

Gaining Perspective...Volume 4

TWO YEARS IN THE KINGDOM OF MOROCCO

BY CHARLIE KOLB



Spring has come to the Atlas. The apple trees are blooming and the poplars on the riverbank are furred with a delicate haze of pale green leaves. The willows are heavy with fuzzy grey catkins and the songbirds have returned to perch on my windowsill when I open them wide to let in the shafting morning sunlight. Tourists go in and out of the village on motorbikes or riding in expensive Land Rovers. "Adventure Tours" they are called, though I have a hard time seeing how a one or two day stop in my village is considered an adventure. 14 months here and even I feel that I have barely seen a fraction of what the Atlas and its people have to share with the world.

A few weeks ago I stood out on the fringes of a wheat field with a friend of mine who I will call "MoHa". He is the brother of a local store owner whom I know well, and one of the few people willing to let me work in his fields with him. I try to come here once a week and learn about the farming methods practiced in this area for millennia. After diverting water from the river through a maze of shallow ditches, we removed the plugs of earth and sod and watched as the water filled his small wheat field row by row.

As I watched, the wind swept down the valley from the heights and brushed the tender green shoots of the new wheat as a loving father might playfully ruffle the hair of his small child in passing. It was cloudy and cool that day, but not unpleasant, and I reveled in the smell of wet earth and the feel of growing things. As MoHa and I waited for the water to fill his field, we sat on the edge of the ditch, him smoking a cigarette and me staring at a small earthworm twisting sinuously in my open palm. Looking at its pale pink skin, at the delicate organs and structures at work beneath the translucent surface, I felt like a small child again, having just turned over a rock in my mother's garden. Though her garden is 6000 miles away on the other side of the world, this worm looked no different than the ones I had watched so long ago.

Above us the banded mountains soared overhead, and by the river ancient willows bowed and stooped as if weary from the long months of another winter quietly endured. At noon, I thanked MoHa for letting me help and walked the long road back into the village, leaving a trail of muddy footprints to mark my passage.

Later that week, I found myself walking through the dirt streets and alleyways of the old part of the village toward the earthen house of the family that provided a home for me in those first crucial months spent here almost a year ago now. My path took me across the graveyard with its quiet stones protruding from a sea of waving golden grass. A memory surfaced from the previous year of a small girl with a flashing smile and beautiful eyes. Kalima. One morning in late summer she simply did not wake to her mother's touch; she sleeps now beneath one of these silent stones, marked red with a splash of paint, raw colored like a fresh wound. Her passing shook us all.

Death comes as no surprise to the people here; the harshness of this destroyed place is not lost on the Berbers of the Ait Haddidou. Death is a constant companion that shadows the children as they play and is greeted by the stooped and weathered elders as an old friend if perchance he comes to call. I am sure they would invite him in for tea and bread if they were able.

A village near here made national news when nine children died in a single unrelenting period of cold several winters ago. Paved roads and power lines followed the tragedy, but countless other villages suffer in remote silence and families continue to bury their dead quietly and resignedly, though they may go before their time.

Such harshness eats at me at times. Even in my terrifying periods of illness, being weak and alone unable to walk or speak, I was protected by virtue of being an American. I knew that I could be evacuated at the push of a button, and on a flight home within a day. There is no such escape for my friends here. This harshness is their reality; it is all they know and places outside the Atlas seem like a

pleasant, but surreal, dream.

When I reached the house, I yelled a greeting from the door before walking inside. I shook hands with my host mother Rkia, father Said, and my siblings Mohamed, Rachid, and Fatima. When I reached the baby, Sufiyan, almost 2 years old, he looked up at me shyly with his big brown eyes. "Slm" (shake hands) I said, and he held out his left to me. I smiled and said "yadnin" (other one), and he offered his right. I took it in mine and shook it once solemnly. He grinned at me, flashing his baby teeth, before burying his head in his mother's arms. Now a toddler, Suf was barely able to crawl when I arrived here last year. Now he not only walks, but runs; he has learned to say some simple words and can now ask for what he wants. Watching him grow and change is another reminder of the passage of my time here and of all the wonderful things I have seen.

I sat down next to Said, in my proper place as another adult male, and spoke with Rkia from across the room. She left after a few minutes and returned with a conical clay tajine filled with spiced meat and vegetables which I ate with relish. I stopped eating meat a few months ago and Rkia no longer offered it to me, instead moving it to an area of the dish where others would eat it. We ate with our hands, using crusty fresh bread baked that morning as utensils. A teapot and basin was offered to each of us to wash up after the meal was finished and the children went out to play. Rkia, Said, and I stayed in the small room and enjoyed a cup of sweet Moroccan tea to aid in digestion. I left soon after that and stopped again in the graveyard watching the light play over the stones and shimmer on the swaying grass.



~
On another afternoon, I leaned against a wall next to a shop and talked with some older men with whom I have become friends. As we spoke quietly about the state of the world and the weather, the sound of singing reached my ears and we all turned to watch as a procession of children made its way up the street toward us.

They moved slowly, dressed in fine clothes, and sang a quiet song as they walked. Most Berber music has a loud, fast tempo and is sung with a frenetic energy. The song sang by the children, mostly young girls, was slow and dreamlike—reverent and peaceful, like a dirge or lament. Above their heads was a human figure dressed in a fine women's jelaba and, at the back of the group, a small boy held a cross aloft. It was exceptionally strange, and I had never seen anything like it here before. Yet it still seemed strangely familiar. I turned to the man next to me to ask about the procession, which was now even with our group. "They are calling the rain," he said solemnly. I looked up at the cobalt sky, cloudless and dry; no rain had fallen in months. I then gestured to the cross and asked what it was. "Did you not know that many of the Berber peoples were Christian before the Arabs came and conquered Morocco?" I shook my head in wonderment and we fell silent for a time. From questions asked later and from what little I can piece together of this strange occurrence, what I had witnessed was a Roman Catholic saint's procession, combined with an ancient Berber rain ceremony. It was a sight to behold.

The following day, I went outside to walk and watched as clouds gathered, towering and swelling on the eastern horizon. The wheat shook in the fierce winds before the storm and the pale tender petals of new apple blossoms swirled around me like summer snow. As I reached my door, the rain began to fall.

~
I have made two good friends here in the village, I will call them "Said" and "Mostafa". They are 18 and 19 respectively, and good listeners. Spending time with them, I sometimes forget I am speaking another language and we talk and laugh long into the night.

Some evenings, they stop by my home to smoke a hookah with me in my living room. Hookahs are common here and exceptionally well made. Mine was

won in poker game played with other volunteers who gathered in Errachidia for the occasion. Said, Mostafa, and I will sit on the cushions in my living room and watch the smoke curl upward into the sunbeams shafting from my skylight. We talk about mundane things: school, girls we have known, families, and various traditions from our discrete cultures. They dream of going to America one day, but with visas notoriously expensive and difficult to obtain here, it is unlikely they will ever make it. But I hope they do.

Said woke me a 6:00 one morning by pounding on my door. I had been expecting and dreading his arrival; he wanted me to go running with him. I trudged down the stairs, brushing the sleep from my eyes, and opened the door. He was outside in short pants and a sweatshirt, trotting in place like an overly energetic pony. I yawned heavily—I have never been a morning person—and bade him wait a few minutes while I bolted a cup of coffee.

The village was quiet so early; store owners were unlocking their shops, and café owners were setting out and wiping down their white plastic tables and chairs. They waved at me as I passed, and I heard my Berber name “Hassan” being called repeatedly, followed by congratulations and wishes of good health.

We left the village trotting north, Said running ahead like a gazelle and me following behind like a kicked shepherd’s dog. We turned onto a dirt road that parallels the village on the other side of the fields and stopped to look at the village. It is situated on a hill above the river and the pink and brown buildings glowed with the rich, honeyed light of sunrise. The dewy wheat fields sparkled in the still air, and snatches of birdsong drifted by on a wind that smelled of apple blossoms. Men in their jelabas and women in their woolen cloaks made their way out to their plots with picks and shovels. Most of the women held a serrated scythe called an “amouger” that they would use to cut fresh alfalfa for their donkeys and mules back home.

We regained the main road by the middle school and turned back toward my house. Said left me there, panting by my door, and ran off to get ready for school. I turned and climbed the stairs for more coffee. Later, I stood in the sun on my rooftop, cup of coffee in hand, and watched Said and Mostafa walking arm and arm toward the school. Said turned back toward my house, saw me, and waved. I smiled. It is good to have friends.

On the third day of his stay in the village, we started out early to climb the folded mountain that I watch from my roof in the evenings. The climb is steep and rugged—there is no trail...



A Fulbright scholar came to my village one day last week. The Fulbright program is a nine-month term in a foreign country, and its scholars teach English or do research while they are here. They have a cut and dry project ready for them when they arrive, and they are paid almost 10 times my salary each month. This one I had met in Errachidia at a friend’s home and he followed me back to my village. He stayed for several days, watching as I spoke Berber with my friends and reacting politely to the fact that none of them would speak to him in Arabic, a language he knows well. I tried to convince them to speak to him, but Arabic is not well-liked on the mountain and Berber pride runs deep and strong in this valley. Instead, I acted as translator and we got along alright.

On the third day of his stay in the village, we started out early to climb the folded mountain that I watch from my roof in the evenings. The climb is steep and rugged—there is no trail—so we surmised that it would take the better part of a day to summit and return.

The initial climb is in a dark canyon of slate and limestone, the floor littered with smoothed stones and flood debris. A trickle of water flowed down its center, following the path of least resistance to the River Melloul far below. Rounding a bend in the canyon, I found the source of the water, a gushing seep where the limestone met the shale. It flowed lazily down the rocks, coated with a film of dark algae and fringed with cushions of moss. I placed my palm on the damp face of the rock and closed my eyes. I could feel the coolness of the water as it trickled between my fingers, the sun beat down overhead, and a hawk cried faintly as it rode on a thermal high above. Caught up in the moment, I felt that I could feel the pulse of the earth itself, weak and thready in these desiccated foothills, but, despite all the harm done to this place, it still lived. I stepped back and we walked on; as I climbed I could feel the water drying on my palm like a crust of blood.

We began the laborious ascent of the mountains flanks, following faint water-trails and picking our way amongst blooming and fragrant “ifssi” plants. On a false summit, we stopped to rest and drink some of the water we had brought in our packs. A warm breeze drifted over us, blowing away up the mountain and following its twisted contours. Borne upon the wind were hundreds of tiny butterflies. All pure white and nearly translucent in the sunlight, they fluttered in

pairs among the flowers, before being borne past our heads like soft snowflakes, their scaly wings brushing our faces as they passed.

It made me smile, and gave me joy to witness such a display of quiet beauty far away up here in the middle of nothingness and shattered rock. By the time we reached the summit the butterflies had gone.

Death comes as no surprise to the people here; the harshness of this destroyed place is not lost on the Berbers of the Ait Haddidou.

Death is a constant companion that shadows the children as they play

There is so much more I could tell you; of the quiet conversations shared over tea with wise old men, of the quiet hours spent watching the fields grow and change, and of so many sights and experiences that are impossible to express on the written page.

I could tell you how, in a neighboring village at sundown, as the call to prayer echoes through the streets, the mules and donkeys come streaming in from the fields running, kicking, and cavorting like wild things, before stopping before the doors of their owner’s homes.

I could tell of the stars that shine at night, of crimson sun and icy moon. So much to say, but all I will end with this; another year lies before me and I welcome it with open arms.

“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”

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:

<http://charlieofmorocco.blogspot.com>
<http://wind-water-stone.blogspot.com>



**Our Claim Stays the Same:
FART-FREE BEANS**

**WE PRIDE OURSELVES
ON OUR FOOD!**

**Our genuine Mexican Cuisine
comes from traditional recipes
& methods from
BAJA, CALIFORNIA & other
states in MEXICO.**

**51 N. MAIN ST
MOAB, UTAH
435.259.6546**

www.miguelsbajagrill.com