TRAVELOGUE

Morocco… proof that fairy tale locales do exist

This year, I accomplished one of my biggest travel dreams: visiting Morocco. It has been the number one place on my bucket list for a few years now...and it was more amazing and magical than I could have ever imagined. As a Muslim traveller, naturally it was a dream for me to visit an Islamic country and to experience the country's culture and vibe. I visited three cities in Morocco – Chefchaouen, Marrakech and Casablanca.

CHEFCHAOUEN

So our trip started with Chefchaouen. Also known as the Blue Pearl of Morocco, Chefchaouen is a famous town hidden high in the mountains and famous for its unique blue streets and buildings. This city is proof that fairytale locales do exist! After reaching the city, my first thoughts were that the place looked very much like Santorini and Cappadocia mixed together! The closest airport to Chefchaouen is Tétouan Airport. When I say close, it's still a 3-hour drive to the actual town, which is located in the mountainous regions. I would highly recommend booking a private car with your hotel because the journey itself can be tiring, and Moroccan taxis aren't the most convenient or reliable in terms of pricing for long journeys.

So why is Chefchaouen blue? I read a

few theories online; one popular theory being that the colour blue gets rid of mosquitos. The general consensus, however, is that the colour blue represents the spiritual life. Blue is a colour that resembles the sky and sea, and is a reminder of God for the Jewish population who came to the town to seek refuge. Today, Chefchaouen's maze-like blue alleyways are lined with boutiques of silver jewellery, wool garments, clothing, antiques, blankets, colourful rugs and hand painted crafts.

Everywhere in Chefchaouen is pretty but it's always nice to have some specific points to help cover the city, so here are a few:

1) Calle Sidi Buchuka

2) Callejon El Asri (the stairs with colourful flower pots)
3) El Ouahabi House
4) Place Haouta (one of the main squares)
5) Paid set (actually someone's private house so you will need to pay 5 MAD to take a photo)
6) Outa El Hammam

So I know this place is pretty Instagram famous and a lot of people go here to take at least one "Instagram worthy" photo. So I thought I'd share a very important tip for those photography enthusiasts - this helped me out a lot.

The whole city itself is worth seeing

so do wear comfortable shoes as there will be a lot of walking! I made a list of photography spots from beforehand, and don't rely on Google Maps, as the street names won't come up on it, and people barely understand English there. What I did was I took screenshots/downloaded photos of each of the places from Google and showed the shop owners the photos - they immediately knew where each and every one of the places were, and happily showed me the way.

MARRAKECH

From Chefchaouen, we flew to Marrakech. Marrakech is literally a place fit for a princess. When you're flying into Marrakech, you'll see a red city sitting amongst a red desert. Exotic buildings, amazing history, and some of the most colourful souks in the world. I had been to Istanbul the year before, and expected the two cities to be very similar – how wrong was I! Marrakech is very, very, traditional, unlike Istanbul, which is much more modern. So a few words about the accommodation in Marrakech, which happens to be one of it's best tourist attractions.

If it falls within your budget, book a Riad in Marrakech to get the complete Marrakech culture and design experience. Riad is basically a traditional Moroccan house, with artistically crafted inner courtyard or garden, often with a fountain at the centre. Each room in a riad is richly decorated with hanging lanterns and colourful textiles, and some of the more expensive riads have private hammams and swimming pools too! La Sultana Marrakech, Riad Yasmine, Riad Azzar, Royal Mansor Marrakech and L'Hotel Marrakech are some of the prettiest Riads in Marrakech.

Unlike Chefchaouen, Marrakech has a very specific list of must-see places – here's a few out of the many!

1) Ben Youssef Madarasa
2) The Medina (souk) – also the main entrance
3) Bahia Palace
4) Koutoubia Mosque
5) Jardin Majorelle
6) Saadian Tombs
7) Le Jardin Secret
8) Heritage museum

Now, many of you already know that Marrakech has often been touted as an unsafe tourist destination and not very tourist-friendly. Whilst I completely disagree with this, as I had a very enjoyable experience in Marrakech, I would still highly recommend doing your research before you go, as it'll really make your trip to this beautiful city easier! Here's a list of 10 things I wish I knew before my trip to Marrakech:

1) Ben Youssef Madrasah is closed for renovation until 2020 - this was like my no.1 must visit place, so if you're planning on going, do check the opening dates online.
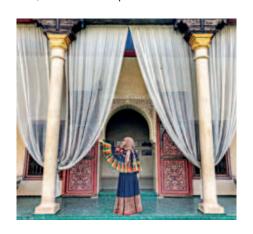
2) The souks in Medina are nothing like the Istanbul Grand Bazaar. Very, very, authentic and traditional, and it may come as a culture shock to many. Whilst most shopkeepers are friendly, some are not.

3) No Free WiFi in the Medina (the souks) and it's pretty easy to get lost in the winding maze of the Medina.

4) Some shop owners will ask for money if you take photos of their shops (some shop owners can even get aggressive when they see you're taking photos of them).

5) Google Maps do not work at all in the Medina – you think you're on the right path and then BAM! you've hit a dead end. When I go travelling, I heavily rely on Google Maps and in Marrakech, this was a problem.

6) Do not drink tap water.

7) Did you know ATM's can run out of money? Cash is important in Marrakech as a lot of places refuse to take cards, so when one of the closest ATM's ran out of money it was a bit of a problem.

8) Pack some Imodium. Seriously, I thought my stomach was strong, but after the first 2-3 days I started feeling ill.

9) Bring toilet paper and hand sanitizer etc. with you (I knew this from before but if you didn't here you go).

10) Standard taxis only take 3 people! As a family of four we had to keep looking for what are called Grand Taxis which are not as common as the standard ones.

All in all, Marrakech has carved a permanent place in my heart. I had never visited Africa, so it was a trip full of new experiences. It was such a change from all the European countries I had recently visited and the whole city was filled with such authentic Arabian vibes.

CASABLANCA

And finally our three-week trip ended in the coastal city of Casablanca- the city of the hugely famous Hassan II Mosque.

As a Muslim, I have a very personal dream to travel to all the famous mosques in the world and perform at least one prayer there, so this was a huge dream come true for me. The Hassan II Mosque rests by the Atlantic Ocean on Morocco's northern coast, and is the largest mosque in Africa, and the seventh largest mosque in the world. The designers of the Hassan II Mosque are known to have used elements and inspiration from Islamic places of worship from Morocco, Spain and the Middle East, which gives the mosque its unique structure.

We started our trip in Casablanca by performing Maghrib prayers in the mosque. The experience was sensational with hundreds of Muslim women lining up, shoulder to shoulder, to pray in one of the biggest and most breath-taking mosques in the world. Surrounded by minarets made out of marble and huge ornate chandeliers, I felt like I was praying in a palace.

It was iconic of our visit to Morocco that the trip ended with us experiencing the sound of the Adhan whilst sitting by the sea in one of the most beautiful mosques in the world, overlooking a beautiful sunset. The sight was so beautiful, it almost made me cry to think that I was leaving all this behind. Visiting Morocco has been a dream of mine for as long as I can remember and as I stood overlooking the sea with the Adhaan ringing in my ears, I realised I had finally fulfilled my dream.

Because, as I always say, there's no time to be bored in a world as beautiful as this.

By Rehnumah Insan
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