

MOROCCO. A COMPLETE REVELATION

OBTIC19cmc. 16DAYS/15MAGICAL NIGHTS. CASABLANCA-RABAT/FES/VOLUBILIS-MEKNES-FES/MERZOUGA (SAHARA) DADES VALLEY-SKOURA/DRAA VALLEY-ZAGORA-OUARZAZATE/MARRAKECH/MARRAKECH- OURIKA VALLEY-MARRAKECH/MARRAKECH-ESSAOUIRA-MARRAKECH/MARRAKECH-TAMADOT/CASABLANCA

DAY 1: CASABLANCA-RABAT: You will be met on arrival at Casablanca's airport from your flight by your English-speaking



National Guide and, after clearing Immigration and Customs we shall leave for an hour's drive to the administrative Imperial capital since 1912 of the Kingdom of Morocco, Rabat (R'bat al Fat'h) - one of the four Imperial Cities, founded in the 12th century (R'bat meaning fortified convent). Sightseeing here will start with a drive through this graceful city of parks and gardens along Victory Avenue to the Méchouar Precinct of the King's Palace. Regrettably, the Palace is not open to the public, but we can savour and photograph its impressive arches, redolent of the finest Islamic architecture. Next we arrive at the Chellah, once a prosperous Roman enclave called *Sala Colonia* in their Mauretania Tingitane Province, to be abandoned late in the 5th century, thence to fall into ruins to be transformed, late in the 14th

century during the reign of the Merinides Sultanate, into a vast cemetery, their Necropolis, where we find also some Roman excavations. This Necropolis was destroyed by the earthquake of 1755 and is today a garden of date and banana palm trees, hibiscus, bougainvillea, olive and fig trees. Legend has it that Jews came to Sala Colonia five centuries before the Carthaginians, in the days of Solomon, to purchase gold. On now to the Archaeological Museum. Built in 1932 and enlarged a few years later to display the finds resulting from intense archaeological research, this museum has housed the National Museum collections since 1986. It is one of the most sumptuous in Morocco and should certainly not be missed. The prehistoric section brings together human remains from the middle Palaeolithic period (probably Neanderthals) to the Neolithic (4000 B.C.), proving the continuity and size of the population at this time. The Islamic archaeology section is constantly growing with finds coming from the excavations of 8th and 9th century sites, enabling us to have a clear idea of their potters, herdsmen, surgeons and bakers who have left us the legacy of their tools, while their womenfolk have left us their jewellery and the animals their harnesses. There is a collection of superb bronzes recovered from the excavations at Volubilis, the Romano-Berber capital of Mauritania Tingitana. When Rome ordered the evacuation of Volubilis in the third century, the citizens, expecting to return shortly, buried their works of art outside the city, where they were to remain undisturbed for 17 centuries. These pieces are kept apart in the Salle des Bronzes. Pre-Roman and Roman civilisations are particularly well-represented by some of the finest pieces to have survived from those periods. there is a first-rate collection of Hellenistic-style bronzes, so exceptional that it is difficult to know where to look first: the "Drunken Donkey", passionately lyrical, an incomparable masterpiece from the time of the Emperor Augustus; the "Volubilis Guard-Dog" (centre-piece of a fountain) with its stunning realism, the "Young man Crowned With Ivy", a marvel of elegance and grace; the Rider and the busts presumed to be those of Cato the Younger and the young King Juba II of Mauritania Tingitana - the "Heads of Young Berbers" in marble, remarkable for their technical perfection and the vigorous strength of their expression. From here we continue to the Mohamed V Mausoleum, located on the southern side of the Great Mosque guarded by the mounted Royal Household Guard, the last resting places of the late King Mohammed V and of his son, the late King Hassan II. Napoleon Bonaparte's tomb at Les Invalides was the inspiration for the interior's modern Islamic design. It was the King Mohammed V who prevented the mass deportation of Moroccan Jews in the early years of World War II. We visit also the minaret of the Great Mosque, known also as the Hassan Tower. Begun in 1195, the tower was intended to be the largest minaret in the world along with the mosque, also intended to be the world's largest. In 1199 Sultan Yacoub el Mansour of the Almohad dynasty died, and construction on the mosque stopped. The tower only reached 44m (140ft), about half of its intended 86m (260ft) height. The rest of the mosque was also left incomplete, with only the foundations of several walls and 200 columns being constructed. Instead of having stairs, the tower is ascended by ramps which would have allowed the muezzin, who leads the call (*adhan*) to the faithful to the 5 daily prayers (*salat*) to ride a horse to the top of the tower to issue the call to prayer. The tower, according to tradition, was designed by an architect named Jabir who used a similar design plan for a sister tower, the Giralda in Seville, Spain. Both of the towers were modeled on the minaret of another one of Jabir's designs, the Koutoubia Mosque in Marrakech. From here we shall proceed into the ancient Medina at the heart of the military history of Rabat - historical sources attest to a continued presence here of a Jewish community since 1492 after their expulsion by the Catholic Kings and the subsequent Inquisition - located in the Al Buhaira Quarter until the establishment of the Mellah in 1807. Here we enter the Kasbah of the Oudayas and Museum whose alleyways are reminiscent of a delightful blue and whitewashed Andalusian village (blue being the colour of Judaism). This was the site of the original R'bat from which generations of cavalry have ridden out to subdue the rebellious Bou Raghhouala Berber tribes. It has also been a bastion against repeated attacks by corsair raiders. The museum is situated in the opulent lodge built by Sultan Moulay Ismail in the 17th century as his Rabat residence. This spectacular lodge is known for its breathtaking garden, the first of its masterpieces, that is a maze of pathways, surrounded by lush vegetation, endless beds of vibrant flowers which soften the strict geometry of those paths, together with beautiful ramparts and fountains making it amongst the very finest of all Andalusian gardens.



Over and above the immaculate gardens that attract many visitors each year, the museum building itself is an awesome sight. Its spacious rooms and ancient interior, which is decorated in true Moroccan fashion, instill an atmosphere of royalty, wealth and absolute luxury. From marble halls, priceless carpets, works of art and unmistakable elegance, the Oudayas Museum is a gateway into the past and the rich hypnotic history of Morocco. At the far end is a room reproducing an ancient Moroccan interior with a vast bay opening onto this glorious spectacle with its magnificent use of colours finished off with beautiful cushions in brocade, silk and gold cover the divans all around the



room. A little further on, in a cool marble room, stand rows of very old illuminated Korans, jewellery, pottery and musical instruments. The carpets exhibited here are not just woven masterpieces, but extraordinary feats of meticulous stitching and detailed work. A true Rabat carpet can have more than 150 thousand stitches to just one square metre. The motifs and patterns found on these carpets are traditional and often refer to the specific craftsman; styles and techniques used to produce these rare carpets being unique to Morocco. Using a less elaborate technique, the rural carpets, called Berbers, demonstrate a powerful sense of composition, colour and ornamentation which is an art of its own with a unique appeal. You may also view the market place, furniture displays, diamond cutting exhibitions, statues, sculptures, textiles, fabrics, metalworking (with both silver and gold) exhibits, decorative arts and displays of costumes. We break for a light lunch in the Restaurant Borj Eddar overlooking the estuary of the Bou Regreg river, its bay being the one-time lair of famed Moroccan corsairs of the Barbary Coast at the Salé Fortress ; the corsairs who raided shipping from the time of the Crusades until early in the 19th century; the corsairs who captured Miguel de Cervantes; the corsairs mentioned in Doctor Dolittle - the Moroccan Sultan Moulay Ismaïl actually made piracy a state monopoly in 1678. In 1783 the first American ship was captured and ransomed for \$60,000 cash; over the next 10 years a further dozen American ships were captured, the crew being made slaves in Algeria, one of the reasons why the United States Navy was born in 1794 with 6 frigates. From here we turn to our delightful accommodation for this night. **LD.**

DAY 2: RABAT - FES. We set out today towards the east via Salé, sister city of Rabat, its Mellah, an important centre of Jewish



intellectual thought, was established the same year as in Rabat. The main door to the Mellah and the beautiful Medersa were constructed by the Merinids, who had close ties to the Jews. Sale's most famous Rabbi, Raphael Ben Mordechai Encaoua (1848-1935) the chief Ribbi of Morocco, is buried in the Salé cemetery. We continue on to the Imperial City of Fes. Fes, the city that was once, after Mecca and Medina, held as one of the holiest cities of the Islamic world; the city whose merchants were travelling to China in the 15th century; the city that, least in importance, gave its name to the red cylindrical, brimless hat used over most of the Moslem world. Moroccans say that Marrakech, Rabat and Casablanca live in

the present, but that Fes definitely lives in the past. It should come as no surprise. European chroniclers of the Middle Ages wrote with awe of the city that for several centuries was the most civilized Western outpost of the Semitic world. Its scholars introduced astronomy and medicine to the West via Spain when it was under Moorish rule. Historians of the time said that Plato and Aristotle first reached Western Europe in Arabic translations - from Fes. Welcome to a different world. With its two hundred mosques and holy shrines, Fes contains more places of worship than any other Moroccan city. At its peak, early in the thirteenth century, Fes el-Bali alone boasted almost eight hundred mosques and mausoleums for its 125,000 inhabitants.



The exciting, fascinating and two thousand year old Imperial City of Fes, surrounded as it is by 9 miles of ramparts situated in a narrow valley, strategically positioned on the old caravan crossroads which once connected the one-time Saharan empires with the Atlantic and Mediterranean trading routes to Europe. In 786, one hundred and fifty years after the death of the Prophet Mohammed Bin Abdullah Banu Hashim, his grandson was to set foot in Morocco. This man was Idriss Ibn Abdallah, destined to become Moulay Idriss, patron saint of Morocco and founder of Fes. Implicated in a failed rebellion against the Arabian Abbasids, he fled Baghdad to come with his bedraggled army to this 'Land of the Setting Sun', beyond which one could travel no further by land. Here, in Fes, on the eastern bank of the seasonal

Oued Fes, after a set-to with the indigenous Berber tribesmen, he started to build what was to become the first Islamic settlement in Morocco.

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Fes contains more places of worship than any other city in Morocco. At its peak, early in the thirteenth century, Fes el-Bali alone boasted almost eight hundred mosques and mausoleums for its 125,000 inhabitants. By the seventeenth century, however, the Scottish traveller William Lithgow reported that places of worship were far outstripped by some twelve thousand licensed brothels and, as the Victorian era traveller Budgett Meakin remarked: "Fes us at once the most religious and the most wicked city in Morocco...the saints and sinner being for the most part, identical ...". With ancient ramparts set against a backdrop of the not-too-distant Middle Atlas Mountains you'll know you're in for a very different

experience; one that our professionally-guided visit will take you to the bustling maze of alleyways of the fascinating medina and souks offering every possible combination of beautiful pottery, Berber carpets, Fassi brassware, Jewish-originated silverware, traditional and modern jewellery, beautiful leather goods all amidst the pungent aromas of spices, herbs and oils. Take in with us the ancient living monuments this city of One Thousand and One Nights has to offer the serious tourist. Fes, one of the pillars of Islam, harboured the most celebrated of Jewish communities and scholars.



Is it Fes or Fez? It is both; and neither. The Western name for the city is drawn from the Arabic *Fas* and, as there is no one correct way to transliterate Arabic words into Western characters, in the French language, the city is referred to as *Fés*, while Americans tend to use *Fez*. Fassin, or Fassis as the residents call themselves, use the pronunciation of *Fas*, so derived from three Arabic letters fa (f), alif (a) and sin (s). So everyone wins.

On arrival, we make for the impressive Dar el Makhzen and a 15 minute stop at the Royal Palace with its magnificent seven bronze gates. From here we walk to and through the Mellah with its intense atmosphere and fine examples of Mauro-Hispanic architecture. We now drive to the Borj Sud, here to take in the panoramic view of the Medina. Off now down to start our Walking Tour of the labyrinth of the ancient Fes Medina and Mellah (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and an Escheresque jumble of alleyways; of the Bou Inania Mosque; of the colourful es-Sabbaghine with its Street of the Dyers; of the brass workers at es-Saffarine; of the impressive al-Quarawiyyin Mosque and University (exterior only) and the el-Atterine Medersa (exterior only) passing the aromas of the Souq el-Atterine area of spices and groceries to the delightful el-Nejjarine Square with its fountain and caravanserai, stopping nearby for



a light lunch. On now to the renowned Tanneries on the bank of the Oued Fes and thence on to the potteries, perfumes and beauty products at the Souq el-Henna. Leaving the Medina from the Bab Boujloud, we tour the magnificent ramparts with its beautiful 'Babs' as we make our way to the 16th century Saâdien watchtower at the North Borj and its Weapons Museum. Hard to miss since it is housed in a 16th century fortress that towers above the city, its stark walls clearly visible over quite a distance. The fortress was once a northern tower that formed part of the walled fortifications that surrounded Fes in times gone by. Built in 1582 at the

command of Saâdien Sultan Ahmed El Mansour Eddahbi as part of efforts to ensure that Fes was adequately protected, no better location for the museum could have been chosen since the building itself is a testimony to the evolution of military warfare and architecture. Here you will find weapons from virtually every age and corner of the country. The majority of the collection has been donated by royalty and as a result, there are even a number of rare pieces included in the displays. Overall, there are more than 5000 different arms in the collection which include 775 military items. All these articles are displayed in a series of 13 different rooms and collections include everything from pre-historic weaponry to rifles with their inlaid butts to modern day rifles. The collection is also not limited to only Moroccan artifacts and includes Indian, European and Asian articles.

The most outstanding portion of the museum simply has to be the Moroccan weaponry, which is not only dangerous, but decorative too. Daggers are encrusted with precious stones and rifle butts are carefully shaped and inlaid with jewels. These articles are so beautifully decorated that they hold appeal for art lovers too. The largest piece in the collection is a cannon that was used during the Battle of the Three Kings (Battle of the Wadi Al-Makhazin). This massive weapon is five meters long and weighs a whopping 12 tons! Weapons specialists will appreciate the development of techniques while art lovers will be impressed by the splendour of the objects. We continue to the Dar Batha Museum, an Hispano-Moorish palace dating from the end of the XIXth century housing some admirable collections of traditional art from Fes. Most traditional forms of art were also practical in nature so they usually took the form of furniture that was given a decorative touch. Therefore you can expect to enjoy intricately carved wooden furniture, wrought



iron with decorative finishing touches, carpets, embroidery and jewelry. Of course, there were also less functional pieces, such as artwork made from sculpted plaster or other decorative materials. Sculpted wood, wrought iron, sculpted plaster or decorative materials that are in fact works of art in their own right. Embroidery, carpets, jewellery and coins compete with one another to attract your attention. But the museum's centrepiece is to be found in the pottery room where you will find an unbeatable display of ceramic objects that have been masterfully crafted by Fez craftsmen through the centuries. Of particular interest are the articles dating back to the 10th century which contain items of 'Fes blue'. At the time, this relatively groundbreaking way of coloring pottery involved the use of cobalt to obtain the bluish coloring. Typical ceramics feature a white enamel background with stylized floral motives interweaved on them in brilliant shades of blue. The floral motifs are both sophisticated and harmonious and are a delight to behold. Not to be missed are the astrolabes - a display featuring a variety of fascinating astronomical instruments that were created and perfected by learned Arabs. They are not only functional, but wonderfully decorative with intricately worked metal and inset jewels. From here we go to your hotel or riad after a day full of contrasting culture and journey into some 1,200 years of history. **BLD.**

DAY 3: FES - MEKNES - VOLUBILIS - MOULAY IDRIS - FES. After breakfast we shall now set out alongside a forest of cork-

oak to the Imperial City of Meknes (whose Medina is a UNESCO World Heritage Site). Arab historians trace the origins of Meknes to the Roman occupation of Morocco from 3B.C. to 40A.D, perhaps as a forward post for the neighbouring Roman city of Volubilis during the search for timber and volcanic rock required for construction which the nearby Middle Atlas Mountains must have provided in plenty. Recent archaeological finds, however, do not offer convincing proof that there was a virtual Romanisation of this settlement that would later develop into the great capital of legendary King Moulay Ismail. This, one of our kingdom's four Imperial Cities, was developed in the 10th century by the Zenata tribe of the Mekkassa Berbers as *Mekkassa es-Zeitoun* ("Meknes of the Olives"), a group of villages among olive



groves around Takarart, an 11th century Berber Almoravid citadel. Situated west of the Saiss plain between the pre-Riffian elevation of Zerhoun and the foothills of the Middle Atlas, Meknes was chosen by Moulay Ismaïl in 1672 to be the capital of his empire. Enjoying a strategically-central position vis-à-vis other regions in Morocco, Meknes sits on a plateau serving as a virtual cross roads for the South-North camel caravan traders and settlers. Throughout its history, its importance grew due to the location, clement weather, abundant water supplies and surrounding fertile plains. The city's unity of style lends it undeniable charm, unchanged for centuries, enhanced still further by the beauty of the surrounding countryside. Moulay Ismail's creation was to be

much talked of in the East and in Europe, most especially at the French court of King Louis XIV and was once called "the Moroccan Versailles". Here we shall visit its 40 km of Ramparts and monumental gates such as the easily most beautiful Bab, or gateway, in all of the Maghreb - the Bab Mansour el Alj. From here to the El Heri es-Souani - the granary of huge vaulted structures and stables - once accommodating the Sultan's 20,000 Arabo-Berber '*Barb*' horses - built by Moulay Ismail's soldiers next to a pool fed by underground channels that brought fresh water all the way from the distant Middle Atlas Mountains; the Christians' Prison, the splendid Moulay Ismail Mausoleum, the Place el-Hedim and the Dar Jamaï Museum. Before housing the Meknès collections, the Dar Jamaï had a number of different uses. Built in 1882 to be the residence of the illustrious Jamaï family, which included two of Sultan Moulay el-Hassan's ministers (1873-1894), it was used as a military hospital after 1912, only becoming the Museum of Moroccan Art in 1920. Today, the palace still displays much of its wealthy beginnings, with a luxurious garden that has been landscaped in an Arab-style and features fruit trees and beautiful cypresses. The



building boasts elegant painted windows, detailed tiles, painted wood and even sculptured plasterwork. It still oozes a feeling of luxury and is a symbol of the wealth and prosperity that was enjoyed by the Jamaï family. The elaborate decoration with sculpted plaster and painted wood as well as the Andalusian garden planted with cypress and fruit trees, gives an accurate idea of the degree of luxury enjoyed by the prosperous bourgeoisie of Meknes. Wrought iron work, wooden sculpture, weaving, leather working, brass and copper ware, metalwork, a museum is devoted to the crafts of the region.



Local talent and skill of the craftsmen of Morocco are displayed through vast and colorful exhibits of painted wood panels, decorated chests, moucharabieh and breathtaking pottery pieces decorated in the use of rich colours and in the magnificent multi-hued embroidery for which they are so famous. You'll no doubt be astounded at the detail and time-consuming effort that is evident in every piece of wrought iron, brass, woodcarving, ceramics, metal work, coppersmith items and leatherwork. This museum also has a wonderful collection of jewelry, traditional costumes and rare carpets.



We leave Meknes for to the wonderful Roman ruins at Volubilis, the Volubilis of really ancient olive presses, mansions, incredible mosaics, monumental arches and Corinthian columns where you'll have a real sense of Roman lifestyle and of that of a subsequent medieval Berber town. The site contains the Mansion containing the mosaic of the Labours of Hercules, the Baths of Gallienus and Baths of Forum

with their fragmentary mosaics; the House of Orpheus and its Dolphin mosaic and Orpheus Myth; the Cortège of Venus many of whose mosaics we may only see from the outside yet will get to see the medallions of Bacchus, Diana and the Abduction of Hylas; the Gordian Palace with its bath house and pooled courtyards; the House of the Wild Beast, the House of Nymphs, the House of the Seasons, the House of Flavius Germanus, the Knights House with an incomplete mosaic of Dionysus Discovering Ariadne Asleep, the Triumphal Arch, the Capitol and the House of Ephebus with its pictorial mosaics, especially that of Bacchus Being drawn in a Chariot by Panthers. We shall break for lunch at the Hotel Volubilis inn with its panoramic view of the ruins to leave Volubilis behind and drive alongside the dark, outlying ridges of the Zerhoun Hills for a panoramic view of the town of Moulay Idriss, the holiest Islamic town in the kingdom of Morocco, where thousands of Moroccan faithful come on pilgrimage (*moussem*) every August to pray at the tomb of this descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. This small hilltop town was named after the Sultan Moulay Idriss the Elder, who oppressed the resident Jews, forcing many of them to convert. It was he who also founded Fes. 70 years ago, it was prohibited to non-Muslims to enter the town. In 788 (or 787) A.D, an event occurred that was to forever change the path of Moroccan culture. Idriss Ibn Abdallah (or Moulay Idriss I as he is called here in Morocco), the great-grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, had fled west from Baghdad to settle in Morocco. The heir to the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus, Moulay had participated in a revolt against the Abbasid dynasty which had usurped the leadership of the Umayyad dynasty to precipitate the split between the Shia and Sunni sects. Forced to flee Abbasid assassins, Moulay initially found asylum in



Tangier but soon thereafter tried to establish himself in the old Roman city of Volubilis. Before long he moved to the nearby region of Zerhoun, where he founded the town that is now called either Moulay Idriss or Zerhoun. The local Berber tribes, passionate neophytes of Islam, were convinced of Moulay's power to lead as both sultan and *iman* (spiritual guide) and his exemplary conduct soon ensured his lordship over many of the Berber tribes. We shall see the elongated square, the green-tiled pyramids of the Zaouiat with its two conical quarters on either side and the labyrinth of alleyways before returning to the Imperial City of Fes and your hotel or riad for a well-earned rest. **BLD.**

DAY 4: FES. Today we may continue our visit by entering the Bab Smarine of the south-western part of the Medina to pass by the Dar Beida Palace and into the Dar Batha Museum of Arts and Traditions. Should you so wish we can drive to the fortified watchtower of Borj Sud, built earlier than the Borj Nord by the same Christian slaves of the Sultan Ahmed el Mansour Eddahbi to arrive back at your hotel or riad after hours full of contrasting culture and history. Again, the order in which these monuments are visited may be left to your expert guide, with more places of interest to be visited according to your interest and level of fitness. This evening we shall take you out to dinner at the Riad Dar Anebar. **BD.**



DAY 5: FES - AZROU - MIDELT - ZIZ GORGES - er RACHIDYA - ERFOUD - MERZOUGA: After breakfast we now set off south to the Sahara, This will be all of a 6½ hour drive, with "comfort stops" and many photo-op opportunities. After some 30 minutes, we arrive at the small 1920s French-built hill station of Immouzèr Du Kandar (1220m). Here we may pause for ten minutes by the kasbah for a look at the little Medina and take in the pleasant Saiss Plateau and now-distant Fes, continuing on to the squeaky-clean Moroccan pseudo-Swiss town of Ifrane (1650m), with its slanted, russet-tiled roofs hidden amidst a forest of cedar, which cannot grow below 1600m. Ifrane is mainly a winter ski resort and a summer hideaway for rich Moroccans wishing to escape the hustle and heat of the large cities. We now drive through to the first real town in the Middle Atlas - Azrou - which in the local Tamazight (Berber) dialect means "rock," for next to the mosque is the massive outcrop from which this town takes its name - was for a long time a strategic settlement established to effect some form of control of the independent mountain Berber



peoples. We continue on now through the Cedar Forests, perchance to feed some of the resident Barbary Apes, to emerge at the Oued Gigou Valley and on through the mountains via the Tizi n'Zad (2178m). Down now through a bleak plain of scrub and desert to the Berber mountain town of Midelt, where we may stop for a light lunch at the El Ayachi Restaurant, the massive Jbel Ayachi (3722m) rising sheer and stark before us. Midelt is so far inland that its microclimate is one of extremes: bitterly cold in winter and oh-so-hot in summer. Our route takes us on through striking countryside, marking the change from mountains to desert. This region was once notorious for raids on caravans by the nomadic Aït Haddidou tribe, who were not pacified, with great difficulty, by the French until the mid-1930s. Now on through a lower Pass (Tizi) of the High Atlas Mountains - the Pass of the She-Camel - Tizi n'Talrehmt (1907m), on across a deserted plain through the town of Aït Messaoud, passing a French Foreign Legion fort with all the reminders of *Beau Geste* and then to the first southern ksar of Aït Kherrou, a river palmeraie (oasis) at the entrance to a small gorge. From here on in, ksours start to dot the countryside as we carry on down alongside the River Ziz (the Berber name meaning Gazelle). On now through the town of Rich, once an important fort during the era of the French Protectorate, on and through the Tunnel Du Légionnaire, built by the French to have ease of rapid access to the rebellious southern tribe of the Aït Atta, to have appear before us a scenic highlight of the really dramatic and majestic canyon of the Ziz Gorges, massive erosions of rock carving a passage through the mountains dominating startlingly green oases and ochre-coloured ksours. We emerge from the Gorges close to the Barrage (Dam) Hassan Addakhil to continue on to the French-built garrison town of Er-Rachidya (previously known as Ksar es' Souq, after their Foreign Legion fort). This pleasant garrison town, alive in the evening with students from the University and Lycée, is still maintained after independence to forestall any further territorial claims from Algeria. Onwards still through the small palm grove at Meski, watered by a natural spring - the famous picture postcard image of La Source Bleue - and the final sector of the Oued Ziz. We cross an arid reddish belt of desert to drop, suddenly, into the valley and the Tizimi Palmeraie and the French-built town of Erfoud which will give you your first impression of the over-powering proximity of the Sahara. Erfoud, once the major Jewish population centre of the Taffilalet, where Jews worked as merchants and artisans and gunsmiths (making the famed intricately-decorated flintlock muskets) as late as the early twentieth century. Here, at the Hotel Tizimi, we exchange our 4 wheels for those of a 4WD to continue on to the Saharan village of Merzouga where we now change our 4 wheels to the 4 legs of our Ships of the Desert for a 90 minute ride into the dunes to our dinner and overnight accommodation in a nomad tent set amid the sands of Lalla Merzouga, the highest dunes of the Erg Chebbi, here to



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witness an awesome sunset of Nature's incredible light show over ever-changing colours of the dunes, sat around the campfire, accompanied by a small group of Berber musicians with whom to sing and dance the night away. **BLD.**

DAY 6: ERG CHEBBI - MERZOUGA - RISSANI - SIJILMASSA- ERFOUD - TODRA GORGES - TINEHRIR - BOUMALNE DU DADES - DADES GORGES - Q'LAAT DES M'GOUNA - SKOURA:



Our last brilliant sunrise, equal almost to last night's unforgettable sunset, our Bedouin breakfast of tea, 'sand' bread, jam and cheese tucked away, we set off back across the plain around 8:30 for in our 4x4 to take us on down further south for a quick dash again south to the town of Rissani, most of whose inhabitants live within the 18th century ksar (fortified kasbah) in a maze of dark almost troglodyte passageways. 5 minutes away are the ruins of Sijilmasa. Established in 757A.D, until the 11th century it was on the exit point for the important camel caravan trade from the Sudan, Mali and Ghana. Laid waste in 1056, rebuilt and again destroyed in 1363 to be rebuilt in the 18th century to be again destroyed and that's what we'll now see - ruins recognised by the World Monuments Fund. We shall also visit the Mausoleum of Moulay Ali Cherif, the founder of the Alaouite Dynasty, which rules Morocco to this day. Back at Erfoud we rejoin our vehicle to continue now westwards to the oasis town of Tinejdad and the start of the Route of 1000 Kasbahs in the magnificent Dadès Valley. We arrive at the small, delightful town of Tinehrir, located at the mouth of the fabulous Todra Gorges, overlooked by a Glaoua Kasbah and which town boasts of the oldest Jewish cemetery in Morocco to set out up the Oued Todra for some 15km into to the deepest, narrowest and most spectacular part of these further wonders of Mother Nature to explore this remarkable canyon. We return to the mouth of the Gorges, perhaps to break for a light lunch in the French-owned Restaurant Chez Michel before continuing to Boumalne du Dadès situated at the mouth of the Dadès Gorge to venture up between the wide, high limestone cliffs with their strangely-shaped erosions and green vegetation, ksours, kasbahs and pisé houses ranging in colours from dark red to greenish black and startling lime-white, passing the Glaoua kasbah at Ait Youl as far as a group of ksours at Ait Arbi built against a volcanic twist in the rocks. We return to the mouth of the Gorge to continue westwards via Qlâa't Des M'Gouna (Citadel of the M'Gouna Tribe) where thousands of small, pink Damascene roses, first planted by French settlers, are grown to make the rose oil essence - "Eau de Rose" - so beloved of the Berber people; you'd do well to purchase here some of the beauty and medicinal products produced here. From here to Skoura, our kasbah-like hotel, dinner and a good night's sleep. **BLD.**

DAY 7: SKOURA - DRAA VALLEY - ZAGORA - OUARZAZATE.



After a late breakfast we set off today through to the Kasbahs at Skoura to the outskirts of Ouarzazate and on down through the delightfully dramatic Draâ Valley, passing many kasbahs and oases to the edge of the Sahara to the dusty, one horse (dromedary) desert 'Hamada' town of Zagora flanked by the Jbel (mountain) Zagora - some say an Arabised version of the name *Caesar* from which the town got its name - the Jbel Tadrhart to the east; the Jbel Sarhro to the north-east and the low-lying Jbel Bani to the south. Draâ translates to 'Black' for most of the inhabitants of this long valley - the Draâ River is the longest river in Morocco - originated from Chad, Mali, Senegal and Mauritania. There is even a sign here telling us the number of days by dromedary to Timbuctou - "Tombouctou 52 Jours" - by foot or by dromedary to Timbuktu in Mali. Time to visit the Kasbah Amazrou, once a Jewish enclave and now inhabited by black-skinned Berber families. Here you may see real African Berber Touaregs, not just local Moroccans dressed up as the "Blue Men". The *Touareg* name was applied to them by early explorers and historians since Leo Africanus. They call themselves variously Kel Tamasheq, Kel Tamajaq "Speakers of Tamasheq" and Imuhagh, Imazaghan or *Imashaghen* meaning "the Free People". They also call themselves *Kel Tagelmust* - "People of the Veil". Most of the inhabitants here are a mixture of Berber, Arab and Jew and descendants of black slaves. Once it was called 'Tazagourt' the singular of plural 'Tizigirt', a Berber word for 'twin peaks', referring to the almost volcanic Jbel, closely resembling a tagine pot, on top of which the ruins of an Almoravid kasbah may be seen. In ancient European maps the Jbel is already indicated but Zagora itself was only built up in the 1940s. Like the expansive succession of oases they are, the palm groves form an abundant canopy of green waving palm leaves that shelter the valley floor from the scorching sun, making this one of the most important date-producing regions in the world. We continue on south to visit nearby Tamegroute with its famous mosques with blue majolica roofs and white minarets. Tamegroute has been a religious centre since the 11th century; its Zaouiat (religious school or monastery) being founded in the 17th century as the seat of the Sufi religious brotherhood of the Naciriyyin. The Naciria got its name and reputation from Sidi Mohammed Bennacer Edderai (1603-1674) who settled in Tamegroute in 1631. Sidi Mohammed Bennacer was a theologian, scholar and physician, especially interested in mental disorders travelling to Ethiopia, Arabia, Egypt, Iraq and Persia, writing a voluminous series of memoirs of his journeys called the *Rihla* to bring back numerous works from all parts of the Islamic world. The brotherhood of black African origin, nomadic olive-skinned Berbers and lighter-skinned Arabs decided in the 17th century to found a university of the Koran (Qur'an). When Bennacer died, the library (in Arabic '*khizana habsia*') of Tamegroute, with its thousands of manuscripts was one of the richest of North Africa. Fine examples of the collection of manuscripts (now 4200) are still on display in the Zaouiat today. Among them are some 13th century illuminated Koran scrolls written on gazelle hide; a 14th century Koran with beautiful calligraphy in Kufic script (the oldest form of Arabic writing), writings of Abu Ali al Hussein ibn Abd Allah ibn Sina (981-1037), known in the west as Avicenna, the foremost physician and philosopher of his time and astronomer, chemist, logician, mathematician, poet, soldier and theologian; of Abu al Walid Mohammed ibn Ahmed ibn Rushd (1126-1198), known in the west as Averroes, the founding father of secular thought in the western world and philosopher, physicist, astronomer, mathematician; of Mohammed ibn Musa al-Khouarizmi, the acknowledged father of algebra - the words algorithm and algorithm stem from *algoritmi*, the Latinised version of his name. There is a translation of Pythagoras together with treatises on theology, astronomy, geography (including original maps of Alexandria) and pharmacology. The building of the Zaouiat, as it stands now with its green tiles, dates from 1869, when it was rebuilt after a fire. A - voluntary - contribution to the upkeep of the Library is always appreciated. From the Zaouiat we stroll through the tunnelled alleyways of the still-inhabited Kasbah to the ancient Pottery Co-operative where pottery being still produced in the simplest of manners, in the



simplest of kilns. As you have been to Fes, here you'll see the famous green glaze associated with its tiled roofs - green, the colour of Islam representing Mother Earth - for the founders of the 'Naciri Religious Brotherhood', wanting to raise the status of the village of Tamegroute to that of a Medina, a thriving caravan hub city, invited merchants, craftsmen and potters to this remote area from Fes to this remote area, a city that enjoyed good relations with Tamegroute at the time. Today Tamegroute is a little village once more, but the pottery has become its main characteristic. The potters cook plates, jugs and jars - all green and brown - in outdoor archaic kilns. Green is obtained with magnesium and copper, brown with antimony and copper. Ancient techniques give the enamel coating infinite variations and the prices are very competitive. We return to Zagora for a light lunch at the Fibule Du Drâa hotel, thence to continue up past the endless palm groves and kasbahs of the dramatic Draâ Valley, to stop at the ancient kasbah at Agdz and other en-route points of photo-opportunity until we arrive to spend the night in the new (1920s) once-garrison town of the French Protectorate - Ouarzazate - whose name comes from a Berber phrase meaning "without noise" or "without confusion" - at our delightful hotel or riad. **BLD.**



DAY 8: OUARZAZATE - KASBAHS TAOURIRT, TIFOULTOUTTE & AÏT BEN HADDOU - MARRAKECH. After breakfast we

shall visit the nearby Kasbah of Taourirt, the kasbah of a former caïd (meaning "master" or "leader,") and later the possession of El Haj T'hami el Mezouari el Glaoui (1879-1956), the last ruling family of the south (the 'Lord of the Atlas') and a strong contender for control over Morocco who had this palace built in Ouarzazate - but never lived there. Once Pasha of Marrakech from 1912 to 1956, he allied himself to the French in Morocco during the Protectorate and conspired with them in the overthrow of the Sultan Mohammed V, grandfather of the actual king of Morocco. Until early in the second half of the 20th century, Moroccan society had been in a state of feudalism very close to that which pertained in Europe during medieval times. At the top was the sultan, who held the two positions of king (temporal ruler) and imam (spiritual leader). His court, or central government (Makhzen), was headed by a Grand Vizier. The next tier of government was provided by a large number of Pashas (from the Persian *padshah*, literally: Viceroy and caïds (the equivalent of European dukes, barons etc) whose responsibilities were to collect taxes and keep order, to which ends they often kept private armies. Under them were the mass of ordinary commoners whose responsibilities were to pay taxes, obey their local master and provide him with troops when necessary. In the autumn of 1893, the then ruling Sultan Moulay Hassan and his army were crossing the High Atlas Mountains after a tax-gathering expedition when they were caught in a blizzard. They were rescued by Si Madani and T'hami and the grateful Sultan bestowed on Si Madani *caïdats* from Tafilalet to the Souss Valleys. In addition, he presented the Glaoui arsenal with a working 77-mm Krupp cannon, the only such weapon in Morocco outside the imperial army, which the Glaoui army used to subdue rival warlords and which is located still outside the kasbah's walls. We continue to the Tiffouloute Kasbah, ancient residence of Pasha Glaoui, thence up towards the north alongside the Oued Ouarzazate via the Assif Ounila Valley to the magnificently exotic kasbah and ksour of Aït Ben Haddou, declared, and rightly so, a World Heritage Site. Here we alight from our vehicle to visit these various kasbahs, so closely-knit that they appear to be but one complete building, backed up against the looming mountain in a stretch of unforgiving Hamada. The thick, high, sheer, elaborately decorated pisé walls, stepped-up housing, turreted, crenulated ramparts, and balustrades and arched 'babs' are a sight not to be missed. One of the more spectacular sights in the Atlas ranges, set upon a rock above a reed-strewn assif, commanding the area for miles around, this kasbah, once home to employees of Pacha Glaoui, controlled the route to Marrakech until the French blasted a road through the Tizi n'Tichka in the late 1920s. From here set off up into the High Atlas Mountains and the exhilarating hairpin bends to alight at the top of the Tizi n'Tichka (2260m) where we might wish to stop to admire a vista dominated by peaks of some 2500+m. Onwards, now, via Aït Ourir Taddert (1650m) and down across the Glaoui Plains to our hotel or riad in Marrakech, here to rest up before dinner. **BD.**



DAY 9: MARRAKECH. After breakfast we shall go for a ride in a calèche around the magnificent ramparts, quite the best

introduction to the Pink City, on to the Majorelle Garden and Museum of Islamic Art of the recently-deceased fashion icon Yves Saint Laurent. Today, beautiful shaded grounds, an impressive collection of exotic plants and trees and an Islamic Art Museum (*Musée d'Art Islamique*) make this garden one of the must-see attractions in Marrakech. The gardens were once the home and haven of French painter Jacques Majorelle, born in 1886 to a renowned cabinet maker in Nancy, France. Travels to Spain, Egypt and the Mediterranean all pulled him away from his native country, but it was Morocco that beckoned Majorelle most strongly. In 1924 Majorelle settled in Marrakech on a property that would become known as Majorelle Garden where he created a retreat with a stunning home, spacious work studio, and vast garden in which he could indulge his botanical interest by growing plants and trees from around the world. Majorelle's passion for Morocco - especially the south - became evident in his paintings. Later travels to Sudan, Guinea, Niger, Senegal and the Ivory Coast were also to influence his work. Although Majorelle opened his property to visitors in 1947, the garden began to deteriorate following his death in 1962. Restoration of the Majorelle Garden began after Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergé purchased Majorelle's former home in 1980. The house itself is not open to the public. Partially hidden by the foliage of trees, its majestic architecture can be seen from certain vantage points in the garden.



Further improvements were made in 2000, including an irrigation system which reduced water costs by 40 percent. Today, the grounds of the Garden are beautifully maintained and create an atmosphere of lush tranquillity. Winding walkways, quaint bridges, gurgling fountains, and shady gazebos add to the landscape. Home to hundreds of exotic plant and tree specimens brought from five continents, these include cactuses, bamboos, palms, blooming potted plants, and aquatic plants. Bird lovers will appreciate seeing the many species of local birds which inhabit the garden amongst which you may spot Pied Wagtails, Kestrels, Storks, Collared Flycatchers and more. The green roofed building that gets most of the attention, however, is the bright cobalt blue (referred to as *bleu Majorelle*) and yellow building that Majorelle used as a studio workshop from 1931 now houses the Museum of Islamic Art. The same cobalt blue is used with bright yellow to add colour and contrast throughout the garden. This small museum houses a tasteful collection of Islamic art, good examples of Moroccan tribal art - some hundreds of years old - textiles, weapons,

carpets from all over North Africa, jewellery, furniture. Some of Jacques Majorelle's art work and engravings of local scenes in Morocco is also on display. There are also exhibitions of marriage curtains and fabrics, embroideries, manuscripts and many other masterpieces. On now down into the Medina to the dramatic Almohad Koutoubia Mosque (entrance to the Mosque is prohibited to non-Muslims), one of the major architectural triumphs of the Almohades, the 12th century dynasty responsible for one of the worst



periods of Jewish persecution. The Koutoubia Mosque is the tallest mosque in Marrakech, its construction decided in 1158 by the Almohad Sultan Abdel Moumen soon after his conquest of Marrakech, occupying the square of a former Almohavid palace whose mosque was destroyed, supposedly as it did not face Mecca. Completed in 1199 with the construction of its famous minaret ordered by the Sultan's grandson, the Caliph Yacoub el-Mansour who died the same year, this minaret (from the Arabic word *menara* or lighthouse) was later used as model for Giralda of Seville then for the Hassan Tower of Rabat. The main function of the minaret was to provide a vantage point from which the moaddin can call out the *adhan*, calling the faithful to prayer. In most Mosques these days, the *adhan* is called not from the minaret, but in

the *musallah*, or Prayer Hall, via a microphone and speaker system, the role of the minaret is now largely for traditional and decorative purposes. A jewel of Hispano-Moresque art made up of 16 outlying naves and one larger central nave, its name is derived from the Arabic *al-Koutoubiyyin* for "bookseller", or "librarian", since it used to be surrounded by the stalls of sellers of manuscripts and books and by scribes. This square tower in finely-worked dressed stone is 77 metres tall, (as high as the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris) including its lantern. Considered to be the *ne plus ultra* structure of its kind, decorated with ceramic tiles forming different patterns on each side, it boasts of six rooms, one above the other, with a ramp leading up around them by way of which the muezzin could ride his horse (or mule) up to the balcony. It is built in a traditional Almohad style and the tower is adorned with four copper globes. According to legend, they were originally made of pure gold, and there were once supposed to have been



only three. The fourth was donated by the wife of Yacoub el-Mansour. As compensation for her failure to keep the fast for one day during the month of Ramadan she had her golden jewellery melted down to fashion the fourth globe. We continue into the Djmaâ el Fnaâ Square (the 'Assembly of the Dead'), where, until the 19th century, were traditionally displayed on stakes the severed heads of criminals. We take lunch at the Al Baraka Restaurant overlooking the Square to see from above stalls of goods, from fruit to alarm clocks; snake charmers and water sellers; fortune tellers and public scribes; tumblers and *nakkachat* - women with syringes full of henna - soothsayers and *gnaoua* musicians. With the touch of a journey back into time we set off into the bustling Kasbah to the lavishly-decorated Saâdien Tombs - discovered in 1917 with some tombs dating from the middle 1550s; this is the ancient cemetery of the *shorfa*, the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. Here you see the Prayer Hall with its horseshoe arches, the tombs of the Alaouite princes from the 18th century and a large tomb of the Black Sultan, the Merinid Dynasty Abou Hassan. On into the Hall of Twelve Columns, the central mausoleum of Ahmed el Mansour, who died in 1603, with its colonnade of twelve decorated marble pillars and intensely carved upper stuccowork that looks like gilded lace. To his right is his son and successor Zaidan; to his left his



grandson Mohammed ech-Cheik. There are 33 other tombs of Saâdien princelings. From here to the El Badii Palace. The remnants of a magnificent palace built by the Saâdien Sultan Ahmed Ibn Moussa al-Mansour in 1578(?) designed by Mohammed el-Heqqq under the influence of the Alhambra in Granada, which took some 16 years to complete, was named 'Badii' (the Incomparable), one of the 99 names of Allah (moreover, *ksar l-bdi* in Moroccan Arabic means 'the porcelain palace', which could



refer to the rich ceramic panels that profusely decorated the building). Montaigne, in his *Voyage en Italie*, reported that Italian craftsmen near Pisa were cutting 'for the King of Fes in Barbary, 50 very tall Italian marble columns which were paid for in sugar, weight for weight. Workmen from different countries, including in Europe, were recruited to execute the work'. For three-quarters of a century, the Badii was the venue for all of the great ceremonies and parties given by the Saâdien Sultans and ended up with a reputation, more or less deserved, for excess and debauchery. This was the main reason why the Alaouite Sultan Moulay Ismail (1672-1727) ordered the complete destruction of the once fairy tale building and used the materials to decorate his own palace in Meknes. Consequently all that remains today is a

section of the 2 metre-thick outer wall, the esplanade, with remains of its pools and orchards, one of the pavilions with its columns and some decorative elements (stucco, marble, zellige - small tiles). However, excavations carried out in the 20th century, the discovery of two drawings of the palace (one Portuguese and one English) and the reports of contemporary chroniclers and foreign visitors give us a reasonably precise idea of how the Badi would have been in its heyday. The palace, thought to have consisted of 360 rooms, was symmetrically planned around an enormous rectangular courtyard measuring 135 m by 110 m, including a long central pool measuring 90 m by 20 m that contained a monumental fountain and had hollows on either side planted with trees and flowers and four small rectangular basins at the ends whose ceramic mosaic paving is still visible. The east side of the palace looked out over a large garden known as 'the Crystal Garden'. Two pavilions measuring 15m by 16m were built halfway along the shorter sides of the courtyard and two more measuring 23m by 15m in the middle of the longer sides. Truncated-pyramid towers stood in the corners of the courtyard. The pavilions were crowned with domes whose ceilings were encrusted with gold from Sudan and precious *muqarnas* (honeycomb work) supported by marble columns with capitals covered with golden leaves. The floors and walls were covered with faience mosaics, the doors were made of sculpted cedar wood and, throughout, the fountains gushed water from the mouths of lions, leopards and pythons sculpted in solid silver. It also has a small, underground, tunnel-like jail with about four cells where the king kept his prisoners. From here to the late 19th century Bahia Palace (its name translates as 'The Brilliant') built by craftsmen from Fes for the black slave Si' Ahmed Ben Musa (or Bou Ahmed) after he



had risen to power and wealth as the Grand Vizier of Sultan Moulay al-Hassan. The attractive, well preserved, Harem Courtyard has featured in many Big Budget Movies. It took nearly 15 years to complete; the rooms (nearly 150!), housed Bou Ahmed, his 4 wives and 24 concubines plus servants and guards. The Palace follows the patterns of typical Islamic architecture, with central courtyards, having rooms leading off them, with doorways that are placed so that you can't see beyond (providing privacy). Fountains and gardens are also typical features, along with the decorative stucco panels, tiled floors and zellige work. From here we continue up to the Dar Si Saïd Museum. Formally a palace originally built by Mehdi Mnebbi (1894-1908), Moroccan ambassador to London, it was then bought by T'hami el Glaoui, the famous Pasha of Marrakech and 'Lord of the Atlas' during the French Protectorate. Restored in 1997, it houses both traditional and contemporary exhibitions of Moroccan arts and sculpture - the very quintessence of Moroccan art. The building is the work of Si Saïd, a half-brother of grand vizier Bou Ahmed who expanded the Bahia Palace. In fact, Dar Si Saïd is a smaller version of that Palace, with finer and more impressive decoration. On the ground floor you can find clothes, objects in beaten copper, and



beautifully decorated weapons, skilfully crafted traditional silver Berber jewellery from the southern Anti Atlas region, oil lamps and carvings in the special Tarouddant soft stone. Splendours from the past? Not at all, for many of the objects on display are still used and worn in mountain areas. Fountains sculpted from pink marble decorate the tiled courtyards that are accented by the turquoise, greens and whites of the mosaic designs. The most important exhibit in the Museum is a marble basin dating back to the 10th century, brought to Marrakech from Cordoba by the Almohad Sultan Ali Ben Youssef. The first floor salon impresses with its Hispano Moorish decoration and elegant furniture in cedar wood. It is such an accurate reproduction that, at any moment you half expect to see a bride in her ceremonial dress return to the armchair and show herself off to all the admiring guests. Other rooms are filled with an abundance of intricate chests, ancient pottery from Safi and Tamegroute, worked leather from Marrakech as well as a remarkable collection of Berber carpets from the High Atlas and others that originate from every corner of the globe; some have made use of leather while others make use of textiles to create items that accurately reflect the regions from which they originate. Stop a moment to examine coming from the Sahara region, characterised by the use of embroidered leather, and large, pile mats evoking the dry beauty of the semi-desert. A remarkably impressive eighteenth and nineteenth-century collection of door and window frames is to be found around the courtyard, all encrusted with the most delicate and refined ornamentation. We continue up into the Medina and the 14th century Ali Ben Youssef Medersa - one of the most beautiful buildings in Marrakech that housed the Islamic equivalent of a monastery; the tranquillity within contrasts with the chaotic pace of life outside in the Medina. Founded by the Merinid Sultan Abou el Hassan in the 14th century, it was almost completely rebuilt during the Saâdien Dynasty who made their distinctive mark in its architecture and art. The Medersa centres on a large courtyard with a central pool for



ablutions. The buildings are made of carved cedar wood, exquisite stuccowork, and colourful zellige tiles. At the back is a sizable prayer hall where the most elaborate decoration can be found. The interior is covered in an abundance of pine cone and palm motifs used around the mihrab to create a three-dimensional appearance. Throughout the Medersa are many Arabic inscriptions in stucco and zellige tile, the most common of which is the *bismillah* invocation: "In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful." Above the central courtyard are the small windows of the tiny student dormitories; over 800 students were housed in this Medersa, difficult to imagine. From stairs in the entry vestibule you can explore all the rooms and enjoy a nice view over the courtyard. The rooms are arranged around smaller inner courtyards, rimmed with fine wood railings. We shall go on to see the Almoravid Dynasty Koubba; also called Koubba Ba'Adiyn, the oldest building in Marrakech and the only Almoravid building to remain standing in Morocco. The Almoravids (1062-1145) were reformers and monastic-type warriors from the desert nomadic Sanhaja Berber tribe in what is now Mauritania. After conquering their homeland, they expanded to Morocco in 1062 and eventually extended their empire all the way to Algiers. Probably an ablutions annexe for the Ben Youssef Mosque, for centuries it was covered over amid the many rebuildings of the mosque; it was only excavated in 1952. This little building is significant not only because it's very old, but because its style is at the root of all Moroccan architecture. Its motifs of pine cones, palms and acanthus leaves were used in the Ben Youssef Mosque and other later buildings; its beautifully-shaped windows became the distinctive design of the Almohades and Merinids. Also highly influential on later designs are the koubba's pyramid-like battlements, the rib design on the dome, and the sophisticated interior support system, composed of a square and star-shaped octagon. In addition to the koubba itself, visitors can view a large water cistern and remains of fountains for performing ablutions. We now proceed to the Marrakech Museum of Contemporary Art and the Bert Flint Museum in the Maison

Tiskiwin. Displayed in a riad constructed at the turn of the twentieth century in Hispano-Mauresque style, Bert Flint, a Dutch anthropologist and art historian, displays his excellent collection of costumes, jewellery, arms, basketwork, musical instruments, Moroccan art, popular traditions and artefacts, carpets and furniture collected over a period of 50 years as he travelled along the Gold Road from the Atlas Mountains to Timbuktu, crossing the regions of the Sahara and the Souss Valley. Flint was born in Groningen in Holland in 1931 and after studying Islamic and Hispanic art and culture moved to Marrakech in 1957 where he taught art while continuing to study Andalusian-Arab culture. Over the years his focus had increasingly turned to rural culture shown here in all its glory and variety. We continue on through the labyrinth of narrow alleyways making up the renowned cool, colourful and aromatic Souqs of Marrakech - the Dyers' Souq being the last to be visited - finishing our guided visit in the Djmaâ el Fnaâ Square. Back at your hotel, you may either lounge around in the late afternoon or



decide to venture further into the bustle of this cosmopolitan city until dinner late this evening **BLD**.

DAY 10: MARRAKECH. Today is at leisure, or you may wish to drive to the Menara Gardens protected by a 4km long rampart containing a large carp-filled basin of water surrounded by fertile experimental orchards. The water basin dates back to the 12th century Almohad Dynasty era fed by a network of irrigation channels. The isolated green-tiled Saâdien pavilion, entirely rebuilt in the 19th century, was once used by successive Saâdien and Alaouite sultans for their romantic escapades. On now to the Palmeraie gardens with its 100,000 date palm trees, market gardens, fruit orchards and fields of wheat, barley and corn, a world class golf course and 33,000 acres of vegetation once watered, since 1106, by an ingenious system of *khettaras* which channelled spring waters piped from underground reservoirs, most of which have now dried up. Legend has it that the nomad tribes of Abu Bakr and Youssef ibn Tachfin from the Haouz Plain revelled in the dried dates they had picked in the Saharan oases. The palm grove is said to have grown up where they spat out the stones. From here we shall drive to the more modern part of Marrakech - the Gueliz - with its large squares, boutique shops and open-air cafés and on to the Hivernage area (which means wintering in French). Henri Prost had added this residential zone to the Gueliz for diplomats and officials who spent their winters here, though most of the elegant villas have been replaced by luxury hotels. You might like to take lunch here before diving back into the souqs perhaps before returning to your hotel or



riad to rest up. **B.**

DAY 11: MARRAKECH - OURIKA VALLEY - MARRAKECH. After breakfast, we shall make a 90 minute excursion south to the beautiful Ourika Valley in those High Atlas Mountains you can see from your hotel or riad, whose stream meanders through orchards, ancient terraced fields, gardens and small pisé (adobe) villages clawed from the mountain sides by the independent Berber tribesmen. We shall continue on up to the last trailhead village in the valley - Setti Fadma. On returning to Marrakech, we shall stop halfway back down the valley at the hamlet of Aghbalou to take lunch at the restaurant Ramuntcho overlooking the oued (river) with the remainder of afternoon at leisure. Your driver and guide will be at your disposition. **BL.**



DAY 12: MARRAKECH - ESSAOUIRA - MARRAKECH. You might wish today to take a 2 hour drive west to the Atlantic Ocean's shores to visit Essaouira, the ancient Phoenician town of Mogador - a corruption of the Berber word *Amegdul*, meaning 'well-protected' - and now, since Independence, called Essaouira - 'Little Picture'. Abandoned by the Portuguese in 1541, it was not until 1765 that the Alaouite Sultan Sidi Mohammad Ibn Abdullah transformed Mogador into a fortified city, charging some prominent Jewish families to promote international trade from the port. The ramparts were never that effective in keeping out the marauding tribesmen but now, a charming artists' town with its old port and cannons overlooking the fishing fleet, Essaouira invites you to wander through the narrow alleyways which make up the Medina to witness artisans at work making their inlaid wooden Thuya tables and boxes and sundry items in lemon or briar wood inlaid with mother of pearl or cherry wood and where the purple dyes once produced by the crushed shellfish were exported from the offshore Purple Islands by the conquering Romans to colour the togas of the rich back home. We continue our leisurely stroll around this enchanting town, perhaps to enjoy a lunch (optional) of Essaouira's famed seafood, either on the quayside or in one of the several quaint cafés, thence to visit the fishermen port and the Mellah. Essaouira's Mellah covers 10 percent of the town, whose Jews constituted almost 40 percent of the population in the late 1880's. Jewish stars on the doors to the Mellah show the degree to which Jews were accepted in Essaouira, to the point that some of the richer Jews did not even live in the Mellah. Commemorative plaques indicate the buildings in which synagogues were located. The Jewish cemetery, just outside the city gates, is well-kept and whose oldest known gravestone dates from 1776, with about 500 in the old cemetery and about 3,500 in the newer one. The marble, granite, and sandstone memorial markers are rough stones or boulders, flat, shaped stones, finely smoothed and inscribed stones and mausoleums. Or perhaps you'd just refer to perfect you tan on the beach, or try your hand at board, kite or wind surfing for which this town is also famous? You'll be pleasantly surprised to find what this artist-colony town has to offer before returning to Marrakech to your hotel or riad. **B.**



DAY 13: MARRAKECH - TAMADOT. After breakfast this morning we shall drive south towards the High Atlas Mountains you can see from the terrace of your riad, a stimulating almost 60 minute drive south past the Moulay Brahim Gorges and the Upper Valleys, snaking up and down the mountain sides in breathtaking loops - so hang on to your hats - past the Berber villages of Asni, Azrou and Tahmoute, of n'Ougmadane, with its old kasbahs, to continue on up the winding road to the Kasbah Tamadot, perched on a cliff face over the Aït Mizane Valley. This eclectic walled haven owned by Sir Richard Branson since 1998, bought during one of his famous ballooning expeditions, is set in its own lush gardens framed against the stunning backdrop of the snow capped High Atlas Mountains. The property is characterised by quaint private areas, rose petal filled fountains and a chilled-out ambience that seeps into your skin within minutes of arriving. Local Berber staff is employed from the surrounding villages, giving you a sense of staying in a traditional Moroccan home rather than a hotel. Each of the rooms and suites in the Kasbah has been individually decorated to reflect the beautiful architecture of the building and feature antiques from all over the world. If you want to relax there's a fabulous spa with a heated indoor and outdoor pool, a traditional Moroccan Hammam and a sauna. For the more active, there are tennis courts and a gym with panoramic views to the valley and mountains. Built as a Berber chieftain's palace and formally the home of Luciano Tempo, the renowned antiques dealer and interior designer, it is packed to its 18th-century wood ceilings with treasures from Africa, India and the Far East. Facilities will include indoor and outdoor pools, a tennis court, spa, a Turkish Hammam, beauty salon and gym. The restaurant serving meals à la carte includes both local specialties and international cuisine and the cellar is well stocked with fabulous wines and champagnes. **B.**



DAY 14: TAMADOT. Today is at leisure, either to relax in this Kasbah's calming atmosphere or to take a short drive north passing below the riverside Berber village of Azrguen n'Moulay Brahim, perched on a bluff overlooking an oued and terraced, irrigated plots of land. We continue up through the valley of the Assif n'Aït Mizane, passing by the Berber villages of Tagadirt and Aït Ali Aguerssiouâl through the Asni Hills - varying in height between 2020m and 2460m - up to the Berber village of Imlil (1740m), called Morocco's 'Little Chamonix', set way up in the foothills of the Western High Atlas Mountains and a main trailhead to the Jbel Toubkal, at 4167m the highest peak in North Africa, to her left is Jbel Aguelzim (3547m) and to her right Jbel Aksouâl (3847m) in all their glory. You might like then to return south then west to the village of Ouirgane in the Azzadene Valley. The region of Ouirgane is also home to many small Berber villages and is also another breathtaking part of the natural beauty of the High Atlas Mountain region. Here, the gentle breezes ensure that Ouirgane is cooler than in the cities and even the winters enjoys a moderate climate. The hills and valleys are littered with dense, untouched forests, fruit orchards carry the gentle fragrance of lime, grapefruit and orange into the air and the gardens are a sea of roses alongside streams cascading down from the mountains amidst fields of wild flowers. **B.**



DAY 15: TAMADOT - CASABLANCA. This morning we set out on the final leg of our adventure for a 4 hour drive back north via



Marrakech and on along the expressway to the White City of Casablanca, the largest city in Africa after Cairo -Casablanca - the commercial capital of Morocco - to arrive at the seaside resort of Aïn Diab, thence on to the Corniche running alongside the Atlantic Ocean where we shall break for lunch at the seafood Restaurant La Mer thence to a once-in-a-lifetime visit of the magnificent Hassan II Mosque, (unfortunately only of the exterior on a Friday) the second largest mosque in the Islamic world after the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca. This architectural masterpiece, a symbol of an Islam open to the world, took 7 years to complete using 50 million man-hours and inaugurated on the 30th August, 1993 was built partially on the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, on the farthest western point of the Maghreb. Conceived by the French architect Michel Pinseau (1924-1999), the Mosque employed 3,300 craftsmen from all over Morocco; has 53,000 m² of carved cedar wood; 67,000 m² of plasterwork and some 10,000 m² of sculpted ornamentation and writings; it contains on the ground floor an oblong Prayer Hall of perfect symmetry measuring 200 x 100m. Supported by seventy-eight pillars where granite, marble and onyx mix their respective reflections, this vast room supports a retractable roof covered with emerald green tiles – the symbolic colour of Islam, representing Mother - to welcome to prayer 25,000 believers inside and 80,000 on the adjoining esplanade. Embedded in the axis of the southern facade, a 210 metre-high minaret, boasts a laser beam of 30km reach pointing towards Mecca. This magnificent Mosque also encompasses a Medersa (School of Koranic learning), a Library, a National Museum and immense lecture halls, all beautifully decorated by artisans from all over Morocco: frescoes and zelliges in traditional geometrical motives, painted and sculptured woods, stuccos of intricate designs, arabesques in decorative drawings and writings in brilliant colour inaugurated in 1992 and a masterpiece of Moroccan architectural design and craftsmanship. After checking into our hotel, we shall later continue down now to the Habous Quarter - the New Medina - a 1920s souk and the King's Palace precinct, returning to our hotel where we may visit the nearby old Medina adjacent to United Nations Square. Not much more than a century old, it is a constant hive of activity, whose cramped, narrow streets abound with a sea of merchants carrying and selling an entire gamut of fruit and vegetables, leather, brass, copper, spices and clothing. The Rue Djemda Es Souk one of the main streets of this Quarter, having amongst its special interest the many shops on Rue de Rabat where a few Jewish goldsmiths still ply their trade and whose windows display jewellery with Hebrew motifs. Many traditions were shared and sometimes even originated with the Arab and Berber population, with different groups worshipping many of the same saints. They also had a mutual fear of the evil eye, or jinn, as it was called, a constant threat, for death, especially the unnaturally high number due to poor living conditions in the Mellah, was often attributed to the evil eye. To ward off such bad luck, a khamsa was worn as a defence against the jinn. The khamsa (which means five), a flat silver or brass decorated hand, created by the Jewish craftsmen, was worn by Jews and Muslims alike. Perhaps you might like later have a drink at the American-owned Rick's Café, (www.rickscafe.ma) complete with mahogany, wicker and ceiling fans - all without 'Rick Blaine' Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, Peter Lorre and Claude Rains - before dinner at the Basmane Restaurant - with Belly Dancer and live music. **B.L.D.**



DAY 16: CASABLANCA - HOME. After breakfast and in accordance with your flight schedule home (check-out from your hotel is by 12:00) you will be transferred Casablanca's International airport in time for you flight home, taking with you some certainly incredible memories of a land so full of remarkable contrasts and very friendly people. **B.**

(FOR COUPLES OR SMALL FAMILIES, WE RECOMMEND CERTAIN RIADS BE CONSIDERED FOR MORE ATMOSPHERE AND PRIVACY)

To choose you hotel or ryad, please close this page and go to Find a Hotel or Find a Ryad.

N.B. THIS PROGRAMME DOES NOT OPERATE AS SUCH OVER CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR, GIVEN THERE IS AN OBLIGATORY REQUIREMENT OF FIVE TO SIX CONSECUTIVE NIGHTS' STAY IN MOST HOTELS IN FES AND MARRAKECH COVERING THE PERIOD 24 DECEMBER TO 05 JANUARY.

OUR PRICES WILL INCLUDE: Accommodation at specified or similar hotels/riads including taxes, *subject to availability at time of reservation*. Portage on 1 piece of luggage per person. All meals as shown in the itinerary (not including alcoholic drinks), or as modified according to your instructions. Private circle trip transportation in a modern air-conditioned vehicle from Casablanca to Casablanca. Sightseeing tours, including a calèche tour in Marrakech, a dromedary ride to the overnight Sahara bivouac, a mule ride to the Kasbah Samra and all related entrance fees as listed in the itinerary. English-speaking Licensed National Guide throughout the tour; bottled or gaseous water en-route; medical and accident insurance.

OUR PRICES WILL NOT INCLUDE: Gratuities to waiters, guide, driver camp headman and cameleer. Any expenditure of a personal nature, nor anything not specifically mentioned in the itinerary.

IT IS RECOMMENDED YOU BRING WITH YOU: Good trainers or sandals; for the Saharan sortie: day pack; broad-brimmed hat (or you may purchase a 'Chèche' before you set out from Erfoud); personal toiletries; long trousers (dromedary ride); camera and Ziploc bags for your sensitive lenses; sunglasses, sunscreen and swimming costume (seasonal). For those who wear contact lenses, it could be a good idea to bring along a spare pair of glasses.

