

Parslows in Morocco 2018

It is hard to know where to start when describing our trip through Morocco. The sights, sounds, smells and experiences were diverse and fascinating.

The dress in Morocco is mainly traditional Islamic style, but many people wear western dress with no head covering and this is quite acceptable. The women mostly dress plainly, but for special occasions they dress in velvets and chiffon with sequins and pearls, very elaborate. The men often wear a long robe with a peaked hood, over a normal shirt and trousers.

In Casablanca, the main language seems to be French and there is a lot of French influence in the food, dress and way of life because the French occupied the country for many years. In most other places in Morocco Arabic is the main language with French as a second language. Our guide sent both his daughters to France for tertiary education. We learnt several words of Arabic, including *waha*, which means OK and *nosnos*, which is literally half and half, half espresso coffee and half milk.



We saw snow-capped mountains, dry river beds (just like central Australia), lush green valleys of date palms surrounded by stony desert and crops growing in very poor soil. There is a lot of agriculture as for centuries each town has been surrounded by farms growing food for local consumption and this is still the case today. Vegetables, olives, dates, almonds and other fruit trees, wheat and barley are all farmed manually. Tractors are used in the fertile west and north, but in arid areas we saw manual labour with the help of donkeys for riding, carting goods or pulling carts.

There are a lot of sheep and goats, but few

fences so every flock of animals has a shepherd nearby, sometimes accompanied by a donkey or a dog. The traditional shepherds are often seen with a crook, looking like they stepped out of a Nativity scene, while some of the younger ones are listening to their iPod or using a cell phone. Nomadic Berbers still live in the desert with herds of sheep and goats. Their temporary houses look very poor from the outside, but we were told they are often lined with nice carpets and are comfortable inside.



The food we were served was a bit disappointing as often the set menus on the tour were the same. But we did enjoy the entrees which were usually fresh bread with a number of different vegetable dishes, always olives, but also other spicy dishes. Coffee is common but the main drink is mint tea and sometimes served by a man such as shown in this picture.

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One of the most interesting places to visit in each city was the old town or medina. In Casablanca we managed to tour the medina on our own as it is relatively small, but in Fes and Marrakesh the medina is large and is a maze, a labyrinth of narrow lanes crowded with people, donkeys, bikes and motor bikes. Everything you could want is on sale in the market -carpets, clothing, household goods and fittings, and of course food.

One disturbing thing for sale in the market was the small live tortoises – probably came from the French cuisine. We also saw raw and cooked snails for sale in the markets. The spices, beans and rice were colourful and smelt wonderful, helping to overcome the smell of raw meat and other sources.

In Marrakesh we visited a health shop where we learnt all about the medicinal properties of local herbs and oils. Here we also saw snake charmers and monkeys on leashes, all to gain the tourist dollar. You have to pay to have your photo taken with them.





On three different occasions we were pressured to buy a carpet. They were magnificent but very expensive. We did end up buying a small rug as a wall hanging. Buying anything was a process of haggling. They will start by suggesting an exorbitant price, we usually paid about half of the first asking price, but that may still have been too much.





This man is a water seller, he carries water in a bag made of a boar's head and has brass cups for people to buy water or for the tourists to take photos – for a few coins naturally. In Marrakesh one of these men approached me with a handful of coins, which turned out to be Australian. So I exchanged them for local currency (7 dirhams = 1 Aust dollar). During this transaction, a lady selling jewellery joined in as she had more English and wanted to make sure I wasn't cheating him. She then gave me a bracelet as a "gift" – I thought as a thank you for helping. But then she wanted me to buy more of her bracelets or give her money. She got very offended when I offered to give the bracelet back. We eventually parted company as I gave her 15 dirhams, but she was not happy. This is what makes travelling so interesting.

In Casablanca we visited one of the few mosques that non-muslims are allowed to enter. The mosque of Hussain II is a massive structure with intricate timber carvings, plaster work and decorative tiling. The tiling pattern is worked out, the tiles are cut to

shape then put in place by hand. The picture of the tiles here was taken in the basement area of the mosque which is for washing before entering the mosque. King Hussain II built the mosque (in part) to provide employment for traditional artisans.



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Our accommodation was varied. The two most interesting places were the Riad in Fes (the town is Fes, the hat is a Fez) and the camp in the Sahara. A Riad is a small private hotel with a courtyard in the centre. This one was accessed from the street by a long set of very narrow and grimy stairs. Men with small carts brought the luggage up the stairs by hand. Despite the constricted access, when we opened the door to our hotel we were met with a magnificent palace with lush gardens. Our suite had 3 rooms, 2 toilets and 2 walk in robes.



In the desert we slept in tents lined with decorated velvet walls complete with an airconditioner and ensuite bathroom.

Before retiring to our luxurious tent, we rode camels over the sand-hills of the Sahara desert to watch the sunset. Interesting, but not an experience we need to repeat.

In Fes we went to a pottery and a tannery. The tannery used large cement tubs for processing the hides. For leather and textiles the dyes are made from natural

materials and they make a big point of this. In Erfoud (on the edge of the desert) we visited a movie studio where we saw props used in *Gladiator* and also *Lawrence of Arabia*. One thing we did not expect to see was Roman ruins, but between Rabat and Fes we visited Volubilis, a vast site of ruins which are being restored with the help of the French.

Our 10 days were full of such different sites and experiences I cannot include it all. Hope this gives you a glimpse of what we saw. All in all it was an amazing experience.

