



Lost and Found in Morocco

Laurie Weckstein

The day started in heady excitement. We bundled ourselves into our little rented Siat, the Spanish everyman's car. It was early because we wanted to catch the first hydrofoil out of Gibraltar and fly over the water of the most famous straits in the world—to Morocco.

It would take an hour and half to get to the tiny port of Tarifa, where we would catch the boat. We shot through the south of Spain as the sun was coming up. It was the nondescript month of March. I was so excited about spending the day in Morocco—on the African continent—that, at the beginning of the adventure, I was willing to imbue the Spanish countryside, with all sorts of meaning. In truth, it was rather dull. We seemed to be up on a never-ending high plateau. Miles of dull, brown dirt from which sprouted miles of pale, dry grasses. Still, we were in Spain and soon we would be in Morocco!

At the coast, we wound our way off the plateau in a series of precarious switchbacks that would make you sick if you thought about it. The occasional car, driven by a genuine Spaniard, would crazily pass. We gave away our pretend-Spaniard status as we carefully maneuvered our way along. It was amazing to me that the road to such a significant place on the planet would feel so remote, so ancient, and only occasionally traveled. If the Straits of Gibraltar were in America, we would have been jam-packed in traffic on a brand-new, twelve-lane super highway—backed up for miles at this point. Instead, we traveled freely and mostly alone on a bleached, decrepit, and truly ancient country road.

At Tarifa, we bought our tickets in thousands of pesetas (only a few dollars). We boarded a normal-looking white boat, big enough for twenty-five to thirty passengers. The mooring lines were loosed in high arcs, landing on the deck of the hydrofoil as screeching gulls wheeled overhead. We started off and the hydrofoil raised up on its characteristically high perch atop the

water. As we literally flew over the water, my companion and I discussed our plans for the day in Morocco. Our hosts back in Spain had recommended that we put ourselves in the capable hands of an experienced tour guide when we arrived. I airily dismissed that suggestion then, just as I was doing to my companion now. "I want to see the *real* Morocco, not some fake, plastic, pretend Morocco!" I protested.

We reached Tangier, Morocco, in forty-five minutes. In the tiniest snatch of a moment, everything changed. At precisely the same instant that my heart thrilled as my feet first touched African soil, my olfactory senses were assaulted by the smell of a particularly repugnant incense. I hate incense. Without registering it consciously, I felt within a moment after landing that this place was already many things. What lay before us seemed like chaos. The colors, the activity, the noise, the *smell* . . .

Within thirty seconds of landing in Tangier, my self-assessed worldliness vanished. I immediately realized that we should *not* be set loose in this place alone. We frantically made our way to the closest of a dozen tour stands just off the dock, the proprietors vying for our American dollars. We'd only just arrived! The most exciting day of my 24-year-old life had turned into the first day in my life that I actually feared for my safety. This was a most unexpected turn of events.

Five minutes later, ensconced in the safety-net of our newly acquired protectors (our tour guides) I took a real look around for the first time since our arrival, now just ten minutes ago. Besides the smell of the place and the realization of some survival instinct I seemed to possess, I had taken nothing else in. Now I took a good look around.

As in any city, there was a lot of vehicular horn-honking. Men and women were dressed in everything from traditional Moroccan long-gowned garb to casual Western dress in wildly colorful, crazily mismatched combinations. There was the occasional turban. Most women wore traditional saris. I stood out in my white pants but it was too late to do anything about that now. As I walked, my pants were like a blinking neon sign announcing that I didn't have a clue about this place. My feet hurt already too. I'd worn the wrong shoes for walking around in this dirty, hard world.

Our main goal was to keep close to our tour guide (*very* close) as we began to walk through this old, old city. Our group was almost immediately set upon by a clutch of dark-skinned, shiny-haired, charming Moroccan children. They ran around and amongst us constantly directing "This way,

lady!” and warning “Lady, don’t fall!” at the holes and pitfalls in the ancient walkways. What seemed charming at first quickly gave way to annoying, as it became obvious that “This way, lady!” and “Lady don’t fall!” were the only Western expressions that these little urchins knew. The only variation being “mister” which was used if appropriate. These little self-appointed tour guides wanted coins and dollars for their services. Their modus operandi was to pester you until you gave in. I quickly learned to ignore them even though they didn’t go away.

“Why aren’t they in school anyway?” I asked our tour guide.

His all-knowing answer, “There is no public school in Morocco.”

“Oh,” I replied.

The remainder of our tour carried us well into the afternoon. We went to an open-air market where bloody sides of cows and pigs hung, attracting flies, and a thousand chickens hung by their feathered necks—no refrigeration anywhere in sight. On the way to lunch, I saw a goat’s head floating in a bucket of water outside the door of a private residence. At lunch, I ate rice. Later, we visited a cool, dark mosque where every interior surface was covered in glittering and dazzling tiles fashioned into shining, breathtaking mosaic scenes. At some point in the afternoon, I gratefully spied the red and white Coca-Cola sign (something familiar!) high up on a building, above a restaurant, only the words “Coca-Cola” were written in Egyptian-looking Moroccan letters. Finally, after the grand-finale camel-ride, we were on the hydrofoil again headed back to civilization.

We arrived at our host’s home in Spain after midnight—dirty, exhausted, and me limping because somewhere during the day on the other continent, the heel had come off one of my low-heeled flat shoes. Despite the low heels, it still caused a limp if one went missing.

I decided that my now-filthy, one-heel-missing shoes symbolized my day in Morocco and my *choice* in wearing them as symbolic of my unknowing arrogance. My excitement had been childlike and, as with a child, it almost immediately disappeared at the very first obstacle—or bad smell. I did not have a good time that day. I picked my way around Tangier trying not to step on anything gross. I tried to keep my pants clean. I complained about the smell of Arab cigarettes. I didn’t actually eat anything of consequence (I drank Coke all day) until we got back to Spain.

Truthfully, I realized I was ashamed of myself. The world was *different* over there. I knew it would be different. *Spain* was different. But this civilization . . . it was raw. It was rich. It was old. And it was hard.

My only saving grace would be to *learn* something from this day. My excuse was ignorance. But I am no longer ignorant after my day in Morocco.

I'd like to return, now fifteen years later and approaching forty years old. I've learned the lesson, I think. I may still feel uneasy in Africa but I won't wear white pants; I'll wear comfortable walking shoes. I won't cringe at every strange new sensation; I'll rejoice in my broadened understanding of our world and the souls that inhabit it. I won't whine over something as trivial as incense; I'll breathe deeply and know the smells for what they are—proof of a rough, honorable, hard-won life in a beautiful, ancient and unforgiving land.