

Dear Friends and Family,

January 22, 2010

Friday in Agadir, light breeze, 22° C, small surf on the bay, sunshine and couscous. Hearing the Friday prayers from a nearby mosque is calming, as is the gentle roll of the surf and contented voices enjoying their couscous or other Friday meal.

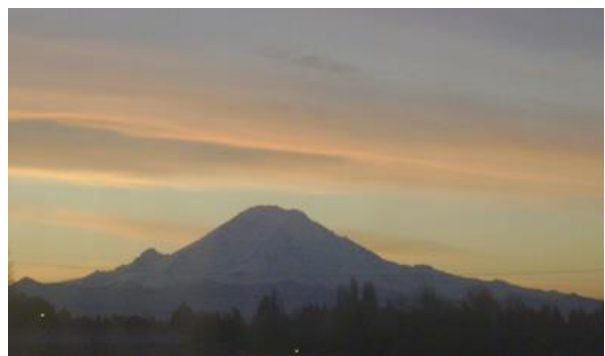
The past few months have come filled with many cultures, even though most of the time was spent in the US. But there, when the travel ranges from Boston to Beaufort, S.C. to Anchorage, Alaska and the Mission District of San Francisco; one could just as well have been traveling across country borders.

The visits were a special opportunity to relax with friends from all phases of my life, in their own current settings. Since many of their homes are in smaller towns, I often felt transported back to a time when life in the US (and elsewhere) was simpler, moved at a slower pace and still had small, family owned businesses. It was nice to see that that world has not completely given way to impersonal malls and national retailers.

There was a nice mix of natural beauty as well : protected sea turtle nests on the beach at Hilton Head, brilliant autumn forest colors in Pennsylvania.



redwoods in Muir Woods just outside San Francisco, the snow-capped guardians of Seattle,



Mts Baker and Rainier.



Anchorage’s setting is stunning – fjords and mountains in every direction. And five minutes from downtown I shared the trail with a moose.

The man-made environment also brought special pleasures with many new and expanded museums (although open fewer hours due to current budget crises), and the incredible murals painted on building facades throughout the Mission District of San Francisco.



I saw many new entries to Chicago’s already stunning skyline. There is a whole new high rise area in the south loop former railroad yards between downtown and Hyde Park, and Millennium Park (now already a decade old) brings excellent new performance facilities to my old neighborhood, which has expanded with townhouses as well as high rises.

(My favorite new one is Aqua by architect Jeanne Gang, Studio Gang Architects - supposedly the largest project awarded to an American architectural firm headed by a woman).



And with Boston's Big Dig finally complete the stunning new Zakim or Bunker Hill Memorial bridge to the Northshore (cable stayed similar to Rama VIII bridge in Bangkok) caps a beautifully revitalized waterfront. (stock photo, not mine)



I was thrilled to see the American artisanal creativity very much thriving in all media, from glass to fiber to video and mixed media. I feel proud that Americans appreciate individual artistic creativity and support it with their pocketbooks. I have been in too many countries where those with wealth do not value their own artists but only give value to products created elsewhere.

I think, on balance, that the old folk song « This land is your land, this land is my land » sums up my feelings of mid October 2009 to mid January 2010. I will never be able to properly thank all of you who welcomed me and put your lives at my disposal – including trips to/from airports at 3 a.m! I will never forget this trip, it has given me a whole new set of happy US memories to sustain me in my ex-pat life.

Everyone has kept asking me « what next ? » and I really don't have an answer other than active retirement! It is time to « smell the roses » and enjoy every hour of every day, these extra years that modern technology's pacemaker has given me. It feels very good to be able to take the time to do each task thoroughly, to be almost spontaneous with my choices of activities, and to minimize the number of necessary tasks each day.

Much has changed and much remains the same here in Agadir. The city keeps growing up into the surrounding hills and south along the coast. There is a beautifully designed and landscaped new brick and marble corniche (boardwalk) extending the full 4 km length of the bay, north to south.



The north is now anchored by a quality new residential (low rise) development and pleasure boat marina. Cruise ships now stop in Agadir.

But the traditional port fish stalls still throb with Moroccan families, vendors' calls, and smells of seafood and cooking oil.

To the south, hotels (low rise) extend almost to the palace and one can no longer walk the beach in front of the palace.



And there are clues that I have changed also. I used to find the moves of women dancing « oriental dance » too daunting. But weeks of learning hula dance in Micronesia gave me the needed moves and « freedom » to execute them. The manager of the club where I do water aerobics each morning (a new addition since my departure) complimented me in Saturday's oriental dance class ! And, after Chatuchuk market (the weekend market in Bangkok) and Dantopka fabric market in Cotonou, the large souk in Agadir is no longer a challenge, but like a neighborhood shopping area. Albeit still with the most beautiful displays of vegetables, olives and spices !

There was a little « tug » when Peace Corps' ad for a pre-service training director for a new program in Indonesia crossed my computer screen this week. I was fascinated by my brief taste of Indonesia last spring, such a vast, varied, beautiful and complex country and how enriched will those volunteers be who get to serve there. But now is not the time for me. In the future ? Who knows. For the present, settling into my home countries' cultures and friendships are the priority while keeping alive the cherished friendships with each of you.

A very old friend gave me a pin during my visit which sums up many thoughts : « Make new friends but keep the old, one is silver the other is gold ».

To all of you friends, silver as well as gold, I wish health and happiness to you and your loved ones.

Love,
Marilee