

## COVID and our Morocco Trip

Faye Girsh

“Do you think we should chance it? I leave tomorrow so I guess we should make up our minds.” It was March 9 and my daughter had called every night that week from Australia while we weighed the pros and cons of carrying out our plans to visit Morocco for 16 days. Ominous signs were coming from China. But a world virus seemed so unlikely that we decided on YES, we’ll take a chance. I get to Marrakesh one day before Kamala does, and things might change. So— on March 10, I am off on my 7:45 AM from San Diego to Marrakesh via Newark and Geneva.



We had traveled together for the last five years — to the Camel Festival in Pushkar, India; to Papua New Guinea; a wonderful boat ride from Moscow to St Petersburg; last year to Ethiopia, and now to Morocco. I had booked a car and driver through a Moroccan tour agency with an agenda focused on Marrakesh and environs then a week in Fez — to return from Casablanca. Kamala’s two sons are now in college, so she was ready to explore and I was happy for her company even though I was used to traveling alone. Only downside: she’s a vegetarian. At my stops there were no indications of a forthcoming plague. No masks, no social distancing, busy airports, long lines, and crowded flights.



Abdul, who met me at the modern airport, said nothing about problems and delivered me — though narrow streets with donkey carts and food stalls — to my riad (small pension in an

old house). I had a delicious dinner there, walked around enjoying the sights and sounds of the Medina and woke the next morning to the call to prayer from our local mosque.



The next day Abdul drove me back to the airport where we waited an hour for Kamala to arrive. It had been a year since I’d seen her so was scrutinizing every face out of the gate for her features. After our mother-child reunion when she did come through, she told me the airports were closing, flights were cancelled,



people were dying from this virus all over the world. I was incredulous and astonished when I realized she was suggesting that we would have to cut our trip short, find flights out, and maybe go back in a few days. NO WAY! Many years ago, I visited Morocco with Kamala's late father. My memories were of colors, exotic architecture, great food, lovely people, amazing things to buy.

Though I had been to other parts of Morocco since then I had not visited Marrakesh and Fez for 30 years and was not about to turn around and leave!

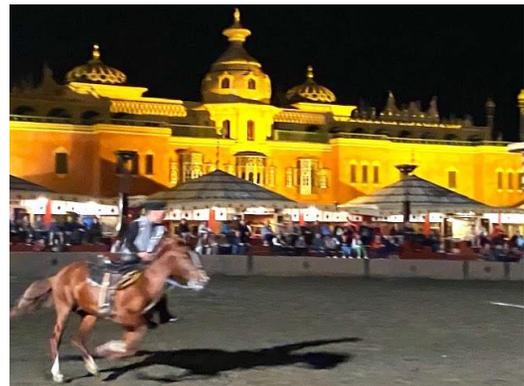


Putting that question aside we had a delightful day exploring the shops, the markets, the mosques, and the people in the day, and winding up at the main square where we watched the African dancers and snake charmers. Streets and squares were packed with tourists.



The next day we drove to the Atlas Mountains where we watched the international trekkers outfit donkeys for climbing the mountains. We discovered the goats in trees that result in Argon oil and tasted the oil with almonds and honey.

That night, back in Marrakesh, we enjoyed a spectacular show with Moroccan food, dancing and horseback displays. We were shocked to hear that this was the last night this legendary event would be open because of the virus. Even that night, sitting with a couple from Paris, we learned that half the reservations were not filled because people were leaving the city.



Undaunted, the next day Abdul drove us to the beautiful fishing village of Essaouira —full of tourists on the beach and boardwalk and in the narrow art-filled streets near our hotel.



I lunched on fresh-caught sardines in a charming outdoor cafe. But as we were enjoying the sun and the passing musicians the waiters were piling up the chairs anticipating closing the restaurant because of Covid.



We dined in a delightful restaurant that night but it too was closing as we left.

By this time Kamala was beginning to convince me that there was a real possibility of closing the country — thus shortening our exploration of Fez — and maybe not getting a flight out. After a 4 hour wait on the phone, we were able to reach United, which changed my later reservation to one leaving in a few days through Toronto. No sooner than that was confirmed did we hear that Canada was closed. I had to find yet another flight. Kamala also had to wait on line to change her flight and was now going earlier through Dubai to Brisbane. A friend emailed me to check out a web site, Cranky Concierge, which will obtain hard to find tickets for a price. Yet more time on line was successful in reaching them and finding flights. I was crushed because there were so many more things I wanted to see, and we had 9 more paid days left. My flight insurance had already let me know that pandemics were not included in the policy.



We had one more day, so we wandered the now almost empty streets of the medina. Empty, that is, of tourists, but the Moroccans were still out buying bread and fresh fruit and veggies. All museums were closed and restaurants, which had been so bustling, were locked. It was fun to wander the empty streets.

At one point we were followed by a friendly man on a bike, who seemed to be patiently leading us somewhere. The outcome was that Kamala was led to a carpet salesroom where she got the super-sales pitch, including mint tea — and bought a carpet.





We had a final dinner at our riad, where we were now the only guests. It was a delight to spend time with Mohammed who served us an interesting fruit and veggie tagine. He told us about his family and sang us a song in Arabic from his home town.



On March 17 Abdul drove us to the airport. He suggested we leave 4 hours before our flight to London because of the potential traffic. The airport was jammed with tourists leaving. It was a great breeding ground for the virus.

We did indulge in a last lunch which happened to be Japanese, a cuisine we both enjoyed since we had lived in Kyoto for a year when Kamala was 13. Then we boarded our crowded flight to London. At that time mask-wearing was not even on the radar. We were blithely inhaling all viruses in the airports and on the planes.



At Heathrow we said our goodbyes. Kamala caught her flight to Dubai, and I had a lovely, clean rest at the airport hotel, albeit I had a hard time finding it, exhaustedly lugging my luggage (no wonder it's called "luggage"). The next day I flew to Los Angeles on an Air New Zealand flight. Fortunately, the plane was not crowded.

Knowing that the flight would arrive in L.A. around 10PM and the connecting flight to San Diego was hours later I had decided to come home by Uber, which I had done coming back from Uganda last year. I indulged again — for under \$200. (BTW, my air fares for this and the last four trips was free because of accumulated frequent flyer miles on United.) We agreed that, though we had warning, we were glad we experienced the joys of this beautiful, exciting country and grateful we both stayed healthy.

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**The author.** Faye Girsh is a retired clinical and forensic psychologist. For the past 33 years she has been involved in the right to die movement having served as President of the Hemlock Society USA and the World Federation of Right to Die Societies and founder of the Final Exit Network and the Hemlock Society of San Diego. The described trip was in March 2020.

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