

READER POSTCARD

Morocco a feast for the senses and soul

Vibrant markets, kind people warm the heart

JOAN THOMPSON
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Our trip to Morocco, where we went with an Intrepid Adventure travel group, began in Tangiers, a short ferry ride away from the hip and charming town of Tarifa in Spain. Yes, in Tangiers and later, in Casablanca, we had taxi drivers to brush off, a faux guide to humour, a melee of potholed streets, sidewalks and intersections to negotiate and bleating traffic to tolerate, but these initial impressions were soon overtaken by one heartwarming experience after another in the two weeks we spent exploring this country. A few of those: the child in the city of Fez eager to take my hand, purely as a welcoming gesture; a storekeeper selling me a few dirhams of raw meat to help feed a pregnant cat adrift in the frenzy of Fez's medina; the children in the mountainous Medelt region, keen to examine "Ali Baba's" (my partner) camera and delighted with the unsolicited gift of "une stylo"; the opportunity to sing with the Berber drummers at our camp in the Sahara; the ubiquitous tajines, Berber "whiskey" (mint tea) and steamed milk, the eager-to-please cooks, waiters and hotel attendants. One is well cared for in Morocco — the extra mile taken, the extra kindness given.

Especially memorable was our tour's camping venture in the Sahara, at the southern edge of Morocco. Ochre sand, piled as perfectly as whipped cream, was impregnable to sound and an impossibly rich backdrop for light. Bathed in a



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warm incandescent glow, we crossed the evening desert via camel train — our rhythms and silence perfectly matched to sweeping shadows of sand and light. The experience was one of the most tranquil of my life — a time-arresting, vision-expanding desert immersion. And bless those camels — their calmness, sure-footedness, stoicism, and sense of brotherhood — content to sit saddled and chained together all night, moments from readiness to do it all over again the next day. The walks, the climbs up the dunes to better views, the impulsive plunges down them, the sudden bursting into song. It was at once a place that

inspired a sense of awe and a sense of play — what kind of magic is that?

Unexpectedly, other than the Sahara, it was the cities in Morocco that intrigued us most. The layers of culture and history (Arab, Jewish, Berber, French, Spanish) embedded in the vieux pierres (old stones) of the streets and buildings appealed to our imaginations (as did the boldness of the cats as if protected by a sixth Muslim precept — to love and let multiply the felines in one's family). And what was most visually staggering in the cities were the medinas — enclosed street markets operating since the medieval period. While every medina

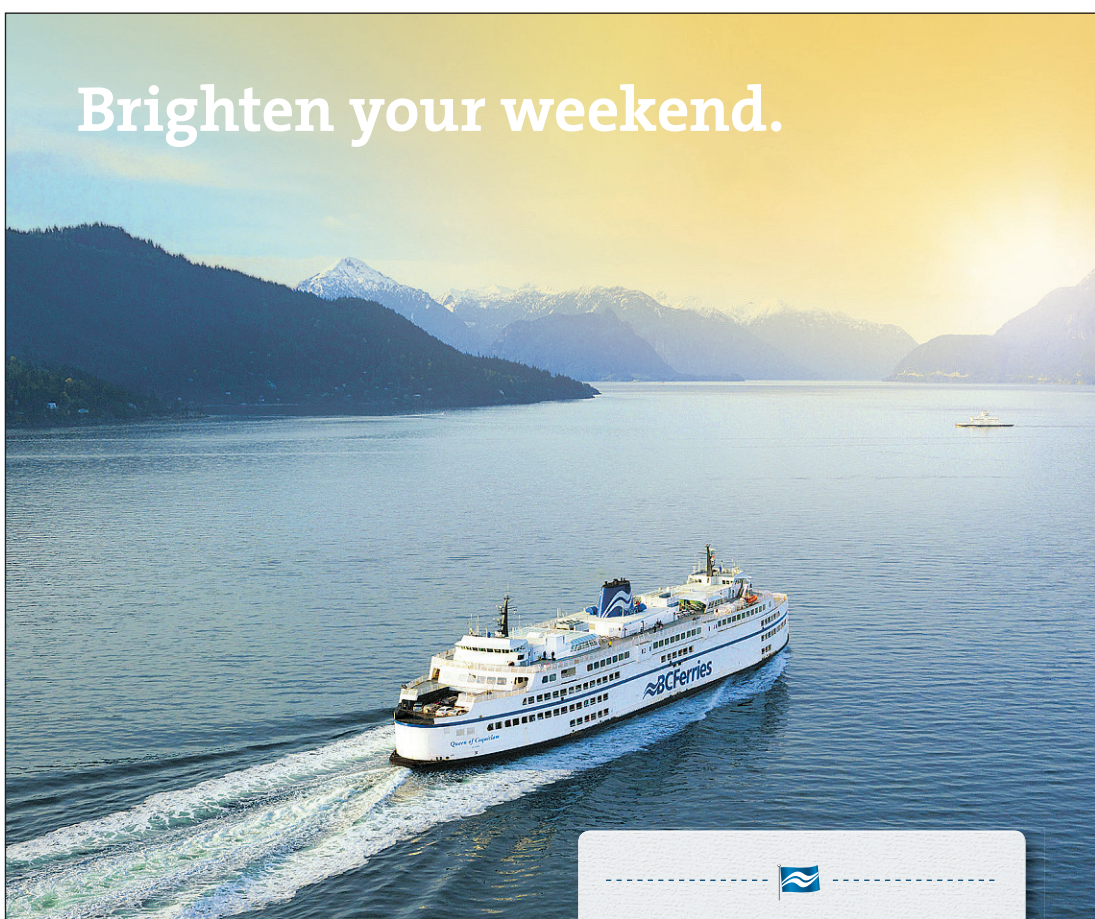


Travelling through the Morocco desert on a camel train is a tranquil experience for reader Joan Thompson, with shadows and light playing on the sand inspiring a sense of awe.

was an assault on the senses, the medina in Fez capped them by its enormity — 1,800 streets and tunnelled alleyways to get lost in, multiplied by thousands of stalls and merchants perched proudly atop mountains of merchandise. The wizardry in their urban planning awed

— 10 alleys devoted to blacksmithing followed by 10 for babouches, butchers, textiles, cushions — as did the cleanliness (the donkeys wore diapers to keep down the waste in the streets!), and amazing traffic flow (given the number of people, motorbikes and laden

donkeys). Amid the cacophony of colour and sound one could feel the townspeople's poise in doing something centuries in the making. Even the children and the cats seemed to be tuned in. What a dazzling eye-ful, what an unforgettable experience and education.



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