

A photograph of a Moroccan courtyard. A tall palm tree stands in the center, its trunk visible through a series of arches. The walls are a warm, yellowish-tan color. A large arch in the foreground frames a view of the courtyard beyond, where another arch and some greenery are visible. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

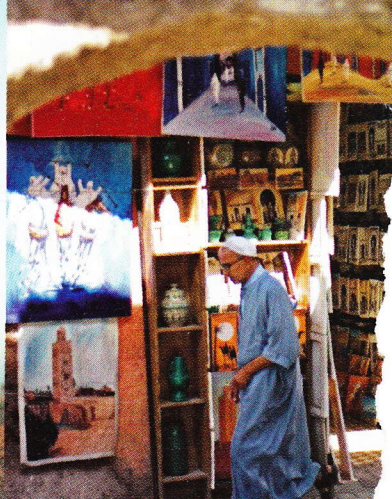
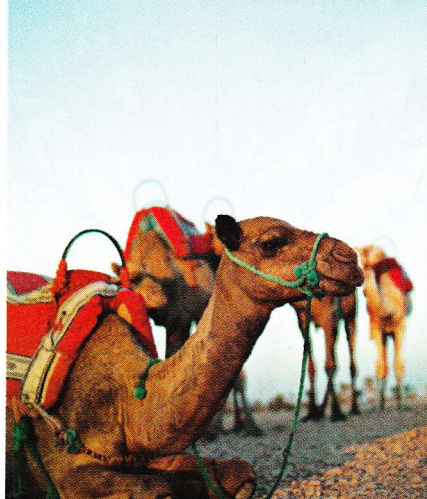
of LIFE

From Marrakech to the Sahara, follow along on novelist **Martha McPhee's** culinary adventure in Morocco as she embraces the beauty of food prepared close to its source

Photographed by **John Kernick**



THIS PAGE Beauty abounds in and around Marrakech, from simple cooking utensils and serene camels to the crowded market full of artwork, textiles, olives and more. **OPPOSITE PAGE** The tour's guide, Peggy Markel, considers her options in a spice stall.



In the humble kitchen of the Kasbah du Toubkal mountain retreat, a Berber chef named Omar Errami, dressed in a traditional white robe and cook's apron, chopped ingredients for a lamb, fig and walnut tagine. On the counter a clay pot sat on a wood fire; the oil in it sizzled as he added the lamb, heaps of red onion, ginger, garlic, saffron and a good amount of water. He covered the base with its conical top, propping it on a wooden spoon to let in air. He spoke no English, but our teacher and guide, Peggy Markel, carefully explained all that he was doing.

Very simple, really. He was making a traditional Moroccan stew: a forgiving recipe that can be altered to suit individual palates and, above all, available local ingredients. There in the High Atlas Mountains, in the shadow of Jbel Toubkal, which at more than 13,000 feet is North Africa's highest peak, fig and walnut trees are abundant. They flourish in the valley below the hotel complex, a series of towers and terraces that mimic the landscape while commanding spectacular views.

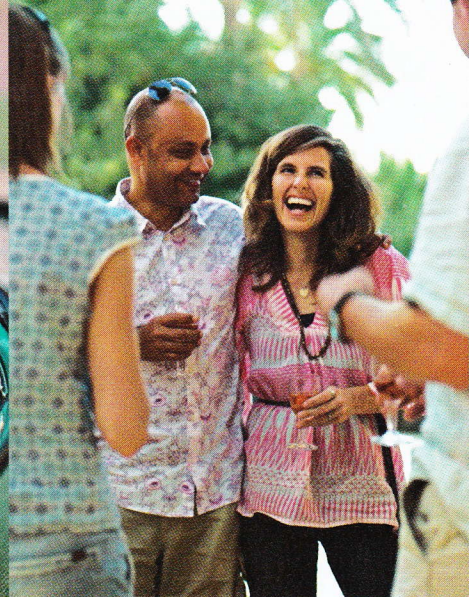
Mid-demonstration, Errami suddenly put down his knife, took off his apron, said in Arabic that he'd be back in five minutes, and dashed off to the mosque—fire still burning. The call to prayer rose above the din of playing children and clucking chickens. In distant villages tucked into the hills, fires glowed as people began making their own dinners—break-fast really, as it was the second day of Ramadan.

I'd come to Morocco to participate in A Feast for the Senses, gastronomic entrepreneur Peggy Markel's 10-day guided culinary tour. I'd first come to Morocco on my honeymoon and had fallen in love with it. I remembered especially the exuberance of Marrakech, the Pink City; I'd been dazzled by the acrobats and the snake charmers, the buskers of Djemaa el Fna Square, the famous marketplace in the heart of the medina. At dusk, the square came to life with the seductive chaos of a carnival, the









THIS PAGE Markel helps prepare a meal that includes zucchini soup (above right) and briouat stuffed with goat cheese (below). Recipes begin on page 158. Top left and right: a hotel worker and two local friends. **OPPOSITE PAGE** Dinner is served.

smoke from the many food stalls inspiring my husband and me to try the lamb kebabs and the squid, the sheep's heads staring out so matter-of-factly, invitingly even, from the many stalls, announcing that here they do things differently. I have always loved the way food teaches us about culture and about ourselves, so I jumped at the chance to join this expedition.

Markel's program begins and ends in Marrakech, with a two-day trip to the High Atlas and a one-day excursion to Essaouira and the coastal Sahara, both within three hours of the city. Markel's intention is to teach the fundamentals of Moroccan cuisine, imparting a sense of the country's disparate origins—Berber, Middle Eastern, Moorish, French—as they come together in the food, as well as an appreciation for eating locally.

Teaching people to understand how and where the food they eat is grown is Markel's lifework. In 1991 she began leading culinary adventures in Tuscany and has since expanded her destinations to include Elba, Sicily, the Amalfi Coast, Thailand and Morocco. The most direct way to understand other cultures, she believes, is through food. "If we understand how others eat, their culinary traditions, we have an immediate sense of who they are, and this breaks down the differences," she says. "We can all relate to food, and food, of course, brings people together."

But what happens when you come to Morocco for the food just as the entire country stops eating during the daylight hours? If you are the intrepid Peggy Markel, you go right ahead.

Following a calling ●●●

Markel is a 51-year-old grandmother with light brown hair, light blue eyes and a free spirit. Based in Boulder, Colorado, she listens to Moroccan pop and Neil Young and dresses hippie-chic, with colorful scarves wrapped around her head. From her family in Alabama, including grandparents who lived on a farm, she learned early the power of eating what you grow—an understanding she carried with her as she pursued an alternative lifestyle. She lived on a commune in Tuscaloosa, where a friend introduced her to meditation.

In her late teens she studied Sufism, a spiritual offshoot of Islam, and became a whirling dervish. She married at 23, had two children, and lived in New Zealand with her young family, but realized by 35 that she was not fulfilled. Feeling an urgent need to express herself, she would rage at the sky, pleading for direction. It came to her: Learn Italian. Her father had been based in Italy during World War II and had spoken fondly of his time there, telling stories of food, poetry, art and the warmth of the people. She began designing Italian culinary tours, and in those days she took her family with her. Now divorced and with her children grown, she spends half of her year in Italy. →







GET COOKING IN MOROCCO

Getting there Royal Air Maroc offers daily nonstop flights from the United States to Morocco. The flight from New York's JFK airport to Casablanca takes about eight hours; change planes in Casablanca for the 40-minute flight to Marrakech.

Staying there The itinerary of Peggy Markel's culinary adventure in Morocco includes five nights at the Jnane Tamsna guesthouse, just outside Marrakech; one night in the Marrakech medina, at the Riad el Mezouar; two nights at the Kasbah du Toubkal in Imilil, in the High Atlas; and one night at the Sidi Kaouki Inn on the Atlantic Ocean.

When to go Markel is offering three Morocco trips in 2008: April 2 to 11, September 10 to 19, and November 12 to 20. The September trip includes yoga classes.

Cost The fee, \$4,940 per person (single) or \$4,595 per person (double), includes lodging, three meals per day, cooking instruction, tours, tastings and ground transportation during the program. Prices do not include airfare. For more information or to register, call 800-988-2851 or go to peggymarkel.com.

Markel's father influenced her, but it's her training in Sufism that best defines her style. "Expressing myself has to do with feeding people not just literally as a cook but also by taking into account the whole being," she says. "I look to nourish as deeply as I can through the experiences I provide and through seeing people for who they are and finding the good."

In our group there were indeed many different personalities. There were six of us, with one couple: a financier, constantly on his BlackBerry, and his wife, who had a knack for malapropisms (the traditional robe *djellaba* became *jambalaya*, for example). The other students included an expensively dressed single woman from New York City, an administrative assistant for the State of New York Appellate Division who was also a serious cook and culinary-adventure aficionado; a lovely pair of women friends in their early sixties who have traveled together for 40 years, one the founder of a specialty foods empire, the other a Harvard faculty recruiter; and me, a little suspicious to the others at first because I was there as a journalist. Certainly it would have been easy for personality conflicts to arise, but Markel's talent for joining people blended us into a cohesive group. Mid-trip we were making plans to reunite.

Immersed in a culture's flavors ●●●

Moroccan cuisine is defined by the variety of herbs and spices that season the tagines, the mix of sweet and savory, of preserved lemon, olives, and fruits stewed with chicken, beef or lamb. The combination of fruit with meat is a Middle Eastern influence, brought by Islam in the seventh century. The mix of herbs and spices also traveled west, with the spice trade. Ras al hanout, a blend of spices essential to Moroccan cooking, translates as "head of the store," meaning the best the shop has to offer. Beautiful to look at, it can contain star anise, cinnamon,

THIS PAGE In the Marrakech medina, a one-night stay at a French-owned riad was all about elegance. **OPPOSITE PAGE** Colors and flavors combine in a fried eggplant and roasted tomato tart.



— allspice, cloves, rosebuds, cardamom, mace—the list goes on and varies from shop to shop.

Markel's curriculum is designed to introduce guests first to the ingredients and later, toward the end of the trip, to give lessons in preparation. Her program began in the tony date-palm oasis of La Palmeraie, on the outskirts of Marrakech. We stayed in the Jnane Tamsna guesthouse, an enclave of Moroccan style, its individually designed rooms, dark wood furniture inlaid with camel bone, luscious velvet and silk upholstery, brass fixtures and multiple pools bathing us in faraway luxury. Surrounding the hotel are gardens thick with pomegranate, quince, orange, and jasmine trees, vegetables and herbs, all used by the chef, Bahija Tarik, in her fabulous dishes. Pluck a pomegranate, add the seeds to a salad. The connection between the garden and the table is quite direct.

Markel deepened the connection by taking us to the Jardin bio-aromatique de l'Ourika, in the market town of Tnine Ourika, about an hour outside Marrakech in the foothills of the High Atlas. Here we had a lesson in the properties of essential oils and a demonstration of Berber bread making in the Tachelhit clay oven; afterward we dipped the bread in olive, nigella seed and argan oils. We learned that nigella seed, known as the seed of blessing, cures everything but death, according to the prophet Muhammad. A dark red-brown, it tastes like cumin (and in fact is sometimes called black cumin). Argan oil, with its wonderful roasted-nut flavor, comes from the argan tree, which grows only in Morocco, near the coast.

The full experience ●●●

Markel has an eye for identifying locations that bring her visitors most directly into Morocco, places it would take the lone traveler quite some time, if ever, to discover. →

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A chicken tagine with preserved lemons and olives. A mule, transportation up and down the High Atlas Mountains. A Tuareg tribesman. Perfect poached pears. OPPOSITE PAGE Time stops inside the medina.



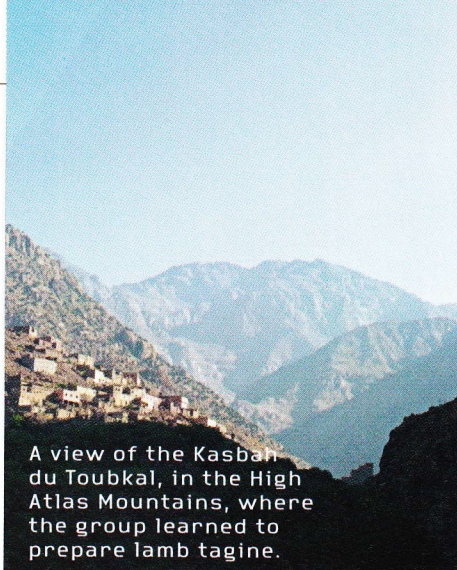
I could tell this about her immediately, and although my plan was to stay for only half the trip (I had a teaching job and small children at home), I called my husband on the first day to ask if he'd mind taking care of the kids for another week and if, on top of that, he'd teach my classes. He agreed! I did not want to miss anything Markel had planned.

In the Jardin Aromatique, lunch was served near hedges of fragrant rosemary, inside a Berber tent strewn with pillows, carpets and rose petals. Not far from the garden, we visited a school that is part of a Global Diversity Foundation initiative to teach poor Berber girls; in addition to receiving a proper education, they learn to document the plant knowledge of their elders as a way of preserving Morocco's biocultural diversity. Part of the tuition for Markel's trip is donated to the foundation.

At the Kasbah du Toubkal in the High Atlas, where Errami taught us his lamb tagine techniques, we hiked in the walnut groves and finished the day in the hammam, or steam bath, rubbing ourselves with black argan soap and ladling ourselves clean with hot water. When we returned to Marrakech to spend a night in the medina, our hotel was the beautiful French-owned Riad el Mezouar, an oasis of calm set in the heart of the souk—the noise of snake charmers, food sellers and fortune tellers shut out by its thick walls. Unable to sleep, I found myself on the inn's roof at three in the morning, a North African breeze blowing as a man played a horn in the alley below. Under a canopy of stars, high above the labyrinthine streets, I was far away from my everyday life and I cherished every second.

The man played his horn for a long time, his song becoming more and more melodic until he stopped and the call to prayer began. It seemed the whole city had to be awake. Later I would learn that the horn player was reminding everyone to eat before sunrise.

From there we traveled to the coast, not far from the fishing village of Essaouira. Near a vast Atlantic beach



A view of the Kasbah du Toubkal, in the High Atlas Mountains, where the group learned to prepare lamb tagine.

with Sahara dunes and sand blowing in waves, we stayed in the small Sidi Kaouki Inn, which has no electricity. Eating by candlelight, drinking a little too much Moroccan rosé, devouring a couscous salad and a chicken tagine, we all felt 18 again. Despite the lack of luxury accommodations (here even the bathroom was shared), we were grateful to Markel because time stopped with the electricity.

Students of Morocco ●●●

From the High Atlas to the riad to the inn on the beach, we watched and learned as our meals were prepared. We noted the subtle differences in the cooks' styles, the blend of ingredients. Philip, the financier and lone male of our group, told us a friend had warned him that he'd tire of tagine. "He is wrong," Philip said after eating his fifth one. "They get more interesting the deeper into Morocco we go."

Back in the comfort of the Jnane Tamsna in Marrakech, to which we returned for the last three days of the tour, we got down to the business of cooking classes, with Tarik as our teacher, assisted by Markel. Donning white aprons and standing around a large counter and stove, we learned to make pastilla, a pigeon pie with rich layers of ground almonds, eggs scrambled in broth, chicken (or pigeon), ras al hanout, and other spices and herbs, sweetened with sugar and encased in phyllo-like dough. Pastilla is labor intensive and made as a festive dish. Indeed, we made it on our last day for our farewell meal.

In all, our group cooked for three mornings. We learned to cure our own lemons and hot chili peppers from the garden. We made our own tagines, flavored as we liked. I discovered that my favorites were the sweet tagines—with ginger and honey and dried fruits—as this combination surprised my palate the most. I learned anew that food always tells a story, and in cooking it here we were becoming a part of the tradition that carries it forward. As much as I was relishing this solo journey, I found myself wanting to make a tagine with my children, tell them what I had learned, see what they'd choose to stir into the pot.

We could not leave Morocco without learning the art of making light, fluffy couscous in a *couscousier*, which resembles a double boiler. Tarik, in lovely broken English mixed with French and a little Spanish and Arabic, explained the Berber origins of the dish and how it's served in different parts of the country. In Fez, for instance, couscous is eaten for breakfast, with soured milk.

I was fascinated by Tarik's hands, the way they worked the couscous. She scooped it up, spread it on a large platter, mixed it with olive oil, scooped it up again, and rolled it against her palms. She wet it, steamed it in the *couscousier*, and rolled it again, repeating these steps four or five times. The technique seemed as precise as that used for making croissants. "The secret is in the hands, the Moroccan spoon," she said, holding them up for emphasis.

Tarik is beautiful. She wears her hair pulled back with a scarf in the traditional manner. On this day, the eighth of Ramadan, well into her daily fast (which permits not even a sip of water), she stood surrounded by ramekins holding saffron and other spices, while recipes and techniques spilled from her in a blend of languages and the couscous rolled and fluffed in her palms, capturing, it seemed, quite completely, the essence of Morocco. →

MARTHA MCPHEE'S MOST RECENT NOVEL IS *L'AMERICA*. SHE TEACHES FICTION AT HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY.