

## **A Man of Morocco**

*Creative Nonfiction by Meg Mahoney*

I couldn't help myself. So thrilled was I to see a mule pulling a cart and driver, I snapped its picture when it was close enough to touch. Looking up, I faced the driver, his hand thrust out in anger. Gesturing an apology, I fumbled for some *dirham* coins. He nodded and put them in his pocket.

Our tour guide Tariq had warned us, *Never take pictures of people without permission*. After my indiscretion, I was careful not to catch their faces, only their look. Figures made of fabric. A single woman, cloaked to the ground with a bundle on her head. Two women talking by a bridge, one with a baby silhouetted in a shawl on her back. Teenage boys playing tag alongside the road. An old man in a field, leaning on his staff. Young girls, with head scarves or without, sitting in a circle in a schoolyard. The dress and scarf of a shepherdess with her flock. Faceless people on a village road, blurred by the speed of our tour bus as we navigated highways from Rabat to the Rif and Chefchaouen, from Fez to Merzouga and over the High Atlas Mountains to Marrakesh.

One of the 25-some travelers on our tour, who counts her countries, snapped pictures freely as we made our way through Rabat's ancient market, leaving angry shopkeepers in her wake. Tariq paused to quell their wrath. Everywhere we went in our two-week circle of Morocco, Tariq shook hands and stopped to talk. He had or made friends everywhere, speaking their languages — Arab, Berber, French. And ours.

The tour was billed as an authentic cultural adventure, a chance to experience Morocco intimately. Our fellow travelers had spanned the globe, exchanging stories of where they'd been and where they'd yet to go, hungry for more, often using the past tense of "do," as in "I've done:" Cambodia, Kenya, Chile.

From the front seat of the bus, Tariq sang us crazy songs. Not singing really but chanting.

“Cool banana, cool banana, cool banana, oh yeah.” Then he laughed his infectious, hiccuping laugh and asked us if we recognized his song. Of course not. But we laughed too, all of us who’d come to look beyond the horizons of North America.

He told us jokes.

*How do you put a camel in a refrigerator with three motions?*

As he paused to let us think, the bus rolled past fields of sheep, each herd tended by a single shepherd.

*Shall I tell you?*

“Yes!”

*First you open the refrigerator.* He paused.

*Then you put the camel in.* Another pause.

*Then you close the door.*

He told stories of golden eagles and eleventh century kasbahs. Of Moroccan lions and elephants shipped to Rome. Of what happens if you eat too many prickly pears to correct your digestion.

“Three,” he said, “Only three. Never eat more than three.” He illustrated his advice with the plight of a friend who had eaten ten. “Lest the seeds create a plug.”

After his story, I eyed that speckled green fruit on market stands from a distance.

He told us of the King of Morocco and all he’s done to improve Moroccan life. Allowing his wife and children to be seen by his people. Instituting programs to preserve energy and the environment. Legislating free education for all, with public universities the most revered. Securing the rights of first and second wives through paperwork.

Protecting the nomadic lifestyle of Bedouins in the Constitution.

“Democracy, equality, liberty,” said Tariq, summing up Morocco’s forward progress, while acknowledging the backward pull of its mix of ancient traditions: Arab, Berber, Bedouin. Change is slow. People live the way they always have. It’s difficult, respecting tradition while moving ahead.

Occasionally, Tariq ran out of things to say but kept talking anyway.

“Oh my god! Look at that,” he’d say. “There’s a man walking on the left side of the road. And there’s another man walking on the right. It’s exquisite.”

And I was made to think how odd — and exquisite — it is to try to understand how different people are and how much the same. How odd to try to grasp that difference by snapping pictures of people doing normal things in normal lives that to me appear extraordinary.

From Rabat our bus drove north to Asilah and turned east into the Rif Mountains. As we arrived in the mountain town of Chefchaouen, a confusing commotion erupted beside the bus. Coming down to collect our baggage, we found our bus driver standing in the dirt with his hand twisted tight in the shirt of a teenage boy, the bus driver clearly angry, the boy caught and scared, the two of them surrounded by arguing men. Tariq cleared us away, to follow the trucks that carried our bags up the hill to our hotel. Later he explained. The boy had been clinging to the frame under the bus, probably trying to smuggle his way to Tangier, onto a ferry and into Spain, not realizing the bus was headed into the Rif. The bus driver became aware of him hanging under the bus, perhaps by a glimpse in his rearview mirror. He drove the final miles slowly, steadily, afraid the boy might fall. Coming to a stop at last, the frightened driver jumped down to grab him. Other men had quickly gathered to argue about how to redirect this boy so

desperate to find a life somewhere else.

Chefchaouen is known as Morocco's Blue Pearl, called thus because there was a time when its Jewish residents painted their homes blue to distinguish them from Islam's green. Although most of Morocco's Jews emigrated to Israel decades ago, the people of Chefchaouen still add fresh paint each spring in time for Ramadan — and for tourists who collect its many shades of blue in images to post for friends back home.

Arriving in a city — Rabat or Chefchaouen, Fez or Marrakesh — we walked through its medina. The medina is the oldest part of a city, the walled-in honeycomb of ancient dwellings built as long as a thousand years ago, with a maze of narrow streets and tiny alleyways, some so small that people turn sideways to pass each other by. The narrowest of the passageways are long and empty, with shuttered windows and unlabeled doors along each side. Wider streets are busy markets, lined with one-room shops, each with one colorful thing to sell. Vegetables and fruits I couldn't name, different types of meat or fish, jewelry, multi-colored shoes. Gold or silver decorations for Arab or Berber weddings. Racks of *djellaba*, the hooded outer robes which many men and women wear. Sandwiches and sweets, green herbs, black and yellow olives, bins of spices in shades of red and brown, dozens of eggs, tens of barrels of different kinds of sweet-smelling dates, buckets of soft pink rosebuds. Impossible not to reach out and touch the rosebuds or the soft leather of a bag, rough woolen weave of a cloak, deep pile in a carpet, slippery silk of a hand-dyed scarf made from an agave plant. To breathe the scent of freshly baked bread wafting from an oven in an alcove: Buy theirs, plump and brown, or bring your own to bake. At lunchtime, customers gathered around grills piled high with skewered meat, the sound of the sizzle as enticing as the smell.

A medina is not just a market. People live there, in dwellings we never saw. Are they

dark and close like the shops? Or are they full of light, like the *riads* where we spent our nights, those remodeled mansions of rich men hidden behind nondescript doors through which they ushered us into garden courtyards open to the sky? When the door of a *riad* closes to the world outside, the only sound is water falling on water.

Commotion falls away. You sit. Someone hands you mint tea. And crunchy cookies. To give you pause before they show you to your room for rest.

I wondered about the private doors, where people really live? The alleyways and workshops of the medina seemed claustrophobic; the cubicles where men and women sew or cook or sell their wares were dim and tiny. But eventually I noticed how a shopkeeper might walk next door to talk with a neighbor or go three doors down to buy some lunch. How they decorate their workshops with family photos and knickknacks. They talk with neighbors across the aisle as bicycles, mules, and carts bring fresh supplies. Children run around corners, seeming to know their way by heart. There are pharmacies and lawyers. Some never go outside the medina's walls, beyond its gates.

The old medina in Fez has 10,000 streets and alleys; 80,000 households; 350,000 inhabitants. From within the medina, the sky is a bright stripe of blue, glimpsed between colored fabrics and carved awnings that shade passageways from too much heat and light. Occasionally a fragment of a minaret rises into view. More often a mosque reveals itself only at its entrance, where elaborate carvings and tiles welcome worshippers when the call to prayer rings out. No one enters a mosque except to pray. It feels intrusive even to crane your neck and peek.

The one exception is Hassan II, a mosque in Casablanca where tourists are allowed inside on guided tours. It's Africa's largest mosque, the world's fifth, with the world's tallest minaret. 105,000 worshippers can gather: 25,000 inside and 80,000 on the

plaza. On special days men line up to pray in perfect rows on the cool expanse of its shiny mosaic floor or outside on the patterned stones. Women are hidden upstairs behind a screen. At the front is a stairway from which an imam leads the prayer, barely visible in the vastness of the space. Huge columns on the main floor have built-in speakers to carry his voice.

As we left the old town in Fez behind, our bus drove to a nearby hill, and we looked back. From afar, the streets of the medina disappeared, its buildings indistinguishable one from another — except the mosques, their minarets tall and white, their roofs tiled green. Below the minarets and across the skyline, satellite dishes crowded the medina's rooftops, all facing in the same direction like palms lifted up in prayer.

Every day as he reviewed our agenda, Tariq punctuated his sentences with “Inshallah.”

“God willing, this is what we’ll do today. Inshallah.”

*Shall I tell you another joke?*

*Yes?*

*Well, you know who is the greatest of all the animals?*

*Yes, you’re right, it’s the lion.*

*Now the lion wanted to give a huge party so he invited all the other animals to celebrate with him. The animals came and partied. They sang and danced together, all of them on their best behavior. No one ate the little mouse or chased the graceful gazelle.*

*But there was one animal that didn’t come. Do you know which animal that was, and why he didn’t come to party?*

We watched the landscape rolling past. There were guesses about which animal

stayed home, none of them correct. The bus stopped so we could watch monkeys in several shades of brown on the side of the road, hard to see against the dirt. They were quick, as curious about us as we were about them. We snapped their pictures freely.

Beyond the green fields of the north and through the Middle Atlas Mountains, we continued south. Southern Morocco is everywhere earthen and ashen, in shades of grey and darker grey, beige and tan and sand. Dwellings, hotels, and shops blend in, like monkeys lost against the landscape. But there are colorful accents, a palette of passionate details. Lavender, green, and yellow shop doors. A woman in a pink scarf or red *djellaba*. Elementary schools are painted in multiple pastels, and there are as many brightly colored plastic chairs as cats waiting to be fed.

Tariq said cats are well cared for because they keep themselves so clean. Not so with dogs, even after they've worked hard all their lives tending sheep. We saw one whose work was done when his shepherd sold his sheep. He stood outside his former home, scrawny, waiting for a bite to eat. An excruciating sight.

Tariq sometimes turned the table on us, probing around our lives, poking at things we overlook.

"I hear that in America, in a place called Utah, some people have two wives. Is that true?"

"I hear that in America anyone can carry a gun. Do you?"

"Can everyone in America go to university?"

Sometimes Tariq ran out of words. Before falling silent, he punctuated his thoughts with greetings, "Nice to meet you. Thank you very much." We laughed at the incongruity.

In the South there were oases. I always pictured an oasis as a mirage or a single well

with a few palm trees. In Morocco an oasis is a river of green that follows water wherever it runs, even underground. Wide swaths of lush vegetation curve and flow for miles, bordered by the earthen and ashen towns.

*Shall I tell you which animal stayed home?*

*Yes?*

*Yes, you're right, it was the camel. But why?*

*You don't know?*

*Because he was still in the refrigerator.*

Tariq told us about his family. He says his father was lucky to find his mother, who is Berber and seven years older. When Tariq comes home, he speaks with his mother in Berber. When his father arrives, they switch to Arab or mix the two without a thought. Tariq's parents never went to school. Neither can read or write. They built a one-story house in Marrakesh, finished just enough for the children to be safe on the rooftop terrace where they hung their laundry. When Tariq grew up, he finished the second floor and moved upstairs; his younger brother built a third. His parents still live downstairs. He's gone a lot, guiding tours through Morocco. But when he's home, he likes to sit with his parents to eat and talk.

"Sometimes my parents go away to visit my sister at her house, and I miss them when they're gone," he says, gesturing lovingly to invisible chairs on either side, as if they're with us now. "I can imagine how I'll miss them when their chairs are empty, and they're really gone. I will always consider them."

He asks, "Do you live with your parents as they grow old?"

As we neared Merzouga in southeastern Morocco, we learned to tie turbans around our heads against wind and sand and other ways to use a 10-meter turban: to filter



water, splint a leg, make a sling or shelter, carry a child or a pile of wood, as a rope for a bucket at a well.

Tariq gave us directions about how to mount a dromedary. Yes, we rode camels, the one-humped kind. Mount a camel while it's lying down. It's patient as you climb aboard, especially since the handler rests his foot on the camel's curled-up front leg. But hang on tight as your dromedary rises; it's anything but smooth. As it untangles its legs to stand, it teeter totters, pitching its rider back and forth. I was startled by the terrible noise a dromedary makes when disturbed by the dromedary rising up behind it. In case you're wondering, as I was, you sit on top of the single hump, on a saddle that isn't soft.

Someone asked, "Tariq, will you be riding too?"

He said, "No. You ride. I walk. I've ridden a camel." And then he laughed, not setting our minds at ease at all.

From my camel, I watched Tariq walking in the distance: a tiny solo figure in a red jacket, stepping steadily along the ridge of the empty dunes, leaving a singular line of footprints. A speck barely visible in the monochrome hills of sand as the shadows of the dunes lengthened and the sun sank down.

Tariq told a story of when he was guiding once in the desert. Two of his party saw a dune they thought to be nearby. Tariq told them it would take six hours to reach, but they set off anyway, late one day. When they hadn't returned by sunset, Tariq and others tried lights as beacons but to no avail. Eventually in hopes of guiding them in, they built bonfires on the peaks of dunes. Many hours later, the hikers reappeared, hugging each other and crying. Inshallah. Perhaps you had to be there to understand the cumulative beauty of this man Tariq. A gentle man, honest, with bubbling humor, prodding us to think about ourselves and how we live. Thoughtful, full of integrity, more than the many

who make the news.

Our trip started and ended in Casablanca, a city no one recommends. Except for the Hassan II Mosque, it's industrial not picturesque. Its movie star reputation is a made-up thing, Rick's Cafe a site for tourists. Before leaving, we spent two days up the coast in Mohammedia, a beach town where Moroccans go. We walked the town, watching people, taking pictures from a distance. Parents playing with their children in a manicured park in the center of town. Families sharing platters of seafood on Sunday afternoon. We found the beach, with Casablanca on the skyline, its industry cloaked in smog. Here and there an umbrella sheltered a woman, fully robed, while men and boys in swim suits played soccer at the water's edge, splashing in the shallow waves. One woman, covered in fabric, wet from her neck to ankles, waded in the water. I didn't take her picture.

As we crossed the High Atlas Mountains, Tariq said, *Shall I tell you one more joke?*

*Yes?*

*How do you put an elephant into a refrigerator in four motions?*

Then he left us mulling.