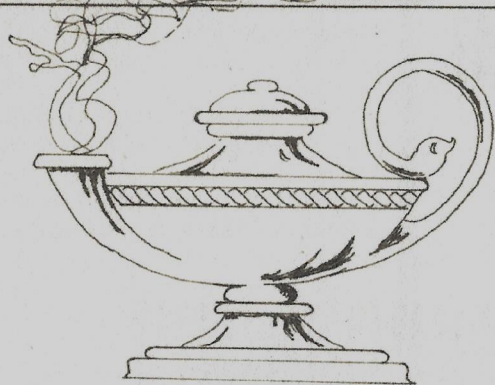


TRAVEL



Morocco's a charmer

But forget those Hollywood images; this country's bigger than Bogart

By BARBARA ANN ROSENBERG
Special to the Exponent

Casablanca — it's that city that Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart made famous, a city that people envision as mysterious and romantic, full of palm trees and intrigue.

Only Casablanca is not like that — not at all (with the exception of a few palm trees on the outskirts and in hotel gardens). Instead, it's a bustling, modern city, full of high-rise buildings and people in everyday clothes, rather than flowing caftans and hooded djellabas, those unisex robes worn over regular clothing in other, more romantic parts of Morocco.

To get atmosphere similar to what was portrayed in "Casablanca" the movie, it's necessary to head further south in Morocco — much further south. You get the first taste of that ambience in Marrakesh, a fascinating, sprawling city of about 475,000, surrounded by sand desert. (It takes about a day to drive there or an hour on Royal Air Maroc.)

Among the city's sophisticated hotels are the world-famous Mamounia and the Tichka, a beautiful, small jewel named for



A snake charmer in Marrakesh displays his numerous wares to any interested party.

Photo by Barbara Ann Rosenberg

the highest mountain in the Atlas chain and run with exquisite finesse by a French manager.

For even greater insight into the country, though, it's a good idea to head south over the breathtakingly beautiful Atlas Mountains and through the Tichka Pass, with its views of the majestic Tichka and other snowcapped peaks. The drive continues through pre-Sahara landscape featuring not sand but rocks — miles and miles of nothing but rocks — and leads, eventually, to Quarzazate, a provincial capital that once served as an outpost for the French Foreign Legion.

Quarzazate is a neat, small city of about 100,000 people, only mildly occupied with tourism. There are several pleasant, comfortable hotels, most of which are oriented to French tourists. The pre-Sahara landscape dominates, hardly resembling the Sahara of Gary Cooper and French Foreign Legion movies I'd seen as a child.

Along the main street that runs straight through town, there are some small tourist shops, all crammed with the usual Moroccan trinkets: bracelets and necklaces of

silver, stones of various colors, copper utensils in every size and shape, and rugs, rugs, rugs.

The weather — in May — was too perfect to spend the day haggling with shopkeepers. So we set out to visit a small oasis called Finnt, described as a "must" by our hotel's concierge and only a short distance away — 15 kilometers, or about 10 miles.

That "short distance" took more than an hour to reach, however, driving over a bone-bruising *piste*, euphemistically described on a Michelin map as an "all-weather road." The oasis was picture-perfect, with towering palm trees and other brilliant-green vegetation and with flowers, too. The change was a startling one from the unrelieved stretches of ochre rocks en route to Finnt.

The little oasis had a clutch of adobe dwellings perched high on a hill rising above the verdant land. We learned that the oasis, itself, was too valuable to waste on housing; it was strictly for growing things:

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dates, almonds, pistachios. The water used for washing and cooking by Finnt's residents came from the only nearby source of water — the narrow stream that kept the oasis flourishing — and was carried up the hill to their homes.

This, however, was the *real* Morocco — at least as it's portrayed in the movies. And that image includes the way in which people dress — in robes, not in suits. This was actually Berber country, where the women dress in black costumes festooned with brilliantly colored spangles or stones and where the men wear their headpieces differently from Arabs in the northern part of the country. The black robes worn by the women cover every part of their bodies, except for their eyes, and the headpieces worn by the men are round, rather than peaked.

After a few hours of this mega-Moroccan atmosphere, however, it was time to retrace our route to Quarzazate. This time, though, our drive included a stop at the rug *cooperatif*, a clutch of shops on the edge of town. Many of the rugs were carefully woven in soft Berber hues to a more-or-less usual pattern that prevails in that part of the country. There were also village rugs in a riot of colors — reds, oranges and blues — randomly interspersed, or so it seemed, with a black-and-white-patterned, flat weave.

How to choose? Buy some of each; obviously, because, after a little good-natured haggling, the prices

turned out to be pretty reasonable.

Across the road was a magnificent, fortified 19th-century castle named for the ubiquitous Mohammed V, a ruler who left his mark on Morocco forever, having modernized its physical conditions and the way of viewing life through education.

Overlooking that imposing site was the Kasbah restaurant, unquestionably the best in the area. The female chef — known simply as "Mama" — did superb things with the vegetables of the area, cooking them with the myriad spices that result in a totally unique Moroccan cuisine.

Our drive also took in a town at the very edge of the Sahara Desert. That site was Zagora, and for anyone with any doubts about where they were, the town featured a huge sign with an arrow pointing to the legendary Timbuctu — 50 days away (by camel, of course) and across open stretches of the Sahara, in Mali.

For the most part, the only camels in evidence were parked behind tourist hotels. Some, however, could occasionally be sighted plowing fields near areas with a source of water. Hitched to teams that included donkeys, the camels provided the brute strength necessary to plow the fields.

The chief tourist activity in and around Zagora, other than haggling for even more trinkets, was watching the sun rise over the dunes. Not a single high-rise could be spotted. *This* was Morocco. Ingrid, Bogey, where are you? ■