

Morocco March 16 - 27

Neither Mona nor I had ever been to Morocco. We wanted to experience it in depth. This is a land in Northwest Afrika just across the Mediterranean from Spain and Portugal with a unique mix of European, African and even some Jewish roots. The early indigenous people dating back 2000 years are called Berbers (derived from the Romans calling them barbarians). After the arrival of Muslim Arabs around 800 A.D. the country became over 95% Sunni Muslim. Any description of Moroccan people must include their Islamic beliefs since they are strong followers of their interpretation of Islam which is quite moderate and surprisingly accepting of religious differences. This is certainly not where extremism comes from. We were frequently surprised by their acknowledgement of common roots with Judaism, with Abraham as common father and strong belief of a single God (Allah). Wherever you go you will hear of Jewish influence and acceptance. ("There is no question the Jews were the first in Jerusalem, it is their land and the First Temple was real.

It also struck us how impactfully its Islamic observance has influenced its styles, customs, and designs to the point of monotonous re-use of common design elements that are either floral or geometric in very specific ways. These are not just fresh artist-conceived designs, they have shape (with some variation) and meaning.

While obviously attempting to modernize in some ways, Morocco reveres its past, its multi-faceted extraordinary crafts skills (hand crafts that is) and its extensive dependance on farm products and animals internally and for export.

First to Fes

We landed in Casablanca and immediately departed to Fes by private driver and wonderful guide Ahmed Sellam (also Joseph). Casablanca is a big, modern city. Fes is awesome for its history, antiquity and its full array of craftsman and markets (souks) of all types.



Farmland everywhere on the way from Casablanca to Fes, which is the most complete medieval city in the Arab world.



Arriving at the magnificent Riad Fes. Carvings in plaster and wood are like this everywhere. Fes, and especially its oldest area called the Medina, a labyrinth of narrow streets and ancient buildings, is like stepping back in time to the Middle Ages, 800 A.D.



The souks are very narrow streets (no cars, but yes, motorcycles and donkeys. Here you can find anything being made and sold, all made locally right before our eyes, by an unending gathering of craftsmen.



"The pharmacy Jessica Alba shopped in."



The pharmacies – with potions for skin, disease, pain, health claims ... you name it – Mona bought a bunch. We'll let you know if she gets even younger looking. On the screen is a video of tree-climbing goats that gobble the big Argan nuts from the Argan trees. They chew and eat the fleshy covering and spit out the large pits which are collected below and cracked for the seeds that make Argan oil – reportedly the most expensive and sought-after oil in the world.



He is hand chipping, carving and inlaying silver. That one is now ours



Hand-making copper items



Leather tannery vats – huge – that's a guy dragging whole animal skins to dissolve hair and prep.



Chipping tile pieces into shapes, one by one



Making the pottery ...



... and then hand-painting with no stencils.



The rug weaving was fascinating. Many are quickly made – but some are made by figure-8 knotting using dyed wool with hand motions so practiced that they hardly need to guide by sight – they feel the vertical guides and pull down the correct colors as needed for the patterns.

They work intensively but no more than 2 hours at a time. Mona tried her hand at it, and reports she wouldn't last five minutes.



No, we're not bringing those Fes hats home.



We had talked about a custom size rug for our dining room, but before Morocco we figured that would just never happen.

Here we designed the pattern, the size and thickness. It will employ four women from this women-only coop, each weaving two hours per day for six months. We especially liked supporting the women – and we'll have our custom designed Berber rug with progress photos. Cool.



Donkey taxi!

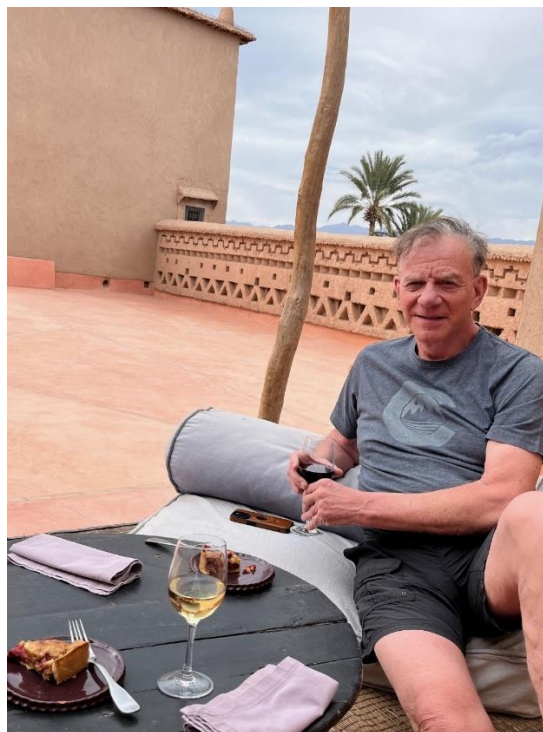


Here we stopped so we could watch the women picking the orange blossoms for teas, oils – just about everything. Wherever you go, the whole country smells amazing from either Jasmine or Orange blossoms and oils.

Mona will always associate the aromas of Jasmine and Orange blossoms with Morocco.

Here the view of the Medina, the oldest part of Fes.





Ahh a bit of relaxation after all that tiring shopping touring, crafting – this is a country that doesn't sit around waiting for government handouts – they are working, making, selling and even exporting. None of this is Chinese copies – we saw it all made right there in the shops by hand.



Mona found her fireplace – right there in our room.

The Western (Moroccan) Sahara

After two days in Fes we went to the Atlas Mountains, a huge range that has some peaks reaching 12,000'. We stayed overnight in the mountains and then traveled to the Sahara – a total change in scenery. I had been looking forward to this for a long time – and it did not disappoint.



Here everyone can be an amazing photographer. It looks serene, but we got a taste of how hostile the desert can be: The super-fine sand-filled winds are tough for walking and even breathing. No wonder the desert people wear full head scarves even around their faces.



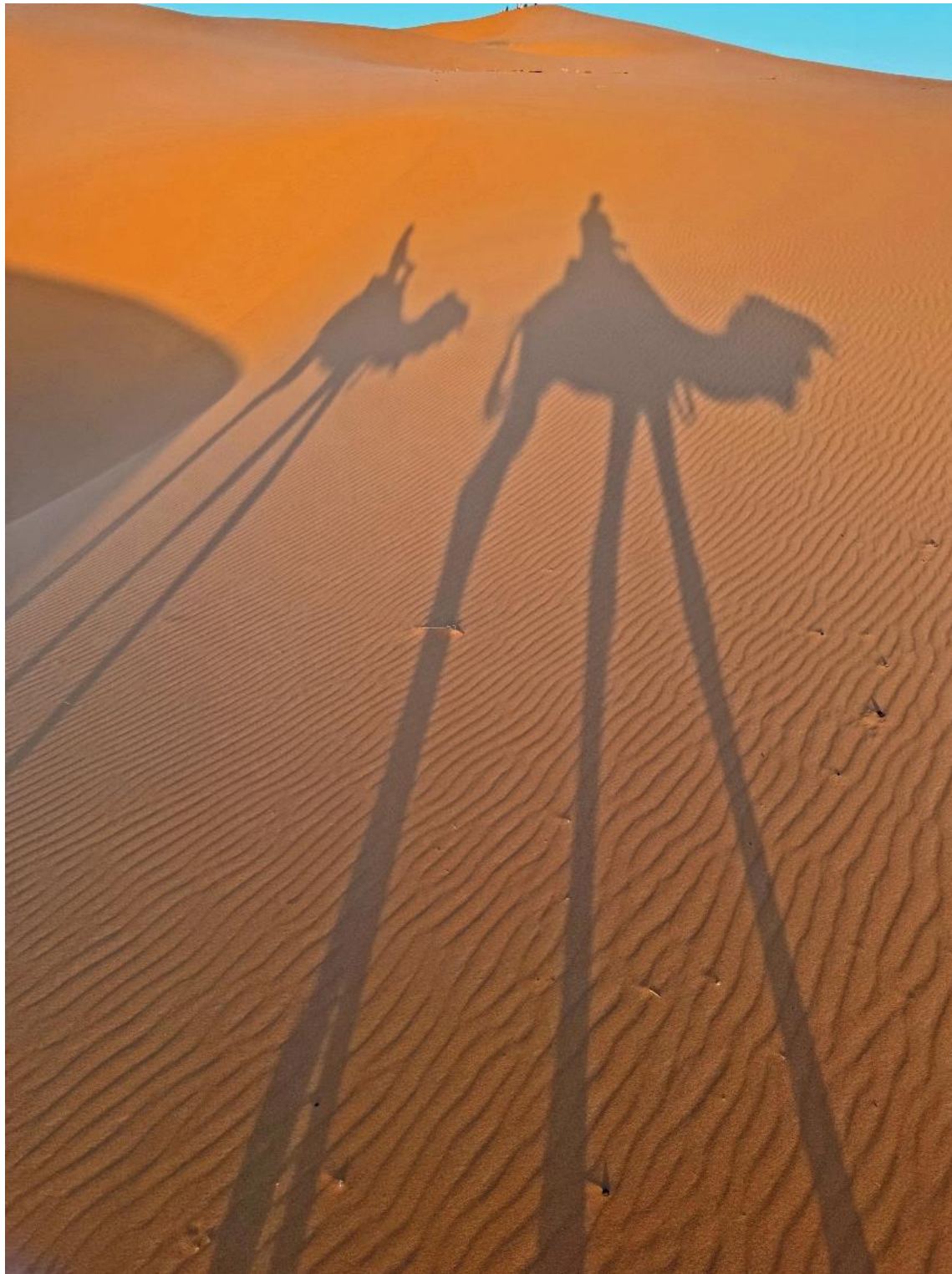
You need camels out there – they can go for a month on their internal water tanks – but need food daily. So, were we roughing it? Nah, our camp was so cool...



We got to camp at 5 pm, sunset was at about 6:30, so we hopped on some camels and headed to the highest dune to watch the sunset. Hopefully the pictures do some justice.













We got back to our tents, washed up and headed for dinner. For most of the trip we had traditional Moroccan food which was a full spate of vegetables grown locally, lamb (tons of sheep and goats around) and beef cooked with a broad array of local spices.

After dinner the staff broke out the music – great – and great fun!



The next morning, I got up before sunrise and hiked out into the desert solo – at first a joy as here – and then the wind turned ferocious and I could barely breathe or see. I don't think I'd last a day in it.

The Gerber Nomads



The wind did subside, and we got a desert guide to take us into the nomad country. We had heard so much about the original indigenous people, the Berbers. They tended their sheep, roamed the Western Sahara, had no religion and survived for many decades in these hostile conditions. They built makeshift housing and tents – only moving if they need to search for new water - and they are still out there.

We learned that when the Jews fled Jerusalem, many fled south including from Spain into Morocco. Some of the Berber population took on Judaism that became a significant part of the country. Much later, many sought better incomes returning to what became Israel. Today there are well over one million Jews in Israel originally Moroccan. Today there are just thousands of Jews in Morocco but they are mostly the wealthy who stayed behind.

Once Islam began spreading, the Arabs brought it to Morocco and the Berbers as well as the immigrating Arabs almost uniformly became Muslim – initially Shia but then converting completely to Sunni, reportedly a more moderate version of Islam. This country is VERY accepting of all faiths – it's nothing like what is found in parts of the Middle East.





Inside Berber nomad homes.

Our guide for the desert, Ahmed (different from our driver who we would rejoin once leaving the Sahara) is shown here – his family are Berber nomads as was he at an earlier age, but he managed to exit that life and have a home and car and an occupation of guiding in the desert.



Ahmed got us invited into a Berber home where we had tea which they call Berber whiskey. The whole country has a style of pouring tea which is from up high- so that the tea surface will foam and the tea will cool slightly.



There we sat and talked for quite a while about his experiences in the desert and about what he knew about the world. It was fascinating and endearing.

He had a mobile phone and showed us some of his photos from the desert – soon I was showing him photos from the Colorado mountains. He (as well as everyone in Morocco) has WhatsApp and right there sent us some of his photos, and I sent him a bunch of mine.

It was a super sweet time.



Here is one of Ahmed's photos of an Acacia tree framed in a sunset.



Ahmed Merzouga – a Berber from Merzouga (prior nomad) in a nomad hut with us in the Moroccan Sahara



Amazingly every now and then you can see a lone Acacia tree in the desert. There are places where water can be found only 7 – 10 meters below surface – below is a well dug that deep for water.



Momma camel and her suckling baby.



A Moroccan musical group and a dancing daughter.

Some of the music sounds very blues-like. They call African Summer Lounge music, and they are aware it has influenced early jazz in the United States.

Truthfully, we had enough of the desert after two days – the sand is incredibly fine, and with the winds blowing, the sand gets everywhere, but we are so happy having the experience.

After 4-wheeling, slipping and sliding up and down sand dunes we got back to the edge of the Sahara to a town called Merzouga where we rejoined our guide, Joseph. In Merzouga he introduced us to the well-promoted fossils that come from the area – this part of the Sahara was once a sea millions of years ago – and they are constantly finding sea -life fossil remains – fossilized squid, snails and other animals that no longer exist.



We toured a workshop where the fossil diggings are carefully restored and polished into platters, table tops and slabs – fabulous works, see a table here:

We escaped buying big things – but a cheese platter, butter dish ... who could resist?

to Skoura and Dar Ahlam

Next stop was halfway to Marrakech to the village of Skoura – it is remote and mostly ancient ruins of casbahs and riads. A riad is a house, usually made of brick, mud, straw and clay with an interior opening to the sky, kind of an atrium. A casbah is a larger complex with



towers on each corner, entirely walled and with lots of rooms. It is for a larger family or even a group of families. We stayed in an amazing place called Dar Ahlam which is in the “Small Luxury Hotel” guide. It deserves to be there.

Everything is authentic including growing all their own vegetables and spices and baking their own bread. This is a retreat meant for relaxation, romance and pampering. Every meal was served just to the two of us, each in a different romantic setting.

For our first breakfast we were invited out into the gardens where a woman had lit a fire early in the morning in a clay urn that acted as an oven. She kneaded dough made of wheat and corn meal for bread. Then she flattened and pasted it on the inner side of the urn. You can see one already stuck there and she’s making another. When the bread finished baking, she pried it off the oven and handed it to our waiter. We then went into one of the many private settings, some inside some outside for our breakfast.



And this is what we get, just for starters. The bread is on the plate on the right and the tray has no less than 9 (count ‘em) homemade jams – almond, orange, date, strawberry, apple ... plus various juices.

It was a real jam session ...



And then came the rest of the breakfast.



For our excursion, we joined up with a local guide to explore the area – hiking/walking through 5th and 14th century village remains, some still inhabited. As with all the guides, I peppered him for historical and Islamic info. The answers were direct and non-defensive. They hate the terrorists too.

At one of the ruins, they were waiting for us. We walked up lots of circular mud stairs and there was a table and lunch. We couldn't imagine how they prepared a full meal with no running water or electricity.

For dinner it was all romance. Candles, fireplace, beautiful setting ...



To Marrakech

Next we drove over the Atlas Mountains to Marrakech. And what a drive that was – this is a huge mountain range and getting through it - well picture Independence Pass times 20 or the Red Mountain Pass out of Ouray times about 5. Countless switchbacks, rugged terrain. Mona got car sick for the first time in her life, but the patch worked well. Fortunately, no snow, although amazingly, the very next day it snowed like it was Aspen up there and we saw this behind us.



On the way, I texted John Galante in Aspen who had set the trip up for us. I was raving about Dar Ahlam to which he replied, *"you ain't seen nothing yet."*

We wondered what that could possibly mean. Well, we found out – our final four days was in Marrakech at the Royal Monsour – it is a hotel built by the King of Morocco inside the Palace grounds with an unlimited budget – i.e. no budget at all. It was built with 1500 craftsmen of every discipline imaginable, and they were clearly challenged to bring their A+ game. The place is beyond words and beyond pictures, here is a feeble try.

Its design is consistent with the Islamic-influenced use of two basic patterns, geometric which you see here and floral. The tile work is usually on floors and up to eye level and above is carved from plaster with similar carvings in various woods. Every ceiling in the entire place has a different pattern, art and materials. Everywhere you looked you had to look for a while to see the craftsmanship.





part of the bar



part of the lobby



the door to our "room" which was one of the smaller ones. Inside atrium entry.





Our first floor, one side



other side, bar, etc.

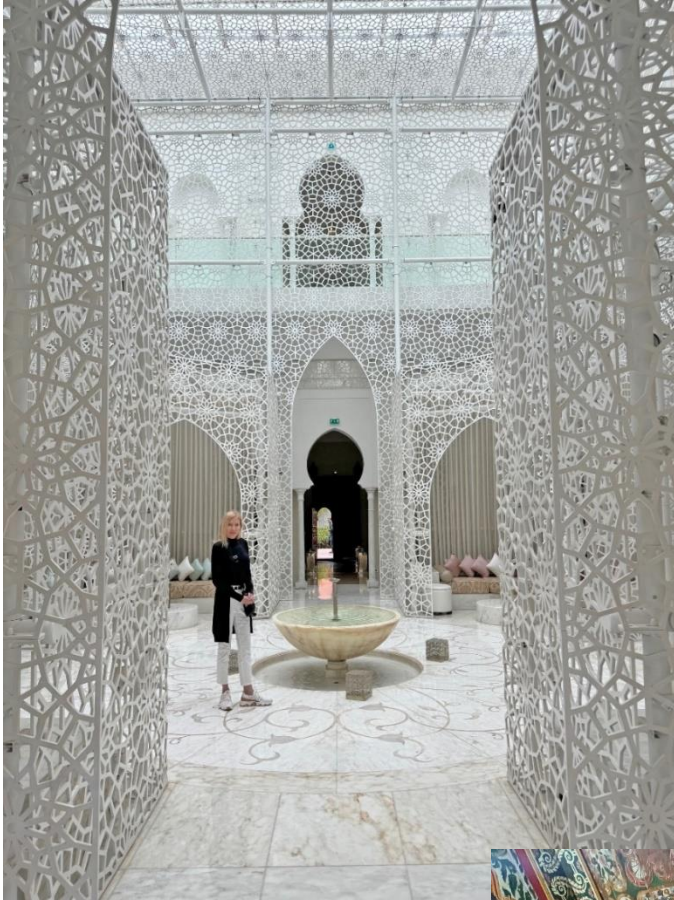


Welcoming treats and view to our atrium

The second floor was the bedroom – equally decorated.

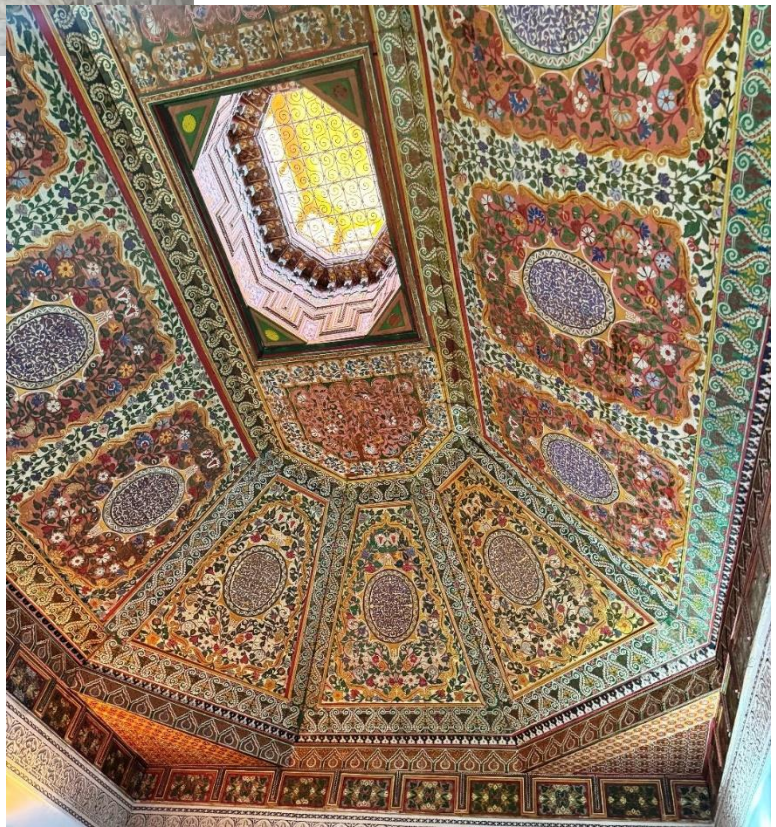
The third floor was our private pool and view to the sky.

I can't imagine what the suites were like.



This is the entry to the spa.

Every single ceiling, dozens of them, were differently crafted, each a work of art.





Four restaurants, one cooler than the previous one but the Moroccan Restaurant was amazing. All that metal is hand-crafted silver.

And then there were the gardens – more amazing than many botanical gardens I have seen.

Some of the trees were clearly over 100 years old – I understand they were transplanted but I have no idea how – they were huge and clearly very old and everywhere.



This is ONE tree.



Plus a huge area where they grow all their own vegetables and spices. It just doesn't end. We took one whole day off just to stay on the property to walk around and enjoy the enormous property.

I know this is the longest picture story I've written – but not sure what to leave out – haven't even said much about the rest of Marrakech yet. We did eat outside the hotel twice, once at a restaurant called Al Fassia managed and owned wholly by women – Mona ordered a salad to share with me – but out came 14 small plates plus lettuce, each prepared with different spices and herbs !! They use so many dishes we couldn't imagine where they keep them.



We spent a day walking through the Marrakech souks including the Jewish sector that used to be caravan central for commerce.



Our guide for this day was Mohammed, quite the historian and spice expert.

I think half the people in Morocco are named Mohammed that we learned usually means first-born and very high honor to be named after the Prophet. The second most popular name is Ahmed (a component of Mohammed)



We spent a half day at a cooking school, learning how to make the most popular Moroccan dishes and work with all the spices and vegetables. We even made bread.



The finished result – chicken, veggies, soups, bread - we even learned how to make a tomato-skin rose



On the most popular square in Marrakech, Mona was charming a colorful old guy ...



So I got busy charming three deadly snakes. That is a Cobra in front, a Viper around my neck and another nasty one slithering on the ground nearby!



Elsewhere on the square a guy's monkey
jumped in my arms



... and then proceeded to jump on my head!
Mona wouldn't go near me until I had a
triple scrub shower and especially a
shampoo.

That is our trip – although we still had to return. We took Air France from Marrakech to Paris, overnighted for a morning United flight back to the U.S. Wouldn't you know it, for the first time ever in all my travels, I left my laptop in the seat pocket of the Air France plane. That was REALLY bad news because while I had backup – it was going to take me at least a week to get a new machine, restore and install all the apps – and I had my big CEO Roundtable to run in just 6 days – ugh, I was distressed.

I called Air France customer support, but it was closed for the day and no overnight service. Doomed.

That's when Mona kicked into action – it was 10 pm and fortunately we were overnighting at the CDG Hilton, just a train-ride back to the terminals. She scraped me up, dragged my depressed ass back to the airport and found almost no-one still around. She found one Air France person on their way home who directed us to the luggage room, but it was closed. She found a maintenance guy who said downstairs there was a non-descript phone on the wall – that we should pick up and someone might answer.

We went there and there was an old banged-up phone, but the wire was ripped out of the wall! The odds got even lower that I was going to get that laptop back. We saw a security guy – told him our story and he said there was another old phone at the other end. Now it's 10:30pm.



We got there, saw an old Princess wall phone near a window, picked it up, heard no dial tone but a guy came to the window on the other side! I told him my woe and he disappeared, only to return a few minutes later to say he got a guy to go to the plane and check our seat.

Fifteen minutes later the guy came back all proud (well he should be) that he had found my machine and there it was in his hands! Maybe I got a bit of Allah rubbed off on me out in the desert?

My real thanks go to Mona – a woman of action and never giving up!