

Let us Share the Cost

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (December 2022)

SYNDICAT D'INITIATIVE DE FEZ



Ponfey
1939

VENEZ VISITER FEZ

IMP. MOULLOT-MARSEILLE

Moroccan Travel Poster, Henri-Jean Pontoy, 1929

The brochure said, "Koutubia Tours presents visitors to Morocco with an authentic desert experience!"

The brochure was beautiful. It was filled with pictures of improbably good looking young Moroccan women, dressed somewhat like supermodels, in traditional gowns that just did not cover them sufficiently, smiling as they held a copper tray filled with food or, smirking engagingly as they poured tea from three feet above a glass while producing a direct hit for the drinker, a handsome blue eyed European man whom the photographer probably coached to look like he was in love with his newly found Moroccan waitress. Suggestive indeed!

Young men dressed liked Tuareg, blue men from the desert, carrying medieval like swords in leather scabbards, posed nobly by the traditional tents of Moroccan notables that reminded one of the settings for Crusader films about Richard the Lion Heart, once again played by some improbably good looking British actor (These tents remind me of the Field of Cloth of Gold from the late European middle ages).

Both the men and women in the brochure have great teeth, a rarity in Morocco where sugar addiction, especially in tea has and continues to cause a lot of tooth decay and some very shiny silver- and gold-plated smiles. But those of us who live here know that.

And then the pictures of camels; thin nomadic Arabs charging with swords, standing for portraits, getting on camels, getting off camels, sitting beside camels, walking near camels.

The brochure went on, “Starry nights, tales of adventure, romance and the sound of moving camels draw you to this (oh no, here it comes again) Arabian Nights like getaway among Saharan dunes.”



Why was I considering setting out on a tourist style packaged walking tour of the great sandy desert, the “erg” of southern Morocco at the edge of the Sahara?” Well, I had to. It was part of my job.

I had to do one such tour in each of the six or seven tourist regions of Morocco for part of my job was advising Israeli tourists on what to do and where to go. And, I could not recommend things I had not done myself, so off to the Sahara.

I started the day early and arrived at the small internal airport outside of Tangier. I was part of a group; an English couple, a French couple, an Italian couple and two Bulgarians who compared to the thin Europeans looked positively obese. Everyone spoke English and French. I was the only expat with passable conversational Arabic.

Sometime later we arrived at the airport in Mhamid, near the dunes whose two-room reception area looked like a piece of stage furniture for the film Beau Geste. It was manned by a young Moroccan graduate of the national hospitality school. She checked our passports and made sure our bags got onto the jeep. Her nails were so sharp and so red that it sounded like a machine gun going off when she put our data into her computer. She was a Casablanca girl, far from the beach. This was her first paid gig, not surprisingly.

Within an hour we were in base camp and each person, or couple

were shown to their tent. This was glamping at its best. The solar shower was filled with hot water, so I took one and washed off the dirt from the flight. Then there was a small solar fridge filled with orange juice and a fresh croissant was waiting under a cloth on a silver tray. There were Berber rugs on the floor, wooden chests for clothing and mesh windows in the tent which allowed you to look out at the limitless sky.

An hour later we were summoned by our camel leader Abdeslam. He held out a map and showed us our route. Seven campsites, seven days of walking, four hours in the morning and two after siesta.

Fireside feasts in the evening where we would watch the stars, the moon, and the falling stars. Just sand, sun, stars, camels, tents, and his staff of somewhat wiry men, some well over sixty, some looking even eighty; thin Arabs and Berbers who remembered the old days of tribal raids and the residual slave trading that continued under the noses of their former French colonial masters.

Over the first few days of riding and walking beside our camels I got to know some of the basics of my traveling companions. Ned and Carol, the English couple were doing graduate work in classical archaeology, and they wanted to experience the desert for during the time of Roman North Africa it was an area that the Romans had not penetrated.

Claudio and Claudia (I kid you not) ran a restaurant in Rome specializing in sea food. They needed a break from their parents and uncles with whom they worked, and they thought a Saharan trip was a guaranteed way of making sure that this holiday would not be joined by a bevy of relatives joining them at the last minute. Cell phone reception was intermittent and they were glad of it.

Hans and Christina were German foresters who believed that the

world was about to end, and that because of climate change Europe would become a desert in their lifetimes so, they wanted to get accustomed to what they were sure was their future, a dry, deforested desert like Europe.

The Bulgarian couple Ivan and Ludmilla were charming, warm, funny employees of the national electricity company and also wanted a break from cell phones and computers and thought that this would be the ideal solution, much cheaper than sitting on a noisy beach in Italy.

I explained to the best of my ability what an Israeli Cultural Attaché does in an Arab Muslim country. When they found out that my grandmother had been born in Tangier, the Italians said, "Ah yes Alexa Haleya, Roots, the American TV show. You are in search of your roots, no?" I agreed.

Someone had improbably brought a guitar. I had learnt how to sing American folk rock in English from neighbors in Jerusalem who were regulars at the Anglo-American folk music festival, Jacob's Ladder, which takes place every year in a different part of Israel.

They really liked my James Taylor and Bob Dylan imitations. In honor of my fellow travelers, I wrote a lyric based on the song "Stuck in the Middle With You," with a rousing chorus that even the camel guides learnt to sing in thick Moroccan accents.

*Camels to the left of me
Camels to the right of me
Stuck in the desert with you*

Our leader Abdeslam was about forty. He told me, "When I grew up here in the 80s, we were still full camel nomads. There

were no schools, there were few transistor radios, there was little tourism. We did not even have a word in Arabic for trekking or adventure tourism.

There were no doctors, little medicine and life was hard. Slowly, slowly things began to change, first cell phones, then Internet, and then Safari companies started setting up camps and there was growing employment in this business. Life got better and easier.

Instead of herding sheep we now herd tourists. They are easier to care for, give us more money and are often fun to be with. I once thought all Europeans were out to exploit Moroccans (you know the Marxists and Islamists here all sound the same. Their mantras are that everyone but us is responsible for any misfortune. A curse on both their houses!)” I was beginning to like this guy.

He continued, “Not far from our last camp I keep a herd of camels. My tent is an Eco-home with solar energy, with an ecologically sustainable well and an oasis like garden where we grow all our herbs and spices, and our local marijuana which is better than even that from the Rif mountains!

I would rather spend a month there than a day in Rabat and Casablanca and by the way, I have a BA in World History and did a course in Old Testament archaeology, you know Yigal Yadin, William Foxwell Albright?” I was stunned and delighted.

The author of the children’s book, *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, used to drive a mail plane in French colonial Sahara. It is not surprising that the planet of the Little Prince reminds one of a deserted Saharan oasis.

He also wrote a meditation on the desert called *The Wisdom of the Sands*. It is a bit pretentious, kind of like Khalil Gibran on mushrooms. I read a chapter each night during my trip and it made much more sense to me out here in the desert than reading it in my house in Tangier, with all the street noise

that surrounds it. The French have a special word for the quite stillness of the desert. It skips my mind.

Here is what St Exupéry wrote about traveling and finding your way:

A pilot's business is with the wind, and with the stars, with night, with sand, with the sea. He strives to outwit the forces of nature. He stares with expectancy for the coming of the dawn the way a gardener awaits the coming of spring. He looks forward to port as a promised land, and truth for him is what lives in the stars.

I thought that that was a pretty good description of Abdeslam and his camel men.

All of us became hypnotized by the simple rhythm of our day. Getting up at dawn. Drinking tea around the campfire. Moving out on or beside our camels. The crew behind us breaking camp and catching up with us mid-day. Siesta under a wide tarp, then two more hours walking, from four to six or five to seven, set up camp, eat a feast, listen to the camel men sing and clap or more of me singing Dylan and Joni Mitchell.

The last day of our trek was overcast. A strange mist surrounded us. I would not call it a sandstorm as such, but the wind stirred up the sand in such a way that it created a kind of sandy mist that obscured our sight in every direction. Abdeslam was not perturbed and said that his portable GPS would get us to the last camp in a few hours. Famous last words.

We wandered for a full day. Our radios did not receive messages. Our transistor radios could not get the BBC. The GPS did not work. We set up camp in the middle of nowhere. We were

told all would be well in the morning.

I went to bed and heard Abdeslam and the other camel guides debating our situation for some hours during the late hours of the night. In the morning Abdeslam visited me in my tent before the other tourists were awake.

We sat together in silence of a full half hour. You may think that Arabs and Berbers never stop talking but that is not true. Among their own kin they can sit silently in a room as if a wall is up around him and no one will bother him. Such are the rules of privacy among people who live in extended households with open courtyards.

After an hour I asked him who the oldest guide in his group was. He told me, "Omari. He is eighty but walks like a man of forty. I have worked with him for ten years. He is tough, sleeps outside and is very obedient." And so, we went to see Omari.

He was sitting with his hands around his djellaba. We greeted him and he returned the salutation.

"Sbah al kher, la bas," he answered, meaning "Good morning, no harm."

We asked for advice, humbly and we both kissed his hand. He said the following, "You are the younger generation. You are in charge now. You have cornered the real estate markets on the coast. You send your children to foreign universities. You speak many languages, and you wonder what men like me can offer, men who can neither read nor write, men who have not traveled to Europe, men who do not use computers? Well, here is the thing. I may be able to get us out of here, but you will have to put me in charge. You must do everything I ask you and no questions asked." We agreed.

He asked us to break camp and put all the camels in a line with all the baggage camels behind us. He would then walk

twenty paces ahead of us, squat down, pick up a handful of sand, put it in his mouth, chew it as if it was good food, spit it out on the ground, smell it and then point in one direction.

He did this for three days straight. During that time, the sand and the mist were still in the air, there was no radio contact, and we began to run out of water, rationing each person one glass twice a day. I have never been so thirsty nor, seen Italians more serious about life.

On the third day we saw the outline of our lost camp and made a beeline for it. It was well supplied with all we needed and the first thing we did was drink ourselves sick with water until our bellies swelled like children who suffered from malnutrition. The mist soon lifted.

Omari pulled the two of us aside and said, "My work is over. You are in charge now." He went back to his job as just one camel guide among others and none of the other members of the tour had any idea of what had really gone on and how close we all were to death by dehydration. We retraced our way back to Mhamid and flew back to Tangier.

The next evening I found myself reading a book called *White Gold* about the lives of English slaves who were captives of the Moroccan Sultan in the mid-1700s. The story is about one Englishman Thomas Pellow. After having been forcibly converted to Islam, the Sultan sent him on a slave raiding expedition across the Sahara to bring back six hundred West African female captives.

The caravan started out with 12,000 camels and made it into what is now Saharan Mauritania where it got lost. Pellow thought they were all going to die of thirst. The author Giles Milton tells us the story in his book *White Gold: The Extraordinary Story of Thomas Pellow and North Africa's One Million European Slaves*.

Pellow was surprised to discover that the guide hired to lead the caravan was blind. He told Pellow that he used his nose to lead them from one waterhole to waterhole, sniffing the sand to determine their exact position. Pellow was skeptical of the man's powers and grew seriously alarmed when six days passed without his finding any water. On the seventh day Pellow and his companions paused to drink from their water skins, but to our very great astonishment found them ..."quite empty, the excessive heat of the sun having exhaled the water through the pores of the leather. They now had only their emergency rations which would sustain them for just a few more days. Thereafter they would be doomed to thirsty death in the desert ...

Milton then describes how the caravan leaders doubted the old man and tested him with fistfuls of sand taken from different places. The old man was not fooled, and within two days they saw on the horizon a green oasis. They soon found water and life.

Two days later I received an email from Abdeslam. It read, "My dear friend. I have given our near brush with death much thought. I am grateful for your advice as even I was beginning to doubt whether the illiterate old men who used to run our caravans had anything to show us in this high tech, early 21th century. I was so wrong.

After you left, I asked Omari a little more about what had happened. He told me that he had prayed to the Patron Saint of Morocco, Moulay Idris, that his skills in reading the sand would bring us back to our camps and to water. He insists that he and I go on pilgrimage and sacrifice there, no, not a goat, but an entire camel at his shrine in Fez next month.

We will go together, and I am paying for the camel. I owe Omari at least that small favor for we are all alive because of him.

I paused and thought for a minute. I then wrote back to Abdeslam, a simple email with one simple message:

“Let us share the cost.”

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Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

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