



2. A week in Morocco 2015

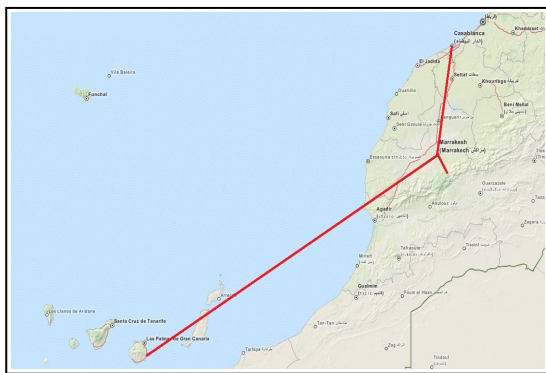


by Johan Kjellander 2015

With Binter Canaria Airways to Marrakech

If you want to travel outside the Canaries, the nearest place to go is Morocco on the African mainland. As we now had plenty of time we decided to spend a week in this fascinating kingdom, so close to us but so different.

We booked a flight to Marrakech and started planning. Lena and Uno, owners of another Swedish boat in Las Palmas, decided to make us company.



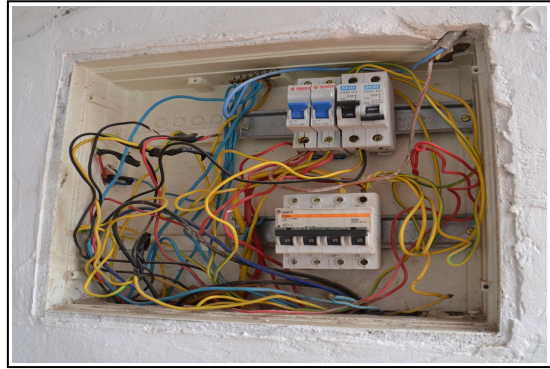
The flight to Marrakech is one and a half hour. We agreed to spend most of our time here but also visit the big city of Casablanca and take a one day trip with car up into the Atlas mountains.

Marrakech



In Marrakech we got a very nice hotel with all possible comfort. Beautiful garden with bar, pool and Wi-Fi. Very European style and maybe not exactly

what we expected but we would soon find that what we saw in Morocco, in general, was more modern and western style than we thought it would be.



Our Swedish friends were more adventurous and booked a small hotel inside the Medina, close to the Souk. The interior of their hotel was very beautiful but I couldn't resist to take a photograph of an electrical installation I found there. Not very safe compared to European standards.

There are many hotels like this, usually named Riad-something after the word for a large private house with a square opening in the middle. Rich people used to have such houses but today some of them serve as small privately owned hotels.

Marrakech is famous for its big and well preserved old city (Medina), founded one thousand years ago and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1985. The Medina is surrounded by a City Wall and once inside you feel the difference. There are many tourist attractions here and we visited some of them, including the Souk which is Moroccos largest traditional Berber market, the Jemaa el-Fna market square, the Koutoubia Mosque and El Badi Palace.



The Souk is like a city of its own inside the old city, full of small shops, stores and workshops. The narrow streets are crowded with people and there are no cars, only horses, mules or donkeys. Most streets are covered by cloth or sheet metal overhead for shadow and if you are here for the first time you need a good map and you might still get lost very easy.



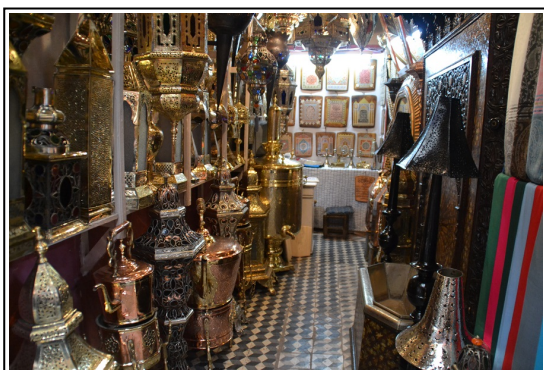
Different parts of the Souk are dedicated to different types of goods. In one street you might find metal goods and in the next street leather or wood.



Wool dyeing (ullfärgning) is a speciality in one part of the Souk. Different minerals are used to create wonderful colors and woven products like carpets or scarfs are sold in the shops.



Tove bought a Pashmina shawl with a very fine pattern in blue colors. Pashmina wool comes from the Cashmere goat but a Pashmina shawl can also include 30-50% silk.



In the metal quarters you could buy anything from tea pots or hookahs (vattenpipor) to locks. All very beautiful.



Many craftsmen have their workshops open so you can see them working. Most of the techniques they use are old and traditional. Life in the Souk is very different from what we are used to.



South of the Souk lies a big open square called Jemaa el-Fnaa. Here you can find restaurants, musicians, artists and many other interesting things. The high tower on the left picture is the minaret of Koutoubia, the biggest mosque in Marrakech.



There are a lot of attractions available for tourists in Jemaa el-Fnaa. How about being photographed with two monkeys or a couple of snakes ? Or why not take a ride in an old style horse carriage.



When the sun goes down Jemaa el-Fnaa changes. Fires are lit and food is prepared and served. Thousands of people come here every night to eat and talk and listen to all the old stories.



Maybe this young man is dreaming of a life as an acrobat. He was practising very advanced jumps and tricks as we passed by.



I think this relatively new sport is called Parkour or Free running.



Another attraction in Marrakech is *Jardin Majorelle*, a garden originally created by the French painter Jaques Majorelle in 1947 but later acquired by the world famous fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent and his colleague Pierre Berger who developed it into its current state.



Everything is carefully designed and very beautiful. A museum dedicated to Berber art and finery was opened inside the garden in 2011.



Nature itself is also very impressive. The intense color of the Bougainvillea in contrast with the green from palms and cactus is beautiful. Same with the orange beak and the body of the blackbird.



A garden in North Africa will naturally have a lot of different cactus species on display. The thorns are unfriendly but also beautiful if you look closely !



After the Majorelle garden, we visited the El Badi palace ruin with its 200 meter long courtyard. Originally built in the late 16:th century by Christian war captives and paid for with money from the Portuguese as compensation for their unsuccessful war against Morocco.

Inside one of the rooms we found a small museum dedicated to an old minbar (Pulpit, Predikstol). It was built in Cordoba 1139 and served in the Koutoubia Mosque in Marrakech for 800 years until recently when it was taken out of duty and restored to its original condition. This minbar is considered by some to be one of the finest works of art in wood in mankind. Unfortunately, cameras were not allowed inside this museum.



The walls of the Badi ruin seem to have a special attraction on birds. There were storks and storks nests everywhere. I also found a small bird I had never seen before, a House Bunting (Hussparv).

Casablanca

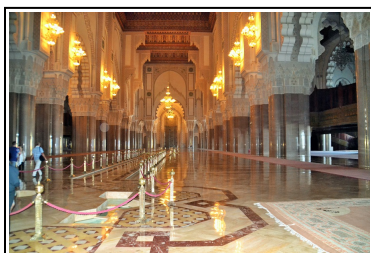


After two days in Marrakech we took the train to Casablanca. The railway station i Marrakech is a beautiful building with all the modern technology

but the chaos on the crowded platform when the train came and everybody fought to get a seat was a quite terrifying experience. In the end we found four seats together and had an interesting trip through the flat and surprisingly green countryside, about 250 km in 4 hours.

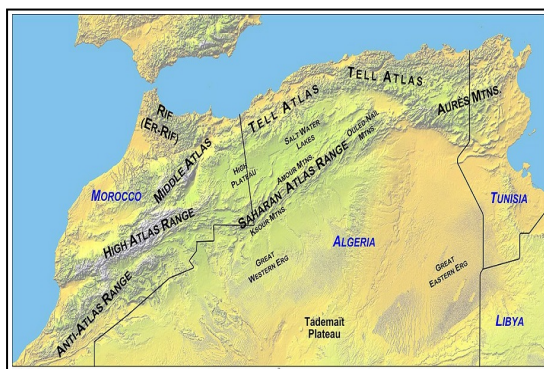


Casablanca is Morocco's biggest city with about 4 million inhabitants and the largest harbour in North Africa. We checked in on an Ibis hotel close to the railway station and set out to have dinner. What could suit better than going to Rick's Cafe, from the classical film *Casablanca* with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman from 1942. We had a wonderful evening here, all four of us.



Next day we took a guided tour in one of the world's largest mosques, Hassan II in Casablanca. Completed in 1993 to a cost of fantastic 600 million euro. The beautiful main hall has space for 25,000 people and there is space for another 80,000 outside. Very beautiful building and very very big.

Atlas Mountains



Map by Willamborg © Public domain

The Atlas Mountains run from Morocco through Algeria and into Tunisia, 2400 kilometers. Marrakech is close to the range called High Atlas with tops

over 4000 meters high.

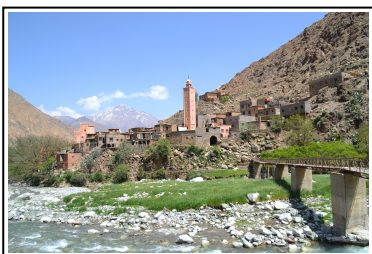
We engaged a taxi driver for a day to take us from Marrakech into the Ourika valley which cuts deep into the High Atlas up to a small village called Setti Fatma. We had lunch there and in the afternoon the taxi took us back to our hotel. Very comfortable and not expensive if you consider that we could split the cost among the four of us.



Ourika valley is very beautiful with water everywhere and snow on the surrounding mountain tops.



The road gets smaller and smaller as you get higher up into the mountains. Melting snow creates beautiful waterfalls but can also flood the road in places.



This is Berber country and many people in the small villages along the road seem to live a relatively primitive life.



There are many workshops along the road where you can buy local products like carpets, jewellery, pottery or woodwork.



A special product is the rare and very expensive oil from the fruits of the Argan tree which grows in southwest Morocco and nowhere else in the world. Argan oil can be used as a skin lotion or in cooking and is scientifically proved to have positive health effects on humans according to Wikipedia.

This was the last day of our visit to Morocco. A week passes quickly but this week was special. We had a great time with our Swedish friends and a lot to talk about on the journey back to Las Palmas the next day.



End of Morocco 2015

