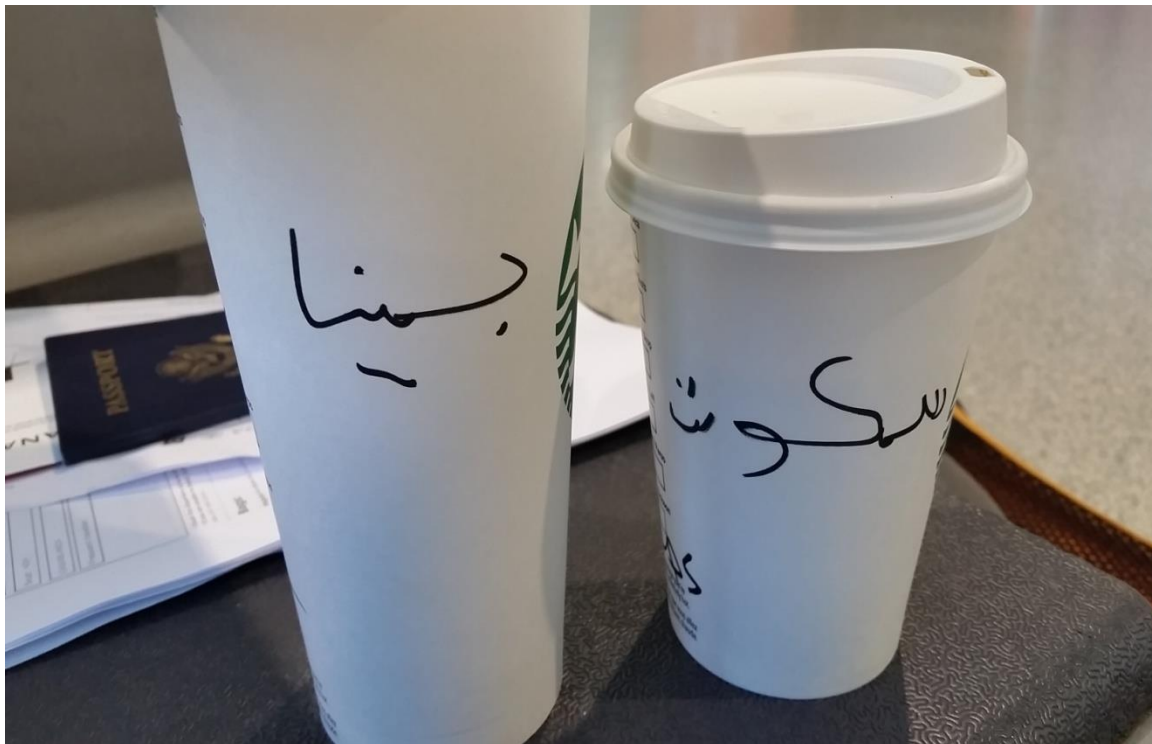


MOROCCO 2018

Rich and Renee Dankert, a couple my wife and I have known for many years, wanted to visit Morocco for an authentic, unique cultural experience. They were somewhat reluctant to go alone, so they enticed us to join them.

My brother and his wife had been there a few years earlier and they highly recommended a private tour company whom they had used... so that's what we did.

JOURNEY BEYOND TRAVEL Visit their web site for more information. www.journeybeyondtravel.com It was a fabulous trip! I highly recommend them!



Gina and Scott written in Arabic, at Starbucks in Casa Blanca.



The country of Morocco lies in the extreme northwestern part of the Africa. Its land mass is about the size of Texas. It borders the Mediterranean Sea to the north, the Atlantic ocean to the west, Algeria to the east and Mauritania to the south and southeast. Spain is also to the north, only 8 miles away at the narrowest point across the Strait of Gibraltar.

The capital is Rabat. The largest city is Casa Blanca (6 million people, pictured above). The government is a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament. The predominant religion is Islam. The official languages are Arabic and Berber. Moroccan culture is a blend of Arabic, Berber, Jewish, European, and West African influences.

Topographically, the coastal regions (especially to the northwest) contain fertile plains where much of the country's agriculture takes place. In the picture above, note the abundant farm fields as we descend towards Casa Blanca, which lies on the Atlantic coast. The Atlas mountains occupy much of the interior of the country. South of this range the country becomes dry and desolate...the most northern part of the Sahara desert.

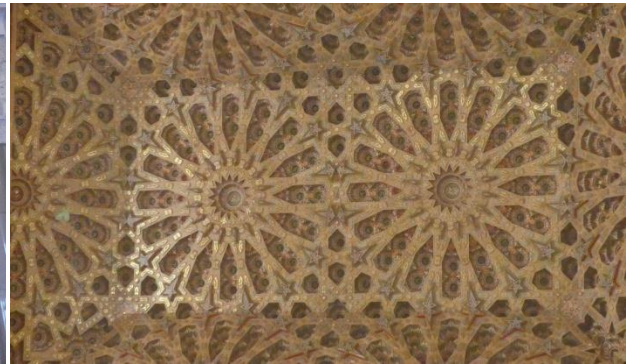


Omar (bottom, left) was our driver and private tour guide. Our first stop was to a market in Casa Blanca. One of his relatives had a stall

there which sold a large variety of spices. The sights and smells were amazing! My wife bought enough to supply many of her friends with future Christmas presents. Look at all the olives in the adjacent booth. Then dinner at a local restaurant. The #1 Moroccan dish is Tagine...a conical shaped clay cooking pot, in which meat (lamb, beef, or chicken) is slow-cooked with a variety of vegetables, herbs and spices. Very tasty! The meal is served in the Tagine pot.



Accommodations, meals, transportation, additional guides, and the itinerary were all set up beforehand by the tour company. We didn't have to worry about anything...just enjoy the journey. Hotels (riad..a traditional Moroccan house or palace) were all 3-5 star rating.



Mosques are as common in Morocco as Christian churches are in this country. Most are open to the public...for a fee. In Casa Blanca we visited the Hassan II Mosque, the largest in Africa, and 5th largest in the world. All mosques have an accompanying tower, called a minaret, and the one here is the tallest in the world (690 feet). 25,000 worshipers can gather together in the main hall at one time. The building is the largest architectural project in Morocco to date. Artisans worked for 7 years to create abundant and beautiful mosaics, marble floors and columns, and carved and painted wood ceilings.



A traditional Moroccan toliet. Aim for the hole, or turn around and squat, then do likewise. All the riads had western style toilets, and Omar was good at knowing which restaurants and rest stops did as well. American fast food was here, especially KFC and McDonald's.





150 miles south of Casa Blanca is the city of Marrakesh. It is the fourth largest city in Morocco. It can trace its origins to the 11th century. The inner, older part of the city is surrounded by walls.



The area within the walls is called the Medina and it is packed with vendors and their stalls. Our Riad (pictured above) was located at the end of a narrow passageway in the Medina. Very quaint.



After a lovely dinner at the Riad (with wine...Muslims don't drink), we ventured out to the main square. It was 11 PM, but the food vendors (all the lights) were doing a brisk business



The minaret and walkway by the local mosque is illuminated nightly. We felt very safe walking around by ourselves after dark.



The next day we toured the Marrakesh Medina and Mohammad (pictured above) was our city guide for the day. We learned about Hamman, which is a form of a Turkish bath. It's a method of cleansing and relaxation of the body. We enjoyed a Hamman in one of the Riads we stayed at. You're taken to a hot, steamy room, much like a sauna. You

are washed, rinsed, exfoliated, oiled, and massaged. It's a wonderful experience.

Moroccan transportation is a blend of the new and the old. There are cars, lots of motorcycles and scooters, but donkeys still pull carts full of goods. Street musician playing a Sintir, a 3 stringed, skin covered bass flute which is plucked. Usually played by ethnic Moroccans known as the Gnawa. Their music is a repertoire of Berber and Arabic spiritual songs and rhymes.

Moroccans love tea. It is served with every meal. It's more than just a drink...it signifies hospitality and friendship. It is almost always green tea to which mint and sugar is added. They love to show off in front of tourists when serving it. Not much coffee is drunk in Morocco.



The next day we left Marrakesh and drove south over the Atlas Mountains. We saw traditional Berber villages along the way. The Berber people have been indigenous to Morocco for over 4000 years.



These Berber homes are earthen in construction. Thick walls and small windows provide cooling in the extreme summer heat.



In the desert just south of the Atlas Mts is the ancient, now abandoned hillside village of Ouarzazate. At its base is the Ait Ben Haddou Kasbah, basically a castle-like citadel or fort. Many movies have been filmed here. This is a popular tourist site.



An hour from Ouarzazate, off the beaten path in a rural setting was our riad for the night, Les Jardins de Skoura. Situated in an oasis of Palms, this truly was a magical place. Wonderful staff, food, and rooms. An amazing place to relax and unwind. The French owner of the riad had two pet dogs, one seen above. Dogs are considered unclean in the Islamic culture and are not kept as pets. Cats are OK.



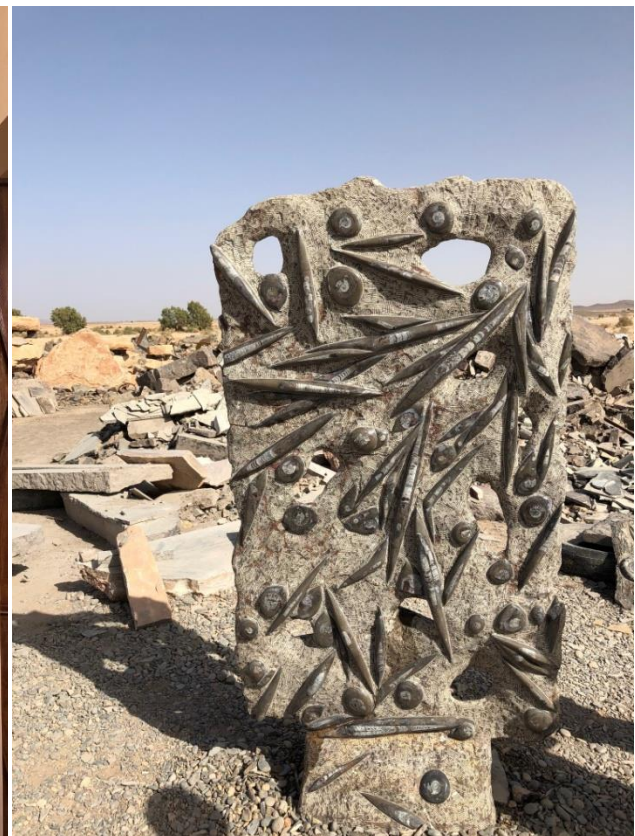


In the desert, long continuous agricultural greenbelts (1/2 mile wide) are found in river valleys. Towns also are prevalent along these waterways. Olives, dates, and to a lesser degree other crops are grown here. We were allowed to visit a co-op farm in one of these greenbelts and it truly was an oasis in the desert wilderness.





Morocco is rich in fossils, especially orthoceras (squid), trilobites, and ammonites (mollusks). A portion of the Sahara desert (including Morocco) was once an ocean and holds the remains of many creatures. Large pieces of sedimentary stone are brought to a factory where it is sawed into 2-3 inch sections to reveal evidence of fossils. Some are drilled out and sold as individual pieces. Or the stone slabs are cleaned and buffed, then sold as table and vanity tops worldwide.







No trip to the Sahara would be complete without the proverbial camel ride in the desert. One thing we learned is that true camels have two humps whereas dromedaries have only one. They took us to an area of extensive sand dunes. Six beasts were roped together, fitted with saddles, and made to sit. We were then hoisted up by our attendants. Then the dromedaries were lead around for 40 minutes.





We spend the night in a tented campsite in the desert...but these tents had a king-size bed, toilet, sink, and shower (cold water). The next morning we got to watch the sun rise over the Moroccan Sahara. We were here in April. Chilly weather. In the summer, it's over 120 F.



These are Bedouin nomads in the desert. They live in tents and primarily raise goats and sheep. They migrate with the seasons. I asked how they traveled such long distances. My guide said they rent a truck!



Before we left the Sahara, we visited the village of Khemlia to listen to Gnawa spiritual music, again played on the Sintir.



The Barbary macaque is unique in that it is the only species of this type found outside of Asia. They are found in forested regions of the Atlas Mountains. A small population also occurs in Gibraltar. We stopped at a tourist location where the primates have become habituated to humans and are not aggressive. You can literally sit with them and give them something to eat.



Panoramic view of the ancient city of Fez, a popular tourist destination. English is widely understood.



Fez was the medieval capital of Morocco, founded in 789 AD. It is the best preserved old city in the Arab world with a sprawling, labyrinthine Medina. The urban area is car-free; goods are transported by donkeys and handcarts. The walls surrounding the Medina are intact. Notice the many minarets which are illuminated at night. We stayed at the Karawan Riad, which had a 5 star rating.



Our tour of the Medina began through the Blue Gate, one of the main entrances into the Old City. It's an ornate, triple-arched gate, built in the typical Moorish style. The Blue tiles on the outside greet visitors and is the color of the city of Fez. The inside, which faces the Medina, is green, the color of Islam.





We had a private guide in Fez and it's a good thing we did...we'd have gotten lost for sure in the crowded, convoluted streets which are full of merchants with all their wares and open food markets.



I loved the narrow passageways that connected one part of the Medina to another.



Donkey and his tired owner. Resting between carrying loads of goods.



The best part of the tour was visiting the Chouara tannery. Buried deep in the city's Medina, this ancient tannery has remained virtually unchanged since the 12th century. Hides of goat, sheep, cows, and camels are all processed manually to produce leather. Workers use

deep earthenware vats to take the hides through a process of soaking, stripping, drying, more soaking, and finally dyeing...or tanning...hence the name. Natural vegetable dyes are used to produce the various colors of the final leather product.



We toured room after room of finished leather products including purses, handbags, suitcases, baskets, etc.



Slippers, sandals, and shoes in a variety of colors



On the last day of our tour we visited the Roman ruins of Volubilis, located NW of Fez. This was originally a Berber village which the Romans took over around 25 BC. They left in 285 AD due to political tensions and local revolts. It was one of the most remote cities within the Roman Empire. The walled city was once home to 20,000 residents. With wealth generated from local olive production, grand residences, public hammans, triumphal arches, and parliament buildings were constructed in the second and third centuries AD. Notice the stork's nest high atop the remaining column.



Our last stop was to the village of Moulay Idriss, an ancient holy Islamic pilgrimage site. One of Muhammad's great-grandsons is buried here. It has only been fully open to non-Muslim visitors since 2005. The picturesque

town is situated on two small hills at the base of the Atlas mountains. We had our best meal here while in Morocco at the Scorpion House.



**Thank you Omar and JOURNEY
BEYOND TRAVEL for a most
memorable vacation!**