

Winter 2011/2012

Friday, 13 January 2012

The smash hit of my winter break was Fes. One of the oldest cities in the world, it was the biggest between 1170 and 1180, something I was amazed to discover. Can you imagine? Larger than London, huger than Paris - and places like New York hadn't even started, of course.

But more of that later. I started in Marrakech; the great thing about that city is you can virtually guarantee sunshine in December, even if it's only T shirt weather. But all the swimming pools are heated so I managed my five hours a day slowly breast stroking length after length. Last year there was a lot of rain but the wonderful aspect about North Africa is that you can get an hour of absolute downpour followed by instant blue sky and heat and the water disappearing in seconds as the steaming thirsty red earth gasps it up and gulps it down, giving off a wonderful rich smell that is the odour of life itself.

But this year - not only no drop of rain but clear blue skies every day for 5 weeks; not a cloud in the entire time.

Morocco is advancing fast towards First World status (if I was young I'd invest in North Africa). Fabulous malls and modern supermarkets. I noticed that avocados - previously a luxury item - are now on every stand next to tomatoes and potatoes. Mind you; the global economy problems are clearly there too (many shops closed) and I noticed tissues are thinner! One sneeze and you're through.

There are some superb restaurants now all over Morocco - thank God, as I don't like North African cuisine at all. The French restaurant in Le Mamounia Hotel is fantastic; great Thai food in the Amanjena; fabulous sushi in Matsuri Rabat.

My top floor suite had incredible views over the city; sitting on the balcony sipping a large mug of Blue Mountain coffee and watching the sun rise over Marrakech as the birds soar across the orange groves and olive trees. Paradise.

People ask me how I can travel and eat on my own. I read a huge amount of novels; catch up on films with DVD's; watch UK TV through my Slingbox (which converts my MacBook Pro into a UK TV set); and making friends all the time. I have dozens of friends in cities around the globe and my habit of speaking to everybody - no matter what age or colour or shape or size - or language, come to that - whilst sneered at in the Old Bailey by the horribly hairy Prosecutor - has brought me many wonderful and varied friends.

I don't like sharing meals (I like being on my own) but I do enjoy coffees, teas and cocktails with friends. Regulars will have seen my video about the cafe in the Djema el Fna - the main square in Marrakech - where the mad suicide bomber sat at MY TABLE to destroy the place (now refurbished and reopened - I enjoyed several cafe au laits there this trip).

The trouble with my favourite hotel in Rabat is that their pool is not heated. No problem in summer but when I jumped in this year, anticipating the chill of the Serpentine, I had to get out after half a length as I realised hypothermia was imminent.

However, in Fes the Palais Jamaï DOES heat their pool in winter. Normally Fes can be quite chilly at that time of year (Fes is further north and in the middle of the country, not on the ocean) but this year it was even hotter than Marrakech and my view across the ancient medina was stunning. Back to my 5 hours a day swimming.

The hotel was built in 1879 and I've stayed there (as in most hotels around the world) for over 45 years. This year I read

Paul Bowles' The Spider's House - see review elsewhere. Set there; splendid.

Walking around the Medina, filming, seeing the tannery and the museums and the shops, I could be living a thousand years ago. No cars. The smells of spices and exotic aromas. Colourful djellabas and outfits. Donkeys. Only, in every hand, mobile phones. And satellite dishes on every roof. And I love the North African habit of people sitting around watching the sunset (at about 5pm). They gather in their hundreds on the sides of the surrounding mountains and I join them, chatting to families and strangers, amazed by the beauty of the light on the city. It is a far, far greater spectacle than TV. Mother Nature wins again.

That happens in Marrakech too, as in most North African cities. The wonder of the world around us. Still breath taking.

Yet again I urge you to visit North Africa, if you never have. Especially now when tourism is down and prices are amazingly small.

On my way back (I cannot stand leaving or entering UK airports and try to drive or Eurostar whenever possible) I stayed for a few nights in Paris. Another city that always impresses. My suite on the 8th floor of the Renaissance Arc de Triomphe overlooked most of Paris and again provides a wonderful view as the sun rises whilst I'm writing this. But, at top whack price of 799 Euros a night, so it should do. Mind you, the Georges V - where I used to stay - has a rate of 4500 Euros a night.

It is, incidentally, now 8.30am and still pitch black (France is an hour later than Britain).

Off in a moment to the Drug Store on the Champs Elysees to buy the UK papers and have a croissant and cappuccino.

You may have noticed I'm looking at a lot of sun rises.

At 67, one wonders how many more I'll be around to see.

Insha'Allah, at least thirty years worth.