

MOROCCO & TUNISIA

'Our Full Morocco & Tunisia Combo'

23 days

Created on: 25 Apr, 2024

Day 1 Arrive in Casablanca

Today we arrive in Morocco and transfer to our central Casablanca hotel.

Casablanca is believed to have been a Phoenician settlement and later a Berber town. It was conquered by the Almohads in 1188, and developed by Sultan Abd el-Moumen as a port. In the 14th century the Portuguese established a settlement here on the site of the village of Anfa, but when it became a pirates' base in 1468, they destroyed it, repeating this act in 1515. The Portuguese reestablished themselves in the late 16th century, renaming the town Casa Blanca, staying until 1755, when an earthquake destroyed the settlement.

Overnight in Casablanca.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Casablanca - Rabat - Fes

This morning we visit the Hassan II Mosque, a glorious structure believed to be only second in size to Islam's most important site, Mecca in Saudi Arabia. The mosque was inaugurated in August 1993, the culmination of five years of intensive labour by over 30,000 workers and craftsmen. Non-Muslims may enter as part of a guided tour.

From Casablanca we travel to Rabat, Morocco's third oldest Imperial City and modern capital. Among the sites in Rabat that we will visit are the Hassan Tower and the Mohammed V Mausoleum. Leaving Rabat we travel to Fes arriving in time for dinner.

The historic city of Fes lies in the Oued Sebou basin, astride the traditional trade route from the Sahara to the Mediterranean and the path from Algeria and the Islamic heartland beyond. For centuries the dominant axis within Morocco was of Fes and Marrakech, two cities linked by their immense power and rivalry. Fes is still seen as the spiritual and cultural capital and holds an enduring fascination for visitors with one of the largest historic medinas full of monuments reflecting the different periods of Morocco's imperial past.

Overnight in Fes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Fes - Volubilis - Meknes - Fes

This morning we visit the impressive site of Volubilis, the best-preserved Roman site in Morocco. Situated on the ledge of a long plateau, the dramatic site was once one of the Roman Empire's most remote outposts. Our local guide here will take you on tour of the site; we also allow free time for photographs.

We also see the sacred town of Moulay Idriss (photo stop only). Moulay Idriss is a dramatic sight, houses and mosques piled up around two rock outcrops, with the 'zaouia,' or sanctuary, in between.

We continue to Meknes, Morocco's youngest Imperial City. We feature the Bab El Mansour gate dating from 1752, complete with its Corinthian columns. The city was built by a massive army of slaves, both Moroccan and Christian, and the Sultan was in particular famed for his barbaric treatment of these people, supposedly interring them in the walls. The city contained within it all that was necessary for such a large population and military machine, with store houses, stables, armouries, exercise areas, gardens and ponds.

We return to Fes.

Overnight in Fes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Fes: City Tour

Today we will have a walking tour of Fes El Bali, the extraordinary medieval walled city. Once inside the gates of this great spectacle, you will see an entirely different view of life in Morocco. In contrast to the well-planned Ville Nouvelle, the old city is a labyrinth of alleys and lanes lined with shops, mosques, homes and schools. In 1980 UNESCO designated the medina a World Heritage Site.

Our guide will take us to the medina to view the market shops, or suqs. Everything from food to clothing can be purchased. We will see the famous dying works with the brightly coloured cloth hanging to dry. A visit to the Royal Palace, several mosques, theological schools, and shops where we can see craftsmen tailoring their work will round out the day's tour. Today's walk is an amazing look into the life of the Moroccan city dweller where little has changed over the centuries.

Overnight in Fes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Fes - Erfoud

We have a morning departure for the Middle Atlas, a region of folded mountains and high, windswept plateaux, vast forests of cork oak and cedar, and lakes and streams full of trout. This is Berber country and sheep and goat-rearing is the main occupation of these resilient, friendly people. We drive via the Berber villages of Imouzzer du Kandari; Ifrane, a fairy-tale town unlike any other in Morocco with white-walled French-style villas with steep red roofs and gables. As the altitude increases, we come to a bare, arid, sandy plateau with another range of mountains in the distance.

We continue to Erfoud, an attractive town -- red and sandy, exuding desert ambiance.

Overnight in Erfoud.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Rissani & Merzouga Dunes

This morning we journey to the historic 8th century caravan town of Rissani to visit the Tafilalt Oasis. The first capital of the Tafilalt and the last stop on the caravan routes south, Rissani has a special place in Moroccan lore. The ruling Alaouite dynasty (from whom Morocco's current ruler, Mohammed VI, is a descendant) launched its bid for power here before triumphing finally in Fes and Marrakech. Today, a quarter of Rissani's population still inhabits a large 17th-century ksar in the center of town.

Later this afternoon we drive by 4WD vehicle to Merzouga to witness sunset over the dunes. We have time to explore the dunes on foot, or by camel! This is a magical Saharan landscape, with huge drifting expanses of sand dunes reaching heights of more than 45 metres (148 ft). Their colour shifts from pink to gold to red to white depending on the time of day.

Overnight at Merzouga.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Merzouga - Todra Gorge - Ouarzazate

This morning we depart for the Todra Gorge, one of Morocco's most spectacular sights. It is a vast fault in the plateau separating the High Atlas from the Jbel Sarhro, two sheer cliffs over 300 metres (958 ft) high separated by a narrow corridor only 20 metres (66 ft) wide.

Later we cross the southern slopes of the High Atlas before arriving at the captivating city of Ouarzazate. We stop en route in the heart of the Dades Valley at the oasis of Kelaa Mgouna.

Overnight in Ouarzazate.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Ouarzazate - Ait Benhaddou - Taroudannt

Our first visit this morning is the Kasbah Taourirt, once belonging to the famous El Glaoui governors. We then proceed to the kasbah of Ait Benhaddou, one of the most spectacular sites in Morocco. The site, which has received extensive renovations from UNESCO, towers high above the El Mellah River and has some of the most highly decorated dark red pise walls. We arrive in the new village on the west bank of the river and proceed to cross the river, usually with an entourage of local children.

After a brief tour and time for independent exploration, we continue our journey toward Taroudannt through the Souss Valley. The area is rich in agriculture, producing oranges, bananas, tomatoes and other crops.

Overnight in Taroudannt.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Taroudannt: City Tour

As the capital of the Souss Valley, Taroudannt has traditionally been an important staging post in the Trans-Sahara caravan routes. The old city is surrounded by nearly 5 km (3 miles) of rich red-ochre walls. The walls, considered by many to be the best preserved in Morocco, give the town an elegant feeling. This morning we have a caleche (horse-drawn carriage) ride around the walls of the city before beginning our walking tour of the suq area. The town is famous for its two suqs: the Souk Arabe and the Marche Berbere. The former specialises in handicrafts and jewelry; the later is famous for house-wares, spices, wooden objects and furniture.

This afternoon is free for you to explore on your own. You may wish to spend more time in the bazaar or take a walk around the impressive city walls and bastions.

Overnight in Taroudannt.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Taroudannt - Essaouira

This morning we travel toward the Atlantic coast and make a short stop in Agadir. From here we travel northward to the fortified, whitewashed fishing village of Essaouira. Once a pirate community, the town is located on a rock promontory overlooking the sometimes raging Atlantic Ocean. There was a small Phoenician settlement at Essaouira, previously called Magdoura or Mogador, a corruption of the Berber word 'Amegdul,' meaning 'well-protected'. The Romans were interested in the purple dye produced from shellfish which they used to colour the robes of the rich.

Orson Welles stayed here for some time, filming part of Othello at the Skala. In the 1960s Essaouira had a brief reputation as a 'happening place', which attracted hippies, notably the rock star, Jimi Hendrix. Before dinner you may want to stroll along the extensive beach or visit the colourful fish market.

Overnight in Essaouira.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Essaouira: Walking Tour

Essaouira is one of Morocco's most charming towns. Old Mogador was occupied in the 15th century by the Portuguese who built the

fortifications around the harbour. These impressive ramparts still give the city a fortified look.

Today you will be guided on a leisurely walking tour of this coastal city. The port area offers an interesting look into the fishery industry of Morocco, and the jewellery suq offers some of the best silver items available. You may also wish to visit one of the many art galleries or visit the Musee Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah which features excellent displays of marquetry and handicrafts. Be sure to visit the Marchée d'espices (spice market) where you can purchase your cooking spices or pick up some "cures" for whatever ails you.

Overnight in Essaouira.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Essaouira - Marrakech

Today we travel from Essaouira inland to Marrakech. As we approach Marrakech, the scenery becomes flatter and greener, as the city is the centre of a large palmerie oasis. You will notice an abundance of the pink mud-brick buildings amid this tree-filled city. With its unique character and charm, Marrakech lures visitors with a hospitable climate and superb location.

This evening we visit the famous Djemma el-Fna in the centre of the city. The Djemma el-Fna is like nowhere else in North Africa. This "Assembly of the Dead," offers a spectacle that is a must-see when visiting Morocco. In the busy square you will witness a carnival of musicians, snake charmers, acrobats, story-tellers, witch doctors, dentists, clowns, monkey's and the like. The enduring smells of the Djemma's food stalls, piled high with platters of specialty cuisine, are well worth a visit just for the experience.

Overnight in Marrakech.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Marrakech: City Tour

Marrakech is one of the world's most enchanting cities. The city is situated on a lush palmerie and city dates to the Almoravid Dynasty circa 1670. Founded by Youssef bin Tachfine, the city became the dominant centre of Morocco. Our morning walking tour takes us to the Koutoubia, nearly 70 m (230 feet) high and emulating the classic Moroccan design. We will also take a short walk through the Mellah or Jewish quarter.

This afternoon we allow free time to visit one of the many gardens -- the Majorelle Garden is recommended. Within the gardens is an excellent museum displaying a collection of Berber objects originating from diverse regions of Morocco, from the Rif to the Sahara.

Overnight in Marrakech.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Marrakech, Morocco - Tunis, Tunisia

Today we fly from Marrakech to Tunis (likely via Casablanca) and transfer to our hotel.

Tunis, the capital of the country, is a bustling metropolis and the home of one-sixth of the country's population. Situated in the Gulf of Tunis on the Mediterranean Sea, the modern city extends along the coastal plains and to the surrounding hills. It is a city of many contrasts, with its modern office buildings, shopping malls and European cafes, the colonial French style of the Ville Nouvelle, and the dynamic Arab souks of Tunis' old Medina.

Overnight in Tunis.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Tunis: The Medina, Bardo Museum, Sidi Bou Said & Carthage

We begin the day with a walking tour through one of two UNESCO sites we visit today (two of the eight in the entire country) -- the old medina of Tunis with its narrow lanes crowded with mosques, tombs, and palaces. This was Tunis until the arrival of the French in the late 19th century, who subsequently built their quarters outside of the "Sea Gate" -- now the Ville Nouvelle. En route we will see the Great Mosque of Tunis, Jemaa Zitouna, and the elegant Place du Gouvernement.

We then visit the Bardo Museum, which houses the largest and finest collection of ancient mosaics in the world. These mosaics were discovered in the wealthiest of Roman villas in the many ancient cities found in Tunisia. Rich patrons commissioned a vast array of subjects and themes, from scenes of gods and goddesses, daily life (hunting, fishing, harvesting), the zodiac, seasons, amphitheatre games. From their exquisite details, we can understand why the North African school of mosaicists was the finest in the ancient world, and whose masterpieces can be found throughout the Mediterranean.

We then head to Sidi Bou Said, a charming hilltop village famous for its beautifully decorated blue and white architecture. Visited by the likes of Cervantes, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Foucault, Sidi Bou Said made an indelible impression on the works of Paul Klee, August Macke and Louis Moilliet who stayed here together in 1914. You will have some free time for lunch and to explore this beautiful village overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

We continue to Carthage -- the legendary city of Queen Dido and Hannibal (today's second UNESCO site). We will begin with a visit to the ancient Punic cemetery -- the Tophet, or sanctuary to Baal and Tanit. Roman propaganda, hostile to their enemy, stated that the Carthaginians ritually sacrificed their children here to the gods. Our next stop is the Punic ports, once the foundation of Carthage's prosperity. Here we see the remains of what was once a sophisticated naval harbour, complete with ship sheds for dry-docking their warships, and a elaborate merchant harbor, for their fleets of cargo ships which engaged in trade throughout the Mediterranean. From here we visit Byrsa hill -- the ancient acropolis and the first area to be settled by the Phoenicians. Crowning the hill is the 19th century Cathedral of St. Louis and the Carthage museum with finds excavated from the city. Our final stop is the Antonine Baths -- the monumental public baths of the city. In the 2nd century AD, these were the largest baths in North Africa and the 3rd largest in the Roman world.

Overnight in Tunis.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Tunis - Bulla Regia & Dougga - Tunis

We leave Tunis early this morning for Bulla Regia. This ancient site is famous for its unique subterranean villas, which belonged to the wealthiest of its inhabitants; we descend to see these luxurious villas and their splendid floor mosaics, still in situ.

After lunch we continue to Dougga, the best-preserved Roman city in Tunisia and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The monumental Capitolium temple stands in the city's Forum, with a breathtaking view over the green rolling hills and plains below. The theaters, gymnasia, baths, shops, stone paved streets and lavish villas are all testimony to the golden age this North African city enjoyed during the Roman era.

Overnight in Tunis.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Tunis - Kairouan: City Touring

This morning we head to Kairouan, travelling through the fertile valleys and rolling hills of the North. Since antiquity to the present, Tunisia is still referred to by other Maghreb countries by the epithet, "Tunisia the Green." This area is a favorite haven for storks, who build their nest on top of telephone towers, minarets and rooftops. We head toward into the Sahel, the transitional barren region between the fertile north and the Sahara desert to the south.

The Holy City of Kairouan is not only the spiritual center of Tunisia, it is the first Islamic city to be established in North Africa, and the 4th oldest Muslim city outside of Arabia. Founded as the capital of the region in 670 AD by the Arab general Oqba ibn Nafi, Kairouan soon acquired magnificent ramparts, mosques, palaces and hammams. Our first stop is the Aghlabid basins, enormous artificial reservoirs constructed in the 9th century to store water for Kairouan, as part of a monumental system in which water was brought by aqueducts to the city from 36km away.

We visit the Great Mosque of Kairouan, the oldest, largest and most important mosque in Tunisia. The lowest story of the towering minaret is thought to date to 730 AD, one century earlier than the structure of the present mosque. Inside we will see the colonnaded courtyard with its ancient wellheads and sundials, and the forest of columns of the prayer sanctuary. The hundreds of columns all differ from one another, in marble types, size, shape and capital designs, since most were taken from ancient Roman sites and reused in the mosque's construction. Our final stop before leaving Kairouan is the Mausoleum of Sidi Sahab, also known as the Mosque of the Barber.

We finish our day with a walking tour of old medina of Kairouan -- the entire medina is protected by UNESCO. Meandering through the lanes, we will stop to admire the beautiful traditional doors and architectural styles, the main monuments, markets, pastry shops and traditional workshops.

Overnight in Kairouan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Kairouan - Sbeitla - Tozeur

We continue to the spectacular Roman city of Sufeitula -- modern Sbeitla. The Roman civic center is incredibly photogenic, due to the excellent state of preservation its three monumental temples dedicated to Juno, Jupiter and Minerva towering over the Forum. Sbeitla, like other North African cities, prospered in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD under the Pax Romana. Upon entering the site, we will see olive press -- one of many in the city, since the inhabitants here became extremely wealthy from the trade of olives and olive oil. After visiting the forum and its temples, we will walk through Sbeitla's stone paved streets to see the public baths, the theater, and numerous Christian basilicas with their elaborate baptisteries covered in colourful mosaics.

Heading south, we arrive in the late afternoon at the fascinating oasis town of Tozeur. In medieval times, Tozeur was an important cultural and market center, due to its strategic location on the caravan routes. Merchants from North and West Africa gathered in this thriving oasis, trade such goods as wool, dates, gold, ivory, salt and slaves. Some of the finest dates of the world are grown in the region, the deglat nour or "finger of light". Medieval accounts state that over 1,000 camels used to leave here per day, laden only with dates!

On arrival we will visit the palmerie to view the various crops being grown and to absorb the oasis atmosphere.

Overnight in Tozeur.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 19 Tozeur - Douz - Matmata - Djerba

Our journey continues eastwards across Chott El Jerid, Tunisia's largest salt lake, extending over 5,000km². The chott lies 30m below sea level, and is a remnant from over 1.5 million years ago when the area was flooded by the sea. Water on the surface of the salt floor reflects strange hues of pink and yellow, and the refraction of light on this depression often creates mirages.

Our next stop is Douz, the "Gateway of the Sahara", another ancient oasis town surrounded by vast expanses of sand dunes. The final leg of our journey takes us to the legendary island of Djerba, where we will spend the first of two nights. Our drive takes us through one of the main olive growing regions of the country; Tunisia has over 65 million olive trees (6 for each inhabitant!) and is currently the 4th largest exporter of olive oil in the world.

We stop at Matmata, where the inhabitants live in rock-hewn dwellings ("troglodyte" homes), some of which are over 400 years old. We will visit the pit dwelling of a local family who will happily show us around. We will also stop to see the cave home which appeared in the first Star Wars film (1977) and was later converted into Hotel Sidi Driss.

Overnight in Djerba.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 The Isle of Djerba

We will spend the morning exploring the sites of this splendid island, the country's most recently-named UNESCO site. Originally settled by the Phoenicians, the isle of Djerba is the mythical place where Odysseus encountered the Lotus Eaters during his journey back home from Troy. Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Vandals, Normans, Arabs, Spaniards, and Ottoman Turks -- all have come to Djerba and left their footprint. Historically Djerba has been known for its sponge fishing and agriculture -- here we can find olive trees which are over 1000 years old. The island today is one of Tunisia's most famous resorts, with its small villages, charming towns, and 125 km of sandy beaches. Today's inhabitants of Djerba are culturally distinct from mainland Tunisians, and are proud of their customs, dress and dialect.

Our first visit is the excellent ethnographic Museum of Patrimoine, which celebrates the island's peoples and traditions. Here we will see displays of marriage festivals and traditional wedding dresses from various parts of the country, traditional costumes of the island, circumcision ceremonies, household and agricultural implements, and displays of typical arts of weaving, calligraphy, jewelry and metalwork. We proceed to the center of Guellala, the pottery producing center of the island where we stop to see the kilns and workshops. Next is El Ghriba ("The Miracle") synagogue: one of the oldest synagogues and most important Jewish pilgrimage sites in the world. Djerba is home to one of the world's most ancient Jewish communities: tradition states that they arrived here after the First Destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 566 BC. This holy synagogue is fascinating for its historic and spiritual importance, as well as for its distinctive style of architecture (a marvelous blend of Jewish, Tunisian, Maghrebian and Sephardic elements). We proceed to the main town Houmt Souq, where first we shall stop to see the medieval fort, Borj el Kebir; this was the scene of a bloody conflict in 1560 between the forces of Dragut, the Barbary corsair, and Philip II of Spain. In town, we will explore the fruit and vegetable markets, watch the excitement at the daily fish auctions, and wander the narrow lanes and souqs. You will have free time to explore more of this charming town, perhaps do some shopping and have lunch at one of the many restaurants in the center.

The rest of the afternoon is at leisure. You may wish to stay in Houmt Souq, go to the beach, or relax at the hotel.

Overnight in Djerba.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 21 Djerba - Sfax

Our drive continues to the coastal city of Sfax where we arrive in time for a walk through the medina. This is the second largest city in Tunisia; today Sfax a major commercial and manufacturing centre (mainly of olive oil, almonds, phosphates and textiles) with very little tourism. Inside the massive 9th century ramparts of the old walled city, is the country's finest "living and working" medina.

On arrival we'll walk through the medina of Sfax; part of the Blacksmith's souq was featured in the film, 'The English Patient.' We will do a walk through the historic lanes, markets and workshops before continuing inland to El Djem (ancient Thysdrus).

Overnight in Sfax.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 22 Sfax - El Djem - Monastir - Tunis

Today we travel to the impressive site of El Djem, the final UNESCO site featured on our tour.

Our first El Djem visit is the excellent Archaeological Museum, with its splendid collection of floor mosaics from the villas of the wealthiest inhabitants of El Djem. Just behind the museum is the House of Africa, an opulent villa covering over 3000 sq m which was found in the center of town, dismantled and moved here in its entirety. The villa is named after one of its excellent fine floor mosaics depicting the Goddess of Africa (the only mosaic of its kind in the world).

The sudden appearance of the massive Roman Amphitheatre is an extraordinary sight. With a capacity of 30,000 spectators, it rises 3 stories above the surrounding plains -- though smaller than the Colosseum in Rome, it is in many ways more impressive due to its excellent state of preservation. It was built during the reigns of the (usurper) Emperors Gordian I and his son, Gordian II, both of whom reigned for only a few weeks before being defeated by the legions sent from Rome. Wild beast fights, gladiatorial combats, circuses and games were held here. We climb up to the upper tiers for excellent views of the arena and surrounding countryside, before descending to the basement to see the chambers where scenery, gladiators, prisoners and wild animals were kept. Wild animals were hoisted by a sophisticated (if not theatrical)

system of elevators and pulleys into the arena to the delight of the spectators.

Returning to the coast, we go to Monastir to see the 8th century ribat, a kind of fortified Islamic monastery, after which the city is named. The Ribat of Monastir affords wonderful views of the city and the sea. North African ribats were built when the inhabitants were threatened by invading European armies; they served not only a military but religious purpose as well, as fortresses and places of prayer and study for devout soldiers. This spectacular ribat served as a backdrop in numerous films, including Monty Python's 'Life of Brian' and Zeffirelli's 'Jesus of Nazareth.'

Overnight in Tunis.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 23 Departure

Departure from Tunis.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast