Santander Travel Grant Report – Patrick Kenny and Alice Mingay

Over the Spring vacation 2017, we travelled north from Marrakech, through Fez and Meknes, to Tangier where we took a ferry to Algeciras and continued our journey through Spain to Barcelona. It was a fantastic trip and we are very grateful for the funding that made it possible. Each of the seven cities we visited displayed its own unique character, yet their overlapping and intermingling histories resulted in a number of shared characteristics and a cultural continuity throughout the journey.

That being said, the journey began in a city of contrasts: wandering through the old city of Marrakesh throws you from a bubbling river of people in one street into the stillest of dusty, residential cul-de-sacs, lit only by the slimmest crack of sky, held in place by the high buildings on either side. Walking from our hostel in the old city to the train station traces a path from the Middle Ages, and their rustic souqs, to the new town of the 20th century French occupation, and past both the ruined palaces of old royal dynasties and the high walls of the current king’s residences. The greatest attraction of Marrakech, at least to us, was the busy, exciting atmosphere of the old markets which varied between catering to tourists, with handicrafts such as brightly painted plates or collections of leather goods, and those selling groceries or more practical items to locals. The heart from which these commercial and residential capillaries spread is the huge city square, the Jemaa el-Fnaa. At night, food tents were constructed and the sounds and smells of large numbers of diners gorging on grilled meat and vegetables, or sipping mint tea, rose up. It wouldn’t be unfair to assume that finding such a square would be easy, but on our first night in Morocco it almost proved beyond us: after receiving directions from our hostel we set off on what was described as a ten-minute walk, only to spend the next hour going in circles. It would not be the last time we would get lost among the streets of the cities we visited. Indeed, quite late on our last night in Marrakech we were attempting to get back to our hostel and having long abandoned uselessly undetailed maps from the internet or guide book, we were relying on Alice’s phone’s compass and bearing due south. We stumbled through the now deserted souqs and suddenly arrived in what appeared to be a side-street leading to a dark residential area that was totally enclosed and covered from the night sky. We stopped to ask whether this way would take us to the Jemaa el-Fnaa and the young Marrakechi man looked us up and down: “yes...but it will be difficult for you...Follow me”. He set off very quickly, diving into the most unbelievably confusing maze of tiny streets, twisting and turning for what felt like at least a mile. Eventually, we emerged, breathless, from a tiny gap, back into the square, and our guide disappeared back into the darkness.

Fès was similar in many ways, certainly with regard to its winding souqs and streets, though its lay out was perhaps even more confusing as it was without the helpful presence of a large city square. Even outside the old city, the area known as the new city – a very relative name: it was started in 1276 – had a similar layout, and included a fascinating Jewish quarter. The history of Jews in Morocco is an interesting one that it is difficult to summarise: while suffering periodic persecution and a large number of restrictions (in Fès, for instance, they were theoretically not allowed to ride outside the Jewish quarters) they were also under the direct protection of the sultan and maintained their own laws within their quarter. The Jewish population in Morocco was between 250,000 to 350,000, but after 1948 most moved to Israel and the population now is under 2,500. Fès is notable
for its three tanneries, the biggest of which is the Chouwara tannery, which constitutes a large, open area made up of dozens of vats filled with dyes of varying hues, or white-green pigeon droppings. The various shops overlooking this honeycombed plaza, where men worked the hides with their feet, were bedecked with bags and wallets and shoes and belts of a hundred different colours and style, many with exceptionally intricate embroidery and stitching. Fès was also notable for some extraordinary religious buildings, built by several different dynasties of Berbers who ruled Morocco: for example, the Medersa Bou Inania, a college for students and also a mosque, was founded by a Merenid Sultan in the 14th century and was an amazing example of carved cedar wood and zellij tilework that covers the building and its courtyard. Further into the city is located what was, until 1993, the largest place of worship in Morocco, the Kairouine Mosque. Completed under the Almoravid dynasty, it is closed to non-Muslims but by looking through the open doorways it was possible to glimpse the elaborate fountain and impressively decorated porticos.

Although our navigational skills had improved we had still managed to get slightly lost while walking from the station to our hostel on the day of our arrival and while at a crossroads peering at our guidebook, an older, very well-dressed gentleman approached us and on being told where we were heading, insisted on showing us the way. It was a good forty-five minute walk and afforded me the best opportunity of the trip to practice my Arabic. I have been learning now for three years and my ability to speak and understand ‘Modern Standard’ Arabic – the sort used in literature or newspapers or by politicians – is fairly good. Unfortunately, it was not enormously helpful in this scenario: although he could understand me, I was handicapped by three factors. The first was that his Arabic was clearly using colloquial words which I had never heard before; secondly, he would spontaneously switch between French and Arabic and back again; and thirdly, he was missing most of his teeth, so even the Arabic that I could understand was difficult to make out exactly. He was very jolly though and was quite content to put up with my stammered apologies at not quite understanding or requests to repeat himself. He also seemed quite amused at us with our large rucksacks: if I understood him correctly then he was cheerfully telling us that we were ‘vagabonds’ and that in the old days if we had turned up to town like that we would have been chased away. After the obligatory discussion of how Jesus is a prophet in Islam and that Christians and Jews are the brothers of Muslims (an absolute classic topic of conversation in Muslim countries), he mentioned that he was in his eighties, so I was curious to ask him about what life had been like at Morocco’s independence from France in 1956. Morocco has never technically been a colony, and its independence had been guaranteed at the Conference of Madrid in 1880, but from 1912 it had been a protectorate of France and had essentially been run by a colonial administration. It was frustrating not to properly understand the answer to my question but I think the gist was that, at first, nothing much happened except that there were fewer white people around –
probably a reference to the colons or colonists, tens of thousands of whom had come to Morocco.

Europe had close historical links, but was also geographically near, as we were reminded when we looked out from the walled Kasbah of Tangier and saw the dark mass of Spain, embedded in mist and sea. Of all the cities we visited, Tangier was the most clearly influenced by Europe. While the old city, draped across a hill whose base was lapped by the incoming waves, had probably the most confusing network of souqs and alleyways of all the places we had visited, the detailing of the houses – the doorways, the shutters, the stairways – looked more European, and the centre of the town was marked with several European-looking cafés and hotels, selling pastries and cream cakes exactly as one might find in a Montmartre patisserie. Indeed, until Hassan II came to the throne in 1961, it had been an International Zone, and was famous as the haunt of Western authors such as Paul Bowles and William Burroughs, as the world’s most famous gay resort, frequented by Tennessee Williams and Kenneth Williams, and as a little regulated haven for banks and Western millionaires’ unbelievably lavish parties.

It should also be said that the food in Morocco was generally excellent. We had been warned beforehand that we may find ourselves eating only varieties of tagine and couscous for the entire time. These two dishes are certainly prominent, but we also enjoyed spiced meats, blacked aubergine stuffed into breads, lusciously juicy oranges and bright pink cactus fruits. We also had the opportunity to try camel meat which was nice, though without an enormously strong flavour. A particular highlight was trying pastilla in Tangier – a Moroccan spiced meat pie with a Spanish name, coated in thin layers of crêpe pastry and dusted with sugar and cinnamon – which we devoured much to the delight of the maître d’.

As our ferry churned the waters across the strait of Gibraltar we said goodbye to Morocco. But as we would soon see in Spain, there were both stark differences and striking similarities to the land across the straits. The Arabic and French were both entirely replaced by Spanish, and street food as we had been enjoying was notably absent, replaced instead with ice-cream shops and tapas bars. Additionally, despite travelling almost directly North, the time zone shifted one-hour forward; Spain remains the farthest-West of all countries to use CET after Franco permanently moved Spanish clocks forward an hour in 1940 to show solidarity with Germany, and despite political talk of falling back an hour, there has been no change as yet. The streets were also stylistically different too, with a great many fewer painted houses, and a great many more weaved metal balconies stacked high up on the sides of buildings. However, the concept of old cities built up of winding streets and public open spaces was not enormously different in principle from those we had found in Morocco.

We disembarked the ferry in Algeciras and bought two tickets on the next coach to Seville. This was an unexpected pleasure, with the road running alongside the coast for most of the journey, as if boasting to newcomers of the deep colour of the sea and the perfect, sunny weather. Seville was perhaps our favourite stop of this trip: the architecture, the tapas and the huge number of open plazas with cafés and restaurants. We seemed to eat about five meals a day, choosing a couple of plates each time from long chalk-and-blackboard menus we could barely understand. For the evening, we were recommended a packed tavern with live music, flamenco dancing, and flowing sangria. Aware that the Spanish eat late, we were still impressed that on our way back to the hostel after midnight, the streets abounded with people eating and chatting. What else was there to do but join in, and we quickly put in a last order of omelette and croquettes at a lively tapas bar on a street corner. We even visited the infamous bullring, although were relieved of having to decide whether to visit a fight as it was the off-season. It has clearly been an important part of Andalusian culture, and the structure of the ring itself, along with the costumes of past fighters and paintings depicting fight scenes, are extremely impressive.
The historical religious buildings from all three Abrahamic faiths were the unequivocal highlight of our week in Spain. It was striking travelling from Morocco, with considerable European influence yet a near total absence of Christian architecture, to Spain, which despite probably being considered one of the hubs of ‘European culture’, visibly and willingly blended styles that had originated far beyond its borders. The remaining buildings and their histories seemed a manifestation of the numerous conquests in Spanish history, and the decision of the victorious to co-opt these beautiful creations of their predecessor.

The Cathedral in Seville, the largest Gothic building in Europe by volume, was built in 1402 following the Christian conquest of the city in 1248. This was done carefully so that the pre-existing Giralda acted as its bell tower, one of only three remaining Almohad minarets in the world (the other two standing in Morocco) built following successful Moorish conquests in 712AD. Next to the cathedral, the palace of the Real Alcázar was beautiful yet intriguing, amalgamating influences from the Middle Ages under the Islamic Mudéjar right through to the Renaissance, Baroque and the 19th Century. Ornamental art and Qur’anic inscriptions, as well as painted ceramics and tiled ceilings, adorned rooms filled with renaissance art and Christian religious symbols. The two sites were aesthetically stunning, and it was extraordinary to see such a mix of religious symbols contained within each building.

The Mezquita-Cathedral of Cordoba provided a similar – though perhaps even more striking – example of cultural fusion. It is said that ‘Abd Al-Rahmân I purchased half of the Hispano-Roman church of San Vicente for the Muslim community’s Friday prayers, then in 784AD, bought the other half on which to erect a new mosque. Three later extensions nearly quintupled the size and forms the base of the structure that still exists, yet with one major difference: in the 16th century, King Carlos I gave the cathedral authorities permission to build a main altar and choir area right in the centre. As such, walking through an archway or turning your head to admire a different bit of the room not only changed the style and period, but also changed the religion it was intended to represent.

Likewise, the Toledo Cathedral stands on the site of the Grand Mosque of Toledo, which itself had replaced a Visigoth church, and, built over 250 years from 1226, incorporates a wide variety of architectural styles. Walking for just 20 minutes further in Toledo, we visited the Synagogue Santa María la Blanca, which is not only notable as the oldest remaining synagogue in Europe, having been built in 1180, but also for having been constructed under the Christian Kingdom
of Castile by Islamic architects for Jewish use. The religious buildings aside, the old city of Toledo is equally charming, sprawled out over a hill, and surrounded on most of the perimeter by the tree-lined River Tagus. Decadent marzipan is a local speciality, along with venison and partridge stews and sheep cheese, a notable departure from the fish nearer the coast.

Thirty-six hours in Barcelona was the final stop of this trip. Unbelievably rich chocolate churros, several more large and intricate cathedrals and a strong coffee on the beach happily wiled away the day, as we wandered down all sorts of winding streets and alleys, and of course, stared at the strange yet captivating work of Antoni Gaudí. Casa Battló, with its curving walls and extraordinary mosaic-glass exterior, must have been a surreal place for the Battló family to live, and was an intriguing building to wander round. The Sagrada Familia was, however, in a different league. The intricacy of the carvings on the outer Passion Façade were incredible, especially those depicting the story of the resurrection of Christ. As it stands, four of the tall outside towers have been fully erected, representing each of the four apostles. The final, tallest tower, representing Christ, remains yet to be built. The inside was even more startling. We visited around 7pm in the evening as the light was setting, which meant the stained glass threw different kaleidoscopic shades off all the walls, meaning there was such a contrast between the monochrome stone exterior and the vast multi-coloured interior. Visiting so many extraordinary places of worship throughout this trip was also a reminder of the immense time and energy that is required to complete such impressive religious buildings. Indeed, the ground-breaking design for this basilica began in 1882, and may still not be complete for another thirty years.

Left: Stained glass inside the Sagrada Familia
Right: Casa Battló
In fitting style, an early morning train saw the trip out. We parted ways at Narbonne and each re-joined our families for the last week of the vacation. This was an extremely memorable trip, and our many thanks once again for the grants which made it possible.

Alice Mingay and Patrick Kenny
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