

Shafiq Aslam

Volunteer Report,

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My trip to Morocco was all planned in a bit of a rush – I found the Africa Trust volunteer programme in the middle of June, and by the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, I'd arrived in the picturesque village of Taroudannt. But even though it was planned in such a hurry, my experiences in Morocco could not have been any better; I have the happiest memories that will stay with me for the rest of my life, and friends that I will always keep in touch with.

I clearly remember my first few days in Morocco – I was incredibly home sick and language was a bit of a problem. But I suppose this is inevitable when you go abroad alone for the first time. However, settling in did not take long, thanks to my host family and the other GMH members. Our first two weeks allowed us to slowly integrate into village life, with lessons on Moroccan culture and the Arabic dialect and a chance to meet other members of the community, not to mention numerous shopping trips to the Taroudannt's souks to help to perfect my bartering skills! The Roudanais people were extremely welcoming and Christina and I quickly made friends. In the evenings, we would usually meet up with Zakiya and Nadia Gohiya and Hicham Ousliman. Towards the end of our time in Morocco, we were also lucky enough to get to know some of Taroudannt's most talented musicians: two brothers, Rabii and Youness and some of their other friends, like Hassan and Noure-dinne. Our evenings were filled with walks around Taroudannt and learning to play the Moroccan drum – the drbouka. I thoroughly enjoyed myself with the young Roudanais. I viewed my stay in Morocco as a chance to make new friends, and by doing this, I learnt a lot about a different way of thinking, a different way of life, but it also made me realise that notwithstanding these differences, we had also had a lot in common, similar goals and aims in life, and we could easily talk about politics, history, music and books.

Many of the young people we met were involved with GMH and the organisation's importance could be seen throughout the community and I am glad that I had a chance to be a part of that, especially at the Lalla Amina Orphange where we volunteered. Christina and I decided to spend about two and a half hours in the disabled house and then the rest of the time with the babies, but as time went on, we tried to spend a more time with the disabled because I not only began to enjoy it more but it was clear that especially in this area, the nannies really appreciated the extra help. Honestly speaking, at first I was not sure if I could work with the disabled children – it was very difficult to organise activities with them and during our very first visit, I did not feel completely at ease. However, I realised it was important to at least give it a try and I'm glad I did. During my first few days there, I was fascinated by Khalid – he's about 12 years old and he doesn't really do

much but he loves his food. He did not respond to any of the activities we set up at the beginning. However, I used to give him his breakfast every day, and I would simply sit with him, pat his back and head every so often and sing to him. By spending time with him, I think he became accustomed to my presence, and then it came – his smiles, his laughter, and more importantly, his hugs! This really touched me and made me feel like I had made real progress with him. I feel like I should mention the other five children, because I also have fond memories of them. Firstly, there was Aziz, who liked clapping, Isaam who was very energetic – he liked climbing out of the window, running and walking outside, Bushra, who was very affectionate, Fadwa – who liked being tickled and lastly, Abdul Illah, who sadly passed away while we were there. His absence was clearly felt within the orphanage - amongst the boys in the nearby houses who seemed to know him well and evidently amongst the nannies who had been like mothers to him. It is nice to know that he will not be forgotten, especially since the other nannies decided to name a newcomer amongst the babies after him!

Working with the babies was more physically draining than with the disabled, but I enjoyed every minute of it. Previously, I had no experience with babies but I quickly became accustomed (and even attached!) to the smells, the baby sick (if you're going to work with the babies, demand an overall before you start work...you've been warned!) and the crying. It was in Taroudannt where I first changed a nappy and first gave a baby a bottle of milk so I gained valuable experience. I became quite attached to the babies, but one in particular - eight month old Jamal. He seemed to quite like me too for some reason – he recognised me when I came into the room and would always come to me. It seems like spent quite a lot of time with him, but in fact it was only four days before he was taken by his new adopted parents. When I discovered he was leaving, I was devastated, I wanted to spend more time with him and take him back to England! But realistically, I knew that he was lucky to be getting the chance to have a better life. I still think about him a lot – a picture of me and him has not come off my computer desktop since I left Morocco! There was something quite serene and peaceful about working with the babies – in the afternoons before the feeding and nappy changing, there would be little to do, except play with the babies - Yara with her curly locks and pretty dresses, Nabil with his flapping arms and huge smile and Ashraf (who is a bit of a legend amongst the babies) with his energetic crawling and attempts to escape from the room are just a few of the precious memories I have of the babies. Leaving the orphanage on our last day was very sad, and now, two months on, I still really miss all the children and the babies – their funny habits, smiles, cries, and even having to clean up after them!

Working in the orphanage and integrating into village life allowed me to gain a valuable insight into the rich Moroccan culture. I learnt how to make couscous, which is the meal traditionally eaten on Friday afternoon, as well as tagine, which I really miss. I think the thing I enjoyed most

about Moroccan culture was the clothing. I absolutely loved going shopping in the souks, bartering for the bright-coloured djelibabs and fabric to get them custom made (which is a must when you're there), not to mention the headscarves and the silver jewellery. I also thoroughly enjoyed the weddings – Christina and I were lucky enough to be invited to four! The different djelibabs and the dancing were a pleasure to view each time!

As part of our busy schedule, three excursions were organised for us, the most memorable one of which was definitely our stay in the mountains. This was the chance to see another way of life in Morocco. Having to go to the toilet "à la nature" is a humorous experience that I can never forget – it's something we joke about...but we never imagine actually having to do it! On the whole, it was a welcomed, peaceful break away from our busy schedule. I did miss Taroudannt and everyone while we were away, and it was nice and comforting when we returned "home".

My last few days in Taroudannt were difficult. Though I was looking forward to going back to England, I knew I would be upset about leaving everyone behind. Moreover, I was also sad about having to leave the Moroccan way of life. I felt I had adapted to it– the hot weather, the afternoon naps, the djelibabs, the early evening goûtee, the toilets in the ground. It is these thoughts and feelings about the experience which make me realise it really was a once in a life time opportunity, it was a lot more than just a holiday or a volunteer experience and I'm extremely lucky to have been given the chance to take part.