

Postcards from "Spain, Portugal & Morocco"

Girls On Tour 2014

07 September - BARCELONA

Hola from Barcelona! We had a free morning today so after a good night sleep and a hearty breakfast it was time to get on the 'hop on hop off' bus for an orientation of the city before our formal tour this afternoon. In the afternoon with our guide Montserrat we visited Park Guell, declared an artistic monument and mankind's heritage by UNESCO.



Next we stopped at the Sagrada Família once more to marvel at the unfinished masterpiece



of the world famous architect, Gaudi. Anton Gaudi worked on the cathedral for 40 years before being killed in an accident in the city at the age of 79. Barcelona's Bullring is now a Monumental one as bullfighting is banned. Our next visit was to the Basilica Santa Maria del Mar, one of the most perfect examples of Gothic style architecture. It took only 55 years to build from 1329 to 1384. Gaudi's influence is all around Barcelona with one of his famous buildings Casa Mila being better known as La Pedrera which was built between 1906 and 1912. It is now owned by one of the big banks who are in the process of restoring it to its former beauty. We finished the day with an amazing welcome dinner of local Catalanian tapas at Taller De Tapas. It will a little getting used to for us to be starting dinner at 8.30pm at night but when in Rome (or Spain)!!!

8th September - Barcelona

I awoke today to a magnificent rainbow over Barcelona. I'm sure it is not something you see every day so I couldn't let it go without capturing it with my camera. After breakfast we left Barcelona and enjoyed a train journey from Barcelona to Madrid on board the AVE with top speed of 301km/hr. It was a really enjoyable trip passing through the countryside and we arrived into Madrid early afternoon. We explored the area around the hotel and will meet our local guide in the morning for a city tour.



9th September – Madrid, Spain.

Today has been a wonderful day in the exciting city of Madrid. We started the day with a tour of the most important buildings and monuments of the city with our local guide Alfonso including a visit to Spain's most famous bullfighting ring Plaza de Toros, Las Ventas de Madrid. Next a visit to the magnificent Royal Palace of Madrid with it's beautiful tapestries and clock collection, frescos, paintings and furniture, not to mention the





priceless collection of Stradivarius stringed instruments. We didn't visit all 3,418 rooms but the ones we did were spectacular. The entrance was the only place we could take photos but I'm sure you will get some idea of the opulence of the palace from just this one image.

10th September – Madrid to Salamanca.

Our first road trip day today travelling from Madrid to the UNESCO World Heritage listed city of Avila. It is magnificent with its imposing medieval walls and narrow cobbled streets. We walked around the city with our local guide Jose learning all about the history of the city and especially about one of its many saints, Saint Teresa. From here we travelled to the beautiful town of Salamanca which in Spanish is called 'La Dorada' or the Golden One due to the colour of the majestic sandstone buildings that are all around the old quarter. We enjoyed an evening of outdoor dining and a spot of shopping in this charming city.



11th Sept – Porto, Portugal.

Olá from Porto, Portugal. A big driving day today coming from Salamanca in Spain to Porto in Portugal. On the way we travelled through the beautiful Douro Region with its terraced vineyards before stopping at the 18th Century Casa Mateus. The palace which is set in beautiful gardens is owned by the Mateus Foundation. It has a collection of beautiful furniture and religious clothing embroidered in gold thread and of the finest fabrics. Next we made a brief stop in Amarante before arriving in Porto. We enjoyed a city tour with our local guide Marta before heading down



to the waterfront to enjoy the outdoor dining and festive ambiance. Another wonderful day.

12th September – Lisbon, Portugal.

Today we travelled from Porto to Lisbon via Obidos and Sintra. Barb celebrated her birthday today and what better place to do so than in Portugal! Our first stop was the quaint walled city of Obidos where we walked the cobblestone alleys dodging the rain and wandered in and out of little shops finding treasures along the way. Our next stop was Sintra

where we visited the National Palace before heading over to the narrow streets to find the local sweet treat, Queijadas, a single serve cheesecake with a caramelised top. Just delicious. We finished today by driving along the coast towards Lisbon where we will spend the next 2 nights before heading back to Spain.

13th September – Lisbon, Portugal.

A leisurely start to the day today which is one of the luxuries of having a two night stay and not having to have cases ready to go. We set out to explore the city of Lisbon starting with a visit to the vantage point for a panorama view looking down towards the city centre. We left the city for the suburb of Belem where we visited the Jeronimos Monastery and the Belem Tower or Torre de Belem which was created in Manueline style of architecture. The Monastery was built in the 15th century by Henry the Navigator. The Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama stayed in the monastery before



setting out in 1497 to discover the orient. We had the pleasure of trying one of Portugals local sweet treats, 'pastel de nata' or Portuguese tarts. Yummm. The streets are busy in Lisbon but they still use the old trains in the centre of town.



14th September – Seville, Spain.

We farewelled beautiful Portugal today and drove South East to Seville the capital of Andalucia via the village of Beja in Portugal. Being Sunday the village was pretty much



deserted so we got to walk around the town and climb the fortress with only a few other people around other than ourselves. We arrived in Seville around 6pm. Seville is lovely

and has a great vibe. We walked from our hotel which is located in the main square down to the river and enjoyed a cruise along the river under the umbrella of a magnificent sunset. As we walked back to the hotel we passed several musicians and a lady dancing the Flamenco adding to the wonderful ambience of the city. It's official, we're now European! We sat down to order dinner at 9.45pm at Don Carlos Restaurante and it was 10.45pm before we finished a delightful meal, Sangria and local wine before wandering across the square to our hotel. Another wonderful day in Spain.



15th September – Seville, Spain.

A leisurely start to the day today with a city tour on the bus first up, followed by a walking tour of the Jewish Quarter and the city centre. One of the highlights for us all was visiting Plaza de España which was the centrepiece of the 1929 Expo. This spectacular building and grounds has been the setting of several films such as Lawrence of Arabia and Star Wars Episodes I and II to name a few. Thousands of people visit the Plaza daily and photos really don't do it justice. We visited the magnificent Gothic Seville Cathedral, the largest Gothic Cathedral and the third largest church in the world.



Barb and I climbed to the top for spectacular views over the city. We had a free afternoon to explore the labyrinth of streets, some retail therapy or a well-earned rest.

16th September – Granada, Spain.

We've had a huge day today and I was going to go straight to bed as it's after midnight and we've just returned from an amazing night of dinner overlooking Alhambra Palace

and Flamenco dancing in a Gypsy cave in Granada. It was a wonderful show full of colour and passion. It topped off a great day travelling from Seville to Granada via Ronda in Andalusia a small village of around 35,000 inhabitants. It was first settled by the Celts in 6th century BC and later by the Romans and many others. This little village has a wide and varied history and was a popular haunt for writers both Spanish and international including Ernest Hemingway and Orsen Welles. It is one of the places I would say if you come to Spain make a point of visiting Ronda.



17th September – Granada, Spain.

Our last day of touring in Spain took us to the magnificent Alhambra Palace and gardens in Granada. The 11th century Palace you see today was added to and built by the Moorish King Mohammed ben Al-Ahmar of the Kingdom of Granada after being built in 889 as a small fortress. The palace and gardens covers an area in excess of 142,000 square metres and is magnificently decorated inside with some of Spains most significant and well known Islamic architecture. The palace was abandoned for over 100 years and most of the furniture and tapestries were taken to other palaces and some rooms were vandalised however for the most it has now been restored and is definitely worth a visit if you come to Spain. After our visit to the Palace we walked down to the old city centre for a bit of retail therapy and a bite to eat before heading back to our hotel. In the evening



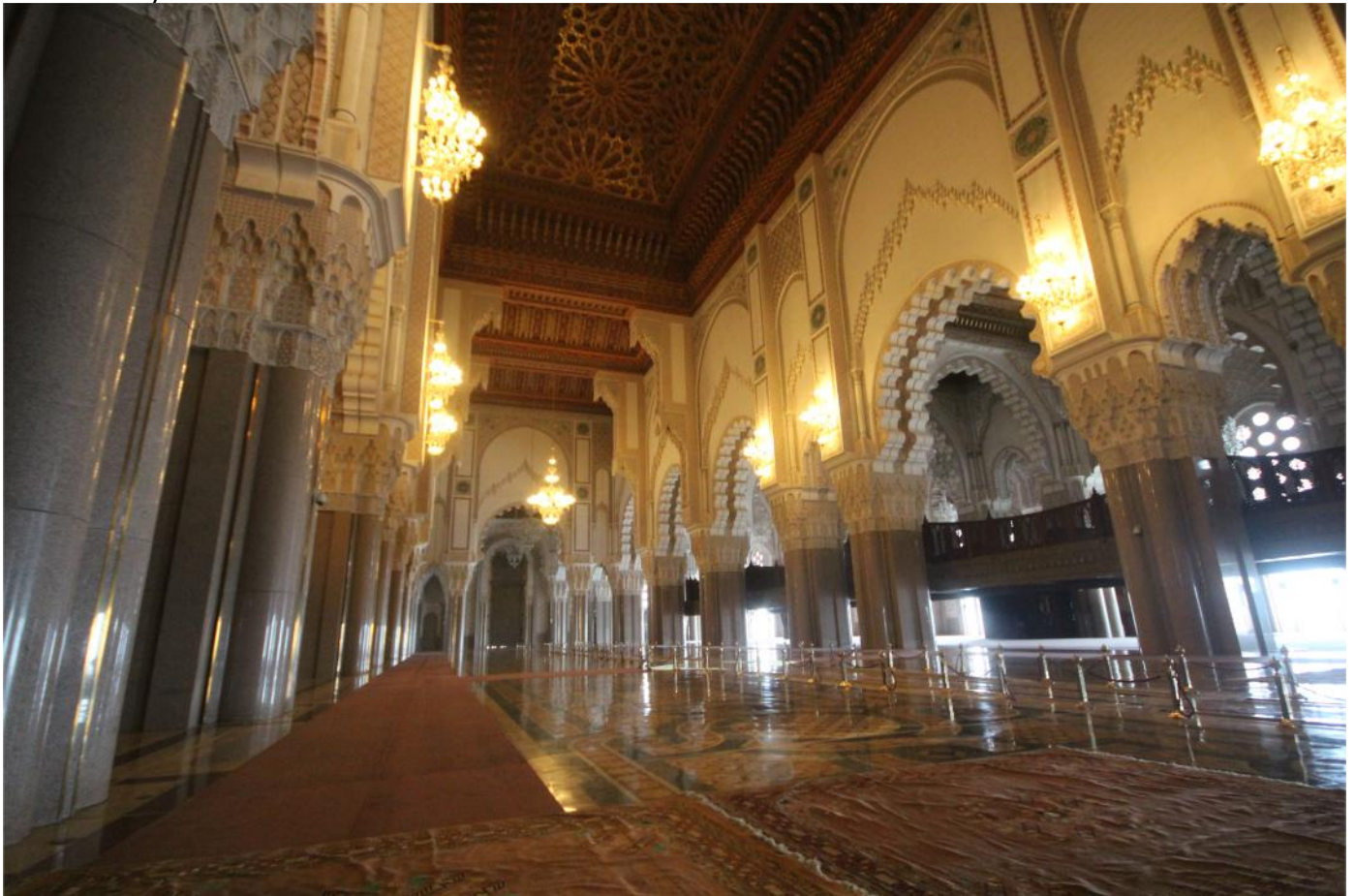


we enjoyed a lovely dinner at Parador de Malaga Gibralfaro, a restaurant perched high up on the hillside overlooking the harbour and the Mediterranean.

19th September – Casablanca, Morocco

After a good night sleep we set off this morning to explore Casablanca starting with the Hassan II Mosque the largest in Morocco and we're told the third largest mosque in the world. We went inside for a visit and it was magnificent. It took only 6 years to build, has a retractable roof and can hold 105,000 worshippers

inside and out. After a city tour we headed south to Marrakech to our wonderful Riad Amina, our home for the next 3 nights located in the Old Medina. Miriam and her staff made us feel very welcome with traditional mint tea before we settled into our rooms. In the evening we went with our driver Ferris and guide Said (Say-ed) to Ksar el Hamba restaurant for a wonderful traditional meal and show. The food, the ambiance and the company were magnificent and a great night was had by all.



Coming in to the Medina (old town) was quite exciting as we navigated our way through the narrow streets dodging cars, bikes, motorcycles and people. Little shops along the way selling freshly baked bread and other local delicacies full of friendly locals smiling and making us feel welcome in their village. The locals are as curious about us as we are about them but they are very happy when they hear our crude attempts at speaking their local language.

20th September – Marrakech, Morocco.

Another amazing day today in Morocco. We started out with a city tour visiting Bahia Palace a 19th century palace built in Islamic and Moroccan style before stopping at the Saadian Tombs which date back to the 16th century. These were discovered in 1917 and have since been restored. About 60 members of the Saadi Dynasty are interned in these tombs and much of the decoration of the tombs is done in Carrara marble from Italy. We walked through several of the small souks in the Medina taking in the sounds and smells of Marrakech but will visit the main one tomorrow afternoon. The highlight of today has to be our cooking class at La Maison Arabe. The kitchen is set up with individual workspaces, fully equipped with the latest appliances. We cooked an amazing chicken tagine with fresh herbs, preserved lemon and fragrant spices including cumin, paprika, ginger and tumeric as well as a cooked salad starter and also learned the secret to making roses from tomato skins. A wonderful finish to another wonderful day in Marrakech.



21st September – Marrakech, Morocco.

Our day started today with a journey up high into the Berber villages of the High Atlas Mountains. We got a chance to see how simply the people live away from the city and how basic their homes and farms are. There was a huge thunder storm overnight so the river was running very fast and red coming down from the mountains. When we got back to town we headed in to Jemaa el-Fnaa Square to experience the sights, smells and sounds of this famous souk. There was a young boy selling the most amazing macaroons for 2 Dirham and crazy snake charmers



intriguing passers-by however the one we encountered was more like a snake teaser than a snake charmer and I'm pretty sure he had been bitten once too many times. I think my favourite characters from the square are the Berber Water Men who walk around in their colourful costumes and brass cups ringing their bells and selling water to anyone who is game enough to drink it. In days gone by when the water supply was far from town in the outskirts of the city they would carry water in their goat skin sacks and sell it in the market. Today they mostly dress for photos and earn money from tourists taking photos which we happily did today with the two smiling gentlemen in this picture.



22nd/23rd September – Tinerhir, Morocco.

What an amazing two days we have had travelling from Marrakech to Tinerhir via the Tizi n'Tichka Pass and then Ouarzazate (Wa-za-zat). Sorry for not updating you yesterday but we were out in the middle of nowhere and I couldn't get any internet. We said goodbye to Miriam and her friendly staff at Riad Amina and got a surprise when we stepped outside the entrance to find 3 donkey carts ready to take our luggage to the bus. We all enjoyed Marrakech but were excited about the next leg of our journey which takes us towards the desert. We travelled up high into the High Atlas Mountains and up through the Tizi n'Tichka Pass at an elevation of 2,260m above sea level. It was amazing to see the villages way down in the valleys and people coming and going about their business on foot up and down the mountains. Our next stop was at the Kasr Ait-Ben-Haddou a UNESCO World Heritage site in the Ounila Valley dating back to the 17th century. This imposing fortress has been the setting for many movies such as Lawrence of Arabia, Gladiator, Babel and Prince of Persia to name a few. We stopped at the



viewpoint high above the Kasbah before getting a closer look by walking through the narrow alleys and down to the front gate. There has been rain for 2 days prior to our visit and the mud bridge to the gate was washed away. We were told we wouldn't be able to get there but we did and it was worth it. Our hotel for the night was Les Tourmalines on the shores of the lake outside Ouarzazate. It was a very beautiful and peaceful setting and we enjoyed a wonderful dinner overlooking the lake. Today we travelled on to Tinerhir stopping along the way for photo stops along the 'road of a thousand kasbahs' and were lucky enough to meet some lovely Berber ladies



who were sitting patiently by the roadside waiting for the local bus. After checking into our hotel we headed out to the beautiful Dades Valley with its magnificent Oases making a striking contrast to the terracotta coloured Kasbahs, the blue skies and the brown hills. We enjoyed a picnic lunch sitting by the roadside in the imposing Todra Gorge before making our way back to our lovely Kasbah Lamrani in Tinerhir stopping along the way for a photo shoot with some of the local

Berber men like my friend Ahmed, who wait at the viewpoint to be photographed with passing tourists. Overall a breathtaking and interesting two days.



24th/25th September – Erfoud, Morocco

On Wednesday we left Tinerhir for Erfoud but not before making a detour to Ali's House of Berber Handicrafts to be welcomed into his family. We wandered through the local souk watching as men stocked their fruit and vegie carts and butcher shops. The locals were quite curious of 15 women wandering through the area but as we greeted them with a friendly 'bonjour' or 'salam' they said good morning back to us with a friendly smile. We have found the Moroccan people to



be very friendly and welcoming. We were all very interested to hear Ali tell us about the different types of rugs and carpets that are made by the different nomadic people of Morocco such as the Berbers, Nomads, Bedouin and the Tuareg (Twareg) who are nomadic Berber farmers from the Saharan interior of North Africa. He also gave us some insight into the items taken with them to use or barter with when moving around the desert and showed us a camel skin sack that they use as a 'suitcase'. It was a very interesting insight into a small part of their life.

We travelled from Tinerhir to Erfoud passing villages and kasbahs along the way watching as people went about their daily tasks of herding stock, collecting firewood and supplies, going to and from school and peddling their wares along the roadside or in makeshift stores. We learned that a village that starts with 'T' such as Tinerhir is a Berber village, a village that starts with 'Ben' is a Jewish village and one that starts with 'Ait' such as Ait-Ben-Haddou is a mix of both Berber and Jewish. Today, Thursday is one many of us will always remember. After a 4.15am wake-up call it was off in 4WD vehicles to the Dunes of Merzouga to see the sunrise. The dunes are on the edge of the Sahara Desert about 50kms from the Algerian border. We rode on camels up to the top of the dunes under a blanket of stars and sat with our camel handlers and watched the sun rise over the desert. What a privilege to be there and experience such beauty, it was magical. After breakfast we set out for the long drive to Fes passing magnificent landscapes and oases along the way and a highlight for the day was being able to go inside a Berber home to see firsthand how they live which was wonderful. Morocco has a surprise around every corner.



26th September – Fes, Morocco.

Another great day today in Morocco. First up this morning we stopped outside the Royal Palace to see the beautiful façade with its spectacular mosaics and bronzed doors. The palace was built by a previous King but the façade was added by the current King. Next we explored the Medina with its narrow streets and leather souks. As it was Friday it wasn't so busy in the Medina so we were able to negotiate our way with our guide through the streets without too many people. No trip to Fes would be complete without visiting the oldest tannery in the world dating back to the 11th century. We climbed up the narrow staircase for views over the tannery but what greets you first is the smell. A kind man is at the entrance to give you a sprig of mint in an attempt to counteract the stench but for those with a weak stomach, be prepared. I actually expected it to be much worse and it was worth it just to get the quintessential Fes shot of the tannery from the balcony. We wandered through the souk haggling with very determined vendors selling leather bags, purses and 'silver' jewellery and also enjoyed a tour of a ceramic factory where several of us purchased beautiful items that will forever remind us of our wonderful experience in Morocco. The day finished with a traditional dinner in a beautifully restored palace in the Medina with delicious food and traditional music and dance.



27th September – Fes, Morocco

Well we are at the pointy end of the trip with only one more, full day of touring to go. Today we headed west to the archaeological site of Volubilis. This UNESCO site was founded in the 3rd century BC by the Phoenicians (ancient Syrians) and grew rapidly under Roman occupation after the 1st century AD. It covers 100 acres and has beautifully preserved mosaics, a triumphal arch and temples. We wandered through the ruins with our local guide Hossam who is a historian, telling us a little about how ancient life would have been in this fertile area before enjoying a picnic in the grounds of the ruins. From here we travelled to Meknes (the city of a hundred minarets) which was the capital of Morocco under the rule of Moulay Ismail during the years 1672



to 1727 before being relocated later to Marrakech. Moulay Ismail is noted as one of the greatest figures in Moroccan history but also one of the cruellest. We visited his Mausoleum which houses the tombs of the Sultan and his family as well as gifts from Louis XIV who was King of France at the time and to whose daughter, Marie Anne, Moulay Ismail offered his hand in marriage. She refused but he kept the gifts just the same. Another of the beautiful structures built by slaves at the hands of Moulay Ismail is the Royal Stables of Meknes. This imposing and impressive building was built to house 12,000 of the royal horses who were each assigned a groom and a slave and were better cared for than his subjects. Tomorrow (Sunday) we head to Rabat for the last leg of our trip.



If you'd like to see more pics and stories about our trip click on this link to see my Facebook page. You don't have to have a login to see the photo album

<https://www.facebook.com/GirlsOnTourAustralia?ref=hl>

Judy and the Girls,
Fes, Morocco – September 2014.