



## “Take me to the Kasbah”

Flying in to Marrakech I wonder if the plane window is so dirty or is it really that brown and dusty down there. Then a river appears like a magic dividing line and the countryside becomes a series of geometrically planned groves of green fruit trees. There are blooming rose beds all the way to the pink turreted mud walls of the old town, the Medina, where I am staying.



On arriving at the Villa des Orangers, an authentic 1938 townhouse just outside the souk, I enter through a nondescript door and into an Arabian nights dark reception area before being ushered into the courtyard. As I sit, I hear only the falling of the fountain. A faint sense of incense wafts through the air. Are the oranges tied on up so high in the trees or are they growing in pots that beautifully? The walls with Arabic design are not sparkling with new paint but there's an air of authenticity here. I sense that this is going to be good.

It's explained to me that there are very few windows to the outside world in these Riads – the local name for town houses and palaces. Rooms usually open only on to a courtyard. My room is very comfortable and has a second floor with terrace looking out over the famous tower in the square.

Why am I here? What do I want to see in such a short time? I'm drawn by the mystery of Marrakech – the souks, the colour, the architecture and Islamic design to some extent (not that I want to re-decorate Moroccan style anytime soon). Of course I want to be bathed in the famous hammam too. I'm taking a guide for a half day tomorrow to get my bearings and to learn a little more about the place. Then I'm going to the Atlas



Mountains the following day to walk through some Berber villages and have lunch at the Kasbah Tamadot (owned by Richard Branson).



Not one to waste time, I book my hammam at 'La Sultana De La Medina', and get quite lost in fading light between the palace gates and a double arch down a dark alley on my supposedly 'easy 4 minute walk'. I tip a kindly local who walks me there and realise only after he salaams ten times and thanks 'princely sir' that what I thought was one dollar was really ten. C'est la vie!

Lying on a marble bench in a room with marble walls, floor and roof, a young girl ladles hot water over my naked body (but for a g-string) before rubbing me all over with a slippery black nugget of beldi soap to prepare the skin for exfoliating. Then 'torture by red glove' – I can see dead skin piling up on this 'sandpaper' device on her hand so I soldier on gritting my teeth. This big boy does cry however when she turns me over and starts on the chest with gusto. My nerves just about settle by the time I finish the follow-up reinvigoration massage with jasmine-scented Moroccan argan oil. So much for relaxation.

Coming home, it is dark. Street lights barely glow and locals are racing to the Mosque for prayers or riding bikes without lights. Everything is closed and I've lost the arches and the palace. I don't have the address or the phone number of where I'm staying, nor could I pronounce the French name. I eventually stumble on the little nondescript opening, and decide to stay in and try the local fare in the hotel - chicken tagine with dates and honey is quite delicious.



The overpowering smells of grinding cumin, freshly-picked piles of mint and bread baking nearly knock me over as we set out on foot for the morning guided tour. This is it. I know I'm in Morocco!



The Bahia Palace is an excellent example of Hispano Moorish architecture and contains excellent examples of Islamic design. It shows a layout of a typical riad – 4 quadrant gardens, a fountain in the centre and is surrounded by rooms (just like my hotel).

The Palace contains excellent examples of stucco work; cedar ceilings and doors painted intricately with vegetable colour and mosaic tiles. Like the Forbidden City in Beijing and Mughal Forts in India, the Palace contains the usual quarters for the King, his legitimate wives, and his harem (other female members of his family (no concubines in Islam), and decorated reception rooms.

Before heading for the souks, the labyrinth market I've heard so much about and am waiting to see, the guide

convinces me that we should first visit the Majorelle Gardens bought many years ago and still housing the villa of Yves Saint Laurent. What a good idea. It contains brightly coloured flower pots, ponds, fountains, trellises and buildings amidst gardens of palms and cactus – “like a Gauguin painting” he says.



Our taxi got sick of waiting for us here so we take a horse and buggy for the short distance to the souk. Industries like leather and metal work are in the outdoor area and it is noisy and so dirty, but in the covered sections we see the colour in the stalls and smell the exotic spices and herbs. Bargaining everywhere. I'm not interested in buying a thing. It makes me realise that these people are really poor. We see children still working in the factories even though there is a new law requiring them to stay in school until age sixteen – but those who've already been trapped in work have slipped through the net. I don't like my guide very much, and I like him even less when I end up in a carpet factory and can't get out!

In the evening I get the chance to see the new and modern Marrakech. Wide landscaped streets with gardens and palms are a surprise after only being in the Medina. I eat in a restaurant run by women from Fez – the only male is on the door. I feel I'm being welcomed into a home, and the fine Moroccan food is said to be the best in town, and not expensive. The special Moroccan soup is bean or chickpea based and delicious, and I choose a strange combo of roasted lamb and prunes to follow.



The evening wouldn't be complete if I didn't see the bustling, much talked about Jemaa El Fna main square and the 70-metre high Koutoubia Tower at night. Thousands are eating at long tables near dozens of stalls of food sellers with music blaring. There are tooth pullers, herbalists, snake charmers and others playing games raucously, dancing, boxing, and story telling – all with the light of pressure lamps only. I get lost again on my way home but now recognize a few landmarks and navigate through the weaving cars, buses and motorbikes back to the calm of my room.

Now for the excitement of a day with the Berbers in the Atlas Mountains! I know when I meet Rashid, my English speaking driver in his new car at first light, its going to be a good day. We head east on roads lined with pepper trees and eucalyptus from Australia. Apple and pear plantations take over as we approach villages made of mud huts at the foot of the mountains. Life hasn't changed for many people for centuries here. They like to keep their traditions and culture - an old lady leads her one cow by a rope, and the bundle of weeds that she's cut in the fields for feed is tied to her back; a shepherd sits and watches his flock graze. Others sit under a canvas with their camels nearby and animals lie down by the stream.



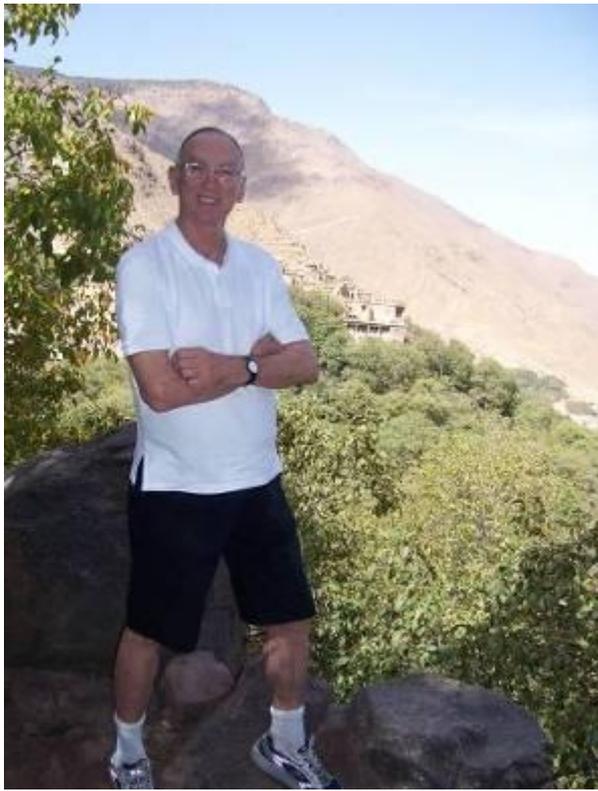
I didn't know that my visit to the Berber village was to be on foot. The local guide tells me that we will trek from about 1,700 metres up to a Berber village at 2,000 metres. (That's as high as the Alps where we followed Julius Caesar and his army into Switzerland last week.) Then we'll cross the river and come down the other side of the mountain to the Kasbah du Toubkal, an eco-lodge in the High Atlas. More pears and apples, but then all I see is the backside of a mule as I clamber over the rocky path trying not to step in something. The



views back down the valley are amazing, and my University-educated guide M'hamed gives me an excellent insight into life here in the mountains. Electricity came only seven years ago and changed much of the way the people live. Irrigation to all the farms terraced on the mountainside on the other hand has been done for centuries.

I pass on the offer for a cup of mint tea fearing what I might catch – but then go back. Why miss out on 'tea with a Berber family'? A pot of boiling hot sage tea and a plate of walnuts is brought to me sitting on a rug and cushion on the floor (Mint tea is served only in summer.) This Berber house has mud walls, a timber roof, and is spotlessly clean. Then down to the river where we run into tourists who have come up the easier route on the back of mules - lazy buggers. We wait to avoid their dust and make the slippery uneven descent over sand and gravel. M'hamed held my hand for part of the way or I may not have made it.





Starting out fresh for the trek up the mountain . . . .



. . . . and finally down the other side to the garden refuge in the Kasbah du Toukbal where M'hamed feeds me dates and washes my hands with orange-scented water . . . .



My reward for this unexpected exertion is a stop for lunch on the way back to Marrakech at Richard Branson's stunningly situated Kasbah Tamadot – with views



out over pink and brown mountains with streams running through the green valley below. A mezze plate of Moroccan specialities with flavours of sesame, almond and cumin and a glass of chilled white wine brought me blissfully back into the decadent world of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Back to Italy tomorrow!