A City of Contrast

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In the days leading up to my academic yearlong stint in Rome my eyes were fixed on a map, I was imagining the endless possibilities of adventure and travel. Curious, I pinpointed the proximity between Morocco and Italy. With the European budget airlines it would be possible to catch a quick flight to Marrakech. My research on the city left me mesmerized by radiant mosques, the tranquil desert and vibrant souks. I was determined to go.

My experience in Rome was incredible, illuminating and ultimately ineffable. I would not trade it for anything. I swallowed the language like I slurped my pasta carbonara, whole and hungrily. I spent lazy afternoons wandering through churches pondering over Renaissance paintings. I watched young Italian children kick a soccer ball in the park. I indulged in two-euro bottles of vino. I stopped and listened to street musicians in the metro stations. And yes, I devoted plenty of time to my studies. However, the city that confronted me with adversity and left me in a state of true wonderment was Marrakech.

Fall break was the opportune moment to travel outside of Italy. My new friends at school were pairing off and planning jaunts around Europe—none had any interest in North Africa. My efforts to persuade people into joining me in Morocco failed. I was frustrated but persistent. Unable to relinquish my desire, it dawned on me… I would travel to Marrakech alone. Three days was all I had. Three days by myself in a foreign country with an unfamiliar language and absolutely no agenda. These were the three most liberating days of my life.
Marrakech is a city of contrasts. Beautiful and impoverished the intricate, colorful mosques are juxtaposed with littered streets and crumbling buildings. Young barefoot children play in back alleys while old men sit reverently sipping hot mint tea. Donkeys are harnessed with carts and trot steadily while one-seat scooters crammed with three passengers whizz past. The sound of men chattering in Moroccan Arabic fills the air while taciturn women quietly shuffle through the town. The laidback, carefree ambiance of the city is the polar opposite of the chaotic, crowded medina filled with vendors and tourists. Incessant shouting echoes from people selling and purchasing artisanal goods. Snake charmers offer to wrap reptiles around your shoulders while women veiled in the hijab grab your hand in an effort to adorn it with henna. Both expect a fee in return. My research on Marrakech had warned me against engaging with these types of individuals but it was inevitable. The minute I paused to observe the commotion of the market I was bombarded. Rather than fear empathy engulfed my senses. These people are not thieves, simply normal men and women trying to scrape by. I let a woman named Fatima decorate my arm with henna as I listened to stories about her children and the long, arduous commute from her village to the medina. Only her hands and eyes were visible amidst the sea of sable fabric, but those eyes gleamed with absolute sincerity and kindness. I felt welcomed in Marrakech.

The residents of Marrakech are also a complexity, demonstrating the clashing views of Islam, the established religion in Morocco. Most Muslims in Morocco belong to the Sunni branch. While I was not required to cover myself I felt bare next to women clad in full burkas, such as Fatima. During my stay I met two men who expound opposing
views of Islam. My encounters with both illuminated the religious spectrum of Islam that so many Americans dismiss because the media focuses on divisions that act under extreme and radical interpretations of the Quran. My chance meetings with these men were enlightening.

While rambling through the maze-like medina vendors shouted in Arabic, French, and Spanish to grab my attention. I avoided the stares that were cast on my blonde hair and blue eyes. Overwhelmed I was unsure of where to turn next. As if reading my thoughts I heard a young man call out, “American? Come with me.” I paused only for a moment before following the stranger as he continued walking. Jaouad spent the rest of the afternoon touring me around the souks. He introduced me to many artists and shop owners. Jaouad offered me a glimpse of his life in Marrakech. In return I told him about my life in America. As the sun sank lower into the sky the conversation kept flowing so we continued talking over dinner. Jaouad abides by many behavioral guidelines that Islam strongly suggests, though these are not explicitly stated in the Quran. He does not consume alcohol, tobacco or meat. Jaouad gave me his opinions on these religious and political matters, explaining his conservative disposition. I’ll never forget his concluding words, “Muslims do not say that our religion is better than any other, we simply offer a different way of life.” These words have resonated with me ever since. After a wonderful day of exploring and connecting with Jaouad, the bill for dinner arrived. Oddly he did not offer to pay for his portion of the meal so I covered the check. I wondered if this was a cultural difference that I was not accustomed to. Jaouad began talking about his views on marriage and his quest for a wife. That was my cue to leave. I thanked him for his
company that day and retreated to the riad where I was staying. As I drifted into sleep the day’s events were becoming muddled in my mind.

The following day I was heading out for lunch when I bumped into the owner of the riad, Youssef. He was also hungry and suggested we go to his favorite restaurant just several doors down. Since I had no plan I was delighted to share a meal with him. Ironically I had traveled to Morocco by myself but I was never alone. Youssef and I ate tajine, a typical Berber dish from North Africa. The dish is similar to a stew, slow-cooked in a clay pot with meat and vegetables. You eat it with your hands and use bread to soak up the broth. Youssef and I shared stories and exchanged laughs. He exuded a leisurely attitude and way of life. We talked about religion and I found Youssef to be liberal. He was not a devout Muslim and indulged in alcohol, tobacco and meat. Afterwards he graciously paid for the meal without any hidden agenda. I felt at ease with Youssef and appreciated his generous, affable nature.

Jaouad and Youssef were contrasting Muslims and proved the futility of making assumptions about people according to their religion or otherwise. I have a deep respect for the Islam religion that stems from my three days in Marrakech. The scent of Moroccan spices and smiling eyes behind veiled faces still linger in my memory. In my journal I described the experience as enchanting. Traveling alone enabled me to meet people from different walks of life and discover the contrasting characteristics of Marrakech. I cannot wait to return.