

# ROUND *the* WORLD

*with Michael and Valerie Lewis*



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## SOUKS, STORKS AND SHEPHERDS

Moroccan cuisine offers many kinds of tajines, or stews, made with lamb, chicken or beef, and often accompanied by prunes, raisins, or apricots. They are cooked in a special clay pot and can include as many as thirty-five different spices. Morocco itself presents the visitor with an equally intriguing blend of peoples, languages, topography, and customs.

On the very edge of northwest Africa, Morocco is one of the countries, along with Algeria and Tunisia, comprising the loose confederation of Muslim states known as the Maghreb. But 'maghreb' also means twilight or 'edge' and Morocco does, indeed, look as if it is about to slip off the tip of the continent into the Atlantic Ocean. When the indigenous Berbers were converted to Islam by Arabs who came across the desert from Yemen early in the eighth century, Morocco became the far western outpost of Islam. At the same time, Berber trade reached far into sub-Saharan Africa, particularly to Senegal and Mali. The Arabs, along with Berber troops, soon moved north into Spain where they created a flourishing Muslim state which reached its apogee between the 12th and 14th centuries, epitomized by the exquisite architecture of Granada and Cordoba. They remained there for seven hundred years before being driven out by the Christians in 1492 and returning to Morocco. Thousands of Jews settled in Morocco at that time for the same reason and became an integral part of life in the large cities for five hundred years until almost all left for Israel, France and the U.S. in the mid-20th century.

The last great foreign influence was France, which made Morocco a French protectorate in 1912 and remained until independence in 1956. The French wanted control of Moroccan agriculture and minerals and in the process built the necessary infrastructure. They established modern towns with wide boulevards outside the old, walled, densely populated 'medinahs' with their narrow streets. Most importantly, perhaps, French and Arabic are the official languages and every Moroccan child starts learning French in third grade.

## Report From Morocco, Trip Date: March 2008



Chellah Necropolis, Rabat

The storks of Morocco have witnessed this melange of native and foreign influences over many millennia. In Rabat, the modern capital, slowly wheeling storks greeted us in large numbers on our first morning, when we stepped inside the high, crenellated walls of the Chellah Necropolis. They flew over us with sticks in their beaks for the nests they were building. They probably did the same over the Phoenicians' settlement there almost three thousand years ago, and they must have watched the Romans build their amphitheatre, baths, and temple. After the first Merenid caliph, in the thirteenth century, chose the site for a mosque and the burial place of both his wife and himself, Chellah became a necropolis for subsequent caliphs. All but destroyed in the earthquake of 1755, the ruins today offer tranquility and an unkempt beauty.



Storks building their nest, Rabat

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Tijania Zaouria, Fez

In contrast, the gates of the old city of Fez attract swallows at dusk. They surely enjoy their swallows' eye view of the jumbled roofs, minarets and domes of the city that seems to tumble down the hill into the maze of alleys at the bottom of the valley. The large expanses of green tile roofs are mosques and include the great Karaouiyyine mosque, which accommodates 20,000 worshippers. It also boasts some of the finest Muslim scholars at one of the oldest universities in the world. Since non-Muslims

are not permitted to enter mosques we visited the 14th century Bou Inania Medersa, or residential college, where students lived in tiny cells but studied and prayed around an



Man in djellaba, Fez

elegant courtyard paved in marble and onyx, and decorated with handsome tilework and finely carved doors. Outside the 'medersa' the city's residents, some swathed in 'djellabas,' or long robes, and some wearing jeans and leather jackets, make their way through the very narrow streets, where it is necessary to dodge stalls with dried fruit, newly-made crepes or leather slippers, avoid carts piled high with boxes, and flatten yourself against the wall while donkeys laden with huge sacks pass by. The different 'souks,' or markets, offer a colorful array of merchandise: huge



Shoes for sale, Fez

stuffed pancreases beside guinea fowl and hares in the butchers' 'souk'; cosmetics in the henna 'souk'; back pain treatment in the spice and herb 'souk'; leather lampshades in the extensive leather 'souk'; close by the tanneries; copper trays in the metal workers' 'souk'; and even musical instruments. Scattered around the old city and set into walls at the junction of many streets are fountains, with handsome tiles from the 17th century or earlier, which still provide water, and a chatting place, for the inhabitants.

The homes in the 'medina' reveal nothing to the passerby on the street because all that is to be seen is a very small and unobtrusive doorway. However, 'fondouks' and 'riads' give the visitor a taste of what is behind the wall. 'Fondouks' provided lodging and work space to traders from rural and distant areas. Workshops were on the ground floor, around the central courtyard, and living space on the upper one or two levels. The striking and elegant architecture in the Fondouk el-Nejjarine indicates that it housed traders in luxury goods. It has been restored by UNESCO, to reveal three floors of graceful wooden galleries. 'Riads' offer another opportunity to see what the larger homes in the 'medinah' are like. These are inns and privately owned hotels, many with a restaurant, converted from larger homes in which several generations lived together in the many rooms around the cool, central courtyard, where there might be trees and a fountain.

From Fez we headed past forests of cork trees up into the Mid-Atlas mountains. As the road climbed higher peaceful cedar forests took over the landscape, made more picturesque by

a brief fall of snow. Beyond the tree line, at about 5000 feet, we crossed stony, windswept plateaus, bordered on one side by ranges of barren rocks and on the other by high, snow-covered mountains. Always there were shepherds, following their large flocks of goats and sheep in spite of the bitter wind, the rain or the snow. When we stopped by one flock the shepherd turned out to be a young woman with piercing eyes, wrapped only in wool garments, and a headscarf. Nearby two dromedaries grazed on the scant vegetation. Once over the pass, on the southern, desert side of the mountains, we dropped down into a warmer valley with a river. Suddenly, there were trees, crops and cane brakes in and around villages of flat-roofed, mud houses. We stopped to walk around



Shepherdess, Mid Atlas Mountains





Berber village, Tinerhir

an abandoned 'kasbah,' the fortified home of the local lord, and were soon greeted by a group of six giggling little girls, who presented us with some hastily picked wild flowers.

Other oases sprang up at intervals along the path of the river, yet only a hundred yards on either side lay barren rocks. Late in the afternoon we came into the large oasis of Tinerhir where we were to spend the night. It, too, was a patch of vivid green in a landscape of dusty red rocks as far as you could see.

Before dinner in our hotel we suddenly heard loud drums along with blaring trumpets. In the lobby were musicians in long white robes playing to an assembly of women and children, who were celebrating the birth of the hotel owner's baby. Outside, in a tent, were the husbands and fathers. The women were elegant in their finely woven and embroidered 'djellabas' and 'cherkas,' or headscarves.

The following morning, we crossed the street and entered a large, walled space where the weekly market was in full swing. Many people from the desert had come by camel, donkey, horse and bus. As in the 'souks,' almost anything you can think of was being sold. Spread out on the ground were spices, dates, baskets, pottery, leather, and iron goods from the blacksmith, as well as computers and TV's.

Later we explored one of the older parts of Tinerhir. To get there we walked under the olive and palm trees on the valley floor, crossing over the irrigation channels and fertile fields where women were cutting grass to take home in huge sacks for the family donkey, goat, or cow. We climbed up from the valley floor to the old houses made of 'pise,' a combination of mud, gravel and straw. This can be badly damaged by heavy rains in the winter and requires much maintenance, so it's not surprising many people move into cement homes if they can afford it. We saw the well where the inhabitants must pull their water up

in a bucket made from rubber tires. Saber, our guide, took us to his home, where he introduced us to his warmly smiling mother. She offered us the ubiquitous Moroccan sweet mint tea, along with warm bread, and the most delicious olive oil which, we discovered, was made from the family's own olives. We consumed it all on a mat on the floor in a small room whose only piece of furniture was a TV.



Berber village, High Atlas Mountains

After Tinerhir we drove across more dry, red, rocky plains before beginning to climb up through the mountains. Berber villages, each with a mosque and houses made of clay, clung to the steep, arid hillsides. Men stood beside the road, selling fossils and brilliant green or scarlet mineral rocks. Judging by the quantity available they must be found in profusion in the surrounding mountains. The cold and windy pass we eventually reached lies at 7,000 feet and is the highest in the High Atlas. While ranges of snow-covered peaks still dominated the horizon a change in climate and flora soon became apparent on the northern, Mediterranean side of the pass. In warm sunshine shrubs, grass and trees soon appeared. Small terraced fields contained wheat and vegetables. Fruit trees were blossoming. We had left the desert and were heading for the coast.



Sardine fishing boats, Essaouira

2500 years ago the Phoenicians used the harbor of Essaouira on the rocky Atlantic coast. In the 15th century the Portuguese traded there. Then, in the 18th century, the sultan employed a French architect to lay out the town and build the huge ramparts which face the pounding waves. All the goods for export to Europe, brought by caravan from many lands south of the Sahara, came through the port of Essaouira. For years it was also the largest exporter of Moroccan sardines. Still today the harbor contains many wooden sardine boats, all painted a striking cerulean blue. In the town's narrow streets women, in white robes, or 'haiks,' covering their entire body except for their eyes, walk past the ubiquitous colorful spice stalls and dried fruit stands. Skilled craftsmen sell their delicately carved marquetry boxes, and artists show fine paintings beside the town walls.



Muslim woman, Essaouira

When we left Essaouira and headed east for Marrakesh we drove past fields of argan trees, which produce an edible oil similar to olive oil. Goats love to eat the argan fruit and can sometimes be seen munching them up in a tree, while their shepherd stands nearby with the less athletic sheep. We passed olive trees, too, and fields of wheat, but gradually the land became drier again and the temperature rose as we came close to exotic Marrakesh.

Winston Churchill loved the city and Yves St Laurent has lived there for decades. He bought the famed Majorelle Garden with its shady palms and bamboo, its cactus garden beside cascading bougainvillea, and pools with carp and lilies. He built a small museum to house his collection of exquisite Moroccan artifacts, and then gave the whole, serene place to the city. Marrakesh has other, renowned public gardens, in addition to all the charming little private courtyards filled with trees and plants, and the many rooftop gardens. They provide relief when summer temperatures climb close to 130 degrees F (50 C). We stayed in a graceful





Goats in argan tree, near Marrakesh

'riad,' where water splashed in the fountain in the courtyard and sparrows flew in for crumbs after meals. From the roof we looked right at the elegant minaret of the enormous Koutoubia mosque, built back in the 13th century and a landmark throughout the city. We were a few minutes from the extraordinary sights of Place Jaman El-Fna, where snake charmers, singers, jugglers and snake oil sellers perform during the day. After dark every night, it throbs with energy as thousands of city residents come out to promenade, shop and eat at brightly-lit barbecue stands, all wreathed in smoke smelling of grilled lamb and beef.

At one of the gates into the 'medinah' storks were nesting on the city walls above the finely carved doors. The nearby ruined Badii Palace offers plenty more accommodation for

storks. Built in the mid-16th century by the first sultan of the Saadian dynasty, it was considered one of the wonders of the Muslim world: as well fine carvings and decorations of marble, onyx, and granite its walls were covered with gold leaf. Less than one hundred years later all this was completely stripped and carried off to the city of Meknes by the new sultan of the conquering dynasty. Fortunately, we could have a small sense of the palace's splendors at the tombs of the Saadian rulers, where plaster filigree arches, carved cedar ceilings, walls of marble and tile, and mosaic floors are of the most extraordinary quality and skill. The Saadians also developed the 14th century Ben Youssef Medersa, where nine hundred students lived in tiny cells upstairs and studied downstairs amid marble, mosaics and carved cedar doors.

The Marrakesh 'medinah,' just like that of Fez, is a maze of narrow streets and 'souks,' interspersed with doors to mosques, 'medersas,' large houses, 'riads,' and royal palaces. We visited a synagogue, the successor to one built in the 15th century when the Jews came to Morocco after being driven out of Spain. When the majority of the country's once large and thriving Jewish population left in the mid-20th century, the Jewish quarter, or mellah, in most cities was occupied by Muslims.

Outside the 'medinah' the modern city explodes with the noise of heavy traffic and crowds of people. Western hotels, restaurants and shops cater to tourists and business people. Women in tight skirts and low-cut tops mingle with others in 'djellabas' and headscarves. The contrasts are striking and underscore the dilemmas Morocco faces. High rates of unemployment and illiteracy hamper development. An autocratic monarchy controls



Marrakesh

most departments of government, allowing for little opposition or alternative ideas. The government sets obstacles for young, ambitious Moroccans who want to work or study abroad. Yet the country is rich in minerals and agricultural products. We found it rich in history, culture, and scenery.. ✚



Place Jaman El-Fna, Marrakesh