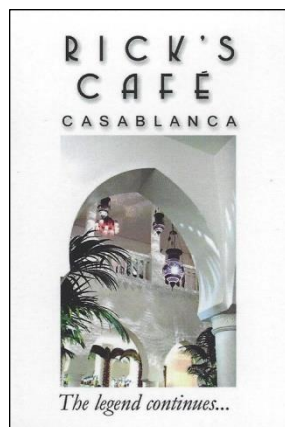


*From McCafé to Rick's Café: An Okemos Chief's
Quest for Golden Arches, Holy Grails, and Sacred Shrines*



by Kerry J. Byrnes (Okemos High Class of '63)



From McCafé to Rick's Café: An Okemos Chief's Quest for Golden Arches, Holy Grails, and Sacred Shrines

by Kerry J. Byrnes (Okemos Class of '63)

From September 27 to October 17 of 2018 my wife Sonia and I were on “on safari” to Spain, Morocco, and Portugal, joining a group of Colombians for a week in each country. In Morocco and Portugal we traveled by road to various cities, towns, and rural areas. While in Spain we did a one-day side trip by train to Toledo. Near the end of visit to Portugal, our driver delivered us to Santiago de Compostela in Spain for two nights before catching a train back to Madrid where we overnighted at a hotel near the Barajas airport and caught our flight back to the States. Along the way, while others in our group focused on sightseeing and shopping, I was on a quest not only to spot McDonald's Golden Arches but also to ensure our pilgrimage was successful both in finding a Holy Grail and visiting a Sacred Shrine.

Spain



**Kerry & Libardo (Sonia's Brother) Lost in Madrid
with Sign on Building Reading “You Are Here”**

After a few days of shopping for chocolates (my priority) and other stuff (Sonia's priority) at El Corte Inglés department store, taking the City Bus Tour (red and blue routes), and sightseeing, we headed early one morning to the Atocha train station to buy tickets for a one-day round trip to Toledo. In the Atocha station's commercial area I spotted what appeared to be the Okemos High School logo (Chief Okemos along with the word "Chief"). On investigating, this was the logo for a clothing store that is also [online](#).



This chance encounter with the former logo (Chief Okemos) for my high school (Okemos High School) inspired me to take some mental notes and photos during our three-week trip with a view that on returning home I would rework my mental notes into a narrative to share with Okemos High alumni and others who might stumble on this article during a Google search.

On arriving at the Toledo train station, some of our group signed up for a city bus tour. When the bus reached our drop off point, and not having had much of a breakfast earlier that morning at the Atocha train station, and having spotted a McDonald's as the bus drove up the hill, it was serendipitous as I guided our group this way rather than that back down the hill that we suddenly found ourselves on the very plaza hosting the McDonald's I had spotted while on the bus. After a futile effort to place my order (a mix of items for members of our group) via the electronic kiosk, I simply placed my order at the counter. Once everyone had their coffee in hand, I sat down to enjoy a delicious chocolate McMuffin!

Actually I previously had dined at a McDonald's in Madrid many years before but begged off eating hamburgers as that visit took place during the midst of Europe coping with "mad cow disease" – so at that time I limited my fine dining at McDonald's to French fries and Coca Cola!



Kerry & Sonia in Santiago de Compostela

As it turned out, on this trip, I would not get back to McDonald's again in Spain until we had returned from Santiago de Compostela the day before our flight back to United States. Indeed, on arriving in Madrid, what a coincidence to discover that the hotel for our last night in Madrid was a block from McDonald's! I wound up eating there twice, both at lunch and then, after our group returned from afternoon sightseeing and shopping in Madrid, Sonia, her brother Libardo, wife Nena, and I went to McDonald's to get a light bite to eat.

All I wanted was a small cheeseburger, potato wedges (rather than French fries), and a yoghurt – but was surprised when the waiter delivered to our table my very first Happy Meal that included a 2x3 Rubik's Cube that I later gifted to my 10-year old grandson on return home. That was just an extra gift, a bit of icing on the cake, as the big gift for Braden was a Real Madrid (red with white stars) soccer ball for his sports memorabilia collection. On my way to McDonald's for lunch earlier that day, I took the following photos.



McDonald's Near Barajas Airport in Madrid



Not to leave the impression that Sonia and I only dined at McDonald's while in Madrid, we also ate meals at several restaurants, including on the Plaza Mayor, in the El Corte Inglés cafeteria, at the Reina Sofía National Museum Art Center, and also at Café & Tapas, the latter serving up an experience that was so bad I posted [a highly negative review](#) on Trip Advisor.



Kerry & Sonia Dining at the Plaza Mayor, Madrid



Kerry & Sonia at Reina Sofía National Museum Art Center

Morocco



Kerry with Driver for our Moroccan Road Trip

Our “*Road to Morocco*” road trip took us from Casablanca to Marrakech, after which we made stops and overnights at various points before returning to Casablanca a week later. Our first stop was Marrakech where our hotel (a home converted into a hotel) hosted our first Moroccan meal – Tagine – and for dessert a bowl of fruit.



Tagine – A Tasty Dish But Not for Every Lunch and Dinner!



Traditional Moroccan Dessert: A Bowl of Fruit



Our Group's First Moroccan Dinner – Tagine & Fruit!

It was already dark, a few days later, on our Moroccan road trip when we reached Fes. By this time we had dined on Tagine more times for lunch and dinner, and in more combinations, than shrimp is served at the Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. (highlighted in the film *Forrest Gump*). So it was a pleasant surprise as we reached Fes to spot a McDonald's as a potential lunch alternative to yet another round of Tagine. The next morning, we did a tiring walk up and down the narrow streets of the Medina (walled city).



Kerry (in Hawaiian Straw Hat) trying to keep pace with our guide.

Eventually, at the lower end of the Medina, we reached our van and climbed in to head for our next stop at the top of a high hill overlooking the city. Later, as we drove back to the city, our group discussed and, I thought, agreed that some would go to McDonalds, while the others would go to a “menu of the day” restaurant. Suddenly, the rest of the group decided they also would go to McDonald’s. During lunch, a member of the “menu of the day” group smiled at me, held up his right thumb, and said that going to McDonald’s was the right choice! Photos of this McDonald’s in Fes are shared below.



A McDonald's In Fes - “Come As You Are”



A Diverse Menu – A Most Welcome Change of Pace from Daily Tagine!



Ice Cream Back on the Menu – Another Welcome Change from Eating Fruit as a Dessert



Moroccan Female Students or Professionals (Most in Western Dress)



McDonald's Club



McDonald's PLAYPLACE!

Lest anyone think that McDonald's was winning out over Tagine, here are a few more photos of our Moroccan dining experiences:



Dining at an Evening Dinner Show in Marrakech with Surprise: Tagine!



Niece Julie Lunching on Surprise: Tagine!



Sonia (right) Ubers to a Desert Rendezvous for Dinner & Night's Sleep



Dinner on the Desert – Waiting for the Inevitable: Tagine!



Kerry First in Line for a Desert Breakfast – Fortunately, No Tagine!

Not a Mirage!

One afternoon, as we drove through the Moroccan desert near the town of Ouarzazate, our driver pulled off the road. We looked across the desert to the left and saw what well could have been mirage (see first photo below)—what we saw appeared to be buildings in the middle of nowhere. Our driver explained that we were looking at part of Atlas Studios, a film production company.



An Atlas Studios Set for a Desert Town



Atlas Studios in the Distance

The photo below shows a closer view of the studio's production facility and a hotel where film actors and crews can stay during a film's shooting and production.



Closer View of Atlas Studios, Morocco



A Film Set at Atlas Studios

According to Wikipedia, **Atlas Studios** is located 5 kilometers (3.1 miles) west of the city of Ouarzazate. Measured by acreage, Atlas is the world's largest film studio, with most of the studio's property lying in the nearby desert and mountains. Many sets from filming various movies remain in place; thus, the studio operates guided tours as a popular tourist attraction. Mohamed Belghmi founded the company in 1983. Since then the studio has expanded, thanks to reliable climate and weather conditions that mimic the natural environments of many countries well.



Entrance to Atlas Studios



Atlas Studios' Oscar Hotel

Many films and TV series have used the services of Atlas Studios including: *Jewel of the Nile*, *The Living Daylights*, *The Mummy*, *Gladiator*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, *Asterix & Obelix: Mission Cleopatra*, *Babel*, *Game of Thrones*, *Atlantis*, *The Amazing Race 10*, *The Grand Tour*, and *Vikings*, among others.



Collage of Poster Art of Films Having Scenes Filmed at Atlas Studios



Our Tour Group Waiting for the Casting Call

Unfortunately, our group of nine Colombians, one American, and Moroccan driver (actually our group traveled in two vehicles) didn't reach Atlas Studios in time for that day's casting call for an international mix of Colombian, American, and Moroccan extras. So Sonia and I "just missed it by that much" being cast in lead roles for the studio's latest film: *Yet One More Tagine for the Tourist!*



And We Were Dressed for the Role of a Lifetime!



That evening the group stayed in another bed-and-breakfast where Sonia and I scored a first floor room, thanks to filling out our registration forms faster than did the others in our group. With a first floor room we didn't have to haul suitcases up the staircase to an upper floor. At previous stops, members of our group, notably Libardo and Nena, were very kind in carrying our suitcases up the stairs, thus sparing Kerry (a hip replacement and two heart surgeries) from having to hoof heavy suitcases to upper floor rooms. To boot, in spite of envious pleas by other members of our group, our first floor room featured a four-poster bed!



Our Room's Four-Poster on the Hotel's First Floor

Portugal

Thankfully, by the time we reached Porto in Portugal, I hadn't worn thin our group's patience about eating at McDonald's, since Porto hosts the "world's most beautiful McDonald's." The morning after our arrival in Porto, we took in some of the city's tourist locations, including as our first stop a plaza having not only a beautiful church but also the McDonald's Imperial, the "world's most beautiful McDonald's"! From the street in front of this McDonald's one would have thought that just another McDonald's was lurking behind the trees in the photo below.



Just Another Run-of-the-Mill McDonald's?

But, on getting closer, this McDonald's started to appear different, not only with a real arched entry but also with an eagle atop the McDonald's name.



Perhaps Not – Kerry & Libardo Ready to Check It Out!



But First A Photo with Sonia (Right) & Sister-in-Law Nena (Left)



We Were Lucky To Arrive Before the Morning Rush!

Perhaps, in the photo above, you noticed that, indeed, this McDonald's is like no other you've ever experienced. I'm not talking about the electronic kiosks, rather the chandeliers and stained glass windows behind the counter.

Yet a bit hungry after breakfast, I passed on trying to contend with the electronic kiosks and went directly to the counter. With no one in line at that moment, it was easy to talk with the clerk about my order. She explained that, if I wanted something from the McCafé, I'd have to order it there.



Nena Challenges Kerry to Order from the Electronic Kiosks



What To Order - Something from the Breakfast Menu?



Or Something from the McCafé Menu?



No Nata (Portuguese Custard Tart) Among the McCafé Pastry Options?

Fortunately Nata was available; I just hadn't seen it in the display case or listed among the items on the McCafé menu. So I ordered yoghurt with granola and strawberry from the regular menu counter and a Nata (Portuguese Custard Tart) from the McCafé counter.



Yoghurt & Nata at the McDonald's Imperial

After my post-breakfast snack, I checked out the downstairs dining area.



Plush Seating in Downstairs Dining

I then went back up to the main floor to take some photos of that floor's architecture and decorations.



Building's Original Murals & Chandeliers Preserved on Main Floor



Customers Ordering at McCafé (Left) & Kiosks (Right)



Fortunately Kerry Had Arrive Ahead of the Rush at the Imperial's McCafé

Some “What to See & Do” in Porto highlights features the McDonald's Imperial as the “Most beautiful McDonald's in the world”.



You won't need to do much research to agree with this statement: this is the most beautiful **McDonald's** restaurant in the world! Period. And, even if you are not into the so-called fast food sold here, the interior is absolutely worth a visit.

This **McDonald's restaurant in Porto** was inaugurated in 1995. I remember coming here when I was a child and this was the Imperial Café, an emblematic historic building from the 30s, just by **Aliados Avenue**, which was frankly in need for a restoration. The final restoration work is a result of a cooperation between two architects ateliers: Archange and A. Burmester. The idea was to give it a fresh look, maintaining the iconic features and recovering the social gathering spirit once so lively here.



Note the Chandeliers and Art Deco Stained Glass Windows

The name "Imperial" comes from the Eagle, still preeminent in the facade, in which you can also find the amazing art deco stained glass. If you come to see the interior (which you must do) your head will be looking up: the roofs and the chandeliers are beautiful.

The offer is diversified and, of course depends on your taste. The truth is that they sell fast food that tastes equal regardless of which part of the planet you are in and, of course, you can choose among the different classic menus of burger sandwich, fries and a drink, starting at approximately 5 Euros.



Stained Glass Windows at McDonald's Imperial in Porto

However, this is not a conventional **McDonald's**, not even in the "McCafé" (the coffee shop, separated from the snacks) where you can find a genuine Portuguese sweet break: coffee with a custard tart... don't forget some cinnamon on top which takes it to another level. Again, if you do not like any of the sandwich menus served here, have a coffee and read the newspaper and stare at the stunning interior for a while. Trust me, you won't regret it.

Check out this [BusinessInsider link](#) for more information about and photos of the McDonald's Imperial in Porto.

In total, while touring all three countries, I “dined” at McDonald’s at least once in each country – Spain (Toledo and Madrid), Morocco (Fes), and Portugal (Porto). Discovering that McDonald’s Imperial in Porto is recognized as the world’s most beautiful McDonald’s was a surprise that was not on my “bucket list” of places I wanted to see during our trip, that is, was neither a Holy Grail nor a Sacred Shrine!

Indeed, I would have been happy to dine at any McDonald’s in Morocco and Portugal in order to add each country to the tally of countries in which I’ve had a Golden Arches experience. I have now eaten at a McDonald’s in 26 countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, England, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Morocco, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, United States, and Venezuela – at least one McDonald’s on four different continents (North America, South America, Europe, and Africa)! While I can’t remember for sure but I possibly also have eaten at McDonald’s in some of the Eastern Caribbean island countries but I just can’t recall visiting any specific McDonald’s in that region.

The Quest’s Holy Grail

So, after “collecting” the two new Golden Arches experiences in Morocco and Portugal, what was the Holy Grail destination of my “bucket list” of places to be visited during our trip? The answer: Rick’s Café.

As you probably know, Rick’s Café was not built at Atlas Studios in Morocco but rather in Los Angeles for the classic Hollywood film *Casablanca* (1942) starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman.



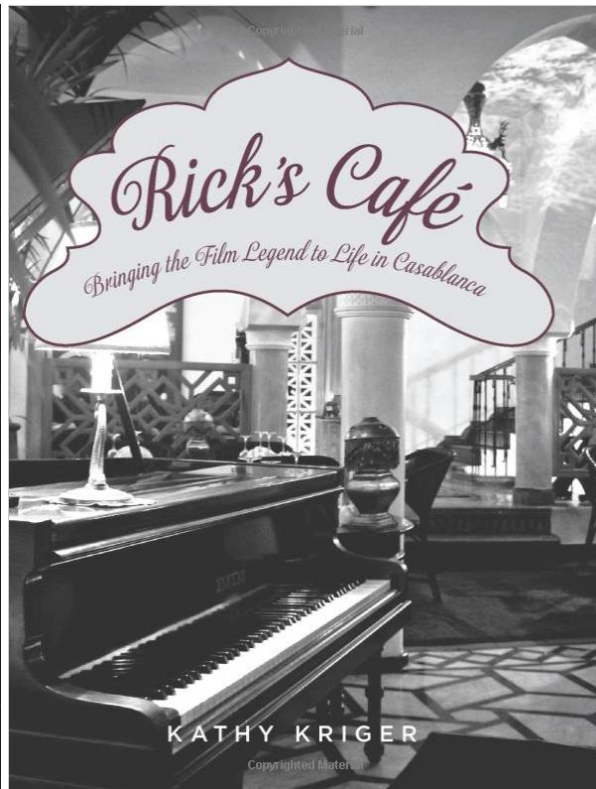
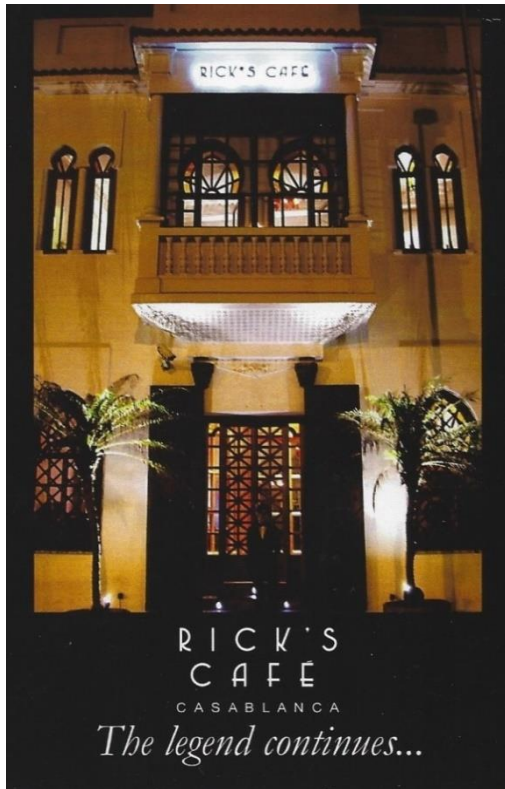


Trailer for *Casablanca* (click on image for YouTube video)

But for years after *Casablanca* became a Hollywood classic, visitors to Casablanca searched unsuccessfully for Rick’s Café as their Holy Grail, that is, until an entrepreneur decided to build a “Rick’s Café” in Casablanca, modeling it’s ambience as closely as possible to the Rick’s Café seen in the film. The story of building today’s “real” Rick’s Café in Casablanca is told by Kathy Kriger in *Rick’s Café – Bringing the Film Legend to Life in Casablanca*.

For more than 60 years, tourists visiting Casablanca tried to visit Rick’s Café Americain only to discover that Warner Brothers had built the entire set on a studio back lot. It was a Hollywood fantasy—until Kathy Kriger came along, that is, and decided after 9/11 to bring the imaginary gin joint to life. In RICK’S CAFE, she takes us through souk back alleys, the Marché Central’s overflowing food stalls, and the shadowy Moroccan business world, all while producing, directing, casting, and playing lead actress in her own story. Instead of letters of transit, she begged for letters of credit; the governor of Casablanca watched her back instead of Captain Renault; and at the piano, playing “As Time Goes By,” sits not Sam but Issam. She encountered paper pushers, absent architects, dedicated craftsmen, mad chefs, and surprising allies. It took over two years, but now, as Captain Renault says to Major Strasser, “Everybody comes to Rick’s.” Here is the remarkable story of a woman who turned Hollywood fantasy into Moroccan reality and made her dream come true.

On checking into our hotel, and while nearly all in our group had never seen the *Casablanca* film, I persuaded them that a visit to Rick’s Café was something just not worth missing. After the hotel concierge gave our guide vague directions on how to find Rick’s, we followed the guide, some 10 meters behind him, as he wasn’t licensed to be a guide in Casablanca. We (he) got lost a couple of times until a knowledgeable local pointed our guide in the right direction. Walking another long block, we spotted a building with the sign “Rick’s Café” on the building’s side. Turning the corner, we arrived at the entrance to Rick’s.



Unfortunately, one just can't walk into Rick's for dinner as a reservation is needed which we hadn't made. But we could go upstairs to the bar for drinks and to order some food.



Bar & Small Dining Table on Second Floor of Rick's Café

With the rest of our group filling up the seats at the bar and a small dining table in front of the bar (see above photo), I found a seat by a TV where *Casablanca* plays on a continuous loop. The first photo shows a “usual suspect” sitting by the TV as a scene featuring Sydney Greenstreet is on the screen, while the second photo features Sam on piano playing “You must remember this, a kiss is just a kiss, ...as time goes by!”



Just outside the bar I sat down at a piano to show off my (nonexistent) skill as a piano player but, I would like to think, was able to muster a compelling pose...if not any right notes!



Okemos Chief Pounds the Ivories at Rick's Café

Looking over the balcony, I took a few photos of the first floor's bar and dining area.



First Floor Dining Room at Rick's Café



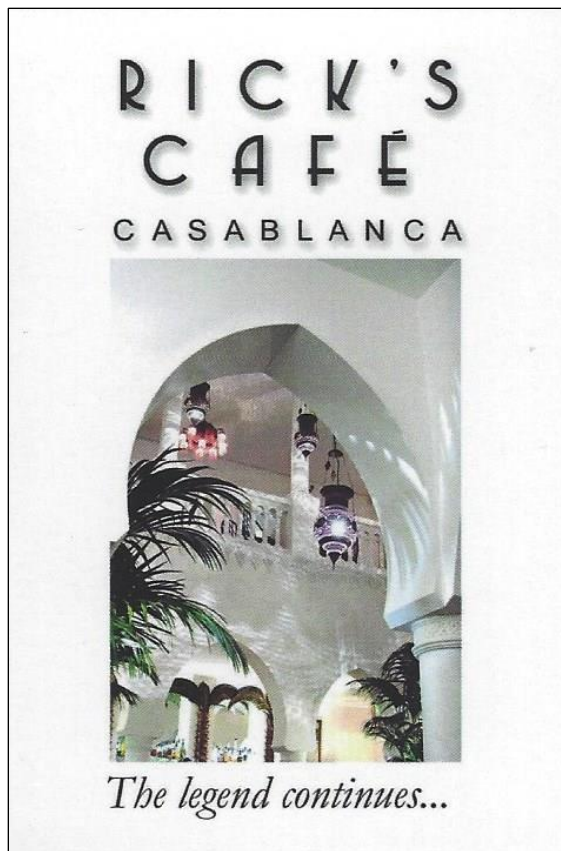
Piano & Drums near the Bar & Dining Area at Rick's Café



First Floor Dining Room at Rick's Café (from Second Floor)



Second Floor Dining Area (Viewed from the Bar)



In case you can't make it to Casablanca, Morocco, check out more about Rick's Café at <http://www.rickscafe.ma/>, [Facebook](#), [Livestream](#), [Pinterest](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).

The Quest's Sacred Shrine

Just as World War II-related events in Morocco inspired *Casablanca* (1942), a quite different set of events in Portugal would later inspire the film *The Miracle of Our Lady of Fatima* (1952). The film's plot is summarized by IMDB.com as follows:

In 1917, three shepherd children living just outside Fatima, Portugal have visions of a lovely lady in a cloud. The anticlerical government wishes to squelch the Church; reports of religious experiences are cause for serious concern. Yet the children stand by their story, and the message of peace and hope the Lady brings. In the last vision, attended by thousands of people, the Lady proves her reality with a spectacular miracle that is seen by everyone present. Based on actual events at Fatima in the summer of 1917.

By 2018 it must have been decades since I first saw the film *The Miracle of Our Lady of Fatima*, either in a theater or on TV while our family lived in Michigan for ten years between 1953 and 1963. Now, probably over 60 years later, our tour of Portugal had brought our group to Fátima and the opportunity to visit a sacred shrine: The Our Lady of Fátima Chapel of the Apparitions.



Lúcia Santos, Jacinta and Francisco Marto, the three children whom the Virgin Mary revealed her famous "three secrets" in Fátima, Portugal



Panoramic view of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary and its colonnade, the Sacred Heart of Jesus statue and the famous Chapel of the Apparitions



The square in front of the Basilica of the Rosary with the Chapel of the Apparitions



Exterior view of the Chapel of the Apparitions



Interior view of the Chapel of the Apparitions in Cova da Iria



Chapel of the Apparitions with [Our Lady](#)'s image



Blue arrow denotes the four-sided path on which the faithful walk on their knees around the Sanctuary as they pray to Our Lady of Fatima for a miracle for themselves or others.

Direct Video Streaming From The Chapel Of Apparitions



This is the actual site where Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco had the visitations from the *Lady Of The Rosary* in 1917. It is a live WEBCAM that is online twenty-four hours a day. What is interesting though, is that you can watch all the services that take place at the *Chapel Of Apparitions* whenever you feel the urge. Safe journeys to all the fans of *The Fatima Project*, wherever you may be.



Click on Image to Link to the Direct Video Stream

It was a moving moment on my quest to experience the Chapel of the Apparitions, not just for the chapel but more so to see all of the faithful (and many tourists) sitting on the chapel's pews or standing behind the pews, many if not all silently praying to Our Lady of Fátima for a miracle. I also prayed the Our Father and Hail Mary, asking Our Lady of Fátima to intervene on behalf of family and friends for their continued health or even recovery from major afflictions. Even more moving was watching the apparently healthy but even more so the crippled and/or elderly wend their way on their knees around the sanctuary (the part of the chapel around the altar as denoted by the blue arrow pointing in the above photo to the woman walking on her knees repeatedly around the sanctuary).

Conclusion

The last day of our journey through Morocco had us back on the road headed to the Casablanca airport for an afternoon check in for our flight to Portugal, the third country that we would visit during our three-week trip (see earlier Portugal section). After dining on so many Tagines during our stay in Morocco, little did I know as I boarded the plane for our flight to Lisbon that only a few days later I'd be experiencing the “world's most beautiful McDonald's” – the McDonald's Imperial in Porto!

Looking back on our trip, the previous three weeks had flown by as we traveled from Madrid in Spain to Casablanca and other destinations in Morocco, and later to Lisbon in Portugal and back to Madrid in Spain! Tourist stops along the way included historic cities, modern suburbs, and rural towns; cathedrals, museums, and art galleries; modern department stores Madrid and small shops in the Medinas of several Moroccan cities; and unforgettable scenery ranging from green valleys to rocky mountains to deserts to agricultural fields (notably olives). We had traveled by plane, train, boat (a cruise on the Douro River separating Porto and Gaia), buses, vans, taxis, and, even for Sonia, riding a dromedary across the dunes to an overnight stay in a luxury tent in the middle of the desert.

Throughout my quest for a Holy Grail (Rick's Café in Casablanca) and a Sacred Shrine (Chapel of the Apparitions), I always found it a welcome site to spot a McDonald's as an alternative to Spanish Paella (traditional dish made of rice, shellfish, chicken, and vegetables), Moroccan Tagine, and Portuguese Peri-Peri (chicken). While one is not likely to discover a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, one can nearly always count on McDonald's Golden Arches to deliver a predictable meal just about anywhere in the world, even if the fare served up is not the gourmet cuisine as one likely would find on the menu at Rick's Café. However, McDonald's, if you are reading this, please consider getting Chocolate McMuffins and Portuguese Natas on the menu in your U.S.-based restaurants—and, for McDonald's in Morocco, you are likely missing a bet if you don't get a McTagine on the menu!



Kerry at Todra Gorge in Morocco & on Douro River Cruise in Porto with Sonia

THE END