



## Postcard From Marrakech

*by Andrew Sullivan*

Nestled at the base of the Atlas Mountains, and surrounded by citrus groves is the city of Marrakech, in Morocco. Located on a southwestern oasis and comprised of predominantly Arabic speaking peoples, Marrakech is a rapidly growing tourist destination and second home for many Middle Eastern and European elites. A contradiction between modernity and tradition, Marrakech attracts rural migrants who seek employment in the fast growing tourism and service industries. Surrounded by irrigated agricultural areas, the outer lying regions are dry and desert like. As a central location for regional trade, migration, travel, and business, the city has always been of interest to the governing bodies of the country with both its site and situation serving as key components to the political and economic function of the region.

The influx of migrants and foreign investors into Marrakech has created a construction boom,

with the creation of several new hotel resorts and rapid development of “big block” housing complexes. These complexes are the homes to the majority of working and middle class Marrakech residents. The upper class typically resides in traditional Riyads, larger estates located on former agricultural lands. The Riyad/Riad includes privacy from the street and an enclosed courtyard, which can contain a garden, pool, fountain, or patio for relaxing. Today, many Riyads are being converted into tourist lodging or taken as second homes by foreign investors.

The French influence upon Morocco, and Marrakech, is evident in the Ville Nouvelle section of the city located outside of the Medina, where food, shopping, and entertainment are concentrated. Although the French controlled Morocco from 1912 until the early 1960s, they left a majority of the City of Marrakech untouched by developing alongside of the original central business district (on what was

then agricultural land). This has created a multiple-nuclei pattern in the city, which serves two competing populations. The original central business district was and still is the Jemaa el Fna, where the entertainment, restaurant, and retail businesses thrive. This is also the location of large public gatherings for political, social, and religious occasions.

Over time, the influx of new investments and developments has created an economic boom in the city, albeit without much needed social improvements such as a public transit system or access to the inner city. Without a centralized transportation system, air quality has suffered as many people get from place to place in cars, taxis, or on scooters or motorcycles all of which are powered by gasoline. In addition, most new developments are being erected in the palm, olive, and orange groves, which are creating even more adverse implications for the burgeoning city. Specifically, the lack of air cleansing trees and vegetation has a standardized effect upon the air quality and pollution of Marrakech, and now with the rapid new developments the further decline is evident to both residents and visitors.

The growth of modern Marrakech is contributed to by the overwhelming amount of new structures that are being built for foreign investors and conference attendees. Although the new planning and growth of the city has provided some ad-

vantages such as economic growth, the lack of oversight in planning is apparent. European influences are noticeable in the wide tree-lined avenues, and

the multi-unit/dual use housing and commerce structures that line these newer thoroughfares.

The original pattern of the city included the walled Medina, where almost all city residents lived, worshipped, and participated in commerce. Outside of this walled city is where the agricultural, livestock, and irrigation works



Source: Mouna Benmoussa

Wide avenues lined with modern dual use structures in the Gueliz sector of Marrakech.

that once sustained the city were located. Although these areas still serve the same purpose, they are rapidly being converted into locations for housing and business. The Medina is full of narrow, covered thoroughways, which are lined with purveyors of all types of goods and services from spice vendors to leather artisans. This concentrated commerce area has been the center of business in Marrakech for centuries, and is now the center of tourism for Marrakech. The Medina district with its rich traditional commercial focus, and strong cultural heritage, is unlikely to change in stark contrast to the rest of the city located outside of the walls. As this Moroccan city strives to develop and modernize, it faces the problems of overpopulation, pollution, and resource stresses. Marrakech must embrace a new planning paradigm, one that respects the inherent limitations of an oasis, and focuses on the real value of the city - its people. §