

## The Oldie Travel Section

### ROCK THE KASBAH

By Hannah Rothschild

"This is antique carpet; Bill Clinton bought same one." The shopkeeper shouted holding up a large orange and brown Kilim. "All leaders come to Ali's cavern I have discount Gorbachov and Tony Blair carpets too." Ignoring the disbelief on our faces the shopkeeper kept up his patter. 'I give you best price and mint tea and we can reminisce about Peckham and Kings Cross.'

That April morning we'd left an overcast Gatwick bound for Western Morocco. Bypassing Agadir's golden sands we drove southeast to Taroudant, a city built on the flat plains below the High Atlas. Though tourists are no longer a novelty here the sight of a blond female driving a car was a sufficiently rare occurrence to have men staring in disbelief and hi-jabbed women grinning and waving. By lunchtime we'd arrived and were sipping freshly squeezed orange juice, shaded from the North African sun by an ancient palm tree.

Hailed as the new Marrakech, recognized as a great base for trekking, Taroudant's old city is enclosed by seven kilometers of crenulated mud and lime tabiat walls. As night fell we walked through the Medina and got caught up in a Moroccan version of a passagiatta. The streets thronged with Taroudantis, most dressed in traditional hooded cloaks or djalabas, walking and chatting. The swallows were out in force, swooping and diving above the crowds Hoovering up the evening insects. Berber women in distinctive electric blue robes huddled together waiting for the bus home to their mountain villages. An occasional donkey cart trotted by and phalanxes of bicycles and mopeds snaked between cars and walkers somehow avoiding carnage.

Turning off the main road we went into the souk, a large covered area of stalls lining gloomy passages lit by the odd bare bulb. Men crouched in their cramped quarters looking out over pots of brightly coloured spices, ironwork and the leather slippers and bags for which Taroudant is famous. Live chickens scabbled around the butcher's feet. Cages full of tortoises and songbirds, rabbits and chameleons promised medicinal cures. Women examined material and bedspreads with great intensity. There were children everywhere. 60% of Morocco's population is under the age of 21.

This was my ninth trip to Morocco and I'm already planning the next. How many Countries offer skiing and swimming, gentle plains and dramatic mountains. Here you get the otherness of Africa with the remnants of French Colonialism, their language, pastries and baguettes. Gardens abound with exotic colourful flowers; at its best the food is delicious and fragrant. Sybarites can live like Kings but style and comfort is easily achievable on a budget. Though recent disturbances in Casablanca have kept some Americans away, these are rare isolated incidents the majority of Moroccans are genuinely charming and helpful.

As time was limited to a mere six days we enlisted the help of Prestige Holidays. This is traveling made easy. With a click of a mouse their website offers a tantalizing choice of cities and hotels, either a la Carte or as part of an educational tour. We chose a two centre holiday, supplied our dates, booked a guide and the only real effort was getting up in time for the Seven am flight.

In Taroudant we stayed at the Palais Salaam hotel, a former Pasha's Palace remodeled by the French and built into the city walls. By far the nicest rooms, with high ceilings and thick tiled walls, are in the old section arranged around inner courtyards full of exotic plants and fountains. There can be few greater pleasures than swimming in a pool overhung by palms, magnolia, bougainvillea, plumbago and jacaranda. Although the Palais Salaam is popular with groups, there are enough places to hide from bumptious French tourists.

The hotel is let down by pretty ordinary food but there are good small restaurants in town. For an exceptional treat order a couscous in advance from Riad Miriam, an unpretentious guesthouse hidden away down tiny allies just a few hundred metres from Place Assarag, the town's bustling main square. At fifteen pounds per head including wine, it isn't the cheapest place in town but imagine aubergines stuffed with roasted vegetables, thick fish soup, crisp Moroccan salad and to finish, the lightest couscous imaginable garnished with juicy lamb, carrots and herbs. The only other diners were two retired Americans who were spending three weeks exploring Morocco by bus. Frances and Clark from Height Asbury were straight out of a Robert Crumb cartoon and reawakened our wanderlust.

The next morning we headed south into the Mini Atlas for an unscheduled adventure. I was reminded of another Moroccan trip, many years ago when a boyfriend confidently told me he knew a special route across the desert to an oasis hotel run by a third generation soldier from the French Camel Corps. Needless to say, we got hopelessly lost in the spiders web of desert tracks near Erfoud. Low on fuel, water and spirits, the outcome looked pretty grim and when a toothless Bedouin knocked loudly on the window holding a dead goat I thought that was that. But he turned out to be our saviour and jumping into the back of the car (with animal) directed us all the way to Hotel Chez Michel.

Now the roads have dramatically improved and driving is easy. On our seven-hour trip through the mini atlas we passed barely a dozen cars. In the Souss valley, one of the better sights was an Argan tree full of climbing goats feasting on delicate leaves. Gradually the terrain became more forbidding, the mountains higher and the earth scorched and scarred by millions of years of shifting tectonic plates. This was Berber country, a landscape dotted with mud coloured villages built on vast granite rocks and tiny cultivated terraces full of almond and pomegranate trees.

Tafrouaut is a perfect base to explore an area that throws up many surprises. An hour's drive south of the town we left the metalled road and found ourselves on a dirt track bumping down an increasingly bleak and forbidding gorge. There was no

vegetation. An hour further, just at the point where you begin to take proper notice of what the petrol gauge says, palm trees began to appear and within a few hundred yards we were in a secret village, with running water, date palms, vegetable plots and butterflies, a tiny green Eden sandwiched between two forbidding walls of angry brown rock barely a hundred yards apart. This is the village of Tizerkine.

Almost as extraordinary as the village itself, are the grand mansions built by its inhabitants, the hard-won fruits of a life spent away from home working in foreign cities or as shopkeepers in Casablanca and Tangier. As substantial as any British stately home, with architecture that owes as much to West Hollywood as southern Morocco, these houses are living proof of the reputation of Tafrouiti men as hard working and penny-wise. Next time you find yourself in a minicab with a Moroccan driver, just remember this man may have a piece of real estate back home which puts your much-loved semi well and truly in the shade.

On our way back we took the Tizi n'Test, one of the most beautiful roads in the world that snakes up the Atlas Mountains to a high pass. For the first twenty kilometers the verges are lined with lavender, euphorbia and buttercups but at the summit only the hardiest plants survive. At the top, we drank tea looking over the valley to snow covered mountains beyond. We set off towards Marrakech and more fertile plains. Every twenty miles there were tiny fortified towns built on high rocky outcrops and near Idni, the spectacular Tin Mal Mosque, built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a great stark reminder of Morocco's former glory days..

I first came to Morocco with a group of friends from University twenty years ago. We meant to explore the whole country but spent most of our time in Marrakech captivated by the snake charmers, bear tamers, water sellers and storytellers in the Djemma el Fna, Marrakech's main square. On our one brief foray out of the city, we borrowed Christopher Gibb's house in Ourika Valley, a place made famous when the Rolling Stones visited. I don't know if the abandoned platform shoe and half eaten leather jacket belonged to Mick or Keith but they served as a reminder that this country was a magnet to the glamorous and talented.

These days it seems that everyone has discovered Marrakech. The streets are full of tourists anxiously studying maps and guidebooks. There are eight flights a day from England alone and it's hard to find a room in many of the smaller, up market hotels known as Dars or Riads. These are grand two-storied, courtyard buildings epitomizing the best of Islamic architecture and providing astonishingly effective protection against the extremes of summer heat and the chaotic noise of the streets. Left to decay by middle-class Marrakechis who preferred life in a spacious suburban villa, many of them are now being rehabilitated either as family homes or, increasingly as delightful small hotels. Winston Churchill might have loved the Mamounia but these days the only place to stay is in the Medina.

Those wanting true independence could rent their own riad. The classiest must be Luksor. Owned by Artistic Polymath Danny Moynihan and his actress wife Catreona Boreman it's a romantic and dashing five-bedroom house only a short walk from the DJamma el

Fna. This is a family house decorated with simple elegance and comes with a cook and gardener.

For the rock star experience take a room at fellow Brit Vanessa Deveraux's uber stylish Riad ElFenn. This is Morocco for devotees of Soho House; think wild colours, leather walls, a rooftop putting green, full sized cinema and modern European paintings. This hotel is so popular that Vanessa's failed twice to secure a room for herself.

Of the four hundred Riads that have undergone this transformation in the last decade or so, one of the finest, restored with a loving attention to traditional craftsmanship and modern convenience, is Riad Kniza which has been in the same family for many generations. Beautifully restored by Mr. and Mrs. Bouskri, named after their daughter Kniza and managed by their son Kamal, this little jewel is a testament to Moroccan talent. Determined to use local materials and ancient crafts, the Bouskris can share responsibility for the resurgence in both skill and interest in local techniques. The plasterwork, tiling and cedar wood doors and ceilings are all handcrafted and Mrs. Bouskri worked with the one of Morocco's few women MPs to reintroduce techniques of embroidery on silk, a style associated with the city of Meknes a century ago.

Each morning the fountains are restocked with fresh roses while guests breakfast on freshly baked bread looking out over the rooftops of the city to the towering Koutabia minaret, built in the twelfth century by Yacoub el Mansour, one of the sultans who transformed Marrakech from a trading city at the end of the Sahara's camel routes into the capital of the western Islamic world, stretching from Tunisia to Toledo. In the distance the snow-covered Atlas Mountains are visible through the shimmering heat.

Places are made by the people who live there and perhaps this is, above all Riad Kniza's most powerful advantage. It's the family home lead by a great Matriarch. Mrs. Bouskri does the shopping and oversees the outstanding cooking; Mr Bouskri, recipient of the Best Guide in Morocco Award, is happy to incorporate his Antique shop into a tour of the town but also quick to recommend others. Unlike our carpet seller in Taroudant, Mohammed Bouskri really has done business with the A list; on his walls are photographs of himself grinning widely next to Ronald Reagan, Brad Pitt and Helmut Kohl. At the end of a tiring day exploring the Souks and Monuments, the Kniza seems like a personal oasis of calm and gentle hospitality.

Our guide Omer first came to Marrakech aged nine with his father made the annual trip from his Berber village to the metropolis by donkey and bus to exchange honey and dates for tea and medicine. Weaving in and out of countless alleyways, Omer explained the complicated and long-established guild system, which still keeps the ironworkers, leather workers, weavers, dyers - and even the mobile phone sellers - all working in harmony throughout the souk. We explored a caravanserai used by the camel drivers of the Sahara right up until the 1950's and wandered around the old spice market, a little square reserved, during the holy month of Ramadan, exclusively for women to entertain each other. Winding our way through the tanning district and past the metalwork area where children still labour over spitting flames beating out lanterns for tourists to take home. Heading home we passed through the old Jewish quarter with balconies that look for all the world as if they've been taken from the Albeycin in Granada - which in a way they

have been since they were built by Jews thrown out of Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella after they had defeated the Moors of Andalusia and used part of the resulting loot to bankroll Columbus on his trip to America. Omer knocked on a tiny door and it opened into a synagogue. A proud Rabbi appeared explaining that his faithfuls still number over two hundred.

It ended too soon and suddenly we were back at the airport. Waiting in line we exchanged stories with fellow travelers who've all had different but memorable experiences. A group of provincial French had quad biked in the Atlas Mountains. Eight Mancunians had done the 'Oasis Tour' in a mini bus and breathlessly relayed stories of flash floods and dangerous river crossings. The Worcester Water Colour Club achieved their finest work in the Souk and one couple never left the poolside preferring the company of books to the world outside. In six days you can only get a glimpse of a country but it's enough to remind one of the wonders of Arabia and Islam, wonders that are sadly overshadowed in our press by terrorist acts committed by a tiny proportion of believers.

Gatwick was still grey but the memories remained. Now we're discussing renting the Luksor for a family Easter or dreaming of that tiny town of the coast that only a few have discovered.