

*Gena Doyscher  
St. Paul, MN*



**El Jadida, a tranquil ending to a fabulous journey through Morocco.**

## *Have guide, will travel – three senior women explore Morocco*

**T**wo women friends, Jo and Bonnie, and I, all in our later 60s (approximately, wink, wink), took a wonderful trip to Morocco in March 2015. We chose to use the personalized services of Journey Beyond Travel (JBT) based on a recommendation by George Carter in the February 2014 issue of *ITN* (p. 30).

JBT was extremely responsive to Bonnie's emails and always answered our questions in a direct manner.

Though we first thought about using an American-based company in case of any political concerns, we were so impressed with JBT (*Ifrane, Morocco; phone, in the US, 855/687-6676, journeybeyondtravel.com*), owned by Fazia and Thomas, that we knew we were making the

right decision when we signed our contracts.

We each decided on booking single rooms rather than sharing. Of course, this increased the cost of our trip considerably, but it was a decision none of us regretted.

Jo and I each paid a total of \$4,824 (including an overnight in Tangier and extra services) and Bonnie paid \$4,579 for the March 5-16 tour. This included all hotels, nine dinners, two lunches, a cooking lesson (where we happily ate what we

cooked), transportation within the country, a driver and all city guides. Tips for our driver, guides and luggage porters in the medinas were extra.



## Getting there

Jo and I had been traveling in Spain prior to our scheduled trip to Morocco, so we took the FRS ferry from Tarifa, Spain, to Tangier (\$44 each). (It was our understanding that travel on this ferry line was less chaotic than the one that departs from Algeciras, Spain.)

I purchased our tickets in advance online, but when we got to the ferry terminal in Tarifa to pick up the actual tickets, I discovered that I didn't have the same credit card with me that I had used to purchase the vouchers. After a moment's consternation, the agent said they would have to charge us for new tickets and refund the online purchase to the original card. The credit came through a week or so after we returned home.

The ferry ride was not as enjoyable as we'd hoped, as we had to "dump" our bags on the unguarded car-park deck or carry them up a steep flight of stairs. The ferry was very full, and we had to stand in line to get a disembarkation form from the onboard purser's office, a very slow process. Nevertheless, the ferry was quite comfortable, and we retrieved our bags on the way out without any problem.

At the ferry landing, a guide from Journey Beyond Travel met us and escorted us to a taxi that took us to our first *dar*, a small, house-type accommodation.

Our stay at **Dar Chams Tanja** was an absolute delight! It was owned and managed by a lovely French couple whose sense of design and concern for quality was evident in the beautiful rooms and bed linens and the delicious meals they served.

That night we enjoyed the full moon from the rooftop terrace while having wine and an assortment of starters. It really was a lovely welcome to Morocco.

## Rabat

A prearranged taxi took us to the train station the next day for our trip to Rabat. When boarding, you must look carefully at the side of each train car for your assigned number. We bought first-class tickets (\$30 each)

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An example of Morocco's beautiful architecture and tilework.

to be ensured seats, but the train was not crowded.

It was a pleasant journey. A porter brought us the ubiquitous mint tea that Morocco is famed for. The tea is usually highly sugared, but, by request, they do serve unsweetened tea.

Upon arrival in Rabat, we were met by a guide from JBT for our transfer to our first *riad*, a small hotel with a courtyard garden. The desk personnel spoke English, but, for our travels throughout the formerly French area of Morocco, it would

have been nice to have remembered some college French! Jo was helpful when we got to the Spanish area. Of course, knowing Arabic or Berber languages would have really come in handy.

**Riad Zyo** was lovely, and it was there that we met up with Bonnie and our JBT driver, Hamid. Hamid would be with us through the entire trip, but he "disappeared" each evening so we would have time to discover and relax on our own.

In Rabat, I fell in love with the "1,000-hole pancakes" (*beghrir*) that we frequently were served, and we all enjoyed the dishes of olives that were served in the afternoon when we ordered wine or tea. We also liked the *tagines*, each cooked and/or served in a clay pot of the same name, but we did get a little "tagined out" over time, as each hotel seemed to think it was important to serve us their national dish. Overall, the food was tasty.

Hamid was calm, courteous and knowledgeable, and his van was new, large and very comfortable. He cleaned the vehicle nightly and was an excellent driver.

The roads in Morocco were, for the most part, in good shape, but, because we went through mountainous areas, the driving was a little

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precarious at times.

The scenery was beautiful. We drove through areas of high desert, fertile farmland, red rock formations, forested mountain slopes and urban and volcanic areas.

We were surprised to see a ski resort and Ifrane, a town that looked like it could be in Switzerland. Of course, the Sahara Desert had its own beauty and charm, and Hamid drove carefully around the wandering camels there.

### On to Fez

Our requested journey took us from Rabat to Chefchaouen, known for its blue-and-white buildings. There we stayed at **Ryad Lina**.

“Chaouen” was a photographer’s delight. However, because of the relative conservatism of the area and the touristy “blueness” of the city, we were not unhappy to leave the next day.

Our next stop was four hours away, in Fez. I thought this was the



**The Sahara Desert at dusk.**

most interesting and fascinating of all the cities we visited. We spent two nights at **Ryad Salama**.

Hamid is from Fez, and he encouraged our shopping there to get “the best.”

We always stayed in the medina area of each city, and it was a little tricky remembering how to find our way back home through the narrow, intertwining streets filled with shops and places to eat.

In Fez, we toured the tanneries and the workshop of weavers who use the “silk” of the agave plant to make beautiful scarves, then visited the market, where you can buy anything you could possibly need or want.

We had a fabulous included meal at **Le Patio Bleu**, in Fez’s medina, but our meal at the Ryad Salama was rather nondescript. However, the rooms were very nice and comfortable, and we met up with a few Americans there, which was a rarity on our trip.

### Special experience

When designing our itinerary, we requested a cooking class, which was arranged for us in Fez.

At **Cafe Clock** ([cafeclock.com](http://cafeclock.com)), our delightful teacher, Souad, not only taught us how to make our requested dishes of *zaalouk* (roasted aubergine with spices), *harira*

(traditional Moroccan soup), *b’stilla bil djaj* (chicken bastilla) and *blighat b t’mer* (date and pastry rolls), she took us to the market beforehand to buy all the ingredients. The chicken for the bastilla was alive when we stopped at the butcher’s but in a plastic bag when we went back some minutes later.

The market tour was a highlight of our trip. The sights and smells were overwhelming, but the quality of the available meats (chicken, goat, camel, beef, etc.), vegetables and fruits was excellent.

We used lots of chopped, fresh herbs in our dishes as well as some of the traditional spices Morocco is famous for, such as cumin, chili powder, paprika and coriander.

The most traditional dishes required a lot of hands-on effort, but Souad acknowledged that busy working women do take shortcuts.

That afternoon, Jo and I treated ourselves to a *hammam* (steam bath) and a massage. What an experience that was! We were seated on very hot marble benches and scrubbed down with very hot water and lovely smelling-soaps and scrubs. I wished I could remember how to say, in French, “It’s too hot!,” but it didn’t matter, as the bath woman was on a mission.

After a while, I decided it was best

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to just relax and enjoy every minute of it. The massage that followed was lovely.

I believe we each paid a total of about \$50 for both experiences.

### Into the desert

The day we left Fez, we drove for a long time — about six hours — to get to Erfoud. Our travels took us through the beautiful Ziz Gorge, and along the way we had lunch at the home of the man who would be our guide for the next day.

Our hotel, **Le Palais du Désert**, was part of a large complex, unlike the previous, boutique lodgings. This was closer in style to an American or European hotel and would have been a fun place to spend a day, as it had lovely pools. We were treated well by staff and had beautiful rooms.

Erfoud, world famous for fossils, was surprising. We were amazed during our visit to the fossil factory/shop, where we learned about fossil digs and watched artisans turn slabs with fossils in them into beautiful tables and sinks. It was a most interesting experience, and we recommend that you visit if going to Morocco.

When planning our trip, Jo was adamant about going to the desert and riding camels. Bonnie had no interest in riding camels, and I, frankly, was not too keen on the idea but decided to take part.

Our local guide, Tata, was with Jo and me as our driver pulled up to the camels and our Berber guide. A few quick instructions and we were off for an hour's ride into the Erg Chebbi dunes of the Sahara, where we would see the sunset. The camel saddles were comfortable and secure, and I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. The textures and colors of the desert were gorgeous as the sun dipped.

When we reached our tent camp, Bonnie, who had arrived by vehicle, was waiting for us with wine, mint tea and lovely cookies and treats provided by the camp. Watching the sunset and the red beauty of the desert is one of my highly cherished memories.

We had a lovely meal in the dining tent followed by traditional music

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performed by the staff. We slept well in our individual tents. The night was very cold and very dark, and when we got up early to watch the sunrise, it was freezing (or at least felt like it was).

### Moving on to Marrakesh

Because we wanted to see so much of Morocco, we had some fairly long travel days. The next day we drove five hours to Skoura, stopping at an interesting museum along the way that featured exhibits on the Jewish presence once in this area.

In Skoura, we had to drive on a very bumpy road to reach our riad, **Les Jardins de Skoura**. It was a lovely place, but the lateness of our arrival and the scheduled early-morning departure did not give us much relaxing time.

Next we headed toward Marrakesh. This was another long drive, but, as we drove, Hamid told us a lot about the areas, the local clothing, which



A woman making phyllo in Fez's souk.

varies from place to place, and the agriculture. We stopped a minimum of every two hours to get out, use facilities, get something to drink and look around a little. Fortunately, the car we were in was very comfortable.

In Marrakesh, a local guide walked us to **Riad Jaaneman**, an oasis in

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the medina. Each of our accommodations in Morocco had its own vibe and beauty. The dars and riads are among the country's treasures.

While traveling in Marrakesh, we were careful about our belongings, but with Hamid accompanying us we felt perfectly safe, as we did throughout Morocco.

The next day we shopped, finding many bargains — nice jewelry, gifts for family and friends and a few trinkets for ourselves. Bargaining (starting at half the asked price) was getting easier for us as we neared the end of the trip. All the merchants were friendly, even charming, and fair.

We saw few American travelers but many from China and Europe.

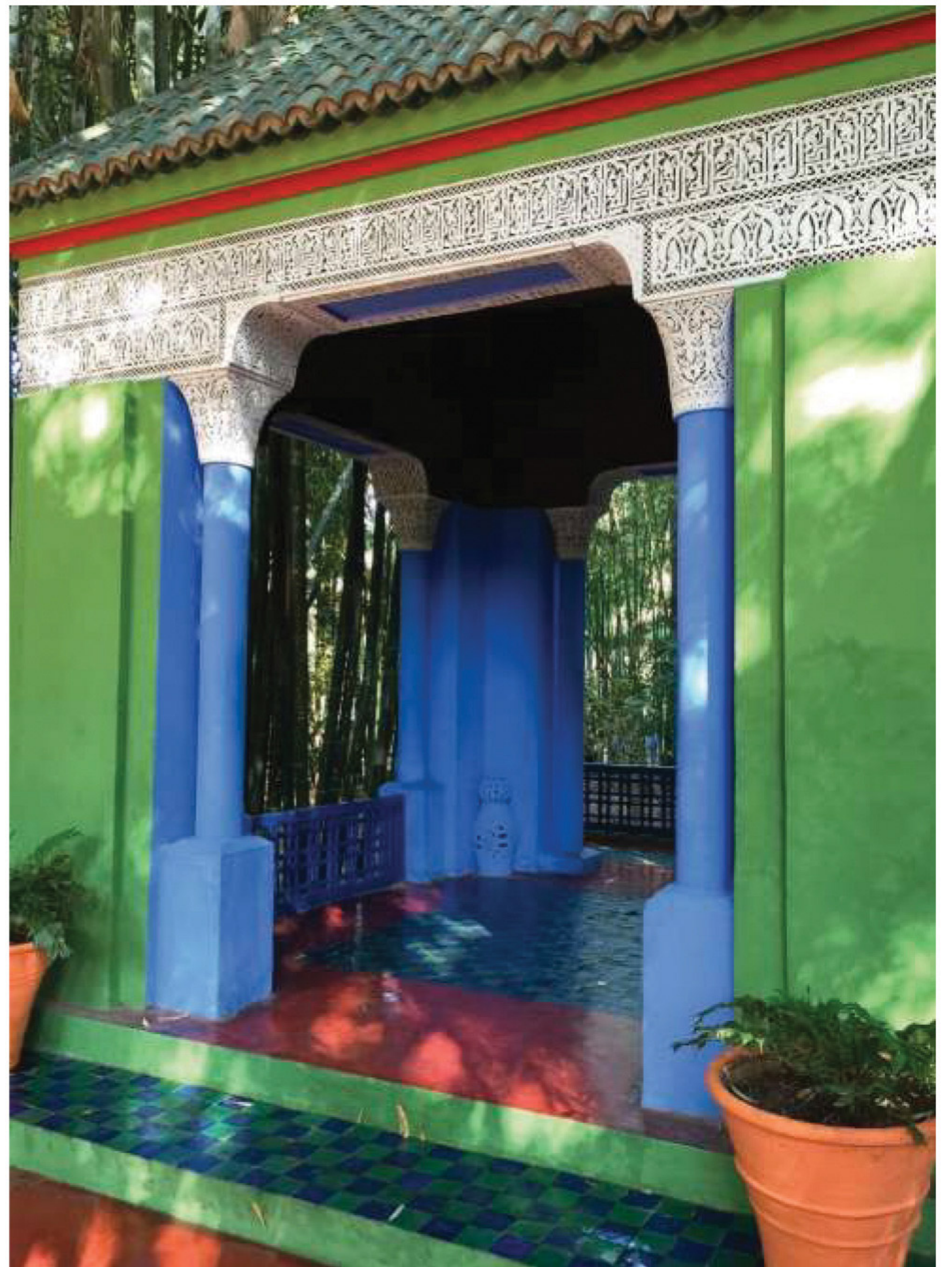
As we were leaving Marrakesh, Hamid stopped at Majorelle Garden (admission, \$5), a 12-acre botanical garden designed by French artist Jacques Majorelle in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1980 it was purchased by Yves Saint Laurent. A memorial to Saint Laurent, whose ashes were scattered in the garden, is located on the property. It is a tranquil and beautiful place in a busy city.

After touring the garden for an hour, our group traveled toward the ocean city of El Jadida. For travelers flying out of Casablanca, JBT

likes to use the lovely country inn **Dar Al Manar**, located outside of El Jadida and about an hour from the Casablanca airport, as staying in Casablanca can be very difficult due to the extreme congestion.

Situated by the ocean on five acres of lovely lawns and trees, El Jadida is owned by a Moroccan woman who studied in France. The living room, with books, music and a fireplace, and the large bedrooms provided a relaxing atmosphere in which to spend our last night in beautiful Morocco.

We were very happy with Journey Beyond Travel and were glad we could see just what we had requested while enjoying the wisdom of a driver/guide who knew his country well, spoke beautiful English and also understood the American culture. We would highly recommend using JBT.



One of the buildings, accented in bright blue and green, in Marrakesh's Majorelle Jardin.

Before our trip, we purchased Travelex Travel Plan insurance through Dan Drennen (*Omaha, NE; www.travelinsurancecenter.com*) for \$72 each. I also alerted the US Department of State's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (*step.state.gov*) of my travel itinerary, as I am prone to do for all international travel.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (*genadoyscher@gmail.com*)

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