

Tim McGirk travels through Morocco — land of holy men, magicians, ill-tempered genies and she-demons with camel feet

ONE OF my first friends in Morocco, Mohammed el Fqhi, was a sorcerer's apprentice. I thought he would be a useful friend and travelling companion to have in a land where jinn (ill-tempered genies) live in the bathroom drains, and a she-demon with camel feet roams the countryside.

I wanted to go to the Souss with the Fqhi. The Souss is a long valley sheltered from the Sahara desert by the High Atlas mountains. There are waterfalls, children selling amethysts the size of ostrich eggs, goats that climb trees, and red citadel cities fragrant with orange blossoms.

The Souss is also known for its sorcerers and holy men, as the Fqhi informed me on setting out from the Moroccan capital, Rabat. The Fqhi was part Soussi and wore kohl around his dark eyes. He insisted on singing James Brown's "Sex Machine" on the long drive we took south from Rabat.

We had passed many Casablanca and were heading along the Atlantic coast to Essaouira, a fortified pirate town of blinding whiteness and indigo-coloured shutters, when the Fqhi explained why the Souss produced so many wizards. "Simple. There's no television. No distraction. They read the Koran all day long," he replied. Many holy men also wandered into the Atlas from the Sahara; their years in the wilderness had taught them the language of serpents and dances that could drive away demons. "My master is a Soussi," said the Fqhi.

I wasn't that impressed with the Fqhi's master. A friend had brought over some of those novelty pellets that you light on Guy Fawkes night and out curls a snake of ash. The magician was so amazed he used up the whole box of pellets in minutes, lighting up one after another until there were dozens of ash serpents being stirred around the roof terrace by the breeze. A real wizard, I thought dismissively, would be above such party tricks.

In Essaouira, constructed by a French architect who fell captive

The sorcerer's lazy apprentice

JON GARDEY



Tribal magic: a young Berber man in Tafraout

in 1764 to a pirate sultan, we visited the souk where artisans made boxes and tables and inlaid them with silver, ebony and lemonwood. A fishing boat had docked inside the sheltered harbour and we dined under the palm trees on fresh grilled sardines and a salad of grated carrots sweetened with orange juice.

Before dawn we left Essaouira, again heading south. "It was on this road," said the Fqhi, "that my uncle's business partner met Aisha Qandisha."

"Who?"

"Aisha Qandisha. Sometimes

"My uncle's friend saw a pretty young girl and stopped his lorry to give her a lift. She wore a beautiful kaftan. But when she went to climb in, the kaftan hiked up and my uncle saw that she was Aisha Qandisha, the demon with camel feet. Then he pushed her out of the lorry and sped away."

"Oh, stop it," I said.

"But you know the man, it's Abdullah Bachar," he protested.

"The one with the bad hand?"

"After he touched Aisha Qandisha, his hand was paralysed. The doctors can't do anything."

Nine kilometres north of Agadir, we turned off on route 7002 which twists through a tropical valley of palm and banana trees that seems like a steamy lost world. Beyond this oasis, the road climbs a spectacular gorge to Immouzer village. The local specialities are bread sprinkled with argan oil — extracted from the excrement of goats who climb the trees and eat the leaves — and thyme honey.

A dirt road leads on to Immouzer des Ida Outanane, a 45ft cascade into a clear rock pool. You can camp here and Restaurant la Mer serves excellent brochettes of kefta — minced lamb mixed with cumin and mint.

Back on the coastal road there are small coves and long white beaches before you reach Agadir, which you should drive through as quickly as possible. It was rebuilt after an earthquake in 1960 in the style of Benidorm or Torremolinos. It is ugly, pretentious and expensive.

We headed inland, south-east to Tafraout, an ancient pink-walled oasis set inside a crown of strange granite spires. In springtime you can smell the almond and orange blossoms of Tafraout long before you see the town. A room at the Hotel Redouane cost £4. The nearby Restaurant Etoile du Sud serves excellent chicken

and lemon tajines (spicy stews) in a long tent. The waiter sprinkles you first with rosewater.

Tafraout is close enough to the Saharan caravan routes to find Mauritanian silver bracelets and tooled leather from Mali. In the main square, Berbers in flowing turquoise robes watched twirling black dancers who, according to the Fqhi, were Gnaoui, a Sudanese cult of exorcists.

From Tafraout we explored the kasbahs — towering red fortresses which look like castles of sand perched precariously atop boulders along the Valley of Ameln which, in Berber, means "almond trees". All along the valley were marabouts — white shrines to Islamicise the supernatural spirits of the place.

The road loops back to Tafraout and from there we set off north to Taroudant, a town of high red ramparts which, for centuries, has guarded the narrow pass over the High Atlas to Marrakesh. The souk around Place Assarag resounds with the hammering of silversmiths and stonemasons.

The road to Marrakesh from Taroudant is 175km long and climbs to 7,000 feet, rising through palm groves, pine forests and villages clinging precariously to the steep mountainside like swallows' nests. We broke the journey at an inn, the Sanglier Qui Fume, near the village of Ourigane; it was run by a French matron who has found a ready supply of frog legs in the nearby stream. This vestige of French colonialism is a treat; the food is excellent, the wines are good and especially welcome after drinking so much sticky sweet mint tea in the abstemious villages on the Saharan side of the mountains.

The Fqhi and I arrived in Marrakesh, laden with amethysts, onyxes and fool's gold bought from children at the Tiz-n-Test summit. We went straight to the Djema-el-Fnaa — the Assembly of the Dead — and climbed to the CTM bus station roof café to watch the currents of people swirl around snake charmers, fortune tellers with tame pigeons, musicians and fire-eaters. The sunset lit the snows of the Atlas, beyond the palm groves, a blazing orange.

As we wandered down into the Djema-el-Fnaa, I wished that I had saved a few trick serpents of smoke from the Fqhi's sorcerer.

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