

GAINING PERSPECTIVE: TWO YEARS IN THE KINGDOM OF MOROCCO...

FROM DURANGO & THE NPS TO PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER...AN INTRODUCTION TO LIFE IN AFRICA FROM CHARLIE KOLB

It's coming on the end of August, and it seems as though fall has already arrived here in the High Atlas Mountains. Looking out from the roof of my cement house in the mornings, nursing a cup of coffee, I am often struck by how much these striking and austere mountains remind me of my home in the southwest. They resemble no area in particular, but I sometimes catch an echo of something; that wet dusty smell after a rain or maybe the way the light makes the mountainsides glow each night at sundown; an imperceptible resonance of home. Or perhaps that's just the wishful thinking of a desert rat far from his territory. According my journal, I am about 200 days in to my Peace Corps Service here in Morocco, with just over a year and a half to go before I can come back to the Southwest and my hometown of Durango. But as the days pass, I learn more and more; not just about Morocco, but about the Southwest, and myself as well.

So let me begin at the beginning, and tell you who I am and where I am coming from. My name is Charlie Kolb and I grew up in Southwest Colorado. I have been exploring the canyon country for as long as I can remember and hope to spend the rest of my life doing the same. I have worked the past 3 years as a Ranger for the National Park Service, and it is this vocation that led me to the Peace Corps. Well, at least, it gave me the justification I needed to sign up. The Peace Corps offers a magic carrot called "Non-competitive Permanent Eligibility," which essentially means that any individual who serves two years abroad in the Peace Corps is eligible to be hired into any permanent position he/she/it qualifies for—with no competition or red tape. So, in short, I found that I needed to move to Africa for two years in order to find the job that would allow me to stay home. One thing led to another and, over a year after my initial glance at the Peace Corps' official website, I found myself on a plane to Casablanca.

Looking through the sheaf of "motivation statements" that I wrote to the PC before I had any idea of where I was going, I see that my primary reason to join the Peace Corps was to "gain perspective". In the past six months I have surely found that. I have gained perspective on my new country, Morocco, perspective on my home in America, and unique perspective on Islam—a religion that many Americans do not understand, or even wish to.

Stepping off the Royal Air Maroc jet in Casablanca, I had no idea what to expect of this new and mysterious place and neither did the 60 or so other Peace Corps Trainees who were milling around me. My head was spinning as we rode a bus for hours across the plains from Casablanca to Marrakech. I had just left behind 4 feet of fresh snow in Colorado, and suddenly I was looking out over fields of new wheat, interspersed with palm trees, and countless tiny villages clustered around the pale minarets of mosques. We

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spent that first night in a walled hotel being eased into the experience. Even in the insular environment of the hotel, everything seemed foreign; the tiled walls, the food, the accented English of the staff members, who were mostly Moroccans themselves. Everything was strange to all of us. I fell asleep that first night on a brocaded couch surrounded by people I did not know and in a country that I did not yet understand.

We rode through the Atlas the next morning, on a pass called Tizi-n-Tichka. It was tortuous and high and I enjoyed looking over the edge into the deep valleys or up to the icy summits high above. It seemed to frighten some of my fellows, but reminded me strongly of the steep passes back home in the Southwest. Villages of earthen huts surrounded by terraced fields clung to the mountainsides. We were told they were populated by Berbers,

the native people of Morocco; some had been here for millennia. Would I end up in a village like that for the duration of my service? I had no idea what was to come, because, at that point, I still had two months before I was assigned my "site", the village I would call home for two years.

My training flew by, and I enjoyed two glorious months of spring in the Dades valley, just north of the Sahara. I lived with a family in an earthen house, eating my meals with them and spending my days in another house with other volunteers. We were learning the "Tamazight" dialect of Berber, called "Tam" for short. Tam is a difficult language, especially coming from English. The first night I spent with my host family, I had no idea what was going on. All I heard was a series of guttural sounds that I struggled to identify

as language. Even the year of Navajo I took in college hadn't been this daunting. Language was not the only hurdle of training and I found myself ill more than once, a situation made even less fun by having to learn to use a "squat toilet". But day by day, things became easier and I began to adjust to and even enjoy my time on the edge of the Sahara.

In early May, training had ended and I had been sworn in as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the city of Ouarzazate. Now I was standing in the town of Rich ready to make the final move to my site. I lugged my duffel bags up to a dusty van called a "Transit" and handed them to a wiry kid on the roof, who proceeded to tie them down. I clambered inside and sat down, feeling the silent gaze of roughly 15 Berbers rest on me with intense curiosity. Even though I had done well in language training, I still felt that I understood very little, and could think of nothing to say. I looked around me; my blue eyes met the brown eyes of the other travelers. The men were

dressed in ankle length robes, or jelabas, in varying shades of white, grey, and brown. Some wore small turbans of white or yellow cloth wrapped tightly around their heads. The women wore loose cotton dresses, and some held a bedsheet around their shoulders—a lighter substitute for the traditional striped cloak. Their dark headscarves were draped over their hair and secured in a series of elaborate knots by a narrow cloth of pink, white, or red. I was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt and I felt very pale. Once the transit filled, and several people climbed on the top to ride, we set off on a five-hour journey up into the mountains.

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My site is a small, remote village whose name I am not allowed to mention in print, and from the first moment I stepped off of the transit in middle of the dusty square, I have been in love with this place. It is one of the coldest sites in Morocco, and I have been told that, like Colorado, it is mild in the summer and icy in the winter. It receives a substantial yearly snowfall and the roads are often closed. Sounds perfect.

The people here are a Berber tribe called the Ait Haddidou and they are one the most ancient in Morocco. Islam, here in the valley, is a "recent development". So, while we do have power, water, and access to rudimentary medical services, the old still retains a very strong presence alongside the new. Men in jelabas walk side by side with boys dressed as if they were transported forward in time from the 80's. Peugeot trundle up and down the hill in the center of town, passing mules and donkeys laden with crops harvested from the fields or plants gathered in the mountains.

This all comes together once a week at the market or souq, which is a blur of sounds, smells, and colors. People come into the village from surrounding communities; many



come from deep in the bled or countryside. People squat on their haunches haggling for goods. Listening to the conversations, I am reminded of the easy interactions I have seen between the Diné when speaking in their native tongue at rug auctions or other large gatherings on and around the rez. Another echo.

One tent sells traditional spices; piles of red, green, and yellow protrude from cloth sacks; the merchant sits in the back, ready to wrap a measure of spice in a newsprint package for the customer to take home. Next to the spice stall, a tent sells televisions and cellular phones; the old and the new, side by side. Vegetable stalls sell everything from melons to zucchini. On normal days, the town is quiet; people go about their business, only coming out to recreate after sundown, when the work is finished in the fields.



The Atlas Mountains

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But the village is only half of my life; the other half is spent in the mountains. My village is the gateway to the 135,000 acre Eastern High Atlas National Park, which is what I am specifically assigned to work on, based on my background with the NPS. The EHANP is beautiful and is home to many people and animals. There are five major villages inside its borders and I hope to do work with the people who live there. It is a pristine expanse of mountain wilderness, interspersed with islands of civilization; at least this is how it seemed at first. This was before I realized just what had happened to this place.

Looking out over the mountains, they seem to have been bare for an eternity; no trees grow on their flanks, and their color is all in shades of grey, yellow, and brown. They give the appearance of being much higher than they actually are; the elevation of my village is around 7000 feet, the mountains top out around 10,000 feet. But it all appears to be above timberline, which at this latitude should be around 12,000 feet. I was perplexed; I thought that maybe the lack of trees was due to the desert climate, but soon realized that we received more than adequate rain and snow to support at least a dryland forest, like the Pinyon-Juniper forests of the Southwest.

At the same time, I realized there was no wildlife; no deer browsed the fields or canyons, and no coyotes wailed in the night. Not that I expected American fauna, but I had at least expected an ecological equivalent—something to at least fill the niches that I knew had to be here. I began to do research and I took an extensive hike through the heart of the park. What I found was a sobering lesson, a story of an ecosystem slowly extinguished

over the course of centuries.

At a pivotal point on my walk I found myself ascending a high mountain valley, heading for a misty pass. Rain was falling lightly and the clouds hung low, shrouding the summits above me. I was a day's walk from the nearest road when I reached the saddle. What I saw on the other side was unbelievable. It was as if I was gazing into another world; a different Atlas than the one that lay at my back. The valley was steep and rugged; I could see no trail of any kind that was to lead me down. It was of the same pale stone as the mountains around my village, but there was one important difference: it was filled, wall to wall, with cedars. Huge Atlas Cedars with flat, spreading canopies and massive trunks. Greek oaks formed the understory and the forest looked vibrant and healthy. I spent that night deep in the valley with a Berber family, curled up on the dirt floor next to their woodstove as a cold rain fell outside.

From this experience I realized that this was what all of these mountains had looked like at one point, that these now barren hills had been covered in thick, mysterious forests, like I had seen that day, and shrouded in mists. Looking at my research I read about the animals that are said to have lived here: the Atlas Bear, Barbary Lion, Striped Hyena, several species of gazelle, and even a species of elk. All of these are now extinct, or else have been driven from these mountains into other areas where they can survive. Incredibly enough, the small impact from the pastoral farmers who scratch out a living in these mountains had nearly destroyed an ecosystem. Like water eroding stone, little by little, the ancient Atlas had been swept away by a slow human tide.

I know how easy it is to look out at the Colorado Plateau and bask in the wonder of its pristine wildness; there are so many areas that remain relatively untouched and unknown—places that seem beyond our reach. Granted, Glen Canyon was once one of those places, and look what happened there. Overall, though, the southwest is still wild, the damages done are still reversible. But here I look daily upon the end result of even a light existence on a delicate land. We think that we are the only ones to destroy our environment, that it is a relatively new phenomenon, what with big industry and human-accelerated climate change. But it seems to me that destruction of our habitat is an ancient human tradition; do not forget that Mesa Verde was almost entirely deforested when the Anasazi moved on. Environmental degradation is nothing new, but being aware of it is. Perhaps the way to preserve our world is not, as many have theorized, simply a way of life that we have forgotten; perhaps it is something we are only beginning to discover.

Sitting here at my desk, during one of the many long nights of Ramadan, I look back and think on all the things I have learned in the past 6 months—how much I have seen, and how much is yet to come. Winter is sweeping in; it will be snowing in a few short months. I have seen so much and yet so little. For now, all I can do is sit back and observe. I have no doubt that my perspectives will continue to shift as I live here; the seasons will change, flowers will bloom and die, and fields will be sown and harvested. As these things change outside, so must I change within; hopefully the perspective I gain, and the lessons I learn can be taken back to the Southwest, and applied in service to the land that I love.

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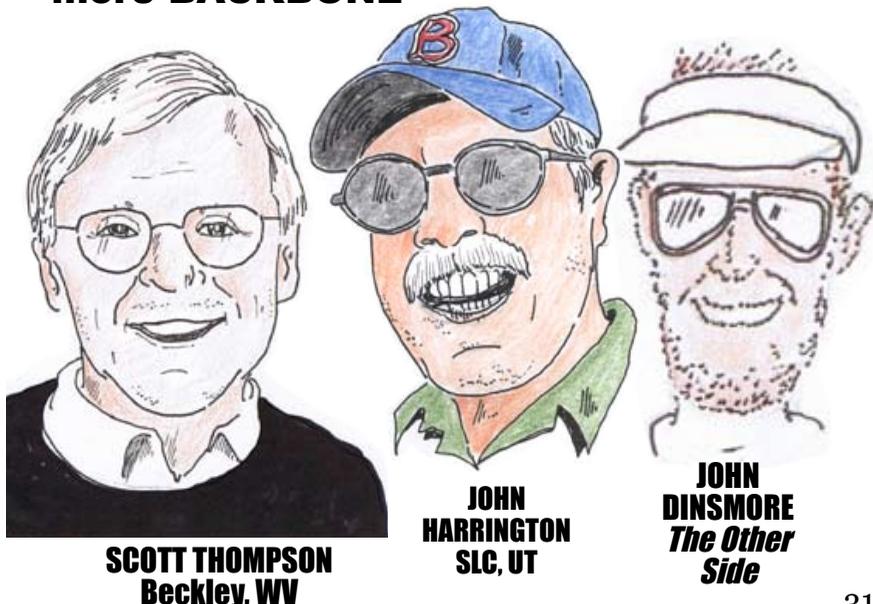
CHARLIE KOLB is almost a native Coloradan, and has worked as a seasonal ranger for the National Park Service, but will be working with the Peace Corps until 2012.

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

You can also follow him via his blogs:

<http://charlieofmorocco.blogspot.com>
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