

In Morocco
By Edith Wharton
1998 Blackstone Audiobooks

August 2006

Ms. Wharton was the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize. This book was originally published in 1919 and is set in 1917, during World War I. This book is an account of Ms. Wharton's travels through Morocco's cities and deserts. It is a typical travelogue and I enjoyed it.

Ms. Wharton begins by stating that there's no travel guidebook to Morocco and that she would've liked to remedy this but she had only one month to explore the country. Factors that limited her time were the approach of the rainy season and wartime consideration, mainly the need to use less gas. She says that although there's a lot written about Morocco, most of it is in large and inaccessible books, most of which are in French.

She says that although her trip was limited by war time conditions, she was lucky enough to travel in Morocco in what she calls that "brief moment of transition between it's subjection to European authority and the fast approaching hour when it's thrown open to the banalities of modern travel." She talks about the round trip ticket as decreasing the allure of many areas of the world, including Morocco. She feels that, at the time of her trip, she can still glimpse the "romantic and ruinous Morocco of yesterday".

Early in the book, she talks a lot about the architecture of Morocco and how a lot of the old is forever lost with new waves of foreign administrators, but that the leader of the current (1917) French administration has an appreciation for the native architecture and allows no European buildings to mar the cohesiveness of the Moroccan villages and cities.

Her trip to Sale is described in great detail – she says that it is everything a reader of the Arabian Nights expects to see here. She cites the charm of its 'extreme compactness' and gives a wonderful description of the clothing of a Berber woman.

She goes into great detail in describing the ruins of Meknes the favorite retreat of one of the great sultans. Captive Christian conscripts were part of the labor force used in building his palaces. It is said that if a captive died while at work, he was simply built into the wall where he had stood. There were harsh penalties for not all being in time – can you imagine thousands of workers painting walls and all the strokes being in time to each other? This is tougher than getting a troupe and a class of students to zill together!!

She also describes Fez in detail, referring to it as a "rich and perpetually menaced city" of towering walls and horseshoe gates. You get a feel for history when she tells you that 'new' Fez was founded in the 14th century. Her description of a house bestriding the street and houses hung over the street thrusting out beams & buttresses to prop each

other's sides reminds me so much of what I saw when I traveled to Morocco in 2001. It was such an amazing feeling to realize that you were walking UNDER parts of peoples' homes as you wandered through the twisting narrow streets. I also felt a familiarity when she commented on the "golden heat haze" – I think I drank more lemonade in my one day in Morocco than any MONTH before or since.

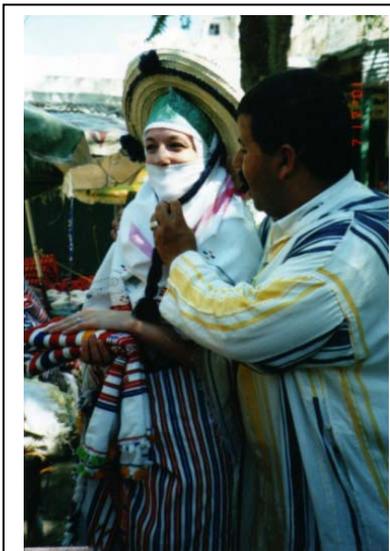
Some of her literary and artistic allusions escape me and I think that if I were reading the book rather than listening to it on tape, I'd actually look up some of the figures she references, for a greater understanding. This is about the only drawback I've found to books on tape – the fact that I can't just put a post-it note on the page and go look up the reference later on is a bit frustrating for me.

Ms. Wharton gives a good synopsis of French influence in the country, but this gets a little dull as she delves into the then-current administration's accomplishments – roads, jetty, warehouses and such, including the size of each!

She explores the ethnology of the Berbers and Tuareg as well as the influence of other peoples in the region, talking in depth about the various wars. This also tends to get a bit tedious and I would've preferred more information of a cultural nature, although the history naturally gives you some insight into the culture.

The book is a nice travelogue, giving you a taste of the place and time. I'd recommend it to anyone who's interested in the history and culture of the area – you can always skip over the parts that delve into minutiae, if you wish.

Graphics of Morocco from virtualltourist.com website



AMIRA of MAS UDA as a
BERBER WOMAN

