



PROFILE

TEXT AND
PHOTOS BY**DR SRIVIDHYA
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Dr Srividhya Jayant Iyer works with the anaesthetic department at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital. While she enjoys providing magical pain relief to labouring patients, she and her husband have a keen passion for travelling. Thankfully, their 14-month-old son seems to share the same sentiments.

Legend

1. Our camel ride through the stunning Sahara desert at Merzouga
2. A bird's eye view of the ancient city of Fes
3. The plentiful and colourful markets at Marrakech

We got out of our vehicle in the dead of the night and ambled towards our accommodation. There it stood – a four-storey, nondescript, sand-coloured building. *Surely there must have been some mistake*, I thought to myself as my husband, Jayant, and the rest of the family gave me looks of concern and consternation. Being the group's travel planner, I was certain I'd gotten luxury on a budget when I made the booking online. In the photos, the place seemed impeccable. Yet there stood this building in the middle of Marrakech.

And then we entered.

Inside was what one could only describe as an oasis in a desert. Two large heated and surreally lit pools greeted us as we were invited to a divan for some Moroccan tea. The rooms were large with beautiful Moroccan decor. My husband remarked that all he needed were some belly dancers to complete the picture, and the rest of the family tried to assuage my slight irritation with compliments about the choice of booking.

This typified our Moroccan experience – Morocco proved to be a hidden gem, with much to offer beneath the rather lacklustre surface.

We are not the greatest winter travellers, so when we were recommended to do a Moroccan tour following our cousin's wedding in Lyon over Christmas to escape the sub-zero temperatures, we quickly took it up. Morocco seemed like an interesting option and none of us really knew what to expect.

We made our booking with Around Morocco, a travel agency run by Lahcen, who came up with a detailed

itinerary and a personalised tour for the family. I daresay Lahcen is among one of the best travel agents I've come across.

Morocco is a strip of land in the north-western edge of Africa and a narrow body of water separates it from Spain. The great Sahara Desert also begins here. Our travels took us through the length of this beautiful country as we traversed various landscapes – lush greenery, snow-capped mountains, hilly terrains and the desert – all compactly packed within one nation.

A BREATHTAKING WELCOME

We began our tour in the enchanting city of Marrakech, also sometimes known as "the red city of Morocco". We felt transported back in time to perhaps a hundred years earlier, when exploring this beautiful city with its multiple alleyways, colourful markets, red-bricked buildings with huge ornamental doors and hundreds of minarets. Add to this picture the donkey carts on the alleys, along with storytellers, singers, sorcerers and snake charmers all competing for





another beautiful “riad” (traditional Moroccan-styled hotel) was to be our accommodation for two more nights.

Fes, often referred to as the “imperial city”, is yet another world heritage city and is believed to be the largest urban car-free city in the world! This ancient capital has much to offer and one can easily get lost in its numerous medinas, 13 mighty gates, eight miles of sandstone walls and some 10,000 alleys! Another knowledgeable tour guide from Lahcen’s team led us through this fascinating city and took us to visit interesting and important cultural sites. During the course of the day, we also managed to squeeze in a much needed shopping break for beautiful Moroccan decor and silk scarfs.

THE VILLAGE OF BLUE

Our last stop was Chefchaouen, the beautiful blue mountain village on the Rif Mountains in northwest Morocco, close to the southern tip of Spain. The walls are blue, the stairs are blue, the doors are blue, everything seems blue, and we were mesmerised by the beauty of this simple village. Although it is an old and small village, it has the comforts of great quality accommodation and restaurants of varying delicious cuisines. Our two days in Chefchaouen were simply amazing and provided us with a much needed rest and time to enjoy the beautiful blue surroundings before making our way back to Rabat, the capital city of Morocco, through scenic roads lined with orange and olive trees. We spent a few hours touring Rabat, which seemed like any typical capital city, before heading to the airport for our journey home.

A TRIP WELL WORTH

Overall, we were all thrilled with our trip and were glad to have spent our holiday in such a beautiful country that has so much to offer. We have sent quite a few of our friends to Morocco after our delightful experience and we’d strongly recommend it to anyone who is keen on an exotic getaway with Arabian and Berber hospitality. ◆

your eye – it was truly fascinating. Our tour guide for Marrakech, arranged for by Lahcen, was well spoken and knowledgeable, and took us to all the important cultural and historical sites. He even went out of his way to get our camera fixed when it broke down on the first day of our trip! Overall, we had a fantastic start to our holiday and were all geared up to see the rest of this beautiful country.

SIGHTS TO BEHOLD

The next part of our journey was a road trip with Mohamed, our driver and guide, along the scenic and winding roads of the Tizi n’Tichka mountain pass. Passing through Berber villages and overlooking the

snow-capped High Atlas mountains, we were on our way towards the town of Ouarzazate, where we spent a night at a charming hotel with a stunning view of the Dades Valley. Along the way, we also passed numerous interesting sights, including the famous “road of a thousand kasbahs” and the “Ait Benhaddou”, a UNESCO world heritage site where the famous and enormous 19th century kasbah stands. It is also the site of numerous Hollywood movie shoots and movie prop ups – including movies like *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Gladiator* and more recently, the popular HBO series, *Game of Thrones*!

Next, we drove towards Merzouga, where we got to refresh with some mint tea at Lahcen’s humble home, before making our way towards the Sahara Desert, where we camped overnight. Ahmed was our guide for that evening; he helped us onto our camels (did I mention we each had a camel?) and led the way towards the remote camp he had set up for us at the desert. The camel ride started off a little bumpy, but soon became enjoyable as we rode through the beautiful sand dunes while enjoying a spectacular sunset. It was dark by the time we arrived at the tent, which was all set up with plush blankets and pillows to keep us warm through the night. Ahmed cooked us a tasty traditional Moroccan dinner, which we thoroughly enjoyed while sitting around the campfire, and we spent a long time stargazing below the magical night sky before retiring to our warm and cosy beds.

The next morning, we rode back to town on our camels and were back on the road again towards Fes, where

