Press

A LIFE IN THE DAY OF SABRINA ROWAN HAMILTON

Sabrina Rowan Hamilton, 37, is an artist and a Budhist. After art college sh travelled around Britain with her husband, Stevie, living in a converted horsebox. Two years ago, they bought and renovated a house in Marrakech where they now spend most of their time

Life in Morocco isn't sanitised like it is in England. The dentist, on his stall, displays teeth he's pulled out

When I first came to live in Marrakech, my day started at dawn with the call of the muezzin from the nearby mosque. He has a loudspeaker, so it's hard to avoid the call to praise Allah, but now I am so used to him that he doesn't disturb my sleep. The day starts whenever I wake, which generally depends on the night before.

Our house is a traditional *riad*, built on two floors around a large, central courtyard, with roof terraces above. Since we moved in, Stevie and I have barely had a night alone. Often I feel like the landlady of a hotel. One set of guests goes, another lot comes. One guy left last night on the train to Tangier, the next lot arrived half an hour before he left, to join the three already here. And tomorrow somebody else is coming for a 10-day stay.

When there aren't too many friends staying with us, I have my breakfast in the courtyard. A few weeks ago I discovered a box full of old jellabas [a traditional long-hooded robe] in a junkyard in a nearby town. The man sold me four for 200 dirham, and I wear them to wake up in.

The three servants arrive at 9am. I give them money to buy bread and milk for breakfast. Hakima and Rkia make jugs of spiced Moroccan coffee with hot milk, and squeeze oranges to make fresh juice. I'm not quite sure what Maser does, but whatever it is, he starts doing it while Hakima and Rkia begin the housework. When the house is full of guests we employ an old cook as well.

My friend Chilita Salvatori died recently, and I've spent a lot of time sorting out her personal effects. The day she died she was meant to be coming to lunch with us, but one of her lodgers called me to say she had collapsed with a suspected heart attack. I ran to her house, but by the time I arrived she was at the point of death. I sat and chanted with her for an hour and a half, supporting her spirit on its passage from her body towards the next life.

Soon after she died, I hired a van to take me and three friends, plus Chilita's 12 cats, to Essaouira, a town 2½ hours west of Marrakech. It was a mercy mission, otherwise the cats would have been put down. As we were passing through the alleys with the last three boxes of cats, people were whispering to each other: "She's taking the cats to Essaouira." There are no secrets here.

Life here hasn't been the same since Chilita died. As a Buddhist I am always aware of the presence of death in life, but now everyone else I see is also aware. This is one of Chilita's many gifts. I have been a Soka Gakkai Buddhist for 12 years. I try to chant at least twice a day, morning and evening. It's essential to my life and work – it feeds my creativity.

When I first came to Morocco I painted small, intense paintings, concentrating on the contrast between dark and light. With time, they have changed. Now, just as the women here move between one task and the next – preparing food, cleansing clothes, purifying the house – I also pass from one canvas to the next, capturing the fundamentals of their life.

One is so in touch with life here. It is not sanitised the way it is in England. The dentist displays the teeth he has pulled out in front of his stall. During a recent festival, every household slaughtered a sheep. For days we were faced with entrails, skins and heads. There is no protection for the weak-hearted. You must embrace life or die. Morocco time is not like western time. The day passes but it is hard to tie it down to hours and minutes. Nothing is hard and fast. Appointments are made but may not be kept. You shift with the sands or get stuck in the mirage.

I sometimes go to lunch at one of the smart restaurants in Gueliz. This is the French quarter of the city, the modern side of Marrakech. Many of the locals know me and have a way of nosing me out, and it can get very tiring. Between here and the main square of the medina, the old quarter, people will greet me but know there is no point in hassling me. When I return to the sanctuary of my house, Hakima makes me mint tea. Nobody makes mint tea like Hakima.

I have been going to Essaouira every week since Chilita died. It's my escape valve – a beautiful town full of craftsmen and fishermen. I stay with my friend Alison, who runs a B&B called the Tea House. She is the ideal hostess, kind and welcoming, and will leave you alone if you wish, but will also take you shopping and haggle in perfect Arabic. She will discuss Plato as easily as the price of fish. I always leave her house with an oasis of tranquillity inside me with which to face the madness of Marrakech.

I never know how long I'll be here. Chilita has taught me the transience of all things. I am lucky to be able to move between here and England without worry. The longer I'm here, the more attached I become to the place, yet in Morocco one knows that nothing is for ever. Within the madness there is a place of stillness that Stevie and I have created. I have learnt that behind the drabbest facade one may find a place of true beauty and peace.

When the sun's power weakens, the house holds me safe, listening to the muezzin calling the faithful once again to prayer, allowing me to sleep until the next day beckons. Who knows what it may hold?

Interview and photograph by Philippa Boston

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