

By Sophie Smith

Travel Writing: Marrakesh, Morocco

Day one

As our minibus flew through the streets of Marrakesh, we rattled around in our seats like peas in a can – childishly respecting the national law that only front seat passengers required a seat belt. I could hardly tear my eyes away from the exceptional vistas racing past my window. Though darkness had engulfed the sky, beneath it the city was flooded with people thriving under the myriad lights. The roads teemed with motorbikes (a predominant mode of transport in Marrakesh, subordinate only to mules pulling carts). But most surprising were the riders, whose ages ranged from toddlers to pensioners. All manner of people rode toward the illuminated city centre, apparently oblivious of the dark and eager for entertainment.

On arrival at the Ilyass hotel the entrance did little to reassure our western minds, that mentally recoiled at the prospect of our impending trip. However, once past the sign swinging from its hinges, the inside was beautiful. We hauled our suitcases into the small lobby and slumped down onto one of the two sofas. Every wall was decorated with zellige - terra cotta tiles - with vibrant colours blooming from the centre of each tile into a geometric flower. While being welcomed by the staff, I sat hypnotised by the ceiling, which was embellished with a kaleidoscope of ornate, gold carvings.

After lugging our bags up two flights of marble stairs - kindly aided by the sinewy male Moroccan hotel staff – we were shown to our rooms. Although authentically decorated with similar mosaic tiles to the lobby, coupled with the blue linoleum floor our room did bear resemblance to a public bathroom. The beds were draped in colourful hand-woven sheets, looking deceptively attractive to me – I remembered the earlier warning of probable bed bugs hidden within the decorative fabric. Our bathroom was highly susceptible to flooding with a sink, toilet and handheld shower crammed into a 4ft by 4ft space with no shower curtain.

We had been provided with two bottles of water as the tap water was unsanitary. Surprisingly, 2 bottles proved to be insufficient with the vacuum of heat that swallowed our small room. Even the open window offered very little means of escape from this pervasive sultriness, with no breeze blowing from the dark outside. I collapsed on top of the covers and slept soundly beneath the blanket of heat that fell over the room.

Day two

At 5am the room I was ripped from slumber by an unusual and very persistent alarm. The grating sound of adhān (call to worship) emanating from the minaret of the Koutoubia Mosque nearby flooded through our open window and echoed around the room. In the fashion of the quintessential atheistic tourist, we responded by burying our heads under our pillows to muffle the incessant chanting, and groaning

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at the rude awakening. The volume fluctuated tauntingly, giving us false hope of its ending only to burst into a new verse.

You can imagine our bewilderment after being jolted awake one morning by the muezzin performing the adhān coughing over the microphone. Apparently a sore throat does not excuse him from his duties to rouse the whole city to fulfill the first pillar of Islam, leaving them subject to his occasional hawking. I personally admired his tenacity and dedication to the job.

On the second day of our trip we peregrinated around Marrakesh, accompanied by our guide: Abdul. Before the market area, we visited the tanneries where leather is made. Upon arrival our tour guide presented each of us with a sprig of mint which we politely accepted, blissfully ignorant of its forthcoming necessitude.

Marrakesh's tanneries were a large outdoor space of round stone baths, all filled with mysterious liquids. Various skins were haphazardly slung everywhere and heavily loaded onto mules, which stood motionless except for sporadic twitches and tail-flicks to swat away the hundreds of flies inhabiting their fur.

The process of tanning leather involves using many different concoctions such as fermented pigeon faeces, thus we learnt the purpose of our mint. As I walked past men wading in the pools of waste, yanking hair from the skins and performing other assorted tortures to the animal hides I desperately clasped the mint leaves to my face like an oxygen mask in a toxic gas attack. If any of the stench were to pervade the mint, an involuntary gag would inevitably follow. As you can imagine, I was too preoccupied with disguising my retches to listen to our guide.

Having escaped the tanneries we proceeded to the market place. The area was crawling with local women making their weekly errands and men milling around the street edges, their leering stares tracing our brisk movement through the cobbled paths. We immediately tried to self-consciously mask our pale, exposed skin with the thin clothes we had obtusely chosen that morning. Lascivious looks from middle-aged men are enough to dissuade any teenager girl from flashy clothing. I felt so uncomfortable that I sheltered myself in a huddle of my more modestly dressed friends.

In the town square is an open space crammed with buskers, but not the typical singers and dancers as in the UK. For those animal rights activists, Marrakesh may not be the perfect place because entertainment in the town square consisted mainly of chained animals dressed in gaudy costumes and performing various tricks. But be warned not to linger too long or you will be harassed for money in return for this appalling spectacle.

As it was around midday at this point the swollen sun was at its apex, pounding out an unwavering 30°C heat. My friends were frantically scrambling for sun hats and protection sprays – much to the amusement of our guide, Abdul – and a miasma of

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sun cream hung thick in the air around the group. We slipped under a sheltered alley where only thin strands of sunlight spilt through the wood-woven awning. Walking down this one narrow street I experienced a full-blown assault on my senses. Stalls selling authentic Moroccan merchandise lined either side, the products including food, clothes, musical instruments and trinkets. There was a stall dedicated to lampshades; elaborate patterns snaking across the beautifully hypnotic colours of stained glass, all encasing one bulb. Opposite were food stalls, with men standing on islands surrounded by their product and shouting advertisements at passersby. These shouts and their responses created a mellifluous cacophony that filled this mysterious underworld around me.

We all spent the rest of the day overspending, mesmerized by the allure of this foreign wonderland. It's people like us who keep the trinket stalls running!

After a day on the town, the group reconvened at a rooftop table of a riad. The dimming sun sunk like a conceding opponent behind the Koutoubia Mosque's minaret and darkness fell. The town square became desolate and lights flickered on around the city, ready for the nighttime crowds.