration was a breeze, but getting our luggage took a while. Before reaching the luggage carousel we decided to exchange some dollars into Moroccan dirhams; the rate fluctuated throughout our trip but hovered around eight dirhams for one dollar. After retrieving our bags and clearing customs we were met by a Gate 1 representative holding up a sign near the exit area. There were several other tour members with him who had arrived on the same flight, as well. We made our way through a section of the airport parking lot and boarded our tour bus. Our first night in Morocco was not in Casablanca, but rather Rabat, the nation's capital, which is located roughly two hours to the north along the Atlantic coast. The scenery consisted mostly of flat farmlands and the occasional town or village. Many of us, sleep-deprived after our long flights, opted to nap during the drive.

Just a few blocks from Le Diwan, our beautiful hotel in Rabat, the bus driver stopped to pick up our tour guide, Abdelaziz El Hissen (who preferred we call him Aziz). He had just dropped off a group of tour members – who'd arrived earlier – at a local restaurant and hitched a ride back to the hotel with us. On the bus Aziz explained the check-in process, collecting our passports momentarily once we arrived at the hotel. While we waited in the lobby for Aziz to check us in, Helene, Noelani and I inquired about the tramline, located about two blocks down the street. It was only 3:00pm and we wanted to explore the *medina* of Sale before our orientation meeting later that evening. The city of Sale is situated across the Bou Regreg River from Rabat; it was originally a small settlement established in the 10<sup>th</sup> century that grew to eventually rival Rabat economically for several hundred years. The Sale *medina* – the oldest section of the city – is touted as a throwback to the traditional Moroccan village. Helene was the first to suggest we visit the place on our own since it would not be included in our city tour the following morning.

After washing up in our hotel rooms and putting our luggage away, the three of us met at 3:30pm in the lobby. I had acquired a free city map from the concierge, who seemed pained to be parting with it. We bundled up; it was raining lightly and quite chilly. Once we reached the Tour Hassan station we didn't know how to procure the tokens to ride the tram. The vending machine kept spitting out our dirhams as the tram pulled into the station. Helene, frustrated, told us to just get on board. I was slightly reluctant, not having any tokens to pay for the ride, but Helene asked someone on the tram (in French) how we could buy tokens. We got off at the next stop and she purchased several pass cards (they didn't use tokens) from an official vendor inside a booth. It was 6 dirhams each way (approximately 80 cents).

We ended up boarding the wrong tram and after crossing the Bou Regreg River into the city of Sale we got off to get our bearings. Helene asked some of the locals where the medina was located. One young woman told us we could enter it from where we were (on the other side of the tracks). Traditionally, tall defensive walls enclose all of Morocco's medinas; along various main avenues you can enter via large entranceways. We were looking for the historic center of the medina, but it was getting late, and although the rain had stopped the temperature kept dropping. We crossed the tramline tracks and walked up to a large entrance gateway, stopping to photograph each other standing before it, and then continued into the old city. Aziz cautioned us not to go too far inside the medina; I'm not sure if this was due to a safety concern or because he didn't want us getting lost. Either way, we decided not to venture more than a few blocks in.

We slowly made our way up a narrow street, taking in the old buildings and sidewalk cafes. The streets were not that busy, probably due to the earlier rain and the late afternoon hour. We came across some wonderfully twisted alleyways; the hallmark of any medina, connecting the old city in ways only the locals can navigate. Since it was our first day in Morocco we were not yet brave enough to explore any further. With the skies becoming increasingly darker, and the temperature continuing to drop, we elected to head back to our hotel for dinner. We made it to Le Diwan by 5:15pm, choosing to eat in the restaurant located on the second floor, which was completely empty when we arrived.

Helene ordered the daily fish special while Noelani and I opted for the beef shank couscous. I was not too impressed with my first Moroccan meal. It cost more than twenty dollars (in dirhams), was quite skimpy on the portions and not all that tasty. I prayed this was an exception, and not typical of Moroccan fare.

We arrived a few minutes late to the orientation meeting held in one of the conference rooms upstairs. This was the first time I got to see the entire tour group. *Holy cow!* There were 38 of us, the largest number of tour passengers I have ever traveled with. Besides Helene, Noelani and myself, our group consisted of: Pam Trier, Whitehall, Michigan; Javier Barreto and his mom, Amarilis (Lily), San Vicente, California; Lynne and Joe Sedotto, Ocala, Florida; sisters Denise and Vanessa DeAlba, California; Mary and Doug Weber, Prescott, Arizona; Ann Longanbach; Martha Verbrugge; Jane Eppinga, Tucson, Arizona; Patricia Wenner and Maureen Murphy, Pennsylvania; Sumit Vanmali and (I believe) Rosalind, California; the Sampsons (Jim, Monica and her mom, Nora), Virginia; Vince and Joan Fiorello, New Jersey; Barbara Swearingen, California; Deborah Benson, Tampa, Florida; sisters Katrina and Elysia Bandong and their parents (whose names I do not remember, sorry), New York City; Constanze and Stephen Wilde, California; Bruce and Janice Wurster, Colorado; Paul Goldensohn, Nevada; Alene Fletcher, Tucson, Arizona; and Gerald and his wife Shirley, whose last name I didn't get because they never signed the email list. I believe this is everyone, and forgive me, gang, if I misspelled someone's name or got any of your details wrong.

Aziz began the meeting by welcoming us to Morocco and then had the hotel staff distribute mint tea (a traditional drink) so we could toast our journey. He spoke briefly about himself and his family. In his late forties, he has been a tour guide for 18 years, although this was his first tour group with Gate 1 Travel. I personally liked the man, but some in the group found his English limited and his personal style somewhat detached. He was definitely very knowledgeable about Moroccan culture and history, and on several occasions throughout the trip he displayed that *personal service* all good tour guides exhibit whenever something goes awry or needs tweaking. With 38 passengers he definitely had his hands full, and I think he performed admirably. Having stated this, let me just say he 'dropped the ball' during the orientation meeting. It rambled on for almost two hours, bogging down over an incredibly long explanation concerning the individual excursions, which left many of us nodding off in our seats. Noelani and Helene actually retired to their room before it was over. Eventually, Aziz realized we were all very tired and ended the meeting shortly after 8:00pm. Back in my room, I set aside my clothes for tomorrow and watched the CNN international news broadcast on television until sleep overcame me.

### **Day Three**

I awoke at 5:00am, having slept the entire night through. I usually suffer from persistent jet lag on most trips, but during this tour I was able to adhere to a good sleeping schedule. By the way, I am an early-riser, so waking up at 5:00am is normal for me. The temperature outside had dropped into the low 40's overnight, and my hotel room felt like a meat locker. I tried to set the thermostat to a warmer setting but it wouldn't work. Living in Miami, my body has acclimated to weather that is hot and humid much of the year, so I am very sensitive to the cold. By the end of the trip the unusually chilly March-April temperature fluctuations in the region caused me to develop a bad case of the sniffles and a sore throat.

I took a hot shower, shaved and made several cups of instant coffee in my room. By 6:30am I was downstairs in the restaurant having breakfast with Joe and Lynne Sedotto. They were early risers, too. Originally from Long Island, New York, they were now retired and living in Ocala, Florida. I believe Lynne was a former psychiatric nurse and Joe worked in the NYC transit system. I enjoyed their company at breakfast. Joe reminded me of my brother (also named Joe); they shared the same sense of humor. I was back in my room thirty minutes later to brush my teeth, use the bathroom one final time and place my luggage in the hallway for the porters. We were leaving for a city tour of Rabat at 8:00am and then continuing on to Fez later in the morning. I wanted to board the bus early to secure a good seat. I am almost 6'1 and most tour buses were not designed with tall people in mind. On this particular coach the seats along the entire right side were closer together than on the left side, which meant less legroom. I needed to sit by myself (so I could splay my lower limbs wide open) in order to be comfortable. With 38 people on this tour – not including Aziz and his assistant – getting a good single seat meant being one of the first people on the bus. Aziz mentioned a seat rotation system during the orientation meeting, but he was only concerned with the first eight rows and didn't mind where we sat as long as everyone had an opportunity to sit in the front.

Considering the size of the group I was surprised we were all on the bus by 8:00am to begin the tour on time. As we left the hotel, Aziz formally introduced Mohammed (our awesome driver) and his assistant, Idriss, a man who rarely spoke and whose primary responsibilities (from what I could tell) seemed to be handing out bottles of water and making sure our members didn't get lost during our walking jaunts. Our first stop that morning was the royal palace; on the way there our guide shared some current details about his country. From time to time, I will offer both modern and historical facts about Morocco – based loosely on Aziz' comments and my own personal research – in order to keep this journal informative:

Morocco is located in the northwestern tip of Africa, in what is sometimes described as the Maghreb region of North Africa, a geographical expanse west of Egypt that includes Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. The Maghreb is incredibly diverse, spanning the unforgiving Sahara desert, the rugged and beautiful Atlas Mountains and the scenic Atlantic coastal plains. Over the next 12 days we would witness this unbelievable diversity firsthand as we traveled from Rabat in a wide arc over the central part of the country back to Casablanca. The population of Morocco is roughly 33 million (recent census figures) but Aziz told us that about 3 million Moroccans live and work abroad,

mostly in Europe. The culture is a unique blend of Berber (the indigenous peoples), Arabic, African and European. The official languages are Berber and Arabic, although many Moroccans speak a hybrid Moroccan Arabic called *Darija*, and French seems to be a language of choice among the younger population. From 1912 until 1956, Morocco was a French protectorate, and a strong French influence is still evident throughout much of the country today. Because of the heavy tourism trade, and its close proximity to Western Europe, many Moroccans are multi-lingual. In Marrakech, for example, I heard restaurant personnel speaking to customers in French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian.

Morocco is a constitutional monarchy. Since the reforms of 2011, the current king, Mohammed VI, shares power with an elected parliament, but the monarch still exercises incredible control over national policy. In addition to presiding over the military and foreign affairs, he is also the official leader for all religious matters. The king can also issue decrees that carry the full weight of the law and has the power to appoint and dismiss the prime minister. Mohammed VI is young, in his early fifties, and appears to be more popular than his dad, Hassan II, who was known for clamping down on dissidents and ruling with an iron fist. By comparison, this king appears to be a cautious modernizer. He married a commoner and has allowed her a very public role in the government, something unheard of in previous Muslim dynasties, and he has even introduced a string of liberal reforms. But there is a long way to go, apparently; just before our arrival in Casablanca there were protests groups outside the royal palace, and although political violence is kept at a minimum by an effective security apparatus, the shadowy presence of radical Islamists within the country can still pose a threat to national security, underscoring a growing challenge for all Arab governments with large segments of unemployed young people.

The country's free market economy is often spearheaded by its large tourism industry, which last year attracted over ten million visitors and may soon replace phosphate as Morocco's number one foreign exchange earner. Businesses and service industries catering to the tourism trade account for a large share of the job market. Everywhere we visited, enterprising Moroccans were figuring out ways to make a living or augment their incomes off the steady stream of foreign visitors, offering their services as guides, selling souvenirs or even providing room and board in the more remote areas. But the largest employer remains the agricultural sector, which accounts for only 14% of the GDP yet still employs roughly 40% of the overall workforce. Morocco's semi-arid climate and relatively poor irrigation systems makes this field – pardon the pun – a particularly tough one to toil in. Along the coastal cities, fishing and seafood products are another major industry. Officially, Morocco's unemployment rate hovers between an enviable 10-12% overall (compared to that of Europe's) but the figures for young people – those under the age of thirty – are much, much higher.

Rabat is the capital and administrative center of the country. Situated along the banks of the Bou Regreg River, settlers started moving into this area around the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, attracted to its fertile plains. Both the Phoenicians and the Romans established trading posts in the estuary just to the southeast of the river. The Roman settlement was called *Sala Colonia*, and after the collapse of the Roman Empire this area gave rise to a Berber



Kingdom known as Chellah. These Berbers built a *ribat*, a fortress-monastery, to protect Chellah from invading marauders. Rabat derives its name from this fortress. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, another town called Sale emerged on the north banks of the river, and as its trading fortunes rose, Chellah's began to decline. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Berber-Muslim Almohads took control of the region and built a strong kasbah where the ribat once stood, using it as a launching point for successful raids into Spain. For a brief period, Rabat became an imperial city under the great Almohad Sultan Abu Yusuf Ya'qub al-Mansur, who built the Kasbah of the Udayas, a large fortress at the mouth of the Bou Regreg River right across from the city of Sale, and also erected the city's defensive walls. Ya'qub al-Mansur began construction of what would have been the world's largest mosque, but he died before its completion and the work was left unfinished (the accompanying minaret, known as the Hassan Tower, still stands today and is a major historical landmark in Rabat).

Our tour bus was the first to arrive that morning at the royal palace compound along *Ad Doustour Boulevard*, situated in the central part of the city. (Note: the king has palaces all over Morocco, but the one in Rabat is considered the most important because this is the political capital of the country). We entered through a large, well-protected gate and parked next to the Friday Prayer Mosque, the king's official mosque whenever he stays at the palace. We followed Aziz through a wide-open central square surrounded by beautifully maintained park grounds until we reached a wide avenue across from the palace entrance. It was not permitted to go beyond this point so we took photographs of the enormous, ornately decorated palace archway from here. On opposite sides of the entranceway were three sets of sentries each wearing either a green, blue or red royal military uniform. According to Aziz, Moroccans can tell if the king is in the palace based on the number of guards stationed at the entrance. On top of the archway waved a huge red Moroccan flag with its green five-point star in the center. The green represents the color of Islam and each of the star's points is symbolic of the five pillars of Islam. While we stood there taking pictures of the royal palace, Aziz gave us some background information on the young king, most of which spoke to his more populous side (like his marriage ceremony in which he took his vows alongside 200 other newlyweds). Next to the palace compound are most of the administrative buildings that run the day-to-day affairs of state.

After about thirty minutes inside the royal palace grounds we walked back to the bus and continued north along *Ad Doustour Boulevard*, the city's ochre-colored medina walls to our left, and arrived at the ruins of Chellah. We stopped for about an hour to tour this archaeological site. In 2012, Chellah was given World Heritage status. What is unique about this location is the variety of ruins found here. Originally, this was the spot of the former Roman port city of Sala Colonia, which played an important role in Rome's maritime conquest of the region. Centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire in the west, Sala Colonia became known as the Berber kingdom of Chellah, and there are ruins from both the former Roman city and various medieval Muslim kingdoms that followed. When Chellah was abandoned for the more prosperous Sale across the river, the Almohad Dynasty that took over in the 12<sup>th</sup> century used the deserted city as a necropolis. So there is also a large medieval cemetery here. Finally, the Merenid Dynasty of Zenata Berbers –

who came after the Almohads – constructed monuments, a large gate, a mosque and a *zawiya* (a large monastery or religious school) at the site during the 1300's, the ruins of which are still visible today. The royal tomb of the Merenid sultan, Abu I-Hasan, is located within the cemetery.

We entered the site through the large stone entranceway and walked down a series of steps overlooking the scenic fertile plains beyond. We reached a clearing just above where the Roman ruins of Sala Colonia lie. Remnants of the old city walls have been excavated, and one can see the stone block outlines of buildings or homes. Just to the east of the Roman ruins are the remains of the *zawiya*, the mosque and other buildings from the Merenid era. Next to it, extending up into the hillside is the old cemetery, with whitewashed tombs, some with green doorways or topped with domes. Aziz lectured us briefly on the history of Chellah before letting us loose to explore on our own. I followed Helene towards a section containing the ruins of a public bath, and we took turns photographing one another inside the remains of the monastery and mosque. Atop the minaret was a stork's nest. In fact, most of the buildings or trees were adorned with these large nests, the gangling-looking birds keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings. The crumbling walls inside the 14<sup>th</sup> century *zawiya* still retained some of its original arabesque decorations and color.

From Chellah we traveled north through Rabat to visit the beautiful Mausoleum of Mohammed V, the current king's grandfather (a respected nationalist who opposed the French and later presided over Morocco's Independence). Besides the tomb of Mohammed V, the underground mausoleum contains the tombs of Hassan II (the former king) and his brother, Prince Abdallah. From the outside, this simple looking white marble building topped with a traditionally Islamic green-tiled roof didn't warrant much attention. Until you step inside, and realize you are actually on a wide balcony peering down into the black and white marble-enshrined resting places of the previous two monarchs, all of it – including the gorgeous high ceiling – stunningly designed in arabesque patterns, complete with a Koran reader who sits and chants verses all day. It was quite spectacular. Most of us took turns having our photo taken with the royal guards posted outside the mausoleum entrance. They were very friendly and accommodating.

The mausoleum is housed on the opposite side of the esplanade containing the 12<sup>th</sup> century Hassan Tower (and adjacent mosque) started by the Almohad ruler Ya'qub al-Mansur in 1195 and later abandoned upon his death four years later. A series of open columns are aligned before the tower. Constructed of red sandstone, the tower was supposed to be the largest minaret ever built – roughly 260 feet – but construction stopped at only 140 feet when the sultan died. The architect who designed the tower is said to be the famous Muslim mathematician and astronomer Jabir ibn Aflah from Seville, Spain, who used the Koutoubia Minaret in Marrakech as the model for both the Giralda Tower in Seville and the Hassan Tower in Rabat. It's interesting to note that this particular style of tower building (known as Giralda towers or *Giraldillas*) was a very popular architectural design in the U.S. between 1890 and 1930. In Florida, for example, both the Freedom Tower in downtown Miami and the Hotel Biltmore tower in Coral Gables (not far from where I live) were built during the 1920's utilizing this style.

Our last stop in Rabat was at the Kasbah of the Udayas, also built by the Almohad king, Ya'qub al-Mansur, during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. When the Almohads captured Rabat they destroyed the former fortress of the Almoravids – the previous ruling dynasty – and began building the Kasbah of the Udayas around 1150. The new city took shape within its defensive walls, but the Kasbah was later deserted when Ya'qub al Mansur died in 1199. We spent thirty minutes here touring the beautiful gardens inside the kasbah courtyard, and walked through a small section of the old medina (where the homes were painted in a stunningly bright indigo blue color). From the ramparts of the fortress we could see the ancient whitewashed town of Sale across the Bou Regreg River.

Shortly after 11:00am we boarded our bus and began our long drive to Fez along National Highway 6 (N6). As we left the city of Rabat we came upon the Mamora Forest, spanning more than 130,000 hectares, home to more than 50% of Morocco's cork trees. Wild turtle mushrooms grow at the foot of these trees and there were local men by the side of the highway selling them in stacked clay pots (to keep them moist). Talking about this forest and Morocco's Mediterranean environment, Aziz mentioned that during our travels today we would be seeing many species of trees similar to those found in California, like acacia, mimosa, hibiscus, palm and olive trees. He also talked about the mountain chains dividing the country. In the north were the Rif Mountains, and in the central and southern parts were the Atlas chains, grouped geographically into Low, Middle and High Atlas Mountains. Our journey through Morocco would take us through different valleys across the Atlas Mountains. The diversity of the landscape was incredible: from green farming areas to rocky gorges and canyons, isolated oases and barren desert.

During our drive, Aziz described the basic layout of Morocco's four imperial cities (Fez, Meknes, Marrakech and Rabat). Each contained a kasbah (fortress) from behind which the medina (the old city) grew, encircled by defensive walls. Each city also had a Jewish Quarter (called a *mellah*). Jews lived peacefully alongside Berbers for centuries prior to the Arab conquest of the region. During the brutal Inquisition period in Spain, many Jews left their Iberian homes and sought refuge in Morocco's imperial cities, where they established themselves as successful traders and merchants. Today, the largest group of Moroccan Jews can be found in Casablanca, and most of what is referred to as 'the Jewish Quarters' throughout the country are actually devoid of Jews. Another characteristic of these imperial cities is the French Quarter. When Morocco became a French protectorate, the new rulers sought to re-create a section of each city in their own image, using French architectural styles and street designs to make the colonists feel more at home. These French areas within the imperial cities make for a stark but fascinating contrast; a major reason Morocco attracts so many visitors annually.

We passed the town of Tiflet, and stopped for a bathroom break at a gas station in Khemisset, before having lunch in the ancient city of Meknes almost an hour later. Located in the northern part of the country, the city of Meknes became the imperial city of Morocco under the reign of Moulay Ismail (1672 – 1727), the second ruler of the Alaouite Dynasty (the current royal family). The city is situated in the agricultural center

of Morocco with the beautiful Mid Atlas Mountains nearby and rolling hillsides of green fertile farmlands surrounding its outskirts. Approaching Meknes we saw a kaleidoscope of colorful marigolds, and orchards of olive trees and vineyards along the highway. We drove through the city to a hilltop restaurant called La Grillarderie where we had a wonderful lunch. I sat with Helene, Noelani, Barbara and Debbie. I ordered the mixed grilled meat kebobs (which this place was famous for) with fries and veggies. During lunch, Barbara and Debbie (who met years earlier on a tour and became traveling companions) told us a very funny story about an incident on the plane ride from JFK. Apparently, Debbie had passed out momentarily in the aisles and was being attended to by the pilot and crew unbeknownst to Barbara, who, when she finally discovered what happened, quipped that Debbie had only done it to get the attention of the handsome pilot.

From Meknes, we detoured north for about thirty minutes to visit the Roman ruins of Volubilis. Before arriving at the site we stopped by the side of the road to photograph the Holy City of Moulay Idriss, which was spread out between two hillsides in the distance. Moulay Idriss, the great grandson of Hasan (who was the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed and a revered martyr in Islam), arrived in Morocco in 789, creating a new dynasty and introducing Islam into the region. He not only founded this town, which bears his name, he also began construction on the great city of Fez. In the very heart of this small ancient village is his mausoleum, a very sacred site for Moroccans who make pilgrimages here throughout their lifetime. Many Moroccans believe that numerous visits to the saint's mausoleum (during the festivals that mark his birth) are equivalent to one trip to Mecca. The town also contains a beautifully designed cylindrical green minaret, the only one of its kind in the country.

Not far from Moulay Idriss are the fascinating Roman ruins of Volubilis. We spent an hour and a half with a local guide touring this site. Originally a Phoenician (and later a Carthaginian) settlement dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, this remote town grew rapidly under Roman rule from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD onward, encompassing more than 100 acres encircled by defensive walls. Built on a shallow slope below the Zerhoun Mountain and surrounded by fertile landscape as far as the eye can see, the Romans who lived here became wealthy on the olive business and built some spectacular homes with intricately detailed mosaic floors, many of which have survived the ravages of time. Although the city is only partially excavated it is considered an excellent example of a successful Roman colonial town and is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. During its peak in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, Volubilis had a population numbering over 20,000 (a considerable size for a colonial town) and contained a basilica, temple and a triumphal arch. Excavations have revealed over 50 villas at the site, marking this town as a very wealthy administrative center within the Roman province of *Mauretania Tingitana* (which covered northwestern Africa). By the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, hostile Berber tribes in the region rose up to end Roman rule in much of the region and Volubilis was abandoned by Rome. The inhabitants, fearing the coming Berber invasion, hid large hoards of coins and bronze statues beneath their villas. They remained hidden for more than 1,700 years before archeologists discovered them.

We made our way through the ancient city, the local guide explaining the ruins to us. In one section we saw the remains of the wealthiest villas, and large private and public baths with incredibly preserved mosaic floors depicting images from Roman mythology or history (usually battle scenes). There was a large wood and stone olive press in one building. The defensive walls are mostly gone, but the North Gate and the Tingis Gate entrances into the city are still visible. The massive Arch of Caracalla has been reconstructed. We climbed up to the *Capitoline Temple*, a large square, its remaining columns topped with stork's nests, and walked through the remains of the *basilica* nearby. In the center of the city was the paved main street known as the *Decumanus Maximus*. Along the western end of the town we saw a stone block with the image of a large penis (supposedly 'pointing' the way to the whorehouse). Some of the more juvenile among us – namely Javier and me – had our picture taken sitting in front of the penis to give the illusion we were, um, exceptionally well-endowed (a guy can dream, *can't he?*). By 4:30pm, we concluded our visit at Volubilis, tipping the local guide generously for a great tour and re-boarded our bus, continuing on to Fez.

We traveled through the farmlands of the Sais Valley for more than an hour before reaching the outskirts of Fez. When we entered the city Aziz had our driver circle the streets near the very busy Mohammed V Boulevard a few blocks from our hotel, pointing out several good restaurants in the area. We checked into the Fez Medina Hotel on Hassan II Avenue shortly after 6:00pm. It had been a long day and most of us were exhausted. After putting away my luggage and washing up in my room, I met Noelani downstairs in the lobby for dinner. Helene was very tired and did not want to stray far from the hotel, so Noelani and I had dinner on our own that night. One of Aziz' local assistants (who accompanied us to the medina the following day) walked us to the Zagora Restaurant on Mohammed V Boulevard, a very popular local eatery, making sure we know how to get back to the hotel before leaving us there. It was getting dark and the walk took us almost twenty minutes. The young guide suggested we head back before 10:00pm when most of the businesses close down for the night. It was quite chilly out, yet the streets were lively, full of people.

Dinner was great, I had a typical Berber dish of lamb with veggies cooked inside a *tajine*, a natural clay pot consisting of a base that is flat and circular with low sides topped by a cone-shaped cover which acts almost like a pressure cooker, returning the condensation to the bottom of the pot while cooking. The tajine is usually placed over hot charcoal or can be set in an oven. With the exception of breakfast, almost everything I ate during my stay in Morocco was prepared inside a tajine. When we finished our meal the waiter brought us the traditional mint tea and a small pastry for dessert. The bill came to only 220 dirhams (or roughly \$28) for the two of us. This was definitely a major improvement over the previous night's dinner. By 9:00pm we quickly walked back to the hotel – the streets eerily deserted by now – and called it a night.

## Day Four

I slept exceptionally well, waking up at 6:00am and feeling very refreshed. I took a nice long shower, dressed and ordered some hot water from room service to make instant coffee. I spent the next hour writing in my journal before heading downstairs for breakfast at 8:00am. The itinerary for today consisted primarily of visiting the medina of Fez, the oldest continually inhabited medina in North Africa. The word *medina* – which is Arabic for ‘city or town’ – usually refers to the historic walled-in section or quarter of a city. And while we spent more than six hours traversing the oldest areas of the Fez medina, we barely scratched the surface of this amazing place! By 9:00am we gathered on the tour bus. A local guide named Abdul was waiting for us. Dressed in a brown *djellaba* (a traditional Arab-Berber loose-fitting outer robe) and wearing a white skullcap *kufis*, Abdul cut quite the figure. He was a tall, thin middle-aged Berber with a deep, authoritative resonance to his voice. Having lived in the medina most of his life he was the perfect guide for navigating us through the seemingly endless maze of alleyways that constitutes the old city. This would be one of my favorite days of the entire tour.

We drove through the modern sections of the city before reaching the royal palace building adjacent to the Jewish Quarter in what is known as *Fez Jedid* (the ‘new’ city) initially established during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The group stood before the massive, ornately decorated entrance doors of the palace taking photos while Abdul lectured on the history of the Jewish Quarter and explained the arabesque artwork framing the façade and doorways of the palace. Initially, the Jewish Quarter (or *mellah*, in Arabic) of Fez was established in 1438. It was built on a site known as *al-Mallah*, the ‘saline area’, and the term *mellah*, which means salt in Arabic, became the designated term for all Jewish Quarters in Morocco. According to Abdul, the ruler of the Merenids – the dynasty that controlled Morocco from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century – permitted Jews fleeing from the Inquisition in Spain and those who’d been forced out of the older parts of the city to settle in the lands surrounding the palace. For their safety, the king built protective walls around the Jewish Quarter with fortified gates. Jews were successful merchants, and the sultans deemed that for the economic stability of the city it was necessary to keep them close by and safe. Eventually, as more *mellahs* sprang up in other Moroccan cities, they took on the more onerous feel of the European ghettos, with Jews being forced to live in over-crowded walled-in neighborhoods. They were often attacked during times of riots and invasions. Small wonder that today almost no Jews live in the “Jewish Quarters” of Morocco.

Abdul took us on a brief walking tour through the Jewish Quarter, its narrow streets lined with old shops below two and three-story homes and apartment buildings, some with wooden balconies and iron-forged windows. We passed the double arched gateway of the *Bab Semmarine* (the blacksmiths’ area) behind the palace, which once housed the main storage silos of the city. From here, we re-boarded our bus and drove to a fortress atop a hillside just outside the city to get a panoramic view of the medina of Fez. Several such fortresses were built along the rolling hills surrounding this once imperial city. It was a commanding and awe-inspiring view. In the valley below, the ancient medinas (there are actually two) merged together in a jumble of buildings crammed so tightly

together they formed a labyrinth of alleyways and side streets; the only discernible modern objects were the satellite dishes dotting the rooftops. We then drove to a market street near the Andalous section of the medina, the oldest part of the city, and began our six-hour walking tour. What an incredible day awaited us!

The *idea* for establishing a town in Fez belongs to Moulay Idriss I, who created the Idrisid Dynasty, but he died before the plans could be implemented, so the actual credit goes to his son, Moulay Idriss II, who built the original city (*Fez El-Bali*) between 789 and 808 AD. Initially, two settlements emerged here, separated by the Fez River. The first composed of several thousand Berber families who had left the turmoil of *Al-Andalus* (Muslim-controlled Spain) and created what became known as the fortified Andalous Quarter along the eastern bank of the river. Later, Arab clans from Kairouan (in what is modern-day Tunisia) settled on the western banks, establishing the fortified Kairaouine Quarter.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century the Almoravid Dynasty united the two towns under a sole rampart, and by the 13<sup>th</sup> century (under the Almohad Dynasty) *Fez El-Bali*, the old city, had grown to its present-day size. In 1276, the Merenid Dynasty founded a new town in Fez called *Fez Jedid* (the new city) to the west of the older one, building the royal palace, army headquarters and fortifications and a new residential area, including the future *mellah* (Jewish Quarter). Over the centuries, the city of Fez has seen its fortunes rise and fall as royal dynasties (and their subsequent civil wars) came and went, but even after Rabat replaced Fez as the political capital in 1912, this ancient town continues to be the country's spiritual and cultural center. The heritage of the two peoples who settled Fez (the Berber Andalus and the Arab Kairaouine) forged a solid foundation for the future cultural, religious and even architectural landscape of the country. In other words, if you want to see the *real* Morocco, go to Fez.

Abdul took us first through the Andalous Quarter. We passed an outdoor produce market, followed by fish and meat vendors before entering the alleyways of the medina. The streets are so narrow – cars and trucks cannot pass – that most of the goods sold within the medina are carried in on the back of horses or small donkeys, making for a very tight fit in some areas. From time to time you will hear commands in either Berber or Arabic to “watch out” for the animals passing through. One of the first places we visited was an ancient *funduq* (a caravanserai or inn where merchants used to store their wares on the first floor and take lodging in the rooms above) now being used as an escargot marketplace. Vendors piled the snails along the *funduq's* courtyard. From here we slowly made our way through the snaking, crowded alleyways until we reached the Al-Andalous Mosque, originally built during the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century in the heart of the Andalous Quarter. It is the second-largest religious center within the medina (the largest is the Kairaouine Mosque) and has undergone many additions and reconstructions over the past 1000 years.

We continued through the narrow streets passing tiny shops with men sitting on the floor weaving fabrics from agave cactus silk, and stopped to visit a wood-carving father-and-son business whose owners were good friends of Abdul's. We came upon the

*Fundug Kaat Smen* area, where the vendors specialize in the sale of honey, olive oil, *khlia* (preserved meat) and *smen* (rancid butter used in cooking). Locals smear the honey and *smen* on bread for a very tasty treat. I wanted to try some of the samples being offered, but the amount of bees and flies buzzing about gave me second thoughts. We crossed into the Kairaouine section of the medina, although it was difficult to tell since the alleyways all looked the same at this point. We arrived at an open square known as the *Place as-Seffarine* (the brass-makers' square) where the shops sold metal goods. Enormous pots and pans were lined up in the center of this square, which can be leased for weddings and special banquets. Nestled between the buildings in one nondescript section was the oldest metal works shop in all of the medina, a sign in Arabic denoting its special status.

Our walking tour included several 'official' store visits; these stops are usually mandatory on all guided tours and serve a multi purpose, offering the weary traveler a chance to rest and/or use the bathroom and buy native goods, the quality of which are 'guaranteed' by both the shop *and* the tour company. Refreshments are usually offered, followed by a pleasant and often entertaining presentation on how the goods are made. Afterwards, you are given time in their showroom to browse and buy. But hold onto your wallets, folks; while the merchandise is definitely nice to look at, rarely is it cheap! I seldom buy anything during these stops – unless I come across an item I absolutely fall in love with – and basically use the time to get an idea of the things I might want to purchase later in the public marketplaces, which are usually less expensive.

The first 'official' store we visited that day was a carpet co-operative not far from the *Place as-Seffarine*. We walked through several more serpentine alleyways before reaching a 14<sup>th</sup> century, beautifully restored three-story home that now served as the warehouse/showroom for locally woven carpets and tapestries. We sat on padded benches around the courtyard of the building (the central part of the house) while staff served us mint tea. A representative of the co-operative gave us a brief lecture on the history of the house. According to him, this was the former home of a middle-class family back in the late medieval period, although it was hard to fathom how a 'middle-class' family could afford such a spacious dwelling. The restored house had three levels with marble flooring, ornately carved cedar wood ceiling trim and balconies, pillars with intricate arabesque designs and enormous tapestries hanging from the upper walls. There were no windows in a traditional Moroccan home from this era, only the open courtyard (the main living room or quarters) in the center of the house, allowing sunlight to illuminate the inside. From the alleyway one could not tell that such a great house existed. In keeping with Muslim tradition, the outside of your home should be simple and as inconspicuous as possible, so as not to offend or embarrass your poorer neighbors, but the inside can be as ostentatious as your budget allows. Throughout the medina, the alleyways were filled with such wonderful homes, kept hidden behind centuries-old walls and plain wooden doors. This particular home was considered a typical middle-class Moroccan *dar* (home, in Arabic) because it contained only a central courtyard. Had this been a *riad* (a home with a large garden) it would have been considered more upper class. Because women were generally prohibited from leaving the house unescorted, the purpose of the garden



was to give them the opportunity to spend time outdoors without actually leaving the premises.

After explaining the history of the house, the rep launched into a wonderful sales pitch on Moroccan carpets. He spoke about the differences between Berber and Arabic carpets, but I cannot remember the distinctions because I was easily distracted; every ten seconds his assistants would unfurl another beautifully woven carpet along the courtyard floor for us to ‘ooh’ and ‘aaah’ over. I *do* recall him mentioning three characteristics of a Fez carpet: they are made of baby lamb wool, double-knotted and reversible. There are also three distinct styles of Fez carpets – the city carpet, the Berber tribal carpet and the woven kilim rugs – each with its own distinct pattern and colors. It is interesting to note that the traditional Berber carpets and kilims have designs similar to those found on Native American fabrics. When the presentation was over we were given thirty minutes or so to browse. The entire house was stockpiled with neatly folded carpets and rugs. And a small army of salesmen who would pounce the moment you showed the slightest interest in anything. Due to the mark-up costs the quoted prices seemed very expensive, but Abdul told us to negotiate and haggle for a much lower price. Lynne, for example, purchased a nice rug for just over \$500 after being told the price was \$1400. Not interested in buying anything, Noelani and I went upstairs to explore the house and take photos, admiring its architecture and décor.

From the carpet house we made our way to the very soul of the medina, the Kairaouine Mosque and University. This is perhaps the most sacred mosque in Morocco – second only to the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca in terms of size – and governs the timing of religious festivals throughout the country. One of its two minarets dates to 956, making it the oldest Islamic monument in Fez. But the founding of the mosque goes back even further, to 857, when the daughter (Fatima al-Fihri) of a wealthy Tunisian refugee used her entire inheritance to build a modest house of prayer for the Tunisian community of Fez (her sister Mariam is responsible for building the Al-Andalous Mosque in 859). A century later, the Umayyad Caliph of Cordoba, Abd Er Rahman III, reconstructed the building, adding the square minaret – a design that became the model for other North African mosques throughout the succeeding centuries – and during the early 12<sup>th</sup> century additional reconstructions were made under the Almoravid Dynasty, creating the beautiful structure we see today. Although the mosque is surrounded by the close quarters of the medina, and thus its size concealed by the adjacent buildings and alleyways, it is huge and can accommodate 22,000 worshippers. The design is intentionally simple, with columns and seemingly endless arches of white marble, but complimented by the finely decorated niches, pulpit and outer courtyard containing beautiful Islamic tile, plaster and woodwork. Unfortunately, non-Muslims are not permitted inside, so we could only view a limited section of the mosque from the open entranceway.

The mosque also houses the Al-Kairaouine University, the oldest existing educational institution in the world according to UNESCO. The school began as a *madrasa*, a religious school associated with the mosque in 859, but as time went by, and subsequent sultans began to patronize the mosque, a large selection of manuscripts were kept at its library and the school began to grow in size and reputation, producing many notable

scholars. Besides religious instruction and *Maliki* studies (Sunni religious law), the curriculum offered courses in Arabic grammar, rhetoric, medicine, logic, science and mathematics. Today, the university continues to offer courses in both religious and modern studies for high school and university level (male-only) Islamic students.

Just to the north of the Al-Kairaouine Mosque and University we stopped to tour the magnificently restored *Medersa el-Attarine*, a 14<sup>th</sup> century *madrassa* (school) built by Merenid Sultan Abou Said Othman. The Medersa el-Atterine served as an annex to the Al-Kairaouine University for students who lived outside the city. It took its name from the surrounding *souq atterine* (the spices and perfume market) where the building was constructed. The Ministry of Religious Affairs was tasked with its recent restoration, and from the looks of the place they spared no expense bringing back the splendor of this medieval school. The replaced *mashrabbiyya* (carved trellis woodwork) has been stained to match the 700-year-old wood; and the renewed sculptured plaster brilliantly brings out the original Islamic artwork. The school was constructed around a marbled porticoed patio and basin (using square columns), decorated with multicolored *zellij* (mosaic tile) and carved verses from the Koran. The *mihrab* inside the prayer hall (this is the niche that faces Mecca indicating in which direction a Muslim should pray) is beautifully carved and flanked by columns made of onyx. A massive brass chandelier is suspended from the carved cedar wood ceiling. Although the Medersa el-Atterine is not as large as other *madrassas* from the same time period, its complete restoration makes it an excellent example of Merenid architecture and should not be missed if visiting the medina.

After our visit to the Medersa el-Atterine we wandered through the alleyways for a few minutes more before arriving at a restaurant called La Medina, situated inside another beautifully restored home. This is where we had our lunch. The waiters placed several cooked vegetable appetizers on each table: carrots, beets, potatoes, *baba ganush* (an eggplant spread), delicious assortments of olives and baskets of wonderful Moroccan bread. I had the chicken tajine for the main course. I thought the meal was excellent, but by nightfall several group members came down with a moderate case of food poisoning that we attributed to this restaurant.

Our next 'official' store visit was to a leather co-operative. We walked through the alleyways towards the tannery section of the medina, stopping to take a look inside what Abdul described as the oldest funduq in the city. We also came upon the shrine (*zawiya*) and mausoleum of Moulay Idriss II, who built the city of Fez. To a *Fassi* (a person from Fez), this is the heart of the medina. Moulay Idriss II is regarded as the patron saint of the city, and visiting his tomb is supposed to bring good luck to outsiders. Since non-Muslims are not permitted inside, we had to collect our 'good karma' from the alleyway. A short distance later we arrived at a large leather shop called *Terrasse de Tannerie* where a store representative greeted us by handing out sprigs of mint; we were instructed to press the mint leaves to our nose once we reached the top of the narrow stairways. He led us to the terraces overlooking the tannery section...*and the smells were horrific*. I was tempted to shove the minty foliage up each nostril. Below us, in a wide courtyard, were enormous vats of colored dyes and pools of liquids used to remove the skin from leather. According to the store rep, the tannery district of Fez is considered a UNESCO World

Heritage site, and the tanning process is still done the same way it was more than a thousand years ago. There are more than 50 tanneries in the area, so you can only imagine how rank the air was. The magical ingredients inside the dissolving liquids are pigeon poo and cow urine, but they also add other chemicals, posing a serious health threat to the workers who are knee deep in this stuff all day. When we were there, a group of smell-hardy laborers (members of guilds who hail from generations of leather workers) were toiling about, dropping fresh skins into dissolving pools and mixing leather into the dye pits. I tried to listen as the store rep explained the process in greater detail, but the smell of rotting, dissolving flesh made me want to gag, and I kept moving around the terraces taking photos and trying to catch a whiff of fresh air. When the presentation was over, we were (thankfully) led back downstairs to the showrooms to browse the leather merchandise. There were jackets, hats, dresses, belts and other accessories. Again, everything was gorgeous, but pricey.

Not far from the leather shop was the *souq an-Nejjarine*, the carpenters' market, with lanes of craftsmen working on their trade (many were making glittering thrones used in wedding ceremonies); its center – a square called *Place an-Nejjarine* – contains one of Fez' most beautiful fountains. We spent the next thirty minutes touring the Nejjarine Museum of Wooden Arts and Crafts located inside an exquisitely restored funduq in this square. Each floor had different historic displays of wood art, furniture and musical instruments. But in all honesty, I was more impressed with the building, which was absolutely stunning. A few of us made it to the rooftop to take photos of the crowded medina skyline.

Our exhausting – *yet culturally rewarding* – walking tour of the medina ended here, and we wearily made our way back to the bus. Getting disorientated in the medina is not a difficult thing to do. I lost all sense of direction five minutes into the walk; for the non-local, negotiating the alleyways becomes nothing more than an exercise in surprise and discovery. Most guidebooks will recommend a starting point usually near the Al-Andalous section, where we entered, pointing out the more prominent historical buildings in the area, but beyond that, you're actually encouraged to 'get lost' in the medina. Explore till your heart's content, each bend or new alleyway will lead you to another historic section. This is what the medina does well: afford the visitor a chance to slip back into time. *And when you're helplessly lost within its narrow labyrinth?* Well, just ask someone for directions, or, better yet, tip a young boy to show you the way out. Perpetually lost foreigners are as common here as back alleys.

A short driving distance from the Andalous Quarter we stopped for our third and final 'official' store visit of the day, to a place Abdul called one of the oldest shops (or co-operatives) in the pottery district of Fez. By now, I was a tad suspicious of these 'official' stores. This one resembled a modern factory, but the men and women inside were definitely making ceramics the old-fashion way on potter's wheels, carefully sculpting and painting their wares and (in one section of the building) even chipping away pieces to make mosaic tiles. A pottery representative led us around the entire place, explaining each process in the creation of ceramic artwork; we were also shown the large kilns used to bake the final products. Our brief tour ended in the factory showroom where we were

given time to browse and shop. I was tempted to buy something here, but once again, the prices drove me back. The problem with these ‘official’ store visits is that the owners know they are dealing with bus loads of foreign tourists who can afford to pay more than the locals, thus the higher prices. I’ve been on trips where the tour guides are even given commissions based on what the group spends in these shops. In Egypt, for example, when the tour group collectively complained about the exorbitant prices in one such ‘official’ store, our ‘sympathetic’ guide stepped in and offered her 10% commission to be reduced from the final cost. So – a word to the wise – *be patient*. Much of what you want to buy in Morocco can be purchased in the market places at a lower price.

By 5:30pm we were heading back to our hotel, stopping for a quick photo-op on a walled hillside overlooking the oldest section of the medina. From here we could clearly see the towering square minaret of the Kairaouine Mosque rising majestically above its crowded surroundings. What a sight! When we reached our hotel thirty minutes later, we said our grateful ‘goodbyes’ to Abdul, tipping him well. Up in my room I took another quick shower and ordered hot water from room service to make instant coffee. I spent almost an hour writing in my journal book, describing the wonderful places we had seen that day. By 7:45pm I went downstairs to the lobby to join the others who had booked the dinner show excursion. Noelani and Helene declined to go, but I am a sucker for these dinner outings.

The brochures tout these events as ‘cultural dinner shows’; they include an authentic local meal followed by a musical performance highlighting some cultural aspect of the country, usually indigenous dance numbers. I have been to enough of these to know they can be a hit or miss affair. They’re basically designed for tourists – rarely do you see locals at one of these places – and they can be quite hokey. From my own personal experiences, the ‘dinner show’ is rarely even-keeled; either the food is great and the show is bad, or vice-versa. But, truth be told, I enjoy them for the most part. Since they are offered early on in the tour, these excursions give me a *culinary* glimpse of what I can expect throughout the trip. Besides, I like unwinding and socializing with my fellow tour members. And on those special occasions when the show is really good (or laughably bad), it gives one something to talk about the following day on the bus.

We drove back to the medina, but to one of the ‘newer’ sections, according to Aziz. The restaurant, *Palais La Medina*, was situated in the middle of a dark, narrow and inclined alleyway. The only illumination at this hour was reflected from lampposts strategically placed throughout the alley, but the shadows they cast were anything but inviting. Thank goodness Aziz was with us, because even the doorman had a shifty look. Once we entered, though, it was like every other place we’d seen earlier that day: a wonderfully restored three-level Moroccan home, its central courtyard converted into a spacious restaurant with adjacent stage. On this stage sat four Moroccan musicians wearing matching stripped djellabas and red Fez hats, cranking out a mix of Berber and Arab-Andalusian music. They used traditional Moroccan instruments: a lute, a *rebab* (fiddle), a *nair* (flute) and a *bendir* (a hand-held frame drum). Although not a big fan of the music, these guys were actually quite good and I thoroughly enjoyed the exotic-sounding tunes. Prior to taking our seats most of us went upstairs to use the bathroom and

take pictures of the house/restaurant from the second level. The mosaic tiles lining the walls were absolutely beautiful.

Our group was divided into two tables; I sat with sisters Vanessa and Denise DeAlba, and Constanze and Stephen Wilde. The waiters immediately brought out several appetizers including cooked beets, carrots, *baba ganush*, potato salad, huge green olives, a lentil dish and plenty of sliced round crusty bread. The main course was chicken breast tajine. Wine and soft drinks were also served. The show lasted about an hour and a half, and consisted of several sets. As we settled down to eat, a group of four men took to the stage to perform a very exhilarating Berber dance number which required a lot of drum twirling and banging. This was followed by a 'belly dancer' clad in a long black and pink robe who appeared to be just shy of her sixtieth birthday. At one point during her set, she asked for volunteers to come up onto the stage and join her. This was when Vanessa earned her Moroccan Actors' Equity card. Our table was adjacent to the stage, and each subsequent performer kept grabbing Vanessa and dragging her into the spotlight. A funny magician with an enormous Poncho Villa mustache followed the belly dancer. He performed one hilarious bit of magic when he pulled a bra out of Vanessa's cleavage. The next belly dancer was a younger woman clad in an exotic outfit, but her youth and flesh were negated by the fact that she was heavier than I was; it was hard to distinguish her gyrating hips from the rolls of fat around her midsection. The most unusual number, though, had to be the last belly dancer of the evening. She wore a traditional Rif mountain Berber costume (with a straw hat) that reminded me more of a Peruvian Quechua native than a North African. By the time she finished, it seemed as if half the audience was on stage with her (including Vanessa!).

As usual, the food was good and the show was somewhat hokey, but entertaining. Our little group had quite a few laughs. By 10:45pm we left for the hotel, just as another group of tourists arrived at the restaurant for a late-night show. It had been a great day, and I was utterly exhausted when I reached my room, going straight to bed.

## Day Five

I awoke just before 5:00am and immediately shaved and showered. By now room service was expecting my call and within two minutes a staff member arrived at my door with a thermos of hot water for my instant coffee. At breakfast I sat with Joe, Lynne, Mary and Doug. We shared a few laughs discussing last night's dinner show, especially the over-the-hill belly dancers. As other members came down for breakfast, we became aware that some had become violently ill throughout the night, with constant bouts of diarrhea and vomiting. Noelani was feeling terrible, and Javier looked as if he might need medical assistance. Neither one could hold anything in their stomach and refused to eat. Monica and Shirley were not feeling well, either. We attributed this sudden (and

alarming) intestinal outbreak to the food we consumed inside the medina yesterday afternoon. Although I felt fine, I *did* recall a momentary queasiness about an hour or so after finishing lunch. The feeling quickly passed; other members told me they had a similar experience. Years ago, a couple I met on a trip to Mexico suggested I consume yogurt each morning at breakfast to ward off stomach ailments and milder bouts of diarrhea. I've been eating yogurt ever since. On this particular trip I went one step further, bringing along probiotic pills to boost my stomach's flora content. I ate what everybody else did on this trip and I did not get sick, so I'm chalking it up to my yogurt/probiotic supplement regimen.

By 8:30am – sick or not – we piled into the bus for our long drive to Erfoud, situated on the edge of the Western Sahara, not far from the Algerian border. We left Fez along National Highway 13 (N13) heading south towards the Middle Atlas Mountains. According to Aziz, we were now entering Berber country, and as we drove through the scenic mountain valleys towards Erfoud, he gave us periodic details about the history and culture of the Berber people in Morocco. The following is a brief recap:

The Berbers are the descendents of the pre-Arab inhabitants of North Africa who tend to concentrate in the mountainous and desert regions of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and the northern parts of Niger, Mali and Mauritania. Roughly 10,000 years ago, a large migration of Eurasians moved into the fertile valleys of North Africa and never left. The ancient kingdom of Numidia – from what is now modern-day Algeria and Tunisia – became one of the first powerful bands of Berber tribal groups. They originally traded with Carthage and supported Hannibal against the Romans until switching sides and aligning themselves with Rome. It was the Romans who coined the name 'Berber' (which means barbarian); they referred to the coastal areas of North Africa as the Barbary Coast – due to the pirates who preyed upon the Mediterranean Sea lanes – and referred to its inhabitants as the Berbers (barbarians). The *actual* name of the Berbers is the *Imazighen*, but over the centuries these tough tribal people proudly adopted the Berber moniker.

The Berber identity is not grounded in a homogenous cultural background. They are as varied and diversified as the countries and regions they live in. *Tamazight*, the official Berber language, is a prime example of this; a linguistic stew mixing many Afro-Asiatic tongues – in addition to Arabic and Western European languages – creating numerous dialects. Throughout their history, the Berbers resisted foreign attempts to influence their individual ethnic identities, but that changed with the introduction of Islam. Although they fought aggressively, and at times successfully, against the ensuing Arab empires, they eventually accepted Islam as their religion. According to Aziz, this was probably due to the fact that Islam is rooted in many of the same traditional customs the Berbers were familiar with. In 711, it was the Muslim Berbers, under the control of the Arab Caliph of Damascus, who invaded Spain (the Iberian peninsula became known as Al-Andalus during this period). Eventually, Muslim Berber kingdoms rose to control not only Morocco but also Al-Andalus.

Over the centuries, the general Berber population has often been pigeonholed as an inferior class, stuck somewhere beneath foreigners and Arabs, and they have had to fight to establish their rights and privileges, a situation that often strengthens tribal bonds. In Europe, the image of the Berbers was of a nomadic warrior people, even though they were – and essentially still are – sedentary farmers and herders. Today, Berbers continue to debate what political role their dual Arabic-Berber heritage should take, and tensions have escalated into regional conflicts in certain North African countries within the past decades – primarily Morocco and Libya – whenever Berber customs are threatened or their territories encroached upon. Modern Berbers are grouped by distinct languages. In Morocco, for example, the *Rif* Berbers occupy the northeastern parts of the country (the Rif Mountains), while the *Harratin* Berbers are an ethnic group who live in the oasis of the Sahara and can be found in the southwestern sections. Of all the things I discovered about the Berbers on this trip, though, the one thing that struck me about them was their friendliness. No matter what part of Morocco we visited, they were always helpful, courteous and seemed – for the most part – genuinely happy to see us.

From Fez we drove south on N13, leaving behind the fertile plains of the Sais Valley, and began our ascent through the Middle Atlas Mountains. Along the way we would pass cedar forests and open fields where sheep and goats grazed. Up in the mountains we drove by the town of Imouzzer, the first of several ski resorts built by the French during the 1920's. Just beyond this town were groves of apple trees. A short distance later we stopped for a thirty-minute break in the town square of Ifrane, an absolutely gorgeous ski resort enclave also built by the French. Because of its high elevation, Ifrane is blanketed with snow between December and February, and the town resembles an Alpine village, complete with Swiss chalet-style homes constructed along winding tree-lined streets. Besides skiing, the area is also popular as a summer retreat, and the king has a royal palace here. In 1995 the English-only Al Akhawayn University opened in Ifrane, specializing in international business. One of only 14 private and exclusive universities in the country, the school has made the town a strong domestic and international draw for college students. During our brief rest stop most of us took the opportunity to exchange money at the local post office and/or sit down in one of the cafes for a hot drink. What a beautiful town!

Just beyond Ifrane we were able to witness a section of the *Cedre Gouraud Forest*, with its dense plateaus of scrub oak and cedar trees, home to a species of primates called the Barbary macaques. The Middle Atlas Mountains, which divide the central portions of the country, serve as the natural water tower for most of Morocco's main river systems, including the Bou Regreg, the Sebou, the Moulouya and the Oum Rbia rivers. The precipitation along these limestone valleys is very high, producing the thick woodlands we came across on our road trip. Historically, traders would cross these valleys en route to major towns, and Berbers would use the summer alpine pastures for their livestock grazing, but few people actually settled in these parts due to the harsh winters and relatively poor soil. Even today, the Middle Atlas Mountains are the least populated areas of the country. Much of the 'towns' we passed consisted of isolated adobe dwellings belonging to Berber farmers or herders.

As we made our way further south, into the province of Midelt, the scenery changed dramatically. Gone were the heavy forests, replaced now by the high plains separating the Middle and High Atlas Mountain ranges. The hinterlands beyond the Moulouya River were nothing more than rolling hills – some blanketed with snow – and wide-open farmlands and pastures as far as the eye could see. At one point, we stopped in a field to photograph the majestic snow-covered summit of the High Atlas Mountains in the far distance, a stunning contrast amidst the vast empty plains. Alongside the two-lane highway we passed an isolated Berber cemetery, plain stones marking the graves. Further on we crossed through the center of Zeida, a small military town in the middle of nowhere; etched into a hillside were the Arabic words for *God-Country-King*. The lands beyond this town became increasingly more barren and sandy.

By 12:30pm we stopped in the city of Midelt for lunch, at an interesting place called the Hotel Kasbah designed to look like an ancient kasbah. Midelt is the provincial capital of this region, originally built by the French as a military outpost to protect and facilitate the mining of gypsum, lead, and other minerals and fossils in the area. Eventually, a railroad was constructed and this mining town began to expand, becoming the second city in Morocco, behind Casablanca, to acquire electricity. Today, this relatively *new* city is made up of Berbers who have settled here from the surrounding villages. Besides mining, Midelt is also the agricultural center for the region, its market famous for locally grown fruits and vegetables and the sale of wool and meat from the area's sheep and goat herders. I enjoyed the lunch, but those in our group who'd been stricken by food poisoning the previous day refused to eat and were still feeling terrible. My heart went out to them.

Continuing our journey south, the landscape quickly turned into barren desert, reminding me of Arizona. By the middle of the afternoon we entered the Ziz Valley and spent part of the trip driving alongside the Ziz River, which carves its way through the craggy gorges of the valley and continues south to the very edges of the Western Sahara. Originating in the Middle Atlas Mountains, the Ziz River is mostly hidden from view behind the canyon walls and hillsides, but its precious water, at times just a small stream, feeds several oases in this otherwise dry environment, providing fertile belts that have allowed people to survive here for centuries. Along these oases we saw several abandoned kasbahs built to protect the villagers from the rampant lawlessness prevalent in the region up until the 1930's. The extreme desert areas to the very south of the Ziz Valley is known as the *Tafilalt*, and between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries an independently fierce kingdom flourished here controlling the caravan trade routes coming to and from the Sahara. The descendants of those hearty souls proved to be just as tough; it took the French twenty years to finally bring this region under their control. The Alaouite dynasty of the current king, Mohammed VI, originated in Tafilalt with Sultan Moulay Al-Rashid in the late 1600's.

We stopped for a quick photo-op at one of the Ziz River gorges; I found the slanting rock formation of the canyon walls very interesting, as if they had been toppled over with time. The section of the Ziz River bed we saw was rocky and mostly dry, with a relatively small meandering stream flowing through the valley. It was difficult for me to



imagine that this ‘trickle’ of water could pump so much life into this rugged terrain of dirt and stone. But just a few miles further south we came across a beautiful oasis of palm and date trees, one of several we saw throughout the valley. Just before we reached the city of Errachidia we passed the Hassan Addakhil Dam – constructed along the Ziz River in 1971 by the former king – with its large reservoir. We made a thirty-minute pit stop at a local gas station in Errachidia, another city originally built as a fortified village for the French Foreign Legion.

When we continued on our way someone asked Aziz to explain the concept of polygamy within Islam. He told us that polygamy had existed long before Islam arrived on the scene in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Contrary to modern stereotypical beliefs concerning the practice, polygamy was not designed as a means of subjugating women for sexual purposes. The practice has always been governed by ‘social legislation’. Constant wars and hardships often meant there were not enough men – or too many widows – and it became prudent to come up with a social system wherein families could take care of one another. A man marrying his brother’s widow, for example, would greatly increase the survival rate of the woman and her children. In times of war, a leader marrying additional wives from an enemy clan usually meant peace.

Under Islam, the Koran clearly states that God wants people to marry; this is a sign of His power and glory, that people should find peace and tranquility through marriage. There are basically two types of marriages in Islam, the monogamous one or the polygamous one. The vast majority of modern day Muslim men (roughly 99% according to my online research) are monogamous, which is seen as more desirable. Why? Under Islam there are stringent conditions governing polygamous marriages. First, men are limited to no more than four wives. Secondly, and more importantly, the man must ensure that *each* wife (and her family) is treated with equal fairness and justice. It is a sin to marry more than one woman and not treat all of them equally. The Koran goes even further in this regard, warning that it is nearly impossible for most men to be fair and just when it comes to having more than one wife, so practicing polygamy could put your Eternity in jeopardy come Judgment Day.

Many Islamic countries today have adopted policies that put greater limitations on polygamous practices. In Morocco, the first wife must give written consent to her husband *before* they marry for him to take on additional wives, something most women will simply not do. In other countries, such as Iran and Egypt, there are special courts designed for the purpose of determining if a man can ‘equally’ provide for more than one wife. So, contrary to what many Christians think, polygamy is seldom practiced in the Muslim World. *As for my take on all of this?* I’m divorced, so I can verify firsthand that trying to please *one* woman at a time is hard enough, let alone four!

Forty-five minutes after leaving Errachidia we stopped once again along the roadside to photograph another oasis – nestled between deep canyon walls – famous for its date trees. Nearby was a village where the dates are brought and dried in the sun. In one field, we saw a small group of local Berber women prostrated on the ground performing their afternoon prayers. They were covered (from their heads to their ankles) in black *haiks*, a

traditional long outer garment worn by more conservative North African women in public. Most haiks are white in color, but in the southern desert regions they tend to be either medium blue or black. At first glance they can easily be mistaken for *burkas*, and serve the same purpose.

Another forty-five minutes later and we reached the outskirts of Erfoud. The landscape was now essentially sandy desert. Not far from the highway, bamboo sand barriers had been erected to keep the shifting desert from covering the roadway. Our hotel – the Kasbah Xaluca Maadid – was located on the perimeter of the city. It was an amazing place – my favorite during the trip – a fairly new structure built to resemble a traditional kasbah inside and out. My room had the look and feel of an ancient Moroccan *dar*, with logs and bamboo weaving lining the ceiling and thick wooden bedposts. A peach-colored see-through curtain separated the Arabesque arch of the bathroom. It was soooooo cool! I spent the next hour washing up, setting aside my clothes for tomorrow and writing in my journal. By 7:30pm I went to the hotel restaurant for an awesome buffet dinner that included paella, various tagine dishes, assorted seafood, salads and an incredibly long dessert bar. *What a feast.* I sat next to Helene, Debbie, Barbara and Pam. Poor Noelani was still not feeling well and decided to skip dinner and go straight to bed. Our little group had a great time, eating and chatting away until about 9:00pm.

After dinner, I accompanied Helene to the hotel boutique to browse for souvenirs. Helene is one of the best shoppers I've ever met in my years of traveling. She has a knack for determining not only the quality but also the correct pricing for most items, and has developed a method of wearing down sales vendors that is absolutely astonishing, incorporating an impressive arsenal of charm and verbal sparring to get her price. Seeing her in action is like watching a chess master demolishing an amateur. When politeness and honest haggling fails, she'll switch to direct confrontation or browbeating until the salesman caves. If neither of these tactics appears to be working, she'll stop in mid-stream and morph into the quintessential California valley girl, feigning innocence and flirting shamelessly. That night, I was able to witness the latter of her 'shopping personas'. The salesman was a young, good-looking Berber man who held his ground on a necklace she was interested in buying; Helene began oozing honey from all pores, purring and cooing and holding onto his arm and saying things like, "*Well, if you're here to sell, than I'm here to buy...*" And he would rub his fingers gently along her shoulders in this imaginary dance and counter, "*Well, if you're here to buy, then I'm here to sell...*" This embarrassing display went back and forth until I couldn't stand it anymore; I felt like I was in the middle of someone else's sexual fantasy...you know, *the middle-aged female shopper and the young swarthy Arab salesman.* (Trust me, it's out on video!). We left the shop without her buying the necklace, but don't think she was deterred. Helene can teach a course on Tactical Retreat and Counter Attack at any war college. She returned the following morning and purchased the necklace for the price she wanted from a different salesman!

Before retiring to our rooms we took the stairs to the rooftop terrace to get a view of the desert at night. It was too dark to see anything, though. We had an early wake-up call the following morning so I hit the bed as soon as I reached my room.

## Day Six

I awoke at 3:50am. Many of us had signed up for the camel ride in the Sahara to see the sunrise and we had to be ready to leave no later than 5:15am. I took a quick shower, dressed and walked in complete darkness from my room near the pool area to the front lobby (there was no phone in my room) to inquire about getting some hot water. Both sleepy-eyed Berber men slumped behind the desk looked at me as if I was insane. They did not speak English, but I was able to convey what I wanted in Spanish. Ten minutes later one of the two men appeared at my door with a scalding tall glass of boiled water and no spoon. I did my best “merci”, tipping the man two dollars for his troubles. I used the bottom of my toothbrush to stir the instant coffee and creamer and then sat down and watched the BBC newscast on TV until it was time to go.

At 5:15am sharp, those of us who were scheduled for the camel-riding excursion were divided into six separate 4-wheel drive utility vehicles for the forty-minute trip southward to Merzouga, a dusty little village about 50 kilometers from the Algerian border. I rode with Denise, Vanessa and Ann. It was pitch-black outside; the only illumination came from the headlights of our vehicles. We zipped along on a paved road for about thirty minutes or so – absolutely nothing visible other than the vehicle in front of us – when suddenly the ride became very bumpy. We had left the road and were now traveling through actual desert. We came to stop in front of what looked like an inn and were ushered inside for some hot mint tea to warm up. It was quite cold and windy at this hour of the morning. Ten minutes later our group was led a short distance into the desert where a pack of kneeling camels awaited us.

The Berber guides grouped us into pairs – I was matched up with Alene – and helped us mount our camels. These were the one-hump variety, which had been equipped with cushioned saddles of some sort. A metal T-bar attached to the front of the saddle acted as a saddle horn. Our guide (whose name I cannot remember) warned me to hold on tight as the animal bolted upright. I had ridden a camel once before, in Egypt, and had forgotten just how tall these lanky creatures can be. The only thing that kept me from being catapulted into the dunes was the death grip I had on the saddle horn. Once we were all astride, our caravan of 24 camels slowly began trekking into the desert. Alene and I were bringing up the rear. It was very nippy, windy and *dark!*

The village of Merzouga is popular for camel riding because it is situated very close to the *Erg Chebbi*, one of Morocco’s two Saharan ergs, a vast sea of dunes formed by wind-blown sand. Sunlight was now peaking its way over the horizon, and as visibility improved we could see the amazing dunes stretching out towards the mountains of

Algeria. There is very little vegetation out here, just shifting mounds of what looks at first like orange-colored sand, some of the dunes reaching heights of 150 meters, spanning an area more than 50 kilometers long from north to south. Our guides were descendents of the sturdy desert nomads known as the Tuareg, who've made this barren landscape their home for centuries. Nowadays they make their living as camel and desert guides, or working in the nearby cities or towns as laborers. Some try their hand at excavating. According to our guide, the mountainous valleys we saw in the far distance were filled with prehistoric fossils that are processed and turned into souvenirs, artwork and furniture.

About fifteen minutes into the desert we stopped at the bottom of a large dune and dismounted. Our guide, using a small wooden stick, tapped on Alene's camel and the animal immediately folded its long legs so she could get off, collapsing the front legs first and then the back ones. Intrigued, I quickly swung my Nikon camera into position to photograph Alene's dismount, assuming my camel would not sit until the guide instructed it to do so. My camel, though, was an independent thinker. No sooner than his buddy in front of him was kneeling on the sand than he decided to go down, too. My hands were holding my camera and not the T-bar, and when the animal folded its front legs the unexpected momentum forced me to sail over the camel's thin smelly neck. What prevented me from landing face first in the sand was our guide, who had positioned himself between the two camels (I'm sure this has happened before). When he saw me hurtling forward he immediately halted my acceleration by planting his hands on my shoulders and steadying me until I could grab onto the saddle horn. How embarrassing. I remember yelping like a frightened child...*not one of my manlier moments, I grant you.*

Like school kids in a giant sandbox, we made our way excitedly up to the tallest section of the dune to await the sunrise. Our guides laid blankets on the sand for us to sit, but many of us just wanted to walk around this large dune taking pictures of the incredible scenery. There was a very friendly mutt who followed us into the desert from the inn; the dog playfully chased the guides down the dunes and took turns going from blanket to blanket soliciting head scratches from the group. We waited about 15 minutes before the hot yellow orb of the sun made its appearance over the horizon, casting a beautiful glow over the seemingly limitless orange dunes. This wonderfully serene moment was another highlight of the trip. After photographing every conceivable angle of the sunrise event, including individual poses with the guides, our group descended the dune – some members volunteered to be dragged down the sandy hill on their blankets! – to where our camels were resting. After remounting, our guides took photos of each of us atop our camel with our own cameras. On the way back we couldn't resist taking additional photographs of the caravan's silhouette against the sand. We passed a series of tents erected between two small dunes not far from the inn that are used by tourists who wish to experience spending a night in the desert like the Berbers; although, it had all the feel of camping in one's backyard.

When we finally dismounted, each guide pulled their couple aside and tried to sell them fossils. I had already given my guide a ten dollar tip – which I thought was more than generous for his services – but he seemed genuinely displeased that I wouldn't buy

his exorbitantly priced fossil souvenirs. Apparently, he augments his income by doing this. During our camel trek – as a way of conversation, I initially thought – our guide went on and on about his fossil hunting in the distant mountains, but I realized now it was just a guise to sell me his souvenirs at the end of the trip. His dogged persistence soured the moment for me and I ignored him and returned to my utility vehicle.

We got back to the hotel before 8:00am, giving everyone time to shower, place our luggage out and have breakfast before departing for Ouarzazate. By 10:00am we were all on the coach for what turned out to be another long bus ride. We did a brief driving tour of Erfoud, at times sharing the road with military tanks from the nearby base. Situated in the *Meknes-Tafilalt* region of north central Morocco, Erfoud turned out to be larger than I thought, with seven districts. Our hotel was located on the outskirts of the city so I did not get a real sense of its size until now. Like many of the more ‘modern’ cities that have sprung up along the Ziz River valley, Erfoud was not formally an ancient *ksar* ( a fortified Arab-Berber village) but rather a French military outpost built during the 1920’s to control the local warring population. Most of the original inhabitants are of Arab descent, but during the 1990’s, as the tourism industry grew, more and more Berbers began settling here, expanding the city tremendously. Over the past decades several movies have been filmed in the dunes of the *Erg Chebbi* near Erfoud, most notably *The Mummy* (1998) and *Prince of Persia* (2010).

We passed many new housing developments and shopping areas. The city is gaining a reputation for its fossil works factories. In fact, prior to leaving Erfoud we spent 45 minutes visiting one (another ‘official’ store, I would imagine). The owner greeted us and showed us how fossils from the nearby desert and mountains are converted into artwork, furniture and souvenirs. I found this process fascinating. Large slabs of rock, imbedded with prehistoric sea fossils (this entire area was under water millions of years ago) are brought to the factory and then later cut, sanded, smoothed, treated and shaped into just about anything you can think of. We saw dining tables, chairs, huge fountain pieces, wall art, decorative columns, etc, etc, all of it made from single or multiple pieces of fossilized rock and stone. The larger items were cost prohibitive, but most of these *unusual* finished products were simply jaw dropping to look at. Luckily for us they had a souvenir shop adjacent to the larger factory where we were able to buy smaller souvenir pieces at reasonable prices. I purchased a cool knick-knack for my coffee table made of fossilized squids.

From the factory we headed west on Route 702, a local two-lane road that cuts across mostly desert landscape, eventually hooking up with National Highway 10 (N10). Just outside Erfoud we passed another rocky hillside with the words *God–Country–King* carved in Arabic. Apparently, these are popular images in or around towns with military bases. Just beyond the small dusty village of Fasna, along the right side of the road, we stopped for a brief tour of an 18<sup>th</sup> century dried out underground well system known as a *khattara* (although they are more commonly referred to as *qanat* throughout the Arab region). For centuries, various kingdoms have dug hundreds of these underground systems, providing much needed water for drinking and irrigation to the desert communities of southern Morocco. The well system is essentially a tunnel or channel that

taps into hidden groundwater and brings it to the surface via gravity alone, without the need for human, animal or mechanical assistance. They are large enough to walk in, and are several kilometers long, dug at a slight incline usually beneath the bed of a river. The idea is to penetrate a water source, allowing it to flow through a porous filtration system into the tunnels where it is naturally transported to the areas where it is collected or diverted for irrigation purposes. At regular intervals the tunnels are punctuated by openings (wells), allowing for air and passageway for the workers who dig out or maintain the system. Nowadays, more modern irrigation techniques are used, but in southern Morocco these *khettaras* are still part of rural life. The one we visited was no longer in service and is basically an open-air museum for tourists. For a fee of 10 dirhams a few of us went down into the tunnels to take a look around. I thought it was a little creepy, but then again, I'm also claustrophobic. Inside the tunnel, Noelani spotted a large scarab beetle but when we tried to photograph it our cameras began acting funny and many of the shots came out blurry. I assumed it was the lighting; Noelani thought sand had gotten into our cameras during our early morning camel trek. When we re-boarded our bus I carefully inspected my camera, tapping on it gently hoping to dislodge any sand trapped inside.

As we continued along Route 702 we came across an active well used primarily for animals. Several herders were massed here with their goats and sheep. Nearby, a baby camel and her mom were crossing the road. *Absolutely adorable*. Forty minutes into our drive we passed the village of Mellaab. It was market day and crowds of locals packed the streets. During this portion of our drive someone asked Aziz about the green five-pointed star on the Moroccan flag, which represents the Five Pillars of Islam. He explained to us what this meant:

Islam has five pillars of faith, or obligations, which each Muslim has to fulfill during his or her lifetime. The first is *Shahadah*, the profession of faith; a Muslim openly recites the creed that "There is no God but God (Allah) and Muhammad is the Messenger of God". Doing so signifies this person's commitment to Islam. The second pillar is *Salah*, or prayer. Since Muslims believe they have a direct relationship with God they are required to pray five times a day (dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening) facing Mecca, Islam's holiest city. Although prayer can be done individually and just about anywhere, it is recommended that a mosque be used. There is also a required Friday congregational service (where the Imam gives a sermon). The third pillar is *Zakat*, or almsgiving. Islam dictates that social responsibility is an integral part of one's service to God; a good Muslim looks after the welfare of the community and especially of its neediest members. The amount of the alms is based on 2.5 percent of a person's net worth after personal and family obligations. Aziz said this particular pillar is usually made on an individual basis, and who gets what is determined by many factors since there are some unscrupulous members of the community who choose to live off the generosity of others. The fourth pillar is *Sawm*, a fast performed during the holy month of Ramadan. The Koran states that fasting during this period is an act of deep worship in which Muslims seek a closer and richer perception of God. The fast also heightens one's sensitivity to the sufferings of the poor. Each year, the actual month of Ramadan changes according to the Muslim calendar, which is based on a lunar calendar. Muslims fast

(abstain from food, drink and sensual pleasures) from dawn to sunset. At sunset, they break fast with a traditional meal (*iftar*) and perform some additional nocturnal worship after the evening prayer. Following this the streets fill nightly in a very festive atmosphere, as friends, family and neighbors gather and visit one another. Children will often receive gifts. The fifth pillar is the *Hajj*, which is the pilgrimage to Mecca, seen as the greatest manifestation of Islamic faith and unity in the world. All Muslims who are both financially and physically capable of doing so must visit Mecca once during their lifetime. This is considered the peak of their religious life; each year more than 2 million Muslims gather spiritually to perform a ritual of pilgrimage during the last month (*Dhu al-Hijjah*) of the Muslim lunar calendar. According to Aziz, the amount of people allowed into Mecca (located in Saudi Arabia) during the Hajj is determined by a country's Muslim population; the more Muslims a country has, the more visas are granted to people from that country. Overall, these Five Pillars of Islam serve to define the basic identity of Muslims, binding together a worldwide community of people who share similar practices and beliefs.

We made a pit stop in the small town of Tinejdad (in the Errachidia Province) shortly before noon. Route 702 ended in Tinejdad, from this point on we would be traveling along National Highway 10 in a southeasterly direction towards Ouarzazate. It took us another hour or so to reach the city of Tinghir where we had lunch. Nestled between the High and Little Atlas Mountains, the name Tinghir means 'foothills of the Atlas'. Over time this village expanded, rising up on the hillsides surrounding one of the most beautiful oases in all of Morocco. Today, the city is simply known as the Tinghir Oasis, and stretches 30 kilometers along the Todra River. We drove through its winding two lane streets amidst heavy traffic due to roadside construction in the area. Besides trade, tourism and agriculture, many of the residents of Tinghir have relatives who work abroad (mostly in Europe) and the constant influx of foreign earnings has fueled a building boom within the valley that we could see firsthand. The twisting mountainous road we traversed contained dozens of newly constructed homes built on whatever tract of land was available; we saw two and three story dwellings perched almost precariously atop of hills or built at the very foot of deep canyon walls.

We ate lunch at the Hotel Yasmina within the majestic Todra Gorges just north of the city. The hotel was constructed at the bottom of the canyon along a section of the Todra River. When we arrived, several local women were washing their laundry along the trickling waters of the riverbed. The group split up since the hotel had several dining areas. I sat with Noelani, Pam, Mary and Doug in the patio in front of the hotel. I believe most of us ordered some kind of vegetable soup (with bread)...or, at least, this is what we shared since it took the wait staff an incredibly long time to serve us. From where we sat within the gorge, the magnificent view of the tall canyon walls more than made up for the mediocre service. After lunch we backtracked through the city of Tinghir and continued our southeastward journey on N10.

An hour later we were traveling through the Dades Valley, home to one of the most scenic rock formations of southern Morocco. We stopped on a ridge near the town of Boumalne du Dades to photograph the fertile strip of valley between the canyons that has

provided sustenance to generations of Berbers in the region. According to Aziz, this particular fertile area is not an oasis, it is irrigated by the Dades River, which runs through the valley, carving out the colorful gorges that begin just north of Boulmalne du Dades and continue eastward along the borders of the High Atlas Mountains.

Unfortunately, it would have taken a timely detour to see the Dades Gorges from N10. We continued through the valley, passing small Berber villages and the occasional goat herding nomads. This region is nicknamed the Valley of the Thousand Kasbahs because it was part of a caravan trade route; many towns and small villages sprang up along its path. As we drove through the Dades Valley we came across the remnants of numerous ancient kasbahs set up to defend the old towns from marauders. Today, many locals in the area still model their homes in the style of traditional kasbahs. We saw quite a few modern versions, as well.

So what *is* a kasbah, anyway? The strictest definition refers to these structures as crenellated castles, or fortresses. They served as the home of the local ruler and were used in the defense of the town or city. The tall towers provided a good vantage point from which to spot any approaching threat and sound the alarm to the villagers. Every town (with any significant value) had a kasbah, but sometimes an entire village is referred to as a kasbah (which can be confusing to a foreigner like me). Looking at these structures from the outside did not impress me much; they often resembled mud castles with high walls and towers made of hardened layers of dirt, stone and straw. And while there seemed to be uniformity in their structures from a distance, up close they took on different shapes, sizes and angles, some of the older ones appearing almost misshapen, as if they were improvised during the construction phase. But looks can be deceiving. The inside of these fortress buildings are often quite spectacular, as we were to discover over the ensuing days.

We made a thirty-minute pit stop at a gas station/tourist shop in the town of El-Kelaa M’Gouna. The small town takes its name from the nearby M’Goun Mountain, and is famous for its roses and intricately made daggers. The valley surrounding El-Kelaa M’Gouna is lined with dense hedgerows of pink roses (although, they were not in full bloom when we visited). In May there is an annual Rose Festival here that attracts people from all over the world. In the market place you can even buy dried edible rose petals, and no visit to this area is complete without purchasing a bottle of rosewater. After using the rest stop bathroom, I sat down with Noelani for a quick espresso. We spent the rest of the time here browsing in the gift shop. I was not interested in buying the rosewater...and the idea of squirreling away a dagger in my luggage worried me. But I did find a very rare item: a Moroccan doll dressed in a traditional white caftan wedding dress. My stepmother collects dolls and I immediately bought it for her as a souvenir (I couldn’t believe the reaction when I gave it to her; *doll collectors are a passionate lot!*). From El-Kelaa M’Gouna we continued southeast on our way to Ouarzazate. Leaving the town, Aziz pointed out the fields of roses on both sides of the highway, telling us that traders introduced roses into the region centuries ago from Damascus.

Approximately fifty kilometers later we passed the Skkoura Oasis (and its nearby town). At one point during its history, Skkoura was a major commercial center, situated



directly on the caravan trade route coming from the Sahara. Blue-robed nomadic traders of North Africa, known as the Tuareg, would spend two months crossing the Sahara and offload their cargo in Skkoura, where High Atlas Mountain Berbers would then transfer the goods to Fez on the back of mules. From the roadside we could see the stately palm trees lining the Oasis. The palm tree is an important element in the survival of Berbers in the Dades Valley, providing food, shade and fronds that are woven into roofing, floor covering and other building materials, including the fence posts used to keep livestock contained. One of the biggest problems confronting *this* particular oasis is poverty. Without adequate incomes, the poor often sell the palms illegally to construction firms or big city resorts as decorations. To stop this, the government opened up a palm art center, where locals can make souvenirs from the fronds and support themselves without having to cut down or destroy the trees.

An hour later we passed the large artificial lake behind the Barrage El-Manspur Eddahbi, a dam built in 1972 just east of the city of Ouarzazate. This dam is fed by the Dades and Ouarzazate rivers, which form the Draa River that dissects the entire valley. Ouarzazate is in the Souss-Massa-Draa region of central Morocco, situated on a plateau to the south of the High Atlas Mountains. Beyond the city, heading west, is nothing but desert. We reached our hotel – the Karam Palace – shortly before 7:00pm. It was an exhausting day, having been up since almost four in the morning. Most of us did not wait for the porters and simply grabbed our luggage in the lobby as soon as we were handed our key cards by Aziz, trekking to the back of the hotel near the pool area in search of our rooms. For a mailman, I have a terrible sense of direction; I quickly became disorientated looking for my room. Noelani was just as confused as I was and we walked in circles until Joe pointed us in the right direction. After putting my luggage away I headed to the hotel restaurant for dinner. I sat with Noelani, Helene, Joe and Lynne. They had a nice buffet, especially the assortments of cold salads and desserts. By 9:00pm I retired to my room and promptly went to bed.

## Day Seven

I slept soundly throughout the night, waking up at 5:30am. I immediately called the reception desk and inquired about getting hot water to make instant coffee. The man I spoke to said there was no room service at that hour, but it was possible to procure some hot water from the hotel restaurant. I nearly killed myself trying to find the place. The lighting fixtures in the hallway were operated by motion sensors and were so spread out my 230 pound frame didn't trigger the mechanism. I couldn't see my hands in front of my face. I maneuvered the black corridors by feeling my way along the walls, cursing repeatedly under my breath, wondering what would happen in the event of a fire...I guess the actual *blaze* would illuminate my path to safety. When I finally reached the restaurant

I tipped one of the waiters who were busy prepping the breakfast buffet to fetch me a thermos of hot water, then I inched my way back to my room in the dark. After enjoying two soothing cups of my liquid addiction, I shaved, showered and wrote in my journal until it was time for breakfast. I sat with Doug and Noelani. By 9:00am we were all on the bus for a full day of sightseeing.

*Ouarzazate* literally means “without noise”, a name I suppose it garnered because it sits on the threshold of the desolate Sahara. The city developed as a merchant town, a crossing point for African traders making their way to the larger northern cities of Morocco or Europe. During French rule, Ouarzazate expanded rapidly, first as a garrison town and then as an administrative center for the region. Today, it is the largest city in the Moroccan Sahara. There has been a large building boom throughout the country – spurred on by Royal decrees over the past two decades making affordable housing available to its citizens – and in no city was this more evident than Ouarzazate. We drove by entire neighborhoods lined with peach-colored housing projects built within the past ten years. The city seems to have been developed along its main road – Mohammed V Avenue – and continues to expand further into the desert as the population grows.

A local Berber tour guide joined us on the bus. His real name was difficult to pronounce so Aziz introduced him simply as Abdul (a popular name in these parts). Our first stop was the Taourirt Ksar, a small fortified village originally built during the 12<sup>th</sup> century and still occupied today, making it the oldest district in the city. Located near the center of town, we got off the bus and slowly made our way through its narrow streets, observing the more than twenty *riads* (old Moroccan mansions) that make up this ancient village. Basically, the layout consisted of a series of closely packed kasbahs whose tight formation to one another – with their high towers and ramparts – created a formidable defensive barrier around the dwellings. The red clay-like structures of the homes were accessible only through plain, solitary wooden doors. We walked through several streets – while Abdul explained the history of the village – until we arrived at the entrance of the enormous Kasbah Taourirt, a palace structure built by the famous Glaoua clan of Berbers who once controlled this region of Morocco. This is one of the most beautiful kasbahs in the country, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and several of its rooms have been wonderfully restored. We spent about an hour touring the inside.

The Glaoua tribe was a petty dynasty of chieftains who controlled the caravan trade routes into West Africa. They rose to power and become imperial administrators in the region, their chieftain acquiring the title of Pasha of Marrakech. Eventually, they sided with the French after the Treaty of Fez and for their loyalty the French bestowed upon the el-Glaoui chieftan virtual Viceroy status from which his clan ruled the southern parts of the country. During French occupation, the Glaoua built many magnificent kasbahs along the Atlas Mountains and in the oases valleys in order to control the pre-Sahara sections of Morocco. The main el-Glaoui kasbah (or chieftain’s residence) was the one in Telouet, which we would visit the following morning en route to Marrakech. The Taourirt Kasbah – constructed in the early part of the 1900’s – was used by the second tier of command, namely the dynasty’s sons and relatives and their extended families (numbering into the hundreds) with an impressive entourage of servants, builders and craftsmen. In total, this

kasbah has almost 300 rooms, some of which have been restored with the help of UNESCO.

We entered the Taourirt Kasbah through the main entrance, into a large courtyard that served as a *souk* (market place). From here, there were numerous wooden doors leading in all directions. In one corner was the famous 77-mm Krupp cannon given to the two Glaoui brothers – the future chieftains Si Madani and T’hami – by the Sultan in gratitude for rescuing him and his army from a fierce winter blizzard in 1893. They used this weapon (the only one in the country outside of the Imperial army) to effectively subdue and conquer their rival warlords, taking control of the region.

We continued inside the main palace building, making our way through restored reception rooms and a kitchen area, climbing twisting wooden staircases to the upper chambers. The rooms were decorated with carved cedar ceilings and trim, white plaster and *zellij* (mosaic) tiles. The narrow hallways were separated by keyhole archways. Some of the rooms were very spacious and tall, while others were compact with low bearing log ceilings. Each room had ornately iron-gated windows with beautiful wooden shutters offering panoramic views of the Taourirt village or of the surrounding mountainous valley. Oddly, the main windows were only several inches off the ground; Abdul told us the kasbahs had very little furniture, so sitting on the rug-covered floor was customary, hence the low positioned windows. The main upstairs corridors or chambers had galley openings where food and drink could be hoisted up from the kitchen like a dumbwaiter. What I found amazing about this Kasbah was its length; through various window openings we could see how this structure stretched out to meet the rest of the village, blending into the surrounding buildings almost seamlessly.

From the Taourirt Kasbah we boarded our bus and drove just one block for another ‘official’ store visit. Although, I have to admit, this was one of my favorite such stops throughout the tour. The place was called *La Caverne des Artisans* and was situated in a shopping district designed to showcase works by local artisans. We spent at least 45 minutes here, but it was worth it just to browse the exquisite arts and handicrafts, ranging from copper plates, glassware, jewelry, lamps, carpets and woodwork. An almost dizzying kaleidoscope of colors and items packed into every nook and cranny of the store. When Aziz announced it was time to go many of us moaned with displeasure, wanting to spend a little more time looking around. Alas, like all of the other ‘official’ stores, the prices were outrageous. *And the salesmen a little unscrupulous.* Noelani, for example, wanted to purchase a small ‘Aladdin’ lamp as a souvenir and inquired as to the price. The first salesman quoted 250 dirhams and when he saw that she did not want to pay that amount, he quickly lowered it to 200. Noelani thanked the man, but decided not to buy it. Just a few minutes later, a different salesman noticed she was still holding the lamp and offered it to her for only 80 dirhams without any haggling. A mark down of nearly seventy percent from one salesman to the next. It was enough to make you want to scream “*Jihad!*”

From here we visited the Atlas Film Corporation Studios, one of the coolest stops on the tour. Located just five kilometers west of Ouarzazate, this movie studio is the largest

in the world in terms of acreage, much of it expanding into the desert and mountains. Nicknamed ‘Ouallywood’, there has been a thriving movie business in this region since the 1950’s. As more and more American and European film companies began filming on location, Morocco’s unique southern landscape proved to be the perfect backdrop for their foreign adventure movies. With the aid of cinematography and a little bit of movie magic, the Ouarzazate area can be easily converted into such exotic places as Tibet, ancient Egypt or Rome, Imperial China, or just about any location – past or present – where deserts or mountains abound. Over the past several decades, several film studios have sprung up in the areas around the city, but none as famous as the Atlas Film Corporation Studio, which opened its doors in 1983.

We pulled into the parking lot and were greeted by enormous statues of Egyptian pharaohs standing side-by-side with their arms crossed in front of their chests. Leftover movie props, I’m sure. Inside, two young employees took us on a personal one-hour tour of the studio lots. We entered a courtyard containing a stunt car replica used in the James Bond movie *The Living Daylights*, and a fake jet fighter used in the film *Jewel of the Nile*. From here we walked through several movie sets, including a Tibetan monastery, an imperial Chinese dwelling and some of the actual ‘Roman’ sets used in the epic Academy-award winning film, *Gladiator*. As we crossed from lot to lot, we passed replicas of historic war machines like catapults and battering rams, and in the distance was what appeared to be a medieval fortress in the middle of the desert (made of plywood and plaster) used in such movies as *Kingdom of Heaven*. The locals are used as extras in the big budget productions, earning approximately 100 dirhams a day. Throughout our tour, we saw posters of movies that had been filmed here. The list is extensive and impressive; besides those I’ve already mentioned, feature films like *The Mummy*, *The Hills Have Eyes 2*, *Kundun*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Alexander the Great*, and *Babel*, among a few, were partially filmed on these lots or surrounding desert. Numerous European movies have been done here, as well. Currently, HBO’s *Game of Thrones* is using the studio for some of its episodes.

Helene and I got separated from the group when we stopped to take photographs of each other before a replica of an ancient Egyptian building (she posed – quite *ham-ily* I might add – in front of a slave’s whipping post). It took us a while before we caught up with the gang on the set of an Egyptian temple, complete with a row of Sphinx-like statues leading up to its entrance. Many of these sets were situated outside, in the desert, and made for a surreal impression, as if you were walking through your own personal time portal. We even saw, inside of a large hanger, a replica of a Roman military sea vessel, with long wooden oars protruding from its sides and a large eagle mast representing the Roman Imperial Army. *Gosh, this place was cool!*

We left the Atlas Film Corporation Studios and drove further north through harsh stony desert terrain to visit the Ksar (fortified village) of Ait-Ben-Haddou, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A typical *ksar* is made up of a group of earthen buildings surrounded by high walls with corner towers. Inside these defensive walls the homes are usually crowded together, some even connecting to one another via passageways. From a distance, the ksar almost appears to be a single unit, like an enormous castle, and this is

by design. Up until the 1930's, much of Morocco was essentially governed by a feudalistic system, and lawlessness prevailed in the more remote areas of the pre-Sahara. For centuries, the locals banded together to form these fortified villages for protection, and the ksar became a typical habitat in the region. The one at Ait-Ben-Haddou is regarded as the most famous ksar in the Ounila Valley, situated on a hill (for better protection) near the southern slopes of the High Atlas Mountains.

We arrived at Ait-Ben-Haddou in the early afternoon. A local guide named Musa was waiting to assist us through the ksar. The actual UNESCO site is located across the Ounila River, and while some of the mud brick homes are still inhabited today, most of the locals live in the more 'modern' village on the opposite side of the riverbank (where our bus parked). We followed Aziz and Musa through the town, passing vendors selling fabrics, clay tajines and souvenirs, reaching a walking bridge erected over the rocky, mostly dried-out riverbed of the Ounila River. On the other side of the bridge rose the ancient ksar. As we walked across I took in the site; it resembled a gigantic red mud city, a jumble of square earthen dwellings built in a tight formation along the sides of a large dusty hill, on top of which rested a ruined loft known as an *agadir* (or *ighram*) that was used primarily for storage but also served as the last bastion of resistance in case of a siege. Our goal was to reach the *agadir*, snaking our way up through the ksar. The desert sun was glaring, but there was a breezy chilliness in the air, which became much colder the further up we climbed.

Historians seem to disagree on who introduced this particular concept of fortified villages to the region. Because of their mud brick design, the original ksars have all but vanished over the centuries, disintegrating with the elements. Most were set up as trading posts within the Draa valley, linking the commercial route between ancient Sudan and Marrakech. The oldest structures at Ait-Ben-Haddou appear to be from the 1600's, although much of this ksar has been restored or reconstructed in recent years as a result of UNESCO, the increasing tourism boom and the movie industry. Scenes from *dozens* of historical films have been shot here, and the village has benefited from the touch-ups.

We followed Musa (who actually lives in the ksar with his family) up a dirt path along the edges of several mud brick dwellings; at one point he led us through his home, which was connected to another house occupied by his sister's family. Musa's home was a simple two-story structure. We entered into a fairly spacious, high-ceilinged living room, sparsely furnished with a row of bench seats along the sides of one of the walls topped with cushions and decorated with colorful fabrics. The pink-colored walls had photographs of Musa's family taped to them. In one corner was a short stairway leading to the second floor. We walked through the small house entering the side where his sister lived, connected by a tiny, shared kitchen consisting of two earthen ovens, and then out into a small courtyard containing a steam/bathhouse (an enclosed brick stall). The entire place reminded me of the adobe structures one might see in a traditional native Mexican village. The mud walls of the homes had bits of straw, enabling the clay to adhere better.

As we continued our spiral ascent up the side of the ksar we were afforded a wonderful view of the desert valley and the High Atlas Mountains, including a clearing

nearby where a scene from the movie *Gladiator* was filmed. We reached the halfway point (at the foot of a wide stone staircase) and before we went any further Aziz announced that those who were too tired or did not wish to make the climb could follow one of the local guides back to the town – to the restaurant where we would be having our lunch – and wait for us there. A local artist had set up shop here. Before we climbed the stairs we took several minutes to watch him make one of his paintings. He had etched the outline of a kasbah in the desert on a white piece of cardboard-like paper, and colored it using only two types of paint: indigo blue and a mixture of brown tea with sugar. When he was done, he lit a small torch and carefully ran the flame along the underside of the painting until the colors dried from the heat. It was fascinating. The sugar in the tea caused subtle darker colors to emerge. I was so impressed I purchased one of his paintings on the way back down (it now proudly hangs on my souvenir wall). Afterwards, we followed Aziz to the top of the ksar. *Holy shit was it cold and windy up there!*

We could feel the wind kicking up as we ascended the stairs; it was brutally cold and unnerving. The loft, or *agadir*, is a square, two-story storage facility that has been restored for the most part, and stood at the highest elevation of the hill. Walking from the stairs up the dirt path to the *agadir* was a painful exercise, as sand and grit kept whipping into our faces along with the bitter cold wind. Noelani insisted I take her photograph once we reached the loft entrance (with the valley in the background) but the grueling mountain air made it nearly impossible to steady myself and focus the camera. After a few attempts I gave up and quickly headed for the comfort of the staircase, followed by the rest of the gang who'd had enough of this gigantic 'wind tunnel'. We gratefully headed back down to the lower levels where it was warmer and less windy.

Aziz led us through a different section of the village; we passed more groups of closely-knit homes with sheep pens and stables with small donkeys. And then we heard what seemed like a loud groaning animal sound, almost like a camel bleating mournfully. I remember turning to Noelani – and with a frown – asking, “*Geez, what is that?*” The disturbing noise continued until Noelani couldn't stand it anymore. She turned to Aziz and asked him if those were camels we were hearing. Imagine our embarrassment when he replied calmly, “No, that is the call for afternoon prayer”. Thankfully, a local woman walked by us at that moment, carrying a basket of freshly baked bread, interrupting the awkwardness. Aziz bought two pieces and asked her where she had come from. She led him to the home of another villager who had allowed her to use his ovens to make the bread. Aziz gave this man 20 dirhams, permitting us to tour his kitchen area. We stood in a central courtyard, sunlight peering down from the open ceiling, eating pieces of bread while the man explained how they cooked their meals. From here we entered what appeared to be a community courtyard, or gathering place. Along one section was a building device that compacted clay, straw and stone used in the construction of the ksar's walls and dwellings. We left the ancient village and re-crossed the Ounila River further down stream, maneuvering the shallow waterway by stepping precariously over sandbags placed along the riverbed. A few of us stopped to take additional photographs of the ksar from this new angle (across the river) and got separated from the rest of the group. We trekked through the town looking for the others until we spotted Musa who led us to the restaurant where we were having lunch. I sat at a large round table situated low

to the floor together with Noelani, Helene, Mary, Doug, Joe and Lynne. The meal was phenomenal. I ordered the grilled *katta* (minced lamb) with rice, veggies and fresh bread.

After lunch, we headed back to Ouarzazate, taking a different route through the desert. Several kilometers in, we stopped briefly to photograph another, less preserved ksar atop a hill on the other side of the valley. An elderly snake charmer was sitting by the side of the road. We watched as he placed a live black scorpion on his forehead and made his thin Cobra snake dance. Some of us tipped the man before re-boarding our bus. A short drive later we made another ‘official’ store visit to a textile cooperative in a tiny desert town that specialized in woven items produced on old-fashioned looms. When we entered the establishment a man was actually weaving some kind of colorful garment on a wooden loom. Several local women were sitting around the small shop embroidering by hand. We were given a demonstration/sales pitch by the owner, and then spent thirty minutes or so browsing and shopping. The place was stacked to the ceiling with fabrics and garments. Again, it was costly, but the female workers were very pleasant and eager to interact with us. I thought Helene had finally met her match when she tried to buy a beautiful green-colored djellaba and encountered a salesman who was not moved by her wily charms or aggressive tactics. I could tell she really wanted the item, too, because she was persistent. Eventually, Aziz saved the day (and Helene’s shopping prowess reputation) by going back into the shop as we boarded the bus and negotiating with the owner for the djellaba. He was able to purchase it for the price Helene had originally offered. Dammit, this woman was good...even when she couldn’t get the job done, she was able to get her way via proxy! *I was in awe.*

We arrived, exhausted, at our hotel shortly before 5:00pm. I purchased a coffee in the bar and headed to my room to relax, wash up and write in my journal. By 7:30 pm I went to the hotel restaurant for another delicious buffet dinner. I sat with Helene, Noelani, Barbara, Joe and Lynne; our conversation centering on our respective travels. Helene wore her new djellaba to dinner. She looked absolutely gorgeous in it. Before retiring for the night I gave Noelani some probiotic pills because her stomach was still feeling a little queasy from the earlier food poisoning incident in Fez. I tried to watch some TV, but most of the shows were in French or Arabic. I went to bed early.

## **Day Eight**

I awoke at 5:30am feeling well rested. I showered, dressed and watched CNN’s nearly non-stop coverage of the search for missing Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, which left Kuala Lumpur for Beijing on March 8<sup>th</sup> and veered off-course vanishing into the ocean somewhere near Australia. What happened to this aircraft, carrying more than 230 passengers and crew, is now regarded as one of the biggest mysteries in aviation history. During my entire stay in Morocco, CNN devoted what seemed like an unnecessarily large segment of each day’s news forecast to the ongoing search and rescue mission. At

7:00am I went downstairs for breakfast, leaving my luggage in the hallway for the porters to pick up. We were scheduled to arrive at Marrakech later that afternoon.

At 8:00am, the twenty of us who had signed up for the morning excursion ride through the Ounila Valley (to visit the famous Telouet Kasbah) gathered in front of the hotel. Five 4x4 utility vehicles were waiting for us; we would rendezvous with the rest of the tour group in the town of Ighrem n'Ougal on National Highway 9 (en route to Marrakech) around noon. There were four of us per vehicle; I rode with Noelani, Helene and Pam. Our guide for this excursion was Abdul, who had led us through the Taourirt Kasbah the previous day. Aziz stayed with the others on the bus. Our five-vehicle caravan headed out into the Ounila Valley fifteen minutes later. It was a chilly morning, and the temperature throughout the valley would get much colder before our excursion was over, but this turned out to be one of the highlights of the trip for me.

The Ounila Valley stretches just south of the High Atlas Mountains from Ait-Ben-Haddou to the village of Telouet. In 2011, the government completed a two-lane road that runs through this verdant, narrow river valley, connecting a series of isolated adobe villages and crumbling ksars, some of which seem frozen in time. We spent several hours driving over mostly hilly terrain, on what was once the main caravan trade route from the sub-Saharan to Marrakech, the trickling waters of the Ounila River at times alternating from one side of the road to another throughout the first part of the journey. There was no traffic whatsoever (except an occasional commercial truck or tourist vehicle); even the locals preferred walking along the road (or riding their donkeys). The Ounila Valley is a lesson in contrasts: isolated by imposing sandstone cliffs and barren hillsides this otherwise desolate region was ideally located in the most passable area of southern Morocco to the sub-Saharan, creating a melting pot of cultures over the centuries. Arab, African, Berber and Jewish traders all plied this route, some settling along the patches of fertile ground irrigated by the meandering river. The contrast in color was also remarkable. We were traveling at the start of spring, when the almond trees near the riverbed begin to blossom, and the gardens and fields were turning green amidst the red, yellow and brown-colored dusty landscape of the surrounding hillsides, and in the distance the white snow-capped mountains of the High Atlas provided a majestic backdrop. What an amazing *scenic* drive this turned out to be!

Our first stop during the excursion was about 7 kilometers north of Ait-Ben-Haddou. Alongside a small oasis stood the crumbling ruins of the Tamdaght Kasbah, a former fortification of the Glaoua tribe who controlled this region for more than fifty years until the Independence movement of the 1950's. We posed for photos along the ridges of the oasis with the kasbah in the background before continuing into the valley. Our driver – a very friendly local named Mohammed – spoke almost no English, but thanks to Helene's French-speaking skills he was able to field questions and greatly enhanced the driving experience, giving us personal cultural insights into the folks who call this valley home. We asked him questions about his family, the local economy, on why some Moroccan women did not like to have their picture taken (which led to a brief discussion on religion), what market day was like in the villages, and the incredibly cold temperatures in the valley (turns out this region is one of the coldest in the country).



About forty-five minutes into our drive we stopped in a small hillside village to visit a local Berber family. The head of the family, a middle-aged man whose name I do not remember, greeted us outside as our vehicles came to a stop on the road in front of his adobe home. He led us into a blue-painted central living room – an open ceiling provided natural light – where we sat around two tables and some scattered plastic lawn chairs. His wife and daughter served us mint tea, placing freshly baked bread – with small plates of olive oil for dipping – on the tables, together with a tray of sugar wafer cookies. We dug in. Afterwards, most of us used the communal bathroom facilities just outside the home (the house was situated in a compound with other dwellings) and spent several minutes photographing the property. The wife led us to a crowded courtyard used as a goat pen. I particularly enjoyed this brief cultural experience. The family was very friendly, answering our questions about rural Berber life, although their teenage daughter seemed somewhat embarrassed (and less enthusiastic than her parents) when some of us took her picture in the kitchen area where she had apparently gone to hide. After thirty minutes we continued on our journey.

We drove for probably another forty-five minutes or so before we reached the village of Telouet, traversing the mountainous passages along the Assaka Gorge, the rock face at times pocked with cave entrances once used by ancient tribal people for shelter and grain storage. We passed several villages (Tizgui, Assaka and Anmiter) situated near the salt river *Oued Mellah*; a seasonal creek that has been providing prized pink salt in these parts for over a thousand years. Local Glaoui chieftains once entrusted Jewish settlers with managing this lucrative salt mine business. We saw several plowed fields already sprouting produce, and herds of goats and sheep grazing in the limited brush along the hillsides. At times Mohammed would slow down so we could photograph the locals riding on top of their donkeys. Helene and Noelani even spoke to a group of young women walking on the road towards a local marketplace. We finally arrived at the famous village of Telouet, and more precisely, at the Telouet Kasbah shortly after 10:00am. This was the seat of the once powerful Glaoua clan.

It would be inappropriate not to mention the historic Glaoua family that reigned supreme over this area for more than fifty years and helped shape what would become modern-day Morocco. Interestingly, the country's own historians often treat the Glaoua history with disdainful ambivalence. The last Glaoua chieftain, Pasha T'hami el-Glaoui, who ruled southern Morocco like a viceroy under the French, did not inspire accolades. He was notorious not only for his legendary excesses and violent retributions, but also for his *spectacular* betrayals. He bit the proverbial hand which fed him so remarkably well – first turning on his king in order to support the French, then turning on the French when the tide of Independence swept over the country – that the French actually coined a new political jargon in his honor; it is used as a verb to describe when one has been deceived, as in “I've been *Glaouised*”.

Several weeks after returning from Morocco, Helene sent me a copy of *Lords of the Atlas* (The rise and fall of the House of Glaoua 1893 – 1956) by famed Scottish author Gavin Maxwell who chronicled the brilliant, often shocking but utterly fascinating

meteoric rise and spectacular crash of the Glaoua dynasty. Having read this wonderful book (and having visited the Telouet village where it all began) I feel compelled to give at least a brief historical recap, if for no other reason than to show how Morocco entered the modern world:

Until not too long ago – the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, actually – Morocco was still governed by a feudalistic system similar to those that ruled over Europe during medieval times. At the top of this pyramid was the sultan (or king), who was both the temporal ruler and the spiritual leader of the country. He appointed a *Grand Vizier* who would administer his court (or central government). Below this level, the sultan controlled his lands through a network of *Pashas* (viceroys) and *Caid*s (dukes or counts) who kept private armies and were responsible for collecting taxes and maintaining law and order. Or, at the very least, *order*. Most of these *Pashas* and *Caid*s were exceptionally cruel, filling the dungeons of their kasbahs with those who displeased them. Fear was often a good enough motivator for keeping the peace.

T'hami el-Glaoui was born in 1879. He was the son of the *Caid* of Telouet by his Ethiopian concubine. When his father died in 1888, his older brother Si el Madani became *Caid* and made the teenage T'hami his assistant. Basically, they were feudal warlords who controlled the Telouet mountain pass, which at the time was the main crossing point along the caravan trade route over the High Atlas Mountains into Marrakech. Traders wishing to pass the mountain road would have to pay the Glaoui chieftain a tribute. But their real wealth derived from the lucrative salt mines near Telouet. This was the main family business. During the late 1800's, there were three major *Caid*ats (made up of powerful warrior tribes) in the High Atlas Mountains. The M'tougga, the Goundafa and the Glaoua. The Glaoua clan had the smallest army and was seen as the least threatening in the region. But all of that changed in the autumn of 1893.

Because of the rampant lawlessness in the pre-Sahara, the sultan would periodically need to send in his Imperial army to keep the peace and – *just as importantly* – to ensure that taxes were paid. When the imperial coffers were empty (as was the case in 1893) the sultan himself would often lead a tax-collecting expedition into the region, putting down rebellions and squeezing everything he could out of the local populations. In June of 1893, King Moulay Hassan led such an expedition from Fez to Marrakech that lasted six months. By the time he was finished he had pacified many of the warring tribes in the region and collected quite a bit of loot. But in the autumn of that year, as he prepared to cross the High Atlas Mountains into Marrakech, the king's army got bogged down in a terrible blizzard in which hundreds of soldiers and pack animals perished. In fact, the entire military expedition seemed to be teetering on the brink of extinction, battling both the bitter snowy cold and starvation. But to the king's rescue came the new, young *Caid* of Telouet, Si el Madani, and his younger brother, T'hami. Hearing that the king's expedition was in dire straits, they welcomed the sultan and his army into Telouet with open arms, feeding them with banquets that lasted several days and presenting the king with hundreds of fresh horses and mules (almost exhausting the resources of the entire Glaoua clan in the process). The grateful (and ailing) King Moulay Hassan recuperated in the warm splendor of the Telouet Kasbah, and before he and his reinvigorated soldiers

continued their journey to Marrakech, he bestowed upon Madani the title of *khalifa*, or royal representative of the region, making him the nominal commander of all the tribes between the High Atlas and the Sahara, and gave him the *Caidat* of Tafilalt, which made the Glaoui chieftain, in name at least, the most powerful man in the region. What cemented his new title in the eyes of the other warrior tribes, though, was the 77mm bronze Krupp cannon the king left him as a gift. This devastating piece of artillery – the only one in Morocco outside of the Imperial Army’s arsenal – could bring down the defensive walls of any kasbah and instilled genuine fear in the Glaoua’s enemies. With his new titles and the threat of his new weapon, the Glaoui chieftain proceeded to bring the region’s tribes under his control.

King Moulay Hassan died the following year (on another tax-collecting expedition). His young son, Abdalaziz IV, took over the throne after some considerable palace intrigue. The new sultan was an admirer of Western culture and took advice from European counsel. This triggered rebellion amongst the more conservative tribes along the Algerian border who felt he was selling the country out to foreigners. The Glaoui brothers joined forces with the king in trying to put down the rebellion, but the Imperial army was routed, and Si el Madani was made the scapegoat and kept at the royal palace in Fez under house arrest where he was humiliated for months before being allowed to return to Telouet. Not surprisingly, the Glaoui brothers determined that their future (indeed, existence) depended on dethroning the young sultan. They conspired with the king’s older brother, Abd al-Hafid, and after a yearlong campaign of royal family infighting, the Glaoui brothers succeeded in helping Abd al-Hafid assume the throne in 1907. In appreciation for their support, the new sultan made Si el Madani his *Grand Vizier* and T’hami the *Pasha* of Marrakech.

Political alliances in Morocco were about as solid as a house of cards, and any shift in the socio-political landscape could bring about abrupt and often brutal consequences. Such was the case by 1911, when – after the ruinous reigns of both Abdalaziz IV and Abd al-Hafid bankrupted the country – riots broke out which led to the deaths of French citizens. Using this as an excuse, the French sent in their military to protect their interests. Once again, the Glaoui brothers became the scapegoat. The king accused them of concealing tax monies (at a time when the country was broke), and stripped the family of their exalted positions. In 1912, the French forced the king to sign the Treaty of Fez, making Morocco a protectorate of France. King Abd al-Hafid abdicated and his brother Yusef ben Hassan was selected king with the blessing of the French authorities.

During Yusef ben Hassan’s turbulent reign, a *Caid* by the name of Ahmed al-Hiba (from the southern Souss-Massa-Draa region) proclaimed himself the new sultan – arguing that the Treaty of Fez had effectively ended the Alaouite Dynasty – and marched on Marrakech. Once again, a desperate situation proved advantageous to the Glaoui chieftains. Ahmed al-Hiba demanded that the new pasha of Marrakech (the one who replaced T’hami el-Glaoui) hand over all foreign Christians so he could use them as a bargaining chip with the French. But many of these foreigners had sought refuge with T’hami, who protected them as long as he could before eventually turning them over to Ahmed al-Hiba’s forces. T’hami was able to send a line of communication to the

approaching French army informing them of the situation in Marrakech. After a quick military campaign, Ahmed al-Hiba was defeated and the hostages rescued. For his role in safeguarding these foreigners, T'hami was reinstated as the Pasha of Marrakech by the French.

The new political reality convinced the brothers to align themselves with France as opposed to the increasingly marginalized royal house. A fortuitous move since the wealth and influence of the El Glaoui household began to grow by leaps and bounds from this point forward. In 1918, when Si el Madani died, the French rewarded T'hami's loyalty by appointing him the head of the family before Madani's own sons, and he rose to become the most powerful Moroccan in the southern part of the country. His massive wealth (he was one of the richest men in the world when he died in 1956) was acquired through often-dubious means. With no one to oppose him, he took advantage of his position, and like a powerful mob boss muscled his way into a percentage of all the agricultural and mining businesses in his domain, and is reputed to have had a vested interest in the vast prostitution rings around Marrakech. When a legal issue arose with the French concerning his vast properties or questionable business practices, he simply bribed his way out of the problem. His fellow Moroccans, on the other hand, were dealt with more severely. T'hami's enemies often languished in the Telouet Kasbah's dungeon (or their severed heads would be put on display as a warning to others) while he wined and dined the international jet set of his age, becoming close friends with such movie legends as Charlie Chaplin, and French artists like composer Maurice Ravel and the novelist and performer Colette. His constant visits to European capitals, and his penchant for extravagant spending and gift-giving, endeared him to many of the influential political leaders of the day. Winston Churchill was a frequent visitor to his Marrakech palace (in fact, Churchill invited T'hami to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1952).

The Pasha of Marrakech was world-renowned, exuding a personality that commanded fear and respect at home, while garnering devotion and admiration abroad. And like most men who had notorious beginnings, his downfall would be equally spectacular. By the early 1950's, a strong opposition to French rule began to take shape in the country. This presented T'hami with a real dilemma. He had sided with the French to ensure his position and power base, and while he was not necessarily opposed to nationalistic yearnings, he knew that the modern concept of 'nationalism' meant that the royal status quo (the feudalistic system which afforded him his position and titles) could be swept away in the aftermath of a popular uprising. So fearful he was of the nationalists, that he had one of his own sons (who sided with them) put in a dungeon.

T'hami el-Glaoui's downfall had its origins in three separate incidents – just weeks apart – which occurred in late 1950, causing a breach with Sultan Mohammed V (the son of Yusef ben Hassan) who had been sitting on the throne since 1927. Although the king's powers were severely curtailed by the French, he was nonetheless the head of the royal family and as such the 'official' leader of Morocco. On November 18, 1950, a group of protesting nationalists were brutally attacked by a clan under the control of T'hami, and the outraged king demanded that his *Pasha* come to his court and explain himself. T'hami was in Paris at the time and a miscommunication between his eldest son and him

prevented him from attending. This really pissed off Mohammed V, who thought that the Glaoua leader had deliberately ignored him. The second incident occurred the following month when the French convened a Council of the Throne (a group made up of influential Moroccans and French colonists who were supposed to advise the Sultan, but in actuality dictated French policy). At this meeting, the French expelled one of the prominent nationalists on the Council of the Throne and the remaining nationalists left in protest, seeking a private audience with the king. As a result of these two incidents, T'hami became convinced that his king was not only displeased with him, but was also conspiring with the nationalists. He became increasingly paranoid and distrustful of the monarch.

The third and final breach occurred during the Annual Feast of Mouloud, held in late December (just a few days later), when the sultan's subjects come before him in court – in large ceremonial processions – to renew their loyalty to him. Such was T'hami's arrogance by this time that when it was his turn, instead of bowing to his king, he used his audience to berate the nationalists in a very angry tirade, essentially criticizing Mohammed V in his own court, a major faux pas. When T'hami's two sons (who were *Caid*s in their own right) went before the king, they tried to smooth things over but somehow made the situation worse. The king had had enough of his insolent *Pasha*, barring him from his court. Outraged, T'hami recalled the rest of his clannish entourage, refusing to participate in the Annual Feast of Mouloud, further infuriating the monarch with this act of mutiny. The die was now officially cast.

Over the next three and a half years, T'hami conspired with the French to remove Mohammed V. In August of 1953 the sultan was exiled to Madagascar and replaced on the throne by a more complacent distant relative named Mohammed Ben Aarafa. T'hami el-Glaoui must have been beside himself with glee; after all, he and his late brother had already orchestrated the dethronement of a previous Alaouite king (Abdalaziz IV) back in 1907, *and nobody seemed to care*. He assumed the removal of Mohammed V would be met with the same public indifference. Well, he was wrong. The nationalistic uprising bracing the country had its roots not only in opposing the French (and those who supported them), but also in replacing the old feudalistic order that had governed Morocco so terribly for centuries.

Angry protests against the new king broke out, with increasingly more dangerous attacks against the Glaoua leaders (T'hami, himself, survived a grenade attack) and the French colonists in particular, in which many were massacred. This led to heavy-handed, brutal reprisals by the French. At first, T'hami continued his support for the foreigners despite their violent retributions against his people, but eventually the French – fearful that their colony was quickly becoming ungovernable – decided to embrace some of the nationalists' political reforms hoping to quell the uprisings. Unfortunately for T'hami, these reforms included language that would do away with such archaic positions such as *Pashas* and *Caid*s.

Seeing the *new* political writing on the wall, T'hami had a change of heart, adopting his once imprisoned son's nationalistic zeal with a fervor usually seen only in those

whose self-preservation is clearly at stake. The new king, Ben Aarafa, abdicated on August 1, 1955 amidst the chaos. The beleaguered French ran the interim government through another Council of the Throne. By now, T'hami had completely turned on the French, refusing to do their dirty work. In one final inglorious act of betrayal, he did an about-face, officially recognizing the ousted Mohammed V as the sultan and demanding that the French fully reinstate him to the throne (even though he was the principle reason the king had been dethroned!). T'hami went to France (where the sultan was in exile) to ask for his forgiveness. In November of 1955, the now popular Mohammed V made his triumphant return to Morocco, where he was not only reinstated as king but also hammered out a deal for independence with the French the following year. *As for T'hami?* He died of stomach cancer shortly after the king's return. Prior to Mohammed V's death in 1961, the monarch made sure to strip T'hami's family of their wealth and properties, ensuring they would never trouble the crown again. The once powerful El Glaoui name became nothing more than an annoying footnote in the royal history of the country.

I hope I didn't bore anyone with this rather lengthy digest, but in order to understand the importance of this region, one must know the local history that shaped it. Morocco is a country whose very name conjures up images of exotic intrigue, and for those of you who wish to dig deeper into its past, you will not be disappointed.

Our vehicles pulled up almost to the very entrance of the Telouet Kasbah, circling the dilapidated mud brick village. Both the town and the Kasbah have been neglected for decades by the royal government. Small wonder considering the history, it's almost as if all traces of the El Glaoui legacy here have been abandoned and allowed to decay. The town conceals what is left of a once active slave quarter. Up until the first half of the last century, the elite of Morocco traded in African slaves (usually from the Sudan and Timbuktu). It was not uncommon for a *Caid* or *Pasha* to own hundreds of black slaves, who were usually treated better than the locals since they were considered property, often working in the kasbahs raising their masters' children, becoming an integral part of the household and at times even rising to become trusted aides and having real socio-political influence. Slave women were also used as concubines, and fathered many children of mixed blood. At times, slaves would be given as gifts between the aristocratic classes. Recently, attempts have been made to restore parts of Telouet and its kasbah for the purpose of preserving their place in history, but the process has been slow-going, to say the least, and most of the red-clay buildings are crumbling and in disrepair.

Abdul led us into the Telouet Kasbah. From the entrance tower, which seemed well preserved, we entered into a decrepit-looking courtyard surrounded by buildings in varying degrees of decay; some had walls that were partially collapsed. The more original structures here date back to 1860, to the time of T'hami's father. Over the following ninety years, the Telouet Kasbah underwent enormous changes and reconstructions as the fortunes of the El Glaoui skyrocketed. Even now, this crumbling complex was still impressive in its size. We followed Abdul to the upstairs receiving court, which contain the best-preserved or restored rooms in the entire Kasbah. We walked through several salons with white stucco walls faceted with *zellij* tiles and exquisitely carved and painted

cedar ceilings, and beautifully decorated columns. As Pasha, T'hami resided in the Bahia Palace of Marrakech, but when he was diagnosed with cancer he returned here to die. Although there were only a couple of restored rooms, I would say the decorations and tile work in the Telouet Kasbah were probably more striking than those of the Bahia Palace (which we visited the following day). We spent about an hour in Telouet. The main road actually bypasses the town – again, I wondered if this was intentional – and the locals seemed just as desperate and ragged as the Kasbah they're trying so desperately to preserve (in order to generate some much-needed tourism revenue). It would be easy to miss Telouet if you didn't know where it was, or its importance in the fascinating history of the country. I've been told that Gate 1 no longer offers this excursion on their Moroccan tours, which is a shame. The drive alone is worth the trip.

We left Telouet and continued on the valley road towards National Highway 9 to rendezvous with our fellow travelers. At the first town we came across – after leaving Telouet – we had another 'cultural' experience. A group of Royal Gendarme (police) was stopping vehicles at a checkpoint. Apparently, they were looking for traffic violators. As we slowly approached the checkpoint, Mohammed gave me a quick glance and saw that I had my seatbelt on. He smiled and sighed... *a little too prematurely*. Helene and Noelani were not wearing *their* seatbelts and the policeman who spotted this immediately lit up like a pinball machine (or was it a cash register?), making Mohammed pull over. Our driver got out of the vehicle and approached the police. After a few minutes, and some exchanging of money, he got back in the 4 X 4 and we were on our way again. Mohammed told us he had to pay 3 dirhams for each passenger not wearing a seatbelt. He told us it was better to give a little *baksheesh* (which in normal parlance would mean a tip, but in this case it was a bribe) to avoid a costly ticket, court date and points on his license. Its interesting to note that in Morocco it takes 40 traffic points (*in one year*) to get your driving privileges suspended. That seemed like an awfully lot of points to me. According to Mohammed the most expensive traffic offense one can commit on this particular one-lane road was to pass another vehicle; the penalty is only 4 points but the fine is a whopping 700 dirhams!

We reached the small town of Ighrem n'Ougal shortly after 12:00pm, catching up with our fellow travelers inside the Café Rafik where most of them had just finished having lunch and were sitting along the open patio in back of the restaurant sipping coffee or tea and taking in the surrounding hillside scenery. We tipped Abdul and Mohammed, thanking them for a wonderful excursion, and proceeded into the restaurant for lunch. I ordered the minced lamb tajine; I think the ladies ordered the Berber omelet (which was also cooked inside a tajine). The meal was delicious.

By 1:15pm we boarded the bus and spent the next several hours driving through the Tichka Mountain Pass on our way to Marrakech. Aziz cautioned those of us who were afraid of heights not to sit in the front of the bus. This mountain road, originally built by the French as a military highway from Marrakech to the pre-Sahara, replaced the old Telouet mountain pass once controlled by the Glaoua clan. At its highest point – the *Col du Tichka* – you reach an elevation that exceeds 6,600 feet. We climbed slowly up into the High Altas Mountains on a narrow, switchback road that offered a dizzying

panoramic view of the valley. The one-lane highway snaked around the mountains; some of the sharper bends and turns proved to be a breath-gasping experience. Sitting in the front of the bus must have felt like one *long* roller-coaster ride. When we reached the Col du Tichka, Aziz stopped the bus and asked if we wanted to get off and take a photo of the surrounding mountains from this elevation. I immediately grabbed my camera and hopped off the bus. The freezing wind made my testicles shrink to the size of marbles in seconds; it was so cold I couldn't think straight, let alone focus my camera, and I quickly re-boarded the coach, taking my pictures from the soothing warmth of my bus seat.

Once we passed the Col du Tichka we began a slow descent into the plains just southeast of Marrakech. The mountainous views were spectacular, but after a while the heavy lunch and the lulling sensation of the bus made me sleepy. I kept nodding off (and banging my head against the window every time our driver maneuvered a bend). As we drove down the mountain we came across small villages nestled along the hills, built on red clay-like soil surrounded by cactus. Marrakech lies in a wide valley hemmed in by the High Atlas Mountains on one side and the end of the Central Atlas Mountains on the other. At the base of these mountains the rocky terrain gave way to forests of pine and almond trees.

By 4:30pm we reached what looked like a series of poorer neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city. We continued straight into the heart of Marrakech, passing a section of the old medina wall on our left as we made our way down the wide *Mohammed V Avenue*, a main artery connecting the old and new areas of the city. At one point we came upon the famous Koutoubia Mosque with its 12<sup>th</sup> century minaret (the inspiration for the Hassan Tower in Rabat and La Giralda Tower in Seville, Spain), across the avenue just a few hundred feet away was the bustling main square known as the *Djemaa el-Fna*. As he had done in Fez, Aziz had our driver circle the streets near our hotel in the more modern section of the city so we could get our bearings, suggesting places to eat along the way (dinner was on our own the next couple of nights).

Check-in at the enormous Kenzi Farah Hotel took nearly forty minutes. For security purposes we were required to fill out guest registration forms. There was an employee dressed like a desert Berber serving mint tea in the lobby; a few of us helped ourselves to a hot glass. Once the room key cards were handed out, nobody waited for the porters. We simply grabbed our luggage and headed to our section of the hotel behind the wide-open pool terrace in the back of the complex. We were spending the next three nights here so I unpacked some of my clothes and then took another shower to freshen up. At 6:30pm I met Helene, Noelani, Pam, Javier and his mom, Lily, in the lobby. We had agreed to go to the *Djemaa el-Fna* together. I purchased a city map from the hotel's boutique, but I couldn't figure the thing out. In my defense, local tourist maps do not accurately capture the crazy meandering street patterns and covered souks that constitute the old city of Marrakech. Javier downloaded a map on his smart phone, and between us we *still* couldn't navigate the streets without some confusion. Luckily, Helene – our trusty 'unofficial' tour guide – somehow knew the way, and we just followed her.



The Kenzi Farah Hotel is located on President Kennedy Avenue (I kid you not) in the trendy Hivernage district of Marrakech. On the corner just south of the hotel we turned left, walking several long city blocks before making a right onto a street called *Rue Harroun Errachid*. We passed the Sofitel Marrakech, a 5-star hotel and casino, and arrived at a wide boulevard called El Yarmouk, on the opposite side was one of the main entrances into the walled medina. We crossed this heavily trafficked street and entered the old city, coming immediately upon the famous La Mamounia Hotel, one of the swankiest establishments in all of Africa, oozing of old European money. I will be mentioning this hotel again later in the journal as we opted to have dinner there the following evening. We continued eastward along Houmman El Fetouaki Avenue. We reached the *Abd El Moumen Square* and saw the landmark Koutoubia Mosque minaret up close, now brightly lit against the darkening skies. The sidewalks and avenues were packed with people and vehicles, and crossing the streets here took some cautious navigating. Eventually we ended up on a pedestrian street lined with shops that led directly into the *Djemaa El Fna Square*. At times we became scattered, blending into the huge crowds; we had to constantly keep a watchful eye on each other so as not to separate. Because of the constant jostling on the streets, Aziz warned us to be careful of pickpockets in the square. I walked with one hand in the front pocket of my nylon pants, cradling my wallet.

When we reached the Djemaa El Fna Square the sight reminded me of a county fair back home. Night was now rapidly descending over the city, yet this place was lit up and hopping like a carnival. This is the largest square in Marrakech, and has existed since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when the area was used for public executions. Ironically, the name of this festive plaza means ‘assembly of the dead’, harkening to its less glamorous past. Today, the square serves multiple purposes; it is a bustling marketplace, a center for restaurants and other makeshift eating establishments, a tourist destination filled with restored *riads* (many of these mansions converted into inns) and palaces. The Djemaa El Fna is also the site of *halqa* (or street theater). Throughout the large open plaza are entertainers performing for the public, trying to eke out a living via tips and donations. UNESCO has deemed this square a ‘masterpiece’ of world heritage, a complete throwback to medieval times. By late morning, the performers are out in full bloom: snake charmers, henna tattoo artists, costumed water-sellers, clowns, astrologers and even potion sellers. Little, it seems, has changed here in the last one thousand years. In the evening, the entertainers give way to dancing and back-flipping musicians playing *Gnawa* music, a rich repertoire of ancient African Islamic spiritual songs that have been fused over the years with similar modern genres like reggae, blues, jazz and even hip-hop. By nightfall, the large tents in the center of the plaza fill with over a hundred chefs who set up makeshift kitchens to feed the ever-increasing crowds. Surrounding the open square are cafes, shops and stalls along pedestrian streets and alleyways, which extend deep into the medina, concealing covered souks (marketplaces) and historical buildings. *This was one fascinating place!* In 2011, terrorists detonated a bomb in one of the cafes inside the square, killing 15 people (mostly foreign tourists), stunning the country. But not even *that* could slow down the dynamic pace of the Djemaa El Fna; it was back in full swing almost immediately.

Just before we entered the main plaza we stopped at a restaurant to use their bathroom facilities (some of us also purchased bottled water). From here we began walking to the center of the square, attracted by the crowds surrounding a group of snake charmers. In the distance, as dusk settled over the city, we could hear the *adhan* (call to prayer) being recited by the *muezzin* over a loud speaker from the Koutoubia Minaret. When we reached the snake charmers I was surprised (and a little freaked out) to see *large* cobras and enormous boa constrictors slithering or standing upright on the tiled floor of the plaza. The snake charmers used hand-held drums to keep the dangerous reptiles in place and to attract curious onlookers. It's interesting to note that while snake charmers have historically touted their musical playing prowess (flutes or drums) as the reason for their hypnotizing effects on snakes, the truth is the reptiles lack an outer ear and cannot actually *hear* sound. Cobras stand at attention because they view the instrument – and for that matter, the snake charmer – as a threat. To minimize the potential risk poised by these creatures, they usually have their poisonous sacs removed, or have their mouths sewn shut or are de-fanged.

Aziz had warned us that if we took photographs of the snake charmers (or snakes) they would demand a tip. He told us not to pay more than 20 dirhams (which was a customary rate). As soon as I raised my camera one of the snake charmers approached me with his hand out. I decided to move on, preferring to photograph the other activities of the square. Pam, Javier, and Lily had the same idea, and as we walked away from the crowd Helene marched right up to the reptiles, beckoned by one of the snake charmers who asked her if she wanted to hold the snake while he took her photograph. Helene – who possess a pair of steel *cojones* in addition to her other attributes – was delighted. The man placed a smaller snake around her neck, which she held up in one hand, while he used her cell phone to snap a picture of her kneeling in front of a fairly large cobra. When I saw the photo afterwards, I thought it was a phenomenal shot, perhaps the best taken of the entire trip. The problem occurred when she was ready to leave. The snake charmer asked for a tip, and when Helene reached into her wallet to give the man the customary 20 dirhams, he insisted on more, pointing to the one and two hundred dirham notes she had in her billfold. Not one to be taken advantage of, Helene protested, telling the snake charmer she would not give him any more money. At which point the man positioned himself in such a way that blocked Helene's path, pressing his leather drum against her sides in a threatening manner preventing her from moving.

Helene began arguing with the snake charmer, drawing the attention of Noelani and a Spanish woman who had witnessed the whole thing. The Spanish woman started yelling at the man in Arabic, grabbing Helene's arm and pulling her away from his clutches. By now, the other snake charmers had come to the aid of their, um, comrade-in-snake, arguing wildly with the Spanish woman. Noelani, not to be outdone, unleashed her North Jersey Italian-American ire on these bastards, too. Meanwhile, I was busy photographing the square dozens of feet away, oblivious to what was unfolding nearby. I heard all the commotion and turned to see this wild scene taking place. Unaware of what had just transpired, my initial reaction was that Helene was caught up in some kind of pick-pocketing scenario, because the Spanish woman – who was arguing loudly with the group of snake charmers – had her hands all over Helene's back and sides (she was actually

trying to get Helene out of there but I thought perhaps she was feeling around for her wallet). Eventually, the snake charmers decided to back off when the Spanish woman threatened to call the police and everybody dispersed. Helene and Noelani thanked the woman and then we all continued as a group towards the marketplace at the back of the plaza, listening to Helene's recounting of what just occurred. I must say, this put a damper on our festive mood. But only temporarily, because the Djemaa El Fna is so full of distractions one barely has time to ponder the negatives.

We made our way through one of the winding covered alleyways on the northernmost side of the plaza, browsing from shop to shop for souvenirs. In one clothing stall I saw some beautiful scarves that would make excellent gifts. I asked the vendor how much and he quoted a price I was not willing to pay, but before I could walk away, Helene – fully recovered from her previous incident – sidled up to me, rolled her eyes and muttered, “For crying out loud, *bargain with the man!*” I could feel the anxiety swelling in my gut. Men suck at this; it's not in our DNA. Once, in Egypt, I literally bargained my way into a *higher* price, paying five times the going rate for a T-shirt because I got the money conversion all wrong. Thankfully, Helene (who has no patience for gullibility) stepped in and bargained with the vendor on my behalf, getting him to lower his price. I was able to purchase several scarves. And as impressed as I was with Helene's bravado, I was even more impressed with Pam's low key approach. She wanted to buy a T-shirt for her husband (who was back in the States), and when the vendor quoted 400 dirhams for the shirt she was holding, Pam simply shook her head and dead-panned, “I'll give you 50 dirhams, *and that's it.*” There must be something in a woman's demeanor which signals the end of negotiations, for the vendor immediately accepted her offer. I, on the other hand, would have been in a backroom somewhere, bent over a barrel with my pants around my ankles, crying, “*Okay, okay, I'll give you 500 dirhams but no more!*”

In an adjacent spice shop we took turns watching Javier try *his* hand at bargaining. Javier is a creative services producer for the Spanish-language Univision television station. He is into cooking and had his heart set on buying some authentic Moroccan saffron, which, from what I gathered, is the culinary equivalent of gold. The vendor actually pulled the seasoning from a jar tucked away in a drawer. For a moment I thought I was witnessing a drug buy, for Javier sniffed it and, in an almost conspiratorial whisper, asked how much was a gram. In the end, he decided not to buy from this shop, suspicious of the quality (saffron users are a fastidious lot). If I'm not mistaken, I think he was able to purchase a few grams from another spice store before we left the square.

A funny incident occurred in another store that specialized in lamps. Helene fell in love with a glass lantern and began her ritual bargaining process with the salesman. She refused to pay his asking price (no surprise there) and kept pressing the man for a much bigger discount. At one point, Helene turned to me and said, “Richard, can you please hold this” and handed me the lamp while she inspected another one. Seeing this, the salesman assumed I was her husband, which is understandable. What was *not* understandable was that he thought she had called me *Rachel* instead of Richard. Perhaps in Morocco, a man who docilely carries his wife's belongings in public is referred to as a *Rachel*; maybe the word means ‘hen-pecked’ in Arabic. Who knows? He turned to me,

frowning, and pleaded, “*Rachel*, will you please help me here. Your wife is being unreasonable.” The others got a big kick out of this, especially since the salesman followed me around the store calling me Rachel repeatedly. Frankly, I thought it was pretty funny, and it didn’t bother me in the least. Besides, it had been a very long day already and I was just too tired to bother correcting the man. So I played along. Of course, Helene and Noelani (those two wisenheimers) couldn’t resist, and they, too, chimed in “Rachel, what do you think about this?” or “Rachel, darling, what time is it?” This became my new nickname throughout the tour.

Done with our shopping for the night we decided to get dinner. We slowly made our way through the alley corridors and back to the main plaza, which was packed with nighttime revelers, shoppers and diners. Near the center of the square hundreds of people were sitting down at bench tables underneath large white tents eating food prepared just a few feet away in outdoor makeshift kitchens. We thought about eating here, seeing how enthusiastic the crowds were and the wonderful cooking aromas wafting through the air, but due to the food poisoning incident back in Fez the group decided to stick with an indoor restaurant. Ironically, the guidebooks recommend eating in the square as opposed to local restaurants because of the turnover rate of the food consumed; as long as you wash your hands and drink only bottled water – they claimed – there was less chance of eating something stale, especially since the kitchens were out in the open and the consumer could see how everything was prepared.

As we crossed the square I took clandestine photos of the locals eating. Early on in the tour Aziz cautioned us not to photograph Moroccans unless we ask for their permission first. I developed a neat little guise. I would pretend to be taking a picture of a building but would actually photograph a wide street scene; this way, nobody could claim I was *directly* pointing a camera at them. Noelani learned her lesson the hard way. She stopped to photograph a group of *haik*-clad Moroccan women walking towards us and all hell broke loose...*again!* The women surrounded Noelani and *angrily* demanded she delete the photo, one of the women even smacked Noelani in the hip. And like the earlier incident with the snake charmers, I watched from the sidelines wondering what all the commotion was about. But after seeing that Noelani might have a real fight on her hands, I contemplated intervening...um, for all of two seconds, and then decided they better work it out between them. Nothing makes a man’s gonads recede more rapidly than the prospect of having to break up a catfight. I guess I’m about as brave as the next fellow, and what this situation called for – quite frankly – was *Rachel*. I stood there passively, stuttering, “hey, hey, c’mon now ladies”... *and then asked if anyone needed me to hold their lamp*. Thankfully, Noelani, after some shoving and angry name-calling, deleted the picture and the women, satisfied, continued on their way. *Whew!*

We hurried through the square at this point, passing the food vendors and the serenading *Gnawa* musicians and reached the taxi stand near Mohammed V Avenue by 8:30pm. Javier had previously downloaded the address of a local restaurant recommended by Trip Advisor on his smart phone, but when we asked the taxi driver about the location it seemed much farther away from the square than we had hoped and we decided as a group to eat closer to our hotel since it was getting late. We chose the

Café Blatt a few blocks from our hotel (one of the restaurants Aziz had recommended when we first arrived in Marrakech). The driver quoted us a price of 60 dirhams, which we agreed to split six ways. We had not seen the taxi yet since our negotiations with the driver were conducted on the sidewalk, but I assumed it was one of the taxi vans parked on the corner. Imagine my dismay when he pulled up to the curb seconds later in an old Mercedes sedan. We piled into this thing like it was a clown car. Javier and Helene sat in front with the driver, the rest of us crammed into the backseat (with Lily sitting on Noelani's lap sideways). Luckily, the drive to the restaurant only lasted about ten minutes. Along the way we passed several Royal Gendarme directing traffic. It was ironic that earlier in the day we got stopped because a few of us were not wearing our seatbelts, yet here we were, packed into this sardine mobile, practically on top of one another, with no one wearing a safety restraint...*and they didn't bat an eye.*

The Café Blatt turned out to be a really nice establishment, very popular with foreigners, having a great atmosphere and an excellent, friendly (young and attractive) staff. We sat upstairs in the non-smoking section. There was a long bar and two musicians playing Arabic-Andalusian music on string instruments. The food was good and we had a relaxing time, a great way to end what turned out to be one of the most exhausting days of the tour. We walked back to the hotel by 10:30pm. Before retiring for the evening I went across the street to another hotel to use their ATM machine since I was out of dirhams (for some reason, the Kensi Farah did not have an ATM on their property; a serious oversight, I thought). By 11:15pm I was in bed, sleeping soundly.

## Day Nine

I was up by 5:30am. My throat was a little sore, and I felt some congestion in my chest. I attributed this to the cold mountain weather we'd been experiencing the last several days. I showered, shaved and did an inventory of my remaining clean clothes. Hmmmmmmmm. Somehow, I was missing one shirt. I normally pack clothing based on the number of days in the tour, making sure I have one set of *everything* per day. In case of an emergency, my back-up system includes a few extra colored T-shirts tucked into the corners of my suitcase. To ensure I had enough *regular* shirts to last the rest of the trip (including the flight home) I opted to wear a black T-shirt that day underneath my nylon safari vest. I ordered hot water from room service to make coffee and then wrote in my journal until it was time for breakfast. I sat with Pam, Joe and Lynne. We talked about our experiences thus far on the tour, and based on what Joe and Lynne were telling me, they were not enjoying this trip as much as I was. Perceptions are a funny thing. There were others on the tour who echoed similar sentiments; some had experienced intestinal problems in Fez or had issues with their rooms or just didn't like Aziz for whatever reason. I felt this was a great tour (in fact, I would go back to Morocco in a heartbeat).

Perhaps my interest in history was the key difference. Pam, who works in the medical records field, also studied history in college and I think she, too, enjoyed this trip immensely.

We began our morning tour of Marrakech at 9:00am. A local guide named Majid joined us on the bus. Our first stop that day was at the Koutoubia Mosque; on the way Majid gave us a brief lecture on his city:

To understand the impact that Morocco has had on the rest of the world, you need to understand the history of Marrakech. Situated in the central section of the country, this city served as Morocco's capital under three separate royal dynasties. Over the centuries, Marrakech exposed and forever changed the world by introducing African and Middle Eastern influences to Europe via trade and conquest. When the Almoravid Dynasty of Marrakech extended their empire into Europe in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, they introduced a new style of architecture which persists to this day: Moorish arches can be seen from Spain to California. The Saadian sugar dealers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century brought sugar to European households and beyond, while Jewish salt merchants improved the taste of the otherwise bland flavor of medieval cooking. Once Europeans became accustomed to these new items they were spurred on to create new trade routes and ended up circumnavigating the world, establishing new colonies and empires in the process. Even the bluesy Gnawa music – inspired by the desolate stretches of the Sahara caravan trade routes – influenced the world of music overall, from the spirituals of the slaves to the anthems of today's rock, pop and hip-hop stars.

Inhabited by Berber farmers since Neolithic times, the official city of Marrakech was established by the Almoravid Dynasty in 1062. It is perhaps the most important of the country's former imperial cities because of its far-reaching influences. Today, this city is the capital of the southwestern economic region known as *Marrakech-Tensift-El Haous*. The city has been nicknamed the "red city" due to the color of its medina walls and the red-sandstone buildings built during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Under the Almoravids, Marrakech quickly became the cultural, religious and trading center for the Maghreb region of North Africa. But the Almoravids reign was brief – 1040 to 1147AD – and with the succeeding Almohad kings, Marrakech went into decline, surpassed by Fez in importance. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the wealthy Saadian Dynasty (of Arab descent) re-established Marrakech as the imperial city, restoring its glorious monuments and constructing beautiful palaces; as a result, the city regained its predominance in the socio-political and economic landscape of the country.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Marrakech became a draw for Sufi pilgrims (a branch of mystical Islam) as the country's seven patron saints are buried here. And after the Treaty of Fez, when the French took control of the country, they appointed T'hami el-Glaoui Pasha of Marrakech, creating a strong viceroy position in this great city that effectively ruled southern Morocco for almost four decades. Even today, Marrakech is considered one of the most important (and popular) cities in all of Africa, a strong economic center with a *huge* tourism appeal. It is particularly popular with the French (many rich or famous

French celebrities own homes here). Like all of Morocco's former imperial cities, Marrakech is divided into two distinct areas: the medina, with its historic fortified walls, souks and serpentine alleyways, and the newer section, in this case the ultra modern *Gueliz* district in the northwestern part of the city.

Our bus parked just outside the gardens surrounding the Koutoubia Mosque and we made our way down a paved walkway to a series of empty fountains leading to the famous minaret. According to Majid, the colors of the flowers and plants within the garden represent the traditional colors of Morocco: red (symbolizing the red stone buildings), green (symbolizing the oases), blue (symbolizing the sky) and white (symbolizing the snow-capped mountains). We posed for a group photo in front of the fountains. Several local men dressed as traditional water sellers were waiting here, and for a few dirhams they would allow you to take their picture. Wearing colorful costumes with enormous tasseled hats, these men click the brass ornaments and bells adorning their torso to attract customers, pouring water from camel leather bags into tin cups for thirsty visitors. In ancient times, water sellers served a community purpose, but today they're basically another licensed tourist attraction, like the fortune-tellers, acrobats and henna tattoo artists you find in the Djemaa El Fna Square.

Majid led us to the base of the Koutoubia minaret, explaining its architecture. Built by the Almohad Dynasty between 1184 and 1199, the minaret itself is a masterpiece of Moorish design. Standing at over 250 feet, it was constructed out of red sandstone with curved arches and windows, pointed merlons, decorated with a wide band of inlay ceramic and topped by a spire consisting of gilded copper balls decreasing in size as it reaches its point (a traditional Moroccan feature). I'm not sure if this landmark is the tallest structure in Marrakech, but it can be easily seen from blocks away. In the evening, floodlights illuminate the tower making it shine like a beacon against the night sky. A little less spectacular was the adjacent mosque. Having traveled to other Muslim countries in recent years, the Moorish style of essentially flat rectangular mosques with a single minaret was not as awe-inspiring to me as the ornately curved or domed mosques I've seen in Egypt or Turkey. I'm certain the inside of the Koutoubia Mosque is quite elaborate and impressive, but under Moroccan law (or custom) non-Muslims cannot enter the premises. It is interesting to note that the original mosque constructed at the site had to be replaced several years later because the niche did not accurately face Mecca. When the present building was finally completed in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, booksellers congregated around its base, making it the largest book market and library in the region. Hence the name, Koutoubia, which is derived from the word *kutubiyyin*, or booksellers.

We took photos of the minaret (from every conceivable angle, it seems) and then re-boarded the bus and made our way east through the medina to the Bahia Royal Palace, situated next to the Jewish Quarter (or Mellah). We spent almost an hour here, but this was due more to the crowds than anything else. Of the 8 hectares and approximately 150 rooms that make up this palace complex, only a small portion is open to the public. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs is currently occupying a section of this historic building, and the palace is occasionally used as a formal venue to receive foreign dignitaries or special guests of state.

The original palace building was constructed during the 1860's as the official residence of Grand Vizier Si Moussa (Sultan Moulay Hassan's chief government administrator), and between 1894 and 1900 the complex was enlarged and embellished by his son, Abu Bou Ahmed. Both Si Moussa and his son were born African slaves who rose to become the king's chamberlain and confidante, eventually wielding considerable power in the royal court in the late 1800's. In fact, upon the sultan's death in 1894, it was Abu Bou Ahmed's conspiratorial intervention (through his contacts as the king's chamberlain) that ensured fourteen-year-old Abdelaziz IV's succession to the throne over his older siblings. In gratitude, he was made Grand Vizier like his father before him. Abu Bou Ahmed, a former slave, then governed the country while the teenage king was coming into his own. The Grand Vizier died suddenly – and quite *suspiciously* – in 1900. He was such a despised despot that the palace was looted bare upon his death. Following the Treaty of Fez, the French used the impressive Bahia Palace to house the protectorate's resident-general.

We got off the bus in the old Jewish Quarter and walked a few blocks to the palace, entering the complex through one of its many gardens, admiring the cypress, orange, jasmine and banana trees leading into the older section of the palace built by Si Moussa. The name *Bahia* means 'brilliance', and as we crossed into the areas embellished by Abu Bou Ahmed, it was clear the son was trying to surpass his father in terms of opulence and grandeur. He greatly expanded the complex, adding a private mosque and larger apartments. Inside, various palace courts were beautifully painted, with inlaid and gilded woodwork ceilings and spectacular sunburst *zellij* (mosaic) tiles meant to dazzle foreign dignitaries. Majid led us to an open courtyard that divided the four separate living quarters of Abu Bou Ahmed's wives. They were suppose to be equal (under Islamic tradition), but it was clear that the quarters of his favorite wife, Lalla Zineb, was a tad more *equal* than the others. Her quarters had intricate marquetry, woven-silk panels and stained-glass windows. The ceiling was painted with rose bouquets. I have no idea what Lalla Zineb looked like – Majid said she was very beautiful – but judging from her quarters, she must have been a striking woman indeed to warrant all this detail and attention. In addition to his four wives, the palace also housed 24 concubines. These Grand Viziers were busy men!

We left the palace and made our way through the Jewish Quarter to a nearby Berber pharmacy and spice store called the *Aux 100,000 Spices*. This was another 'official store' visit. We sat in a large room adjacent to the pharmacy while a store representative named Haya gave us a brief demonstration on Moroccan spices and herbal medications. Most of the products she showed us were geared towards personal hygiene and grooming or to remedy skin conditions, from anti-aging creams and hair gels to ointments for eczema and rosacea. With the help of several female assistants, Haya passed the products around so we could touch, rub or smell to our hearts content. The shop sold a large variety of local spices and herbs, as well. Helene asked Noelani (who is into herbal remedies and natural beauty products) to evaluate a skin care lotion she wanted to buy. Noelani read the ingredients on the plastic container and discovered many of the same chemicals used in mass-produced products back home. It made me wonder just how 'natural and



authentic' all this stuff really was. But I must confess, Haya was quite persuasive. She would hold up a bottle of whatever product she was promoting next, and, like a well-schooled carnival snake oil salesman, she would almost make you believe it could deliver the goods. A concoction of ginseng, honey and ginger was touted as a sure fire way to get a man's libido back in sync. The argan and almond oils in the anti-aging cream were 'guaranteed' to erase wrinkles in the pruniest of faces. Thank goodness she wasn't pedaling a hair-restorer because I would have marched out of there with a gallon of the stuff tucked under my arm. And just when you thought you could resist her sales pitch, she would throw in a free bottle if you made a multiple purchase. *Drats!* The ladies in our group began shopping like it was Black Friday. When the demonstration was over, we were given time to wander around the pharmacy. Hundreds of jars were stacked neatly along the walls filled with herbs and spices. Before leaving, most of us availed ourselves of the store's bathroom facilities, which – curiously enough – smelled horribly. You'd think for a shop advertising *100,000 spices* they'd put something in the bathrooms to mask the odor.

Our next stop was a tour of the Saadian Tombs. We drove through the Jewish Quarter and headed west on *Rue Uqba ben Nafaa*, passing the plaza known as the *Place des Ferblantiers*. Not far from this plaza are the ruins of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Badi Palace built by Sultan Ahmed el-Mansour, the great Saadian king. The name *Badi* means 'the incomparable', and the king spared no expense making sure nothing else in Morocco came close in terms of sheer opulence, decorating his royal complex in gold, turquoise and crystal. In fact, the Badi Palace was so temptingly splendid that 75 years after its construction, the succeeding dynasty looted it bare, and what remains today is an empty palace fortress indiscernible (except for its size) from the many historic kasbahs in the region.

The Saadi Dynasty originated in Tagmadert, in the Draa River Valley. They claimed to be descendents of the Prophet Muhammed through his daughter, Fatima Zahra, and led a successful campaign against the ruling Zenata Berber dynasty (the Wattasids) to effectively control most of the country. During their brief reign (1554 to 1659) they fought several decisive battles against the Portuguese, vanquishing them from many parts of Morocco, and consolidated their territories. The most famous of the Saadi Sultans was Ahmed el-Mansour who built the Badi Palace. His penchant for spectacular and grandiose things was not confined to living quarters, either. He ordered the construction of a beautiful mausoleum complex referred to as the Saadian Tombs, which contain the bodies of about sixty members of the Saadi royal family. During the reign of the succeeding Alaouite Dynasty (the current royal lineage), King Moulay Ismail wanted to eliminate all traces of his opulent predecessors and walled the tombs, sealing them from the public for centuries. Over time, people forgot the mausoleum even existed, and it wasn't until 1917 that they were re-discovered and eventually restored. Today, the Saadian Tombs are a huge tourism draw in Marrakech.

We spent about half an hour touring the complex. There are three rooms; the most famous is Chamber of the 12 Pillars where Ahmed el-Mansour is entombed. The other two rooms were dedicated, respectively, to the princes and the important women of the

Saadi clan. The chambers are lined with steles constructed out of imported Italian Carrara marble. The walls within the main funerary chamber are decorated in honeycombed stalactite plasterwork gilded with pure gold. Separating the three chambers is a garden-courtyard containing the resting places of roughly 170 trusted servants, soldiers and government officials, overshadowed by the stone mausoleum of Ahmed el-Mansour's mother, carved with poetic verses and blessings. The complex was packed with tourists, and we had to wait in line to view the individual burial chambers.

By 12:30pm our complimentary morning tour of Marrakech was completed, and we now had the rest of the day to explore the city on our own. Aziz had our driver drop most of us off at the Djemaa El Fna Square, suggesting several historical places to visit within the medina. A small group of us had opted to take an afternoon excursion with Aziz that included a couscous cooking demonstration at a local restaurant (followed by lunch there) and a tour of the *Jardin Majorelle* (a private garden donated to the city by the late designer Yves Saint Laurent). Neither of my two female companions had elected to take the excursion, so I was on my own. Our tour group splintered, everyone going off in separate directions to explore the Djemaa El Fna.

Those of us on the afternoon excursion followed Aziz to an establishment called *Restaurant Albaraka* located on the opposite side of the square. The restaurant was part of a restored *riad* (a large mansion). We were led to a private room and sat in a semi-circle facing two tables where a female chef – with Aziz acting as interpreter – gave us a cooking class on how to prepare a classical Moroccan couscous dish. On the table before her were various plates with ingredients already diced and chopped, and several large mixing bowls. On a portable cooking instrument were two stainless-steel pots, one on top of the other. The chef placed the pots on the table and began filling the larger one with sections of lamb, an assortment of veggies (squash, grated tomatoes, zucchini, onions, potatoes), 2 tablespoons of salt and pepper, one and a half liters of water, and half a cup of sunflower and olive oil. She mixed all of this together, adding some local spices, including some celery stalks and parsley tied together in a bunch for additional flavor (these last ingredients were later removed prior to serving). She then placed this pot on the burner and began preparing the couscous.

The three times I've made couscous at home I simply boiled the stuff that comes in the box. This woman was making couscous from scratch! Using ground Semolina wheat with a little white flour and water, she pounded, rolled and sifted this mixture over and over again in a large wooden pan. Satisfied with the consistency, she then placed the couscous in the empty stainless-steel pot and set it over the one already on the burner. She told us the couscous had to cook for ten minutes before it is rolled and mixed again, this time a little olive oil or extra water added (if necessary). The couscous is then returned to the stove for an additional ten minutes at which time it undergoes a third and final mixing. The entire meal is then allowed to cook thoroughly (approximately an hour and fifteen minutes total) before it is ready for serving. Using a pre-cooked sample, the chef first arranged the couscous on a very large ceramic plate, lifting up the edges and flattening out the middle – like a reservoir – and then she slowly ladled the lamb and veggies into the center, garnishing the dish with olives and cooked chickpeas. Like

typical tourists, we gathered around the table and took turns photographing the finished meal. My impressions on all of this? Frankly, it seemed a little too labor intensive...*I think I'll stick to the boxed couscous!*

When the cooking demonstration was over, we filed into the large central courtyard, arranging ourselves around a big round table tucked into a shaded corner of one of the raised terraces. The staff brought out the traditional cooked salad appetizers, olives and bread, and for the main dish we had a couscous dish similar to the one the chef had demonstrated for us. It was all very tasty, including the pastries and mint tea they served afterwards.

By 3:00pm we trekked back to our bus and headed north along Mohammed V Avenue to the Bab Doukkala district to visit the *Jardin Majorelle*. Judging from the amount of tour buses parked outside the garden, this spot is a very popular one with tourists. We spent over an hour here. The Jardin Majorelle is a twelve-acre botanical garden designed by the French landscape painter Jacques Majorelle, who went to Marrakech in 1919 and fell in love with the place, making it his home. One of the colors he used extensively throughout the garden and its buildings is a bright cobalt blue, which became known as Majorelle Blue. He opened the garden to the public in 1947. Eighteen years after Majorelle's death in 1962, French designer Yves Saint Laurent and his one time male partner and business associate, Pierre Berge, purchased the garden. So grateful was the French designer for his acceptance by the city (considering his status as a controversial gay fashion icon) that he eventually donated the garden to Marrakech. When Yves Saint Laurent died in 2008 his ashes were scattered inside the garden.

I have seen many botanical gardens in my day, but nothing quite like this. The garden that Jacques Majorelle started cultivating in the mid-1920s has morphed into a psychedelic desert landscape consisting of more than 300 plant species from five different continents. Strolling through the meandering walkways you are confronted by a forest of dense green bamboo (people have actually scratched graffiti into the stalks) and an assortment of fascinating cacti (from tall and skinny to wide and star-burst) and uniquely placed palm trees, all of it surrounded by a colorful mix of fuchsia bougainvillea and other flowers sprouting out of equally colorful terracotta planters situated throughout the garden. In the area where Yves Saint Laurent's ashes were scattered, there is a monument to him in the shape of a ridged stone column.

For me, the most interesting aspect of this visit was not the gardens (as nice as they were), but the art and Berber museums set up inside Majorelle's blue villa. The art museum includes contemporary works, pieces by Majorelle, and a collection of Yves Saint Laurent items. But I found the Berber museum, a small three-room affair, to be phenomenal. I learned more about Berber culture inside this tiny museum than on the entire trip. As we entered to our right was a rack containing information cards (in various languages) that explained each of the displays. *And what amazing displays!* We saw jewelry pieces, tools, furniture, pots, weapons and even mannequins dressed in the individual costumes of the various Berber tribes inhabiting Morocco. Photography was not permitted, so I purchased an official guidebook to remind me of what I had seen. If

you visit the Jardin Majorelle, I recommend you take some extra time to see the Berber Museum. It is small, but definitely worth it.

We left the Jardin Majorelle and drove back to the Djemaa el Fna Square. Aziz had told the other members of the group that if they wanted a ride back to the hotel to meet at the square by no later than 6:00pm. This gave us approximately an hour and a half to explore on our own. Lily suggested we ask Aziz where to go inside the medina. He not only recommended a few places, he agreed to take us there if we hurried our pace (due to the time). Pam, Lily, Javier and I followed Aziz through the centuries-old alleyways of the medina in back of the Djemaa El Fna. The others went off to do some shopping. We quickly traversed a section of covered narrow streets, passing the Souk el Haddadine (the old iron works marketplace) and seemingly endless shops and stalls, and came upon the ruins of the 12<sup>th</sup> century *Koubba Ba'adiyn*, the oldest building in Marrakech. The site dates back to the Almoravid Dynasty that founded the city. In 1147, the Almohads defeated the Almoravids and tore down all traces of the their legacy, but somehow overlooked this building, which is the only surviving structure from the Almoravid era. Its main feature is an elegant domed tower that juts up from the ground where it was excavated. Archeologists believe it was part of a bathing complex adjacent to some long-vanished mosque. According to Aziz, it is regarded as a good example of early North African architecture. Next to the Koubba Ba'adiyn is the Museum of Marrakech. Aziz paid for our entrance fee and gave us thirty minutes to tour inside.

The Museum of Marrakech is housed in the Mnebhi Palace, the residential mansion of Mehdi Mnebhi, who served as foreign minister to Sultan Abdelaziz IV (1894 – 1908). It was built at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is fairly typical of a Moroccan *riad* or big house, with a large inner courtyard surrounded by various spacious rooms. The floors are covered with detailed tiling, the walls with intricate mosaics, and the ceilings with artfully carved cedar wood. The inner courtyard has been covered and has an enormous chandelier hanging from its center. The house has quite a history. Some say even *cursed*. Mnebhi lost the house to T'hami el Glaoui when Sultan Abdelaziz was overthrown by his older brother; T'hami lost the house after Independence during the mid-1950s. In 1965, the building became the site of Marrakech's first girls' school, but the upkeep was too costly to maintain and the school closed. In 1997, the Omar Benjelloun Foundation purchased the house and after extensive restoration work, converted it into a museum. Aziz waited outside in the open courtyard café in front of the house while the four of us went inside. The displays included Fassi pottery, Rabati embroidery, inlaid daggers, an old pottery wheel, and several large copper stoves used for heating water. In the restored *hammam* (steam room) were framed photographs dating back over a hundred years, and the kitchen area was set up as an art gallery, with unusual contemporary and abstract works on display from different parts of the world. I loved this visit (I am a *huge* museum fan), and what impressed me the most was not the items on display (which were okay) but rather the house, which is actually one *big* display in itself. The idea that T'hami el Glaoui stole this palace from its previous owner was worth the admission price alone! The four of us hurried from room to room (the displays were not numerous) at times stopping to pose and photograph one another.

By 5:15pm we exited the museum to rendezvous with Aziz, surprised to find him sitting with Noelani and Helene in the café. I couldn't believe Helene found this place through all the twisting alleyways! Before we returned to the square, Aziz walked us over to the nearby *Ali ben Youssef Medersa*, the 14<sup>th</sup> century Koranic learning center established by the Merenid Dynasty. This was once the largest Islamic school in North Africa, and, according to Aziz, looks splendid from the inside. Unfortunately, we did not have enough time to go in, so we settled for taking photographs of the famous Arabic blessing that hangs above the entryway, which reads: "You who enter my door, may your highest hopes be exceeded" Afterwards, we followed our tour guide back to the square where most of the others were already waiting on the bus.

We reached the Kensi Farah Hotel by 6:30pm. Gate 1 offered an optional dinner-show excursion that evening which included a horse-drawn carriage ride, but Helene had convinced both Noelani and I to eat at La Mamounia Hotel, instead. Actually, Helene had been pitching this idea for some time, and we agreed after listening to her spirited description of La Mamounia, a historic 5-star hotel built during the 1920s and spread out over 20 acres of idyllic gardens. Helene, who is of British descent, was fond of telling us that Winston Churchill *loved* this place, calling La Mamounia "the most lovely spot in the whole world".

The history of La Mamounia is fascinating. Situated just within the ochre-colored ramparts of the Marrakech medina, the establishment is a throwback to the grand hotels of the early 1900s, a blend of Art Deco and Moorish styles. The hotel is named after its famous garden, which once belonged to Prince Moulay Mamoun, the son of an 18<sup>th</sup> century sultan. The list of foreign dignitaries who have stayed here is legendary, from Charles de Gaulle to Ronald Reagan to Nelson Mandela. Churchill and Roosevelt met here while attending the Casablanca Conference in 1943. And the litany of famous celebrities over the past 80 years who have frequented this elegant establishment is equally impressive. Great movies have been filmed here. In fact, great movies have been *inspired* here. I read that Alfred Hitchcock got the idea for his thriller "The Birds" after opening his suite's balcony door and being startled by a flock of pigeons. The hotel has undergone several renovations since it was built – during the 1950s, an expansion period added 100 additional rooms, and during the 1980s a wider, more modern entranceway was designed – but the place still retains its 1920s Art Deco charm.

Lily, Javier, Denise and Vanessa wanted to tag along, so we agreed to meet in the lobby at 7:30pm. Before returning to my room to shower again and get ready, Helene gave me an up-and-down glance and suggested I wear 'something nice'. I guess this was her way of telling me my customary plaid shirts and nylon zip-off pants would simply not do at La Mamounia, with its highbrow upper crust clientele. I am not a slave to fashion, though, and rarely (read: *never*) bring anything fancy to wear on my guided tours. The best I could do was throw on a pair of black jeans together with a checkered long-sleeved shirt (the nicest shirt I had, vaguely resembling a tablecloth). We set out for La Mamounia without Helene, who had gone ahead in a cab to secure a table for us (we weren't sure if the restaurant required a reservation). We walked the same path we had taken the previous night heading to the Djemaa El Fna Square. When we arrived at the

hotel entrance, Helene was already waiting for us. The security detail immediately assumed we were not guests – *my checkered shirt didn't fool anyone!* – and asked us what we wanted. Helene told them in French that we were having dinner there (I could have sworn one of the guards rolled his eyes) and we continued into the main lobby, passing a Rolls Royce and several Mercedes limos parked in front. The immense lobby was simply stunning. I was a tad intimidated.

Helene gathered us together and broke the news concerning dinner. La Mamounia has three restaurants, each with its own culinary specialty: Moroccan, Italian or French. We had tentatively agreed to eat in the Moroccan one because, well, quite frankly, when in Rome, etc, etc. Helene had perused the menu and the cheapest item (without drink, appetizer or dessert) was 800 dirhams, or roughly \$100. Some of us balked, not wanting to pay well over a hundred dollars apiece for a meal. *I know I didn't*. Noelani was in a transitional phase back home, and she didn't want to spend this kind of money, either. Javier didn't seem to mind, but his mom had some concerns over the cost. The DeAlba sisters looked like they were game for anything. Helene, looking so lovely and sophisticated in her new green *djellaba* dress, had her heart set on eating in this hotel. We decided to take a stroll around the gardens while the sun was still out and discuss our dinner options further. To reach the garden terrace we had to cross the incredibly long bar lounge, an atmospheric throwback to the 1930s. We came across a gigantic pool, beyond this were acres of well-maintained gardens and tree-lined pathways. The smell from the blooming flowers and orchids was heavenly.

As night fell, we reentered the hotel and sat briefly in the bar lounge debating where to have dinner. The idea of eating in the lounge itself came up, but we preferred to sit in a restaurant. Helene suggested we look at the other two eating establishments in the hotel. The Italian restaurant was just as pricey, and no one really wanted to eat *Italian* in Morocco. So we went upstairs to the French restaurant and checked their menu. By now I think Helene was getting embarrassed and a bit frustrated. Finally, hunger set in and we decided to go French. In the end, I figured, *what the heck, I'm on vacation and I have my visa card*. I invited Noelani to have dinner on me. The waiters put together a few tables for us and we sat down to a delicious meal. Even the whipped butter for the bread was outstanding. I had the grilled lamb with garlic mashed potatoes and a separate order of escargot for appetizers that I shared with Noelani. We also shared dessert, a dish called the Churchill Soufflé (a very light, custard dish served very warm with a side of creamy orange sherbet). Actually, everyone took turns sampling each other's desserts. We had a great time. Helene entertained us with some funny impersonations of radio callers from her California Valley teenage years. And for all our concerns about the cost, the bill was quite reasonable considering the place and atmosphere. After dinner, Helene decided to take a petit cab back to our hotel; the rest of us walked. It had been another long and rewarding – albeit exhausting – day, and I went straight to bed as soon as I reached my room.

## Day Ten

I awoke at 5:00am. My throat was still sore, accompanied now by a slight case of the sniffles. I hoped I wasn't coming down with a cold. I took a long hot shower, skipped my shave and ordered a thermos of hot water from room service (some of which I used to gargle). I spent an hour writing in my journal, trying to sort out the sequence and descriptions of the previous day's activities. By 7:00am I went down for breakfast.

Today's itinerary consisted of only one thing: a daylong optional excursion to the fabulous seaside city of Essaouira. Everyone in the group had signed up for it. By 8:00am we boarded our bus for the long drive to the western coastline. As we left the city we passed the large Marrakech train station and someone asked Aziz about the railway system in the country. He told us south of the city there are no railroad tracks due to the mountainous terrain. Currently, the railway system of Morocco follows an arc from Marrakech northward, along the western coastline, and then juts across the *Fez-Boulemane* region, extending northward again towards the eastern border with Algeria before heading south and ending in the small city of Bouarfa in the *Oriental* region of the country. Most of the central mountainous and southern desert areas of Morocco do not have rail access, or, for that matter, hardly any roadways. Public access roads are a relatively new concept for most Moroccans. In fact, when the El Glaoui brothers conspired to topple Sultan Abdelaziz IV in 1907, there wasn't a single road or train track in the entire country!

We drove for a couple of hours through alternating landscapes of rolling hills and flat green farmlands, passing groves of olive and argan trees, and an occasional vineyard. To our right we could still see the snow-capped mountains of the High Atlas. Halfway to Essaouira we crossed the center of Chichaoua, a small town where – according to Aziz – many of its residents work in France. You can usually tell if a town or village has many foreign-working residents, because there is quite a bit of house construction going on. Apparently, working abroad is far more lucrative than working at home. About thirty minutes later we made a pit stop at a café in the village of Sidi Mokhtar. I had a delicious latte and some cookies. Noelani took this time to videotape sisters Katrina and Elysia for her Kindness Conversations project. Several years earlier, Noelani began videotaping random individuals discussing the topic of 'kindness' and what it meant to them. She has posted these very interesting video segments on YouTube and has published two books based on her work. I did my Kindness conversation when we were in India together. Noelani usually has her video camera nearby and will ask *anyone* if they'd like to be interviewed. It is a commendable project, and I encourage my readers to go online (at YouTube) to check out these fascinating videos.

From Sidi Mokhtar we continued westward along Route 207. The road was incredibly flat from here on out. During this portion of the ride Aziz touched upon various topics concerning Islam, although I cannot recall everything he said. I remember he briefly talked about the traditional dress of Muslim women in Morocco, the haik and the hooded djellaba as opposed to the burka worn in the Middle East. He mentioned the influence of Islam on the nation's laws and constitution, and told us that while Morocco is a traditional Muslim country it is not regarded as a religiously conservative one. Under Islam, children are taught to pray at age seven, and are obligated by age ten. But by the age of fourteen, it becomes a matter of free will whether they pray or not.

He also spoke about the differences between *Sunni* and *Shia* (Shiite) Muslims. Essentially, the two main sub-groups of Islam share most of the same fundamental Islamic beliefs and articles of faith. The difference is more political than religious. But over the centuries, these political differences have spawned practices and positions that have spiritual overtones and have created enormous – often bitter and violent – divides between the two groups of worshippers. The split began over who should lead the faithful following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. A group of the Prophet's closest companions advocated electing the most capable for the job. Those who felt the same way were called *Sunnis*, which in Arabic means “those who follow in the tradition of the Prophet”. They elected Abu Bakr, a close friend and advisor of the Prophet, to become the first Caliph of the Islamic nation. On the other side was a group of Muslims who believed that the leadership of the faithful should have stayed within the Prophet's family, or those he specifically appointed, or by Imams anointed by God Himself (how one determines this I'm not sure). This group believed that upon the Prophet's death, leadership should have passed to his cousin/son-in-law, Ali bin Abu Talib. This group became known as *Shia* Muslims (the term *Shia* refers to a loyal group of supporters, in this case, supporters of Ali). Historically, Shia Muslims do not recognize the elected Sunni religious leaders, and have always followed their own Imams. Currently, 85% of Muslims worldwide are Sunnis. Most of the Shia Muslims are found in Iran, Iraq and in large minority communities in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain. Morocco is a Sunni Muslim country.

A short while after leaving Sidi Mokhtar we came upon an incredibly surreal scene: *a tree full of goats*. I kid you not. If Aziz hadn't told us about this beforehand, I would have thought I was having a monumental “Lucy in the sky” flashback from my acid-dropping college days! We stopped next to a field of argan trees, and the one nearest to the road had half a dozen goats perched on its branches. In this particular region, goats sometimes climb the lower branches of the argan tree to eat its leaves and fruit. At some point, local herders realized that tourists found this amusing and got an idea. Why not place goats on all the branches? According to Aziz, the herders place their most docile animals on the branches of an argan tree next to the road for a couple of hours each day hoping to entice a busload of tourists (like us). They usually charge two to five dirhams per person to take pictures. I'm not sure if this constitutes animal abuse (I mean, the goats didn't seem harmed in any way, just perplexed, standing immobile on the tree limbs staring back at us) but this definitely warranted a photograph, so I guiltily coughed up the coin and took my shot. Please don't think I'm a *baaaaaaaaaaaaaa'd* person!



Not far from the city of Essaouira we made another ‘official store’ visit in the small rural town of Ounara. We stopped to visit the Marjana Cooperative, a locally owned business that produces argan oil for both consumption and cosmetic products. Several years ago the sister of the current king began encouraging and sponsoring cooperatives like this one, owned and operated by women in the hopes of not only alleviating economic hardships amongst the poor but also to empower women to become independent via entrepreneurship. The Marjana Cooperative is one of the more successful enterprises started under that program. Argan trees are endemic to Morocco where they grow well in harsh, drought-prone areas. The oil is extracted from the kernels within the tree nut. In addition to its uses as a cooking oil (and for bread dipping), Moroccans view argan oil as a wonder drug, touting its healing properties for a wide range of ailments, from treating skin conditions to curing digestive disorders.

We were met in the parking lot by a young female representative who led us to a one-story processing plant where a group of local women – dressed in colorful djellabas – were seated on the floor, their backs to the wall, performing the various stages of argan oil extraction. We also met the president of the cooperative, a perpetually smiling woman whose demeanor was so cheerful and soothing I would have purchased a dead skunk from her if she had been inclined to sell me one. The representative explained what the workers sitting on the floor were doing. Apparently, extracting oil from an argan nut is an extremely labor-intensive process. It requires releasing the kernels from its fruit. The process begins by first letting the fruit dry in the open air and removing the fleshy pulp around the nut. The next step, the most difficult part, is cracking open the nut to get at the two or three kernels inside. Engineers have tried, and failed, to develop a machine to crack these incredibly sturdy nut casings open. The problem is the different sizes of the nuts, which can be round, oval or conical in shape, making a uniform mechanical process useless. So releasing the kernels must be done by hand. And no better set of hands exists than those of local Berber women who have been cracking open argan nuts for centuries. The woman sat with their legs crossed in front of them, cradling a large stone. They would place an argan nut on the stone and then pound the top of it with a smaller rock. The nut casing would split in half and the kernels deposited into a nearby bowl. According to the representative, these women were paid by the weight of the kernels they extracted on a daily basis. There were no set hours for the workers (since they all had family duties to attend to), they would simply come in during whatever free period they had. And it wasn’t as easy as it looked, either. Noelani tried her hand at argan nut cracking and barely got one open after several attempts (and quite a few chuckles from the local women).

The next step in the process was to pass these kernels to a group of women who mashed them repeatedly until a dark, brown oily paste was secreted. I’m not sure what happened next, but the representative told us there were two types of oils produced, one for cooking and one for cosmetic or medicinal purposes. We were taken to a large store where the shelves were stocked with numerous products made from the argan oil. We were told that all of the profits benefit the cooperative, supporting the local economy (and the women in particular); although, I don’t believe this sales pitch was even necessary

since many of the products were beauty supplies...and from my experience, selling beauty supplies to a group of women (tourists or not) was about as easy as selling ice cream to a bunch of fat kids. If you're wondering, I purchased a bottle of aftershave lotion.

From Ounara, it took us roughly thirty more minutes before we reached Essaouira. Aziz stopped the bus on a hill overlooking the city so we could take panoramic photos of this historic seaport. Almost blocking the entrance into the harbor is Mogador Island, a nature reserve now off-limits to most visitors. There is an abandoned prison on the island built during the second part of the 1800's. We continued to the waterfront and spent the next several hours touring this amazing port city. Aziz suggested we might want to wear our jackets or coats since the winds were quite chilly this time of year. The beach was mostly deserted. Because of the strong Atlantic winds, Essaouira has never been highly regarded as a summer retreat by the normally beach-crazy Europeans, regardless of its long and wide sandy shoreline. But it *is* a major attraction for international wind and kite surfers year round. Part of its charm is that it hasn't been taken over completely by tourism (at least not in the winter, when the cold winds keep most people away; in the summertime it is packed with *Moroccan* beachgoers who don't seem to mind the wind).

Essaouira's history is a curious mix of foreigners, regional tribal peoples and temporary conquerors. Going all the way back to the time of the Phoenicians (500 BC), this natural harbor has always been prized and, periodically, controlled by foreigners. The discovery of Tyrian purple, a coveted dye made from sea snails found along the coastline of Essaouira, made this a very valuable trading post during Roman times. During the early 1500's, the Portuguese established several fortresses along the Western Atlantic coastline, including one in Essaouira. The Portuguese named the city Mogador (probably after Sidi Mogdoul, a Muslim saint from the Middle Ages who is buried here). Most of these Portuguese garrisons did not survive long and soon other European powers tried (in vain) to establish a hold on Mogador during the latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. France succeeded in forcing the sultan of Marrakech to sign a treaty giving them preferential trading rights in 1631. Today, the ethnic mix of the city stems from a hearty cultural stew consisting of Arab Chiadma in the north, the Haha Berbers in the south, the Gnawa peoples from even further south into Africa and the influences of the Portuguese and French.

The architectural layout of the city is also unique, blending European and Moroccan styles. In 1764, Sultan Mohammed III, an early ruler of the current Alaouite dynasty, commissioned the French architect Theodore Cornut to build a modern city in the barren sand and wind that he later called Essaouira (which means 'well designed'). Cornut patterned the city to resemble the port towns of Brittany, France. But once inside its walls, Essaouira takes on the familiar feel of a traditional Moroccan medina, with narrow twisting alleyways, souks and fabulous riads. Sultan Mohammed III signed peace treaties with numerous European powers (after throwing some of them out of his port cities), and invited English and Jewish traders to do business in Essaouira. The sultan was also able to contain the nefarious activities of the Barbary corsairs (pirates) who wrecked havoc along the coastal shipping lanes. During this period, Essaouira became a vital trading link

between Timbuktu (Mali) and Europe, bringing the many goods of the caravan trade route (ivory, gold, salt, ostrich feathers, etc) to the outside world.

When the French converted Morocco into a protectorate in 1912, they changed the name of Essaouira back to Mogador, and established a strong military, administrative and economic presence in the city, although its role as a major trading post had all but ceased. Following Independence in 1956, this now sleepy little seaport reverted back to using the name Essaouira. Over the past fifty years the city has become a center for local sculptors and painters, inspired by a museum created by sculptor Boujemaa Lakhdar and the opening of an art gallery by M. Frederic Damgaard. During the 1960's and 70's, Essaouira became famous as a 'hippie hangout' after notable musicians like Jimi Hendrix and Cat Stevens visited the city.

The real charm of Essaouira, though, lies not in its limited formal sites (the 18<sup>th</sup> century fortress walls and historical buildings) but rather the ability to lose oneself in this timeless seaside medina, its souks, galleries, seafood markets and wonderful cafes, to climb the historic ramparts lined with cannons, to take in the fishing pier with its trawlers docked side-by-side amongst hundreds of small blue wooden vessels, to gaze at the sea crashing repeatedly against the jagged rock barriers beyond the shoreline and smell that familiar smell of the ocean, to browse leisurely in its shops. They are no pushy vendors here. And you will find unbelievable works of art, from woodcarvings to original paintings, all at a fraction of what you'd pay elsewhere in the country. The freshly caught seafood sold in the restaurants is relatively inexpensive (and delicious!). This was one of my favorite places on the tour, I only wish we could have spent the night here.

A local female guide named Rashida met us near the waterfront and led us to the fishing harbor right outside the massive defensive walls of the city. I suffer from tinnitus (ringing in the ears) and sometimes the slightest background noise can make it difficult for me to hear someone speaking. Such was the case with Rashida, whose accent and lack of vocal projection made it impossible for me to understand what she was saying unless I was standing right next to her. After a while I stopped trying to focus on what she was lecturing about and began photographing the pier area. One thing I did pick up was that Morocco, in 1777, became the first country in the world to officially recognize the newly established United States of America. In fact, George Washington had asked the sultan if he could afford American vessels protection from the Barbary pirates, seeing as how these new 'Americans' were at war with England and needed to keep their trade routes open. According to Rashida, the U.S. Navy was actually created in response to these pirate attacks off the western coastline of Morocco.

Large fishing trawlers shared the pier with hundreds of small wooden rowboats painted a bright blue, fastened and held together by thick rope. Piles of fishing nets were everywhere. Considering the amount of boats docked in the harbor, I didn't see many fishermen, and wondered if they go out late at night or very early in the morning. From here, we continued into the town itself, walking through the massive stone gate entrance. Essaouira is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a perfect example of an 18<sup>th</sup> century fortified town based on a European model. We came upon a large public square before

entering the actual medina. Rashida walked us through a section of the old town, to the fortress. We climbed a wide stone ramp to the top of the battlements facing the Atlantic Ocean; huge cannons were lined from one end of the ramparts to the other, creating what I could only imagine was a frightening defensive barrage against bygone invaders. According to Rashida, the rocky barriers just beyond the shoreline made it difficult for enemy ships to get too close to the city, and the massive (incredibly loud) cannons had a range that could either sink them or keep them at bay.

At this point, Helene and I got separated from the rest of the group. We wandered off to take photographs of one another posing next to the ramparts, or the cannons, or the fortress stone ramps, or to capture beautiful panoramic shots of the city's shoreline. Helene gave me some tips on how to capture good photographic scenes. Before we knew it, our group had disappeared into the medina, leaving us at the fortress. We tried to catch up but we couldn't find them anywhere. The advantage of the Essaouira medina is that it is not as big as the ones in Fez or Marrakech, and thus more easily navigated. We had two and a half hours to explore on our own before returning to the bus so we decided to have lunch and do some shopping on our own.

After strolling through various alleyways we came upon a seafood restaurant in the center of a wide, private courtyard and went inside. We had what can only be described as a *feast*. The restaurant offered a seafood special (for two persons) that cost 250 dirhams (which came to about \$30 with the tip) and included so much food we couldn't eat it all. The only problem was that everything was prepared fresh upon ordering (normally, this wouldn't be considered a drawback, but we were pressed for time) and the meal was brought to us in courses over an hour and fifteen minute period. The first course consisted of either a vegetable or fish soup. Next came the Moroccan *tapas* (cooked veggies and various spreads) with plenty of bread and butter. Finally, the main dish, an enormous platter consisting of five lobster tails, boiled shrimp, grilled fish, fried calamari and mussels. The pace of the service was unhurried (much like the rest of the town) but everything was absolutely delicious. Helene eventually had to tell the waiter/owner in French to please hurry up with the dessert because we were on a tight schedule. The man seemed pained that we could not leisurely enjoy this wonderful meal he and his wife had prepared for us (I think there were only two other tables occupied at that moment). For dessert we were given homemade flan (a caramelized custard) and sweet orange slices sprinkled with cinnamon, followed by coffee. *Whew!* We waddled out of there and spent our remaining time shopping in the medina.

Essaouira artisans offer the visitor quite a few interesting venues. Besides the numerous art shops and galleries, there are handicrafts that are unique to the area. *Thuya* wood-carving is an art form here, passed down from generation to generation since Roman times. *Thuya* (pronounced twee-ya) is a rare tree wood, native to Morocco, which grows only in the southern coastal forests near Essaouira and Agadir. Wood carvers make exquisite cabinets from this precious material. Cedar carvings are also popular here (and cheap). I purchased several jewelry boxes for only a few dollars. Another artistic item one finds in the medina are beautiful tin-glazed painted pottery known as *faience*. And many shops sell locally made Saidi-Souiri carpets and tapestries. You can also find a

tremendous amount of colorful local portraits and paintings, usually depicting life in the medina, some of it interestingly done on camel leather and framed in simple wood. In June of each year, over the course of four days, the Gnawa Festival of World Music is held in Essaouira, attracting hundreds of thousands of music lovers and musicians from all over the world. In addition to traditional Gnawa music, concerts of reggae, jazz and rock are played in what is referred to as the Moroccan 'Woodstock'. It seems as if Essaouira has a little bit of everything to please any artistic palate.

Helene and I strolled the alleyways, stopping from shop to shop. Eventually, we separated to pursue our different buying needs, meeting up later on the bus. I was able to get some dirhams from a local ATM machine before we left Essaouira. By 3:45pm we were heading back to Marrakech, everyone excitedly talking about the visit and what they had done or purchased. Noelani told me that Rashida had taken the group to the fish market where they had lunch, purchasing freshly caught fish that was either fried or broiled as they waited. On the way back we passed a royal motorcade on the opposite side of the road heading towards Essaouira. Aziz thought that perhaps the queen was in the area. Roughly an hour into the drive back, I (and many of my companions) nodded off. I well-deserved nap, I might add.

We reached our hotel in Marrakech by 6:30pm. My throat was very sore. I ordered more hot water from room service to make coffee and gargle. An hour later I met Noelani, Javier, Lily and Pam in the lobby for dinner. Helene did not join us since she wanted to try the casino at the swanky Sofitel Marrakech Hotel nearby. Once again, we walked to the Djemaa El Fna Square (by now we knew the route like the back of our hands) and chose to eat in a famous open-air rooftop café overlooking the main square. It was Saturday night and very, very crowded. The view from the café was excellent, the square and the alleys leading into the medina were lit up brightly; large crowds had gathered around the makeshift kitchens and tents in the middle of the square, street musicians were in full force, and an army of local buyers moved slowly amongst the stalls and shops looking for bargains. It was all very exciting to watch. Pam and I each ordered the personal size pizza (which was pretty good). Noelani ordered a vegetable couscous but it took so long she canceled the order (the restaurant was packed and the staff seemed overwhelmed). I don't think Javier and his mom ate anything. We took great photos of the square from our elevated vantage point and then spent the next hour or so browsing the shops. In one store, Noelani purchased a leather bag after shamelessly flirting with the young salesman. I was able to pick up some unique kitchen magnets for souvenirs. The weather had warmed somewhat (it was no longer chilly) and the walk back to the hotel was very pleasant. I climbed into bed by 11:00pm, thoroughly exhausted.

## **Day Eleven**

I awoke at 5:30am, my throat still sore and I was beginning to feel very congested. As usual, I immediately ordered hot water upon waking and sat down with my first cup of coffee to write in my journal. I showered and shaved and went down to breakfast by 8:00am. Joe and Lynne were already in the restaurant; I let Joe copy my map outlines. I had purchased a road map of Morocco several days earlier and had been highlighting the highways and areas we had visited (in anticipation of writing this travelogue). Joe wanted a copy for his own records. I think Pam also made a copy for her photo book. Later, I joined Noelani, Helene and Debbie at their table. Noelani suggested I try the vegetable soup to ease my cold symptoms. I didn't even know they *had* soup at the breakfast buffet. I downed a delicious hot cup before returning to my room.

We were leaving for Casablanca at 12:30pm, which freed up our entire morning. I repacked my luggage and left it by the side of the bed for later. I had not seen a Christian church since arriving in Morocco, and Aziz mentioned there was an old French Catholic Church (built shortly after the country became a French protectorate) not far from the hotel. I wanted to take a photograph of it and ran the idea past some of the others. Noelani, Pam, Javier and Lily said they wouldn't mind making the walk, so we met at 10:20am in front of the hotel and began our trek. It was a cool, pleasant morning, perfect for a stroll. The neighborhood surrounding our hotel was very modern, with tiled sidewalks and well-maintained public parks. I had my Marrakech map out and was directing our way. *This was a mistake.* As a navigator, I am about as resourceful as a dead end. To make matters worse, the tourist map I was using (purchased at the hotel boutique on our first night in Marrakech) was not very accurate, often omitting insignificant side streets, confusing me into thinking we were further from our destination than we really were.

We headed north along *John F. Kennedy Avenue* and were suppose to make a left on *Moulay el Hassan Avenue* two blocks down, but the map skipped the first side street we came upon and I was thrown off course (compounding my error were the absence of street signs). We overshot our intended avenue and ended up making a left on *Rue Ibn El Qadi*, a quiet residential street lined with apartment building on one side and a public park on the other. Before we knew it, we had reached the ultra-modern plaza known as the *Place du 16 Novembre* in the ritzy Gueliz district, on the intersection of the busy Mohammed V Avenue. Noelani, who hadn't packed her luggage yet and was concerned about the time, decided to head back to the hotel. The rest of us took some photos near the plaza and explored a little more, asking people on the street if they knew where the French Catholic Church was, but nobody did. We hastily retreated the same way we came and inadvertently found *Moulay el Hassan Avenue*. Pam and I (troopers that we were) continued to search for this doggone church while Javier and Lily returned to the hotel. We walked several blocks along this street until we reached Mohammed V Avenue again (this time near the *Place El Hourria*, another plaza) but were unable to locate the site. Frustrated, we headed back to the hotel. Later, when our bus was leaving the city, I asked Aziz just where in the heck was this church. He pointed it out to us as we drove by. I

remember turning to Pam and laughing, it was a small structure hidden behind several buildings. *We would never have found it!*

We spent the next three and a half hours traveling north along National Highway 9 (N9) towards the seaside port of Casablanca, our last stop on the tour. Compared to the scenery we had witnessed thus far (especially our drives through the Atlas Mountains), the ride to Casablanca was pretty boring; some occasional hills, but basically it was flat farmlands most of the way. The road followed a path almost parallel to the railroad tracks that stretch from Marrakech to the coastline. Aziz surprised us by popping in a dvd of the old black and white movie classic *Casablanca* on the bus' entertainment system. It was pretty cool watching Humphrey Bogart outsmart those Nazis while actually traveling to the famed city. By 2:00pm we stopped for lunch at a gas station/grocery store/café in the town of Skhour Rehamna. I ordered a beef *kefta* (minced) patty served with bread and salad (like a burger) and a side of fries. An hour later we were on the road again.

As we got closer to Casablanca, the green hilly farmlands reminded some of my fellow travelers of the Tuscan region of Italy. We reached the outskirts of the city by 4:00pm and passed the Casablanca Technopark, a large cluster of information technology businesses that form Morocco's first industrial park. The complex was created in 2001, and is supervised by the Ministry of Commerce. Currently, more than 130 companies – ranging from large corporations to start-up businesses – are situated here, specializing mostly in IT and software engineering enterprises. Technopark is a joint venture between the government, which put up 35% of the capital, and a consortium of private Moroccan banks that fund the rest.

We continued into the heart of the city, surprised that the streets, for a Sunday afternoon, were empty. Aziz told us there was a big soccer match going on between two of Morocco's biggest teams and most of the city's inhabitants were either at the stadium or watching at home or in cafes. A large police presence was visible on the streets to control the soccer crowds and prevent rioting. As was the case with the other large cities we visited, Aziz had our driver take us on a mini-sightseeing tour before heading to our hotel. He told us that Casablanca is the largest populated city in the country, with more than 4.5 million inhabitants. It also has the largest port in Morocco, something that hasn't changed much since the days of the Phoenicians and Romans. Berbers, who settled in the area around the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, originally built the city on a hill and called the place *Anfa*.

Our bus slowly made its way through the Anfa (hillside) district where wealthy Moroccans live. The streets here are very well maintained and the mansions are hidden behind large protective walls, some with guard gates. We passed the spectacular walled-in palatial residence belonging to the king of Saudi Arabia. We also saw the U.S. Consulate building but were told not to take photographs for security reasons. From here, we made a U-turn and followed the *corniche* (seaside) road along the Atlantic coast back to the downtown area. There were wide pavements and boardwalks along the beach front, filled with shops and restaurants, reminding me – in parts – of both the Jersey shore and Miami Beach. In fact, much of the downtown architecture was designed by the French in

an Art Deco style; it almost felt as if I was back on South Beach (in Florida). We also saw the magnificent Hassan II Mosque built along a promontory facing the Atlantic Ocean (we toured the inside the following day). Just before arriving at our hotel we drove by the new port area of Casablanca, and stopped to photograph Rick's Café, a restaurant developed by a former American diplomat to look like the famed 'gin joint' from the movie classic. Opened in 2004, Rick's Cafe is located inside a thoroughly renovated and restored riad from the 1930's. Several of our group members had dinner there later that evening.

We reached the Novotel Casablanca City Center Hotel (or, as we called it, the Novotel) by 5:10pm. After securing our room entry cards from the front desk we grabbed our luggage and headed to our rooms. I hung the last of my clean clothes in the closet and took another quick shower. My room had a small coffee machine and I made a cup and wrote some notes down in my journal before heading to the lobby at 6:30pm to join Helene, Noelani, Denise and Vanessa for dinner. We agreed to go to a restaurant called Les Fleurs just down the street from our hotel that Aziz recommended. The place reminded me of a typical diner back home, complete with booths and a Formica counter. The food was good and reasonably priced. Other members of our group had elected to eat here, as well. Lily and Javier joined us and at nearby tables were friends Ann, Martha, Patricia and Maureen, and the Bandung Family. I ordered the lamb ribs with rice, veggies and fries. Denise had the *pastilla*, a Moroccan meat pie made with squab (fledgling pigeon). When we were in Ouarzazate, she also sampled the pastilla made with pigeon and camel. She shared it with the group. It was tasty, like a crustier potpie. For dessert, everyone ordered (and shared) something different; I had the Napoleon cake, Helene had the carrot cake, the DeAlba sisters had an assortment of cookies, and Noelani had the driest piece of orange pound cake imaginable (it tasted like stale cornbread).

We finished dinner at 8:45pm, the group splitting up. Helene took a taxi with Javier and Lily to go visit Rick's Café (which was celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary). Noelani, Denise, Vanessa and I spent the next hour or so strolling the streets of central Casablanca. We headed east along the *Avenue des Forces Armees Royales* (the Royal Armed Forces Avenue) a major urban thoroughfare of the city. It was dark and pretty desolate, and we realized we were going the wrong way; all the action was along the *Place des Nations Unies* (the United Nations Plaza) in the opposite direction. We made a U-turn and walked several blocks to the plaza. It was amazing; the streets were packed with large crowds of soccer revelers. Just to the northwest of the plaza is the original medina of Casablanca. A rather run-down looking area that highlights (through its dilapidated alleyways and small size) just how much the French expanded and improved this port city. We crossed the wide street, observing the restored Clock Tower near the United Nations Plaza, and briefly walked through its marketplace, but the shops were already closing for the night. There was trash everywhere and the locals here seemed suspicious at best, so we opted to join the safety of the large crowds along the modern *Rue Allah ben Abdellah*, walking down some of the active side streets filled with restaurants and outdoor cafes. The newly built tramline runs along this area, probably why this side of the street was so congested at this hour. People were continually arriving to catch a tram ride home. Tired of walking, we sat near the tram station and spent the next ten minutes people-gazing. At that



moment, we could have been on any city street corner in America. Families, kids playing, young couples strolling. The more I travel the more I realize how similar we all are.

We decided to call it a night and walked back to our hotel by 10:00pm. None of the ladies were big coffee drinkers, so they were nice enough to give me the Nescafe packets from their rooms (I was almost out of instant coffee!) before we retired for the evening. Exhausted, I tried to watch the BBC news broadcast but fell asleep within minutes.

## Day Twelve

I awoke at 3:00am feeling terrible. My throat was red raw and painfully swollen and my sinuses were so congested I could only breath through my mouth (which is probably why I awoke so abruptly). I wearily got out of bed and allowed some water to boil in the coffee machine so I could gargle with it. Next, I rummaged through my kit bag to see what I could take to help alleviate my symptoms. I downed 1000 mg of Vitamin C, 100 mg of zinc, a strong nasal decongestive, two Advils, and for good measure, I placed a nasal strip over the bridge of my nose to help facilitate my breathing. This did the trick, and about forty minutes later I was able to go back to sleep. When I awoke at 6:30am I was feeling much better. I shaved, showered and had my usual gallon of coffee, writing in my journal until it was time for breakfast. That morning I sat with Debbie, Helene, Noelani, Joe and Lynne.

Today was our last full day in Morocco; our itinerary included a morning tour of the city. We were on the bus by 9:00am. Normally, a local guide would have accompanied us on the city tour, but Aziz is from Casablanca so he was literally our *resident* expert. We drove to the United Nations Plaza (the large traffic junction that constitutes the center of the city) and headed east along Mohammed V Boulevard, one of Casablanca's main arteries. Aziz gave us a brief historical background on the city and pointed out many of the more famous structures along the way.

Casablanca, with its population of 4.5 million, is the largest city in the Maghreb region of North Africa, and probably one of the most important, economically, in the entire continent. Casablanca serves as Morocco's largest port and industrial center, making it the major business hub of the country. The largest population of Moroccan Jews lives in this city; many are descendants of the Sephardic Jews who originally settled in the area when it was known as Anfa, at times they scattered elsewhere due to civil strife or foreign invasions, but returned to the city over the centuries to establish what is today a thriving business community. Like most coveted seaports, Casablanca has a colorful history. The first to set up shop here were Berber fishermen during the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC, followed by the Phoenicians and the Romans. During the early Middle Ages the city

became the regional capital of a group of Berber tribes known as the *Barghawata*. Invading Muslim dynasties took turns controlling the port, and during the early part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Barbary pirates used the harbor as a safe haven. These Anfa pirates so terrorized the sea lanes along the Atlantic coastline that Portugal was forced to send several military expeditions to subdue them, eventually taking over the port and giving it its new name, Casa Branca, which means 'white house' in Portuguese.

Between 1580 and 1640, the Spanish and Portuguese crowns were held by the same king and the city came under Spain's control (although it was governed by an autonomous Portuguese administration). When royal ties between Spain and Portugal splintered again, Casablanca reverted back to the Portuguese. In 1755, a devastating earthquake leveled much of the town, and the colony was abandoned by the Europeans. In the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Alaouite Sultan, Mohammed ben Abdallah (Mohammed III) reconstructed the town with the help of Spanish merchants, and gave it its Arabic name, which is the Spanish translation of Casablanca. By now, though, the city had lost most of its luster in terms of being a trading port, and it slowly dwindled down to only several hundred inhabitants by the early 1800's. The big turnaround occurred following Europe's economic boom of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Moroccan goods, notably grains and wool, were in big demand. The fertile plains just outside Casablanca supplied Western Europe with grain while the country's wool merchants provided materials for Great Britain's huge textile industries. Agents and traders flocked back to the port city in droves, and Casablanca was re-established as a major trading port.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the French had secured permission to build an artificial harbor to facilitate the increased shipping activities of the area. In 1907, riots broke out against the French when their builders desecrated a Muslim cemetery in the city, and the French used this as an excuse to send in warships and soldiers to bombard (and subdue) the town. After Morocco was declared a protectorate in 1912, the city came under direct French control. At this point, Casablanca *really* began to expand. Louis Hubert Gonzalve Lyautey, the first resident-general of the French Protectorate, hired the famous architect Henri Prost to redesign the city and turn it into the 'jewel' of the French colonies. By the 1930's the city became a European architectural wonder, with wide avenues and colonial buildings designed under a new style known as Parisian Art Deco. And while much of this 'new' city still exists today, Casablanca's population has ballooned beyond its current housing capacity. The city is surrounded by over-crowded shantytowns that have become the source of much social unrest. But regardless of its social ills, Casablanca is perhaps the most cosmopolitan city in all of Morocco. The influence of international trade on Casablanca has had a major impact on the city's residents, who are more open to Western ideas than anywhere else in the country. You can see this in the way the people dress and hang out together; in other more conservative parts of the country men and women's activities are often segregated, but in Casablanca you will witness mixed crowds everywhere, at cafes, hip nightclubs, the beach. This is the uniqueness of the city; it offers a glimpse of what modern Muslim societies might look like as they press forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

On our drive eastward along Mohammed V Avenue we could already see the heavy influence of French architecture on this city. Mixed in among the modern structures were entire blocks of colonial buildings designed under a style known as Mauresque, a blend of European influences of the time with traditional Islamic features such as arches, columns, scroll and tilework. During the 1930's the new Art Deco style (characterized by ornate wrought-iron balconies, staircases, windows, rounded exterior corners and carved facades and friezes) was added to the Mauresque architecture, creating a wonderful new urban landscape. Even the most neglected apartment buildings we saw, with clotheslines crisscrossing the balconies, had a certain grace and charm.

At one point, we turned onto Hassan II Avenue heading south and stopped at the Mohammed V Central Plaza. We got off the bus to take photographs. Directly fronting the plaza is the *Palais of Justice* (the law court building) with its vaulted hall, and adjacent to it, on the southern end of the square was the *Wilaya*, the old police headquarters now housing the governor's office, topped with a modernist clock tower. Just to the north of this square is the equally impressive main post office, designed with arches and stone columns and decorated with interesting mosaics. Like most of the area, the French built all three structures.

From here we continued to the southeast corner of the city to visit the *Habous Quarter*, known as the Nouvelle (new) Medina, built during the 1930's. Aziz told us there were eight political districts within Casablanca, each with its own mayor and city hall. The Habous Quarter is one of the more famous districts because the Royal Palace is located here. Our first stop in the Habous Quarter was at the Mahakma du Pasha, a parliamentary building used by the courts of justice and as a reception hall during special state functions. We spent about thirty minutes touring the larger halls and courtyards of this incredible structure. Since this is an active government building our access was limited, but what we did see was quite impressive. Constructed between 1948 and 1952 (with a heavy focus on Spanish-Moorish architecture) it is comprised of more than 60 ornate rooms with intricately carved wooden ceilings. We entered through a large arabesque archway and walked through several halls with beautiful stuccowork, sculptures, wrought-iron railings and earthenware floor tiles. A portrait of the king and his father adorned separate walls. Enormous chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceilings. The hallways were covered in mosaic; the doors painted in a traditionally Islamic green color. Columned balconies containing government offices surrounded the open garden courtyards. The building was absolutely gorgeous. And there was a solemnity to the place, as if you were inside a mosque. It was Monday, a work day, yet we hardly heard a peep from the staff members who occasionally popped out of an office and disappeared down a hallway. Aziz told us we were lucky to have been allowed in; although admission is free, the building is sometimes closed to the public due to the nature of its government function.

We left the Mahakma du Pasha building and walked several blocks north to the Royal Palace. Aziz spoke to the sentries posted at the gate and they permitted us to enter the large courtyard in front of the palace to take photographs. This was only allowed because the king was not currently staying in Casablanca. Normally, the grounds are off-limits to

the public, and for good reason; earlier in the month there was a group of protestors just outside the royal gates. Apparently, His Majesty likes to keep on the move. We took our photos of the palace and quickly moved on ourselves.

Aziz led us on a short walking tour through the Nouvelle Medina nearby. The French built the Habous Quarter during the 1930s in order to facilitate the rural exodus that had been ongoing since the 1920s. It was their attempt to create a traditional Moroccan medina but with a European flair. Instead of the usual labyrinth of twisting alleyways, the French built neat rows of streets with shops and a mosque surrounded by a strip of lawn, typical of the church-centered villages one would see in Europe. Aziz stopped in front of one home to explain the concept of the ornate doors leading into the house. Made of heavy wood, most of the doors in the medina were arch-shaped (like horseshoes) for good luck and had either elaborate carvings or were studded with metal work. Another unique aspect were the door knockers, many in the form of a small black hand known as the Hand of Fatima (named after the Prophet's daughter) that is supposed to ward off evil spirits. According to Aziz, the locals knock in a certain way to inform the females of the house if a man is at the door so they can put on their veils. Prior to returning to the bus, we stopped for a short break in one of the café-bakeries within the medina (the Habous Quarter is famous for its bakeries), most of us ordered coffee and sampled the delicious box of cookies Mary purchased and was nice enough to share with us.

From the Habous Quarter we headed back north towards the Atlantic coastline to visit the Hasan II Mosque, making a brief stop at the plaza known as the *Place de l'Europe* – along *Mohamed Zerktouni Boulevard* – to tour the Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church, perhaps the nicest church in the entire country. According to my online research, Morocco has approximately 20,000 Catholics; most are expatriates from Spain or France. Construction of Our Lady of Lourdes started during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but was abandoned briefly after Independence was declared. The inside work was so beautiful that King Mohammed V allowed its completion in 1959. Although it looks nothing like the famed church in France, it is spectacular in its own right. From the outside, it resembles a large concrete arch, and one might easily mistake it for something other than a church, but inside is a wonderful display of stain-glass windows that will take your breath away. The windows line the entire sides of the nave and parts of the high concrete ceiling, depicting scenes from the bible with stunning detail and colors. When you first enter the church, the sunlight shining through the stain-glass creates a wondrous kaleidoscope of hues and shades that cast saintly shadows on the pews. Adjacent to the church is a grotto filled with prayer candles.

From Our Lady of Lourdes we continued north along *Moulay Youssef Boulevard*, passing the *Parc de la Ligue Arabe* (the Arab League Park), the largest open space in the city. On the northwest edge of this park is the imposing white structure of the 1930s-built *Cathedrale du Sacre Coeur* (Sacred Heart of Jesus), a once graceful cathedral designed with neo-gothic influences that was deconsecrated in 1956 and is now quite dilapidated on the inside, according to Aziz. A short drive later we reached the Hasan II Mosque. Our morning tour of Casablanca ended here. If we wanted to take the one-hour tour inside the mosque (with an official guide) it would cost us an additional 120 dirhams apiece. I

thought it was a mistake on the part of Gate 1 Travel to not include this site tour with our free itinerary. The most amazing thing you will see in Casablanca is the Hassan II Mosque. In fact, it is touted this way, and recommended by all tour companies and guidebooks as one of the reasons for visiting the city. About one third of the group did not want to go inside (this included Noelani and Helene for some reason); Aziz had our driver take those members back to the hotel so they could sightsee on their own, and told the rest of us the bus would return to pick us up near the entrance once the mosque tour was completed.

Built for the occasion of King Hassan II's 60th birthday, the temple was completed in 1993. By far, the Hassan II Mosque is the most stunning *modern* mosque I have ever seen, and I have now seen quite a few of them in my travels. It resembles, on first glance, a typical North African mosque, although much larger in size, a somewhat rectangular building with a single tall minaret. But the comparisons end there. The French architect Michel Pinseau designed the structure, which sits on a rocky outcrop over the Atlantic Ocean adjacent to the shoreline along *Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah Boulevard*. The idea of putting the mosque over the sea is symbolic of the Koranic verse stating that God built his throne upon the water. It is the largest in Africa, and currently listed as the seventh largest mosque in the world in terms of the capacity of worshippers it can hold (25,000 in the actual building and an additional 80,000 in the courtyard outside). But on the inside, few parallel its beauty. The 210-meter high minaret is the tallest structure in the country (and supposedly the tallest religious structure in the world) and has a laser beam directed at Mecca that can be easily seen at night when the entire building is lit up in floodlights. The complex stretches out over 22 acres, costing approximately 585 million euros to construct (more than 800 million in U.S. dollars), making this one of the most expensive public undertakings in Morocco's history at the time (and widely criticized considering that the country was broke; in addition to foreign loans, more than 12 million Moroccans donated monies for its construction). This now landmark building has amenities most mosques do not; worshippers can pray on a centrally heated floor, or enjoy the sunshine or stars through a fully retractable roof, or simply watch the waves of the Atlantic Ocean crash along the rocks beneath the building via a glass floor in the basement area. It is an astonishing house of worship.

When we arrived, a shroud of fog coming in from the Atlantic covered much of the building, concealing parts of the 60-story minaret. But as we waited for Aziz to buy our entry tickets the mist began to lift and we were able to take wonderful photos of the tower and the front of the building. Made of re-enforced concrete cement, the exterior structure is covered with traditional Moroccan design, ornamented with pale blue marble and *Zellij* tile work and displaying bronze, titanium and granite finishes. There were several massive arch-shaped doors leading into the mosque. I believe they have hourly tours, and when it was our turn, we gathered in front of the main entrance with several female guides leading the way (and a rather large group of tourists) and went inside. The cavernous chamber that is the mosque itself just blew me away. The center was a high-ceiling prayer hall, lined with domes, arches, columns and woodwork of such exquisite carvings that it made you stand in awe of it all. More than 6,000 artisans were brought in over a period of five years to delicately create this building. All of the materials used in

the construction of the mosque came from Morocco with the exception of some of the white Italian granite and the 56 glass chandeliers suspended along the sides of the hall. The chamber is so massive that, according to my research, you can fit Paris' Notre Dame inside of it.

We had to remove our shoes by the entrance before entering, and then spent the next hour touring the building. Although the mosque has a first-rate speaker system (hidden from view) the natural acoustics within this enormous structure was not very good and I could barely hear the main guide unless I was standing next to her. After a while I began to venture off on my own to take photos. Running along the sides of the prayer hall were beautifully carved wooden mezzanines used by female worshippers. On the side facing the Atlantic Ocean were massive arabesque doors with intricately patterned wrought-iron work that, when opened, gave you a view of the sea. Our tour group followed the guides downstairs, to the ablution room where a series of round, beautifully polished granite washing fountains filled the area, resembling over-sized saucer cups. Pam and I took turns photographing each other along the fountains and soon discovered that our tour group had moved on without us. We went back upstairs to the prayer hall but our group was not there and we assumed they had already left the mosque. In actuality, the group had descended down into the *hammam* area (a large public steam bath facility). We put on our shoes and followed the exit. We spent the next fifteen minutes or so walking along the outer edges of the mosque, taking spectacular pictures of the waves crashing along the rocky outcrop, waiting for our group to return. I discovered in my research that the mosque needed constant monitoring and restoration work since salt water had permeated the concrete foundation and rusted the steel rebar, causing it to expand in sections and form cracks which can undermine the entire structure.

When we got back on the bus I noticed that only the assistant, Idriss, had accompanied the driver. Someone in the group asked him where Aziz was; his vague reply was that Aziz was attending to a member who had gotten ill or needed some kind of medical attention. Idriss' demeanor did not imply any sense of urgency so I just assumed one of our members probably came down with some sort of stomach ailment. These things happen on foreign tours. But when we arrived at the Novotel at 1:30pm I found a frantic Noelani in the lobby. She told me Helene had gone missing. Noelani was noticeably upset. When I asked her what happened, she told me they got separated near the Hassan II Mosque when Helene got off the bus momentarily to use the bathroom. Other tour members were now gathering in the lobby speculating about what could have happened to her. It began to dawn on us that perhaps the person who needed medical attention was Helene. Noelani tried calling Helene on her cell phone but there was no answer, and then we tried to reach Aziz on his phone. Again, no answer. The more we speculated, the more upset Noelani became.

Eventually, the front desk was able to contact Aziz who told Noelani that Helene had slipped at the mosque and had injured herself and needed to be taken to the hospital. Helene was being X-rayed as he spoke. Aziz did not know the extent of Helene's injuries, but said he would stay with her as long as necessary and notify us of her condition the moment he knew more. Noelani thanked him, but she was not relieved. Helene was her

traveling companion (and they were scheduled to spend several days in Rome after leaving Morocco); not knowing her condition made Noelani very nervous. Because all we could do now was wait for more news, a group of us convinced Noelani to head over to the medina to keep her preoccupied and stop her from worrying so much. Besides, we assured her, Aziz had our cell phone numbers and would call us if there were any new developments.

Javier, Lily, the DeAlba sisters, Noelani and I walked back to the United Nations Plaza. When we reached the medina, Vanessa, Denise and I opted to have lunch at the McDonald's located off *Rue Allah ben Abdellah* (the main street opposite Mohammed V Boulevard) near the tramline. Javier, Lily and Noelani were not hungry and proceeded into the medina. It is a tradition of mine to eat in a McDonald's restaurant in every country I visit. I like comparing the quality of the Big Mac and fries. Despite the negative worldwide opinions about American fast food, every Mickey D's I've been to outside of the U.S. has always been packed. This place was no exception. Many McDonald's restaurants offer menu items specific to the country they serve; for example, in India they had veggie burgers, and in El Salvador I saw grilled cheese sandwiches. Denise (who enjoyed trying new foods) ordered the 'strange' menu item, but I can't recall what it was. Perhaps some kind of cheese poppers. After lunch we crossed the main avenue again and entered the medina to find the ever-so-trusting Noelani being guided around by a suspicious-looking local man who appeared hell-bent on steering her to a specific area of the marketplace. Apparently, Javier and Lily had already returned to the hotel and she was all alone with this creepy guy. The DeAlba sisters decided to go back as well since they wanted to finish packing and get ready for our farewell dinner later that evening. Noelani thanked the shiftily middle-aged man who had been assisting her; he glanced sullenly at me and – with the pained look of a white slave trader who just lost a new prospect – shuffled off.

Noelani and I spent the next two hours strolling the streets of the downtown area. We stopped twice to have coffee at outdoor cafes; the conversation was mostly about poor Helene. When we returned to the hotel (shortly after 5:00pm) we found a very distressed-looking Helene in her room, in bed, with crutches by her side. She had broken her pelvis and was in considerable discomfort. I was immediately alarmed, a broken pelvis sounded like a really serious thing. *How could they have allowed her to come back to the hotel?* Originally, the doctors thought she might have broken her hip due to the excruciating pain she experienced after the fall. But the x-ray revealed a neat crack in one of her pelvic bones. This was actually *good* news. A broken pelvis heals by itself – according to her Moroccan doctor – after about six to eight weeks. But she needed to be immobile for the next three days to prevent further damaging the bone, which meant she couldn't travel and would have to stay in Casablanca while she mended. I'm sure this played a huge factor in her distress.

I spent an hour in the room with her and most of the time she was on her smart phone to the travel insurance company (and Gate 1) to try and figure out what she should do next. She called Alitalia to cancel her flight to Rome for the following day and tried to get them to reschedule a trip back to the states in either Business or First Class (since she

needed additional room to stretch out). Apparently, she was getting quite the run-a-round from the customer service reps. I could almost feel her struggling to keep the tone in her voice cordial; and I admired her greatly for it, being in pain and all. If that had been me, the expletives would have been specific and frequent. Frustrating matters more was the insurance company's insistence on seeing medical reports and having her checked out by *their* physicians while she was in Casablanca, and the possible need for a nurse to accompany her home. Who knew how long all this would take? What a traveler's nightmare this turned out to be! I also felt for Noelani, she was tied up in emotional knots over the whole situation. They were supposed to leave for Rome together the following day. And while Helene kept insisting she would be fine and for her to continue the journey without her, Noelani didn't know what to do, should she stay with Helene or continue by herself (the cost associated with staying would have put a great financial burden on her at that moment, as well). This was a fine mess, indeed. As Helene lamented, "*Why did I decide to use the bathroom at the mosque?*"

While I was in the room, several tour members popped in to check on Helene; Javier and Lily were very concerned and continuously offered their assistance in any way they could, and Aziz was constantly running errands for her. He also negotiated a lower room rate with the hotel so that her extra stay would not be too expensive. Even though her insurance company would end up reimbursing her she still needed to pay many of the costs up front. Frankly, I didn't know what to do for her, other than look sympathetic in that usual hospital visitor's sort of way. Several years earlier, on my way to the Balkans, I had gotten stranded in Germany because of an airline union strike. I arrived one day late for the tour and my luggage was lost for almost five days. The inconvenience I was put through made me think I had gone through some terrible ordeal, but looking at poor Helene, I realized I was quite lucky; there are far worse things that can happen to a world traveler than having to wash the same underwear in a hotel sink every night. And I have to admit, Helene (at least outwardly) was taking this more stoically than I ever would have. I'm a nervous fellow by nature, and the thought of being stranded in a foreign country by myself (injured, no less!) would have ratcheted up my anxiety levels considerably. Kudos to you, Helene! *You are one tough cookie.*

By 6:15pm, convinced that everyone who needed to know about Helene's situation – (like Gate 1, the travel insurance company, the airlines, her family, friends, etc) – had been notified, and the wheels were somehow in motion to get her back safely, I excused myself and returned to my room to shower again and change my shirt (the last clean buttoned one). An hour later I met Noelani in the lobby for the farewell dinner. She didn't want to go, but Helene insisted. The group boarded the bus and we took a nice drive along the *corniche* road parallel to the shoreline – the sun setting on the horizon – to a restaurant called La Terrazza. It was a relatively fancy place situated right on the beach. During the drive many of our fellow passengers wanted to know how Helene was doing. At the restaurant we were seated at different tables, in our section I sat with Noelani, Constanze, Stephen, Sumit and Rosalind. The food was great. Besides the usual appetizers and bread, I had the eggplant *tian*, followed by a lightly breaded chicken cutlet with all the fixings, and for dessert a delicious chocolate *tiramisu*. Since I do not drink alcohol, Noelani asked me for my free beer. She thought a few beers would ease her



stress. But Noelani is a health nut who does not consume alcohol regularly, and the only thing the beers did was turn her face an attractive shade of red. Our conversation was lively, although at times dampened by the events of the past several hours. Because it was our last night together, we reminisced about the things we had seen and done on the tour. I had collected a list of emails so I could send everyone a copy of this journal. Most of us took this opportunity to thank (and tip) Aziz, his assistant, Idriss, and our wonderful driver, Mohammed. By 10:00pm we were back at the hotel.

I had an early airport pickup the following morning, so I went up to see Helene one last time. She was sitting in bed, trying to eat the meal Aziz brought her from the restaurant. A few others stopped by, as well, to say good luck and goodbye. Considering her ordeal, Helene was in relatively good spirits, her sense of humor still intact. She allowed me to see the X-ray of her broken pelvis, and I quipped that not even her boyfriend had seen *this* side of her. While we were having our farewell dinner, the travel insurance company had sent over a local doctor and nurse who confirmed her condition and left her a pile of documents she needed to fill out and fax back to them. Helene tried to convince the insurance company to accept Noelani as her ‘accompanying nurse’ back to the States, but they wouldn’t go for it, so Noelani had no choice but to continue on to Rome without her. The idea of leaving Helene in Casablanca by herself (thankfully Aziz lives in the city and checked up on her daily) was not a comforting one, and as difficult as it was for *me* to say ‘goodbye’, I can only imagine how Noelani must have felt the following day. Before I left, I asked Helene to explain what happened, for I had not heard the full details yet. I’m not sure what was worse, the broken pelvis or the experience she went through:

Helene decided to use the bathroom at the mosque prior to heading back to the hotel. She got off the bus and as she approached the building she took her camera out and began photographing the minaret. Trying to get her camera in focus (she was either walking at the same time or going down some stairs, I’m not sure) Helene momentarily lost her footing and fell hard, experiencing a sharp almost immediate pain radiating from her midsection. She was unable to get up on her own; two Arab men lifted her (quite excruciatingly, she said) onto a straight back chair and carried her around that way. By now, someone had notified Aziz and he was with her from that point forward. The Moroccan equivalent of 911 was dialed and an old narrow ambulance pulled up to the mosque a short while later. But there was another patient already inside the ambulance; a boy suffering from internal injuries, laid out on a gurney moaning and sweating profusely, taking up most of the space. The boy’s mother was crouched near her son’s head saying something in Arabic, trying to calm him down. The attendants had to lift Helene onto a ledge that ran along the inside of the ambulance; she was perched haphazardly, holding onto Aziz for balance, during the entire ride to the hospital. And while every bump on the road caused her severe discomfort, she told me she was playing second fiddle to the boy on the gurney, who was obviously in the throes of agony.

When they arrived at the hospital, the scene reminded Helene (and I am quoting her) of a “Dickensian hall of horrors”. The emergency room/treatment area was a large, drab arena lined on one side with outdated molded plastic chairs, many of them with broken

armrests, and a row of gurneys on the opposite side filled with a variety of groaning patients. Instead of nurses, family members were holding up IV bags and trying to comfort their sick relatives by administering water or patting them down with wet paper towels or cloths. Helene was transferred to a wheelchair with a broken right footrest. The attendant wheeling her around was so brusque she kept banging her right foot along the walls and doorways, sending shooting pains up her right side where the fracture was located. Aziz tried his best to get one of the doctors to look at Helene, but she described the hospital staff as being 'overwhelmed'. Apparently, the frustrated doctor he spoke to informed Aziz that most of the patients had been waiting all day and that she, too, would have to wait her turn. Meanwhile, a man from behind her wheelchair was screaming so loudly Helene felt terrified just sitting there. It didn't take long for Aziz to sum up the situation; he told Helene she needed to get out of there and go to a private clinic. He called for another ambulance. Thirty minutes later, a more modern-looking and better-equipped ambulance pulled up to the emergency ward with an equally nicer attendant who carefully placed her on a gurney and whisked her off to a private clinic (in a better section of town).

As she was being wheeled into this new medical building, the French sign above the clinic denoted a specialty in orthopedics. Within short order she was X-rayed and taken to an examination room. Two extremely inattentive nurses half-heartedly assisted her in going to the bathroom, removing her pants and underwear and thrusting an ice-cold bed pan underneath her with such force that she yelled out in pain. I will not mention how inconsiderately they wiped her down since I've already included enough *don't-need-to-know* information. Eventually, a pleasant, white-haired doctor wearing a lab coat came into the examination room and checked the x-rays and told Helene, in French, that although she had a fracture, it was not serious. Helene, not one to miss a comedic opportunity, retorted, "That's easy for you to say, doc, you're still walking around on two good legs." The doctor laughed and called in Aziz and told him what she had said and he, too, started laughing. Helene once told me she wanted to be a stand-up comedian, and somehow, lying there with a broken pelvis, I'm certain she found comfort in 'working her audience'.

The doctor gave Aziz a prescription for the crutches and pain medication, and the bill for the X-rays and ambulance. I think Helene gave Aziz three hundred U.S. dollars to cover the expenses. Another ambulance transported them back to the hotel. Aziz immediately went to the pharmacy to pick up the items for her. Helene wanted me to mention in this journal how thoughtful and helpful Aziz was during her entire ordeal. Even after the tour was over, he kept visiting her every day in the hotel until she left, making sure she had bottled water and whatever else she required. Now *that* is a tour guide! Helene was very philosophical about her experience; Morocco had been a great trip, regardless of her unfortunate incident. She considered herself 'lucky' that her injuries were not more serious and that the accident happened on the very last day of the tour, so she didn't miss anything. What a trooper!

It was time for me to say 'goodbye' to both Helene and Noelani. Since we live on opposite sides of the United States I didn't know when we would be reunited again.

World travel is such a unique thing, you become good friends with complete strangers who sometimes share nothing more in common with you than the act of wanting to explore the planet. And then you go back home, usually never to see them again. I promised Helene I would be in touch with Gate 1 Travel as soon as I reached the States to demand that they bring her home promptly. There were some hugs and then I returned to my room where I did my final repacking and set aside my clothes for the trip home. I requested a 5:00am wake-up call from the front desk. Restless the night prior to a plane ride, I needed to take an Ambien to help me sleep.

### **Day Thirteen and Fourteen**

I awoke before the front desk called, quickly showering and getting dressed. I made several cups of coffee in my room and wrote in my journal. By 6:15am I placed my luggage in the hallway for the porters and went down to the lobby where I joined Vanessa and Denise for breakfast. The three of us were taking the same flight to Paris (the rest of the group had different flight schedules; some had already left earlier in the morning, while others were leaving later in the afternoon or spending additional time in Morocco). At 7:00am, Aziz met us in the lobby to say 'goodbye'. We boarded a transport van with our luggage and headed to the airport, which was a thirty-minute ride. A new Gate 1 representative was waiting for us who walked us through the check-in process. Our Air France flight departed around 10:40am, taking just under three hours to reach Paris. I was booked on a continuing flight to JFK, the DeAlba sisters were heading back to California. They were nice enough to sit and keep me company in the departure area before my plane left (their flight was leaving later). I used the last of my dirhams to buy us coffee and water at one of the concession stands. When my flight was ready to board, I said my goodbyes, promising to send them the journal.

Prior to boarding I had some concerns because my original seating assignment had been changed. The plane had been over-booked and they were asking for volunteers to either switch seats or choose another flight. When it was my turn to board, the airline staff inquired if I wanted an upgrade. I had already ascertained that my seat was on the aisle (for my claustrophobia) but they were offering to give me an upgrade to Business Class in exchange for my current seat. Apparently, there was a gentleman whose flying anxieties were so great he couldn't fly unless he sat at the end of the row. I was going to accept the offer until they informed me it was a middle seat. Suddenly, my own anxiety levels flew off the charts...*nine hours boxed in between two (probably overweight) rich pricks*. No way! I declined the offer, and I knew immediately it was a mistake. The airline staff turned to one another, frowned, made hand gestures and all but said, "*You stupeed American*" ...and for good reason, too. When I entered the plane and saw how big and comfortable those Business Class seats were, with more than enough legroom and spacing to ward off any feelings of being closed in, I almost wanted to cry. Especially

when I saw my own seat. It was the very last aisle seat at the back of the plane, next to the toilets. Sitting in front of me was a family of four with one infant who cried from Paris to New York seemingly non-stop. Throughout the flight I had to contend with a steady stream of passengers who lined up to use the restrooms next to my seat (inadvertently bumping my head and waking me up whenever I managed to get some sleep). Not to mention the nauseating smells each time those bathroom doors were opened. Yes, I am indeed a *stupeed American!*

We arrived at JFK airport at 7:20pm. For the first time since using this terminal I breezed through customs and immigration (thanks to the new ID machines they installed) and was even more surprised to see my luggage already on the carousel. I took the JFK Air Train to the Federal Circle terminal to catch a shuttle bus to my Holiday Inn. There were no connecting flights to Miami leaving from this airport after 9:00pm. I did not want to book a separate flight from La Guardia Airport, having to go through the hassle of getting a cab and rushing over there (especially after such a long trip) to catch a late night flight home, so I booked a room at a nearby Holiday Inn and left for Miami the following morning.

I won't bore you with the details of a night's stay at the Holiday Inn, or the headache I endured getting a ride there (I was not aware their shuttle service was unavailable after a certain hour; I had to bribe the driver of a different shuttle bus to drop me off at the hotel). Suffice it to say I made it back to Miami by 8:45am the following day. After all the traveling I was actually looking forward to getting back to my personal routine and tackling the list of errands I needed to do...that is, until I realized my car battery was still dead. *Welcome, home!*

I had the rest of the week off (before going back to work), and I kept myself busy calling family and friends and telling them about the trip, downloading and editing photos, getting my notes ready for the arduous task of writing this travelogue. I called Helene while she was still in Casablanca; she was well, but frustrated over the slow handling of her case by the travel insurance company. She eventually booked her own flight back home a couple of days later. I called Gate 1 Travel and sent several emails on her behalf. I think they helped facilitate a total reimbursement of her expenses with the insurance company. Noelani went on to Rome and spent several days sightseeing before returning to New Jersey, although she later sent me an email telling me it was a bummer not having Helene with her, and that she didn't enjoy it as much.

I can't say enough about this trip, and would recommend Morocco to anyone, especially those who enjoy mixing historical places with their travels. The country has so many exotic settings, wonderful natural landscapes and fascinating medieval cities to explore. The people were mostly warm and friendly, the accommodations very nice. The food was great. *And the experiences were amazing.* Walking through the incredible Fez medina. Riding a camel into the Sahara to see the sunrise. Exploring the historical kasbahs. Shopping in the 11<sup>th</sup> century square of Marrakech. *Wow.* We saw so much in so little time. Memories – thanks in part to this journal – that will last me a lifetime. I would like to thank my traveling companions Noelani and Helene (and the rest of the group) for

a fantastic time; after all, it's the *people* who make the tour special. As a parting gift for your companionship, I'll be sending everyone a copy of these pages. The thoughts and opinions are mine, but we all shared a similar experience, and it is my hope that in the future, whenever you read this journal, it will instantly take you back to Morocco and our time together. Till we meet again, may your *tajine* always be filled with goodies.

Richard C. Rodriguez

(My trip to Morocco occurred between March 27<sup>th</sup> and April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014)











