



The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca

Tahir Shah

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In the tradition of *A Year in Provence* and *Under the Tuscan Sun*, acclaimed English travel writer Tahir Shah shares a highly entertaining account of making an exotic dream come true. By turns hilarious and harrowing, here is the story of his family's move from the gray skies of London to the sun-drenched city of Casablanca, where Islamic tradition and African folklore converge—and nothing is as easy as it seems....

Inspired by the Moroccan vacations of his childhood, Tahir Shah dreamed of making a home in that astonishing country. At age thirty-six he got his chance. Investing what money he and his wife, Rachana, had, Tahir packed up his growing family and bought Dar Khalifa, a crumbling ruin of a mansion by the sea in Casablanca that once belonged to the city's caliph, or spiritual leader.

With its lush grounds, cool, secluded courtyards, and relaxed pace, life at Dar Khalifa seems sure to fulfill Tahir's fantasy—until he discovers that in many ways he is farther from home than he imagined. For in Morocco an empty house is thought to attract jinns, invisible spirits unique to the Islamic world. The ardent belief in their presence greatly hampers sleep and renovation plans, but that is just the beginning. From elaborate exorcism rituals involving sacrificial goats to dealing with gangster neighbors intent on stealing their property, the Shahs must cope with a new culture and all that comes with it.

Endlessly enthralling, *The Caliph's House* charts a year in the life of one family who takes a tremendous gamble. As we follow Tahir on his travels throughout the kingdom, from Tangier to Marrakech to the Sahara, we discover a world of fierce contrasts that any true adventurer would be thrilled to call home.

From the Hardcover edition.

The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca Details

Date : Published (first published January 1st 2006)

ISBN :

Author : Tahir Shah

Format : Kindle Edition 368 pages

Genre : Travel, Nonfiction, Northern Africa, Morocco, Autobiography, Memoir, Cultural, Africa

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From Reader Review The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca for online ebook

Tamara Agha-Jaffar says

Tired of what he describes as his “meager existence” under the wet, grey skies of England, Tahir Shah decides to uproot his wife and young children and move to Morocco, chronicling their experience in *The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca*. Shah purchases the Caliph’s house (Dar Khalifa) in Casablanca, a dilapidated home, empty for ten years and situated on the edge of a shantytown. Upon entering his new home, he discovers his house comes equipped with a staff of three guardians and a she-jinn known as Qandisha. The intrepid guardians do their best to educate Shah on Moroccan ways and caution him to tread carefully so as not to incur the wrath of Qandisha who haunts the house and who (understandably) resents his presence.

So begins a year of living in the Caliph’s house. Shah’s vision is to remodel the decrepit home and restore it to its former glory. This brings him in contact with Moroccan craftsmen who are incredibly skilled at what they do but who work at a maddeningly slow pace. Shah eventually learns to accept the Moroccan way of doing things and, by the end of the year, the Caliph’s house has been beautifully remodeled with fountains, colorful mosaics, plush gardens, and a library that is the envy of any book lover. Additionally, the jinn have been successfully exorcised from his home through a combination of prayers, chanting, rituals, and the slaughter of a goat. The book concludes with Shah and his wife lying back and admiring all they have accomplished in the space of a year. He is finally at peace.

Some of the fantastic happenings in the book should be taken with a grain of salt. But perhaps nothing is quite as unbelievable as Shah’s gallant determination to forge ahead in the face of what appear to be insurmountable challenges. Shah speaks of these challenges with humor and irony. What shines throughout is his love for his adopted country in spite of the trials and tribulations he endures—or, perhaps, because of them.

Shah graphically illuminates Moroccan culture and life in Dar Khalifa. His engaging jaunt through the underbelly of Moroccan life exposes us to shady characters who speak in ambiguities, a place where corruption is rampant, where poverty abounds, and where money exchanges hands without quite knowing what one is getting in return. It is an excursion made all the more appealing due to Shah’s ability to capture the sights, sounds, scents, and texture of life in Morocco that waft through every page with vibrancy and color. A delightful and entertaining read. Highly recommended.

Agnese says

Kas man bija Maroka l?dz šim? Valsts Zieme??frik?, kur sensen? pag?tn? k?du laiku mitusi m?su eksprezidente Vaira V??e-Freiberga. Varb?t v?l ar? enciklop?diski dati no vidusskolas laika, kad rakst?ju projekta darbu par ?frikas valst?m. Ideja to dar?t toreiz dzima, pateicoties Albertam Šveiceram. Es nezinu, kas iedvesmoja citas meitenes vecum?, kas vairs ?sti neskait?s b?rn?ba (man bija mazpadsmīt gadu), bet man tieši toreiz rok?s non?ca š? hum?nista un medic?nas mision?ra "Apv?rš?a" s?rij? izdot? gr?mata "V?stules no Lambarenes", kur? vi?š apraksta savu pieredzi m?sdienu Gabon?.

Kas man ir Maroka tagad? Kr?su, smaržu un garšu p?rbag?t?ba; majest?tiski nami, kuri glab? aizg?jušo gadsimtu grezn?bu; isl?ms bez radik?lisma; tirgošan?s ar kaul?šanos; m??tic?ba visplaš?kaj? l?dz šim sastaptaj? noz?m?; eksotiski augi un putni; tik garas un trad?cij?s balst?tas sarunas, k?das Rietumu pasaul?, iesp?jams, nekad nav tikušas risin?tas; ?imene k? visliel?k? v?rt?ba; atg?din?jums, ka senie latvieši nav bijuši vien?gie, kuri, darbu darot, dzied?juši; m?sdienu amatnieki un meistari, kuri piekopj gadsimtiem senas prasmes, izmantojot senos, primit?vos darbar?kus.

Šis bija viens varens piedz?vojums, kuru l?dz?gi zieme?briežu vilkto kamanu zvani?iem (j?dom?, ka slepena b?rnu nov?rošana, lai lemtu par d?van?m, jau ir s?kusies) visa ce?a garum? pavad?ja mani dzidrie smieki.

Missy J says

Moroccan craftsman working on *zellij*, beautiful mosaic tilework.

Everything is made by hand!

Teamwork!

Zellij, beautiful Moroccan mosaic tilework.

When I came across the title of this book, I thought it would be about the author's travel experience living in Casablanca for a year. But no... This book is about the author **buying**(!) a house in Morocco, moving his family to Casablanca and their first year living in Dar Khalifa (the name of the house).

When I started reading this book, I was a bit apprehensive that this book would be about a foreigner, who would impose his Western beliefs and standards upon a land utterly different from the West. Or worse, that he would have exotic fantasies and expectations of Morocco and would then be left in disappointment. But no... Fortunately, this book is just an honest account of Tahir Shah's experience settling down in Casablanca. He doesn't mask the challenges he faces in everyday life, but he also gives the reader a full account of what draws him to Morocco (his grandfather, who died in Tangier and the ability to give his children a better upbringing).

While most of the book does include details on the renovation works of Dar Khalifa, the author also gives incredible insights into Moroccan culture and mentality. I loved Kamal! He is such a rascal, who always comes up with an innovative solution, no matter how difficult the problem appears. Moreover, I couldn't help thinking how incredible Shah's wife Rachana is, to have endured all that has happened in the book! Nonetheless, this book is truly funny and I laughed hard, especially when I read the story of the "Bavarian hausfrau Lulu"~! I also enjoyed the little proverbs preceding each chapter ("*The value of dwelling is in the dweller*," "*Never give advice in a crowd*")

Overall, a very light and enjoyable read. A must for anybody who loves Morocco.

The same life that poses the problem tends to provide a solution.

Real charity is given anonymously. Speak about it and the meaning is lost.

Elizabeth says

Take the movie "The Money Pit", move it to Casablanca, give the Shelley Long character two children but her only role is to get really angry a couple of times, give all the characters a language barrier with the locals, make the Tom Hanks character an idiot, give them a gardener, a nanny, a maid, three guardians and a personal assistant who cause more problems than they solve and you've got this mess of a book.

The flow was weird - the author would describe something, say a search for new engine for his car and then he would switch to meeting a Countess who knew his grandfather and then he would go to a third thing and then back to the engine.

There was very little cultural information except that all Moroccans believe in Jinns, they live off whoever has the best paying job and quit their own, they do the opposite of what you tell them to and will attempt to connive you as much as possible. Yeah, lovely. I'm sure that's an in depth and sensitive analysis.

At least it was easy to read.

Jason Goodwin says

This is how I reviewed this book in The Washington Post:
From The Washington Post's Book World?

It's been 20 years since Peter Mayle wrote his bestseller *A Year in Provence*, and there's no sign yet of the "Year In..." franchise flagging. After all, what two-week vacationer could fail to dream of a year in Provence, Marrakesh or Tuscany? These are modern Mediterranean fairy tales, and they're put together with the simplest ingredients: magical neighbors, hellish builders and much more olive oil than you expected. The Caliph's House looks like one of those books, but it isn't. British travel writer Tahir Shah's highly readable account of moving his young family to Casablanca is constructed with something weirder and sharper: vinegar, perhaps, and ectoplasm.

It opens ordinarily enough. Shah is at a Casablanca lawyer's office, signing the sale contract, taking in the view of the street, ruminating on why he had always wanted to skip the grey skies of England for the warmth and color of Morocco. He picks up the heavy old key. The caliph's house is his. At that very moment, a car bomb explodes outside the lawyer's office, covering them both with broken glass. An eerie portent of things to come, perhaps. Shah's new home, the vast Caliph's House, has been empty for 10 years and now stands decrepit, if not derelict, on the fringe of a shantytown. With it, Shah finds that he has also acquired staff: three lugubrious and potentially sinister "guardians," who come "as if by some medieval right of sale." More medieval still, a vengeful she-jinn called Qandisha haunts the house, they say.

Over the next few months she reveals her presence in various grisly ways: stringing cats up in trees and

sucking raw meat through the toilet bowl. Children are said to be her favorite target. It may be no coincidence that the local gangster wants them out so he can steal the land. Down in the shantytown an elderly stamp-collector, who will take no money for teaching the author Arabic but likes his foreign stamps, gives him some amiable advice: "You put mannequins in the children's beds, and tell your children to sleep in the oven each night. Do that, and you will all be safe." An educated young lady Shah hires to get the renovations underway ultimately claims to have a 300-meter-tall jinn sitting at her shoulder, cleans out Shah's bank account and reports him as a terrorist to the police. Her replacement – the crafty, efficient Kamal – is a binge-drinker on a perpetual high-wire, a sort of psychopathic Jeeves whose brutal and bizarre history includes a long interlude in the United States, where he made the acquaintance of Mohamed Atta, the 9/11 hijacker.

Yet nothing in Casablanca is quite as odd as Shah's determination to carry on as usual. He and his imperturbable wife want servants, a big house in the sun and a bellyful of local color for their two toddlers. What they get is the local custom of dropping gobbets of raw chicken into the well to appease the jinns, and a bellyful of streptococcus. It's almost fatal, but they don't flush the key down the one working lavatory and get a cab to the airport. The thought briefly flits through Shah's mind, but it doesn't take hold. Instead, we are led on a darkly comic journey into the North African underworld, with the reckless but thoroughly well-connected Kamal as chaperone to Shah's dubious Dante.

The joke is that Shah, in spite of his Afghan heritage, in spite of his descent from the Prophet, is a man with a rationalist moral gyroscope. He doesn't believe in jinns, which everyone else seems to have like head lice. He's bothered by rats, he has servant trouble, he discovers the desperate shifts the poor make to survive — the stealing, the sudden flashes of dignity, the mutual aid networks that underpin the black market, the medieval superstitions. Nothing works quite the way it works in a mature, liberal, democratic capitalist society. Everything has a price, but the routes to that price are devious and surprising. Every explanation raises more questions than it answers: Shah has baffling encounters and warily follows instructions he cannot understand.

One night he is taken to a mysterious rendezvous in the desert and expects to be killed, but nothing happens. Another day he gives a lift to an old man who steals his car. Fifteen minutes later, the elderly thief drives back, apologizing that if he took the car for good, no one would ever give an old man a lift again. It's in this sly side-step from common reality that the Shah persona comes into its own. He doesn't play it too knowingly, but he doesn't play himself for a fool, either.

If Kamal is a Jeeves on amphetamines, Shah is no woolly-headed Wooster. He finds himself a very good fixer. He gets the house superbly done, with tiling and the tadelakt, so that he and his family can leave the single room they've occupied all year. And he finds out a lot about his grandfather, a widower who retired to Morocco because it was the one place he'd never traveled with his adored wife; he lived for years in Tangiers before being struck dead by a Coca-Cola delivery truck. Shah writes an outrageously black comedy with the straightest of poker faces. And in some quiet alchemical way, he finds himself at peace with the guardians and the imam and the gangster down the road and the shanty dwellers on his doorstep and the bank manager at home. He's living there still.

Sydney (?????) says

This was an interesting story, because I picked this up, thinking that it was some type of historical fiction... but, it was about a modern man's quest to re-establish himself in his homeland.

I quite enjoyed the story, only because you could feel his journey - from learning what a 'jinn' is to understanding a women's role in Moroccan society - he just had a lot of things to learn. It's an easy read, no swearing or inappropriate scenes - a lot of it is just about day - to - day life. It's not for those looking for a political story or even a religious one. It's simply one man's adventure from England to Morocco, and he brought the whole family along for the ride x

Marie says

I have read a couple of these books where people do major life changes and it always amazes me how little preparation they take and how incredibly naive they are. He starts the books telling us that all his friends and family were against the move and I now agree with them. Not because of the idea of such a drastic move (from London to Casablanca) but because the guy is a bit of an idiot. For a start he makes no start on learning either French or Arabic, he signs a contract in arabic without getting anyone to translate it for him and he pays the builder up front, in full!!!! As I said the guy is a bit of an idiot.

Yes there are laughs but in my case more sighs. I understand that he probably deliberately leaves out a lot about his wife and children to keep some privacy but instead I got the feeling that he kind of abandoned them while he revelled in the experience. I was also wondering where in all his dramas he managed to get his actual bill paying work done.

Thank god it was well written and easy reading too or I might have thrown it out the window but if you like this genre then go for it.

Christa says

Another book that I don't know how to rate. It was amusing, I'll give it that. I think I would have gotten more out of it if I hadn't been living in Morocco for so long. During a lot of the book, I was thinking that the author was stupid or that he had done things that were really stupid/ naive. Then the language thing - I guess he speaks fluent French and in Casablanca that works fine because everyone there speaks French but things were so easy for him because he always seemed to have either a translator with him or people who spoke his language. And he's a man, so Casablanca, while often stressful and strange, wasn't the same for him. Maybe part of it is just that I hate Casa so much I wonder why anyone would ever choose to live there. Again, maybe I'd have liked it better if I had had my own transportation, more money, better places to stay, didn't understand the Darija people said behind your back, didn't realize much everyone was inflating prices and could speak French....so many 'ifs', right?

It's hard for me to get a feel on his take on the culture. He didn't understand a lot of things that were happening around him, and he tried to describe things with humor. Sometimes this worked, and his ironic voice was okay. But other times it just annoyed me and made me frustrated with him. I felt bad for his wife, who was basically a non-character in the story and only had occasional paragraphs about her, and would have been interested in learning more about her experiences and takes on situations. But then that would have been a totally different story.

Jessaka says

The title sounded good and maybe that is how I ended up with this book in my bookcase. Good thing it did, because it was a very fun read, and so I couldn't put it down.

Tahir Shah had been to Morocco when he was a kid and never forgot the place. I had been to Morocco at the Epcot Center in Florida's Disneyworld and never forgot my meal there. Mix dried fruits in meats or any food, and yum. I have a meatloaf recipe with groundup dried apricots in the center that I used to make for myself when I was single. My husband would never try anything with dried fruit.

Tahir grew tired of living in sunless England, so he talked his wife into moving to Casablanca. How she lasted I will never know. While I would find it wonderful to live in such a place, I could not have put up with the remodeling of their house.

When they buy a 22 room house, they learn that three guardians (workers) come with it, but with these guardians come problems. First, Tahir is told that jinns live in the house, and they must get rid of them. (Jinns are evil spirits that are mentioned in the Quran.)

Next, he is told that in order to get rid of the jinns he must kill a goat in each of the rooms. Are you counting? Tahir doesn't believe in evil spirits and will not even think of killing 22 goats, so he ignores the guardians who are now constantly after him about these jinns and the trouble they can and will cause. Since he won't kill the goats, the jinns tell him that his family must be quiet when they talk, and that they must never use the bathroom in the middle of the night, because jinns are drawn to water, especially that in their commode. First time he gets up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom, while in midstream, a guardian grabs him. Stop!!!

Tahir's remodeling doesn't go very well at all, because the people he hired, well, they created messes, and it looked as if nothing was ever going to get done. I believe that I would have fired them all or in my case, I would have my husband do the work, and I would be the clean-up crew. If I were doing it alone I would have just patched up holes and painted the place. Yet, when I look at the photo of Tahir's home that is posted here, the finished product is really beautiful and was worth it all.

Tahir's writing continued to charm me to the very end, but if this is a true story, then I feel for him and for his wife. Still, he learned from the experience and they are still living in Casablanca.

Maggie says

A fascinating and often hysterically funny look at life in Morocco, through the eyes of an Afghan who was primarily raised in England, but has traveled widely. I loved the sayings which headed every chapter, such as: "Never give advice in a crowd" and "Every beetle is a gazelle in the eye of its mother." Shah was very lucky to be able to connect with his grandfather's life as well, because his grandfather had spent his last years in Morocco. Meeting those people who had known him and been touched by him is irreplaceable.

I'll admit that sometimes the things that happened in the book were so fantastic that I wondered if they could possibly be true, but I've found nothing to suggest that they weren't. It's worth the price of the book to find out how Shah and his 'think outside the box' assistant gets his money back from the architect he fired. An absolutely inspired solution. Recommended.

Stephanie says

Tahir Shah has a lot of good reasons for moving to Morocco. He wants to escape England and the rat race. He wants to recapture the magic of his own childhood vacations in Morocco. He wants to learn more about the grandfather that had died there years ago. He wants a house to renovate, one that will allow his delusions of grandeur to run wild.

Shah gets all of that and more when he buys a crumbling palace, *Dar Khalifa* (The Caliph's House) in Casablanca. He also gets three guardians (they come with the house). He gets an architect with a zeal for destruction and little interest in renovation. He gets an assistant, Kamal, that he doesn't trust and doesn't particularly like, but needs desperately. But mostly, he gets Jinns. Lots of them. And it turns out that jinns, invisible and usually malign spirits, can cause a lot of problems. Whether you believe in them or not is irrelevant.

The resulting (nonfiction!) book, *The Caliph's House*, is a delight, a thoroughly entertaining description of Shah's first year in Morocco. The characters he meets are almost unbelievably eccentric, like those in a zany comedy movie but all the more interesting because they're real. His adventures are often laugh-out-loud hilarious. His first night in his new home, Shah has his very first run-in with jinns...in the toilet. Kamal manages to obtain a refund from the useless architect by throwing a feast. Shah's world map is condemned by the censorship police because Western Sahara isn't in the same color as Morocco. I laughed so much that my husband forbade me to read in bed when he was trying to sleep.

Best of all, the whole time I was laughing, I was learning. This book was, for me, a fascinating glimpse into a culture very different from our own. Moroccans have rich superstitions and traditions that infuse every aspect of their lives. Shah skillfully illuminates facets of Arab culture that, in this era of post-9/11 paranoia, we seldom see or bother to consider. He doesn't ignore the fanatics; they're there, lurking in the fringes of his narrative, but they don't seem to have much of an influence on daily Casablanca life. I, for one, didn't miss them.

In spite of frustrations and challenges, Shah comes to love Morocco and its people, warts and all. He lives there to this day. Having read this book, a part of me (a very, very small part of me) longs to join him.

This book does have some objectionable words, but in the context in which they appeared, they were usually pretty darn funny.

Varti Stepanyan says

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Megan says

I have to confess that my opinion of this book may be swayed by my minor obsession with the following topics: Morocco; picking up and moving your life to a new and exotic locale; and refurbishing old houses with traditional techniques. Since this book is about the author's experience moving his entire family from England to Morocco, buying a villa and working with local artisans to return it to its former glory, it was right up my alley!

The author has a wonderful, strong sense of self in his tone, and the humor with which the story is conveyed feels a bit like listening to a good friend's trials and tribulations over a cup of coffee.

Anyone who has had occasion to try to get something done within the restrictions of a foreign culture will relate to this story, and enjoy laughing along with Shah at every new complication and frustration he encounters.

Donna says

As someone with a personal connection with Morocco, who has lived there, who has gone through various trials and tribulations there, but who is still very much in love with the country, this book is definitely a 5 star read.

Not only does Tahir Shah capture the funny side of the tough times faced in Morocco, but his feelings for the country, very much like my own, only grow on the completion of these difficult moments.

This truly is a wonderful read. It definitely captures similar feelings to what I had in the beginning of my relationship with Morocco, and brought me a lot of nostalgia when reading it.

Jessica says

Tahir Shah came across as ethnocentric and self-involved. He barreled through his adventure (read: early mid-life crisis) thinking only of himself and his money; often times mentioning an author's paltry salary, then making an ostentatious building decision for his mansion. I was also perturbed by the way in which his wife was merely a sounding board for his frustrations. Read this book if you're looking for a way to flip mansion's in Morocco while swindling the local people and dismissing their culture as lazy. Or, save yourself the time and don't read it at all. I read it because I was traveling and it was the only book I had packed. Ha.