

# Looking for green in Marrakesh,



WEEC 2013

'Environmental Education in Cities and Rural Areas: Seeking Greater Harmony' was the theme of the 7<sup>th</sup> World Environmental Educators Congress in Marrakesh in June. 'Rural' isn't often a word included in conferences, so it had made me a bit keen to be a part of, and see what was on offer on, the world stage.



The patchwork green banners hanging over the *Palais du Congrès*, encouraged me to look for green as a sign of such harmony. I should explain that I live on a farm, which may colour the way I view big cities.

En route to the Congress, my rural background seemed welcomed at the edge of the Medina. How many farmers were here? This green marquis, was for the Farmers Bank – and showing Australia on its globe!



Marrakesh was exotic, warm, dry and had with lots of green! The route to the Congress went down a big boulevard, with its middle path sheltered by rows of trees.



The outside of buildings were usually high walls. Inside were courtyards, with some sort of green. My *Riad Ilayka*, right in the Medina, was cheery with the birds and bees

attending its fountain, flowers and potted trees - and no city noises!



There were formal parks too, where trees made a huge difference – like this one which I zigzagged through.



With some 2000 people at the Congress, coming from 100 countries, the suite of different types of sessions, and adjoining exhibitions made a great variety of experiences. My French widened the opportunities for me to communicate with people, in sessions and informally.



The Moroccan teachers I spoke with were excited to share what they were doing in FEE's *eco-ecoles* program. The (Arabic) map in the schools section set towns where wildlife lived.



Their exhibition was of 3D models of schools. They had been created by the children using only recycled materials. Several of the schools showed veggie gardens and/or composting areas.



My favourite, from the school located where their teacher is pointing, had vultures in the playground. The birch and feather models spun around and up- as these big birds rose on afternoon thermals above the school.



Other schools showed off their recycling programs. I was treated to a carefully spoken (French) explanation of making recycled paper and presented with a card. It was a wonderful cross-cultural activity – it could have been any Aussie school making such a talk to a visitor.



Nearby another school produced Art works from broken pieces of glass. I had noticed that there was often broken glass atop walls - much safer than on the ground! But what these children did with it was stunning -





There was also a trades exhibition for sustainability. I spent a lunch time talking (in French) with two National Park rangers, learning about their wetland birds and some issues from earthquakes and heritage buildings – which we don't have!



A highlight was the Royal Banquet, hosted by Her Royal Highness Princess Lalla Hasna, at the *Palais El Badii*, the magnificent open-air castle, on the outskirts of the Medina in Marrakesh. The *Palais* had a resident population of storks sitting atop its walls, which flew in at dusk.



This ancient castle had an orchard within its walls and no roof, creating a wonderful ambience as night fell. Then a truly spectacular light and music 'spectacle' was performed on the walls and in the grounds, under the stars. Dinner - seven courses – followed, served quickly to 1000 people. With all the staff for this, I guessed left-overs went to them!



At the University Tour on the last day, I heard about several research projects. They were working with a desalinisation plant. Solar energy was being trialled to distil Argan oil.



With rapid urbanisation taking place, here as in many other countries, issues of housing designs are being researched: orientation, composition and potential for passive cooling from pipes in the ground. This concept had come from Canada and its applicability was being tested locally.



Returning to the Medina from this high-tech university, a low-tech scene greeted me. While quaint, this transport was here for the tourists rather than the locals. Marrakesh had lots of traffic, in which the horse and carts, ran side by side. All they needed was their feed bags, water troughs, parking space beside the park and a farrier who worked there.



A shuttle service ran from the Medina to the Congress. However I got on a local bus accidentally one day and had a ride through the suburbs to the edge of town. I discovered that the *Fondation de Mohammed VI*, which co-sponsored the Congress, was active in its community. A TV screen ran a delightful cartoon with song, promoting sustainable behaviours. It was the only advertising on the bus and much more pleasant than the ads that adorn Melbourne's buses!

The post office supported 'green' with this billboard "Nature is a gift for the present, let's protect it for the future".



Through the Congress' Round Tables, Talks, Plenaries, Exhibitions and conversations, there was much exploration and wisdom on a variety of issues, including rural-urban ones. The concluding statements included issues about this rapidly urbanising world, and education for it.

What did someone from a 'rural area' find for this 'greater harmony with urban areas'? My 'green' search had found an interface of rural and urban influences, which merged into one environment at Marrakesh/Congress. I'd been delighted by amazing sights and people - many small things under an umbrella of a government promotion. An interesting harmony still evolving!



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