

Thomas International



Tales From The Road

Vol 1

True short stories about life as a
Globetrotting Tour Guide

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To the Babe on the cover ...
thank you.

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Bye Bye

Tale: Bye Bye

I'm in Marrakesh, Morocco, where it's 96 degrees in the shade. I'm sitting in a terrace cafe located on the sun-drenched roof of an antiquated three story building that has occupied the same spot for centuries. The equally ancient ornate wrought iron railing I'm leaning against is all that prevents me from falling 30 feet into the teeming vibrant square below. This bustling square is the site of the Djemaa el Fna, a huge 800 year old outdoor market located in the “medina quarter” or “old city” of Marrakesh, Morocco.

From my perch I observe this ancient square and reflect on its chameleon personality that constantly changes throughout the day. In the morning you would find the temporary stalls with merchants offering daily staples like oranges, water, and vegetables. By afternoon the stalls are occupied by dancers,

story tellers, magicians, medicine men and snake charmers. Evening brings out the native masses as they enjoy supper at what are now mouth-watering food stalls.

The square is edged to my left and right with terraced cafes, ancient gardens and inexpensive hotels. Directly across from me, off in the distance, begins the souks, a vast commercial business district that predates this square. In the souks you will find thousands of one and two story buildings and store fronts crowded together and lining narrow streets, some no more than footpaths, that meander forever through a maze of similar streets and structures. Here a person can disappear, simply vanish, in the blink of an eye.

Within the souks is heard a constant din of merchants, traders and customers haggling over goods and services that haven't changed much since the twelfth century. Your senses are inundated with the poignant smells of imported herbs and spices. You'll shield your eyes from the sun's reflection off brilliant polished brass and beveled mirrors. Eventually even you will

succumb to their beauty and purchase intricately woven Moroccan rugs and tapestries. The streets are too narrow for modern vehicles so the merchants rely on the oldest mode of transportation known to man, the donkey and the push cart.

Within the souks time has stopped.

I am surrounded by ancient history as I anxiously wait for my tour group to rendezvous at this prearranged spot. Earlier this morning 96 sleep-deprived American tourists boarded a Spandex Air Lines charter for the short flight from Tenerife, Canary Islands (a Spanish territory and popular tourist destination located 65 miles off the west coast of Africa) to Marrakesh for a one day whirlwind tour of one of Morocco's oldest cities.

We had spent the morning visiting the Koutoubia Mosque with its magnificent 235 foot minaret; then the ancient ruins of the Palace of Bedi which is the colorful setting for the annual folklore festival. After riding some honest-to-god camels we finished the morning at Medrassa Ben Youssef, a Muslim school and walled

garden burial grounds built in 1565 for the Saadian princes. The fountain located there is decorated with stalactite wand wood carvings and inscribed with kufic and cursive Arab script.

Following our lunch at the Hotel Moroc Turist, the afternoon has been set aside for shopping in the “medina quarter”. An early dinner is scheduled at the Marrakesh Casino where we will dine on traditional Moroccan food while being entertained by local musicians, acrobats and belly dancers. Finally we will board the Flying Tampax (as the airline is known to us tour directors) for an 8 pm departure back to Tenerife.

The reason I'm a bit apprehensive as I wait for my group is because they are all members of local chapters from West Virginia and Maryland of a large fraternal organization, the Order of the Eastern Star. Having spent the day with them I know that for most of them this is the first time that they have traveled outside the confines of their respective states. The thought of my middle-aged novice travelers wandering the unpredictable and

sometimes treacherous alleyways of the 800 year old souks is enough to stress any tour director.

I'm sitting in the rooftop cafe and chatting with my local guide, Mustapha, when he abruptly stops what he is saying and gestures with his chin at something happening below. I turn around and visually sweep the marketplace.

“What?” I ask.

He points to a cluster of stalls approximately 200 yards from our vantage point and asks, “Weren't those girls on your plane?”

I finally zero in on what he's talking about. I see two very attractive blond young women giggling, weaving and supporting each other as they follow a good looking Moroccan youth thorough the stalls towards the souks.

“Yea,” I respond. “They were part of that German group of 20 that shared our plane from Tenerife this morning.” He obviously had noticed the two babes when they boarded their bus with their

German speaking Moroccan guide.

“What are they doing? They're acting drunk or stoned. Do you think they smoked some hash with that guy?”

He shrugs his shoulders and then says, “Bye bye.”

I turn to look at him and ask, “What do you mean 'bye bye'?”

He answers with three words that instantly chills me to the bone, “White slave market.”

“What !?!” I yell. I knew about the slave traders that have been operating here in Marrakesh for the last 800 years and had briefed my group about that danger. To lighten the mood I had also added that I thought my group was too old to attract the slave traders attention. Not so the youthful German group and here were two members of that group being led to a fate worse than death.

“Come on !” I yelled as I grabbed his arm and started for the staircase which would take us down to the square.

He digs in his heels and says, “Wait”, while again motioning with his chin. “Look.”

I quickly turn back to the square and scan the area where I had just seen the two women. They were gone! I look at Mustapha and he says, “You'll never find them.”

I'm stunned. I'm trying to comprehend what had just happened when members of my group materialize and start angling toward us. I'm obliged to put on my 'excited' face as I listen to their animated discussions of their innocent adventures in the souks; forcing the harsh reality of what I had just witnessed into the far recesses of my memory. I looked at Mustapha and gave him a slight shake of my head. He understands not to mention what we had just witnessed. We still had four more hours here in Marrakesh and there was no sense creating panic and concern

within the group.

It's now 8 pm and my animated group is sitting on the plane swapping stories while patiently waiting for the German group to show. Finally at 9 pm, an hour past our scheduled departure time, a very somber German group boards the plane and settles into their seats. I silently count heads and... yup... there's only 18. They're missing the two blonds.

Once airborne I see Dieter, the tour director for the German group head to the rear of the plane and I follow. I need the details.

He's devastated. Something like this has never happened to him in the 25 years that he's been leading tours. He tells me that he and his Moroccan guide had repeatedly warned his young group about the potential pitfalls and dangers of this ancient city, but the two women apparently thought otherwise.

I told him that I saw the two women with a Moroccan boy heading into the souks and he replied that so too had some

members of his group. But, by the time they had reacted to the danger, the women had disappeared. It all happened so fast. He said he reported the incident to the appropriate authorities but was left with the impression that this was not a rare incident and to not expect a happy ending.

By the time we landed in Tenerife the story had spread to my group. They really kept it alive for the rest of the week in Tenerife. I'm willing to bet that even today there are members of that tour group who still tell the story. Heck. I do.

I also wonder what life has been like, these many years, for those two women. The kidnappings occurred in April of 1975. If anyone knows drop me a line. Erbitten.