

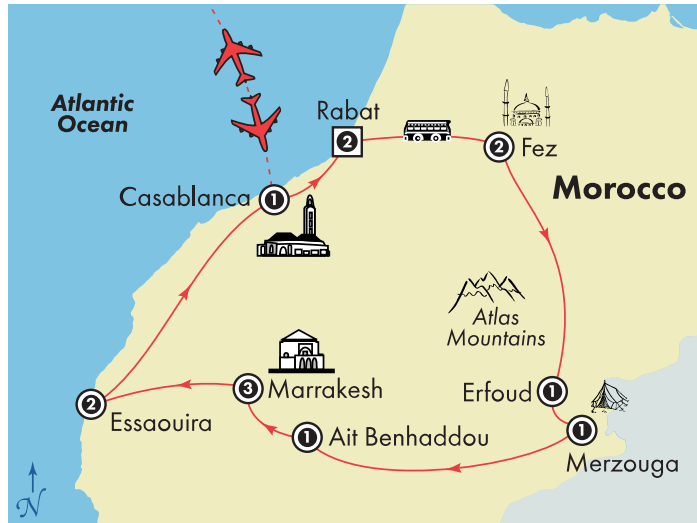
Morocco – “Gate 1 Tour”

(Nov. 3-18, 2019)

Where is Morocco and why did we decide to go there? Morocco, officially the Kingdom of Morocco, is a country located in the Maghreb region of North Africa. It overlooks the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. The capital is Rabat and the largest city is Casablanca. Morocco spans an area of over 440,000 square miles and has a population of over 36 million.



Africa – Showing Morocco



Our Tour Around the Country

Why are we going here? Is Morocco safe?

Where else can you ride a camel at sunset and stay the night in a Berber tent in the Sahara Desert, under more stars than you have ever seen before, and then the next day sleep in a luxurious boutique hotel (called a riad)? And, we can say without hesitation that it is a very safe country. It is stable politically and welcomes thousands of tourists and travelers every year.

Our story began in New York City, where we visited Times Square, then spent a day with our Grandson Aydan and toured the American Museum of Natural History.



Times Square, New York at Hershey Choc World



Museum of Natural History – with Aydan

After dinner with Aydan at the local Shake Shack, Donna & I said goodbye then boarded our flight from JFK to Casablanca, via Royal Air Maroc. We landed in Casablanca around 9:30am on Monday morning where we met our “Gate 1” guide and tour bus that immediately took us on a 2 hour ride to the Villa Mandarin hotel in Rabat, our “official” first tour stop in Morocco.

We met our “Gate 1” group travel companions at the 6:30pm orientation meeting followed by dinner (our first taste of real Moroccan food.)



Royal Air Maroc Arriving in Casablanca



Villa Mandarin Resort – Rabat



Group Orientation Mtg/Dinner

The next morning we toured the capital city of Rabat – stopping at the Galerie Bab Rouah (Gate of the Wind), the Royal Palace and a walking tour of the ancient Roman city of Chellah (Sala). *Excavations show a substantial port city with ruined Roman architectural elements including a principal roadway, a forum and a triumphal arch. Sala was a center of Christianity from the 2nd century. Salā was the name given to the city founded by the Muslim conquerors of North Africa, which was mostly abandoned, then rebuilt in the 13th century. The ruins of their medieval fortress are still visible. The Berbers used the site as a royal burial ground. The Marinids made the site a holy necropolis, or chellah, and built a complex that included mosque, minaret, and royal tombs. The tall minaret of the now-ruined mosque was built of stone and tilework, and still stands.*



Ruins of the Ancient Roman City of Sala (Chellah)

Our next stop was the Hassan Tower (Unfinished Mosque) and Mausoleum of Mohammed 5th. (See photos on the next page) Next to the mausoleum of Mohamed V is situated the biggest failure of Morocco, the Rabat Tower. This minaret was once planned to become the highest minaret of the largest Mosque of Morocco, but they ran out of money and the Tower was only

half-way finished and the pillars of the Mosque only partly. Nevertheless, this unfinished Mosque attracts hundreds of Muslims to pray there.



Rabat's Unfinished Mosque



Entrance to the Mausoleum of Mohammed 5th



Our final stop for the day was to the Kasbah of the Udayas – a UNESCO World Heritage site.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kasbah_of_the_Udayas - This is a charming walled place with old houses and narrow cobbled streets. All the houses are painted in white with blue shades. One side is lying on the Atlantic Ocean.



Walled Kasbah of the Udayas



White & Blue Buildings



Facing the Atlantic Ocean

The following morning our bus headed to the city of Fes, stopping at the Bab El Camis (Thursday Gate) at the town of Meknes, and visiting nearby Volubilis, another UNESCO World Heritage Site, listed for being "an exceptionally well preserved example of a large Roman colonial town on the fringes of the Empire". <https://www.timetravelturtle.com/volubilis-ruins-morocco/>



Ruins of the Ancient Roman City of Volubilis

It grew rapidly under Roman rule from the 1st century AD onward and expanded to cover about 100 acres with a 1.6 mi circuit of walls.

The following morning we did a walking tour of Fez stopping to visit the Fondouk (woodcarving museum) then onto the “Chouara tannery,” one of the most visited sites in Fez Medina; due to the fact, that it is one of the oldest tanneries in the world; where good quality leather used in famous trademarks is treated with natural materials in those tanneries.



The ancient city of Fez houses within its walls an exquisite collection of monuments and sights that showcase the rich history and traditions of the Moroccan people. One of these monuments is Fondouk an 18th century roadside inn transformed into a museum dedicated to the wooden arts and crafts typical of Morocco.
 ← Entrance ::::::::::: Inside →



The largest of the three tanneries of Fez is the ← **Chouara Tannery**, which is also one of the city’s most iconic sights. The Chouara Tannery is reputed to be the oldest tannery in the world, and the site has not changed since the 11th century.

That night we had a special Moroccan dinner at our hotel with our some friends from our tour group, and we all dressed for the occasion.



Carey & Donna at the Riad Fes hotel’s Moroccan dinner, with some new friends from this Gate 1 tour of Morocco.

Restored to its original glory, Riad Fès - Relais & Châteaux are located in the heart of the ancient city of Fez. It has succeeded in combining refinement with inspiration and allowed us to relax and enjoy our stay in a serene atmosphere with decor reminiscent of Arabian Nights.

Our Friday morning bus trip to our Sahara Desert hotel was momentarily interrupted because of a minor bus accident. It seems our tour bus and an overweight hay truck collided causing enough damage to our bus that we were forced to vacate it. Luckily, and by sheer chance, another tour bus from the same bus company (with only 13 passengers), picked us up and took us to our hotel. The resulting 2-hour delay didn't have any significant impact on our journey and no one was injured, so all is well.



Bus accident on the way to the Sahara



Smashed window on our 48 passenger bus

We arrived at the Kasbah Xaluca Maadid resort in Erfoud in time for an 8:15pm dinner. Erfoud is a city known as "the Door to the Desert."



The Kasbah is listed as unique in Morocco due to its distinctive characteristics. It was built with the traditional Moroccan building bricks, and it is a perfect place to relax & enjoy the moment. It has 137 spacious rooms decorated with regional materials and combines tradition with modern amenities, a fantastic place, situated among the dunes and palms.

We were all looking forward to the next day's activities – a visit to the ammonite fossil factory followed by the excursion into the Sahara Desert – the largest hot desert on Earth.

Morocco has vast deposits of Devonian Limestone which date back three hundred fifty million years. Ammonites found today in Morocco once flourished in a warm shallow sea which covered what is now the Sahara Desert. As the shells of the creatures accumulated on the sea floor, they were buried by sediments and, over the ages, transformed into stone by physical and chemical processes. Today they are quarried from a marble (calcium carbonate) deposit. The stone is carved and polished by Moroccan craftsmen to reveal a rare glimpse of ancient life on earth.



Tour of the Ammonite factory and Visitor's Center

Around 3:00pm we began our drive, in 4-wheel drive vehicles, to the Sahara Desert. Keep in mind that the Sahara is about the same size as the continental US, so its big (to say the least).

One of the special things about being on a guided tour is that the guide arranges events for you typically would not do simply because you don't know that it's possible. In this case, we stopped at the home of a Berber lady and shared tea with her and her family. **Who are the Berbers?**



Our visit to a Berber tent on our way to the Sahara Desert

The Berbers are a light skinned people who have been called by many names: Libyans by the ancient Greeks, Numbians, and Africans by the Romans and Moors by medieval Europe. In fact, it was the Arabs who came up with the Berber name. Islam came to the Berbers in the 9th and 10th centuries. Prior to then, most Berbers across Africa were Christian or Jewish. Two great Islamic Berber dynasties, Almoravids and Almohads, ruled large parts of Spain and northwest Africa. Today, most of the Moroccans are either Berbers, Arabs, or Moors (people of Berber/Arab decent). Their ancestors became the Almoravids and Almohads that built the mighty Moorish empire that ruled Spain, Portugal and Northern African.

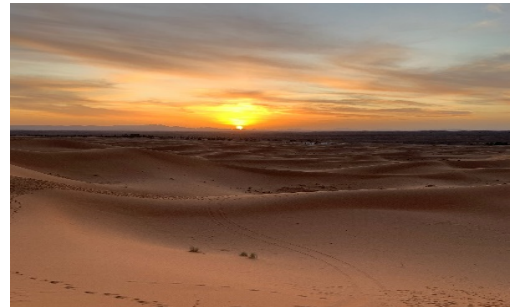


Here is a Berber “nomadic” woman serving our group tea in her tent.



This is home for her family.

The highlight of this trip was the camel ride into the sunset in the Sahara Desert and staying overnight in a tent where the dunes rise and fall around you. You can actually feel the adventurous spirit of the ancient explorers.



This is definitely an adventure that everyone should have on their “bucket list.”



A Moroccan band greeting us after the ride. / Campfire / Moroccan Dinner / Our carpeted campsite

We awoke the next morning amidst the silence of the desert as Morocco’s natural beauty continued to astound us. It was a cold night in the desert but there were plenty of warm blankets inside our tent, so we slept well. By the way, our tent was complete with a toilet and shower, however it was way too cold to take a shower in the morning. After breakfast we left the camp and made our way to the oasis of Tinghir. The real attraction here is the spectacular Todgha Gorge, a deep ravine carved by the Todgha river over many centuries.



Todra Gorge and River

The Todgha Gorge is a series of limestone river canyons, or wadi, in the eastern part of the High Atlas Mountains in Morocco, near the town of Tinerhir. Both the Todgha and neighboring Dades Rivers are responsible for carving out these deep cliff-sided canyons, on their final 25 miles through the mountains. The height of the canyon walls can vary, but in some places can be up to 1300 feet high.

Dinner tonight was at the Ait Benhaddou hotel near the UNESCO World Heritage site of the same name.

Ait Benhaddou is an ighrem along the former caravan route between the Sahara and Marrakech. Inside the walls of the ksar (fortified village) are half a dozen kasbahs, or merchants' houses. Ksar Ait Benhaddou is a great example of Moroccan earthen clay architecture and has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1987. (See pictures on the next page.)



Visit to and climb up to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ait Benhaddou

Later that day we drove to the mythical city of Marrakech. The “Red City” of Marrakesh is a magical place, brimming with markets, gardens, palaces, and mosques. The main square is a place of wonder and mystery, with snake charmers, great food and a souk like no other.

Our tour of Marrakech began at the Saadian Dynasty Tombs which are located just outside Marrakech and were constructed during the reign of Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur in the late 16th century. This is the resting place of al-Mansur, his family, and other notable officials from that era. These tombs were discovered in 1917; restoration began shortly thereafter. Today, much of its original splendor has been restored.

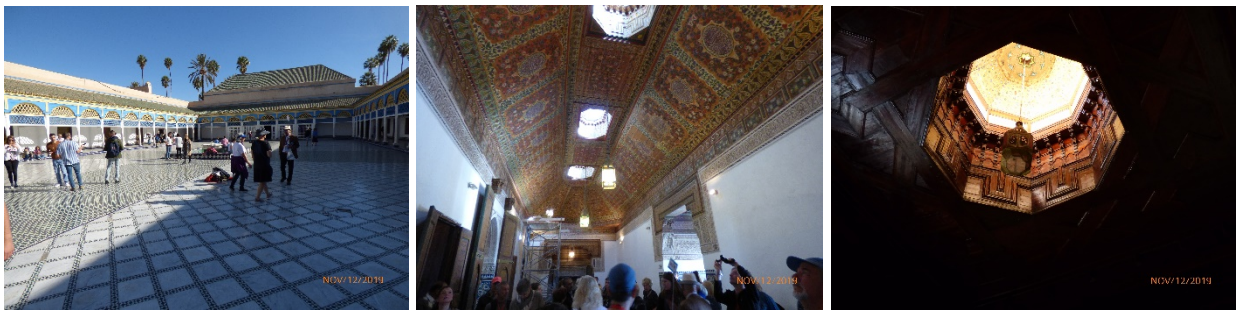


The sacred tombs of the Saadian Dynasty – the resting place of over 60 members of the Saadi family

We spent the next several minutes hanging out with “the Water People” near the Koutoubia 12th century mosque, followed by a private tour of the Bahia Palace. *It was built in the late 19th century, intended to be the greatest palace of its time. The name means “brilliance”. As in other buildings of the period in other countries, it was intended to capture the essence of the Islamic and Moroccan style.*



← Hanging out with “the Water People” near the Koutoubia 12th century mosque. This is an amazing structure, the largest mosque in Marrakech, surrounded by beautiful gardens just off the main square where you can buy everything from lamps to orange juice. They are called “Water People” because they wait at the fountain and charge tourist to take a picture with them.



Photos from inside the Bahia Palace -----

A stop at the Jardin Majorelle was followed by an afternoon at the “main square.” *The Majorelle Garden is a two and half acre botanical garden and artist's landscape garden. It was created by the French Orientalist artist, Jacques Majorelle over almost forty years, starting in 1923, and features a Cubist villa designed by the French architect, Paul Sinoir in the 1930s. The property was the residence of the artist and his wife from 1923 until their divorce in the 1950s. In the 1980s, the property was purchased by the fashion designers, Yves Saint-Laurent and Pierre Bergé who worked to restore it.*



The Jardin Majorelle in Marrakech is one of the most visited sites in Morocco.

You could spend your entire day at the “main square” in Marrakech. There is so much to see and do. Many of our fellow travelers spent most of the rest of the day here. Donna & I ate lunch (Moroccan pizza) at one of the local eateries ; shopped around for an hour or so for a souvenir or two; marveled at the snake charmers, then, needing a break, took the bus back to our hotel.

Panoramic view of Jemaa el-Fnaa – the “main square” in Marrakech. (Courtesy of Wikipedia)



Our Moroccan Pizza



----- Snake Charmer with deadly cobra's -----



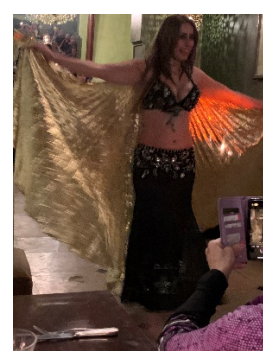
Upon our return to the hotel we took a one hour nap (old people do that you know!!) then got ready for our evening **horse drawn carriage ride** to the Lotus Privilege restaurant for a lavish dinner and a show (a classic Moroccan band with an elegant belly dancing performance.)👏😊



Horse drawn carriage ride through the city



Band that greeted us at the restaurant



Belly Dancer

The next day we toured the Ourika Valley and Botanical Gardens and had a mint tea demonstration at the home of a local Berber family.



The Ourika Valley is about 35 miles from Marrakech. Situated in the foothills of the Atlas mountains it contains a number of Berber Villages, female cooperatives manufacturing Argan Oil and set of waterfalls near the Ourika itself. One of the richest valleys in Morocco with flowing water, abundant trees, dazzling flowers, blooming bushes, and magnificent waterfalls.



Invited in for a cup of hot tea, we also had the opportunity to tour the Berber home including the kitchen, living quarters, and below the home where livestock (a cow, two sheep and a mule) was kept stabled.

During our visit to the Botanical/Herb Gardens we were treated to a “Berber foot bath.” A small in-ground pool is filled with steaming hot water, then the cool water is added slowly until it is just the right temperature for your personal taste. A concoction of seaweed, herbs and aromatics is added to the water as we relaxed and enjoyed our pampering time.



Botanical / Herb Gardens

***** Enjoying the Berber Foot Bath *****

On day 12 of our trip we went to school – cooking school. One of the highlights of the trip for Donna - we spent the morning in an authentic Medina’s Riad to learn from one of the best “Dada chefs” in town, how to prepare traditional Moroccan tajine and salads, as well as Moroccan flat bread. (A “Dada” is a traditional Moroccan chef)

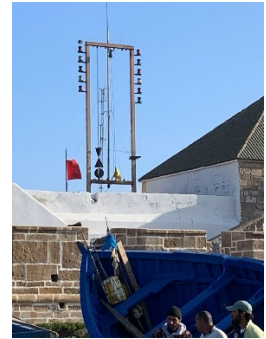


After eating what we cooked we were on our way from Marrakech to Essaouira. We made a brief stop at the Argan Oil Women’s Coop to learn how this elixir is extracted from the argan nut. But, a funny thing happened on the way. We saw “goats in trees.” That’s right – can you believe it? Goats in trees. Well – now we can cross that one off our “bucket list.”



Argan Oil Women’s Co-op – women extracting argan nuts from their shells – by hand.

The seaport town of Essaouira is a UNESCO World heritage listed city bordering the Atlantic ocean, with Portuguese, French and Berber architecture. It's a place to relax and explore the ancient streets and bustling fish market. We spent two nights here.



Our day at leisure began with a one-hour orientation walk & talk around the city, led by a local guide. Donna spent the next couple hours shopping while I walked the beach and other parts of the city taking pictures. Later we had lunch at a local café. Followed by more local site-seeing and shopping. Dinner was at the hotel accompanied by a traditional Moroccan band.



Moroccan Band



Donna & several of the other people, both women and men, chose to have traditional Moroccan "henna" tattoos painted on their arms.

The next day we were back on the motor-coach and headed back to Casablanca, our starting point of this tour. When many of us think of 'Casablanca', we remember it as a **romantic film** (well, most of us do). But then again, it's also a drama involving terror, murder and flight. One can call it a character study, centering on Rick (Humphrey Bogart). Well – guess what? We've never watched that movie - until now. That's right – our tour guide, Moha, played the movie on the screen in the bus while driving to the fabled city itself.



After we arrived, we were taken to the Mosque of Hassan II – the largest mosque in Morocco, the second largest in Africa, & the 5th largest in the world. Its minaret is the world's tallest at 689 feet.



The mosque stands on a promontory looking out to the Atlantic Ocean; worshippers can pray over the sea but there is no glass floor looking into the sea. The walls are of hand-crafted marble and the roof is retractable. A maximum of 105,000 worshippers can gather together for prayer: 25,000 inside the mosque hall and another 80,000 on the mosque's outside ground.

Our farewell dinner was on the top floor of the Kenzi Hotel in downtown Casablanca. It was fantastic as was our tour. When people throw around the word 'exotic', they're most likely referring to places like Morocco. Places where riding a camel over dunes while the sun shimmers dramatically on the horizon is not an unusual thing. Where tagines with chicken

come spiked with saffron and argan, carpet merchants haggle in the bazaars and Berber tribesmen herd goats on the slopes of the High Atlas Mountains. A Morocco tour is basically the answer to all your Lawrence of Arabia-type fantasies. We stayed in historic riads, camped beneath the Saharan stars and enjoyed classic Moroccan music, food and hospitality. Whether it was the wind-battered port town of Essaouira or the crumbling Kasbahs and oases of the deep desert – ‘exotic’ doesn’t come close. Don’t take my word for it. Go see. You won’t regret it. ---- *Safe travels* -----

Back On the Road Again – *Carey & Donna Beamesderfer* – Dec. 28, 2019

<https://careystravelsite.shutterfly.com/>