

MOROCCO

'Caravans & Kasbahs'

14 days

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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.

Overnight in Fes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 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 5 Fes - Erfoud

Today we embark on a scenic 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 Talrhemt 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 kasbah style hotel with full amenities.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Rissani & Merzouga Dunes

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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. 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 7 Merzouga - Todra Gorge - Ouarzazate

This morning we'll embark on an exciting 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 (with our main pieces of 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 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 pisé 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 - Taghazout - Essaouira

This morning we travel toward the Atlantic coast and make a (possibly lunch) 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 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.

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.

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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 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 its history dates to the Almoravid Dynasty circa 1670. Founded by Youssef bin Tachfine, the city became the dominant centre of Morocco.

Our exploration of Marrakech begins at the iconic Koutoubia Mosque (which you may have already glimpsed), its impressive minaret a landmark of the city. From here, we'll delve into the Mellah, the historic Jewish quarter, with its distinct atmosphere and architecture.

Our cultural immersion continues with a visit to the Museum of Moroccan Arts, Dar Si Said. Housed in a beautiful former palace, this museum showcases the rich artistry and craftsmanship of Morocco, with exhibits featuring intricate woodwork, ceramics, textiles, and jewelry. Next we'll explore the opulent Palais Bahia, a stunning 19th-century palace intended to be the greatest palace of its time. Wander through its intricate courtyards, admire the detailed tile-work, and imagine the lives of those who once resided within its walls.

To conclude our guided exploration, we'll step into the serenity of the Marjorelle Gardens. This tranquil oasis, with its striking blue architecture, exotic plants, and the fascinating Berber Museum, offers a peaceful escape from the city bustle. 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, or relax and soak in the city's atmosphere.

Overnight in Marrakech.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Marrakech.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast