



My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 22 of my **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

Morocco

Inshallah: *God willing or If God wills*. Nothing happens unless God wills it.

There is no mission planned for this trip, other than sun and some place very different. When consulted two weeks ago, the I Ching foretold a reawakening of yin in contrast to yang, in nature in contrast to spirit. A passage in a book I read in preparation suggested that *Inshallah* is an approach to life that places trust in God, minimizing desire and striving for success or accomplishment.

I arrive in Casablanca in the morning of January 28, 2020. The plan for the next three weeks is three days here, eight in Marrakesh, five in Tangier and four in Rabat - with day-trips to other places. Most people speak French here, so communication should be easy. I actually managed to sleep a little on the overnight flight, and for the first time ever I was asleep when we landed, jarred awake by the wheels hitting the runway. On the train waiting at the airport to take me into the city, I take my camera out of its case and place it on the little table in front of me. Here we go, another story begins, this one on a new continent, Africa.

The Hotel Central is easy to find, a short walk from the Casa Port Train Station. Room 323 is small and a bit shabby, but the location is great and it has a balcony that overlooks a small square, Place Ahmed el Bidaoui, and beyond that the port. Saeeda, the charming young Berber lady at the reception desk, has dreamy dark eyes, but the next morning I will see the other side when she's upbraiding the night clerk, spitting venom, eyes wild and crazy. In the West, we don't display our anger like this.

The first thing I do is walk through the old town (which is called a medina here) to the Hassan II Mosque, the third largest in the world and the city's main attraction, built right up against the sea. There are all sorts of people and things going on here, including surfers taking advantage of the large waves next to the outer walls. I buy a ticket for a three o'clock tour of the interior and I'm thinking this visit will be it for the day. The mosque and sounds and smell of the Atlantic are enough.

Despite all the noise outside in the square below my balcony, I'm in bed by 9:30 and I will sleep eleven hours in a cold room with heavy blankets and a space heater. The ancient blue balcony doors have gaps at the top and bottom that let in the cold.

It's still dark and the neighborhood is still asleep when I walk downstairs for breakfast at 8:30. What time do people get up here and why am I alone in this gloomy breakfast room? It seems dreamlike and I wonder if I've actually woken up. I was pondering a day-trip on one of my three days here but I'm thinking now I'll stay put and get a deeper impression of this noisy, polluted city that people on the Web say is missable. The plan on Day 2 is to wander, try to find my way around without a map, get lost, look for the tram that goes to the beach and, hopefully, find a book.

When I leave at ten, Ahmed el Bidaoui Square is full of stray cats, most of them hardly bigger than kittens, competing for scraps with huge seagulls, but there are hardly any people about. It doesn't take long to get lost and after an hour I'm probably no more than fifteen minutes away from the hotel but who cares. I want to absorb the chaos and mayhem of downtown Casablanca and I've got all day to find the Preface bookstore.

I eventually find the bookstore with a few shelves of English books and pick up something interesting by a prolific author I've never heard of: *On Identity*, by Amin Maalouf, a French Lebanese writer. The preface is well-written and promising, and the book is only 133 pages, which satisfies my preference for short books.



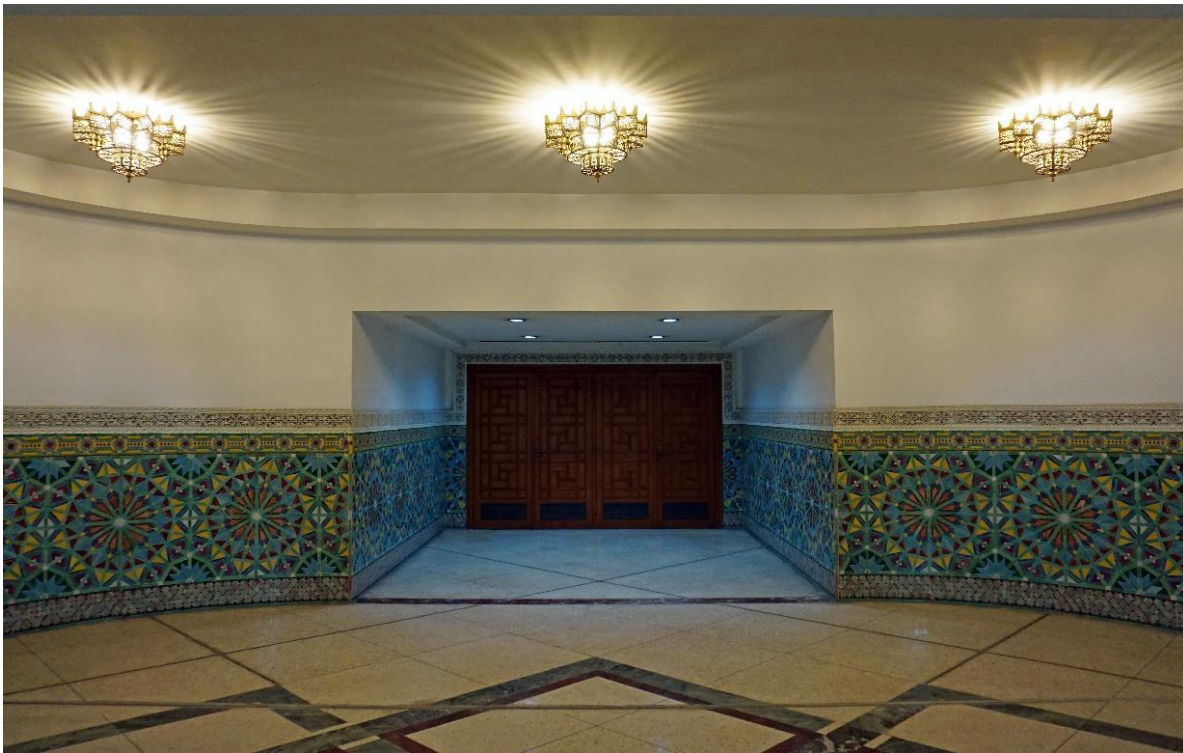
View from the balcony, Hotel Central, Casablanca



Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca



Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca



Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca



Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca



Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca

Then I get lost looking for the tram and learn that it's not only Google that doesn't know where it is. Anyone I ask is mystified too, maybe because it's hopelessly impossible to give directions in a city like this, with no right-angle intersections or street signs. I find Wi-Fi and lunch in a Starbucks and proceed to follow the little blue dot, dodging cars and motorcycles (some spewing the toxic blue haze that hangs in the air), pollution tickling the back of my throat, thoroughly enjoying myself.

I linger at an intersection on Boulevard de Paris where there's a large teacher demonstration happening. Then I finally stumble upon the phantom tram which is jam-packed but I get a seat almost immediately when someone gets up to leave. It turns out not to be the line that goes to the beach though, and I eventually disembark as it moves further and further into suburbs.

Then it's back to the city center to walk, walk and walk before returning to the hotel the short way, through the medina, which I would never have been able to navigate without the little blue dot on my phone tracking me. You lose your sense of direction as soon as you enter one of these labyrinths.

I take a break in my room, balcony doors open, the view of the square and the port in front of me and a maze of rooftops all around. Then it's back through the other side of the medina to the Hassan II Mosque to wait for the lights to come on after the sun goes down. It takes two hours but there's a lot going on around the mosque and the tide is in, so the Atlantic is churning.

The lights come on slowly, one at a time it seems, and the effect is dramatic. It's a fairly new structure, only about forty years old, built with 'donations' from the public, and it really is something to see. I take a taxi back to the hotel, not yet prepared to walk through the medina in the dark.

It takes a few hours to fall asleep, lingering on the surface of consciousness, just lying there, starting dreams but never slipping under. I eventually take one of the over-the-counter sleeping pills I use on overnight flights and proceed to have unsettling dreams.

It's cold in the breakfast room again in the morning of Day 3. It's 9 degrees outside but for some reason a large window is wide open as it was yesterday. The Hotel Central was built in 1912 and looks like it's never been renovated. Saeeda tells me it's part of its charm, and I believe her. Facing the port, right next to the medina, it was the center of town a hundred years ago, now it's a fifteen-minute walk to the new center, if you know your way through the labyrinth.



Demonstration on Blvd. de Paris, Casablanca



Casablanca Tram



Casa Voyageur Train Station, Casablanca



Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca



Casablanca, Morocco

The walk to the tram that Google says should take thirty minutes of course takes an hour-and-a-half and by the time I arrive, I've had it with downtown Casablanca and once again understand why people suggest skipping this noisy city altogether. It's basically a parking lot, cut through by speedways full of racing cars and loud, smelly motorcycles.

This time I find the right tram line and take it all the way to the end, to Ain Diab Beach for fresh air and to walk beside the ocean. Lunch is at the beachside Kentucky Fried Chicken, under the watchful gaze of stray cats. One sits next to my outdoor table, staring at me until I offer it a bite, which it rejects, probably because I chose the spicy option.

I'm exhausted. I'll return to the hotel for a bit then look for a jacket at a nearby shopping mall. I'd like to leave the one I have behind. I read some Maalouf on the tram.

As a person of Lebanese origin living and writing in French, I think Maalouf feels he has wasted a lot of words and energy on the question of whether he is French or Lebanese, or simply permanently hyphenated. And so he writes a book on identity which he says, "can't be compartmentalized." Identity is a mixture unique to every person. He writes about an attitude "that reduces identity in all its many aspects to one single affiliation, and one that is proclaimed in anger." We do this when we identify as victims or members of a special, chosen group.

We do this to others as well, and to much harm. Identity isn't static, change is part of a fully lived life, and life itself "is a creator of differences... Every individual without exception possesses a composite identity." And yet we have an urge to categorize people, to brand them with specific identities. We imprison them when we do this, just as we imprison ourselves in identities. But in the same way we can liberate them (and ourselves) when we do the opposite. When we don't make any presumptions about who they (or we) are.

I don't last long in the large, brand new mall, the sterile opulence too much of a contrast to what I've been experiencing these past two days. When I cross the road to return to my hotel through the medina, passing Rick's Café on the way, a long lineup of tourists is waiting to get in. The iconic movie *Casablanca* was shot entirely in Hollywood, so I'm not even curious about what this place might be.



Ain Diab Beach, Casablanca



KFC on the beach, Casablanca

Making my way carefully through the crowded streets of the medina, children are everywhere, including a small park where a group of boys are playing soccer with a stray mutt running alongside them that takes a two-second break from the game at one point to drop a small turd before rejoining the gang. The congestion seems dangerous to me. A small truck speeds through the crowd, somehow not hitting anyone; a car goes even faster, the driver texting on his phone as people skillfully dodge out of his way. People are buying bread and grilled meat from grungy little shops and stalls. They look poor but they sure look happy – happier than the shoppers in the mall I just left.

It's not been the best travel day. I hardly took any photos, and I'm already looking forward to Marrakesh tomorrow. I make the stupid mistake of eating half a plate of shrimp linguini at one of the sketchy little restaurants in the square in front of the hotel, despite being subtly warned by Saeeda not to. But the stomach makes it through the night intact, with only one interruption in another dream-filled sleep.

It's Day 4 and so far the trip has been the opposite of the last one in Russia, with not a cloud in sight. I could have slept more but I've got a train to catch. When I arrive three hours later, I have trouble finding the Red Hotel Marrakesh, which happens to be right across the street from the train station. But it isn't actually red – it's peach-colored like 90% of the buildings in what is referred to as Morocco's 'red city'.

I get a lot of the tourist stuff over with right away, including the forty-minute walk to Jemaa el-Fna, the famous square in the medina. The first thing I do in the huge bazaar is find a nice fridge magnet. I was disappointed with the last two magnets I brought back from Russia where there weren't a lot to choose from. There's an incredible variety here, probably the best fridge magnet country I've ever visited.

Beyond the square, there are far too many motorcycles in the crowded narrow streets of the medina. At certain points the passage narrows to about six feet and still the bloody bikes somehow slip through, barely slowing down and maiming no one. A mystery.



Jemaa el-Fna, Marrakesh



Jemaa el-Fna, Marrakesh

I make it to the wonderful Maison de la Photographie de Marrakech after circling the labyrinth for forty-five minutes (Google said it should have taken eight). The stunning prints in the gallery are mostly black and white and mostly of people, taken in Morocco between 1868 and 1960. The gallery is housed in what used to be a caravanserai, a resting place for camels on the first floor and people on the upper floors, the top of the building open to the sky.

I want to avoid the 45-minute walk back to the hotel in rush-hour traffic but can't find a taxi. The traffic is almost as toxic and chaotic as in Casablanca, stinging the eyes, assaulting the ears, and risking your life when you need to cross a street, but I soon learn to stand next to locals and just walk into the river of speeding traffic which miraculously parts. I make it back in one piece and my hotel room is a fine refuge.

I linger in bed till 10:30 on Day 5, then waste the rest of the first half of the day trying to find the tourist office in a city with no right angles, no street signs and no posted address numbers. When I find it, it's not only closed, it looks like it's never been open. The Café du Livre is nearby but extremely well hidden, accessible only through the courtyard of a hotel and it too is not yet open as advertised on the Web, so I kill some time in a shopping mall across the street. The Café du Livre will end being a waste of time, with only a few shelves of mouldy English fiction. The coffee is good, but the Wi-Fi isn't working, so where to go from here?

I start walking and somehow manage to find the Church of the Holy Martyrs where I'll be attending mass tomorrow morning, and then La Mamounia, a ritzy hotel with a famous garden but not much else. What am I going to do for the next seven days in Marrakesh? Maybe just enjoy the warmth in quiet places like this. And the lovely aroma – a blend of flowers and orange trees? I find a bench and decide to sit still for a good while, listen to the birds, and read a bit.

Identity (especially grievance identity) has been weaponized and Maalouf says a new concept of identity is required. Identity warriors succeed only because we let them by sustaining tribal emotions in our hearts and tribal concepts in our minds. It's a very old habit that's turned very bad. Time to declare it obsolete.

Life is changing so fast that, in a sense, this is an age in which everyone has been made a migrant. The best a migrant can do is embrace the new situation, the new culture, a process made easier when their own situation and culture are respected by the new. It's a mutual process.



Marrakesh, the "Red" City



Church of the Holy Martyrs, Marrakesh

I walk a bit more before taking a taxi back to the hotel. I'm exhausted and feeling like there's nothing to photograph here; everything's the same color and the contrast of rich and poor is discouraging, along with the noise and sustained panic of the traffic. Even the large grocery store down the street from the hotel, where I buy three Snickers bars and three oranges, is a bit depressing. Maybe it's the relentless sun too, not a hardship but just as monotonous as the greyness of Russia last October. In the evening I plan three day-trips to escape the city.

Preoccupation with identity continues in a dream that night, a hectic, disturbing dream with a cast of characters from my past. People's identities kept shifting in the dream. First it was one ex-lover being pulled away from family obligations, then another. Next, I am explaining the organizational obligation to represent others, the principal part of my former role as a union leader. There seems to be an understanding in the dream that life is a series of roles, but these roles aren't solid, they're in constant flux. We confuse roles with the person.

For the first time, I'm noticing a common point early in these trips when a feeling of dread emerges. What is it? The concept of flexible, ever-changing identities is disturbing, like when I had a thought of suicide today, not that I am in any way contemplating such a thing, but for a moment I could imagine it, especially if I were stuck in a foreign city like Marrakech with no fixed identity, no specific roles. Is it a fear or suspicion that I am no one beyond these roles, underneath what is reflected in other people?

The sky is blue again in the morning of Day 6, and the air is clearer – I can see the Atlas Mountains in the distance for the first time. The Web was wrong: English mass at the Church of the Holy Martyrs is at noon, not ten, but I understand most of the French, spoken with African accents. The African choir is wonderful, the highlight of the trip so far. The Gospel story tells me nothing, however, and I have to circle the neighborhood a couple of times as I did yesterday to find a way out, which is fine because I'm in no hurry today.

I step into Cyber Park, an eco sanctuary, on the way to the Bahia Palace. The scents are intoxicating. Before I got out of bed to record last night's dream, trying to remain partially in a dream state with my eyes shut, I thought I could comprehend certain things about identity I had never imagined before. How, in conjunction with Maalouf's assertion that each person has a unique and ever-evolving identity, we are also expressions or embodiments of larger identities.



Church of the Holy Martyrs, Marrakesh



Bahia Palace, Marrakesh

But whatever I thought I understood about identity could be hallucinatory or incomprehensible in a waking state, the kind of things that occur to you when alone in a strange place. I eat a Snickers bar before I leave the park.

I eventually find the Bahia Palace and spend a pleasant hour in this simple, not overly restored attraction. Then it's a long, slow walk back and by the time I reach the hotel I need to lie down, which feels wonderful, but I also need to stay awake or I won't sleep tonight. I buy my ticket to Tangier in the train station across the street, eat dinner, and check out the alcohol options in the hotel and the vicinity. Nothing appeals, so it's a quiet evening spent editing photos and writing to friends.

On Day 7, I'm off to the Atlas Mountains on an organized day-trip. It's me and four charming young German women with a guide and a driver in a minivan. It's a ninety-minute drive from the city to a town where we start what will be a very difficult (for me) climb, mostly on loose rocks, up to a waterfall and then down a long path to the guide's house. The website should have advised 'not for grandpas' because without the help of a rental donkey part of the way up the mountain, I would hardly have been able to keep up with the girls.

We get to see the inside of the guide's Berber house and have a very tasty Tajin for lunch in the local restaurant. By the time I'm dropped off at my hotel, I'm convinced I need a new knee, but it's back on the streets again for an unusually simple (only one semi-right-angle turn) walk to the Chatr Bookstore where I find *Islam Beyond the Violent Jihadis*, by Ziauddin Sardar, a book that argues that Islam has been corrupted by a virulent strain of literalist hatred.

The first week of the trip is over and I think I've gotten past the dread-bump. It was nice talking to the young women today, easy to make them laugh at the oddity of four girls and a grandpa climbing a mountain in North Africa and my bonding with the donkey that saved my life. Dinner is at Yanni, the same restaurant I went to my first day here, the one where a cat sat staring at me while I ate. This time, a cat is standing on a chair reaching for leftover food at a table next to me when the hipster-looking waiter, who struts like an owner, picks up a large empty plastic water bottle and slams it down to the floor next to the cat, making a very loud noise. The cat leaps straight into the air and runs off.



Atlas Mountains



Atlas Mountains



The donkey

Then two large muscle-bound men who look like weightlifters enter with a twelve or thirteen-year-old street urchin with torn pants. One tells the boy to sit at a table, he will get him something to eat. The boy looks calm but wary and I wonder what is really going on. The men seem to know the fierce-looking hipster waiter who grabs the boy by the collar, lifts him out of the chair and pushes him into the street. The muscle-heads don't object, and I think I won't be coming back here.

I look around for the boy when I leave and he appears almost immediately, raising one finger the way beggars do here, asking for one dirham. I hand him the 20-dirham note I have in my hand and he vanishes with no response, not even a glance.

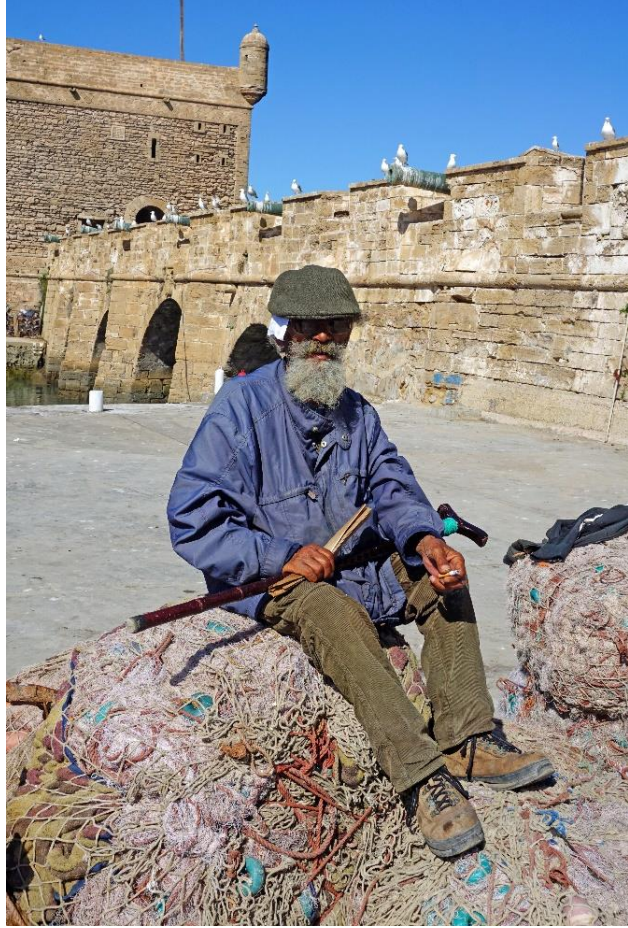
I'm not sure what I'm doing in the morning of Day 8. Do I make the three-hour bus ride to Essaouira or not? Deciding I could use some sea air and may never come back this way again, I cross the street to catch the nine o'clock bus. It's a comfortable ride through interesting landscape and towns. At a rest stop halfway, I strike up a conversation about solo travel with Hayley, a young woman from Colorado. I tell her my theory that after two weeks alone in a foreign place, a skin is shed and roles and identities begin to fall away. But when you travel with a friend or partner, you bring your self – a constant reflection of your identities - with you.

Soon after we arrive it becomes clear that this will be the best camera day so far. What a spectacularly photogenic place. The people, the fish market, the sea, the boats, the ramparts... all of it, most of all the colors. To think I almost didn't come. What would I have done in the city today?

I get shots of boys swimming next to fishing boats in a small harbor and what looks like a three-year-old boy sitting on the ground selling small packets of tissues, as beggars do here. I give him some money and take his photo and wonder who is taking care of him. Soon, a girl, maybe his older sister, shows up. An old man sitting on a pile of fishing nets seems to know he is photogenic, accepting the bill I give him and urging me to take more shots, but one is enough, thank you. In another shot, gulls are lined up on top of fishing sheds with blue, weather-beaten doors, all facing the same direction as if planning an attack.



Essaouira, Morocco



Essaouira, Morocco



Essaouira, Morocco

I take a long break, walking barefoot on the beach before having something to eat and taking more photos in late afternoon light. There are Moroccan hippies in the main square, selling jewelry and playing music, looking like hippies everywhere, beautiful, sun-baked young nomads. It's been a wonderful day but the ever present (even on the beach) smell of fish is starting to get to me; I'm glad I'm not staying more than a few hours.

Halfway home it's pitch black outside the bus and I can still smell fish. I hope it hasn't permeated my clothes. In the evening I read some Maalouf.

Maalouf explains the tension between the Western and Arab worlds: "The influence of religion on people is often exaggerated, while the influence of people on religion is neglected. You could read a dozen large tomes on the history of Islam... and you still wouldn't understand what is going on in Algeria. But read 30 pages on colonialism and decolonization and then you'll understand quite a lot."

For centuries, modernity has been seen as coming from the richer, more technologically advanced West. And now the relentless phenomenon of globalization has become synonymous with Westernization (more specifically, Americanization) and the marginalization of one's own culture, language, status... The question becomes, how to modernize without losing identity.

I'm back on a minibus early in the morning of Day 9 for a three-hour drive to Ouzoud Falls, where we are told at one point we will meet some monkeys. The trip will be a disappointing tourist jaunt, the falls nothing special and in the shade so not even worth photographing. The monkeys were great, accustomed to performing for the humans for peanuts that touts are constantly trying to sell you, and of course there are other touts and shops everywhere along the way, all selling the same things. I get only one shot that I like, a shot of a monkey sitting on a rock with a scenic valley vista behind it, striking a perfect pose for a couple of tourists.

There and back, I'm stuck in a not very comfortable row of seats at the back of the minibus with three young French women from Rennes. On the way back I have an interesting conversation with the grumpy one next to me. She asks if I enjoyed the excursion, I shrug, and we are instant friends. All in all, it was a pretty wasted day. I don't think I'll do any more of these organized tours. The whole point of travelling for me is to be free and alone.



Essaouira, Morocco



Monkey posing for tourists at Ouzoud Falls

Day 10 is almost the halfway point of the trip and I have to say it's been a good one so far. Today I do laundry. What an adventure to find what seems to be the only laundry service in the city that charges by kilo and not by item. The hotel would have charged me \$80 for one load and both the hotel clerk and the taxi driver doubt the existence of the service I found on the Web. As advised, I bring photos, the phone number and address but even after the driver calls the laundry, it's still very difficult for him to find it.

The laundry can only be done by tomorrow, so I'll have to come back. The driver agrees to pick me up and bring me back in the morning and thank God he was there to translate French to Arabic. By now, I'm thinking I should have just paid the hotel's ransom.

I ask the driver to drop me off at the Jardin Majorelle, a major tourist attraction, but the line-up is too long, so screw that. Even if I waited, there would certainly be too many people inside to enjoy or get any decent photos. I step into a café that claims to have Wi-Fi, but it doesn't work, and it seems that nothing is working today. I have no idea where I am, but the blue Google dot comes to life on my phone and I manage to find the nearby Seven Tombs which is a parking lot at the moment, full of hundreds of taxis.

Then, finally, I allow myself to get caught by a shark. Ibrahim says he saw me at the Jardin where he does maintenance work during the night, and insists I need to see an authentic Berber market, not the touristy Jemaa el-Fna that sells things made in China. Today is special because once every fifteen days vendors can sell their wares without paying tax, so the streets will be full. He says he doesn't want any money from me, he's just walking home from work and lives in the Berber section of the medina. It's not far, he says, and only a ten-minute walk to Jemaa el-Fna afterwards. He seems genuine, but just about everything he says from this point on will be various degrees of untrue.

It really is a fascinating thirty-minute walk through alleys of woodworkers, metalworkers, recyclers... He 'buys' me a glass of authentic Berber tea in a grungy little shop and guides me through all sorts of nooks and crannies where tourists never go. I've decided to trust him even though I know I am prey, because I sense this special access is probably worth whatever shakedown is coming. There is not a single tourist around, yet no one is paying any attention to me, most certainly because they know and respect that I am Ibrahim's caught fish.



At one point, in an extremely crowded alley, a fight breaks out and a young man close to me picks up a small plastic chair and throws it violently at someone sitting on top of one of the just-small-enough-to-squeeze-through tractor-like vehicles you see in these places. I'm reluctant to squeeze past this altercation myself, to brush past this explosive young man. He does it again - grabs another chair - but people restrain him with angry shouting all around. Ibrahim is ahead of me and wants me to pass, but I'm still holding back. He takes my hand and pulls me through.

He asks me to wait while he steps into a shop to buy the four special spices that go into a Tajin (later he will overcharge me for them) then takes me to the inevitable carpet/weaving shop where the charming owner, an older gentleman, offers tea and wants to show me his wares, insisting of course that there is no obligation to buy. It all looks authentic and there is someone actually weaving on a huge, ancient contraption.

I play along because there are beautiful things in the shop and I did want to bring something nice back from Morocco. His dark-skinned, fez-wearing, assistant begins to lay out carpets and bedspreads, one at a time, and when I tell the owner which two spreads I like he takes out a sheet of paper and says he's going to show me how things are done here. He draws six squares and says he will write his first price in the top left box, then I will write my first offer beside it.

His first price is 1,800 Dirhams. I make a show of pondering, then write 350 in response. He laughs, pleased, I think, that I seem to know how to play and haven't done what many tourists probably do, overbidding because they don't want to insult with a low first offer. His second price is 1,400. I respond with 450. His third 'final' price is 1,000 and at that point I pretend I've lost interest which eventually leads to a final, final, final price of 700.

I end up paying the equivalent of \$100 Canadian for a beautiful, pure silk bed spread that is surely worth much more back home. His assistant walks me to an ATM to retrieve the cash and asks for a tip, but I refuse this last ruse – enough is enough.



A quiet corner of the medina, Marrakesh

Ibrahim had quickly vanished as soon as I left the shop (and paid him supposedly for the spices and the 'free' tea), leaving me stranded where I really shouldn't be. The assistant had advised me to take a taxi out of the neighborhood because I didn't seem to be, as Ibrahim had assured me, close to Jemaa el-Fna. But I can see the Madrasa Ben Yousef on my phone, which is on my list of places to visit, and it's not far, so I decide to try it on my own. I get lost of course in the labyrinth, a fish in hostile waters, and there's no shortage of young sharks offering directions. "Follow me," the young Ibrahims say, no doubt wanting to guide me to another shop.

I follow one for a few moments because he says the way out (as always) is *just around the corner*, but almost immediately spot a Czech couple who are being led in the opposite direction by another shark and we join forces to find our way out with no 'help'. We look for a taxi but there's nothing in these narrow streets. Finally, we find the Musée de Marrakech and things are back to normal. I thank them profusely for rescuing me. They can't believe I am here alone and I'm questioning my judgement now.

The museum is a beautiful, cool refuge, but there's nothing special inside, except Wi-Fi in the outdoor café and a nice table in the shade to take a long writing and reading break. Next, I visit the Secret Garden which is an expensive tourist trap and not even architecturally interesting. Walking back to the hotel (I don't feel like arguing with a taxi driver) looks like a simple, almost straight line on my phone and it almost is. I only get diverted by weird turns three times trying to exit the medina, but quickly recover.

In the evening, I have a pint of beer at an Irish Pub down the street from my hotel and boy does it taste good, so much better when forbidden. But food is not served till eight, so it's Yanni again for their delicious Spaghetti Bolognese, which costs less than half the price of the beer. The mean hipster waiter isn't here tonight, so I don't feel guilty, and neither is the little boy outside on the sidewalk. I would have liked to give him more money.

Day 10 was a stressful but interesting day. I learned things about poverty, authenticity and customs from Ibrahim and the merchant. On Day 11, the trip is half over and aside from picking up laundry this morning, nothing is planned. Maybe I'll just take a long walk and retrace my first expedition to Jemaa el-Fna. It will be cooler today with a high of 22 instead of the 27 or 28 of the past few days, and there's actually some fog in the morning.



Musée de Marrakech



Musée de Marrakech

Picking up the laundry is a pleasant thirty minutes with Badr, my friendly driver who has the radio tuned to a station playing a beautiful lyrical recitation of the Koran, an inspirational background accompaniment I will hear playing in shops and other places.

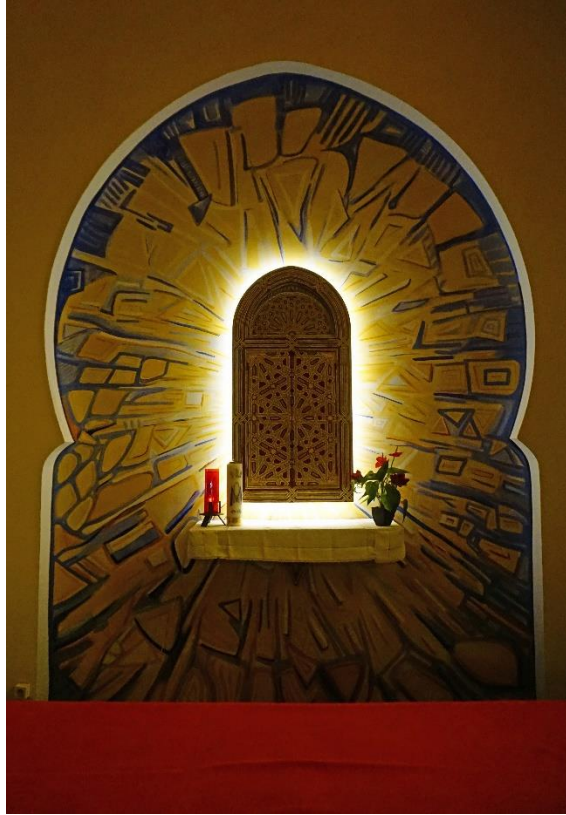
After this chore is done, I start to walk in the fog in the general direction of the medina, strange to have no destination. It's the first time in eleven days that the sky is not blue and there's the Church of the Holy Martyrs and the doors are open and it's dark inside, so quiet, the first opportunity on this trip to feel something slightly sacred. I think of the taxi driver driving around with verses of the Koran filling the car, a constant reminder of mindfulness, and I wonder again, as I did in Russia, if I'm losing my religion.

It's comfortable in the pew in the back and I like the church, happy it's so close to the hotel, happy to have visited it three times now. An older French gentleman appears and gives me a book commemorating the Pope's visit to Morocco, but I leave it behind when I leave.

In Russia last October I craved sunshine and now it's pleasing to walk in cool, overcast weather for a change. But when I enter and begin to explore Cyberpark, in a matter of minutes the fog dissipates and the sky turns blue, shadows slowly emerge, and the interlude is over. I've never witnessed this kind of rapid transition before. Once the sun is out, I find it hard to leave the park which is now full of cats waking up to begin their day of scrounging.

Across the street is the Ensemble Artisanal where you can browse local products with fixed prices and without being assaulted by merchants, which is a relief but also somehow a letdown. Further down the street, Jemaa el-Fna is not too crowded or chaotic yet. I find a café in the square and read a chapter of Maalouf.

Maalouf says the speed of globalization has exacerbated the identity crisis in countries forced to adapt. Embracing a religion - Islam – offers a strong, cross-cultural identity. He talks about the “twilight of nationalities” and how “globalization draws us simultaneously towards two contrasting results, one welcome, the other not: i.e., universality and uniformity.” On a positive note, the Web could lead to identity being “seen as the sum of all our (varied) allegiances, and, within it, allegiance to the human community itself would become increasingly important.”



Church of the Holy Martyrs



Sun beginning to show through the fog in Cyberpark



The fog suddenly dissipates in Cyberpark

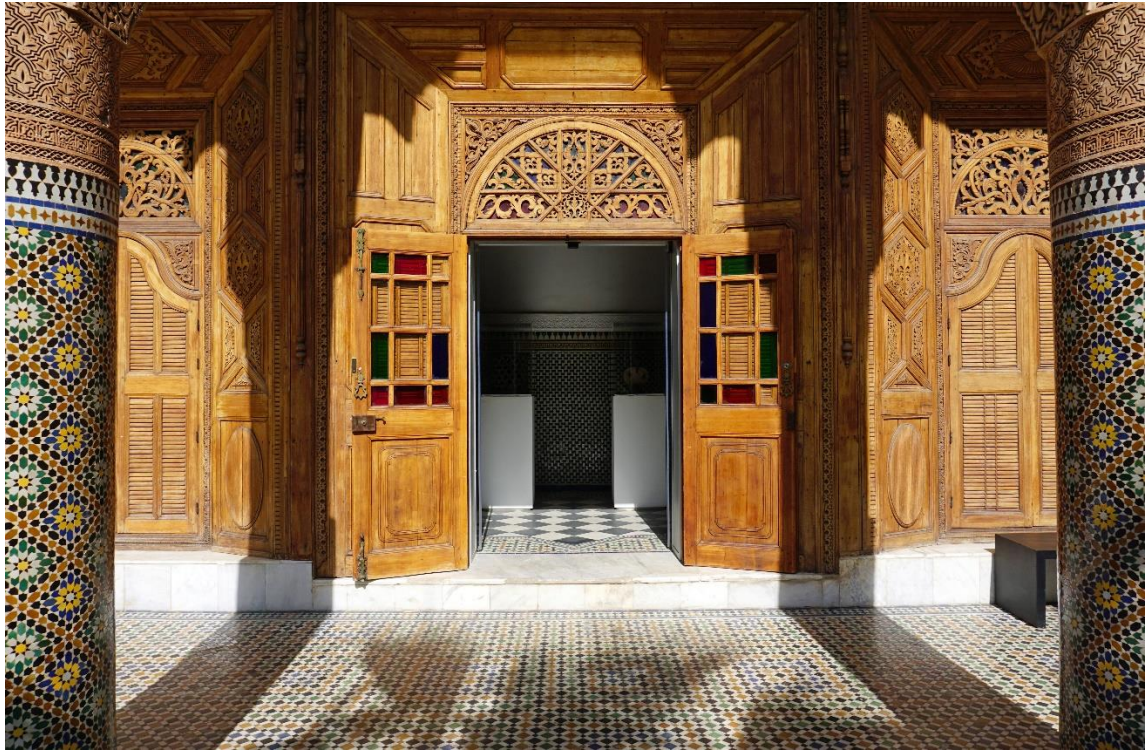


Maalouf has common sense observations on the “excesses of political correctness” and the paradox of how noble-minded attempts to try to not just honor but absorb mostly superficial cultural differences can lead to uniformity. On the other hand, “globalization exacerbates identity behavior but one day might make it less lethal” as people inevitably come to share more commonalities.

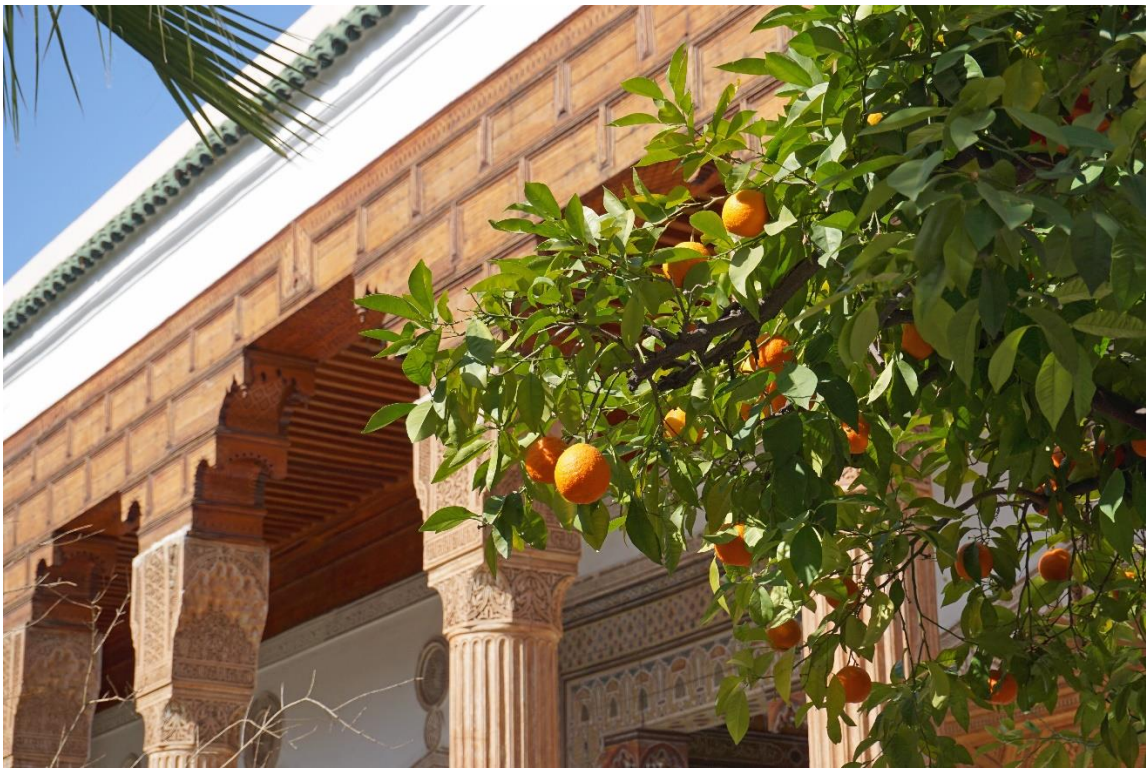
I buy a small Marrakesh fridge magnet in the square and then take my time finding the Musée des Confluences in the Dar el Bach Palace. It’s the most beautiful building I’ve seen so far, an anthropological museum with not much content, but I find most museums overwhelming anyway, with too much stuff. Then, it’s a long walk to the Menara Shopping Mall, not far from my hotel, to look for a jacket and a bottle of wine. I don’t find a jacket but finally get my hands on a nice bottle and it’s a good last evening in Marrakesh. It’s been a good day too, and tomorrow morning will be relaxed – my train to Tangier leaves from the station across the street at 11:50.

For the second time on this trip I have stomach trouble in the night, no doubt due to the bottle of wine I drank so quickly, but the vivid dreams that result are worth it. One is the cliché dream where for complicated reasons I’m locked out of my house, stranded in a busy street in my underwear. Our unconscious knows how carefully we guard the fact that we aren’t the person we present to the world. We don’t really know who we are but of necessity assume roles, or identities.

It’s one more magnificent buffet breakfast at the Red Hotel Marrakesh in the morning of Day 12. It turns out I’m starving, and the wonky stomach seems to be back in business. After walking around the neighborhood one last time, the first leg of the train trip to Casablanca is a lot of fun, two-and-a-half hours of non-stop conversation with Alex, a retired lawyer and serious solo traveller, and Chadi, an alpha forty-year-old British Egyptian now living in Marrakesh, travelling to Casablanca on business.



Musée des Confluences in the Dar el Bach Palace, Marrakesh



Musée des Confluences in the Dar el Bach Palace, Marrakesh

I learn a lot from both men, such as how safe and cheap and interesting places like Egypt and Tunisia are. Alex is from Boston, even though at the moment he travels so much he doesn't have a fixed address. It's rare that I get a chance to speak to another solo traveller my age. Chadi claims to have eleven children by eleven different women and is eager to show me an app on his phone that hooks you up with Moroccan prostitutes of which, he says, there are very many, especially in the nightclubs.

He boasts about a gorgeous girl who ended up staying with him for three days and spending \$400 on *him*. She was investing in him as a future regular or even boyfriend, he says, but insists he could never be fooled into taking a prostitute as a girlfriend. Once a whore, always a whore, he says. All of this after he proudly showed me his young son video-chatting on the phone, upset because his father wasn't there when he woke up. He seems unfazed by what, by Western standards, are contradictory, even reprehensible, attitudes and behavior.

I'm not interested in his app but I ask him about getting some of the renowned local hashish (kif) and he says it's very easy: just ask any of the yellow-vested parking guys you see everywhere here, hustlers who make a living pretending they have authority to help you park your car and then keep an eye on it, maybe even wash it in the meantime.

I catch the second train at the Casa Voyageur station in Casablanca, a high-speed first class treat of a ride, but with no one to talk to. Sitting on a stool in the cafeteria car with the city of Rabat whizzing by in the big window in front of me, I'm thinking there's nothing like a good train, the best way to travel (aside from a road trip). Chadi told me Tangier is his favorite city in Morocco. It's clean, he said, and more European than the rest of the country. He probably means it has the best nightclubs.

I can see the sea at the end of the street when I exit the train station in Tangier, another beautiful station. Google says just walk to the end of the street and turn left to get to my hotel. Nearing my hotel, a yellow vest named Mohammed starts talking to me and he's soon apparently escorting me to my hotel, for a fee of course, and a tip for his son who is accompanying him today. He's friendly and speaks good English, an older man, so, I ask him about kif and sure enough he pulls a big chunk out of his vest pocket and breaks off a sizeable piece that he sells me for the equivalent of about seven dollars.

I check into Barcelo Tanger, a big, modern hotel facing the ocean, find a shop to buy some rolling papers and tobacco, and cross the street to stroll along the beach with the locals. There's a full moon hanging over the water and I probably take about fifty shots as the sun goes down and the light changes, just to get one good one. And it is a good one, maybe the best of the trip, with moonlight reflected on the water, even on the waves.

Back on the sidewalk looking for food, I feel more like prey than ever, young men eyeing me, sometimes saying things I can't make out. Maybe because it's dark outside or maybe they are out selling kif to the tourists? I hope this is not a sign of things to come.



Full moon in Tangier

I sleep well in a comfortable bed in Room 307. Day 13 will begin with mass at Our Lady of Assumption, after which I will look for the Kasbah, a place I visited forty-three years ago on a day-trip from Spain. I finish Maalouf before I leave the hotel.

Maalouf ends his book on several positive notes. He says we need to encourage people to avoid assuming self-defeating identities based on victimization. There is no globalization conspiracy and “more than any other time in human history, (the world) belongs to all those who want to make a place for themselves in it.” He acknowledges the seemingly unstoppable spread of the English language and the fact that many languages are threatened with extinction. He has an interesting solution to this problem. He proposes a voluntary policy of encouraging each person to learn three languages: their own, English and a third freely chosen.

Most importantly, he says we need to “tame the wild beast of identity,” and the individual needs to become comfortable with dual or multiple affiliations, to “be able to identify, at least to some degree, both with the country he lives in and with our present day world.” We need to identify with an inclusive future, not an idealized past.

The church is a steep walk uphill from the ocean, and it turns out mass is in French at 10:30, not English at 10 as advertised on the Web. As in Marrakesh last week, half the congregation is Black African and the small choir entirely. And again, the singing is wonderful. The liturgy is about charity: prayers and rituals and sacraments are nice, but only actions matter.

Then it’s a few puffs of kif and another steep climb up to the Kasbah on a glorious day. I’m moving slowly, taking breaks to catch my breath, absorbing and appreciating where I am. With a few things already planned for the next four days, this may be my only visit to this old part of Tangier.

There are no tourists to follow so I get lost, ending up in a modern-looking park full of people out on a Sunday afternoon. A row of three or four cafés at the edge of the park share a common outdoor setup of chairs and tables and there must be at least a hundred people, mostly families, eating, drinking, talking and playing board games. A nice scene.



Our Lady of Assumption, Tangier



Feeling like I'm moving in circles looking for the heart of the Kasbah, a shark appears just at the point where tourists are probably misdirected into a perpetual loop. I see a sign pointing to the Kasbah almost immediately after he approaches, but he doesn't leave my side. I thank him and tell him I like to get lost and don't need a guide (I know the drill by now) and he tells me I'll never find my way (probably because his fellow sharks have removed vital signs) and sure enough after ten minutes of moving in what seems like the only directions possible, I'm back at his stakeout and he's saying with a bit of resentment, "See, I told you, but you wanted to try yourself."

I tell him again that I like to get lost and there's a café right there which gives me a chance to take a break and time to plan my next move. I need to outsmart this guy; the neighborhood is so small there aren't that many possibilities. I will eventually find my way and explore every part of the Kasbah, at which point I have to find my way out.

I find the main square, the Grand Socco, but from there I count eight possible exits and after circling the square three times I finally figure out that the way out is the same way I came in. Counterintuitively, you have to climb a long, steep street to find the way back down to ocean. From there I will get lost many more times, returning over and over to the same spots, even for the third time to the shark's stakeout where, thankfully, he isn't there to mock me. At least this time I'm looking for the way out, not in.

I continue to navigate the labyrinth. Now and then a shark will offer to point me in the right direction, inevitably in the direction of a shop or restaurant that will pay him a commission for delivering a fish. One shark walking beside me keeps saying repeatedly, "Just go straight, straight, straight, then left." This in a place with not a single straight line. Of course, we soon pass his shop and he invites me in for tea, but I escape unscathed. Just before I'm about to give up there's a lookout over the ocean and at least now I have some sense of orientation. Even as I write this, sitting down at the lookout, I can feel a shark's eyes on me. Waiting, lurking.

I eventually find my way out and have a nice, relaxing evening near my hotel. It's been another good day with the camera.



The Kasbah, Tangier

On my balcony in the morning of Day 14, the full moon hangs over the buildings on my left, the sea to my right. Every trip brings changes and I thought I felt a certain awakening last night. I suspect and confirm on the Web that the moon represents Yin energy and the I Ching prediction begins to make sense.

Today's day-trip to Chefchaouen is expensive, apparently meant to be a private ride to and back from the 'Blue City', but at the last minute we pick up another person. Philip is a Chinese student with a cough, which he quickly assures me is due to a lingering cold, not the coronavirus that the world is obsessed with at the moment. It's a long drive and I learn some things about China, including the fact that even a smart and sweet young man like Philip supports a non-democratic government, convinced that without it his country would suffer and break up into at least five separate states.

A guide meets us at Chefchaouen and stays with us for an hour, showing us around the medina. At one point, a lunatic walks by ranting angrily at no one visible (maybe me?). I ask the guide what he is saying, and he tells me cocaine is now a problem here where there is not enough work for the young men. The drug comes from Columbia via Senegal, he says.

He leaves us at what he calls the best restaurant in town, where I enjoy the best Moroccan meal yet, a reasonably priced Tajin. Then I have two hours to myself to wander in the medina, but there's a problem with two of my camera batteries so soon I'm left only with my phone. I have enough photos already, but I end up getting a couple of pretty nice shots with my phone.

The ride back is quicker than this morning and dinner is a takeout pizza, which I'm hoping will serve as breakfast too. It's windy for the first time on this trip and I realize I've been taking the spectacular weather for granted. I got some good shots today in a one-of-a-kind place, my favorite of an orange cat in a blue city with an imposing shadow, striking a noble pose.

I'm on my own again on Day 15, on a train to Asilah, a small coastal town forty minutes south. On the way to the train station I encountered Mohammed, my yellow-vested friendly shark, and realized this will happen every time I pass through his territory. He offered me more kif which I declined. Then he asked me to tip him a coffee, so I gave him a dollar, for what, I'm not sure.



Chefchaouen, Morocco



Chefchaouen, Morocco



Orange cat in a blue city

It's a thirty-minute walk to the medina from the train station in Asilah but a taxi is only a couple of bucks. When I arrive at the little square near the entrance, the sharks come out and it will soon become apparent I'm practically the only fish in the pond this morning. "No problem, no problem," one says when I immediately tell him I don't need a guide. "It's safe here, we are very friendly people." No thank you, I say. I don't need a guide. "Not a problem, I just have one question. Where are you from?" I just want to walk alone, I say with some emphasis, and he backs off. Another one immediately moves in and I wave him off with my hand.

The *Where are you from?* the sharks most commonly open with is just a hook. If you answer, you're immediately part of a conversation Western politeness makes it very difficult to escape from. I know the poor are desperate and I may be comparatively rich to some of them but, honestly, I would clean toilets before I even thought about harassing people for a living. Pretending to be friendly when all you want is their money.

The narrow streets of the medina are mostly deserted at this time of the morning and I wonder if I should be concerned. What if I meet a shady shark (or two or three) here? Down one alley I was about to turn into, there's a pack of three stray dogs, one of whom stoops to drop a turd in the middle of the road before catching up with his mates. I don't particularly want to be alone with a pack of dogs either, so I turn the other way. Not for the first time on this trip, I'm wishing there were more tourists around, not less.

The sun is still too low to cast enough light into the narrow passageways of the medina and the tide is way out on the beach where a solitary dog on the sand sits staring at the town, his back to the sea. I'll come back to the beach but first I enjoy another fantastic coffee and Moroccan bread with butter at Café Esmeralda where I linger for at least an hour with Sardar and the beards.

Ziauddin Sardar begins his book emphasizing that there are two versions of Islam: one based on love and tolerance, the other, more modern, based on brutal sectarianism. In his introduction he says he is going to suggest that the root cause of fanaticism, violent extremism and paranoid jihadism is a single sect that has gone berserk: Wahhabism, which is propped up by the police state and theocracy that is Saudi Arabia. Muslims make up a quarter of the world's population, and the vast majority believe the extremists to be as crazy and ignorant as almost everyone else does.



Asilah, Morocco



Asilah, Morocco



Assilah, Morocco

He devotes a whole chapter to various styles of mandatory beards, many of which are meant to indicate very specific and exclusionary allegiances. Basing one's identity on what he calls "facial furniture" is particularly nefarious: "The will of God has been manipulated and appropriated by all types of beards."

Back in the medina it appears to have clouded over for the first time on this trip and I almost welcome the change in light, not exactly grey or overcast, with no discernable clouds, but a sort of muted purple. This really is the opposite of Russia. On the beach, I spend a lot of time slowly walking back and forth, a strong breeze blowing Atlantic air into my lungs and the wonderful scent of saltwater. The dog is still there, sleeping now on the sand. I like this solitary beach dog, appreciate his style.

Then it's back to Café Esmeralda for another coffee and Moroccan bread, this time with cheese. I decide to take the five o'clock train back to Tangier instead of the three o'clock, which gives me almost three more hours. I spend the first people-watching and reading here at my favorite café in this strange little town.

Sardar repeatedly blames Saudi Arabia for the horrific bloodlust of Islamic extremists, clearly stating that "Isis is Saudi Arabia". And that religion has nothing to do with these people's motivation. Isis recruits from Europe, for example, are mostly thrill-seekers seeking violence, and many are young women: "the eagerness among good Muslim girls to hook up with bad jihadi boys is a strong part of the group's appeal." Nothing to do with religion.

By the time I get up to leave Esmeralda, the sky is blue again and the shadows are sharp. I wander the medina aimlessly, getting some nice shots, before I bump into the shark that first greeted me when I arrived. The second time you bump into a shark you're considered an old friend, the third time you must surely owe them something. You can't expect three free passes, can you? But, again, I escape, thinking I'm getting good at this.

On the way out of the medina I enter the courtyard of a mosque where there are two goats who decide they need to piss while staring me down, first one then the other. Then they start to loudly bleat, still looking straight at me. Are they telling me to piss off?



Asilah, Morocco



Asilah, Morocco



Pissing goats in Asilah, Morocco

Waiting in the small square for a taxi to appear, there are police present so the sharks are at bay, but they move in as soon as the cops leave, offering me advice, trying to sell me things... doing their best to discourage tourists from ever wanting to return.

It's been a very good travel day. I bought all the train tickets I will need for the rest of the trip and in the evening I find another excellent and cheap Spaghetti Bolognese (which seems to be a standard here) at a Tendys restaurant in the nearby Ibn Batouta Shopping Mall. I need to find a book tomorrow, something contemplative preferably.

The plan for Day 16, my last in Tangier, is really no plan. I'll just wander around the city to get a lasting impression before I leave. And hopefully find a book; there are three stores on my list, all not too far from each other. I'll move slowly because the feet are starting to get sore.

Walking up the usual winding streets from the sea, I get lost at the first zig but after a few zags I spot a tourist office where the lady behind the counter tells me the first bookstore, Les Collines, is actually across the street. But there are just a handful of English books in the store, and mostly fiction at Les Insolites, the second store, just a few blocks away. I sit down for Wi-Fi and coffee in a smoke-filled men's only café to find directions for the third bookstore, which I know is very near but I'm tired of walking in circles. The map I was given at the tourist office couldn't be more useless, but then what's the point of a map when there are no street signs.

Finally, the Mexique Bookshop has a lot of English books, but nothing jumps off the shelves, so I will probably find myself bookless tomorrow. From this heavily congested neighborhood I somehow manage to find the Cinematheque Rio Grand Socco to confirm that a film I would like to see, *1917*, is indeed playing at five and not seven as advertised on the Web. Maybe I'll come back later.

Then, I lose it when a guy in the square holding a menu grabs my arm and then another menu-wielding shark is in my face as well and I shout NO!, whereupon shark number one immediately lets go and number two backs off. I walk down to the bay for lunch before returning to the hotel for a bit. The feet are worse and I need to find a solution. Maybe the feet are telling me to take a day off, rest in the hotel and look for new shoes.



Tangier, Morocco



Tangier, Morocco



Tangier, Morocco

I buy some talcum powder in the Ibn Batouta Mall and it sort of seems to solve the problem and I end up taking a long walk along the beach, then to the end of the new Tanja Marina pier. Dinner is the same as yesterday back at the Ibn Batouta Mall. I like the proximity, banality and quickly growing familiarity of this shark-free place although, aside from the menu-wielders, I was only approached by two sharks today (one a scruffy-looking guy who claimed to work in my hotel, which is unlikely) and both backed off immediately. Maybe they sense I've been here long enough to know how to ward them off – just avoid eye contact and answer no questions. I find a new jacket at Ibn Batouta before returning to the hotel.

It's been a lazy day with hardly anything accomplished, but I have a new jacket. Tangier has been disappointing, but I had two great day-trips and a memorable full moon. Tomorrow, the last leg of the trip begins and I'm hoping I have enough energy left for Rabat.

My train in the morning of Day 17 leaves at eleven, so I enjoy moving slowly before taking a cab to the station, arriving early enough to sit down for breakfast. I exaggerate a little perhaps, but it's the best breakfast I've ever had. A perfect cheese omelet, five wonderful black olives, a couple of slices of tomato that taste like tomato, fine bread and stellar coffee. I have never appreciated food as much on a trip and resolve to pay more attention to it in these last four days.

I finish Sardar on the high-speed train they call *Al Boraq*, named after the winged horse that carried the prophet Mohammed. Sardar says Islamic orthodoxy is a root cause of violent jihadism, propagated through the madrasa schools. He writes about how progressive and free-thinking Islamic culture was in the Middle Ages, compared to Europe at the time. This was before an orthodox backlash of which he says, "enough is enough. It is time to rethink what Islam means in the 21st century... In essence, Muslim tradition is little more than medieval Arab tribal customs that have been enshrined in Islamic law and morality."

He's very clear about his position: "The closing of the Muslim mind is one of the greatest tragedies of modern history." Only the Muslim community can change this. Orthodoxy needs to be subdued and the madrasas need to be regulated with legislation and inspection.



Tanja Marina Pier, Tangier

When I arrive at Rabat Agdal Station, I'm relieved to discover that taxi drivers here are legally required to use their meters. But then the driver takes me on a joy ride, picking up other people and taking three times as long to reach my destination as I know from the Web it should. The meter had gone black along the way but suddenly comes back to life when I step out of the taxi. He wants to charge me 57 Dirhams, but I get angry and give him 20, which is what I know it should cost at the most. I'm learning how to deal with these people but now have to learn how to show anger without actually getting upset, without taking the shenanigans personally because they really aren't.

My bed-and-breakfast, the Riad Dar Yanis, looks 100% authentic, and it's on a side street in the middle of the hectic medina, a nice way to end the trip. I'm greeted with tea in the common area on the ground floor before I'm taken to Room No. 2 upstairs. It's all very lovely but a bit run-down, which is perfect - I wouldn't be comfortable otherwise. Mine is an L-shaped corner room, one of a handful surrounding an open area.

The location in the ancient heart of the city is fantastic, within walking distance of just about anything you would want to see. Around the corner, the medina gate is five minutes down Avenue Mohammed V, and straight ahead another ten minutes is the Rabat Ville Train Station. I find the English Bookshop easily, but it's closed from 1:30 to 4, so I'll catch it on the way back.

There are too many cars, blocking sidewalks, parked so close together every-which-way, it's often impossible to pass between them. Beyond the gate, Mohammed V turns into a wide boulevard leading to many other sites on my list, including the king's palace. On one corner I find the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, which is beautiful inside and out. And it has a café. And it's practically empty. And it has beautiful bathrooms. And it's free. I take a couple of puffs of kif and step inside for only thirty minutes this time, but I will definitely come back.

Next, I find St. Peter's Cathedral where at first I think a mass is underway and I'll wait it out, but then I see a coffin at the altar and realize it's a funeral. I'm sitting in the back pew and soon what I presume to be professional pall bearers join me and maybe it's almost over, I think, so I step outside to wait. Before long the coffin is carried out and pushed into the back of a van and I re-enter the church where I take a few photos and think I feel something slightly sacred before moving on.



Riad Dar Yanis



St. Peter's Cathedral



Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. Rabat

The Chellah Fort and Ruins are easy to find further down Mohammed V, and they are superb. And again, there are hardly any visitors. But there are dozens of storks in huge nests in a tower next to the Roman ruins and in trees behind. And many cats as well, of course, one of them a shark-cat following me, meowing loudly for a handout. I half expect him to ask me where I'm from.

I would have liked to take a taxi back to the medina, but I really don't feel like any more unpleasantness. This is the irony: if taxi drivers and merchants here treated tourists with more respect, I'm sure they would make more money. I would be taking taxis all day and tipping generously. It's so easy making my way back straight up Mohammed V, I'm almost disappointed. Everything seems to be on or near this boulevard, and lo-and-behold there are street signs, probably an edict from the king who would prefer to know where he is in his own town.

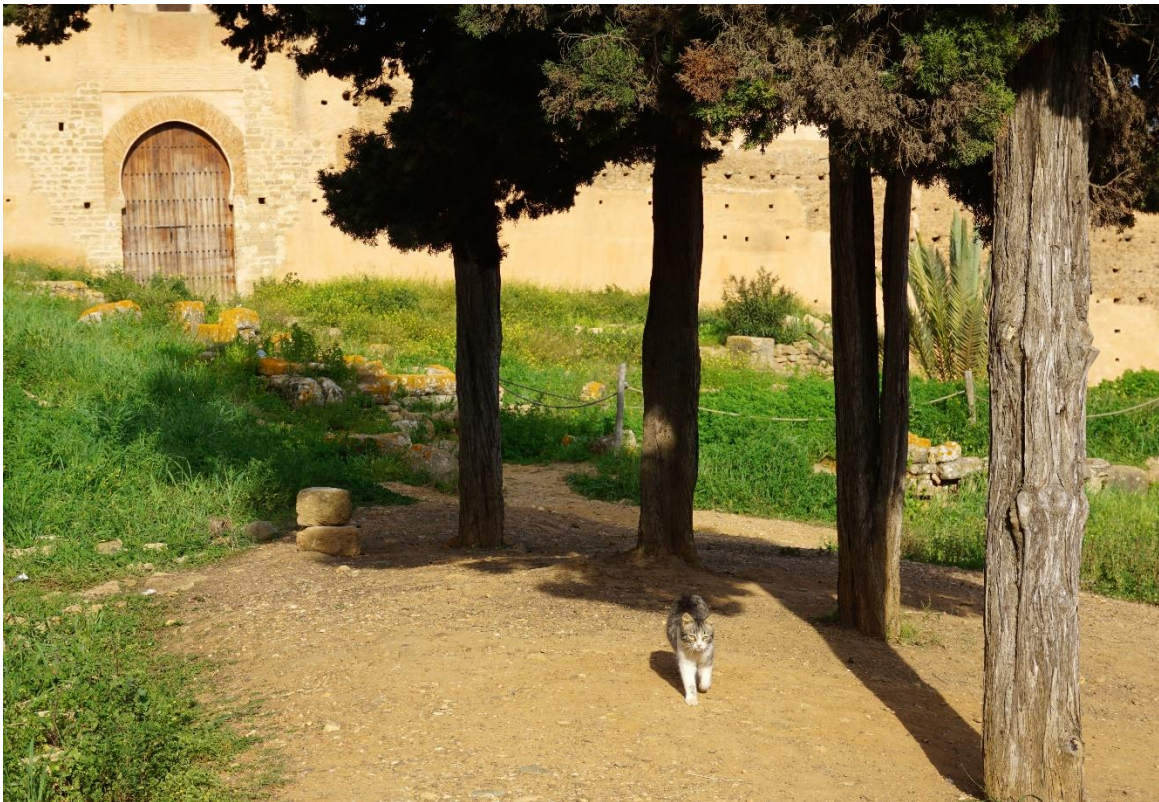
The English Bookshop is open now but it's a crazy house, a tiny room so packed with books you can hardly move. There are piles of boxes in the narrow aisles, with only the top one visible. I will never understand why some used bookshop owners do this. What is the point of a book you can't see? The passageways are so narrow I have serious trouble moving my eyes back far enough to make out the titles without reading glasses. Some shelves have three threads tacked and stretched across, preventing you from retrieving any of the very ordinary looking books. Really? I've seen eccentric used bookshops before, but this one takes the cake. There is surely a book for me somewhere in this mess, but claustrophobia kicks in and I give up. Maybe I'll do without these last few days. I'm immersed in more human life and activity than ever before and I recall the words of the I Ching - *Nature in contrast to spirit* - and maybe this trip will be different from the rest in this way too.

It's been a fine day. Dinner is at another incredible fast-food restaurant before re-entering the pulsing chaos of the medina to walk to the sanctuary of my room. So far, I'm loving Rabat and the Riad Dar Yanis.

But the riad is a strange place to wake up on Day 18, Valentines Day. It feels like I'm in someone's house, a dim, quiet house. With several things to see on my list, it could be a very busy day.



Chellah Fort and Ruins, Rabat



Where are you from?



Storks at the Chellah Fort and Ruins, Rabat

The first stop is the 12th century Kasbah of the Udayas and the adjacent older medina of Rabat. Then it's down to the waterfront, to a promenade with wonderful views of the Kasbah and fishermen on the calm waters of the Bou Regreg River. Then uphill again to the Hassan Tower. There are so many photo ops I think I might have to return to the hotel to charge a battery before I go to Salé on the other side of the river. I've never had a trip like this before, with so much of visual interest and such consistently good camera weather.

Hassan Tower is actually not so photogenic at this time of day, and the areas with good vantage points are closed, so I catch the nearby tram to Salé to walk through yet another medina to the Madrasa of Abu al-Hasan. The streets of this medina are narrow as usual, but especially third-world. I put my camera (tourist badge) away and begin to walk with a deliberate pace, like I know where I'm going, trying as best I can to follow the little blue Google dot.

In the thirty minutes it takes to get to the Madrasa, I will not see a single person who doesn't look like they live here, and I will be the only visitor at the 14th century religious school. It's a bit of a disappointment: aside from the ornate ground floor, there are two floors of tiny student cells and not much else. I ask the ticket lady about finding a taxi back to the tram station and she tells me the cleaner hanging about will show me where to find one but I am soon commandeered by the shark who had offered to 'guide' when I arrived. He says I don't need a taxi, he will show me a way to walk back in ten minutes, but when I see a taxi, I want it. I give him a small tip and he says the ride will take only three minutes, very cheap, but then the same thing happens as yesterday.

The driver turns on the meter, then immediately picks up two other people and we are off on another joy ride at my expense. This time I get angry as soon as it becomes obvious we are going nowhere near the station and several times I demand to be let out. The older couple he picked up are sympathetic, probably embarrassed by the driver's chicanery, a disgraceful way to treat foreigners. I think they are insisting the driver take me to the station and he does soon after take me to a tram station, not the one I asked for but a station nonetheless. I'm losing all respect for these swindlers who seem to have zero respect for me.



Older medina, Rabat



Bou Regreg River, Rabat



Boats on the Bou Regreg River, Rabat



Hassan Tower, Rabat

I return to the riad briefly to recharge a camera battery and get a recommendation for a restaurant from one of the guys who work there. The Restaurant de la Liberation is across the street from the second mosque around the corner. My seat faces a street full of men standing and kneeling, standing and kneeling, on a huge carpet laid out in front of the mosque. It's Friday, so I guess they are taking part in a service, not just the usual prayers. It's another excellent and cheap omelet, this one potato, and extremely good café au lait. I don't believe I've had better coffee in any other country, not even Italy.

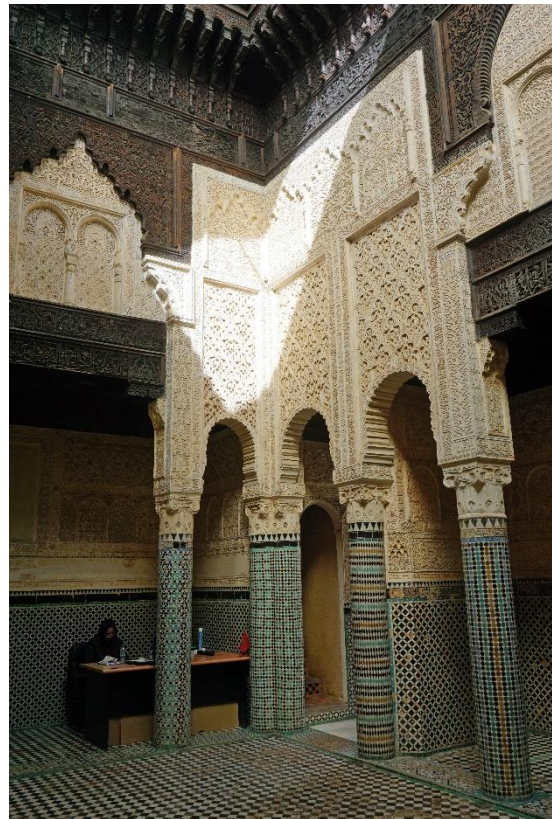
I had asked the guy at the riad about the local taxis but, aside from telling the driver not to pick up other passengers at the start, there's not much you can do. One way or another, it seems like it will be a disagreeable experience. The government could solve this problem in a week with a few inspectors posing as tourists and immediate loss of license if caught stealing. Just like they could easily walk up to any yellow vest and arrest them for drug dealing which is technically illegal in a country that provides much of the world with its hashish, but as with any country, corruption becomes ingrained and peoples' livelihoods come to depend on it.

I return to the riad again after lunch, unsure about my next move. The right foot is bad and I've got two more days of walking ahead of me. I decide to hang around the neighborhood and see the movie *1917* at the Ciné Atlas near the train station at five. I take my time strolling, exploring the vicinity more thoroughly. Where are the supermarkets? I could kill for a beer or a couple of glasses of wine. So far, the city looks completely dry. I almost buy Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* from one of the many sidewalk book vendors, but it feels something like cross-contamination from the last trip.

The film is an emotional ride, very good and exciting and, as usual, an interesting interlude during a trip. It's dark when I leave the theater and the neighborhood is teeming with people on a Friday night. Back at the Restaurant de la Liberation for dinner, I get to taste Harari soup, accompanied by a disappointing merguez sandwich. Afterwards I surrender and return to the book vendor to buy *Notes from the Underground*. It seems I can't be without a book. It's been a full day.



Salé



Madrasa of Abu al-Hasan

The 2nd class car on the train to Meknes in the morning of Day 19 is full and, once again, I seem to be the only foreigner. The book I bought last night chiefly to keep me company on this two-and-a-half-hour trip is forgotten back at the hotel, which leaves me with the window and a lot of time to think. I'm physically tired and the foot seems to be getting worse. Usually it doesn't start the day sore as it did this morning. The question is, how slow can I go today? Everything I want to see in Meknes is on the same path, except for the Royal Stables. I guess I'll find out what a Meknes taxi is like.

I treat myself to a late breakfast at Dots Café across the street from the train station as soon as I arrive. I'm hungry and want to get my bearings before I start walking. What an amazing meal, a new best-breakfast-ever! A wonderful cheese omelet, café au lait, yogurt, three of the best dates I've ever eaten, a dish of about twelve black olives, bread, and a tall glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. All for the equivalent of four dollars.

I begin my walk to the medina in a fairly modern, straightforward neighborhood, then find myself off-course after two consecutive roundabouts, but just for a bit. The roads are wide and visibility is good in this slightly hilly city, so it's easy to get back on track. Once I find Lahdim Square and the medina, it's the usual hit-or-miss affair, trying to find the two places I want to visit. Of course, there are no signs of any kind to help but I eventually find the Dar Jamai Museum, which is closed for renovations, and then the Bou Anania Madrasa, which itself will make the day-trip worthwhile, at the end of a dark, covered laneway.

The views of other rooftops and towers from the roof of the 14th century religious school are fascinating and I linger for close to an hour almost entirely by myself, taking photos and feeling intensely present on top of this strange city. It's very quiet up here except for the sing-song recitations of children in a nearby school and the occasional rooster crowing.

Before I leave, I ask the museum guy to point me in the direction of the Mausoleum of Moulay Ismail, but he says it's closed for renovations too. He also says a taxi to the Royal Stables should cost only 7 dirhams. Back in the square I take a break in one of the ubiquitous cafés where men-only sit facing the sidewalk with a cup or glass and a small bottle of water.



Lahdim Square, Meknes



Lahdim Square, Meknes



View from the roof of the Bou Anania Madrasa, Meknes



View from the roof of the Bou Anania Madrasa, Meknes



Bou Anania Madrasa



Then I look for a taxi in the square, but whenever one comes, someone else steps forward to grab it before me. And when I do manage to flag one down, the driver can't understand where I want to go and it's looking like it will be a long walk down a wide open-to-the-sun road but I'm soon approached by Nabih, a well-dressed older shark who says he will take me to the stables and other places for just 100 dirhams (\$15), and promises to get me 'Moroccan prices' on taxis as well. So, for the second time on this trip I allow myself to be fished in.

I ask him to walk slowly as he takes me through interesting short cuts Google doesn't know about, and he does for about ten seconds but, like Ibrahim in Marrakesh, there's no slowing him down. He's almost always well ahead of me but I know I'm on an invisible line – he hasn't been paid yet so he's not going to lose me. We make it to the Stables in half the Google time but they are closed too. I take some shots of the adjacent reservoir, happy at least not to have to worry about how to get around from this point on. We take (a very cheap) taxi to the old, old medina, the Berber section, and it's like a repeat of Marrakesh, only it's not a market day and the streets where tourists rarely go aren't jam-packed.

Nabih points a few things out to fulfill his guide functions and eventually leads me to the inevitable shop, this one in the metal-workers alley. A young man busy at his worktable, etching designs with what look like thin metal threads, shows me his blackened hands (to prove he's an authentic craftsman?) before the hard sell. For ten minutes I'm saying no until finally I agree to buy an engraved black metal 'hand of Fatima' for a hundred dirhams. He really doesn't want to give me change for the two-hundred bill I gave him and keeps making offers of other combinations of bracelets, boxes and whatnot at what they both call 'catastrophic' prices.

But I escape with my change and I like what I purchased very much so I don't feel bad about the scam. What's interesting is that when Nabih puts me in another very cheap, pre-negotiated taxi to return to the train station, he insists on giving me his telephone number so if I, or anyone I know, comes to Meknes they can contact him for his services. It's interesting because he clearly doesn't think he's doing anything scammy or misleading by leading tourists to a shop.



Meknes, Morocco



Royal Stables Meknes, Morocco



Nabih

I pay a bit extra for a first-class train ticket back to Rabat and decide that the running-around part of the trip is over. Tomorrow, I'll go to mass in the morning, then slowly revisit the main sights of Rabat. I'll try to have a contemplative, mindful last day. I'm sharing my compartment on the train with a family consisting of a boy, a girl, a mother and grandmother. I can't figure out what languages they are speaking. Some French, bits of English, Arabic, something Germanic or Scandinavian? Czech maybe? My own linguistic inadequacies are embarrassing in comparison.

Dinner is veggie pizza in a second-floor restaurant overlooking a hectic intersection of the medina not far from my riad. On the way, I took a photo of a local stray dog with a broken ear and found a beautiful prayer rug for only 50 dirhams (7\$). I never thought I would say *Pas cher!* to a Moroccan merchant, but it just slipped out. The tiny shop was next to a mosque and seemed to sell only religious articles, so maybe the prices are relatively fixed in such a place.

With so many attractions closed, it wasn't a great day in Meknes, except for the time spent on the roof of the Bou Anania Madrasa, the kind of priceless travel moment that lingers forever. And I think I learned something from Nabih about how services rendered works here. And in the evening, I will realize that I got some nice shots on a day that felt a little broken.

It's a misty, grey morning on Day 20, the last day of the trip. Sunday mass is at nearby Église Saint François d'Assise, where there are so many children in attendance it sounds more like a nursery than a church. It's a well-maintained, neat little parish, but the mass says nothing to me. It's still misty (and cold) when I leave the church at ten, so I slowly walk to the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, hoping it will be open and it is, as is the café where I finish transcribing excerpts from Maalouf.

The sun is out when I leave the museum but it quickly clouds over and it's still chilly and quiet on Avenue Mohammed V. I revisit St. Peter's for a few moments where a mass is underway, but I don't feel the magic I felt last time. Then I return to the Kasbah of the Udayas, this time walking down the hill on the other side to a beach with massive waves. There are locals taking in the ocean's violent display, just like me on this grey day.



Église Saint François d'Assise, Rabat





Old medina walls, Rabat

The Kasbah seems to be disappearing in the mist behind the abandoned cemetery next to the beach. Is Morocco beginning to fade already? Will it seem like an exotic dream when I get home? It's 1:45 and the grey-white cloud cover shows no signs of dissipating. It feels like the sky is disappearing too and I realize I've forgotten my notebook, so I return to the riad, very slowly and carefully with my bad foot. I don't like to be without the notebook and I'm wondering if the camera part of the trip is over.

But just like I can't stop reading, I can't seem to stop taking pictures. I'm alone on the rooftop terrace where the owner has just brought me a complimentary cup of coffee. Maybe today is to remind me of what I learned about light in Russia last October. Russia showed me I could take photos without sunlight, then I come to a place where there seems to be nothing but sunlight. Beyond the prettiness of the riad terrace, I can see different shapes and textures on the surrounding rooftops. Satellite dishes, old tires, a woman hanging clothes on a line, exposed stones and bricks of various vintage. And lots of cement.

I like the way an antenna leans in relation to the massive cement block of what is probably the back of a building like mine, with no windows to the outside world, just the inner courtyard. The coffee comes and it's very good. It's now 3:30 and maybe a little less grey, or maybe I'm just adapting. It seems like I'm coming down with a cold.

I read a few pages of Dostoevsky but decide not to continue with it. I'll be without both sun and a book today. I can't stay on the roof forever and decide to explore some side streets of the medina. Someone has placed a piece of fish in front of the dog with the broken ear, but she's not interested, eyes closed, still slightly trembling as she was yesterday. Surely not long for this world.

It's up and down Mohammed V a few times in the hustle and bustle, absorbing the chaos, watching the people one last time, and then the trip is over. I buy a small takeout pizza and hobble back to the riad on my sore foot. Now there's an ache in my left shoulder from carrying the camera bag for 20 days and I think my body is already anticipating the end of this ordeal.

The journey home the next day begins with a taxi ride to Rabat-Agdal, another beautiful Moroccan train station. And the driver takes me straight there, with no extra passengers and on the meter! I tip him generously with all the change I have left, and thank him sincerely, happy to leave on a positive note, good to know they're not all sketchy.





Rabat Medina



Rabat Medina



Dog with a broken ear, Rabat

It's grey again this morning, which makes me feel a bit smug because my job here is done. I've got an hour to wait for my train to the airport at Casa Voyageur Station in Casablanca where, as usual, the first stop of the trip seems like months ago. I really did a lot on this trip, visiting ten different places in twenty days: Casablanca – Marrakesh – Atlas Mountains – Essaouira – Ouzoud Falls - Tangier – Chefchaouen – Asilah – Rabat – Meknes.

2020 has felt different from the start and soon after I get home in mid-February the COVID-19 pandemic will begin to shut the world down, causing anxiety and even some panic, most of all a global obsession that blocks out almost everything else. For me, it feels like an opportunity to press the reset button, especially when images of the planet healing begin to surface, images of animals entering cities and clear blue water in the canals of Venice. For the first time, humans are being given an opportunity to think on a global scale, as members of the same species.

On a personal level, I feel like I'm returning from Morocco with less of a grip on my own identity, or identities. Maybe the I Ching reading speaks to this opportunity to let go of confining roles, to separate myself from what I do, where I came from and where I think I'm going - to experience a freedom that leaves one more open to the mundanity of the moment. Amin Maalouf writes about "the twilight of nationalities" and the need to "tame the wild beast of identity." What's your heritage, your tribe, your culture? What do you do? Religion, tribe, profession, status... Who are you? *Where are you from?*

Ziauddin Sardar said stylized beards as a Muslim badge of identity were first prescribed centuries ago as a way to distinguish friend from foe on the battlefield, in the days before uniforms. If identities are basically just roles that can be adopted or discarded, if I choose not to have any enemies, can I diminish the need for identity?

Sardar also wrote about the term Orientalism, which is: "The proclivity of representing Islam and Muslims as the darker side of Europe." Maybe I shouldn't have paid so much attention to the sharks and crooked cab drivers. Just a way of

doing business. I think of beautiful Saeeda showing her anger, her dark side. It's just a cultural thing - they show their darkness, we hide ours.

I'll remember other things about Morocco too: the food and the coffee, the lovely scents in Cyberpark in the morning, the children's voices on the rooftop of the madrasa in Meknes, the full moon in Tangier, the constant sense of being lost in the labyrinths of the medinas. I eventually found my way out of every labyrinth I entered and I've come home with good memories and lots of good photos.

I read somewhere that Islamic culture is focused on spiritual origins, as Western culture was in the Middle Ages but is now focused on the future and 'progress'. Personally, I would prefer to focus on the Divine, the sacredness of life, the joy of being not dead, because let's be honest, living mindful of the Divine *is* the best way to live. But I think our relationship with the Divine can only be solitary – utterly intimate.

I recall the two conversations about solitude, with Haley on the bus and Alex on the train, and for the first time I'm thinking that solitude might be the most significant thing about these trips. The planes, trains, buses and radical displacement just serve to provide space for solitude - the opportunity to be truly alone, to forget who I am and lose my identities for a while. Maybe this explains the two recurring phenomena I observed: the mysterious dread that emerges a few days into a trip and the ominous dreams. Things that emerge when no one is there to watch and I'm paying close attention with a camera and a notebook.

Finally, it seems there was hardly anything spiritual about this trip, aside from the moment of grace I felt in St. Peter's in Rabat and the time spent on the roof of the madrasa in Meknes. Can only a moment or two qualify a trip as a pilgrimage?

Every trip brings insights or enforces things already understood but forgotten. Like *Inshallah*. There is freedom in trusting one's life and the big questions (the ones we can never answer) to a deity. In this state of trust, that may appear to be a state of submission, we can paradoxically act more freely. We can in any given moment do what we feel is right or appropriate and, *God Willing*, all will turn out well.

Just saying *God Willing* throughout the day - just saying God's name, in fact - opens one up to the possibility of mindfulness. Like the lyrical Koran wafting in the air of Badr's taxi in Marrakesh. It was a very good trip.