

# A Beekeeper's Life in Morocco

## Part 1

by William Blomstedt

The bus sped under a hot gray cloud, hauling a bundle of passengers and baggage across the desert landscape. From the look of the torn seats, tired curtains, and the way the attendant had to physically wrench open the side door every time we stopped, this bus was not at the beginning of its life. It had traveled this dusty journey hundreds of times. Maybe thousands. At least today's route was well-paved, not like the day before where the road asphalt had crumbled away on both sides so that it was only wide enough for one vehicle. Whenever another car or bus came from the opposite direction both drivers would head straight at each other until the very last second, when whoever was smaller would rip the steering wheel to the side, sending the right two tires onto the dirt shoulder at no less than full speed. After whooshing past, our driver would bring the tires back over the asphalt lip (likely tearing off another chunk and

narrowing the road even further), and we would continue forward, in the center, until the next heart-wrenching game of chicken.

That morning I boarded the bus in Fez, one of the grand cities of Morocco. After the EurBee conference in Spain, I traveled by bus to Gibraltar and then took a ferry across the strait to Tangier. I didn't know much about Morocco, but my first few days had been a crash course in its geography, people, culture. Morocco is a diverse, dry country that hugs the northwest corner of Africa, touching both the Atlantic and Mediterranean seas. It has the Atlas mountains running down the center and the vast Sahara desert inland of these. But where there is water, either by a river or pumped from deep in the ground, the land becomes beautiful and fertile; the hot, long summer can work wonders for certain crops like oranges, pomegranates, olives, dates and saffron. Morocco is about the size and shape of California, with only 5 million

less people (33 million). Drinking highly-sweetened mint tea and sitting in cafes seemed to be the national pastime.

On this trip I had ten days to travel from Tangier to Marrakesh. For some weeks prior I had been searching for a contact – a beekeeper or researcher with whom I could discuss Moroccan apiculture – but the number of options fell dramatically because I couldn't speak Arabic, nor French, Morocco's second language. My thinking about "bee travel" had been refined at the recent conferences, when a Danish bee extension worker named Flemming said to me: "When I visit beekeepers in a different country, I don't care how the bees look. Open up a hive everywhere and it's basically the same. When I travel, I want to see how the *beekeepers* live."

Flemming's words stuck with me, and it was on this desert-ward journey when I spied my first sign of Moroccan beekeepers. In previous days I had passed through the



(l) Desert landscape watched during the bus ride. Beekeepers are somewhere out there! (r) The edge of Er-Rich, a small town on the road to the desert



(l) Khalid Zari, his swarm catching hive, and his shop. (r) A beekeeping mural on the side of Khalid's shop.

breadbasket of Morocco, but the beehives, if there were any, had been hidden among the trees and fields. South of Fez the agricultural greens gave way into desert browns, oranges and grays, with the only plant life a hardy scrub brush. These were too small to obscure the off-white hives, spread out in a grid, but as the road lifted the bus off the valley floor and into the mountains, the hives blended in with the landscape, disappearing into a dusty beige soup.

As I peered downwards, a sudden flash in the foreground caught my attention – a liter bottle, set upon on a box on the side of the road. Soon enough another, filled with something dark and golden, and directly after this sign the road widened into a scenic pull-off. Here was the owner of the hives: a squinting, sun-blasted man squatting on the wall, watching the traffic pass. There was no shade at all, his head wrapped in a sheet to block both sun and sand. The bus quickly left him behind, but he wasn't the only one, for the next turn-out there sat another beekeeper, in similar shape, followed by another, six in total, their lives seemingly ruled by boredom and inactivity. How many customers were they likely to have in a day, or a week? There weren't many vehicles traveling on this road, and how many drivers would make the sudden decision, at

50 mph, to stop for a bottle of honey? And then to still have a one in six shot?

I thought about those beekeepers until later that afternoon, when walking the street of a town called Er-Rich, I came across another man selling honey. Er-Rich was not a rich town, but it was located in a richly beautiful small river valley, around five miles across, with mountains bursting upwards on two sides. From the top of these mountains, one could see the green river-fed vegetation snake through the valley, while the brown buildings blended into the landscape, like boulders that had been swept in during some historic flood.

I had stopped in Er-Rich for no particular reason, merely because I had been riding the bus for 8 hours and wanted to stretch my legs. On my first meander through town I stumbled upon this beekeeper sitting on a stoop with a few honey-filled glass coke bottles. I paused in front of the bottles and the man leapt into an excited yet unintelligible sales pitch. He had two types of honey, one dark and one light. I can't recall how I tasted them, (I don't think he had any wooden tasting sticks, maybe he just dumped some onto my fingers), but I do remember their flavors: the dark was better, it had a few earthy notes, but when I tried the light, it tasted like a sweet

pure nothingness. This honey struck me as suspect, and I declined a purchase even as the beekeeper, noticing my reluctance at the size, pantomimed the offer of finding a smaller bottle.

Later on that night, I stopped in an internet cafe and found a gem in my inbox: a beekeeper from the coast emailed to say I could visit. Sadly, my decision that morning to head to the desert had brought me almost 200 miles (or eight bus-hours) in the wrong direction from the coast. The small decisions of travel. This meant I could return the way I came, to see the same desert landscape and beekeepers again tomorrow, or I could take the uncertain route straight through the Atlas mountains. Either way I now had a goal: the coast.

Cool, salty air greeted me the evening I stepped off the bus in El Jaidida, a small city popular with Moroccan tourists, but often passed over by foreigners. The previous two days had been a bumpy ride through the Atlas mountains, the journey broken up by a night in a small village in the midst of a wedding festival. Inner Morocco is the land of Berber, the ethnically indigenous people of North Africa, and every year the village of Imilchil held an event where potential Berber brides and grooms dressed in their finest jewel-spangled wares and gathered



(l) Some camel action in the town of Imilchil (r) *Apis mellifera intermissa*



(l) Khalid's many varieties of honey he produces, and collection of foreign bee books. (r) Orange honey

together in a sort of marriage market; walking to-and-fro, playing coquettish games, and looking for *the one*. After some sort of designated, receptive signal passed between a pair, they and their families would sit down together for mint tea, and if the woman served the tea with sugar, then it was a sealed deal. At the end of the weekend there was a wedding ceremony, and married life started on Monday.

Somehow I was able to pass through Imilchil without getting hitched (not without a fight, for a group of comical young Berbers were hoping I'd marry a waitress who served me very sweet tea) and on the bus ride to the coast I sat next to an English-speaking man who talked with me about America. Morocco has had a long and cordial relationship with the US; in 1777, Morocco was the first country to recognize the new nation of America. Ten years later the two nations signed a Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which still exists today, making it the longest unbroken political pact in US history. Morocco is also one of our closest allies in the Middle East, as they have taken a zero tolerance policy against Al Qaeda and the affiliated groups. It also has been stable, and did not suffer through the 2011 Arab uprising, as did most of North Africa. I was traveling in Morocco during the midst of the ISIS battle in Iraq,

and I was told several times that ISIS and Islamist are not the same thing. The majority of Muslims do not agree with the extremist groups, and that what was happening in Iraq should not be reflected upon Islam or the rest of the Arab world.

I arrived in El Jaidida at around 8 PM. After finding a hotel I called my contact, a beekeeper by the name of Khalid Zairi, to tell him I arrived. But instead of making plans for the next day Khalid told me to hold on and ten minutes later an old, tan pick-up truck pulled to the curb. Khalid flung the passenger door open and I jumped inside.

Here I began my lesson with a different side of Morocco. Previously, most of the interactions I had were in the major cities, among herds of tourists. "Where are you from?" was the typical opening line, said by a guy passing on the street or sitting on a step. If I answered, it would start an interaction which led to the nearby shop of a "cousin" that was "only open today." I would suddenly find myself bargaining for an expensive carpet or lamp that I didn't really want in the first place. But since the owner just served me tea and asked about my home and my family, I felt like I should buy something and I needed to buy presents anyway, until all these small concessions piled on my conscience and I left the shop

a self-doubting owner of ancient Moroccan apparel I will probably never wear. And this happened over and over: walking through the old part of town and a passer-by would begin telling me the history of a building, a street, a neighborhood until 15 minutes later I realized he thought he was my guide and wanted money; getting directions was impossible too, as the old city centers were mazes and someone always had to lead you for a fee. It made me stop answering people's greetings, scrutinize every interaction for the hidden machination, and generally feel bad for being rude and suspicious to everyone. But once outside of the big cities or the tourist-heavy areas, kind and honest people shone through. For me, Khalid flipped everything around, convincing me that the famed Moroccan hospitality is not merely a myth, or a thing of the past.

Khalid surprised me by being young, only 28, and full of life. He wore a baseball hat, short-sleeved collared shirt and corduroy pants, all a sort of brown-green color scheme that matched his truck. He spoke English, not perfectly, but we could communicate most everything we wanted to say. During the ride away from the center of El Jaidida we introduced ourselves – he had a few hundred hives and, like almost all beekeepers in Morocco, he had to migrate



(l) Rosemary honey (r) Other products for sale in Sahabeille: smokers, almond paste, pollen lip balm, etc.



(l) A virgin queen caught from a nuc on top of Khalid's building (r) Walking among Khalid's hives

with them to different honey flows. Some of his bees were nearby on the coast for eucalyptus blossom, others were down near the Sahara. He used Langstroth hives; only a few Moroccan beekeepers still used skeps or traditional hives. At one point during the ride his phone rang and while driving he had to find a small flashlight to be able to see the incoming number on his cracked phone display.

We drove to a different part of the town and he parked the truck next to a mural of black on orange depicting beekeepers at work. Khalid walked to the front of the building, which had a colorful facade under a sign "Sahabeille," and unlocked the door. Inside was his brand-new shop, only opened a few months ago. Here he sold beekeeping equipment, pollen, lip balm and, of course, honey. On the counter sat 15 small jars of honey, each a different type, and we immediately began a round of taste-testing. As opposed to the honey I tried in Er-Rich, these honeys exploded with flavor, each one telling the taste buds a different story of flowers and fields. Around 30 types of monofloral honey can be produced in Morocco, with around a dozen common varieties, and this evening I tasted orange,

avocado, carob, thyme, jujube and rosemary. As we made our way through the honeys, errant bees found the pile of used tasting-spoons and began a taste test of their own.

As a climax, Khalid fed me "Miel d euphorbia echinus," made from a cactus known as spurge, or in Arabic "darmoosse." It was a dark honey, and besides its incredible, complex flavor, my throat began to heat up a few seconds after I swallowed, not unlike the Anzer rhodenon honey in Turkey. Darmoose is only made deep in the desert and Khalid told me a single hive is usually only able to produce a few pounds. At around \$30 per pound it is also one of the most expensive honeys but, in general, honey in Morocco is fairly expensive. More expensive than in the US. When I told a restaurant-owner in the city of Fez the price of American honey, he was sent adrift with the idea of starting a honey importation scheme, and claimed I would be the perfect business partner. Later on I read that Moroccan beekeepers aren't able to meet the demand for the nation's consumption, and a fair amount of honey is imported and likely relabeled as Moroccan. Even with salaries much lower than in the US, Moroccans still buy their expensive honey because it is seen

as a traditional medicine and spoonfuls are taken to remedy any number of illnesses.

It wasn't long after we arrived in the shop that one of Khalid's friends, another beekeeper named Rashad, joined us. Soon another friend arrived, a plumber named Heshim, and Khalid made tea for everyone with a small camp stove. Phone calls were made, a few more people showed up and I realized that it was Friday night, and this was the evening plan. Khalid seemed right at home, holding court in his shop, joking and laughing with his crew of friends. Even a passerby saw the shop open at 10:30 PM and came in to inquire about honey. Khalid quickly put his laptop on the desk and flipped through the pictures he showed me not an hour earlier. These photos, mixed in with pictures of his 3-year-old daughter and his vacation, documented his beekeeping work in the southern desert: the cactus blooming, bees flying out of the entrances, and he and his friend camping in the truck. The customer, convinced, bought two ½ kilo jars of the good stuff, *miel d euphorbia echinus*, and then left us to the remainder of our Friday night tea session.

To be continued in Part II next month



(l) Honey made from *Bupleurum spinosum* (r) A way of providing water for hives. Surprisingly, I didn't see that many artificial water sources. Khalid said the bees were normally near some sort of agriculture, and could find water there.