

A Traveller's History of North Africa

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If you want to know more about the region you're traveling to than what to see, where to stay, and what to eat (and what to avoid eating), then A Traveller's History series is your ticket. These relatively short, easily carried paperbacks cover the entire history of areas around the world. If a James Michener novel isn't available for the place you're traveling to, or you prefer your history without the melodrama, these books provide similarly thorough backgrounds.

Their latest offering, A Traveller's History of North Africa, follows its predecessors' example of a fine, well-told, and complete history, this time covering the region of Northwest Africa, also known as the Maghreb, which is currently divided into Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauretania. Since some of these countries are difficult to visit at present, A Traveller's History of North Africa could be the only way to approach them. Armchair travelers and history buffs will also be interested.

The history of North Africa is one of conquest. Berber tribes wandered the desert for millennia until merchants from Phoenicia moved in to trade, followed by an ousted princess from Tyre, Elissa, whom readers of the Aeneid will recognize as Dido. She created Carthage, which became the center of a great North African empire. Then the Romans conquered Carthage, the Christians (bringing St. Augustine, one of the area's most famous inhabitants to Westerners) conquered the Romans, and the Arabs conquered the Christians. Along about the eleventh century, a series of native dynasties ruled: first there were the Almoravids, the Almohads, then the Merenids, Zayyanids, and Hafsids. Then the Christians came back in the form of Crusaders. Next came the Ottomans, who ruled all of the Maghreb except for Morocco, which managed to restore native reign; and then the Europeans governed until this century. Having thrown off the yoke of foreign rule once again, today the contemporary countries of North Africa are governing themselves with varying degrees of success.

It's a romantic and exciting history, but you'll have to bring your own imagination to supplement the facts provided; the writing is a little dry. The book also includes maps from different centuries, a chronology of major events, a list of rulers and a bibliography. The past does help explain the present, so whether you are wondering where the color and music of Morocco comes from or why you can't visit Libya, A Traveller's History of North Africa is an excellent source.

CELESTE SOLLÖD (January / February 1999)

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