

Marrakech the Moroccan Marinade

If there is a broken gateway over a barren landscape to Morocco then Casa-the-Blanket Airport is a lesson in calculated ineptitude. The Casablanca Airport is archaic and the slow shuffle to an Orwellian passport Control is a mind sapping exercise in crowd tolerance. A gang of Ustasi mono-gnomes were having a collective investigation in seeing how long a 747 processing could takeif you did not really try.

A stentorian questioning on ones motive for coming and resulting 90 minute delay means missing the connection via the under ground train station to Marrakech. Eventual release and the now mandatory wait start the journey to catch the Marrakech Express via the city train. The train connection is at Voyagers Station which opens the soul to the outskirts of Casablanca.

This passage is everyman's pastiche of the Tijuana backblocks as the tracks penetrate the backdoor desolation of rampant poverty and the detritus of the survival fight. Concrete block houses in barren fields of blowing plastic bags greet the incoming traveller.

Tickets cannot be purchased prior to arriving in Casablanca and the Travel net tells a tale of easy train connections and a two class system. The crowds have built at platform 2 and jostling for positions to board takes on a collective urgency and the reason is soon apparent. The train arrives and the few that disembark struggle to get off as the masses crawl over the top to find a way to the non existent seating. 4 large bags and duty-free hand luggage is to greater disadvantage in this Le Mans start.

No seats, ledges, corridor or derriere purchase is available and the fact the outside door cannot close provides a footway to ownership. The doorway encompasses a toilet ,thoroughfare to other carriages ,plus 6 adults and the dreaded 4 bags all jockeying for a comfort zone and a handhold to steady the rocking beast. The French are at the start of the Easter school vacations and it seems the Moroccans are out in sympathy for perhaps the Islamic equivalent.

The train stopped 4 more times in the next hour picking up more passengers and squeezing bodies into even less space. Perhaps that illusion of the Marrakech Express romanticised by Crosby Stills and Nash in the 60s psyche should have been aptly renamed the Marrakech Distress. Into this packed morass a breads and drink vendor somehow managed to push through the fanning millions and force a path to solicit his wares.

The aroma of the toilet wafted into the small space as varied shapes and sizes of veiled and hadjibbed females pressed into action. Young Moroccan guys attempted to light up cigarettes but were glared into submission and they took to hanging in the rocking space between carriages. The speed of the train set up a short jerking motion which pitched the players of locomotive La Crosse into tenuous handholds and shirt supporting.

Throw this tight situation into a good repartee with a Moroccan Lad who with fractured conversation filled the gaps in understanding local foibles and his wishes of emigration. The common issue was the lack of work and the scale of remuneration and in reply his questions were how he would live in Australia. The broken door to the carriage the whole time was slung open to the tracks, blasting the gap with wind and noise, somewhat abating the serial cigarette smoking interspersing the talk.



Arrival at Marrakech Station spewed out a caterwauling mass of locals who advanced in the knowledge they knew where they were going, unlike the tourists.

Trip Advisor searches and replies intimated that grabbing a cab to Riad Dar Palmyra was a breeze, etched in local legend and do not pay more than 50 Dirhams . A clangour of exhortations and urgings surrounded us from every middleman to use this or that Grande Taxi as the prize of extorting a 200 dirham fare were mashed into the haranguing.

Realisation set in that no driver knew the Riad, the printed instructions were of lesser help, the bargaining capacity diminished and helplessness looked a more exciting option. Banter between varied drivers, passerbyes and any willing amateur Michelin chartists led to bags and bods wedged into a grande taxi at 100 dirham's on a trip to somewhere.

A ride into the Medina even knowing your destination is a lifetime experience but this was made more precarious by the enormity of the Saturday night crowd headed toward the Djemma El Fna square. A side street of known repute led to small boys being asked for directions and one excitedly pointing down a dusty alley.

Taxi was left parked in the middle of the road and a series of twisting and turning alleys and dark overhangs were stepped under and a large foreboding door appeared in a baked mud wall. A knock, a greeting and the congenial Moroccan host Boubker returned to the cab to help drag luggage.

The erstwhile and voluble 12 year old guide stuck his hand out for the fee. His ministrations for more than 20 dirham's led to rapid speech, a cuff under the ear by Boubker and sent on his way for the attempted highway robbery.



Riad Dar Palmyra was like a treasure trove, a Moroccan Merchants home managed by Boubker and a helper, converted to modern use and owned by an absentee French family.

Instantly the business of the payment commenced whilst a bottle of Moroccan Rose, bites of olives, peanuts and pickled vegetables appeared pronto.

The Riad has 5 rooms, 2 at ground level and 3 on the 2nd floor and a large tented terrace and washing area perched on top overlooking the snow-capped Atlas Mountains in the distance.



The domestic dumping of chattels, the travel grime encrustations surgically removed in time for an advance on the Saturday night fervour of Djemma El Fna. Directional guidance was finessed through the traffic and the entry to the square resembled the Rolling Stones at concert with lights, smoke and seemingly 20,000 people.

Groups of people surrounding beating drummers, Gnawa Singers, acrobats, snake charmers as a giant carnivale of locals and tourists moved about the square. The main event at night takes place around the food stalls numbered in no logical sequence and comprising around 40 all up.

This first viewing of "Jamma" reminds that Paul Bowles reiterated with no fear and favour his epitaph." Without Djemma El Fna Marrakech would be like any other Moroccan Town."



The base for culinary expeditions is to do in Rome so the flavours of Fna were the lynchpins behind the experimentation of sucking the souk or marinating Marok at the square. Cruising the stalls prior to settling at each venue adds to the selection criteria as interactive parrying between competing vendors heightens the final destination.

Touts press the value of each stall with shouts of "Me Jamie Oliver" "See you later alligator" "Hey moustache eat here" as the smoke and smells invade every space. Plates of small snails half the size of the French Escargot at 5 dirham are found throughout the Souk in large baskets purging themselves before sale.

Cheap and cheerful with a peppery flavour served in a boiled state, eaten with toothpicks. Haricot and lentil porridge or broth plates were a good local staple and the stalls were well occupied at 5 Dirhams.

The sheep stalls had lively action and the display of sheep's heads did give an impression of an all encompassing dine. The heads were lined up boiled ,grimacing with teeth protruding accompanied by the tongues, hearts, breasts, offal skewers and brains which sat out on display without refrigeration.

A serve of head was a flourishing display of a boiled head chopped into pieces to separate teeth, fat, bone, lips and nostrils into a small plate of steaming protein. A tagine of lamb pieces was ordered with a few more meaty bits as an accompaniment and positions sorted by relocating Moroccans to let the boys from Oz take up the benches.



This tasty dalliance into the Djemma Stalls was finished off with a double chocolate glaze and the evenings repast for 3 was a lowly \$A9.00 each.

Varied comments via the net spruik the dangers of food poisoning but the sheer weight of numbers suggests that the backlash from tourists would impact on its viability. Detracting points are minor with only minimal hassles from souk vendors, plus zealous donations activity by some performers being the major detractions.

The proclivity of beggars to press into the psyche is uncomfortable and leaving at night the donkey cart owners are sleeping under their wagons. Whatever means possible are being used to survive with small children selling biscuits and individual cigarettes, confronting youths sell toys and mothers clutching babies with arms outstretched can intrude upon ones karma. The repartee of the vendors plus smoke, noise, crowds, and exotica drives the Djemma El Fna food karaoke machine like no other.

The psychology of the infidel is disturbed from slumber even through the most jetlagged of sleep as a new day dawns at 4.30am resonating to the dirge of call to prayer. The Riad breakfast is included in the E50 double room and is a feast of fresh apricot jam, flat breads, Lebanese style roti, fresh orange juice and espresso all balanced with the Australian staple of vegemite. The courtyard is an oasis of calm inside the maze of alleys with paintings, pools, fountain and Moroccan furniture with French twists.

Breakfast alternative venue is to go to the terrace where the view can stretch across the early morning rooftop gardens. The Kings Palace wall is the height of the Riad roof but close enough to see the roof garden and Palace outlines only 100 meters away. Red Bus touring like Dubai, Rome and London is the best radar orientation system to acquaint a cohesive tourist attack on Marrakech.

The red bus can be picked up at many stops but jumping on at Djemma El Fna for \$A19 for 2 separate tours is money well spent as the map for future exploration is laid out. The bus heads to Gerliz or new town a series of pink buildings with boulevards and gardens courtesy of French architecture. Large Euro hotels give the area a similarity to any modern city with only the hue identifying some individuality.

An interesting use of palm gardens with moats flooded from aquifers forming levee banks around individual plants. The traffic mayhem of the Medina is simplified here with French cafes and commerce areas promenading the avenues. The blue bus tour goes to the palm forest out of town where 1200 hectares of forest is being regenerated to replicate what were 500,000 trees from times past.

The bus passes by the Golf Course Palmyriad with luxurious estates, private villas and a peer into the opulence that is hidden from the Marakechee by high walls.

The mission of any pure tourist is to attack the Souks in a pincer move hoping that somehow elucidation of the unmapable maze reveals all.

The exhortations of sellers, braying donkeys, beeping scooters, honking petite taxis pushing and shunting in tight turns as every alley leads into another. Throw in a primordial soup of massed humanity and it's the Souk.



Blind leading the blind deeper goes the caravansera into the maze looking for the elusive Tanneries or whatever lurks around the next corner. Asking directions is an invite to inherit the ubiquitous Moroccan guide a professor of financial self providence who will not take no for an answer.

The guide follows muttering and haranguing trying to force a minders role and the unwanted soliciting is sinister and coercive. A non-guidance missile is required forcing a rethink of strategy returning to the Square for a more concise Souk methodology. Entering and circling from the Djemma Square brings the stalls into a layering effect with the leather, footwear, lanterns, clothing, eyeware and merchandising into competitive cohesion.

At every turn there is a different sight or angle that demands the digitalised version of holiday memorabilia. The vendors cry their patter each trying to elicit the origins of the buying species giving them the advantage of inveigling the customer into the web. The majority of the clientele is French and the originating gambit is "Bonsoir Monsieur/Madam" an English answer gives an instant nationality change to "I give you best price".

Bartering is a way of life and the going trade for hard bargaining is 30% of the offered price resulting in a settling amount of 50% to 60% of the original. Sights of culinary note were the fresh chickens that were live in the cage awaiting instant despatch negating the need for refrigeration. A veritable horror show of butchers cutting, chopping and hanging a meaty front row of bull's nostrils, tongues, legs in the dusty breezeways.

Creative zoological medical marvels abound as on the hoof hedgehogs are a caged cure for asthma.



Chameleons blinking in the sunlight are more likely to end up as pets than on the table but there is no denying curb side dining is as an exciting pastime as can be imagined and competition between critters both on and off the plate is a mine field of culinary trepidation.

Marrakech is a shopper's heaven with cheap eyewear, tribal trinkets and the current trends toward furnishing Arabesque style are covered both in the souk and downtown. The Government tourist store has fixed prices but is at least a guide price wise for the forays into the bargaining world of real Moroccan commerce.

A quick way to get some lessons in photography is to take photos of the omnipresent guards lolling about the enormous Palace gates. A camera pointed in their direction brings a quick response as the perpetrator is forced to expunge the graven images.

The streets hum with the daily hustle but the population goes about their living cycle in deference to the now increasing tourist trade and it is a safe city to bridge the Islamic world with the West.