

ON CAMELS & COBBLESTONES

Next Step Goes to Morocco

By Angene Wilson

We went to Morocco with NPCA's Next Step Travel because we had never been to North Africa. We wanted to ride camels on the Sahara. We had seen camel caravans in northern Nigeria and gotten as far as Bamako, Mali on our aborted trip to Timbuktu when we served with Peace Corps in Liberia. We wanted to buy a leather hassock to replace the Moroccan one we had bought from a Hausa trader when we lived in Sierra Leone. We wanted to visit Tangier at the northern tip of the continent of Africa to bookend our visit to the southern tip in Cape Town, South Africa, including Robben Island.

We did ride camels at the erg Chebbi desert camp, 4000 kilometers north of Timbuktu, on the orange Sahara sand. We did haggle for a new leather hassock in Fes. We did wake up our second morning in Tangier in an old hotel on the Mediterranean waterfront with the nearby mosque loudspeaker calling the faithful to prayer.

But there was much, much more! We found Morocco to be a wonderful combination of past, present, and future with surprises in all three. Our excellent RPCV leaders Tim Resch and Kristy Larsen, occasional Moroccan guides, current and past Moroccan Volunteers, and leaders of NGOs all educated us. As a bonus, we enjoyed sharing the journey with RPCVs

Camels take Next Step travelers on sunset and sunrise rides into the erg Chebbi desert outside of Merzouga near the Algerian border. The author and her husband, Jack, (right) enjoy Moroccan dinner with travel companions in Meknes, one of Morocco's four imperial cities and a UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

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and their friends from all over the U.S., from Alaska to Virginia. Our lodgings were varied, always interesting, occasionally sumptuous, occasionally necessitating pulling one's suitcase for "a ways" on cobblestones to a *riad*—a bed and breakfast inside the *medina*, the old Arab quarter of a North African city. Moroccan food was excellent. Our favorite tagine was beef with quince and pickled lemon.

The past: We had read about the *medinas* but walking the narrow streets was special, whether in the blue and white Asilah community on the Atlantic coast with iconic doors and painted walls from the 2017 international cultural festival, or in the famous city of Fes. The *medina* in Fes included an Islamic university and shops; we visited a tannery, a pharmacy, and a rug emporium. In the *medina* we also

saw people just going about their lives, schoolgirls with pink backpacks, men leading donkeys or riding motorcycles, a baby crying behind a closed door.

We hadn't expected the impressive Roman ruins at Volubilis, a granary for the ancient empire. We hadn't known that the American Legation in Tangier had been given to the United States in 1821 by Sultan Moulay Suleiman. It is the only National Historic Trust beyond U.S. borders, now rented to an independent research center that hosts a library, exhibits, and guest speakers, and has organized an outreach program that serves local marginalized women and children. Of the exhibits, I particularly appreciated the lead soldier diorama of the 1591 battle of Tondibi in which Moroccan forces defeated the famed Songhai Empire. As a teacher of African history, I have long taught about that battle, mid-point in the long centuries of connection of North and West Africa across the Sahara.

The present: Tim explained that Morocco is to the European Union as Mexico is to the U.S. in tourism and industry; both manufacture auto parts and provide agricultural products. Driving between Rabat and Tangier, we passed cork oak forests and greenhouses growing bananas for export. Later we walked in markets offering prickly pears, dates, pomegranates, citrus, and piles of olives. We were impressed by the rural electrification and by the tree planting. We learned that as a non-petrol state, Morocco is committed to renewable energy, that Morocco hosted the Climate Change Convention after the Paris Climate Agreement, that it has banned plastic bags,



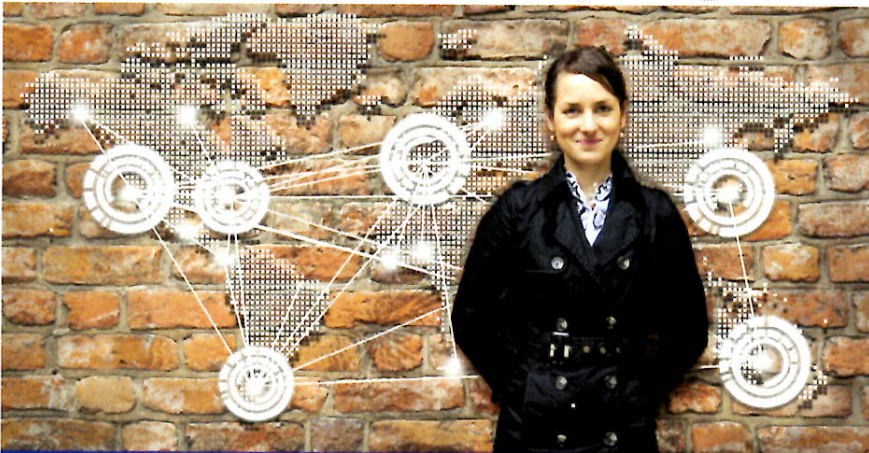


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has wind farms, and will soon have the largest solar farm in the world. We were surprised by the excellent roads, including rest stops on one toll road that outshone most in the U.S. One day, after seeing Berber villages hugging an incredible rock landscape, we saw the future in road construction when we drove over the 9,525-foot Tizi-n'Ouadi pass of the High Atlas Mountains.

The future: Youth are the future of any country so the focus of Peace Corps Morocco on youth development seems sensible although not always an easy assignment for Volunteers. I especially enjoyed following Volunteer Brittani through a checkerboard of date palm fields as she talked about her girls' club. On another evening we listened to Jessica, who had recently completed her Peace Corps assignment, describe plans for her wedding to Mohammed. Tim estimated there have been at least 200 Peace Corps-Moroccan marriages over the decades. NGOs are also part of the future: in Marrakesh we heard about the High Atlas Foundation's planting millions of trees and plans for getting organic certification for fruit and processing citrus. One way Morocco is dealing humanely with both present and future is their migration policy that allows for legalized migrants. Family law has also been reformed and more females than males hold Ph.Ds.

On the last day of the trip, in Essaouira on the Atlantic Ocean, we strolled through its *medina*. At one shop we saw cloth that reminded us of cloth in Liberia.

The shopkeeper urged us to buy it.

I said, "I don't need."

He replied, "But maybe it needs you."

We did not buy the cloth but thought that perhaps Morocco needs us to "take the world back home" and share what we have learned. Affordable, less touristy Next Step Travel in Morocco enables that and leaves one wanting to know more.

Angene Wilson taught secondary social studies in Liberia from 1962 to 1964 as a Peace Corps Volunteer, and then at teacher training colleges in Sierra Leone (66-68) and Fiji (70-72) while her husband Jack was associate Peace Corps director and Peace Corps director. She is professor emerita of education at the University of Kentucky.