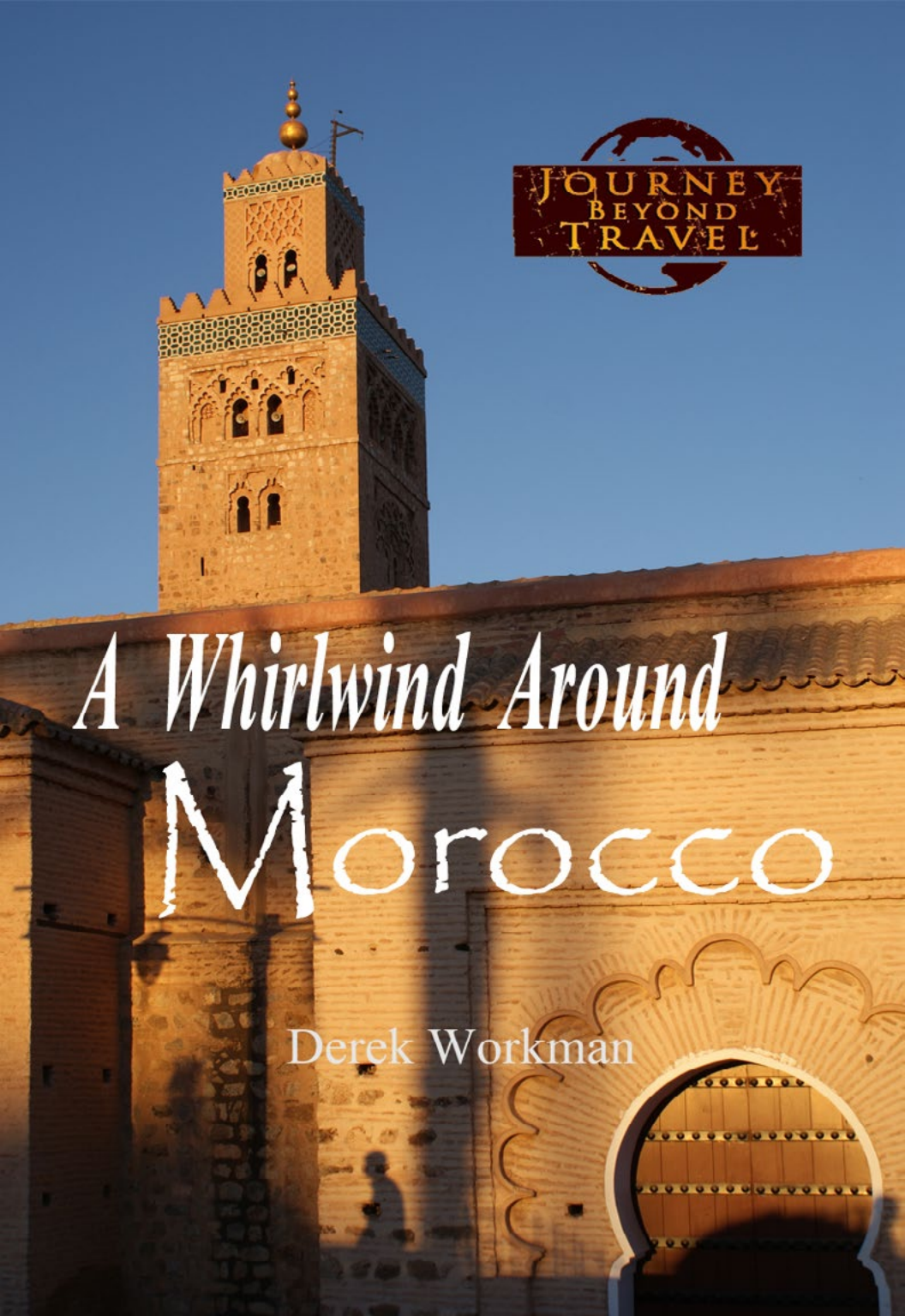

A Whirlwind Around Morocco

Derek Workman

Written, photographed and designed by Derek Workman. (www.spainuncovered.net)

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A Whirlwind Around Morocco

A Light-Hearted Moroccan Travel Adventure

Derek Workman

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Introduction

A Whirlwind Tour

Most people's idea of a travel journalist's life is one long round of first class travel to exotic destinations, stays in luxury hotels, cruises on the fanciest of yachts and sumptuous meals served with superb wines. This may be the case for the Bill Brysons of this world, but for the Derek Workmans, who are around 99.9% of working travel writers, the reality couldn't be more different.

My travelling is usually based on the sale of one – or if I'm lucky, two – articles within reasonable proximity of each other. The fees almost inevitably have to cover all expenses, so unless I can sweet-talk a hotel into a room for the night, I lay my head in places you would walk by with a shudder and eat elbow-to-elbow in worker's cafes. And there is no such thing as a lounge by the swimming pool; when I'm not on my feet researching I'm sat on a chair in a café writing up my daily notes on my laptop and uploading photos while having a coffee and a sandwich. This is the real life of a travel writer.

So imagine my absolute delight when Journey Beyond Travel offered me the chance of a two-week tour around Morocco, with car, driver and fancy hotels, to research material for their new site. "When!" was the only thought that came to mind.

You will be able to read my stories about this glorious country and its enchanting people as they appear on JourneyBeyondTravel.com over the next few months, but to whet your appetite this booklet brings together the daily blogs I wrote on my whirlwind tour. I hope they paint a picture for you of some of the delights you can experience when you make your own tour of Morocco – hopefully at a more leisurely pace than mine!

Derek Workman
Valencia, Spain, October 2013

DAY ONE

The Beautiful Chaos of Jmaa el Fna

This is the first day of a two week twirl around Morocco, and even though I've been visiting this wonderful country regularly for a couple of years, this is the first time I've actually been on a tour, so I'll be seeing a lot of places totally new to me.

My trip begins in Marrakesh, and it starts with a leg-stretch to Jmaa el Fna in the sultry hours of late afternoon, where a slight breeze barely cuts the heat of the last rays of the day. Later in the evening the food stalls will be heaving as the young hustlers target tourists, but at the moment it's setting up and banter time, cat-calls and chats between the men as they eat their meal before going over the gastronomic wall into battle.

Some of the food stalls are already in action, mainly those of the early evening local's trade. A water seller in his gaudy red outfit and conical hat with the dangling threads of sequins and tassels seems strangely out of place sat on a bench between a couple of young lads in jeans and T-shirts, supping from a bowl of harira, spicy tomato and vegetable soup.

At the stalls chefs hover around their pans waiting for the rush they hope will come later. When the stall-holders see me with pen and notepad they shout out the number of their stall and make me promise to come back later. Soon I've got a bingo card full of recommendations, none of which will get my custom as my hotel will be preparing dinner for me this evening, but I've eaten here plenty of times in the past and will again in the future.

At No. 80, Chez Simo, the man himself shows me the back of his menu, where he's featured, as proudly as any small-town Joe who's had his photo taken with the President, sat alongside various celebrities who have graced his white plastic tablecloths; the renowned British chef, Rick Stein (who Simo swears is Scottish, which is news to me because he was born in Oxfordshire), Antonio Carlucci, and Jermaine Jackson, amongst others whose images are so blurred that you couldn't contradict if he included Mick Jagger among them.

Jimi Hendrix at stall 100 – I'm fairly sure it's not the real McReggae reincarnated – promises that his place is air-conditioned (remember, these are open-air stalls) and 'finger lickin' good', while Paigomoa who hustles for no. 65 promises 'Harrods' quality and 5-star Michelin'. I'm bowled over by the audacity of Hassan who, under his catchphrase of 'At 25 you stay alive', promises a free hammam and massage and a two-year guarantee of no diarrhea.

It's such an everyday thing, but I always feel I'm really in Marrakesh when I have my first glass of freshly squeezed orange juice from one of the stalls in La Place, as locals refer to Jmaa el Fna. While I'm drinking, a couple of lady-boy dancers and their band start setting up just in front of me. It doesn't seem the best of spots because to my right is a CD stall belting out Moroccan rock. It doesn't appear to bother the lady-boys, though, and as the band's number increases, the violins, tambours and drums soon overwhelm the Maroc-rock. In retaliation, the owner of the CD stall boosts the volume. It looks as though there is an audio war about to begin.

I'm drawn away from the cacophony when a large green satin sun umbrella belts me in the back. I turn around and see a henna painter in full abaya, including veiled eyes and gloved hands, scuttling around to catch her plastic stools, which are skittering across the square in a sudden gust of wind. I grab the umbrella and hold it in front of me while I make toward her, feeling myself blown around like the heroe in an early black and white slapstick movie. Between us we return the umbrella to its metal support, which hadn't been especially supportive in the first place.

DAY TWO

For Every Zig There's a Zag

The road climbs from the semi-arid plains that surround Marrakesh through the zig-zag bends that will eventually become the Tizi n'Tchika Pass. Rumour has it that there are around three hundred bends between Marrakesh and Ourzazate but Naim, my driver, tells me that there are only two – left and right, but they are repeated a helluva lot.

This is the route that carried caravans of thousands of camels from Timbuktu to Marrakesh, with their precious loads of gold, spices and slaves. The latter poor souls would be sold in the slave souk in Marrakesh, many of them making their final stage of their African journey to Mogador, (these days known as Essouaria), before turning their back on their homeland for the terrifying voyage to the America's.

We see a ragged ruin, its collapsed wall tapering upward like a street bum's single rotten tooth, a picture postcard of donkey's, scratting chickens, shady trees and bright blue sky. A cliché photo for the archive, but as an eccentric old Swiss photographer once told me, 'Derek, zere iz nozing wrong viz cliché photos. Zay pay ze rent.'

As I photograph the ruin I see a pile of bricks made from mud and straw, the same building method used for millennia in this region. With a shelf life of around forty years they need constant and regular maintenance before heavy winter rains quite literally wash them away.

A bean pole-thin man in his early forties comes out of the small house beside the ruin and is a bit concerned, in a humorous way, as to why I'm photographing his pile of building materials, ones he'd made by hand over the previous weeks. Naim explains that I'm interested in old architecture (quick on his feet, that lad), and bean pole tells us that he's rebuilding in the old way because, while it's faster using concrete blocks

and they last forever they are bad for your back. Other than their weight I can't think of any way the back could benefit from building with mud and straw, but apparently it's because they keep the house cool in summer and warm in winter. I still can't see the back connection, though, but who am I to argue? I'm sure there will be plenty of things I'll just have to take for granted and keep my mouth shut about in the couple of weeks to come.

We make a stop at Ait ben Haddou, a glorious mixture of scenic traditional walled village and dramatic cinema backdrop that has been used by plenty of big name Hollywood directors. When Naim and I finish our walkabout through crumbling streets we decide to have a cold drink in a café where the owner has a fan lethargically wafting the air, more moving it around than actually cooling, and I experience one of those wonderful moments of Moroccan incongruity.

Suspended from the ceiling are dozens of plastic nets of gaudy plastic fruit; great bundles of mandarins you will never squeeze a drop of juice out of, walnuts that will never be cracked open, long red chillies that won't flavour a tajine or

couscous, succulent peaches that will never be sucked, Daisy Duck masks, paper picnic plates with cuddly bears in frocks on them, elegant cardboard containers that tie with a ribbon so you can carefully take your gift of a piece of wedding cake home with you, (one printed with the image of an enraptured couple, the lady bearing an uncanny resemblance to a youthful Liza Minnelli). After time spent in the historic world of Ait ben Haddou, I'm totally tickled pink to have been brought back to the twenty-first century and all its crass commercialism by this wonderfully kitsch display. It ends the day with a perfect giggle-worthy moment.

DAY THREE

Florence of Arabia

The only thing worse than going uphill on a camel is going downhill, or at least it is if you don't count the getting on and off, or the camel standing up to begin your trek, which pales into nothing the first time the animal drops on its front knees for you to dismount. And there's the bit in the middle, the lumpen swaying as the beast plods along, following the curve of the dunes in its meandering route, where your legs begin to ache because there are no stirrups to put your feet in to give you a modicum of support and at least a faint shade of elegance. Come to think of it, there's little to recommend a camel ride, so it's no surprise that most of the guides you talk to prefer to walk. I bet Peter O'Toole had a stunt double when it came to humping along on a dromedary during the filming of Lawrence of Arabia.

Because of their knowledge of this hostile terrain, Berbers could ensure safe passage from their fellow desert nomads, and acted as guides for the caravans of up to 12,000 camels who crossed from Timbuktu to Marrakesh and beyond. The camels might be able to survive for long periods without food and water, but their handlers couldn't, (nor the slaves that were a main commercial 'product'), and to carry enough water for human consumption would drastically reduce space for the precious cargoes of gold and spice. Runners were employed to travel ahead and arrange for water to be shipped back to the caravan from oases on the route. Fortunately for our little group, our 'oasis' is only an hour's ride away, but we are still required to carry our own drinking water.

I'd always imagined my night under the desert stars as a sandy version of the cowboy on the range, rolled up in a blanket with his head resting on his saddle, (although that was before I encountered a camel saddle, a lumpy thing if ever I saw one). In a nod in the direction of romanticism, I'd thrown in

a thick Moroccan rug to lie on in my imaginings. The reality was a bit different. I'm too old and decrepit for all that roughing-it malarkey and I'm quite prepared to forgo my frontier spirit and ask the camp chaps if I can drag the mattress out of my genuine Berber-style tent of woven wool and throw it on the ground. But they go one step further – they bring out the whole bed, mattress, sheets, pillows, blankets and all. And they do the same for the other five happy campers who want to drift off with the stars as a coverlet. Maybe not the romantic image of 'a night under the Saharan stars', but I have to admit that it's a little dash of unexpected comfort.

I'm the first to 'bed down'. The soft, warm breeze makes a single sheet enough, and I roll up in it. The camp is lit only by three candles, their pockets of light flickering on the dark wool of the tents, and the glow from a three-quarter moon. There is a susurration of wind and whispering as the camp settles down, checking if small flashlights are in easy reach for the late night visit to the toilet tent fifty metres away. A low conversation drifts down from a couple sat on a dune above the tents, but not intrusive.

The stars are everything I'd hoped for. More than just twinkles in a black-blue sky, they seem to spit and shimmer with life, and I'm tempted to ask if someone could please switch off the moon so I can get the full celestial show-time effect. The wind has picked up slightly so I drag a blanket over myself. I try to keep my eyes open so that I can concentrate on my star-spangled desert night sky, but they have a will of their own and I'm soon curled up under my blanket drifting off in the silence.

The desert dawn isn't a vast bright burst of colour that happens in some places in the world, but a gradual ice blue outlining of daylight against the shadowed deep ochre of the dunes. Slowly, individual features become clear; hummocks of coarse grass that pocket the sands become visible. No sound except the whispering wind that creates small wavelets of sand.

I sit on a dune watching the sunrise, and sounds drift up from the desert encampment as it comes to life. My fellow campers climb dunes of various heights, depending on age and athletic ability. The ice-sky warms to blue. I hear the complaining sounds of camels as Zaid the camel driver loads them up for the return

journey. He talks to them as he puts on their saddles over the top of folded blankets to provide padding (and also a useful way to carry the used sheets back to the hotel).

We begin our return journey to the hotel and a hot shower, and I discover that I'm at the head of the caravan not because I have the physique of a sultan but because the camel I've been allocated doesn't like to be behind another and nips at the bums of any in front of him.

As our long shadows walk alongside us I reflect that as humpy, lumpy and grumpy a camel might be, it has a romanticism that isn't inherent in a 4x4. If I'm going to spend a night under the stars I'd rather do it properly and put up with the temporary discomfort of an authentic ride on an animal that has all the appearance and angularity of something that has been designed by a committee – a committee that originally set out to design a horse but got slightly lost along the way.

JOURNEY BEYOND TRAVEL

DAY FOUR

Skeletons in the Sand

When we hear the word 'desert' our mind inevitably conjures up the image of undulating dunes of golden sand, and it comes as a bit of a surprise to discover that great swathes of desert landscape consist of high, barren, rocky plateaus. This is the hamada, a seemingly desolate wasteland that carries the eye into infinity.

As we drive over the long stretches of scattered rock and spiky shrub that is the hamada, it's almost impossible to imagine the force of the floods of heavy winter rains. They may be rare, but this is the area of torrential storms of biblical (or koranic) proportions. Almost nothing moves outside my window other than the occasional sand squall and a shepherd watching over his slowly chomping flock. When referring to these withering lands, the French historian Fernand Braudel, said that, 'Crossing such a zone (especially without mechanized transport) is worthwhile only when exceptional circumstances cause the expected gain to outweigh the cost and danger'.

We travel over scattered patches of sand, and, as in an airplane that hits pockets of turbulence, I feel a frisson as the 4x4 slithers over the low rises. To my unaccustomed eye there is no indication of any route, other than simply spotting a small building in the distance and heading for it, but Tata, my guide, assures me that years of driving in the hamad accustom you to the tiniest changes of terrain – until the rains come, when all routes are re-made.

It's this region of Morocco that is responsible for the rare meteorological phenomena known ominously as 'blood rains', where Saharan sand is carried across Europe and dropped as red downpours. The Roman philosopher Livy wrote in 181 B.C. 'In the precinct of Vulcan and Concord there was a shower of blood. . . . Being disturbed by these prodigies and deaths,

the Fathers decreed, both that the consuls should sacrifice full-grown victims to whatever gods it seemed proper.'

The last 'good' rain was twenty-five years ago, but the sand had 'forgotten' where the river lay and enormous areas of the Sahara were flooded, carrying away small villages and thousands of tented homes of nomads. Even as late as 2006, Riad Maria, a large desert hotel, was completely destroyed in a flash flood, leaving nothing but skeletal remains and an arch to nowhere.

We stop in the village of Khamlia, famous for its Gnoua musicians, descendants of a group of workers handed over as a token of an accord to end a 300-year blood war between Algeria and Morocco. I'm the sole member of the audience as Pigeons de Sable put on a show for me.

Gnoua musicians were playing hypnotic trance music long before the electronic version invaded discos. The rhythmic clapping, drumbeat, and metallic clacking of the karkaba, the small hand-held cymbals, were used in ceremonies to 'evoke ancestral saints who can drive out evil, cure psychological ills, or remedy scorpion stings'. As a culture they are said to heal diseases by the use of colour, cultural imagery, perfumes and fright, although I think I can live without the last prescription.

I've always found Gnoua music a bit discordant, but as the musician-dancers in their white robes and turbans, and a deep red cord with large glittering sequins crossed over their chest, began their performance I started to enter into the rhythm of the music. Dipping and swaying, jumping and circling, this traditional performance in a small dark room in a tiny desert village is a world away from the false few moments of clanging and tassel swaying you get for ten dirhams in Marrakesh's Jmaa el Fna.

Tea and salaams over, I'm surprised when one of the musicians says in beautifully modulated English, "Excuse me sir, but you've left your pen on the sofa." I probably shouldn't be surprised really, but it wasn't something I expected to hear in the wilds of the Sahara.

We're on our way to lunch at Tata's family home in the Ziz Valley when we make an unscheduled stop at Mifis, a ghost town of crumbling mud and straw homes where once

a prosperous mining community lived during the time of the French Protectorate. When the French pulled out of Morocco in the 1950s taking the military who had inhabited the village with them, the coal mine continued but the village was abandoned.

I'm fascinated by the eerie sense of desolation and decay as I walk the streets, and I'm completely taken aback when the call to prayer broadcast from a loudspeaker breaks the almost total silence.

I cross through the ruin of what was probably someone's living room half a century ago. Among the hundreds of dilapidated buildings totally devoid of life stands a one-storey mosque, its small minaret standing higher than anything that's left of the village that surrounds it. Two men cross the square in front of me to enter the mosque, nodding in my direction. I feel as if I'm part of a surreal movie where at any moment the director is going to jump out of a ruin and scream at me for walking into shot. But no-one does.

It's only later, as I leave what's left of Mifis that I see a few houses that are obviously inhabited. I have no idea why anyone should live in this desolate hole and there is no-one here to ask, but my heart goes out to whoever has to spend their life in the spectral shadow of a community that ceased to exist six decades ago.

DAY FIVE

Monkey Business

There's a crispness in the air as we climb into the Middle Atlas Mountains, despite what appears to be a cloudless summer sky. Small farms are hidden in dips in the mountain valleys and tiny fields of corn glow in the early morning sunlight. Off in the distance the peaks of the High Atlas are covered in snow. Naim stops the car so that I can take a deep breath of crystalline air after the heat of the last few days.

This was once a vast area of cedar forest but uncontrolled felling until recently has created deforestation on an enormous scale. Atlas cedar was used in the palaces of kings, princes and the very wealthy, to create beautiful carvings that will never be seen by the public. Fortunately, a national parks programme set up by the Government twenty years ago controls the felling of this conifer and the planting of new trees.

But all thoughts of rampage through nature drift away as we drive the near empty roads, dappled with shadows from the stately trees. We stop for a short break at an entrance to the Ifrane National Park, and just as we are about to leave, Naim spots a Barbary macaque coming towards us through the forest. Just like the macaques on Gibraltar, these monkeys are used to humans and see them as a food source, but unlike their Gibraltar brethren they seem more passive and undemanding in their dealings with we more upright apes.

As if he's out for a morning stroll, the macaque saunters towards us, occasionally stopping for a scratch of his chest and to look around, as if we're of little importance in his life and he's not really decided whether he should bother with us or not. In stops and starts he approaches us. Naim brings a couple of packets of cheese biscuits and the end of a baguette from the car, breaks it into pieces and throws them in the monkey's direction. He picks them up and nibbles them.

A few minutes later a movement in the shadows heralds the

arrival of a female with a young monkey hanging onto her back. Working on the premise that there actually is such a thing as a free lunch, she saunters forth to gather up the bits of cheese biscuits Naim has thrown in her direction. The baby, with its fine covering of hair, large eyes and a wrinkled brow that creates an expression of permanent surprise, is perfectly at home with every move and sway as mom bends to pick up breakfast or drink from the car tyre cut in half that is their water trough.

When the biscuits and bread run out the trio gather for a family grooming session, which, according to research completed in 2007, underpins primate society and is an excellent stress reducer, more for the giver than the receiver. It reminds me of when I was a child, and my mother would ask one of us kids to brush her hair while we watched TV, her favourite form of relaxation. Fortunately, all we were required to do was brush, no need to pick at anything.

DAY SIX

A Game of Thrones

They say that you ain't seen nuttin' until you've seen a Moroccan wedding – and the Fassis are the boys (and girls) to beat the band!

While it's considered the height of chic at a European-style wedding to change from a voluminous white wedding gown into elegant evening wear to dance the night away, the girlies of Fez go through more changes than you could shake a well-stocked wardrobe at during their all-night partying to celebrate their nuptials. And these aren't just a nice frock or two, they will have three or four complete changes of crowns and gorgeous caftans in different colours, with scarves, shoes, belts – the whole matching kit and caboodle. At some time during the night the couple will appear formally dressed, she in a chedda, the traditional Fassi wedding dress with a crown of vertical strips of burnished gold and long lengths of gold or silver embroidered fabric framing her face, and a voluminous headdress and skirts that allow only the oval of her face to stand out from the sparkling light reflecting off the of ornate gilding of the embroidery. At the end of the celebrations, around four in the morning, modern girls will appear in a traditional white European-style wedding dress. But as if it wasn't enough that the fancy garment industry is on over-time to dress the girls, for each newly-robed entrance the bride has to be born aloft on a different wedding chair, preferably one that matches her outfit.

Like a Roman senator doing his rounds in a fancy sedan chair carried by four large slaves, the Fassi bride's wedding chair is an ornate confection of pillars and posts, curlicues and cushions, lace and dangling tassels, hoisted on the shoulders of four stout ladies. The chaps have to settle for a seat that is more of a large tray than a chair, and minus the fancy canopy. The couple will be carried the short distance from the door to their throne, a construction of such gloriously over-the-top ridiculousness that

you would just die to have one as the centre-piece of your chi-chi glass and pale oak living room at home. Or maybe not.

These fabulous furniture follies may look the part at a celebration where the participants are so extravagantly dressed that they would put a Gay Pride parade to shame, but in the ramshackle back alleyways of the souks their sudden appearance amongst the carpenter's workshops is akin to discovering a glittering ruby in a bucket of supermarket coleslaw.

After wandering the medina for a couple of hours I see a chap pulling a trolley with what appear to be a pair of strange trays and a fancy top roped on it. Not having anything more pressing, I follow him. He unknowingly leads me into the depths of the souks, where I find myself introduced to the world of wacky wedding chairs.

Mr. Nassim has been making these chairs and sofas for almost forty years, since he started in the workshop of his uncle as a mere lad of thirteen. Working to designs limited only by his imagination and a stub of pencil to draw on a bit of paper, - no 3D design software played with on a computer features in his fantastical creations - fantails and folderols are his stock in trade. I'm torn between a three-tiered double throne of relative simplicity – although 'relative simplicity' in the context of Mr. Nassim's creations is a contradiction in terms – and the full outrageous fluff of curly-whirly backdrop, buttoned cushions, scrolled arms and scrunched up lace. I'm saved from my deliberations by the fact that I have neither a girlfriend nor fiancé with whom I can share a sofa, in the unlikely event they should ever consent to be my wife. Even more unlikely than my buying one of Mr. Nassim's creations to make a centre-piece in my far from chi-chi apartment.

I'm allowed to test drive a sedan chair, and the squeak I hear as I settle into the bright white cushions reminds me that as extravagant as these furnishings appear, they are almost always made these days of plasticised wipe-down fabrics. Not surprising really, because they, along with the fancy frocks, gorgeous table-ware and most of the accoutrements of the big day are hired by the newly-wed's family, and the pretty penny invested in the making of the happy bride's throne has

to be born over a fair number of 'big days'.

In the triumvirate of birth, death and marriage, just opposite Mr. Nassim's showroom that represents one of the happiest moments of life is a small workshop tending to the necessities of one of the saddest. On the floor, dappled by sunlight, is a plain yellow-painted box, the shape of a house with a peaked roof, the length of a man. A simple plank coffin, totally lacking the ostentatious ornamentation associated with western funerary. A reminder to make the most of Mr. Nassim's frivolities while we can.

JOURNEY BEYOND TRAVEL

DAY SEVEN

Climbing the Stairway to Heaven

I've never been good with maps, particularly city maps. I quite like getting lost because there is usually someone to set you on the right path. And in Morocco you can always use a GPS. By that I don't mean the hi-tech computer equipment, it's the nickname given to young boys in the street who are always offering to guide you somewhere. The truth is that half the time they don't know either, but you're lost, so who cares.

On my first visit to Fez I'd bought a map. First lesson; never buy a map that has a pretty little seal on it. It may seduce you into thinking that you are opening a box of delights, but for all the good this one did I might as well have asked someone to scrawl a quick diagram on the back of a cigarette packet. But what the heck, I've got a mouth (which sadly speaks neither Arabic or French), and so long as I remembered that R'Cif is actually pronounced 'R'Sef', I couldn't go far wrong.

I start in the Plaza R'Cif, and before I enter the melee of the medina I become absorbed by some ladies sorting through mounds of second-hand women's and children's shoes laid out on blankets. Bent double, they delve into the haphazard scattering, trying to match a pair. I watch for a few minutes, and the only pair I can spot are some bright red canvas sandals with enormous heels and a lace that ties around the ankle. It occurs to me that it would make a pretty good temporary job for some young kid, sorting out the pairs and tying them together with string. Although perhaps part of the bargain hunting is in the chase for the lost slipper, the reverse of the Cinderella story of trying to find a foot to go in one.

As I'm just having a wander it doesn't matter which direction I take, so I walk into the medina, turn right and weave my way in. As you enter the medina in Marrakesh from Jmaa el Fna, all the shops in the first few hundred metres are given over to almost exactly the same products, mainly aimed at tourists. What

I like about the medina in Fez is that while you still have the babouches, djellabas and brass trays for sale, the tiny shops are mixed in with butchers, coffee grinders and vegetable stalls, purveyors of all your daily needs. I also like the way the narrow alleys rise and fall, often at awkward angles, as they make their way up the hill.

Within a few minutes I find myself at the foot of a steep set of steps. In front of me a lady with a pushchair is trying to carry both it and a couple of bags of shopping up the slope. In the pushchair, or 'stroller' as Americans call it, a dumpy child swathed in clothes glares out grumpily, as small children can when not exactly pleased about being bumped up and down a flight of steps – and it was a long flight of steps. I gesture to the lady to take the handles, I take the crossbar at the front and between us we haul child and shopping up the steps.

When we reach the top I put my end of the pushchair down and, with profuse thanks from the lady, turn to continue on my way. And then I see another flight of equally steep steps, with no alleyways heading off in another direction. The only way is up. I turn around with the thought that sometimes it pays to mind your own business, and pick up my end of the pushchair again. My shortage of breath when we finally get to the top of this flight is as much to do with carrying a weighty young chap

as it is to being out of practise with trudging uphill, but I comfort myself with the thought that the poor dear probably does that every day without a word of complaint.

The slope continues upward, out of the world of the tourist wanderer into the everyday world of Fez family life. Outside a butcher's shop a young boy is deftly shaving a camel's head with a cut-throat razor, whether preparing it for the pot or practising for a future as a barber, I've no idea, but he was doing a pretty good job. Next to the shop a ram with a wonderfully curling set of horns is tied to a door with a length of string. Tomorrow's lunch or a woolly guard dog, again I've no idea, but with a set of horns like that I'm not about the get any closer to find out.

I pick up two ballpoint pens from a blanket on the ground covered with pens, pencils, notebooks and the like and ask the price. A pretty young teenager says "Quatre dirham." "Pardon?" I say, not sure if I've heard correctly, and behind me a voice says, "Six." I wasn't going to argue for the sake of a couple of dirhams, so I hand the money over to the man sat on the blanket, who seems bemused by the whole operation. I look at the girl and laugh. "You said four." The broad giggling smile she gives me is worth every cent of the two dirhams I've been overcharged.

DAY EIGHT

A Tuk-Tuk to Far

I've always been beguiled by tuk-tuks, those strange little workhorses, half motor-bike, half mini-pic-up that in one form or another can be found almost anywhere in the world. These marvellous little beasties go by various names, trishaw, autorickshaw, autorick, bajaj, mototaxi, baby taxi, depending where you are, and as the names imply, are a motorized version of the traditional pulled rickshaw or cycle rickshaw. But the tuk-tuks in Morocco are monsters in comparison to their Asian brethren, with big 'don't-mess-with-me' motorbike front ends that would sneer at the wimpish eastern model based on the design of the Vespa motor-scooter.

I struggle to photograph one that seems to be blossoming with plants as we drive into Meknes, but the bumpy road jostles me around too much to get a decent shot. A small conifer, a young hydrangea, deep red and yellow marigolds, zinnias, if I'm not mistaken, which I probably am given that I can't get a good view as we're bouncing along; a bougainvillea climbing a cane, broad leaves and skinny leaves in various shades of green. Plant identification has never been my strong point, which probably accounts for the weird horticultural miss-match that I call my garden.

The basic tuk-tuk model is open to the elements, both the back-end and the driver, who can get pretty chilly with nothing to protect him against winter winds other than a thick djellaba and a woolly hat. These are used mainly for deliveries into the periphery of the medina, creating a bit of competition for the muleteers, but getting their comeuppance with narrow alleyways and steep stepped inclines where the languidly plodding mule come into its own. You also see them occasionally careering around loaded with kids sitting on wooden crates – in fact anybody sitting on wooden crates – who can't afford the price of a bus ticket.

The more upmarket versions will have roll-up plastic sides and an awning to protect the driver from the worst of sun and rain, with some of them even having a full windshield to save streaming eyes from the chill-factor of driving into biting wind in the winter and dust in the summer. Invariably, when the rider has a crash-helmet it will be hung on a hook somewhere and not on his head as nature intended, while to guard against the constant thrub of the engine against a chap's private parts and as minor solace to a bum pounded by bumpy roads, the rider will almost always be sat on a thick cushion or folded rug.

The fancier tuk-tuks have padded benches running the length of the trailer interior and serve as competition to the petit taxis and grande taxis that hustle the streets for passengers. The petit taxis are supposedly for use within a city and the grande taxis for longer distances, with the tuk-tuk getting in where the others can't reach. The padded benches are merely a sort-of approximation of how many people they can carry, and they work on the principle that when the seats are jammed sardine-like and no-one else can sit in the mini-gap on the floor between legs (they are too low for standing) there is still space for a couple of lightweights to hang onto the frame beside the driver. They seem to have taken this packing style from the grande taxis, whose seating plan of driver and four adults went out of the window long ago. I once saw one in Fez that was so jam-packed passengers in the rear seats were trying to hold the doors closed with their arms out the windows and with two kids sat in the trunk with the lid up. It took off in a cloud of smoke and the exhaust sparking as it dragged along the road.

Hard-working things they may be, but even the best of machines can go wrong. As we pull up a slight rise at a set of traffic lights, cars nearest the sidewalk are trying to push in front of others to get past a semi-stationary tuk-tuk loaded with boxes. The driver is almost bent double trying to push his vehicle up the hill but not quite making it. Each time he stops to take a breather his tuk-tuk rolls back a little, like Sisyphus in Greek mythology, forever rolling an enormous boulder uphill only to see it rolling back down again.

DAY NINE

Chaouen the Fat

I take a morning coffee on the Plaza Utan el-Hamman, the 'watch the world go by' main square of Chefchouen medina. The waiter spends more time hustling people into his café than serving them. He seems to take it as a personal insult if they don't come inside, throwing insults after those that walk away.

I'm amused by a rotund Spanish man sitting with a group of friends at a table nearby. He has a fancy Canon camera, but every time he tries to take a photo of his travelling companions sat at the table the camera doesn't work. I watch him for a while as he keeps trying with no success and complaining that his expensive camera has stopped working half way through their holiday. I finally give in and walk over to him. I suggest he tips the peak of his baseball cap back a bit and try again. He does, and voila!, the camera works again. The simple explanation is that when the automatic flash flipped open, the peak of his cap was stopping it from opening fully, therefore not completing the electronic cycle. Laughs all round and a fully functioning camera to record his holidays.

I walk into the upper levels of the medina and the higher I go the streets become less tourism orientated and more directed at village way of life. Small grocers, furniture makers, bakers and artisans fill the tiny shops. At the Librairie El Dai Ben Maymouna piles of second-hand magazines going back decades form a low wall outside the shop. To pass the time the owner reads something from his stock, sat on a small rickety stool in the morning sunlight. In his cluttered shop bundles of tied-up magazines share shelf space with dog-eared paperback books, and faded black and white photos pinned to the door show Chefchaouen as it was generations ago. A couple of postcard stands display out-of-date cards, some of them almost curled double by exposure to the sun.

Next door is Janine Internet, with its stock of computer

necessities, and a place to send modern day versions of the postcards, the photos you took yourself a couple of hours ago with an iphone, but lacking the charm of the stock in the Librairie's worn out display stands next door. It's a curious contrast, the ultra-modern next to the outdated, but a commonplace sight in Morocco.

This ancient quartier is a place of corners shaded by hanging vines, a dispute as a builder blocks a shop doorway with bags of cement before he hoists them above, boys on bikes dodging the pedestrians as they scramble downhill, a father hand-in-hand with his small son entering a barber shop that has outmoded photos of models with dense lacquered hair taped to the widow.

A mini-moment of drama occurs as a man tries to raise a wire supporting a large grapevine that crosses the narrow street. The wire has settled on a telephone cable, which looks as if it is about to be torn from the wall by the weight of the grapes. He's concentrating so much on poking with his pole that he doesn't

notice that the wire has dropped under one of the tiles on his roof. With a mighty heft he pushes the vines up over the phone cable and at the same time dislodges the tile. With a crash, the roof tile hits the ground, scattering shards into the street. He looks around bemused, realizing that he has just created himself another repair job.

The crash makes a baker jump as he steps out his shop. He's carrying a tray of freshly-baked round loves covered in tea towel-sized cloths that he lays on the low frame of a banquette, without the mattress, waiting for the owners to collect them. At one end two metal trays of baked peppers show what someone is having for lunch. At the end of the day, when all the bread has been baked, he will slide trays of honey and orange-blossom water pastries into the oven to cook by the cooling embers of the oven fire.

DAY TEN

Taking a Deco at Casablanca

Much is made of Maimi and its Art Deco District, and rightly so, with its restoration and preservation of some of the best of 1930s and 40s architecture (although sadly a bit too much kitsch than correct in some cases), but it came as a bit of a surprise when I was told that in its heyday Casablanca had ten times the number of Art Deco buildings that Miami had, the city a clean pre-war palette to be played with by many of France's top architects of the day.

Unfortunately you'll have to have your wits about you to spot what's left, at least with the exteriors, which have been remodelled almost to extinction. There are plenty of interiors that still retain the fripperies of fancy wrought-iron balconies, swooping stairways, brass adornments, luscious marble and lacquered wood that takes you back to the time of elegant ladies in sinuous frocks escorted by lounge lizards in smartly cut suits.

Mers Sultan is just an ordinary sort of neighbourhood near the centre of the city and not somewhere you'll find aflood with tourists, but behind the grime of decades there are still plenty of Deco gems to please the eagle-eyed. Step into the Cinema Lynx on Avenue Mers Sultan and you are cocooned in an oyster shell of blue and yellow wave-form ceiling radiating from the screen, itself covered in a deep red curtain suspended from the proscenium arch, as if you are about to watch a stage play. And if you want to finish the night in semi-seedy Deco style, slip into nearby Bar Atomic where little has changed, other than the sawdust on the floor, since the 1940s, and bottles of beer are still chilled in the original wooden fridges.

For the full-frontal Art Deco style, Cinema Rialto is just as it was in the 1920s, albeit slightly more 'rubbed around the edges' than the day it opened, but the dear old dame, fast approaching her century, is still as popular as ever. Saucy Josephine Baker,

temptress of the Parisian stage, once trod the Rialto's boards, and while the nearby restaurant Petit Poucet may also be a bit less glamorous than when Edith Piaf and author of The Little Prince, (and aristocrat, poet, and pioneering aviator), Antoine de St Exupéry whiled away their time there, it still has an air of faded elegance reminiscent of its glory days.

The most splendid staircase in Casablanca is said to be the wrought-iron delight at the design store Thema Maison on Houssine Ben Ali. The shop that was once a mansion built in the 1940s is now a showcase for the owner's fabric designs and the best of Moroccan artisans, but was the family home before the family fled the nest and it became the delight that you see now. After a decadent shop, the restaurant Rouget de l'Isle (just over the road down an alley of the same name) is a beautifully restored 1930s building, with the addition of being one of the top French restaurants in the city at an affordable price.

Hassan II Mosque, the largest in Morocco and seventh largest in the world, gets plenty of attention, but in its own way the Sacré-Coeur Cathedral is another fascinating work of architecture. Designed by the French architect Paul Tournon and built in 1930, it was an experiment in the decorative use of cast concrete. An enormous wedding cake of a building, it clearly shows its Deco provenance but with subtle twists to appeal to its Moroccan situation. Grandiose as it is on the outside, it's relatively modest on the inside, and though it was deconsecrated and fell into disuse after Morocco's independence in 1956, it's still a pretty piece of eye-candy if you like your Deco on a vast scale.

But really, Deco-vastness isn't what you find much of in Casablanca these days. It's more the subtle indications, the memory of loucheness in the sweep of a stairway or the curve of a door escutcheon. But it's there, sometimes hidden by decades of abandonment, but it's still there.

DAY ELEVEN

Souk it and See

A long drive today, enlivened by one of my favourite Moroccan pastimes – a stroll around a village weekly market.

If it wasn't for the parsimonious airline baggage allowance I might well have acquired a handsome example of a goat, with a frightening, or glorious, set of curly horns, depending on your perspective. Even if I'd paid full price for a seat for him, I suspect there would have been some petty regulation to stop me from taking him home. Mind you, at 1800Dhms he isn't going cheap, and when a burly chap in a deep blue djellaba steps up and begins the bidding at 1400 I realize I'm off the hook. It turns out the ram is being sold for breeding, and as I live in the centre of a city I suspect there'd be few female goats to allow the hearty chap to perform his natural function. I'm told a cow would cost me 10,000Dhms, and a fattened sheep ready for the chop around 1200Dhms, which makes a couple of grilled chops a bit expensive – tasty, but expensive.

At a different market last year I saw a chap with a few years under his robe stagger by with a fat sheep. It was a couple of months before Eid Al-Adha, the feast that commemorates Prophet Abraham's willingness to obey God when he was toldthat he was to sacrifice his son, but he was getting in early to get a good'un because by the time feast day arrived the price would have doubled. He'd given himself a few weeks to get it to full match fitness so that the family and friends who would share it would complement him on the fine quality of the meat and his sharpness at having bought early.

To the side of today's bleating and butting sheep and goats is a butcher's stall, but not one you'd go to for prime rib; his stock is all the bits that get ground into pet food elsewhere (or bargain 99cent 'beef' burgers), but here make wonderful stews. I feel moderately glad that my request to photograph a wheezing

old guy with a week's stubble and a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth who's carefully skinning a cow's head is denied. I suspect the Health and Safety tyrants that terrorise the food industry elsewhere would need to go around in groups if they were to try and enforce a 'no spilling cigarette ash on a cow's head' rule here.

I find it worthwhile to offer to pay for photos of people working. Ten dirhams will not only get you a better photo than trying to sneak one, but you often get the subject joining into the spirit of things. An elderly man has a pile of crushed dried figs laid out on a plastic sheet, and while he doesn't want to be photographed himself (which is what I am trying to do) he carefully unfolds the plastic sheet and shooshes his lady clients aside so they don't cast a shadow, allowing me a worthless photo of a pile of figs. He then presents me with a chunk of crushed figs and carefully wraps it in a piece of brown paper.

Alongside the fig man is Mr. Popcorn Seller, with a wonderful hand-cranked popping machine. I ask if I can take a photo and he politely insists that I wait until he makes a new batch.

Meanwhile, in a gesture of camaraderie, Naim hands over half our gift from the fig man.

The un-state-of-the-art popcorn machine is an old, blackened pan with a hinged lid mounted on a swivel and set over a small gas ring. The lid is flipped up with a fingernail, a handful of popping corn and a dribble of oil thrown in and the lid flicked down. We three stand like campers waiting for the kettle to boil for their early morning cup of tea. Within a couple of minutes I can hear vigorous popping going on inside the pan and when Mr. Popcorn judges the time is right he flips open the lid and a spitting and sparkling of yellowy-white popcorn leaps out the pan. He spins the machine on its swivel and a cascade scatters on his metal serving tray. A couple of handfuls of salt thrown over, and the cooking process is done. A twist of a piece of paper into a cone, and there's our 1Dhms-worth, cheap at half the price.

Unfortunately, I really don't like popcorn, particularly the salted variety. At a respectful distance from the popcorn seller Naim puts the packet of popcorn, the remaining crushed dried figs and a 1Dhm coin into the hands of an elderly lady, who seems very chipper at her impromptu picnic.

The highlight of our little jaunt is when I see a pair of joke spectacles with a bulbous nose and moustache attached. I had a set when I was five years old, many decades ago. I tell that to Mustapha, the young salesman, who, quick as a whip, replies, 'In that case you should buy one to remember that time.' Nifty sales ploy, so I buy one each for my two grandchildren. They'll be one up on their granddad, though, because mine didn't have two paper blowers attached to the sides that shoot out sideways and squeal when you blow into them, as Mustapha's does.

A village souk is more Arabian mayhem than the exotic atmosphere of Arabian nights, but nothing really gives the true atmosphere of Morocco as a wander around a weekly village market.

JOURNEY BEYOND TRAVEL
GO BEYOND THE DESTINATION

DAY TWELVE

Getting a Grilling

I've never been a great lover of fish, other than for the few months I lived in Jerez de la Frontera in Andalucia, a town famous for its sherry, flamenco (where it was supposedly born), and being the home of the Royal Andalucian horse dancing school, none of which particularly enthused me, although it did have the most incredible fish market. (And, apropos of nothing at all, Jerez is near Cadiz, the first city and port in Europe, and where that supposed icon of British gastronomy – deep fried fish – was born, invented by the Jewish community as a Shabbat meal because it could be eaten cold.)

But, a couple of thousand miles south, to Essaouaira, Morocco's home of the 'laid back' on the southern Atlantic coast, and just the place to sample the best fish in the country.

Ragragui Botzad is a mere slip of a lad in his early twenties, but for a few years in his teens he helped his father, Hussain, man the small fishing boat that has been Hussain's livelihood for over thirty-five years. Each morning Hussain walks to the port to look at the sea; if it's calm enough he works, if it isn't, he doesn't. It's a simple as that. No matter what the catch, the first fifty dirhams from the sale covers petrol, the second is rental paid to the owner, and the rest he splits with his one-man crew. Eventually Ragragui decided that the same sickness that bedeviled Horatio Nelson, a violent stomach aversion to the swell of the waves, was a good enough reason for him to end his fishing career. But it left him with an excellent knowledge of the local fish, so he was the ideal chap to take me around the fishing port and help me choose lunch.

The quayside in the harbour around noon is where the words 'hustle' and 'bustle' were made for. Men and women alike, young and old, haggle over sardines sparkling in wooden boxes of crushed ice, dorada still with a salt-sea smell, family-size octopi, and some seriously ugly specimens that look terrifying even when dead.

Ragragui walks me along the quay, chatting with acquaintances and explaining to me the best way to cook some of the more unusual species. But as my lunch is to be something that will be grilled on a barbecue and not cooked in a pot, he ends our stroll with his friend, Hamid. A fine dorada is selected and a handful of fat sardines, bigger than any I've seen the fish markets in Valencia, Spain, where I live – and Hamid has a big hand. The seven he drops on a piece of paper alongside the dorada are far more than I would normally eat. For this lot I pay the princely sum of twenty dirhams, about one fifth of what I would pay at home. When I hand over the money, Hamid tries to put another dorada on the pile, just for friendship's sake, but I tell him that as much as I appreciate his generosity, it would probably end up being eaten by one of the street cats because I have enough for a grand lunch already.

We stroll back to 'grill street' in the narrow alleyways off Derb Chbanat, where cubby-hole restaurants prepare tajines of slow-food takeaways. On the way I pick up a bottle of Poms, my favourite sparkling apple juice when I'm in Morocco. Ragragui has to go to work so puts me in the hands of Madame Hadija, who takes the plastic bag of fish to clean and grill it.

In the small square, charcoal grills made from large cans cut in half are set up on rickety tables thrown together out of odds and ends of lumber. Three worn out white plastic garden tables and seven chairs shunted together below a pair of beach umbrellas, one advertising coffee and the other with faded oranges as the motif, provide the dining area of Madame Hadija's establishment, a place where locals sit and exchange a few words if no-one is using the chairs for commercial purposes.

Three one-person tajines rest on top of individual charcoal burners, and are constantly being replaced as they are carried away for someone's lunch. When one is removed the coals are given a quick rake over and top up, with a breeze from a small circular ventilation wall fan held in Madame Hadija's hand to get the coals glowing before another tajine is set in place. As the smoke wafts along the light breeze through the alleyways the aromas of grilling fish perfume the air.

Like a sommelier showing the label of an expensive bottle of wine, Lahcen, the man who is to cook my sardines, holds them

up in the fold-over grill for my inspection before putting them on his round charcoal burner. The local bakery is literally a hole in the wall, and while my sardines are cooking Madame Hadija walks over and buys the small flat loaf I'm to eat with my fish.

As much as I like dorado, I've never been a fan of either sardines or charcoal grills, but with something so fresh from the catch, a large squeeze of lemon and Lahcen's decades of experience I'm converted, although my problem is the same as it is with making a decent cup of mint tea. Can I produce this splendid flavor at home?

DAY THIRTEEN

Roadside Marketing

As we are leaving Essaouaira, Naim points out a curious bit of roadside business that adds to my collection of 'roadside marketing' that has amused me over the years. As you drive into town you will see young men waving bunches of keys at you. If you are looking for cheap accommodation these are the chaps to talk to, because by waving the keys they are telling you that they have rooms or apartments to rent, and you can be sure it won't be in some fancy hotel with fancy hotel prices.

I first became aware of roadside marketing (although not in its strictest sense, that of selling something), in the foothills of the High Atlas Mountains when I saw a small boy of about four sat on a rock beside four large blue metal gas bottles. His job was to wait for the gas bottle wagon. If he was big enough he might be entrusted to hold the money to pay for the refills, but if he was only a little'un, as soon as he saw the wagon he would run to get his mama. Sometimes there was no-one guarding the empty bottles, and the wagon driver would blare his horn to attract attention. But if you didn't get your refills, especially in winter time when wood was hard to come by in more remote regions, you would be having cold meals for the next couple of weeks until the bottle man came around again.

There always seems to be something for sale at the side of the road, depending on the season and the region: roses, olives, eggs, chicken, figs, prunes, apricots. Fruit in plastic buckets, olive oil in yellow plastic containers, everything re-cycled. Whole families sit by the side of road under a shade tree, and if you don't see anyone, as soon as you stop someone appears.

In bee-keeping areas you might be tempted to wonder why you see so many large bottles of Coca Cola and Pepsi for sale by the side of the road. These aren't wayside cafés, there to slake your thirst on a hot Moroccan day; the bottles are full of honey, which deteriorates in plastic, so the glass coke

bottles are perfect for storing the precious – and expensive – miracle food. At around four hundred dirhams for a 1.5ltr bottle it doesn't come cheap, but it will be some of the best you have ever tasted and will have more health-giving properties than you could shake a medical dictionary at.

As you leave Casablanca heading north or south on the coast road you see fishermen doing their best to cast their lines from the few rocky outcrops not pounded by the blustery Atlantic waves. If they are successful with their catch it may well end up on the family plate, but before that the fishermen will try to sell it to the drivers passing by at speed, laid over a frame or holding it up on sticks to catch attention.

Around Chefchouen they take their marketing seriously, with shaded stalls selling all manner of local produce, but also traditional local headwear, conical straw hats with brightly coloured pompoms hanging from a wide brim, reminiscent of those worn by the water-sellers of almost any ancient medina.

Dates from the Ziz Valley, some of the most delicious in Morocco; Cherries from Safrou near Fez; the best quality hena from Tazrine, used in the intricate hand decorations created throughout Morocco; walnuts from Imlil in the High Atlas Mountains, the base village from where ascents of Jbel Toubkal, North Africa's highest peak begin; saffron from Taliouine, Agadir and Ouazazarte (where you will also find the largest film studio on the world, Atlas studios).

You occasionally see food stalls set up by the road-side catering to the traveller, and when I'm tempted to stop to sample a bowl of couscous with a strange sauce made with unpasteurised local milk poured over it, Naim suggests it might be safer to stick to the wrapped sandwiches we bought at a petrol station earlier in the day. Long hours of driving on twisting country roads are not conducive to gurgling stomachs, and while locals may happily consume milk-covered couscous it might not be the best of things for a tender foreigner to try. I bow to his greater knowledge and his unspoken wish that he probably doesn't want to be driving someone who would be seeking a toilet every few kilometres.

DAY FOURTEEN

Salt of the Earth

I set off for a morning stroll with Omar, my guide, who's more used to week-long walks in the high peaks of the High Atlas than taking a lazy wander in the foothills, which is about the best my aging legs can manage.

The mountain landscape is beautiful, but it still strikes me, as it did at my first sight of this lush area, that sometimes no-matter how far we travel some things stay the same. Anyone who knows the Valencian region in Spain, where I live, would be totally at home in these surroundings. The same rolling landscape, red and cream striated earth, pine covered hills and olive groves you would see if you took a ride half an hour inland from my home in the city. But the architectural geography of low, boxy, one-storey villages of mud and stone, plastered over with dull pink adobe made from the local soil, with the literal high point of the village being the minaret, is in total contrast to a Spanish village. But above all, it is the people, their animals and the way of life that create such a striking image.

We wander through pine forests and below walnut trees, following footpaths cut from the hillsides by the slow clomping of mules over millennia. Blush pink oleander marks the course where streams will flow during the rains, but which at the moment are pebbly cuts through the red earth. Omar is taking me to see a process that has barely changed over the centuries and was a major contributor to the wealth of the city that lies in the great plain at the foot of the High Atlas.

On the long and hazardous journey from Timbuktu to Marrakesh caravans of up to 12,000 camels would bring precious cargoes of gold, spices and slaves. These lost souls would either be sold at the slave market in the Red City or continue onward for their last view of their homeland before embarking at Mogador, these days Essaouira, on the terrifying voyage across the Atlantic to the Americas. An equally precious

cargo would retrace the route from Marrakesh to the Sudan, but while the inward freight brought riches and flavourings, the outward carried the difference between life and death – salt.

Far from just being a condiment, salt was so important to the prosperity of the city that part of the ancient medina is called the Mellah, from the Hebrew word for salt, 'melach'. Almost every city in Morocco had a mellah, which was surrounded by a wall with a fortified gateway, and built near the royal palace to protect its inhabitants from recurring riots because they played such a vital role in the local economy.

Salt has been mined in the High Atlas Mountains for millennia and other than using a motorised pump to draw the water from the well these days, almost nothing has changed in its production since the days of the camel caravans.

When I first set eyes on the salt beds set in a shallow valley in the mountains near Ouirgane it seems totally deserted, not a soul in sight nor a sound to be heard, other than the steady thrum of a motor pump. At first glance there seems nothing to see, other than some piles of sparkling white and a rickety structure of wooden posts with a roof of brushwood and sacking providing shade for the pump. As I move further in I see a few dilapidated huts built of mud bricks that blend with the red of the surrounding hillsides.

A few steps further and the beds themselves become more obvious, with low stone walls creating shallow tanks. Some are bone dry, their earth bottoms jigsawed by the baking sun; others are white with salt ready for collection, while most have a thin layer of crystalising water, the salt course and shimmering like an early morning frost.

At various points around the glistening field small wells supply the water, sometimes drawn up by the pump, although still occasionally using the traditional method – a donkey hauling on a rope. The wells are less than a metre wide, lined with stones gather from the hillsides. I'm amazed at how shallow they are; in some I can see the surface of the water glimmering a couple of metres below. Across the mouth a narrow wooden tree trunk has ropes around it descending into the water, connected either to buckets or supporting the rubber hoses the thickness of a man's forearm that snake across and around the tanks,

connected to the pump that draws the water from the wells and spews it into waiting tanks for the ancient process to begin again.

Footpaths meander between the tanks, separating each family's 'plot' just as they would in an allotment growing vegetables. This low-tech production system is still run by local families, as it has been for generations, most likely supplying the same salt that was traded for gold, spices and slaves in Marrakesh a thousand years ago.

JOURNEY BEYOND TRAVEL

DAY FIFTEEN

Football Crazy

My last day in Morocco, but as I have a late flight it gives me plenty of time for a final stroll around the souk. I've often found that these aimless walks, where I'm not focused on getting somewhere fast, bring the best rewards. If I had been intent on a destination I'd probably have walked right past the tiny shop of Kamal Boukentar, the last hand-made soccer ball maker in the Marrakech Medina.

Kamal spends his days hand-sewing footballs, sat on a rush-seated chair outside his wardrobe-size workshop, La Clinique du Ballon, deep in the souks of Marrakesh Medina. He painstakingly sews small panels of leather together with an exactness of stitch that makes you think it has been sewn by machine. Occasionally he stops to spray the seam he is working on with water, to soften the leather and make it easier to sew. He is the only handmade leather football maker in Morocco, and, quite possibly, one of only a handful left in Africa and Europe.

When we first meet, Kamal is working on a model from the 1930s with eighteen panels. On a shelf in the shop window is the ultimate in the fine art of football making, a ball of seventy-two pieces, probably one of only two in the world, one made by Kamal, the other laboriously sewn by his father forty years earlier.

"Mohamed Boukentar, my father, started the shop in 1965, and was one of about twenty makers in the Medina at the time. During the seventies my mother, Lalla Aicha, worked with him, and is the only woman ever to have hand-sewn leather footballs in Morocco. I began in 1984, when I was twelve, and it took me a week to make my first football." He points to the ball in the window. "I can make an eighteen-piece ball in one day, but that one took me ten days of solid work. It's purely for display, to show just how intricate a ball can be, and there is no price in the world that would get me to part with it."

Most people probably just assume that a soccer ball is made from a basic design, which is exactly what I thought – which goes to show how most people, including me, are completely wrong. The majority of modern soccer balls are made up of thirty-two panels, but an original can be made up of ten different numbers of pieces from four to thirty-four, and each of those will have three or four different designs, around thirty different patterns in all.

As the ball comes together like a complicated inside-out puzzle, Kamal inserts the rubber bladder that inflates the finished ball. Fortunately, he doesn't go as far as using a pig's bladder as they would in the early days of the game. In its natural state, the leather is pale beige, but after three carefully rubbed-on coats of olive oil it attains the rich brown colour and muted sheen of memories of games played by men with short haircuts and knee-length baggy shorts, who didn't feel the need to kiss and cuddle each other whenever a goal was scored.

Despite being a sporting work of art, Kamal's footballs are never likely to see a soccer pitch. "Most people buy them for decoration or as gifts. But I like it when an older man buys one because it reminds him of when he played soccer as a boy. I've got an original pair of 1930s boots on display and sometimes people tell me what it was like playing in them. Heavy and uncomfortable, by the sound of it!"

And Now it's Your Turn

I hope you have enjoyed these stories, but the best part is yet to come – your own journey around this majestic country. You can read more stories, discover a mine of information and, with the help of ***JBT Insider Guides***, delve deep into the heart of Morocco's most exotic and intriguing cities at **JourneyBeyondTravel.com**. You will be able to taste your adventure in advance with personally designed itineraries that cover Morocco virtually from top to toe. And you can be absolutely sure that your journey truly will…

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