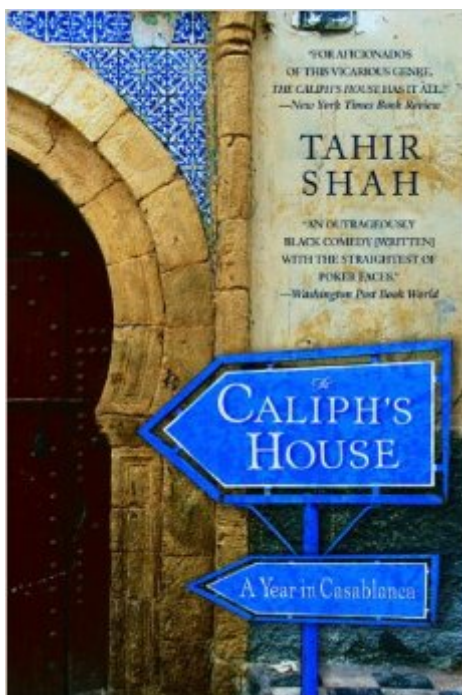


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# The Caliph's House: A Year In Casablanca



## 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

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## Customer Reviews

This is a very funny and readable account of Tahir Shah's ordeals trying to remodel a decrepit palace in Casablanca. In some ways, Shah's account reads like a man's Moroccan version of *UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN*. It's less romantic and food-oriented, but references the similar nightmares and pleasures involved with restoring an ancient dwelling. This book is VERY funny. Tahir Shah is an Englishman of Afghani descent, so Morocco really is a culture shock for him. The odd and "backwards" aspects of trying to get things done in Morocco are amusing and educational. For instance, Shah ends up having to have the house exorcised for jinni (genies) and even having to take a second wife (it's not what you might think) to finish the project. Looking at the other reader reviews below, it's clear that I'm not the only one with a high opinion of *THE CALIPH'S HOUSE*. Trust us!

I found out about Tahir Shah's "The Caliph's House" in an issue of the International Herald Tribune. Although I've lived in Spain, speak French, and have many friends from Northern Africa (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco), I've not yet had the pleasure of visiting Morocco, where Tahir Shah moved his wife Rachana and children to escape the stale, boring life of London. Raised by an Afghan father on tribal legends and childhood treks through the Atlas Mountains, Shah is drawn by the sense of exotic beauty and deep-seated cultural values of Morocco, enough so that he purchases a run-down estate in a shantytown. The Caliph's House is filled with traces of bygone beauty: secret gardens in inner courtyards, mysterious locked rooms, and unlimited potential for restoration: the beautiful bejmat mosaics and fountains that Islamic art has been famous for for centuries, carved cedar shelves, grand doors. Shah quickly realizes that despite its French appearance and legacy, Casablanca is purely North African, governed by age-old ritual and superstition: Jinns that rule his new home and cause accidents and deaths, workmen that never finish a single project, the constant headache of bargaining for every item needed for restoration, living next to seething slums where Arab Gulf Al-Qaeda members are recruiting in the local mosque. The cast of characters is immensely entertaining, serving to outline the contrasts in modern Morocco: a French countess who was a friend of Shah's grandfather, a pessimistic French diplomat, an elderly stamp collector who trades stamps for stories, three guardians who come with the house but end up causing nothing but headaches, a local gangster and his trophy wife, and the servants that Shah hires to attempt to add rule and order back to his life, but who quickly teach him that to accomplish anything, he needs to think like a true Moroccan. Unlike the myriad of home restoration shows on the BBC and HGTV, Shah's project is plagued by disaster from the beginning: a phony architect and his bungling workers knock down walls with glee, Shah's black market sand provider is jailed on prostitution

charges, his mail-order furniture from India (ordered after several glasses of wine) and personal library of 10,000 books is held hostage by Moroccan customs, and the supposed haunting by Jinns is enough to nearly drive Shah and family from Dar Khalifa, but cooler heads and a new cultural awakening prevails. Shah learns to admire the wealth of cultural traditions that guide Morocco, reconnects with his famous grandfather, who spent the last years of his life in Casablanca, and finds the journey ultimately rewarding. Full of sharp humour, eagle-eyed observations gleaned from a lifetime of travels, and an eye for beauty, "The Caliph's House" is a delightful, exotic journey into the cultural heart of Morocco, full of whispering fountains, lush secret gardens, the glitter of glazed tile mosaics, the muezzin's chant, and the call of the unknown.

The Caliph's House is my favorite book by Tahir Shah so far. As enjoyable as its predecessors, it takes the usual features of Shah's work -surreal adventures, humor, lack of self-consciousness, endurance of obstacles, extravagant characters, revelatory moments- to a higher level of complexity. Shah weaves his tale in an intricate-yet-seamless pattern of interconnected stories, echoing the reconstruction process of the house itself. Some of the smaller stories, particularly the ones involving non-linear problem solving, have an old or timeless feeling to them; they seem to have come out of a folk-tale collection. The book manages to convey a great deal of knowledge about Morocco, while touching on issues such as religious fanaticism or the narrowness of Western life ("the cycle of zombie commuting and pseudo-friends"). Above all, The Caliph's House is about dealing with a different and unknown culture. What the reader encounters is not standardized tourism or paranoid confrontation or a platitude-laden celebration of multiculturalism, but something subtler and richer (and more fun). There is much to learn from Tahir Shah's attitude: a mixture of respect, flexibility, humor, trust and sheer stubbornness.

Unlike books that make you feel you have visited a place, reading THE CALIPH'S HOUSE is like being there. Besides the Moroccans and their jinns, you meet Americans, you flashback to Britain, then get into the seamy side of Ramadan. It's like what really happens when you visit a strange country and get off the beaten track--far from what the programmed tourist agent or the propagandist ever shows you. I like Tahir Shah. His book comes off like going on an adventure with a good friend.

I couldn't put this book down. My husband is Moroccan and I've spent a lot of time with in his family home there. I could relate to a lot of Shah's descriptions, based on my own and friends'

experiences. Shah's writing is wonderful, funny and not at all condescending like other "live abroad" books.

I couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry! (Bet Tahir felt the same way!) What can I say. I felt like I was back in Morocco living through what must have seemed like hell some days... but Mr. Shah took it all in stride! I have to hand it to him... he is a very patient man. The personal rewards of undertaking such a huge project and over seeing so many workers, who speak a foreign tongue, would have driven most people around the bend. But instead, Tahir Shah made this journey a rich adventure, not only for himself, but for the reader. I've spent quite some time in Morocco and have had my share of friends from there, but I have never read about these people written in such a wonderful and loving way. With all their crazy beliefs, customs and ways of life, they are the most generous and alive people I have ever met. Bravo to Tahir for writing such a real and honest account of these people and himself!

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