

OLDER... AND BOLDER



Justine Tyerman surprises herself with her daring exploits in Morocco . . .

The ancient fortress of Ait Ben Haddou.

PICTURES © Justine Tyerman

I travelled undercover in Morocco. Being a bit of a wuss, I was a little concerned about developments in North Africa and the Middle East. And just to make me feel even more anxious about my forthcoming most adventurous trip to date, my well-travelled boss's parting words to me were "never identify yourself as a journalist in that part of the world".

Visions of being thrown in jail or abducted by terrorists danced through my imagination which needs very little fuel to set it alight and raging on multiple fronts.

A bus tour of Turkey, cruising down the Danube, sailing the Croatian coast, travelling by train around Switzerland, driving across Italy, skiing in the French Alps and lounging around in villas in Crete and Santorini had been the extent of my overseas adventures to date so in my view, Morocco was a highly exotic but somewhat risky destination.

Fortunately my good friend Robyn Galloway, managing director of The Innovative Travel Company with whom I was travelling, set my mind at rest by organising business cards for me with the nice vague title of consultant rather than travel writer.

She also reassured me that guides on all her Ancient Kingdoms tours were highly experienced and left nothing to chance.

I need not have worried. It was such a waste of energy. The Moroccans I encountered were friendly, polite, hospitable and extremely welcoming, and once I began the tour, terrorist plots were the farthest thing from my mind.

That often seems to be the case. From an outside perspective, a place often sounds more dangerous than it is in reality, once you are on the ground.

Our charming Moroccan guides

accompanied us everywhere. I felt entirely safe at all times and free to enjoy the vibrant life of this most colourful, ancient and fascinating of countries.

I ended up doing things I never dreamed I was brave enough to do.

Having explored the souks in Marrakech and Fes with our guides during the day, I felt confident to return with my Innovative Travel hosts in the evenings to do some serious haggling with the good-natured salesmen in their tiny shops crammed full of shoes, handbags, fabrics, ceramics, bronze goods and jewellery. It was huge fun.

Despite being snake phobic, I was so fascinated by the snake charmers and their shiny black cobras in Marrakech's crowded Djemaa el Fna Square, I managed to overcome my horror of them. I astonished myself by being able to study the snakes out in the open — from a distance — and appreciate their beauty and grace.

I rode a camel up sharp red ridges in the Merzouga Desert on the fringe of the Sahara to watch the sunset from a sand dune mountain just 55km from the Algerian border.

Later, we sat around a campfire, drank Moroccan rosé, ate a three-course feast of salads, tagine, couscous and platters of fresh fruit, and were entertained by musicians and dancers from Senegal and Mali.

I was happy to wander alone in the breathtaking Todra Gorge after my travel-mates had all gone on for lunch. Millions of years of erosion by a river had left a dramatic gash in the High Atlas Mountains 160m deep and only 10m wide in places.

I waded knee deep into the river, soaked my neck scarf in the cool, clear water and gazed up in wonder at the vertical canyon walls



Justine's elegant suite at the luxurious Riad Fes.

towering above me on both sides.

The only time dark thoughts ever flitted across my mind was when we were exploring the ancient fortress of Ait Ben Haddou, a UNESCO world heritage site in the foothills of the High Atlas Mountains.

My fear in this instance was not for myself but for safety of this magnificent treasure in the province of Ouarzazate. The site has become famous as a film set in such movies as Jesus of Nazareth, The Jewel of the Nile, The Mummy, Gladiator, Alexander and the television series Game of Thrones. In an unstable country, its fame could make it a target but as Robyn wisely pointed out,

"This is Morocco not Afghanistan. You can't compare the two countries."

Our accommodation, a mixture of modern five-star hotels, riads (traditional Moroccan extended family homes built around a central courtyard) and kasbahs (fortresses), was outstanding.

My elegant suite at the luxurious Riad Fes in the heart of the oldest medina in Morocco, was secure in the extreme. Once frequented by Fassi nobility, my rooms had decorative grillwork on the outside of the windows, massive wooden doors that enclosed the windows and doors from the outside at night, wooden shutters on the inside of the windows

Marrakech's Djemaa el Fna Square comes alive at night.

PICTURE © Wikimedia Commons



Beautiful Amina, the dada or traditional Moroccan chef at La Maison Arabe cooking school in Marrakech.



The magnificent Todra Gorge in the High Atlas Mountains.



Justine (right) and friend Margy set off on a camel trek into the Merzouga Desert on the fringe of the Sahara.

Panic attack in cooking class

and elaborate flounced curtains reaching all the way to the top of the 4 metre-high walls. The staff there were exceptional, a shining example of Moroccan hospitality.

I did have one panic attack however. I had been looking forward immensely to the cooking school we were to attend at the prestigious La Maison Arabe in Marrakech but when it came time to actually follow the beautiful Amina's instructions, I was flummoxed. My husband does most of the cooking at home so I suddenly found myself way out of my comfort zone.

However our gracious dada (traditional Moroccan chef) was at my side throughout the class, helping me prepare three dishes for lunch — a chicken tagine with preserved lemons, olives, saffron and many spices, a Zalouk salad

with aubergines, tomatoes, garlic and spices, and a Taktuka salad with roasted green peppers, tomatoes and spices.

I needed no help however to consume the delicious lunch and sample excellent Moroccan wines to match the cuisine.

It seems as though I'm getting bolder as I grow older — Robyn who travels regularly to places like Egypt, Oman, Jordan and Turkey wants me to become even more adventurous and go to Egypt next. Elhamy ElZayat, the chairman of the Tourism Board of Egypt and one of 50 people nominated to write the new constitution for the fledgling democracy is a good friend of hers. He says many positive things are taking place in his country and tourists are welcomed with open arms.

• *Justine Tyerman travelled courtesy of The Innovative Travel Company, a New Zealand travel company with 25 years' experience. They are specialists on travel in Morocco and can design tailor-made tours to suit individual tastes and budgets. www.innovativetravel.co.nz*

• *Justine stayed at the Sofitel Marrakech Lounge and Spa in Marrakech; Kasbah Dar Dif in Ouarzazate; Xaluca Maadid Hotel in Erfoud; Riad Fes in Fes, and Gray Boutique Hotel and Spa in Casablanca.*

• *Justine flew Emirates Airline from Auckland to Casablanca. New Zealand travellers can take one of three daily A380 flights from Auckland to Dubai, where Emirates offers direct transfers to Casablanca, Morocco. Special fares on sale until August 11 have return flights from \$NZ2569 ex- Auckland. www.emirates.com*