

CURA Writing Competition

**Memoirs of An Exotic Place**

**by**

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Arriving by plane on a hot sunny day, the air was dry as bone, with a variety of sights, sounds and smells surrounding us and we knew that we were in a strange, foreign land. Small cars whizzed around like ants on an anthill, with apparently no rules for lane keeping, turn signals or parking. It seems that motorcycles can accommodate 4 people at a time, which doesn't evoke a reaction by anyone except from foreigners. It is amazing to watch the cars and pedestrians navigate a roundabout where six roads intersect – an example of patience, courage and skills. The markets, an eclectic collage of visual stimulation spread throughout the land in big cities and small towns and villages, are a staple of life, where tourists and locals alike purchase food essentials and other goods. The mainstay of typical daily life, the markets provide a social gathering place and the variety foodstuffs and commodities to cater to anyone's tastes. Friendly people are selling everything under the sun in these ubiquitous craft markets, from handcrafted leather goods such as shoes, slippers, purses, jackets, wallets, hats, belts to exotic silks and colourful fabrics for shirts, shawls, dresses to intricately designed carpets. Beautiful baskets of all shapes and sizes, hand woven from tall grasses, can be purchased at every market.

Local fruits and vegetables are on fabulous displays providing a rich and colourful assortment of choices. Exotic spices with highly entertaining names such as super viagra, the royal love tea, root to become fatter or thinner, constipation tea, and

diarrhea tea are everywhere, adding to the markets' delicious smells. Exotic displays of fish, goat and camel heads, colourful fruit stands, native pottery and crockery, fabulous oils, spectacular fabrics, fragrant perfumes, spices, olives, figs, dates, and cookies can overwhelm the visitor.

This was a land of mystery – a time warp harkening back to biblical times, with ancient stone ruins and cisterns. Underground water wells are a necessity, dotting the landscape like ant hills, providing the essentials of life. One can enter these underground wells and see how intricate tunnels can transport water to irrigate the cropland and provide drinking water for the people.

In every major city and village, there are the centrepiece fortresses and royal palaces, adorned with courtyards and spectacular gardens, trimmed bushes and trees. The tilework, colours and patterns created by the artisans who constructed these structures are unique. Many large doorways abound, made of exotic woods and intricate carvings, and windows with screens of lattices of many differing and unique patterns.

### Landscape

From majestic mountain ranges, sprawling barren deserts, lush river valleys, chiseled canyons, meandering rivers, ocean beaches, rugged cliffs, oases and wave filled coastlines, this land has every type of landscape imaginable. In the higher elevations, there are resorts for skiing, surprising for such a desert climate but adds

to the allure of this place. The mountains are high, rugged, barren, slightly red in colour and form valleys that are deep and wide and mostly non-accessible except by mules or now by helicopters. Travelling through the mountain ranges and passes is an experience in itself, as the extremely long and windy, narrow roads with adjacent steep rock faces and boulders strewn throughout makes for a harrowing experience and not for the faint of heart! There are huge road building projects attempting to widen and stabilize the road and many companies hire huge numbers of seasonal workers to get as much work done as possible during the good weather. Some of the equipment looks like it was brought from overseas when more up to date machines were developed. Building new roads through the mountains is an engineering miracle that takes much skill. Bulldozers are precariously perched on rock ledges, carving roads following the precise movements of their operators who control the behemoth machinery with military precision, not unlike surgeons performing a delicate operation.

The mountains have different kinds of deserts, many being very rocky and moonlike. Very little grows in these areas unless there is a source of water easily available. There are very few small herds of sheep and goats and the only cows seen are tethered and alone. Donkeys and horses are used for local transportation and for hauling wagons filled with goods. The rustic houses are all built into the hillside and look like they are abandoned but they are not. The outsides are all grey

or beige in colour depending on how the bricks are made. Most of the dwellings are very old with electricity brought to them by long, single cables, but many homes have modern amenities like satellite dishes attached to them and most people seem to have cell phones.

Many places would be barren if not for the building of many dams to bring water into their areas. Reminiscent of the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia, farmers grow olives, dates and almonds. Due to the vast open areas, there are many windbreaks set up with wild cactus, some are as high as 10 feet tall.

A spectacular feature is the gorge, which is worth the whole trip just to see this wonderful rock structure. One can walk about one km into the gorge through a fairly narrow road that is at most ten meters wide. There is a turning point for the tour buses but how they manage it safely is a testament to the operator's driving abilities. One would not want to take their car in there for fear of hitting a person, the rock wall or another vehicle. The gorge goes into the mountains for about 40 kms to the headwaters of the two rivers that have carved this gorge over many, many centuries. One can spend much time exploring this wonderful formation with its steep rock faces that visiting rock climbers try to master. The whole area is a rocky desert with steep volcanic mountains, with a peculiar sight that many small towns are built into these rocky hillsides.

Architecture

This land is strewn with incredible places of worship and royal palaces, attesting to the religious culture and fondness of the monarchy. Lots of Italian marble, cedar from Israel, ornate wrought iron gates and lush and colourful gardens. The fifth largest place of worship in the world is here and has the tallest minaret. The marble craftsmanship of this voluminous building is unique and it is huge, holding 25,000 worshippers inside (5000 of those places are reserved for women) and 80,000 outside.

Like Buckingham Palace, the Royal Palace is magnificent and one can only visit the Gardens and see the front gates. The design is beautifully balanced and the outside is lovely and clean. The Palace has its own place of worship with an ornate minaret overlooking the sprawling plazas. Guarding the palace are soldiers in beautifully coloured uniforms.

No visit would be complete without a trip to the spiritual, intellectual and economic capital of the land. Walking through the new 'city', meaning it was only 600 years old, the pedestrian lanes are a little wider here with fewer tripping hazards than in the old city which dates back about 1100 years. There are many narrow streets and walkways and one could easily get lost without a guide. They use donkeys, mules, horses and hand carts to bring in supplies and to take out finished products. The animals typically have the right of way and their masters yell something like "Bianca" when they want you to move, so you quickly learn to

move to the edge. The animals also leave their calling cards so that is another hazard one needs to watch out for!

Fortresses and palaces are located throughout the country. The majority of them are very old and still have many of their original features such as carved cedar doors and intricate tile work. The stairs are an experience as no two seemed to be the same height or the same tread size and because handrails are sparse, one had to use the walls for balance. There are many twists and turns, walking hazards and lots of passages seemed to be dead ends. The pasha or governor was the head of the palace and kept many concubines with their own lavish living quarters. One of these fortresses is a UNESCO heritage site, the designation of which helps with the restoration, repair and maintenance of the buildings.

Another UNESCO world heritage site was the Roman ruins. These ruins were discovered in 1916 by German POWs who were taken there by the French. The remaining structures consisted of walls, archways, columns, pools, baths and waterways. The area was on rugged terrain with loose rock strewn everywhere, but walking through it was a trip back through time.

A visit to the tombs of a 16<sup>th</sup> century dynasty displayed the ornate craftsmanship of the burial place of the monarchy. Unlike the underground tombs in other parts of the world, these tombs are above ground and are not tiny enclosed spaces. The tile work on the walls and carvings are exquisite. The king's tomb was the most

elaborate, but the other members of the Royal Family were well sent on their final journeys.

Close by is a palace that was built in the 19th century. The rooms were again very ornate with the hand carved doors and intricate wrought iron—such delicate work. The monarchs of this era had great wealth to afford this kind of luxury. The king's rooms were the most elaborate, but those of his three wives were also opulent, which no doubt, they had to be!

### Industry and Crafts

Leather is an important commodity here, and they make all kinds of leather, especially from goat skins, in all the colours of the rainbow. These skins are turned into leather goods from fine craftsman. The sprawling leather factory takes the raw skins and prepares them for tanning by first removing the animal hair, cleaning the skins, putting the skins in various chemical baths, colouring the skins in pools of dye and then leaving the skins to dry on railings and racks in the hot dry sun, all by hand. The final product is soft and supple and shipped around the country to make leather goods.

Natural fossils abound in the area, and the fossil factory turns fossil slabs into dinnerware, sinks, tabletops, countertops of various shapes and sizes and every kind of trinket imaginable. Large fossil laden slabs are cut with custom machinery



and then shaped into the desired form. Artisans then trim and polish the rock into smooth and shiny pieces of art and sculptures.

The ceramics factory is where they made a variety dinnerware, vases, teapots, tabletops and fountains. All were beautifully hand crafted – some with inlays of gold and silver. Craft persons worked tirelessly to create the variety of delicate and intricate patterns of all shapes and sizes to cater to anyone's tastes.

The carpet factory contained thousands of colourful handmade woven carpets of various materials, sizes and qualities. The walls were covered with carpets to display the traditional patterns. If one was interested in a carpet, the workers would take it off the wall and spread it on the floor for examination. Bargaining the price is second nature in this land, so being prepared to barter with the vendors will get the best deal. Once purchased, they package the carpet compactly so it can be shipped anywhere in the world.

Alas, the most memorable moment was sitting on a sand dune watching the fireball of the sun slowly set in the west, creating wonderful long shadows on the landscape while the coolness of the evening overcame the heat of the day. Soon afterwards, the twinkling of stars and planets appeared in the vast blackness of space – a true vision of heaven. One stood in awe and silence absorbing this amazing experience.

This land was exotic.

This land was exciting.

This land was beautiful.

This land was timeless.

This land was Morocco!