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On the road in Morocco



NORTH AFRICA | Discover a land of contrasts, from bustling markets to the magical Sahara

BY SHELLEY WOOD

SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN

TMARRAKECH, Morocco alia Abbes is selling us a carpet, but you wouldn't know it. That is, if it weren't for his assistant, bent double under colourful rolls of woven sheep and camel wool, slogging by every few minutes to slap down another rug for consideration.

In what may be the most cunning sales tactic we've seen yet in the weeks we've spent in and around the city of Marrakech, Morocco, Talia has scarcely mentioned carpets in the lilting mixture of French and English streaming from his lips. He is talking about ancient cultures, the soul's innermost aesthetic, modern-day tourists and, most riveting, his theory on how fear of Islam is manufactured by the media.

"Do you ever read Chomsky?" he asks, switching to English.

It is perhaps our most fascinating conversation in Marrakech, but by no means the only time Moroccans candidly answered our questions about the kinds of travellers visiting their country when the rift between western and Islamic worlds seems wider by the day.

Marrakech is one of Morocco's largest, most African cities, and an ideal base for exploring the Atlas mountains that hem the city, the

coast 175 kilometres to the west, and the northern Sahara desert, a day's drive southeast. Casablanca and Tangier are struggling with reputations of being grittier, more volatile cities where West and East, rich and poor, are increasingly at odds. By contrast, Marrakech, with much of its old-world, self-preoccupied bustle intact, feels safe and hospitable.

Not that Marrakech is by any means tame. At least within the old walled city or medina, Marrakech can give the impression of a house party ready to burst its own doors.

The city is best known for its sprawling warren of covered souks or markets where adventurous tourists can lose themselves for hours, shopping for everything from carpets to herbal "Viagra." We squander all sense of time in the perpetual gloaming of the souks, finally emerging into the bright of day laden with scarves, bedspreads and pointy babouche slippers. Like markets the world over, the souks of Marrakech can be both alienating and exhilarating, but while the vendors are frequently aggressive and brusque, the overall tone of even the hardest haggling is good-humoured: part sales, part spectacle. A particularly animated salesman can gather an audience of admirers — Moroccans and tourists alike — stopping just short of taking a bow when the transaction is completed. But

when we resist a hard-sell, the vendor ceases his patter and shrugs, all smiles.

"Well then, warm welcome to Morocco!" he says, raising his arms as if to embrace us. "Bienvenue!"

The central square known as the Djemaa el-Fna is the pounding heart of Marrakech's old city, throbbing by day with vendors hawking everything from orange juice to henna tattoos. By night, the central plaza teems with open-air restaurants offering mouth-watering displays of tajine, couscous, fried eggplant, and savoury pigeon pies, as well as the less appealing boiled goats brains. Surrounding the eating area are snake-charmers, story-tellers, palm-readers, jugglers and musicians, creating a cacophony that belies the literal translation of the square's name: "place of the dead."

After several days spent ogling the mosques, ancient palaces, and the labyrinthine souks of Marrakech, we seek a day's respite in the sleepy coastal town of Essaouira. Located north of the package tourist resort-town of Agadir, Essaouira is more compact and focused primarily on the catching and selling of fish. Still, the narrow streets of the old town here, too, are festooned with carpets and souvenirs aplenty, while the pristine beach and blue waves beckon sunbathers and surfers



In the sleepy fishing town of Essaouira, colourful carpets for sale festoon the streets. Nearby, a pristine beach and blue waves beckon.

Moroccans 'peaceful people'

From Ft

alike. A three-hour drive east of Marrakech, Essaouira is the kind of place that if you visit for a day, you'll wish you had more time, and if you stayed longer, you might never leave.

For our second excursion out of Marrakech, we sign up for a three-day Land Rover safari that takes us east through the High Atlas mountains and dry valleys of central Morocco, then south to the dusty village of Merzouga at the edge of the Sahara desert. The drive from Marrakech to Merzouga covers some of the most spectacular terrain in the country: lush palm oases, as well as seemingly barren plateaus and arid hills dotted with kasbahs, or fortified villages, constructed out of the same blushing earth of the cliff-sides they cling to. The towering Dadès and Todra gorges provide a dramatic transition from mountain to plain, and a range of short day hikes, longer treks, and even a well-established rock-climbing scene.

The aim of our safari, however, is an overnight foray by camel into the Sahara. One of the much hyped, undoubtedly clichéd attractions of Morocco, the Saharan camel trek surprises us by being authentically magical. A multitude of tour operators in Marrakech and throughout Morocco can organize multi-day camel trips deep into the rosy dunes close to the Algerian border; we found our afternoon departure from Merzouga, a single night under the stars and return to civilization at dawn to be the perfect dip into this hushed landscape — any longer and you'd certainly

need to feel more comfortable on a camel with only a blanket for a saddle.

Back in Marrakech, we arrange our third and final jaunt out of the city, this time to the sleepy mountain village of Imlil. We hire Hassan El Hamri, a Petit Taxi driver, to take us 60 kilometres south into the Toubkal trekking region of Morocco's High Atlas. Soft-spoken but talkative, with a blazing smile, Hassan picks us up from the restored riad, or traditional townhouse, where we are staying on the edge of the Djemaa el-Fna, and ferries us through the mountain pass, stopping en route at a market in a tiny village that does not appear in our guidebooks. There are no tourist trinkets to be seen here, no pushy salesmen. People smile and nod but more or less ignore us, recognizing the improbability of selling us any live chickens or raw legs of lamb.

"This is how the people here live," Hassan tells me. "Simply. Peacefully. Those who do not visit Morocco may not realize this, but we are a peaceful people."

Imlil itself has a range of hostels and "Gîtes" that serve as the starting point for trekkers, as well as the Kasbah du Toubkal, a more luxurious restored fortress above Imlil. We opt to stay in a "brand new" kasbah, built under the direction of a Swiss ex-pat whose kasbah, she assured us, is authentic in every way, down to the red mud walls, straw roof, and basement hammam, or baths. And indeed, her project, which had opened only one week before our visit, was nestled among other squat mud homes built in an identical fashion. Our visit seemed a momentous event for the

villagers who popped in and out of the building to smile hello, bring fresh mint for tea or another roll of toilet paper — anything to get a look at the first foreign visitors staying in their part of the village. We spend our days exploring the trails above the town, many of them the starting points for multi-day, and even multi-week treks deep into the High Atlas.

We wait until our final day back in Marrakech to buy our carpet. By now, we tell ourselves, we are seasoned. We can follow the intricate dance steps of the carpet sellers with the same combination of wits, play-acting, and lightheartedness that we've seen practised by the glibbest salesmen in the souks.

We are unprepared for Talia and his silvery sales pitch-come-socio-political philosophising. We spend hours in his stuffy three-storied tapis shop, viewing carpet upon dusty carpet, enchanted by both the colours and the conversation. It may be that Talia launched into his lecture the instant he saw the glimmer of true desire we feel — and try to disguise — when we see the carpet we will ultimately buy. Or it may be that Talia genuinely enjoys conversing with foreigners. He likes Canadians, he tells us. They are different from Europeans and, he says carefully, different from Americans.

We know that flattery is an integral part of the spiel, but we're intrigued. When we ask how he can tell the difference, Talia says he scarcely meets Americans in Marrakech these days, but when he does, they rarely speak French, and they aren't "comfortable."

"They wouldn't sit here like this, just speaking," he says, gesturing at the walls groaning with folded rugs and tapestries. He blames the global media and some of the world's most powerful leaders for creating what he calls, "la défiance," the distrust, between Islamic countries and the West.

"And for what?" he asks. "Have we not had a lovely afternoon together discussing the important things in life?"

When we buy the carpet, which we inevitably do, Talia shakes our hands, beaming all the while, urging us to write him when we're home. "And will you not think of me and our time together every time you look at your beautiful tapis?" he asks.

And we do.

Kelowna resident Shelley Wood is a freelance writer.

If you go ...

TRANSPORTATION:



British Airways and Air France have daily flights to Marrakech.

To get in and around Marrakech, you can hire a Petit Taxi for short-hauls and Grands Taxis to drive you as far as you want to go.

ACCOMMODATION:



Large chain hotels abound, particularly in Marrakech's Ville Nouvelle, but for a richer Moroccan experience within the Medina walls,

seek out a restored riad through www.riadomaroc.com or www.marrakech-riads.net.

In Imlil, the Kasbah du Toubkal has its own website: www.kasbahdutoubkal.com/

TREKKING:



Many hotels and riads can organize you a car and driver, or direct you to a reputable travel agency offering organized tours into the mountains and dunes.