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Joey Paysinger

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Identity Crisis: Unifying a Culturally Maimed Morocco

I travelled through Morocco by bus, face smashed against a half fogged window. I saw a lot of that rough country; maybe too much. I saw decay made solid: Tangier, culturally maimed, falling down. I saw Rabat, bright and pulsing, alive with commerce and a sense of purpose; what a city can be. Rabat has public transport; there's a contemporary art museum. When I was there, I felt safe, I felt at ease; I felt like I was in a place connected to the rest of the world. In Tangier, the atmosphere is dark. I'm sure it gets hot there, but I don't think that city ever escapes the cloud of grime and chaos that cast it in shadow. The mountain city of Chefchaouen, on the other hand: it's a tourist trap, albeit a gorgeous one. Go there to buy weed and get lost in a maze of blue keepsakes. And Fez: a market with a city tacked on. I liked it there; I got lost and liked it. Fez is a good summation of Morocco's struggle for identity. An ancient market overgrown with people; enough so to warrant a new city: a French one—a colonial one—one whose main boulevard looks like a rough draft of the Champs-Élysées. But it works. The two sides of the sprawl balance each other to form a template of what Morocco can be: culturally mangled, but living.

The old medina in Fez is a rat's nest set in stone—UNESCO bait. You can walk all day and not see all of it. I can remember smelling five different men selling camel meat and to this day I couldn't tell you where to find them. That's the fun part; walking for an hour can get you just as lost as walking for five. The medina in Fez is pure and unfiltered Morocco; it is a constant, blaring, unending high note of bartering and the death throes of unlucky roosters. I couldn't stand it and wanted to drown in it all at the exact same time. And then, afterward, I walked five blocks south and got McDonalds. It's perfect: from the top floor of a mall in the new

city you can see the crumbling mosques of the old one. Fez juggles heritage and modernity to create a culture that is distinct from other parts of Morocco in that it is successful. Chefchaouen, far up there in the Rif Mountains, could learn a thing or two.

No matter where you're coming from, the bus ride to Chefchaouen is brutal. It's long and windy and you'll drive past many towns that aren't even worth mentioning by a chatty tour guide. This journey, in all its dullness, is representative of the very one-dimensional nature of the blue city you inevitably arrive at. If you got lost in Fez, you'll get lost here too. Not because Chefchaouen is very big or very confusing, but because the whole of it is bathed in a light blue so constant and without interruption, it looks as if a cluster of Smurfs burst their slimy blueness onto every available surface. Chefchaouen is one-dimensional, monotone; and not even a pleasant monotone like one you can fall asleep to; a monotone like the noise an EKG machine makes when someone flatlines. Know that I liked Chefchaouen; I liked it a lot. It was unique in a quaint way and the people there could not have been nicer; I had tea at a woman's house and never before had I been offered or eaten more cookies. But, alas, Chefchaouen is doomed to never be a capital of the country it exists within, but instead persist as a place tourists go to stay in nice hotels and buy junk; it is culture commodified. Despite all this, Chefchaouen unashamedly identifies with its role as a place sightseers go; it embraces it. Amongst all the things Chefchaouen does not have going for it, it has that. Tangier, well, doesn't.

My point of entry into Morocco was the same as most people's. I got off the boat in Tangier and, after about an hour's time, wanted to get back on. Don't go there if you can avoid it; especially if you're a woman (or homosexual, have engaged in premarital sex, consumed alcohol, et cetera). In Tangier, men sit in cafés like hawks, all looking outward at passersby: at me, at my friends; they ooze predation. Though they're likely harmless, you can never quite tell;

men like lions raised in captivity. While they're a staple of it, these men do not define Tangier; the nondescript and crumbling buildings, the aimless hustle and bustle, those do. Never once in Tangier did I see anyone really do anything. The people there walked quickly and without concern for the peril of their city's streets, but that was it. Tangier is remarkable as an oddity; it has no feeling or character, no personality. New York has a skyline and an attitude, London has Big Ben; Tangier has chaos and fast ferries, nothing good. It exists as a place to park boats and stamp passports; it's a hub, a shell of a city. I saw it but didn't look twice. I got out of there, and, eventually, found myself in Rabat, the most westernized city in the north of Morocco.

Before visiting Rabat, I had seen enough of Morocco. I came to the capital knowing what a city can fail at, can exist without being. Rabat doesn't have to have a functional and comprehensive rail line running through its center; it does not need a Nike store. But it has those things. It has engaged in the practice of excess. It has found itself in surplus; it is a modern city that exists beyond tourism and trinkets. I walked the streets of Rabat undetected; no one cared that I looked out of place: tall, blonde, and cynical. Maybe Rabat was so appealing because I was fully immersed within it; I stayed with a local family in an apartment downtown. They were nice; we ate bowls of mashed beans and they spoke French at me. In Rabat I saw what it was like to be Moroccan; no longer was I tourist in a tourist town, I was a local living in big city, a whole city; a city with a purpose and a past—balance. Like Fez, Rabat has managed to find a happy medium between confusing alleyways packed with loud men hawking olives and broad boulevards with lots of parking. The amalgamation of cultures in Rabat and Fez create a viable identity, a successful one; one that can, and should, prevail over the blue streets of Chefchaouen and the distressed facades of Tangier. There is hope for a unifying culture to be found in Morocco, it just depends where you look.