

Dreams of Morocco

Story and photos by Suzanne Wright

When I close my eyes and think of North Africa I think of olives first.

Throughout the country, there were always glistening heaps of olives in the customary blue and white crockery or subdued earthenware bowls. They were in myriad shapes and colors: plump and purple; tiny and green; round and red; sleek and black; and delicate and yellow. Each one has its own distinctive flavor: sharp, tangy, bitter, meaty, acidic, briny, oily, sour. Before every meal, a selection of olives was placed on your table; often nuts or bread accompanied the olives. I let the complex flavors of each olive dance on its width; I couldn't keep from licking my fingers—salty, redolent of the sea. I wasn't once disappointed.

For twenty years I dreamt of Morocco.

My desire was born 20 years earlier, when I was a petulant 16-year old, making a final childhood vacation with my family to Florida's Walt Disney World. I sulked through the park until I wandered into the Moroccan pavilion where I was instantly mesmerized. First, there were the faces of the beautiful people. Young men and women with burnished brown skin and deeply hooded, exotically shaped eyes kissed with a thick fringe of lashes, shiny black hair and pillowy lips.

Then there were the mosaics, thousands of tiny colored pieces of glass in a dizzying pattern. There were sumptuous silks in showy pinks, reds, purples, ochres. In the mid-summer heat, I closed my eyes and I could see visions dancing on my lids, visions of an exotic land and its beautiful people, its sumptuous crafts. Then and there, I decided I must go to Morocco.

Twenty years is a long-time to envision a place, to build up expectations. But Morocco didn't disappoint.

I traveled in Morocco for two weeks in May and June 1999, putting 1500 miles on a beat-up Renault. By the end of the trip it looked like the Clampetts' jalopy, stacked skyward, Beverly Hillbillies-style, with treasures found in the ten cities I visited. Speaking a bit of French was helpful, but not necessary. Traveling with a boyfriend who didn't shave and looked like a Berber (a nomadic tribesman) made our movements easy. Whenever I was discovered to be an American (my olive skin and dark hair fooled a few), smiles ensued and, always, the query "How do you like our country?" followed. I could answer back with an equally genuine smile, "I love Morocco."

For a small country, Morocco is remarkably diverse with ocean, desert, the Atlas mountains. The gorges of Tinehir evoke those of the American Southwest. While at the Atlantic seaport town of Essouira, I watched colorful boat-building and ambled through the manageable, whitewashed medina. In Erfoud, the jump-off point to the Sahara desert, I awoke at 3 a.m. and sped out to the dunes with a guide of perhaps 18 years, who created

a road in the sand, racing to beat the sunrise at 4:30 a.m. The undulating red sand dunes evoke the lush planes of a woman's body. I rode a camel to a high point where I could see Algeria in the distance. I was transfixed, listening intently to the sound of a beetle picking its way up a shifting dune. I actually heard the wind rustling fine grains. By 9 a.m., under a scorching sun, my guide, Mohammed (everyone is seemingly named Mohammed), created a new road with his tires. Back at the hotel, the staff was abuzz with news that the movie crew for *The Mummy* was checking in. For the remaining mornings I was there, they arose early and decimated the breakfast buffet prior to filming.

In Tangier, where Europe gives way to a less studied continent, I toasted the setting sun at a legendary hotel with a sweet drink named for heiress Betty Hutton. In Marrakech, I skirted snake charmer and fortune teller in Jemaa el Fna Square and stayed in a lavish hotel that featured peacocks lazily strutting by the pool, gardens laden with date and jacaranda trees and rose petals in the fountains of the lobby. There's no trace of Bogart and Bergman in shrieking Casablanca, however there is an opulent mosque, built entirely from private funds. I ate fish tangine, couscous studded with raisins and apricots, chicken and preserved lemons. I drank reasonably good red wine labeled President. I bought folk art for \$50 that rivals some of the most celebrated Southern artists I collect.

It is a magical place, Morocco. Its shimmering vistas are swoon inducing. The medina, or town center, is both mysterious and revealing; it is both siren and muse. I close my eyes and I see medinas fluttering across my memories. I loved getting lost in the cacophony of Fez, a medieval city with a mazelike center. Some smells arrest your nostrils unpleasantly; others cause your nose to twitch in sheer delight. Narrow shops sell combs carved in bone, others sell herbs, still others sell jalabis, the modest robes worn by both men and women. Goats and children share the narrow stone paths with merchants and shoppers.

The piercing call to prayer—which occurs five times a day, every day—is both mournful and hopeful, marking my day with its rhythm. It was a rich, deep tunnel I took comfort in and looked forward to hearing, marking my days just as surely as a watch. It was audible even in my dreams. I learned that green is the color of Islam and that many mosques tile their soaring columns in that special medium leafy shade.

The people, the music, the food, the crafts, the architecture, all tumbled in front of my eyes like colors in a kaleidoscope. Soon, I found myself ecstatically jumbled, changed in this land that bewitched writer Paul Bowles.

It took me two decades to get to Morocco. I can't wait to return. Until then, I have my dreams.