

# Marrakech

## Through Place Djemma El-Fna

Marrakech - By Dominick Merle

Place Djemma El Fna, Morocco - What in the world am I doing here again? That's admittedly not a very wise way to begin a travel article, but logic and wisdom have no place in this near indescribable setting where pure pandemonium has ruled for the past 800-odd years.

I'm standing in the middle of Place Djemma El Fna square in Marrakech's old quarter, surrounded by the strangest assortment of characters gathered anywhere on the face of the earth. In fact, the name of the square translates roughly to "End of the World."

There are snake charmers waving aging toothless cobras, acrobats, musicians, spell weavers, storytellers, voodoo and black magic practitioners, tattoo and henna painters, and herbal remedies and cures of every description, including one man who tossed a blanket on the ground and set up a dental practice, pulling aching teeth on the spot with pliers-like instruments. No telling

what tomorrow will bring, as new "acts" appear almost daily.

Place Djemma El Fna was originally a square where public beheadings took place, and later became the traditional meeting place of peasants and merchants from Marrakech and the nearby mountain villages. That was eight centuries ago. It hasn't changed much since then, except perhaps getting a little daffier by the day.

In the mornings, this vast square overflows with carts of fruit and roasted grains, spice sellers, the colorful "guerrabs" (water vendors) with their leather bottles and metal drinking cups, basket sellers and ironmongers.

The guerrabs are easy to spot with their outlandish cone-shaped hats, red costumes and metal cups dangling down each side. But they rarely sell water these days, earning money instead by posing for tourist pictures. "Some don't even have water in those pouches," my guide Abdel remarked.

That's when I arrived on this, my fourth visit, still wondering why I returned, but knowing full well that if there is a fifth visit I'll undoubtedly be back here once more, because it is as fascinating as it is strange. No one can ignore it; even UNESCO finally added it to its prestigious list of world heritage sites.

Thousands, perhaps as many as ten ➤

ساحة جامع الفنا  
Jamaa El-Fna Square.

thousand, people make their way to this large square daily. A man carrying two monkeys wants me to take a picture. So does the flute player with the old toothless cobra. Two young men nearby stage a mock boxing match, then suddenly stop and sing a couple of duets. For some reason, it seemed perfectly normal. As you weave through the square, the sights, sounds—and smells—are often overwhelming. At dusk, another transformation takes place. Men begin arriving with their long wooden tables and cooking utensils. Soon, the hot food stalls start smoking. There are rows and rows of spiced meats and fish, varieties of couscous, roasted lamb and many stew-like dishes prepared in a "tajine," an earthenware plate with a distinctive conical cover.

And then, as the sun sets, "a thousand and one lanterns," or so they say, light up the square. Whatever the number, it is a magnificent sight. The feasting and performances last until the early hours of the morning. Then Place Djemma El Fna rests for a few hours until the fruit and spice merchants begin arriving to kick off the next day's show.

While the square is undoubtedly Marrakech's, and perhaps Morocco's biggest tourist attraction, you'd be hard pressed to find a city official who would sing its praises. They'd much rather discuss the many upscale hotels, restaurants and museums.

Beyond the square is an intricate maze of narrow alleys, protected from the sun by slatted awnings. This is the main "souk," one of the world's largest crafts markets. There are many bargains in leather goods, copperware, jewelry and carpets—and just as many ripoffs.

Vendors sometimes ask 20 times more than the fair value of an item, especially if you are alone. If you negotiate down to half that amount, they still walk away with an outlandish profit. Know your product and roughly what it's worth, or travel with someone who does.

Your nose will alert you as you approach the spices and foods. The aromas of saffron, cumin, black pepper, ginger, cloves and orange flowers intermingle into an intoxicating bouquet. There are stalls where various nuts and dried fruit are piled high like pyramids. They are displayed on an upward slant with the vendor visible from the waist up in the center. He enters from a crawlspace below and spends the better



السجاد المراكشي.  
Carpets Market.



التوابل المغربية.  
Spice Sellers.

part of his day there, a scoop in one hand and a scale in the other.

There are said to be more than 5,000 individual shops in the souk, some as tiny as the average size refrigerator. Whatever the exact number, one can easily get lost in the winding maze of alleys, but most vendors will point the way out for you.

We made several visits to Place Djemma El Fna during our stay in Marrakech-- at early morning, mid-afternoon and late evening, watching it transform into a bizarre three-ring circus. No two performances were alike.

Abdel promised I would see something even more spectacular the next day--goats that climb trees. So early the next morning we drove west towards the seaside resort of Essaouira. The goats have a sweet tooth for the leaves of the argan tree, which is indigenous to Morocco and grows only in this region.

The animals have become adept climbers to get to these tasty leaves. But this treetop grazing drives the farmers wild, because the goats also eat some of the nuts from the argan tree, and from these nuts comes the most prized and expensive oil of Morocco, which is used sparingly on salads or as a bread dip. The oil is so treasured that some Moroccans carry small vials of it with them and add a drop or two to their food in restaurants.

"We may see them soon," Abdel said, after

about an hour's drive west of Marrakech. And almost right on cue, just ahead we saw several parked vans where this rare spectacle was taking place. There, perched on the limbs of a tree about 20 feet high, were a dozen goats, looking like highwire performers.

The nimble animals seemed indifferent to our presence, casually nibbling on the leaves. They were black, brown and white and stood almost motionless on the limbs, resembling oversized Christmas tree ornaments. As we headed back to Marrakech, the goats were still dining in the treetops.

"Now," Abdel said with a smile, "What do you think of that?"

"Has anyone ever tried to plant one of these trees in Place Djemma El Fna," I asked.

(Dominick Merle is Canadian Director and one of the co-founders of the International Food, Wine & Travel Writers Assn.). ■

#### IF YOU GO:

*No visas or medical shots are required for North Americans, only a valid passport.*

*Royal Air Maroc has nonstop flights to Casablanca from Montreal and New York, with connections to Marrakech. Check with your travel agent for other airlines with services to Morocco.*

*For further information contact the Morocco National Tourist offices at 1800 McGill College Ave., Suite 2450, Montreal H3A 3J6, at 20 E. 46th St, Suite 1201, New York, NY 10017, or visit the website [www.morocco-tourism.org.ma](http://www.morocco-tourism.org.ma)*