

Travel Log – Morocco

March 11

If it's Friday why not Morocco? After two days of rest post the Cohen's week of travelling we crossed the continent by Ferry to Africa. We spent the first day mostly getting there and a few hours on a guided tour of Tetouan's medina (a 5 square Kilometre housing some 77 thousands habitants or better yet co-habitant) I liked the tour more than mom. To her it reminded the Jaffa catacombs that she had to walk through to see her aunt when she was a child, most likely not a good memory. I enjoyed the tour even though coming from the Middle East I am not easily impressed by dirty crowded markets. It felt more like going through a favela in Rio. I did enjoy though the fact that I understood the mostly Spanish explanations of the guide and was able to communicate in Spanish with the two Argentinian women with us on the tour.





Interesting that mom seems to always pick organized tours where we are if not alone (Far East) we're in the company of one (Machu Pitchu) or two other people. No wonder we can't connect with other people. The Cohens brought back good memories of our early life in Israel and our long stay 4 years ago. They also reminded us how long we've lived in Canada to where some stereotypical Israeli behaviour does not agree with us anymore. However find other good and loyal friends who would make the trip especially for mom's birthday and spend as much time with us. Tomorrow is another day in Chefchuan, Morocco the Blue City.

I do not remember taking as many photos of any one place than on our walking tour of Chefchuan. This town in the north of Morocco built in 1471 at the foot of a 3000+ meters mountain range is magnificent. Seldom does a town have so much character with so many charming corners, alleyways all with the blue motif. It's best to just watch the pictures to get the idea. If the trip ended here and we have Asilah and Tanger to go, the trip would have been worthwhile. It is a unique experience seemingly even in Morocco.





Asilah was uneventful, it is just a quaint seemingly an artist village on the Atlantic Ocean. Tangier was much different. It is the major city in Northern Morocco with about a million inhabitants. There are posh homes, many parks, Ocean vistas and beautiful neighbourhoods on the one hand, new and modern apartment buildings and then the classical Arab Medina where the poor live and its noisy, dirty and crowded as you would expect and the traditional Suk. We could have done without it but se la vie and la vie is mucho bueno so far.





It appears that Morocco of all the North African and Middle East Arab countries has its act together. People seem to be happy. The industrial free zone attracted many multinationals to come to Tangier notably Renault. But in the whole country healthcare and higher education is free (Bernie Sanders style). The country is safe. No sign of religious or sectarian tensions. People credit the king and his wife with introducing reforms. Notably women (except the Berber women who are artisans and where polygamy is common) are participating in the workforce in white colour professional positions and even in the armed forces. On the street most women still wear traditional garb and the hijab but we have seen only one woman in thousands with a niqab. Young girls split almost half traditional and half European. Morocco may be a good model for the rest of the Arab/Muslim countries in the region but is it possible that for this you need to have a king?

April 3

It is worth going to Marrakesh if for no other reason than to spend an evening in Djamma El Fna. This is a unique experience and everything you read about or seen in the movies. The mysterious, mischievous Marrakesh. Enormous crowds of local families and tourists gather at this huge square close to sunset for what can best be described as a bizarre form of entertainment. Snake charmers, acrobats, fortune tellers, monkey handlers, magicians, games of luck and traditional instrument music bands do the entertainment as the crowd circles them at times five deep. Want to take a photo? It'll cost you and they are expert in spotting cheaters who are trying to sneak in a photo without paying. It feels safe though as long as you keep your valuables in your front pockets.





At the same time food stands, juice bars and souvenir shops are busy. The square is also the gateway to the Suk a labyrinth of anything and everything you would ever consider buying. It is notably clean and orderly when compared to the one we saw in Tangerang. The mosque, the governor's palace and the olive groves and pool are par for the course.



April 5

Leaving Marrakesh for the Sahara desert through the Atlas mountain range. As predicted we are the only people on this tour. Where did we hear that before? This morning we started off with unusually dense fog, mist and rain for this time a year in this part of Morocco. Whatever we miss today we'll see on the way back as there is only this one road back.



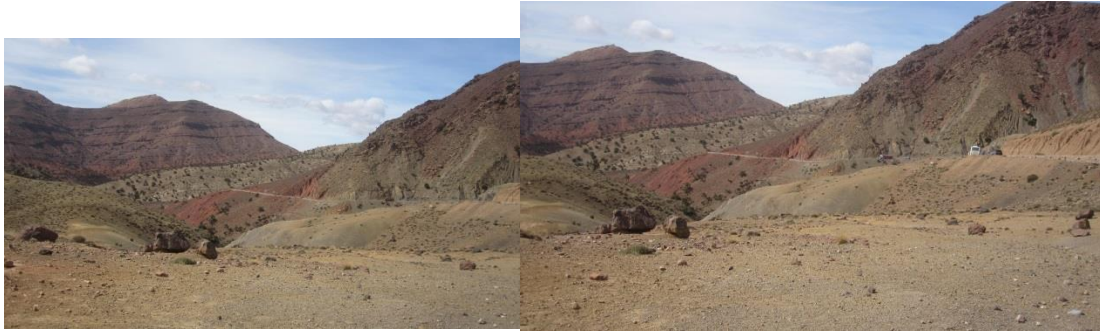


Our driver is Aziz. He is late twenty or early thirty old. He is a Berber. His mother is a mountain nomad and his father a desert nomad (two different life styles). He never went to school but speaks 6 languages which he says he learned in the 5 years he worked in tourism as a driver/guide. He reads and writes as well but we did not ask him how or where he learned. He understands English but doesn't speak well. We understand Spanish but don't speak well. In other words we get along famously. He lives with his extended family of 32 in a single home in Merzouga a village near the Algerian border and home to the largest, tallest desert dunes (one up to 150 meters high). The village is known for the different car rallies that are main tourist attractions in the Sahara desert. He calls mom Fatima and me Ahmed. Aziz reconfigured our trip to get more touristic value and we trust him without hesitation. We'll let you know.

So far it's a tie. On the one hand we were saved from having to spend the night in a tent camp in the middle of nothing being the only people in the entire camp, thanks to Aziz 1:0, Good luck. On the other hand we checked into our tomorrow's hotel booking in Zagora, a hotel criminally designated as a 4 star. The room did not have hot water, there was no power to charge the iPhone or power the TV, the phone did not work but that's true for the whole (huge) hotel. The bell boy dressed in traditional garb grabbed the key to our room and disappeared in the bowels of the hotel corridors ahead of us so that we had to track him down by shouting HALO in a pitch dark corridor. After two trips to the reception and two attempt to move us to a functioning room we finally were told that we were upgraded to a suite and that there will be a bottle of wine awaiting us there. Well, it's a huge suite that could easily accommodate 20 people around the conference table. It smelled. No one has been there for a long time and the windows were never opened. The worst hotel experience in our world travels.

April 6

The Sahara desert is so vast and surprisingly so appealing and pleasing to the eye. The tourist image of Sahara is that of dunes and camels and we are yet to experience that part. The desert is much more than that. The colours, textures and shapes of the mountains and the terrain, stimulate your imagination. You see what appear to be human images or you just imagine: faces, body shapes in different poses of males and females. But, above all it is the vastness. In less than six days God created lots and lots of nature wonders although after a seven hours drive in the desert you begin to think that maybe too many. Another aspect of the desert is driving through the few villages and nomad camps scattered generally near an oasis. You begin to think as to your concept of life challenges, aspirations and fulfillment and theirs only to realize that they appear at least to be much calmer if not content.



Mom and I have plenty of time to talk about things we don't usually talk about. Mom just mentioned the fact that both in Malaga and in Morocco the influence of religion on day to day life is so acute and in our opinion burdensome. Mom says and I agree that we are so fortunate to live in Canada where religion is truly a personal choice much more so than even in the U.S. How fortunate are our children and grandchildren to be brought up in a civil society that is free of religious worship dictates.

Up until late this afternoon we were somewhat ambivalent about our trip to the desert. It seemed that the driving time to exciting moments was getting to be too high. On the one hand it gave us the opportunity to talk about worldly topics we rarely talk about at home, on the other hand boredom started to creep in.





This all ended when we "boarded" the fourteen kilometre camel ride across the famous Merzouga dunes to our overnight camp close to the Algerian border. The ride itself was as comfortable as sitting on a chair for one and a half hour. But the views were out of this world. For a first timer it must have paralleled the views from the moon landing. Breath taking shapes, forms and ripples in a vast sea of sand. Views that may not even be authentically reflected in the photos.



If the trip started and ended this evening it would have been worth the experience. Instead we're at our camp site in a nomad tent tired but excited waiting for the Tangin dinner and a good night sleep. We have a tent (not anything like you're used to- much more robust with thick carpets acting as walls and doors. It sleeps six but we have it for ourselves. For the first time we were joined on our four camel caravan by two Frenchmen and the camp is buzzing with old and young people from different countries. We are waiting for the Tangin to be ready before we hit the sack. Good night from the Sahara Desert. By the way tonight to our surprise we had the best homemade meal since we left Toronto.



April 7

It is not every day that you are the only guests on an exotic tour and that the main attractions are in and around the birthplace of your guide who picked you up some for hundred kilometres in Marrakesh. This morning we saw what a simple, primitive life is like for the nomads in the desert. No running water, no electricity (although as of recent solar panels donated by a Spanish tourist) no transportation other than a camel, no beds or what we consider to be furniture. This one is the last family in this abandoned village the birthplace of Aziz. He reflects on his youth and growing up in this village as a happy time. No school, nothing to do but mess around

with friends, occasionally helping his father herding sheep. No expectations, no disappointments and no regrets. Today, he says he would not fathom giving away his iPhone, car, TV etc., yet life in the larger village he says is much more stressful. That's progress for you.



We were treated to a homemade Cuscus luncheon made by Aziz's mother. It was delicious. This is very special because cuscus is only prepared and served on Friday. That's the good news. The bad news is that we were subjected to a "Doda Vita" experience (inside joke). We sat for two hours in a newly built house huge dining or guest room with Aziz's mother, grandmother, sister and her two toddlers and two aunts one with a baby. None of them speak anything but Berber, may be Arabic and a little French. So we were sitting there smiling nicely, being polite the Canadian way and sneaking a peak at the watch from time to time. For Aziz and his family it worked out as we offered to pay for the lunch and they accepted. Once again we checked in to a resort hotel with at least a 100 rooms, a gorgeous swimming pool and a beautiful garden, where we are the only guests. This has been a recurring and somewhat eerie experience. We spent the evening drafting a complaint to the tour operator for whatever its worth.



April 8

The morning started by sending a Happy Birthday greeting to Ethan David who is 16(!) years old today. We also attached greetings from the monkey and the camel.

Mom outdid herself today by insisting to go to the Dades gorge after the driver suggested that we should skip it as "there was nothing to see there". You decide. It turned out to be the most interesting, exciting drive with spectacular views of mountains in different colours and shapes, lush valleys and homes built into the mountain side and blending into the landscape with their predominant Adobe colour. Mom has a knack for knowing what she wants and making sure she gets it. The driver is not too happy as it extended his day by a few hours but so what? The Todra gorge was also impressive but not as much. However this day ends - it's a winner.





April 9

Just when you think that you have seen all that there is to see, you arrive at Ait BnHaddou. The view from the top of the Kasbah is heavenly. Some tourists prefer to shop for souvenirs at the different booths rather than to climb to the top and have no idea what they missed. Take a look. This elaborate structure including a Jewish synagogue was a major station in the Caravan route across the Sahara to Marrakesh and sits on the bank of a "riverchik" that flows all the way to Mauritania. BnHaddou and Ouarzazate unbeknownst to us but widely known in the world is the Hollywood of Africa. Not only are there two major studios but the Kasbah itself and the surroundings were used to film movies such as Lawrence of Arabia, The Gladiators, Samson and Delilah, Indiana Johns and more recently Game of Thrones.







When you see the spectacular desert scenes you immediately understand why. We are on our way back to Marrakesh through the Atlas mountainous road. There are at least two distinct impressions as you look out through the window of the 4x4. One is that you did not realize how many shades there are to the colour Brown. The second is the technological limitation of the iPhone and even the non-professional Cannon cameras to capture the width and depth of the scenes. Next generation: 3D Cameras. All told it was a spectacular trip albeit on a level of service and guidance, below the bar we set on other trips.





April 10

Aren't we glad we are leaving Spain in a few days. The prime minister of Spain is proposing to abandon the long held tradition of the Siesta. Spanish workers will now have to sleep on the job between the hours of 2-4. As we have no jobs we have little choice but to leave Spain and return to Canada.