

## QUINTESSENTIAL MOROCCO

### Casablanca, Chefchaouen, the Imperial Cities & The Sahara

**15 days**

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#### Day 1 Arrive in Casablanca

Today we arrive in Casablanca, a dynamic modern city built upon layers of history. Believed to have started as a Phoenician and Berber settlement, the area later became a port. After periods of Portuguese influence and destruction, the modern city largely emerged following an 18th-century earthquake, growing into Morocco's economic hub. Casablanca offers a unique feel, where its historical roots blend with a vibrant, forward-looking energy, creating a distinct urban character.

Overnight in Casablanca.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

#### Day 2 Casablanca - Rabat - Chefchaouen

Before leaving Casablanca, we'll 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. After a break for lunch, we continue to Chefchaouen, arriving in time for dinner.

Chefchaouen is renowned globally for its captivating medina, a labyrinth of shady alleyways where whitewashed houses adorned with striking blue turquoise doors and wrought iron windows create a visually stunning scene. Colourful tile-covered roofs add to the charm, while busy squares offer glimpses of local life connected by the town's characteristic steep alleyways.

Overnight in Chefchaouen.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 3 Chefchaouen Touring

Today is dedicated to immersing ourselves in the unique charm of Chefchaouen.

Our orientation walk will guide us through its famous blue-washed streets, the best way to truly absorb the atmosphere of this holy town. We'll have time to wander on foot, discovering hidden corners and picturesque scenes. Perhaps we'll pause at a cafe terrace to admire the view, possibly overlooking the grand Tarik-Ben-Ziad mosque. You'll notice the Andalusian architectural influences in the kasbah and its serene gardens.

We will also visit the interesting ethnographic museum, which houses collections of local embroidery and traditional clothing, including the iconic djellaba, a garment with its origins in this very region. For something different we will visit a traditional oil mill -- there are more than 1,500 of them!

Overnight in Chefchaouen.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 4 Chefchaouen - Ouazzane - Fes

This morning, we bid farewell to Chefchaouen and set off towards the imperial city of Fes. Our drive will initially wind through the scenic Rif

Mountains with vistas of rolling green hills, rugged terrain, and panoramic views, making this leg of our journey a visual treat.

Our first significant stop will be in Ouazzane, a town of considerable spiritual importance in Morocco. Often referred to as "Little Paris" for its serene atmosphere and perhaps a certain understated charm, Ouazzane has historically been a center for Sufism and a place of pilgrimage for both Muslims and Jewish visitors, who come to venerate the tomb of Rabbi Amram ben Diwan. We'll take some time here to explore its tranquil streets and perhaps get some lunch, soaking in the unique ambiance of this "House of Safety," a town that historically stood unwalled, offering refuge.

After our stop in Ouazzane, the landscape will begin to transition. As we leave the mountainous region behind and approach the plains surrounding Fes, you'll notice a shift towards more fertile agricultural landscapes. Olive groves and cultivated fields will become more prominent, signaling our approach to the Sais Plain and the bustling city that awaits. We'll arrive in Fes in the late afternoon.

Overnight in Fes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## **Day 5 From Fes: Exploring Volubilis & Meknes**

Today we embark on a day excursion from Fes to delve into Morocco's rich history, visiting the ancient Roman city of Volubilis and the imperial city of Meknes.

Our journey begins with a drive to Volubilis, a UNESCO World Heritage site that stands as the best-preserved Roman ruins in Morocco. Situated on a fertile plain, this once-thriving outpost of the Roman Empire offers a fascinating glimpse into life here centuries ago. As we explore the site, you'll marvel at the remarkably intact mosaics, depicting scenes from mythology and daily life, the towering Basilica, and the impressive Triumphal Arch. Our local guide will bring the history of this distant Roman province to life, painting a picture of its former glory. You'll have ample time to wander and photograph this evocative location.

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.

A short drive takes us to Meknes, an imperial city that reached its zenith under the rule of Sultan Moulay Ismail in the 17th century. Here we'll discover the grandeur of its past, starting with the monumental Bab Mansour, a magnificent gate considered one of the most beautiful in Morocco. We'll also visit the Mausoleum of Moulay Ismail, a place of serene beauty and historical significance. Prepare to be impressed by the sheer scale of the Heri es-Souani, the vast royal granaries and stables, which hint at the power and ambition of the Alaouite dynasty. We'll have time for lunch in Meknes and to absorb the atmosphere of this less-crowded imperial city before returning to Fes in the late afternoon.

Overnight in Fes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## **Day 6 Fes: City Tour**

Today we will have a full-day guided walking tour of Fes El Bali, the extraordinary medieval walled city (we'll have several breaks for a quick rest/refreshment and a longer one for lunch). 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 on-foot exploration of Fes begins with a breathtaking panoramic view of the entire city from its northern vantage point. This offers a fantastic orientation, allowing you to appreciate the sprawling Medina and its surrounding hills. We then delve into the craftsmanship of the Potters' Quarter, where you can witness traditional ceramic making techniques passed down through generations. Following this, we'll see the impressive gates of the Royal Palace (exterior view) and explore the Mellah, the historic Jewish quarter, with its distinct architecture and atmosphere.

Also along our route, we'll visit the exquisite Medersa Bou Inania, a stunning example of Marinid architecture. We'll also view the exterior of the revered Kairouine Mosque, one of the oldest universities in the world (non-Muslims cannot enter).

Our walk continues to the sacred Tomb of Moulay Idriss II, the founder of Fes (exterior view), the ornately tiled Nejjarine Fountain, the

bustling Blacksmiths' squares, and the intricate Weaving Quarter. Our sensory journey culminates at the famous Dyers' souk and the traditional tanneries, where you can witness the age-old methods of dyeing leather, a truly unique spectacle.

Finally, as our tour concludes, we'll take in another panoramic view of Fes, this time from the South side of the city, offering a different perspective on this captivating city.

Overnight in Fes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### **Day 7 Fes - Ifrane - Erfoud**

Today we embark on a scenic full-day journey through the diverse landscapes of Morocco, heading towards the gateway to the Sahara. Our route takes us through the Middle Atlas Mountains, where we'll experience its unique character.

Our first stop will be Ifrane, a charming town with an unexpected alpine feel, often likened to a Swiss resort. Here, you'll have some time to explore its neat streets, perhaps see the iconic stone lion, and enjoy the refreshing atmosphere.

Continuing our ascent into the Middle Atlas, we'll enter the Cedar Forest, home to the playful Barbary macaques. We'll make a stop here for a chance to observe these fascinating creatures in their natural habitat amidst the ancient cedar trees.

Our journey then takes us towards Midelt, travelling through apple-growing regions and offering opportunities for scenic photo stops, including the panoramic Col de Ziad. As we approach Midelt, the imposing Djebel Ayachi of the High Atlas will come into view. We'll pause in Midelt for lunch. In the afternoon, we'll continue our drive towards Erfoud, crossing the Tizi N Tahrhemt pass and noting the dramatic Ziz Gorge. As we near Erfoud, you'll begin to see the landscapes transitioning towards the pre-Saharan environment, with views of the Ziz Valley oases and traditional adobe-style constructions (ksour).

Late afternoon arrival in Erfoud, the threshold to the Sahara. **THIS EVENING** you should prepare an overnight bag with everything you will need for our time and overnight at Merzouga and the following morning before our return to Erfoud.

Overnight in Erfoud.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### **Day 8 Rissani & Merzouga Dunes**

This morning we'll explore the region around Erfoud and Rissani, delving into the history and local culture. We'll begin with a visit to Rissani, the historical capital of the Tafilalt region and the origin of Morocco's current ruling dynasty. Here we'll see the peaceful Alaouite Mausoleum and wander through the vibrant local market (souk), a colourful hub of daily life offering everything from produce to handicrafts. We'll also explore a traditional Ksar, an ancient fortified village, to appreciate its unique architecture.

Depending on local opportunities, we might also visit a fossil workshop near Erfoud, this area being known for its unique black marble embedded with fossils. You'll learn about this fascinating aspect of the region's geology.

After lunch, we'll transfer to 4x4 vehicles and begin our journey towards the majestic Erg Chebbi dunes of Merzouga. This exhilarating ride will take us partly off-road, offering fantastic views of the Sahara's changing landscapes. If possible, we'll pause for a traditional tea break in a nomad encampment under a tent and make a stop for a panoramic photo opportunity of the impressive sand dunes.

Upon arrival at Merzouga, an exciting camel excursion awaits. We'll embark on a roughly 20-minute ride that takes us to a vantage point to witness a spectacular sunset over the golden dunes. Following the sunset, it will be another 20-minute ride back. The camels are led by local young men who will accompany us on this memorable experience.

Tonight, we'll settle into our accommodation in Merzouga, with dinner scheduled to allow time for those returning from the camel trek to freshen up and relax after a full day of travel and sightseeing. You can spend the evening under the stars by the campfire with our camp hosts.

Overnight at Merzouga - desert camp.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 9 Merzouga - Todra Gorge - Ouarzazate

This morning we'll embark on an exciting full-day journey from Merzouga to Ouarzazate, exploring the stunning landscapes and cultural heritage of the Moroccan desert. Our adventure begins with a scenic 4WD drive from Merzouga back to Erfoud, where we'll transfer to our bus (and be reunited with our mail luggage) and take a moment to freshen up.

From Erfoud, we'll head to the ancient Khattara irrigation system, a remarkable feat of engineering that showcases the ingenuity of our ancestors. We'll have a photo stop at Tirnehir and then visit the breathtaking Todra Gorges, where towering cliffs rise above the river.

After lunch in Tirnehir, we'll continue our journey along the Dades River Valley, passing through picturesque villages and oases. We'll make photo stops at Boulmane du Dades and Kelaa Mgouna, where we can learn about the local rose water production.

Our final stop will be at the stunning Kasbah Skoura, a 17th-century fortress that offers breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape. We'll take a guided walk around the kasbah and explore the nearby village.

As we arrive in Ouarzazate, we'll check into our hotel after a day filled with spectacular scenery and cultural insights.

Overnight in Ouarzazate.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 10 Ouarzazate - Ait Benhaddou - Marrakech

This morning, we'll start our full day of travel and sightseeing, with something a little different from the iconic sights of Morocco as we visit Atlas Studios in Ouarzazate. For a break from ancient architecture and bustling souks, we'll step into the world of cinema. This famous studio has hosted the production of numerous international films, including epics like "Gladiator" and "Lawrence of Arabia" (though the latter wasn't filmed here, many others of that genre were). Touring the studios offers a unique glimpse behind the scenes of film making in this stunning landscape.

From the cinematic world, we'll travel to the ancient grandeur of the Kasbah of Ait Benhaddou, a UNESCO World Heritage site that truly embodies the timeless beauty of Morocco. This remarkably preserved ksar, with its towering mud-brick walls and traditional architecture, seems to rise organically from the hillside. As we explore its winding alleyways and learn about its history, you'll understand why it has served as a breathtaking backdrop for countless films and continues to captivate visitors with its authentic charm.

Our journey then continues towards Marrakech; this route allows us to appreciate the changing scenery as we leave the desert landscapes behind and head towards the plains surrounding Marrakech. If time permits, we may be able to make a stop at a local argan oil producer, where we can learn about the production of this precious oil. 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, a place 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 11 Marrakech: City Tour

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Marrakech is one of the world's most enchanting cities. The city is situated on a lush palmerie and its history dates to the Almoravid Dynasty circa 1070. Founded by Youssef ibn Tachfin, the city became the dominant centre of Morocco and served as the capital of this powerful medieval empire that stretched across North Africa and into Spain.

Our exploration of Marrakech begins at the iconic Koutoubia Mosque (which you may have already glimpsed), its impressive minaret a landmark of the city. This 12th-century masterpiece, built during the Almohad period, stands as a testament to Morocco's rich Islamic architectural heritage. From here, we'll delve into the Mellah, the historic Jewish quarter, with its distinct atmosphere and architecture that tells the story of Morocco's diverse cultural heritage.

Our cultural immersion continues with a visit to the Museum of Moroccan Arts, Dar Si Said. Housed in a beautiful former palace dating from the late 19th century, this museum showcases the rich artistry and craftsmanship of Morocco, with exhibits featuring intricate woodwork, ceramics, textiles, and jewelry that span centuries of Moroccan creative tradition.

Next we'll explore the opulent Palais Bahia, a stunning 19th-century palace built during the Alaouite Dynasty and intended to be the greatest palace of its time. Wander through its intricate courtyards, admire the detailed tilework, and imagine the lives of the grand viziers and their families who once resided within its walls during Morocco's more recent royal history.

To conclude our guided exploration, we'll step into the serenity of the Majorelle Gardens. This tranquil oasis, with its striking blue architecture, exotic plants, and the fascinating Berber Museum, offers a peaceful escape from the city bustle. Created by French painter Jacques Majorelle in the 1920s and later restored by Yves Saint Laurent, you'll have time to wander through its calming pathways and admire its unique beauty.

The afternoon is then free for you to explore Marrakech further at your own pace. You might choose to revisit the vibrant souks for shopping, explore other gardens, visit a traditional hammam, or relax at a rooftop café and soak in the city's atmosphere while watching the Atlas Mountains in the distance.

Overnight in Marrakech.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### **Day 12 Marrakech - Essaouira**

Today we travel from the bustling inland city of Marrakech to the charming coastal town of Essaouira, making a stop in the small coastal town of Taghazout, a traditional fishing village where blue boats line the beach. Each morning the fishermen make their way out to the ocean to catch fish that is sold fresh later that day; the colour scheme of blue and white boats is echoed by the houses in the village. Taghazout is a popular place for surfers and, despite extensive resort development, still has a laid-back vibe.

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 beach and/or visit the colourful fish market.

Overnight in Essaouira.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### **Day 13 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.

We begin our exploration of Essaouira with a visit to its bustling fishing harbour. The scene is a vibrant tapestry of activity, with an incredible array of fresh fish and seafood being auctioned, loaded, and delivered amidst the lively atmosphere of vendors, onlookers, and the

ever-present seagulls. Don't miss a glimpse of the traditional shipyard.

Next, we'll wander through the narrow back streets along the ramparts to the Skala de la Ville (the city bastion). Perched along the northern cliffs, this offers magnificent panoramic views across the sea, the Medina, the Kasbah, and the old Jewish quarter (Mellah).

Continuing our exploration of the Medina, a UNESCO World Heritage site, we'll make our way towards the Grand Mosque and then to the vibrant Jewellers' Souk, and the aromatic Fish and Spice Souks. We'll also stroll through the historic Mellah, perhaps passing by the Lalla Mira Hammam, which has a cinematic connection. For those interested, a visit to the Haim Pinto Synagogue offers a glimpse into the town's Jewish heritage.

The afternoon is free for you to explore Essaouira at your own pace. You might choose to get further immersed in the Medina for exploring and shopping, or perhaps attend the daily Port Fish Auction for a second look.

Overnight in Essaouira.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 14 Essaouira - Casablanca**

After relatively leisurely morning, we'll leave behind the coastal ambiance of Essaouira and journey northwards along the scenic Atlantic coastline toward Casablanca. Along the way, we'll be treated to expansive views of the rugged cliffs meeting the ocean, perhaps glimpses of sandy beaches, and the ever-present Atlantic breeze.

Around the midpoint of our journey, we'll make a stop in Safi for a break and chance to get some lunch. Safi itself is a picturesque place known for its pottery.

As we travel onwards, the landscape will gradually transition from the windswept feel of the coast to increasing urban activity as we arrive back in Morocco's largest city in time for a bit of a break before our last evening meal together.

Overnight in Casablanca.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 15 Departure**

Departure from Casablanca.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast