

GUTSY WOMEN TRAVEL THE ROAD TO MARRAKECH AND SO MUCH MORE...

Besides the movie Casablanca, (it wasn't even filmed there), the Crosby, Stills & Nash ditty, "Road to Marrakech" and a love for Berber carpets and stews made in a pyramid shaped clay tagine...my knowledge about the topography, culture, religion and people of Morocco before my recent 15 day **Morocco Sahara Odyssey** with **Gutsy Women Travel** left much to my imagination.



Journeying alongside 13 women from around the world, our small group of fearless trekkers ranged in age from 22 to 74...but we found common ground in this magical country breaking down ill-conceived notions about the Muslim religion and lifestyle and most surprisingly... the role of Moroccan women. The women we met included the most traditional and religious donning head-to-toe scarves and robes with only their eyes peering through, more westernized career girls wearing designer jeans and t-shirts and even belly dancers in scanty costumes...each calling Morocco

their home and every one of them as interesting as interested in us, and as smart and savvy as women all over the world.

Besides visiting the palaces, parks, mosques, squares, souks, medinas, walls and impressive gates of the royal cities Marrakech, Rabat, Meknès, Fès and port town Casablanca, we stayed in traditional colorfully tiled riads, camped in carpeted nomadic tents amongst the sand dunes of the Sahara, meandered among lush olive, date and fig groves, soaked in Aspen filled forests, dipped our toes in magical lakes and river gorges, traversed the rough canyons of the Atlas Mountains, played in the movie capital Ouarzazate , shopped and haggled in the oldest Arab medina –all while sharing stories and immersing ourselves into the daily life of both city dwellers and nomads as their welcomed guests.

Morocco is a country cloaked in mystery and intrigue, palm trees and mosques. From the souks and medinas drawing visitors to explore a labyrinth of alleys and shops, to its intricate craftsmen, and a wide variety of exotic foods and spices to its more cosmopolitan cities. What set **Gutsy Women Tours** apart from other travel companies are first and foremost their “women only” small group tours that allow you to really see and do it all. When *not* traveling with a caravan of tourists you have the opportunity to go off the beaten path. Second to none are **Gutsy’s** local tour guides – who seem to know everyone and offer a friendly high five and kind word to all those who crossed our path (incredible for a country of 33 million). Mohamed Ait Maskour our guide was wonderful and knows the inside outs of both his country’s history and current structure and took us well beyond typical tourist sites to “local” food markets and street side farm stands, regional cooking lessons, religious instruction with a Islamic Imam, Alfalfa harvesting with farmers, school instruction with children and our daily Arabic language lessons providing the opportunity for more intimate first hand access to the locals.

Our travel coincided with one of the biggest Muslim celebrations Eid al-Adha a holiday that involves animal sacrifice, prayers and family gatherings. The days leading up to the celebration include acquiring a lamb for the feast and we stopped to speak with farmers and families herding their “lambs” via car, truck and cart. The celebration day itself begins with

morning prayers, (preceded by the countrywide, ever present and very moving “call to prayer” you hear five times daily). This holiday encourages all to share food and money with the poor, family and friends and we joined in on the celebration, and eating and conversing like locals.

Camels play an important role in Morocco and I was offered *thousands* by several men along with marriage proposals (alas I remain single). A highlight included our camel ride in the Sahara complete with a mini rain and sand storm right out of the movies. Spending a day on a camel is a wonderful way to ride through the arid beauty and orange desert sand dunes with glimpses of distant mountain summits, and unforgettable sunrises and sunsets. I also ate my first Camel burger (tender, delicious) at the trendy rooftop Clock Café (locations in Fez and Marrakech) and learned the proper way to grab, roll and eat *couscous* Moroccan style with your right hand.

Other highlights included stripping down and visiting a local Hammam (bathhouse) where we joined Islamic women in their ritual of hygiene and purification; afterward, we went to a local home and had henna tattoos a traditional beauty ritual. Another day we broke into smaller groups of four and spend an afternoon with a local “Berber” household working in the kitchen and learning about local foods, spices and farming, sitting with younger children and teenagers comparing favorite sports, dating traditions and social media, as well as conversing with multi-generational family members to discuss everything from politics, to economic conditions, education to gender roles, even tough topics like homosexuality and terrorism – no subject off limits and each only presenting the geographical and religious differences between us as bridges to our commonality and shared human spirit. In the end each group was dressed in traditional Moroccan clothing, walked through the village and assembled for a group fashion show – what fun!

Visiting Morocco is a must and **Gutsy Women Travel** is an excellent way to get you there. Here is what some of my fellow Gutsy women had to say about the journey...

Who would have thought that traveling with a bunch of women that I never

met would be so much fun? Just when I thought nothing could top the last adventure, another one would occur. The Bedouin woman on the side of the road inviting us into her tent for tea, watching the sheep in trucks awaiting to be sacrificed for the holiday, trying not to get lost in the souks of Fez, 14 half-naked ladies in the Hammam getting scrubbed down and having buckets of water thrown at us, picking out henna patterns, bargaining in Marrakech, and of course the Sahara and our wind and rain adventure on a camel. Did we really do all that? Most important, however, is the friendships we made and the Moroccan people we met. It was quite a cultural and educational experience for me. As I learned about Islam and saw people in their home environment, I realized that beneath the politics there are more similarities than differences between us.

Marge Carty, Boca Raton, FL

I loved getting to know everyone--the women, the guides, the people we encountered along the way. I think it was great that we had a head start knowing one another through the group emails leading up to the trip. I had a few personal firsts on this trip; first time using a squat toilet, first time baring (nearly) all in front of 13+ other women at the hammam, first time riding a camel (and eating one), first time getting henna. I loved every minute of it!

Carolyn Rupert, Albuquerque, NM

Besides being an overall incredible experience, I am struck over and over again by how gracious and generous the Moroccan people were, inviting this group of total strangers into their homes and sharing, in some cases, what little they had, with us. We probably all had more packed in our suitcases for this one trip than many of them owned in total, but there was little hesitation to share with us. I can't imagine pulling up to the front of an American's house and receiving this same kind of gracious treatment. Traveling with other women--It's the best!! Women experience travel in a more humanistic way, connecting with places and people from the heart and soul. Gutsy give us lots of those places and people with which to do just that kind of connection. Women also create family as they travel, weaving 14 strangers from different parts of the country and world, into a sisterhood intertwining our new experiences in Morocco with our life experiences from home into an incredibly rich tapestry of connection. -I am fortunate enough

to have now done 2 trips with Gutsy and I think what's unique is first, women traveling with women. To that is added so many opportunities to take the experience deeper, to connect as people regardless of language or culture. Gutsy goes the extra mile to make this an experience to last a lifetime. Each picture I look at has a thousand other pieces because we met the people and the culture up close and personal.
Pat Paul, Fair Oaks, CA

I have been telling my friends and family that the mountains of sand took up half of the sky! And we couldn't have paid or arranged for the sand storm while camel riding. I best time I had on the entire trip was the desert

Diana Gasper, Bettendorf, IA

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Founder of C.I. Visions, Inc. the beauty, fashion and lifestyle public relations and marketing agency and recognized for her talent in creative marketing, Carol has owned and operated C.I. Visions, Inc. for over 30 years. Balancing her interests for everything beautiful and fashionable with her passion for global education and awareness of humankind and its relationship with the diverse environments in which we live, Carol is a true Gutsy Woman.