

ATLAS MOUNTAINS , MINT TEA AND A GOOD SOAK IN A HAMMAM

Geography trip to Morocco

The Geography department need little encouragement to venture into pastures new. October in Marrakesh has a certain, pleasing ring to it and the A level group of intrepid explorers told us about their amazing, unforgettable experience in assembly recently. Marrakesh is the 3rd largest city in Morocco after Casablanca and the medina (the old city enclosed by walls) is split into quarters according to the age of its buildings. The earliest buildings date back to the 11th , 12th and 16th century. The later ones, built by the French, show off more modern architecture with European influence, as you'd expect. There's consistency in each quarter: 5 set features (a nursery, mosque, hammam (Turkish baths), bakery and pharmacy) to cater for basic needs.



On our first day in Marrakesh we took a trip in a horse and cart around the town –our first experience of Moroccan lifestyle and culture. Around the outskirts there was a huge contrast between the dilapidated shanty towns and the rich European sector. We went to the tanneries where the leather from sheep, cows and camels is dried, then treated with bird excrement which was a bit of a challenge. We were given fresh mint to mask the smell. A highlight was visiting the pharmacy, where we learnt about natural remedies made in the area, and the bakery, where bread was baking in traditional stone ovens.



The main square is called the Djemma El Fna. It was full of story-tellers, snake charmers, palm readers and henna tattooists. We were suddenly plunged into a different culture, a different set of morals and beliefs. But girls need to shop from time to time

and after the trek we walked round the souks. There were so many bright colours everywhere. The sellers were mostly male and it was rare to see a woman vendor. We harnessed our bartering skills and bought local produce including kohl (natural eye liner) and natural red lip tint. The city was dense, bustling with life, with a wide range of crafts and economic activities, which was a completely different experience for us all.



From Imlil, in the Atlas Mountains, we trekked hard, walking 30 miles over two days on rough, unmanaged terrain and at high altitude. Day One we were met early by our guide, Sahid. It took three mules to bear the load of our overnight bags and sleeping bags. The weather was gorgeous and the views were stunning. We had regular stops for mint tea and field sketches. A huge lunch came courtesy of the muletiers; we needed it to fortify ourselves for our English guide's game –playing of 'Banana banana banana'. Don't ask. The traditional berber village where we slept had no power so - dinner by candlelight, berber entertainment and a good night's sleep....! Breakfast was outside. Somehow we forgot the freezing temperatures as we gazed at the Atlas mountains. You needed courage and optimism to tackle 'Death Mountain'; the steep side and rough, unstable paths meant we had to walk in single file. The mules took each of us through the deep river in heavy rain; a bath in the local hammam never felt so good.



But not everyone lives in the Atlas Mountains; Marrakech is a big draw, because there are limited economic opportunities and poor access to services in the mountains – the nearest hospital is ten hours away, for example, and few schools, which girls attend in

the mornings and boys in the afternoons. Steep relief and narrow valleys make the mountains difficult for agriculture. Tourism, however, offers more hope, though its impact is not always good. The positive effects are that more jobs are created and tourists can safely and relatively cheaply get a taste of the culture, religion and natural environment of the country. On the downside, it would be a mistake for there to be a dependency on tourism, particularly in the current economic climate, and the dilution of the culture can already be seen in the adoption of western dress by some locals. Tourism increases pollution and erosion. We have to be more sensitive to that.



Members of the Geography department certainly want to do what they can to support girls in education in Morocco. Click on the link below to find out what you can do too.

<http://www.educationforallmorocco.org/>