

North Africa Trip, Morocco Leg
Casablanca, Marrakech, Merzouga, Fes, Meknes, Asilah, Rabat
May 12-27, June 10-11, 2006
(Exchange rate: 8.3 Dirham for \$1US)
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Friday, May 12, 2006

Got up and headed south, not wanting to be late, getting to San Diego Airport to catch my flight at 7:30am to Casablanca, Morocco via JFK airport in New York. My first excitement was when reading the tickets, they were imprinted with Delta Airlines though my printed itinerary showed American Airlines. At first I thought I was in the wrong terminal! But wait, the flight numbers matched the American departure screen. Thank goodness, I was fine!

I had evil paper tickets so I had to wait in line 15 minutes and get bumped to the front because the plane was prepping to load. Cruised through security and only had spare minutes before preboarding. The lesson was that paper tickets require a minimum of 1.5 hours before flight time.

The flight to JFK was uneventful and the layover time just long enough to grab a bite to eat because I became hungry in the last half hour and all US domestic flights charge money for food. Pathetic. Arrived at terminal 9, had to take the train into the city one stop and then back to the airport. This place is huge!

Dodged the long line at Royal Air Maroc and used the executive class line because I had no baggage to check, as I was living out of my medium sized backpack. It's bigger than a school book backpack but far smaller than a backpacking pack. Then ran upstairs and wolfed down a McDonald's chicken sandwich, a fitting last American meal for a month. Caught the flight an hour later and we're off!

Had a strange feeling of fear and trepidation - probably watched too many movies and seen the real thing in images and on television of all the bad things happening in the Middle East.

The food on Royal Air Maroc airlines is excellent. I had lamb. Befriended a guy named Nasr. He was working as gas a truck driver in the US and has nearly completed his time in the US for citizenship. He was returning to care for his ailing mother. Nasr gave me some good ideas and inspired confidence in my crazy venture to North Africa.

The plane was full of people traveling all over Africa. Apparently Casablanca is a cheaper jumping point into African countries via JFK than Europe is. All the people from African countries wore suit jackets while a group of students from Georgia University looked like slobs. Funny contrast.

Saturday, May 13, 2006

The people deplane down a staircase and bus over to the terminal. Changed \$150US into 1274 Dirham, hit the toilet and missed the train by seven minutes. Damn. Did give me time to start this journal, though.... Uh oh, gotta go - don't want to miss another train at 8:50am!

The ride into Casablanca was uneventful, passing through endless fields, ramshackle homes, goat and cow herds and many sheep with young boys and old men tending to them. No one wears shorts here whenever, hot, cold or otherwise. Many of the road/rail crossings have manned crossing gates - one or more men sit in a little booth and manually lower the gate when a train approaches. These trains are run on overhead electric cables and have a child's train whistle sound for their warning claxon.

Arrived at Casa Voyageurs train station at 9:30am and prepared for the foray into Casablanca.

Naturally, several people walk up to talk to you, presumably taxi or hotel touts. I ignored them for a few, took in the city and prepared to get whisked to the Hyatt.

My taxi driver jokingly said 2,000 Euro to the hotel. Hahah. It was 20Dh (Dirham) instead of the 10Dh like it was supposed to be but I guessed going to the Hyatt tags you as rich and as a consequence, reduces your bargaining power.

Got to the Hyatt and noticed lots of guys in suits standing around, blocking the drive through entrance to the hotel - presumably after the hotel Tulip Farah was bombed in 2003, blocking the driveway was implemented. Your bags are also searched upon entering the hotel. Maniac terrorists.

Checked in without trouble and the one clerk was courteous enough. The porter took my bag up to the room and I tipped him 2Dh. A few minutes later, a plate of plums arrived from the hotel GM, welcoming me and thanking me for the stay.

I was toast by this point as I didn't sleep on the plane at all, maybe 2 hours, though I did make a new friend so hopefully it was worth it. I lay down and crashed out on the stiff bed with a nice feather comforter. I was out quickly.

Awoke at about 3pm (7am my time) and prepped for a venture into the city. I debated for a ridiculous amount of time to sight see or set up for hotels and transport. Photography won out but it would cost me later.

Walked down Blvd FAR and checked out the street vendors and their wares. They sell everything here. Found a little hole in the wall to eat something as I was famished by this point. Saw a young boy order a bread sandwich with filling and a frothy greenish drink. The vendor asked several questions in quick French and I nodded and accepted whatever he said - couldn't understand him at all. After what seemed like an eternity to a hungry man, I scarfed down the filled pastry and consumed the frothy drink. I couldn't place the taste, though there was the mildest hint of green pees.

Tired of walking, I caught a petit taxi (red) to the Hassan II mosque. It was only a few minutes ride but saved me precious daylight.

The strange smells and bustling humanity somewhat rejuvenated my tired spirit, enough to give me the stamina to finish out the day. The ocean breeze at the mosque cooled my heated skin and I felt happy again.

The mosque is the world's second largest and has the tallest minaret (prayer calling tower). You're not allowed in except on tour and then only a few late morning/early afternoon ones are available. People took their shoes off upon entering and parents chased their children before they gleefully ran into the mosque.

After an hour of running around creating images, the evening lights turned on and the call to prayer began. Men entered the huge (40' tall) entrance and the women the lower, smaller side entrance. Watched as one father donned a scarf over his daughter's head before entering the main entrance for evening prayers.

Was leaning up against a wall as a brace to take some evening shots when a teenager stood right in front of me. I snapped a shot of his backside and he departed. I shot him a dirty look while laughing to myself. Next time I shall give a more playful and entertaining monologue.

Grabbed some popcorn from a street vendor for 1Dh, ate it and caught a taxi back to the hotel for 20Dh.

Grabbed my Lonely Planet for transport information, shot an email off that I was okay and then headed to the bus station for a ticket to Essaouira. The only bus time they had left was 5pm. Gah! That puts me in at midnight. I initially bought a ticket but was able to secure a refund as I realized I didn't want to waste another day in Casablanca. Caught a taxi over to Casa Voyageurs train station to get a 7am ticket to Marrakech for 75Dh and taxied back to the Hyatt. This would cause me to miss Essaouira but staying at Casablanca was very unattractive. Round trip taxi cost - 40Dh. Getting murdered in taxi fare for staying at the hotel and doing things late at night.

Discovered reservations for hotels must be made with the concierge no later than 6pm for hotels in other cities as they have to fax your info back and forth. I now was reaping the cost of sightseeing rather than securing hotels and transport. I'll get to Marrakech tomorrow and figure it out.

It was 11pm before I bedded down and I had to charge batteries and download images. This is a killer schedule on no sleep.

Sunday, May 14, 2006

Woke up at 4:45am and couldn't get back to sleep by my appointed 6am wake up time. That's going to hurt. Thank goodness I bought pastries last night for breakfast. The fresh squeezed OJ purchased last night bothered my stomach so I couldn't power it down as I'd liked. Showered, brushed and hurriedly checked out as I had little time to make the train station. I was again a captive at 30Dh taxi to the train station. Gah! Arrived with 15 minutes to spare as the train was late.

Caught the train without incident and saw the Moroccan version of Obi-Wan Kenobi in the train car. Got a few stealthy shots of some people with the digisnap in stealth mode but nothing exciting. The train car became stifflingly hot and I unwisely chose the east sunny side of the car, so I enjoyed a miserably roasting ride to Marrakech. Did offset the hunger with a 5Dh pastry, though.

Moroccans are a strange bunch - they help you on one hand and try to take your money away on the other. A man came up to me after the train ride when I was sitting on a bench debating where to go. He pointed to his perfume bottle then to me. I politely refused and he gestured that it was "okay". So I put my arm out, he sprayed it then my neck and the other arm. Then he offered me a pack of tissues since I was sniffing. I refused but he insisted and I accepted. He then bid me farewell. Moroccans are helpful and courteous in many ways.

Caught a taxi but as predicted by Lonely Planet, he refused to the meter and I didn't feel like fighting so I accepted the 20Dh to Dar Si Said in hopes of finding a place to sleep. This involved much wandering lost and just fortunately happened to come across a sign for Hotel Challah. It's listed in Lonely Planet so I took the risk. For 100Dh per night, it was tough to pass up. The room looked and smelled clean so I bit on it.

The showers cost 7Dh cold and 10Dh hot, with a shared toilet. Not too bad for \$11US total.

Apparently someone runs tours to Merzouga and Erg Chebbi from here so I'll be back at 3pm. Got directions to Djemaa el-Fna, the crazy central square. Just like the book says, there are cobra snake charmers (who've sewn the mouth clothes but claim the snake is well trained), money handlers, water vendors, food sellers, story tellers - all in a huge square on a hot day.

A crazy man came up to me and offered to give me a tour of "Berber sellers", here only one day a week. Haha! He showed me endless halls of junk and wares for sale. 3000Dh (\$360US!) jackets that should only cost 700Dh (\$84US). "What, these things have been here forever!", I said. He replied, "No, no, the best quality." This place is just like China. After the little "tour", I had to get back to the hotel. The maniac wanted 3 British pounds (\$6US) for his worthless little

tour. I laughed as that cost as much as my dinner. For his services I offered 5Dh. He argued. I walked. He pleaded with me for a tip for his grand tour. I said I was "...insulted, take it or leave it." He swore at me and I laughed and left.

The tour to Erg Chebbi was 1900Dh (\$228US) for three days, leaving tomorrow, all inclusive save lunch and drinks. We'll see. It really messes my schedule up since I wanted to bus to Fes from southern Morocco in a few days, hit up Essaouira, and I hadn't even seen Marrakech yet. However, it was a perfect opportunity so I went with the Canadian couple for tomorrow. (Note - the Canadian couple paid \$600Cn Paris to Marrakech, a good deal).

Collected my camera and headed to Djemaa el-Fna ("the big square") to take in the sights. This place is much wilder in the late afternoon. Funny, much here is geared toward Moroccans since their story telling is done in Arabic. Had dinner - finally!! I was Famished. Watched the teeming life pass by while eating and relaxing.

Went up to the huge balcony on the southeast square, bought my 10Dh drink as the entrance fee and watched. What a circus. And it's like this every night? Spent a good hour watching until sunset. Went down to join the fray, watching for pickpockets.

While photographing a fountain, a water seller tried to get my attention in French, presumably to request payment for photographing a city fountain. My ploy was to say, "No understand French/English/or whatever" to make people go away. I pretend to be British, Spanish, Japanese, American, depending on the situation.

Went back to the hotel and slept at 10pm. Geeze this place is loud, thank goodness for ear plugs. People here regularly stay up past midnight. Crazy. Sleep!

Monday, May 15, 2006

This proved to be a very long day. Found a breakfast place firstly to get some sort of take out pastry. It was covered in some sort of chocolate mix. Quite good and incredibly filling. Made a friend with an Aussie doing a multi-month tour of Africa from south to north, headed to the UK for some work. Wow! Now that's the way to go.

Sent off a bunch of postcards to the family and friends. We'll see if they arrive.

Met up with our tour set-up guy at the motel to get going. We packed (3 of us) into that small car and headed off, exchanged that tiny car for an even smaller Hyundai Atos (smaller than a Geo Metro), got our driver and headed out.

Once we left the confines of Marrakech, you could see the wide expanse of the land. Passed Hassan II's (former king) royal golf course and headed up the mountain. Somehow our little car powered up the hills and we stopped several times to take photos and buy refreshments.

The landscape reminds me of the California high and low deserts, just with different plants. Stopped to take photos of a Berber village and some Berber kids came to us, asking for money. I flashed a 5Dh piece as an experiment and not-to-surprisingly, I had 10 hands instantly trying to pry the coin out of mine. Had they been nice, I would have given it up but I yelled, "Ne pas!" There after I had a boy following me around - won't do that again. Also watched for kids trying to pickpocket at the same time.

We crested the mountains and came to the Kasbah of Ait BenHaddou where part of the movie Gladiator was filmed. The meal at the restaurant was outrageously priced (95Dh) so we skipped. Walked up to the top of the Kasbah for the view and visited a guy in a cave to cool off. Chatted for a while and upon leaving, he hit me up for "Money for the house" since I was the last person to leave the cave. Gave him 5Dh and he looked at me incredulously. Pay to visit and chat, bah.

What kind of hospitality was that? Everyone wants their cut.

The view from the top of the Kasbah was quite impressive with the mud brick contrasted with the green oasis created by the river. After taking that in, it was getting later and it was time to roll. We ambled down and I stole pictures where possible. The pictures of the Gladiator filming showed this Kasbah was quite done up for the film, with columns and all sorts of stuff not normally here. Funny. The plain photos of the actors differed wildly from what was actually seen in the movies.

Seeing as the day had burned on, we tore through the high desert at 120kph and the little car felt like it was breaking apart. We reached the cut off to Todra Gorge just past sunset and we drove into the deep canyon.

We waited quite a while for dinner and surprise, 3 of us had to share a room. Funny? Yes. Surprising? No. By dinner at almost 9pm, we were famished. It was an excellent tagine of meat, vegetables and soup. Very good and filling food. Desert was cut oranges with nutmeg and melons. Yum.

We retired at 11pm.

Not surprisingly, some tourist lady brought her dumb dog and the pleasant little beast barked into the night. Then there was the meowing cat the early morning hours behind the room. Then a barking dog awoke deep in the gorge at 2am. Figured it was 6 hour of sleep at best, so it's going to be another dog tired day. Sleeping in the car has been somewhat of a good recovery mechanism, though.

Tuesday, Mar 16, 2006

We tossed our things in the car to walk around Todra Gorge, one of the locations of the movie "The Mummy", where the movie scene with a huge wall of water ready to consume the main characters courses through a steep walled canyon. This is the place. Quite impressive. A kid asked us for money to "Make sure the car is safe." Haha! Omar, our intrepid guide, talked him away. We checked out a hand dug cave in rock made for nomads. Totally solid rock.

Got a photo of a goat herder, but some Italian dude had already given his 0.20 Euros. I gave him 10Dh for a direct portrait but really hate giving money but he wouldn't have it any other way. Once the precedent is set from many years ago of paying people, that's it.

We stopped and visited with some nomads by a well in the middle of the desert. It was about 60 feet deep. The nomads were nice and shared some tea cooked on a fire (in the hot desert) with us. It tasted sweet and thick. One of the guys had a terrible open blister on his heel, all swollen. Louis-Philip, Anne-Sophie (the Canadian couple) and I pooled our sad medical supplies and did the best to help the poor guy. It really needed stronger Neosporin and a seriously large bandage but we did what we could. It looked incredibly painful to walk around like that with sandals in the desert, leading camels around.

We stopped in Merzouga to visit to visit Maison Touareg, a carpet vending shop. I got called a Berber and finally, at the end of negotiating, a Jew, for including shipping in the negotiated price so I know that I did fairly well, as that's a pretty good insult coming from those people. But, I saw people who had bought six carpets for \$110US each where my medium one cost \$140. The guy started at \$1,200 for a large one and I started at \$100. Should have started at \$50! Same ridiculous price gap for the smaller rug. Should have brought a sports team t-shirt and I could have traded it for a larger carpet for a song. Take the advice online and bring stuff to trade. Dang it.

Driving out to Erg Chebbi, you'll drive into the desert and you better know where you're going

because there are several locations and roads running all over the place. This is when Omar, our driver, earned his total value.

We arrived at the north building complex in a string of buildings along the dune erg, maybe a mile north of the water tower and larger building group. Getting there two hours before our appointed camel ride time, we had time to eat and drink. 60Dh for a bottle of water and tagine was a bit steep but you're also a captive audience here.

We could only bring one backpack, Louis-Philip's, so I grabbed my essential camera gear, ignoring the potentially important things like toothbrush and such. Note - you have to bring your own water into the desert!!! Don't forget this crucial detail. Buy it before you get there, as the prices are five times higher here. Again, this was another place where bringing an American t-shirt for trade would have worked wonderfully with the Berbers at the buildings.

Unfortunately, by this 3rd day of very little sleep, I ended up with a runny nose. Crap, my immune system sucks. I didn't religiously use my hand cleaner, either. Paid the price!

We mounted our mighty steeds (camels) and headed into the desert, lead by a guy walking the dunes. Omar advised me to wrap my camera in plastic as the blowing desert sand was guaranteed to destroy it. Albertson's plastic grocery sacks to the rescue. We rode for an hour, quite a ways into the dune sea of Erg Chebbi, a treacherous place where you'd easily die if you didn't know what you were doing. Riding a camel isn't the most comfortable experience, even with blankets and a big wrap around the hump. Riding downhill is the worst because you slide onto the camel's back. The flats are okay and uphill is the best. This is all relative, mind you.

We arrived at camp in one hour - quite a busy place! There are small and big camps for various groups. The guide uses a "Shhhhh" sound and lowers his hands to tell the camel to drop you down, front legs first. Seeing as we had little time before sunset, we began the trek up the 230 yard tall dune.

A tiring, rough hour later, we arrived at the top via a round-about approach. Directly climbing the steepest part is impossible. The sun had already set when we arrived at top. Of course. There is no penumbra (pink) in the sky here, no pink between the lit sky and the Earth shadow. Unfortunate! I finished the climb to the far top dune, took a few worthless snaps and headed back down.

Dinner had begun by the time I got back in the dark. At first you're served a bunch of tea. Very good, like the nomad tea of earlier today. Then bread was brought along with a massive tagine of vegetables and chicken. It was incredibly flavorful but there was so much food we couldn't finish it. Also had Moroccan soup before the tagine, again excellent. The last plate was a dish of cut oranges and melons. Yum!

We did all of this eating in the dark by starlight and a single candle which provided more than enough light. In fact, sometimes that single candle was blinding compared to the darkness outside. It was a comedy to handle the candle when a slight breeze did come up. We created a makeshift candle holder from a chopped water bottle and ballasted it with sand which we had no shortage of. Unfortunately to get that bottle, I had to slam down a huge amount of water. Big, big mistake before bed.

We lay out under the stars and enjoyed the incredible view. Saw a satellite and three falling stars. Oddly absent was the Milky Way. Wrong time of year?

I had a sleepless night from being up every 15 minutes to relieve myself from all the water I gulped down after coming down from the dune and for some reason my mind spun wildly and wouldn't shut up. And then I had a runny nose. Take away that veil of hell and it would have been a pleasant night of sleep. Maybe got 4 hours in. While sick. That sucked.

Wednesday, May 17, 2006

Waking up for the sunrise to the sound of birds was nice, if I had slept. Obviously paying for my past evils last night and today.

Being very fatigued, I slowly plodded over to some distant dunes east of camp and did my best to raise my spirits with activity. Found the peak of a nice dune and did notice the pink penumbra of light on a sole cirrus ice cloud hovering over the desert. It left quickly, happening as I was walking up to my perch. Even with the polarizer and split grad, a tripod was necessary to entertain that mediocre shot.

Some-what got in the groove with a fascinating pattern of light and shadow over the dunes. Due to the copious amount of dust in the air, the sunlight was subdued, almost fleeting. You could see it but there was no defined edge on the huge dune west of camp. Experimented with several different composes and approaches with the intent to get the best I could, given the way I was feeling.

Found a scarab beetle waddling across a dune and entertained him for a while. I learned what sort of tracks it made so I could identify them later in other dunes. Other creatures must have passed by in the night, as many tracks didn't match the beetle tracks. Wonder what they were?

This was a time where I had wished I'd brought a tiny backpack to keep gear. My camera battery was dying after 400+ shots, with virtually no chimping. I think a lot of metering ate up the battery. Will learn to cut that down to a minimum, too. Very impressive considering I couldn't charge my battery last night. The 4GB compact flash card had plenty of space up to this point, too.

Observing that the sunrise watcher groups were headed back to camp well in advance of me, I secured my gear and began the walk back. Those with better sleep/health/energy tackled part or the entire huge dune in the morning as well. Quite impressive. Surprisingly, much of the sand was quite firm to walk on, not nearly as hard packed as wet beach sand but not nearly as loose as dry beach sand. For this, I was grateful.

Breakfast was the bread from last night, orange marmalade, a very soft cheese, tea and thin orange juice. It was all quite good, served on a Japanese-height table on the carpet that we slept on. Accursed flies bothered the meal, though.

We folded our sleeping sheets and the amazingly comfortable blanket (slept on a thin mattress), piled them up and waited for our guide to prepare the camels.

Omar, also the name of our camel driver, clapped his hands and commanded our camels up. We mounted and began the one hour ride back to the little Kasbah to meet Omar, our driver. Being tired, the ride back was even less comfortable. At least it was cooler, may 80 degrees F in the morning sun at 7am. Hahaha! I did my best to absorb every aspect of the ride, the smells, sights, sounds and feelings. Again I concluded 1 hour into the dunes is a ridiculously long walk if you don't know what you're doing.

We arrived without incident and I bought a polished fossil from our guide as a tip, 80Dh. We woke Omar from his Moroccan late morning slumber and he offered the shower facilities for our use. Whoa, it was gross. And when I'm grossed out, that's bad. I just rinsed the sand out of my hair. It was good to get the grit out. But the smell of that place, gah.

Hopped into our mighty coffin Hyundai Atos and began the very long drive back to Marrakech. This car doesn't let you miss one bump, crack or undulation in the road. It's only slightly softer than riding in a forklift with a direct connection to the road surface. I was hoping to sleep on the way back but that was proving to be impossible. And, Omar noted that he wasn't given enough

cash to run the AC without running out of gas. Piece of crap, inquire next time.

I tried to nod off when I could but the rough ride made that impossible, able to doze at best. And the heat was unpleasant. At our gas fill-up point, I told Omar that we were using AC and I didn't care, so I contributed 100Dh to get the gas so the AC could be on the whole way back. I was a little hot about it but I realized Omar was too nice to be part of a Moroccan money squeeze ploy, he was only a driver. I wanted to squeeze the money out of the dude who set up the trip but I voted later for harmony since the guy hangs out at Hotel Challah, where I'm staying. Don't want my stuff ripped off as a coincidence.

Omar dropped us at our hotel after a miserable 8 hour drive - it was hot, I was tired and had an evil runny nose. If I'd slept and not been entertaining a cold, it wouldn't have been nearly so bad. Gave Omar a 50Dh tip - he was nice and accommodating and I didn't hold anything against him.

Exchanged email with Louis-Philip and warned them of the difficulty of finding a taxi in Marrakech in the morning (6am), as they had a very early flight. I went to have an excellent salad and chicken/French fry dinner at Café Toubkal, outside the alley way to the hotel. Came back, showered and took a Tylenol PM and went to sleep, with earplugs in. Slept until 6am until the birds blasted me awake.

Thursday, May 18, 2006

Felt much better with the first decent sleep I've had since I've been in Morocco. Had to buy the train ticket to Fes and get a sleeper car (couchette). Lonely Planet didn't say if there was one available to Fes, though. Hopefully. Brushed, showered, charged and downloaded all the images from the past few days.

I hadn't shot nearly as much as I'd anticipated thus far but I'm not shooting many duplicates of the same things, cutting down on the editing once home. That'll be better anyway. I had to carry the Lonely Planet with me today because I lacked the foresight to photocopy the relevant pages. It was okay because I needed the full book to use at the train station anyway.

The taxis here are supposed to meter but they don't without a huge fight, just like Lonely Planet says. They say 20Dh, you counter 10Dh. They usually capitulate.

Discovered there were no convenient overnight trains to Fes but Patrick, a nice old British guy, suggested using the sleeper car to Sidi-Kacem (9pm-3am) and then catching a train to Fes at 8am or using a grand taxi. That should get me in early enough to find a place to sleep without trouble in Fes. We'll see!

Taxied over to Jardin Majorelle and the Museum of Islamic Art to have a look-see. The garden (30Dh) was peaceful and I rested 1/2 hour before moving on to the museum (15Dh) which had mostly modern pieces. Never the less, it was a pleasant respite from the insanity of Marrakech.

Went to the Saadian Tombs and caught a taxi to Palais el Badii Saddians to see some of the most impressive tomb architecture finery, with some of the most excruciating detail I've ever seen. The place isn't huge but the artwork is incredible. It did take a bit of "pinballing" (asking people every few blocks) to get to them but it was worth the effort.

The Palais el Badii seemed like an initial disappointment of ruins but it yielded a few gems. It had a huge woodwork minbar (an Islamic pulpit) from the 12th century and was in amazingly good shape. You can't get very close to it but it was just fine anyway. No photos allowed in there. Exiting that, came out, turned left into the next entrance and found a bunch of holes covered with grates in the ground, suggesting hidden passages. I wandered for a bit and found access to the underground labyrinth. Quite fun and much cooler than the outside, being underground. Leaving the underground, getting on around this ancient palace clockwise, I saw many huge stork nests.

They make a funny clicking sound (hence called Ack-ack in Arabic) and are huge. They really could carry a baby.

Finished that and headed back to Djemaa el-Fna and the hotel to shower up, go over to Cafe Toubkal for a spectacular supper of an excellent salad (romaine lettuce, beets, cappers, onions, cucumbers and other unidentifiable vegetables) and a chicken tagine with potatoes and capers in a wonderfully tasty sauce, sided with two types of olives with hot chilies and bread. Highly recommended.

Walked back to the hotel and made a stop at Shiram Internet for 5Dh for 1/2 hour to shoot of some emails and then sleep.

Friday, May 19, 2006

Met post-grads Penny and Fahn from Berkley this morning. They were going to do the souq walk so I invited to join me on the walk. They're both grad students studying chemical biology stuff. Sounds like fun. Ha. Shared with them the basics of how the food, ATMs, pharmacies and such work here since they arrived in Morocco last night.

We picked up a bread omelet with chocolate and headed out for the walk.

We had great difficulty finding where to start the souq walk and wandered around, finding a mosque to observe how morning prayers proceeded. The prayers maybe last 20 minutes, 5 times a day. You take your shoes off before entering, do an absolution water wash and proceed with prayers. Quite fascinating to watch. We proceeded and finally found the Museum of Marrakech, with great searching.

The souq walk actually starts north of the alleyway to Hotel Challah, almost directly across from Chez Chegrouni (a great food place) down an alleyway. I discovered this after completing the museum tour, but that's okay. The Lonely Planet start location description leaves something to be desired.

A nice old man virtually took us to the Musee du Morocco. He was kind and not a "guide", looking for money, just helping out. You never know in this country what you're going to get. Fahn & Penny's French skills came in very handy, though it took a while to teach them the pinball technique rather than aimlessly wandering when a specific goal is in mind.

The Musee du Marrakech is quite nice and has a good selection of pieces from throughout the region. It was well worth the search to see the main hall of the museum alone.

The next three sites on the souq walk are connected by joint tickets so buy all three places for 60Dh as they're extremely close and all worth seeing. Naturally, we didn't initially buy the combine ticket but were able to weasel the second place on the first ticket price of 40Dh.

The Ali Ben Youssef Medersa is the most impressive of all three, being the biggest theological college at the time in the region, housing what seems to be an impossible 900 students at the time. You can get lost wandering through all the rooms. I did. The Koubba Ba'diyn is of historical interest, with a few photographs around of the excavation but you don't miss much unless you like ruins.

All of these places were fun to visit but we could have done without the irrepressible heat, powering down a 1.5L of water and not hitting the toilet once. Even the most powerful perfume or deodorant doesn't save you here. It was entertaining from the male perspective with the veritable sweat-wet t-shirt contest but the small amount of entertainment was outweighed by the discomfort of the heat with no breeze.

Needing to head back to the hotel and get supper, I took my leave of Penny and Fahn and headed off. They were off to buy bus tickets to Ouarzazate and then to rent a car to get to Merzouga and bus to Fes. I warned them with, "Good luck, ladies". After having a guide run me through there, I'd never try that on a tight schedule as you'll never find your way well enough. In retrospect, I would never bother renting a car there for the suffering you'll go through.

Walked through the wonderfully smelling leather souq on the way back and stopped at Cafe Toubkal for my last meal in Marrakech. The head waiter recognized me, shook my hand, and offered me the front row seat where it was relatively cool. I enjoyed a mouth watering mouton tagine along with a salad and freshly squeezed orange juice. All of that and a pretty sunset while the endless madness of Djemaa el-Fna played out in front of me.

Finally took a photo, a bad flash one, of the old man in a wheel chair between Internet Shiram and Hotel Challah. And I stupidly paid 25Dh, negotiated by a young girl who knew how to squeeze for money. I was too gutless to try this during the daylight when I the shot would have looked good. The old man did get a good laugh looking at the photo I took, though.

The whole day I was enjoying a miserable cough and nose, requiring many visits to the toilet to clear it. Disgusting.

Hit the hotel, wrote a bit and caught a taxi to the train station. Had left my backpack at Hotel Challah in a storeroom during the day, as checkout was at noon. Just like Casablanca, the metered taxis are 50% more expensive at night, so the 20Dh fare was more reasonable this time.

Guess who I can into in my assigned berth in the train? Patrick, the Brit who suggested this actual route! What an irony. We had a pleasant chat and an older Scot joined into the conversation. The Scot happened to be buying property in Essaouira. Patrick said that at my age, he financed traveling for 6 years by taking odd jobs and not minding where he slept and what he ate, doing everything from flipping (and living off of) burgers in the US to being a helper in a game park in South Africa. That story seems to be consistent with the way I've heard other people do long term travel, landing lucky jobs and being blessed as you go along. I'd guess it'd take half a year to learn to do that properly. Patrick said he doesn't even know how to drive and is retired, a character from a bygone era. What an incredible life! The Scott was also pleasant, too. Both the Brit & the Scot were old and funny guys.

Sleeping in a couchette (sleeper train) was fine with earplugs. I was off to Sidi-Kacem.

Saturday, May 20, 2006

I set my watch alarm and it made meeting the conductor in the morning to get off the train much easier. Slept fairly well. Got of into an apparently industrial city with refineries right next to the train station. No wonder it's not on the tourist docket.

I wimped out and bought a 35Dh train ticket at 845am (it was 5am right now) to Fes as I'm still sniffly and don't want a 2+ hour car ride packed with 7 people while feeling bad. Not 20 minutes after I bought the train ticket, a guy came up and asked me to share a grand taxi to Fes. He was well dressed and nice but I'd already bought my ticket. With him, I was Canadian (from Vancouver for the lack of French excuse) to avoid attention. Never know. Now I wait for the Fes train.

Got a few shots of an older woman sitting at the station - they'll be nice. People in Sidi-Kacem seem normal rather Marrakech, so it was much easier taking stealthy shots.

Got some rest on the train, battling back this cough and running nose junk. Please go away.

Arrived in Fes without incident and made my decision to go to the Pension Batha Hotel. This way

I know where I'm going in the city and it's on a main route rather than down the labyrinth of the medina. The taxi driver used the meter without question, looking at me oddly when I requested, as though, "Why would anyone ever request such an obvious thing?" We rode ten minutes to Bab Bou Jeloud, the primary entrance to the medina.

From the description in Lonely Planet, I was preparing to be accosted with tourism and hotel touts, as mad rush was described. Nothing was farther from the truth. Almost no one paid attention to me, far less than Marrakech at least. One guy tried to be a guide at the train station and there were no hotel touts at all. For all the anticipation, I was disappointed. No, not really.

Pension Batha hotel wasn't far down at all, easy to find, just past Hotel Batha. The reception harpy wanted to see that I had cash before she started filling out paperwork. The place seemed fine but there was something emanating from the reception girl, earning her harpy status, like the standoff-ish cleaning harpies at Hotel Challah. Only a double room was available for 180Dh/nite, so I got two nights right there and was done with things for days, since I'd bought my train ticket to Meknes for Monday, saving stress. The place even uses old school skeleton looking keys, from years past. Cool. The room has a toilet closet with the shower inside it as well. It's hot from 8pm to 12am. Inconvenient but it's not shared, so I learned to like cold showers.

Rested a few before striking out for lunch. There are a bunch of restaurant touts near Bab Bou Jeloud, so I stopped at one that looked inviting, saw the high prices and then requested an omelet with fries, 30Dh. The meals seemed awfully expensive. It was tasty fare and gave me the energy to continue on.

Not wanting to waste my time but take it easy, I decided to do the medina walk, described in the Lonely Planet.

Almost immediately, a faux guide boy of 13 years old glommed onto me and tried to start guiding me around the medina. No matter what I said, he wouldn't leave even though I told him I wouldn't pay. He persisted for about half the walk, providing all the info anyway and then said "Today free, tomorrow you pay 30Dh?" "Sure, whatever kid." He finally left and 10 minutes later, another two boys lampreyed themselves on to me. However, they suffered a worse fate than just not being paid.

It's illegal to guide people through the medina unless you are a city licensed guide, charging 120Dh for an hour or two. The kids only cost 30Dh but there are plain clothes police in the medina, looking to arrest faux guides. Maybe five minutes into my second group of guides, two guys in regular clothes put their hands on the boys' shoulders, pulled them aside and talked to them for a minute. Then the unmistakable sound of clicking handcuffs could be heard. The boys were cuffed together and the two officers lead them away. All of this occurred without even acknowledging my existence. If you are going to use a faux guide, make sure to pay them at the end of the tour because they might not survive the entire trip. The kids will spend three months in jail, according to Lonely Planet.

After completing the walk, I set off to find the tanneries, as the map suggested a fairly straightforward route. A boy ended up leading me on a shortcut through a building with an absolutely exquisite dining hall, completely hidden, and into the right path with a simple "Thank you", with no request for money. Strange.

Found the way to the tanneries without much grief at all. However, once you arrive is when the fun starts. I tried to wonder around the tubs and this guy, with a sadly printed "badge" claiming to be the tanneries guardian (so it said on his hastily donned badge), wished to extract 10Dh for looking around. A couple guys also started saying I had to pay it so I dropped it and headed up to the patios where a 23 year old boy gave me a good description of how it all works.

The place stinks due to the animal products used to cure the leather - pigeon crap for goat skins,

for example. The yellow is done with a yellow spice (like turmeric) on the roofs, making yellow the most expensive. Green is done with mint, red with rust, blue with indigo and don't recall the orange coloring. You can see people hand pounding and cutting the leather, sewing it all together by hand. Naturally, this tour led to a purchase bargaining session. I saw that the cheap cushions (75Dh, cow leather), so I thought I'd snag one.

Apparently, camel leather is superior to all others and extracts a huge price premium. The boy started at a laughable 2,000Dh for the one I wanted. I countered 400Dh (started too high again to show motion!) I whittled him down for half an hour down to 1,000Dh then to 600Dh but I only advanced to 430Dh. He just wouldn't drop below 600 for the fancy one so I switched one with less complicated leatherwork. He started dropping in 10Dh increments so I knew I was close to the mark.

I pulled him below his apparent stopping point of 500 to 460Dh but this time I had to ship. Hope not to get murdered there (Ended up being 176Dh to the US). Only an hour of negotiating a "democratic price", cutting \$185US off the original price. Hahaha! The other kid helping wanted a 5Dh tip for serving the mint tea with sugar. That was the last tip I gave for so-called hospitality. Since I didn't have the money to pay for the cushion, the boy guided me back to the hotel, he paid the cab ride back and I paid him off. Also made them make a cardboard box for me (though later find out the Moroccan post office repackages things, as this kid said). No matter what, these people don't lose money when they sell, so squeeze the heck out of them. They never hurt.

Struck out for dinner at Bab Bou Jelloud, settling on Restaurant La Kasbah du Fes. What a disappointment. Fes is supposed to be the culinary capital of the country but I disagree. I ordered a tagine for 40Dh and it was okay but the tagine base was not hot at all, meaning it wasn't cooked in it. The food was prepared elsewhere then loaded in there, causing the food to go cold very quickly. And the taste was that of a bland crock pot beef stew. I could hardly eat it down knowing what I was missing, but I needed the energy. That place has a great view. Don't waste your Dirham. Talked to some people later and they said boys cook the food there rather than women and that's why it sucks. They're infamous for that.

Popped into an internet cafe (5Dh for 1/2 hr), shot off a few emails on a frustratingly different keyboard and headed back to Pension Batha. Tossed things aside and laid down, trying to abate the sneezing fit that grabbed me upon leaving La Kasbah. Bought two large water bottles for 6Dh each from two 13 year olds running a store. Laid down and went to sleep!

Sunday, May 21, 2006

Slept until 7am, trying to rest and get over this accursed cold. Things started getting loud outside so it was time to rise. Another cold shower to test my manliness (or lack of it) and headed up for breakfast on the roof patio.

The breakfast was the traditional orange juice, bread, marmalade, strange cheese, coffee and milk. All quite tasty again. There were two French traveling couples up there as well, enjoying the 9am late start to the day.

The first order of business was to ship off the cushion to Dad & Mom. Enjoyed paying the 12Dh expense of a round trip to a closed post office. This country may be Muslim but Sunday is still the day everyone closes shop, as I was to discover. Went back to Pension Batha and dropped off my cubic foot of camel leather, instead opting to head for Musee Batha.

It was closed.

Okay, perhaps this will be a good rest day to let the body battle this bug that continues to vex me. Got in a cat nap, against my standards but a necessary evil.

After being rested, I decided to strike out and capture some images of Fes.

"Do I look like a wallet? No, then why do you treat me like one?" is my new line to hit beggar kids with. It works wonderfully well. I'll add more humor to the dialog as I go along to make it interesting.

Walked up the road a bit and took the long way around to the Bab Bou Jeloud entrance, just to bide my time. Caught a huge lunch of kabobs, skewers and sundry sides, plus drink for 75Dh. I didn't want something that large but I couldn't explain to get a smaller meal. It was tasty enough, located in the place farthest east of Bab Bou Jeloud. My shaken confidence in Fes food was restored.

While walking along the garden, a kid only speaking Arabic on a bike hit me up for a drink from my water bottle. Not interested in sharing cooties, I took my last slug of water and handed it over to him, as he didn't look too good. I took a few snaps of him in trade of his pleasant snaggle-tooth smile. He offered me a whopping 10Dh (\$1.25US) for my Oakley glasses. I laughed and bid him farewell. As it was getting on in the day, I returned to the hotel to pick up my filters and try my photography luck.

Lonely Planet describes the ancient Merinid Tombs as a place to avoid at dusk alone. It's quite busy and there are many families there, so perhaps I can see pickpockets hiding in the crowd, but not really. Didn't see anything bad myself but keeping extra vigilant does take a toll on your experience.

I accidentally had the taxi driver drop me off too early so I walked the rest of the way to the tombs. The tombs are in an impressive state of decay, being made out of brick and a very rough mortar material with the mortar being half as thick as each brick, making it quite weak. There are three complexes, the one on the hill and two much lower down near the road. Those lower ones enjoy the company of donkeys rather than people.

The view of Fes is quite impressive from this vantage point. You can see the whole of the Medina here and you can appreciate the vastness of the labyrinth. Took a few panoramic test shots. Will see if they stitch together reasonably well once I'm home in three weeks. It's amazing there is still that much more to see and do yet! The time will pass quickly, though.

Not wanting to miss the dinner show I bought at 8pm (it was 7pm), I took off walking in search of a taxi to the hotel. I had to walk well past the Hotel Merinid before finding one - a long ways. Keep that in mind when visiting this place.

Quickly got dressed in non-sweaty clothes, enjoyed my first hot shower in days and ran out to dinner. Got behind a Brit tour group and it was clear they were the biggest group at the dinner location.

The proprietor greeted me warmly, returned my 100Dh deposit for the reservation and offered me the head seat in the room. No complaints. I stupidly wasted time debating before settling on the 500Dh meal which included a pigeon pastilla, a kind of pigeon meat bread pocket. The waiter says no westerners ever order that meal, it's only Moroccans.

The meal #2 is a five course affair, including a wonderful salad of things I've never eaten before and couldn't identify. It was delectable. That was preceded by a different Moroccan soup than I'd had, also very good and served steaming hot. All the while musicians are playing various pieces on traditional instruments in the background. By the time my steak & kabob meat rolls arrived, the first belly dancer had done her number, almost waking up the unanimated British contingent.

They all sit and smiled but are the most unanimated crowd ever. Several of the entertainers and servers tried to get some rhythmic clapping going but I've seen more action from an orchard of

olive trees than I did by these people. Guess that's the Brit tour way.

When the magician was entertaining the crowd, the feared pigeon pastilla arrived, a stuffed bread roll full of spices, unknown vegetables and pigeon meat. Strangely, the mental aspect of the meal was much worse than anything - the dish was quite wonderful. Had never tasted meat like that (it doesn't taste like chicken) and the bread is slathered in a tasty sauce and powdered sugar, giving sweetness to an otherwise meat/bread tasting dish.

The third belly dancer was in a more traditional dress and pulled some of the crowd to the floor to join in. Several refused, afraid that they might have fun? I got pulled in with the last group of guys and we had a good time doing a poor follow of the dancer's lead. One would have to be insane to pay to see our sad performance. My final dish was a platter of melons and cookies, perfectly ripe and tasty.

Seeing as it was late, 10:30pm, the tour group was herded out by their Fez wearing tour leader and I followed suit. The entire affair (drinks, food, and a 10% tax) was 707Dh. Fine for a last night in Fes.

Packed, enjoyed another warm, non-manly shower and hit bed.

Monday, May 22, 2006

6am was a cruel but necessary alarm time to catch the 7am train. Got my things together, still wondering if my lost hematite bracelet was buried inside my bag, and grabbed my "small" cubic foot of camel leather and was off.

Got on the train early, stowed my things and was off to Meknes.

The tough part is knowing what station to get off at. There are two stops in between Fes and Meknes, so I kept asking people if this was right until someone explained (in French) that it was the next stop. Here we go!

Here are huge expanses of vineyards between stop #2 and Meknes. Just the right climate apparently.

Got a petite taxi over to the Hotel Moroc, a budget hotel just inside the Medina. It seemed like a nice enough place but the reception guy doesn't speak any English so I didn't think I was going to get any help out of him to get a vehicle to Volubilis without great heartache. I remember seeing a hotel named Ibis on the way here and it is listed in the Lonely Planet. I was prepping to start walking out but three cute French girls walked past the reception desk, smiled, leered and said "Bonjour" in more than a courteous way. That almost made me stay and battle my way through the language barrier. Then I laughed at myself and started walking toward Hotel Ibis. This is the first hotel trouble I've had, so not too bad a record.

Hotel Ibis is a three star, very nice and 420Dh/nite rather than the 100Dh/nite of Hotel Moroc. But without help, I'm not going to get to Volubilis. The reception desk indicated that getting there is not trouble and just get the time to them and I'll be scheduled. Easy enough.

Dropped my things and grabbed the leather cushion and caught a taxi to the post office, eager to mail it out. The main office does everything but mail packages. The mailing entrance is on the left side of the building. A couple guys helped me repackage the cushion, a required process costing 20Dh. The shipping then cost 176Dh to the US. Much better than hauling this box around the world!

Walked to Ville Nouvelle for food and found a pizza place for lunch, "Free pizza Moroc" was the name. The chicken pizza wasn't exciting but it was good enough. It was more interesting to

watch the people scurrying about. There are few people here who dress traditionally. Really, you could drop this view into almost any country in the world. Change the faces and vehicle models, a different language and you would have no idea that you were in a different country. The conclusion is that staying in the new part of the city is pointless for me. There is nothing original here.

Back at the hotel, I geared up for the trip to Volubilis. All cameras, filters, bean bags and ready to rumble. Met up with the grand taxi driver and we rode the half hour to the Roman ruins. The ride there is pastoral, with cows, sheep, large farm lands and clean scenes. Gorgeous land of flowers and people walking alongside the road.

The entrance fee is 20Dh to the UNESCO World Heritage Site and then I ended up with a guide around the site.

He didn't speak English so I was able to pick up about 20% of what he described in French but I got a feeling for the dates and names of the places. We blasted through the site in one hour but he did show all the major mosaics. That was somewhat worth it, or so I thought. At the end of the tour, he collected his 120Dh (!) payment and then I made the mistake of opening my wallet to pay and of course he wanted a tip. Knowing that I was American, he battled me for a 60Dh tip. Geeze, I almost didn't pay but 10Dh but thought better of it as he could make life difficult. "Come on, your a rich American" was the line. Greedy bastards.

Now I had my chance to wander around the site on my own and enjoyed the time, sitting and thinking about the people who plied this landscape 2,000 years ago. There were a few tourists at the site so my only company were the donkeys and bees buzzing around. Ended up discovering that I didn't need the tour guide at all.

Wandered up and down the lanes, taking a closer looks at the things I blasted by before. Touched, sat on and explored to my heart's content. The sky was overcast so it was murderous when a photo contained the sky - the dynamic range with blasted white was too much when compared with blue skies. However, the contrast of the light on the stone was flat, easier to deal with. I preferred to have bright blue skies because it better balances with the foreground. I'd debated going here tomorrow but there was the risk of bad weather so I took the chance while it was available or regret it.

There are several storks nesting in the public forum area. Ugly nests, fairly ugly birds, on beautiful Roman columns. Funny contrast.

The grand taxi ride for 4 hours was 300Dh but my trip was 5 hours. Again, I stupidly opened my wallet and the taxi driver demanded more money for the longer trip. I finally saw the pattern - don't flash the cash. The people are just like that greedy girl in Big Bear years ago - she ignored my chatter completely, until seeing the cash in my wallet, and became very chatty. Nice. From now on, transfer the cash from the wallet to the pocket before having to pay; otherwise you'll get the squeeze of another 100Dh for the ride like I did.

Went over to Restaurant Oumnia for a neatly cooked home made meal with a spectacular ambiance and music. The family was very nice and the meal was good. It was served with long times between courses, so don't be in a rush when coming here.

Walking back to the hotel, I saw several guys walking hand in hand/arm in arm; it's interesting to see coming from the American perspective. Passing one kid, I heard him breathing into a bag and then caught the unmistakable smell of model glue. The Lonely Planet was right that there are glue sniffing kids around. It's entertaining when the written prediction becomes the reality. Sleep!

Tuesday, May 23, 2006

Guts weren't very stable this morning, so I took an Imodium AD and let things settle a bit before heading out to do the medina and souq walk today. This will be the last major event like that in Morocco.

Sauntered over to the medina to find the starting place for the suggested walk and went from there. Found most of the suggested places to see on the walk without difficulty. I spent most of the time taking shots from the hip in hopes of capturing some of the humanity of Morocco. The light in Fes was too dark and nearly impossible without harassment in Marrakech, so this was my shot.

The woodworking activity here is incredible and it was fun to see how those intricate patterns are made - boys chisel them out by hand. An interesting thing to note - only men work in the shop and souqs, no women at all. Also, during the day in the cafes, only men occupy the street side cafes to do the people watching. Again, sitting in the restaurants and cafes during the day and night is a male only activity unless you're a tourist.

Completed the walk just in time to discover that the Dar Jamai Museum was closed for lunch. Crap. Caught a somewhat scary omelet for lunch, but I didn't die so it had to be okay. It didn't taste bad, just not used to cuts of bologna, so I feed them to my new found cat buddy sitting next to me. He was more than appreciative for the meal.

I was dismayed this morning to find completely blue skies, meaning there were better Volubilis photos to be had. However, as the day wore on, more clouds began to fill the sky. Strangely, I felt vindicated. Went back to the hotel in between the medina and ville nouvelle to get more rest and work on this persistent cough.

Headed out at 3pm, the time the museum was supposed to open. The closed doors on my arrival suggested an alternative conclusion to the quest. Work was being done inside the museum today and you know what that means. Not to be discouraged, I took up a photo sniper point and worked on capturing images of fashion here. Not actually looking through the viewfinder meant lots of wasted shots (to avoid people weirding out) but digital affords that luxury.

Content I'd caught a few good ones and having to battle the camera because I've not completely learned to see how it sees yet, I sat at the northernmost cafe with the rest of the Moroccan men and enjoyed two cups of tea while waiting for the last of the daylight to pass before striking out for supper.

Striking out was an adequate description of my success in finding a few eat places described by Lonely Planet. I either couldn't find them or they happened to open at a much later time than I wanted to eat. In my wandering, I noted the strange (to me) custom that men walking on the street will go up to other men drinking at the cafe and request a drink from the sitting person's cup. At least thus far, the request seems to be granted 100% of the time. For Americans, this is unthinkable, but here if you're needy, it seems to be a perfectly acceptable thing to do.

I ended up at the Dauphin restaurant, the furthest away possible in Ville Nouvelle from my originally intended restaurant in the medina. The place had a quiet decor, conducive to a contemplative dinner by oneself. With the somewhat sad music, about half in French, this place took me back to the time I spent in Paris a few years ago.

However, I enjoyed a far more pleasant mental projection of a much nicer face from my past than the unpleasantly cranky one that accompanied me nearly three years before. The subdued lighting made this journey into reflection much simpler; being elated yet reflective that I'm so blessed to be able take a trip like this by myself, to learn a little about the people who live in this country and expose something more of my person to myself. All of this mental wandering was going on while a pleasant dinner was being served up. I ordered the salad of the house with

shredded cabbage, carrots, a quarter of an artichoke, beets, a fancy cut avocado and a few unidentifiable yet fabulously tasty things. The main dish was a fish tagine. The tastiness of this dish was overshadowed by its treacherous nature – it was full of fish bones. Able to work past that, I continued to revel in my lost thoughts and feelings.

Cruelly, my daydream was killed by the striking of a lighter and the room filling with smoke. All at once I remembered where I was, quickly finished my meal and paid the 150Dh. The walk back to the hotel was fine and I got to sleep quickly.

Wednesday, May 24, 2006

Woke up pleasantly to the sound of chirping birds a few moments before my alarm, the best way to rise. Got down to the breakfast and for the second time avoided being forced to sign the register, saving myself many Dirhams. Checked out and paid the 800Dh for the two nights and caught a taxi to the 7:50am train. Had about 10 minutes to spare and discovered I'll be changing trains at Sidi Kacem again...

You have to shove your way onto the trains or you'll be the last person on. Just like standing in lines, people walk right up to the side front with total disregard for the other people standing there. It's a third world thing. Made the train transfer without incident.

Asilah's train station is a half hour walk from the first hotels in ville nouvelle; it's inconvenient so don't plan on getting into the city quickly. There are no taxis at the station. Petit taxis are much rarer here, being a small town. The walk is pleasant enough along the Atlantic beach, though.

Staying at Hotel Mansour. For what the place is with *very* limited hot water, it's expensive at 240Dh/nite. But it's the relative closeness to the train station in town that will save walking on Saturday that's important. I'm on the 4th floor, all stairs all the way up. Gets tiring with a heavy backpack.

Getting to Lixus is going to be challenging, as the reception guy speaks little English and doesn't have a connection to do it. However, people here speak Spanish so I'll have fun punishing them with my equivalent 3-year-old's Spanish. French and Spanish are jumbled up in my brain, though French still dominates for now.

Rested for a while to work on this annoying cough with disgusting results. It seems to get better but only incrementally. Since these last few days are quite easy, it should be good to help kick it.

Sauntered into the medina around 4pm and got a Spanish omelet for lunch. This thing was huge but I was dying so it was appreciated.

The medina is very Spanish/Portuguese, with white-wash walls and bright colors, contrasted to the other cities with earth tone walls and dark souqs. Not much is sold here compared to the other cities, either. Woodwork is quite active here, though, just like in Meknes.

Found the corner overlook and it has a beautiful position in the parapet for the sunset, jutting out into the beach, 40 feet above it. Since it was two hours until sunset, I wanted to make it to Paradise beach to have a look, so I wandered south.

The part of the city south of the medina is an absolute dump. Trash is strewn about, while buildings are going up at a rapid pace and yet all the streets are dirt. This is the world you expect when you visit a 3rd world country. For the most part, people ignored me, as they had nothing to sell.

Never made Paradise Beach, though walked along a lonesome cliff on the western African Atlantic. The wind here is constant, picking up sand and pelting you with it on occasion. Did find

Lance's Mosquito Coast location with more than one semi-permanent tent setup and a makeshift fence around it. One could set up shop here along this cliff and I don't think anyone would care.

Headed back to the south medina ramparts and caught sunset. The light wasn't really as strong as I'd hoped but I made do.

A medina in the dark with lighting sometimes is more interesting, especially with the people. Just like Lonely Planet predicted, had one guy come up and offer me all sorts of drugs, everything under the sun. He was friendly but persistent in his various offerings. I passed on him and went over to The Place for dinner and enjoyed an excellent swordfish steak. This place has European prices, though! Don't expect to eat for \$1US here.

There were two American girls who kept looking my way but every time I caught their glance and smiled, they looked away after staring for a moment. As they were leaving, I pulled out of them that they were from Kansas City of all places. Then they stared sheepishly and I said "Have fun!" They looked under 25 years old, so they clearly hadn't received their talking upgrade yet - it's an American phenomenon. Earlier I'd overheard them talking about how they partied up Spain and how the people there wouldn't soon forget them. Unlikely.

Walked back to the hotel, had one guy try to get my attention and use different languages but I fully ignored him. That was the first time I'd felt like someone was following me for quite a while but ditched him after a few blocks. Didn't want to reveal my hotel. Up the stairs and to bed at 9am.

Thursday, May 25, 2006

Up at 6am, enjoyed the whole 5 minutes of hot water before it ran out, washed some clothes since they dry quickly in this African heat. Love these shirts!

The 20Dh breakfast here was nice enough, like any other Moroccan breakfast. Clearly I'm the only patron at this hotel for now, too.

Wandered over to the grand taxi area just east of the big minaret mosque and asked for a taxi to Lixus. Since I was a solo tripper and I had no bargaining power, it was a 400Dh trip with a 4 hour max stay. Did specify the maximum time this go-around. I learn. The driver spoke Arabic and Spanish so we did everything in Spanish the whole trip. Not too much trouble, just mixed in French and English when I couldn't remember a word.

There is old guy acting as the "guardian" of Lixus, with a little badge around his neck, fleecing people for a 20Dh tip to keep watch over the site. I ignored him and suggest other people do the same. I told him "La officina turistico digame Lixus es libra" – "The tourist office said Lixus is free", or something like that. Close enough.

The site is quite decayed but it's nice to see the original rather than a sad attempt at restoration like Volubilis has suffered. The columns were made out of concrete and suffered a decaying fate. The aggregate in their concrete mix is too small to give the cement much strength. There is one huge mosaic but the centerpiece is all but destroyed. Funny, the "guardian" took two Brits over to the mosaic and walked all over the mosaic. An archeological "guardian" the old guy is not!

The site was well worth looking over but the bugs there were maddening. With all the flowers blooming, that was an inevitable consequence. This is one full building left and a large piece of wall left to suggest several other large structures were in the area. There was even an underground storage area currently storing a hive of bees.

Back in Asilah, I tired of having one pair of pants sagging due to carrying things and loosing weight so I had a guy find a few belts for me to choose from. He wanted 150Dh for the one that

fit. We bargained in Spanish for a few and did the walk away technique, getting it for 40Dh though I should have squeezed for 30Dh. Now, my stretch elastic pants don't fall down and I'm happier for it.

Sat for an hour and drank tea with the people watching men of Asilah to see what goes on. You can have 4 handfuls of peanuts for 2Dh, a shoe shine for 4Dh as well as a glass of tea for the same price. A dude in what looked like a Jedi cloak wandered the two cafes on the corner, the whole time downing people's drinks when the patron left the cafe. He would down the drinks and then hurriedly walk away each time while saying nothing. Everyone seems to know everyone here, too. Quite fun to watch the bold handshakes and Euro cheek kissing.

A side note - Looking on the Lonely Planet map, I discovered a town called Tantouine in the southern Moroccan desert. I can see now where some of the ideas for Star Wars came from.

Headed for restaurant row in front of the medina's north entrance and chose somewhat poorly. The olives were served without the traditional spices at Restaurant Marbella and the salad, though freshly cut, was uninspired. The Moroccan soup was good enough and the three fried sole fish tasty enough, once I peeled through the breading. With fresh squeezed orange juice, the bill was 64Dh (10% service charge). Again, not the cheap prices I'm used to.

Didn't have anyone follow me this time and crashed out at 9:30pm.

Friday, May 26, 2006

Awoke to birds singing with the sun's arrival and the constant sounds of 24 hour winds that buffet Asilah. The beach is unpleasant as you will be sand blasted the entire time you are on it. The clouds are gorgeous today. I ended a sneezing fit with my shoulder spasmed, souring my mood. I really, really hate that. Advil to the rescue, then take my two minutes of hot water shower and head down for breakfast.

Made the 35 minute walk to the train station and caught the train without incident. It's a four hour ride to Rabat so I caught some rest, observed how windy this section of Morocco is and enjoyed the unencumbered transport.

Getting into Rabatville station - it's underground. I kept asking people when the correct stop was as there are at least three in the area.

Went and got a 211Dh room at Hotel D'Orsay and the room is on the 3rd floor, with the inside courtyard. Ugly but quiet. It was already 2pm by this time so I struck out for the Archeology museum, past the military place. Lots of uniformed guys there!

The museum was fun because it tied together several of the places I've been two over the past two weeks, so the names and the descriptions matched what was in my mind to the museum. Entrance fee - 10Dh. They had bronze statues, Stone Age stuff, and gold...all the usual. A good wrap up of the Romans, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Jews, Sadians, Merinids and unnamed ancient peoples in Morocco.

Walked down to Chellah, the site of the original Roman city here - 10Dh. This place is chock full of people since it is right next to the city. It would have been great to spend several hours here but deep gray clouds were looming above with deep rumbles of thunder in the distance. Not wishing to be rained upon, I departed and made the one mile walk back to the hotel. Just as I arrived, hiding under the awnings, the sky opened up and heavy drops washed the streets.

I laid in my bed a long while listening to the sound of rain in North Africa, contrasted with the din of the city in the background. It was a tad surreal as I certainly didn't anticipate rain but I reveled in the sensory experience.

Went down and found a seat on the sidewalk cafe to do the Moroccan male activity of cafe people watching and tea drinking. Men wear dress shoes here while women wear heels. There are still a notable amount of traditional slippers here but far fewer than any city I've been in. Loafers are very common here, too. This is the place of the suit for men and western dressed. Women are very chic, European fashionable with all the accessories. Heels are the norm. Not as many women here with head scarves compared to the rest of the Morocco.

Talked with one guy at length (in French) about life here, his business and family, the soccer (football they call it) match between America and Morocco and other banter. Perhaps spent a good hour. It helped with the French listening skills and I caught a good portion of what he said, including his desire to start a carbonated orange and carrot juice distribution company through Coca Cola or Pepsi. Don't laugh, I bought a similar product and enjoyed it while in Asilah. He also mentioned it hadn't rained in a month so this downpour was unusual.

Had to nearly walk to the medina to find an internet cafe on Mohamed I Ave. 5Dh/half hour. The keyboards are just different enough to slow one down, to the point of frustration.

Sensing the guts a bit unstable, probably due to last night's salad, I wandered down back toward the hotel but got lost and walked way past it, down a darker street. Ended up catching a blue petite taxi to the hotel. After 8pm, the fare increases by 50%, so be wary. I ended up with barely enough change, only having one Dirham remaining in my pocket. That was financially tight. Made it upstairs to the toilet just in time....

Went out for a soothing soup dinner at 10pm - no more huge meals and then going to bed immediately.

The last day in Morocco will be in Rabat as I'm taking the train directly to the airport and skipping Casablanca all together.

Saturday, May 27, 2006

Woke up to birds chirping, shaved and showered and prepped for the last day here.

The last day in Rabat was hot and muggy, not what I'd hoped for after a rain storm. Had wanted to stay sweat free for the flight to Cairo. Since there is no breakfast at the Hotel D'Orsay, I got a pastry and was served coffee at the cafe around the corner. It was fine but the breakfast wasn't powerful enough for a day of wandering. That was the first mini cup of coffee I'd powered down in my life and my stomach reminded me of that.

Brushed, showered and stowed my backpack at the hotel. That's always a little scary but hauling it around all day wasn't attractive, either.

Walked over and explored the Kasbah des Oudaias on the ocean and river corner of Rabat. A faux guide leached onto me for a while until I bored him off with my picture taking. He and another annoying faux guide said the Kasbah would close at noon. Not likely.

Enjoyed a drink while overlooking the beach and watching construction to pass the time since I'd seen all I wanted to. That was fine until 1pm when my meager breakfast completely failed me and I trudged toward the train station until a non-scary food place appeared. An omelet with cheese sandwich revived me for a few more hours of walking and exploring.

Rabat medina is actually situated on a cliff above the river but the height isn't apparent until you are below the medina, walking along the river. It was a pleasant stroll, except for the humidity. Yesterday's rain yesterday had now dashed the hopes for a sweat free day.

Headed over to a different cafe and nursed a tasty Poms drink (carbonated apple juice, like Martinelli's apple cider in the US). Dinner was at the Italian place across from the train station, a seafood spaghetti dinner filled me. Gave myself an hour to eat, go to the hotel, wash my face and get to the train station. That was tighter than I'd liked, leaving me 5 minutes to spare. A hotel next to the train station was a good choice.

Transferring to the airport train isn't done at Casa Voyageurs station, so watch out. It's some other station. Ask people, it's easier. And follow the airplane baggage, too. Now I sit, riding to the airport at 8:40pm, with my flight at 11:45pm, a good window in case of trouble.

As usual, there is a departure card to fill out before entering the departure area - grab it and fill it out before trying to leave. Also, the first customs guys want to know how many US dollars and Euros you have. I said \$50 but it's more like a few hundred. "I need money when getting into Cairo", I said to make them disinterested. Have a small amount of plausible excuses as you never know what amount will trigger interest from those people.

A bag of chips at the airport is an expensive 20Dh - buy something before coming to the airport as I ate 25Dh tagine, a whole dinner in Marrakech. Smoking is allowed in the terminal. Blech.

Met two older women from New York City doing a super-short five day trip to Egypt. Sounded aggressive and painful. Told them about my experiences in Marrakech and how to get to the Sahara without much effort.

2 weeks pass in Egypt...

Saturday, June 10, 2006

Returned to Morocco for one day without much fanfare. The flight back was uneventful. Ran the gauntlet of immigration and customs without trouble and went downstairs and bought a 30Dh train ticket to Casablanca.

Make sure to get off at Casa Voyageurs and not Casa Oasis or Nouvelle Medina or Casa Port. You'll be far from where you should be and the next train might not come for an hour or more. Got into Casa Voyageurs, asked for the train schedule to the airport and bought a 30Dh ticket back to the airport for tomorrow, cutting my delay time at the train station in case something holds me up. Less stress.

Ignored the taxi touts while doing this and they bored of me, looking for other suckers. Left the train station and walked down a block, grabbed a red petit taxi whilst the driver used the meter without question, resulting in a 10Dh ride to the Hyatt. The taxis at the train station will always negotiate an amount more than what the fare should be.

The Hyatt staff was impersonal as ever, though a bit warmer this time. Ugh, forgot how expensive this place was at 1,600Dh (\$192US). Oh well, as were guts were beginning to destabilize, a shared toilet at a cheaper hotel would not be pleasant. The peaches left as a welcome gift by the GM were tasty and juicy but only ate one to prevent more dysentery-like symptoms.

The cafe across the street serves okay Paninis, though not as good as in Paris. Enjoyed my last cup of Moroccan mint tea, too. Watched the people walk by. A guy snorting out of a plastic bag full of glue came by and begged money off people until the waiters made him go away.

People selling things also hit you up there. I appreciate my blessed station in life more now because I'm not shining shoes for 4Dh (\$0.50US) or selling packets of tissues and, that failing, begging for food. "Appreciate what you have" kept ringing in my mind. You just might be shining shoes tomorrow.

Went to the medina to find dinner and found a local place shown to me by some guy. It was an okay tagine, though the bill was ridiculous. The owner wanted 117Dh for it!! I balked and started arguing, that's four times what it should cost. Gah, people try to rip you at every step. Argued the price down to 80Dh. Still 2-3x over priced but I was dumb enough not to ask the price first. Went with another guy to look at his shop for a few minutes of entertainment and then left. Didn't need any more junk for ridiculous prices.

Holed myself up in the room and entertained myself with Discovery Channel, letting the completely unstable guts do their worst. Slept at 10pm and felt a bit bad as I was still on Egyptian time, so that was 1am for me.

Sunday, June 11, 2006

Woke up earlier than the wakeup call. Still on Egypt time. Showered and went down for the buffet breakfast at the pool. It was fine, no custom made food, though. Got the bill. This was the second time I swore out loud on this trip when I saw it cost 220Dh! Holy crap. That's what I get for being lazy. Geeze, that's expensive beyond belief, costing the same as dinner at the Marriot Resort in Sharm el-Sheikh. At least there could have been a dude making omelets. Ugh.

Checked out and caught a taxi to Casa Voyageurs train station. The taxi used the meter without question. Good. The train was a little late but I'd still arrive three hours early to the airport to figure this out.

Good thing I was early because passengers for the US, Canada & other western places have to go to terminal 3 via a shuttle bus for 5 minutes. You don't want to miss that shuttle.

Casablanca's Mohammed V airport had the most levels of security ever, beating out Buenos Aires. 3 x-rays, countless passport checks, 2 physical inspections of my backpack contents that they dig through. Then as you leave the terminal for the bus, you get a full police frisk and pat down, including your collar, and everywhere else. Women are called into a curtained booth and then patted down by a female officer.

The flight to New York was 8 hours, routed up high in the Atlantic, over Nova Scotia. The PhD Moroccan living in Minneapolis sitting next to me said two weeks ago (May 28) that the road to Errachidia and Merzouga was badly damaged due to flash flooding. Wow! Talk about dodging the bullet. That would have prevented my trek to the Sahara.

With a 3 hour layover in New York City, it was a 6.5 hour flight to San Diego. Got home at 11:30pm, Sunday night and was at work at 6:30am on Monday.

Epilogue

Sitting here a week later, the jet lag finally gone from my head, I think back to the time I spent in North Africa, running through Morocco and Egypt. Morocco doesn't have the famous sights that Egypt does but the Morocco was more fun. The food was by far the best for a country as a whole that I've had in the world yet. The Lonely Planet was indispensable and pretty accurate through Morocco. Some of the prices have increased, but not as markedly as current prices compared to the 2004 release of Egypt Lonely Planet.

The total trip cost to both countries was just over \$5,000, Morocco costing \$3,000. Egypt was a cheaper because I flew from Casablanca, saving \$700 compared to a San Diego to Cairo flight. Staying at a place other than the Casablanca Hyatt would have saved \$400+. Looking back, that was the one thing I would have changed. It was a convenient hotel but the cost of staying there outstripped everything else by so much that it wasn't worth it in retrospect. The flight from San Diego to Casablanca via New York was \$1120, purchased April 10th, 2006. It would have been

possible to cut down my expenses by an easy 20% by being more careful about where I stayed and ate at. However, that involves more time and effort. Time wasn't a luxury to cover Morocco in two weeks with sleep; effort is a measure of being lazy, since saving a dollar by starving and walking an extra mile isn't worth it to me. As was, I lost 8 pounds on the trip.

Moroccan people were nice and helpful, aside from those trying to sell you something or pushing a service. That was true in Egypt as well. The regular people on the street in North Africa were the friendliest on the planet thus far. "You have to be cool when living in the desert", one friend said. Never felt threatened or in danger through the whole trip. I did follow the rules of watching the back, quickly looking back every so often, not repeating routes, not staying some place too long and never telling someone my true itinerary. Always said I was going somewhere other than where I was headed to. Kidnapping usually takes planning so don't make it easy.

Lessons:

Sort through your wallet in private

Ask the price of everything first, always

There were one or two things I missed in Morocco but there isn't a compelling need to return there to cover those things. If the opportunity comes up in the future, I'll take it. But, there are so many other places in the world that there's no reason for me to return there.