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North Africa



Moroccan musicals in Marrakech moccasins



↑ Road to nowhere.

Words and photos: Elle McConnell

Morocco has a strong history of musical connections with western cultures. Crosby Stills and Nash wrote their classic '60s anthem *Marrakech Express* here. Jimi Hendrix and Bob Marley visited Essaouira, where they completely failed to learn how to surf, Cat Stevens (when he was still called Cat Stevens) used to visit Marrakech. Sting has performed and written here and his contemporary music contains unmistakable Berber influences. Even

Australia's own eternally revered Billy Thorpe apparently spent some time here sampling the famous Moroccan Gold riff with none other than the Crown Prince — who is now the current king, so we'd better be careful not to say too much more about *that*.

As we find ourselves now sitting in our moccasins in the sand on the fringes of the Sahara desert, with the fire embers glowing as warmly as the Madeira in our glasses, it's easy to understand how such international →

↓Rocking the casbah — the Atlas Mountains are impressive from any angle.

↑This is not a film set. Not always, anyway.

Bob and Jimi never did learn to surf...





↑ Al Jazeera Cafe, as seen on television. Or not.

↓ Tree-climbing goats are a traditional Moroccan feature.

artists have been seduced by Morocco.

The four normal-looking guys who served us dinner an hour ago have now emerged from their tent wearing traditional

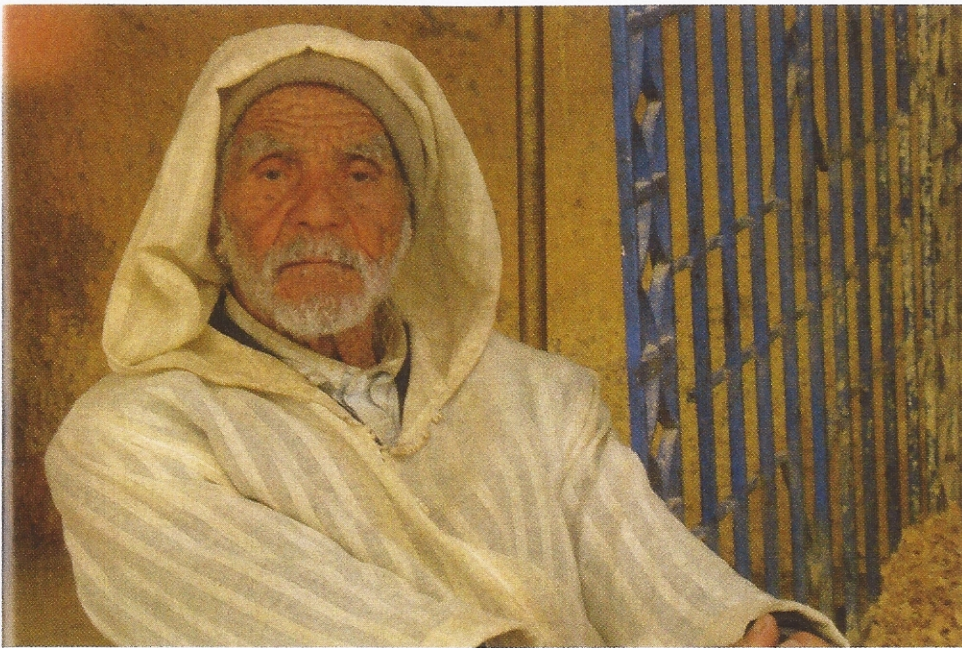
blue Tuareg robes, loosely tied indigo blue turbans, and each carrying a simple instrument such as a lute, a stringed buzuk or a crude drum. Within seconds we are transported to another time, another world. I cannot understand a single word they sing (my Arabic being a little rusty) but it doesn't matter. The beat, the handclapping, the

rhythm, the voices, all have an intoxicating effect far beyond the generous quantities of liquor on offer.

After perhaps half a dozen numbers, the hosts invited us to participate with a song ➔

↓ "Midnight at the Oasis". Just hum along if you don't remember the words.





↑ Berber face, not necessarily impressed with being photographed.

from our own culture. Ha. Yes. After some consultation the best we could come up with was an embarrassing rendition of “Give Me a Home Among the Gum Trees”. One brave lady then did a reasonable attempt of “Midnight at the Oasis”, a song she had downloaded to her iPod before leaving home — in anticipation of this precise moment.

There are, of course, some motorcycles involved in this story. My husband and I had joined a Ferris Wheels tour entitled Moroccan Magic, and indeed it was proving to be more magical than we had anticipated. Our all-BMW fleet awaited us in Marrakech, from whence we visited the Atlantic coast and the aforementioned Essaouira before heading inland to cross the Atlas Mountains. The amazing diversity of the terrain is one of the lasting impressions — rugged coastlines, huge mountains, arid regions of sparse vegetation, absolute desert, then dense forests and tropical woodlands near the Mediterranean coast. Our 650s, 800s and 1200s lapped it all up eagerly, with 15 well-behaved riders and three pillions in our group.

Then there’s the Moroccan architecture! Kasbahs and medinas in unmistakable angle-cut adobe mud brick. Entire villages resembling film sets, such as Ait Ben Haddou where, indeed, major sequences of *Gladiator* were filmed. And *Babel* and *The Mummy*, and *Black Hawk Down* and *The Bourne Ultimatum*, and *The Jewel of the Nile* and ...

During our visit much of the Muslim world was in turmoil — Tunisia, Egypt,

the right to vote, the right to divorce, and greater freedom than virtually anywhere else in the Muslim world. The wife of our motorbike supplier in Marrakech is a pilot enjoying the rank of captain, flying for the national carrier Air Maroc. Compare this to Saudi Arabia, where women are not even allowed to drive a car!

We did a little low flying ourselves as we pushed the BMWs through a series of twisty corners and switchbacks on the way through the spectacular Dades Gorge. It’s an iconic location for a motorcycle photo shoot — one used by Moto Guzzi in a double-page advertisement in this very magazine. Then we visited the ancient Imperial capital of Fes, where Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner escaped from the bad guys through the fetid dyeing vats of the leather tannery.



↑ Moroccan fare, and western cameras ready to capture it ...

Algeria, Libya. But we saw none of this unrest in Morocco, where the Islamic monarchy is well-regarded and they love their king. As we rode through a small rural village, we saw thousands of people lining the streets and waving flags, and we were obliged to vacate the road as an impressive entourage rolled in. Then suddenly there was the king himself, standing up through the sunroof of his limousine and waving to his adoring, cheering subjects.

It must be said, of course, that Morocco is not a fundamentalist Islamic state. The Call to Prayer is still heard five times a day but not so many people drop everything to rush off to the mosque. Alcohol is not only tolerated but enjoyed, and women have

It’s all over far too soon. Where does three weeks go so quickly? It seems like only yesterday we were sitting in the sand dunes of the Sahara. As we return to Marrakech to reluctantly hand back the bike keys, I find myself unable to stop singing “Midnight at the Oasis. Send your camel to bed.”

Who? What? Where? How? When?

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