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## THE MANY FACES OF MOROCCO THIS NORTHERN AFRICAN NATION BECKONS THE TRAVELER TO DISCOVER ITS MYSTIQUE AND CHARM; [Run Of Paper Edition 2]

*Mia Taylor BYLM:taylom. The Patriot Ledger.* Quincy, Mass.: Aug 22, 1998. pg. 35

### Abstract (Summary)

"Five stars!" exclaimed 50-year-old Mohammed Chraibi, standing in his brown djellaba and sandals and gazing at the tiny Moroccan village of Bhalil, his home town and a place he ranks second to none.

Mint tea, the most popular drink in Morocco, is made by adding a few sprigs of mint to green tea and then saturating it with sugar. Nearly every visit in Morocco, whether to a home or a store, begins with the tea ceremony.

Our adventure began with our guide, 26-year-old Abdellah Mouhsine, greeting us at the airport in Casablanca. Mouhsine drives tourists around Morocco to support his parents and siblings. He learned the trade from his father, who spent the bulk of his life working as a tour guide and retired at 50. The responsibility of supporting the family then fell to Mouhsine, the oldest male in the family.

### Full Text (2890 words)

*Copyright Patriot Ledger Aug 22, 1998*

"Five stars!" exclaimed 50-year-old Mohammed Chraibi, standing in his brown djellaba and sandals and gazing at the tiny Moroccan village of Bhalil, his home town and a place he ranks second to none.

Nestled in the Moroccan countryside in a narrow mountain valley, Bhalit is a picturesque community of about 1,500, where the homes are awash in pastel hues of pink, yellow and blue.

Just 30 minutes from the bustling city of Fez, life in Bhalil remains simple. Most of the residents live in two- and three-room stone houses perched on the valley walls. At a river, clusters of women gather to wash laundry.

About 40 families live in caves carved from the mountainside hundreds of years ago. Chraibi, the village's only tour guide, is one of these cave dwellers. He, his children and in-laws share a cave furnished with the amenities of modern life, including a radio, television and refrigerator.

Like many of the gracious people my husband and I encountered on a visit to Morocco, Chraibi welcomes strangers into his home for tea and conversation on a moment's notice.

For many Americans, Morocco conjures up images of dusty desert towns, mysterious men wearing blue turbans, veiled women and Humphrey Bogart's Casablanca. Recently, because of the Persian Gulf War and the explosion of terrorist bombs at tourist sites in Egypt, travel to North 35

Africa and Islamic countries has taken on an intimidating air.

But Morocco, at the westernmost edge of Africa, has remained apart from these tensions. A lot of this protection comes from the Rif and Atlas mountains, which are a natural barrier to the outside world. More of it comes from the laid-back attitude of its inhabitants.

The country is only slightly larger than Texas, yet it offers much more than just vast expanses of desert. Our visit included long walks along scenic beaches, treks through remote mountain villages, rolling countryside dotted by olive

trees, and bustling cosmopolitan cities where snake charmers and storytellers still hold court.

What makes a trip to Morocco special is the ongoing dance between old and new, and the warm, gracious people who bring the country and its varied traditions to life.

Which brought Chraibi to the second five-star item on his list -- his mother-in-law, who was waiting to serve us some of Morocco's famous mint tea.

Her grandson, a lanky boy with deep, sleepy brown eyes, led us up a narrow winding path through a cluster of homes perched on the hillside. After several twists and turns, the path emerged in a small clearing amid a row of cave entrances. Each cave opening is tucked between two protruding stone walls which create small semi-private front yards.

Between one of these sets of stone walls is Chraibi's home. The entrance to the cave is at the end of a neatly kept walkway of smooth square stones. Tall pink flowers line the path. The doorway is surrounded by vines of flowers dangling from the hillside above. A wooden door frame is painted turquoise, and the village's pastel theme is continued on the interior walls, which are turquoise and yellow.

Just inside, to the left, is an archway covered with a hanging curtain. Through it our hostess emerged, carrying a steaming silver tea pot.

Mint tea, the most popular drink in Morocco, is made by adding a few sprigs of mint to green tea and then saturating it with sugar. Nearly every visit in Morocco, whether to a home or a store, begins with the tea ceremony.

The tea is poured by holding the pot far above the glass, so that bubbles rise to the surface of the beverage. There is always a second pour, to fill your glass. No matter how humble the household, the teapot is invariably silver.

In Morocco's big cities it's not unusual to see a woman striding confidently down the street in a miniskirt. But most women in rural villages remain veiled and shy away from peering eyes and camera lenses. Chraibi's mother-in-law is a mix of both worlds. She dresses in long skirts and wraps her head in a scarf, but shyness is replaced with a welcoming, curious attitude toward the tourists she invites into her home.

We noticed that she had three small, circular, swirling tattoos on her face. One on her chin, another on the tip of her nose and a third on her forehead. With Chraibi interpreting, we learned that Berber women tattoo their hands, feet and faces to attract a mate. If a woman wants to get married quickly, she begins tattooing her chin as early as 13 or 14 years old. Once engaged, she tattoos her nose. Upon getting married, a tattoo is added on the forehead.

The tattoo design is drawn on the skin first with a pen or pencil. Then, a pin is used to prick the skin in the desired design. After that, black ashes are spread in the bleeding pin-pricked skin. When the skin heals, the black ash design is trapped inside.

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Throughout rural Morocco we enjoyed several encounters with people like Chraibi and his mother-in-law, thanks to the way we chose to travel.

Instead of a package tour, we hired a car and a driver who spoke both Arabic and English fluently. We arranged our trip through a small travel agency in Virginia, owned by Hassan Samrhouni, a native of Morocco whose extended family continues to live in his homeland.

Our adventure began with our guide, 26-year-old Abdellah Mouhsine, greeting us at the airport in Casablanca. Mouhsine drives tourists around Morocco to support his parents and siblings. He learned the trade from his father, who spent the bulk of his life working as a tour guide and retired at 50. The responsibility of supporting the family then fell to Mouhsine, the oldest male in the family.

After inquiring about our comfort on the five-hour flight from New York, Mouhsine had our luggage whisked to the car for us and within moments we were headed toward our first destination, Rabat, the political capital of Morocco since 1912.

Rabat is a fairly modern city, with broad, tree-lined avenues, cinemas, bookstores, blocks of apartment buildings and more than a million inhabitants. Spending a day or two there is a nice way to ease into a visit to Morocco.

We visited the imperial palace, the marketplace, the 12th-century Hassan Tower and mosque, and the lavish tomb of King Mohammed V, the present king's father, who died in 1961.

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The remote, 15th-century Muslim village of Chechaouen was our second destination. This is a charming village where the houses are painted in contrasting shades of blue and white. In addition to its striking physical beauty, Chechaouen is place that has barely been touched by tourism and as a result provides a peaceful view of traditional small-town Moroccan life.

Just outside Rabat, Mouhsine surprised us with a stop at the Musee Dar Belghazi, a museum in an inconspicuous white, two-story home decked with dark wooden balconies. The building is on a lush plot of land with large drooping trees. Tucked behind a tall stone wall, the whole place was reminiscent of once-grand plantation in the southern United States whose glory days have come and gone.

The museum was dimly lit and the display somewhat haphazard, but it contained a vast and impressive collection of Moroccan antiques. It was a good introduction to the quality crafts that are produced in Morocco; during our visit, we were barraged with dozens of variations throughout the country.

One of the most interesting parts of the collection was the intricately embroidered Moroccan wedding belts. Moroccan brides used to sew these dazzling multi-colored belts to wear as part of their wedding attire. Throughout the wedding day a bride would change outfits and adjust the belt to reveal a section of color that matched the current outfit.

The tradition of making wedding belts, one antiques dealer told us, has been abandoned in favor of slightly more modern attire. The wedding belts that remain have become collector's items.

After leaving the outskirts of Rabat, the road to Chechaouen takes you through the Rif mountains, which rise immediately south of the Mediterranean coast and run parallel to the shore. We drove through orchards of olive trees, passing herds of sheep and children trotting along on donkeys.

That evening, as the sun set, we snacked on homemade bread dipped in freshly pressed olive oil. We discovered this treat just before arriving in Chechaouen, in a one-room, mud-roofed building. The building contained an olive press operated by Kouuti Abd-Latif; Mouhsine had spotted Latif's olive press and decided it was a good place for us to rest.

Though Latif did not speak English, with Mouhsine as our translator there was no problem. The owner was more than happy to stop his work, offer us some mint tea, give a demonstration of how olive oil is made and pose for photos.

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The next day, after an early morning walking tour of Chechaouen, we departed for Fez.

Located in northern Morocco, Fez has a population of half a million and is divided into three parts. Old Fez, a Muslim community dating back to the 9th century, is filled with bustling narrow alleys that remain inaccessible to cars. New Fez, a 13th-century imperial city, is dominated by the royal palace. The third section is the mellah or old Jewish ghetto.

We spent two days discovering Fez's secrets -- mostly in the old city, which is completely encircled by a 10-mile wall punctuated with grand arches and entrances. Hiring a guide to navigate Old Fez's unmarked winding, maze-like alleys is a must. Mouhsine found us one who had grown up there.

Old Fez is the most complete medieval Islamic city in the world. Our first venture into its twisting and turning alleyways was like a walk back through time. On one corner was a blacksmith's stall, and across the alley was the man who repairs teapots. On another corner, rows of men who sharpen knives work in tiny stalls that line the cobblestone walkways.

Every neighborhood contains its own mosque, bakery and Koranic school. Each morning before school, young

children scurry through the streets, transporting trays of freshly mixed bread dough from home to the local baker. While they're at school, the dough is baked in a large communal brick oven. On their way home for lunch, the children stop at the baker's to retrieve the finished product for the family's afternoon and evening meals.

In the dyers' marketplace, liquid pools of deep blue and magenta bathed the alley. Old jeans were being dipped into steaming buckets of dye, reemerging a crisp shade of blue or black for continued use. Vibrant magenta bundles of freshly dyed wool and jeans hung side by side to dry.

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After Fez, we headed for the Sahara, to visit the Morocco of travel books and Hollywood movies. But on our way, we again ventured off the beaten path.

Mouhsine had been promising us a traditional Moroccan barbecued lunch since the start of the trip, and he chose to share this treat with us in a dusty crossroads reminiscent of the old West. A trading post for desert travelers, Zeida has only one short main street, where Moroccans shop, play soccer or simply sit and watch the cars, people and time pass.

We picked out a piece of fresh lamb dangling in front of a butcher's stall and took it to a young man down the street who barbecued it at a roadside grill while we sat at a picnic table and watched.

The meat was coated in spices and grilled to perfection. We also had a pot a lamb tagine, which is similar to lamb stew. The meat, served in a delicious light brown broth amid fresh vegetables, was so tender it was falling off the bone. We sopped up the broth with freshly baked bread and washed our meal down with a bottle of Coke and a pot of tea -- all for about \$10.

As dusk settled, we arrived at the oasis town of Erfoud. Here the houses are built of clay the same color as the desert sand. Groups of women shrouded in black or purple veils scurried by mysteriously. Lush green palm trees leaned grandly over the main road. This was the Morocco of romance.

Early one morning, we hired a Land Rover to take us into the desert to watch the sun rise. In the cold, predawn darkness we scrambled to the top of a steep sand dune. For hours we sat mesmerized -- first by the vast expanse of stars in the deep blue sky above us, and then by the miles of dunes before us that became less and less a shadowy mystery as the sun crept over the horizon.

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Our final afternoon was spent exploring the seaside village of Essaouira, one of the most enchanting towns on the Moroccan coast.

The old town and port are circled by 18th-century battlements perched on a rocky shoreline, overlooking the sea. A sandy bay sweeps to the south, and wooded hills loom to the east. The population is a mix of fishermen, craftsmen, tourists and youth.

Orson Welles filmed some of "Othello" here, and Jimi Hendrix and Cat Stevens lingered on its streets. We spent the afternoon walking along cobblestone alleys lined with whitewashed houses and peering into woodcarver's shops.

That evening, we dined on grilled seafood at a portside picnic table. The cook was the fisherman who had spent the day catching our meal. We enjoyed several plates of shining crispy sardines, grilled calamari, a red shellfish similar to lobster, salad and soda -- all for about \$15. We had so much food that we shared it with a solitary man sitting next to us.

As the sun set, we chatted with the fisherman, our neighbor and Mouhsine, learning more about life in Morocco.

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If you go:

## Flying

Royal Air Maroc is the only airline that offers direct flights to Morocco from New York's John F. Kennedy International airport. There are several flights a week, and the flying time is just under seven hours. The airline's reservation number is 1-212-750-6071.

Round-trip fares during high season (June through August) are between \$820 and \$850, plus \$54 in taxes. From September on, the prices drop to between \$600 and \$700, with the same taxes.

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## Customized itinerary

For help planning your trip, booking hotels and arranging for a car and English-speaking driver while in Morocco, you can't beat Casablanca Travel & Tours. The agency is owned and operated by Hassan Samrhouni, a native of Morocco who knows the country inside and out.

The telephone number is: 703-271-0377 or 1-800-MAGHREB.

Hiring a car and driver is expensive, but an excellent way to get to know the country and its people. We paid about \$900 for 10 days of nearly around-the-clock service.

One alternative is renting a car and hiring a guide on a day-to-day basis. The downside of this option is not having the guide with you in those off-the-beaten-path places between the big cities, where a translator can unlock many doors.

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## Passports and visas

A full valid passport is required for travel to Morocco. Visitors can stay for three months. If you wish to stay longer, you can apply to the local police department.

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## For more information

The Moroccan National Tourist Office, located in New York City, will provide free information about the various regions of Morocco and their many colorful festivals, as well as maps. The office is also a great place to check out the reputation of any Moroccan tour operator you may be interested in using. The office's number is 212-557-2520.

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## Selected events

One of the most interesting aspects of traveling to Morocco is being able to witness one of the country's spectacular regional festivals. There are festivals nearly every month of the year in Morocco, and each typically includes a day to a week of feasting, dancing and music.

Some of them are: the almond blossom festival in Tafraoute in February; the rose festival in El-Kelaa M'Gouna in May; the cherry festival in Sefrou in June; and the date festival in the Erfoud region each October.

The specific dates of the various festivals change slightly from year to year; contact the tourist office for definitive information when planning your trip.

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## Accommodations

Information on hotels and hostels is available in tourist guidebooks or from travel agents.

Thanks to our driver's connections, we enjoyed some charming bed and breakfasts. In Essaouira, the Villa Maroc and Hotel Riad Al Madina are once-grand Moroccan homes built in the traditional style: four stories high, around an open courtyard. Both are lined from ceiling to floor with beautiful Moroccan tile work, have inexpensive rates and are worth a trip to Essaouira.

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MAP: Stephen Ide/The Patriot Ledger - Morocco's road less traveled

**[Illustration]**

Caption: Mia Taylor/The Patriot Ledger - A Berber woman pauses after gathering dried brush to use for fires.; A man in the dyers' marketplace in Old Fez dyes cloth and clothes.; A woman sits on the steps of her home in Bhalil, Morocco.; Above, a group of boys and a donkey in Morocco's Rif mountains. At left, a camel herder in the country's arid South.

Credit: The Patriot Ledger

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