

SOUTHERN SPAIN & MOROCCO

25 days

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Day 1 Arrive in Madrid

Today we arrive in Madrid and transfer to our hotel.

The capital of Spain, located in the heart of the peninsula and right in the center of the Castillian plain, is a cosmopolitan city, a business center, headquarters for the Public Administration, Government, Spanish Parliament and the home of the Spanish Royal Family.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Madrid & The Prado

Madrid reveals its imperial grandeur through a panoramic tour culminating at the world-renowned Prado Museum, where Spanish artistic genius spans five centuries.

Our route to the museum passes Plaza España and the Cervantes Monument, honouring Spain's greatest literary figure whose Don Quixote captured the Spanish spirit of impossible dreams pursued with noble determination.

Originally opened in 1819, the Prado houses the finest works collected by Spanish royalty alongside Spanish paintings gathered from diverse sources over two centuries. This represents one of the world's most important art repositories, including vast collections of Italian masterpieces reflecting Spain's historical connections to the Italian peninsula.

For our purposes, however, we concentrate on Spanish masters whose works define national artistic identity: Velázquez's court portraits revealing imperial Spain's complexity, Goya's paintings spanning from royal commissions to haunting war scenes, Ribera's dramatic chiaroscuro, El Greco's mystical elongated figures, and Zurbarán's contemplative religious scenes.

After our guided tour, we stroll up Gran Vía into Madrid's old quarter, experiencing the capital's vibrant street life firsthand. Free time for lunch and independent exploration follows, with your Tour Leader providing recommendations for shopping, historical sites, and galleries.

Consider visiting the nearby Reina Sofía for important modern art collections, including Picasso's masterpiece "Guernica," or the Museo Naval, among the world's most significant naval museums, documenting Spanish maritime history from the Armada through contemporary times.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Madrid: Toledo Day Trip

Toledo beckons from its rocky promontory surrounded by the Tagus River's protective embrace, where Arab, Jewish, Christian, Roman, and Visigothic elements blend into Spain's most culturally complex city.

Perched dramatically above the meandering river, Toledo's unique position fostered the remarkable cultural synthesis palpable throughout its ancient streets. Narrow alleyways wind between houses, synagogues, churches, and mosques, each architectural style contributing to the city's extraordinary historical tapestry reflecting over two millennia of continuous habitation.

We visit the stunning Cathedral, a Gothic architecture masterpiece whose soaring spaces and intricate stonework demonstrate medieval Christian ambition. The Santa María la Blanca Synagogue showcases Moorish design influences from Granada, illustrating Toledo's position as medieval Spain's multicultural crossroads where different faiths coexisted and cross-pollinated.

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Toledo's crown jewel awaits in the Church of Santo Tomé, housing El Greco's breathtaking masterpiece "The Burial of the Count of Orgaz." This painting represents Spanish Renaissance art's pinnacle, demonstrating how the Greek-born artist synthesised Byzantine traditions with Spanish mysticism to create uniquely powerful religious imagery.

Wandering Toledo's labyrinthine streets, we uncover secrets spanning from Roman foundations through Visigothic capitals to Moorish innovations and Christian reconquest. The city's architecture, art, and atmosphere testify to civilisations that shaped its identity through conquest, coexistence, and cultural exchange.

After a break for lunch, free time allows exploration of Toledo's shops, markets, and hidden corners before returning to Madrid.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Madrid - Train to Cordoba: City Tour

Spain's efficient rail network carries us south across the Despeñaperros Mountains, crossing the dramatic border pass between Castile and Andalusia as landscapes transform from central plateau to southern valleys.

Córdoba, a UNESCO World Heritage City, reveals its extraordinary multicultural heritage through monuments spanning Roman foundations, Visigothic churches, Islamic masterpieces, and Christian reconquest. Our exploration begins at the Roman Bridge and Calahorra Tower, an Arab defensive structure guarding the Guadalquivir River crossing for over a millennium.

The centrepiece awaits in the Mezquita-Catedral, or Great Mosque of Córdoba, among the oldest structures surviving from Al-Andalus's Islamic period. This architectural palimpsest illustrates Córdoba's complex history: historians believe a Roman temple to Janus originally occupied this site, converted into a Visigothic church after the 572 conquest, then transformed into a mosque and completely rebuilt by exiled Umayyad descendants.

The Umayyads, originally ruling from Damascus until 750, established their western capital here, creating an architectural marvel of horseshoe arches and alternating red and white stonework that influenced Islamic architecture throughout the Mediterranean. We visit the Alcázar fortress built by King Alfonso XI, containing remarkable mosaics and Roman sarcophagi that reveal Córdoba's archaeological depth.

Finally, we stroll through the Jewish Quarter where the synagogue represents medieval Iberian Jewish culture's architectural achievements.

Please note: Our official meal plan includes breakfast and dinner; however, due to variables such as hotel location, your Tour Leader may substitute lunch for dinner today, with advance notice provided.

Overnight in Cordoba.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Cordoba - Granada

Granada awaits in Andalusia's heart, where the majestic Sierra Nevada mountains create a snow-capped backdrop for Spain's most romantically situated city.

Conquered by Moors in 711 AD, Granada blossomed into one of Europe's wealthiest and most refined cities, becoming the final Muslim stronghold in Iberia. The Nasrid dynasty transformed Granada into a jewel of Islamic civilisation, creating architectural masterpieces that survive as testaments to medieval Muslim cultural achievement.

Granada's rich history and heritage remain visible throughout the city centre through cobblestone streets and lovely plazas that witnessed the end of Al-Andalus. In 1992, Granada commemorated the 500th anniversary of Christian reconquest by the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, marking the completion of the centuries-long Reconquista.

Upon arrival, we visit the Royal Chapel featuring tombs carved from marble by Tuscan sculptor Domenico Fancelli. Both Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand died before the chapel's completion, requiring temporary burial in the Friary of San Francisco within the Alhambra. They

were later moved to the chapel once finished, buried alongside King Philip and Queen Juana.

Although their original intention called for all future Spanish monarchs to rest here, this didn't materialise as the monastery at El Escorial became the preferred royal burial site instead.

Granada's position beneath snow-capped peaks, combined with its Moorish architectural heritage and gypsy traditions, creates an atmosphere unmatched elsewhere in Spain.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Granada: The Alhambra

The Alhambra commands our attention as Granada's supreme attraction—a mighty fortress housing an extraordinarily delicate Moorish palace begun in the 13th century by Nasrid sultans ruling the last Spanish Muslim kingdom.

This fantasy of "lace in stone" surrounded by arabesque gardens and fountains offers superb views across the Old Quarter and Sacromonte, the mountain occupied by Roma cave dwellers whose flamenco traditions echo through Granada's evening air. The Alhambra represents the Moorish concept of life itself—something glorious to be ennobled by learning and enlivened by every form of earthly pleasure.

Walking through the Court of Lions, Hall of Ambassadors, and other palatial chambers, we witness Islamic architectural genius at its pinnacle. Intricate geometric patterns, muqarnas ceilings, and Arabic calligraphy transform structural elements into spiritual meditation, creating spaces that blur boundaries between earthly and divine realms.

The adjoining Generalife Gardens demonstrate sophisticated hydraulic engineering, where water channels, fountains, and reflecting pools create cooling microclimates within Andalusia's intense summer heat. These pleasure gardens allowed Nasrid rulers to enjoy paradise on earth, their design principles influencing Islamic garden traditions from Morocco to Central Asia.

We conclude with an informal stroll through the old Moorish quarter of Albaicín, where narrow streets climb hillsides dotted with traditional white houses offering glimpses into Granada's continuing Andalusian lifestyle.

The balance of the day allows independent exploration of Granada's countless treasures.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Granada - Reserva Tauro - Ronda: Town Tour

Our route winds through Málaga Province's mountains toward historic Ronda, perched dramatically on a towering plateau above deep gorges carved by geological forces over millions of years.

En route, we visit Reserva Tauro, a 500-acre bull and horse breeding farm providing insight into Andalusian cultural traditions surrounding bulls without attending actual bullfights. This educational approach presents bullfighting's cultural and historical context objectively, allowing understanding of controversial practices that remain integral to Spanish heritage in certain regions.

Arriving in Ronda, we explore the old town where Romans, Arabs, and Christians left indelible marks on this ancient settlement. Our walking tour includes the Casa Museo Don Bosco, offering unique glimpses into Saint John Bosco's life and work—the 19th-century Italian Catholic priest renowned for his dedication to young people's education and welfare.

The museum's collections include personal artifacts, historical documents, and materials related to Bosco's revolutionary educational methods that influenced Catholic pedagogy worldwide.

Ronda captivates visitors with its dramatic escarpments and panoramic views, particularly the deep El Tajo gorge carrying the Rio Guadalevín through the city centre. We suggest walking to the 18th-century Puente Nuevo bridge, which spans the 100-metre (328-foot) chasm below, offering unparalleled views across the Serranía de Ronda mountains.

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Overnight in Ronda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Ronda - Pileta Caves - Olive Oil Tour - Sevilla

We journey to Seville via the well-preserved rock paintings at Pileta Caves, where 25,000-year-old Neolithic and Paleolithic drawings reveal humanity's earliest artistic expressions. Walking required on wet stone with no handrails - please consult your Tour Leader for guidance.

These ancient artworks of black, ochre, and red pigments, created from clay and fat mixtures, depict mostly abstract lines and patterns alongside recognisable horses, goats, cattle, and a rare giant fish. This authentic archaeological site requires steady footing and patience for slow walking through naturally formed chambers.

We then follow "the Route of the White Villages" (Pueblos Blancos)—a series of whitewashed towns in the Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park. These charming settlements feature brilliant white houses adorned with colourful flower pots, mountain vistas, and traces of Islamic and Christian heritage creating quintessentially Andalusian landscapes. Here we visit one of the region's olive oil producers for a comprehensive tour and included lunch (replacing dinner today). This area produces renowned extra virgin olive oil transmitting the complete aroma, flavour, and essence of Zahara de la Sierra's olive groves.

The demanding process involves steep slopes requiring manual caretaking and harvesting, rewarded by exceptionally fruity, sweet, and gentle flavours enhanced by the area's high rainfall. We learn about traditional production methods while tasting both olive oil and locally made wine. Our regional lunch features assorted tapas, local cheeses, fruits, and sweets (vegetarians well accommodated), providing authentic Andalusian gastronomy.

Overnight in Sevilla.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 9 Sevilla: City Tour

Sevilla unveils itself as a vibrant tapestry of Andalusian charm, Spain's fourth-largest city and the cultural heart of this captivating region. Picturesque streets lined with restored Moorish architecture, fragrant orange groves, and flower-filled patios create an atmosphere enhanced by castanets' rhythmic sounds—hallmarks of Sevilla's flamenco heritage.

We immerse ourselves in Sevilla's architectural wonders, beginning with the magnificent Cathedral—the world's largest Gothic cathedral boasting stunning stained-glass windows, a magnificent choir, and numerous chapels. Time permitting, we ascend the iconic Giralda Tower for breathtaking panoramic views across this historic city.

Next, we step back in time at the Alcázar Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and among Europe's oldest continuously used royal residences. We explore intricate Moorish architecture, lush gardens, and grand halls where Christian and Islamic artistic traditions merge seamlessly. The palace's evolution through Almohad, Mudéjar, and Renaissance periods creates architectural layers revealing Sevilla's complex cultural heritage.

Along the Guadalquivir River banks, we encounter historic landmarks including the Maestranza Bullring, symbolising Sevilla's bullfighting traditions, and the Torre del Oro, a 13th-century watchtower that once protected the city's river approaches.

For contemporary appreciation, we admire the Monument to Tolerance by Eduardo Chillida, a striking sculpture symbolising peace and understanding that reflects modern Sevilla's commitment to cultural harmony.

Overnight in Sevilla.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Sevilla - Tarifa, Spain - Ferry to Tangier, Morocco

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As we leave Spain behind, we make our way to the port city of Tarifa, where we'll board a ferry to cross the Strait of Gibraltar into Africa. The narrow strait, just 14 kilometres wide at its narrowest point, has played a significant role in shaping the history of both Europe and North Africa. For centuries, this waterway has connected the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, facilitating the exchange of cultures, goods, and ideas between civilizations.

As we sail across, the landscape shifts, and the Moroccan city of Tangier comes into view. With its rich history and strategic location, Tangier has been influenced by various cultures, including North African, Spanish, Portuguese, and French. We'll explore this vibrant city, taking in its colourful streets, historic landmarks, and beautiful vistas. From the medina's narrow alleys to the city's stunning beaches, Tangier's unique blend of cultures and traditions is on full display.

* In the event that we have only a small group continuing to Morocco, it may be more expedient for us to fly from Sevilla to Morocco instead. Depending on ever-changing air schedules, it is also possible that our stay in Sevilla could be extended by a day with a flight direct to Casablanca the following day. This potential situation will become clearer closer to departure.

Overnight in Tangier.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Tangier - Casablanca

Today we travel by road to Casablanca with a stop for lunch en route.

Our road trip along the scenic Atlantic coast unfolds before us, with the rugged Rif Mountains giving way to rolling hills and picturesque villages. We'll traverse the fertile plains of the Gharb region, known for its lush agriculture and charming towns.

Casablanca boasts a rich history dating back to the Phoenicians and Berbers. The city's strategic location made it a prized possession for various conquerors, including the Almohads, who developed it as a thriving port in the 12th century. The Portuguese later established a settlement, but their presence was marked by destruction and rebirth. Today it's a bustling city that serves as Morocco's economic hub. We'll get a glimpse of the city's modern landscape before heading to our next destination tomorrow.

Overnight in Casablanca.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 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 13 Chefchaouen Touring

Today belongs entirely to one of Morocco's most photogenic – and most genuinely enchanting – destinations. Chefchaouen, founded in

1471 as a refuge for Andalusian Muslims and Jews expelled from Spain, has grown from a remote mountain stronghold into a town that rewards slow, unhurried exploration. Its famous blue-washed medina – the shade varying from pale powder to deep indigo depending on the quarter and the hour – reflects a living tradition, with locals still re-blueing their walls each spring.

Our orientation walk threads through the medina's steep, irregular lanes, passing through the central Plaza Uta el-Hammam, anchored by the Tarik Ben Ziad mosque and the kasbah's ramparts. Inside, an Andalusian garden and ethnographic museum hold collections of local embroidery, ceremonial dress, and the iconic djellaba, a garment with its origins in this very region. We'll also visit a traditional oil mill – a glimpse into an industry that sustains the Rif valleys to this day, with more than 1,500 operating in the surrounding region.

The afternoon is yours. The souks carry genuine local character – wool blankets, leather goods, hand-crafted ceramics – in a refreshingly unhurried atmosphere. Those with energy for a short climb will find the Spanish mosque above the medina rewards the effort with panoramic views of the blue rooftops below, especially lovely in late afternoon light. At the base of the old walls, the Ras el-Maa waterfall offers a quieter pleasure, locals still washing laundry in the stream as they always have. Sooner or later, a café terrace and mint tea will claim you – as well it should.

Overnight in Chefchaouen.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Chefchaouen - Ouazzane - Fes

This morning, we bid farewell to Chefchaouen and set off towards the imperial city of Fes. Our full-day journey 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 15 From Fes: Exploring Volubilis & Meknes

Today we embark on a full-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.

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Overnight in Fes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 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 place.

Overnight in Fes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Fes - Ifrane - Erfoud

Today we embark on another 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 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 essentials for tomorrow's desert excursion to Merzouga. We'll be transferring to 4x4 vehicles tomorrow, leaving our main luggage behind on the bus before heading to Merzouga for the night. We'll rejoin the bus the following morning when we return to Erfoud.

Overnight in Erfoud.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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Day 18 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 Tafilalet 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 a break for lunch, we'll transfer to 4x4 vehicles for an exhilarating journey into the Sahara towards the majestic Erg Chebbi dunes of Merzouga. This adventure takes us partly off-road across the desert landscape, offering fantastic views of the changing terrain. If possible, we'll pause for a traditional tea break in a nomad encampment under a tent and make a stop for panoramic photos of the towering sand dunes—the Erg Chebbi is the largest and highest dune system in the Moroccan Sahara.

We'll arrive at our desert-edge accommodation in Merzouga, where an unforgettable camel excursion awaits. In the late afternoon, we'll embark on a roughly 20-minute camel ride into the heart of the dunes to witness a spectacular Saharan sunset. As the sun sinks below the golden sands, you'll experience the profound silence and otherworldly beauty of the desert. Following this magical moment, it will be another 20-minute ride back to our auberge.

Tonight we'll stay at our comfortable lodging on the edge of the Erg Chebbi, with dinner scheduled to allow time for those returning from the camel trek to freshen up and relax. You can enjoy the desert evening under vast starlit skies, sharing stories of the day's adventure.

Overnight at Merzouga desert auberge.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 19 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 main 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 a lunch break 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 20 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 21 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 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 22 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 23 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 24 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 25 Departure

Departure from Casablanca.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast