

MOROCCO MEDIEVAL AND MODERN - SCENTSATIONAL MARRAKECH AND FES

OBTIC22m 8DAYS/7NIGHTS

DAY 1: MARRAKECH. You will be met on arrival in the Imperial City of Marrakech by our English-speaking guide and transferred to your hotel or riad. Evening free for personal activities. **D.** Subject to arrival time Marrakech, the calèche tour mentioned may be made in the afternoon after check-in, leaving the next morning or late afternoon free.

DAY 2: 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 muezzin 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-Koutoubiyin* 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 moaddin 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-Heqqs under the influence of the Alhambra in Granada, which took some 16 years to complete, was named 'Badi' (the Incomparable), one of the 99 names of Allah (moreover, ksar *I-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 Badi 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 now 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, 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'Adiyin, 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 or riad, 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 3: MARRAKECH - AÏT BEN HADDOU - OUARZAZATE - MARRAKECH: Refreshed, breakfasted and raring to go, we now

set forth on a day's excursion towards south down across the Glaoua Plains via Aït Ourir Taddert (1650m) up into the High Atlas Mountains and their exhilarating hairpin bends to alight at the top of the Tizi n'Tichka (2260m) - the highest paved road in Morocco, which offers an impressive landscape in the heart of the Atlas Mountain chain. We'll see deep valleys and villages clinging to steep mountain slopes, with fields cultivated along the edges of the rivers in the valleys below. We stop for a photo-op of a vista dominated by peaks of some 2500+m to continue now into a totally different countryside, from stark mountains and plains in the Assif Ounila Valley to ochre earth, oases and the magnificently exotic and remote 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. Originally built circa 1703 by the Sultan Moulay Ismail from Meknes, the first King of Morocco, it was to become home to employees of El Haj T'hami el Mezouari el Glaoui (1879-1956), the last ruling family of the south (the 'Lords of the Atlas') and a strong contender for control over Morocco, they are 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 controlled the route to Marrakech until the French blasted a road through the Tizi n'Tichka in the late 1920s. We shall cross back over the oued to take lunch in full view of the Kasbah and dramatic surrounds before setting off to the new (1920s) once-garrison town of the French Protectorate - Ouarzazate - at the crossroads of the Dadès and Draâ Valleys, set between the High Atlas Mountains and the end of the Sahara region of oases and sand. During the French Protectorate period, Ouarzazate expanded considerably as a Foreign Legion garrison town, administrative centre and customs post. It is still the arrival point of different cultures and crafts with a Sunday souq filled with henna, roses, caraway, distilled herb tea, Berber vases, objects in engraved stone, blankets and famous Ouzguita carpets of blue or resplendent gold with beautiful geometric designs. Here we shall visit the nearby Kasbah of Taourirt, the kasbah of the former caïd (meaning "master" or "leader,") and later the possession of the same Pasha El Glaoui 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, great grandfather of the actual king of Morocco. Until the second half of the 20th century, Moroccan society was 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. From here set off back up into the High Atlas Mountains and the Tizi n'Tichka (2260m) to continue through the mountains and back across the Glaoua Plains to our hotel or riad in Marrakech after a day spent amidst kasbahs set against the southern face of the High Atlas Mountains backdrop. **BL.**

DAY 4: MARRAKECH. A day at leisure in this cosmopolitan Pink City of Marrakech, pronounced *Marrakch*...Marrakouch - the land

of the sons of Kouch, black African warriors from Mauritania - created by the Almoravid Saharan chieftain Abou Bekr way back in 1062 when his army set up camp in the heart of the Haouz Plain to control the caravan trade north-south of gold, slaves, salt (more valued than gold itself), spices; once the capital of an empire stretching from Senegal to Toledo, it is all here, the Medina surrounded by reddish-brown ramparts and palm trees and the soaring peaks of the High Atlas Mountains towering in the background, stores – ancient and modern which you might wish to re-visit as you wander with your licensed guide with an opportunity to purchase some or many of the local and Berber handicrafts in leather, brass, copper, silver or gold; beautiful carpets, each with their story to tell (and so close to what was once the Slave Market); artistry in polished wood; a myriad of perfumes and a simply amazing selection of so many spices. Or you may wish to leave that for your oncoming visit of Fes. Be that as it may, your car and guide are at your disposal. **B.**



DAY 5: MARRAKECH - HIGH & MIDDLE ATLAS MOUNTAINS - FES. After breakfast we set off towards the north-east alongside the low hills of the Jbilet to the town of Beni Mellal with the Middle Atlas Mountains to our right, to follow the winding main road up to the town of Khenifra and into the Middle Atlas cedar forests, perchance to feed some of the resident Barbary Apes - and 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 - for a long time a strategic settlement established to effect some form of control of the independent mountain Berber peoples. Here you might wish to take a break for a light lunch before 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 - which in the local Tamazight (Berber) dialect means "caves" - is mainly a winter ski resort and a summer hideaway for rich Moroccans wishing to escape the hustle and heat of the large cities. Down now to the small 1920s French-built hill station of Immouzèr Du Kandar (1220m) crossing the pleasant Saïss Plateau to arrive, after some 6 hours' drive (including "comfort" stops) at the ancient imperial city of Fes and your hotel or riad for the next 3 nights. Dinner will be in either in your hotel or riad. **BD.**



DAY 6: FES: 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. The city that was once, after Mecca and Medina, held to be one of the holiest cities in the Islamic world; the city whose merchants were travelling to China in the 15th century; the city that (of least importance) gave its name to the red cylindrical brimless hat. Moroccans say that Marrakech, Rabat and Casablanca live in the present, but that Fes certainly lives in the past. No surprises here, for European chroniclers of the Middle Ages wrote with awe of this city that for several centuries was the most civilised Western outpost of the Semitic world. Its scholars introduced astronomy and medicine to the West via Spain when that country was under Moorish rule. Historians of the time said that the writings of both Plato and Aristotle first reached Western Europe in Arabic translations - from Fes.



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 with the indigenous Berber tribesmen, he started to build what was to become the first Islamic settlement in Morocco. Welcome to this different world, so reminiscent of a Jerusalem of 1000 years ago. With its two hundred mosques and holy shrines, 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.



As soon as you ready after breakfast, 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); of the Bou Inania Mosque and the Maimonides' clock; of the Jewish cemetery and the Synagogues of Ben Saâdoun & Aben Danan; 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 the Dar Batha Museum with its collection of carpets, woodwork to arrive back at your hotel or riad after a day full of contrasting culture and journey into some 1,200 years of history. **BLD.**

DAY 7: FES/MEKNES/VOLUBILIS/MOULAY IDRIS/FES: After a latish breakfast we shall now set out westwards to the Imperial City of Meknes, noted for its carpet weaving and fine wines.



Arab historians trace the origins of Meknes to the Roman occupation of Morocco from 3BC to 40AD, 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 Sultan Moulay Ismail. This, one of the 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 built among olive groves around Takarart, an 8th century Berber kasbah or 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 Sultan Moulay Ismail 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.



This old city may not be among the finest in Morocco, but the Royal Palace - the Dar el Makhzen - fills a considerable part of it. Erected around 1700 AD during the tyrannical rule of Sultan Moulay Ismail who reigned for 55 years, he had chosen Meknes as his strategic seat of power in 1672 and then, using famously brutal discipline, he attempted to turn the little university town into a capital that would rival Versailles. You'll surely marvel at these ruins which once were one of the most sumptuous palaces of Meknes, now still exemplified by this stunning view of arcades open to the sky.

His 25 kilometres of ramparts surrounding the Dar el-Kebira (Imperial City) were personally supervised - Ismail strolled about the construction sites with a pickaxe and whip and decapitated workers who

displeased him. Those slaves, captured by corsairs off the Atlantic coast at Salé, near Rabat, (these same corsairs whose descendants were to "capture" Robinson Crusoe) who died of exhaustion were entombed within the walls they were building. He is



rumoured to have had some 30,000 people killed during this period, but the figures are far higher if you include those in his various campaigns. His motto was to the effect that: "My subjects are like rats in a basket, and if I don't shake the basket, they will gnaw their way out." To construct his Imperial monuments, Ismail plundered materials from all over Morocco including the Roman marble from the nearby and otherwise intact ruins of Volubilis. Meknes, this city of Moulay Ismail, is one of the only cities in Morocco where the Mellah does not adjoin the Royal Palace. It is also the only city where Jews

decided to create a new Mellah after the French Protectorate was installed. The European city houses several synagogues as well as a community centre. In this Imperial city of Meknes, the tomb of Moulay Ismail memorialises the Alaouite Sultan who protected the Jews whilst he was securing control of the Moroccan empire. Palaces, mosques, gardens, lakes, granaries and stables were built over a period of 50 years; yet Moulay Ismail's dream city, surrounded by a massive rampart wall, was never finished.

The great monuments, the massive walls, the huge gates, the elaborate gardens, the integrated neighbourhoods, the bustling market and the unique crafts and arts point to layers of history compacted and superimposed in every corner of the city. There is so much history for one to unravel and marvel at that Meknes was classified in 1996 as a World Heritage Site. In the traditional, unusual and picturesque souqs of Meknes, ordinary objects become extraordinary. In the main square, fondouks (inns), hairdressers, blacksmiths and bazaars vie for your custom. That sound of music is coming from the Bab el-Jdid. That is not surprising, for this is where you will find the musical instrument shops. Bang on the taut skin of a *derbouka* (drum), you'll not be able to resist the temptation.



The Bab el-Mansour el-Ali truly is one of the most beautiful gates in North Africa. Built by Christian slaves between the years 1672 and 1727 in the classical Arabic style of which this is probably the best example, you step through its majestic archway to find yourself immersed in Moulay Ismail's unfinished dream. One of the best known and admired of Meknes' grand gates, the Gate leads from the Imperial City and Lalla Aoudad Esplanade to El-Hedim Square.



In Meknes, even the ruins are grandiose. Those of Dar el-Kebira, the first palace built by Moulay Ismail, contained two mosques and more than twenty pavilions. Then there are other fabulous monuments, such as the Sidi Said Mosque, the Bab El Berdaïne, the Bab El Khemis, Bab Jamâa En Nouar, the Moulay Ismail Mausoleum and the Koubba El Khayatine. The Imperial city of Meknes with its twenty gates, over fifty palaces and fifteen miles of exterior ramparts counts amongst its most impressive sites the Dar El-Ma with its high vaulted, climate-controlled chambers once serving as storerooms in case of attack or drought. Every Mosque in Morocco is tiled in green. Green is the colour of Islam, representing

Mother Earth. The Minaret is never hard to find, towering above the terra cotta tiles of the Medina's souqs and upstairs dwellings. This is the sole rounded minaret in Morocco. The al-Masjid al-Kebira, or Great Mosque, is the largest and at the centre of the



Meknes Medina and, although non-Muslims cannot enter, as a consolation across the way is the 14th century Medersa Bou Inania, a college of theology and Muslim Law. The Medersa typifies the traditional Fassi architecture, combining carved cedar from the forests of the Middle Atlas Mountains with stuccowork and *zellij* (tile and mosaics). Bathed in light and outshining the Alhambra and other Mudejar buildings in Spain, the court yard is well preserved by Moroccan standards providing refuge to a few dozen families of cats. Upstairs, surrounding the open square below, are four hallways of small stone rooms, like cells, where students, in pairs, once studied and slept with only a pocket of sunlight.

From the terrace above we overlook the Medina and its mass of unruly rooftops and the green tiled minarets of at least a dozen Mosques.

Here we shall visit the Dar el Makhzen and the Bab Mansour; the El Heri es-Souani - the granary of huge vaulted structures and stables - once accommodating some 20,000 'Barb' horses (a cross-breed of Arab and Berber horses) - built by this despotic Sultan 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 really splendid Moulay Ismail Mausoleum and the Place el-Hedim - an enormous open-air market with heaps of clay pottery, over which peers the 19th century Dar Jamaï Palace, built by Sultan Moulay Hassan I. The palace now houses a Museum of Moroccan Art, displaying restored, furnished rooms dripping with ornate plasterwork, inlaid wood and painted ceilings, carved walls, wall to wall hand-knotted Berber carpets and embroidered silk lounges, divans and pillows. The master sitting room is domed with a copula of delicate plaster stalactites. Then there's the Medina which remains to this day a maze of narrow streets of cobblestone and dirt, with traffic of donkeys and children and craftspeople on their way to and from their own unique souq, organised by craft - wood, metal, carpet, food and spices. Our walk today takes us through a twisting labyrinth of wall-holes, each revealing a



cluster of men sitting cross-legged on the floor sewing and embroidering with lightening-quick fingers. They work in the dim shade of the street, where medieval walls are so high there is little direct, scorching sunlight. Hundreds of shades of silk thread are spun and twisted together to make thicker, stronger threads for making dresses and robes and fabrics for upholstery. The men are



steadfast in their work, leaning over lapfuls of delicate fabric, skillfully pulling needles with alacrity. At almost every mind-boggling corner where there is no right or left, only deeper and narrower, there is a fountain - an essential component of Islamic life. The fountain at one time was the necessary means by which members of the community retrieved water. Today it is a symbol of community, a wash basin for the vendors at the souqs, a splash station and watering hole for the children. The fountains are decorated entirely with tiny colourful tiles and carved and painted wood. Some have been left to decay and get filthy, some have stopped running altogether, but some remain as useful and integral to the corner as they did centuries ago. We shall drive north 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 Cortege 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 leave Volubilis behind us for a light lunch at the Hotel Volubilis Inn's restaurant with a panoramic view of the ruins town of Moulay Idriss, the holiest Islamic town in the kingdom of Morocco, where thousands of Moroccan faithful come on pilgrimage (*mousssem*) every August to pray at the tomb

of this descendant of the Prophet Mohammed with its elongated square and green-tiled pyramids of the Zaouiat with its two conical towers quarters on either side and labyrinth of alleyways. From here it's back to our hotel or riad for the night. **BL.**

DAY 8: FES - ONWARDS. After breakfast and in accordance with your flight schedule (check-out from your hotel is at 12:00) you will be transferred to International airport in time for your onward flight connecting over Casablanca, 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 hotel or riad as *available at time of reservation* - including relevant taxes. Meals as detailed (excluding alcoholic beverages), or as modified in accordance with your instructions. Porterage on 1 piece of luggage per person in/out airports & riads. Private transportation in an air-conditioned vehicle. Sightseeing tours, including one by calèche in Marrakech, all related entrance fees as listed in the itinerary. An English-speaking Licensed National Guide throughout. Bottled water en-route. Medical and Accident Insurance.

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

IT IS RECOMMENDED YOU BRING WITH YOU: good trainers; hat, pullover; day pack; hygienic 'wipes;' camera and Ziploc bags for sensitive lenses; sunglasses, sunscreen, swimming costume (seasonal).