OUR GREAT O.A.T. MOROCCAN ADVENTURE ~ APRIL 24-MAY 12, 2018

BY CINDY CRANE





<u>Marco Island, Florida</u> <u>Tuesday, 4/24/18 ~</u> We finally got Daisy the cat out of the suitcase and finished



packing. Randle & Susanne picked us up @ 2:15pm and then we picked up Cathy. The van that we rented for our trip to the airport was just large enough to hold all of our luggage as we started the trip across the Everglades. By now we knew that our first Air France flight was changed due to the strike and was now scheduled to leave one hour

later. While driving across the Everglades, Cathy and I both got an email that our Paris to Morocco flight was cancelled but they were trying to rebook us. We arrived at Miami International Airport and went to check-in at the Air France terminal. Because of the big strike, there were no customers at the counter except us, so we had lots of agents trying to help us. We were told that our 2nd flight was cancelled completely, not just delayed. After about an hour there, we were told that we were booked on Royal Air Maroc flight #AT789, and we were told that once we land in Paris at Charles De Gaulle Airport, we should go to the Air France counter to get our tickets, boarding passes, and seat assignments. We had a long, but pleasant flight across the "big pond". Once we arrived at the Air France counter, the mayhem began. We were told that Air France couldn't help us and we needed to go to Terminal 1 to the Royal Air Maroc counter to get our tickets. We tried...absolutely no one in the entire airport seemed to be able to give us directions. Go here...go there...never heard of Royal Air Maroc! We finally

made our way out of Terminal 2 to buses that were to take us to Terminal 1. This was after going through the passport and security areas twice. We rode on an orange bus that zig-zagged through what seemed like most of Paris to get to a green bus to get to Terminal 1. This place was ridiculous! There was absolutely no signage, there were escalators and giant ramps going up and down. No one seemed to know anything about Royal Air Maroc or how to get there. You had to go up an escalator to go down. The elevator didn't stop on the 4th level. When we finally found the correct ticket area, the security guard would not let all 5 of us go up to the counter. He made me go up alone with all 5 passports. I told the female agent our story and she asked to see the luggage tags which I gave her. Now we found out that the Air France agents had put Crane luggage receipts on Grossman bags, and vice versa. Oh well, at least all receipts said that the bags were to be checked through to Casablanca. This agent was not friendly or helpful at all. By this time Randle had come up to the desk and demanded to know why she won't give us boarding passes or seat assignments, even though I had an email that said we had confirmed tickets. The agent said we must come back at 5:05pm to talk to her. We were quite concerned about our bags but she wouldn't budge from her story and kept saying to come back at 5:05pm. We left and went over to talk to a man in "customer service" who told us that the plane was full and we were actually on "standby". I now think that Royal Air Maroc was pissed about the Air France strike and the fact that Air France had transferred all of its passengers to RAM, which was screwing up their flights with their regular passengers. We were told that the ticket agent would take care of all of her regular passengers before they would consider us. The customer service agent told us that there were 2 more flights to Casablanca, one at 7:40pm which we could not do and another one at 9:30pm which had 80 seats available and we might be able to do IF we were bumped from our flight, but he couldn't do anything until after 5:05pm. And the 9:30pm flight was out of Orly Airport, a 1hour bus ride away! God knows what we would have done with our luggage. So, very dejectedly, we left to get something to eat with our 15 Euro food vouchers that Randle had gotten from Air France. It was a nightmare trying to get to any restaurants in Terminal 1. Some were on level 4 but the elevators did not stop at level 4 and we could not ride the escalators because we didn't have a boarding pass. Finally, we stopped at a Bistro for beer and sandwiches. At 4:45pm we went back to the RAM counter line but "Gestapo Man", the same security guard, would not let us get in line until 5:05pm. We waited and watched as scores of people checked in to get their boarding passes. Tempers flared. Another security guard

came over and told us we now had to wait till 5:15pm. We waited all the while just convinced that we were screwed and would have to spend the night in Paris. At 5:00pm "Gestapo Man" went over to talk to the female ticket agent and they came over to us. She now smiled and handed us each a boarding pass. Unbelievable!! Now we had to really rush to get through passport check and security again to get to our gate where they were already boarding. We finally made it onto the plane, which was much smaller than the last one and without the nicer seats we had paid extra for, but nonetheless we finally arrived in Casablanca. We picked up our luggage and finally managed to get out of the building where we were met by our driver for the transfer to Casablanca Novotel. After over 33 hours of travel, we arrived at our hotel at 11:30pm. We were exhausted, but in bed by midnight on <u>Wednesday, 4/25/18.</u>

CASABLANCA

<u>Thursday, 4/26/18</u> ~ After the flight from hell and a good night's sleep we had breakfast at Novotel (\$15 each and not very good). We are finally ready to begin our adventure in Morocco. After breakfast we met up with Jeanne, Susan, and Mako who had just arrived at the hotel. They went up to their rooms to rest while the five of us went out exploring. Susanne had a Fodor book with ideas of places to go and see. After using our Debit Cards to get some money from the Bank-in-a-Box (ATM), we walked down one of the main streets and into some of the small streets in the medina (the Old City) where there were many stalls of



food and things for sale. A man dressed in a nice suit latched onto Susanne and told her that the Berber artisans were in town today, and they only came once a month. He would show us how to get to where she wanted to go to see the good stuff, "not the China stuff". She couldn't shake him and he finally led us away from where we actually wanted to go to a rug store of his friend "Sammy", then he quickly disappeared. We managed to get out of Sammy's shop without buying anything and kept wandering about. We went past a small local restaurant with some tajine pots cooking out on the

sidewalk. Ed and Randle wanted to eat lunch, so the 5 of us split the 3 tajine pots with 3 large loafs of bread and Pepsi's to drink. The entire bill was about \$11 total for the 5 of us...not bad!! And the food was delicious. At the next street, we stopped at a Tourist Bureau and met a nice lady who arranged a 3-hour tour for all 8 of us the next day in two taxis with



two English speaking guides for a cost of about \$20 each. We went back to the hotel to go to the bathroom and rest. Most of the bathrooms were only a hole in the floor with no toilet paper, so we weren't quite ready for that adventure! As soon as I got back into our room, the phone rang and one of the drivers for tomorrow, Hakim, called from the lobby and wanted me to come down to meet him. I was afraid that there had been a misunderstanding as we were to meet him tomorrow at 10am, but we went down. He was extremely nice and told us that his father had been in the US military and lived to be 103 years old. He said that I looked like his wife and he told Eddie he would pay him 1 million camels for me! He showed us where to meet the taxis the next morning then was on his way. After resting for a while, we went down to the Novotel Delight bar to meet



the other ladies for drinks. The bartender brought over 3 plates of complimentary appetizers for us. Eddie and I each had 2 Casablanca Beers. We were told that there are 11 different types of beer made in Casablanca. The others each had some very good wines and the total cost was very reasonable...not far from a Marco Island Happy Hour. This was

our first taste of Moroccan hospitality and

we were quite impressed.

Susanne found a great little restaurant called Al Mouria with classic Moroccan food, wine, and a lovely enclosed courtyard. We had a very funny waiter and the food was delicious. The female owner came out to meet us. We shared two bottles of wine and all had a great experience. The entire bill worked out to be

about \$22 each. We took another taxi back to the hotel. So far, Casablanca has been great!

<u>Friday, 4/27/18 ~</u> Eddie and I skipped breakfast this morning and Eddie went over and had tea with Hakim after he hit the ATM for some more money. At the appointed time, we met our tour guides Hakim and Joseph who took us on our Casablanca tour. We drove by the port area on the right where there is a lot of



construction for the new port that the King is building on the Atlantic. On the left was the wall around the ancient medina. We went past several gates in the wall. Next was the old oceanfront fortress with big cannons. Inside the fort was La Squala Restaurant. This was very

nice inside with pretty fountains and gardens. Next, we went to the outside of Rick's Café for more photo opps. Rick's Café is a very popular tourist place even though the movie "Casablanca" was not filmed here. Hakim is very funny...he loves the ladies and loves to take photos. We next went past an old mosque with an antique sailboat on top. We drove through a medina market and saw all the stalls of fruits, veggies, meats, breads. Everyone was so very friendly, smiling and waving to us. Our next stop was at the big mosque of Hassan II, the most famous one in Casablanca. We walked around the outside and took lots of photos but didn't get inside. (We will do this with our OAT group on our last day of the trip.)

Hakim wrapped my pashmina scarf around my head like a Berber or Bedouin. We next went shopping to the Berber area where Sammy's rug shop is located. We didn't go in there again, but Hakim took us into a store that sold spices, lotions, Argon oils, etc. The others in the second taxi, Randle, Susanne, Sue, and Mako, refused to get out

and go shopping. We next drove by a waterfront area for a view of the big mosque from the water. This is truly an impressive building! We drove along the Corniche where we saw a big portrait of the King and his family. The Corniche is the big beach area but it was pretty rocky with lots of waves. Nothing like our Marco Island beach. On this street we saw a McDonalds and a Burger King and directly across from the McDonalds was the Obesity Clinic, where you could also go for a sex change. We drove through an area of very expensive homes and saw the two homes where Roosevelt and Churchill met to discuss strategy in 1943 during WWII. This meeting marked the first time an American president left American soil during wartime. There was a nice area with polo courts and we saw many beautiful horses. There was a large golf course and we drove by the Catholic Church, but it was closed. There was a very beautiful gate into the medina with a lot of carved stone and mosaic work. We went past the El Houbousse, a large expensive shopping area. Joseph's taxi stopped there to shop, but our taxi took us to the Jurisdictional Area. This was a large square with lots of people and pigeons. While Hakim was taking a photo of our group, a man came up to us with seeds or bread crumbs which he threw down in front of us to attract



the pigeons, then he waved his hat and they all flew away as the picture was taken. Of course, he wanted to be paid but we ignored him as we had not asked for this service. We did some shopping in "Exposition Nationale D'Artisanal", the Tourist sponsored shop where all things are made in Morocco, not China. Hakim explained to us that he is a

driver paid by the Tourism industry and cannot get paid commissions by the shopkeepers. At the door, we met a very pretty lady from Spain and Hakim tied her scarf on her head just like mine. We walked through another area in the medina where there were several "hotels", which were actually riads. We will be staying at a few riads during our trip. As we walked through the tiny streets of the medina a man there said I looked like a Berber with my headscarf and everyone would think I was a local Moroccan. We finished up our tour with Hakim at our hotel where we met with the other group and went for a late lunch at Taverne du Dauphine (a seafood restaurant). We walked some more after lunch before coming back to the hotel. We met in the lobby at 6pm just as Pam & Tim Clune and Becca & Dave Scarborough arrived from their European pre-trip. They were beat and went up to their rooms. The 8 of us decided to try for a reservation at

Rick's Café. Our hotel clerk said "no way! Rick's was all booked because of a conference staying next door at the Sofitel. We walked down to Rick's anyway,



hoping to get in for a drink when they opened at 6:30pm. We were in line after one couple and in no time at all there was a huge line behind us. The door opened at 6:30pm and the maître 'd told us they were completely booked, but we could go up to the bar for a drink. We were seated at a roulette table covered in glass in the cute little bar area. The bar at one side had 4 bar stools. The other side had a TV playing the movie Casablanca. Our waiter said we could eat here so we were very happy. Just as our drinks arrived we raised our glasses in a toast and I said "*Here's looking at you kid*", at the EXACT same

time that Bogie said it in the movie. A magical moment! Our meal was delicious and afterwards we walked back to the Novotel and to our bar for a nightcap. Here we met a fun lady named Keeko who was just back from a tour with another tour company. Randle gave her a card from OAT. She lives in Atlanta and owns many restaurants.

TRANSFER TO RABAT, the Capital City

Saturday, 4/28/18 ~ It was a beautiful sunny morning. We met for breakfast in the hotel. The Clunes and Scarboroughs left to take a van directly to Rabat. Jeanne had already booked our transfer for the 8 of us to go back to the airport to pick up an additional person and to meet the OAT representative. We met in the lobby at 1pm and took 2 small buses with 4 people in each one. Our drivers kept up with each other through the crazy traffic of Casablanca, but outside of the city the other driver must have passed us because he dropped off his passengers and was heading back into town before we got there. We circled around the airport 3 times before our driver finally got to the correct place and dropped us off. We met our other friends and waited for Lydia to arrive. We waited and waited and waited. Finally, she did arrive and we all got into another bus for the drive to Rabat where we arrived at Le Diwan Hotel and met Noureddine, our trip leader from OAT. We checked into our rooms around 6:15pm and shortly thereafter went down to the bar for Happy Hour then dinner at 7:30pm. Our last 2 travelers, Dave & Marcia arrived late from their pre-trip in Tangiers. After a nice dinner, we

went up to bed for a good night's sleep. This was a much nicer hotel than the Novotel. Noureddine said that goodnight in Arabic is "laylaseeaida".

Sunday, 4/29/18 ~ We had a lovely breakfast at 8am and our meeting with



Noureddine at 9am. He was a very nice man, a Berber which is the oldest group of people in Morocco. He had 25 plus years' experience as a tour guide and lived in Marrakech with his wife Mary and 2 daughters age 16 and 11.

Noureddine gave us a few words in Arabic:

- ~ Good morning is "Saba'a alKair".
- ~ You can use "salaam" for hello or goodbye
- ~ Where's the toilette? is "Faen el merhad?".
- ~ Please is "Min failak".

I already knew that "La Shokran", which means no thank you, is extremely useful, especially in the market place. To be more forceful just say La La! (No No!)

Next Noureddine gave us a brief explanation of our upcoming journey. **Rabat** is the political Capitol of Morocco and the King lives there. **Fez**, **locally known as Fes**, was built 1,200 years ago and has not had much change since that time. The Medina (old city) there is a UNESCO historical site. We will have our first homehosted dinner in Fez at a riad, which is basically a B&B. In **Erfoud** we will be staying in a Kasbah and we will then switch to our 4 by 4 vehicles for our trip to the desert where we will sleep in tents in the Sahara Desert. We will need to take only our small carry-on luggage for this part of the trip and our big bags will remain on the big bus. After our desert adventure we will stay in **Ouarzazate**, the Moroccan Hollywood, where we will experience "A day in the life". Then we will travel to **Marrakech** and stay in another riad close to the biggest square in the world.

The optional trips are to **Meknes**, a UNESCO World Heritage site, **Volubilis**, the ruins of an old Roman city, and in Marrakech the **Jardin de Majorelle**, once owned by Yves St. Laurent with its beautiful **Berber Museum**, the **Islamic Art Museum**, and **Marrakesh Museum**.

Shopping opportunities will be in Fez for leather, woven fabrics, wrapping of turbans, as well as pottery and ceramics, and in Marrakech for rugs.

After our orientation meeting with Noureddine we left on the bus for our tour of **Rabat**, one of Morocco's ancient imperial cities and its capital since 1913. Our first stop was the **Royal Palace** and the **Bab ar-Rouah** (Gate of the Winds). The

King Mohammed VI lived here with his wife and one son and one daughter. These children along with 9 other selected children attend school here, elementary through high school. The son will become the next king and the other children are being groomed to become ministers in various cabinets. This King has only one wife and she was the first to ever to be seen unveiled. She is quite beautiful.



The flag of Morocco was red with a green star. Red means that Moroccans are ready to spill blood for their country. The green star stands for Islam and the 5 points of the star signify the 5 principles of Islam. Muslims also pray 5 times a day. The main two branches of Islam are Sunni and Shi'ite and only Sunni is practiced in Morocco. It is illegal in Morocco to be a practicing Shi'ite. Morocco was the first Islamic country to send us condolences after the 9-11 tragedy.

Next, we went to visit the ruins of **Chellah Necropolis**, a 14th century Merinid necropolis. The Berber Almohads used the site as a royal burial ground. These



are very beautiful gardens with impressive ruins dating back to the ancient Romans and ancient Muslims. There were many storks here, mating and nesting on the top of the minaret. They made a loud clicking noise to attract a mate. There were also lots of cats everywhere. The Prophet Mohammed had many cats that he loved, so all Moroccans love them too. People don't have many dogs in their

houses because they fear that when a dog barks it frightens away the angels. We saw the tomb where the founder of this city, Abou El Hassan, is "sleeping", and

many more graves. Here we saw the pool which is said to take you to heaven and which is guarded by eels. This pool is said to produce miracles and women are known to toss eggs to the eels for fertility.

We saw the river which separates Rabat from Sale. The future Opera House



tall. At the other end was the beautiful mausoleum of Mohammed V, which was guarded by the king's guards, another active mosque with separate entrances for men and for women, and an area for the future mausoleum for King Mohammed VI. The king's horses and guards stood at the entry gate and the entrance to the mausoleum and were happy to have their photos taken.

Our next stop was the **Kasbah**, which means castle...the cradle of Rabat. We stopped for a nice buffet lunch at **Borj Eddare**, a beautiful

which was being built on the river will be better than the one in Sydney, Australia, according to Noureddine.

We traveled to the unfinished Hassan Tower, built by Abu Yusuf Yaqub al-Mansur, the third Caliph of the Almohad Caliphate in 1195. This was at one time planned to be the largest mosque in the world. When al-Mansur died in 1199, construction on the mosque stopped. This huge unfinished area looked like a giant square with 348 columns meant to hold up the roof. At one end was the unfinished minaret tower. It was 140 feet tall but was once planned to be 260

feet





restaurant overlooking the beach, jetty, and crashing waves. ("Shahay taheba" means Bon Appetit in Arabic.)

After lunch we climbed up to the top of the Kasbah for wonderful views of the river and Sale. This Kasbah was built to help repel the many Barbary pirates. We passed down through the Andalusian

area of the Kasbah to the famous steps where Tom Cruise filmed his fight scene in the latest Mission Impossible

movie.

On the way back to the hotel, some people got off and visited the modern art museum while others went back to the hotel to rest before our Happy Hour at the XO Bar. After Happy Hour, our bus took us to the medina where we met our guide with a lantern who





walked us through the narrow winding streets of the medina. We visited the only remaining Jewish Riad, then went to the Riad Dinarjet for another happy hour and our official Welcome Dinner, a delicious traditional Moroccan dinner. There were many, many courses followed by a delicious dessert and mint tea. Two musicians played us while we ate. Although I showed Noureddine

that most of us at our table had "happy plates", I was worried about all the food that was not eaten. He assured me that no food ever goes to waste in Morocco...any food not eaten at any meal goes to feed the many poor who are begging on the streets, or to feed the animals.

This evenings' bounty of food was a fine example of the hospitality of the Moroccan people. When you visit a Moroccan at home, they will lavish you with

food, sometimes so much that you could not possible finish it all. The food courses will continue until the dessert, frequently fresh fruit or sliced oranges with cinnamon, arrives at the table. Then you will always be welcomed with mint tea, which they drink with sugar. It is considered rude to not partake of the tea. Eddie asked Noureddine how to politely refuse the tea and he told him to touch the glass lightly with your right hand and say "La Shokran" (No Thank You). This would become important as some of us developed stomach problems...

TRANSFER TO FEZ

Monday, 4/30/18 ~ After a nice breakfast, we checked out of Le Diwan Hotel and



began our journey to Fez, known locally as Fes. Before leaving town, we stopped at a liquor store called The Cave. Downstairs was a nicely stocked store with all kinds of wine, beer, and liquor and we stocked up for our time in Fez and the desert where we would not be able to buy wine. We bought 6 bottles of local Moroccan wine for less than \$40.

Eddie bought a case of Heineken. We had the boxes of wine and cases of beer put onto the bus. Now we could continue our daily Happy Hours.

As we left Rabat we saw much new construction, such as the new opera house, and many very tall towers of minarets. The King of Morocco was very progressive

and had started many construction projects in the big cities as well as a project called "Green Morocco" whereby the government will give plants or trees to the farmers and provide them with drip irrigation systems so that they may grow their crops. Driving through this plateau we saw many wheat fields, olive orchards, apricot, peach, pear, almond, and pomegranate trees. Potatoes, tomatoes, onions, and turnips are



grown. Agriculture was very important to Morocco.

Fishing was an important industry in Morocco with over 175 types of fish being caught. Phosphate production was also very important with 2/3 of the world's resources found in the Western Sahara area of Morocco. Phosphate is used for fertilizer, food additives and many other things.

We passed through the largest oak forest in the world. The bark was harvested from the tree initially at 25 years old, and then every 10 years after. Google says: *"Oak bark is used as a tea for diarrhea, colds, fever, cough, bronchitis, for stimulating appetite and for improving digestion."* If only we had known this we could have stripped a tree and taken the bark with us! It would have come in handy later in the trip! The bark was used for these and many other purposes



until the tree is 95 years old. Truffle mushrooms are grown in this area as well. There were beautiful views of the countryside farms with mountains in the distance. We saw sweeping fields with many beautiful wild flowers and poppies, olive trees, and prickly pears. There were many goats and cows. Each little village had a mosque.

We were now entering into wine country, the most important area being at the bottom of the Middle Atlas Mountains. Production started during the French Protectorate. And we had the opportunity to sample many of the local wines on this trip which were inexpensive (\$5-\$10 a bottle) and very good. This was actually one of the things that Eddie was worried about before coming here...that he would not be able to find a drink in Morocco. Thankfully, this proved to be incorrect. We had Happy Hour every single day! According to Muslim law, wine is only for non-Muslims. However, this is quite different in practice. Socially if a Muslim wants to enjoy drinking alcohol, he should do it in private. It is OK inside, but not outside. If a Muslim is caught drunk he could go to jail for 20-30 days. The one exception is that during Ramadan, NO alcohol is consumed by any Muslim for the whole month. Liquor stores close down as well as many bars. The Koran states that: 1. Wine is good and it is bad, but it is more bad and better to avoid it. 2. You should avoid praying while drinking. 3. Alcohol is strictly forbidden during Ramadan.

During our 4-plus hour bus ride to Fez, Noureddine told us a little about the Muslim religion. Islam, along with Judaism and Christianity, is one of the three Abrahamic Religions. Muslims believe that there is only one God and Allah is his name. Mohammed was his prophet. Muslims should pray 5 times each day if possible, always facing Mecca in the East when doing so. They should make a trip to Mecca at least once in their lifetime if possible. When making the trip to Mecca, they should always wear a plain white robe so that everyone looks alike. If a parent is too sick to make it to Mecca, then the son should make the trek for the parent. Muslims should give alms to the poor. "Intention" is the most important aspect of the Muslim faith. Allah understands that no one is perfect and can do everything right all the time.

There are several different calendars. The one we refer to most of the time is the Roman calendar with the date now 2018. Muslim follows a lunar calendar and the Muslim date is now 1439. The Muslim calendar began when Mohammed moved from Mecca to Medina. The Berber calendar date is 2968, and the Jewish calendar date is 5778. Ramadan is the holy month of fasting when Muslims are not allowed to eat or drink anything, even water, from sunrise to sundown. After sundown they eat three meals. Ramadan moves forward 14 days each year. This year it begins on May 16th. After Ramadan, there is a feast day called Eid al-Fitr, when everyone celebrates the end of fasting and many lambs are slaughtered.

FEZ (a.k.a. Fes)

Fez is nestled between the Rif Mountains and the Middle Atlas Mountains. It is the second largest city in Morocco and is known as the religious capitol. There were two main sections, the Ville Nouvelle, the new French section, and the



Medina, the older walled city. The Medina is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and houses the oldest university in the world, and, incidentally, also the world's largest car-free urban zone (but watch for the scooters!). There were two Andalusian mosques here built by two ladies. The Andalusian Quarter of the city was populated by people from the south of Spain. The current King's wife was Andalusian. We arrived in Fez and checked into our **Riad Dar Dmana**. A riad is a Moroccan home that has been refurbished into an intimate hotel or B&B. It typically has a central courtyard with gardens and a fountain, surrounded by bedrooms. The ceiling is typically open to the sky above the courtyard in a true riad. If the courtyard is covered by a ceiling the house is actually called a Dar. We each had a different type of room, some small, some quite large, but each very quaint. There were 4 floors. Our room was called "Aicha "and was located up one flight of



top of a high hill to a fort called **Borj Sud** where we had a panoramic view of the Median. We visited the **Fez Moroccan Pottery and Zellige "Pottery de Fes"**, where we learned how this pottery (lead-free made from gray clay for cooking) was made and decorated and also learned how the beautiful mosaic was done. This was fascinating to watch these young craftsmen ply their trade. The mosaics were truly beautiful.

We arrived back at our riad and had Happy Hour with our wines that we had purchased at

steps. After checking into our rooms, we met for lunch downstairs, which consisted of several salads, veggies, meatballs, and fried egg. Dessert was orange slices with cinnamon. After lunch we went to our bus and met our local guide, Mohammed, and drove up to the



The Cave. Then we took some bottles of wine with us as we walked through the medina to the other riad for a dinner. This riad was a very large true riad all on one floor and over 5,000 square feet. It was 600 years old. The owner greeted us and gave a tea ceremony. His beautiful wife and 4 children met us and served us while we had Happy Hour again and then we went to our two tables for the



dinner. There was so much food with many courses. The meal seemed to go on for hours. Finally, after the fruit was served and a very warm goodbye from our host family, we walked back through the winding streets of the medina to our home riad and went to bed.

Unfortunately, shortly after going to bed, I got violently ill and was sick all night and the next day. Dave Scarborough and Lydia also got sick that night. This was the beginning of some tough days and nights for most of our group. By the end of the trip 12 of the 15 of us would have gastro-intestinal problems. Eddie was the last one to come down with it, on the last night in the Sahara. Where was that Oak bark when we needed it??

<u>Tuesday, 5/1/18 ~</u> I was still very ill so I did not go on the excursion today, but a fun time was had by all as the group explored the souks (markets) of Fez, walking through the tiny streets of the medina. This area was a UNESCO World Heritage Site and it includes the **mellah**, the traditional Jewish Quarter, with the gates of the Royal Palace. The souks had every imaginable type of stall with foods, clothes, shoes, and jewelry for sale. The group viewed the famous tanning areas



where they were given mint leaves to put up their noses to help with the bad smell. The tanning process uses (smelly) pigeon poop! Eddie says historically urine from people and animals was also used. Google confirms this: *"Tanning leather: Urine is full of urea, which degrades into ammonia. Ammonia in water acts as a* caustic but weak base. Its high pH breaks down organic material, making urine the perfect substance for ancients to use in softening and tanning animal hides."



The group was treated to a lesson of tying turbans. There were donkeys carrying all sorts of things through the tiny streets. There were bazaars, cafes, and shops everywhere. Some of the streets were so narrow that you almost had to walk sideways to get your shoulders through. After lunch at Restaurant Nejjarine and more exploration of the medina, the group came back to

the riad. During Happy Hour it seemed like more people were starting to drop like flies from the "Sultan Shuffle". Now Cathy did not feel well and did not go out for the dinner tonight. Unfortunately, tonight was the scheduled Home Hosted dinner and we were down to only a few people going to the two homes. Eddie



and the Clunes attended one of the dinners. (There should have been 7 or 8 of us). The family was very friendly. The daughter spoke good English and was very westernized in dress and manner. Unfortunately, the son was very excited about watching a loud Soccer game on TV and it added a layer of confusion to

the communication. The family dressed Tim and Eddie up in traditional dress.

<u>Wednesday, 5/2/18</u> ~ Today, after breakfast in the riad, those of us who were able took the optional tours of **Meknes** and **Volubilis**. This was a wonderful day as we toured two UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The area is a center for producing olives and olive oil. There are three colors of olives grown...green, red, and black. We saw lots of sheep grazing among the olive trees. There were also many potatoes grown here. We went to **Volubilis**, the well-preserved ruins of an

ancient Berber and Roman city, considered to be the ancient capital of the kingdom of Mauretania. Noureddine took us through the very interesting sites and explained about the area. The walls of the city were built in 168-169 AD and took in an area of 42 hectares (about 100 acres). This was a bustling Roman city until the 1757 earthquake destroyed it. Restoration began in



1915 and continues to this day. The small museum we toured at the beginning of the site held remarkable statues that had been excavated and examples of beautiful mosaics.

Once we entered the ruins it was amazing to see how well preserved and beautiful the mosaics still were. We saw several houses...House of Orpheus which was 6,000 square feet and had a huge mosaic of Orpheus playing his harp, the House of Hercules with beautiful mosaics showing the many stories of Hercules,



the House of Ephebe, daughter of Cleopatra, the House of Venus which had very beautiful mosaics, the brothel house, which had a statue of a penis, and the Arch de Triomphe. From here you could see the whitewashed holy city of **Moulay Idriss** in the distance. We walked the old streets of the city and tried to envision what life must have been like then. Eddie noted that the tile mosaics, somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 years old,

were in better shape than the tiles in our 17-year-old Marco house! Apparently, the Romans knew what they were doing? And Marco tile companies not so much?

Our next stop was to be **Meknes**, onetime home of the Moroccan sultanate. On the way we stopped to see some Barbary apes on the side of the road and enjoyed their antics. We saw many herds of beautiful black faced sheep, donkeys, and nomad tents in the distance.

During the drive Noureddine told us a little more of the politics of Morocco. The country had both a monarchy and a constitution. The present King, Mohammed VI can





trace his lineage directly back to the prophet Mohammed. He was head of state, the army, and of the religion. Under the Constitution, Governors are appointed by the King and Mayors are elected. There are two chambers in the government. Many things are subsidized by the government so that the poor people can get by. Medical care is almost free and education is free.

The King owned the largest farm in Morocco and there was a hot spring there called Spring of Allah. The population was made up of Berber and Arabic people. Muslim was the

predominant religion at around 99%. There was a small number of Catholics and very few Jews. At one time there were many Jews but they have mostly moved to Israel.

Meknes, known as the "Moroccan Versailles", was built in the 11th century by the Almoravids as a military settlement. It became the capital of Morocco under the reign of **Sultan Moulay Ismail**. Moulay Ismail, the founder of modern Morocco, was a very powerful man as well as being very prolific. He had 1,764 sons, not counting the daughters. Before Islam, many baby girls were buried alive. There is no record of the fate of the Sultan's daughters. He was the longest ruling Sultan at 45 years and he had over 200 wives. Meknes had 3 sets of walls around the old town and we went inside to explore this beautiful town. It had the largest military academy in Africa.



After lunch we visited the Sultan's jail which once housed 100,000 prisoners. Now there was a very interesting art exhibit there. We saw the Sultan's granaries and the stables which housed 12,000 horses.

Morocco is famous for its streetlamp posts, each decorated differently for each area. We also noticed that the taxi cabs are different colors for each city.... red for Casablanca, blue for Rabat, tan for Marrakech.

After a great day of touring, we went back to our riad to repack for our next trip. We had a lovely dinner of Bastilla (Pigeon Pie), a famous Moroccan dish. Ours was made with chicken instead of pigeons. Perhaps

the pigeons were being kept busy in the tannery? We had fruit crepe rolls for dessert. Dave Scarborough was still so sick, along with Becca, and she was so worried about him that I gave him my prescription drugs (Lomotil) to stop the bad diarrhea. Evidently this did the trick as he was among the living the next morning, and able to join us on the long bus ride.

TRANSFER TO ERFOUND, via the Middle Atlas Mountains

Thursday, 5/3/18 ~ We had an excellent breakfast this morning at our riad. Unfortunately, Randle and Susanne were not well this morning, but everyone got on the bus for our big trip over the Middle Atlas Mountains. This was a very long (9 hour) but beautiful trip. We passed pine groves, cedar forests, and small villages with Swiss-like chalets. Eddie kept an eye out for some fresh Oak bark but didn't see any Oak trees! One town had many vacation schools for the children. There were many beautiful orchards in bloom. Another town named Ifrane looked like an Alps winter resort. It was a Berber town, but a very modern town. Two brothers, former kings of Saudi Arabia and Morocco, founded the University here which teaches in English. The current King of Morocco had a palace here in this beautiful town. There were Barbary macaques (monkeys) living here in the forests and it was named as one of the 10 cleanest cities in the world.



We trekked up through the mountains and passed so many different geologic and ecological zones. Parts looked so much like the Grand Canyon of the USA. We crossed a 6,000-foot pass in the mountains as we kept going towards the Sahara.

Morocco was known for its forests...cedar, oak, pine, date

palm, and argon. Morocco was also known as a country of contrasts. In Casablanca and Rabat, we had the coastlines. We had the pastures of the plateau in Fez. There were the great mountain ranges of Rif, Middle Atlas, High Atlas, and Anti (small) Atlas. And of course, there was the Sahara Desert, the largest hot desert in the world, roughly the size of the continental United States. The original people of Morocco were Berbers. Then came the Arabs who brought the Muslim



religion.

Noureddine told us about the Nomads. who were shepherds. They lived off the land and traveled from one small hut to another. They made their money from their

sheep. In the two months after Ramadan, over 2 million sheep were sold. We saw so many herds of small beautiful red-faced sheep, different from the ones we saw before. He said that this will probably be the last of the Nomads as the children grow up and want to live more in the cities and not follow the Nomad style of life. There were many small vans with cages on top for the sheep. The Nomads don't really walk as much as they used to. Now they hire cars and taxis to travel from place to place. Some even had motorcycles.

A Kasbah was a fortified village where the rulers lived...sheiks, caftans, or kings. It also means a fortified house, sort of like a castle. A Medina was a walled city. A Souk was a market within the medina. A Ksar was a fortified village.

We discussed the Western Sahara. This huge area was once controlled by the Spanish. When Franco died, King Hassan II organized the Green March where 350,000 civilians marched across the border. Separatists in the Sahara fought a war between Algeria and Morocco until the U. N. stepped in. There has been a cease fire for almost 30 years. While we were in Morocco, there was some news



that changes were ahead for the Western Sahara.

We crossed the Mid Atlas Mountains onto the plateau. The High Atlas Mountains were in front of us in the distance with lots of snow. The top elevation is 14,000 feet high.

We entered the town of **Midelt**, a miner's town and the second city, after Casablanca, to get electricity. Many ores were

mined here including manganese, cobalt, and lead. Dinosaurs were found here. The town was known as the capital for apples. We had lunch at the **Hotel Kasbah**



Asmar, a nice lunch of excellent soup, baked trout, and apple tart for dessert. After lunch, we drove some more through very high mountains on zig-zaggy roads and down into the plains with the dry riverbed to our left. Now we saw lots of date palm groves along the river areas. The houses were now more clay adobe-type houses.

The Moroccan Army dated back to the Idrisi Dynasty in 1,000 AD. There were 175,000 soldiers and 150,000 reservists. Their motto was "God, Country, King".

They fought against Spain for the Western Sahara. They fought Algeria during the "Sand War". They fought in the Gulf War. They used mostly American equipment, then French, then Russian. The Algerian Army used mostly Russian equipment. It was now an all-volunteer army.



a nice pool area, beautiful landscaping and great food! We had a Happy Hour and saw our first white camel. This was so nice that we wished we could have stayed here more than just one night.



ERFOUD

After this very long trip, we arrived at our next hotel, the beautiful **Chergui Kasbah** in Erfoud. What a delight this place was with large beautiful rooms,



Transfer to the OAT Sahara Tent Camp Friday, 5/4/18 ~ After breakfast, we checked out at 10am and got into our 4x4 vehicles with our small bags to begin our journey to the desert. We stopped at Macro Fossil, where we had a lesson on the 400+ million-year-old fossils of Erfoud and bought many beautiful sculptures, plates, and pieces of jewelry. We purchased some unique

presents for our staff of cat sitters who are caring for Daisy and Tonya back on Marco Island.





We visited the Ksar Ouled Abdel Halim which looked good from the outside but was not restored on the inside. We toured a beautiful area called Bni M'Hamed Sijelmass with beautiful gardens and a big mosque where we

could see some men inside getting ready for prayer.





We stopped at the sacred village of **Rissani** on the edge of the desert



to visit a family at their oasis farm and learn about their life. This was delightful and amazing that so many crops could be grown in this arid area. He had a big grove of date palms-150 female and 1 male tree. He had trees of every sort, fields of wheat and alfalfa, a donkey, sheep, goats and chickens. His daughter sold us some cute hand-made camels. Now our journey to the desert really began with our driver Bryan flying across very rough desert roads and then "off piste" onto the land where there were no roads. We went a good distance then we began to see some areas of tents here and there and a few camels. This looked like nothing I ever expected. There were several areas of white tents and some permanent buildings. We came upon our camp area very close to the sand dunes of **Merzouga** and when we turned into our camp area, many of us were disappointed in what we saw...grayish tents which looked sort of like an internment camp. They were pretty ugly on the



outside but were actually more of an authentic Berber tent with camel hair on the roofs. On the inside they were covered in very colorful rugs and cloth walls. Each tent had a single toilet and a shower area. We got settled into our tents and then took a hike up the high sand dunes to watch the sunset. The sunset "pooped



out", so we went back to the dining tent area for dinner. Before dinner, our chef came out and gave us a cooking demo of chicken tajine. We had our Happy Hour and then just as soon as we finished the dinner, the wind picked up and we all hightailed it to our tents to button up for what turned out to be a sandstorm throughout the night. We heard the sounds of music and drums from the campsite next door until around midnight.

The wind during the sandstorm was furious...sort of like the sound from a hurricane...but no water, just sand. We planned to get up at 5am to watch the sunrise. However, I did not sleep well at all, so I stayed in bed. Our door blew

open 8 times during the night! By now Tim, Dave, and Marcia, and Mako are also feeling unwell.

<u>Saturday, 5/5/18 ~</u> Noureddine came by for wake-up call at 5am and Eddie got dressed to watch the sunrise. He had tea with Noureddine but no one else showed up and it was a somewhat overcast morning from the sandstorm, so "sunrise" was cancelled and Ed came back to bed for a while.



After breakfast we headed out for our **camel ride** in the sand dunes. This was a lot of fun and even Cathy rode a camel. Our camel driver was very cute and when we asked him if he had been to America, he said he had not even been to



Casablanca. We rode for quite a while and ended up at a lovely new resort being built here in the desert where we had some Coke Zero's.





We had a lot of fun dancing with them.

Our next stop was to **Khamlia**, a remote desert village famous for its **Gnawa** musicians. At **Dar Gnauua** we had a great presentation of singing, drumming, and dancing by the local musicians. They were all darkskinned ancestors of slaves who were brought from the south to be part of the Black Guard of Sultan Moulay Ismail.



Then we left to visit a **Nomad** family. The man lived in the desert with his wife (who was in town with one of his sons at the time) and his youngest son, daughter-in-law, and 2 grandchildren. He didn't know his age and he never learned to read. When Noureddine asked him if this was his home, he

replied that the home "belongs to Allah". These nomad people had no possessions except the clothes on their backs, one motorcycle, and a bicycle.

Their main possession and livelihood was their herd of sheep. The home they inhabited had two small rooms, no bathroom or running water. They had to walk to a far- away well to bring home gallons of water. We sat under a Berber tent with this nomad and were served a formal ceremony of mint tea. On the way back to



our camp area, we stopped at a Berber nomad cemetery, which was just a few black rocks to mark the graves. Back at the camp, we had Happy Hour and watched another sunset from the "baby sand dunes" close by our dining tent.



Noureddine talked to us and answered guestions about the Muslim religion. It seems it is the fastest growing religion on the planet. According to the Muslim tenants your main purpose in life is to marry and produce children. Sadly, this may eventually lead to overpopulation in Morocco. At the current rate of growth, the population is forecast to double in the next 20 years. The Sunni Muslim religion practiced here in Morocco is a very peaceful religion. The proponents abhor violence and do not understand all of the terrorism that is happening around the world. The dress of Muslims is very conservative with no low necklines, no arms or shoulders exposed and preferably pants down to the ankles. Many Muslim ladies cover their heads with scarfs. I saw many different kinds of head coverings but not so many black burkas that you see on TV from the ladies in Saudi Arabia. The

Muslims highly respect the Virgin Mary. The three main times in a Muslim man's life are circumcision at usually a very young age, marriage, which is sometimes arranged, and a journey to Mecca sometime during his life. Visiting the mosque to pray 5 times a day is very important and the ritual is very interesting. Men are expected to go to the mosque to pray, but the women usually are at home working and taking care of the children, so they pray at home. They may go to the mosque and there is a separate door for them. Before praying, you must remove your shoes and put them into the green bags. Then you must cleanse yourself before the prayer. There is a big area where you would go for cleansing. You wash your private parts first in rest rooms, then go to the fountains where you wash your hands three times, your feet three times, your head three times, your face three times. Then you stand in line with the other men and first bow

down at the waist then kneel down on your knees and put your head to the floor while you chant that Allah is great.

Muslims are very conservative. Muslim men and women do not touch each other publicly, even when they dance.

I found the desert to be somewhat magical. It made me become contemplative. Some random thoughts...Morocco was so very diverse in its landscape, in its customs, in its people. The Moroccans were quite lovely people, very friendly and



inquisitive. It was sad to think that this will be the last generation of the Nomads. The desert sand dunes were very beautiful with extremely soft orange sand. Many other areas of the Sahara were covered with black sand and small back pieces of magma rocks from volcanoes.

TRANSFER TO OUARZAZATE (a.k.a. The door of the desert)

<u>Sunday, 5/6/18 ~</u> At 5am I got up to check out the sunrise over the sand dunes...not bad. This morning Eddie's stomach was not good...I hope he is not getting what everyone else has had. So far, most of our group has been sick at least one day. After breakfast, we checked out of the camp area and started our bumpy ride with Bryan out of the desert. Once we got onto the roads, Eddie discovered that he didn't have his passport and money. Panic attack!! He had left it in the tent, but luckily Noureddine called his associate on his cell phone. The camp staff found it, and another OAT trip leader one day behind us will deliver it to Ourarzazate.

Footnote: Here we are in the Sahara Desert, in the middle of the sand dunes, with cell phone and WiFi service. Why do you suppose Sprint cannot provide adequate cell service over all of our tiny 4X6 mile island just across the bridge from Naples, Florida?

As we drove through Erfoud, we saw the system of aqueducts which look like a field of mini volcanoes. They were not in use now. We stopped at the Ksar of El



Khorbat, an abandoned ksar (fortified or walled city). A young man and his friend are restoring the entire area. He had built a nice Berber Museum and restaurant where we had lunch. After lunch, we continued on to **Ouarzazate**, a city built by the French as an outpost for the Sahara Desert. On the way, we went through many quaint towns in the **Valley of Roses**. There were hedges of roses planted around the fields. Kids were standing at the side of the road with hearts made of roses. The Festival of Roses was to take place in two weeks. When we checked into our hotel at **Le Berbere Palace**, it looked like paradise!

Ouarzazate means "no problems" and it is known as the Moroccan Hollywood. There are movie studios here and a new one being built now. But there are NO movie theatres in the town!! "Alexander the Great" by Ridley Scott was filmed here as well as "Lawrence of Arabia", "The Living Daylights", "The Last Temptation of Christ", "The Mummy",



"Kundun", "The Hills Have Eyes", "Prince of Persia", "Gladiator", "Babel" and many more films. Even some of the TV series "Game of Thrones" was filmed here.

Ouarzazate has the largest solar plant in the world, a \$9 Billion projected cost. Electricity created during the day-time will be stored in molten salt storage cells for use at night. This area was a crossroads between Zagoula and Marrakech. Zagoula is famous for its date palm groves.



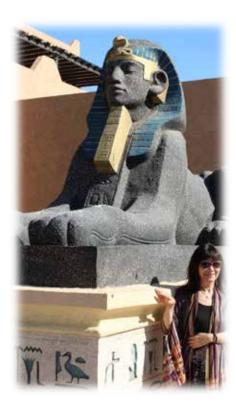
We checked into our next room at Le Berbere Palace, which was an exquisite place, more like the Beverly Hills Hotel than a regular hotel. There was extensive landscaping, a huge pool area, large airy restaurant, and many movie props throughout. What a great place to rest and relax! Dinner was delicious, but Eddie missed it as he was feeling pretty bad.



Monday, 5/7/18 ~ After breakfast we started out on our tour. We stopped at the Oscar Atlas Studios which was a fun place with many props from movies, especially about Cleopatra. We drove by Cla Studios, another huge studio, and we drove by the site for the new

Moroccan film Studio which was currently being built.

Our next stop was a visit to **Ait Benhaddou**, a picturesque mountainside Berber town where our group will experience **"A Day in the Life"**. First, we met some of the local men of the village and saw how they constructed their homes. We met an artist who was doing some very interesting paintings that came to life when he put a torch under them. Of course, I had to buy a piece of his artwork! Then we went into the fields to see how the ladies harvest the crops.







We visited a small **Kasbah** and had our mint tea ceremony. The tea ceremony was quite impressive everywhere we went. The small glasses and the silver tea pots always arrived on a big silver tray. Tea was usually served by the man of the house as a means of welcome. First the tea is poured into two glasses, then poured back into the pot. Then the tea was poured into the glasses again by the tea pot or pots from very high up. The purpose was to create a small amount of foam or bubbles on the top of the tea. Tea was usually served with sugar and sometimes mint leaves inside the glass as well as mixed in with the

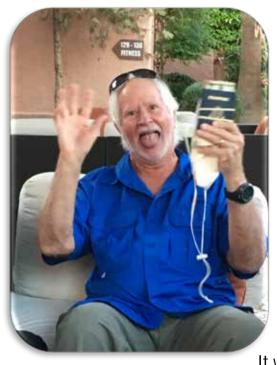
tea.

We went to visit the **Imik Smik Women's** Association for Rural Development, established in 2012. It is sponsored by Grand Circle Foundation. We met the ladies and learned how they made couscous and cookies. It was a "hands on





lesson" as many of our group actually participated in the process. After our cooking lessons, we went to the home of one of the ladies and had the homecooked lunch which we had helped to make. We gave them the gifts we had brought from home for them and the school supplies. Then a few of us ladies got henna tattoos on our hands before we headed back to the hotel for a little relaxation before Happy Hour. Ed and I went shopping across the street and I bought my Toureg Caravan necklace. The merchant started at 650 dirhams and I got it for 200 dirhams (about \$20 US).





During Happy Hour Eddie's passport and money arrived...YEA!! We had dinner at **Dimitri's**, a wonderful Greek restaurant where we had duck. It was delicious!

Footnote: Eddie's passport case also had about \$900 cash in it. Noureddine had cautioned him that his stuff would pass through many hands before returning to him. Eddie would have settled for just getting the passport back. To his pleasant surprise every dollar of the cash was also returned. We doubt that would have happened in most of the counties we have visited, including our own!

TRANSFER TO MARRAKECH

<u>Tuesday, 5/8/18</u> ~ After breakfast we checked out of Le Berbere Palace and began our ride to Marrakech. This was another very long and beautiful bus ride through various locals. We passed areas of white walnut trees which are unique to the Atlas area. We traveled through many diverse ecosystems including



through the mountains on some pretty scary roads. This was the area where the movie "Babel" starring Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchette was filmed. These roads were getting some much-needed repair work. Many large curves were being taken out by carving through the rock. We went through a pass at 7,000 feet, but the summit



of the High Atlas Mountains is 14,000 feet. We went past an area called **S'Koura** which had many Kasbahs, some in ruins, some restored. We had a couple of rest stops at really cool places. At each

rest stop we are able to purchase cappuccino or ice cream as well as small things like postcards. We were now on the north-west (rainy) side of the Atlas Mountains and everything was green

and lush again. We were heading into Marrakech and were excited to see this legendary city. Here we stayed in another riad, the **Riad Nesma** in the medina. This is a true riad with the open roof. Our



room was on the ground level for a change. The restaurant where we had breakfast and (later) Happy Hour was on the fourth level at the balcony. Lots of steep stairs!!



The riad was located right in the heart of the medina, so that shops were just outside our door. It was fairly easy to navigate the winding streets, but we always had to be wary of the "vehicular terrorists", the many speeding motorcycles, mopeds, and bicycles that traveled these narrow winding streets.

Marrakech was known for having the friendliest people in all of Morocco. The Toureg Berbers (Blue Men) came from the south to the palm groves to live in Marrakech. The Sultan's gardens were located here and were built in 1,100AD. There were hunting expeditions here.



We began our exploration of the area by walking through the small winding streets of the medina up to the legendary **Djemaa el-Fna Square**. This was an amazing experience as we saw

everything from snake charmers to monkeys

and acrobats, and I even got to dance with a transvestite! Eddie checked out the local "dentist". After this we had dinner at the Riad right next door at their ritzy new restaurant. There was a belly dancer and eventually food, but Eddie was still not feeling well, so he drank a couple Casablanca's and checked out early. I loved the musician who wore a red Fez hat with a tassel which he spun around over his head as he sang. It was a very late night!





We went through the souks and spice markets and past the great walls of the medina. As everywhere else in Morocco, there were many cats here. We went by the great **Koutoubia** minaret, but it was closed to non-Muslims so we just got photos from outside. We viewed the **Saadian** Wednesday, 5/9/18 ~ This morning after breakfast we began our exploration of Marrakech with a visit to the Bahia Palace. This was a very beautiful area with great gardens and fabulous carvings and mosaics in each room. We saw how the harem lived and where the kids went to Koranic school.



Tombs, dated back to the time of the Saadian dynasty Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur. The Sultan and his family are "sleeping here". The tombs are located on the south side of the Kasbah Mosque. The finely carved cedar wood and stucco work were very interesting. Next, we had our **caliche horse-drawn carriage ride** through the **Ville Nouvelle** section of town. Today we had lunch at **Portofino**, a great pizza place. Eddie was very happy with his pizza and Casablanca beers.

After lunch we visited a Berber rug store where we saw many beautiful, but expensive rugs. After Happy Hour at our riad we all went to dinner at Palais Dar Dmana for another tajine dinner.



after breakfast, we did the optional tours of **Marrakesh**. We visited the very beautiful **Jardin de**

Majorelle, built in 1920s by French artist Jacques Majorelle and once owned by Yves St. Laurent. This was a lovely and serene place with beautiful lush gardens and one of the most beautiful cactus gardens I have ever seen. The huge pots of very bright colors of blue, red, and yellow accented the plantings. There was a memorial to Yves St. Laurent as well as a fantastic **Berber Museum**. Our next stop was to be the **Ben Youssef Medersa**, once the largest Koranic school in North Africa, but it was closed for repairs. We viewed the nearby

Marrakech Museum with its fabulous art collection.

We strolled through the narrow streets of the medina, past the construction sites, and the many stalls where leather hides are turned into shoes.





We

viewed the Maison de la Photographie, a very interesting museum of old photographs from 1870-1950. We had lunch on the rooftop terrace of this museum. All the meals were cooked and served in Tajines. We had the Meatball Tajine.

After Happy Hour at **Riad Nesma**, we did



some final packing and then we enjoyed a wonderful farewell party hosted by our riad. We drank, ate, and danced with the entertainers. Afterwards we all went to our farewell dinner at the fabulous **Red House** in Marrakech. This was a truly elegant restaurant and the food was delicious. We got to meet Noureddine's wife

Mary and his two lovely daughters. It was a wonderful evening! Our group of 15 sat in a big room and each gave their impression and comments on the trip.



Hassan II Mosque, completed in 1993. This mosque is the largest in Morocco and the third largest in the world and holds 105,000 people at prayer (25,000 inside and 80,000 outside). The construction cost is estimated to be between \$400-\$700 million, paid for by the people of Morocco. The inside was stunning with the decorated walls and ceilings.

TRANSFER BACK TO CASSABLANCA <u>Friday, 5/11/18 ~</u> After breakfast we depart for Casablanca where we toured the magnificent





It may be the largest building I have ever been inside. The outside was equally stunning with the beautiful mosaics. Its minaret is the world's tallest at 210 meters (689 ft), taller than the great pyramid in Egypt. Google says: *"Initially at 146.5 meters (481 feet), the Great Pyramid was the tallest man-made structure in the world for more than 3,800 years."*

The mosque was originally built out over the water (the Atlantic Ocean!). Later, in 2005, structural concerns resulted in a massive 50 million Euro renovation. Land was filled around the Mosque and part of the area underneath turned into a parking garage (not confirmed by Google) our guide told us.



We did a walking tour through the city center where we went past several other mosques, souks, bakeries, and even had camel burgers for lunch. Noureddine purchased the ground camel meat from the only lady butcher in Casablanca, we walked around the corner to an outdoor grill where the burgers were grilled.



What a treat!

While the French controlled Morocco during the first half of the 20th century, they added to the local architecture and you can see Moorish, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco structures throughout town. Morocco gained its independence in 1956.

After our tour of the city and the beautiful mosque, we checked into our rooms at the **Novotel** for the night. We enjoyed a last Happy Hour and dinner together at the hotel restaurant, then it was off to the room for final packing. We were up at 3am with bags out at 3:30 am and on the bus to the airport by 4am.

Luckily our flights with Air France were all fine this time even though the company was still on strike. We had uneventful, if long, flights back home to Miami. At the Miami airport it seemed as if we were walking all the way back to Marco Island before we finally arrived at the car rental area, but we made it, and after our 2-hour drive back across the Everglades, we arrived home safe and sound and full of wonderful memories of our exciting trip to Morocco.

We had a great group of people who all got along nicely. The people of Morocco were very friendly and interesting. Our accommodations were comfortable, especially in Rabat, Erfoud, and Ouarzazate. Our tours, especially the optional trips, were all good. The food was, for the most part, interesting and tasty. We loved having Happy Hour each day! Our trip leader, Noureddine was very knowledgeable and fun-loving. He made the trip special. The only thing that was bad was the fact that 12 of the 15 of us all got sick for at least one day and that was pretty uncomfortable for us all. But all in all, it was a great trip!

Recorded and edited by

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May, 2018









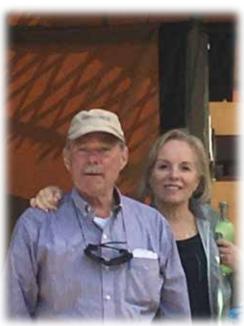










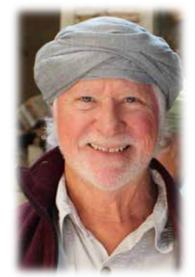


































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