

THE OLDEST BACKPACKERS IN TOWN

MOROCCAN MEANDER

Gill Vine





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THE OLDEST BACKPACKERS IN TOWN SERIES

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17 April 2013: Marrakesh

It ain't 'alf hot mum

Arrived in Marrakesh yesterday...it is very hot!

Our hotel is a traditional riad. The beds are rather hard and there isn't room to swing a cat, but it's clean and atmospheric. The water in pool, though cold, is warmer than swimming in the sea at home. I swim my obligatory fifty lengths. Ian dips his obligatory big toe then sits on the pool loungers refusing to join me.

This morning finds us in the souk, which is interesting and less hassle than we might expect although we soon discover that a sense of direction is a must. We see wool being dyed and tourists being fleeced. After his previous successes on eBay, Ian is disappointed that he fails to get any bids for me – too much fat and not enough meat? Highly likely.

Tonight we eat in a Lebanese restaurant – very tasty. Mint tea is very nice and so is beer – but at £5 for a small bottle it is expensive. I think Ian is going to have to revert back to mint tea!



Dyed wool hung out to dry on public railings



Inside the Medersa



What's for sale in the souk?

18 April 2013: Marrakesh

A bit of an education

This morning we rise early aiming to avoid the main heat of the day. Breakfast is at 7am. What's this? All the terrace tables have napkins on them...a German tour group has arrived.

We decide to take it easy and haggle for a taxi to take us to the old town. We make our way to the Ali ben Youssef Medersa, a twelfth century university. It's still early and the gates are closed. We are told by a very pleasant and helpful Moroccan pushing his motorbike that it doesn't open till noon on Tuesdays. Apparently they are cleaning so we had better visit the tanneries instead. Yeah, tell that to another sucker, and by the way it's Thursday! We sit outside the gates to wait. Man on motorbike circles the streets passing us four or five times each time reminding us that the medersa is closed. At 9am the gates open...looks like they completed the cleaning early today!

The medersa is beautiful with lots of intricate carvings and colourful tiles. The students 'cells' are located upstairs. They look grim but on the upside I doubt they had any student loans to contend with. The courtyard below with its little pool is beautiful and peaceful. All in all, a very well restored and tranquil place to spend some quiet time. Ideal for arty photography.

Next we wander back into the labyrinth of the souk stuffed full of weird and wonderful wares. We pass a long bench lined with animal skulls and Ian is invited to take a close look at the wildlife. Then it's time for a mint tea in the shade on the edge of Djemma el-Fna, a large square in the central medina. This place is filled with snake charmers, acrobats, jugglers, men with monkeys, bands of drummers and the like, all competing for our attention and some cash from our pockets. It's a very lively place.

Back at our riad, we retreat to the serenity of the hotel pool. The water is still freezing but I do my obligatory fifty lengths. Ian doesn't even bother to dip his toe.

Evening finds us back in Jemma el Fna square for a typical Moroccan dinner and more of the local entertainment.



11 May 2013: Ouarzazate

Lights, camera, action

Did I mention that our last hotel had a hot shower which sprayed cold water even when turned to hot? Well now we are in Ouarzazate and our shower sprays hot water even when turned to cold! We must be in the worst room in the hotel. The rooms are modern and clean with very comfortable beds except that we don't have an outside window and it is stiflingly hot. The guys at reception are very pleasant offering us a fan which is more than I had hoped. Even so Ian spends half the night sitting in the shower tray with water trickling over him. Our room is also right at the top...up six flights of stairs. They have no lift. Who needs a gym?

In a vain attempt to beat the heat we are up at 7.30am for breakfast and then it's off to the Grand Taxi stand at the end of our road following Omar's plan. As predicted we are approached to take a private taxi to our destination, Ait Ben Haddou, at the tourist rate of 300Dh. No, we say, we want the share taxi for the local rate of 10Dh per person to Salt River. The taxi driver looks blank as if I am speaking Berber. So we point to the word written in Arabic for us by Omar. OK, OK he says, although not quite yet beaten, but you are only two. We know I say, grand taxi is six persons, 10Dh per person...not a problem, we will wait for four more persons. OK, now he is beat.

We pick a bit of nearby shade and wait. Now there are four of us in total so we tell taxi driver OK, we will pay for four persons and off we go to Salt River. Here we must change to another grand taxi to complete our journey but it is only 5Dh per person for this part of the trip so we pay for all six places.

We arrive in Ait Ben Haddou and, still following Omar's plan, we make our way across the public foot bridge, not through the Berber houses for which we must pay a fat fee. The small town with its ancient kasbah is interesting and we slowly make our way from bottom to top. Many films have been shot here including Jesus of Nazareth and Lawrence of Arabia.



Ait Ben Haddou



Busker at Ait Ben Haddou



13 May 2013: Essaouira

It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock

We wake late – that's the good thing about not having a window in your room! It is 8.30am and we eat our breakfast before going out to explore the town. Even so, we are almost the first to rise...this is a backpackers hostel after all – unlike us, youngsters tend to party late. Ian claims I am clearly at home here, harking back to my younger days of wanderlust – he is not so sure about the place at all. I have to say I'm glad these kind of places still exist – the only difference between then and now seems to be that today's travellers all write home on laptops and phones instead of using pen and paper.

Essaouira, whose claim to fame lies in Orson Wells' filming of *Othello*, is a really interesting and atmospheric place. It was here that the film's opening shot featured Iago dangled from the city walls. We are glad we have chosen this town to end our journey in Morocco. Like most Moroccan towns we have encountered, it is a labyrinth of streets. But for seasoned travellers (is that us?) who have already taken on the challenge of Fès and eventually conquered, it is a doddle.

We wander through the streets crammed full of shops with colourful wares. Thankfully the shop owners are not too pushy here either. Then we try to find the battlements, taking on the small dark side streets and understanding why the guide book tells us not to venture here after sunset. We reach the city walls but it seems there is no way to climb the battlements here.



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