

TRAVEL
BY LISA ARCELLA

Marvelous Morocco

North Africa offers once
in a lifetime experiences



Morocco is full of unexpected surprises, starting with the (relatively) short seven-hour direct flight from New York's *JFK* to *Casablanca*. And no matter what they might actually be saying to each other in Arabic or French, locals seem genuinely happy to be hosting American visitors. The food's good, the weather's wonderful and the history is fascinating. In a nutshell, it's a memorable travel destination.

Most visitors start in *Marrakech*, visiting its great souq, or marketplace, that's surrounded by ancient ramparts. Also on most itineraries is *Fez*, the country's cultural capital, with a labyrinthine old town and amazing shopping. If you visit, hiring a local guide is a good idea to keep from getting lost in its maze.

No matter where you decide to travel within the country, the experience will certainly be enhanced if you can include one of the country's many *moussems*-or festivals-that take place year round. Travel experts say the best time of year to explore Morocco is in the spring, from March through May. A lot of people find the summer months very hot, but Fez holds a huge international music festival in June, and in August, there's the *International Arts Festival* in *Asilah* that's an art lover and shopper's paradise.

In May you can find the *Rose Festival*, which celebrates the harvest of Persian roses. The *Moussems of Ben Aissa* is one of the country's largest *moussems* and takes place in *Meknes*. It's a festival held to honor local saints and is full of pageantry straight out of medieval times. Every month there are various celebrations that will offer an interesting insight to the culture and people.

My trip took me to the *Berber festival, Moussems de Tan-Tan* in December, which felt almost like stepping into a Hollywood back lot. And right on cue, there was even a Saharan sand storm that left me wondering if *Lawrence of Arabia* might come flying over a dune at any moment.

Set in the desert of *Hmada*, in the southern part of the country, the *moussems* is the largest gathering of nomadic tribes in Northern Africa. A makeshift city with tents as far as the eye can see suddenly pops up in the barren landscape. Two huge camel cutouts overlook the temporary town. And aside from the nearly 1,000 tents where families are living, there are also cultural displays about Saharan life, the teaching of the Koran and craft demonstrations, all of which have earned it a place as one of UNESCO's world heritage sites.

In a huge center arena, groups of ten or twelve horseman, dressed in flowing blue robes on ornately adorned horses come thundering forward, guns high in the air. They will come to a sudden stop and fire in unison. It's a heart-stopping display of pageantry, followed by hundreds riding on the backs of camels and even more young nomads displaying their impressive skills on even more horses.

Women in traditional costumes are singing, camels are traded, and even potential marriages are being brokered between families. Even Prince Moulay Rachid, brother of Morocco's King Mohammed VI, arrives to give his royal seal of approval. Forget *Ringling Brothers*, this is clearly the best show on earth. But instead of being an overly commercialized circus with *Tan-Tan* t-shirts for sale, the experience seems authentic, designed to serve the nomads who have traveled here from the countryside and beyond, not for camera-snapping tourists like yours truly.