

Here's Looking at You....Morocco

Morocco, "Morocco Mole" (of Secret Squirrel fame), Berber living, bouncing off the back of some camel and Casablanca, always Casablanca. Coming to Morocco has been a 'thing' with me for a bit; visions of dimly lit alleys and kasbahs, catacombs of humanity all trying to sell me something as I take pictures of it all.

So I hopped a slow boat to Tangier and kept the camera at the ready.

While I'm writing this, the canon has sounded, denoting the end of today's fasting of Ramadan. The streets are clogged with locals, seeking out that first meal of the day and bartering for every dinar. This clatter comes wafting thru my small window on this my last night in Morocco.

I don't think I found what I was looking for in Morocco. Over the last month, via trains, buses, shared taxis and the odd camel, I've moved thru a good handful of cities and seen some stuff, but in the end, TIA, This-Is-Africa and the reality of present day Morocco didn't exactly match up with my visions of what it would/could be.

Tangier, a rather dirty, musky northern doormat to the country was first up; at 4am. The boat was late getting to port, and the subsequent drive and unwanted "assist" from a local to get me to the hostel was an indication of the realities here. There was a medina there for sure, every town here has one, full of those tight winding streets I had envisioned beforehand, but what it had to offer was offset by the 'curb appeal' or lack thereof. This was no carefree stroll thru the market with cheerful vendors entering the lively art of conversation. This was carnival barkers chattering like magpies on a phone line, coming towards you in a frontal assault. My beard made it easy for them, and the recurring chant of "Ali Baba" would begin early and often. I calculated that if I paused for more than a second during my stroll, this was enough to elicit an offer to tour the shop and a sincere plea of "buy why?" when I didn't. Two days of smelling rotting garbage in the medina here was enough and if you could, and I would advise, you move past Tangier with haste.

About three hours on a local bus brought the traveler to Chefchouaen (shef-sho-wan); the blue city. Here they'd like you to think it's the only blue city in the world, but the Bon Voyager was quick to whip out a few snapshots of Jodhpur, India to counter that notion...but color aside, what a place. Hostel connections are made step by step here. Tangier Kasbah hostel recommended, Aline Hostel in 'Chef' and there I was. Now what they didn't mention was the one-mile hike from the bus stop...all up hill. Cardio impact aside, once I got my gear up that hill, that's where I wanted to stay...the views here were stunning...

The vibe here was good, and the medina is kept clean by a "blue crew" who refresh the paint by day, and sweep by night...the town has character, and characters aplenty. To see the blue wash applied was camera worthy, but the painters were shy, though easily distracted.

There are drugs readily available here, from a “farm” for such things, and in short order I became versed in the difference between “pre-press” and “pressed” hash, as it seemed like something to know about. From extensive interviews it all seemed medicinal, though I’m no doctor, it just seemed like everyone was in need of a dose. Whatever your ailment, here in “Chef” you’ll find the cure.

Founded by Portugal in 1471, there’s a bakery here pumping out discus-shaped loaves for almost as long. The buildings appear thrown on the side of a foothill, like a plate of blueberry kefta. There is peace here, but unfortunately I came across this Moroccan “dessert” before I had really taken in much of the rest, so I pushed on.

Fez, a whirling dervish of commotion and commerce, compared to “Chef” is another four hours away. The medina here has almost 5,000 alleys with another 500 dead-ends, and after dropping off my bags at the hostel, I went out to get lost....it didn’t take long. You can really get too reliant on technology, and my mapping app works well when it can “see” the satellites above; this is NOT the case in a Kasbah...technology goes “dark” quickly here. The “Ali Baba” crews were in fine form, letting me know that they saw me well before I saw them. The chanting of “Baba” rose with all the fervor of the Muslim 5pm call to prayer. Somehow I got spit back out onto the main street intact, and without having to buy a carpet; it was a miracle. Released from the belly of the retail beast of Fez was pretty exhilarating. I took a city tour the next day that added shots of a leather tannery, and a bowl of fava bean soup to my experiences.

I would spend the day touring the ruins of Votubilis, the south-west edge of the Roman Empire; dating to 245. Leaving Fez seemed to be a lot easier than getting in; short red taxi to a modern rail station, ticket purchase and a hop onto a departing train had me heading south to Marrakech.

The eight hours passed slowly, unlike a bus with assigned seats, the Moroccan Rail, in second class, takes on all comers, and might be the longest commuter train around. There was a passenger swap at every station for the first four hours, but eventually the cast of characters stabilized and we all took a nap.

Marrakech is the ‘big city’, with the largest medina, Kasbah and footprint. I wandered the streets for a few days before touring the countryside and out to the Sahara. Here too, I had grand notions of how I would “meet” the desert. I had been in many deserts from India to Australia and thought I knew what was involved; but in the end, TIA-This Is Africa, and I took what was on offer.

I had hoped to spend almost 10 days in the journey to the desert. There are tour operators everywhere in Marrakech, and after way too much conversation and route planning, my 10-day “wish” evaporated like the wisps of a mirage. To customize a trip to be something special here, becomes expensive quickly, so in the end, after a reality check lasting two complete ice-cream bars, I got on the normal tour bus. Sometimes you just get on the bus.

The tour to the desert at Marzouga was a genius move, as it turns out. The big piece for me, was to shoot the ‘ighrem’ (fortified village) at Ait Ben Haddou. The pictures looked incredible, and it’s been the setting for several movies... the walls of caked mud, fired by the heat of a thousand summers to a consistency of reinforced concrete. I couldn’t wait....but then....

Sometimes it rains in the desert; not often but it does...and did. Ait Ben Haddou quickly turned into Ait Ben Haddon't...wet dirt isn't so photogenic as it turns out. An hour tramping around, then an overpriced lunch and we were on our way. There was an hour spent at Dades Canyon, another place filled with promise, but once you've spent a summer hiking around the rocks of the American West, nothing else really compares. There were road-side retailers here too, their chants of "Ali Baba" are probably still echoing out there.

By late afternoon on the second day, we were at Marzouga, gateway to the Sahara. I had hoped to somehow avoid the camel ride and opt for more photo opportunities on the back of a dune buggy, but in the end, you get on the camel. The "desert tour to Berber came overnight" felt more like a carnival ride. Yes, it's a living animal, but they're roped together, nose to tail, and your seat has a set of handle-bars. "Please grip the handle bars firmly and completely until the camel comes to a full and complete stop." The Berber "camp" is more like four low-slung festival tents done in black. Three to sleep in and one to eat in. There was also a "berber toilet" which was a toilet mounted to a wooden platform over a hole. I can't say for sure, but I doubt Lawrence of Arabia had such luxury. Inside the tents, there were rugs on the floor and foam mattresses covered in Berber rugs, that smelled of wet camel. And then the rains came...again.

But it's times like this you're glad for companionship, and my tour-mates came thru. There were cards played, a drum circle and even sledding down the dunes around us. As the "Great Baba" I was called upon for advice and occasional wisdom from those less than half my age...

At the crack of dawn it was back on the camel to our awaiting bus. Nothing more to see in the Sahara or on the tour bus, just 11hrs of driving across the nothingness that ends up being middle Morocco. An entire day driving passed boarded up or abandoned villages. It almost seemed like everyone waited until the freshly paved road had cooled enough to drive on, then they left town for the big city, leaving only an odd smattering of pottery and fossil sellers in their wake.

After a full day on a tour bus built for much smaller people, I took a day off to "uncoil" before pushing on to the coast.

The predominant tourist in northern and central Morocco is French-Canadien. There is a direct flight from Montreal to Marrakech and they share a common language. But moving to the coast, the tourist becomes German. Perhaps it's the water, or more likely incredibly cheap airfares from Munich.

I spent two days at a surf hostel just north of Agadir. The hostel was fine, but the scenery was more like a construction site. Tagaught has been discovered. There is presently a three-mile long line of hotels under construction, and once completed, you probably won't be able to see the sea from the road. The one upside was learning how to make Berber pizza, but in the end, that was about it.

So I pushed on to Essaouira, about two and a half hours north. There was supposed to be a public bus, but being Ramadan, the bus never came. A friend and I ended up in a shared taxi and though it tripled the price, we changed locations.

Essaouira is the “resort” option from Marrakech. The tours can take you out here for a few hours on a day trip, but staying here is different. The dorm room at the hostel was crowded but the folks were friendly to an aging traveler which was nice. There is an endless stretch of beach here, but the medina walking and beach combing ruled here. There is a high wall surrounding Essaouira but with the wall comes a “hole” in the wall, actually a bit of crumbled infrastructure, where you can access another stretch of beach. One might describe the scene there as a “garbage dump” but upon closer inspection, it’s mostly Moroccan tiles, washed up on the shore, or deposited there by unknown forces. I spent a few hours on the hunt for surf-worn examples and came back with a small bag of “keepers” but only time and weight will determine if they stay with me longer.

After three days in Essaouira it was time to push on. I was lured to El Jadida, about three hours north, by the on-line photos of a Portuguese water tank (or cistern). As with a lot of things, the road ahead looks a lot simpler on the internet than in reality. It turns out that the major bus lines, CTM or Supratours, don’t make this run, so the bus is a “local”, stopping for every lost soul who makes the “down-wave” along the roadside. And we stopped a lot. The 3hr estimate turned into almost six hours, and then, we were only about 6 miles away, the bus pulls over and I get dumped on the side of the road. There would be a local bus to take me into town as the bus continued on to Casablanca...

Eventually I found my way to El Jadida, but I was frazzled, the train, the delay, the drive into town had all taken a toll. I had hopes of walking into the cheap hotel and finding a room, but that too, was not to be. Thankfully a local woman took pity on my situation and pointed me towards a similarly priced room and I was set.

The cistern took a few hours to shoot, and could have benefitted from more water being down there, but I got my shots and the trip went well.

Pushing on to Casablanca, there was a train, which was both on time and cheap. I located a cheap hotel for two nights and have been relaxing a bit.

Morocco has been a place where modern realities come in conflict with ones perceptions. I had hoped for more of the ancient mystique, but how do you market that. The Berbers who settled this area, have cell phone and cable bills to pay. Tourists arrive by the plane and busload, and how best to capitalize on that market is the reason for all the shops, but for a guy who needs none of what they are selling, it all became repetitive pretty quickly..

So the Tangier Kasbah hostel got me to Align, in “Chef” which recommended Funky Fez in Fez, which brought me to Dream Kasbah in Marrakech, who thought the Surf Hostel would work on the coast, which suggested Chill-Art in Essaouira, and it was hotels after that.

Morocco is fairly cheap in the end, \$20 a day for food lodging is enough...

And I move on...

My Dissertation on Travel

In this, my last year of the “Travel PHD”, there are a lot of things you’re supposed to “know and apply” out here:

How to keep your credit cards and passport in different locations,

How to get the best rates when converting money

How to not overcommit on hostel rooms

When to eat out, when to cook

But sometimes it’s hard to apply all that when you’re out in “the field”. I guess that’s why it’s a PHD for Travel.

Heading out here, essentially “one last time”, armed with the knowledge of how to do this all the “right” way, I’m struck by how often the path towards “right” gets murky once it’s your feet walking that path. The phone apps are no help at all, and quite often give you a false sense of security, promoting that others have gone somewhere before you and it’s going to be worth it...Sort of like asking a stranger for a dinner reservation. You’re putting a lot of faith in an unknown opinion.

But you get on the bus, you book your hostel and you walk along the paths worn down by those who came before you and try to take it all in. Certain moves get easier with repetition; my packing/unpacking is a lot easier once I’ve “lost” it all and found it again. But there are moves that never seem to get refined, no matter how often you make them.

Heading to airports has always been an issue for me. Perhaps it’s the finality of the move, leaving one locale for another, but for me, it’s the memories of flights missed or diverted, for no better reason than I misread the ticket or timetable...that keeps me on edge...Like a sanity test with all your luggage...did I remember things, what did I forget?

This last voyage, essentially a last year of my “schooling” will be a time of great interest. Saying “hello” to several new countries, while saying, perhaps, a bittersweet “goodbye” to the notion of living my life on the road this way....a traveler running out of road...