

Pikes Peak River Runners

Yallah To Morocco October 2010



By Christina King

Photo Credits: Christina King, Astrid Tucker & Karen Fox

Trip Participants: Left to right starting with back row, Helen Hoeker, Shelby Traugott, Astrid Tucker (my mother), Linda Millison, Rebecca (Becky) Christmas, Christina King, Karen Ganz, Linda Levine, Richard Hoeker, Karen Fox (my sister), Dominic Sette-Ducati, our fixer extraordinaire (guide) Aziz Slimani, Marty Millison, Linda Levine, and Carol Sciacca.



[Yallah To Morocco video](#)

[Eyeglass Donations video](#)

Day 1 & 2, Sat-Sun, Oct 9-10, 2010 Mom's Birthday

Our mother/daughter trip began first with agreeing on a continent and second on a country. Not an easy task when my mother, sister and I can be so different. My mother and I have been to Peru and southern Africa together. My sister has been to France and Italy with my mother. Obviously, we needed to find

common ground to take a trip together. Morocco fit the bill and we booked our trip with Overseas Adventure Travel! Our adventure began on my mother's birthday with a 6 am start from Woodland Park, CO to DIA in Denver, Minneapolis to Paris with a final leg to Casablanca (arriving there the next day). Note: Delta flight was awful, wish we could have flown Air France the entire way. Karen met us in Paris, and I managed a bit of sleep on the final flight into Casablanca, Morocco.

Our guide (fixer) Aziz Slimani met us at the airport and after an ATM withdrawal for dirhams we got in our bus and headed to Rabat, the capital of Morocco. The countryside looks poor, lots of mud-sided homes with satellite dishes on top, flocks of sheep and goats and many children along the road. Most women (and some men) wear Jellaba's, long modest robes with a pointed hoodie. Many women wear headscarves as well. We have a group meeting at our hotel outlining our trip plans, eat dinner and finally go to bed around 9:30 pm. I am so tired! It rained overnight and I slept like a rock.



Day 3, Mon, Oct 11, 2010 Rabat



Our first full day in Rabat sets the tone for our entire trip. We fill the day with many diverse activities and our first is a Moroccan Arabic lesson. Aziz passes out a phrase "cheat sheet" and we practice the short phrases and words. I thought French might be helpful but not really. It does not seem like many Moroccan's (outside of the bigger cities) speak French other than a few phrases. The people we meet are friendly and I use "Shukran" (thank you) many times a day. Aziz's favorite word is "Yallah" which means "Let's go." We adopt this word and yell it along with Aziz every opportunity we get. I think I will start using it on river trips in the future. Aziz gives us a Gesture handout that familiarizes us with the common types of non-verbal communication. Unfortunately, several of us (me included) goof up and use the a-okay hand gesture at least once by mistake on our trip. Our A-Okay hand gesture means something vastly different (and offensive) in Morocco.

Our group is fun (more women than men) and we quickly bond. Poor Shelby fell in the bathroom last night and appeared at breakfast with a doozy of a shiner around her eye. This turns out to be the least of her issues as the trip progresses (most of us end up with dysentery).

Our first stop in Rabat is King Mohammed VI's Royal Palace. We only get to see it from the outside and it is protected by the Royal Guard in very ornate uniforms. My impression is that this King is much admired by Moroccans. He has been referred to as "the King of the Poor." His numerous social and equality programs have improved the lives of many Moroccans. He places a high value on clean water, electricity, development, women's rights and helping the poor through education. Our next stop is called Chellah which features ancient Roman Ruins, a Muslim mosque and burial place AND the first place (of many) where we see an incredible number of cats. Aziz explains that they do not believe in spaying or neutering any animals – thus the high number of cats. They also do not name animals (even pets). A donkey is called a "h'mar" and all donkeys are named h'mar. Kind of like naming your dog, "Dog."

Lucky stork nests perch high on the Chellah mosque minaret (tall tower where calls to prayer come from). Calls to prayer are chanted (across every city we visit) five times a day. This chant calls Muslim's to hasten to the mosque for prayer. No one instantly flops to the ground and begins praying. It is simply a public audio reminder to those without watches. A visit to an archeological museum is a nice diversion to see old artifacts. We visit a sultan's garden with fragrant flower scents in the air. Hassan II's tomb (the current King's father) and mosque has full time Royal Guards standing at attention 24 hours a day. The five times a day "calls to prayer" are a constant throughout our trip.



Note: The common Moroccan vehicles are Mercedes and BMW's. This seems odd to me, but I think many of them run on diesel. No surprise that I did not see any American-made vehicles. I notice that in one town all the taxis are old style Mercedes. Gasoline prices are equivalent to \$4.50/gallon. Morocco has no oil reserves and imports their oil from the Middle Eastern countries.

My initial stereotypical perception of Muslim societies involved fierce beard-faced men in long robes clenching their fists in anger at the US -- typical of what we see on television. I thought the women would be completely enveloped in "burkas." I knew that was probably not true but purposely did virtually no homework about Morocco before arriving. I wanted to see for myself without too many preconceived notions before I arrived. In fact, I notice most men are clean shaven with only a neatly trimmed mustache. I have completely changed my initial impression and find that the Moroccan people are friendly and happy, love their country, respect religions that believe in one God

(Allah) and practice gracious hospitality towards strangers. I quickly adopt the local custom of head/hair covering. This habit allows me to communicate more easily with women. Specifically, it was difficult for most rural women to even make eye contact with me if I do not wear a headscarf. Making eye contact and smiles are impossible for them to sustain towards most uncovered western women. I notice that the more I try to blend with their culture it makes a positive difference in my ability to communicate (in my terrible Arabic cheat sheet) with women. In addition, I notice that men tend to stare (uncomfortably so) when I do not cover my hair. Despite the lack of language skills on my part (Aziz helps a lot) it is not too hard to communicate basic questions and answers with each other.





By lunch we are tired and enjoy a fish kabob meal at an ocean-side restaurant while watching surfers glide down the waves. Poor Linda Levine chooses the chicken and quickly becomes the first person to get sick. Eleven of thirteen of us end up getting sick in Fez so she is just the first one to go down. Linda thinks it was the chicken she ordered, instead of the fish that most of us ate. We return to the hotel and some of our group rest for the afternoon. Mom, Karen, and I decide to walk down to the medina (shopping area) and wander through the narrow alleys and shops. We spent a couple of hours in the dark cobblestone alleys of the medina eyeing the meat shops, sweet stores, handicraft booths and people. My mind is twirling with all my first impressions of this country.



On our way back to the hotel we slipped into a Jewish synagogue where worshipers are just starting to gather (it is in an unmarked modern building located on the same street as our hotel). We got back to the hotel with just enough time to join the group for our official welcome dinner and we were not disappointed.

Aziz escorted us through the medina to our restaurant. The hustle and bustle in the alleys continued at all hours and our dinner was scrumptious. My favorite food tonight was a pastry-like chicken dish called Pastilla. It tasted of almonds drizzled in honey, stuffed with chicken, cinnamon, onions and layered with crispy phyllo sheets topped with powdered sugar. Sometimes this is served with pigeon, but I am glad it was chicken tonight. Aziz entertained us after dinner by playing guitar. We got the first of many cups of piping hot mint tea on our trip today. The servers pour the hot tea from high above the tray into tiny glasses to create a froth on the top of the beverage. Most Moroccans eat dinner late (usually around 9 pm) so when we show up at 7:30 pm, we are always the first ones to be seated for dinner. Makes for quiet restaurants!



Day 4, Tues, Oct 12, 2010 Volubilis & Fez

We wake up early this morning and begin a long drive to Fez with multiple stops along the way. Our first stop is an up close and personal look at a cork forest and cork bark. I now understand why cork is considered a renewable flooring material. Basically, it is scraped off living trees while keeping the tree alive. The cork bark grows back after several years and is harvested many times over. Another stop involved stretching our legs and saying hello to a woman and child at a roadside stand that Aziz routinely visits. She is selling many items including honey. Aziz buys a handful of fresh mint that fills our bus with a refreshing scent. I notice that a lot of Moroccan food is drizzled with honey which explains the number of people with poor teeth.

We take a rainy tour of the Roman ruins at Volubilis and admire the shiny mosaic of Roman tiles. Our guide explains the purpose behind the many rooms and structures including the myth that relates to a supposed Roman habit of eating as much as possible then vomiting it up in a special room (Vomitorium). Turns out this is a myth but plays out on the next day of our trip. A stop in the town of Meknes provides a unique view of a smaller city in Morocco. Many places we visit are UNESCO World Heritage sites. Both Volubilis and Meknes fall into this category. We have lunch at a beautiful restaurant in Meknes and visit another mosque/tomb and garden. The tile work, or zellij, consists of geometrical mosaics and is intricately beautiful.



We arrive in Fez (Aziz's hometown) and settle into our hotel after a post-dinner walk down a nearby city blvd. Does Fez smell like olive oil? Seems so to me. I LOVE green olives. Note: A fun read "A House in Fez"



Day 5, Wed, Oct 13, 2010 Happy Vomitorium Day

Last night I woke up at 11:15 pm and began violently vomiting (with diarrhea) every 30 minutes straight through until 4 am. I was thoroughly drained. I decided that I was able to keep down a Cipro antibiotic pill by 4 am and promptly fell into an exhausted sleep. My mother knocked on my hotel room door early and asked if I was sick. Karen and my mother had begun the same cycle of dysentery about 3 am. I was too weak to go

out with the group that morning. Turns out most of our group was ill ... with more to come. Fortunately, I turned the corner at noon and joined the remaining “healthy” ones in our group in the Fez medina.







My mother decided to join me but quickly turned back at the tannery. Imagine the smell of death and multiply that one-hundred-fold and then you can get a sense of the tannery odors. The tannery employee waved sprigs of fresh mint leaves at me and I attempted to stuff it up my nose to hold back my queasiness. I rebounded enough to visit a ceramics factory and a home hosted dinner visit that night. The rest of our group became sick, one by one with the same symptoms. Poor Karen missed Fez completely and spent the entire day and evening in her room. Some were sick off and on throughout the rest of the trip and others rebounded as well. Only Helen and Dominic escaped our brush with dysentery. Today marks the first day of toilet paper hoarding. My suitcase and backpack contain at least 4 rolls by the time we reach the end of our trip.



The maze-like feel of the Fez medina was amazing. Only people and heavily loaded donkeys fit into the narrow alleys lined with shops of every sort. A donkey's life in the Arab world must be misery, their loads dwarf their small frame. I routinely see donkeys with huge loads AND a person riding on top! The sights and smells will linger with me well beyond our trip. Camel and sheep heads and feet are a delicacy. Then again, I do love Swedish blood pudding which would be horrifying to any Muslim.

I would have been lost for days if we did not have a guide during our visit in the old Fez medina. Cats prowled everywhere, patiently waiting for scraps of meat to fall to the alley floor. The medina shops had a dizzying array of handicrafts, household goods, food and accompanying flies buzzing over the honey drizzled sweets. The only saving grace about those cats was my hope that they keep the rodent population in check.





The ceramics factory guide allowed me to take a hand at shaping a tagine pot but I am convinced my tagine lid effort ended up in the reject pile. My pot turned out very wobbly- looking. Supposedly there are 500,000 people packed into the 9,000 alleys of the Fez medina and I believe it! Aziz said he knew the Fez medina well since he explored every alley growing up there as a child. The alleys are so narrow that only two to three people (at most) can walk side by side. The donkeys trot through with their wide loads.

Warnings shout out from the hurried donkey drivers, but we barely hear them over the general din of the crowds and shopkeepers. The donkeys require us to make way so press our backs against the mud walls and pray they do not step on our feet. The poor donkey's (and women) all carry heavy loads. I took a photo of the medina from an overlook and am astounded at how many TV satellite dishes sprout from these old buildings. The modern juxtaposed against the old is fascinating.



Only six of us were able to participate in our home hosted dinner visits tonight. I enjoyed the visit but was only capable of nibbling on the blandest portions of the meal because my stomach remained shaky. The parents in the family we visited were about my age (Mohammed and Nadja) with two children (a 12-year-old

girl and a 5-year-old boy). The daughter was just learning English and went to a private school (she began to learn French in 2nd grade). They love family picnics in the Middle Atlas Mountains above Fez. Beach vacations in Tangier are also a favorite holiday location. Mohammed runs his father's farm outside of Fez and harvests olives (4,000 trees), chickpeas and other grains with a few domestic animals as well. His wife spoke only a bit of English, so he translated our questions back and forth. We shared country stories and customs enjoying our discussions. Mohammed's English is quite good because of a previous job at a European-oriented import/export business. He shared with us many details about their family life, how he and his wife met, and customs in their country.

Day 6, Thurs, Oct 14, 2010 Happy Birthday Karen

This day will have to be the worst birthday Karen has ever experienced. Mom and Karen are still sick and must face a long ride in the bus today to our next destination. Our first stop (other than bathrooms of which Aziz knows all the good locations) is a ski resort town called Ifrane (5,500 ft elevation) in the Middle Atlas Mountains. Ifrane looks like a small town in Switzerland and boasts yet another Royal Palace. Ifrane provides a cool respite in the heat of summer. We see plump sheep on the drier hillsides surrounded by forested mountains. As we descend from the mountaintops, we begin to find drier Arizona-like desert canyons (wadi). The wadis that have water, such as



the immense Tafilalt, have palm groves filled with thousands of date trees. I have become quite adept in picking out the best quality dates. I think the best quality dates are lighter in color (tan and lighter brown), plump in size and soft in texture. Aziz shares the history of the Blue Men of the Sahara or Tuareg traders. The conflict with Algeria has put an end to the trading circle they once freely used to travel between countries.

Note: Cell phone coverage is almost universal across Morocco. I see numerous cell phone towers during our travels. I wish we had such good coverage in the western US!

Karen ends up throwing up one last time on the bus (fortunately in a plastic bag) and is completely spent by the end of the day. My mother is tight lipped and tired as well. As a side note, when Aziz asked us today who wanted plain boiled white rice for lunch, all the lunch-eaters hands shot up in the air. Carol and Karen Fox slept in a hotel

room during lunch. Aziz arranged for a birthday cake for Karen after dinner, but she just could not manage a bite of her treat. Our Erfoud hotel is really beautifully lit up at night but most of the group goes to bed early.

Day 7, Fri, Oct 15, 2010 Fossils, Camels & Fennecs

I woke up early today and strolled through downtown Erfoud - not a metropolis. School children were on their way to class, bread and propane was being delivered and cafés are just starting to open.

Note: Men dominate the cafés – “doing business” as Aziz says. The women work hard, and I have a difficult time equating the work that men do with the work that women do. It seems really unbalanced to me. Most women and young girls wear scarves, but I notice that the young girls wear the fashionable skinny jeans under their long tops.

Our first stop is at a fossil factory. The slabs are trucked from a nearby quarry and then polished and transformed into gorgeous works of art – both practical (such as sinks/tables) and sculptured art pieces. I should have purchased a fossil piece, but the prices were awfully expensive.



We stop by for a home visit to a “poor class” family and I distribute the first of 32 pairs of prescription glasses to Moroccan families. I saw the desperate need for prescription eyeglasses on my last Africa trip and asked my co-workers to donate old prescription eyeglasses before I left for Morocco. My bag was so full that my mother had to take the overflow glasses in her luggage for me.

How it works: I asked Aziz to help identify poor Moroccan’s that he knew could not see well. Many nomads know Aziz from previous trips, so he had a good sense of their vision problems. I then pulled out my bag of old donated prescription glasses and they start to try them on. Rarely did the first few pair work but once a pair worked, their face would light up. They were literally given the gift of sight. Most older women needed reading glasses, but younger boys and girls typically needed them for distance. Many older women did not use the glasses for reading (they could not read) but instead used them to see close-up handiwork such as embroidery or weaving. Students appreciated the glasses for reading and classroom work. These are Moroccan’s that will NEVER be able to afford to see an eye doctor much less purchase a pair of glasses. This simple plan worked beautifully, and it was so rewarding to see them smile once they could see better with their glasses. Thanks to my Colorado Springs Utilities co-workers for being so generous.





I experienced my first camel ride today. It was fun to gently plod through the Sahara Desert dunes. Mom even loosened up her grip on her camel's saddle after 30 minutes and thoroughly enjoyed our friendly camel ride. We rode our docile camels past old Kasbahs (fortresses) and building ruins. Frankly, most buildings that we see in Morocco look like ruins, I have no sense of how old some buildings are compared to others. They all look old! Virtually all buildings are multi-story, usually pierced with scaffolding holes and encased with thick ochre adobe walls. Windows are guarded with decorative (and security functional) wrought iron ornamental bars and doors consist of thick decorated wooden slabs. I enjoy seeing the beauty in windows and doors as we travel the country. We stop at a French Legionnaires ruin (old fort) passing acacia trees along the way. The area we pass through visibly shows the negative effect of desertification creeping into former savannah lands.





We arrive at our camp in the afternoon and take a short siesta as we settle into our canvas tents. A pesky wild donkey gets in the tents and trash, so the camp crew ties him up to keep him out of trouble. Aziz reminds us to put our chairs down in front of our tents if we want a wakeup call before dawn tomorrow to watch the sunrise from the surrounding sand dunes. Most of the group declines the offer. Karen and I incite a group "chair scare" when we joke that we will put all the chairs down after they have all gone to bed. Everyone has a jittery laugh about that scenario- we were just teasing. Before we eat dinner, our camp cook gives us a tagine cooking lesson. After dinner, we take a walk under the star-filled skies and watch for the bright eyes of Fennec Foxes in our flashlight beams. It is hot but not overwhelming so.

FYI: I found a [more detailed and fact-filled description of this portion of our trip written by previous OAT traveler](#). Enjoy!



Day 8, Sat, Oct 16, 2010 Sahara

We start today with a walk to a local nomad camp where I bought a scarf and gave away more glasses. The woman invites us in her tent and her 24-year-old son pours us hot mint tea. We exchange small gifts and Aziz translates their story for us. She is spinning camel wool into yarn for rug (and tent cloth) weaving. They spend

the hot summer in the cooler Middle Atlas mountain area and have just returned to the Sahara for the winter. She is a widow with about 8 children and depends on the children to take care of her. They own eight camels, and she has been widowed for three years. Widowed women rarely remarry but widowed men usually do remarry. We visit several other nomad women and give them glasses including one woman gathering water at the well. I noticed the well had been dug in 2000 and see the bucket is a used tire (we see them in markets). The children look well-cared for and happy. Aziz arms us with sledgehammers and we organize our own hunt for fossils. Everyone finds several fossils on a rocky hillside.

Note: Other ideas for small gifts include toothbrushes, pink nail polish, pretty hair ties, barrettes, cute clothes for children (8-10 years old boys and girls), wild colored pencils and pipe cleaners and fun socks (boys and girls).



It got hot today, and we scramble back to camp for lunch and siesta. Karen, Mom and I took showers and then pampered ourselves with a belated birthday spa session that included Korean face masks and The Body Shop lotions and potions. It felt great in the heat of the afternoon and my mother and Karen are finally feeling well enough to enjoy their postponed birthday celebrations. Dominic forgoes any decorum in his shower and takes a two-for-one approach. He washes himself and his clothes at the same time!



Aziz and Hussein (who also received eyeglasses) teach us a popular Moroccan card game called Ronda. We break a few rules while learning to play this new game and have fun figuring out how to keep score. Before dinner, Aziz explains the history and background of Islam. I will not attempt to summarize it because I could not do justice to how diplomatically Aziz walked us through the discussion. It was a great learning experience.

Karen and I took a walk after dark, but before dinner. We wandered out of sight of camp for a moment, losing our way. The massive dunes hid the minimal lantern glow from our campsite, but we quickly got back on track. At dinner tonight, Aziz arranged a surprise by inviting all the nomads we had met today to join us. One of our drivers went out to pick them up. We enjoyed visiting with our guests immensely and were able to use hand gestures and our Berber/Arabic cheat sheets liberally tonight. Before bedtime, Karen and I hiked up a dune and sat under the stars and giggled our hearts out. We only saw a few pairs of Fennec Fox eyes glowing in the dark tonight.

Day 9, Sun, Oct 17, 2010 Hammam Steam Bath

We left camp by foot this morning and were picked up an hour later by our Toyota Landcruiser drivers. Our first stop was a subsistence farm where we enjoyed a tour of the cows, sheep, goats, alfalfa, olive trees, dates (*photos at left*), pomegranates and henna fields. This farmer barely made ends meet for his large family.

Our next stop was a cemetery where Aziz explained Moroccan funeral customs. The only grave markers were flat rocks and no writing – the elders had to pass along who was buried where. Men and women had different grave markers (ways in that the rocks were placed). Women's graves had parallel flat stones and men's graves had one end piece rotated at 90 degrees. The same size grave was dug for both men and women and even if it was a fat person, they just stuffed them in the grave (on his/her side, facing Mecca). We crested one last pass before dropping into our next oasis at Tineghir. What a gorgeous panorama!



Date palms, old Kasbahs, mosque ruins and farming plots. That afternoon we treated ourselves to a Hammam, an interesting steam bath experience. The experience was fun, but I did feel like a layer (rolls) of skin had been scrubbed off my entire body by an SOS pad. No photos of this experience. My Sahara sand is completely gone at the end of this bath.





Day 10, Mon, Oct 18, 2010 A Day in the Life

We began our day of immersion into all things Moroccan by strolling through the Tineghir oasis and farming plots. The women taught us to cut alfalfa by hand (back-breaking work) and then we discovered an old mosque ruin to explore. Our next stop was the weekly market where we ran into our Hammam girls doing their weekly shopping (fun to see someone we recognized from the day before). The market was a feast for the eyes with so many items for sale. There were truckloads of secondhand clothing, used shoes (\$1/each), old appliances, spices, grains, vegetables, fruit, and meat. The ickiest thing I saw today was sheep skins filled with buttermilk. All was “for sale” and haggling was occurring at a blistering pace on all fronts. Aziz is an expert at pointing out every local pickpocket and we get used to burying all valuable items deep in our pockets.



Our next stop to dispense more eyeglasses was a vocational school for physically and mentally handicapped Moroccans. Morocco has very few social programs and this was a non-profit alternative to teach these disabled students a trade that could help them earn money for their families. For lunch we visited a boarding institution for students who lived in rural areas and came into town for a high school education. The boys were given a place to live and food to eat while they attended a regular public school nearby. When we arrived, the boys were eating from tables with no plates. It had a “Lord of the Flies” appearance and for a moment my mother (and I) thought we were going to eat this way as well. This is a Grand Circle Foundation supported boarding institution that prepares poor and mainly rural (and orphaned) students for further education and jobs. A select group of boys were invited to join us for our lunch (with plates!) in a large room next to the library. All had studied English, and several were good speakers (thanks to subtitled movies). It was enjoyable to listen to their questions and comments about our cultures. One young man said his greatest wish was to be able to send his parents to Mecca. Not a typical wish for a young man in the U.S. We donated the rest of my eyeglasses plus many other school supplies (such as maps, paper, pencils, etc...) to the headmaster of the boarding institution.



Aziz arranged for us to visit a Berber carpet weaving store where we learned all about the art and history of making sweet Moroccan mint tea. When I saw how much sugar (from the solid sugar cone) was placed in the

tea, I immediately realized why my teeth tingled whenever I sipped on a glass. We left the carpet store to drive up the narrow Todra River Gorge stopping at fantastic overlooks along the way. Our last activity of the day was to visit a local Henna artist where we picked our favorite designs to be drawn on our hands. I washed it off before dinner, but the henna design stays on my hand until it finally fades away about two weeks later.







Day 11, Tues, Oct 19, 2010 Day of 1001 Kasbah's & One Wedding

We begin our day by driving up the Dades Gorge, but first stopping for a Berber Pizza along the way. A local family (yup, the husband has four wives) hosts us for tea and we learn how to make a Berber pizza. The dough is split into two round circles on a flat table and filled with chopped onions, peppers, olives, and seasonings, then sealed up and baked in a charcoal bread oven. Some of our group have trouble looking past the flies hovering over the pizza filling and others turn away from the smoke of the dark room. But at this point, it does not bother me much. I figure it is baked and what is a little extra fly protein added to my diet. The Berber pizza tasted delicious, warm, and toasty. Dades Gorge is like Todra Gorge and we marvel at the narrow cliffs between this small river.





We begin a long drive to our next destination but as always there are a lot of welcome stops along the way. Aziz promises that we will see 1001 Kasbahs (forts) and he appears to be correct. Ruins dot every horizon line.

Our lunch stop included a visit to a local Imam's (worship leader) home for a lesson on Muslim weddings. Dominic and Carol "get married" by the local Imam and we laugh until our cheeks ache when Dominic gets confused about who must pay the dowry. Dominic comes up with a dowry item of a "Lamborghini" but when he finds

out that the groom gives dowry to the bride, he desperately tries to backpeddle out of his promise. We arrive in Quarzazate, a town that is preparing for the King of Morocco's visit in a few days. All the Moroccan flags along the streets are fluttering in the wind and it appears that workers are sprucing up the town in preparation for the King's arrival. Busloads of military police shuttle into the town to provide protection during the royal visit.



Day 12, Wed, Oct 20, 2010 Almond Butter & Marrakesh

Today continues our Moroccan Hollywood set multiplied many times over. In fact, many famous movies have been filmed in this area but we are more fascinated with the snake charmers. Or should I say creeped out. The snakes drape over our necks and down our shirts while the snake charmer (with one rotten remaining tooth in his mouth) laughs crazily at our expressions. My mother hangs back away from the snakes (and the snake charmer).



I remain astounded at how many ruins litter the countryside, open for anyone to explore. We cross the High Atlas Mountains along steep and windy roads with a final pass at 7,200 feet in elevation. A stop for tea invites local children to proudly show me their schoolbooks. I introduce the children to my mother and sister which delights them with surprise.

The highest mountain peak is Toubkal (13,671 feet), whose snowy peaks can be seen from Marrakesh. The weather is cool and rainy but warms up dramatically once we approach Marrakesh. One last stop at a womens almond nut cooperative provides a nice break. They produce both almond butter (like peanut butter) for eating and almond oil for cosmetic purposes.

During the last couple of days Aziz has presented discussion and information about many controversial topics within Morocco. Those topics include adultery, divorce, prostitution, homosexuality, out of wedlock pregnancy, and more. Part of OAT's learning and discovery efforts expect that the guide will discuss and share diverse and controversial cultural topics that other cultures might take for granted but are not part of a typical travel book. It was certainly eye-opening to hear what Moroccans think and how they react to situations that many cultures face.

We arrive in Marrakesh by 5 pm and have time for Karen and I take a stroll down to the exclusive La Mamounia Hotel before dinner. Overall, the weather on this trip was only hot in the Sahara Desert and even there it cooled down quite a bit at night. Most of the other locations required cotton shirts (sometimes a fleece vest to go over that) and slacks. Not nearly as hot as I thought it would be in Morocco in October.

Day 13, Thurs, Oct 21, 2010 Exploring the Midnight Express in Marrakesh

Okay, I just wanted to say that we were in bed by 9 pm last night. Our first activity in Marrakesh was to take the Caleche Horse carriage ride around the city. We visited some tombs and the Bahia Palace (intricately carved and painted ceilings) and shopped in the medina in the afternoon. Karen and I took Mom to La Mamounia for a quick spin and then returned to the hotel to get ready for our mysterious Moroccan evening. Our evening began with a trip to a local neighborhood for a drumming music/trance ceremony and fortune telling ("a pregnancy, energetic and happy" foretold in my future). Next, we visited a rooftop balcony that overlooks the Djemaa el Fna, an open square which transforms itself into a cacophony of noise, grilling smoke, food, people, and general craziness at night. Finally, we topped the evening off with an elaborate Moroccan feast which included a belly dancer (more appealing to the men I think). I am certain we are back at the hotel and in bed by 10 pm!





Day 14, Fri, Oct 22, 2010 Free day

A portion of our group (including Mom, Karen, and I) rented a small bus today and set about exploring Marrakesh with Aziz as our guide. It was supposed to be our free day, but I was not particularly interested in spending it shopping and appreciated Aziz showing us more of Marrakesh. We visited another palace that had been converted into a museum with lots of artifacts. A Berber Pharmacia (spice store for health remedies) was a favorite stop because I found cheap saffron.

A relaxing stroll in the Majorelle Garden was wonderful – I really liked the pools framed by the blue walls of the buildings and green of the plants. Browsing a local silver jewelry merchant store, lunch and more buying in a handicraft store (Mom bought a small rug there) rounded up our early activities for the day. Karen and I went back to the medina but bought nothing. Instead, we preferred to wander the alleyways looking at the variety of goods and people.





Karen tried on a Jellaba but decided it was too expensive. Of course, she picked the most expensive one in the market! Some of the stores we visited this afternoon included the lamp makers, ceramics, slippers, hats, basket makers, fabric, and yarn dyers and at least 1001 more cats prowling the alleys. I never saw a single mouse or rat. We got back to the hotel just in time to get ready for our official farewell dinner at a French restaurant. Aziz gave us farewell presents of a small Moroccan flag and knitted Gnawa hats which we wore to dinner. Aziz thanked us for allowing him to show us his beloved country and we thanked him for a wonderful adventure in Morocco.

Linda Levine and Karen Ganz read him their poem about our trip and Marty counted down the "top ten things that Aziz did for us" list. Aziz said that the best thing we could do for Morocco is to tell our friends and family what an interesting place Morocco was to visit and encourage other travelers to visit Morocco.

Day 15, Sat, Oct 23, 2010 Casablanca

Technically today is our last day and we pack it full of activities. We drive in the rain to Casablanca, but the skies dry up as we enter the outskirts of town. We leave the goat and camel country behind and begin to see the plains with sheep and grain fields again. Casablanca is a big modern city of 5.5 million.





We visit Hassan II's mosque (completed in 1993) and are allowed in as long as we take our shoes off! It fits 105,000 worshippers and is very impressive. A stroll down the La Corniche waterfront walk in Casablanca rounded out a perfect day. The Casablanca Morocco International marathon is scheduled for tomorrow and we have runners from all over Africa and beyond staying at our hotel. We eat a roasted chicken dinner at a local rotisserie and find it hard to believe our trip has already come to an end. We know we must get up at 4 am tomorrow morning to catch early flights back to the US but reminisce over our fun adventures. Twenty-six hours after we left Casablanca, my mother and I arrived home, tired but happy – minus my suitcase which arrived at 6 am the next day. I find myself craving dates and green olives within 48 hours of leaving Morocco.



Some of our favorite quotes during our trip:

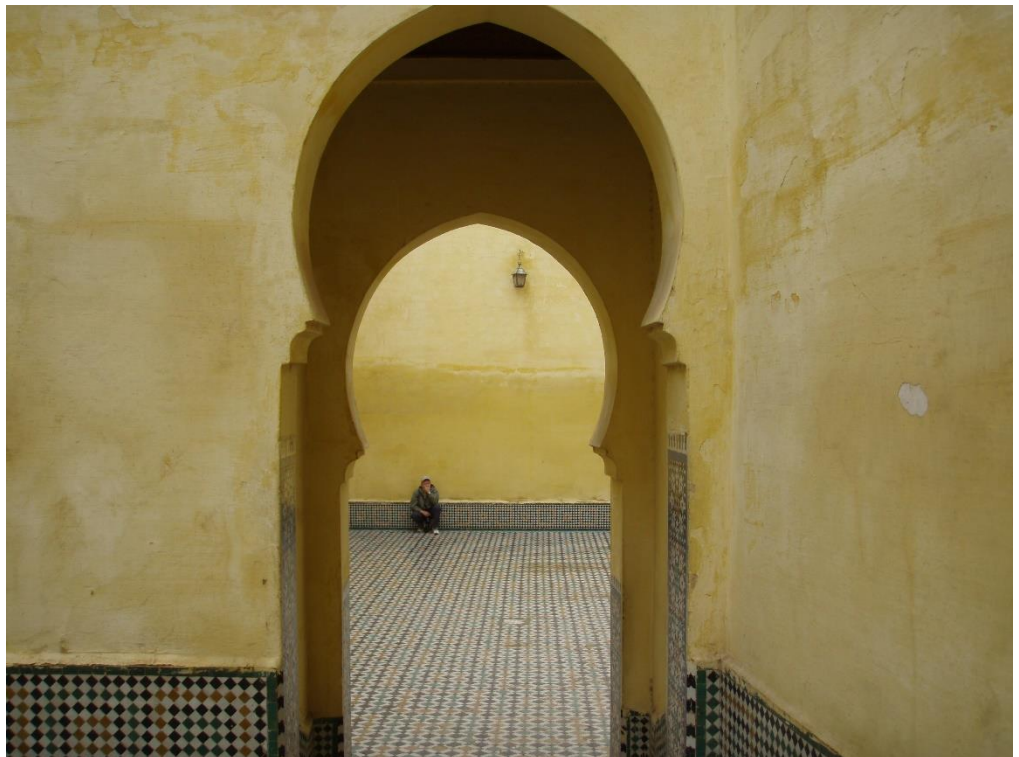
- “Yallah, yallah”, let’s go!
- “As usual, do not eat the tomatoes.”
- “That is a big piece” when we were looking at a Roman statue of a naked Moroccan King.
- “You have got a bit of bile on your upper lip.”
- “Thank you, Aziz, for buying me the Depends.”
- “I never want to be reincarnated as a donkey.”
- “Finger Lickin Good” said by a street vendor in the Marrakesh square, Karen replied “That is really not a selling point”
- “The men at the café are working” as they sip on their coffee and tea all day long.
- In the Sahara on a night-walk “I think we are lost, we should go this way”, “No, we should go this way,” *stamp of a foot*, “I am the cartographer, I am right” ... “Guess not.”
- “Be nice to your mother or else you get another negative tick mark on your left shoulder.”
- “Anyone got a dirham for the toilet?” “Want some toilet paper?”
- “Thank goodness for the bidet”
- “Chair Scare”
- “Who wants plain boiled white rice for lunch today?” “Me, me, me....”
- “Legal pickpockets” = Moroccan traffic policemen

My top four favorite things:

1. Traveling in Morocco with my mother and sister
2. The Sahara Desert & the Nomad families
3. A Day in the Life
4. Dates and Green Olives

My top two worst things:

1. Getting sick
2. Feeling sorry for the donkeys





**Farewell Poem: Moroccan Sahara Odyssey
October 2010**

It's hard to believe we met twelve days ago
Waiting in airport thirteen in a row.
We looked at each other and quickly assessed
Who would excel and who would offer less.

Off to buy dirham and use the toilette
A move that foreshadowed the problems we met.
The first meal offered a dire prediction
Of what to expect as our group affliction.

As the journey continued, we fell into our roles
Each bringing to light a piece of their souls.
At mealtimes, on bus or walking the sites
Individual assets came to the light.

Personal photographer and history buff
Richard brought to our group more than enough.
His challenging questions were timely and bright
We'll forgive his politics – a bit to the right!

The hotel shops were always Helen's domain
She rushed to get postcards and see what remained.
Our most traveled OAT, so much world she has seen
Offering tips for new journeys for places not been.

Yogurt and bananas for too many days
She shops for her Sadie with such joy she displays.
Checking her email – no effort too much
For family and friends she stayed in close touch.

You rode your own camel and conquered the fear.
Sorry we kept you waiting so often, my dear.
Some ailments you had – it could have been more
Yet important for you to know your Phillies score.

Youngest among us, you brought such a glow
Surveying bright colors of scarves in a row.
A look hard to beat, you walked dressed to kill.
The desert trekking garb certainly fit the bill.

Sister Christina has a voice of her own
Bearing glasses for Nomads and others who roam.
Yelling "chair scare" to warn us if wake up we miss
Sunrise in Sahara – no one can dismiss.

Queen mother for sure, so chic and so smart
She's quiet but funny and has won every heart.
Swedish by birth but American in her ways
Finally got her rug she'll enjoy all her days.

DAR girl and southern, she finally got to meet
Some fun Jewish travelers now ready to greet.
Her voice may have left, but her spirit has not
She bounces back from it all never complaining her lot.

A travel buddy, dear Becky, of holiday fame
She wears as important date right there in her name.
Not a long distance jumper, but a trouper for sure
She bring tales to her kids of the snakes she did lure.

Il "vecchio" Italian who has a bum hip
Still trying to find a good wine he can sip!
Hot sex in the Sahara caused the bed to break down
A kidder – he's always just fooling around.

Supporting him always, no whines from this side
Saint Carol is crutch, life partner and bride.
She loves a good laugh and most things that we do
Now showered in presents – our hats off to you!

She forgets all her stuff – be it watch or her kindle
Always smiling and listening – with each one she does mingle.
The camera is present – her need to capture all
A kidder and friend, she's there if you call.

Vivacious and spirited, this red head's not from here.
Can't fool any Moroccan - no Mohammed or Emir.
She talks of her kids though grown they may be
Buying hats, camels and scarves – bracelets of silver filigree.

The man of the hour, a King among men
Caregiver, medic with money to lend.
He leads with his heart – his country to love
Teaching us Islam – about his God above.

So much to say - his talents abound.
He studies his history and has been around.
A jokester as well – he knows all his lines
And manages the thirteen with grace so divine.

He gives all he's got each hour of the day
Reminding us all – no tomatoes – no way.
He runs all our errands with hardly a fret
He is far and away the best Moroccan we've met.

We've had so many adventures – who can forget
All the minarets, medinas and mosques that we've met.
We've seen date trees and fig leaves and olives galore
The wheat fields and apples – to name a few more.

We cut some alfalfa with ladies of the farm
But when we took photos, they sounded the alarm.
The calls to prayer kept so many awake
But buses and luggage never came late.

Fox watching intense . . . they never did show
Their twinkling eyes like stars in a row.
Riding camels to lunch was quite an event.
What more could you want but a john in the tent.

There's much more we could tell but it's getting quite late.
Going on and on would make it second rate.
The kinship created was unique in its kind
Who would have thought or had it in mind?

We've had lots of fun sharing lives past and now
But it's time to move on and say "good-bye" somehow.
We only ask that you please keep in touch
Through email or facebook – we just don't tweet much.

Ensha Allah (*Inshallah*)

Linda and Karen