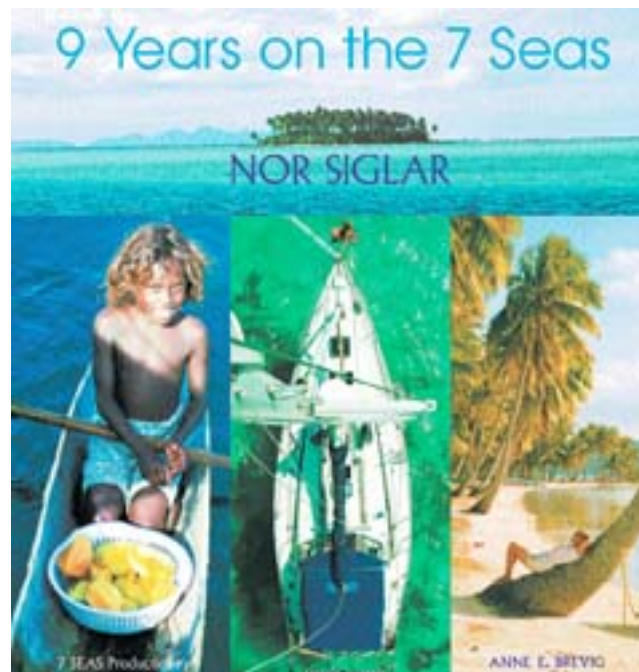


Anne E. Brevig

9 Years on the 7 Seas

NOR SIGLAR

Sample Chapter: Our Moroccan Experience



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OUR MOROCCAN EXPERIENCE



Celebrating Martin's birthday abeam Europe's westernmost point.

Nor Siglar is in Gibraltar getting ready for the Big Atlantic crossing. She is not alone. There is hectic activity in Sheppard Marina as sailors from all over the world frantically prepare themselves and their vessels for the upcoming challenge. Everyone is anxious to get underway. Everyone has long Maintenance & Repair lists. Nerves are on edge – the atmosphere is tense.

“Replace the standing rigging” is the first item on our list; not a simple task, even under normal circumstances. And especially not for Martin, who has a bad back and is unable to do the job himself. We have to rely on someone else’s expertise. So when the rigger arrives and sends his apprentice up the mast, while he himself shouts orders from the deck below, we lose our cool. We realize that the job will take forever. It may not even get properly done. We are already delayed far behind schedule, and voice our concerns. “Yes, but he’s got to learn some time,” the rigger exclaims visibly annoyed. “Of course!” we counter. “But not on our boat.”

We keep going from early morning till late at night. The wind generator, which is completely eroded, is replaced with solar panels. The life raft receives its annual inspection, the emergency beacon and bilge pumps are checked, the engine overhauled, a new toilet installed, the first aid kit replenished, health and boat insurance renewed. We also invest in a new whisker pole for the trade winds ahead, renew emergency lights and flares, stock up on batteries and bulbs, blocks and shackles and spares for every conceivable purpose. When we think we have covered everything, we suddenly remember something else.

To relieve the stress, we ride our bikes every afternoon; either around the famous Rock, or across the airport runway to Spain, where we copy charts for next to nothing and provision at La Liniá’s colourful outdoor market. The boat is virtually turned inside out and reorganized from stem to stern to make room for new purchases and provisions. We pack and stow, stow and pack, move

things from their usual spots, forget where we put them, become miserable and get on each other’s nerves.

Our two-week stay soon becomes four. At the 11th hour, we trade our Mediterranean cruising guides and charts for those needed in the Caribbean and note the coordinates of a small port in Morocco, in case of emergency. Finally, on October 30, the Skipper’s birthday, we’re as ready as we’ll ever be. But Martin’s back is painful. “You ought to take a few days rest,” I plead. But no way. “It’s *my* birthday, so I should be able to do as I like, don’t you think?” We cut the lines, hoist full sails and set out to sea. The current runs strong in the Strait. But that doesn’t prevent a school of playful dolphins from giving us a wonderful show, a lovely start to a long anticipated journey. As we round Europe’s southernmost lighthouse, the birthday boy is celebrated with canapés and gifts – and a tiny shot of *aquavit*. We like each other again. Things are back to normal. Almost.

For when it's Martin's turn at the helm that night, he needs help to tie his shoelaces. And when he signs off at 0100, the pain is so intense that he can barely climb into the bunk. I keep watch until the sun peeks over the horizon, so that he may have a long rest. But, when I call him, he is barely able to get up. Fortunately, the weather is still good, so he can lie down in the cockpit with pillows under his knees, while the wind vane takes care of the steering. The situation is not encouraging. We consider aborting the passage to the Canaries and deviate to Morocco. There is only one problem: Our small-scale chart is not at all suitable for entering a harbour.

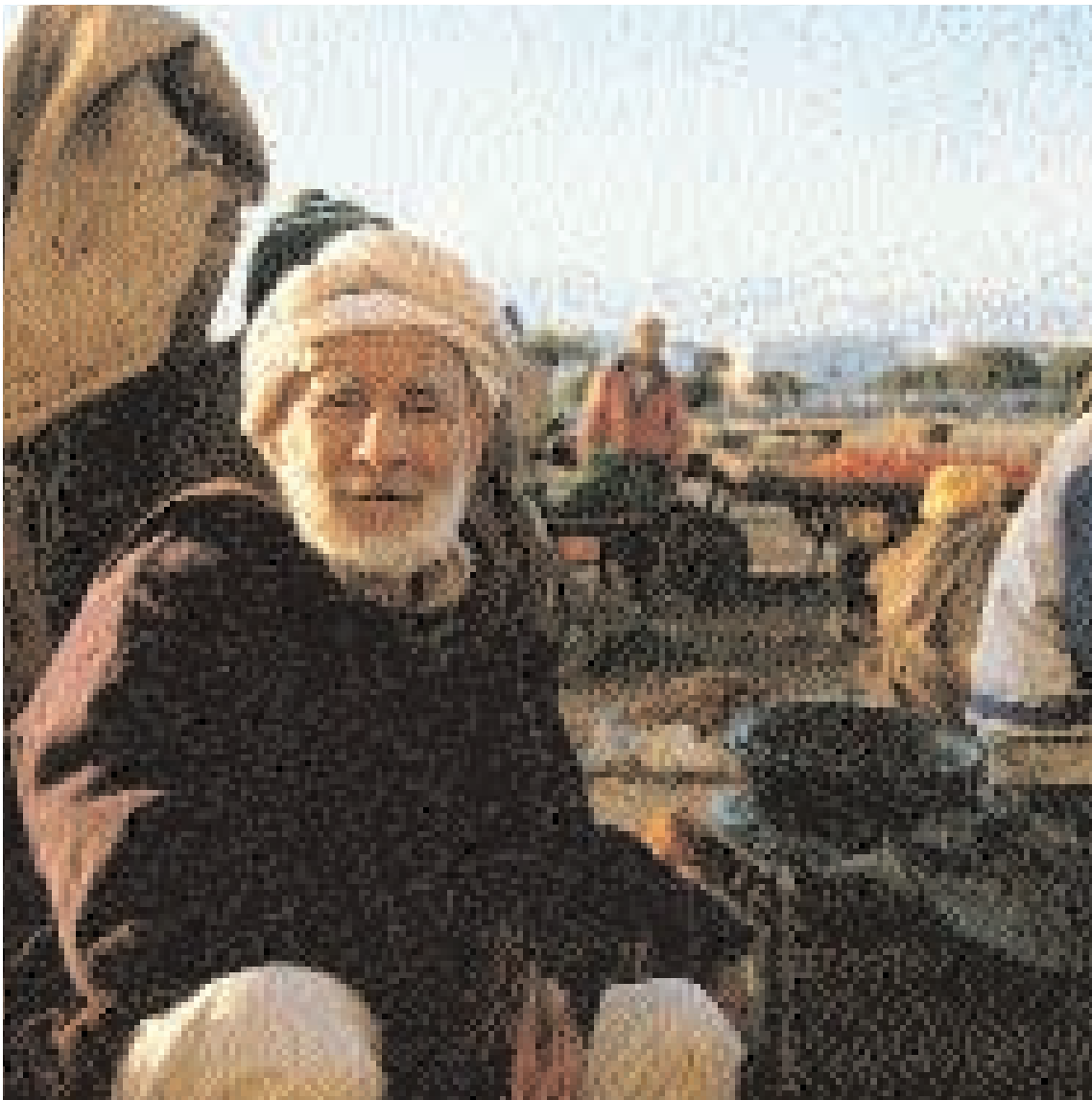
The second night out, Martin's back seizes up completely. He can't get up for his watch. The night is long and lonely. I am not keen to continue alone like this for another 3-4 days with an incapacitated skipper onboard. The following morning we admit defeat. I find the notes from Gibraltar, where someone recommended a small yacht club just north of Casablanca. We check into the British Maritime Mobile Net. The coordinates for Mohammedia are confirmed. It is reassuring to talk to someone who has been there before. "The coast is clear and free from obstructions," radio amateur ZB2IO declares. "Just find the breakwater and go straight in." What a moral support these ham nets are! With an amateur licence and a short wave radio onboard, you are never alone. Help is only a phone-call away, which is an enormous relief at sea, far away from civilization.

The visibility is poor. The air is full of dust from Sahara. Soon a thin layer of orange desert sand covers the boat. I get a fright when I discover the lower spreaders drooping downwards at a strange angle. The shrouds are slack. The so-called experts in Gibraltar have failed to put clamps at the ends of the spreaders. I hesitate to tell Martin. He wouldn't be able to do fix it anyway and would only worry. It helps to tighten the turnbuckles a bit. Fortunately, there is hardly any wind so I can lower the sails and continue under motor minimizing the stress to mast and rig. Only six hours to go. I struggle to stay awake. It's hard when you don't have a horizon to concentrate on. The coastline is low and we can't see land until we're virtually on top of the breakwater. Thank God for GPS and reliable coordinates!

Ever so slowly, I poke the bow around the jetty into a big, open bay. Without a proper harbour chart I have no idea where to go. A fishing boat comes steaming by. "*Messieurs! S'il vous plaît!*" I call out. "Could you tell us where the marina is, please?" The men ignore me. "My husband is sick," I continue. "Could you help me find a place to



Spice Woman at outdoor market in Mohammedia.



The water carrier, Ibrahim.

dock?” That does it. “*Bien sûr, madame!* Follow us!”

The fishermen escort us past a large petroleum refinery to a small marina full of cabin cruisers, a few sailboats and the Moroccan Coast Guard. As we approach, two guys suddenly start waving like mad. “*Non! Non! Privé!*” they yell at the top of their voices. “*Excusé moi!* The captain is ill,” I call back in despair. The mood changes *tout de suite*. “*Abhhh madame! Venez ici!*” We are given a prime spot alongside the *Gendarmerie*.

Rumours of a Canadian sailboat with a sick captain onboard spread fast in the harbour. People come flocking down to see us. Everyone is kind. Everyone offers help. But there is no space available in Yacht Club de Mohammedia. “How long are you staying?” the Club Manager asks, looking at Martin who can barely move. “As soon as I am

mobile,” he answers. The next day, a member’s boat is put ashore to make room for us.

So there we were. In an unfamiliar little port in Morocco feeling sorry for ourselves. Our mood improves a bit, though, when we discover that we are in good company. King Hassan II has two of his yachts moored right across from us. “You are safe here,” a very pleasant Harbour Master states as he clears us in. Genuinely concerned, he enquires about Martin’s health, and assures us that we can stay as long as we want. “There is no need to worry,” he reiterates. “Since the King has his yachts here, the compound is heavily guarded around the clock. All traffic must enter through a checkpoint.”

We receive preferential treatment from day one. The night guard accompanies me to the pharmacy, brings us flowers and mint tea. Suddenly, out of the

clear blue, a physiotherapist appears. But after four treatments, Martin’s condition takes a turn for the worse. He has lost the feeling in several toes. The pain is excruciating. We send for a doctor. The diagnosis comes as no surprise. “You have a slipped disk which exerts pressure on the sciatic nerve,” Dr. Nezha, a young, pretty female doctor confirms and orders complete rest. “Oh no! We don’t have time for that!” the Skipper exclaims with impatience. “I’ve got to get well fast! We have to pick up crew in the Cape Verde Islands 1000 nautical miles from here in less than a month.”

In order to speed up the healing process, the doctor decides to give Martin a cortisone shot once a day for two weeks. We enjoy her morning calls onboard. She always brings us goodies; figs and dates, almonds and homemade bread. And she always takes the time to chat. This way, we learn a lot about the people and life style in this country, whose King is said to be a direct descendent from the Prophet Mohammed. We learn that Morocco doesn’t have such severe problems with fundamentalists as their neighbour, Algeria. “But what about poverty?” we enquire. During conversations with marina staff, we have been led to believe that poverty is a big problem in Morocco. “Not at all! It isn’t as bad as it looks,” Dr. Nezha, a typical representative of the monarchy’s small elite insists. “It’s hard for you foreigners to understand, but the poor in Morocco live quite well. We Muslims are obliged to help each other. It says in the Koran. Therefore, nobody has to go hungry or be destitute in our society. We look after the sick and needy and respect the elders. Nobody has to end up in an old folk’s home here. The extended family ensures that nobody is lonely. For us, religion and family are more important than money and material wealth,” this very modern Arabic doctor states, while criticizing the western world’s treatment of the older generation. Dr. Nezha definitely strikes a tender, guilty chord. We can’t help but ask if she also prays five times a day. “*Mais bien sûr!*” she exclaims surprised. “It’s just as natural for me as brushing my teeth.”

When the treatment is over, Dr. Nezha exclaims with a bright smile: “Now only rest and Allah’s help can get you back on your feet!” But even Allah can’t get us to Cape Verde in time for our rendezvous. Our crew is informed and invited to join us after Christmas instead.

Days turn into weeks, weeks to months. Martin shows no sign of improvement. “You must come with me to *hammam, capitaine!*” an upbeat Abdelhak, YCM’s jovial night guard suggests one day. “A healthy Turkish bath! That’s all you need.

Then you'll get well in no time. We Arabs don't like doctors. No, we place our trust in a hot and steamy *hammam*, natural herbs and remedies, not to mention a proper Moroccan massage. And Allah, of course."

He is just fabulous with us, this young man who works 14 hours a day 7 days a week and supports an extended family of ten on a salary of \$170 per month. Night after night he brings us dinner from home. "Since you're not able to go out and eat good Moroccan food, my wife and mother will ensure that you get proper, healthy nourishment as long as you're here with us," he states with a smile. But Abdelhak won't let us pay for the meals. "It's not us who are doing this for you. It is Allah!" We understand that it is important to be on a good footing with Him. We also understand that if Muslims accept money for a favour, it is no longer considered a gift but a service. It won't count when the points are added up on Judgement Day.

We try to figure out how we can reciprocate this endless generosity without hurting their feelings. There are no laundry facilities in the yacht club. Maybe we could ask them to do our washing for us? Then we could pay them for the food indirectly by giving them a little extra for the laundry. We know they are poor. In addition to his two children, his wife and mother, who, by the way, is also his wife's aunt, Abdelhak has three unmarried sisters and two unemployed brothers-in-law to support. Our laundry comes back clean as a whistle, nicely folded in a large prayer shawl. But there is no way he'll let us pay for it.

One evening, Abdelhak is not his proper self. He has a toothache. "I must pull five teeth," he moans. "But I can't afford it. Besides, I am too scared." We send him off with a jar of aspirin. Suddenly, we get a bright idea. Martin makes a terrific drawing of Abdelhak in the dentist's chair, complete with his trademark Los Angeles Raiders baseball cap. Below, he draws five ugly molars and the amount, 100 *dirham* each. Then we put the drawing together with 500 *dirham* in a mayonnaise jar, wrap it in some old T-shirts and hide it amongst the pots and pans that he picks up in the morning, after his customary cup of coffee onboard.

When Abdelhak turns up that evening, he is overloaded with plastic bags containing a veritable gourmet feast. The money is not mentioned with a word. As he is about to leave, we ask if he found anything unusual amongst the dishes that morning. Somewhat embarrassed, he admits that his wife, Saïida discovered the jar first. "She was so delighted that she ran straight to the *souk* and bought a live chicken and *seven* types of vegetables before I could

stop her! Had I found it first, I would have returned it to you," he insists. We can't help but grasp the opportunity. "Well, you know, Abdelhak, it wasn't us who gave you the money. It was Allah!"

Many more drawings and *dirhams* found their way into jars hidden amongst used clothing and goodies for the family. We shall never know who received the most pleasure from this game and the relationship that ensued. One thing is certain: For us it became an incredibly meaningful experience, an experience so touching that we shall never forget.

Our dear Abdelhak had only two molars extracted. "But why?" we wondered. We could see that he felt uneasy. "I was afraid," he replied with a sheepish grin. We suspected that he had something else on his mind. Then it came, barely audible: "My neighbour died this morning." The family needed money for the funeral. And since Abdelhak had the cash, he gave it to them. So there went the rest of our money. To pay for the funeral of a complete stranger. "But Abdelhak!" we said rather perturbed. "The money was for you! Not for someone we've never met! You were supposed to use it on your teeth!" "*Mais monsieur et madame!*" Abdelhak countered meekly. "I had no choice. It says in the Koran: Muslims are



The night guard, Abdelhak makes fresh mint tea onboard.



Madame Sitaf squats all day long, her grandchild on her back, cooking for a family of ten on a one-burner stove. Couscous with our Muslim friends

obliged to share their wealth. Today I had the cash. Next time it may be *me* who needs it.”

This is how we realized why Abdelhak would never borrow anything from us. He could not guarantee that he would be able to return it. Martin had offered him the use of his raingear as long as we were in Morocco. But *non-merci!* If someone needed it more than him, i.e. a sick, old man, he would have to pass it on. Now we had the explanation of why the dinner pots some times were half-empty when he arrived at night. He had given some of our food to hungry guards on his way to work.

Seven weeks later Martin’s condition is still unchanged. We become more and more depressed. It looks like he may have to have an operation. We

discuss the situation with some French-Moroccan yacht club members. They have nothing complimentary to say about the local medical system. “Don’t ever let yourself get admitted to hospital in this country”, one of the richest members of the club warned. “The standard is shocking. We expatriates go to France when we need an operation.”

We *must* get home somehow. But how? Martin’s radius is limited to a hobble from the forward bunk to the head and back. And what should we do with Nor Siglar? There is no way we can leave her in YCM. Even though people are both kind and helpful, we cannot rely on them to look after our beloved home in our absence. A few days ago, a powerboat sank right next to us. If we could only put her ashore! But the travellift in the marina can’t handle sailboats. Maybe we could sail back to Gibraltar and put her “on the hard” there? But then there is the question of weather. December is not a good month to sail north. Not a good idea with a helpless skipper onboard. Day in and day out, we are racking our brains to find a workable solution. The dilemma gets more and more complicated as time passes by and Martin doesn’t get any better.

Just before Christmas, his condition deteriorates. He has developed a bedsore. Something has to be done. “Is it possible to have a cat scan here in Morocco,” we ask Dr. Nezha. “Yes, of course!” she confirms. “At a private clinic in Casablanca.” An elderly French Moroccan widow, whom we have befriended, offers her help and becomes our chauffeur for the rest of our stay. And what’s more – Madame Lili de Bridieu de Chateaubriand lived in Anne’s hometown after the war! “This must be fate”, she announces. “When I was in Halden, it was me who needed help and a kind family looked after me there. Now it’s my turn to help someone from Halden here!”

“This is an emergency! Your husband needs an operation right away. We can do it tomorrow!” the Arabic doctor concludes after the examination. He can sense our hesitation. “We’ve heard so many horror stories about Moroccan hospitals and are really scared! We’d like to get home,” I plead. “Oui, madame, I understand perfectly,” the sympathetic surgeon replies. “But under these circumstances, such a long trip is too risky for your husband. Clinique Anoul is a private clinic. All our doctors are educated in France and well acquainted with the latest in technology and procedures. Your husband is in good hands. I’ll perform the operation myself.” Dr. Amrani is Professor of Neurology at the University of Casablanca. The clinic looks neat and clean. The staff is professional and polite. Martin looks 100 years old where he sits doubled over with

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pain in his wheel chair. "Let's get it over with," he whispers with resignation.

The operation takes place the following morning. When I visit the patient in the afternoon, he is surrounded by beautiful Berber and Arabic nurses. A dozen red roses adorn his bedside table. They are from the clinic. The foreign sailor receives VIP treatment. He loves every minute of it. The operation is successful, the pain is gone and three days later, the day before Christmas, Martin is released from the hospital.

And what a Christmas it is! Our dear friend, Abdelhak brings us all sorts of delicacies from home, and together with Madame Lili, our faithful chauffeur, we celebrate an unforgettable Christmas onboard Nor Siglar. Abdelhak is in his glory as he surprises us with gifts galore: a nicely framed scripture from the Koran, purple velvet slippers and beautifully embroidered one-size-fits-all underpants for *madame*, a *djellaba* and white pleated balloon breeches for his beloved *capitaine*. And how could he afford all this? Well, it was thanks to the Christmas bonus we had given him, hidden in a jar the day before.

Martin improves rapidly. As soon as he is well



"Our" Moroccan family rented wedding garb and jewellery to dress Anne as a Moroccan bride.

Henna is an integral part of the bride's makeup. It took several months for it to wear off.

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The foreign sailor gets TLC from beautiful Arab nurses.



enough, we accompany Abdelhak and his wife, Saiida to the *hammam*; one for men, one for women and children. The huge public bath is piping hot and steamy, full of stark naked women in all ages, shapes and sizes. Saiida finds an empty spot for the two of us. She then proceeds to wash my hair and entire body with loving care; gently massaging me all over before rinsing me with buckets full of warm water collected from huge tubs with continuously running faucets. Saiida treats me

like a queen. “*Ca va, madame?*” The look in her eyes is both inquisitive and tender. “Are you ever beautiful,” I think. “And what a shame that your husband can’t see you now.” Saiida is truly a sight to behold, like a sensuous painting, as she gracefully, almost passionately shampoos her long, black hair with exquisite poise.

After the bath, we go home to the Sitaf family. We even stay overnight in their humble quarters where the kitchen is nothing but a shack and the toilet a hole in the cement floor. We feel a curious, yet intense closeness toward these strangers, as though we’ve known them forever. And it is truly unique to be able to observe them as they go about their daily chores. Everything is so different from what we are used to. I never thought it possible to squat all day long cooking for a family of ten on a single burner propane camp stove. “Is it really true that Abdelhak beat you when you were newly married, Saiida?” I ask, as I watch her preparing the traditional *couscous*. He had told us on the boat that when they met, she didn’t know how to cook, so he had to beat her till she could. “*Oui, madame,*” she answered earnestly. “It’s true. I really didn’t know how to cook.”

A few days later, as we celebrate Ramadan with our doctor and friends from the elite, the contrast between rich and poor feels enormous. The hospitality is just as genuine, but after the overnight stay at the Sitaf’s, the luxury seems overwhelming. It is difficult to forget the poverty around the corner. But one thing is clear: Islam is the common deno-

Our dear Abdelhak buys us gifts with the Christmas bonus we gave him.



minator and main focus of everyone’s existence. All strive to satisfy Allah, all appear firm and unshakable in their faith. We consider ourselves fortunate to have had the opportunity to meet Moroccans from all walks of life. Rich or poor, we have never experienced such kindness, generosity and warmth anywhere else on our travels.

At the end of January, Martin receives a clean bill of health. “But you must quit this sailing of yours,” Dr. Amrani declares. “Your back can’t take it.” A difficult period is past. We are anxious to get going. Still, we are not looking forward to the departure. Our involuntary delay has become a positive experience.

Quite a few people turn up to see us off. But it’s Abdelhak who catches our attention. He looks so forlorn where he is standing dressed in Martin’s old clothes. “*Bon voyage! Merci pour tout!*” he calls after us. “Come back soon! *Chez nous,* you’ll always have a home in Morocco.” We can’t help but think of the simple little dwelling. But when it comes right down to it, our friends are not so poor after all. And, of course, it is us who should say thanks. “*Shukran, Abdelhak!* Yes! We’ll be back soon,” we promise with tears in our eyes. *Insh’Allah.*

MOROCCO



Coordinates:	32°00′ N, 05° 00′ W
Location:	Northern Africa; borders the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean between Algeria and Western Sahara
Government:	Constitutional monarchy
Area:	446,550 sq. km
Coastline:	1,835 km
Population:	31,689,265 (2003) Arab-Berber 99.1%, other 0.7%, Jewish 0.2%
Capital:	Rabat
Languages:	Arabic (official), French, Berber dialects
Religions:	Muslim 98.7%, Christian 1.1%, Jewish 0.2%
Currency:	Moroccan dirham (MAD)
Industries:	Phosphate rock mining and processing, food processing, leather goods, textiles, construction, tourism
Agriculture:	Barley, wheat, citrus, wine, vegetables, olives, livestock
Exports:	Clothing, fish, inorganic chemicals, transistors, crude minerals, fertilizers, petroleum products, fruits, vegetables