

Sunday Travel

Section **L**

Mike Ferrell, *Travel editor*

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Atmosphere of mystery, intrigue shrouds Morocco

by Edward I. Placidi

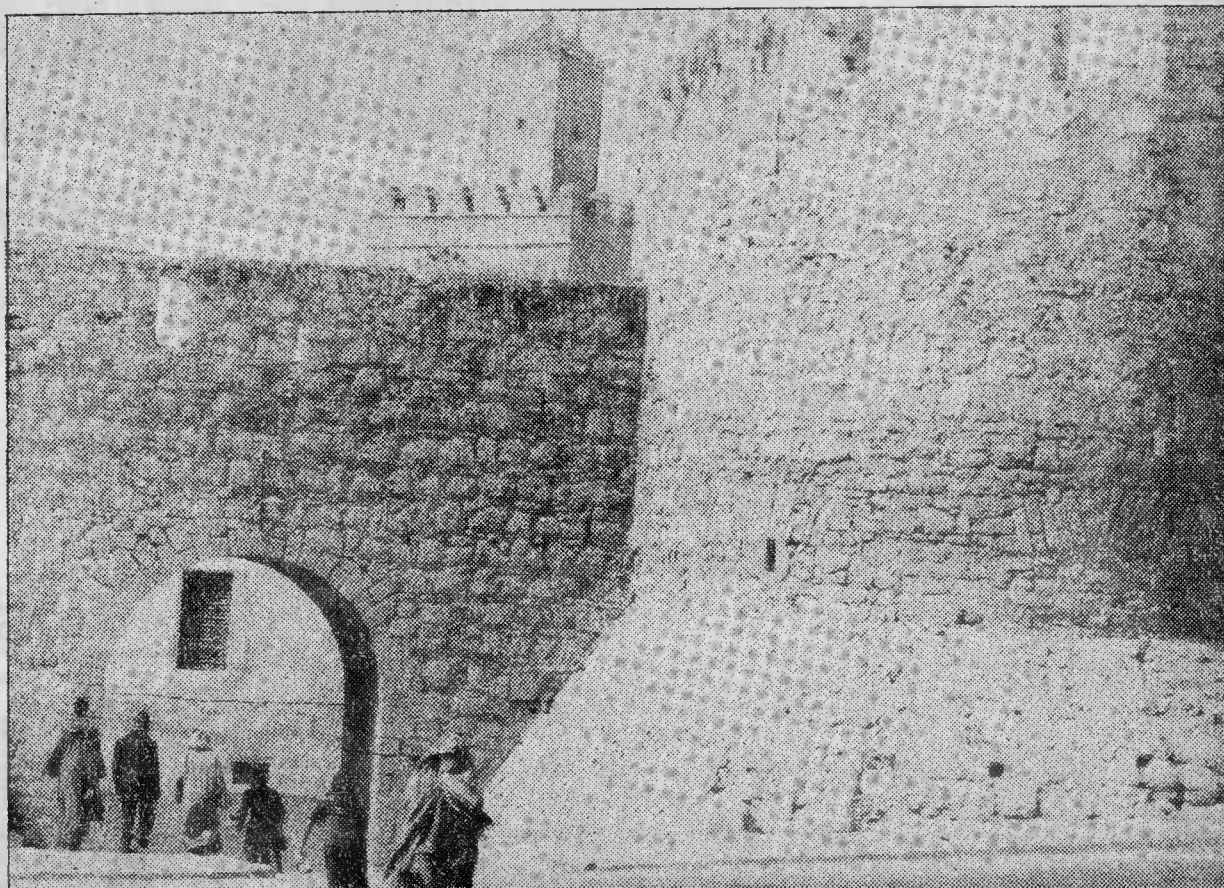
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SETTING out down a Moroccan street, invariably you are picked up on local "radar."

Young multilingual boys suddenly appear at your side attempting to convince you that as your guide they can unlock the mysteries of Morocco for you, something you could never do on your own.

Their point is well taken. The *mdinas*, or old centers, of Moroccan cities are such complex and intricate labyrinths [you'd think they were intensionally modeled after King Minos' infamous, inescapable labyrinth] of covered lanes, archways, narrow alleys and endless *souks* or market areas that to find your way out on your own you may have to mark your trail behind you.

Moreover, with every nook and cranny of these mind-boggling mazes harboring something different — rug weavers at work in a sunlit patio entered by a dark archway, a 400-year-old church built by Portuguese colonialists reached only by a dead-end alley or a rooftop cafe



mazes harboring something different — rug weavers at work in a sunlit patio entered by a dark archway, a 400-year-old church built by Portuguese colonialists reached only by a dead-end alley, or a rooftop cafe with a view over the city at the top of unmarked stairs — it's easy to miss much of what is all around you. Even the most seasoned traveler needs an introduction to this fascinating world that defies understanding.

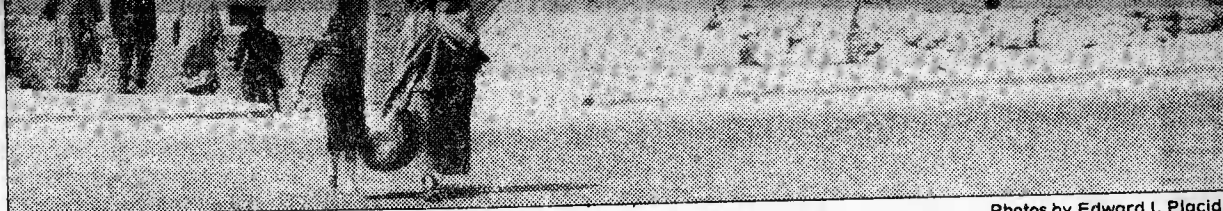
An atmosphere of mystery and intrigue shrouds the *mdinas*, yet just beyond these walled old quarters of every Moroccan city is a modern city too of wide avenues, high-rise buildings, good restaurants, boutiques and first-class hotels. Two worlds — two distant eras in time — carry on side by side in this land of striking diversity crowning the northeast corner of Africa.

Few countries, in fact, offer more diversity or lay better claim to having it all. There are the alive and venerable "Imperial Cities," Rabat, Meknes, Marrakesh and Fez, ancient gems enclosed in awesome walls, as well as the former Portuguese fortress cities on the Atlantic coast, Essaquira, Safi and El Jadida.

Cosmopolitan and sophisticated yet intriguing Tangiers remains a haven for writers and artists, while Casablanca is a 20th century industrial city of palm-lined avenues and bougainvillea-graced villas — belying the Bogart/Rick's Cafe image in its namesake movie.

IF pageantry and tradition are your passion, you can witness daring Berber horsemen, blasting old-fashioned muskets in the air, compete and perform in numerous festivals; watch the creating of an extraordinary variety of artisanry; clap to flamboyant dancers and musicians, each of Morocco's many tribes with its own repertory of revered performers; or attend a "marriage market" where tattooed women with henna-dyed hair parade in brilliant robes and ancient jewelry hoping to lure one of the men in the crowd into wedlock.

Morocco is also a land of soaring snow-capped peaks, of turbulent riv-



Photos by Edward I. Placidi

In the beach resort of Safi, Moroccan life carries on within a 400-year-old Portuguese city enclosed in imposing fortifications. Por-

tugal held sway on Morocco's Atlantic coast centuries before the great European colonization of Africa.

ers plunging into deep valleys, palm oases, aromatic forests, undulating sand dunes and powdery beaches — a land of perhaps unequaled topographical and geographical diversity.

Its 172,413 square miles encompass everything from the cruel expanse of Saharan sands of the deep south to the vast cultivated central plains — bountiful with an endless variety of fruits, nuts and vegetables — that are enclosed by the great Atlas mountain chain, an extension of the Alpine mountain system of Europe.

It also ranges from a 1,500-mile coastline, divided between the warm waters of the equatorial Atlantic Ocean to the west to the Mediterranean Sea on the north, dotted with resorts that are bathed in some 300 days of sunshine a year.

To the eye, Morocco is the stuff of the Bible and Arabian Nights. Little seems to have changed in hundred of years. Turbaned men in flowing robes plod dusty streets astride laden donkeys. Veiled women, rows of blind beggars, bellowing hawkers and haggling fat merchants fill the teeming *souks*, where the scents of sweet mint tea, sizzling shish kebab and incense fill the air.

"The Great South," or Sahara, is the domain of desert and mountain tribes in traditional garb living in villages of red, ochre or pink sundried mud. Here are startling gorges, camel markets, oases of palm and fruit trees, the famed "Blue Men" whose hair, beard and skin turn blue from their jagged pinacles.

The Sahara meets the Atlantic at Agadir, Morocco's premier seaside resort. Nicknamed "Morocco's Mi-

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A rug weaver works in a market area of the "Imperial City" of Fez.

MOROCCO

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ami beach," it boasts superb beaches, climate, hotels and amenities. In 1960, ancient Agadir was completely leveled by an earthquake and in the years since an ultramodern "tourist city" has arisen from the rubble.

JUST north of Agadir is "Portuguese Morocco." Portugal held sway here on the Atlantic centuries before the great European colonization of Africa, and they left behind a string of ocean-front bastions that remain one of the outstanding colonial architectural legacies on the continent. In the beach resorts of Safi, El Jadida and Essaouira, Moroccan life goes on within 400-year-old Portuguese cities enclosed in imposing fortifications.

On the Mediterranean coast, the tiny fishing ports of M'Diq and Al Hoceima have blossomed into popu-

lar resort areas.

The Imperial Cities [imperial because each has been the country's royal capital] together embody all the contrasts and fascination ^{that is} Morocco. Rabat, today's capital, is a gracious city of gardens, flowered avenues, King Hassan's sprawling palace and monumental gateways. Rimmed by Atlantic beaches, Rabat is protected by two miles of crenelated walls.

Fez is the country's intellectual and cultural capital, known for its university, grand mosques, superb craftsmen and rich *souks* — *souks* displaying aromatic pyramids of rich-colored spices, glittering hand-pounded brass and copper, ornate leather creations and colorful camel's hair rugs. Not only will the boy-guides unlock Morocco's mysteries for you, but help you get the best prices on artisanry — all for \$1 or \$2.

Elegant Rabat and refined Fez contrast with the gargantuan proportions of Meknes' awesome gateways and 25 miles of nine-foot-thick triple walls surrounding what was once the largest palace in the world.

And then there is the voluptuous charm of Marrakesh. Known as "The Pearl of the South," Marrakesh is exciting, palpitating, colorful, a theater of life. Founded by veiled men from the Sahara in the 11th century, its vibrant *souks* cover some two square miles and its camel market lures tribesmen and

nomads from far and wide.

ADJACENT Marrakesh's old There aren't many places like Morocco in this world, but Morocco is worth visiting just for the spectacle that erupts each evening in Marrakesh's main square: medicine men, storytellers, snake charmers, black dancers from Mauritania, acrobats, magicians and jugglers put on a dazzling non-stop show.

Edward I. Placidi is a free-lance writer from New York City.



Photo by Edward I. Placidi

Veiled women, rows of blind beggars, bellowing hawkers and haggling merchants fill Morocco's teeming market areas. This market is in the city of Meknes.