

14 Hour Excursion Ship to Ship



Marrakech, pronounced *Marrakch*...Marrakouch - the land of the sons of Kouch, black African warriors from Mauritania - was created by the Almoravid Saharan Sultan 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; once the capital of an empire stretching from Senegal to Toledo, the very name itself conjures up visions of colourful and aromatic souks bustling with people, fortune-tellers, snake charmers, street acrobats and peddlers to a background of drums and the tingling aromas of a multitude of spices. It is all here, surrounded by reddish-brown ramparts and palm trees, and the soaring peaks of the High Atlas Mountains towering through the summer haze. If you choose to take only one excursion during your cruise, this should be it, for Marrakech, the 'Pink City', is still one of the truly magical, mysterious and exotic places left in the world with its labyrinth of alleyways in the ancient Medina; secluded palaces, riads, museums, mosques, mosaics and markets; wide avenues filled with luxury shops - and those beautiful gardens.



Our 3 hours drive south-east from Casablanca across the arid Ben Guerir plain leads us to the Imperial City of Marrakech, where we shall drive past the impressive city Ramparts to the Koutoubia Mosque, this for centuries has dominated the skyline of Marrakech. The Koutoubia Mosque is the tallest mosque in Marrakech. Its construction was 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 *mnara* 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-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 shall pay a quick visit to the tranquil Majorelle Gardens of the deceased fashion icon Yves Saint Laurent, first laid out by the French artist Louis Majorelle, overlooked by the High Atlas Mountains with pavilions in a dynamic shade of blue; lush greenery, palm trees, cacti, still pools and shady nooks. We continue down to the Kasbah to visit the lavishly-decorated 16th century Saâdien Tombs - some 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. We continue on to visit the Dar el Bahia Palace, once the 19th century residence built by the Grand Vizier Ba Ahmed, with its higgledy-piggledy arrangement of close, intimate rooms, beautifully-decorated reception rooms, all with their particular mosaics and ceiling decorations, small gardens and courtyards; of these we get to see the apartments of the Sultan's favourite concubine, the magnificent Council Chamber and the central courtyard paved in marble and decorated with zelliges (intricate tile work), fountains and flowers - the inner courtyards were reserved for the sultan's four wives and twenty four concubines. After a light lunch in a good Moroccan restaurant (with folklore show), we set off into the 12th century Medina to stroll through the maze of narrow alleyways to the 14th century 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, it is 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 Djmaâ el Fnaâ Square where we will find a permanent theatre of musicians, acrobats, snake-charmers, food stalls and storytellers. There will be free time to wander with your licensed guide through the covered souqs 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 delicate and colourful, aromatic spices. At the agreed time, we board our vehicles to take us back to our awaiting ship. L.



This tour involves a long drive, even with a comfort stop in each direction, and Marrakech is invariably heaving with people. The walk through the wattle-shaded souqs will be a very crowded experience over sometimes uneven ground, and you will be invited, politely, by shopkeepers to purchase their wares, yet the effort is well worth it for the sheer magic of having enjoyed a bit of bartering and but a small taste of this legendary, exciting and exotic city, so enjoyed by Moroccan themselves.

Please note that this tour requires a total walking time of about 3 hours.

OUR PRICES WILL INCLUDE: Private circle trip transportation in an air-conditioned vehicle from Port to Port. *Medical and Accident insurance.* Private guided sightseeing excursion and all related entrance fees as listed in the itinerary. Light lunch and folklore show. An English-speaking Licensed National Guide throughout. Bottled or gaseous water en-route.

OUR PRICES WILL NOT INCLUDE: Gratuities to waiter, guides 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; pullover (seasonal); day pack; hygienic 'wipes;' camera and Ziploc bags for sensitive lenses; hat, sunglasses, sunscreen.