

Play it again, faster

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(<http://www.smh.com.au/travel/play-it-again-faster-20110617-1g6ou.html>) Morocco ... playing in Tangier's old medina. Photo: Getty

Steve McKenna rides a railway in the midst of a renaissance, ticking off romantic destinations as he goes.

I'D HALF expected Tangier's railway station to resemble an old-fashioned Indian terminus: air rife with spicy smells, frantic ticket kiosks and nearly every open space covered in blankets, on which generations of families would sit amid bulging piles of baggage.

However, with its shiny marble floors, small, orderly queues and almost clinically sedate atmosphere, Tanger Ville seems almost too spick and span for a place with as much culture-shock potential as Morocco.

But this gleaming new edge-of-town transport hub is a symbol of the renaissance gripping the country's previously neglected rail system. A multimillion-dollar cash injection has sparked the construction, or refurbishment, of more than 40 stations, while new track and rolling stock is leading to faster, more comfortable journeys.

The investment has clearly charmed the public. Last year, network operator ONCF carried an estimated 30 million passengers – up from 14 million in 2002. A jolt of caffeine (and of excitement) hits me as I sip a cafe au lait and survey Tanger Ville's electronic departures board, which, in French and Arabic, flaunts a series of exotic destinations.

There's Casablanca, which conjures all kinds of romantic visions (the iconic film poster of a bow-tied Bogart embracing Ingrid Bergman keeps running through my head); there's Fez, the myth-drenched old heartland of Islamic Morocco; and Meknes, the launch pad for trips to the legendary Roman ruins of Volubilis, and a historic spot in its own right.

I'm catching the train bound for Marrakesh, a city that bathes in its own magical allure. I head onto the platform alongside a microcosm of 21st-century Morocco – men, women and children in a mix of Western-style clobber and traditional Moroccan attire (headscarves, colourful tunics and hooded djellabas) – and I find myself humming the words to Crosby, Stills & Nash's classic folksy tune *Marrakesh Express*.

Released in 1969, it includes verses such as: "Looking at the world through the sunset in your eyes, travelling the train through clear Moroccan skies, ducks and pigs and chickens call, animal carpet wall to wall . . ."

A few things have changed. It's a bright, sunny day – as it was back then – but there are no ducks, pigs or chickens aboard and animal skin plays no part in the decor.

Today's train is clean, workman-like and split into two classes, both air-conditioned, with an aisle running down one side.

As the cost difference is negligible, I've plumped for first class, which is more comfortable.

I've also decided that going to Marrakesh in one fell swoop – 8 hours – would be exhausting, so I'm splitting the journey by having lunch in the capital, Rabat, then boarding another train later.

Leaving behind the suburban wastelands of Tangier, which hugs the Mediterranean coast, we're soon skirting empty Atlantic Ocean beaches. I notice seagulls careering above a solitary fisherman, who has waded into the choppy waters with a rod twice his size.

After stopping at the artsy seaside town of Assilah we jerk inland, through mist-strewn olive groves and sparse green countryside, and plough a fairly bland furrow for a few hours before heading back out towards the coast.

This trip isn't especially scenic – there are no postcard Saharan views up here – but it's absorbing. Two Moroccan women in my compartment, one in her 20s, the other in her 40s, are talking animatedly about the uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East. Pointing to some dramatic photos in their magazines, they ask me, in French, what I think. I'm soon deep in conversation in Arabic, French, English and Spanish, of which we can all speak a little.

The same social problems exist in Morocco – high unemployment, especially among youths, and poverty. The women are torn over whether a revolt could erupt here. "Maybe. Maybe not. Hard to tell. It could do, though ..."

Protests have occurred in Morocco this year and state forces have been accused, in some cases, of clamping down violently; compared with Syria and Bahrain, however, the situation is stable.

It transpires the older woman works for the United Nations' food relief program which takes her to rural Morocco to improve the diets of malnourished children.

She doesn't reach these far-flung spots by rail, though. While things have come a long way since the late 19th century, when the first line in Morocco stretched 600 metres from a sultan's palace to his garden, the country still only has 2000 kilometres of track.

Several places that aren't covered by ONCF – including gorgeous towns such as Chefchaouen and Essaouira – are linked to the network by Supratours' deluxe coaches, yet hundreds of towns and villages remain well off the beaten track as speed, rather than connectivity, tops the agenda.

For example, a new two-track line, with double-decker trains, has cut journey times between Casablanca and Fez to three hours, 20 minutes, a 70-minute reduction.

By 2015, French-built TGV Duplex trains, running at up to 320km/h, will link Tangier and Casablanca in just two hours, 10 minutes and in the most ambitious scheme, by 2030 the 700 kilometres from Tangier to Agadir will be traversed in just four hours.

More pie in the sky, perhaps, though still technically feasible, is a mooted 40-kilometre line under the Strait of Gibraltar, linking Morocco and Spain. "We'll believe that when we see it," the UN woman says.

We part company in Rabat, an attractive city of palm tree-lined boulevards. It's been the capital since Morocco gained independence from French protectorate rule in 1956 but has never taken off as a tourist hot spot.

After lunching on lamb tajine, I board a train that's a step up from the one I'd been on earlier. In terms of cleanliness, comfort and image, first class lives up to its name.

Conversations in French dominate my compartment. Marrakesh has a thriving expat scene with the French, in particular, still madly in love with their former colonial outpost.

The thirtysomething man opposite me is Parisian and has a hotel in Marrakesh. We chat – in English – about politics, culture, sport, tourism and, naturally, the train. "It's very good, isn't it?" he says. "Just like trains in France." As we pull into Casablanca, he adds: "Today it'll take us four more hours to get to Marrakesh; in a few years, on a new TGV train, just one hour. Amazing, hey!"

If Tanger Ville was a symbol of the new Moroccan railways, then vibrant Gare de Marrakesh is its poster boy. Modelled on the elaborately designed gates of Marrakesh's old medina and flush with Islamic-inspired features, it's a sightseeing spectacle.

Purists and nostalgic types might be dismayed that a previously gritty old network has embraced modernity so enthusiastically but, for most, Morocco is on the right track.

