

## MOROCCAN ADVENTURE

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**Julie & Ted Vigeland & six other intrepid travelers.**

**May 2015**

*Trip arranged through Alexander & Roberts (General Tours)*

*Julie sent over a 16 page report, the report below has been edited by staff at Willamette Intl. Travel. Julie throughout her report mentions the incredible sunsets many enjoyed with a glass of wine from their rooftop terraces.*

As soon as we arrived in Casablanca we were offered tea. We had read about tea being offered everywhere as a warm welcome and...it is true. There is the real ritual of pouring it high above the tea glass, which we experienced time after time. It is a lovely tradition and the very positive thing is that they often offered the usual very sugary tea or an optional unsweetened. At various times it was nice to have the choice. Evening dinner at “Rick’s Café”

**Recommendation:** Although it may seem in advance of being there to be touristy...one definitely needs to have a dinner at Rick’s Café (co-owned by Kathy Krieger from Portland who once owned Unicorn Travel in Portland). Because of this connection the group received special attention and Kathy was there to welcome them. Julie said you really felt you were in a movie set. . All of the restaurants recommended take reservations via the internet. This is worth doing.

Next morning we were picked up by Younes and our driver for the two weeks, Muhammed. We couldn’t have been luckier in this pairing. We toured the sights of Casablanca, then on to Rabat. In Rabat we took in the Mausoleum of Mohammed V and the Hassan Tour. The grand scale of all of these buildings was breathtaking. Next up was the Oudaia Kasbah. This is a seaside city all in blue and white. We didn’t have much time there but it was so peaceful. And then we were off to Fez. We checked into the beautiful Riad Fez and would be there for three nights

**Recommendation:** Riad Fez is a perfect place to stay. Ask when they are having a dinner by the pool when checking in. We missed that but it looked lovely. Breakfasts are delicious and there is something for everyone. It is included.

**Important to note:** Our schedule was changed in order to tour Fez on Thursday given that Friday most places would have been closed due to Friday being a Holy Day for Muslims. That should be noted for

travelers. **Recommendation:** At least two days are needed in Fez so as to explore more – so much to take in!

We loved Fez and could probably even have spent more time there as the sightseeing that we took in was a bit rushed at times. Fez is the oldest of the country's imperial cities. The world's largest intact medieval city is within the walls of its medina. There are more than 9,500 narrow streets! We visited a fascinating ceramic "factory" and watched the artisans make and create mosaic tiles and intricate designs for pottery pieces. One of the most surprising things we saw as we continued through the medina was on a mannequin ...it was an Oregon t-shirt!

Up next were the tanneries. Yes, we'd seen pictures in advance but nothing can prepare one for the sights and....smells. The smells are from the bleaching of the leather using pigeon poop and goat urine. It is so awful that they hand out a big bunch of mint to hold up to the nose while touring!! But, it was well worth it. The sight of the men working in the dye vats is beyond unbelievable.

**Recommendation:** Make reservations ahead of time restaurant Numero 7. Be sure to find out if the restaurant where you are going takes cash only. That was the case with Numero 7. Or if no reservations, be sure to ask before you order. Most places do take credit cards but some don't.

From Fez we drove to Meknes one of the 4 imperial cities and the beautiful Gate of Bab El Mansour. But the stunner was the Granary and Royal Stables. The stables large enough to have held 20,000 horses! It was truly awesome. We walked through much of the Granary and then came out to the light and the stables. Luckily here we had Younes as our guide.

After Meknes we headed into the Middle Atlas Mountains right into the heart of Berber country. We stopped for coffee and a little walking in a charming town, Ifrane. It looked just like a German alpine village. We went through the Ziz Valley and on to Erfoud.

Following lunch we drove through some amazing and huge oasis areas miles and miles long. To see the vast nothing and then the "river" of green lushness was startling and yet another amazing sight. In Erfoud we were changing into our 4 X 4 vehicles as we were headed to the sand for our overnight in a desert camp.

**(Note from Willamette** – a last minute change took the group to a newer desert camp which did not live up to anyone's expectations. As it was so new the drivers got lost and arrival at the camp was after sunset. Alexander & Roberts (General Tours) is still in contact with the Morocco people to find out what went wrong as the camp was not the one confirmed, but this group being exceptional travelers, took the unexpected and disappointing change in stride and even reported some laughing as they rushed through sand dunes trying to get the last glimpse of the setting sun).

Next morning before dawn wake up time. We quickly got dressed and walked out of our tents to find our “camels,” actually dromedaries, waiting for us. The camel drivers took our scarves and wrapped them on our heads turban style. Then it was time to climb on our rides. There is a real trick to this and we all listened and watched carefully. No one wanted to be the first to fall. (No one did!) Once we were all perched in our seats we were off and being led by our camel drivers. Climbing up the sand dunes isn’t too tricky but going down...yikes! One has to sit waaaaay back in the “saddle” and hang on tightly with the knees. We did all manage to do it amidst lots of giggles and wise cracks. Just before the sun started to rise we got off the camels, with help. Then the magic started. The sunrise was nothing less than spectacular

**Recommendation:** What I can’t imagine is going to Morocco and not staying in the desert. It is beautiful and haunting. The light is absolutely mesmerizing. I would always recommend that as part of the trip.

After our early morning camel ride, we headed to Rissani. It is kind of mind boggling to think of all that we saw there. We were met by and guided through the city by a Tuareg or “Blue Man” guide. These “Blue Men” belong to the Tuareg tribes spread throughout a broad area. Their robes and headdress are designed to keep out the blowing sand. It was the dye in the robes that actually turned the skin blue. These former nomads are generally located in cities now finding various jobs like...guiding. Our guide led us through the remains of a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Kasbah and the palace of Ksar Abbar. He wanted us to see as much as possible so took us through the souk which included the selling of sheep, donkeys, and cattle. I had trouble seeing these animals tied up in the intense heat with no water. Lots of bartering going on. One of the more interesting parts was the donkey parking lot. There were donkeys for sale, yes. But there was also the area for the donkeys that had been either ridden to market or were the beasts of burden. In the souk we saw the veiled women buying their goods and just carrying on their daily lives. Again the display of goods was usually beautiful.

**Recommendation:** There are many places like Rissani I am sure. But it is a must for the traveler to take in cities like this. So many of the people live in these smaller cities and villages and in order to get real sense of their lives these places should be visited.

Then we were off again into more desert and oasis areas. The cities are built between the mountains and the oasis. Then the cultivating of the crops in the oasis makes for a beautifully artistic mosaic. And then on past rivers where women were doing their wash. It was almost impossible to really soak all of this in. And then...we came to the Todra Gorge with its 1000 ft. limestone cliffs. As we came down into the Gorge the colors were incredible. Our final destination today: Hotel Xaluca in Boumalne, Dades.

Next morning our trip took us through the Route of 1,000 Casbahs. It is the ancient caravan route. Besides the vision of the people and towns along the way we had two interesting, but very different, stops. We were seeing signs for a Rose Festival that had just happened. There were lots of small places selling all sorts of rose products. We went into the one that Younes likes and just had to purchase some wonderfully smelling rose lotion.

Even though it was very hot, the second stop and the special treat of the day was the visit to Kasbah Ait Benhaddou. It is the best preserved of the kasbahs in the Atlas Mountains. It is especially famous due to so many films being made there. It is in dozens of movies. The heat in the narrow pathways inside the Kasbah was almost suffocating. We continued our walk and then headed down towards the river. And, we had a little surprise. The only way to get across the (shallow) river was to cross on a series of sacks put there for that purpose or do as some did and just get the feet wet! We spent the evening at Sultana Royal Golf in Ourarazate.

Leaving Ourarazate we headed into the high Atlas. We took the Tizi-n-Tichka Pass and it was harrowing. Twisty, windy and narrow roads with no guardrails. But there were also some incredible sights such as stone homes clinging to the sides of rocky slopes. The High Atlas is the highest mountain range in North Africa and is where, in isolation, the Berber tribes once thrived. The pass we took is the country's highest pass. As one of the guidebooks noted...the High Atlas roads are not for the faint of heart! At the highest point we reached 7,417 ft. When we stopped for lunch we had a chance to have goat tagine and several of us tried it. It was delicious and very moist.

We checked into the Heure Bleue Palais, Essaouiria for the next two nights. Our room was fine but at least one of the rooms had trouble with the air conditioner. The Palais is located inside the walls of the Medina and was very convenient.

Next day was a free day and we all split up to go on our own adventures in this UNESCO World Heritage site. Ted and I headed to the fish market. We first explored the area where many of the boats are kept. There were fishermen fixing their nets and working on their boats. Another lasting image will be those blue boats bobbing in the water all tied together. Blue boats. Blue sky. And the people going about their business. We crossed over to the other side of the little bay to the fish market. Fishermen had tables filled with fish and the women were bartering. Some only had their catch on a cloth on the ground. But, it was clear that the women knew what they wanted for the day!

Next morning following breakfast, Ted and I walked and walked around the Medina and out to the outer walls. As opposed to Marrakech the next day, it wasn't difficult to find our way around. Yes, there were lots of narrow streets but they actually started to look familiar. We enjoyed an art gallery that the Josephson's had told us they had been in the day before. We bought a small piece and wished we could have bought more of this craftwork from local artists.

**Recommendation:** If in the city do check out Galerie Damgaard.

**On to Marrakech;** Not too far out of Essaouira we made a stop at the Cooperative Marjana. This is a women's cooperative where Argan products are made from the Argan berries. The berries, which are sun-dried, are then peeled. Inside are almond-like nuts. Those are cracked open by hand. I was asked to try it and...I never did get the nut opened. Some of these women do this all day. The nuts are roasted and then ground by hand in a mill. That residue is actually used for a high-quality animal feed. The Argan oil is the desired end product and is used for cooking as well as being the base for many other products varying from body lotion to hair conditioner. This was one of the cooperatives but all of the work is done only by women.

**Recommendation:** Definitely tour one of these cooperatives! And, if purchasing any of the products make sure it is the real thing. What is sold on the roadsides is usually "watered down" with olive or sunflower oil.

We arrived in Marrakech and were welcomed with tea in a gorgeous room at La Maison Arabes which is located in the heart of the city. This was a beautiful riad and the rooms were large and wonderful. Being here three nights was a real treat.

Since Morocco was experiencing a heat wave (it was 110 when we arrived) he thought it best that we divide up the touring over two days rather than one, as planned. We were all fine with that! We toured the Saadian Tombs, the Bahia Palace, and the Koutoubia Minaret and went into the souks via Jemaa El Fna. Oh my...we certainly would have been lost in the souks without Younes. Lots and lots to see and take in even as we were going from place to place in our van.

Younes then took us to the Jemaa El Fna, the medina's central square, as the sun was setting. What had been a mostly empty square was now filled with food stalls and people. All of the sights that one has read about are there. Three of we ladies decided that we would have henna painted on our hands. Younes managed the money so we wouldn't be cheated. The setting sun. The lights. The sounds. The smells. There is no way to describe this place. And to think that it is every night of the week just like this!