



Welcome to Rott's Manor

Morocco 2012 Trip Report

A wonderful 2-week trip to Morocco with Overseas Adventure Travel. We made a circle around Morocco, visiting Rabat, Fes, Meknes, Volubilis, Ourzazate (the amazingly scenic movie capital of Morocco) as well as Marrakech and Casablanca and many other small towns. We also visited with local families including an Imam, nomads and semi nomads. Climb up the sand dunes at our desert camp before first light to see sunrise over the Sahara was awesome. The whole trip was made special by our warm and wonderful tour guide, Mohammed, who made it much more than just a sightseeing trip.

Saturday, December 15th: Atlanta to Paris

We had an easy uneventful flight. The onboard meals were not too bad.

Sunday, December 16th: Paris to Casablanca, bus transfer to Rabat

We arrived at CDG at 8:30AM - our flight to Casablanca left around 1:00PM and we arrived in Casablanca around 3:00PM. Mary landed with what she is pretty sure is a sinus infection...she will have to keep an eye on this. Mohammed, our Program Director, was waiting us. It was a bit of a ride to our hotel in Rabat. We met at 7 pm for dinner. Dinner started with the satisfying traditional Moroccan tasty soup of Harira. For the second course we were served roasted chicken and vegetables. A nice caramel flan was served for dessert.

Monday, December 17th: Rabat

Upon waking up, Mary is sure about her sinus infection, bummer. We met after breakfast for our orientation meeting with the group and Mohammed. Mohammed also gave a brief Arabic language lesson. After the meeting Mary tells Mohammed that she needs to see a doctor to get some antibiotics for her sinus infections, Mohammed says no problem, we can stop at a pharmacy and get some antibiotics today (no doctor necessary).

Our first stop this morning was at the complex of the Hassan Tower and the Mausoleum of Mohammed V. The Hassan Tower is the minaret of an incomplete mosque that was began in 1195. The tower was intended to be the tallest minaret in the world along with

the mosque, also intended to be the world's largest. In 1199, Sultan Yacoub al-Mansour died and construction on the mosque stopped. The Mausoleum, a more recent construction only completed in 1971, contains the tombs of King Mohammed V and his two sons, King Hassan II and Prince Abdallah. The building is considered a masterpiece of modern Alaouite dynasty architecture, with its white silhouette, topped by a typical green tiled roof. Inside of the Mausoleum is decorated with elaborate mosaics from floor to ceiling.

We had a brief walking tour of Rabat's government district. Walking near the Royal Palace and gazing at its impressive Bab ar-Rouah (Gate of the Winds).

Next we traveled on to Chellah which is a necropolis and complex of ancient Roman and medieval ruins at the outskirts of Rabat, Morocco. Here the Romans set up the outpost of Chellah, which became a thriving city. In the 13th century a sultan built a necropolis on top of the Roman site and surrounded it with defensive walls. Many of the structures in Chellah were damaged or destroyed in an 18th century earthquake.

OAT has arranged a very beautiful spot on the Atlantic Ocean for lunch today, Restaurant Borj Eddar (www.borjeddar.net). With a view of crashing surf beneath a lighthouse, we enjoyed a tasty very lunch. We started with a fresh salad, then the main course of skewered fish, grilled vegetables, and saffron rice...and for dessert we had ice cream. And no meal is complete in Morocco without mint tea.

Next stop was Kasbah des Oudaras, a quaint village-like quarter crammed with rows of whitewashed houses with brightly colored doors and ornate door-knockers. The Kasbah is also known for its Andalusia Gardens.

Just outside the walled village, was a pharmacy where Mary and Mohammed picked up some antibiotics to take care of Mary's sinus infection.

Then we stopped at Morocco's version of a WalMart, Marjane, to add to our stash of wine and snacks for the week.

Dinner was at a beautiful home in the medina that had been turned into a restaurant, Dar Rbatia Restaurant Marocain. Appetizers of carrots, eggplant, lentils and curried squash. Then Pigeon Bastilla (shredded pigeon/chicken, with cinnamon, powdered sugar, and other spices) followed by braised lamb shanks with prunes and apricots. For dessert, we had Ktefa, a dessert milk bastilla -- layers and layers of phylo dough sweetened fried almonds and a custard sauce (creme anglaise), that the waiter smashed with a fork before serving generous portions. All during the meal we were entertained by a musician playing a traditional Moroccan instrument.

The evening finished off with a night photo stop back at the Mausoleum of Mohammed V. The way the Mausoleum is lit at night is a sight not to be missed.

Tuesday, December 18th: Rabat to Fes, discover Volubilis

On our way to Fes we passed the King's ranch and the Royal Stables, unfortunately the bus fogged up and it was tough to see, and impossible to photograph. Mohammed told us that the King loves golf, but couldn't hit the ball out of the sand traps. He even hired Tiger Woods to give him lessons but it didn't help. So, for a while the golf courses in Morocco had no sand traps. If you're King, nothing is a problem.

We stopped to see Oak Cork trees and learn about the harvesting of the cork.

Mohammed also stopped the bus along the way to buy some acorns from the roadside sellers. This is the season when the acorns are harvested. They were fairly tasteless -- almost like coconut, but much milder.

Later we also stopped to see the asparagus and other vegetables being sold by the roadside. They are slightly different than the varieties available here in the USA.

We had a brief visit with Fatima at her farm house. She cooked scrambled eggs with rosemary for our group and warmed up some bread to serve with olive oil.

We passed through the town of Tiflet, a region rich with ancient history including a settlement by Phoenicians and Romans during the first millennium BC. Main income comes from farming. Before 9/11/2001 Tiflet had many Peace Corps workers helping local women in a beekeeping cooperative. The U.S. government evacuated them because of concerns over their safety post September 11th, 2001. Many Moroccans, who now live in Europe, build retirement homes here and come to work on their homes during the summer.

We arrived in Meknes and entered through the Bab el-Khemis which was build between 1061 and 1147 and is known as the Thursday Gate. The name came about because of its proximity to a nearby camel market which was held on Thursdays. It was also the entrance to the old Mellah or Jewish quarter and gardens.

Lunch was on a lovely restaurant balcony, overlooking Habs Qara (Prison of the Christian Slaves): A huge underground prison where Moulay Ismail "allegedly" kept Christian prisoners. Our lunch course started with a variety of olives, small plates of lentils, eggplant, and fava beans. The second course was the traditional Moroccan tasty soup of Harira. Then the main course was chicken kabobs, rice, and French fries. For dessert we were served fresh fruit.

We had a brief educational (and shopping) stop at a nearby craft shop. We learned that Damascene, or inlaid metalwork, is a specialty in the city of Meknes. Craftsmen inlay with a hammer ornamental wires of silver in a carved metallic surface, often on blackened surface metal. The pattern is typical of Islamic ornamentation, as are the panels of Arabic design on the sides of the animal. Mary looked around and took some photos, but no shiny item caught her eye.

After about a 45 minute drive, we arrived at Volubilis now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was once a Roman city built in ~40AD and remained with a population of ~20,000 for quite a while. The Romans at Volubilis exported the lions that were used in the fights at the Roman Coliseum. Mosaics still decorate the "rooms." People continued to live in Volubilis for more than 1,000 years. It was first abandoned in the 18th century when it was demolished to provide building materials for palaces in nearby Meknes. If that destruction had not occurred, Volubilis would have been one of the best preserved Roman sites anywhere. Today storks make nest high on top of the columns that are left standing.

We left Volubilis for Fes. Mohammed told us that the dogs waiting by the side of the road are not strays, but they learned to wait for people to throw them scraps of food.

We arrived in Fes and our hotel was the beautiful Riad El Amines. Riads are large private homes, usually with a garden in the center (ours had a lovely pool), that are currently being converted to hotels. We got the best suite in the Riad, Le Maalem. Not only are we told it is the suite that Bono of the band U2 stayed in while in Fes, but we can even get WiFi right at our desk in our suite...most of the time.

We had a delicious dinner right in the Riad. Delicious appetizers followed by a chicken with preserved lemon dish. For dessert, we had a very special sweet custard. And once again, all during the meal we were entertained by a musician playing a traditional Moroccan instrument. It really is these little touches that make the trip so nice.

Wednesday, December 19th: Fes

Today we have a "city guide", also named Mohammed. He takes us to our first stop this morning, the King's palaces in Fes, with its 7 doors, one for each day of the week. Followed with a walk exploring the traditional Jewish quarter called Mellah, during which we visited with a very cute kitten.

Then we stopped into the 17th century Aben Danan Synagogue of Fes. Closed during World War II and since then deteriorated, until 1996 World Monuments Fund assisted in its restoration project.

Next was a stop at a ceramics workshop to learn about Fes Moroccan pottery. The pottery in this area is special because it is lead free. After our educational lessons, the shoppers were released into the showroom with shopping baskets. The Shanghai'd for shopping day has begun.

Then was a walk through the crowded Fes medina, which is another UNESCO World Heritage Site, strolling past the merchants of all things imaginable.

We stopped into the courtyard of the Kairaouine Mosque, named after refugees from Kairawan in Tunisia. The mosque is the most important in the country, governing for

instance, the times of Ramadan, and the University is one of the oldest having been founded in 857A.D.

More walking through the labyrinth called the medina, but with a purpose...lunch. Surrounded with all of this history this morning, you know that OAT would select a historic lunch venue and they did. Restaurant Laanibra is a restored 14th-century palace hidden inside the medina. This meal started with sesame sprinkled honeyed sweet cookies (yummy), followed by the Harira soup, chicken kabobs, steamed veggies, and white rice. Fresh fruit and mint tea completed the meal.

After lunch, we did more walking through the medina. One of our destinations, the Bou Inania Madrasa, built in the mid 1350's, and as we were told, an excellent example of Berber architecture. The madrasa was both an educational institute and a congregational mosque and is the only madrasa in Fes with a minaret. It became one of the most important religious institutions of Fes and Morocco. The madrasa was renovated in the 18th century and then again in the 20th century and is one of the few religious places in Morocco accessible for non-Islamic visitors. It has beautiful carved wood, colorful tiles and carved plaster, inscribed with verses from the Koran.

Then the Shanghai'd for shopping day began in earnest – Our next stop was the jalaba/kaftan store... we learned about weaving fabric and how to properly wear a jalaba. And we learned not to mess with Nikki, as did the salesman who was trying to pressure her into trying something on!

The next stop was the infamous Fes tannery. Sheep, goat and cow skins are processed to make the millions of slippers, purses, and jackets that we've seen all over Morocco. They are cured, stretched, scraped and dyed in many vats. This process has basically remained unchanged since medieval times. The dyes are made of natural materials. A pungent mixture of pigeon poop, acids and cow urine is used to make the hides supple. Pretty gross. We we're given a sprig of mint for our noses to ward off the smell. And after photos, we were ushered through the various jackets, purses, slippers & belts showrooms.

Finally, we arrived back at our lovely Riad, with only a brief time for catching up with emails before we went off to our home hosted meal. We were very fortunate to be in a home with a college aged young lady and her mother. Only the young lady spoke English fluently, thou the mother spoke more English than we spoke Arabic. The mother prepared a bountiful meal, beginning with soup, then a wonderful salad, followed with a tasty tagine and the daughter had made a flan for dessert. Since the daughter was accustomed to visitors, she kept conversation flowing. She even brought out some Moroccan recipe books to share some of the recipes that we were enjoying this evening.

Thursday, December 20th: Fes to Erfoud

This morning we have to leave our lovely suite, for the unknown...

Leaving Fes, we leave the Arab area, for Berber territory. 56% of the population is Berbers, with a different language, different traditions and different customs. Luckily Mohammed is Berber and knows the area. According to Mohammed, the Arabs are more religious and more educated and Berbers are warmer and more hospitable.

We are now riding in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. The change in terrain to rocky fields, means a change in crops, the people here prefer to grow trees, specifically apple trees. People rent out their apartments in the Atlas Mountains during the summer to city people from Fes. The temperature is much better during the summer in the Atlas Mountains.

Once the Atlas Mountains were tree covered and filled with animal life. Mankind and our history destroyed both. There is a major reforestation project happening in the mountains and big fines are levied for anyone caught chopping down trees. Large fenced areas protect reintroduced species of wildlife.

Our next stop was Ifrane in north-central Morocco in the Middle Atlas Mountains. It's a fairly modern town catering to international tourists. The Switzerland of Morocco, they call it, with pseudo-Alpine villas and large suburban streets. It's also the home of Al Akhawayn University, based on the American system of education. In the city of Ifrane there is a statue paying tribute to the last Barbary lion of Morocco, which was shot in 1922 near the city.

Leaving Ifrane, we traveled through a cedar forest. There is a good bit of snow here... enough even to go sledding. Locals have made homemade sleds that look like pallets attached to skis. And they have set up little makeshift ski/sledding areas. Mary never wanting to miss any experience gets Mohammed to stop the bus so that she can take a trip or two down a slope in the Atlas Mountains...check that one off the list!

Next Mohammed has arranged an "impromptu" visit to a semi-nomadic woman's tent. Mohammed has done this many times, and comes prepared with groceries for each of us to give our hostess as she invites us into her humble dwelling. The man of the house was out tending the sheep while they graze. We were invited into her home where she offered us warm bread and olive oil. Semi-nomadic means that these people spend several months here, and when it gets too cold, they move down the mountain where they find food for their sheep.

After our visit, we continued on through the Middle Atlas Mountains down to the High Plains area between the mountain ranges. This area resembles the America's West. It was in this area that we reached Kasbah Asmar, our lunch stop. This area is known for its fresh water trout, which is what Mohammed has ordered for our lunch today. The ever familiar delicious soup starts the meal, and then fresh fruit including refreshing pomegranate was served for dessert.

Our next stop to stretch our legs, was for a walk through the tunnel Fom Zaabal which was dug by the French Foreign Legion around 1927...that was pretty neat to see.

It was a long ride, and the bus needed fuel and we needed a bathroom stop. Thankfully there is a modern gas station along the way. We all had fun browsing the shelves, picking out snacks and souvenirs.

Then we drove through the largest oasis in Morocco at 71 miles in length. This is the season when dates are harvested and we saw dates drying all over rooftops and any available open spaces.

We watched an amazing sunset from the bus just before pulling in to our "edge-of-the-desert" resort.

Dinner was at the hotel this evening. The dining room was cold, even after Mohammed started a beautiful fire. We were served soup first, then a unique tagine of turkey meatballs and eggs. Dessert was a flan with apple slices.

Friday, December 21st: Erfoud to Daya El Maider in the Sahara

After a relatively ho-hum breakfast, our luggage was carefully loaded on top of the 4x4's and covered up with tarps and we were on our way to begin our Sahara adventure...or so we thought.

Our last stop before we actually got to the Sahara, was the Manar Marble factory where tables, washbasins, fountains and other small items are made from fossils and trilobites. Millions of years ago, this area was the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. Pieces of rock containing fossils are harvested and are being made into items for sale. We bought a few small souvenirs.

Now we are in the Sahara... some amazing dunes, not the baby powder sand type of Tunisia, but amazing all the same. And some very flat and rocky moonlike surface that we are racing across.

We raced our 4x4's to the little village of Khamlia, for a performance of North African Berber music and dance performed by the group, Gnawa Khamlia. This village is the only settlement in Morocco where its entire people are from black African descendants, mainly from Sudan.

Next we race our 4x4's a little bit further to our waiting camels. Pete has decided to photograph the procession rather than ride another camel. Mary and the rest of the group rode for about an hour to our lunch tent site in the middle of the desert. The camels cooperated and gave us a nice gentle ride to lunch.

The first course for lunch was a cold salad of cooked bell peppers, zucchini, and tomatoes, cucumbers, and yellow rice. The main course was the most beautiful tagine,

with mutton, vegetables, and couscous. Apples and tangerines were offered for dessert.

After lunch, we loaded back up into the jeeps and went off racing through the desert. It was quite a drive from the camel ride to our eventual 2-night camping site and we did not arrive there until nearly sunset.

The camps here in Morocco are in some ways better than the ones in Tunisia, and in some ways, they make Mary miss Tunisia even more. In Tunisia, the drum of generator was not noticed until it was cut off near midnight, but here, you can already "hear" the silence... there is no generator.... Which means no charging camera batteries for the 2-days that we are here. The sand here is not as powdery as in Tunisia, as a matter of fact; all of Morocco has been much rockier. And then there are the dunes themselves. In Tunisia, they seemed endless, here the Sahara is flat with some dunes that go on for quite a while (but not endless) behind our tents.

We had just enough time to drop our stuff in the tent, and get up to the sand dunes to watch the sun set. It was a nice sunset. And we were looking forward to stargazing later in the evening.

Tonight the camp staff has prepared to educate us with a cooking class. They will show us how to prepare a basic chicken tagine. Simple for some but still a very complicated process; chop then cook for 10 minutes, chop more stuff add to the stuff that has cooked for 10 minutes, cook for another 20 minutes, chop more stuff, then add to the other stuff cook for another 10 minutes! Where is Emeril?!?

After the cooking lesson, we were all very hungry. And the camp staff did not disappoint, serving us the delicious traditional soup for starters. Then a main course of chicken with vegetables was served. For dessert we had sliced oranges with cinnamon.

We tried to do a little star gazing after dinner, but a lot of clouds had rolled in. Regardless, Pete used his Sky View app on his iPhone to locate various constellations and point those out to the group.

Saturday, December 22nd: Daya El Maider in the Sahara

Almost the entire group got up to see the sunrise from the dunes behind the tents (except Gen, who is the most current victim of the stomach bug). It was peaceful and beautiful on the dunes before first light. We saw tiny dung beetle tracks and desert jumping mice tracks. Pete and I climbed the highest dune, not many on this tour made it up that monster, the sand was deep and it was not easy.

After sunrise, a Berber breakfast was served. It is amazing what they server out here. The best breakfasts this entire trip was served at camp.

After breakfast, we walked the 45 minutes in the desert to visit with some nomads. The walk was pleasant and not difficult at all. The terrain is almost dirt road-like between our camp and the nomad's tent. Then entire walk we are followed by the 4x4's just in case we want a ride.

At the nomad's tent, we gather at the 4x4's to get the groceries to give to the nomads. Mohammed has sent bottled water, tea leaves and sugar ahead of our arrival so that the nomads who would, out of their generosity, serve us tea would have the proper items to do so (bottled water). In the nomad's tent, we take a seat and sip on mint tea while listening to stories of their lives and while the wife cards camel hair. Just outside the tent the children set up shop of their crafts and scarves.

We continue on in the 4x4's to visit two more nomad tents. At the first is a woman and her preteen daughter. Cynthia, from our group, has brought coloring books and gets the child to color. At the next camp there is a young woman baking bread in an outside clay oven.

It has already been an interesting morning and Mohammed isn't yet done with our discoveries. He takes us to a camel well. Pete and some others in our group get blessings by filling the trough for the camels.

Next we have a brief bathroom stop at an oasis, hotel, and bar that is frequented by rally drivers. Pete and Mary order a coke while perusing the trophies in the bar area.

Then Mohammed took us to a volcanic uplift for a geological lesson in Morocco's history...we went fossil hunting. Many of us had good luck and found some good souvenirs to take home.

Wow, it has been a busy day and we haven't even had lunch yet. Back to camp and lunch is served. We had a wonderful cold salad with rice, boiled eggs, tomatoes, cucumbers, cheese, tuna fish, corn, olives and bread. Dessert was bananas, tangerines, and pomegranates.

The afternoon was spent at leisure napping and reading at the camp, oh and taking a camp shower. The staff heats the water and puts in the container at the top of the "shower tents" when you are ready for your shower, gravity does the rest when you turn the shower on. Pretty good showers, considering the location.

Before dinner, Mohammed gave a talk on Islam. Then we were joined by the three nomadic ladies for dinner. Tonight's dinner was spaghetti. Dessert was chopped apples and oranges. After dinner there was drum music, singing and dancing. Then the whole party moved outside where there was a nice fire. Then there was some more singing and dancing.

And finally, the clouds were not so bad and we could see some stars!

Sunday, December 23rd: Daya El Maider in the Sahara to Tineghir

Our breakfast was Berber omelet -- pretty good, actually. Then, we all posed for a camp photo. This may have been the best part of the trip. Mohammed wanted to make sure we got some exercise today. So, after we packed up all of our stuff, we walked for about 45 minutes out into the Sahara while the drivers loaded up our stuff onto the 4x4's.

Soon enough the 4x4's came racing along and picked us up. Not long after that we came across a motorcycle driven by a nomad in full sandstorm dress herding camels -- quite the sight; we all took lots of pictures.

We had a quick visit with a young family eking out their survival on the edge of the Sahara herding goats. We gave them some of our remaining groceries.

All too soon we were leaving the Sahara behind. We made a stop at a Berber cemetery that was filled with far too many children. Until recently vaccines were not readily available in Morocco and the child mortality rate was reflective of that. Thankfully, that number is improving.

Then we had a brief stop at an outpost, where most everyone bought a cold beverage to drink while Mohammed led us on a tour of their garden. Not much was visibly growing at this time.

We drive on...and on...and on.

Our picnic lunch was leftover breakfast --bread, hard boiled eggs, cheese, a tomato and tangerines. The stomach bug that has been going around all week has claimed its' latest victim...Mary wasn't feeling well.

Then we continue to drive on...and on...and on.

Finally we arrived in Tineghir mid afternoon. Next on the agenda was the Hammam, the Turkish Moroccan baths, for those feeling adventurous -- Pete & Mary were not that adventurous.

Mary was not leaving the room for the foreseeable future. Pete enjoyed some relaxing time, before joining the group for dinner at the hotel.

Monday, December 24th: Tineghir

Mary was feeling ill and did not venture out of the hotel room most of the day. Pete took good care of her bringing her bread, bananas and tea from the breakfast offerings, all of which settled her stomach and got her back on the road to recovery (a good dose of pepto and a day of rest helped too). Then Pete joined the group for a day of discovery.

The town of Tineghir and the dwellings are the color of sand -- many homes looked like the adobe dwellings we have in our southwest.

After breakfast, it was back on the bus for a ride through the eastern part of the High Atlas mountains with its dramatic scenery. We drove down to the Todra Gorge, a canyon (or wadi), formed by the Todra and Dades rivers the last 2000' of the gorge are the most spectacular as it narrows to a flat stony track, in places as little as 33' wide, with sheer and smooth rock walls up to 525' high on each side. This tiny glacial stream was once a river which filled the gorge. Many adventurous rock climbers flock to this area. We had a beautiful walk along the bottom of the gorge and saw evidence of life in the gorge. People live in the gorge. We saw old adobe abandoned buildings -- they almost blended into the stone. As we ascended out of the gorge, we were awestruck by the colors -- all pink and ochre.

Next stop was the boarding school (funded in part by the Grand Circle Foundation). The school is quite unusual in that kids go to classes at various schools of their choice, but they board at this boarding school. Most are kids who don't have the discipline to study at home. The schedule is rigorous- they are up at 5 to pray, breakfast at 7, school from 9 - 12 and then 2 - 6. Homework for 2 - 3 hours, 6 days/week. The boys were terrific - friendly, smart, able to converse in English, or if not English, fluent French. The boys we spoke with all had lofty ambitions and it was fun to talk with them over lunch.

Before dinner, the ladies had their hands tattooed henna style by the hotels resident expert named, of course, Fatima. By this time, Mary was even feeling human again and joined in on the rest of the evening's activities. We hung out in the hotel's bar for a hour or so before dinner.

Dinner was at another hotel just a bit across town. It was to be dinner and a show. The meal was served in a tent-like building that was meant to make you feel as if a Sultan had invited you for a banquet. Mohammed joined the band singing and playing a drum. Bread and soup were served and Mary was happy. Then the main course of grilled chicken and vegetables were served. Mary's stomach was holding up, the food was tasty and the entertainment was wonderful. For dessert a plateful of beautiful fresh fruit was presented.

Tuesday, December 25th : Tineghir to Ouarzazate (pronounced "War za zat")

This was the day that the stomach bug would attack Pete; unfortunately it was to be a long travel day too. Pete secured the back of the bus and slept most of the day.

We enjoyed a scenic ride through the spectacular Dadès Valley. The valley itself is made lush and green by the river, while the surrounding area is a rocky desert. We got out of the bus and walked up the gorge for a bit and saw goats grazing on the cliffs of the gorge. There are simple communities still living in the valley of the gorge in traditional houses. We saw women washing laundry in the river and laying it to dry on the surrounding bushes and rock walls.

Next we continued our journey through the Middle Atlas Mountains along the salt route that the trading caravans would have taken on their way to Timbuktu, Niger and Sudan. In the olden days they were laden with salt which they would exchange across the desert for slaves and gold. We are still in the Berber area where the main industry is farming. We are getting to higher elevations. Although the date palm trees still grow, they don't produce fruit because of the elevation.

We came to the house of the Imam, our lunch stop for the day. Pete was still not feeling well and the Imam offered him a room to sleep in while the rest of the group was shown to the dining room.

We learned that after the attacks in Casablanca in 2003 (reportedly incited by radical Imams), Imams are now appointed by the government and are well trained by the Ministry of Religion to ensure that no extremist views are taught. To be an Imam, a man must have at least 6 years of religious and secular training and, in advance of attending Imam school, he must memorize the Koran. This is no small task since the Koran, according to one source, contains approximately 604 pages of non-linear structure – it has no defined beginning, middle, or end.

The wife of the Imam, made Berber pizzas for us as appetizers for lunch. Flat dough filled with a mixture of garlic and veggies folded up, then pounded flat, and baked in hot clay oven for a minute or two. Very yummy and Mary almost filled up on these.

Before the main lunch was served, the Imam and his brother re-enacted a wedding ceremony with Bob & Chris. They were dressed in traditional garb, a dowry of 4-acres & 2 goats was negotiated and the marriage contract was signed with no protest from other family members. It was interesting to learn about the customs in the Islam religion.

On with the meal...we had delicious soup, chicken, couscous, veggies, tea and fruit. The Imam showed us how to roll the couscous up in a ball and use 3 fingers to pop in his mouth. The Imam's home has been restored by UNESCO because it's a one of a kind building, really magnificent to tour around.

Then it was goodbye to the Imam and his family, and back onto the bus heading to Ouarzazate. On the way we were treated to some amazing scenery.

We had an amazing suite for this one night in Ouazazate. It even had a separate bathrooms off of the sitting/living room and another one off of the bedroom. We arrived at this hotel with plenty of time to even use the pool, but it was too cool. Mary walked around the resort and took pictures while Pete rested and tried to shake the effects of the stomach bug.

Dinner this evening was a plentiful buffet at the hotel. It even had real sweets for desserts not just fruit.

Wednesday, December 26th: Ouarzazate to Marakech

Breakfast this morning is a nice buffet. Mary is really misses BACON. There is no meat offered a breakfast. Of course, there will be no pork, meaning no bacon or ham, in an Islamic country but at this point Mary would try tofu bacon...desperation is setting in.

Ouarzazate is the movie capital of Morocco. It is the perfect setting for Egyptian and western movies and has been featured in many films. Ouarzazate became famous when it's nearby Kasbah appeared in the 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*.

We stopped at an overlook with a wonderful view of this Kasbah, Ait Benhaddou. It was there that Mohammed introduced us to a very interesting character and his critter, a non-venomous snake. Leaving our new friend, our next stop would be a short hike from the road to explore the ins and outs of Ait Benhaddou.

Climbing up the Kasbah, Mohammed introduced us to a local artist using an interesting technique of painting with natural water colors that darken when heat is carefully applied to the paper. A few of us even bought some souvenir paintings from this young fellow.

Continuing our climb up the Kasbah Mohamed explains that Ait Benhaddou is actually 6 kasbahs (city or fortress) and nearly 50 houses. Almost all are in ruins since most of the original inhabitants moved to the other side of the river, closer to the modern road.

Ait Benhaddou was named a world heritage site and is one of the most scenic places we've seen thus far. Morocco has undergone an attempt to save many of the kasbahs. Ait Benhaddou was established in the 13th century and the buildings are made of earth and straw and are scattered everywhere (as are the vendors).

We visited with a woman who still lives in the kasbah. Her daughters would like her to come and live with them, but she doesn't want to leave the village. We are told that she is very self-sufficient... we did see that she has several sheep living within her dwelling.

Some of us climbed to the top of the very top of the kasbah -- the views were fabulous. Along the way at a shop, we saw photos of the coliseum that played a prominent role in the movie *The Gladiator*, with Russell Crowe, Ait Benhaddou was used as a backdrop in that movie and in a few others; like *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Back on the bus, we drove through the High Atlas mountains. Lots of reforestation is currently taking place -- mainly oak and pine. We stopped at 6,400' for lunch. The lunch setting was breathtaking and chilly. We had a very nice meal of soup, Berber omelet, chicken shish ka bob, French fries, tangerines and hot tea.

After lunch, we reached the highest part of the road at 7,000'. Somewhere near there, we stopped at a scenic overlook where we had some very impressive views (but a bit chilly)! The road snaked down below us from the snow capped mountains.

Next, we stopped at a women's cooperative to see how argan oil is produced and processed. The oil is very valued and is used both in cooking and in beauty products. It's produced from the kernels of the argan tree, endemic to Morocco and well adapted to drought and other environmentally difficult conditions of southwestern Morocco. It grows wild in semi-desert soil, and its deep root system helps to protect against soil erosion. Argan oil remains one of the rarest oils in the world due to the small and very specific growing areas. Before modern times, the Berbers would collect undigested Argan pits from the waste of goats which climb the trees to eat their fruit. The pits were then ground and pressed to make the nutty oil used in cooking and cosmetics. The oil used in cosmetic and culinary products available today has most likely been harvested directly from the tree and processed with machines. But it was interesting to see the women actually cracking and pressing the pits using hand crank stone grinders.

Then it was on to Marrakech, the city of roses. And the roses were in bloom everywhere. As we drove into the city, Mohammed pointed out the La Mamounia, a luxury hotel where both Churchill and Roosevelt came when they met for the Casablanca Conference in 1943, and were said to have had discussions from the roof of the hotel while gazing out at the mountains and walls of the old city. Ronald and Nancy Reagan, Charles de Gaulle, and Nelson Mandela have also stayed at la Mamounia. Our hotel, not as ritzy as La Mamounia, but did have a 4* rating. The only thing that we thought was 4* was that it was in a very good location.

Thursday, December 27th: Marrakech

This morning, after a buffet breakfast at our hotel, we toured Marrakech in traditional horse-drawn *caliches* (carriages).

Our first stop was the Koutoubia mosque, the largest mosque in Marrakech. The minaret was completed in the 10th century and used as the model for the Giralda in Seville. It is considered the ultimate structure of its kind. The tower is more than 200' tall and has 4 copper globes at the top (rather than the 3 we have seen). According to legend, the globes were originally made of pure gold and the fourth globe was donated by the wife of the Calif who built the minaret, for her failure to keep the fast for one day during the month of Ramadan. She had her golden jewelry melted down to form the fourth globe. We had a group photo taken in front of the minaret.

Our next stop was the Bahai Palace in the medina along the northern edge of the Jewish quarter. It has beautiful architecture, colorful marble tiles and ornate wooden ceilings. It also, was much more crowded than any of the sites we have yet visited.

Even busier than the Palace was our next stop, at the Saadian Tombs. The Saadian Tombs were constructed during the reign of Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur in the late 16th century. The Tombs were re-discovered in 1917; restoration began shortly thereafter.

Our final stop of our caliche tour is the main square of Djemaa el Fna which is teeming with snake charmers, story tellers, fortune tellers, monkeys on leashes, water boys and enough sensory treats to cause overload. It's a bit too crazy for us.

Next Mohammed lead a stroll through the souk, an insane shopping experience, thousands of tiny stalls, each having "the best".

Today's lunch is not included in the tour. Mohammed suggested Portofino, a nice little Italian restaurant outside the souk for our lunch stop. We had a salad and Quarto Frommagia pizza. Our pizza choice was a poor one because it was really more like garlic bread since it was without red tomato sauce; just crust, garlic and four cheeses.

After lunch, we stopped off at the best gelato place in Marrakech (according to Mohammed). Pete still wasn't 100% so, we decided to return to our hotel rather than back to the craziness of the main square to rest for a few hours before this evening's excursion.

Well, Pete still wasn't up to a night out. So, poor Mohammed had only a bunch of crazy women to escort to the Djemaa el Fna square to see it at night. What a transformation! Food courts appeared with every kind of food imaginable available. We sampled steamed sheep's head and the snails (all under the supervision of Mohammed).

Then we went to a lovely restaurant, Dar Es-Salam, which was featured in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Plates and plates of appetizers were served. When a tasty tagine arrived so too did a Berber dancer bearing a tray of lit candles on her head. She proceeded to perform a dance requiring a high degree of balance. With the next course of food, the Berber band broke into some more oscillating music and an Egyptian belly dancer in a skimpy costume appeared performing a traditional Arabic belly-dance that seemed to never end (and somehow she never broke a sweat). The meal was exceptional. The entertainment was amazing too.

Friday, December 28th: Marrakech

After another buffet breakfast at the hotel, we hired a private guide and took off for the countryside of Morocco. This trip has been all about cities and Medinas, we wanted to see some nature, and Mary had found some information on the internet about a beautiful waterfall. The Ouzoud Waterfalls are the biggest waterfalls in Morocco, dropping 110 meters, and they are just a day trip from Marrakech. So, that is our destination today.

We hired a wonderful day guide to drive us around. He first took us to a surprise stop at a cave. There were concrete stairs that went steeply down from the road... Mary keep thinking what goes down must go up, and these stairs just went on forever it seemed.

We were rewarded at the bottom with lovely waterfall. Our guide took our picture in front of it, then said let's go explore the cave.

The cave is not a "developed" tourist site, there is no concrete pathway, no "safe" stairway with handrails... just large boulders, some slippery and icky places that our guide gives Mary a hand up and over. Pete seems to handle the terrain just fine. Once inside the cave, our guide gets to a certain place and tells us to turn around and look at the entrance... it is shaped just like the continent of Africa... cool!!!!

It is not yet, 9:30 am and Mary is thinking about all of those stairs... our guide just keeps going deeper in the cave. Then Mary finally realizes that the cave is under the road and we are not going back up the way we came down. The way out is through the cave and up the other side. There are some difficult spots, but the stairs up don't seem so imposing on this side.

Back on the road again, we snap photos of the Moroccan countryside. Our guide offers to stop any where that we want to see.

Our next stop is a bathroom stop at a gas station. Coincidentally, there is also a restaurant here that our guide tells us has the best tagines. They take hours to prepare, so he orders ours and then we head on to the Ouzoud Waterfall.

Once at Ouzoud, our day guide has to let us explore on our own. There are particular "tourist" licenses that he does not have that are required for him to accompany us down the well developed tourist path to the base of the waterfalls.

The stairway at Ouzoud Waterfalls is lined with vendors selling everything imaginable. The restaurants have tagines that smell wonderful, but this is the slow season and our guide warns us that the food may not be fresh. In the busy season, we are sure they do a good business and their food would be fine...but it is best to avoid it now.

We took our time at the Waterfalls. There are several overlook levels that we stop at and take many pictures. At the base, we watched several tourist board a decorated boat that took them into the pond at the base of the falls.

On our way back up the stairway at Ouzoud, we were able to see a family of Barbary macaques (monkeys) in the trees. They now only live in Morocco and Algeria in the Atlas Mountains, their wild numbers are declining and they are listed as an endangered species.

After our climb up the stairs at the waterfall, we had definitely worked up our appetite. It seemed like a long drive back to the gas station/restaurant for our tagine. Our guide was right the food was wonderful. We sat at a table outside, near an olive tree, looking at the snow covered Atlas Mountains... and we had a family of cats for companions. One of the cats was so photogenic. We spent a lot of time photographing him with the flowers after our meal.

Back on the road we arrived in Marrakech, before darkness. Our guide felt compelled to show us more. So, he drove us by the Kings Palace. Unfortunately, he did not know our luck with political uprisings...(6 months after we left Thailand...there were riots, while we were in Tunisia...the Arab Spring began...etc)....and while driving to the Palace we came upon police in riot gear, our guide was shocked...he never before saw such a thing... couldn't imagine what would be happening...every road he turned down seemed to be closed and it took some time to get away from the Palace. We never saw anything "bad", just police, and it shook our guide up. We told him that we really did need to get back to the hotel to prepare for our farewell dinner (truth) anyways. So, lets call it a day. So, he returned us to the hotel. Later we found out that electric and gas bills had been increasing to a point where the people had decided to protest at the Palace gates, riot police responded and sadly people were hurt. We arrived after it had "quieted down" but the police were still on the scene and had the roads "secured".

We got cleaned up and joined our OAT group for our fancy farewell dinner. We were loaded on the bus and driven near the square, where we ate at a fancy French restaurant. There were signs at the door of the awards that they had won. Honestly, it was not one of Mary's favorite meals. The first course was a chicken noodle soup, then we were served a mushroom gravy covered chicken with steamed vegetables and buttered spaghetti. Dessert was a flan.

Saturday, December 29th: Marrakech to Casablanca

We left Marrakech at 8:30 bound for Casablanca.

Our first stop was at the Berber pharmacy and herb shop (to buy spices). We were educated on the many uses for the many many Moroccan spices. The salesperson had the flair of the best snake oil salesman of the old old West. But she was successful; I think she sold something to just about everyone of us.

After much driving on the major highway, we stopped at a gas station/convenience store. This was a really modern business much like our Race Trac's or Quick Trips here in the US. Everyone had fun shopping for snacks.

Casablanca is Morocco's largest city as well as its chief port. Casablanca is the economic and business center of Morocco, while Rabat is the political capital. The Port of Casablanca is one of the largest ports in the world and the primary naval base for the Royal Moroccan Navy. The French built its huge harbor. Textiles are the main industry of Casablanca with much competition from China. There are lots of job opportunities but living expenses are extremely high.

We drove through the upscale area and saw the building where Churchill, FDR, DeGaulle and Mohammed V met to discuss WWII. The King of Saudi Arabia has a magnificent home high on a hill near this part of Casablanca.

Our next stop was the King Hassan II Mosque - a magnificent building --the 3rd largest mosque in the world after Mecca and Medina. It was completed in 1993 and has been estimated to have cost as much as 800 million. Almost all the materials of the Hassan II Mosque are from Morocco, with the sole exceptions of the imported white granite columns and glass chandeliers from Murano and marble from Carrara. More than 6,000 Moroccan master craftsmen and artisans were employed to work these local materials into the intricate decorations that embellish the entire structure. When construction passed its deadline in the early 1990s, 1,400 men worked by day and 1,000 worked by night to bring the vast project to completion. It is estimated to hold 100,000 people. Even non-Muslims such as ourselves can take a tour of this beautiful Mosque.

After our tour of the Mosque our bus, dropped us off a few blocks from where Mohammed suggested that we should have lunch today. Costa Brava is a local deli/café which serves a sandwich called a schwama. A schwama has meat in it that is a lot like our gyros. Conveniently, the restaurant is just a few blocks from our hotel.

The friendly staff at the Moroccan House Hotel greeted us with tea and cookies. We were given the lovely “green suite”. The room was quite comfortable for a one night stay. This hotel was so much nicer than the one in Marrakech.

Dinner tonight was “on our own” and most of the group had gathered for dinner at Rick’s Cafe (from the movie Casablanca)...Pete and I asked for a private table (wanting to be “romantic” – best move all trip). And one of the best meals of the trip.

Sunday, December 30th: Casablanca to Paris/Paris to Atlanta

We had to get up at 2 or 3 am to get to the airport to catch our flight. The staff at the Moroccan House Hotel set up a lovely breakfast buffet and were on hand to take care of anything that we needed, sending us off with a smile.

We had an easy uneventful flight. The onboard meals were not too bad. And so ended another fabulous trip!