

Saturday, May 7, 2011

## Four Hour Tangier Encounter

Last night the clerk at the Navy Lodge suggested that we see if anyone else wanted to go on a day trip. I thought that sounded okay. Ten minutes later she called to say that Dan and Yana in room 15 (next to us) would like to go on a day trip with us.

I changed my mind about Cadiz. We decided to try to go to Morocco today. I set the alarm for 7am. We woke up at 9am. The sound of the AC fan was too loud for me to hear my small alarm.

Got up quick and fired up the iPod. I checked the State Department website to see if Morocco was safe to visit. No alerts.

We got on the road as quickly as possible. I set the GPS for Tarifa, the southernmost point in Spain and where we would catch the ferry. It would be almost 80 miles to Tarifa. The darned GPS took us through El Puerto. The most direct route, but not my idea of a fast start. We were already two hours late getting started. Traffic and slow ups. We would try to come back another way.

Once we got through El Puerto and got on the A-4 we were cruising along. There was little traffic on the four lane highway. Beautiful scenery. About half way to Tarifa and near Vejer the highway went from four lanes to two. Still little traffic and great scenery.

I was surprised at the number of solar panels that covered the hillside nearby. There was a windmill farm along the way. There must have been fifty of them. In our stay in Spain we saw dozens of windmill farms. Oh, yes. These were modern windmills for generating electric power, not the wooden kind that Don Quixote was challenging to a duel in the Cervantes novel of the 1500s.

We came over through a low pass in the hills and the blue sea was right there before us. So very close were the mountains of Morocco (North Africa) head of us.

Getting to the waterfront was easy. I parked the rental car in the ferry terminal lot. The next ferry wasn't until 1pm. We were way later than I wanted to be. It gave us time to fill out the immigration papers for Morocco and Spain (to get back in). That was the real urgency of getting our passports stamped back in Rota. Without an entry stamp going into Spain it is very, very difficult to get back into Spain from Morocco.

We left about 1pm. The ferry is a catamaran powered by jet drive. We were doing about 25 miles an hour. It was only about an hour ride. The cabin was more like a huge lounge.

There was a food bar and there were slot machines on the rear compartment. The side windows were very large and we had a wonderful view of the Straits of Gibraltar and the ships passing in and out of the Mediterranean Sea. We couldn't see Gibraltar. It was to the west around a headland.

As we sat there I noticed a line of people leading to a section of the saloon lounge ahead of us and out of sight. It dawned on me. I remembered from my reading. It was Moroccan immigration.



Right there on the ferry. We had to get our passports stamped before the ferry arrived in Tangiers. We took turns doing that while one of us stayed with our jackets and my backpack. That was to save our seats.

The fast ferry started to roll a bit in the swells that swept in from the Atlantic Ocean to our right. Jan's stomach started to get queasy. Not a good sign. It started when she was in the passport line and she didn't have a view of the outside. I prayed she could hold on. I was glad when we pulled into Tangier harbor and passed the breakwater. She was fine after that.

There was a surge to the back of the ferry. The ferry backed into the pier and lowered the vehicle ramp. We held back. No sense in getting jostled in the rush. I had Jan's purse in my backpack and the lock in place. She had cash in one jeans pocket and her passport in the other. I had my wallet in my front jeans pocket with my smaller camera and my passport in the other front pocket. I had my Canon camera slung around my neck. It wouldn't be wise to get "bumped" by a stranger and lose something valuable.

We had picked the perfect day for this trip. When we left Rota it was raining lightly and the sky was overcast with dark clouds. I told Jan, Dan, and Yana that I planned to go, even if it was raining lightly. We had our windbreakers that had hoods.

Unlike Thursday when we got here, despite the rain, it was cool. By the time we got to Tarifa the skies were clear. A nice cool breeze was blowing in from the Atlantic Ocean.

Dan had been to Morocco years before. He said to expect to be mobbed by native tour escorts as soon as we got off the boat. Since we were the last pedestrian passengers of the boat there was only one guide standing there facing us. That took care of fending off the local tour escorts.



His name is Nageb (pronounced "Nahjib"). About six feet tall, or more. Dressed in a black robe called a "djellaba." It has a hood that could be pulled up over his head. That fell down the back of his robe. He wore a short rounded hat called a "taqiyah."

Nageb welcomed us like we were expecting him to be waiting there for us. We had to slow down his welcome to see if we could set a price for his services. I made it clear that we didn't want to see any rugs. We wanted to see the old city, see some silver jewelry (namely rings - what Jan likes), get some coins for the school kids, and eat a meal.

Right away we thought his price was too high. This was going to be good. It's not like there were any other tour escorts there to go to if we couldn't come to an agreement. After some fast talking by Dan, and myself we came to an agreement of sorts. The price became much lower than we were quoted to begin with.

Dan had a special agenda. He wanted his wife to see the snake charmers and to ride a camel. Nageb said the camel ride would cost extra. That was out of the way. Since Dan said he would pay the extra expense for the side trip we had an agreement. There were four of us I felt like we were getting a good deal. I

wanted to be back to the ferry in three hours. Nageb said we would do it all in three hours, it was already 2pm. I did not want to drive in Spain in the dark. I was not familiar with the countryside and El Puerta specifically. And..... Nageb said no money up front. Only when we were done and we were satisfied with his services. I liked to hear that.

Nageb had a mini van waiting in the parking lot. I could not drive in Tangiers. The drivers were insane. The fact that we weren't killed was a miracle. We had a short drive up through the city with Nageb giving us a running commentary of the city around us.

The minivan dropped us off at the Casbah, "fortress,"



This left us with Nageb who led us thru an arch in the wall.

Before us was the Straits of Gibraltar far below. The sun was shining and the water below was several shades of blue, depending on the depth of the water. We could see Spain right there in front of us. There were ships passing from the left into the Mediterranean and ships passing from the right into the Atlantic Ocean. How could it get any better than this?



Nageb just stood there with his arms crossed and with a big smile on his face, like he ordered it up special, just for us.

Back inside the fortress wall was a surprise. I had expected milling crowds with tourists jockeying for position to get close to the snake charmers, blocking our view.



It must have been late in the day for them. There was one snake charmer. It was just him, Nageb, and the four of us.

The snake charmer brought out his cobra and proceeded to put on a show. Nageb said we could get closer if we wanted to. Jan and I were fine right where we were.

The man then brought out a huge "grass snake." He invited us to come forward and pet the snake.

He thought we would want our picture taken with the snake draped around our shoulders. Jan and I were fine right where we were.



Nageb said we would now go eat. He asked if we wanted fast food or traditional Moroccan food. We were hungry. We decided to be adventurous and risk our lives on a traditional meal.

From the Casbah, Nageb lead us down into the Medina, the old city. The Medina had high stone walls and narrow lanes.



We didn't go far. He showed us around a "blind" alley to an open gate. I wasn't too sure about this. The open gate led to the homes of European families there in the Medina. This dead end alley was definitely not what I expected. The buildings had obviously been renovated. The wooden doors were of expensive wood, studded with metal.

From there Nageb led us down into the Medina. Downhill, twisting and turning. The streets here were maybe ten feet across. I was totally lost in minutes. There is no way I could find my way back to where we started from. Not only that, we walked down, down, down. It would be exhausting to find my way back.

The lane passed under countless arches as we followed Nageb. Dan paused long enough to point towards the ceiling of one archway. Bundles of electrical wires were attached there leading into the Medina. Geez, Mike Holmes, from the TV show would be amazed, and horrified.

As we got deeper, literally, into the Medina we passed many of the residents. Almost all of them smiled at us some said hello in English. My sense of smell went into overdrive. The smell of the herbs and food cooking was wonderful.

Nageb stopped at a restaurant that had windows that were open to the narrow lane. He ushered us in. He said the meal would cost us 10 Euros each (about \$15) and the owner would take care of us. He would be back by the time we finished our meal.

The restaurant was spotless. Plain tile on the floor and ornate tile on the walls. We were the only customers. After all it was almost 3 pm. We had already used up an hour of our three hour tour.



I put my backpack on the floor under the open window. You could jump through the opening. I thought about someone just reaching in and grabbing my backpack, but you couldn't see it from the lane. I had my iPod in the backpack. I shrugged and decided it would be okay.

The waiter told us what we would be getting. He talked quickly and I didn't exactly follow what he was saying. We ordered sodas and orange juice to go with our meal.

The first course consisted of a bowl of marinated olives and a plate with bread. The bread was great. The olives were a bit spicy. I still had a few of them. Jan said they were too spicy for her. Next came two salads and two soups.



After Jan's adventure with the salad yesterday she passed the salad to me. She took the soup. It has been many, many years since I was in Europe or Asia. As I remembered you "don't eat" lettuce or salad or fruit in a foreign land. Oh, well. I had anti diarrhea pills back at our room in Rota. The salad plate was divided into four different portions of salad. Pickled beets, and three assortments of pickled vegetables. I timidly started in. The salad was delicious. Yana had the other salad. She even ate the bed of lettuce the salad came on.

Dan and Jan had the bowls of soup. They said it was delicious also. Not too spicy either. Jan doesn't like spicy food. The waiter hovered around the end of the table every few minutes, eager to please.

The next course was kabobs, probably chicken. Hot and spicy, but not too spicy for Jan to enjoy. We hardly had time to finish that when the cous cous appeared. A bowl of rice with a chicken thigh and vegetables on top, covered by a red sauce. The chicken and vegetables were tender.

I'm not a rice eater, but the rice intrigued me. It was as though the rice kernels had been chopped up. There was plenty of sauce in the bowl so I tried it. Pretty darned good but I was getting full.



The last course was a small plate of baklava, a pecan cookie, and some sort of thick cookie. The baklava was dripping with honey. We couldn't eat it all.

Before we left the restaurant we all decided to make a trip to the bathroom. The bathroom was much different than ours. All elaborate tile. Spotlessly clean. There was no toilet paper.

I had learned my lesson from Arcos yesterday when we had been caught without TP. However, this time I was prepared. I had brought a roll of toilet paper in a zip loc bag. The day was saved.

I looked at my watch. Four o'clock. Two of our three hours gone.

Nageb showed up and led us away. He just wanted to show us something. Right down the lane.

I should say that vendors attempted to assail us from time to time but Nageb waved them away. If one of us made the mistake of stopping to look at a bracelet or wallet from one of the street vendors we had trouble shooshing them away.

He led us to a shop. Lots of old stuff to look at. Pottery. Metalware. Then the shopkeeper invited us upstairs. Oh, oh. A rug shop. Dan made the mistake of being interested. He asked the price of a rug. "Only \$2,500 dollars." I stifled a laugh. In truth, the rugs, or carpets were beautiful. I couldn't help but admire and like the carpets that Dan wanted to look at. I didn't mind the sales pitch because I was taking photos. It was really interesting. Needless to say we didn't buy any carpets.



Nageb next led us to a silver shop. This is what Jan and Yana wanted to see.



I looked at silver knives but really could not afford one.

Dan was interested in rings. He found one he liked but it wasn't his size. I liked it and it was my size. Too much. Jan found a few things she liked and we haggled away. Too much work.

Then Dan came over and told us how well Yana haggled. Yana is Russian. He called Yana over and I talked to her. I went to work on Jan. Did she really want the things she picked? Then I went to work. Haggling is interesting, but hard work. I didn't want to insult the man. Jan got her boxes and I got my ring. Jan was happy. That was all that I cared about.

**Time was short. We had already used up our three hours and we were deep, deep, deep in the Medina.**

**Much to my relief we exited at the lower end of the Medina. Nageb, using his cell phone, had the mini van waiting for us.**

**I thought we would skip the camel ride. No, Nageb wasn't through. We made it to the camel ride. One camel master or whatever you call him. No other tourists present. Dan got his ride. Yana got her photo taken on the camel. Jan got her photo taken on the camel. We were done.**



**Nageb then ushered us to the mini van. Quick. Quick. He got us to the ferry landing just as the ferry arrived from Tarifa. I half expected him to ask for more money since we took an extra hour, but he didn't.**

**There was a tour group just arriving to get aboard the ferry. Nageb took us to the front of the passport line. And then the baggage check. He took us right to the ferry ramp.**

**Our four hours in Tangier was fantastic. The tour, the food, everything was much more than we could have hoped for. The best day of our trip so far.**

**The ferry ride back to Tarifa was very scenic, but otherwise uneventful.**

**We didn't leave Tarifa until after 8pm. We were going to have to drive after dark. The road back north was pretty much deserted. After dark I didn't have any headlights glaring in my eyes. Somehow we avoided El Puerto by driving past the town on the A-4. I ignored my GPS and its instructions to turn into El Puerto. We finally saw a sign for Rota after we passed the last of the lights of El Puerto.**

**We were back at the Navy Lodge by 10pm, tired but very satisfied with the day.**

**Tom Sparkman**