

Liza and Andy Copeland explore the Atlantic coast of Morocco on route to the Canary Islands.

Just thirty-two miles from the busy marinas and bars of Gibraltar lies Moroccan Tangier. Situated at the western extremity of the Arab world, it is known as the 'farthest land of the setting sun', and its impact on us was immediate. The Moslem fasting month of Ramadan had just ended and we were woken next day by the most tuneful, joyous Muezzin we have ever heard. A pink sunrise washed over the square minaret rising above the whitewashed buildings of the medina and on the brightly painted fishing boats moored close by.

Morocco's most cosmopolitan city, Tangier was coveted for its strategic site. Settled by Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Portuguese, Spanish, British and French colonizers its faded glory made it irresistible to writers and artists alike. Evidence of these histories is everywhere in both the contrasting old medina and the new town, both just a five-minute walk from the secured port where the docks for yachts lie. On our first day all was quiet, the day after Ramadan being for family celebrations and most were dressed in ornate djellabas, (kaftan hooded robes), and traditional white and yellow soft leather babouches (slippers) that are worn with great dignity throughout Morocco on a daily basis.

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The following morning life returned to normal, giving an assault to the senses that prepared us well for sailing south down Morocco's Atlantic coast. Squeezed into the narrow passages of the old town and in more elegant stores along the gracious boulevards of the new, the many vendors displayed a wealth of exotic wares from around the country - ornate brass, copper and silver, colorful ceramics and pottery, ornately painted wooden panels, glowing metal and leather lamps, textile and leather bags, opulent jewellery, and clothing galore, with the white walls a perfect backcloth for the brightly-coloured carpets. Aromas wafted from restaurants with tajine stews simmering outside in conical clay pots. Warm wheels of delicious Moroccan flatbread also beckoned as did delectable French pastries. Produce market stalls were laden with fresh fruit and vegetables, spices, nuts and succulent dried fruit while flamboyant Berber women in large colorful 'flowerpot' hats enticed us with large rounds of white curd cheese. In the meat market the rows of hanging chickens (with feet, necks and heads on of course), were an initial shock. Shrieks from a chicken being slaughtered made those already gutted a favourable option, although as Andy commented 'the squealer couldn't be fresher!' I did, however, baulk at

his suggestion that we purchase some of the dangling strips of rubbery offal!

Planning to be in the Canary Islands by November we had the choice of an 850nm leg into the Atlantic with a visit Madeira en route (beautiful to visit, but already explored in 1986 when we took part in the first Atlantic Rally for Cruisers) or coastal hopping down the African shore. Morocco's rich history and cultural mix, lived-in 'imperial cities' with ornate buildings and vibrant labyrinth markets, its snow-capped Atlas Mountains, vast desert and endless sand beaches have long been romanticized by westerners but we had heard little about cruising its coast.

Intrigued, we researched Imray's North African guide and various travel books and learnt that Morocco also had fascinating old fishing ports to explore that have been used for thousands of years. Filled with colourful wooden fishing boats they are still very Moroccan and unspoilt, with thriving traditional communities in the old towns as new towns have nearly all been developed separately outside. The picturesque Portuguese forts add appeal as do the histories of the explorers, traders, pirates and even Thor Hyerdahl, who have all had an influence on these shores.

It was attractive to us that very few yachts

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shopping for local crafts is a delight: cruise this coast, particularly after the busy and yellow soft leather babouches (slippers) or carpets that are worn with great dignity throughout Morocco on a daily basis. The author with Ahmend the Club Manager at Mohammedia

MOROCCAN MAGIC

Mediterranean, but this also means that there are few marinas and yachting facilities. Although the coast has few anchorages there are several ports protected by large seawalls. Originally hoping to day-sail down the coast, we found that our 7'3" (2.20m) draft limited us to mostly to these major ports as many small bays and inlets have shallow bars at the entrance. But the more we read the more we felt that cruising this coast and exploring this fascinating country would be very worthwhile, and fortunately the typical weather patterns for September and October are ideal.

Whatever the route to the Canaries, the first challenge is leaving the Mediterranean and sailing west. (See Cruising Tips). After studying the complex current patterns of the Strait of Gibraltar we decided to leave at 10.30am, giving time to top up with inexpensive fuel before clearing out with Gibraltar officials and arriving in Tangier before dusk. Despite our studies, the current swirled unpredictably in the Strait, with up to 2 knots both with and against us, but Bagheera settled in well to windward in a 15-knot westerly and surprisingly calm seas. With the seaway busy with shipping and dolphins repeatedly leaping in unison around the boat, it seemed far less than five hours later that we entered Tangier's channel. The other six boats that had left Gibraltar at the same time, we noted, were all firmly headed west into the Atlantic Ocean.



Tangier 35° 47N 5° 47W VHF Ch. 6, 14

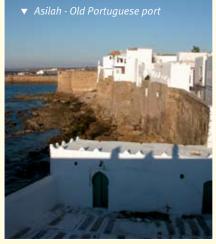
The commercial port of Tangier has an easy entry with an inner harbour filled with fishing boats and six docks in the inner, northern arm, the outer two for visitors and dredged to 4.5om. Electricity and water are available and despite many extension cables worked well. Total moorage, power etc: was €10 per day. Abdullah, a charming employee from the Royal Moroccan Yacht Club, was there to greet us, returning later with his large ledger, which gave an opportunity to see details of other visiting yachts. Although many hundreds of boats are based in or visit Gibraltar, and Tangier is en route for the Canaries, we were only the 159th boat to visit that year that flew 25 different foreign flags.

Happy about the marina's security, we took a 2-hour ride up steep winding roads and across the fertile valleys of the Rif Mountains to Chefchaouen with its blue-washed buildings and metal-studded doors and frames in a long-distance grand taxi and stopped to shop and sightsee in Tetouan.



Asilah 35° 28'N 6° 02'W 25nm

The current can run up to four knots around rocky Cape Spartel, the entry point into the Atlantic, so it is important to time departures carefully when leaving for Asilah, down the Atlantic coast. A rising easterly wind followed the shore as we turned south, giving an exhilarating sail, particularly when it gusted to 40 knots! The entrance to Asilah is narrow and it is prudent to immediately turn starboard to gain protection from the seawall if there is a large swell. Creeping into the small, shallow fishing harbour, there was just enough water for our draft to anchor. Yachts with shallower draft can tie to fishing boats or go to the



fishing wall if there is room. Immediately officials arrived in a large RIB, and after being invited to leave our dinghy tied to theirs at the wharf we were soon walking along the ramparts of this attractive 15th Century Portuguese port town. The peacefulness of its small medina with immaculate whitewashed buildings, ochre tiled roofs, doors in blues, yellows and greens, gracious arches and towering date palms disguise its turbulent past. It is now a relaxed tourist destination for Moroccans, but few overseas visitors and seen. We were the only yacht.

Larache 35° 12N 6° 09W 17nm

Although a Port of Entry and spacious harbour it has a tricky bar. Suggest following a local fishing boat for safe passage.

Mehdia and Kenitra (close to the capital Rabat) 34° 16N 6° 42W 59 miles

Medhia is a port close to the river mouth with Kenitra about 7 miles upstream. The entrance is formed by two breakwaters but transit is difficult with many moving sandbanks. Friends left their boat successfully alongside

a pontoon in Kenitra to go inland as there is a convenient rail link and found the local people extremely helpful and friendly. We did not visit due to our draft.

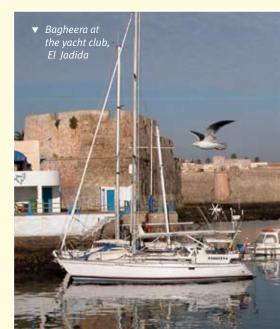
Note: Sable Dor marina, supposedly just south of Dakar and appearing on charts and in previous guides, does not exist! Friends were recently turned away when looking for it and were told the king stopped development as it was too near the palace.

Mohammedia 33° 43N 7° 23'W VHF 11,13,16 48nm

An overnight passage took us from Asilah to Mohammedia (126 m), just 12 miles north of Casablanca. The coast here has long white sand beaches and the lagoons behind are a bird paradise. Winds were light but the night was busy weaving our way through fishing fleets and their lines of nets, with their confusing lights. We arrived mid-morning to an enthusiastic welcome at the Mohammedia Yacht Club dock located behind a long seawall and south of the port. With the rebuilding of the yacht club in close-by Casablanca delayed and no dockage available there we were delighted to find we could leave Bagheera here in this modern, secure facility for €13 per day, which includes use of its elegant club and pool situated just outside the port. The fish market can be visited on the way. The club's gracious manager Ahmed was soon driving us around the wide boulevards in town. He not only helped buy train tickets for a 2-day visit to the famous imperial cities of Fès and Meknès (see Tourist Tips) but also gave us a tour of the good facilities and market in the town on the way back. It should be noted that the yacht club has just two docks, and that there could be a space problem for visitors particularly during regattas. Some anchoring is also allowed but check depths carefully as the tidal range during Spring tides is 3.5 metres.

El Jadida 33º 15'N 8º 29'W VHF 6,12 55nm

After a day trip by commuter train from Mohammedia to Casablanca (Morocco's economic centre) to see the vast new Hasan II Mosque, (which has stimulated a surge of traditional artistry in wood, metal, tile and plaster, and well worth visiting), we left on the high tide at 10.30pm. This time it was a quiet trip with just a few freighters and large fishing vessels off Casablanca.





Rafts of red fishing boats by the thick, crenulated Portuguese medina walls made a picturesque landfall at El Jadida midmorning. Two French boats were moored at the small vacht club wall at the NE corner of the fishing harbour and a pleasant young employee beckoned us to tie outside them. The habour masters office is en route to the port security gate (see Cruising Tips for the interesting situation that followed). The moorage was just €3 with a full-time guard, or if room one could anchor close by. This fishing port is fascinating and the attractive town well worth a visit. There were excellent prices for souvenirs, and a delightful market that emanated aromas of coriander and mint. French meals at the yacht Club were quite delicious and Andy could have dined for the rest of his life at the local fish eatery!

Jorf Lasfar, 33º 07N 8º 39W 13 miles south of El Jadida is not attractive but it is a safe harbour in bad weather.

Oualidia Lagoon 32º 45N 9º03W 46m

In calm conditions it sounds quite lovely but I have spoken to no-one who has stopped there.

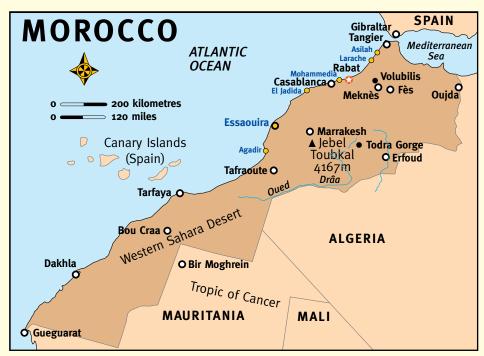
Safi 32º 18'N 9º 16'W VHF 16 28m

This is another busy and sheltered fishing harbour created by a long seawall. When calling the port on VHF Channel 16 we were told to proceed to the middle fishing harbour. We tied to the big ship wharf which was free but with the tides lines needed frequent attention and the surge made it uncomfortable. The lively high walled town is a walk from the port with its famous potteries a steep hike above. This was the only port where the official asked for 'baksheesh'. (See Cruising Notes)

Essaouira 31º 30'N 9º 47'W 55 m

The wind was up and down on the trip to Essaouira, first from the east then veering south with a rapidly falling barometer. On entering the harbour at 9.30am, having given the rocks off the spectacular Portuguese fort a wide berth, it was a surprise to see three rafts of visiting yachts tiered out from the floating dock immediately to starboard. There had been so few down the coast. Our timing was fortunate. Just after mooring alongside a British boat, the wind started to gust to 35knots. It was the beginning of a five-day blustery November blow but we couldn't have been in a more attractive, fascinating place. Only one problem arose. Official boats lay on the inside next to the dock and most had very slack lines so a raft could surge quite far on the outer end. In contrast the single hander outside us secured his non-stretch old genoa sheets he was using as mooring lines winched tight! To clear-in one goes to the officials located in the buildings just outside the port where one gets a first glimpse of this amazing old town.

Although at first glance Essaouira seems just a tourist town, its medina ramparts and side streets hold a wealth of artisans at work. In



abundance are woodworkers, who carve and polish the root of the local thuya tree into bowls, boxes, and trays etc that have an extraordinarily rich golden colour and pattern like burr-walnut. We couldn't resist and bought endless gifts. An Irish cruiser and I also visited the traditional women's Hamam de la Kasbah bath house. Although not as luxurious as Turkish baths we had our pores efficiently cleansed with a 'grimmage' scrub then luxuriated in a massage followed by alternating buckets of hot and warm water gently poured over us, nurturing our 'new' skin. This is a must!



Agadir 30º 24N 9º 38W 72m

There was time for day-trip by bus to Marrakesh (see Tourist Tips - Imperial Cities) before the weather cleared for a pleasant sail to Agadir, a new tourist town but a good kickoff point for the Canary Islands. The yacht club staff were extremely friendly and completed all paperwork, moorage was reasonable and the inexpensive food stalls outside the port were the best yet. A marina may be completed. Highlights included a visit to the Oued Souss Estuary to see huge flocks of flamingos, and being shown around an impressive boat vard where, under French management, large yachts in steel, aluminium and fibreglass with stunning interior joiner work, are being built and refitted at very inexpensive prices. Their bread and butter product, however, was steel long boats for the British canals. We had our starter motor rebuilt here quickly and inexpensively.

From Agadir northwesterly winds gave a pleasant 30-hour sail to Graciosa, the first of the Canary Islands, and back to the contrasting culture of Spain.

As those who have heard me at the World Cruising Atlantic Circuit Forum at the Southampton Boat show know, I feel taking time to cruise to the Canaries before completing the Atlantic crossing is highly beneficial, particularly for women. One has time to ease into and enjoy the cruising lifestyle. Victualling up for the Atlantic and storage routines can be started in a relaxed way. Repairs can be completed and forgotten equipment purchased. While France, Spain and Portugal give delightful experiences of western cultures, magical Morocco prepares one well for adventures in different cultures, both in the Caribbean and beyond. Happy cruising!

CRUISING TIPS

Officialdom

In most Moroccan ports the officials collected our passports and ship's documents, all wearing smart uniforms, with the exception of Immigration who wear plain clothes, also speak English and generally appear in charge. If the officials don't come to the boat find the port captain's office in the port and start the process. Have plenty of copies of ship's papers and passports. Although paperwork must be completed it is efficiently done. Often passports are kept by the officials and stamped passes are issued in each port for identification, used when leaving or entering the port or travelling inland, although are seldom asked for.

As frequently found around the world be prepared for regulations to vary from those ports before and after, and with other cruisers. Sometimes, however, the situation is outrageous and one has to react. This was the situation in El Jadida. Soon after arrival a local, Ahmed, arrived to help take me to the office of the port captain, five minutes up the dock. He was recommended in our cruising guide, but I found him aggressive (later confirmed by others) and involved in a scam to charge yachts an extra €100 as a 'port security fee' - which I refused to pay. This, as well as the wife clearing in as captain, left the officials speechless! They decided to let us stay all day to discuss the matter. Moroccan hospitality could not then deny us the opportunity to enjoy



their town. Later on board, Andy showed them an article in a magazine that I'd written and I was summoned to see the boss (a woman, I might add) who apologized profusely about the charge, and asked me to tell my readership that there would never be such a fee again!

- It is rare to be asked for Baksheesh (only for whisky in Safi which we ignored) and have rarely given any in 21 years of cruising
- In most ports authorities can be reached on VHF 16. Other frequencies found have been mentioned in the text. Note: It frequently took repeated calls!
- Waypoints quoted have been taken from our Nobeltec charts for entry markers but obviously not to be used for your own navigation. (Note: the exception is Asilah which Nobeltec labels to a river inlet 7 miles north of the town.) Piloting this coast is not difficult and the chartlets in the Imray Guide are helpful.

Moorage

In Morocco dock charges are calculated by the day, not by the night, so if arriving in the evening and leaving the following morning you pay for two days!

Weather

Straits of Gibraltar

Winds Summer: Usually west or east (Levante). Often strong by day, light at night. Winter: As winter approaches again west or east winds but are southwest ahead of a depression.

Gales Infrequent, but can be severe and last for 2-3 days.

Visibility Occasional fog

Currents Easterly inflow through the Straits is sometimes augmented by a flood tide and westerly winds and can reach 5-6 knots. During ebb tides current can be 2-3 knots to the west. Tides can be very confused and tide charts can be inaccurate depending on wind, tide and current.

Sea conditions can be very turbulent with wind against current conditions.

Atlantic Coast of Morocco

Winds summer: prevailing from SW on northern coast , gales are rare. As winter approaches gales become more frequent associated with Atlantic depressions.

Visibility Sahara dust haze can reduce visibility along this coast.

Currents Not significant but a tidal range of over 3 metres must be taken into consideration.

Sea conditions – Atlantic swells affects the coast generally 1-2 metres in summer but up to five metres in winter.

Weather forecasts

Gibraltar radio within 50 miles radius is on FM 92.6 and AM 1458 Kh.

In Morocco we found no usable local radio forecasts or Navtex, but the Harbour Master can generally provide a good synopsis and generally a forecast. Weather fax pictures did not apply to coastal conditions. Those with satellite communications or SSB/Ham radios and Pactor modems will find GRIB files useful.

Piloting

Harbour entry is particularly tricky across the bars and into narrow port entrances if there is a swell running, caused by the Atlantic waves on a shallow continental shelf. This is more prevalent during winter months.

Travel at night can be busy with fishing boats. Their lights were often confusing, frequently put on at the last minute, or do not exist at all, and the wooden boats barely showed up on radar even when close.

Time GMT all year

TOP-TIPS FOR TOURISTS Not To Be Missed

Morocco's Imperial Cities

Morocco's imperial cities are an unforgettable experience. We visited Fès, Meknès and Marrakech (missing the capital Rabat), and were overwhelmed with the grandeur of vast old buildings with ornate wooden ceilings, intricate tiles and plasterwork. The vibrant, bustling, rabbit warren medinas and souks that are crammed with artisans making and displaying their wares, intermingled with mosques, spice stalls, restaurants, apothecaries and hammam bath houses give an overload of new sights, aromas, tastes and sounds. Fès, the cultural and spiritual capital of Morocco, is one of the oldest medieval cities in the world. It is easy to get lost in its labyrinth of lanes and we were glad we took a guide. Besides the extraordinary experience of being taken back in time, we will particularly remember the colourful carpet warehouses (we succumbed!), the weavers with henna-patterned hands, the vast dye pits and tanneries, the endless variety of dishes in a palace restaurant, and the high speed carts with unforgiving drivers yelling 'Balek! Balek!' (beware). Meknès is slower paced, with graceful storks nesting on the walls of one of the many lavish palaces, the stunningly beautiful Mausoleum of Moulay Ismail, outstanding displays of furniture and pottery, and a beautifully restored riad, now a museum, whose owner had 600 wives and 1000 children! The red-ochre Marrakesh, back-clothed by the snow-capped High Atlas Mountains, rose to all expectations. The compact souk heaving with artisans at work, with babouches cobblers, carpenters, metalworkers, leatherworkers, tailors, textile dyers etc: all using the simplest of tools was noisy and colourful, but it is Place Djemaa el-Fna square that made it particularly memorable. As dusk falls, mouth-watering aromas emanate from the many food stalls while musicians, buskers, dancers, snake charmers, palm readers, acrobats, magicians, fortune tellers and many more provide endless entertainment. Friends who went further inland to explore the Atlas Mountains and desert had additional rewarding experiences, particularly fascinated by the local artisans and culture.

Cruising Cuisine

While cruising the coast and inland there are a wealth of opportunities for dining ashore

from the local inexpensive eateries that have seafood galore and street and market stalls, to elegant 'Palace' fine dining. Produce markets are an array of colourful pinnacles of spices and dried fruit, varied seasonal fresh fruit and vegetables, and inexpensive meat and fish, if a little gory! Large towns all have well-stocked supermarkets.

As with its artistry, Moroccan food is influenced by Berber, Arab and Spanish traditions, along with the more recent French influence. Often needing many hours to prepare some dishes have to be ordered in advance. Typical fare includes couscous (semolina) served with meat and vegetables and a spicy sauce. Tagine (meat and vegetable stew) slowly baked in an earthenware dish, and the rich Harira, a stockpot soup, all flavoured with an amazing variety of spices, herbs, nuts and dried fruit. Salads are served everywhere (a typical salade Moroccan being finely chopped tomatoes, peppers and onions) as are brochettes, kebabs, roast chicken and frites (French fries). French pastries and fresh fruit end a meal. The many cafés offering mint tea and coffee are seldom empty and the thick freshly squeezed oranges from the juice stalls are full of flavour. Although a Muslim country, alcohol is readily available. If one has the opportunity, eating in one of the opulent Palace restaurants, particularly in an imperial city, is a must, also trying pastilla, a fine pastry-covered pigeon dish that comes from Fès.

TOP-TIPS FOR MOROCCAN CRUISING

- One of the delightful aspects of Morocco is that we never felt threatened or any hostility to the contrary. Although I never felt uncomfortable walking alone I feel women will prefer to go in company ashore until they are familiar with the area. Being predominantly Muslim Moroccans dress very conservatively even when in western clothing so its best to follow suit shorts and bare shoulders are a no-no!
- Do take time to get to know some local people. Although not generally outgoing with tourists they are charming, personable, well informed and hospitable. Although the first language is Arabic and the second Berber, French (Morocco was colonized from 1912-56) is still the language of commerce and widely used socially, so a French dictionary is useful. In the north many also speak English and Spanish.
- Besides cruising guides buy travel books (eg Lonely Planet Series, also other reference books birds, fish etc) before leaving home to study the country before arrival. With such a wealth of experiences available in Morocco you will not only appreciate them more but probably have to prioritize!
- Although visas are not required by EU and many other nationals check tourist regulations



in each port if leaving the boat as sometimes a tourist form is required to travel inland. Always take your passport or provided travel documents for identification.

- Know exchange rates before arrival and exchanging money. In Tangier most merchants accept Euros. Current exchange rate is approximately 11 Moroccan Dirhams to the Euro and 17 to the pound. As with all world travel have credit/debit cards on both the Plus and Cirrus systems to be sure to access money from bank machines.
- Make sure that the meter is turned on in a taxi or you may be charged an astronomical fare if in a tourist centre (eg between the train station and Hasan II mosque in Casablanca). If no meter, negotiate a price before getting in.
- The bazaars are busy, follow the usual rules of holding onto to bags and cameras tightly. I would suggest always going in company in the Imperial cities, particularly Fès. Taking a registered guide on the first visit, not only prevents one getting lost in the confusing mass of narrow streets, it gives an interesting overview for future explores -although you will also get taken to the guide's favourite vendors! Hotels and tourist offices will find a guide for you at the going rate. Although tourist touting is strictly patrolled by the tourist police if a personable young man suggests he could show you around and engages you in conversation, the chances are he will be difficult to shake and will expect a fee!
- Trains are excellent for inland travel, with first class inexpensive. Buses are generally good and the long distance taxi can be

crowded but inexpensive. Car Rental is expensive and it can be difficult to purchase insurance.

- Ask before taking people pictures, particularly of women, although I find being able to show people their picture in the window of a digital camera often changes their reticence! Incidentally printing a picture for them makes a special gift.
- Communications. Internet cafés in most towns (be aware e-mails may not go through in any country from internet cafés and one should cc to oneself to be sure.) Telecentres everywhere for phone calls with average prices.
- Finally, inexpensive, beautiful gifts abound, probably the best you will see in your Caribbean travels, but do keep room to provision the boat for the Atlantic crossing!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liza is a lifelong sailor, developing her skills on the River Thames at Twickenham and on the Solent at Hill Head. An avid racer she has competed in several university, national and world championships. At the Sunfish world Championships in Venezuela she met Andy and they were married aboard the classic yacht Ticonderoga and honeymooned on a first Atlantic crossing. Three children later they set out for a two-year sabbatical which evolved into a six-year circumnavigation. They have completed more miles since, in North America, the Med, West Africa, South America and are currently back in the Caribbean. When not cruising the oceans of the world or working boatshows and giving seminars, Liza lives in Vancouver, BC and writes articles for a number of magazines. Their 1985 Beneteau 38, Bagheera, has now cruised over 100,000 miles and visited 106 countries.



Liza is the award winning author of four best-selling books on cruising. Just Cruising tells of Mediterranean, Caribbean and South Pacific travels. Still Cruising completes a circumnavigation from Australia, through SE Asia, East and South Africa back to S. America to Florida. Comfortable Cruising gives information about cruising around North and Central America and their realistic Comprehensive Cruising for Cowards aims to make your cruising life a success.

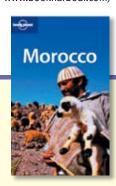
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