

JOURNEY ACROSS MOROCCO

In April 2008, we took a trip to Morocco with the Travel Group of the Royal Photographic Society. Starting in Marrakech, we travelled south and east across the High Atlas mountains and through the southern oases to the edge of the Sahara desert, very close to the border with Algeria. Retracing our steps, we spent two days exploring the sights of Marrakech.

The road from Marrakech into the mountains quickly left behind the boulevards lined with roses and oleanders, and the spreading fields of ripening grain, plantations of orange trees and olives. As the landscape became more barren, with glimpses of snow covered peaks, the road twisted and turned as it climbed up to the Tizi-n-Tichka pass, 7,400 feet above sea level. Villages built of red mud clung to the rocky slopes, above splashes of green fields where the villagers picked fodder for their donkeys to carry home, or spread out to dry the clothes they had washed in the river. As the road wound down the southern flank, the villages grew larger, and increasingly contained one or more kasbahs, some more ruined than others, as well as mosques decorated with geometric patterns.

We had the opportunity to view kasbahs at closer quarters when we visited the fortified village of Ait Benhaddou. Here we could see how the thick walls, built with bricks made from the red or ochre coloured earth often mixed with straw, kept the rooms inside warm in winter and cool in summer, and were decorated with attractive patterns. The kasbah traditionally provided protection for a family and their animals, and those still inhabited continued to shelter both man and livestock. In the one I visited, bright rugs and cushions lent comfort to the dwelling rooms, while four sheep and a goat in an interior yard eagerly devoured the fresh fodder brought from the fields by the river.

In the town of Oarzazate, we toured a much larger example of a kasbah, the Taourit Kasbah, once the house of the local lords. Still under restoration, this was a labyrinth of twisting stairs and rooms – some big, some small, some high ceilinged, some low, and a few decorated with dazzling tiles, painted wooden shutters or ceilings.

We saw many more kasbahs from our coach window on the long journey towards the desert. Apart from a stretch in the Dades valley where roses are grown extensively, their petals harvested for their scent, the landscape became increasingly bare. Occasional patches of green showed where the land was irrigated. Otherwise, it provided only thin grazing for large flocks of sheep, goats or camels, attended by herdsmen. Eventually, we were decanted from our coach into 4x4s for the final drive off road into the desert. As the sun set, we could see Erg Chebbi dunes gleaming golden in the distance beyond the stony waste.

Our base in the desert was at the village of Merzouga, our hotel backing onto the dunes and a line of camels waiting to take travellers into them. Merzouga, like so many places south of the mountains, had originally been a French foreign legion outpost. This area was disputed territory during the war with Algeria, and we saw remnants of the conflict – former gun emplacements, and a largely deserted military camp, mostly crumbling but still containing a few soldiers and a freshly painted small mosque. There was a palpable sense of adventure, especially watching independent travellers preparing to leave the hotel in the morning, by motorbike, jeep or camper van, loading water and other supplies on board before they set off – perhaps along the Paris Dakar rally route which passes nearby.

Most of the desert was grey stone, with occasional pink/orange sand dunes, or drifts of lighter sand on which grow tussocky grass and small bushes. Here and there an isolated tree stood out. Surprisingly, there was also a seasonal lake, Dayet Srji, which we were lucky enough to see still filled with water after the winter, fringed by reeds and grasses,

and frequented by grazing camels, flamingos, geese and other birds. Water, supplied by a network of irrigation channels, also brought life to Merzouga's oasis, where vegetables and herbs were cultivated beneath palm trees.

Our desert safari offered glimpses of the life of the local people. We stopped at an isolated Berber dwelling, where a veiled woman flitted in and out of the dark doorways of a mud hut, while her husband received guests in a tent made comfortable with cushions and rugs. In a village, we were treated to a performance of Gnaoua music by the Groupe des Bambaras – shorter than it would have been because mourners were arriving at the house next door where a neighbour had died. And we visited a tiny mine in the middle of the desert, where two men dug minerals from a deep hole in the ground. Later, camels took the group into the dunes to watch the sun set.

On our journey back from the desert to the city, we stopped in Rissani, the market and shops empty as the locals went to the mosque for Friday prayers. In Morocco, non-believers are not allowed to enter most mosques, so we were restricted to the lovely gardens outside. At Tinerhir, we passed a school where tiny children were being taught to recite the Koran, on our way to the extensive and ancient palm grove along the Todra valley. Alive with birdsong and the sound of water rushing along the network of irrigation channels, these gardens comprised a patchwork of terraced fields, where wild flowers grew among the barley, salads and broad beans, shaded by tall date palms, olives, apricots, pomegranates and figs. Further along the valley, we entered the Todra gorge, where the river passes through a narrow gap between high cliffs. It was Saturday, and the gorge was busy with local visitors, friends and families enjoying a picnic and groups of children playing in the river.

Our hotel for the last three nights in Marrakech was one of many riads, a converted old house in the heart of the medina, the old town within the city walls. The cool quiet interior of the riad was in marked contrast to the noise and bustle of the streets outside, above which the call to prayer rang out at the appointed times from the city's mosques. We followed our guide along twisting narrow streets, through the souks piled high with goods for sale, struggling to make our way through the crowds of people, bicycles, motor bikes, donkey carts and vans, stopping to visit a communal bread oven and a herbalist. At the southern end of the souks we found the Place Jemaa el-Fna, the great open square where locals and tourists alike gathered to buy from the many stalls or to watch whatever entertainers were performing – dancers, musicians, snake charmers, magicians. At night, we saw the daytime stalls replaced by a host of open air eateries, smoke rising from their grills as they competed for custom. For the group, evening entertainment was provided by a visit to a fantasia, a high speed display of horsemanship complete with guns, fireworks, and a magic carpet!

Of the monuments we visited in the medina, the highlight was the Ben Youssef Medersa, a 16th century building which until the 1950s was an important Koranic school. We explored the warren of small rooms where the students lived, each of them different, some overlooking the fine central courtyard. The Koutoubia Mosque, although we could not enter it, was an impressive focal point, especially from the vantage point of the rose gardens outside. Flowers were a notable feature of the more modern quarters of Marrakech, where colourful borders lined the boulevards. Vast olive groves surrounded a large rectangular reservoir in the Menara imperial gardens. Our final visit was to a much smaller garden, the exquisite enclosed Majorelle garden, restored by Yves Saint-Laurent.

From a photographic point of view, there was plenty of varied subject matter on our journey across Morocco, and the weather was generally kind to us. One disappointment was the difficulty in obtaining pictures of the people. We naturally wished to respect any unwillingness to be photographed, and we accepted that some individuals demanded payment in return for a pose. But we were surprised by the degree to which cries of "no"

greeted a lifted camera – particularly in Marrakech, where it was difficult as a result even to photograph a general street scene.

One unexpected bonus of the trip was the generally excellent food we enjoyed. Whether resting during the heat of the day under tented canopies, or relaxing in the evening with a glass of Moroccan wine, the dishes of couscous, tagine or other delicacies were a delightful way to sample local culture, and we had many memorable meals to complement our photographs.

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