

To Marrakesh and back: a diversion from everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux (year 2 weeks 42 - 43)

One snowy day last winter, tramping through the white fields under a grey sky, the walkers of St Dié were all reminiscing about the bright colours and sunshine of Marrakech. They spoke with the proprietary air of ex colonialists. They'd all been there, and were amazed that we hadn't. "Oh, you simply must go there!" However, "the police are very nasty", was neighbour Pierre Laine's reaction to our projected trip. "Like Algeria. I was there in the war". One of his lengthier pronouncements!

We were curious as to how being part of an all-French package tour would influence our perceptions. Isn't it wonderful the way the French spontaneously applaud when a plane lands! A real breaking of the tension and celebration. Then at passport control the queuing passengers left the "confidentiality" distance normally reserved for banks, so no-one could hear vicious interrogations. Our passports received the first stamps they'd had in many years (most of the French passengers seemed to travel on their identity cards). On arrival at the four star Hotel Marrakech the tour representatives confiscated our return tickets (to be ransomed on the last day by payment of hotel tabs). They assured us this would avoid extremely unpleasant "misunderstandings" with the police over stolen and sold passports and also that, despite the late arrival hour (11 pm), dinner would be served immediately. The entire hotel was dedicated to French guests - and us.

When we set out to explore on our first morning (after coffee and croissants), the fabled colours didn't oblige. The skies were grey and the weather cool, with rain threatening. Many of the men were wearing full length black, brown and grey robes with long pointed hoods. The women's clothes were muted greys, browns, navy, dull reds and blacks too. The huge old city walls, without the sunshine on them, seemed a dull mustard rather than spicy red. The rows of horse drawn carriages (calèches) on the huge main square, the Jemaa El Fna, looked sad and damp. And the snake charmers' snakes seemed (fortunately) unwilling to uncoil or rear up in the damp, despite the pipe playing.

Watching the same scene on Jemaa El Fna on subsequent days, the sun was brilliant, the buildings were all pink against a cobalt sky, and the snow glistened white on the High Atlas Mountains to the east. Lithe men gathered huge groups of men, young and elderly, as they demonstrated the suppleness that could be yours if only you bought ... whatever potion or device they were selling. Look - your arm will rotate like this! And you, sir, see how I can bend you over my back. And, see, after all these years you can touch your toes, - well almost. A storyteller held his audience proverbially spellbound as his story unrolled with eloquent gestures. Fortune-tellers squatted on upturned crates. Stalls selling oranges and flowers flanked the square. The best spots from which to survey the bustle were the rooftop café terraces. Over glasses of mint tea. Perhaps nibbling an almond tart. In the background the call from one mosque, picked up and echoed by other mosques, seemed to go unheeded by the throngs.

In the evenings the scene on Jemaa El Fna would change again, as the cooks in immaculate whites set up their restaurant stalls and a silvery haze rose above the sizzling kebabs and sausages, pre-cooked sheeps' heads, the copper tea urns, the mounds of snails, and the vivid green, orange and scarlet vegetables. Every stall holder pressed you to be seated and taste his wares. And the benches and tables would be packed with noisy diners – both locals and tourists. And everywhere the thick din of drums and horns.

Jemaa El Fna was such a focal point. To the north lay the narrow streets of the souk, and to the south the old walled town (kasbah), former Jewish quarter (mellah) and the palaces. The west end was dominated by the tall tower of the Koutoubia Mosque; the roads to the east led to the tannery area, with their pits and basins for soaking and cleaning camel, goat and sheep skins. We never got completely lost in the maze of narrow streets in the souk, but neither did we succeed in doubling back along exactly the same route when we wanted to find the same narrow shop again! (Bargaining seemed to involve a lot of walking out of shops – but if we walked too far, we never found them again!) Our purchases were very modest, but the hunt provided such entertainment. Such wonderful smells as we sniffed jars of saffron at spice stalls, amid other stalls piled high with dates, figs and nuts. How do you tell old Berber silver bracelets from those just knocked up behind the stall? And all the tiny shops crowded with lemon, mauve, scarlet and blue slippers, some encrusted with glittery glass or sequins (but cheaper at a huge slipper emporium with labelled prices). In squares opening off the narrow lanes were hens with their legs tied, night-dresses and robes, eggs, stacks of round woollen and cotton hats, black magic and healing ingredients, amber necklaces, brown sticky soap with the texture of swarfega, silver earrings and necklaces, huge lamps casting intricate patterned light, scarves striped in pink, purple and silver, polished thuya wood boxes and carvings of Tintin and Snowy, cones of golden and orange spices, ivory inlaid low cedar tables and chests of drawers, and palatial rooms behind golden gleaming doors stacked and draped with bright carpets. Impossible to walk straight past without lingering!

Then suddenly, after the noise, the bustle of crowds, of hand and donkey carts, of motorcycles, there would be the thick walls of the old houses (riads) with their peaceful inner balconied and tiled courtyards or the silent elaborate richness of the old Koran school (Medersa Ben Youssef), with its lofty courtyard of carved marble and wood (Koran texts), small students' chambers, intricately carved window frames, light wells and doors. The restored Bahia Palace was equally elegant, with the added pleasure of linked courtyards with fountains, palms, lemon and orange trees, and purple and pink and scarlet cascades of blossom. And there were all the elaborately carved doorways into the mosques (closed to us infidels).

The name of Louis Majorelle was familiar to us from the Art Nouveau museum in Nancy. It was a lovely experience to visit the garden created in the twenties by his son, Jacques, in the new part of Marrakech. Outside the high garden walls were red buildings and dusty roads. Inside were spiky green and silver shapes of palms and cactus, the gentle sounds of water bright with red fish and basking little frogs, diagonally textured silver tree barks, strident purple and scarlet blossoms, yellow and blue giant flower urns, all against a backdrop

of the brilliant blue walls of Majorelle's studio and the sculpted kasbah-style tower of his house. The studio had been turned into a tasteful, cherished museum of Islamic Art. The small entry room containing some of Majorelle's delicate Moroccan watercolours and more flamboyant oils was fascinating.

After the intensity and bustle of Marrakech, we were keen to see its context. So we took a couple of coach trips out beyond the surrounding palm and orange groves. Going west one day we passed through dry, stony countryside (still ploughed by horses) then scrubby hunting territory, until we reached the coast and port of Essaouira. The white buildings with their blue doors and shutters were a contrast with the red of Marrakech. All the way the tour guide kept up a stream of information, in very clear French, about the economy, agriculture, education and cultural life. French tourists seem to lap up information. We were fortunate that the harsh coastal winds had subsided and the sunshine was warm as we strolled round the streets, especially the silver and spice markets and the former Jewish merchants' quarter (alas now crumbling) with its carved stars still over the doorways. Then we walked along the fortified sea wall down to the port with its fishing boats and nets and restaurants. Surrounded by adoring cats, we sat outside one of the restaurants eating fried fish and watching the world go by.

Earlier in the week we'd got up at 6.30 to take the four hour coach trip south-eastwards over one of the High Atlas passes to the desert town of Ouarzazate. Another journey of contrasts - the tall palm groves around Marrakech, the white and pink almond blossom as we started to climb a valley, smoke rising from the Berber villages clamped to the grey mountain sides, the incredible gold and purple crystals glinting in the heart of the sombre grey and black tennis-ball-sized rocks sold by the roadside, and the Foreign Legion built road snaking resolutely up towards the snowline and the highest pass (7,415 ft), the Tizi n Tichka pass. Then down through arid rocky villages towards the desert plains. This was the kasbah trip - the trip of the old walled towns built around the huge central sculpted grain stores. We strolled through the most famous - Ait Benhaddou, which has been preserved by UNESCO (and periodically enhanced for the filming of Lawrence of Arabia, Gladiator, Jesus of Nazareth, and Sodom and Gomorrah). We crossed the wide river in front of the village walls, stepping on strategically placed cement bags. All very picturesque till you learnt that the river water was salty, and the women had to walk 10km for drinking water. The old village is almost abandoned, apart from characters obligingly posing for a small fee in flamboyant gold and blue robes (preferably with a camel or some sheep) in front of the river (?Jordan) or Bethlehem's stable. The sense of displacement continued as we approached Ouarzazate, with the walls of a Pharaoh's palace on our left (left from a recent Asterix and Obelix film-set!) It was quite a relief to drive into a "normal hotel" in this former French garrison town, and sit under a huge shady canopy by the swimming pool for a typical French-Moroccan meal of colourful salads, chicken tagine, fresh oranges and mint tea.

The St Dié walkers were right. It was a flamboyant and colourful experience. We loved it. The week felt really long. And, if you want, you can see John's photos on the website at <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/les-irottes/Marrakech/Marrakech.htm>