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SUMMER TRIPS

Morocco's Dangerous Mystique

Exotic hotels and busy markets are drawing travelers, despite the risks

By STAN SESSER

July 7, 2007; Page P5

MARRAKESH, Morocco -- I'm walking back to my hotel after an evening enjoying the public square here, full of busy cafes and snake charmers. But the day ends on a jarring note. As I pick my way down twisting alleys too narrow for cars, I soon realize that I'm lost. A teenage boy presses upon me his services as a "guide," and he is so persistent that I eventually take shelter in a little open-front restaurant.

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Stan Sesser

The famous mud-walled Kasbah of Ait Benhaddou, on the other side of High Atlas Mountains from Marrakesh. Scenes from Lawrence of Arabia and Gladiator were filmed here.

modern glamour and ancient history. Some 6.5 million people visited Morocco last year, up almost 50% since 2002.

Hundreds of old family mansions, called riads, are being converted into small, luxurious hotels. There are beaches on both the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts, mountains for hiking and vast stretches of desert for four-wheel-drive touring. The drive across the High Atlas Mountains to the town of Ait Benhaddou, the ancient mud-walled kasbah featured in "Lawrence of Arabia" and "Gladiator," is worth a trip to the country in itself.

Above all there is Fez, the cultural capital, and Marrakesh, a city that captures the fun and frantic spirit of the country. Both

Visiting Morocco can evoke that kind of anxiety. There are real safety concerns: The U.S. State Department says the potential for "violence against American interests and citizens remains high." But more tourists keep coming, drawn by an unusual combination of

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have vast medinas, the old Arab quarters, which are full of twisting streets. The Fez medina is comparatively sedate and reflects more of the country's history, while the Marrakesh medina throbs with the intensity and prosperity that the tourist revolution has brought. Zooming motorbikes on the cobblestone streets send pedestrians scurrying for cover; rug merchants will grab the arm of visitors and attempt to pull them into their shops; restaurants try to lure you to the outdoor dining tables that give you a ringside seat on all the action.

Whether it's taking a trip to Bali beaches, visiting the great monuments of Jerusalem or braving the notorious crime in South Africa to go on a safari, instinct, rather than government warnings, seems to prevail for many travelers in the decision on traveling to any particular country. And that instinct apparently counts heavily on the trendiness of the destination, rather than on a weighing of the actual safety factors.



Joe LeMonnier

Morocco, for instance, isn't on the list of more than two dozen countries that the State Department recommends Americans avoid. But the country has sustained terrorist attacks, and violence is a potential daily threat. In March, a suicide bomber blew himself up in a Casablanca Internet cafe, wounding several people. In April, two men blew themselves up in Casablanca near the U.S. Consulate and the American Language Center, just five days after three bombers did the same after being cornered by police.

Michael Brein, a Portland, Ore., psychologist who specializes in travel, calls the interest in more risky destinations "the Cancún effect," a reference to the fact that Mexico's upscale beach resort remains popular despite other parts of the country being plagued with robberies, abductions and extortion attempts. "We seek romance, excitement and adventure just to the point of danger, which is a fine line," he states. "And the more expensive and exotic the destinations and hotels, the more secure the tourists will feel."

But is Morocco really dangerous? Despite the night I got lost in the Marrakesh medina, Morocco is generally a safe place to visit. The streets of the medinas are patrolled by plainclothes policemen, who will yank away and interrogate a young local man for even approaching a tourist. Penalties for crimes against foreigners are so severe that incidents of crime are minimal, hotel owners and tourism officials claim. Morocco is "much safer than

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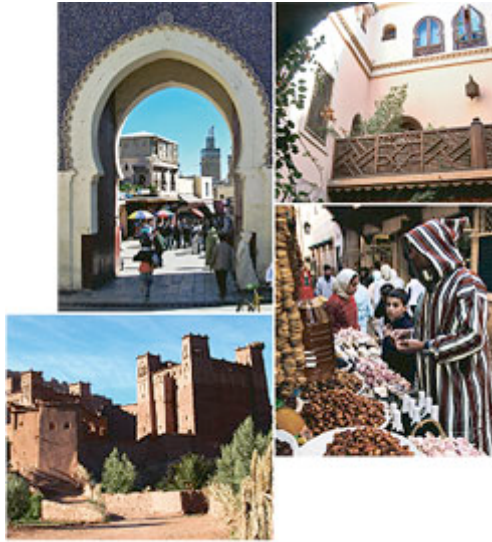
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Europe," insists Adil Douiri, the country's tourism minister. "Crime figures show this."

Peter Sporn, an associate professor of medicine at Northwestern University, who was on vacation in Marrakesh with his family and friends, says he hasn't felt a moment of danger. "There's no hostility. None," he says. "We've encountered no one who has had a bad experience."



Stan Sesser (3); Alamy (Market)

Clockwise from top left, the medina in Fez; La Maison Arabe in Marrakesh; a busy Fez market; the town of Ait Benhaddou in the High Atlas Mountains.

The phenomenon of the riad has been one of the saviors of Moroccan tourism, a factor that helps put it into a category entirely apart from other Arab lands. Mr. Douiri boasts that the riad -- found only in the medinas of Fez and Marrakesh -- is "a unique product; there's no competition. A hotel is a hotel, but a riad is Morocco."

Moroccan families who own crumbling old mansions are discovering that they can sell them for a small fortune to be turned into these high-end boutique hotels. Marrakesh, the center of Moroccan tourism, got its first one only a decade ago, but today there are more than 500. Fez, the cultural capital, has 40.

Although prices of rooms in riads run up to \$1,000, and although they lack some of the amenities of larger hotels, many are booked solid six months in advance. Morocco is primarily a destination for European vacationers, but so many Americans are now

patronizing the high-end riads that when I had dinner in one, all 12 people in the four-table dining room were from the U.S.

While the riads are indeed luxurious, there's a downside. The rooms are long and narrow, with windows only on one side looking out into the inner courtyard. You have to keep your curtains closed since guests are walking past, making the rooms dark and stuffy. And since the alleys are too narrow for taxis, going out for dinner can be a hassle.

In Marrakesh, the British co-owner of Riad Noir d'Ivoire, Jill Fechtmann, can still barely believe what happened when her riad opened its doors last year in mid-December. "We were totally naïve," she says. "In 24 hours we were fully booked for Christmas and New Year's. We have guests who have already been here two or three times."

She calls Marrakesh "unbelievable": "It's so fashionable it's now the St. Tropez of Northern Africa."

* * *

Trip Plan

Getting There: Royal Air Maroc flies nonstop to Casablanca from New York City. Morocco's two most attractive tourist destinations, Marrakesh and Fez, can be reached on low-cost airlines from many of Europe's major capitals.

Where to Stay: With more than 500 riads in Marrakesh and 40 in Fez, there are plenty to

choose from -- if you book far enough in advance. In Marrakesh, Riad Kniza is run by a friendly and helpful Moroccan family; from \$300 to \$470 a night (www.riadkniza.com). With its 17 rooms, La Maison Arabe is larger than most and stunningly decorated; from \$230 to \$720 (www.lamaisonarabe.com). In Fez, I liked the Riad Maison Bleue; about \$225 (www.maisonbleue.com).

Where to Eat: Three of the most prominent high-end restaurants in Marrakesh catering to tourists are Yacout, Dar Moha and Dar Marjana. They, like nearly every restaurant in Morocco, focus on couscous and tajines (stews in a clay pot). Try the food stalls in the big central square, Place Jemâa-el-Fna, where you sit on benches at long tables and dine simply. I had excellent deep-fried calamari, fish and eggplant at stand 12 for about \$10 a person. In Fez, a classic banquet is served at La Maison Bleue, a small luxury hotel; \$65 for a fixed-price dinner (Tel: 212-35-636052). In Fez's new city, La Cheminée serves Moroccan food with a French accent; about \$20 (Tel: 212-35-624902).

What to Do: Drive from Marrakesh across the High Atlas Mountains to see the ancient mud-walled cities, called kasbahs. Aït Benhaddou, which was featured in the films "Lawrence of Arabia" and "Gladiator," is spectacular. There are several little hotels nearby to spend the night. Your riad in Marrakesh can arrange a car and driver.

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