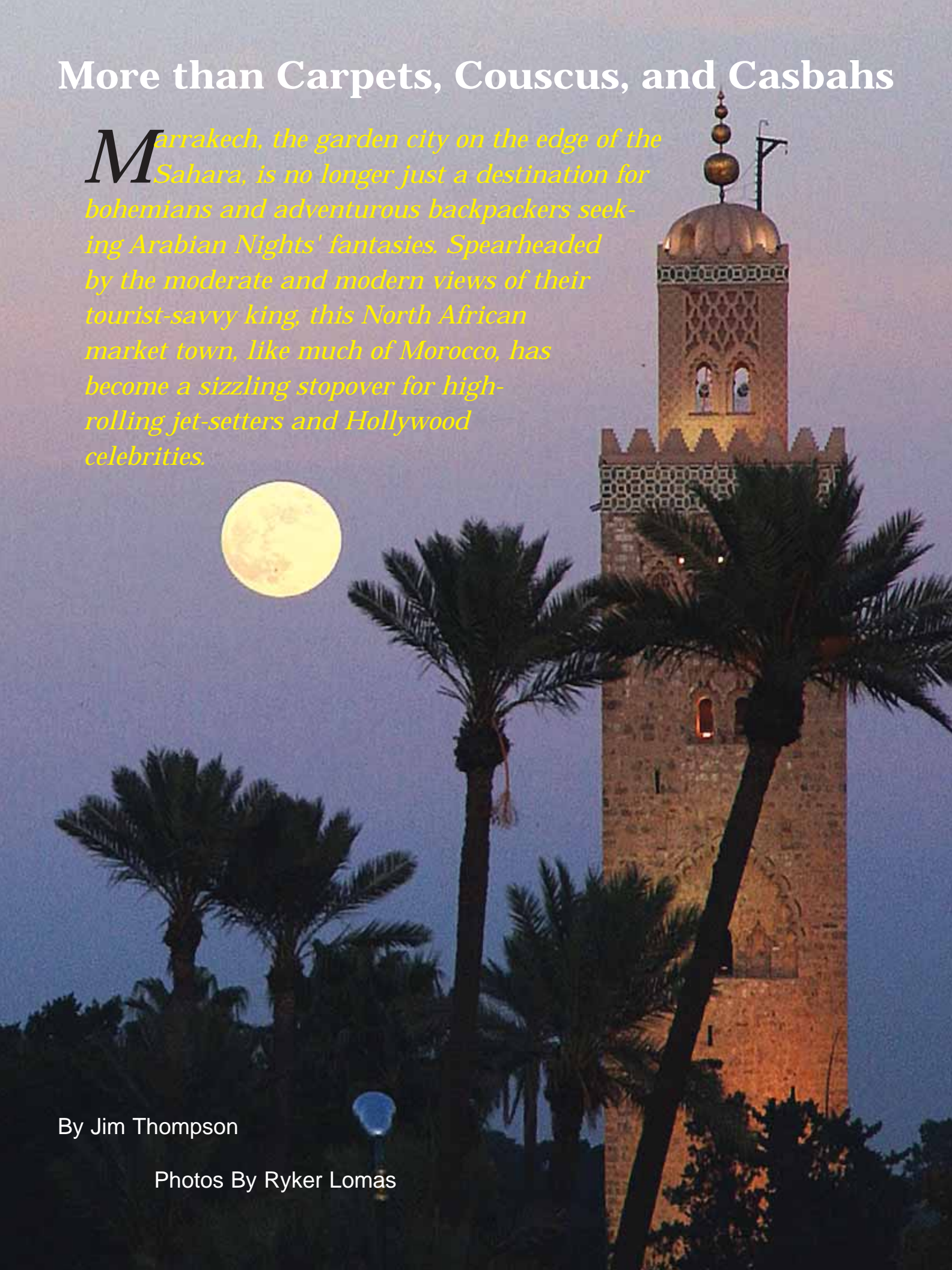


# More than Carpets, Couscous, and Casbahs

*Marrakech, the garden city on the edge of the Sahara, is no longer just a destination for bohemians and adventurous backpackers seeking Arabian Nights' fantasies. Spearheaded by the moderate and modern views of their tourist-savvy king, this North African market town, like much of Morocco, has become a sizzling stopover for high-rolling jet-setters and Hollywood celebrities.*

By Jim Thompson

Photos By Ryker Lomas





*Equestrian show on the beach at the Sofitel Agadir*

"The old Morocco is still here, but these days you will have to look for it," said Mohammad, the doorman at the Sofitel Hotel in Marrakech and my new friend. I had come to Marrakech hoping to find the romantic Morocco I saw in classic films like *Casablanca*; the adventurous Morocco I saw in *"Indiana Jones"* and *"The Mummy;"* and the ancient Morocco I had read and heard about as a young boy.

To my surprise, what I found was a modern country of sophistication and style that is rapidly becoming the playground for the jet-set and an exotic getaway for celebrities and corporate moguls.

Morocco, as I found in my trip to Marrakech, is much more than the land of *Arabian Nights*, carpets, casbahs, and veiled women I read about as a child. It's an energetic, vibrant country alive with spectacular architecture that blends ancient themes with modern conveniences. Unique cuisine that fuses African, Middle Eastern, and Western flavors and seasonings along with fashionable boutiques, and breath-taking resorts that rival any found along the French Riviera make Marrakech a wonderful destination.

It's dazzling mosaic of African, Arab and Berber cultures, spiced with a dash of European influence, is at once strange and romantic, alluring and unfamiliar. Colorful markets, antiquities, and age-old religious shrines stand in contrast to shopping centers, beach resorts, great restaurants, casinos, and modern buildings.

Rising in the souks, once-dilapidated riads (grand houses built around patios) are being reborn as B&B's catering to European and American visitors with furnishings and style that will make guests feel like a sultan.

Except for the summer months, when Marrakech roasts under the intense desert sun, the city has wonderful weather. In winter, moderate daytime temperatures make it the perfect getaway from cold weather in most European and American cities. But, if it's snow you want, the nearby Atlas Mountains provide reasonable skiing only a short drive from Marrakech. The government has several projects in the works to develop ski resorts in the Atlas that will cater to the growing influx of visitors from throughout Europe, the Middle East and the U.S.

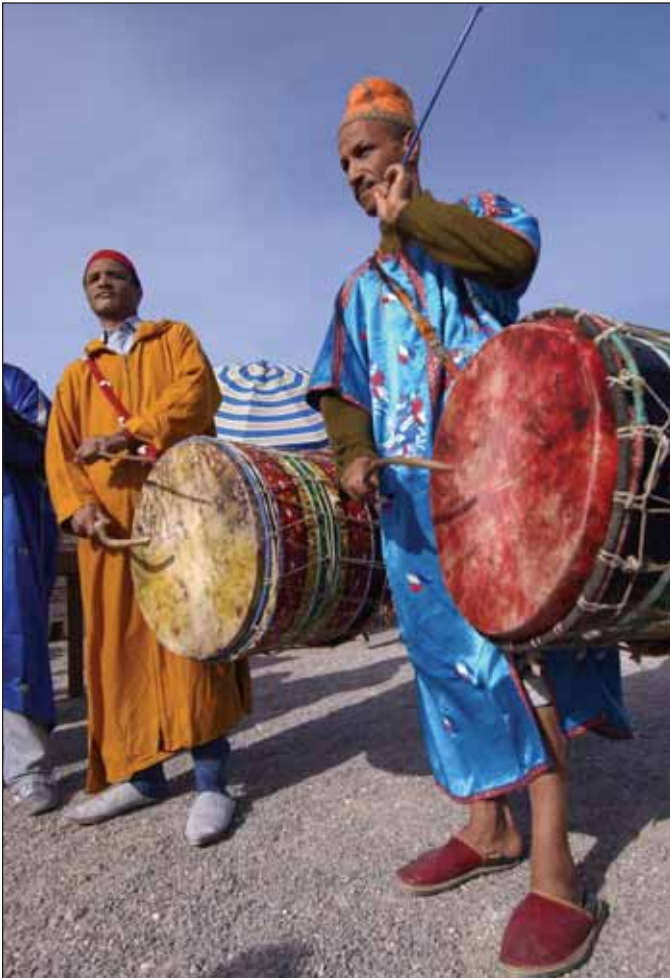


*Pool area at the Sofitel Marrakech*

Those seeking the exotic will not be disappointed. Morocco still offers a taste of its ancient roots. In many ways, life in Marrakech carries on as it has for centuries. It was this romantic, and, admittedly, naive view of this wondrous country that drew me here in the first place.

## Recapturing Youth

It started when I was a boy. A neighbor showed me a hand carved burl walnut box he brought back from Morocco and told me vivid tales of his adventures navigating the souks and riding camels with the blue men of the Sahara in this faraway land. In many ways, it was these stories that shaped my view of the world and lead me to my love of travel.



*Musicians set the beat at the Marrakech Medina*

When I arrived in Marrakech, I was determined to find that ancient Morocco and, even more important to me, find a carved wooden box like the one I had seen so many years ago.

My hotel was the ideal base to launch my adventure. The Sofitel Marrakech (located on Rue Harroun Errachid) lies at the foot of the Atlas Mountains and within easy reach of the medina and the famous Jamma El Fna square.

With 258 rooms, most with a balcony and mountain views, a luxurious swimming pool, gardens, two restaurants, a disco, three bars, business center, fitness facility, and a Turkish bath, it offers everything you could want in a modern hotel. Best of all the architecture blends all of these conveniences with a style that

is reminiscent of ancient times. Moorish arches, interior fountains, lounging areas with pillows and couches, and carefully crafted mosaics provide a feeling of days past. It is a marvelous blend of the old and the new.

After a relaxing day at the hotel to shake off the effects of the long flight, I joined a group of friends for a trip to a unique restaurant outside Marrakech called Chez Ali. Located about a 45-minute drive from Marrakech in what appears to be the middle of nowhere, Chez Ali is part traditional Moroccan gathering, part Disneyland, and part three-ring circus.

## Three-Ring Fantasy

Raising out of the desolate surroundings, the complex is like an ancient Bedouin settlement built on a grand scale. Riders on horseback, along with musicians playing traditional music, greeted us as we climbed from the buses and passed through the Moorish arched gates. Entering the complex was like a step back in time as we wound our way through a maze of archways, fake buildings, and imitation camps. All the while, an endless stream of musicians, exotic dancers, and acrobats performed at each twist and turn.

Sure, it was showy, touristy, and not strictly authentic but, hey, we were in Morocco and what better way to get a slice of the old ways and have a bit of fun in the process. It took about five minutes before we finally got to the main section, which was made up of huge dining areas that resembled desert tents on steroids and a central arena for equestrian performances. Our party was in the largest of the tents, but there were other, smaller ones, for smaller groups of people.

The dinner included several traditional Moroccan dishes served in separate courses along with music and dancing between each serving. Afterwards, we were treated to a show featuring the 'fantasia' horse-



*Snake charmer at the Jemma el Fna square in Marrakech*

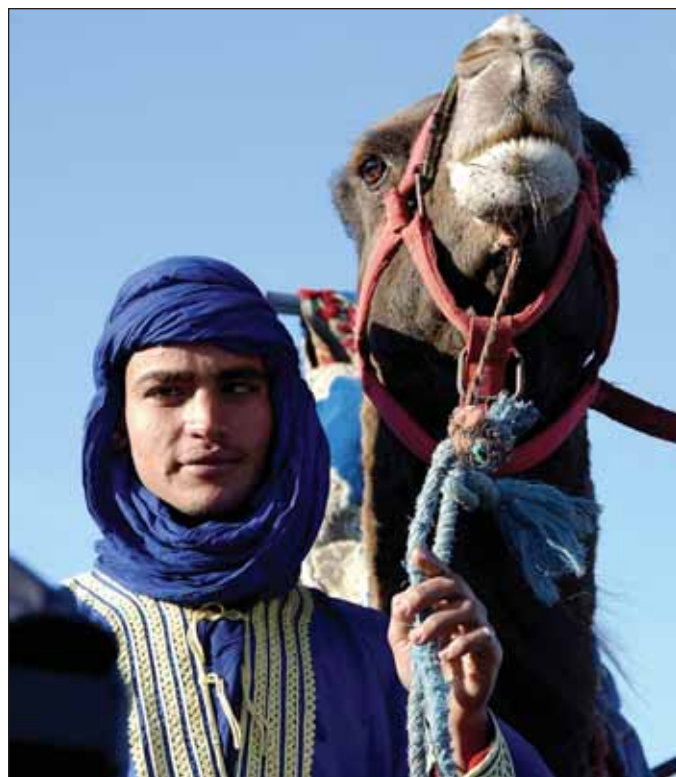
men and camel riders in the arena that was capped by a laser projected girl riding a flying carpet in the night sky above. It was loud, pretentious, showy, garish, and probably nothing like a genuine cultural experience, but it was also lots of fun. If you go to Marrakech, this place is definitely worth a visit.

The next morning, I rose to the same sounds that have been heard in this city for over 800 years. The inflected intonation of the call to pray by the muezzin swells from the 230-foot minaret of the Koutoubia Mosque - the spiritual beacon that towers over Marrakech and covers the city in a blanket of haunting, song-like sounds. Five times a day, devote Muslims drop to their knees to recite their prayers when the call is heard.

I had already been in Marrakech for two days and still had not found the carved wooden box I promised myself to bring home. I was beginning to wonder if I was just setting myself up for a disappointment. I was told that the best place to start looking was the medina, or old town. So, that was where I was headed.

In the lobby, Mohammed provided me with directions to the souk (traditional marketplace) which was within easy walking distance, along with his assurance that I would be perfectly safe along the way. I did a lot of walking while in Marrakech and never once did I feel unsafe, uneasy, or out-of-place.

Along the way, veiled women passed quietly and horse-drawn carts and carriages (called a caleche) navigated between fast moving cars and motorcycles. I stopped to peek into several intriguing restaurants, browsed



*Camels can still be seen in Morocco*

through shops and checked out other hotels, including La Mamounia - a favorite of Winston Churchill and one of the great hotels of the world. Built in 1923, its blending of Art Deco and Moorish elements offer an inviting intermingling of the East and the West.

As I walked, I noticed large, ripe, orange tangerines hanging from the trees that line many of the streets. I don't know what the local laws say, but I just couldn't resist picking a few and eating them as I walked.



*One of the many winding streets in the Marrakech souks*

## Seeking the Souks

It wasn't long before I encountered the walls of the medina, which rose before me like a medieval fortress. The pink-colored, sun-baked mud walls conjured images of sheiks and tales of the Arabian nights. I almost felt like I should be saying 'open, sesame' as I entered.

Inside is a wide-open square, called the Jemaa el Fna, packed with people. The scene was almost hypnotic in its sheer diversity and, in some ways, its strangeness - at least to the Westerner. Here you will find jugglers, snake charmers, fakirs, quacks, merchants, tattoo artists, and monkey handlers who perform, strut, bargain, amuse, charm and entertain. For those not used to such things, the atmosphere can be overwhelming yet, at the same time, exhilarating.

At night, it's even more intense, as I found out a few days later. When the sun goes down, the area comes alive with makeshift tables and 'instant' restaurants. Where there is only an open square during the daytime, suddenly appears a kaleidoscope of vendors who fire up portable grills and setup moveable restaurants.

Swirling clouds of smoke intertwine with the glow of lamps and the exotic smells of food ranging from goats heads and sausages to snails and couscous. The food is not only tasty, but also plentiful. I tried several varieties of fish, some excellent chicken kabobs, and lots of

interesting vegetable dishes. Best of all the prices are low - a few dollars will buy you much more than you can expect to eat.

Along with the food, the entertainment is non-stop. Musicians playing every manner of traditional and homegrown instruments provide an intoxicating beat. There is a pulse and rhythm here that is like no other. Besides the charmer who worked with several large cobras, my favorite character was a man playing a banjo while a live chicken perched on his head.

After making my way through the square, I came to the edge of the souks of the medina - at least, one part of them. There are several entrances into the souks, which are a labyrinth of dark, tunnel-like streets illuminated by occasional electric lamps and shards of sunlight that puncture the reeds and fabric overhead which protect shoppers from the heat of the summer sun. In an instant I knew this is the place where I'd find my wooden box.

There is so much going on in the souks that it takes a while to get oriented. What appears at first to be a disorganized jumble of stalls and vendors selling everything from fabrics to spices is actually a network of specialized markets. I bought a few scarves and a jibali (a long, loose fitting traditional dress worn by men and women) for souvenirs, looked over the mounds of spices, and fended off repeated offers to buy handmade shoes and slippers.

Before long, I came upon row after row of shops selling small wooden boxes. There were all types, shapes and sizes. Each was made from various woods and most were inlaid with other woods, mother-of-pearl, or semi-precious stones.



*The souks are a labyrinth of shops*



*View of the Jemaa el Fna in Marrakech*

What I thought was going to be a quest, turned out to be more a problem of selecting just the right wooden box. There were so many to choose from that I had a hard time making any decision. I finally bought several (the prices were extremely reasonable and the quality was exceptionally high) but none was exactly like the one I remembered from my childhood. Since I a few more days in Morocco, I decided to keep up my search.

At the end of the day, I returned to the hotel, tired, a little lighter in the wallet, but delighted with my day at the souks.

## **Agadir Adventure**

The next morning, we headed to Agadir - a 30 minute flight from Marrakech. Agadir is Morocco's principal resort. It's new hotels, high quality restaurants, and sophisticated nightclubs make it the number one tourist destination in the country.

The original town, which was little more than a fishing village, was leveled by an earthquake in 1960 and has since been rebuilt as a tourist Mecca. Agadir boasts a modern port and administration center, along with impressive residences and tourist facilities. Add to this



*Old meets new at the Medina d'Agadir*



*Camel & riders at Sofitel Agadir resort*

more than six miles (10 kilometers) of white sandy beach and an average of 300 days of sunshine each year, and it's easy to see why Agadir is so popular. Along with the many tourist complexes and resort facilities, visitors will also find Korean, Japanese, Italian, Arabic, French and just about every other type of restaurant imaginable.

One of our stops was a visit to the Sofitel Agadir Resort (BP 226 Cité Founty P4, Baie des Palmiers) and a nearby golf course. Located along the beach, the 5-star Sofitel Agadir resort and hotel offered a stunning luncheon of excellent regional food, a dazzling equestrian show on the beach, and musical entertainment. With traditional craftsmen, entertainers, musicians, and vendors selling everything from exotic spices to mosaic-inlaid doors, the resort is certainly one of the best in Morocco.

Just outside town is the Medina d'Agadir, a re-creation of an ancient casbah, built by Italian architect Coco Polizzi, and another stop on our day-trip. Although new, its narrow, stone walkways, craft shops, and stone walls, makes you feel like you are walking in the footsteps of Berber and Arabic tribesmen thousands of years ago. Besides the shops, dozens of craftsmen are busy making everything from mosaic tables, floors, and doors that are shipped around the world for architectural projects.

While wandering the streets of this delightful complex, I came across a little shop tucked away in the maze of stone streets. Inside were some truly wonderful wooden boxes. I took a mental inventory as my eyes quickly scanned the shelves for the exact box that I had been searching for. Within minutes, I found it. A simple box without inlay made from a single chunk of burl walnut. It was a perfect copy of the one that I had seen so many years ago.

The shop owner spoke no English but, fortunately, I had a secret weapon. A young, attractive woman with beautiful, flashing eyes from our group, who spoke Arabic, was with me. The shop owner quoted a price, but in this part of the world, that is only an opening bid. I called in the big guns. After some gentle negotiating, a few bats of her eyelashes, and a plea for a special price "just for me," the shop owner was soon weak-in-the-knees and offering his rock bottom deal.

I walked out with a smile on my face. My quest was complete. It will never be sought after by museums, but, for me, the little box was the end of a lifelong search and one that conjures memories of this wonderful land whenever I look at it.



*Guests are welcomed at Sofitel Agadir resort*