

A Postcard from Marrakech

Having been in Morocco with SPANA, the Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad, for three weeks now, I am starting to feel more settled in. The first week was spent with the Technical Director of SPANA, Gigi Kay, seeing three of the clinics that they run here and getting used to the protocols and drugs available. Then I arrived at the Marrakech clinic where I am to be based for five weeks of my stay here.

Apart from the heat, approximately 40 degrees each day, the biggest adjustment has been to the difference between the approach to a case here compared to a case in the UK. As each equine here is vital to the everyday life of their owner, euthanasia is hardly ever an option, and as we are one of the best equipped clinics in the area, referral is also not an option. This means that each case is approached with the view that something has to be done to relieve the animals suffering, and consequently far from being a clinic dealing with purely basic veterinary care as I was expecting, SPANA carries out fairly advanced medicine and surgery on a daily basis (although obviously limited by the reduced pharmacy available here).

The second aspect of my work here that has taken me a while to get used to is termed "owner non-compliance" in the UK, but reaches new levels here in Morocco. On my first visit to a souk, (a weekly market in Morocco), I saw a donkey with a broken leg. I tried, via an interpreter, to explain to the owner that there was nothing we could do for the donkey and that the kindest thing that we could do would be to put him to sleep. However he refused to allow us to do this and we had to let him lead his limping donkey away to try some traditional medicine. At first I could not comprehend why anyone would do this, but after talking to some of the SPANA workers it was explained to me that the people here do not see the difference between the western medicine and their own traditional medicines and witch doctors, and so if one doesn't work they will just try another. As you can imagine this can be very frustrating.

This week has been particularly interesting as we have been carrying out the inspection of the caleches in Marrakech. These are horse drawn carriages that carry tourists around the city. Several years ago the horses used to be extremely thin and badly treated, but now SPANA works with the government here to impose an official registration scheme, whereby to legally work as a caleche driver the owners have to take the horses to SPANA three times a year to be inspected, and have an obligation to keep them in good condition. This morning the Moroccan vet and I saw 50 caleches between us, each with between one and four horses each. Generally I was extremely impressed by their overall condition, and any problems that I pointed out seemed to be received with interest and appreciation. All the horses that pass the inspection have their official number marked on their hooves, and any that fail have to return once the problem has been corrected to receive their number.

Several of the cases that have been hospitalised while I have been here have now been discharged and the gratitude of the owners is extremely rewarding. They are genuinely delighted that someone has taken the time to care for their animal, and to understand the impact that losing these animals would have had on their lives. My lack of Arabic has reduced communication to a series of bizarre charades, but they have been some of the most eloquent thank-yous that I have yet received as a vet.

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