

Despite the Beauties of Home, I Trek the World

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Those who live in Santa Cruz, California have much to be thankful for. I am glad to be one of them. Surrounded by the beauty of the nation's most dramatic coastline, refreshed every morning by its benign climate, with a sweet wife to share my days and nights, with children nearby, with fascinating books half read, a piano at hand, and half-finished articles in the computer, I have far more reasons than I can list to acknowledge that life in this setting is safe, sustaining, convenient, and agreeably challenging as in few parts of the world. Such being the case, I am correspondingly compelled to ask myself why I keep leaving it to visit those other parts. Yet that is only too evidently the case. Toward the end of the first year of the new millennium, I surprised myself by calculating that I had spent four months--one-third of the year 2000--on the road. That ratio has remained unaltered since then. And all too akin to Sinbad the Sailor, no sooner do I return from one excursion abroad than I seem doomed to begin dreaming of the next.

Over the years, I have struggled to make sense of that paradox. This travel letter reflects one of many efforts to resolve it. Although I might equally well have written about China or Romania, Iceland, Turkey, or Tibet—in all of which I recently had opportunities to undertake extended journeys—a trip to Morocco in the spring of last year seemed to draw my thoughts on the potential rewards of personal encounters with other civilizations into particularly sharp focus.

That trip was not my first to the country. For two years in the mid-1960s I had taught at Makerere University in the East African nation of Uganda on secondment from the University of Chicago's Political Science faculty. In late June of 1972, on my way back to that university with my family on a Fulbright Lectureship, I stopped off in Morocco for ten days. The blazing summer heat had precluded our venturing beyond its four royal cities; but as I began using slides from that visit in subsequent years in my classes on political change in the Third World at the University of California (Santa Cruz), I came increasingly to marvel at those photographic reminders of Morocco's tiled palaces, fountains, palm gardens, elegant towers, high walls, and thatch-covered markets, even when matched against the more exotic outposts of Islamic civilization I was later to visit in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Yemen, and Central Asia.

More recent journeys to Tunisia and Turkish Anatolia only whetted my eagerness to revisit the westernmost projection of Islamic culture. March and April, with their rain-washed blue skies and moderate temperatures, were said to be ideal months for exploring the desert valleys and Berber mudbrick kasbahs of the Moroccan Southeast that I had had to pass up in my previous visit. And now the prospect of war with Iraq brought into sharpened perspective a rationale for deepening my understanding of Arabic Islam. Although my lack of anything beyond the simplicities of phrasebook Arabic would limit

what I could learn, I already knew that French would serve me well throughout Morocco and with nearly all its social classes.

Whatever the merits of these expectations, my timing could hardly have been better. Toward midnight on March 19, as I briefly deplaned in Washington en route to Casablanca, a cab driver told me that President Bush had just announced the launching of the first cruise missiles at Baghdad. Three weeks later I was poised to take the train from Fez to Rabat—the capital and most overtly political of Morocco’s cities—when my wife phoned me from Santa Cruz to let me know that Saddam’s statue had just been pulled down in a Baghdad plaza. Between these points I would have given much for a better understanding of the commentary accompanying Al-Jazeera’s bloody pictures as they appeared on the dusty television screens in small hotels and cafés, and even more for the linguistic capability needed to eavesdrop on the remarks they elicited from huddled groups of (exclusively male) watchers. Even so, I found that cab drivers, waiters, garage attendants, storekeepers, train travelers, an occasional journalist, and desk attendants at hotels could be induced to become voluble and frank in French; and from them I heard numerous variations of a common line: Saddam is a terrible man; thank God we have nobody like him on the borders of our tolerant country; but it is not right for America to attack an Arab nation that was not responsible for 9/11, and we cannot therefore rejoice in the success of American arms. Such outbursts confirmed what I had expected to hear in one of the Arab world’s better-governed, more level-headed societies.

Somewhat over a year after my visit, polling data now rather surprisingly depict Moroccan responses regarding America’s image as among the most hostile in the entire Islamic region, with generally on the order of 90% negative replies to questions about our role in the world—a saddening fall-out from our unhappy track record as occupiers of Iraq, and despite a recent savage bombing explosion by Islamic militants in Casablanca that cost some 40 Moroccan lives. The Morocco I visited had, however, good reason to think about more pressing issues than Saddam Hussein’s downfall. Any traveler through the Moroccan hinterlands must soon be struck by the exceptional ecological and ethnic diversity of this relatively small kingdom. Only firm adherence to Islam keeps these differences subordinated. Since the conclusion of World War II a succession of able monarchs have used personal demonstrations of conspicuous piety as “commander of the faithful” to fend off Islamist critics while enlarging the space for inaugurating needed social changes (most recently, regarding the supremely sensitive issue of the status of women). Even so, the organization of their monarchical power bases has not sufficed to enable them to confront forthrightly such issues as Morocco’s spiraling population growth. One consequence is growing clusters of “surplus” children on street-corners that better-regulated Tunisia keeps in school.

Over time, however, my other reasons for visiting Morocco overtook these concerns. After a few days amid the cobra charmers and incredibly lavish handicraft bazaars of Marrakesh, I picked up a rental car and drove in a wide arc over the next two weeks from Morocco’s Atlantic coast through pre-Saharan valleys and over the Atlas mountains to the ever-astonishing medieval labyrinths of Fez. Along the way, I followed a de-

sert highway to its end in remote Sidi Ifni, the half-forgotten, end-of-the-world capital of formerly Spanish Sahara, now known mainly to stamp collectors and connoisseurs of crumbling art-deco buildings. I then turned inland to immaculately painted pink and yellow villages nestled next to irrigated palm groves in the gorges of the High Atlas. In the kasbah of Aït Benhaddou, familiar to cinephiles from urban scenes in David Lean's "Lawrence of Arabia", I spent a long evening at the home of a massive, blue-robed Tuareg merchant who sang and played the oud very well and regaled me with possibly fictitious tales of life along the caravan trail to Nouakchott in the misplaced assurance that he could wear down my resistance to buying a Mauritanian rug before I partook of the dinner he had promised in return for my having earlier given a needed lift in my Fiat Palio to his nephew. Later I was to experience something of Lawrence's exhilaration as I climbed among the sand dunes of the Saharan erg east of Merzouga to greet the morning sun.

Before then, however, I had headed southeastwards into the lush valley of the Draa. Toward its end, near where it dissipates in the wastes of the Sahara, I was urged to accept an overnight camel ride into the desert from the formerly French military outpost of Zagora as partial compensation for a botched hotel booking. Previously, I had resolved I would never yield to pressures for so touristically commodified an undertaking. Fortunately, I overcame my principles. My gentle, snow-white male camel provided an admirable and unexpectedly comfortable perch on his hump for peering into Zagora's walled gardens on either side of the narrow lanes down which we proceeded at a stately pace into the open desert. That night, as I sat in a solitary black tent chatting about Arabic music with the camel driver and an elderly cook, with the brilliant stars above and a last call to prayer drifting faintly over the sands from a distant village hidden by palm groves, I had to admit to myself that this packaged experience had indeed brought me many of the very images that had most strongly drawn me back to Morocco.

By train and bus I eventually reached Tangier. My time in Morocco ended there, but not my journey. With ears, eyes, and palate newly retrained by a month's sensory immersion in the architectural, auditory, and culinary riches of Moroccan culture, I had resolved to cross the Straits of Gibraltar while these images remained fresh to revisit their projection into the design of the great cities, gardens, mosques and palaces of Andalucía and to take note of the Moorish residues in the conventions of Hispanic lifestyles surrounding them. But that is a tale for another time.