

Day 1 continued – Meknes and Volubilis

From Rabat we headed to Meknes, just east of Rabat. This was our first real opportunity to see the Moroccan countryside. And it was beautiful. Several things stand out.



First, there are donkeys everywhere. Donkeys carrying people along the side of the road. Donkeys carrying large packages along the side of the road. Donkeys carrying vegetables, and plants and anything else you can think of, along the side of the road. We even saw wild donkeys, literally frolicking.

One also sees sheep and goats and cows in the fields. This is farm land as agriculture is the number one industry (tourism is number 2) and Meknes lies in the midst of fertile

land. It is in fact known for olives, wine and mint tea (so, what could be bad?).

The second thing you notice is people walking. Long distances. Over mountains. Through valleys. From town to town. From village to market. Few people have cars outside of the major cities, so the modes of transportation include walking. And motorcycles. And bicycles.



truffles



There were olive trees everywhere (and covered with olives), apple trees, orange trees. Corn. Tomatoes. Potatoes. Grapes. Truffles. Yes, truffles. As you drive between towns there are people sitting on the side of the road with small buckets of truffles for sale. They are about every one-city block. I am not sure who stops to buy them, or how you choose one truffle seller vs. another, but I guess it is lucrative. You also see individuals selling apples along the side of the road. Or oranges. But always in groups, one city-block apart.

The farm houses were almost always pink surrounded by green fields (or often brown fields as there has been



little rain so far this year). At the edge of the farm, there were often graves. Families stay together. Beyond the fields and fields were the mountains. More about those when we reach the High Atlas.



As we drove on the highway, which was really a toll-way, there were cameras to catch speeding cars. The funny part was that the camera was set up on a tripod on the side of the road, right next to a police car. Unfortunately I never caught a picture of that as they were often slightly behind a bush, but nevertheless, it was quite humorous. Then, a few miles down, there would be cones set up and police waiting to pull over the speeding offender.

Another sight was the Ibis. Hundreds of them. Sometimes we would see one walking around on its own. But other times we would see trees just covered with them. And speaking of birds, many of the minarets had stork nests at the top.

Meknes was the capital of Morocco under the reign until 1727 when it was moved to Marrakesh. It was named after one of the 12 Berber tribes, the Miknasa or Imeknasen (yes, there are 12 Berber tribes). As we drove into town, we passed a university which students everywhere. The women were a combination of Western and more traditional. It was encouraging to see so many young people getting educated as Morocco still have high illiteracy rate, particularly outside of the big cities. Education is only mandatory until 6th grade, and we spoke to at least 2 local guides who never went to school. Interestingly, they learned English from talking with the tourists.



We drove into town, through the Bab el-Berdaine gate into the old city, a gate decorated with beautiful tile. We drove through narrow streets, with the walls of the palace on one side, and the old city wall on the other. The King has a palace in every major city; so this was his Meknes palace. It was getting late and was about time for the afternoon siesta, when all shops and restaurants close for a few hours, and everyone goes home to sleep,

so we parked the car near the water, and went in search of food. We ended up at the Restaurant Salma, where we climbed and climbed several stories of stairs with walls covered in beautiful tile, to their upstairs balcony. There we had a beautiful view of the city and the walls.

A plate of olives was placed on the table, along with a basket of bread. The meal was a set menu with choices of soup or Moroccan salad and tagine or couscous. The Moroccan salad was just like the Israeli salad – my favorite. Between that and the olives, I was a happy camper. Later we learned that many salads are called Moroccan salad, and often are just tomatoes and onions.



And here we had our first taste of tagine – one of many. Tagine is an earthen pot in which one places spices, herbs and either meat, lamb, chicken and/or vegetables. One of the more common is chicken with preserved lemon and olives, or meat with prunes. I chose a vegetable tagine for my first time. Andy had couscous, another standard meal in Morocco. But more about the food later.



Our first stop after lunch was an area with the old walls and a large pool where we were told the King would come to swim. And then it was back on the road to our visit to Volubilis.



On the way we passed the city of Moulay Idriss, a complex of white houses with green tiled roofs on the side of the mountain. This is the city where Moulay Idriss is buried, the man that first brought Islam to Morocco. He was a decendent of Ali, the son-in-law of Mohammed the prophet.



The view of the town was magnificent but our destination was the old, partially excavated Roman city of Volubilis, which began as a Phoenician settlement in the 3rd century BCE, but grew under Roman rule from the 1st century, around the year 45. The areas excavated include the remains of long, wide boulevards, a Basilica, columns around an altar for sacrifices, called the Capitol, a Triumphal Arch which looks out at the olive tree fields below. There are many remains of grand homes with large mosaic floors, many still intact such as the one of Diana and the bathing nymphs, suggesting that this was a rich city. There was a hamam (baths) for the rich, and a separate one down the hill for the poor. We

had a local guide her, Abdul, who lived his whole life in the village we could see from the ruins. He grew up playing among the ruined city and he understand the history, spoke a beautiful English (again, learned from the tourists), and made the 1.5 hours we spent there go by as minutes. He was one of our best guides. He picked fresh figs for us to eat, and found a berry (or fruit – we don't know what was) that he picked off the trees and had us taste. Later we found out that in French it is called Zizyphus Mauritania. I finally had a chance to look it up: Zizyphus mauritiana, also known as Ber, Chinee Apple, Jujube, Indian plumand Masau is a [tropical](#) fruit tree.



The entire site of Volubilis is still being excavated. A modern museum is almost completed. This will enhance the area, but will also spoil it in some ways. We were glad we got to see it in it more natural state.









It was back on the road again, passing more groves of olive trees,



more apples sold at the side of the road, more donkeys, and more views of the beautiful countryside. We began to climb into the middle Atlas Mountains and stopped at the top of one mountain to look down at a beautiful lake, the Sidi Ali Lake. There were vendors there as well, selling the largest squash I have ever seen. The middle Atlas Mountains reach over 10,000 feet. The volcanos of the mountains fill with rain and create the lakes. The mountains are covered with cedar, cork oak (which I had never seen before – the bottom half of the trunk really is the color of cork while the top half is darker), and maritime pine. In the winter, these mountains are covered in snow.

Then we finally arrive in Fes, well after the sun had set. And thus, day 1 in Morocco.

