

We arrived in Casablanca at what we thought would be 5:45pm but turned out to be 7:45pm. All the computers said 6:45. Yet it was really 7:45. Seems Morocco changes its clock but nobody knows about it. And that was just the beginning of the confusion.

We made it through passport control quickly and Phyllis and I went to exchange money. A word to the wise, the exchange rate at Banks is much better than at the airport, although I had read it was the same throughout the country. Not so.

Well we were busy dealing with the currency exchange, Andy and Ben went to get our luggage. Mine arrived. Phyllis's arrived. Ben's arrived. But Andy's suitcase was nowhere to be seen. We went to baggage control and they said they would send someone to see if it was still on the plane. Phyllis and Ben went out to find our driver and we waited; and we waited, and waited, and waited. About 45 minutes later, after we had begun to fill out all the paperwork, they found the bag on the carousel all the way at the other end of baggage claim.

Feeling better with all the bags at hand, Andy and I also headed out to meet the driver. When we got past all the people with the signs and all the family members waiting for their friends and relatives, we found Phyllis and Ben, but no driver.

Phyllis and Ben had looked for the driver all over terminal 2, where we had landed, as well as terminal 1. We waited for about an hour but still no one with a sign with our names could be found. A kind guide waiting for someone else allowed us to use his telephone and we called the phone number that we had for the travel agency. But it was late at night, it was in Marrakesh, and it was closed.

So we took a taxi to our hotel. Soon after we arrived we got a call from the lobby at the driver had called looking for us and was coming to meet us at the hotel. Seems he had waited three hours at terminal 1 and could not find us either. Not a great way to start the trip.

But the next morning we woke up a bit refreshed and ready to hit the road. Ibriham, our driver/guide, took us around Casablanca.

Everyone told us not to bother going to Casablanca, but how can one come to Morocco and not say you've been to Casablanca? Everybody remembers the movie, Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, and play it again Sam.

But they were all right. Casablanca really is not a city that would be on the top of my list of things to see in Morocco.

Casablanca began as a small Berber town on the slopes of the Anfa hills. In the start of the 20th century the harbor grew and it became a place to trade sugar, tea, wheat and corn with the Western world. The city grew, and began to be modernized. That was the start of the large metropolis it is today. Casablanca is the city of 6 million people, full of traffic. And very polluted. Buildings in Casablanca can be up to 10 stories high; in comparison, In Marrakesh, they can only be 3 stories high. Ibriham said: Casablanca has good drivers and a bad soccer team."

Like most of Morocco, it was once filled with Jews and Moors, Arabs and Berbers, who all got along. The Jews came at the start of the inquisition, around 1492, primarily from Andolucia, along with the Arabs from Spain. They were merchants and traders, trading salt and sugar for other goods. They became master silversmiths and bronze makers and taught the Arabs how to do the same. Everywhere you go Morocco, people tell you how this is the trade the Jews taught us how to do.

The main boulevard running through Casablanca (and most other major cities) is called Mohammed V. It runs through the city from one end to the other and is surrounded on either side by covered arcade houses, shops and restaurants. And traffic. Oh yes, and traffic.

Casablanca is a port on the Atlantic Ocean (Ibriham said if we start swimming, we could reach the East Coast of the US).



We began our tour of Casablanca with a visit to the Hassan II mosque. This is one of the largest mosques, in fact, it is the second largest religious building in the world after the mosque in Mecca and it has the tallest Minaret in all of Europe. The minaret is 82 feet wide and 656 feet tall! The fountains are covered with tile work and framed with marble. The columns of the prayer hall doorways, fountains and stairs are also marble, often in combination with granite and onyx. The massive doors are engraved in brass and titanium. It really was beautiful. The prayer hall holds 25,000 people with a separate upstairs women's gallery holding another 5000.

We drove by the El-Hank lighthouse in the upscale neighborhood of Corniche d'Ain Diab, just west of the Mosque. We then visited Pigeon Square (yes, full of pigeons) which is really called Place Mohammed V, across from the post office.



And then we hit the road and headed to Rabat.

Rabat is the political capital of Morocco (they say Fez is the cultural capital). It is also on the Atlantic coast, just up the road from Casablanca. Rabat is considered the product of a fertile exchange between the Arab past and Western modernism. There is a new town built by the French, and of course the old town, the Medina, which is surrounded by the Andalusian Wall (called that because it was built by the Arabs from Andalusia) from the 17th century. It is believed, based on archaeological digs, that the Romans first occupied the area of Rabat. Around 1150, Yacoub el-Mansour, the first ruler of the Almohad dynasty set up came and built the imperial residence on the site of a former ribat – a fortified monastery. A great city was built and named Ribat el-Fath, Camp of Victory. When he died in 1199, all construction on the new city stopped. The city walls were complete and still stand today, but the Hassan Mosque and minaret were unfinished. The part of the mosque that was built was destroyed in the great earthquake of 1755 and only the unfinished minaret and columns remained.



The old Medina wall, like all the old walls in Morocco, have holes in them for ventilation and to keep them from cracking. The Hassan Tower (minaret) and the Mausoleum of Mohammed V are within the walls. We began our visit with a walk through the grounds of the Mausoleum of Mohammed V and the Hassan tower. Mohammed V was the father of Moroccan independence and the grandfather of the current king. He was the head of the Alaouite dynasty.

The entrances at the gates on either side are guarded by two soldiers on horses, in their white uniforms (white for summer, red for winter). It is a large complex that houses both the Hassan Tower and the mausoleum. The Hassan Tower, or Tour Hassan, is the minaret of the incomplete mosque (as I describe above, begun in 1195) which was intended to be the largest minaret in the world along with the mosque. At the point that construction ceased, the tower reached 140 ft, only about half of its intended 260 ft. The rest of the mosque was also left incomplete, with only the beginnings of several walls and 200 columns being constructed.

This makes the complex look like a Roman ruin. Instead of stairs, the tower has ramps which would have allowed the muezzin (who give the call for prayer – before it became a recording) to ride a horse to the top of the tower to issue the call to prayer.

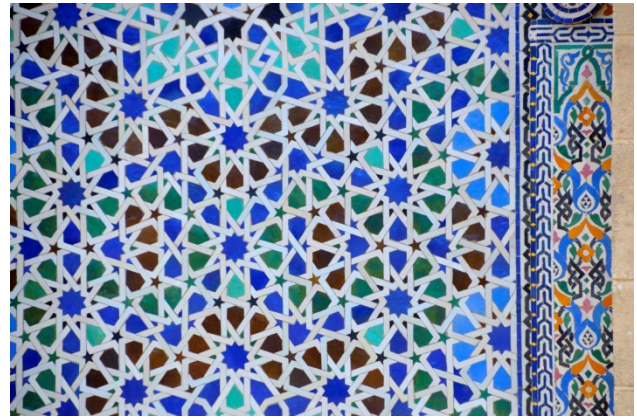


Figure 1 Hassan Tower





The mausoleum was built much later and was commissioned by King Hassan II in the memory of his father, Mohammed V. (Note: the kings alternate names with each generation from Mohammed to Hassan). It contains the tombs of the king and of his two sons, late King Hassan II, who died in 1999, and Prince Abdallah. The mausoleum itself is spectacular – white Italian marble with a green tiled roof. Green is the color of Islam, so many mosques and minarets have green tile. Although we did not get to go inside, I read that the sarcophagus is made from one granite slab. Another tidbit, that we actually learned days later in Marrakesh, is that the Muslim are buried on their right sides, with their faces facing Mecca. And thus so is Mohammed V.





Right outside the walls was a water man. What is a water man, you ask? These are men in funny looking red hats and outfits, with brass cups hanging from them. They are the ones that would supply the locals with water brought up from the wells and stored in goatskin bags worn on their backs. They have bells which they ring to announce themselves. I must admit I paid to take his picture. This was one I just could not resist.



There is more to day 1, but I haven't written it yet and thought I would get this sent off in the meantime. Enjoy.