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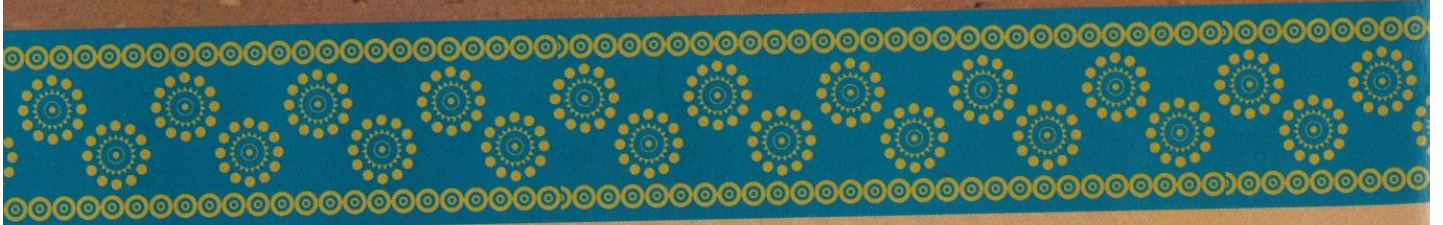
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DECEMBER 2012



MYSTERIES

BY SUZETTE LIPSCOMB

OF MOROCCO

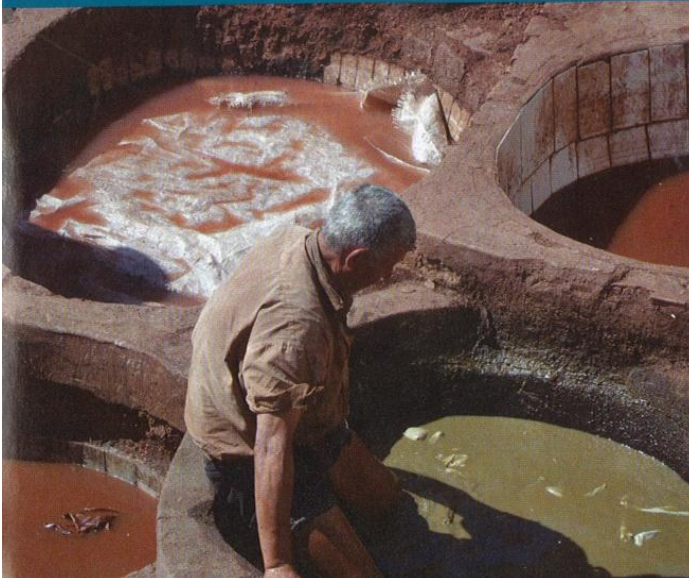
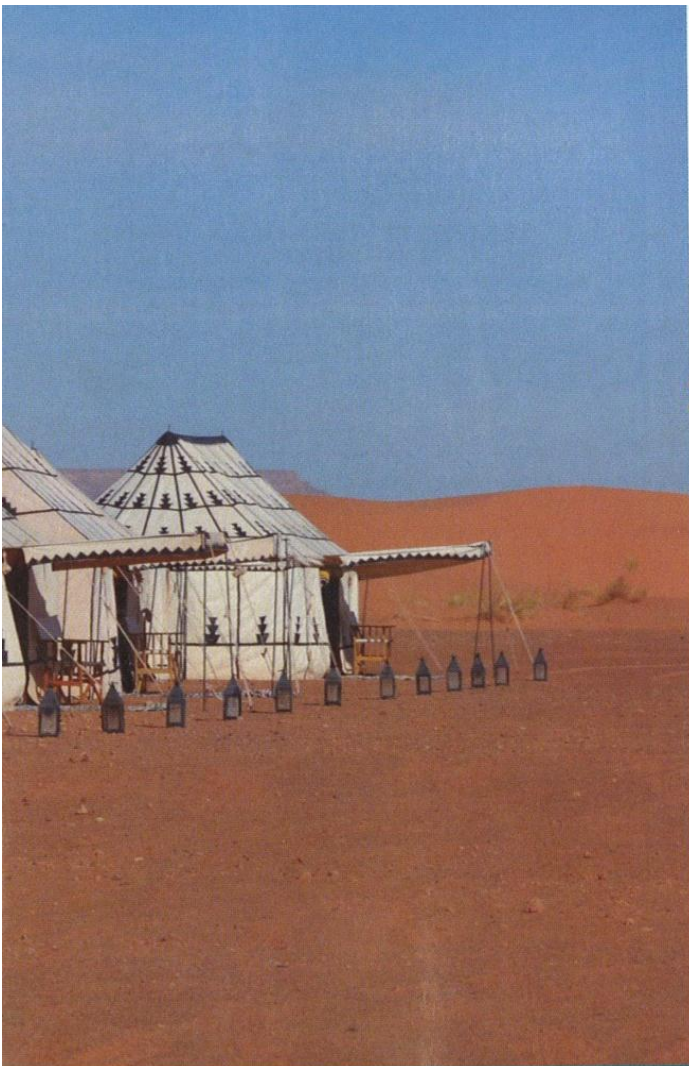
JEALOUSY SCREENS, BREAD MAKERS, CAMEL RIDES, AND BLUE MEN ARE ALL PART OF THE ENCHANTING JOURNEY

You can say 'very unique,' or is it only correct to say 'unique?'" our guide asks me. I try to explain that technically, "unique" refers to one-of-a-kind, so using "very" preceding "unique" is not really proper grammar. He is pensive. "I thought so," he says, "so I will stop using it. But then again, some things are just very unique," he adds.

With the knowledge of a Rhodes scholar, the agility of a professional athlete, and the charisma of a young JFK Jr., Younes is a "very unique" guide who steers us through Morocco's raw and intense Fes Medina (marketplace) where a fly-infested camel head hangs at the entrance to greet us and Souk (food) abounds. Younes sprints around corners and darts through alleys with us until we enter at the Blue Gate, the one closest to Riad Fes, and there begins the assault on our five senses. An abundance of heat mixes with the odor of spices, the clash and clang of the brass maker square, and the quiet of the Theological school.

The smells, sounds, and tastes are overwhelming in every way, but none more so than when we enter a store and are handed a piece of mint. Friendly I think – perhaps we are supposed to dunk it in our tea? Turns out, it's for our noses. We climb stair after stair until we reach the pinnacle – an open-air window overlooking the Chouara Tannery, the largest of four traditional tanneries in the medina, where the mint is no match for the stench from the hides that are being treated in dried earth vats. We watch the "lucky" men (because the job is an honor to have and well paid), whose hands never lose the stain of the colorful plant-sourced dyes, pound, scrape, dip and repeat. I try to record the moment with the camera, but a picture cannot convey the intense smell of rotting flesh mingled with that of pigeon droppings. One woman throws up and I wonder if the shop owners are surprised or used to this. The smell doesn't prevent me from buying an antique striped Berber rug fashioned into a satchel bag for around \$150, which I later see copied at every stall in the marketplace. It's hard to balance the siren call of the jeweled poufs and carpet bags with the stink of rotting flesh below, but contradictions like this are to be found everywhere in Morocco. As the saying goes, "Dar Dbagh, Dar Dhab," the tannery is a gold mine.

This is not how I imagined this place. Knowing that Spain's coast borders North Africa at a distance of only nine miles via the Strait of Gibraltar, I expected Morocco to be more "Europe-light." But nothing about Morocco is light. It's just the opposite, in fact; everything is intense: the people, the religion, colors and smells. While Morocco and Southern California may share a similar latitude, 32 degrees north and 33 degrees north respectively, they have a vastly different emotional climate. Women's rights are one area of divergence, politics another.



YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY...BUT NOT FAR ENOUGH

Members of the Alaouite Dynasty have been ruling Morocco since the 17th century. The current King, His Majesty Mohammad VI, ascended the throne in 1999 upon the death of his father, and within a year, formed a commission to revise the existing *Moudawana* – the Arabic Family Code. On the commission's recommendation, the king replaced the ancient code, improving women's rights in Morocco by, amongst other things, raising the minimum legal age of marriage for men and women to 18, making men and women jointly responsible for the family, allowing female children of men to inherit property, and prohibiting the taking of additional wives without the first wife's consent (with the very reasonable maximum number of wives limited to four). As a young king, he dispensed with his father's royal harem, took one wife, and has allowed her to occasionally be seen in public – the first Moroccan Monarch ever to do so.

Current law is hopefully moving away things like "jealousy screens," ornate, intricate and wood-carved, typically found covering balconies that overlook the street, to prevent women from being seen. The outward-facing courtyards allow a woman to see out, but not to be viewed from the street. Hiding women because of the belief that they distract men is the practice at the base of many customs, especially the traditional Riad design (an Arabic word for garden), built around a center, where the women of the family can look in and down, but not outside.

There is no jealousy screen on my room at Riad Fes, a sanctuary of glass, and breezy, ethereal curtains, that overlooks the open-air spa. The aroma of essential oils drifts up to my wing and I am free to look out over the pool and fountains. From the window I have a perfect view of a multi-story, live green wall. Each room at this Relais et Chateau property is different; each is custom-decorated, with enchanting amenities including the interesting *savon noir* (black soap) that leaves me smelling a bit like tar.

Meals at Riad Fes are sumptuous. Guests meet for dinner in the hotel's stunning courtyard, which has a baby grand piano and an elevator to a rooftop deck overlooking the city. *La Maison Bleue* prepares our first dinner and does so in a fashion fit for kings. We are offered drinks in the courtyard while listening to traditional Berber music played with a carved ivory "feather" on an *oud*, which means wood, before being seated on sunken brocade cushions around a large circular table where dish after dish is brought to the table seasoned and spiced with exotic flavors and color combinations. The music is soothing and it's not lost on me that the 5,000 year old instrument is often played as a remedy for insanity.

THE "SPIES" IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD (THE BREAD MAKERS)

Younes tells me in order to understand the spies, I must first understand that the Old City of Fes is made up of many tiny neighborhoods, each with five things to facilitate the daily needs of their inhabitants: a mosque, a Koranic school, a fountain, an oven and a Hammam (steam bath). The Hammam is often located near the public ovens because of the need for heat and steam.

Each day the bread makers bake over 400 loaves for the community without labels or names. How on earth do they keep it straight, I ask? Are there different recipes? Do some people use sesame and some wheat, different flours, leave notes? "No, we all make our bread the same way," Younes tells me. "We use wheat, barley, bran, salt, and yeast. Sesame is for dessert," he chides. So even with the same recipe for all the loaves of bread, the bakers are able to distinguish which loaves belong to which family. They know the consistency, the way the woman prepares the loaf; they can feel the way she kneads the dough. If there are double the loaves, someone may have company. If you are a stranger looking for someone, go there, Younes tells me. They know which young women are unmarried, whom your son should marry, which families have guests. It is rumored that the bread makers also serve as informants for the police. "Something else," Younes says. "When we used to live in the Medina, sometimes my mom would leave her dough outside on the doorstep, and a passerby would carry it to the oven. They always knew which one was ours. When I go back now, I stop by and say hello; it's been many years, but they always remember the names of my entire family."





PREVIOUS PAGE The private Abercrombie & Kent tented "glampground;" Chouara Tannery, the largest of four traditional tanneries in the Fes Medina THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Mint tea is served upon arrival at the lobby of the Riad Fes; Djemma El Fna in Marrakech; Roman ruins in Volubilis near the city of Meknes; the pool at Palais Namaskar

INSHALLAH! – GOD WILLING

Religion is a huge part of Moroccan culture, and I am surprised to learn that acceptance of other religions is widely tolerated in this primarily Muslim country. Younes knows the population of every city, the history of each monument, but his knowledge is especially deep in the area of religion. Along with being an official state guide, he is sitting for his PhD exams in Islamic Religion and Literature. Fes is the undisputed religious center of Morocco and we are able to visit the most important Islamic school in the country, possibly the world: The University of al-Karaouine in the heart of the medina, founded by Fatima al-Fihir, and first opened in 841 as a mosque and developed into an institute of higher learning in 859. Fatima used her entire inheritance to fund the mosque that she could not attend and built it with materials from her local community. So determined was she for its completion that she fasted daily throughout its construction for the entire two years. According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, it is the oldest degree-granting university in the world. In the middle of a sweltering day, the moon sits over the roof of the school and we see men bowed down in midday prayers (with the women in the rear of the mosque of course).

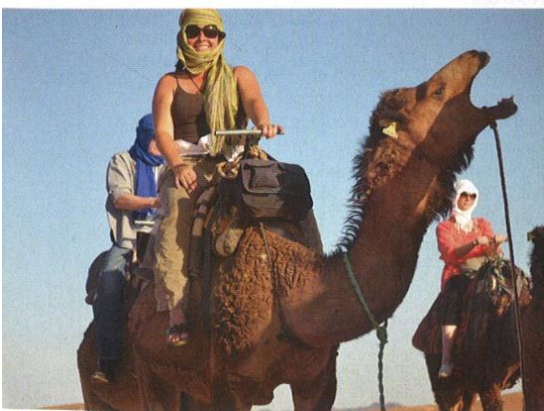
TUSCANY IN MOROCCO?

Our driver whisks us off to Volubilis, near the city of Meknes, to see Roman ruins. At a gas station stop I enlist the help of our label-loving and able-bodied guide to negotiate and cut a large watermelon for our group from a man selling them out of the back of a white pickup truck. It costs 55 dirhams (roughly \$6) and we eat the best watermelon of my life in an asphalt carpet picnic in the parking lot. Volubilis was most likely a Carthaginian settlement from the third century BCE, and in 1997, UNESCO named this archeological marvel a World Heritage Site. Evidence of 10 centuries of occupation can be found in the treasured antiquities. Most notable are the large number of intact mosaic floors depicting gods and goddesses: Dionysus, Bacchus, Aphrodite, Hercules and others. Off in the distance, I see rows of Cypress and olive trees, which remind me of Tuscany. Morocco's vast and varied landscape is another one of the many surprises on my journey. With three times as many miles of coastline as California (2200 versus 840), there are similar pursuits of fishing, surfing, shopping, but also vast oases and empty deserts that stretch as far as the eye can see.

WHAT DO YOU WEAR TO RIDE A CAMEL?

After a long sticky drive through the desert, we arrive at our private Abercrombie & Kent tented "glampground," anxious to ride our camels and see the beauty of the stars at night with no extraneous light to interfere. Our guides wrap us up like burritos with our five dollar scarves from the medina to protect our white necks and faces from the harsh sun, and load us on camels. I don't know how it's possible, but in the middle of nowhere, the A&K staff open bottles of wine and prepare one of the best meals I have in all of Morocco, with mint tea and fresh-baked cookies for dessert, all with no electricity.

At night, the desert is quiet and hot, so I pull my bed out of my tent and sleep under the canopy of moonlight. The starry night keeps me awake and energized. I watch the row of lanterns burn out one by one and the power of the desert startles me with strange Moroccan dreams in the moments when I do nod off. If I thought sunset on the Sahara was fantastic, I had no idea how beautiful the sunrise would be. I came to Morocco with some of my father's ashes, and as the sun rises over Algeria, I go for a walk, climb a small serene dune, and sprinkle some of them into the air where they flutter and land in a white ghostlike shadow on the unblemished sand. Now he has been to the deserts of Morocco with me. As I return to camp, a group of young children and mothers materialize like a mirage, selling trinkets and crafts in the middle of this campground, their desert school. We visit with them for a few minutes and then our group begins the Atlas mountain traverse to Marrakech.

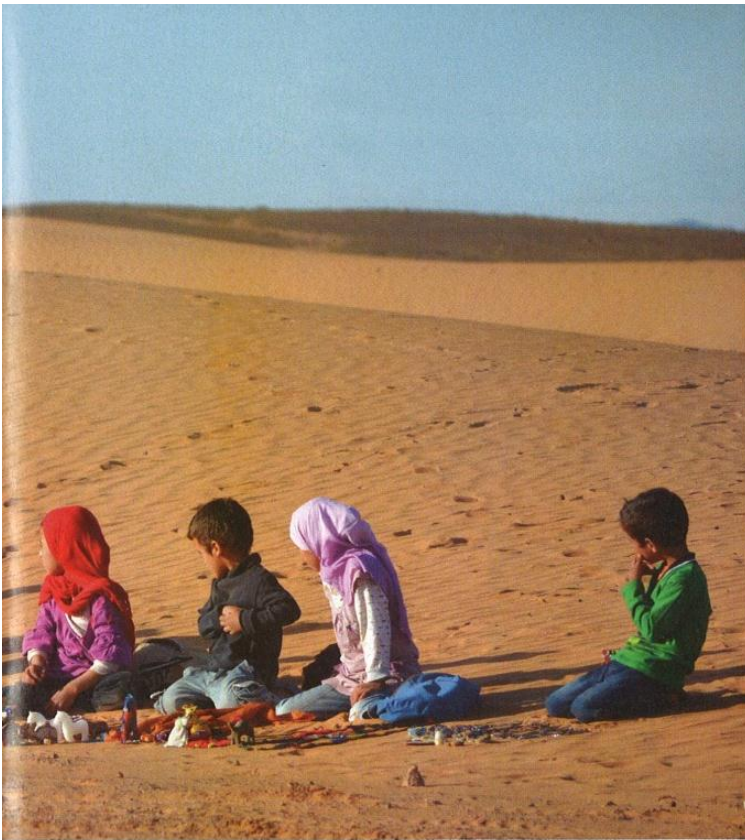


ON THE ROAD

What do a Smurf, pink Converse tennis shoes, and a Koala all have in common? Miniature versions are all hanging from the rear view mirrors of our elegant, air-conditioned travel van. I dozed off for a bit and wake up in the fairy tale mountain town of Ifrane, complete with real life gingerbread houses. Possibly the coldest city in Africa, Ifrane is home to a variety of terrains, a ski resort, cedar and oak forests, and chalet-styled homes and restaurants. The air smells fresh and clean, a sharp contrast from the congested, heated center of Fes. We stop for a quick café en route through the Atlas Mountains toward Todra Gorge.

Todra Gorge is a breathtaking site, with walled sides converging in a misty blue, lavender, pinkish glitter along the water's edge. The town of Erfoud lies along the dam of the river Ziz and magical fossils await. We watch giant cutting machines from the Carrera area of Italy break down the stone, painstakingly slowly so as not to crack the fossils. A German man is working on a sculpture while they carve a kitchen counter for a lady in Connecticut. We stop in the date market souk where, piled high on tarps, are thousands of dates in every conceivable color.

I spy two women dressed in the traditional black *abaya* from head to toe and meet my first Tuareg or "Blue Man." A Nomadic tribe of Berber speaking people, the name Tuareg is derived from the Arabic word "tawarek" which means king of the road. Sporting one-size-fits-all floor length royal blue costumes with white scarves fashioned in the shape of the evil eye, Blue Men use the wild indigo flower to rub across their skin to protect themselves from wind and mosquitos as well as to help prevent wrinkles from the harsh Sahara sun. A man named Omar approaches, resplendent in his attire, with a wide, gorgeous smile, asks for my e-mail address, and offers me the chance to



be his third wife. I smile, perplexed by the fact that a desert nomad has e-mail and two other wives.

Then it's onto "Mollywood," Morocco's own film capital of Ouarzazate, which used to be a French Foreign Legion location in the 1920s. Little did I know when watching *Casablanca* the night before my departure that it was filmed here, not in Casablanca, along with many other famous movies: *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Cleopatra*, *The Man Who Knew too Much*, *The Jewel of the Nile*, *Gladiator*, *Sex and the City 2* and too many others to mention. The road of the "Thousand Kasbahs" and Berber villages is breathtaking. Lone brown tents in the middle of nowhere house families in the roadside hills. Real date palm valleys and oases dot the landscape with true mirages. Finally, we make it to Marrakech.

PASS BY LEAVE QUICK

The Arab words for Marrakech mean "pass by, leave quick," but we do neither. We start at Djemma El Fna, which feels like the center of the universe. The only way to experience the food stalls with cooked sheep's heads and the siren calls of the snake charmers is to dive in. I am surprised by the red costume-clad, castanet-bearing water sellers. Although a few gutsy Moroccan men approach with offers to be their second or third wives, our guide protects me with a look. We move through Bahia Palace with its incredible ceilings and European influence and head to Jardin Majorelle, built by Jacques Majorelle in the 20s and after years of neglect, taken over in 1966 and maintained lovingly by Yves Saint Laurent and his partner, Pierre Berge. The famous Moroccan blue is actually trademarked, and nowhere is it more evident that amongst these very tranquil gardens. As night falls on the reddish colored medina, we snake our way through the labyrinth of alleyways and have a scrumptious candlelit dinner by the pool at La Maison Arabe (which is also a lovely boutique hotel, spa and cooking school).



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The author riding a camel with Abercrombie & Kent; a group of children selling crafts in the desert; shopping in Marrakech; Omar the Blue Man; the breathtaking Todra Gorge



FROM LEFT The coolest new place to chill in Marrakech - the Palais Namaskar couples room at the spa; a private pool villa; the unique Younes Daris



PALAIS NAMASKAR

The coolest new place to chill in Marrakech is Palais Namaskar. Built by a low key, self-made billionaire, and opened in April, it is the most tranquil, elegant hotel I have ever. The owner is also a feng shui master and astrologer. It shows everywhere on the property, most notably on the 12-acre grounds set in an elegant residential neighborhood a 15 minute drive from the center. When I arrive at my private gated villa, I know what it feels like to be Princess Jasmine, trapped behind palace gates. Except, unlike the princess, I never want to leave. I take a swim in my private pool and wish my home were as large or as well decorated as my villa. I daydream and bathe in my outdoor sunken tub terraced off my soothing rainfall bathroom before I head back into the cacophony of the Marrakech Medina.

After a day of sightseeing, I return to the Palais's Spa and Wellness Center. It has the same flowing neutrals and soothing colors of the room's decor. Elegant shades of grey and browns with royal purple float throughout signature pieces while Murano and traditional chandeliers hang from the ceilings. Votives line the niches around the heavy drapes that bunch along the floor. The spa has a full menu of services including traditional (the Hammam) and Ayurvedic treatments.

I opt for a traditional service with a young woman named Hadiji. After a wash-down with *savon noir* and a trickle of warm water from a shiny brass kettle Hadiji uses a loofah to remove the dirt and dust of the desert and marketplace, plus a small layer of skin for good measure. Then there's more washing, rinsing and a shower with *savon noir* followed by Hadiji spritzing me with orange blossom water. I feel like a child who's been bathed by its mother, except my mother wasn't a whiz with the loofah. If you want to participate in your treatment and like a traditional experience, try the Hammam. If you prefer to just lie there and be pampered, choose a massage or facial based on the Ayurvedic spa line ILA.

MAGIC CARPET RIDE

I hadn't intended to purchase a rug, but after helping a friend negotiate a small carpet for her sunny Florida abode, I admire an unusual room-size rug hanging on the wall. One hour later, and after fielding the offer to be the salesman's first wife and negotiating what I think is a fair price, I am the proud owner of a tangerine, Berber-influenced wool rug. I leave the store with a rug the size of a small dead body stitched up in a plastic bag and soon after I am boarding the plane with my memories, heavy luggage, and a surprising new knowledge of the country and its people.



GO THERE

Here are all the websites, but you can scrap all the planning and hire Unique Younes to be at your beck and call for a reasonable fee. He can arrange drivers, hotels, restaurants and medina excursions and will be your private guide all over Morocco. Email him at younesdarif@hotmail.fr.

Tourism Website for Morocco :: morocco.com

Dream :: riadfes.com

Feast :: maisonbleue.com

Behold the beauty of the Majorelle gardens and Bahia Palace
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:: morocco.com/attractions/el-bahia-palace

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