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# IMPERIAL ADVENTURE

*Written by Bridget Williams*



## DISCOVERING THE MAGIC OF MOROCCO

Though I will never forget the aromas, when queried, I struggle to find words descriptive enough to encapsulate them. How does one communicate the simultaneous experience of perfume and pungent, an affront to the senses that has yet to be rivaled by any other place I've visited in the world? Such is the dilemma when describing my whirlwind tour of the imperial cities of Morocco: Fes, Marrakech, Meknes and Rabat, as well as brief stops in Casablanca, Chefchaouen and Volubilis. With legacies as distinct as the dynasties they represented over the millennia, each imperial city offered an expected glimpse of ancient traditions, but more surprising was the cohabitation of cosmopolitan ideals.





Lobby of the Sofitel Rabat Jardin des Roses

After a six-hour flight from JFK, we touched down at 5:30 a.m. in Casablanca, where after collecting our bags, we were greeted by our guide for the week - Saida Ezzahoui - a petite woman possessing immense charisma and seemingly indiminishable energy for such an early hour. We settled into our comfortable shuttle bus, and as the silhouette of palm trees became illuminated by the sunrise, Saida launched into a fascinating overview of Morocco's history, religion, language, topography and customs.

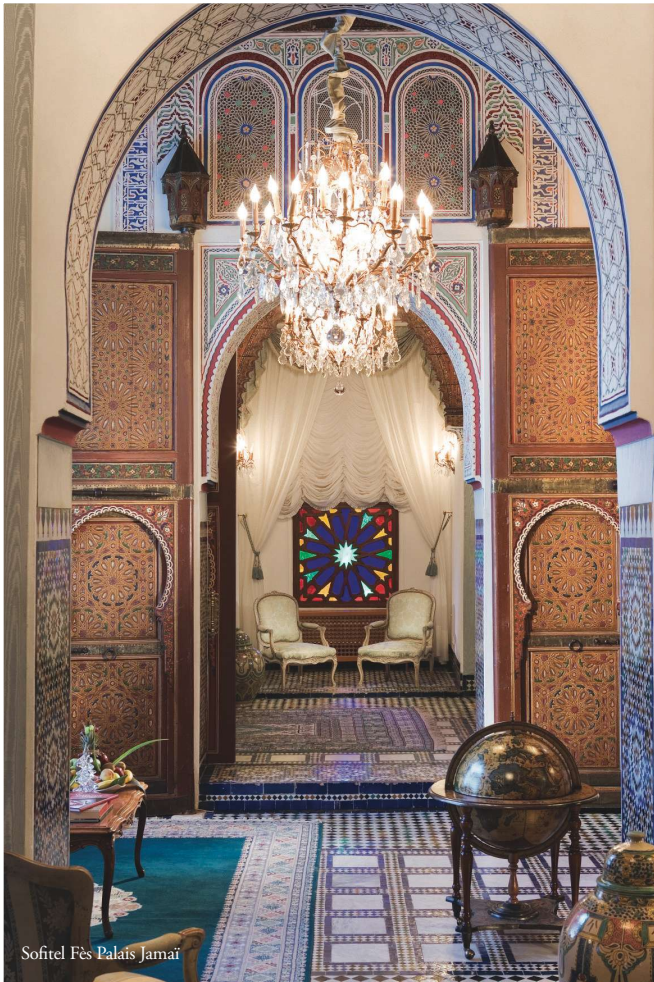
With five million inhabitants, Casablanca is Morocco's biggest and most modern city. Named by the Portuguese after an impressive white house of a 10th-century chief, Casablanca was included in the portion of the country between Fez and Rabat that was a French protectorate from 1912 to 1956, resulting in a legacy of French influence in the school system and government. The city's importance as a hub of business was evident by Palm Beach-like enclaves of grand ocean view homes hidden behind manicured hedges.

A light breakfast of pastries and mint tea at a café on the Atlantic was followed by a visit to the impressive Hassan II Mosque, the largest in the country and the seventh largest in the world, capable of holding 105,000 worshippers. One of only two

mosques in the country open to non-Muslim visitors, Saida, a Suni Muslim, provided us with an easy-to-understand overview of her faith, highlighting its ease of practice and more tolerant nature (poignantly underscored by her conservative Western dress sans hijab).

Meknes, originally settled by Berbers in the ninth century, was our next stop. Bab Mansour is the most notable among the city's 27 gates. Within the medina's main square there were carts laden with sheep carcasses, and Saida explained that Muslims were celebrating Eid al-Adha, or the Feast of Sacrifice, with each family slaughtering a sheep to mark the occasion. After telling us about the sheep her family kept in their garage to mark the holiday, she likened it to the American tradition of turkey on Thanksgiving, and we laughed at the thought of a DIY turkey day.

Under the rule of Moulay Ismaïl, known for his abject cruelty, his capital city of Meknes became noteworthy for its extravagance, with some 25,000 slaves used during the construction of the imperial palace and monuments, some of which included stoned pilfered from the nearby Roman ruins at Volubilis. The remains of the palace, including stables capable of accommodating 12,000 horses, provide a fascinating glimpse of life in medieval Morocco.



Sofitel Fès Palais Jamaï



Pastries in the medina at Marrakesh.

Our first traditional Moroccan meal was had at lunch in the stunning courtyard of Riad Didi Meknes, owned by direct descendants of sultan Moulay Sulaiman. The confines were such a visual treat, resplendent with polished tiles on the floor and mosaic walls in rainbow hues, painted woodwork and intimate rooms that invited exploration, that I quickly forgot my hunger, until our first course, little plates of “cooked salad,” was presented. A veritable feast of beets, carrots, potatoes, olives, eggplant and white beans, all scented with aromatic spices that lent unique flavor profiles, was enough to draw me back to the table.

En route to Fez we made a late afternoon stop at Volubilis, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Once an important Roman town on the westernmost border of Roman conquests, the ruins, heavily damaged by the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, hint at the sophisticated city that once flourished there. Among the highlights are 30 high quality mosaics that remain in their original location, oil presses, an aqueduct, a judiciary basilica and a triumphal arch.

Located within the walls of the medina in Fes and boasting both Moorish and Arabic architecture, the Sofitel Fès Palais Jamaï provided a welcome respite after a long day of travel and exploration. While certainly luxurious, the

property still retains ample authenticity to underscore its exotic locale. Still satiated from our feast at lunch, we opted for light bites and Moroccan wine in the hotel’s Al Mandar bar. While most observant Muslims avoid alcohol, our group never had a problem finding a good glass of Moroccan wine (a good dry martini was a little harder to come by).

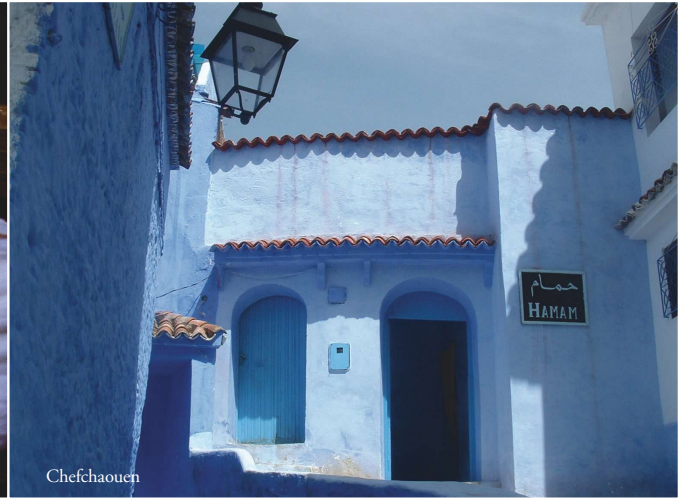
Awakened at sunrise by the Islamic call to prayer, I stepped onto my balcony to watch as the medina slowly came to life. After an American-style buffet breakfast by the outdoor pool, Saida met us sporting a traditional and colorful djellaba, a loose-fitting robe worn by both men and women. A narrow alleyway just steps away from the hotel’s front entrance leads to a labyrinth that links the 187 neighborhoods inside the medina. Within just a few steps, sensory overload commences and intensifies with every turn. This is where the services of a guide are imperative, first of all to keep one from becoming hopelessly lost and second for help in finding the best artisans for leather goods, rugs, silver, copper and brass pieces, spices and the like. Saida was an invaluable advocate, ensuring shopkeepers gave us their finest grade of saffron, providing bargaining tips, and knowing when to step in and when to let us try our hand at haggling.



Fes Marché du Mellah



Fes Artisan



Chefchaouen



Leather souq in Fes.



Cooked salad course at Riad Didi Meknes

The leather souq is home to the oldest leather tannery in the world, dating back at least nine centuries. Those who can stomach the stench can watch from a balcony as men standing knee-deep in a honeycomb arrangement of stone “bowls” containing various colored vegetable dyes do the manual, back-breaking work of processing the sheep and goat skins. After dyeing, the hides are laid on the surrounding rooftops to dry. The resulting high quality leather handiwork is plentiful and varied, and the shopkeepers are persistent in their sales tactics, but there are certainly bargains to be had as one particularly adept and stalwart negotiator in our group found out.

As a rule, Saida pointed out that most Moroccans prefer to eat and entertain at home, and as such, the diversity of dining options and menu choices is somewhat limited. For a true taste of Moroccan cuisine, it is advisable, as we did, to have your guide arrange a meal in a private riad, which is a traditional Moroccan multi-story house where rooms open to an interior garden courtyard with a water feature or fountain. The experience of leaving the mayhem of the medina, stepping through a nondescript doorway in a sea of similarly sand-colored facades and into an explosion of opulent color and

texture is an almost indescribable experience and was by far the best meal of the entire trip. The multi-course feast our hostess prepared out of her tiny, and by American standards, primitive kitchen was almost unfathomable to me.

Following an afternoon of shopping and exploring, we set out for Chefchaouen, positioned against the Rif Mountains in the northwest part of the country. En route, following a discussion of the region’s olive oils, Saida made an impromptu stop at an olive oil press that uses a hybrid of centuries-old and modern techniques. As soon as we exited the van we could smell the intoxicating aroma wafting from huge piles of picholine and Spanish olives. After observing the production process, we were invited to dip chunks of crusty bread into plates of the freshly pressed oil – what an intense palate pleaser!

Chefchaouen is most noted for its whitewashed homes with powder-blue accents and alleyways. Saida explained the blue hue was a superstitious hedge against evil eye. A popular tourist destination due to its proximity to Tangier, I found the city to be among the friendliest and one I’d be comfortable exploring without the assistance of a guide. As we traversed up and down the hilly, narrow alleyways, moving aside to let “kamikaze



donkeys” laden with cans full of gasoline pass by, the beauty of the city revealed itself. At the source of a fresh mountain spring that cascades down the mountain, children played and women tended to their daily laundry. Hiking up into the hills, we observed women baking bread in a communal oven and a pick-up soccer match taking place on the outskirts of an ancient cemetery. Casa Hassan, a charming guesthouse decorated with unique art and craftwork characteristic of the region, is an ideal spot for exploring the city’s many treasures.

On the mountainous, windy road leading to Rabat, the country’s capital and its third largest city, scrubland gave way to coniferous forest and meandering streams. Travel by road can be arduous, particularly when stuck behind a slow-moving truck on narrow two-lane roads. Located on the Atlantic Ocean at the mouth of the river Bou Regreg, Rabat is primarily an administrative city.

Close to the Royal Palace and the Mausoleum of Mohammed V, the five-star Sofitel Rabat Jardin des Roses hotel combines contemporary luxury with classic Moroccan architecture motifs. Housed within a 1960s-era tower, the nondescript exterior gives no hint of the interior’s chic confines. The gleaming marble-floored lobby includes a handful of high-end boutiques that cater to its well-heeled clientele. At the

far end of the space, near the entrance to 17-acres of gardens dotted with some 3,000 roses, a chandelier of Murano “bubbles” is suspended over a tranquil water feature.

One of the more memorable experiences during our time in Rabat, which included visits to the Hassan Tower Mausoleum and Chellah Necropolis, was dinner at Restaurant Le Ziryab. Located in Rue des Consuls in the heart of the medina, we were met at our car by a man in traditional attire carrying a lantern, who led us through a maze of ancient alleyways to the restaurant. The deft hands of a lone musician playing a lotar, a Moroccan guitar, provided the soundtrack for the evening as we dined on an abundant, multi-course meal of traditional fare, including cooked salads, lamb and chicken tangine, couscous and pastila.

The remainder of our trip were spent in the bustling city of Marrakech, the most important former imperial city, and home to both the largest Berber souk in Morocco and Djemaa el Fna, one of the busiest open-air squares and market places in the world. Reflecting the dichotomy of old and new, our home base for two nights was the Four Seasons Hotel Marrakech, a calming, contemporary compound spread over 40-acres of Moorish gardens a short walk from the ancient ramparts of the medina.





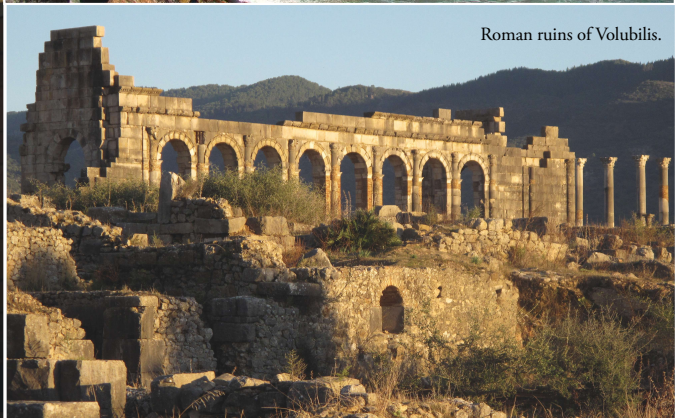
Djemaa el Fna at dusk



Mausoleum of Mohammed V in Rabat



Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca



Roman ruins of Volubilis.



Four Seasons Hotel Marrakech

Built to resemble a modern-day medina, the rose-hued walled sanctuary features alluring arcades, fountain courtyards, Moorish gardens and 141 guest rooms in low-rise accommodations with views of the snow-capped Atlas Mountains and Menara Gardens. The family friendly property includes a comprehensive children's program in a dedicated facility as well as two pools – one for families and another for adults only. After a day in the bustling souks, returning to the calming confines of the resort was a welcome respite. Even more indulgent is an afternoon spent within the confines of their lavish 32,000-square-foot spa and fitness center. The pure argan oil I picked up in the spa boutique has been nothing short of a magic elixir for both dry skin and hair.

Discerning travelers wishing to “go native” and stay within the medina would be well served by a trio of riads – Dar Les Cigognes, Riad Kaiss and Le Nid des Cigognes - that comprise The Sanssouci Collection. The collection is owned by expatriates Eben Lenderking and Tanja Tibaldi, who fell in love with the city during a 15-day vacation, during which they worked up a business plan on a napkin during New Year's Eve

and implemented it the next day by purchasing their first riad. Each unique property has been carefully renovated (taking as long as four years in some cases) to adhere to traditional architectural styles and materials while sparing no guest amenity. Each property offers an on-site concierge, a restaurant serving traditional Moroccan cuisine and a full bar, daily bespoke cooking classes from one-hour to full-day, a traditional hammam, and spa services using their proprietary product line. At Dar Les Cigognes, a rooftop terrace with 1,500 potted trees puts you eye level with the storks that nest atop the palace ramparts.

Lenderking, who remarked that he feels safer in Marrakech than in London or New York City, particularly enjoys the city's “fascinating remnants of Jewish culture,” and the “amazing artisan traditions that are a part of daily life.” When it comes to finding the best street food, he recommended following the locals and looking outside the square to the working class restaurants where the cuisine is most authentic.

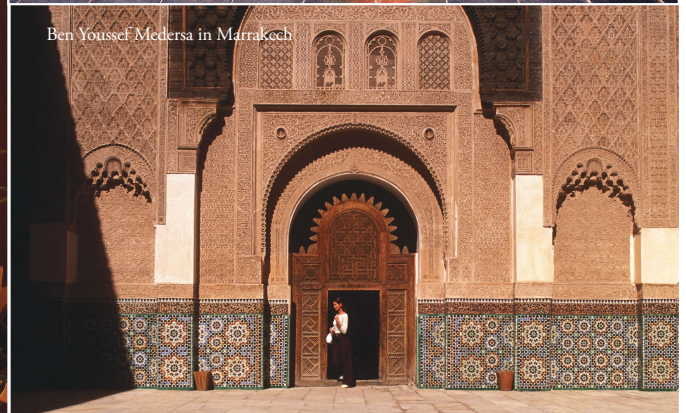
Bianca Jagger, Cecil Beaton and Yves Saint Laurent are some of the well-known revelers who lived the bon vivant lifestyle of expats in Marrakech in the latter half of the 20th



Riad Jass, Marrakech. Photo by Elan Fleisher.



Majorelle Gardens, Marrakech



Ben Youssef Medersa in Marrakech

century. The 12-acre Majorelle Gardens, designed by French painter Jacques Majorelle in the 1920s and 30s and purchased in 1980 by Laurent and Pierre Bergé, are a popular tourist destination (plan to visit early or late in the day for the smallest crowds). Laurent's ashes were scattered there following his death in 2008. The painter's studio is now a museum displaying the personal collections of Laurent and Bergé.

Also worth a visit are the lavishly decorated Saadian Tombs and the Ben Youssef Medersa, an Islamic school attached to the Ben Youssef Mosque that was founded in the 14th century and completely rebuilt in the 1560s. It is home to some of the most beautiful art and architecture in Marrakesh. Even in a state of partial ruin, it is not too much a stretch of the imagination to envision the former grandeur of the 360-room El Badi Palace, built by Ahmed Al Mansour between 1578 and 1602.

Like the finale in a fireworks show, a day at Djemaa el Fna was our final adventure. After shopping in the souks, where I picked up some gorgeous high-quality caftans from Bourriad Karim, and my travelmates drove a hard bargain to acquire several fine carpets, we arrived at the square by early afternoon.

At that time of day, the scene was sedate enough, with a handful of snake charmers, henna artists and various peddlers milling about the square, but as day turned to dusk, scores of food vendors wheeled in carts offering all manner of epicurean delights, turning the square into a carnival-like scene. Again, our guide was invaluable in offering tips for handling the pushy street performers as well as advising which food carts to savor and, more important, to steer clear of.

Returning to the serene confines of the Four Seasons, I slipped into the heated pool to unwind before heading to the spa to experience a traditional hammam bath and facial with oils of rose, jasmine and orange flower. The indulgent escape provided an ideal opportunity to reflect on my extraordinary Moroccan adventure. **sl**

**SOURCES Moroccan National Tourist Office** - [sanssoucicollection.com](http://sanssoucicollection.com) **Guide services:** Saida Ezzahoui – [saidam@hotmail.com](mailto:saidam@hotmail.com). **Chefchaouen:** Cassa Hassan - [casahassan.com](http://casahassan.com). **Fes:** Sofitel Fès Palais Jamaï - [sofitel.com/gb/hotel-2141-sofitel-fes-palais-jamai/index.shtml](http://sofitel.com/gb/hotel-2141-sofitel-fes-palais-jamai/index.shtml). **Marrakech:** Four Seasons Hotel Marrakech - [fourseasons.com/Marrakech](http://fourseasons.com/Marrakech); The Sanssouci Collection - [sanssoucicollection.com](http://sanssoucicollection.com); Majorelle Gardens – [jardinmajorelle.com](http://jardinmajorelle.com) **Meknes:** Riad didi Meknes - [palaisdidi.com/en/](http://palaisdidi.com/en/). **Rabat:** Sofitel Rabat Jardin des Roses - [sofitel.com/gb/hotel-6813-sofitel-rabat-jardin-des-roses/index.shtml](http://sofitel.com/gb/hotel-6813-sofitel-rabat-jardin-des-roses/index.shtml); Restaurant Le Ziryab - [restaurantleziryab.com](http://restaurantleziryab.com).