

Erfoud, Merzouga and the Sahara Desert  
Sunday, Oct 6, 2013

We left Fez early in the morning and headed to Merzouga in the Sahara desert. We drove through the Atlas Mountains, past Berber villages, mountain sides covered in sheep and wild donkeys, and just plain beautiful mountains. We passed through a town where many wealthy people come from Europe to buy villas as second homes and to go skiing (yes, there is skiing in Morocco).



One of the sights we saw fairly often along the drive though the Berber villages was washing day. The women take their carpets and other laundry down to the river and wash them. The carpets are beaten and left out to dry in the sun. We saw this over and over again (more pictures later). This adds to the color of Morocco.



The Middle Atlas are covered in Palm Trees. You will be driving along, seeing nothing but sandy-looking mountains. And suddenly there will be an oasis (literally), green fields, groves of palm trees and a Berber village.



It was date season and along the side of the road the locals were selling whole stems of yellow dates (that still need to be dried to be eaten). The oasis was really a beautiful sight.



The area between the Middle and the High Atlas looks like the moon. But the High Atlas are beautiful in a different way. The colors were magnificent. Purple, pink, green, yellow, brown, red.



We stopped for lunch at a hotel on the road. (What was the menu? Tagine of course!)



And then it was back on the road heading to the desert. On the way we suddenly saw soldiers all over the road. And red flags everywhere. Seems the King was in town and was going to be driving through. There were crowds along the sides of the road waiting for hours to catch a sight of him. The King is very loved (unlike his father) and is really a King not just of the people but of the poor people. He is the one that instituted mandatory education (although only until sixth grade), emancipating women (there are 95 women in Parliament; limiting wives to one (from four; unless the first wife gives her consent for a second wife; assuring the women get half of everything in a divorce). He has been known to get in his car and just drive around. Abriham one day stopped at a red light right next to the King. But since this was an official occasion, there were soldiers everywhere – for miles and miles and miles – just standing there, in full uniform in the heat. Abriham told us several times how Morocco is very safe internally, but worries about terrorists from outside the country.



Our last stop was to see fossils. This area of the desert is full of fossils such as ammonites, orthoceras, trilobites and dinosaur teeth. This part of the Sahara was once an ocean and so the fossils are everywhere. The people that live here make a living from searching the desert and selling what they find. Others, more skilled artisans, make tables (the fossil in the picture is the size of a table), plates etc with the fossils in them. We were given a “tour” of how they work the fossils which ended where? At the gift shop, of course. We did not buy anything, but keep reading....



At the fossil factory we were picked up by a 4-wheel drive to head into the Sahara. As we got closer and closer, we could see the dunes appearing in the distance. We pulled into our “hotel” – the Bivouac La Belle Etoile. We had a choice when planning this trip between sleeping in a tent with shared bathrooms or sleeping in the deluxe tent. Not sure what happened to Phyllis and my judgment as we usually go for the best, but we opted this time for the basic tent. We arrived and were shown to our tents, just a few steps from the building. We had imagined it out in the dunes. We were next to the dunes, and certainly in the sand. And the sand was everywhere – in the beds, in our clothes, in our suitcases – but I get ahead of myself. (However – moral of the story – do not miss the camel ride in the Sahara, but opt for the deluxe tent.) By the way, although I keep saying camel, they are really dromedaries. Only one hump.



We were escorted into the lobby area where we waited to check in, given mint tea of course. Someone came over to us to review our planned trek into the desert the next morning to see the sun rise. But it was still early, there was nothing else to do there, so they offered us a ride to see the sunset as well. And so we did. But first, we went to drop off our bags at our tents. The path from the building to the tents was covered in Berber rugs. The tents were all connected to each other, with blankets hung over the openings. The tent itself was also made of blankets/carpets. It was colorful, if nothing else.





But the ride through the desert was amazing. It was the four of us on our camels with two guides, Mohammed the older and Mohammed the younger. Mohammed the younger lives in a village 15 km away. He walks through the desert each day to take tourists on sunset and sunrise rides. Sometimes he rides his bike on the road. The rest of the day he either just sits around or works with his father on fossils. He walked barefoot the whole time.

And the desert was amazing. The colors! Orange, pink, beige. The patterns! The shadows! The quiet! The bump, bump, bump of the camels. We rode for about an hour, out, out, out into the dunes.



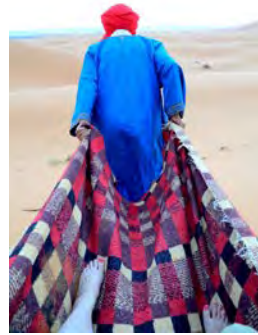
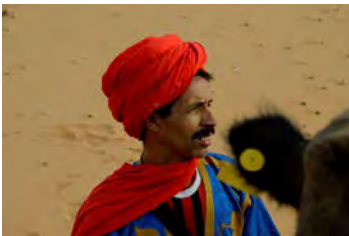
At some point we stopped and dismounted. The camels all sat down and waited for us. And we climbed one of the dunes to watch the sun set. I took off my shoes as that really is the best way to walk in the sand. And the sand was so fine; it felt like silk. When I say we climbed the dunes, don't think for a moment it was easy. At one part, Mohammed the older threw out his scarf and pulled Phyllis and me up the hill. In the picture of me being pulled up with the red scarf, you can see how far down the camels are.



But when we got to the top, they laid out a blanket and we sat and watched the sun set. Unfortunately, it was very overcast so the colors were not as vibrant as they might have been, but it was still very beautiful.



After the sun had set, each Mohammed had us sit on the blankets, then pulled us down the hill, almost like a sled. That was so much fun!



Then it was back onto the camels for the hour ride back to the tents. It was dark (after all the sun had set), the wind picked up and suddenly we were in a sand storm. Sand was everywhere (my biggest concern was for the camera which I tried to keep covered). We finally made it back with sand in every crevice. We went into the dining hall for dinner (not worth even talking about – worse meal we had) and then went off to bed. It was hot. It was windy. It was sandy.

Mohammed the younger came to wake us at 5:30 in the morning. We threw on our clothes and went back out on the camels, this time to watch the sun rise. The trip was only 30 min (closer dune) with less climbing up sand. We sat quietly watching the sun come up, watching the sand change colors. There was a large group of Japanese tourists on other dunes, and they were a bit noisy, but overall it was us and the sand and the sun slowly making its way into the sky.



Ben decided to take a walk and climbed up to the top of the next dune till he was just a speck. Andy also went exploring.



When we returned to camp, the Mohammeds led the camels to the side for privacy, laid out a blanket for us, and then laid out fossil items to sell. The selling never ends. On the one hand, we could have been annoyed. On the other hand, this is how they make their living. Walking camels for tourists to ride through the desert and selling fossils. One can't blame them for that.

We cleaned up, showered, had breakfast, tried to shake the sand out (ha!) and hit the road. It was time to begin the next day's adventure.

[Please see below for panoramic views of the sunrise]

Panoramic views of the sunrise

