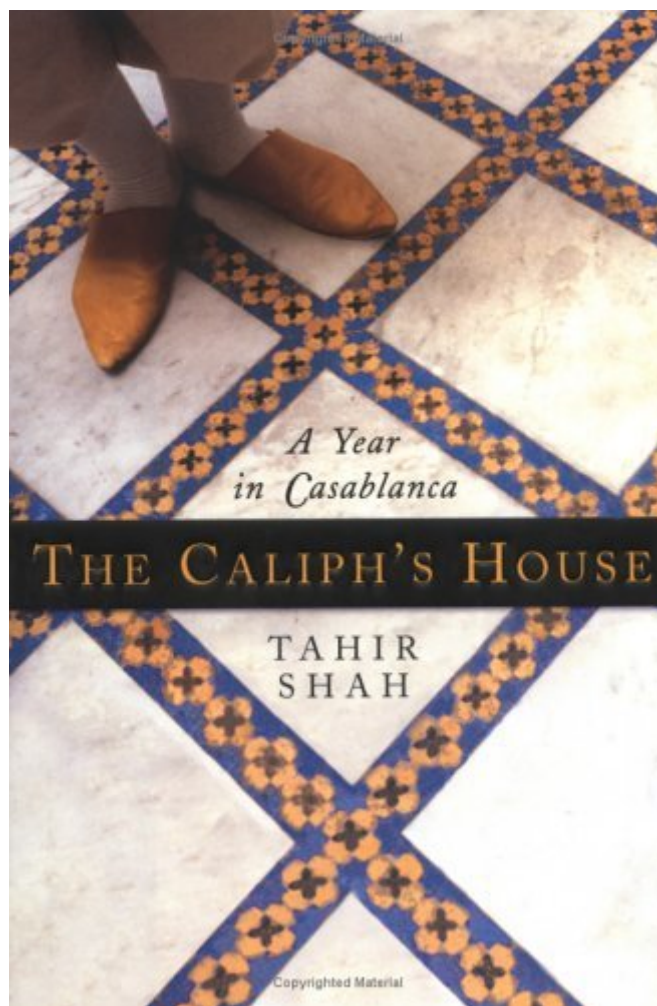


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# The Caliph's House



## Synopsis

In the tradition of *A Year in Provence* and *Under the Tuscan Sun*, acclaimed English travel writer Tahir Shah shares a highly entertaining account of making an exotic dream come true. By turns hilarious and harrowing, here is the story of his family's move from the gray skies of London to the sun-drenched city of Casablanca, where Islamic tradition and African folklore converge "and nothing is as easy as it seems". Inspired by the Moroccan vacations of his childhood, Tahir Shah dreamed of making a home in that astonishing country. At age thirty-six he got his chance. Investing what money he and his wife, Rachana, had, Tahir packed up his growing family and bought Dar Khalifa, a crumbling ruin of a mansion by the sea in Casablanca that once belonged to the city's caliph, or spiritual leader. With its lush grounds, cool, secluded courtyards, and relaxed pace, life at Dar Khalifa seems sure to fulfill Tahir's fantasy "until he discovers that in many ways he is farther from home than he imagined. For in Morocco an empty house is thought to attract jinns, invisible spirits unique to the Islamic world. The ardent belief in their presence greatly hampers sleep and renovation plans, but that is just the beginning. From elaborate exorcism rituals involving sacrificial goats to dealing with gangster neighbors intent on stealing their property, the Shahs must cope with a new culture and all that comes with it. Endlessly enthralling, *The Caliph's House* charts a year in the life of one family who takes a tremendous gamble. As we follow Tahir on his travels throughout the kingdom, from Tangier to Marrakech to the Sahara, we discover a world of fierce contrasts that any true adventurer would be thrilled to call home. From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

File Size: 1538 KB

Print Length: 368 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 0553383108

Publisher: Bantam (January 31, 2006)

Publication Date: January 31, 2006

Sold by: Random House LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B000FCKPR6

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #84,970 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #2 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Travel > Africa > Morocco #9 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Travel > Specialty Travel > Family Travel #10 in Books > Travel > Africa > Morocco

## Customer Reviews

I was going to give this book two stars but then I finished reading the book. In the end Shah sells a deceased neighbor's stamp collection and gives the money he makes from the sale to the neighbor's widow. He also earns the trust and respect of his household caretakers by holding a ceremony to expel Jinn's (evil spirits) from his house in Casablanca, his work as somebody who has escaped drab London complete. Other fun parts of the book are learning about Moroccan craftsmanship, trading practices, religious practices, coffee, and food. Shah observes and reflects and repeats, and reveals himself as a thoughtful person, which I also gleaned from reading his Wikipedia page. He wants the world to be a more peaceful place and works toward that goal. The reason I can't give this book four stars is because it could be about half the length it is. For example, in one sequence late in the book he describes in great detail how he buys cedar wood for construction of his new library. Hemingway is turning over in his grave. The other reason this book can't be higher than three stars is because it is episodic and formulaic. Here is the formula of each episode: Shah wants to do a renovation project in the house, the caretakers tell him it will be difficult because the house is haunted by evil spirits, his other assistant Kamal finds some back alley way to get the job done. Repeat that sequence and you have the book. Also, Shah has this incredibly annoying habit of ending each episode with a cliffhanger quote that is I suppose supposed to be amusing but is in fact irritating because the situations are never that dangerous or worrisome. He tries to build in drama where simple descriptions might do. Lastly, Shah must be a wealthy man. He isn't transparent about how much money is required to buy a house in Casablanca, employ anywhere from four to ten servants, keep up a local school through donations, renovate the house with intricate work, buy a car, and such is, but this is no task that an average person can perform, and as such the book leaves you with the knowledge that as long as you have enough money, life will be secure, albeit at times unpredictable due to the varying levels of dependability of those you interact with. It reminds me a little of the TV show *West World* in the sense that you pay a ton of money to have a "real" experience in an exotic place while all the normal, non-wealthy people out

there have to work through their drab existence from paycheck to paycheck.

A confession: I adore Morocco. It is a place of dreams, beauty and ideas that are foreign and lovely. The food is fresh and fragrant with spices. As a tourist, a people watcher and a scholar, I have studied the place. So when I picked up *The Caliph's House*, I expected to return to the place of my dreams and spend a week enjoying the book. Instead, I met a new and different Morocco of workers, customs and household djins never before encountered. The story line involves a Londoner of Afghan descent who moves his young family to a rundown but beautiful estate home just outside a bidonville of Casablanca intending to restore the house to its former glory. Work proceeds, or not, based on a complicated system of beliefs and customs that we learn about through a series of work stoppages, destructions and contractors. As it turns out, the house comes with three longtime resident guardians who have much advice that varies as to usefulness and self-servingness. Some of this is laugh out loud funny and some provides deep cultural insights. I knew nothing about djins before reading this book and the author knew nothing about them before writing it. Nonetheless, if you have djins in your toilets or wells, there is hell to pay. This is a beautifully written book replete with cultural context and human concerns. It evokes a powerful sense of place. It is also by turns hilarious and deeply moving. In the end, it is a delightful book that is also insightful about working class Moroccan life.

This book gave a wonderful, entertaining account of moving from London to Casablanca. The obstacles the author encountered provide the reader with a window into life in Casablanca, with all its checks and balances. Surviving the renovation of *The Caliph's House* is a nightmare that makes one appreciate the saner, if frustrating issues we western renovator's regularly encounter. Tame by comparison. An interesting, humorous, and enlightening read.

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