

GET OUT OF TOWN
escape



Wall art in Asilah done by local children (Picture: Linda Botting)

COLOUR IN ASILAH

The ancient trading post of Asilah has come to life with an international art festival that has given the town a new coat of colour

WORDS AND PICTURES LINDA BOTTING

Move over Chefchaouen, Asilah is the new cultural centre of Morocco. While many people flock to Morocco's "blue town" Chefchaouen, they overlook the small, artistic coastal town of Asilah. In fact, Asilah is fast becoming a cultural mecca in its own right.

The first thing I noticed walking through the old, brown town gates, were painters whitewashing the 15th century Medina walls. They were in the midst of preparing for the 40th Cultural Moussem International Arts Festival beginning on July 15.

Second, I noticed the looming Portuguese-built Al-Kamra Tower, and former 1500s Governor's residence standing tall above the Medina walls making an impressive backdrop for the festival.

Asilah is unlike other Moroccan cities frequented by visitors. It is a town where you will find locals going about life as they have for the past 2000 years. Fruit stands sell fresh

orange juice and carts drawn by donkeys still clutter along cobblestoned alleys.

The annual festival attracts artists from around the world, livening up this sleepy, slow-paced town for one month each year.

So, how did the festival begin? Asilah struggled to recover fully following a long history of being conquered. Asilah was



originally named Sili by the Phoenicians, who used it as a trading post. It was then conquered on and off by the Spanish and Portuguese.

Asilah spent centuries changing leadership only to return to Moroccan rule in 1692. However, full independence was not gained until 1956. At this point, the tired and battered old Medina had seen better days. When it came to restoring the town for future generations, a cost effective way of doing so was needed.

It was thanks to local artist/curator Mohammed Melebi and his friend Mohammed Berraiou, the current Mayor of Asilah who inspired the idea of inviting artists to decorate the medina walls with murals. They both believed culture was a valuable resource to re-establishing the town after years of hardship.

Together, they created the vibrant and colourful Cultural Moussem International Arts festival. From a social perspective, the festival was a way of bringing together people from around the world who shared a common theme of art and communication.



ASILAH, MOROCCO

GETTING THERE Asilah is an easy daytrip from the centre of Tangier. You can either hire a car through Ethno Car Hire ethnocarhire.com/ or take the train which is a 40 minute journey and will cost you \$10 in first class or \$6 in second class oncf.ma/. If you are catching the train, the station is 2km from the town centre. You can take a petit taxi from Asilah train station at a cost of approximately \$4.

EAT THERE Oceano-Casa Pepe, Plaza Zabala Asilah 90050, Morocco, Telephone: +322 5394-27385. Located right in front of the old medina walls, Casa Pepe is a family-owned, Spanish style restaurant which serves Spanish and Moroccan dishes.

SLEEP THERE If you need more time to explore the narrow, winding streets, there are a number of accommodation options to suit all budgets. Stay in a riad like a local would do for under \$100 and small but stylish retreats are available for when you want to escape from the streets.

