MOROCCO'S MEDINAS--MAZES OF HUMANITY

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[Assignment: Based on your direct observations, write a description of a place that conveys feeling (delight, awe, disappointment, amusement, etc.) more through recording of details than through statement of attitude. Try to blend subjective and objective points of view, to appeal to at least three senses, to highlight special features of the subject, and to arrange details in a logical pattern.]

(1) Last summer my family and I took a Globus Getaway Tour to Portugal, Spain, and Morocco. My parents avoid "touristy" vacations and love visiting countries with completely different cultures. This time, Morocco sparked my parents' interest. Having visited Egypt, a country with a similar cultural background, I thought that I was prepared for the "culture shock." Unfortunately, even though Egypt and Morocco are both Third World countries, I found out that Morocco is much poorer. Most Moroccans are craftsmen and sell their products to tourists and the local people. Getting off the plane in Tangiers, I was bombarded by Moroccans trying to sell me everything they could. This was even more so in the Medinas, the old Arabic quarters in urban areas of Morocco. These "cities within cities" are mazes of humanity, with masses of Moroccans all attempting to sell their own "best" products. These areas of narrow streets containing bazaar shops and craftshops are a step back in centuries. And they are crucial to understanding the Moroccan way of life.

(2) Entering the Medina, I was surrounded by street sellers, water merchants trying to sell water from dingy, dirty cups, beggars, and smiling children. At first I felt completely lost in this swarm of people, but Rashad, our tour guide for Morocco, took us under his wing and led us through the Medina. We could not have survived without him. Surrounded by dark-skinned, dark-haired people, I felt so alien as an American teenager with partially blond hair, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. Soon I acquired many young followers who tagged along beside me asking, "How many camels for you?" Later, I found out that this Moroccan phrase was the equivalent of the American, "Hey baby, you look fine!" One young Moroccan boy about ten years old insisted on giving me presents and asking me if I liked him. I smiled at him as he gave me a tiny brass hand mirror. A few minutes later the boy seemed upset and I found out from Rashad that I was supposed to give him a gift in return. When I apologized and returned the mirror, he just grinned and disappeared into the crowd.

(3) Next, as I turned the corner of a narrow street, I came face to face with a donkey. My scared face brought much laughter from my parents and an explanation from Rashad. In the Medina, with the restriction on cars, the main mode of transportation is the donkey and the camel, with an occasional mo-ped or motorcycle weaving between the animals. To avoid accidents and to warn the people, the owner of the donkey or camel shouts, "Balekl! Balekl!" meaning "Attention! Attention!" and the crowd opens just enough to allow donkey, camel or carrier to wedge through. If I need to remember just one Arabic word in the Medina, it would be "Balekl!"
(4) We headed toward the craftshops. In the shop of the brass workers, I heard a great clang of hammers on metal and saw an old craftsman shaping the metal. In the background were displays of bowls, jars, trays, and vases. My attention caused the craftsman to look up from his work and he beamed at me, very proud of his accomplishments. Next to the brass shop, I saw bearded men in thick spectacles making jewelry and, later, men tanning leather. I watched them softening, curing, and dying the leather into every color as they stood in puddles of color around their steaming vats. The wool dyers worked outside their shop, dipping and wringing their new-dyed skeins. I watched the dyers, dressed in knee-length robes drenched in purple, hang their garlands of new-dyed skeins on wires that crossed the narrow street. These bright-colored wools caught the sun with colors of scarlet, emerald, saffron, yellow, and orange flame. I looked down and caught a glimpse of a slow stream of lavender trickling down the street. When one of the dyers was finished with his work, I watched him shampoo his hair in a small bucket outside the shop and rinse off his purple bare legs and feet.

(5) My favorite area of the Medina was yet to come--the small yet plentiful bazaar shops. These box-like shops were grouped by categories: the souk of spices; of perfumes; of jewelry; of babouches (soft, brightly dyed slippers); the souk of cottons. In the packed street, merchants make their way with great effort, holding up goods and shouting the last price offered into the ear of anyone who shows the least interest. I could not hear Rashad, our tour guide, tell us where to go because all the merchants and children were trying to get our attention. Shouts of "Hello Americans! Do you want to buy this?" echoed through the narrow streets. One Moroccan grabbed my shirt and told me that the sandals he was selling were a great bargain. At the same time, two little girls clung to me saying that I needed bracelets because I was a young lady. It was difficult to walk away.

(6) Just then an older man urged me to buy a kaftan, the typical Moroccan dress for women. Shaking my head to signify a no, I walked into an enclosed rug shop with my tour group. We listened to the workers in the shop talk about how the rugs are made. After drinking our complimentary green mint tea, we were subjected to high pressure salesmanship. While my father resisted buying a $1,000 rug, my sister succumbed to a $300 rug, persuaded by the seller who kept saying, "Good price for college student." As we walked out of the door I again saw the man who had tried to sell me the kaftan. We must have been inside the rug store for nearly an hour. When our eyes met, he smiled at me and held up the kaftan. Amused by his devotion to selling me the kaftan, I purchased it for a reasonable amount. Later, I realized that his "devotion" was really persistence, the tactic Moroccans use to sell their goods. But buying and selling takes place with bargaining. There are frequent shouts and arms and hands, having no other space to move in, fly upward in hot argument. Being a great bargain shopper at home, bargaining in the Medinas made my pupils dilate and my hands shake with excitement. I loved going from shop to shop trying to get the best bargains and then proudly telling my family that I had got a better deal than they had.

(7) Definitely, the Medinas of Morocco were an experience that I will never forget. The pictures, souvenirs, and my daily journal help me
reminisce about Morocco and its Medinas but these are not really necessary. I carry vivid pictures in my mind, nor will I ever forget the screams of "Balek! Balek!" or the hounding of merchants in the Medinas.