

**Ep #152: Plan the Perfect Morocco Adventure:
Sahara Desert, Medina Walks, and the Blue City**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

Alex Payne, Jess Field, and Pam Lorg

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Alex: To camel rides in the Sahara to getting lost in the Medina of Fez, we did it all with a mix of points, miles, and cash. Keep listening to hear how we did it.

Welcome to *Points Talk with the Travel Mom Squad*. We are three moms who've discovered how to leverage credit card welcome offers to get hundreds of thousands of dollars of travel expenses for nearly free. We've used credit card points and miles to take vacations to places like Hawaii, Paris, Greece, Maldives, Japan, and so much more. And the best part? We each still have 800 plus credit scores. Imagine being able to take the vacation of your dreams for nearly free. It's totally possible, and we're here to show you how.

Alex: Hey, I'm Alex.

Pam: And I'm Pam, Alex's mom. Let's talk points.

Alex: Yeah, you don't usually get to do that part, the "Let's talk points." That's usually Jess.

Pam: I know. I almost messed up because I was waiting for Jess to say something, but Jess is off in Switzerland. So we're holding down the fort today with Megan. Thanks, Megan, for being here to help us out.

Alex: So my mom and I just returned from a super fast-paced, whirlwind adventure to Morocco. It included seven hotels or riads, or luxury tents. So it was the ultimate hotel-hopping adventure. And Megan is here with us, like my mom said, because she has visited Morocco as well, using points. So she's going to fill in kind of her details too. So, Mom, do you want to kick it off and kind of tell us how this trip came to be?

Pam: Well, we plan a yearly trip, my four daughters and I. And right around COVID time, we had planned a trip where we were going to go to— help me with this if I've got it wrong, Alex. We were going to Barcelona, and I know we were going to Marrakesh. There was another place that we were going to.

Alex: We were going to Venice. It was a very random...

Pam: That's right. It was very random.

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Alex: Yeah, it was just like where we found flights, like business class flights to and from, and that had flights, direct flights to each other. It's kind of how it came to be. We were flying into Barcelona out of Venice.

Pam: Yeah, and I think we were trying to make everyone's dreams come true a little bit, and so it was kind of a mismatch. And then COVID happened, and so that trip didn't happen. And so in the meantime, we've done some other trips.

I would say that the trip that I've really wanted to take for a very long time has been Morocco. That has just been my dream trip that I want to go on. And so when it came time to plan this year's trip, I think I kind of twisted some arms and got people involved and excited about it. I will say there was one daughter that I don't think was ever very excited about it, and that's my daughter Kelly, who really likes a good beach relaxing vacation.

And as Alex said in the beginning, this was a whirlwind trip. We want to see all of Morocco as much as we could. All of my daughters have children; they can't be gone that long. And so it was really quick. Like she said, we were gone eight nights. Seven nights were in different hotels, riads, or luxury tents. So that's the only place we stayed twice was the Park Hyatt Marrakesh, which I could have stayed there for a lot longer. More on that later.

So it was whirlwind. We were in a really nice van. We traveled everywhere. We traveled almost every single day we traveled. I'm not a road trip person. I avoid them like the plague. And I actually did fine. I got a lot of rest, a lot of relaxation, and it was not bad at all.

We added up our driving, and we're talking about 3-hour days, 5-hour days, a 7-hour day, but all in all, it was about 24 hours total to see everything. But we just didn't want to miss anything. And afterwards, we thought, what would we have cut out? We really couldn't have thought, we really couldn't think of what we would have cut out. And so it was definitely different than our usual beachy, relaxed stays.

It was a mixture of points and miles, and cash. Like we said on a previous podcast, our goal isn't to get everything paid for. It is to reduce our costs

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significantly. And so for this type of trip, especially, there was just no way to make it all work with points and miles. One of those reasons was that we were doing so much driving. We are five women. None of us wanted to be a driver, driving us all over Morocco.

And so we got a guide, and it's kind of a funny story because Alex found this guide. One of our readers, someone that listens or reads.

Alex: She's a student as well.

Pam: Oh, she's a student. Okay. What's her name again? You tell the story because you know the story of how this worked.

Alex: So her name's Jenni, and she sent a DM and she was like, "Oh, I saw that you guys are planning a trip to Morocco. I have the best guide to recommend." And we were kind of like, oh, well, we're using points for some of our hotel stays. I don't know if we need a guide.

And then the more we looked into it, we're like, okay, well, there's not points hotels everywhere in Morocco, first of all. Second of all, we're like, okay, well, we want to go here, here, and here. We don't want to drive. Like we mentioned, the more we looked into it we're like, okay, this sounds amazing. We're going to do the guide.

Then I'm looking up on her Instagram account at her pictures, and I believe her handle is "everywhereonyourlist." Don't quote me on that, but she's a travel agent. She lives in Utah as well. Looking at her pictures and my sister's best friend is in her pictures from Morocco. And I'm like, what? I sent it to my sister, and she's like, "Oh my gosh, she told me she went to Morocco. I meant to ask her."

Anyways, long story short, that girl Jenni and my sister's friend Celeste are really good friends and went on this trip to Morocco together. So we were like, okay, now we really are like, we've got to do this because we actually know somebody who has used him, and she was like, okay, yeah, you need to use our guide. He was amazing.

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Pam: Yeah, so that's what we thought. If it's good enough for Jenni and Celeste, it was definitely good enough for us. So we chose a man named Mustapha from Morocco Adventures. We'll put the link in the show notes. He picked us up. He has a driver named Hamid who we just loved, and they took us everywhere, and it could not have gone better.

If you want to go to Morocco, I highly suggest you book them. We felt safe everywhere, we felt looked after. I don't know how many times we heard Mustapha say, "Everything good, Madame Pam?" I mean, he really looked out for the old girl. They were kind, they were funny, they were—it was just the perfect experience with a guide that you could possibly pick.

Alex: Well, and I know a lot of people say, I've had this question in DMs as I've been recapping the trip is, did you feel safe? Did you feel safe? 1,000% we felt safe. Granted, we were never walking alone by ourselves, but Mustapha would set up local guides for us in each city.

So if we're in Fez, there's, he has a local guide that's taking us around the Medina, showing us all the major sites. And so we just, yeah, we felt incredibly safe. And I will say, I would not want to drive there by myself. One, the roads are a little interesting, and the way people drive there is a little interesting. I think lanes are a suggestion sometimes.

Pam: Definitely.

Megan: Yeah, you have to be aggressive.

Pam: Yes.

Alex: And there are so many police stops. So many times there's like police checkpoints. And I saw a reel on Instagram of a girl who her and her husband went and they drove, and they got a few tickets for going like 4 miles per hour over the speed limit. And so you're not going to have to deal with that kind of stuff if you have a guide. I think they maybe, I don't know for sure, but maybe they see tourists and they're like, oh, we can get a ticket for these people for going 4 miles per hour over.

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So we highly suggest a driver. Megan, you guys didn't drive yourselves either, right?

Megan: No, we hired a driver for our long days, but I was with my husband, and the funny part is people kept speaking Arabic to him because he has dark hair. And he was like, No, no, no, we're American. Like we speak English. But again, like we were by ourselves and we walked miles and miles in all the cities just the two of us, had no problems at all.

Pam: Yeah. Well, I think the people are genuinely really, really nice people. In fact, some of my favorite things that happened on our trip were just local interactions. I remember going into this place to buy a bowl, and were you in there with me, Alex, or...?

Alex: It was Kelly. You were buying a ceramic bowl.

Pam: Yes. And this guy was just the cutest thing. Just, I would suggest a price and he'd just laugh at me. And it was just the cutest thing. Finally, I just thought, you know what, you deserve this extra \$10 because you are just too cute. And then I remember going into the bathroom one time and this little, this lady, and I mean, she's earning you what? Two dirhams, or you know, it was like 2 cents, you know, by giving us toilet paper, and she seemed kind of just a little bit stern. And as I walked out, she stopped a big old smile and kissed her lips, you know, her kissed her hand, and gave me the, what do you call that?

Alex: Just, I don't know, a wave.

Pam: Yeah, with her lips, you know. And it was just, some of those moments are just some of the funnest and the best, and just seeing the families. And so I felt completely safe, never felt, you know, unsafe there. And I feel like even if um, Mohammed, Mustapha wasn't right there with us the whole time, I still felt safe. The people were very kind.

Alex: Yeah. And my only thing would be like maybe I'd get lost in a Medina.

Pam: Right. Definitely.

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Alex: But I would feel safe. The people are so kind. I don't really understand why everybody, why there's this thing of, oh, is Morocco safe? I felt safe.

Pam: Yeah, I did too. And the Medinas are insane. I would absolutely, I would 100% get lost in them. I had a real keen eye on you girls and our guide. They are, they twist and turn, and they are, they are insane. So we 100% thought it was worth paying for a guide.

We did use a mixture of points and miles and cash, like I said. We booked three Hyatt hotels. We used obviously Hyatt points there. We flew over in business class and back in business class. And so we used miles for that, and we'll get into those particulars in a little bit. But for those of you that I know, everybody's just dying to know what did this cost you? How expensive was this to use a guide?

So we were, it was eight days. They picked us up at the airport. They delivered us to the airport. They were with us anywhere we went. They were our ride, our transportation everywhere, even if we went with a local tour guide, they took us there, they picked us up there. So constantly made sure we got where we were going and that we were safe.

It cost us about \$900 a person for this eight days. That included three nights in riads. Riads are kind of their special hotel. It looks like a regular building on the outside and there's a courtyard on the inside, there can be a pool on the inside. So it's kind of everything's built inside. It included a luxury tent stay, "luxury tent," I say in quotes a little bit, but you know, it was really fun.

Alex: Hey, they had bathrooms and air conditioning.

Pam: Exactly, exactly. So yeah, you're out in the middle of the Sahara Desert. So it was pretty luxury for that. Camel rides, visiting multiple sites, tours in each city with a local tour guide. We had an incredibly nice van. It included breakfast everywhere that we went and dinner in many of the places. We covered tips to our guide and driver, also to our local guides, entry fees to museums, and we really didn't pay much, many entrance fees. We paid for a few dinners. I believe

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all of our lunches. And then we used points to stay at the Park Hyatt and the Hyatt Regency Casablanca. I think this was really a good deal.

Alex: I just think of even the amount of driving we did and all the gas that was spent and all those hotel stays, like it's for, and the other thing I want to say too is we literally showed up on the trip. We did not plan a single thing. We trusted Mustapha with all of it.

I also want to say, he can customize anything that you want to do. It also included going out and visiting a local nomad village, which we'll talk about in a bit, but he had a group before our group of these women from Australia, like in their 20s. And they actually went and stayed the night with the nomadic village under the stars.

So he can customize your trip however you want it. If you know, you don't want to go here or you want to go here, like that would be the only thing that I would wish maybe we would have done was actually he sent us the itinerary. None of us just really looked at it and looked at what exactly we were doing, because I think there were a couple of stops. We do a lot of driving, but there's a lot of stops along the way. And I think some of those stops we would have been fine skipping, but none of them were like, they were all good. It was just like, oh, we've been in the car for a while. We're ready to just get to our hotel.

So that would be my only suggestion is to look at just do a little bit of your own research. But that's what was really nice is he can customize your trip however, with whatever you want.

Pam: Yeah, and to Mustapha, I know he'll listen to this. Shout out to you. We hope your family is doing well. We couldn't have asked for a better tour guide. Please tell, give Hamid our very best.

Alex: I want to say too, we, this wasn't sponsored. This is true thoughts and feelings about Mustapha and how great he is. So not sponsored in the slightest. We paid for it.

Pam: Not sponsored. We paid.

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Alex: All right. So for flights, we used a 20% transfer bonus from Chase to Air France to book our flights. We flew from JFK, stopped over in Paris and then on to, or a layover, and then on to Marrakesh. With the transfer bonus, I think it was like 44,000 or 45,000 points each. So that was a really good price. And then we did the same thing on the reverse end. We flew Casablanca, Paris to Dulles for the same price in business class. So it worked out really great. I was really happy with that price of what, like, 108,000 to 110,000 points per person round trip in business class. So it was great.

My only complaint was it was like the older Air France plane on both ends, and we were like on the way home, we were really hoping it was going to be like their newer ones because they have ones where you know, there's the door that shuts, and we did not have that. So it was, it was still great. You know, not going to complain about lay flat seats. Megan, how did you guys get to and from?

Megan: Yeah, so we actually did the reverse. So we flew into Casablanca and did the opposite loop that you did on your trip. And we booked Iberia through Quantas, and we flew JFK to Casablanca, and we paid 32,500 miles and \$86 each, and that was economy. So you guys got a really good deal.

Pam: Yeah, we did.

Megan: And then we just positioned from our little airport in Rochester to JFK on a Delta flight for \$80 cash. And it was just my husband and I, so I don't mind paying that. But on the way home, we actually flew from Marrakesh all the way back to our little airport in Rochester on United.

Alex: Wow.

Megan: So we went from Marrakesh to Frankfurt, Germany, and then Germany to Newark, and then Newark to Rochester. And that was all on the same ticket for 40,000 points and \$105 in taxes and fees, which you can't beat that. To get all the way home and not have to position.

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Alex: Yeah, no, that is so nice. I really do like that about United. I've had some experiences with them as well, where I'm coming home and they can get me all the way home on a really good price.

All right. So, like my mom mentioned, we stayed at the Park Hyatt Marrakesh. We stayed here for two nights. And when we all got there...

Pam: Oh, I could have stayed there. I could have stayed there for a week. If you guys had more time, I would have loved to have stayed there and then started our trip or ended our trip there because it was gorgeous.

Alex: Well, that's what we kind of were saying is, oh, it would have been a great place to end the trip because you've been going, going, going, and then just being able to relax for a couple days would be really, really nice. I will say it's not super close to the Medina, and you know, the main sites. You are going to have to drive, but I'd say what? It took maybe 15, 20 minutes to get there. It's not like super far, but you'll need transportation.

Pam: You're not going to walk from the hotel to the Medina.

Alex: No, you're not going to walk. It's in like a gated community on a golf course, kind of. So it's a category 7 hotel. We were there off-peak time, so we paid just 25,000 points a night. Like my mom said, the whole property is just stunning. Like, go check out my Instagram story highlight. It is beautiful. We used a suite upgrade award. I will say the rooms sleep two, even in the suites. So we did, there was five of us. We had to book three rooms. So my mom had her own room there, which was, you know, nice, nice for her.

They're kind of set up... They're connected buildings, but they have like stairs going. I don't know how they would get a roll-away bed in these rooms, even if they allowed that. So, food there was very, very good. We had, we ate dinner there both nights. Really good fish. We had poolside food. With our Globalist status, we got complimentary breakfast. Really good. The service there was so good. The people were so kind and friendly. The day we checked out, they knew that we were like had a drive ahead of us. So they gave us to-go boxes. And

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were like, go get some more food from the breakfast buffet to take with you. So they were so, so kind.

In Marrakesh, we did a walking tour. So Mustapha set us up with a local guide, and we just walked through all the main sites. We walked through the Medina. We did a little shopping in the, I think it's called souk, the souk?

Pam: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Alex: We saw the, what was the palace?

Pam: I don't remember the name.

Alex: I don't remember the palace, but that was one of the ones we had to pay entry. I think it was like 10 dirhams, which, no, maybe it was a little more than that, but it wasn't much.

We walked through the main square, where there were snake charmers and monkeys. One thing I will say that was kind of a surprise, and our local guide did make sure to tell us this ahead of time is one, you can't just take pictures of people. You need to ask permission before you... Like, if you're walking through the Medina, it's just culturally, it's not, I mean, I think it's a really good idea. I don't think in any part of the world we should just be snapping pictures of people. But they, he just was like, if you want a picture, let me know, and I will ask or, you know, if you're just getting a picture not of the people, it's fine.

But another thing, so like I said, there's snake charmers and monkeys in the main square. This part's a little uncomfortable. They you will go, and the snake charmers will try to get you to come over and then they'll just grab your phone and start taking pictures, but then they're like, you need to give me money for taking your picture. So you need to know about that ahead of time.

Megan: Yeah.

Alex: We gave them a little money, but then they were wanting money from each of us. And we're like, we already paid you. Like, so if just avoid that if you don't want to worry about that. My sister took a picture from a distance of like this guy

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dressed up in like some traditional type clothing. And he was like telling her she needed to pay him, and she's like, I wasn't even getting a picture of you. And so there's just some things that can get maybe a little uncomfortable. That's why it was kind of nice having a local guide. We did not go anywhere near the monkeys because that was the most depressing thing we'd ever seen. Like, so yeah, just some stuff to have in keep in mind.

It was really hot. We were really warm. I would say if you are wanting to go to Morocco, late fall is your best bet there. Usually, the busiest times they say is like September, October, November, and then again like it picks back up like February, March-ish. I think if we would have gone in October, that would have been a little bit better, but we were fine.

Once we were done in the city or in Marrakesh, we went to the pool and relaxed at the Park Hyatt. But that was kind of our experience there. I liked Marrakesh, but it wasn't my favorite of the trip, of the places we went. Megan, what did you guys think of Marrakesh?

Megan: Yeah, we really loved it too, but again, I thought Fez was the, like stole the show. I love, I loved Fez. And we had the same. We had three days in Marrakesh, and that was enough because we wanted to go and see as much as we could. But, and you can't skip it. I still think you have to go there. But yeah, and same with the market. We just took like super wide loops around everybody because I was like, I'm not getting close to anybody that wants to bring a snake or monkey near me.

Pam: So after our two days in Marrakesh and at the beautiful Park Hyatt Marrakesh, we went on to the desert. And that took us, we actually took two days to get there because we stopped midway and stayed at a riad that was really, I really liked it. I thought it was such a nice riad. It was the Paradise, I don't know if it's Dade or what, Riad, but we'll link it in the show notes.

Alex: I think it's Dades.

Pam: Dades, okay. And dinner and breakfast were included with that tour. That was really a great stay, and we had such an amazing dinner there. That was

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probably one of the best dinners we had the whole trip. I will say, and I think I've said before, I'm not the most adventurous eater. We didn't eat a lot of, well, we didn't have tanjine for say, but we did have multiple, multiple chicken skewers. In fact, I think we...

Alex: And a lot of couscous.

Pam: And a lot of couscous. And they were good. But by the end of eight days, I must say, I was tired of having that. It was because that's pretty much what we ate. And then I always had a lot of Pringles too. That was my snack of choice.

Alex: And so, yeah. We did have a couple of us have some stomach problems because you're just eating different stuff in a different country. I would not say it is them. I would say it is us and our bodies just not being used to things. So you it was a little scary when you're driving 7 hours and you're having some stomach issues. So just make sure you pack what you're going to need for that.

But I will say another shout-out to Mustapha. He was so kind. He was like, let me know if your guys' stomachs aren't feeling well. We can stop. I will, we'll have like we'll get it all situation. So it like eased a lot of that anxiety of, oh my gosh, I'm on a road trip and my stomach is not doing well. What am I going to do? I felt really as good as I could like in the situation. So it was myself and my sister were the lucky ones to have some upset stomachs on this trip.

Pam: But then Casey and I had trouble, you know, the day that we left and the next day. So at least it wasn't on the trip. I think I say it's a lot to do with the spices, you know, different things that we're just not used to. But yeah, but we had an amazing dinner there at the, that Riad. As we traveled through some beautiful sites, some amazing, gorgeous. Um, the next day we went on to the desert. We went into our luxury tent stay, where we had a dinner and show.

I don't think we loved the food that night as much as we had as we'd like the food before, but that's just, you know, kind of what happens when you're traveling in a different country, but there's always something that we could eat. And the star of our stay in the desert was, without a doubt, our camel rides.

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So we had stopped previously at a little place that Mustapha knew. We bought scarves. They showed us how to wrap them, not that we remembered. Someone had to help us again wrap our scarves, but putting them on and getting on those camels, being in the Sahara Desert, was a surreal moment for all of us. I think every single one of us, when we talked later about what our favorite moments were, I don't think anybody left that out. You know, we're in this long line, all five of us, following our the guide who's walking, and we can look at our shadow on the Sahara sand and there we are. It's just was like being in a movie. It was, it was really amazing.

Alex: I felt like the whole, like our hotel there, because we stayed at a luxury tent the first night, and then the hotel that owns that same area right then the second night. And it felt like I was on a movie set, and even the hotel kind of felt like if Disney had created it. Like, it just felt like I don't know, it was like felt like a movie set, and just is this real? Are we here? And I'm looking out, and all I see are sand dunes. It was really cool.

And we loved the kid that took us out on the camels. He was this cute 17-year-old boy named Ibrahim, and he so they take you out on the camels, you walk up, you get off the camels, like midway to your stop. You walk up the dunes, and then he took pictures of all of us. He was like having us do like funny little things. And then he we got back on the camels and kept going to the luxury tents, but he was so cute just chatting with us, and he gave each of us a little bottle of sand from the Sahara Desert that we could bring home. So he was really, really cute.

Pam: Yeah, he really was. So the second night we stayed at the hotel that's, you know, adjoining the luxury tents. I mean, the luxury tents are a little ways off, but they're both owned by the same company, Auberge des Sud. I wouldn't say it was really fancy, but like Alex said, it was really interesting. It was very clean. It had a pool, and the reason for the trip needing so much driving was that desert experience. And so although we didn't love to drive that much, not one of us, that's was probably a highlight. None of us would have taken that off, you know, what we did. So 100% say go to the desert even if you have to drive. It will be one of those pinch-me moments that you will never regret having done.

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Alex: Yeah, it. Were you going to mention what else we did in the desert?

Pam: Yes, but go ahead, you tell.

Alex: Okay. So the other day, so like my mom said, we were there for two nights. So the first, the day we got there was the camel ride. The next day, Mustapha actually is from the desert. That's where him and his family live. So he took us out in like a four-wheel drive vehicle through the desert. We saw like the border of there's Algeria right across the way. And then we got to go visit a nomad family.

So there are still nomads who just travel around. Some of them stay more in certain areas now. They don't travel as much, but we got to go visit with a family and yeah, see what their homes are like. It kind of felt like we were off on like a National Geographic experience. It was really cool to see how these other families live. I feel that's to me sometimes my favorite thing about traveling and is just seeing there's families all over the world and we can have completely different lifestyles, but we're still just people with families raising our kids and love our kids. And that was really cool. We got to go there, and Mustapha served us tea there. You're going to get a lot of tea while you are there.

Yeah, and then we just got to see a little bit more of after visiting the Nomadic Village, then we went and we went to a local store where they show, sell carpets and rugs. And these rugs are made by the nomadic people, and when you purchase them, the vast majority of the sales go back to the nomadic tribe. And it takes them so long to make some of these rugs, like nine months even. So we did buy some rugs there. I got like a small enough one. I actually have it in my office. It's right under my feet as we're recording. I got, we got small ones so that we could carry them home. But that was neat.

I would say it was a little higher pressure than we were expecting when we were there. But it felt good to be able to give back to those local communities. And that's something too that I noticed is with Morocco as a whole is the country really relies on tourism. And so there are going to be opportunities when you're there to purchase local goods and handicrafts from the community, and I would, I would encourage you to do so because that's giving back to these local

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communities, you know, for them letting you come see their lives and their area. I think it's good to invest back into their local economies.

So Megan, I know that you guys did the desert as well. So tell us where you stayed and what your experience was like, and you hired a driver, right, to take you there.

Megan: Yeah, so we came from Fez, and our driver picked us up from our riad there. And it was a 9-hour drive. We just went straight through. So we made a couple stops along the way. Like, once you get into the Atlas Mountains, there's some wild monkeys, there's a couple like Game of Thrones sites that you can stop at, filming sites, and there's a couple other things.

But we stayed at actually really funny, the name is called Luxury Desert Camp. And when we were there, talking about how it feels like it's National Geographic, there was actually a National Geographic tour at the same place when we were there.

Pam: Oh no way.

Alex: That's so cool.

Megan: So 100%, these are the types of places you would see in the National Geographic shows and magazines. And we stayed in a dome tent, so it was kind of like one whole wall was just windows. So you, you could close curtains.

Alex: That's really cool.

Megan: Yeah, but you were in the middle of nowhere, so you could just wake up with the sunrise right in front of you at your window and it was, I have to say, probably a top three travel experience staying out in the desert.

Alex: Yeah. Did yours have air conditioning?

Megan: It did have air conditioning and a full bathroom right inside our tent. So it's not, it's luxury like what you said, but still there's sand everywhere. It's like worse than being at the beach. But it, we were there for two nights, and we did the same thing. So we drove from Fez out to the desert and then from the desert

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to Marrakesh. So we did like the reverse for you. But again, just absolutely loved it and would definitely make sure to add that on even if we want to go back with the kids.

Pam: Yeah.

Alex: Okay, next, reverse of Megan, we drove to Fez. I forget how long this day was. I want to say it was maybe 7 hours for us.

Megan: You said yours was nine, though, so maybe it was longer.

Pam: I think it was eight or nine.

Megan: But we made stops. We had a lot of stops.

Alex: Yeah, we did a couple of stops. We did stop like you said at to see the wild monkeys. My mom was just standing there, and all of a sudden, a monkey was on her shoulders, and she's like, oh my goodness, what is happening?

Pam: Freaked me out.

Megan: They are not afraid of people.

Pam: No, they are not.

Alex: So we stopped there. We also stopped, I don't remember the name of the place we stopped. It was a really quick stop, but we felt like, this was what was so interesting. You start off like Marrakesh is very hot and dry, desert-y feel. You drive through the Atlas Mountains, which is, you know, mountains. It's still kind of got that drier feel to it. And then you get to the desert, and then you keep going, and all of a sudden it's like green and trees, and it just felt like this little place we went to, I wish I could remember the name of it, but it felt like almost like a little.

Pam: It looks like Switzerland, almost.

Alex: Yeah, it was like a little ski resort town almost, is what it felt like. We're like, wow, this, are we still in Morocco? This feels so different.

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Then we continued on to Fez. Fez felt so different. Fez is much bigger than Marrakesh for sure. Like, it just got a lot more people there. The riad we stayed at was amazing. It's called Riad Salam Fez. We got there and we're like, oh my gosh, this is what we imagined with when we were thinking of a riad. This is it. It's just the mosaic tiles everywhere, so pretty. The courtyard with the little garden and the pool.

We did a hammam that night. And this was another nice thing. We, I think it was the day before, we didn't have a hammam scheduled. And my mom said, "Hey Mustapha, is there any way we can fit in a visit to a hammam while we're here? Like, while we're in Fez?" Granted, we're in Fez for one night. So it's not like we're giving him a lot to work with. And he's like, oh yeah, like I'll see what I can do. He was able to get us into the hammam at the hotel. It was a really cool experience. It's a really small hammam. And I'm granted, let me just say, I've never, I've never done a hammam, so this was a first for me.

Pam: The riad is very big. Huge riad. But the hammam, the spa area, was very small, much smaller than the one I did in Istanbul, which was just, it was just a hammam. So this is a hammam inside the hotel, and it was very small.

Alex: So it's, they have an area just for women, and there are like two tables for massages, and then inside like a shower type area, I don't know how else to describe it. There's room for two. So four people can visit the hammam at a time because you just switch. So I started off with a massage. It was like a 45-minute full-body massage, really good massage. And then switched into the shower area, and they did like a coffee scrub, another body scrub, wash your hair.

Pam: Charcoal, charcoal scrub.

Alex: A charcoal scrub. And they just splashing warm water on you. It was so nice and relaxing. The women working there were super kind and friendly, and made you feel very comfortable. I will say you, only thing you're wearing in this particular hammam was like a bathing suit bottom. So that's something to keep in mind, and they are going to wash you, and so you just, you know, go in with your own modesty level of comfort, but just be aware that if you're not comfortable with that, then you might want to skip it. But we were fine with it.

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They, I felt very comfortable with the women. They were very respectful, and it was a, one of, I also, all five of us, that was one of our favorite things we did on the trip as well as visit the hammam.

The next day, we toured the city. We visited the Medina, once again, we had a local guide. We visited, you know, some mosques. We went to the Tannery, which is the, I think is it the biggest working tannery in the world? Or in Africa, maybe?

Megan: It has to be because it's very well known.

Alex: Yeah, very well known.

Pam: And very smelly.

Alex: Yeah, it's very well known for its smell. I don't really know what to expect, but the reason it smells so bad is because they use pigeon poop. And so I was worried it was going to be like a vomit type smell. I don't know what I was thinking, but I was like, oh, this is like, it's it doesn't smell, it smells terrible, but it wasn't like as bad. There, they gave us mint and so we could stick the mint up. We actually stick it up our noses. We looked really silly.

And once again, like the guy at the Tannery who took us around, so kind and friendly, and he just, he told us about how it all works. He took us down to the shops, but he was like, no, this time there was literally no pressure to buy anything. He was like, oh, I see you guys aren't really interested. Let's just get you on your way. Like so, so, so kind and friendly.

One thing I want to mention, too, is I was like, kind of like, how does a Tannery work? This seems like interesting. But he said, all of the leather they get is from animals that are that are used for food. In case anyone's wondering, I was like, are they just killing animals for leather? 'Cause that seems, that's terrible. But that's not what they do, according to the guy.

So overall, we loved Fez. I, yeah, we all really loved Fez. We also visited a cooperative, that's the word, right, Mom? Where they, uh, like where they make ceramics and things like that. And that was really cool to see the process of how

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they make these beautiful crafts and the level of detail and work and the artistry that they have.

It's really cool because a lot of these are very old traditions that the government is trying to keep alive in their communities. And so they put a lot into, you know, just keep passing these traditions on. And just the level of artistry, we got to watch the people painting on these tiny or, you know, like these very intricate details, and that was really, really neat to see.

So Megan, tell us about your time in Fez.

Megan: Yeah, so we also only had one night, and I wish we had two or three. Like, there was just, it was so much to see. This is where actually we bought rugs, and we ended up buying five rugs and we had them shipped home to us. And I seriously was like, what's the chances these are actually going to arrive at our house because it felt so like, I just felt so weird. But they had us sign the back of each of our rugs. We they had us take pictures of everything and then they folded them all up and then put them like in a package and had to sign it again so we knew that everything was all put together and our rugs arrived perfectly in the package that we signed like two to three weeks after we got home from our trip and so again it was like what you said it was high pressure but I was like, nah, I don't know, we'll see. But then I just found so many things that we loved. I was like, Oh we're finishing our basement, let's just put all brand new Morocco rugs down there.

Alex: I mean, when are you going to be in Morocco again to get these rugs that are made by hand? And that's the thing I want to say too is that was a nice thing about going with a guide is they take you to the places where you're not getting, you're getting the real authentic goods, not the mass produced ones that are knockoffs that they're might, people might be saying are real that aren't real.

Megan: Yeah. And we just had a guide for the day, and our Riad actually hooked them up for us. So we came from Casablanca, and we took the train, and that was like super easy. We just bought tickets at the train station. We bought first class tickets so we had assigned seats in our little like berth had air conditioning. So that was super easy.

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And then we got to the Riad, she was like, well, you have a couple hours. Do you want me to find you a guide for the day? Because she's like, there's no way you're going to do everything yourself. And we're like, okay, yeah. And she found us this guy, and then within 20 minutes, he was there. He was like, hey, I'm here. And he was like, this tour normally takes 7 hours, but we're going to try to fit it in before dinner time.

So even when you stay at those little riads, like they are so well connected. So if you don't have a guide the whole time, I think even if you just ask, it's like almost having your own personal little concierge. Like they know everything. They know everybody in their town. They are so well connected that if you need dinner reservations or a restaurant or a guide or anything, they will help you find that.

Pam: Yeah, that's a really good point. I felt the same way, and I felt like the people at the Riad were so friendly. So once we left Fez, it was super important for me. I don't think anybody else had ever heard of.

Alex: No, I wanted to go here.

Pam: Okay, I didn't know if you, any of you had heard. I don't think the other girls had ever heard of it. But it's uh Chefchaouen, also known as the Blue City, which is easier to stay. And it is absolutely gorgeous. It was more breathtaking than I thought it would be and it was actually bigger than I thought it would be, too. I remember thinking when we got there, it was like, are we in Morocco or are we in Greece or Croatia? Because it was just kind of the white stucco with but everything's been painted blue all over the city. Do you remember the reason why they did that, Alex? All of a sudden, I'm blanking on why.

Alex: No, but our guide Muhammad's going to be disappointed. There's a lot of myths about it. There's a lot of myths, he said, and he him he actually has a some friends and him are working on correcting the Wikipedia pages because they are not correct. But one of the myths is that, like, the blue would repel mosquitoes, would repel mosquitoes. And he's like, that's not, that's not true. I believe it started off like a brown color, and then it was like it was getting too dusty. And then they painted it white, and white was getting too; it got so dirty. And then I think that's when they switched to blue.

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Pam: Right. And I think once they started painting it blue, it just got so much notoriety. It's like, we are now going to be, we're now going to be known as a blue city, and we're going to paint blue all over this city. And it's breathtakingly beautiful. He was talking about

Alex: It felt more touristy than the other areas. Like, it was like at night, it was alive and hopping, and there's just people walking around in the square, and it just, yeah, it was just had a different feel than the other areas, maybe.

Pam: Yeah, and I think that we got there late, and because we'd had to drive quite a bit, we'd spent the morning in Fez, dropped off one of my daughters that had to be back to fly to London. So we dropped her off at the airport, and then we drove to the Blue City. So it we got there a little late. I would have loved to have spent two nights there.

I especially, I wanted to go out that night because it was just looked fun and exciting, and like Alex said, it was hopping, but we were tired and we hadn't had dinner, and by the time we had dinner, we were like, oh, we got to go to bed. But it was just a gorgeous, gorgeous city. We had, we stayed in a riad. I think it was called Riad Hicham or something. I have it written; it will be in the notes. It was Riad Hicham is what it was. Really nice riad. Again, I felt like the people were so nice.

Alex: The location was really great, too. It was right kind of in the middle of the square.

Pam: Yeah, so it was great. We had a really good dinner there, too. We kind of got away from the chicken kebabs for a while. I think we tried some pasta and some other items, and so that was kind of nice that it had a little bit more variety.

Alex: Yeah, and we just ate at the hotel, too.

Pam: And the next morning, we met up with a guide called Muhammad from Top Lux Travels. We'll link that in the show notes. This guy was probably our favorite local guide, and it blew our mind the way he knew English, and he had literally

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no accent. And it was, it was it we just were like scratching our head. It was like, huh? You're really from.

Alex: He said he watches a lot of TV. He's he's from he's from Chefchaouen, which, if he told u,s the locals just call it Chaouen. So if you don't want to be known as a tourist right off the bat, make sure you're calling it Chaouen. But he was just, I mean, all of our guides were fantastic. He was just very personable and yeah, he was just.

Pam: And took all our pictures. He was such a good photographer. Remember?

Alex: He was like, "Hey, why don't you girls stand here and I'm going to get your picture?" and he'd like get the lighting right. And he was saying how he has considered adding another tour where he does like pictures. We're like, yes, you need to do that. You're so good at these pictures.

So yeah, he was a really, really great guide. We actually, this was semi, this was actually embarrassing. We wanted, my sister and I wanted to get a soccer jersey for our kid from a couple of the teams, players from the Morocco national team. And there's a little stand. My mom had just got cash from an ATM, but then she had to hurry back to the hotel because our we were supposed to be heading to Casablanca.

So we were in a rush, and so Muhammad's like, Oh, I can take you guys to the stall. And my sister's like, Oh my gosh, I only have a little bit of cash left. And we're like, do they take cards? He's like, yeah, they take cards. Well, the one we went to did not take cards. So we were like 40 dirhams short, and he was like, oh, I'll get it.

Pam: 400. So \$40.

Alex: And he's like, Oh, I can pay for it. It's fine. And we're like, no, no, no, no. We're not letting you do that. And he's like, No, it's fine. You guys can just pay me back when we get back with your mom. And we're like, oh my gosh, we had just given him his tip too because we were technically done. And we're like, no,

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we're not letting you use your tip to help pay for these soccer jerseys. It'll be fine. We'll get one in Casablanca or somewhere else.

And he's like, he insisted. So he spotted us the extra money, helped us. It was a older man that was selling the jerseys, and so I don't he didn't speak very much English. So he was translating for us, got us the jerseys. We get back to the hotel, we got him his money and paid him back. But he was so nice.

So once again, Mustapha had set us up with him. And that's the nice thing, too, is Mustapha has all these connections with these guides, and so he chooses the best ones. But if you don't go with Mustapha and you're just happening to be in Chefchaouen, look up Muhammad at Top Lux Travels. I'll link it in the show. It's like my mom said, at least just book with him. I think our tour was like 2 and 1/2 hours, and he took us through all the neighborhoods and told us everything. But yeah, he was a great guide. Megan, you need to go now. You need to go to Chefchaouen now.

Megan: I know. I know. And I actually, I was going to say that the reason we picked Morocco for this, like, kid-free trip was because I'm always like, let's pick somewhere that we wouldn't necessarily take the kids. But then, after going, I'm like, they would have loved this. They would have loved everything that we did. They wouldn't have cared about the long days in the car. Like, I want to go back with our girls so bad because I honestly think they would truly appreciate and love everything there.

Alex: We saw a family of like, it was like just husband and wife and two young kids getting family pictures done in Chefchaouen and I was like, oh, I wish, I want to come here and get my family pictures done. Like I'm sure there's a Flytographer that can take your pictures there because literally every corner, you're like, oh my gosh, this is so cute. Oh my gosh, this is so cute, and taking pictures. It would be an amazing... So, Megan, you need to go and take family pictures.

Megan: I know. I know.

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Pam: It is an Instagrammer's dream city, amazing. So once we left Chefchaouen, we drove to Casablanca, and Mustapha had said that there really isn't much to see in Casablanca. And so the only thing we really saw there was the mosque there and it wasn't open to, you know, really get in there, but we took a quick look at it.

We were leaving the next day at 7:30 in the morning. So we were not in for a late night anyway. We did stay at the Hyatt Regency Casablanca, but that was about 45 minutes away from the airport. So that made for a really early day for us. I think we all got up at 4:00 in the morning. It was, it was a little rough. I will not lie. But it was, we had great flights. The Hyatt Regency, I must say, I think that the pictures do it more justice than it is. So, in other words, it was pretty outdated. And I think did we, I think we'd even used suite upgrade.

Alex: Well, I think originally we were maybe going to have two nights there, and like, yeah, I wouldn't use a suite upgrade there, but it was going to be expiring anyway. So I was like, whatever, we'll just use it. And the suite was nice. Like, it was really big. It had a, it was a huge suite, and it had nice views of the mosque, but it was just very dated. Like, the carpet could use a refresh. But we did eat dinner at the hotel, and the dinner at the hotel was really good.

Pam: Yeah, so it's, I just don't think it rated as high as most Hyatt Regencys do for me. That's for sure.

So some hints if you're going to Morocco and go to Morocco. If you want a really different type of a trip, you're not going to use all your points and miles for it. You can, you know, definitely cut down on costs by staying at a few hotels, definitely your flights.

One thing that's really important here is most of the time you don't need to bring cash or a debit card. We were in a world of hurt if we hadn't done that. There were many places that not take a credit card. We need to tip our tour guide. We needed to tip our local tour guides. We were looking all over sometimes. Oh, who has some money in their debit card? Who can go get some cash? And I felt like I spent quite a bit of time looking for an ATM so I could get enough cash to do all the tipping that we needed to do.

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Alex: Yeah. One thing too, with the cash is some places will accept US dollars, and they will also accept euros. Like we were out at lunch one day, and for change, my mom got back dirhams and euros. So that's something to keep in mind, but like I've never been on a trip where cash was as important as it was in Morocco.

Pam: And the local currency. So just plan on that. I 100% would say, especially if you are women, get a guide. You need a guide. I would even with my husband, I just would feel more comfortable. I think traveling, you know, walking through the medinas and some of these things are just confusing. It is just one of those places that a guide is super important.

Don't feel like this is a place that you shouldn't travel to, that it's not going to be safe. We always felt safe, super friendly people. We love the people. They were, they were wonderful people. Another thing, and we said this before, is to learn a few words. We called our my daughter Casey, our linguist. She knew a few more words than we did, but the people.

Alex: No she didn't. She knew the same amount, but she just...

Pam: She just used it all the time.

Alex: Any chance she get. The funniest was we were walking around in Fez, and a guy came up and was like asking if she wanted to buy something. She's like, "Oh, la shukran," which means no, thank you. And he's like, "Ooh, Arabic." And she, she's like, no, that's all I speak. La shukran, that's it. It was pretty funny.

Pam: But the people appreciated it.

Alex: They really do. Like, we got really good at saying shukran or la shukran and salam. Those were our go-tos.

Pam: Megan, what did what did tips did you have? Did you guys learn any more language than we did?

Megan: Yeah, well, actually, the funny part is that Tim and I actually met in Arabic class in college.

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Alex: Oh my goodness, no way.

Megan: I was, I had a double major in political science and French, and I had to take a second language, so I took Arabic. And then, naturally, all of the military guys were in the Arabic class.

Alex: That is so crazy. I had no idea. Which French, in Morocco, French is like...

Megan: Is also a very common language. Yeah. So either one, if you just know a few words, you will get by, and they would be so happy if you even just try.

Pam: Megan, I'm amazed. So you were you just out there in Morocco speaking Arabic everywhere?

Megan: Tim was because he has, like, he doesn't get embarrassed. I get embarrassed with my language speaking because I feel like I don't say the accents correctly, so they're just going to be like, Oh, you're American, I'll just switch to English. But Tim was like, he tried really hard, and they loved it. Like, and I.

Alex: That's great.

Megan: It really made a big difference.

Pam: Okay, any final words from either of you about your trips to Morocco?

Alex: I mean, my only complaint about it was the amount of driving, but like we've said, I don't know how we would do this trip and see what we saw. Like, there's no way to do it without driving. I mean, maybe give yourself more time so you're not going as quickly if you can.

But I just think it was a really cool experience, very different. We just, I just loved being able to see another culture. Like my mom said, I think some of my favorite moments were just the one-on-one connections with the local people between whether that's like our local guide or a man in a shop that we're talking to or the lady in the restroom or, you know, there was another teenage boy that was helping us in one of the markets in Marrakesh who was selling us stuff and he's speaking with us a mix of like English and Arabic.

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And he was so funny and so cute. He was probably like 14 years old. In the end, he's like, let's all take a picture. We take a picture together. He gives us all hats to put on. He's like, you can't keep the hats. You can't keep the hats. They're just for the picture. But they're such kind, warm people. And like at the end, you know, we bought a few, like some of us bought these little cutting boards, and at the end he's giving us all, okay, take this too and giving us all like little honey stirs, you know. So the people are just so friendly, and I loved it. I think if you're considering going, you should definitely do it.

Megan: Yeah, and I totally agree. And I am not a person to typically repeat destinations because I have so many on my bucket list, but I think this is the trip that I would 100% want to do again and take the girls with us. And even now, they're 9 and 10 years old. I think that they would be a great age to go and they would enjoy everything so much.

Alex: Yeah, I think it'd be amazing to take kids too. Like, I just think these kinds of trips you learn a lot about, it's just kind of eye-opening. You're like, oh, you know, I just love those kinds of things where you can kind of connect with another culture and a different way of life. And I think our kids can learn a lot from those experiences, too. I mean, I learn a lot. So the younger you can learn about the world, the better, I think.

Pam: Well, you know what I remember with you saying that, Alex, is us being with the Nomad family, and there were those two little boys there who they don't go to school. They probably have never gone to school, and they were messing around on a little motorcycle, and they would just look at us with these little shy little smiles and stuff, and I just thought, you know what? Your lives are a lot different than ours, but you know what? You are happy, you're living your best life, you're loved. And it was just, you know, magical.

Alex: And little boys are little boys wherever you're at in the world.

Pam: Exactly. They're giving you these shy little smiles. You know, reminding me of my grandchildren. So you know, we are just so, so grateful what points of miles allows us to do. It's allowed us to go to places we never thought we could go to, just like Morocco.

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It lets us plan magical getaways and create memories together. I just am so grateful that I'm able to travel with my daughters every year on these annual trips. It's one of my favorite trips of the year. We've created some magical moments, some new inside jokes that never would have happened if we hadn't gotten to points and miles. So I hope that each of you are able to use points and miles to create the same memories. If you found this episode helpful, share it with your friends and family, and please leave us a review.

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