

Veterinary Volunteers in North Africa

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This information is based on notes given to volunteers arriving in Morocco to work with SPANA; as such it is biased towards equine work, and Morocco. However most of the concepts can be extrapolated to other parts of North Africa.

These notes are intended to ensure that you have, at your fingertips, the minimum of information for your stay while working in North Africa.

1. Politics and Religion
2. General Cultural Hints
3. Personal Safety
4. Health and Safety
5. Insurance
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1. Politics and Religion

Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya are Arabic Nations (Morocco is a Kingdom, the others are Republics). All were French designated territories or protectorates of France during the Colonial period. French is therefore widely spoken, especially among the urban elderly and the educated population. Most University level education is still in French. Arabic is the main language of the home and street, dialects vary and in some areas are heavily mixed with Berber dialects. Any efforts that non Arabic speakers can make to improve their French will be a great help. Some people speak English with varying degrees of fluency but many do not. They are however very used to “schoolbook” French and are very tolerant. It is in fact a great opportunity to develop any dormant language skills!

Islam predominates as the main religion and it would be sensible for volunteers to at least learn a little about it before departure to the country. It is important, for example, to understand the attitudes towards alcohol and gender relations. Certain aspects like the fasting month of Ramadan may affect such things as office working hours.

If you show an interest in the religion, your colleagues will be very happy to talk to you about it; however it is advisable not to get into arguments about religion!

Similarly, avoid discussions of a political nature unless you know someone VERY well, and even then with caution. Local people may make negative comments themselves about the leadership of their country, but you should refrain from making disparaging remarks yourself!

2. General cultural hints

When eating in Morocco dishes are often eaten by hand. Only use your right hand. Avoid passing things with your left hand and never shake someone's hand with your left hand.

Greetings and social niceties are much more important in Morocco than in the UK. Always take the time to say hellos and goodbyes, enquiring about someone's health or family always goes down well. Shake everyone's hand at the beginning and end of each day. Try and learn a few basic Arabic phrases early in your stay!

Moroccan people are extremely courteous and hospitable, but often things take longer than you would expect in the UK. Patience is often required. Always keep smiling.

3. Personal Safety

Being a SPANA volunteer requires changes in lifestyle preferences and habits in deference to host country cultural expectations and in order to minimize security risks. Choices in dress, living arrangements, means of travel, entertainment, and companionship may have a direct impact on how volunteers are viewed, and thus treated by Moroccans. Navigating the differences in gender relations may be one of the most sensitive and difficult lessons to learn, but one, which could have a direct impact on your safety, and the protection provided by the local community. Mature behaviour and the exercise of sound judgment will enhance personal safety.

The most effective way of being safe is to avoid putting oneself in unsafe situations. Activities that compromise personal safety, in any way, should be carefully considered before starting out. There is usually a safer way of achieving the same goal but it may take some reflection and even help from someone else to reduce the risk. Trying to adopt a culturally appropriate lifestyle will help to promote your safety.

Living and travelling in an unfamiliar environment, having a limited understanding of local language and culture, and being perceived as well-off are some of the factors that can put you at risk. You may experience unwanted attention and harassment. Petty thefts and burglaries are not uncommon, and incidents of physical and minor sexual assaults do occur. Major assault is extremely rare but minor assault can be distressing so, if possible, prevention is always best. Much of the information contained within these notes has been adapted from information the US Peace Corps supply to their workers. Other useful references include:

"Culture Shock! A Guide to Customs and Etiquette - Morocco" (Revised 2003) Orin Hargraves. Kuperard.

"The Rough Guide to Morocco" 7th Edition" (2004). Rough Guides

4. Health and Safety

In Morocco, while there are clear legal expectations, the Health and Safety at Work structures are less rigidly enforced than you might be used to at home. This means that the

ultimate responsibility for your safety rests with you. Make no assumptions that anything has been put in place to protect you and you will usually be safe.

Many volunteers get ill in the first week with upset stomachs. If you are going to be here for any length of time it is not worth treating your 'travellers diarrhoea' with antibiotics unless you develop fevers, blood and or mucus – you need to keep hydrated and you will get over it yourself.

Remember to keep hydrated and don't hesitate to get help if you need it. Dehydration makes you tire quickly and gives you headaches

5. Insurance

It is strongly advised that volunteers take out insurance to cover themselves during the time that they are working and travelling around the country. Some organisations may provide local cover but it will be very limited. Professional Liability Insurance is not yet commonly used; a few of the small animal private vets in Morocco have started taking this up.

6. Rabies

All volunteers should arrive fully immunised against rabies and have documentary evidence. No work can be undertaken by persons who are not fully vaccinated. Volunteers should consult their medical practitioner well in advance of travelling and follow recommended prophylactic advice.

7. Working as a Vet

- a) As volunteers you will probably be working under the responsibility of the local vets, therefore they are ultimately responsible for decisions medical or surgical. Good relations and communication are obviously essential if all parties are to gain from the experience.
- b) Keep good lines of communication open with the local vets, please don't embark on surgery without their say so and make sure they are around during any surgery.
- c) Do not consider euthanasia of animals without first consulting the local vet.
- d) Vets are held in high esteem by the Moroccans, try and dress the part. Shorts and vests will be poorly judged.
- e) There is no animal welfare authority here so owners cannot be obliged to do as the vet requests. Sometimes tragic cases which needed euthanasia yesterday have to be allowed to walk away if the owner disagrees with euthanasia. This can be hard, but the animal does not belong to us. We have no legal right to euthanase or treat against owners wishes.
- f) Euthanasia is often a difficult issue in a culture which finds it somewhat unacceptable. A situation for persuasion. Remember to stay polite.
- g) You will need to come with basic personal equipment and protective clothing. This will include: protective clothing (2 overalls minimum), protective footwear, sunhat, and

stethoscope. Other basic items such as thermometers, hoof knives should be available but you may wish to have your own resources.

h) Bear in mind that your role here is not only a learning one but that you will also be expected to share knowledge and ideas. The vets here are often skilled and very practical especially in tropical problems but they have not had access to all the theory that is in your brains. Share it with them if possible once you have established a working relationship.

i) You are also here to assist in training technicians when appropriate. This means trying to be more correct than correct, please don't cut corners. Please try and improve the way we do practical things.

j) It may be useful to consider bringing out with material you have found useful / interesting at college in CD format. A laptop or desktop facility can usually be found somewhere.

k) "TPR"s are just as important in the desert as they are at vet school!

l) The same goes for records. Please write down any observations and treatment details. Encourage best practice in note taking.

8. Clinical Safety Guidelines

a) Mules are extremely dangerous. Do NOT go into a box with a mule without getting one of the grooms to catch it for you first. Golden rule number one!

b) Always use headcollars. Please encourage all others to do so.

c) Rabies is an ever present threat. Dogs with rabies often present with no more than hind limb ataxia, no drooling or slavering or madness, equines with rabies often look like colics. With any neurological problem in an equine, rabies is always a differential. If in any doubt use gloves to examine. Use gloves to examine mouths.

d) Use the Hausman gag with care and sedate with Xylazine anything that looks edgy with its mouth open. Use stocks and always keep one hand on the Hausman - that way you will know where it is when it's about to hit you!

e) If performing rectal examinations use the stocks and/or hobbles. Remember in the souk you can attach these to animals legs, it is something they are used to.

f) Think carefully before performing any potentially hazardous procedure in the souk. Ask the vet first. Consider what might be the consequences / potential problems. Owners are unlikely to be happy to see animals bleeding or injured as a consequence of our efforts, however well intentioned and souks are unpredictable, busy places.

g) Despite the heat solid footwear is recommended, wearing sandals is a sure way to get your toes broken. Also helps to wear a hat!

Remember

- In Morocco it helps to always remain polite.
- If in doubt, ask first.
- DON'T GET HURT!

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SPANNA