

In Morocco with Edith Wharton

Teresa Lynn Hasan-Kerr

After the first world war, the American writer Edith Wharton published *In Morocco*, a book recording her month-long travels through the nation which was then under French and Spanish colonization. Because of her connection to French Governor General Lyautey in particular, Wharton received special privileges, like witnessing the sacred sheep slaughter at Aid-El-Kabir in a Sultan's home and having military tanks available for her protection. Despite her upper-class status, she said that she wrote *In Morocco* for the ordinary traveller at a moment when there was no travel guide for the place. Wharton's rich descriptions of the mountains and deserts are vivid, painting a picture of a charming land.

In 2017, three years shy of a century later, I arrived in Tetouan, a small city in the north, to teach my American English fresh out of college. Today, there are plenty of guides to the now independent and recovering country, but I've listened to Edith Wharton on audiobook during trips to other cities. I've trekked through 21st century Fes, Marrakech, Tangier and more, comparing them to the scenes Wharton describes as 'the setting of a life of a people who have gone on wearing the same clothes, observing the same customs, believing in the same fetiches and using the same saddle ploughs, looms, and dye-stuffs as in the days when the



foundations of the first mosque of El Kairouiyin were laid.¹ El Kairouiyin, being built in Fes in the 9th century, is the world's first university.

The ancient world is still in the stone walls of the old medina, in the bath houses ever buzzing with gossip. And yet, in the Tetouani souk, used iPhones are on display among an array of other battered objects, making even the newest goods seem like old. The streets are lined with rows of dusty toothbrushes, earphones, sneakers, pots, wires, jackets, cameras, mirrors with the price fingered on them, knockoff shirts, picture frames, underwear, jewelry, and the most of it is remote controllers. Items at the market can live multiple lives and, marvelously, not one goes to waste. Morocco's got a good collection of soap dishes and doorknobs, and likewise it's got plenty of centuries. The way that old customs survive in the Internet Age is not in opposition to the times. The setting of a people who don't think twice about parking a donkey cart next to a pile of fidget spinners is harmonic.

Though we both arrived around October, Edith Wharton stayed a month and I six times that. In writing about her short stay, she claimed that all Muslim architecture is based on 'unchanging conditions'² of Muslim civilization: polygamy, slavery, sex segregation and hot weather. I can attest to not one of these things, except hot weather, but it's matched in the winter with brutal cold. I find it impossible to determine

¹ Edith Wharton and Margaret Armstrong, *In Morocco* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920) pp.262-63

² *Ibid.* p. 266



what is permanent, even in my own life. I moved repeatedly growing up and have continued to relocate in my adult life. I would prefer to settle in one place, but about each place I stayed I'm not sure. I like to think that I'm moving towards a hometown, rather from one.

Something did fall into place just as Wharton predicted: 'now that the war is over, only a few months' work on roads and railways divide it from the great torrent of 'tourism': and once that deluge is let loose, no eye will ever again see Moulay Idriss and Fez and Marrakech as I saw them.'³ Around the time Wharton wrote these words, the small city of Chefchaouen, which was previously sealed off to foreigners, opened to the public. A decade later, it was painted every hue of bright blue and from then on it became an increasingly popular travel destination. Now in Chefchaouen, just passing through the currents of tourists in the blue streets makes you invisible. Try drifting past crowds discussing the street musicians, then a group of students pointing to an ostrich on a leash, the owner charging per photo. Waiters tirelessly sway foreigners over to their tables on the terrace.

At times it feels like anything goes. Right now people are getting into a taxi for the next city, lending a portion of their laps to a stranger. The man who has just installed a new propane tank for hot water is testing for leaks with the flick of a lighter. In a shop, someone is inspecting the legitimacy of a pair of Gucci socks he wants to buy. With bare hands, a butcher hangs meat on a hook for display the entire summer

³ *Ibid.* p. ix



day. Wharton seems to acknowledge that this country, having had many shifts in authority over time, has a lot of irregularity, saying, ‘everywhere behind the bristling walls and rock-clamped towers of old Morocco lurks the shadowy spirit of instability.’⁴ From Moroccan people, I’ve heard similar comments, said in tones varying from humorous to vexed to unphased and accepting.

I’ve experienced Morocco’s unpredictability to be both frustrating and amusing. To illustrate, I went to see the legendary Hercules Cave alone one day. It was inspiring and soothing and absolutely full of tourists. Leaving, I got in a taxi, with a family of three in the back and what seemed to be a couple sharing the passenger seat, to go into Tangier, the nearest city. After five or so minutes of driving, the taxi stopped at a place that was not Tangier to let the family get out. The man of the couple began to argue with the driver in Arabic. I asked no one in particular what was happening, in English. The man sharing the passenger seat turned and answered that the taxi driver did not intend to go to Tangier yet. Even though we three had paid to go, he wanted more passengers to replace the ones which got out, so he could make a bit more money by charging them for a portion of the ten minute ride remaining. The taxi driver was determined. After another minute of their back and forth, I offered that we just altogether desert him. The couple chuckled and we did, after a partial refund.

We caught a small bus into the city. I learned a little about them. The woman was from Germany and the man from

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 235



Casablanca. They weren't a couple. She was staying with him for a sort of work-away arrangement with the small company he worked for. In Tangier, they were happy to have me tag along their sightseeing. We spent hours walking through this 'cosmopolitan, frowsy, familiar Tangier, that every tourist has visited for the last forty years.'⁵ On a whim, we made plans for him to show me Casa. Soon, I had to teach a night class back in Tetouan. I parted feeling like we were friends, but without having given my contact information. The best moments in this kaleidoscopic place are unexpectedly enjoying new people.

The worst are being at the mercy of bureaucracy. To illustrate, the warm and beautiful family I stayed with in Fes weren't surprised that the police decided to help me after a small robbery on the street while a few months ago their thirteen year old got no aid after a knife to the throat. The difference is my privilege as a foreigner. Foreigners, especially tourists, are valued. The police officer generously typed up my report with two fingers, then had to reprint it due to several errors. Once an accurate account was completed and signed, we discovered it was the wrong form.

As I continue to explore, I'm no longer comparing my travels to *In Morocco* to allow my experiences to be more authentic. However, the observation 'everywhere...lurks the shadowy spirit of instability' resonates when every day, coming from and going to the apartment rented by my work, I pass the mailbox to which no one—not me, my roommate,

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 4



my landlord, or director—has a key. I've decided to live here, where life is easygoing, unless one day I decide to go.

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