

Morocco 2019

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Dubai to Casablanca

(Shari) Anticipating another long travel day, I awake two hours before my 3:30 AM alarm. A taxi takes us to the airport where we have no waiting lines. Security again pulls me aside for a pat down. It has happened on every international flight so far. I wonder what is suspicious about me.

Bert and I share three seats on our Emirates flight so we have plenty of room. We are definitely in the nationality minority, surrounded by Arab dress and voices. Luckily, signs and announcements are also repeated in English. As we approach Casablanca, I cannot help but notice its difference from Dubai. Stretching before me out the jet window is miles and miles of farmlands, though no skyscrapers. As our prearranged driver takes us into the city, we see more single-family homes and no skyscrapers. Our hotel is luxurious and provides us with a refreshing mint tea and cookies. Our room is huge, overlooking the busy city and a distant view of the Atlantic Ocean.

(Bert) In my mind's eye, Dubai is not far from Casablanca. However, our flight takes six hours, traveling from the Middle East to northwestern Africa. We pick up our baggage and walk outside to the area where we will meet the hotel driver. We see no sign with our name on it and after a long wait, Shari calls the hotel and they call the driver. Turns out, he was waiting for us inside the terminal. The drive from the Casablanca airport to Casablanca city center is at least 45 minutes, slowed noticeably once we get into city traffic. We are pleasantly surprised by our European-style hotel. I take photos from our balcony.



Massive chandelier in hotel lobby



Mint tea and cookies served upon arrival



Casablanca, with Atlantic Ocean on horizon



Lesser Black-backed Gulls fill the air and rest on construction crane



Minaret and adjacent mosque



Neighboring homes and gardens



Shopping center



Transportation contrast

Casablanca to Chefchaouen

(Bert) Yesterday was a day to rest, the first in two months. Today we leave our wonderful hotel room and travel north with our new group and Moroccan guide, Rachid, in a minivan. The drive is perhaps best told by photos which give us our first feel for Morocco. Casablanca is a large city and it takes a long time to exit. We see quite a variety of housing, mostly reasonably kept apartments. However, recent itinerate travelers from rural areas, unable to secure employment, live in leanto shacks under deplorable conditions.



Our room at the Casablanca Hotel



Busy Casablanca in the morning



Casablanca apartments



Slum where recent immigrants from rural areas are forced to live



All apartments are crowned by multiple TV antennas

Outside the city we find our first pair of White Storks standing on their very tall nest. When we traveled in Europe, and especially Poland, we found many stork nests, but that was after the storks had migrated south. So, this is my first time to see one in the wild. It certainly is not my last, as only a few miles later we see a farmfield covered with white dots: hundreds of storks.



First view of White Storks



Field of White Storks



Closeup of the storks

(Shari) Who would look forward to a seven hour bus ride? Contrary to what you might expect, it is wonderful. Our guide tells us about how people live, often using old farming methods to plow, plant, and harvest. Leaving the crowded city of Casablanca behind us, the highway winds through recently plowed farmlands, hillsides of olive trees, and acres of cork forests used to make wine corks. Our group of twelve is friendly and talkative and time quickly slips by. Stopping for a potty break at a nice clean new gas station many of us try the nous nous, a coffee milk drink. Later our lunch stop us at sidewalk cafe with meat hanging on hooks and tangines filled with steaming flavorful vegetables and kefti, grilled flavorful meatballs. The bread that goes with it is delicious. Our drink is the ever present mint tea.



Rural town along the Atlantic Ocean



Plowing field with a mule

(Bert) At our first stop, Jeff and I go to the back of the gas station to look for birds, finding a non-descript Common Chiffchaff that rarely stays still for photos. Better is a magpie that at first struck us as the Common Magpie, often seen in Europe. However, we noticed an unusual blue mark behind the eye that stood out even from a great distance. After studying eBird, a bird app, and a bird field guide, we deduced it is a Maghreb Magpie.



Common Chiffchaff



Maghreb Magpie



The magpie was sitting on the donkey when I lined it up for a photo, but flew off just as I snapped the shutter.



Guineafowl in same orchard as the magpies



Donkey cart



Rural farmhouse



Farm plots surrounded yucca



Rainbow over olive trees

Chefchaouen 1

(Bert) We reach Chefchaouen in late afternoon in light rain. We are immediately stuck by its blue houses and walls and want to stop for photos, but with the rain we decide to do it another time. We check into our hotel, one that looks like it is hundreds of years old, but is rather recently built. The rooms are small, designed in suites with Jeff and Barbara in one room with bath and shower, us in another one, also with bath and shower, and sharing a large living area. Rooms are cold, so Shari immediately turns on the heater for our bedroom.



(Shari) Climbing the mountain, the bus turns the corner to a city painted in blue, Chefchaouen. As we approach our destination, it is raining pretty hard. Some still get off the bus to take a picture of the blue buildings set against the mountains. Our hotel has mint tea and date and peanut cookies for us before handing out room assignments. The hotel is a collection of small buildings, each with two rooms sharing a sitting area. Jeff and Barbara are our suite mates. The room is small and unfortunately our suitcases land on the floor. The only thing disconcerting in the whole city is the thousands of steps. There must be 100 from the street to our room. Later, before dark we take a walk in the city and climb and descend more steps than I care to count. Barbara's fitbit says it was 85 flights. Dinner at the hotel was preordered before our walk. Bert has kebabs and I have chicken couscous. Mine tastes like something I make at home, good but not special. Cheese pie for dessert is good. All of us are tired and welcome our bed at 9 pm.

(Bert) Once we are settled, Rachid leads the group on a city walk. I should have taken my walking stick along, as there are hundreds of steps, mostly down to the city center and market but, of course, steps up on the way back to the hotel. Chefchaouen is a city in the Rif Mountains of northwest Morocco. The city is noticeably built on a steep incline and no street is flat for more than a few dozen feet. As dusk settles into nightfall, the city lights illuminate the blue-washed buildings. With the addition of numerous narrow streets, it makes for a photographer's delight.



Blue-washed Chefchaouen







City market



Candlelight dinner

Chefchaouen 2

(Shari) Call to prayer happens five times per day. Loud speakers are placed all over the city for people to hear the call. This morning the Imam chants a full 29 minutes, starting at 6 AM. If I had a thought of sleeping in, that was discarded. We want to walk around the city before the shops open to experience the city's blueness. That we do.



Morning walk in blue Chefchaouen



Chefchaouen and the Rif Mountains

(Bert) Our bus is ample enough for each of us to have three seats, so traveling through the countryside is comfortable and our visibility is enhanced with huge tinted windows. Today we ride through the Rif Mountains to visit a family in their rural home. We meet Mohammed, his wife, two children, and the wife's sister. The precocious young girl steals the stage, eagerly showing us her coloring books and posing for photos. Through Rachid's interpretation, the adults answer questions from us and we learn about their lives, work, and family. Mohammed leads us in a downhill walk to the olive press he uses to get olive oil from trees on his property. Jeff and I study birds we see, several of which are life birds and others we have rarely seen: Sardinian Warbler, European Stonechat, Water Pipit, Crested Lark, and several Chough (rhymes with rough) that I deduce to be Red-billed Choughs. Just as our bus leaves the family, we see a Eurasian Kestrel hovering right beside the bus. I quickly snap a series of photos and then take more when it rests in a nearby tree.

(Shari) After walking in Chefchaouen, we have breakfast before getting into the bus for our home farm tour. The family hosting the tour lives on an olive orchard and they press their own olive oil. The couple's two little girls are adorable and we get a glimpse of Moroccan country life. We are greeted with mint tea and cookies and then walk downhill to the olive press. After the climb back uphill we have lunch of two plates of assorted vegetables and meat with homemade bread baked in a clay oven. After the drive back to Chefchaouen it is nap time.



Rif Mountains



Mountain road at elevation with few trees



Olive Tree



Olive Tree leaves and black olive





Village mosque



Olive press



Walking uphill from olive press to the farm home



Dinner



Red-billed Chough



Crested Lark



Sardinian Warbler



Hovering Eurasian Kestrel



Eurasian Kestrel

Chefchaouen 3 Tetouan

(Bert) Today we head to Tetouan by motorcoach, again enjoying the scenery of the Rif Mountains. Just at the edge of the city we stop to see a sheep market. A big truck is overloaded with hay bales and one man is throwing off bales next to an open lot crowded with sheep. Herdsmen tend to their sheep and haggle with potential buyers over price and quality. I am frequently distracted from the sheep sale to look skyward. Dozens, later hundreds, of gulls float over the city and river, all of them apparently Yellow-legged Gulls. A flock of black birds, Eurasian Jackdaws, fights strong winds as it attempts to land in a treetop. We stop at a restaurant for toilets and a coffee break. I pass on the coffee, remaining outside to watch storks perched atop a communications tower. With only room for three of the oversized birds, whenever one flies in for a landing, a perched bird is forced to take off.

(Shari) We cross the mountains, unbelievable landscapes, to visit a unique city center, a Medina. Along the way, we make an unscheduled stop at a sheep market. Hundreds of sheep with front legs tied together are unloaded from trucks into a large grassy area in town. Here people come to buy them. Trucks and trucks of hay wait nearby.



Overloaded trucks with hay bales at sheep market



Sheep Market



Bound sheep



Yellow-legged Gull



Hundreds of Yellow-legged Gulls



Eurasian Jackdaws



White Storks



White Stork

Chefchaouen 4 – Tetouan

(Bert) Every village has a mosque and larger towns have multiple mosques, but here in Tetouan we also see a Christian church. Other religions are tolerated without prejudice, the only restriction being that they cannot proselytize. We visit a Jewish synagogue that has less than a dozen members. Most Jews left Morocco to go to Israel upon its formation, although they had been accepted in Morocco. The caretaker shows us a very old Torah that is written on goatskin.



Christian church in Tetouan



Torah scrolls in Jewish synagog

(Shari) The Medina is an old labyrinth of alleyways, each with their own theme: leather area, gold area, bakery goods, women's clothes, and on and on. Walking through the busy narrow streets sided by

crowded vendors, I am happy a policeman accompanies us and I notice we are not inundated with pesky vendors that do not accept “no” for an answer. However, we sure get stares. We stop to see the leather dying vats. Some are soaking in the vats, in another a man stands in waders and with gloved hands he pulls out wet pelts, and elsewhere sheep pelts drape over racks.



Narrow passageways in residential portion of the medina



Bread vendor in the medina



Tanning vats where hides are soaked



Sheep skins in the vat



Sheep skins hanging to dry

(Shari) We drive along the Mediterranean Sea and stop for lunch at a fresh fish house. Rachid selects tuna, whitefish, shark, calamari and swordfish to be pan fried and served to us. We end with a scrumptious chocolate torte. Our way home is the scenic route over the mountains past small towns and villages, canyons and rushing streams and waterfalls.

(Bert) When driving through the Rif Mountains we stop at a scenic overlook at Talassemtane National Park, set aside by the Moroccan government to protect the last of its fir forests. Rachid points to a rustic house far below us—nearly inaccessible by road—where he says they grow marijuana, although it is illegal in Morocco. Nearby a high waterfall is dwarfed by the much higher mountains.



Mediterranean Sea



Rif Mountains



Marijuana farm?



Talassemtane National Park



Talassemtane National Park

Tangier

(Shari) Morocco is incredibly diverse and beautiful. Leaving the Rif Mountains with villages nestled in the valleys and on the hillsides, we drive the coastal road with fancy beach condos and parks. After a Lebanese lunch, we sightsee along the coast. We stop for pictures at the point where the Atlantic meets the Mediterranean and where Hercules was said to have spent the night. Our hotel overlooks the Mediterranean and we can see Spain from our balcony.

(Bert) From the Rif Mountains, we ride our comfortable bus north to the Mediterranean coast. Certainly in my Top 10 of coastal roads, the smooth paved highway glides us along the coast with the blue sea frequently in view. The highlight is seeing the Rock of Gibraltar in broad daylight. I've seen it before when we crossed the Atlantic by ship and entered the Mediterranean at 3 AM. I got up in the middle of the night to see the Rock on a hazy predawn morning. It was only a dark shadow outlined by city lights. Now we see it plainly from the Africa side.



The last of the Rif Mountains as we head north



Descending from the mountains on a serpentine highway to the coast



Rock of Gibraltar in the distance



Rock of Gibraltar with Spain in the background

(Bert) We reach the outskirts of Tangier (Tanger) and its massive new port facilities. It will soon outpace Casablanca as the major port of northern Africa. Then we cruise past the Tangier beaches, the luxurious vacation condos and hotels, and the radiantly blue Mediterranean. Continuing westward, we reach the marker that defines the division between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Here we can no longer see the coast of Spain. Near there is a grotto which myth tells us is where Hercules visited. The high-ceilinged cave opens to the sea and makes for unusual photography. Rock Doves fly in and out

of the cave and roost in high cavities. Here at the northern coast of Africa, both the native Rock Doves mix with the feral Rock Doves.



Port of Tangier



Tangier beaches



Mediterranean coastline at Tangier



Division between Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean



A vendor sells statues of Hercules



Inside Grotte d'Hercule



Inside Grotte d'Hercule



Rock Doves, presumably not feral



View from our Tangier hotel

Tangier 2

(Bert) The view from our hotel window is of closely packed riads and homes with the marina and beach of the Mediterranean in the background. A flock of Monk Parakeets flies below me and a few land in a palm tree. I have some time to spare and decide to walk near the hotel. I find two new species, a House Bunting and Spotless Starling.



View of Tangier from our hotel



Monk Parakeets



House Bunting



Spotless Starlings

(Shari) After another filling buffet breakfast, we continue our time in Tangier with a walking tour from our hotel. The fish market is fascinating with colorful fish artfully arranged to attract buyers. In addition to fish, we walk past pig and cow hooves and entrails hanging from hooks. What is done with stomachs, brains, intestines, etc? I hope we don't find out in our group meals.



Fresh fish and meat market

(Bert) While the group is inside at the fish and meat market, I am waiting outside. We have been seeing feral cats everywhere in the city, most looking very healthy and fat. I sometimes wonder who feeds them. Here I see one of the patrons of cats when a lady brings food to a herd of cats. In the same area teenagers wave to me to be photographed. While adults wave their finger, indicating no photographs, these youths are anxious. Strange, though, their future is dismal and foreboding. They have run away from homes in rural areas, moving north to the sea coast at Tangier, and are hoping to somehow get across the Gibraltar gap to Spain. Likely, they have left school at the third to fifth grade, are undereducated, have limited skills, have no money, cannot get a job, and worst yet, I can see them sniffing drugs from paper bags. A great disparity exists in Morocco between the countryside and the city. City life, especially, education in Morocco is not all that different from the U.S. However, education, training, and opportunities are poor and limited in the countryside. The youth are escaping from one poor situation to another with even less opportunity because they lack an education.



Lady feeding feral cats



Runaway boys, some sniffing drugs



Young boy sleeping on the street

(Shari) Walking about a block, we visit a Jewish cemetery. So many people died in 1924 but I don't know why.

(Bert) Jews were once common residents of Morocco, attested now by old synagogues and cemeteries. Although not discriminated against, and protected from Nazi Germany in WWII, most Jews left when Israel was formed. The Jewish cemetery is now a memorial. A block away is the Tangier American Legation, a museum of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Most interesting to me is letters between

the Morocco king and George Washington. Morocco was the first country to acknowledge American independence and the letters show their cordial relationship.



Jewish cemetery

(Shari) The United States was the first country to recognize Morocco as a country. We are fortunate to visit the first legation, a very nice place to live. Most interesting to me is the display of female clothing.



Legation United States of America



Moroccan clothing displayed at Legation

(Shari) What I appreciate about an OAT trip is the educational aspect of it. Rachid notices a group of young men dressed in the same colored hoodies and an identifying insignia. He tells us of their humanitarian efforts. They often go into grocery stores and pay the bills of the poor who cannot afford their living expenses.

We walk to the marina for lunch, a very ritzy place by the way. A bus picks us up to take us a couple of miles to the train station. We are treated to a bullet train ride, a train traveling almost 200 mph. We have seats in the upper compartment with a bird's eye view of the countryside whizzing past our window. We pass cars and trucks on the freeway as if they are standing still. The ride is so smooth and we are in Rabat before we know it. Our bus, which left earlier and carried our luggage, is waiting for us and takes us to another very nice hotel where we are given dinner.



Tangier mariana and restaurants



Bullet train to Rabat



Countryside between Tangier and Rabat



Our hotel room in Rabat

Rabat 1

(Bert) Our Rabat hotel faces the River Bou Regreg which separates Rabat from Salé, both along the Atlantic Ocean. Rabat is the capital of Morocco, although several other cities have served in the past. In

our tour of the city we stretch time from the Phoenicians to the modern kingdom. Our first stop is Dâr-al-Makhzen, the Royal Palace of the king, guarded by military in traditional costumes.



View from our Rabat hotel, colorful boats and modern expressway



Symmetrical passageway in government building



Royal Palace, Dâr-al-Makhzen



Guards at Royal Palace

From the current, we step into the past. Phoenicians visited Salé 3000 years ago and 2000 years ago the Romans established a settlement they called Sala Colonia. Sala is mentioned Ptolemy. Muslim Arabs took over the area in the 7th century and built Chellah. Now the area is floral gardens with the more open areas and the taller structures taken over by storks.



Walled entrance to Chellah



Ruins of Chellah sanctuary with 13th century minaret



Roman ruins of Sala Colonia



Stork condominium



Chellah wall with square holes used for scaffolding during construction and air passage later



Eurasian Kestrel occupying scaffolding foothold

We next visit Hassan Tower and the pillars of an unfinished mosque. Commissioned by the Caliph, Abu Yusuf Yaqub al-Mansur, in 1195, the tower was intended to be the largest minaret in the world, just as the mosque was to be the largest. However, al-Mansur died in 1199 and construction ceased. Pillars supported a roof that collapsed in the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake. A colorfully dressed guard mounted on a white stallion stand at attention at the entrance. Adjacent to the unfinished mosque is the Mohamed V Mausoleum. Inside the mausoleum, an imam reads from the Koran.



Guard at Hassan Tower and Hassan Tower (minaret) and roofless pillars



Some of the 348 original columns



Mohamed V Mausoleum built in the 1950s



Imam reading from the Koran



Ornate outside wall to Mohamed V Mausoleum

We visit the Museum of History and Civilizations, an archaeological museum with an extensive collection of Roman artifacts and a few dating to the Phoenicians. Many marble and brass sculptures, amazingly intricate and lifelike, include a Roman water pipe showing the way pieces link together.



Roman marble bust



Linked Roman water pipe made of pottery

(Shari) Our bus for the next two weeks is a 48-seater. We have 15 people. Sweet! Today our trips are short, 10 minutes max, and many: Royal Palace, Roman ruins, mausoleum and unfinished mosque, and a Kasbah or fortified home. The best visit is tonight's restaurant. To find it we go, in darkness, to the Medina, which is the old section of town where people lived in the past and still live today. Ornate doors facing the passages indicate this is not a poor neighborhood. No graffiti are on the walls and no junk lies in the passageways. Surprisingly, no kids play outdoors either. It is the strangest place I've ever been to. Entering the restaurant reminds me of a speakeasy: an unmarked doorway leading down narrow alleys, a knock on a door before it opens, dark interior with benches and cushions. Servers are in traditional dress. Food offers unique flavors.



Entrance to the Medina





Entrance to restaurant by knocking on the door





Tagine, a Moroccan speciality

Rabat to Fes

(Bert) After leaving Rabat in early morning, our first stop is at the Thursday market in Khemisset. One day per week, many villages have a market in which they buy and sell. In this case, it is fruit and vegetables. Although often displayed in the open, here a huge canvas tent covers vendors clustered close together, separated by narrow aisles.



Horse-drawn cart carrying vegetables to market



Entrance to the Khemisset farmer's market



Under the tent



Pomegranate opened for display



Across the street from the market, a Spotless Starling carries nesting material to a second story window. My photo captures its window-reflected image as well as the bird itself.



Spotless Starling and its reflection

(Shari) We have just entered the outskirts of Fes when Rachid sees a woman and small child with a man holding a sign saying they are Syrian refugees needing help. He stops the bus and asks us if we would like to talk with them. We readily concur, so Rachid asks permission of the family. They agree to tell us their story. He was a dentist in Syria before the war. Their house was destroyed and the family escaped to Morocco, via Turkey, two years ago. His two daughters are in school today, his wife is five months

pregnant, and he has a three-year-old boy. Although the Moroccan government allows them to stay in the country, it does not provide any aid. The family is reduced to begging for food and money, as he is not allowed to work. We all give him some cash but think it is a drop in the bucket. So sad!



Syrian refuge family



We cluster around the Syrian family to hear of their plight



A group photo with the Syrian family at the center

(Bert) We arrive in Fes, the oldest of Morocco's imperial cities, founded in 789. After checking into our hotel, we "experience" the hammam. Rachid has told us much about the hammam, a public steam room where you are scrubbed clean by another person. He tells us some like it, some don't, but it is an "experience" not to be missed. Shari is hesitant; I am willing to try. The men enter one side of the building; the women enter another door. We strip to our underwear or swimming suit and enter the concrete-walled and floored room splashing with buckets of water. On one side is very hot water and on the other is cold water. The attendant men dip plastic buckets in each, mixing the extremes to get warm water that they pour over us. Each of us has a man assigned to clean us. I hand him the very course cloth I was given—something I would use to scrub a dirty kettle with baked-on burnt food—and vigorously scrubs my chest, back, arms, head, and legs. To reach different body parts, he pushes me in the desired positions, sometimes sitting, sometimes lying flat on my back or stomach. The back scrubbing feels good, the chest rubbing hurts. Although the warm water feels good, my cleansing finishes with a bucket of ice cold water poured over my head. After I redress, my skin feels cleaner than it has ever felt. Yes, it was an experience.

(Shari) Some of us experience a hammam, a sort of steam bath. As we enter, we are handed a towel, a scrubby, and some soft olive oil soap in a baggie. We undress to our underwear, I in my swimming suit, and enter a room with about 20 other women stripped to only underpants or less. Many buckets of hot water litter the floor and we are motioned to sit next to them and spread the oily soap on our skin. A woman attendant chooses Holly first and she scrubs and scrubs Holly until she is red. Maureen is scrubbed also and she is roughly moved into various positions that do not look comfortable to me. After a long wait, everyone but me is being worked on. This does not look like fun. I begin to feel dizzy and decide to leave the hot steamy room. Numerous women do not let me leave and pull my hand to

benches to sit down. I just want out but cannot communicate that to the others. I go in different directions looking for an exit. Each time grabbed by the hand and led to a bench. Each time I get up and try to escape. Finally, I find the exit and dry myself before getting dressed. The other women liked the experience but I found it intrusive and unsanitary. The bus takes us back toward our hotel, a 17th century house made into a hotel. The ornate decorations are incredible and remind me of Italian churches I have seen. Located in the old section of town where the streets are so narrow our bus could not get closer than four blocks, forcing us to walk.

(Bert) Our hotel is in the medina, an old section of Fes where narrow streets prevent big busses from passing. Hotel workers, pushing carts down the pocked paved street, carry off our big suitcases. With backpacks and small carry-ons, we walk in the street past shops, homes, and other hotels, trying to avoid the constant stream of bicycles, scooters, small motorcycles, pushcarts, and the occasional small car. The unpretentious hotel door opens to rooms fit to be a palace. This is one of many riads, formerly private homes, usually with walls removed to open three such adjacent dwellings into one larger hotel. Ornate tiles and carvings decorate everything from floor to ceilings. Elaborate chandeliers hang from lofty ceilings and two fountains center sitting areas and private dining rooms. The bedrooms are also richly decorated, but less so, and substantially smaller, though ours includes a spacious bathroom and shower, and a sitting area with a small table. Awkward, though, is where to open our suitcases.









Volubilis 1

(Bert) Viewing the colorful Moroccan countryside from the spacious windows and comfort of the big bus has been a treat. Today's ride to Volubilis provides some of my most scenic photos and it is hard to pick the best to include here. Since we do so much today with lots of photos, I will split it into several journal entries. I took all of the photos below from the bus as we drive. Note the details sometimes show farmers plowing with donkeys.









Volubilis 2

(Shari) Volubilis, a Roman city of 500 AD had 10,000 people living in it before its demise. In the 1700s the Lisbon earthquake destroyed it but it recently has been undergoing restoration. Amazing to me is the intricacies of the tile work still in existence. After lunch, we visit Meknes, a city protected by three rings of walls and formerly housing a stable for 12,000 horses.

(Bert) Outside of Rome itself, the Roman ruins at Volubilis are the most impressive and extensive I have visited. Originally a Berber city dating to the third century BC, it first was the capital of Mauretania. Romans took over the city in 40 A.D., building a city wall surrounding semicircular towers, elaborate

homes, monuments, and temples. Its peak population grew to 20,000 inhabitants. In 285, local Berber tribes captured the city and the Romans did not recapture it because its remoteness at the southwestern corner of the empire made it difficult to defend. Abandoned in the 11th century, most of the structures remained intact. Subsequently, the 1755 Lisbon earthquake destroyed many buildings and stones were removed to build Meknes. Excavations began in 1915 and what we see today is far-reaching and amazing, especially concerning the detailed intact mosaics.



Southwest corner of Roman Empire. Volubilis is in lower left corner of map.



Volubilis was built on Mount Zerhoun. Olive trees in the far distance.



House of Orpheus



Mosaic floor in house of Orpheus



Details of mosaic showing animals charmed by music of Orpheus playing the lyre



Emperor Galen's thermal public baths



Remnants of olive press



Monument dedicated to Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, about 218 A.D.



The Forum



House of the Rider: mosaic details showing acrobat riding backward on a horse



Triumphal Arch, built in 217 A.D. in honor of Emperor Caracalla and his mother Julia Domna



House of Columns, named for various columns (fluted, plain, and spiral)



Square archway



Mosaic floor



Mosaic details of Bacchus discovering Ariane



Arches of Volubilis

Meknes

(Bert) From Volubilis we travel to the walled city of Meknes, the former home of the 17th century sultan, Moulay Ismail. Most unusual are the granaries and stable the sultan had built for his 12,000 royal horses. Each horse had a groom and a slave who aided the groom and kept the stable exceptionally clean. No ordinary granary, to keep it cool the walls are very thick and tall, with vents in the ceiling, and an underground stream for additional cooling. Outside the granary and stables is an artificial lake built for the sultan to supply water for his horses.



Date-palm-lined park in Meknes



Ornate gate to walled historic center of Meknes



Sahrij Swani, a lake created to supply water for horses



Granary



Mechanism to bring water up from underground stream



Inside the granary



Horse stables for 12,000

Fes 1

(Shari) Amazing as they were, the ruins and stables are not the highlight of the day. At 6:45 PM a 19-year-old girl (Arab name escapes me) comes to walk us to her home. She speaks English impeccably, telling us she learned it from American songs and U-tube. She has such charisma and captivates the six of our group for the two hours we are with her. We meet her mother Fatima, her banker father, and her younger 14-year-old sister. Her mother has cooked our meal of lamb tagine and also serves it.

Our hostess translates our English to French for her parents, asking and answering questions. She is in her second year of college, studying finance and business, and hoping to get her PhD. She is a modern Arab girl that does not wear traditional dress although her mother does. When the evening call to prayer is heard, dad leaves the table to walk across the street for his prayers, returning about 20 minutes later. She is interested in what we all do and listens intently as we tell her, translating as we go to her parents. She walks us back to our Riad, promising to email us her mother's recipe for fermented butter.



Fatima and her two daughters



Fatima serving Bert mint tea



A few of our travel group with Moroccan family in their home



Fatima with daughter and husband

Fes medina 1

(Shari) We have a fun filled day at the market. Fez's medina or old city is the largest in the world. Our riad or hotel us in it, as is the house we visited for dinner last night. Yet we have to take a bus to get to the market. We walk the narrow-streets and alleys for five hours, always keeping our guide in sight for fear of getting lost. The oldest street, some 600 years old, is also the narrowest. It is only about 3 feet wide and very dark.

(Bert) Medina is an Arabic word, retained in the English language and referring to the ancient quarter of a city in northern Africa. A walled medina centers all of the cities we have visited thus far. In the oldest sections, all of the buildings are built contiguously, with very narrow passageways between them. Rachid has warned us to walk single file, staying to one side, and listening for vendors trying to pass us with donkeys, bicycles, scooters, motorcycles, and all manner of carts. None of these vehicles moves slowly and instead they barge on ahead, revving their engines if necessary. A straight passageway is not to be found, and none has a name, so getting lost is highly likely for a visitor. An "address" is a section of the medina plus a number.



Hillside view of the Fes medina



Closely packed buildings in the medina



Minaret and mosque inside the medina



One of the gates through the wall of the Fes medina



Narrowest "street" in Morocco





Fes medina 2

(Bert) In addition to private homes, riads, mosques, and synagogues, the majority of buildings house small cubicles open to the street, each occupied by a single vendor or artisan. A few larger quarters contain “factories” for leather making or ceramics. We visit the ceramics factory where dozens of workers create a wide variety of tables, fountains, and smaller items of pottery. Workers use their hands and simple tools, often working in an assembly line format.



Pottery making



Adding patterns to the pottery



Finished bowl



Workers sit on the floor, working with hand tools



Chipping ceramic tiles into polygonal shapes



Chipped ceramic pieces



Placing the ceramic pieces on a flat adhesive surface



Nearly-finished table top



Finished products



Finished tabletop



Fes medina 3

(Shari) Different areas of the souk cluster vendors together by the goods they make or sell. First, we meander through the food section. Besides the normal fruits and vegetables, meat and fish, we see camel meat and goats heads. The artful arrangement of dates and nuts fascinates me. Women make extremely thin dough much like filo, but thinner. We see coppersmiths forming pots and kettles by hand, pottery workers making colorful clay items, wood carvers carving elaborate decorations into furniture and kitchen items, sweaty men dyeing clothing, and others weaving fabric into clothes.



Carts, people, and olives



Olives



Dates



Goat feet



Goat heads



Camel head and man dying used clothing



Metalwork





Copper metalworker



Pick a chicken and the sales clerk will cut off its head for you



Coca-Cola delivery vehicle

Fes medina 4

(Shari) Once I saw a TV program about dyeing leather, so I am anxious to visit the place and see the big vats of dye with leather in various stages of completion. Leather goods are sold and I am so tempted to buy a goat's skin coat, as it is extremely soft and waterproof. I do buy a hand woven scarf as we all do. The seller knew what he was doing when he draped it artfully over our heads.

(Bert) Traditional Arabic weddings last for days and the bride wears seven different gowns, each of a different color. In the section of the medina dedicated to selling these gowns, each vendor displays multiple colors. At the leather factory, we climb three stories of steps to a position overlooking the operation. To remove hair and soften the leather, goatskins soak in vats containing pigeon feces, a source of ammonia. Other vats contain natural dyes such as indigo for blues and greens, madder root for red, henna for red-brown, pomegranate skin for black, and the most precious, saffron, for producing yellow. Wet skins hang from balconies on the surrounding multi-story buildings.



Wedding gowns



Dyeing vats in leather factory



Drying goat skins



Upper stories of leather factory, with drying goatskins

(Bert) Still wandering the medina, Rachid guides us through an unobtrusive doorway, down a stairway, and into a windowless weaving shop. Several workers operate looms in traditional methods. The owner explains the different cloths they work with: cotton, sheep wool, and silk made from palm trees. He arranges scarfs on the women's heads first, then the men. He fits the scarfs in a variety of ways, producing quite different effect. The women are so intrigued they all want to buy a scarf for themselves. We take a group photo to show off our new look.



Operating a loom





Moroccans now refer to Jeff as Ali Baba



A selfie, using a mirror



Mysterious



Middle Atlas Mountains

(Bert) Thus far, we have been traveling mostly in the lowlands of the western part of Morocco, with the exception of the relatively low (8000 ft.) Rif Mountains in the far north. Today we travel farther inland through the much taller Middle Atlas and later, the High Atlas Mountains. While previously much of the rural areas have higher rainfall, suitable for farming, today we see much drier areas, barely appropriate

for sheep grazing, and, at the highest areas, devoid of trees or even shrubs. Nonetheless, the scenery is again fascinating from the comfort of our big bus. We pass through very few villages and, elsewhere, a small scattering of roughly built houses in the countryside. At Ifran, one of the more substantial alpine villages, looking much like a ski resort but without any ski hills, Jeff and I walk around the streets while others enjoy coffee. I photograph a pair of Jackdaws and then Jeff spots a bird very high in a leafless tree. It is too high to identify through binoculars, but from my photos I recognize it as a Mistle Thrush.

(Shari) A long bus drive seems short. We have 48 seats for 14 passengers. I keep changing sides to avoid the sun as the bus winds up the mountain. So much interesting scenery as we make our way across the Atlas Mountains. The terrain loses its green and replaces it with brown. Rocks are everywhere and gathered into border fencing. For a coffee and bathroom break, we stop at a cute ski village. Here Bert finds fossils at terrific prices. We use all our Moroccan money to purchase trilobite and ammonite fossils. He holds up the whole bus, waiting for change, and puts us behind schedule.



Our spacious bus



The northern edge of the Middle Atlas Mountains



Small villages



Few houses, some appearing abandoned



Jackdaw



Mistle Thrush



Sheep grazing among rocks, cedars in background

(Bert) While in the Middle Atlas, we pass dense patches of cedar trees. Here we get a quick glimpse of Barbary macaques (Barbary apes) usually associated with Gibraltar, but actually an ape of the Atlas Mountains of Algeria and Morocco. After the cedar forests, the land becomes barren and exceedingly rocky. The few dwellings are temporary, often covered with blankets, and are used by nomads that bring their sheep here to graze on the sparse grass. In the distance, we pass Jbel Bou Naceur, the highest peak in Middle Atlas Mountains at just over 10,000 feet.

(Shari) We see Barbary apes, but after leaving the bus for a better look at the apes, we find none. At one point when in the mountains, I checked my GPS and found we are at almost 6000 feet. Patches of snow show along the road.



Newly planted cedar forest



Barbary macaques



Snow in shadows of rocks, altitude 6200 ft.



Nomadic sheepherder and his flock



Nomad dwelling



Distant sheep herds on treeless mountains



Jbel Bou Naceur, highest peak in Middle Atlas Mountains

(Shari) I usually forget that I am in Africa until I see the Afriquia fuel stations that are dominant in the country. Another stop is at a fuel station for a potty break. The woman's facility has four stalls, two of which we leave unoccupied as these are squatting potties (just holes in the floor) with no toilet paper. The other two have no toilet paper either but at least they are western style, albeit without seats. In addition, there is no water in the sinks. Luckily, we each have Kleenex and hand sanitizers along. Our guide tells us these pit stops are the best in this remote area.

We see many sheep that Rachid says are owned by the nomads that are on the mountain looking for grass not covered in snow. We stop again at a lake where the birders scan for birds. We stop for lunch at Hotel Taddart and we have a delicious trout meal.



Lake stop with only a White Wagtail on the shore



Northern boundary of High Atlas Mountains, viewed from Middle Atlas



Adobe dwelling in the middle of nowhere





Hotel Taddart in Midelt



Trout for lunch



Common Raven in the Middle Atlas Mountains at Midelt

High Atlas Mountains

(Bert) Traveling through the Middle Atlas Mountains, the ride was straight with a rise in elevation barely noticeable. What a difference we experience when we drive through the High Atlas: sharp curves, dramatic drop-offs, and soaring raw mountains rising over 13,000 ft. Looking more closely at the

slanted mountainsides, I can see the evidence of plate tectonics. In the early Jurassic Period, the supercontinent Pangea split apart, leaving this area within the African plate, near a boundary with the Eurasian and North American plates. Large blocks of the earth's crust slipped downward, only to be pushed back up even higher in the Cenozoic Period when the African and Eurasian plates collided.









Women washing clothes in river







Reservoir built to capture water in the High Atlas

(Shari) The adobe houses and the villages are small until we get to one with three army bases. The village is close to the Algerian border where there are disputes about property and the borderline. We see groups of women, each wearing a black hijab and sitting on the bare ground in the desert, chatting in circles of eight to ten while the men populate the chairs in coffee shops.

The last stop before our hotel is at a panoramic view of 50 km of date palms in a canyon called Oasis du Tafilalet. Our hotel, Kasbah Chergui, is a welcome sight at 6:30. We are greeted with mint tea and cookies while we wait for room assignments. An hour later, we are treated to a huge buffet. I don't

think anyone is hungry but we eat anyway because it looks so good, especially its assortment of salads and vegetables. However, the desserts take the prize.



Oasis du Tafilalet



Date palms at Oasis du Tafilalet



Welcome tradition with mint tea



Crepe dessert for dinner

Sahara Desert 1

(Bert) We spent the night at a palatial hotel with a stunning interior courtyard. After a big spread of food for breakfast, for which I am trying to cut back from three big meals each day, Jeff and I explore the courtyard for birds. A White Wagtail hops along the edge of the swimming pool, wading in for a bath. Perched on a wooden pole, we study a redstart, trying to decide between Black Redstart and Common Redstart, but eventually I decide it is a new one for us, a Moussler's Redstart. Surprisingly, we see another redstart wading in the pool edge, but this one is a Black Redstart.



Interior courtyard of Kasbah Chergui



Female Moussler's Redstart



Black Redstart

(Bert) Our bus carries us to a tour of a fossil processing company, Macro Fossiles Kasbah. Back home, I have often shopped for Moroccan fossils and own several polished specimens of ammonites. However, I knew nothing about how they find them and prepare them for sale. Collected at a nearby private site, huge boulders litter the backyard of the facility. During the Paleozoic Era, some 245-570 million years ago, a predecessor of the Mediterranean Sea covered the Sahara of Morocco. During that era, dead prehistoric sea life, now extinct species, settled to the sediment below the sea and later became solidified into rock. Most prominent are spiraled ammonites, squid-like cone-shaped Orthoceras, and chunky trilobites. Workers cut through some of the boulders with a diamond saw and when the guide pours water on the unpolished surface, the fossils shine through. The marvel of these fossils is partly the detailed features of the creatures and partly the cutting and polishing skill of the artisans. I am particularly intrigued by trilobites, a crustacean that lived 350-400 million years ago. They had “eyes”, lenses made of calcite. I once attended a scientific lecture where a crystallographer presented his studies of appositional trilobite eyes, finding that they were single crystals, permitting light to pass through to the sensory surface below the crystal.



Enormous sculpture advertising a fossil shop gives a good depiction of what an ammonite looked like



Marble slab cut with diamond saw and showing the imbedded sea life



Cut and polished ammonite



Cone-shaped Orthoceras fossils imbedded within the artisan's 3D cut of the marble



Diamond-studded saw



High speed polisher



Unrefined rock exposing a huge trilobite



Enormous trilobites (compare size to electrical outlet)



Skillfully cut rock showing details of trilobite, including protruding “eyes”

(Shari) We are going to the Sahara Desert today. First, though, our bus takes us to the meeting point, a fossil place. Bert had bought some fossils yesterday from a street vendor but I had no idea they were so plentiful. We start our tour where slabs of marble are in various stages of cutting and polishing. The slabs show hundreds of embedded fossils. They are simply stunning. All of us can imagine the slabs in our houses, made into coffee tables, sinks or countertops. Instead, we buy smaller items in the gift shop. I get a small marble box, some jewelry, and a soap dish.



Our purchases from upper left, top row: polished soap dish, polished small box, small polished stone with hole to put in necklace; second row: paired geode opens to trilobite, paired polished halves of ammonite; third row: small polished ammonite.

Sahara Desert 2

(Shari) "I'm so excited", Marsha says, echoing everyone's thoughts. We transfer from bus to a fleet of four 4-wheel-drive SUVs, suitable for driving through the desert. In about two hours of driving, first on a flat gravelly surface, and then on soft sand that digs deep furrows as the SUV spins left and right against the resistance, we enter our camp. There are several camp villages here, each with a circle of rigid tents. Our tent is the one in the center of my photo. Look at that bed with its canopy! The room also has bathroom facilities and a little sitting area.







(Bert) Only minutes after we arrive at the Sahara camp, I spot my first new bird, a White-crowned Wheatear, perched atop one of the tents. A very friendly bird, it seems to have adopted the camp as its home. My field guide app says it “breeds in desolate mountain deserts, on barren stony plains ... thriving in terrain totally devoid of vegetation.” That fits where we are. Jeff finds another thrasher-like bird and, thumbing through his book, he suspects it is a Dupont’s Lark. Later we see more larks and decide they are Greater Hoopoe-Larks. Either way, it’s a new bird!



White-crowned Wheatear



Greater Hoopoe-Lark

(Shari) After lunch we are off to visit a nomad family, taking the SUVs deeper into the Sahara Desert. We arrive unannounced and the grandma quickly gets the camel hair tent ready for guests by spreading rugs and pillows on the ground. We sit under the shelter and learn about her family. Before her husband died two years ago, they decided to stop moving from place to place and build a permanent structure. It looks better than it is. Made from clay bricks held together by straw and stones it seems one good rainstorm would wash it away. Three rooms divide the small house. A few scattered rugs cover part of the dirt floor. I do not see any chairs, tables or furniture of any kind. She lives here with her son, two daughters, and grandchild.

The family owns seven camels, which her son now rents to hotels for tourist rides. That is their only income. There are hundreds of nomad families wandering in the desert. This area houses maybe seven families. Apparently, the government no longer allows the nomads to go in the mountains because of a border dispute with Algeria. Unable to move their animals from place to place in search of food, they settle here and scratch out whatever living they can make. As she talks to us through our guide-interpreter, she cards camel hair and spins it into a thick thread. I imagine each day is the same: work, work, work, just to survive. The tour company gives them money for the privilege of talking with us so that helps out I am sure.

(Bert) Undoubtedly, this is the poorest family I have ever met, and one with the bleakest of outlooks for improvement. Perhaps it was better when her husband was alive and they had a flock of sheep or goats that brought in income. Now she cards wool in the shade of a blanketed tent propped up by wooden stakes and tied down with ropes. The open sides permit air to pass, but it still must be hot under the desert sun in summer. She owns a few goats and when donkeys wander by aimlessly, we ask if she owns those too. No, a neighboring nomad family owns the donkeys. Renting her camels for tourist rides is her meager source of income. Near the tent is a tall stack of branches propped up on a wooden

platform. Rachid asks us to guess why the wood is on a platform. We come up with six or seven guesses, none right, when he tells us it is so that sand drifts below the stack and does not pile up to make a dune.

Her cute granddaughter attentively listens to our questions and her grandmother's answers. Perhaps the diversion is the highlight of her day. She does not attend school and I doubt her mother or grandmother did either. Will she be a nomad too when she grows up?

The daughter brings us a tray of glasses, a metal pot filled with tea, a small bowl of peanuts, and another of goat cheese. It is the traditional way to welcome guests. Also following tradition, Rachid pours the tea from the pot raised high above the glasses.

We walk over to the adobe house. Constructed with clay bricks, plastered over with more desert clay, the house stays relatively cool in the hot desert air. However, adobe houses are in constant need of repair, damaged by wind and rain. On the ground near the house, we see her oven, a traditional rounded clay structure open on one end and fired with wood. On the roof of the house is a single small solar panel, the only modern element that separates her from hundreds of years of tradition. The solar panel powers a single incandescent bulb. No other electrical appliances!



Tent for social gathering



Granddaughter and nomad Grandmother





Firewood stack on raised platform











Sahara Desert 3

(Bert) After visiting the nomad family we are back in the SUVs heading to a place in the desert where the underlying rock is exposed. We explore the rocks closely, looking for fossils. It is not hard to find them, though most are so imbedded in huge boulders that there is no way to extract them. We search for smaller rocks, turning them around to see if they hide fossils. After a half hour we have gathered more treasures than we can carry and certainly more than our baggage limits will allow on our return to the U.S.



Exposed surface of a boulder with embedded *Orthoceras* fossils



A good size comparison of the fossils



One of the 3-lb. rocks I picked up shows Orthoceras fossils

(Shari) After looking for fossils, we go to view the sunset on the dunes. Climbing up is tricky, but we make it, and the sunset is worth it.

(Bert) I will let my photos tell the story of the sand dunes at sunset. However, there is another story to tell. While we stand atop one of the dunes, I watch a Moroccan woman walking with little effort across the dunes and uphill, heading in our direction. She sits down on the sand a few feet from where we stand, opens up her bag, and arranges colorful figurines on the sand. I point to a camel crudely

handmade from a wooden support covered with colorful cloth. "Fifty," she says, clearly implying fifty dirhams or about \$5 U.S. Then we notice a small glass vial filled with sand from the Sahara, also "fifty". Without bargaining, which would be common practice, I give her a hundred dirhams for the two. I am impressed with her marketing savvy and happy to help a poor person who supports herself with a trade.

















Sahara Desert 4



Sunrise in the Sahara Desert

(Shari) Today, we heard and danced to local music, we visited an irrigated date farm and learned about date pollination, we had a cooking demonstration making a Berber pizza and then ate it for dinner, and we had a discussion about Islam. On any other day, those things would have been a highlight. I am going to write about one thing today because it was such a highlight even though it only took three hours of our day. Nothing competes with riding a camel in the dunes of the Sahara Desert.

Our camels are waiting for us when we arrive: one camel per person, four camels in a group, linked by a rope, each group with a guide dressed in colorful Moroccan garb. I video Bert getting on the camel while I await my turn. Then I get on. I am told to step on my guide's knee and lift my leg over the saddle. Two guides hold the kneeling camel down so it does not prematurely get up and another helps push my leg over the saddle. So far so good! "Hang on and lean back," I am told. The camel immediately jerks me backwards as it rises up onto its knees and then gently I go forward as it stands. So far so good!

(Bert) I am looking forward to riding a camel in the desert, but with a little trepidation. I developed arthritis in my legs two years ago and my walking pace has slowed to a third of what it used to be. However, that would not affect riding a camel. What would, though, is that I cannot spread my legs very far apart. The first hard part is swinging my leg over the broad camel. I manage, but with some pain. Shari and Barbara are ahead of our foursome team and they both seem to be doing better than I am. The lady behind me quits right after she gets on the camel. She says that is enough of an experience for her. We head off with an unriden camel following me. My body swings left and right with the pace of the camel, and to keep from falling over the head of the camel, I need to lean far back on the saddle when the camel goes down a sand dune. I take those adaptations in stride and enjoy the surrounding views of the tall dunes.



Camels are ready for us



Check out those teeth!



Camel rising



Katlin dresses for the occasion





(Shari) Bert is right behind me and Barbara takes the front camel. We are the first group leading the rest. I had wanted to take pictures but I was not about to release my tightly gripped hands to get at my camera. So I am relying on photos from other people. The camel has a wobbly gait and going down a dune is rather frightening at first. Sometime after the first 15 minutes, I relax and enjoy the experience. See the photo of Bert behind me? And the cool picture of our shadows?



(Bert) The pain of spreading my legs is increasing and even though I point my legs over the front of the camel to keep them away from the wide hump, they keep sliding back and the pain increases. Finally, after a half hour of pain, I ask to dismount. Walking in the soft sand is much easier and it gives me opportunity to photograph the others on the camel caravan.



(Shari) And then there were two. Bert's arthritis hurts him too much and he bails out about half way into the ride. That's me in black behind Barbara, the first one in turquoise. After about one and half hours we get off our camels. This is by far easier than getting on. I stand next to our guide and get one last picture of the three of us.



Sahara Desert 5

(Bert) Although Shari is satisfied writing just about the camel ride, I have more to say about seeing flamingos. While the camel caravan advances through the dunes, I walk in the sand past a small oasis of trees and notice a very pale sparrow. It is a Desert Sparrow, found only in the driest parts of the Sahara Desert of northern Africa. Because of habitat destruction, it is becoming scarce and I am lucky to see one. I read that the Berbers have holes in the walls of their homes to welcome the sparrows. They

consider it a sign of good news if a Desert Sparrow sings in the house throughout the day. In the same oasis I get a good photo of a Great Gray Shrike, sharp enough to recognize it is the *elegans* subspecies, specific to North Africa away from the coast. It looks a lot like our Northern Shrike.



Female Desert Sparrow



Great Gray Shrike

(Bert) In route to the flamingoes, in the barren open desert, we have been seeing ravens, though usually so distant we cannot see details. When I see one resting on the ground nearby, I ask the SUV driver to stop. I get good photos of another new species, Brown-necked Raven.



Brown-necked Raven

We reach the swallow lake where Rachid says flamingos occur. Reflecting on the glassy surface, a herd of wandering camels is on the opposite side of the lake. Studying the lake and shorelines, I see two distant flamingos, dozens of Ruddy Shelducks, a few Northern Pintails, and several Eurasian Coots. A Common Chiffchaff hides in the only shrub in the area. Flying over the small lake are a few swallows or martins that through my photos I deduce are Rock Martins, another new species for me.





Ruddy Shelduck



Rock Martin (Pale Craig-Martin)

We drive a quarter mile farther to another swallow lake. In less arid times, the two lakes would join. Like many other parts of the world, Morocco suffers from climate change, specifically the lack of rain. At the second lake is a large flock of 27 Greater Flamingoes, majestically walking ankle deep in the still water. One spreads its wings, revealing a deep dark pink underside and pitch-black secondaries. Beneath the tall flamingoes, a few comparatively tiny Black-winged Stilts feed. On the shoreline, I spot five White Wagtails, a Water Pipit, and a Common Ringed Plover. The plover's back matches the drab coloring of the mud that it walks through, the mud darkening its orange legs to obscurity. Much later,

after we return to our tent lodges, I find a male Desert Sparrow just outside our lodge. It has been a great day for birding in the Sahara Desert.



Greater Flamingo







Water Pipit





Male Desert Sparrow

Desert farmer

(Shari) I want to mention a place we visited yesterday, before I continue with today's travels.

Fascinating is the date farmer whose father settled the land and devised an irrigation system. Now he has 150 female date trees and one male. He explains how the pollination works. He also shows us crops he grows between the trees.

(Bert) To pollinate a female date tree, the farmer takes a single branch from the male tree that contains many flowers and inserts the branch between the flowering branches on the female tree. Wind spreads pollen from the male branch to the female flowers. Therefore, one male tree can cross-pollinate all of the female trees in his orchard. The date farmer's father found water in the desert using a divining rod. Recall that Y-shaped branch where you grab the Y ends and point the trunk end level ahead of you. Presumably, when the trunk points down, you've found water. That's what his father did and found water six feet below the surface. Rashid tells an alternate story where a farmer he knows spent hundreds of dollars digging dry holes and never did find water. The farmer also demonstrates his irrigation system. First, he primes his pump with a few buckets of water. Then he cranks his gasoline engine. When it kicks in, it pumps water into the concrete reservoir. From there the water flows along furrows dug in the sand and passing through the orchard.



Farmer demonstrating date palm pollination technique



Priming the pump



Cranking gasoline engine



Water pouring from underground well

Anti-Atlas Mountains

(Shari) We have to depart the magical Sahara Desert today and reverse our route in the SUVs to meet our comfortable bus. Our drive takes over nine hours but we have interesting stops along the way.

(Bert) Our first stop is a date market where farmers bring crates full of various colored dates. Intermediaries move up and down the row, negotiating prices for large quantities. They, in turn, will take the dates to markets in the cities. Price depends on quality, market demand, and how badly the farmer needs money. Just like olives, Moroccans consume huge quantities of dates.



Farmer bringing dates to market



Dates



Dates, dates, dates



(Bert) We pass through sleepy little towns wedged between the low mountains. Shari says, “I like riding in the bus looking at the fascinating world go by.” Most intriguing is watching people, the way they dress, and their transportation methods. Noticeably, the older Moroccans dress traditionally, wearing a djellaba. Almost all djellabas, especially those worn by men, have a baggy pointed hood called a qob. Older women usually have their head covered in a scarf and some of them have their face covered as well. However, younger Moroccans dress more or less the same as young Americans.













Anti-Atlas Mountains to Ouarzazate

(Bert) We stop at a desolate, relatively flat, location in the desert where curious mounds of sand parallel the highway and stretch to the distant mountains. I looked at Google Earth and the satellite views pick up the lines of sand piles. Examining the wooden structure above the mounds and then descending some twenty-five feet below the apparatus and into tall tunnels, we learn that this is the remains of an old aqueduct dug underground by slaves.



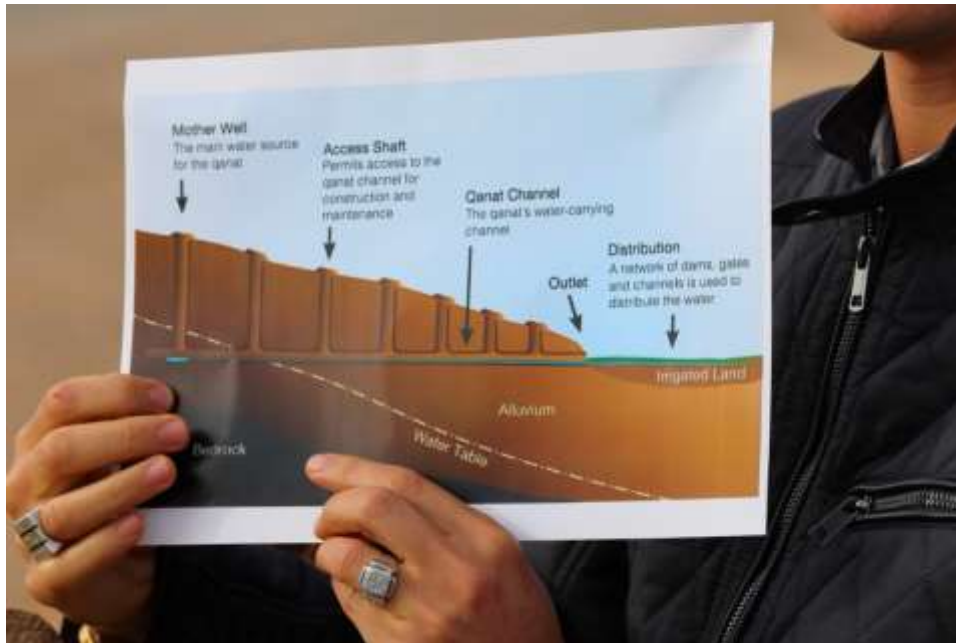
Mounds of sand above water tunnels



Google Earth satellite images of rows of sand mounds



Apparatus to access water from aqueduct



Aqueduct tunnel

(Shari) A stop at the Berber museum after lunch is fascinating. It is a museum of early Berber life much like our museums show things of the 1800s.

(Bert) One museum exhibit shows a wooden tablet inscribed with verses from the Koran. Rashid tells us when he was a child he used one of these at school to memorize the Koran. According to Rashid, the emphasis then and now was to be able to recite the Koran, although understanding what it meant was much less important. He says many adults know the words, but not the meaning.



Entrance to museum



Koran verses on wooden tablet



Hand cranked washing machine on rooftop near the museum

(Bert) Our journey continues as we watch the scenic desert and mountains pass by from our bus. Sunset comes before we reach our destination at Ouarzazate.

(Shari) We get to Ouarzazate late and immediately head to dinner. Again a delicious buffet. My photo shows the dessert selections.



Near Imiter



Boumaine Dades



Qued Dades



Sunset on outskirts of Ouarzazate



Dessert display

Ouarzazate

(Bert) Before today, I would not have put Morocco and Hollywood movies in the same sentence. Nor would I have suspected that deep in the deserts and Anti-Atlas Mountains lays a substantial movie studio. We pass Atlas Film Studios and far behind it is a village-sized movie set, a medieval ksar with desert surroundings and a mountain backdrop. It is probably the largest film studio in the world. At least a hundred movies were filmed in Ouarzazate or nearby countryside. Among these are Gladiator, Ben Hur, Lawrence of Arabia, The Mummy, The Passion of the Christ, and, recently, Game of Thrones and Disney's Aladdin. In the hotel we are staying at, The Berber Palace, we see stage props in the massive galleries between sitting areas and dining room. As we drive away from Ouarzazate, the rugged landscape takes on an otherworld appearance and, in fact, it is likely the more recent Star Wars movies were filmed here. Even our Moroccan guide today is often an extra in the movies. He appeared in Gladiator and met Russell Crowe and he appeared in season four of Game of Thrones.



Atlas Studios, Ouarzazate



Medieval ksar of Ait Benhaddou, built as a movie set



Two of a hundred movies filled in



The Pharaoh's Throne used in filming The Ten Commandments





Movie props used in Mission Cleopatra



Background settings for Star Wars



Ouarzazate to Ait Ben Haddou

(Shari) Today is Thanksgiving and we have a special one. Rachid takes us to Abraham's house in Ait Ben Haddou, a few miles from our hotel. After greeting the family, we are shown their home. There is a great room used only for special guests, where we gather and will eat later. The bathroom has a sink, a conventional toilet, and a squatty potty that we have seen often in Morocco. A small, but modern, kitchen is at the back of the house, as well as two bedrooms: the parents' room and the kids' room. The family room has a TV. Out back is a room for the goats and a clay oven used by townspeople. After the house tour, I help making bread. I assist in patting it out and then they put it into the wood-fired oven.



Our Moroccan guide and interpreter, who also is an extra in movies like Gladiator



Guest parlor



Squatty potty



Family room



Open-topped room behind the house has goats



Making bread



Bread oven

Each of us carries a small stool and we head outside in the backyard for our snack of mint tea and the just-baked bread. Two of their children and a school friend entertain us with songs they have memorized, one a traditional Moroccan song, the other the national anthem.



Serving mint tea



Serving bread we baked earlier

We walk back to the house and participate in brick making. Abraham shovels a mixture of dirt, manure and straw into a mold to harden. Jeff takes the shovel and makes a brick too. Doing that 180 times a day is really hard work. This is still the way they make many houses because adobe homes keep cooler than concrete ones in the hot summer.



Shoveling adobe into mold



A new brick



Jeff makes a brick too

After such hard work, we go to the special room to eat. First, we wash our hands and then watch the women put out the serving dishes. Dessert is fresh fruit, typical in Moroccan meals.



Washing before dinner



Dishing out dinner



Fresh fruit for dessert

After dessert we say goodbye to this special family. Next we visit a women's cooperative that bakes cookies and sells them to help community women. We actually roll out the cookies and eat them with mint tea. Two in our group dress in traditional costume. Many of us also decorate our arms with henna, a common practice. The henna goes on as a thick gel, key to drying in 15 to 30 minutes and then it either falls off or is scrapped off. My arm is red. It stung a little bit and turned red but for only a short time. Later it turns dark and looks like a tattoo. It should last for several weeks.



Making cookies



Two in our group wearing traditional festive Moroccan clothes



Applying henna



Finished henna artwork

High Atlas Mountains

(Shari) I am excited about today. We go to Marrakesh, the exotic city that besides Casablanca everyone reads about. First we have a fascinating drive through the High Atlas Mountains that many think is the highlight of the tour so far. To me everything is a highlight. The road winds and twists up and then again down with many miles under construction. We see hamlets nestled in the valleys, each with a mosque of course.

(Bert) A long travel day, though through scenic mountains, the High Atlas, highway cresting at 7415 feet, sights best told through photos.













Marrakesh 1

(Bert) We know we are on the outskirts of Marrakesh when we see our first golf course. The city has so many golf courses Google offers a list of the top 10. Our bus passes through the outer gate, entering the enormous Medina. Nineteen kilometers of pink walls, built around 1122, surround the medina. The bus takes us to the famous center square, called Jemaa-El-Fna. The sight is overwhelming, like out of a huge movie set, but it is real. Hundreds of vendors hawking their wares, food of every description, trinkets, babbles, and fine craftwork, snake charmers, live dancing cobras, Barbary apes on leashes, donkeys, bicycles, scooters, Gypsy dancers, people of every color and description.

(Shari) After arriving in Marrakesh in mid-afternoon, our bus cannot negotiate the narrow crowded streets. Carriers put our bags in a cart and we walk about 19 minutes to our Riad Palais des Princesses. We luck out and our room is on the ground floor. Think, NO STEPS.



One of many golf courses in Marrakesh



One of the gates into the Marrakesh medina



Narrow passageway to our riad



Lobby and doorway to our room at Riad Palais des Princesses



Our bed in Riad Palais des Princesses



Friendly vendor at Jemaa-El-Fna Square



Jemaa-El-Fna Square



Jemaa-El-Fna Square

(Shari) When visiting cities like New Orleans, I never want to spend the money for a horse drawn carriage ride. Today it is included in our tour price and we get our money's worth. For an hour we make a big loop through the crowded streets of Marrakesh sharing the road with buses, motorcycles, and cars. After the ride we walk around the famous square, snapping picture after picture, asking permission for close-ups of people, avoiding those that want to be paid, though taking distance photos of others. As it grows dark, Bert almost walks over a poisonous cobra dancing in front of a man on a blanket prepared to charm the snake, for a price.



Horse drawn carriage on Marrakesh streets





One of many minarets in Marrakesh



Carriage mingles with cars, buses and scooters on city streets



Marrakesh



Royal Theater



Cobras, vipers and snake charmers

(Bert) Our carriage returns to Jemaa-El-Fna Square at dusk. Hundreds more visitors have crowded the square, obviously the “place to be” in the evening. Since this afternoon, lighted booths blossomed throughout the once-open square. A huge screen shows highlights of the Marrakesh Film Festival currently in progress. As the sun sets, it paints the sky in oily orange and yellow, outlining the tall minaret and mosque.



Jemaa-El-Fna Square at dusk



Snake charmer and poisonous snakes in easy reach of passersby



Jemaa-El-Fna Square at sunset



Jemaa-El-Fna Square at sunset



Lite vendor booths in Jemaa-El-Fna Square at sunset

Marrakesh 2

(Bert) This morning we visit Palais Bahia, one of the largest palaces in the Casablanca medina. We have a local guide, Jose, leading us through the many rooms and explaining its history. The palace, built 1894-1900, spans five acres, including courtyards and gardens. The walls and floors are elaborately decorated with mosaic tile. Ceilings are even more ornate than the walls and are sculpted and painted plaster and wood.



Entering Palais Bahia



Walls of Palais Bahia



Courtyard with fruit trees



Mosaic courtyard in Palais Bahia



Ornate wooden ceilings



Group photo in front of mosaic walls and floors of Palais Bahia

(Bert) Our guide Jose tells his life story, one that is beyond our experiences. His father was in the French Army and lost an arm in the war. He was already married and had children when he told his wife he wanted another wife. His wife said it was fine with her. He found a woman he wanted to marry, but his wife said she could not live with that woman. This repeated several times and he began to wonder if she really would let him have another wife. Then his wife met a stranger in the market that she liked. She told her husband he could marry that woman. So he agreed and the two of them traveled 180 km to the woman's home to ask for her in marriage. At first, the woman declined because she did not want to marry an invalid, but eventually she consented, so they married. By Islamic law, he must spend equal time with each wife, but the second wife did not become pregnant. However, the first wife had another child. The second wife still did not become pregnant and it was thought that she was sterile. When the first wife became pregnant again, the second wife wanted the child to be hers too. The first wife agreed and when the baby, our guide today, was born, the first wife wrapped the baby in a blanket and handed him to the second wife. Our guide grew up knowing and loving both mothers.

However, the story does not end there. The second wife was the wise one and frequently consulted for family decisions. When our guide wanted to get married, his parents arranged a wife for him. It was not his will, but he married the woman anyway. Two weeks into the marriage, neither our guide nor his new wife was happy. They had not known each other previously and did not love each other. He told her they should separate and see if they would change their minds. Shortly thereafter they decided to continue their marriage, mostly because of custom and because they followed their parents advice without question. The marriage became a happy one and they now have six children, including two sets of twins of which they are very proud.

(Shari) Today we get to walk around the famous Marrakesh market. I am so glad we have a guide as I would get lost for sure. We wander past the many vendors displaying their wares in about a 10x10 or 20x20 booth, ceilinged and walled on three sides. Sections within the souks are divided by type of goods: shoes, purses, copper pots, jewelry, clothing (men's, women's and children separately), spices, meat, baked goods, dates and nuts, fruits and veggies, musical instruments, soldered knickknacks and on and on. We wander well over two hours and my Fitbit logs over 10,000 steps.



Souk adjacent to Jemaa-El-Fna Square





(Shari) We have a detailed presentation at a Berber carpet shop, explaining the history and regional differences of the handwoven carpets. Then one carpet after another is unfurled on the floor in front of us so that we can see the intricate designs, styles, and colors. We have opportunity to buy a carpet and Jeff and Barbara do so. Too bad I have no place to put one in our home, nor room in my luggage to carry it.





Berber carpets



(Shari) To end a wonderful day, we dine with Jeff and Barbara in a third-story restaurant overlooking the square. Bert and I share rabbit tagine. From our table next to glassed walls, we watch the activities below and see hundreds of people gather near the huge screen showing film festival highlights.



Restaurant where we dined





Jemaa-El-Fna Square



Marrakesh 3

(Bert) I will start with a photo I took of a viper and explain it later, but for now, can you see the head of the snake?



(Bert) We start the day with a visit to Jardin Majorelle, a delightful “oasis” in the heart of the medina. It was a private garden, but now is open to the public and is so popular we arrive early to avoid the crowds that come later. I take photos of the great variety of plantings, but am soon distracted by the birds that have made this home.



Jardin Majorelle



Jardin Majorelle



Common Wood-Pigeon



Common Bulbul



Gray Wagtail

We return to Jemaa-El-Fna Square. This time I “pay the piper”, i.e., I offer 10 dirhams (a dollar) to the snake charmer is that I can get close up photos of the dancing cobra and the slumbering viper. I take a dozen photos as it turns its body left and right. I notice that it fakes a strike anytime someone gets too close, but that it limits its range to about as far as it can extend its upper body without moving the circular base of its body. Most fascinating is the flatness of its “neck” and its tilted head. The poisonous viper never moves and you will notice how perfectly its head is camouflaged within its scaly body.





Head shot

We eat lunch at a pizza restaurant on the third floor with a view of the square. I have my long lens camera so I can get good views of the square from a higher perspective. I try to let my photos capture the magic of the color, diversity, and bustle of this ethnic marketplace. Late this evening, we walk to our bus and it takes us to a fancy restaurant, The Red House, for a farewell dinner. This is the end of the

main tour. Tomorrow we split up and four of us continue on the post-tour for several more days of seeing Morocco.











Panoramic view of the square



Dinner at The Red House

To Essaouira

(Bert) From the inland city of Marrakesh we drive to the Atlantic coast at Essaouira. Our group is now four – Jeff, Barbara, Shari and me – plus our new driver and new guide Naima. So, we don't need a big bus. Instead, we are riding limousine-style, facing each other, in the back of a black Mercedes-Benz. Our first stop is the small village of Sidi Mokhtar where the most interesting thing to do is watch people going about their daily business. I get my best photo of a Chiffchaff and I think it is the Common Chiffchaff, but question whether it could be Iberian Chiffchaff.



Common or Iberian Chiffchaff



Sidi Mokhtar



(Shari) Before our farewell dinner last night, we met our guide for the post trip. She is not Rachid, an exceptionally talented guide. I worry that with our small group I will not be able to hide in the cracks, so to speak. It is only Jeff, Barbara, Bert and I taking this post trip. I had diarrhea last night and feel achy all over today. I just want to sleep. We have an 8-passenger limousine for the six of us and our driver seems nice. I try to sleep but our guide is very talkative and does not seem to understand that I do not feel good. She repeats what she told us last night, at least three times. Yes, I know what the program says we are to see. Now just let me sleep.

We do make two very interesting stops. The first is unplanned though our guide has been looking for it. She sees an olive press in operation. People in the area pick their olives, put them in a sack, and bring them to the press where they are weighed and pressed into oil. The owner obliges us and shows the operation.

(Bert) The olive press is very similar to the one used by the Romans for over a thousand years. Within a large circular pit, two large stone wheels rotate around a shaft, crushing olives poured into the pit. The difference here is the power comes from an engine, not mules.



(Shari) We pass some goats in trees but do not stop as our guide says they are tourist goats tied to platforms and made to stay in the trees replicating the real goats we will see in two days.



Goats tied in the tree

(Shari) Another planned stop is at a women's cooperative that makes goat cheese. We meet the women, have a taste of cheese, and then meet the friendly goats. The goats are kept in a barn during the cold season, and they are extremely curious about us. These goats were imported from France especially for goat cheese and are much more valuable than the goatherds we see in the countryside.



Lots of nannies



One billy for all the nannies



Inquisitive

(Shari) After our goat visit, our guide and driver have angry words with each other. Of course, they speak in Arabic and we do not understand. Then each gets on their cell phone and more loud emotional words are spoken to someone on the other end of the phone. Gees, finally we get going and there is blessed silence in the front seat. I sleep.

(Bert) Since Shari brings up the argument, let me say what it was all about. Our guide should be the one in charge, but she is a woman. Our driver is a man and doesn't like being told what to do by a woman. The road to the goats was muddy and the driver was concerned his Mercedes would get stuck and he called the company to complain, without first addressing our guide about the issue. That puts our guide in a bad position with the company, since she should be the one to solve problems. Back on the highway, we stop at an overview of the Atlantic Ocean and the city of Essaouira. An island that we should learn more about tomorrow is visible. Off and on, we have been driving in rain, much to Naima's surprise. When we arrive at a home visit with Missha, I ask her when it last rained. She said it did not rain last year and very little recently.



Essaouira

(Shari) We have a home visit with Missha for lunch and you know I'm sick when I don't eat the goat tagine, bread and vegetables. The dessert is an interesting arrangement of angel hair pasta, sweet tasting and sprinkled with powdered sugar and cinnamon. Our host cooks for weddings and it is a traditional wedding dessert, called seffa. Finally we arrive at our hotel and all I want to do is climb into bed.



Seffa Desert

Essaouira

(Bert) As I type the heading for this blog, the name of this city, I wonder if there is any other word that includes all five vowels, including four in succession.

Shari is staying in the hotel room, as she still does not feel good. We meet Naima and our driver and ride the short distance to the walled city. From there we walk to the fishing boats. On the way, I again see Spotless Starlings, which so far have been difficult to photograph. This time I have good lighting and capture a flock of nine.



Spotless Starlings

Shari would have liked seeing the harbor, bustling with activity as the fishermen tend to their boats and nets. The colorful and varied catch from last night is already on display for purchase. Naima is checking it out, looking for sardines for lunch. Her intention is to take us around the markets and buy everything we need for a meal. Then she will take it to a restaurant where they prepare the food we bring.

An old fisherman who says he was a hippy in Morocco and speaks fluent English gives us a tour of the harbor, explaining the variety of boats each outfitted for a special type of fish to catch. Many of the blue boats are small and since the fishermen haven't been given the go-ahead to start fishing today, the boats are bunched together side-by-side end-to-end.

Crews of young men operate the larger boats. As I look at them, I wonder how many of their ancestors had the same occupation. Away for the some occupations of city dwellers, it seems work life has not changed for five hundred years. Fish are caught in long nets and now the crew is preoccupied with stretching, untangling, and pulling out debris.



Port d'Essaouira



Blue fishing boats lined up at Port d'Essaouira



Great Cormorant and its shadow



Young fishermen stretching their nets



Fish for sale

From the dock we can see two famous islands called Île de Mogador, also known as Îles Purpuraires (Purple Isles). Roman ruins, first built when Augustus was emperor, are still found on the islands. Here the Romans extracted purple dye from mollusks. The island had visitors even earlier as Phoenician artifacts have been found. We are not permitted to visit the island, but we sure would like to, as it is now a nature reserve for Eleonora's Falcon.



Île de Mogador



Colorful eye of Yellow-legged Gull

From the harbor, we walk through the gates into the ancient city. Along the wall, at the second level walkway, a long line of 16th and 17th century cannons point through crenellations toward the sea. We walk into the marketplace, talk to a man who hand crafts a three-stringed gimbri. Jeff is curious about the construction and wonders how the neck is attached to the gimbri, so the craftsman takes one apart to show him. He plays a Moroccan song on the gimbri by strumming the strings, two of which he adjusts the note by moving his finger position on the neck, but leaves the third string on a single low

base note. At the same time he hits the body of the gimbri with his thumb, producing a drumming sound.

We visit a wood crafting shop with an impressive array of handmade wood dishes, furniture, and crafts such as the camel Jeff and Barbara purchase. We visit Synagogue Communautaire de Mogador where a Moslem woman is caretaker. The synagogue was inaugurated in 1865, though nowadays very few Jewish people remain in the city. However, the place had a famous rabbi, so it is often visited by Jewish tourists.





Handcrafted wooden dishes and souvenirs



Synagogue Communautaire de Mogador

Time for lunch and I'm sure Shari would have enjoyed this one. All of our food shopping has been delivered and the restaurant prepares it for us. It is a restaurant where you pay for the preparation but not the food itself. I should have taken a photo of the food when it arrived, as that is what Shari always does. Instead, my photo is of the sardines and calamari we were too full to eat.

Next we go to a silversmith shop where they make elegant jewelry. The bracelets displayed in my photo are three styles: Jewish, Islamic, and Berber. I like the earrings and buy a pair for Shari.



Leftovers



Silver bracelets



Silver earrings

We return to the hotel in time for sunset that I capture photographically through the palms and also as a backdrop to Île de Mogador. A bird I cannot identify rests on a branch above me. I will e-mail one of the women from our tour group because now she is traveling with a bird guide in Morocco. Maybe he can identify it.





Unidentified until next day

(Shari) I sleep until 9:45 missing today's excursion. Feeling a bit better, I go down to breakfast to eat a roll and cheese. I sleep some more and eat the yogurt Bert brought to the room earlier. I sleep some more, watch impeachment hearings and sleep some more. When Bert returns at 4:30, he has our guide with us. She has brought me about 3 dozen cookies and 1 dozen oranges. She wants me to get better so bad. After she leaves I sleep some more.

Argon trees south of Essaouira

(Bert) Shari is feeling better and we take the elevator down to breakfast. Knowing that some of us are interested in birds, our guide adds a few extra stops at good birding sites. At the first, an estuary to the sea near Dar Sultan Palace, our best birds are a Little Grebe and Little Egret. I also see another chiffchaff, and this one looks even more like an Iberian Chiffchaff. At the next stop along a shallow creek, we watch a Green Sandpiper.

By the way, I got an e-mail back from Patsy who is on tour with a Moroccan bird guide. The guide says the mystery bird I photographed yesterday is a juvenile male European Stonechat.



Sunrise in Essaouira



Breakfast with view of Atlantic Ocean





Little Grebe



Iberian Chiffchaff



Green Sandpiper

(Shari) Feeling better today, I join Bert for breakfast eating only some bread and cheese and wrapping more for a snack later. We paid for the optional trip today and I am happy I can join in.

We go to a women's cooperative where they prepare argon oil and make its associated products. I bet you never heard of argon oil. I know I never did. The argon tree only grows in this area of Morocco and some area in Israel. The tree has nuts that make oil much like almonds. To get at the oil, the outer shell must be removed. One removal method is by goats eating and digesting the shell and pooping out the nut. The other method is by hand. Seven women in the cooperative sit on the floor and grab each nut one by one, placing it on a rock and hitting the nut with a stone, dropping the shell on the floor and saving the inner nut. They are after the little white seed shown in the woman's hand. The seeds are roasted or not, depending on the product wanted. All the seeds are then ground between two disks of rock. The products made from the extracted oil are many. From the wide selection, I buy soap, cooking oil, and hand lotion.



Argon tree



Argon nuts



Splitting argon nuts to remove the shell



Argon nuts split open



Grinding argon nuts to extract oil

(Shari) After viewing the products we talk with the women. Even though their lot in life is hard, they are a happy bunch, joking with us about wanting a husband and singing and dancing.





(Shari) As I mentioned, another way of getting the outer shell off the nut is by digestion through goats. Oil gotten in this manner is not as good as it smells and tastes of goat. The goats actually climb the argon trees to eat the nuts.

(Bert) We stop to watch goats climbing in argon trees, surprised at how agile they are. I catch one goat in action as it jumps down from a tree. The goat shepherd is quite friendly and even lets Shari and Barbara hold a kid.



Goat eating argon nuts





South of Essaouira

(Shari) After our visit to the goats, we stop at a weekly souk or market in a rural town. People come from all around to buy the products sold or get items repaired from the vendors. Some come on donkeys and there is a donkey parking lot. Most are men. We see butchered animals for sale with their male parts in plain view as proof they are not selling any females. Chickens with their throats slit are upside down in metal cones with legs still twitching, left to bleed out. The hair on goats legs are burned off and the smell is powerful. For sale, fruits and vegetables are piled on blankets on the ground. For the asking, we can taste dates, pomegranates, and oranges.



Donkey parking lot



Goods to sell arrive on bags strapped to donkeys



Sheep for sale





Weekly market at Commune Rurale Agerd





(Bert) After visiting the farmer's market, our driver takes us to Le Domaine du Val d'Argan, a vineyard owned by Charles Melia, a French wine maker. I find it surprising to find a wine producer in Morocco where 99.9% of the population is Muslim. The Quran forbids alcohol and other intoxicants. However, this prohibition must be ignored by some in Morocco as over 90% of this winery's products are sold within the country. Shari, with a bit of help from me, makes wine each winter, so we are interested in our tour of the winery. The wine is stored in huge tanks with labels marking their capacity. However, it is hard to identify with the unit of measure, hectoliter-inches. The bottle filling process is similar to what we did when I worked at a Coca-Cola bottling factory during college summers. After the tour we have lunch at the restaurant above the winery. Again, we are served large quantities of a great variety of foods, but this time we also have our choice of their local wines.

(Shari) We do all this in the morning visiting a winery and having lunch in the afternoon. Needless to say, no one is hungry for dinner but we manage to have a bowl of soup.



Le Domaine du Val d'Argan





Essaouira to Casablanca

(Bert) From Essaouira we drive north along the Atlantic coast, stopping for a rest stop at the busy coastal port of Safi. Another one of those birds we have seen frequently but has avoided close up photos is Common Bulbul. This morning I get my shot.



Safi



Safi



Common Bulbul

(Shari) On our way back to Casablanca, we stop at an oyster farm. They buy 1,000,000 little oysters 1 mm in size (yes that small) three times per year and grow them in baskets in the lagoon in front of their processing plant. We see the cleaning process inside their warehouse. Naima, our guide, assures me the oysters are safe to eat and orders a dozen for us to share.

(Bert) While seeing the oyster farm is interesting, as usual I get side tracked looking at the birds that like the marshy environment as well. I found Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlew, Green Sandpiper, and best of all, Temminck's Stint, a very small sandpiper.



Oysters in mesh boxes



Great Cormorants in marsh and Atlantic Ocean in background



Oyster vats for cleaning



Cases filled with oysters



Fresh oysters on the half shell



Temminck's Stint and Whimbrel



Eurasian Curlew

(Shari) We eat lunch at a seafood restaurant on the beach. However, none of us is very hungry and we pick at the food. We all think we are fed too much. The meals are all huge. Bert and I also do not like eating lunch at 2 PM and dinner at 7 or 8. Oh well, such a criticism to have is not much.

(Bert) Naima introduces us to the manager of Issa Blanca restaurant and in the conversation in French she must have said something about our interest in birds. The manager tells her about a nearby site and even offers to lead us there. After lunch we drive to a RAMSAR site protected for its birds, especially its large population of Greater Flamingos. The marshy area near the ocean is called Site d'Intérêt Biologique et Ecologique Sidi Moussa – Oualidia. Three of us quickly walk to the observation deck overlooking the marsh and immediately see about 90 flamingos. Scanning the ponds and marsh, we add Black-winged Stilts, Gray Heron, Great Egret, Little Egret, and others we have seen elsewhere.

(Shari) We stop at a spot known to have birds. While the three amigos pan the surroundings with their binoculars, Mohammed, our driver, and I make friends with the local kids. I see him give them our leftover bottles of water and ask if they would like the cookies I have. He starts passing them out and the number of kids grows. He starts breaking the cookies in pieces so they stretch. I add all the cookies I had and it is like the Pied Piper. Kids come out of nowhere. One little girl wants to show me her green eyes. I suppose that is a rarity in this all black-hair black-eyed country.



Site d'Intérêt Biologique et Ecologique Sidi Moussa – Oualidia



Greater Flamingos



Black-winged Stilt



(Shari) We arrive at the hotel we started at in November. To our surprise, they have a huge Christmas tree in the lobby. Christmas may be misnomer because there are no Christian symbols on the tree, only bears, stars, and reindeer. Nevertheless, it does welcome us and make us nostalgic for home.



Casablanca

(Bert) It is a rare opportunity to see the inside of a mosque, let alone the largest in Africa. Its minaret at 690 ft. in height was the largest in the world until 2019 when Algeria built one even taller. Constructed under the leadership of King Hassan II, in honor of the departed King Mohammed V, the mosque's elaborate decorations were created by 6000 master Moroccan artisans, using cedar from the middle Atlas Mountains, marble from Agadir, and granite from Tafroute. The enormous prayer hall is 660 ft. by 330 ft., crowned by glass chandeliers imported from Murano. Incredibly, the 1100-ton roof is retractable and can be opened in just five minutes. For a country like Morocco, the cost was prohibitive. The government did not have enough money, so the king asked all its citizens to contribute and a minimum amount was stipulated, with a larger amount encouraged. The construction cost is estimated at \$400-\$700 million.

(Shari) Today we see the third largest mosque in the world. Built in seven years, completed in 1993, it has the capacity to hold 25,000 Moslems inside and another 80,000 outside. We enter early when crowds are less. Usually non-Muslims are not allowed inside mosques but Naima says King Hassan II wanted to show Islam to the world as being a tolerant religion. Out of respect, Barbara and I put on head scarfs and remove our shoes, carrying them around in a little bag. We enter the huge room where the men, bringing their own rug, would pray. Women pray upstairs in a smaller room. A hammam, a place for cleansing, is in the basement, but it is no longer used except for special occasions.



Hassan II Mosque and minaret



Second tallest minaret in the world



Wearing scarfs for respect



Entrance doors and windows, looking from the inside out, and reflecting on the marble floor



Ornate carved and painted cedar ceiling



Enormous prayer hall; chandeliers reflecting off polished marble floor



Naima tells us about Islamic tiles



Second floor is where women pray



Loud speakers are hidden within the wood paneling in the upright rectangular box



Marble hammam in basement

(Shari) The remainder of the day is kind of a waste. Both Jeff and I are feeling weak and queasy. We have seen enough Medinas and souks. In fact, I did not even take pictures. Finally, at 4 PM we go back to the hotel to rest up. Jeff does not join us for our last dinner in Morocco. Barbara and I have a hard time saying goodbye. It has been a wonderful trip.

(Bert) After touring the mosque, we walk along the promenade paralleling the sea. Although there is very little beach, shorebirds take up on the many swimming pools and I see Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, Black Plover, and Common Ringed Plover.

Our driver picks us up and we head to Casablanca's medina, though harder to recognize since it no longer has a surrounding wall. We arrive at the souks just as the call to prayer is announced. Almost all shops are roped off and the vendors line up in an open area, first standing in prayer, than spreading their prayer rugs and kneeling in prayer. Women stand by, not participating. Also, I notice a number of dark Africans, probably immigrants from Kenya, that do not participate. Ten or twenty minutes later, business resumes. We have seen so many wonderful souks, we are shopped out. I guess that is a signal it is time to go home.

Tomorrow starts the adventure of flying home in a marathon of connecting flights. I will write about it when we get home.



Casablanca esplanade



Almost no beach



Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, and Common Ringed Plovers



2 PM call to prayer inside souks of Casablanca medina

Casablanca to McAllen, via Barcelona, New York and Dallas

(Bert) We set our alarms to wake us at 3:30 AM. Breakfast is delivered to our room and we eat while we finish packing. Importantly, we weigh our luggage, concerned that the fossilized rocks we picked up in the Sahara Desert might have put us over the 50-lb. limit. We barely get by. Our pre-arranged driver takes us to the Casablanca International Airport, a 1-hr drive, although somewhat faster at this early hour.

On schedule, we board Royal Air Moroc for the flight to Barcelona. The pilot announces there will be a short delay as they check the airplane. I fall asleep for an hour only to be awakened by another announcement in Arabic. Suddenly all the passengers get up, open up the luggage racks and line up to exit the plane. Not understanding the Arabic, we wonder what is happening until someone translates to English. The plane cannot be fixed and we are transferring to another. Outside the exit staircase, two buses carry us and the other passengers across the airport to another waiting plane. More delays, but finally the replacement jet is airborne and we fly across the top of Africa, across the Mediterranean Sea, and land in Barcelona, Spain.



The Casablanca delay does not affect our schedule, as our next flight is not until 4:05 PM. Shari picked Norwegian Air Shuttle for the long trans-Atlantic flight because she could upgrade to first class for a nominal amount. However, a few weeks ago she received an e-mail saying Norwegian had switched airports from Newark to JFK. Our connecting flight was booked from Newark and getting from one airport to the other in the middle of the night is not easy. After much hassle, she was able to switch the American flight to Dallas to another one initiating from JFK.

The Norwegian flight is pleasant and uneventful. I watch two movies and am delighted that one is “Casablanca,” starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. I had never seen this famous movie, although I remember hearing Bogart’s famous line “Here’s looking at you, kid”, addressing Bergman.





Our flight arrives on time at 9 PM in New York. Our rescheduled connecting flight is not until early tomorrow morning, so Shari has booked a hotel. Retrieving luggage, passing through customs, taking the train to where hotel busses pick up, waiting in the cold winter weather, riding through New York airport traffic, checking in the hotel, ... it is 11 PM before we reach our room. We set our alarms and should get about five hours of sleep.

Dreary-eyed at 4:30 AM, we are about to leave the room when Shari gets a text message saying our American flight has been rescheduled to late in the morning. We catch a few more hours of sleep and catch the hotel bus to the airport.

The rescheduled flight is delayed yet again. After more than an hour, we begin boarding, then wait some more. Finally, the pilots come on board and the captain announces they were delayed in New York traffic. He taxis to the runway and we wait again while they pull out the plane ahead of us because it has mechanical problems. Finally, we are in the air and from my window seat I watch the New York skyline and harbor.

Our flight is so late, we doubt we will make the connecting flight. However, our steward assures us the Dallas terminal has been notified and someone will be waiting for us to escort us to the connecting gate. It does not happen. We wait in line to exit and then find no one waiting for us and the gate keeper unaware of our situation. We take off on our own, take the train to cross the airport, and rush to our gate. By now the departure time has passed. However, hundreds are waiting at the desk and the boarding is just starting. The flight also was delayed, this time to our benefit.

Needless to say, our luggage does not transfer in time. We meet our friends at the McAllen airport and we return home without our luggage. It is now late Sunday evening, 46 hours since we left our Casablanca hotel.

