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Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: Lost luggage, found perspective

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 10.12.25



(Picryl)

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The thing about preparing for Morocco is that one inevitably turns to the wrong material. Bogart, for instance. I watch “Casablanca” the week before departure, my fourth viewing if memory serves (and memory, at 40-something, serves with increasing selectivity). Then “The Man Who Knew Too Much,” because why stop at one vintage delusion?

These films have precisely nothing to do with Morocco – or everything to do with it –depending on your tolerance for Hollywood’s blithely imagined geography.

What they don’t show you in the movies is Charles de Gaulle airport, that fluorescent purgatory where the gate on my e-ticket turns out to be fiction, requiring me to backtrack via train to another terminal, through security again (because once is never enough), only to discover 25 Brazilian tourists at the ready.

Now, I love Brazil. My ex-wife is Brazilian. I spend considerable time there, enchanted by the place and its people, but somewhere between Rio and Paris, the concept of orderly boarding has been lost to history. In Zone 5, they may be, but the moment the agent picks up her microphone, it is Pamplona, and they are the bulls.

I should mention that Morocco – the actual country, not the Hollywood version – has been receiving disorganized visitors for approximately 12 centuries. The Almoravid dynasty in the 11th century welcomed Berber tribes, Andalusian refugees, and sub-Saharan traders, all of whom arrived without boarding groups or assigned seating. They managed. The question is whether *I* will.

My aisle seat on Air France has minimal legroom. I arrange myself into something resembling human posture when a young French fellow materializes – punk aesthetics, magnificent fro, earrings, tattoos, the full rapper repertoire.

“Move,” he commands.

“Pardon?” I say.

“Move your seat,” he clarifies. “I’m taller.”

I give him some version of Rhett Butler: “Frankly, sir, I don’t give a d---.” Irritated, he sits in his assigned seat. We do not speak again.

Three hours of flight: no TV, no music, no distractions except the growing awareness that this airline has decided entertainment is optional.

Then comes the sound.

At first, I think I’ve imagined it – exhaustion and recycled air can alter one’s perception – but no. Barking. High-pitched, anxious yip-yip-yipping as we descend. Not a Georgia Bulldogs fan, as I briefly hope, but an actual dog, somewhere in the cabin, sharing its feelings about our rapid approach to earth. You don’t appreciate how sound carries in an aluminum tube until a canine provides live commentary on your landing.

The Brazilians applaud when we touch down. I forget that’s their custom. Charming, really, except it signals the beginning of Act Two: The Rush to Deplane, a performance wherein orderly row-by-row queuing is replaced by a dysfunctional scramble.

Baggage claim. Marrakesh. An hour watching the carousel deliver everyone’s luggage but mine. The Almoravids conquered an empire spanning from Senegal to Spain in the 11th century; I can’t conquer the simple task of arriving with my belongings.

Finally, I accept the truth: my suitcase has decided to arrive separately, on its own schedule.

Taxi to the hotel. No clothes. The front desk attendants, bless their hearts, produce a toothbrush as if it were frankincense.

I shower, wrap myself in a robe, and contemplate the absurdity of my position: Here I am at a civilizational crossroads where Romans, Arabs, Berbers, and Europeans have been intersecting for millennia, and I am wearing hotel terry cloth yet cannot figure out how to turn out the lights.

Morning, alas, arrives with its inevitable bureaucracy. I taxi back to the airport – the same one I left the night before – only to discover that my luggage has indeed arrived, but baggage claim won't open for another hour. I wait, retrieve my prodigal suitcase, and return to the hotel, realizing that I have no cash for my driver. Worse, the ATM objects to my bank card. So, I negotiate with the front desk, much like I am brokering the Treaty of Fes (signed in 1912, when Morocco became a French protectorate).

Then – *then* – breakfast: Moroccan coffee, which is essentially French coffee with North African self-confidence; pastries that taste of butter and centuries of culinary cross-pollination; my luggage beside me like a chastened pet. A week in Morocco stretches ahead, full of promise and properly packed clothing.

Sitting here, caffeinated and finally, *finally* whole again, I understand something about being American that all my Bogart films didn't teach me: we are spoiled beyond measure.

Not in a bad way, but as people who've forgotten that most of human history involved showing up without confirmation emails, wearing the same clothes for weeks, drinking whatever water is available, and calling it Tuesday. We have engineered comfort to such a degree that its absence feels like a catastrophe: a lost suitcase becomes a Greek tragedy; no in-flight entertainment becomes privation.

And here's the thing: This capacity for indignation over minor inconveniences is perhaps our greatest luxury. To come from a place so organized, so systematized, so relentlessly functional that a gate change feels like chaos? That's not a character flaw. It's extraordinary fortune.

Morocco has been Morocco for millennia, gracefully receiving the prepared and the clueless, the luggage-bearing and the luggage-less, and it will remain Morocco long after we've gone home to our reliable liens and ATMs.

I sip my coffee. The week spreads before me like an unread book. Somewhere in the medina, merchants who can trace their family businesses back to the Marinid dynasty open their stalls. And I, American, temporary, grateful, finally in possession of clean underwear, am ready to join them.

Maybe the real luxury isn't comfort at all, but the chance to be uncomfortable in a world still willing to surprise you.

Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Advisor for the Capital Markets Initiative at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at AllenMendenhall.com.

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