

WHERE THE PAST STAYS PRESENT

On the north-west coast of Africa lies Casablanca, an ancient exotic land embraced in the sweeping sands of the Sahara; merely nine miles from Europe, it's a millennium away

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The Hassan II
Mosque

The enchanting Kingdom of Morocco, teeming with Moorish citadels, flamboyant *bazaars*, camels, *kasbahs* and mile-long souks, is the cradle of African business – perhaps the birthplace of trade. Moroccan cities are blazing cauldrons of frenetic souks, head spinning aromas of cloves and cinnamon, luxurious silks and velvet and rich shades of indigo, saffron and garnet.

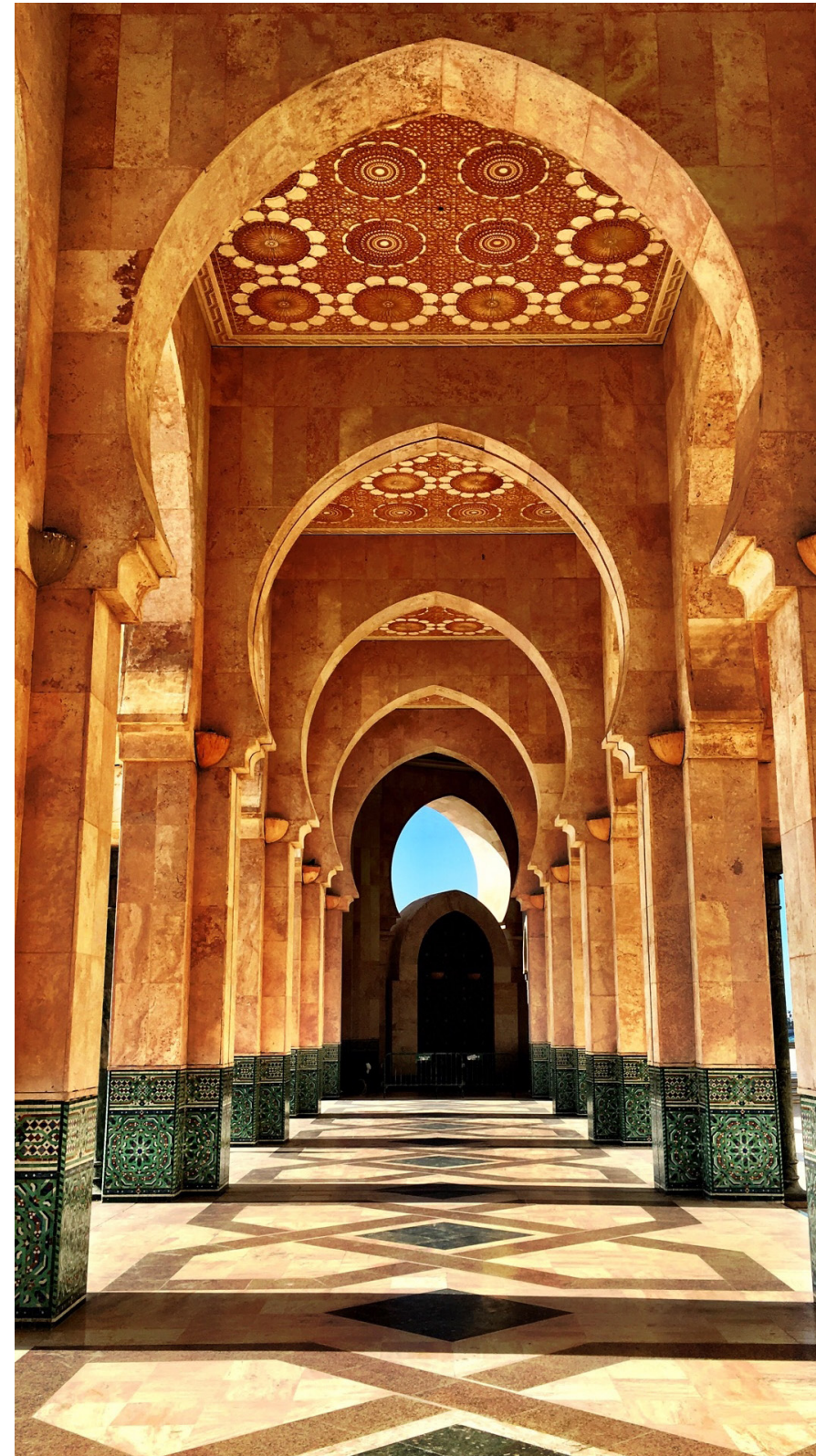
Casablanca is a living, breathing cosmopolitan city that draws you in. It's packed with, stroking architecture, designer shopping malls like the giant Morocco Mall – the largest in Africa. The city is crammed with galleries, fashion boutiques, cutting-edge nightlife, and unforgettable dining experiences where statuesque belly-dancers pick up the pace.

Within the ancient paprika-coloured city walls, the daily lives contained within play out as they have for centuries. Thronged with activity, excited chatter fills every nuance; chanting emits from mysterious shops who trade in

powders and potions; veiled women haggle with stall holders contained within the spiders-web of alleyways, which are overshadowed by tall buildings, creating merciful coolness. And above it all, haunting Berber music floats through the air.

Casablanca is famed for its gloomy, aromatic medina's bulging with handmade wares, trinkets, spices and traditional food. Elegant hand-crafted daggers are suspended from canvassed ceilings, ornate silver boxes inlaid with precious gems, and exquisite jewellery – made of lapis lazuli, amber, coral, and turquoise are displayed on low tables. In these shopping nirvanas, tradition compels each medieval market to have smaller souks within, focusing on one speciality. One alley will hold traders selling olives and pickles, another selling wool and tassels, or dried fruit and nut, or fabric. Should you step into a spice souk you'll immediately be swathed in a luscious fragrant combination of cumin, cinnamon, and cloves – and warm-smelling nutmeg coloured soil.

Souk in the Moroccan old town



Corridor Of Hassan II Mosque

“Come,” Farid, an elderly shopkeeper with a flickering smile implored, “I make beautiful Berber.” Never one to stand in the way of progress, I stepped into a rich cocoa-coloured dress edged with tiny silver bells, and to cover my hair a sapphire blue silk veil trimmed with the finest wisps of silver thread. Farid, a rugged and amiable fellow, brought my veil together below my chin and twirled it up around my head, draping it rather seductively across my face, revealing only my eyes. I was further dressed with traditional Berber jewellery. Time dissipated between costume changes and tales of Farid's childhood caravan treks across the Sahara. His oyster eyes were enlivened, and his deep folded face beamed at his recollections; his hand regularly found mine when I understood his jokes.

Tourists the world over are iffy about visiting Muslim countries like Morocco, but here, the only dangers travellers face are irresistible sales pitches and charming sales techniques. If you remain disinterested you stand to pick up a bargain, particularly in the specialist markets deep inside the larger souks.

Quartier Habous bazaar is a marvellous rug souk filled with the babble of a dozen tongues. Inside the souk, which was built by the French in the 1930s, you'll pass by shoulder-high mounds of folded rugs embossed in hues of ruby, fuchsia and ginger. Each rug is distinctive and intrinsically designed, so expect to spend at least half a day haggling over these prized possessions. Also, be prepared to drink three or four glasses of sweet, hot mint tea, which is somewhat soothing to the spirit. You'll be invited to return later, possibly for dinner with the merchant, and to collect what will become your excess baggage.

Before returning to collect my investment rug, I partook in another must-do Moroccan tradition and visited a hammam for a multi-step scrub-up. It consists of various hot and cold-water treatments, olive-oil soap, mud paste, exfoliation, and a vigorous massage, which may have you discovering new muscle groups you didn't know you had! Be selective when choosing your hammam as most are spotlessly clean, but there are still a few, which look actively infectious.



(Left) Mural painting at the City Centre; (below) Porcelain pots, one of the famous buys at the souks



The traditional Moroccan architecture



Sidestepping almond-eyed veiled women who swoop down fragrant aromatic alleyways, taking home the makings of dinner, I threaded my way back to the rug souk. The air was warm and had a whiff of freshly baked bread. Muktar, the genteel and amiable rug merchant, seated me at a low table; a servant placed a large steaming colourful dish before us then ceremoniously removed the lid. My senses were immediately overcome with the aromas of sweet stewed fruits, olives, lemons, herbs, turmeric and lamb.

“This is our local dish – *Tajin*,” Muktar smiled, urging me to follow his lead by dipping the bread into the dish. With the light of a thick African sunset in the backdrop, we spoke of Moroccan food and discussed the beliefs of Islam.

Tajin took a sip of tea and grew momentarily thoughtful. The paraffin lamp on the leather trunk beside him hissed, the weak pools of blue light emphasised his eyes, which burned

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bright and sharp, like the eyes of an old rooster. Cheering up somewhat Muktar politely asked after the places I had visited and whether I would return. I beamed enthusiastically, nodding vigorously. With a certain flourish of satisfaction Muktar clapped his hands sharply, startling a servant who’d been nodding off into a broken chicken-neck sleep in the corner. The table was cleared promptly. A stick of a man appeared from the shadows, bundled my rug over his shoulder, and following instructions issued by Muktar, his rug-bearing servant trots off to my hotel.

I turned to Muktar with an extended hand, “As-salaam alaykum. And thank you for your hospitality and friendship; till we meet again.”

He took my hand, leaning forward slightly. “Inshallah.” God willing.

I also got the chance to visit the Rick’s Café, the legendary ‘Gin Joint’ of *Casablanca* movie fame. It’s a tribute piano bar and restaurant set in an ancient courtyard-style manor house built up against the Old Medina’s wall. It was filled with design elements resonant of the movie – with its bowed archways, hand-carved bar, chiselled balconies, beaded brass lighting and plants that cast long shadows across white walls. Sure. It’s as clichéd as they come, but it teems with atmosphere, complete with an authentic 1930’s piano. *As Time Goes By* is a common request to the in-house pianist.

But it’s the souks where most of the experiences await. They’re a colourful explosion of hijabs, laughter and wicker baskets, of flamboyant bolts of cloth and cards of bright, shiny buttons – your senses are crushed under the weight of the stimuli. Here buying and selling is not so much an economic exchange as an essential social transaction. This is where the past stays present.