



HAPPY RETURNS TO MOGADOR FOR FESTIVAL D'

By Jerry W. Bird



It's been seven long years since we first toured Morocco with the Ministry of Tourism as part of the ATA media team. This time, our purpose is to set up Africa Travel Magazine's first office in Africa, here at Essaouira, a beautiful Atlantic Coast city, once known as Mogador. A world-class golf course development, with multi-star hotels is underway and many other attractions are on the horizon. Since arriving from Paris on Royal Air Maroc, we have visited Rabat, with brief stops at Safi and Al Jaddida, spent two days in Casablanca and another in Marrakech, meeting old friends and new. Some of our positive impressions were a new Autoroute, with divided highway and the start of a Tramway system in Rabat. Muguette's brother, **Maurice Goufrani** of the Pompidou Centre in Paris, asked us to make sure we covered **Festival Gnaoua** (Gnawa) Essaouira, a unique musical experience, June 24-29, 2009. This event is high on our agenda and is in the **Venues World Edition**, now available for download at www.africa-ata.org/venues.pdf

Known as the "windy city," Essaouira is Morocco's wind-surfing capital, where the sky is ablaze with multi colored kites from dawn to dusk every day.

Flashback 2002

Here we are, basking in the noonday sun on North Africa's Atlantic Coast at Essaouira, Morocco, following a journey of discovery which began in the Imperial City of Fès and continued via Rabat, Casablanca and Marrakech. In a few days, we will drive south to the resort city of Agadir, with its luxury beach front hotels and lavish casinos, catering to the jet set of Europe, Africa and Middle East. Most North Americans have yet to really discover Morocco's coastal resort cities - and that's a prime opportunity for our magazine, read by travel professionals



and their clients. We are enjoying a nautical view of Essaouira's historic seaport, once known as Mogador, from our dockside table at " Chez Sam. "Highly recom-

mended by locals in the know, this charming waterfront restaurant is surrounded by fishing boats and marine activity. Men repairing fishnets, shucking shrimp and sorting sardines, looming skeletons of boats under construction add to the scene. The interior of Chez Sam reminds me of Trader Vic's, once a popular hang-out in our home port of Vancouver, and Ivar's in Seattle. The fresh seafood, decor and atmosphere are magnificent and the impressive gallery of celebrity photos; Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong, Stevie Wonder and others, attests to the fact that the owner comes from the world of jazz. Sam and his huge, jet black dog Nikita joined our table a few days later, and thanks to that rendezvous, I was able to learn the history of this outstanding restaurateur and the origin of the Essaouira (Mogador) seaport's most popular eatery. Freshness is the order of the day, every day at Chez Sam and also at the many outdoor stalls, perched side-by-side along the dock area. Each offers visitors fresh caught



ESSAOUIRA GNAOUA ET MUSIQUES DU MONDE

products from the sea to the table and each competes vigorously with its neighbour for our attention. Barkers, menu boards and tempting displays of fresh catch from the Atlantic is their marketing approach. I enjoyed a generous portion of sole fillet and fresh salad for less than five dollars U.S. My two colleagues split a large crab for a similar tab. Overhead a flotilla of sea gulls was dipping and diving against a background of crashing whitecaps, rocky outcrops and rugged remnants of the centuries old Portuguese fort that marks the city's place in history. Some call this the "city of winds ... and when we visited Essaouira earlier this same week, a minor storm was brewing. Gusts swept the area clear of surfers, bathers, wanderers and beachcombers. A few lonesome camel drivers still tended their stalls near the far end of the crescent shaped beach, and the waves grew even more fierce as they pounded the shore. But today, near the end of December, the weather is as balmy as any spring afternoon, and the buyers and browsers are out in force, filling the Medina with its dozens of shops and stalls. We found an excellent Cyber Cafe right by the entrance and are getting our dozens of e-mail letters ready to send around the world. It's a great way to stay in touch, which is why we always carry our 'portable office - a reliable Macintosh laptop computer.

Arabian Nights On New Years Eve in Morocco

One of my favorite meeting places in Essaouira is the 5-star Sofitel Mogador, located on the main promenade facing the beach. Here's where we spent one of the most enjoyable New Year's Eve celebrations in years. It started with an invitation to a Fashion Show, which continued into the wee hours. For starters, the hotel's dining room staff were all decked like Aladdin (of the lamp), and the entire ballroom looked like a scene from Arabian Nights, complete with belly dancers, mariachis with their Spanish guitars, Magicians and special visual and musical effects. The entire evening was unforgettable. We then moved to the hotel's beach side restaurant, where the music was going full tilt. One of local girls modeled Muguette's bottle- green gown with shoulder wrap- one of several gifts we received from our friend and former Tourism Minister, Hon. Sylla Diakite of Conakry, Guinea. The Moroccan Khaftan fashion segment of the evening proved highly popular.

Doors of Hospitality

Another friendly, convenient place to meet is the Hotel des Isles. Next to the Medina and offers a full range of services. Since we spent almost two weeks in the immediate area, we are pleased to recommend a stay in Essaouira to any traveler looking

for something different. Photos courtesy: Thierry Mareschal and the Essaouira Cultural Center.

Olive Branch Tours

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