

*Gaining Perspective...Volume 4*  
**TWO YEARS IN THE  
 KINGDOM OF MOROCCO**

BY CHARLIE KOLB

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It is funny how I again find myself writing on the train. After my home visit at Christmas and my brief detour in Frankfurt, I have spent a large portion of these last two months in my high mountain village alone and trying to get through the winter. It has been intensely cold and, in the mornings, before dawn, even the air seems to have frozen during the night. When my living room heats during the day, tiny icicles shower down onto my head, and I occasionally have to break through a crystalline rime covering the basin in my bathroom.



Out in the village, the men spend much of their days outside, sitting in whatever café happens to be in the direct sunlight. Like a flock of migratory birds they move from one side of the street to the other; everyone wearing a jelaba (robe), including me. The women seem to be inside much of the time, so I see very little of them. But occasionally when I smell baking bread wafting from an ornately sculpted window, or watch the smoke trailing from kitchen chimneys in the early morning when I drink my coffee at sunrise, I know that they are in there working.

In many ways, this ancient society is set up in two spheres by necessity. To survive up here, it seems that two lives must be lived to maintain a single home. The women here are proud of the role they play in keeping their home running and the men are proud of their work and socializing outside the home. I am not saying that I agree with this separation of identities, and concrete assignation of roles, but I am saying that as a Peace Corps volunteer and single male in the Atlas, I very much feel as though I am living two lives. I have even gone so far as to schedule "village" and "home" days on my calendar, so I am able to devote equal time to both.



~ Winter is relinquishing its grip slowly but surely on the Atlas, the sun came out a week or so ago and allowed me the four hours necessary to do my laundry by hand on the roof. I came out of that day with a huge bundle of clean clothes and a matching set of abrasions on my knuckles. The following week, I went to the capital city of Rabat for a volunteer committee meeting. I took a 10 hour bus from my market town of Rich; transport here has become so easy now that I hardly even think about it anymore. I just go with the flow and hope that I arrive at my destination at some point. Occasionally I find myself at the wrong destination entirely, but that doesn't particularly bother me either. I can always backtrack.

Today is an auspicious day in my life as a Peace Corps Volunteer, it is the one year anniversary of my arrival in this country. One year ago today, I staggered down onto the runway at the Mohammed V airport in Casablanca. The pavement was wet from a recent rain, and the weak morning sunlight barely illuminated



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the swaying palms that stood in a row before the terminal. I was tired, confused, and apprehensive; not to mention surrounded by people who felt the same way. We were facing the unknown, my colleagues and I; twenty-six months in Morocco lay before us and that fact gave us pause. We came from all walks of life, from all over the country. We all had differing notions on what brought us here to Morocco, and what we expected from the country and from ourselves.

I can't remember what I expected of this place; that memory has faded as time has gone by. I know that I certainly expected much more hostility toward me as an American from the people here, but I quickly learned that expectation was simply born of fears seeded by a sensationalist media, theirs and ours. The people who surrounded me, who took me in, and who cared for me and still do---these people were no different from you or me, and ultimately I began to see more similarities between our cultures than differences. Though there were still enough differences to ensure a steep learning curve indeed. I had to relearn most aspects of my life; from how to speak and how to eat, to how to clean myself and use the bathroom. I do my laundry by hand and all my own cooking. Eating out is a rare pleasure that only happens in cities. But though the trail has been rocky and the way steep, the benefits far outweigh the difficulties. Part of what I have gained from my experiences of the past year is a deeper understanding of the world as a whole and how we as humans relate to each other globally. I have gained a new respect and understanding of my own culture and have come to realize just how unique America is. We have an amazing amount of freedoms. I also have gained a deeper understanding of myself; who I am and what I want.

I am able to travel confidently, communicate effectively across language barriers, and am more at ease overall than I have ever been. I have found solace in my solitude and have come to treasure the days, weeks, and months spent in my high mountain aerie. I have found beauty even in these harsh and desolate



mountains and have even come to love them as though they were my own Southwest.

More experienced volunteers, many who have trained, mentored, and supported me over the last year, have completed their service and moved on with their lives. They are now in graduate school and easing themselves back into "reality"; but is it any more real than here? Morocco is so raw and vital; each day holds a wealth of experience. A wave of sights, sounds, and smells assails me whenever I go anywhere, and my world is a mixture of 3000 years of tradition and a few decades of modernity. I have come to love olives and dates, and find myself craving cumin at strange times. The speed and opulence of American life has lost its appeal to me and I have fallen in love with the slow, steady pace of life in the mountains.

I find myself wanting nothing more from my life than to be still and to write. To be surrounded by vast silence and warm sun under an endless sky. This love of simplicity has always been present in me, but it has been sharpened and refined by the past year spent here.

~ I have spent the past few days with my friends in Casablanca, the same wonderful people I spent time with over Thanksgiving. Though I found myself again admiring the opulence of their home and enjoying the wonderful food they provided; more and more I found myself enjoying their company and insight rather than simply reveling in the creature comforts that surrounded me. I would have been just as happy cooking them dinner in my concrete hut. That said, I certainly cherish my time spent there, playing with the dogs, talking and laughing about things familiar to me; things from my past life. In their home, I feel that I am not just Charlie the Peace Corps Volunteer, which is how most of my friends here know me, I think they see more of the big picture of my life, and our conversations inspire, challenge, and convict me. Good friends and mentors are that way.

Later, I found myself in the Ancient Medina (old imperial city) of Fes; legend has it that the city's name comes from the old Arabic word for "pickaxe," because of a golden pickaxe that was unearthed here by the first settlers of this valley. How true this may be, I am unsure; but I am happy with the name because of how easy it is to pronounce, as opposed to, say, "Ouarzazate".

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Spring is in full flower here in Fes, everything is green and the hillsides are covered in shimmering silver olive trees. Birds are everywhere and house buntings flit in and out of the earthen homes and riyadhs of the medina. The storks have returned to their towering nests on the mosque minarets, and clouds of white egrets glide in from the river at sundown. My hotel is a "no frills" affair, consisting of a bed on a wire frame covered in sheets so threadbare that the mattress is visible through them. My bathroom is a Turkish toilet shared with the entire floor. Somehow, a year in, this doesn't bother me and the view from the roof more than makes up for it. It overlooks the "great tannery gate", or the Bab Boujaloud in Arabic, a massive crenellated archway covered in blue and green tile. People bustle in and out of the arch and the medina stretches away into the distance, a vista of flat roofs and minarets all covered in satellite dishes which I have heard referred to as "the flower that blooms in peacetime".

Navigating the medina for the first time since my return trip from the states, I found that my Arabic has improved to the extent that I can carry on a simple conversation and banter with locals, as well as repel guides, which are everywhere here and very persistent. Fes is a city of simple pleasures, cappuccinos on quiet rooftops and music drifting in from every direction. There are always English speakers to be found here, in the form of tourists or other volunteers passing through. Speaking English is a pleasure in itself. It is easy to forget the harshness of my village here, surrounded by comforts and the greenery of spring. But I need to go back home, a week is far too long away; although I would have welcomed it just a few short months ago.

On the bus ride south toward my village, I felt the air grow cold again as the trees disappeared and the horizon became hazy with dust blown in on a storm from the Sahara. At a stopping point, I sighed realizing that I had to again put on my long underwear, my second skin, and shrug on my heavy coat. I caught a transit twenty minutes after arriving in my souq town of Rich and after another three hours of cramped and smelly travel I was home.



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~ Easing back into my routine over the past couple of days has been a pleasure, with its early morning wake ups and rooftop coffee drinking. My mailbox was full of month-late Valentines day cards which I read in my study next to the heater. The time not spent drinking tea in the village or shopping for food is spent here in my study, usually reading. I recently finished "the Sea Wolf" by Jack London, the 32nd book I have read since my arrival. I am hoping to make it to 100.

I have work now too, the potential to teach Environmental Education at the local middle school, as well as a trail building project in the nearby national park, but more on that later. My good friends on the mountain, volunteers from the previous staging group, finish their service in April. While I will be sad to see them go, it will be exciting to train their replacements and introduce the new volunteers to the wonders of the Eastern High Atlas. Hopefully they will love this place as much as I do.

When I think of how much the previous volunteers helped me through the difficult patches of this first year, and there have been many, I realize just how difficult it will be to suddenly go from the role of student to teacher. But I feel that I am ready.

In the next few months, I will watch the bands of snow recede from the mountains above the village. The apple trees will soon be in flower and the bone-white poplars will again be green with new leaves. I look forward to long days of shafting sunlight and the sudden violence of summer storms that blow in from the north. I will again fast for Ramadan when it comes in late summer, and will better be able to enjoy the camaraderie and fellowship that exists from an entire country going nocturnal. I am excited for another fall and spring, and even a second winter. I can look forward to all of this because I have experienced it once before, and therein lies the joy of the second year here in Morocco.

*"The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not reflect the views or opinions of the U.S. Government"*

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*The Zephyr looks forward to sharing-regular reports from Charlie.  
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