

# Gaining Perspective...Volume 2

# TWO YEARS IN THE KINGDOM OF MOROCCO

BY CHARLIE KOLB

When I woke up the other morning I could see my breath. It hung in the air before me like a low-lying cloud that had invaded my study. I forget about this phenomenon every year during the warm months, but then all of the memories of winters past come flooding back whenever I see that first wisp of steam in the fall. I remember when I used to try to guess how cold it was by the volume and consistency of the vapor and how quickly it disappeared in the pale winter sunlight. At such times, when I am thrown back into the familiar past, I forget that I am no longer in Colorado; I am in Africa.

My village is said to be the coldest site in Morocco, or at least the coldest place that Peace Corps places its volunteers. While many of my friends are still sweating in the Palm Oases on the Saharan Fringe, or comfortably cool in the lower mountains near Fes and Meknes, I am already beginning to shiver. The aged Berber men who drink tea with me on Souq (Market) day tell me that this is to be a very cold winter. I tend to believe them; indeed, looking at their weathered hands and faces, they seem to be more a part of the Atlas than anything else. They are one with the mountains and I think they can feel it coming.

The poplars along the River Melloul have lit up like roman candles; they are the only trees in this landscape and shine golden against the grey mountains above them and the brown fields below. My American friends and family tell me that, back on the Colorado Plateau, the Aspens are changing on the hillsides in broad bands of pale yellow and the first snow of the season has just dusted the high peaks of the San Juans. In the canyons, the cottonwoods are beginning their transition as well and the washes run gold with their heart shaped leaves. I remember the descent of a slot canyon some years ago and a brief moment in the narrows near the canyon mouth. The walls were dark with desert varnish and late afternoon sunlight was high up on the northern face. It was cold down on the gravel of the canyon floor. Cold, still, and silent. I stood there quietly as a gentle breeze sighed over head and sent down a shower of golden serviceberry leaves from a bush on the rim. They fell slowly through the sunbeam, spinning and winking like coins.



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Here in Morocco the feeling of fall is not so different from what I am used to on the plateau; it is the feeling of slowing down, as if the earth is being put to sleep for a season. Now all that is left to do is to watch the leaves fall from the poplars and wait for the frosts to come and the snows to follow. I climb up to my rooftop every morning to drink my coffee in the sunlight and scan the valley to see what may have changed overnight. I see people and animals moving over the fields—harvesting the last of the year’s potatoes and turning over the earth with mule-drawn plows. In the village across the river, smoke rises from the same chimney each morning and I wonder if the women are making bread in the kitchen.

I had tea with an elderly woman in her kitchen a week or so ago and discovered that she was the one who made bread for all of the cafés and shops in my village, sometimes up to 60 loaves a day. I have learned plenty of other things like this; recently I befriended the local metalworkers and acquired a woodstove and hand forged axe from them. They do everything from shoeing stock to making tools—anything to do with metal. It is fascinating to be in a place where people have a specific role in the community, contributing to the group as a whole. Not many people leave this place and family businesses often pass down through generations; one 30’ x 30’ field may have been owned by the same family for centuries.

The rhythm of life is different here as well; it is so much slower than the frenetic pace of America and the rest of the Western world. Time just flows differently, and people care



more about relationships than being on time for a meeting. In America, time tends to center around the individual, while, in many agrarian societies, like this one, time centers around the group. This was described to me at the beginning of my service as the difference between Monochronic and Polychronic time. I saw this in the Southwest growing up and spending time with my Navajo friends; “Rez Time”, as I have heard it referred to, is polychronic time. I feel I have made the time transition well, although I am still very punctual; if people ask me what I am doing on a given day, I usually cannot tell them. I answer in a string of maybes. I think it will be hard to switch back when I finally return to the states.

I have very little time-related stress here in the village. Whenever I go anywhere, I never count on the transport being where it is supposed to be when it is supposed to be there, and allow several days to go anywhere. This was tough at first, but now I have really gotten used to waiting for hours on end for a taxi or minibus to take me to the next leg of my journey. So many things that seemed strange during those first couple of months now seem commonplace and I am beginning to forget what it was like to own a car, have a daily commute, or have set times to be anywhere more specific than “morning”, “afternoon”, or “tomorrow”. After living here for 8 months, I am beginning to realize the peace of

mind that comes with a loose schedule. In the States, I was ruled by my calendar and mapped out every detail of my life in a painfully meticulous fashion. I remember feeling as if I was always late or early but never really on time for anything. Living here is an entirely different feeling.

My village has only had electricity for 3 years. It still only has running water for four hours a day. But the western world is slowly encroaching on this ancient culture and I see signs of it every day. Most of the kids here run around in knock-offs of Nike and Adidas sportswear and hats sport slogans like “I Love NY” or “Budweiser;” the last one is particularly ironic in a culture that prohibits alcohol consumption. Everywhere there are logos and labels representing French or American Corporations. Everything Western is often idolized and the image of life in places like America is elevated to mythic proportions. A Moroccan teenager approached me the other day and asked me to explain what “50 cent” was saying in his rap song “The Candy Shop”. I declined to explain.

Many people wear sport coats and wristwatches, although I often leave my watch at home. Everyone has a cellular phone and most hotels have internet. Yet down the street there is a mule-drawn plough turning the earth and readying the fields for winter. The collision between these two worlds has been a sudden one. Some things are brand new, and others have remained unchanged for millennia.

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I have to wonder how completely this culture will be changed by westernization. I am sure that my village will be a different place by the time I leave Morocco in 2012. To some extent, I feel that the more modern a society becomes, the less cultural diversity is retained. As we advance, we seem to let go of and disregard the past as opposed to keeping it alive and sacred through stories and traditions. Here I live in this ancient, storied society and get to witness firsthand the effect of the old and the new meeting every time I venture out into my village.

As I have written before, the human-caused environmental degradation has been extreme and the ecology of the High-Atlas has been severely damaged by the ancient, traditional way of life. Much of the technology taking root in my village is efficient and occasionally “green”, and the Moroccan Government seems to have a favorable view

on renewable energy and eco-friendly construction. Maybe some of the damage can be slowed or stopped by these new innovations. Morocco gets more modern every year.

But what is going to happen to the culture here? How much "improvement" can my village take before it loses itself in the shuffle? Homogenization is often the death of culture, and I can see that my village could soon be another victim of the slow tide of progress. But the irony of the situation for me, as a development worker focusing on the environment and its protection, is that the more modern my village becomes, the better it is for the local ecology. Switching from, say, sheepherding to ecotourism would take the pressure off of the already shattered ecosystem and allow some degree of healing to take place. Improvements in sanitation and irrigation practices would remove toxins and pathogens from the nearby river and maybe allow a regeneration of the riparian corridor along the Melloul valley. The list goes on, but at what cost? Both culture and environment have incalculable value; and what is best for a culture may not be the best for the environment.

The National Park that I work with, the Eastern High Atlas National Park, is 135,000 acres of daggerlike mountains and long, narrow river valleys. Some of the valleys are still filled with Atlas Cedar (*Libocedrus atlanticus*), an endangered tree species, and some of the mountaintops foster hanging gardens of orchids and other strange wildflowers that I have yet to identify. But for the most part, the mountainsides are barren and the river valleys are filled entirely with fields and mud houses. All parts of the park are stunningly beautiful, but part of what makes them lovely is the delicate interplay of pastoral civilization with the rugged austerity of the surrounding landscape.



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By principle I am a strict preservationist; I idolize John Muir and am wary of Gifford Pinchot. I share Muir's viewpoint that the incredible balance of the natural world is something incredible and unfathomable to humans. We cannot improve upon it, but we can learn from it; it is an incredible self-righting machine that functions best when left untouched. The agency that I once worked for, the National Park Service, bases its mission on the idea that land is best protected when boundary lines are drawn around it and people are removed. In the early 1900s, in what was to be Great Smoky Mountains National Park, literally hundreds of people were displaced by the NPS. The people of the cove culture found in that branch of the Appalachians were made refugees, but the environment was encapsulated and protected—though how effective that protection is in such a popular park remains debatable.

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I know that the National Park here in Morocco would benefit from such an approach. If this park were managed in the same way that we managed the Smokies, there would be miles of scenic byway, overlooks, campgrounds, and shiny, neat park "villages." All of the original residents would have been relocated by then and the hillsides would be starting to heal themselves. It would be clean and safe and beautiful. But the Berbers of the High Atlas are a people defined by their landscape; they are a piece of it and the land would seem strange without their stairstepped villages that cling to the steep hillsides or the fields of golden wheat that fill the valley floors in late summer. The ecosystem here has lost so many niches that restoring it to its original primal form would be next to impossible. Yet, on the opposite end of the spectrum, leaving the status quo of the park intact

will ensure the complete destruction of the few reservoirs of biodiversity remaining in the Atlas.

It is a fascinating thing, like a step backward in time, to be thrown into these situations that mirror the glory days of the American National Park System, but to see them through the lens of modern ecological and sociological management strategies. "America's best idea" was the vanguard; we were the first in the world to realize that some things are so precious that we need to save them from ourselves. Other countries, especially those outside the "western world" have followed suit in recent decades and Morocco's National Parks are some of the most recent. So here I am, an American Park Ranger in Morocco. I have nearly 150 years of National Park history to work from, and the swirling unknown of a deeply rooted and ancient culture to work with. What is the right thing to do? What am I even able to do?

I have no current projects, just many ideas and prospects on the horizon. I maintain contact with many people back in the States and tell them whatever I can about my life here; after all, that is also part of my job. I continue to learn the Tamazight Language and make friends in my town, as we all wait for the snow to come. In the next month, the leaves will fall from the poplars by the river and the mountains will greet each day silver with frost. Life will slow to a crawl as my friends spend more and more time indoors by the fire, and I will sift through my sheaf of Park Management Plans and my shelf of community development books and try to wrap my mind around my service as a whole. I will try to understand the delicate balance between the Moroccan people and their environment, and hopefully learn if the preservation of an ecosystem really must result in the destruction of a culture. Thankfully, there are few places better for thought and reflection than beside a hot woodstove as the snow falls gently outside.

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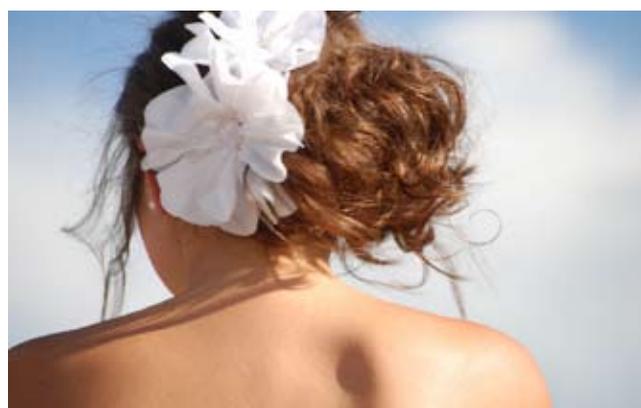
**CHARLIE KOLB** is almost a native Coloradan, and has worked as a seasonal ranger for the National Park Service, but will be working with the Peace Corps until 2012.

*The Zephyr looks forward to sharing-regular reports from Charlie. You can also follow him via his blogs:*

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