



The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca

By Tahir Shah

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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.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. When Shah, his pregnant wife and their small daughter move from England to Morocco, where he'd vacationed as a child, he enters a realm of "invisible spirits and their parallel world." Shah buys the Caliph's House, once a palatial compound, now heavy with algae, cobwebs and termites. Unoccupied for a decade, the place harbors a willful jinni (invisible spirit), who Shah, the rational Westerner, reluctantly grasps must be exorcised by traditional means. As Shah remodels the haunted house, he encounters a cast of entertaining, sometimes bizarre characters. Three retainers, whose lives are governed by the jinni, have attached themselves to the property. Confounding craftsmen plague but eventually beautify the house. Intriguing servants come and go, notably Zohra, whose imaginary friend, a 100-foot tall jinni, lives on her shoulder. A "gangster neighbor and his trophy wife" conspire to acquire the Caliph's House, and a countess remembers Shah's grandfather and his secrets. Passers-through offer eccentricity (Kenny, visiting 15 cities on five continents where *Casablanca* is playing; Pete, a convert to Islam, seeking "a world without America"). There is a thin, dark post-9/11 thread in Shah's elegantly woven tale. The dominant colors, however, are luminous. "[L]ife not filled with severe learning curves was no life at all," Shah observes. Trailing Shah through his is sheer delight. Illus. (Jan.)

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

In the March 2006 issue of *The Atlantic*, Terry Castle faced his addiction to the shelter magazines and furnishings catalogues that drive the "billion dollar business of home improvement." These same addicts put books like Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* and Frances Mayes's *Under the Tuscan Sun* atop the best seller lists. Travel writer Tahir Shah (*In Search of King Solomon's Mines*; *Sorcerer's Apprentice*) possesses the same idealistic (and some critics say naïve) pursuit of greener grass through domestic upheaval. While critics compare his book with the aforementioned classics of the genre, it is Shah's dark humor and skillful depiction of Casablanca that distinguish *The Caliph's House*. Though less intrepid souls might not care to live there, reviewers insist a few nights at Dar Khalifa in the company of such a talented writer is time well spent.

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From [Booklist](#)

Afghan writer Shah uproots his family from the comforts of London and moves to Casablanca. There he purchases not just any house but the abandoned residence of the caliph. Undeterred by suicide bombers, jinns, and innumerable job applicants, Shah installs his family in the decrepit house and begins to restore its walls, its gardens, and its fountains. Reconstructing the house immerses Shah in Moroccan everyday life. He has to deal with plagues of rats, swarms of bees, and the ever-threatening prospect of organized crime. Shah's picture of Moroccan society, its deeply held Islamic faith, its primitive superstition, and its raucous economy makes for endlessly fascinating reading. Particularly telling is his encounter with the realities of Ramadan, which seems to bring out both the best and worst in people's characters. Shah is cautious not to judge a society different from Western expectations, and he never makes fun of the odd characters who pepper his narrative. Shah's own heritage as both Afghan and Briton blesses him with a unique and penetrating point of view. *Mark Knoblauch*

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Users Review

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