

A JOURNEY THROUGH MOROCCO'S 'BLACK' HERITAGE

OBTHB01cc 12 DAYS/11 MAGICAL NIGHTS. CASABLANCA-RABAT/FES/VOLUBILIS-MEKNES-FES/MARRAKECH-OUARZAZATE-ZAGORA/MARRAKECH/ESSAOURIA-SAFI-OUALIDIA-EL JADIDA-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, or Sala Colonia, a necropolis and complex of ancient Phoenician, Carthaginian and Roman town known as Sala Colonia and referred to as Sala by Ptolemy. The Almohad Dynasty

used the ghost town as a necropolis, to abandon the site in 1154 A.D., in favour of nearby Salé.

The Merinid Dynasty "*el Sultan Aswad*" or "**Black Sultan**", Abu el Hassan Ali el Saïd who reigned from 1331-1351, the most famous of the Merinides rulers of Morocco who got his name like his dark skin from his mother an Abyssinian enslaved Nubian described as "*dark and of mixed blood*" to whom in one of his inscriptions he paid the lofty tribute: "*Her noble and saintly Highness! May Allah enlighten her tomb and sanctify her soul!*", rebuilt the original Carthaginian enclosure wall of crushed loam between 1310 and 1334 with five sides of differing lengths and 20 towers, to add an arched gate, or 'Bab', in 1339, decorated with carving, and coloured marble and tiles, with an octagonal tower on either side above which is a square platform, a mosque, a zaouia and royal tombs. Abu Youssef Yacoub, the second Merinid Sultan, later built a mosque, consisting of a small courtyard, followed by a three-aisled sanctuary in which the Mihrab is straight ahead. An arched doorway on the left has the remains of floral and geometric zellij in five colours. On the right, are the nearer tombs in the ruins of the zaouia include those of Abu el Hassan and his favourite wife, a beautiful white European captive named Shams-ed-Douha, or "The Morning Sun"; these tombs, one of the architectural treasures of Morocco, are in a rectangular courtyard with a minaret and a ruined funerary chapel with very intricate carving surrounded by small cells and a pool surrounded by a columned arcade whose bases still discernible. Upon the eastern face of the Sultan's sarcophagus is a wall of red stone carved with an inscription from the Koran, softened with time, with the exquisite ornament of the Alhambra. Many of the structures in Chellah were damaged by the Lisbon 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.

Abu Hassan Ali el Saïd was renowned for his ambition, courage, and the fortitude with which he bore his reverses, as well as for his patronage of art. Under him Moroccan art, architecture, and literature rose to the zenith of their splendour. His Medrasas or schools, upon which he lavished all the beauties of Moroccan art, are monuments to his highly civilized taste and love of culture. His reign following that of his father, Abu Said Uthman, who was unable to make wars of conquest in Spain, started when he came to the throne by ousting his brother. In 1330 he inflicted a crushing defeat upon the Christian King of Léon and Castile and captured Gibraltar. Ten years later he made himself master of the Mediterranean by destroying the Christian fleet commanded by the white admiral, Godfrey Tenorio. Then began a long series of misfortunes as the kings of Léon and Castile and Portugal, allying themselves against him, defeated him, not only to take his treasures but also his wives. Driven from Europe, he returned to North Africa to conquer Tunisia and Algeria and became so great a power in North Africa that the Mameluke sultans of Egypt looked to him as the protector of Western Islam. Whilst absent from Morocco, his subjects revolted under his son, Abu Fares, who seized the throne. With his army, the Black Sultan sailed from Tunis for Morocco, but a storm in the Mediterranean wrecked his fleet. Thrown into the water with the dead tossing around him, he managed to save himself by clinging to a piece of wreckage and finally drifted ashore near Algiers. Undaunted, he gathered a large army and marched against his son. He was defeated but, notwithstanding, he reached Fes and captured it yet was unable to hold the city and was driven into the Sahara, where he assembled army after army, hurling them against his foes again and again, only to be beaten each time.

Stern, self-denying, and dynamic, the *Black Sultan* refused to yield to the pleasures that had softened so many of his predecessors, and was thus able to endure hardship and vicissitudes such as few monarchs have had to face. While at times he was subject to outbursts of extreme cruelty, he was nonetheless refined and possessed great nobility of spirit. To this Sultan are also due the Medersas in Fes and El Mesbahiya (named after the first of scholars who used to teach in it, Abu Dhiaa Misbah bin Abdullah al-Yalsuti); El Jdid (reconstructed by the Sultan Mohammed Bin Abdullah Al-Alaoui); the El Attarine, the Sbaiyin (Sughra) and the Es-Sahrij (or Kubra); all used to teach the seven readings of the Holy Qur'an and marking the height of a civilization associated with their name, seeking by their foundation to strike the imagination of the Moslems of his capital and to show them what he could accomplish. A man of many parts, he inscribed a copy of the Koran (Qur'an) with his own hand and had it richly bound in leather and gold and sent to Mecca to be placed in the Mosque; he likewise sent copies to Medina and Jerusalem. His power and glory reached their height at the date of the building of the Mesbahiya for by then he had subdued Central Morocco and had made himself the most powerful sovereign in Western Islam. He married a daughter of the king of Tunis and, upon the death of her father, annexed his dominions to Morocco. He died June 21, 1357, after a reign of twenty-one years and 6 years of imprisonment by his son. This son, Abu Inan Fares, later grieved for his disloyalty and in remorse erected the Medersa Bou Inania, a theological temple of learning for students who boarded there, to this day one of the most artistic and most sacred in Morocco.



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" (centrepiece 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 XVIIth 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 Ismail 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 accommodation for this night. **BLD.**

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 gem of the walk through town is the Medrasa founded by the same 'Black Sultan' Abu Hassan Ali el Saïd in 1341. Restored in 2005, its stunning courtyard is decorated with multicolored tiles, slender pillars and elaborately carved cedar. Above are the minute cells once occupied by students who once also enjoyed the lovely vista. The Medrasa is one of the best (and best-restored) examples of Moorish architecture, in all of its sublime delicacy that is open to non-Islamic visitors, who are barred from most mosques in Morocco. The main door to the Mellah and the beautiful Medersa were constructed during the Merinid Dynasty. We continue on to 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. 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.



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.



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.



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 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 originally developed in the 10th century by the Zenata tribe of the Meknassa Berbers as *Meknassa 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 is principally the city of the Alaouite Dynasty Sultan Moulay Ismail - "The Bloodthirsty" - who wanted to create a royal capital here in 1672 that would rival the French court of King Louis XIV at Versailles. He had an



army of bricklayers, black slaves and several hundred captured Christian slaves build 120km of thick, defensive ramparts, splendid palaces, stables for 12,000 'Barb' horses, hanging gardens watered by a 4 hectare pond and immense granaries in the event of sieges. After almost a century of construction, he left behind one of the most beautiful cities in Arabo-Mauresque style in the world. This despotic Sultan came to power in 1672 and remained firmly in control for fifty-five years, for the keys to his reign were his legendary capricious cruelty, his political talents and especially his military, whose core was the near-legendary Praetorian Black Guard (in Arabic, *Abid*, from a root meaning "slave"), a corps of some sixteen thousand unmixed loyal black-African slave-soldiers descended from black captives (*Saharaoui*) brought to Morocco from Senegal. Some of the black-skinned people you may see strolling the narrow alleyways claim direct descendancy from this Black Guard. In 1690, having seen the moral decline of his Arab soldiers and having noticed that the black slaves brought to him from distant Senegal were lion-muscled, superbly built and as fierce fighters as those once invincible Arabs, he determined to form a new, better

army. So he sent squads of Arab slave drivers to beat the forests of Senegal for blacks where, from the roundup, 10,000 of the most perfect men, 10,000 of the soundest maidens were selected and sent to Gao just south of Timbuktu on the Niger River from where the captive lines of men and maidens were force-marched north to Marrakesh.

Once inside the city, chains were knocked off, the Negro men were told to pick their own brides and mate with them forthwith. The great mass-mating lasted for weeks. From here, the best were selected to be based in Meknes to be settled in a special colony and given wives - their male offspring would be pressed into military careers at the age of sixteen - and each couple conditionally given a strip of land to till and the choice of either a donkey or a camel. By the end of his reign this Sultan's Nubian black soldiers had grown ten times in number.

This Black Guard were charged with fighting Ismail's campaigns against the European-controlled fortress enclaves dotting his empire's Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts and with patrolling Morocco's unstable countryside: they crushed rebellions against Ismail's rule not only by Moroccan Berber tribes but also by Ismail's seditious sons, who defected from service as his provincial governors to revolt as would-be usurpers of his throne. In England, by 1535, during an age when belief in witchcraft and hobgoblins was universal, such creatures of fancy were assigned as *blackguards to his Satanic Majesty*, some say in distant reference to Moulay Ismail and the tales told by Moorish servants - 'blackamoors', thus being used to refer to the lowest servants in a household and by 1560, it was being used to refer to attendants, dressed in black and often attending some villainous character. The sense of the vagabond or criminal class doesn't appear until the 1680s and the modern sense of a scoundrel dates to the 1730s.

Moulay Ismail, said to have sired 888 children by 500 women, always went about his court surrounded by a bodyguard of eighty black slave-soldiers, with muskets and scimitars at the ready in case of any attempt on the Sultan's life. At his throne, Ismail was attended by a slave charged with twirling a parasol above the Sultan at all times (a legend says that on at least one occasion, Ismail pulled out his sword and murdered an attendant who had allowed the sun to briefly fall upon his skin). Two more slaves fanned the flies away from his face, while a third held a napkin beneath his chin to collect his spittle. Despite his excesses, Moulay Ismail is remembered for driving out the Spanish and British from Morocco, uniting the country and of course his establishment of the Alaouite dynasty. His strict observance of orthodox Islamic ritual has also conferred a salutary, healing power on him and you will see many Moroccans here visiting his shrine at the Moulay Ismail Mausoleum seeking 'baraka,' or intercession, to receive health, well-being and luck.

Though the Black Guard was fiercely loyal, they remained just as vulnerable to their commander's fits of rage as his European slaves and Berber subjects. When the French ambassador Pidou de Saint-Olon was granted an audience with Moulay Ismail, the latter arrived at this meeting with his sleeves drenched in blood up to the elbows, after having slit the throats of two of his favorite black attendants on a whim. When Ismail's officially-approved Barbary pirates brought in a Portuguese ship they had just captured, Ismail was presented a beautiful handcrafted hatchet found on board: the sultan immediately struck and killed a Black Guard for no other reason than to test the blade. These corsairs periodically raided the west coast of England and carried off men, women and children as slaves. Thomas Pellow, aged 11 in 1715, was one of the unlucky ones, as by this date the Barbary pirates were considered only a minor danger. A Cornish schoolboy playing truant on his uncle's trading vessel en route to Genoa, Pellow was captured along with the ship and its company off the Straits of Gibraltar. For 23 years, Pellow was beaten, tortured and starved before finally being forced to abjure Christianity to save his life. As a "renegade", Pellow was exempt from the prisoner ransoms and rescue missions mounted from England, because these applied only to Christians. He eventually found a niche as a bodyguard in Sultan Moulay Ismail's army.

Pellow helped to suppress many uprisings of tribesmen in the Atlas Mountains, and in 1731-32 went on a 1,500-mile slaving expedition south to Senegal across the deserts of north-west Africa. But always he longed to escape, and in 1738, taking

advantage of the endemic civil wars that convulsed Morocco after Moulay Ismail's death in 1727, he travelled to the coast, boarded an Irish ship and was landed safely at Gibraltar.

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 vaulted granary and one-time stables at El Heri es-Souani; 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 and still oozes a feeling of luxury and 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 with a wonderful collection of jewelry, traditional costumes and rare carpets. 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.

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 Roman emperor and general Lucius Septimius Severus, born and raised at Leptis Magna (now modern Libya) in Rome's historic Africa Province, was the first such emperor to be born in Africa. He was of Syrian Roman ancestry on his mother's side (Julia Domna) and of Berber or Punic ancestry on his father's, a wealthy, distinguished family of ancient Rome's Equestrian rank (*ordo equester*) - the lower of the two aristocratic classes, ranking below the Senatorial Order (*ordo senatorius*). A member of this order was known as an *eques* (plural: *equites*), which in Latin has the general meaning of any person mounted on a horse (*equus*), but in this context carries the specific meaning of "knight". In 211 C.E. he was succeeded by his son Marcus Aurelius

Antoninus aka Caracalla. Caracalla was born April 4, 188 C.E., in Lyon, France, whilst his father was serving as Governor under the emperor Commodus. The child's name originally is said to have been Lucius Septimus Bassianus, the cognomen commemorating the family of his mother. When he was seven years old, his name was changed to Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. Caracalla, a nickname and originally derisive, was never used officially. The year 212 C.E. saw a flurry of administrative reforms under the young emperor's leadership. Soldiers received increases in pay and in legal rights, but the most noteworthy change was the bestowal of Roman citizenship upon all free residents of the empire. In gratitude, a triumphal arch was erected in honour of Caracalla's and his here at Volubilis. Caracalla's rule was followed by the short reign of the Roman Emperor from Mauritania Tingitana Marcus Opellius Macrinus, the Praetorian Prefect and the first non-senator to become emperor, if only for fourteen months. He took the name Severus to have his reign reflect some of the stature and continuity of both Septimius and Caracalla.



The site contains the Mansion with its 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 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 (*mousslem*) 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) AD, an event occurred that was to forever change the path of Moroccan culture. Idriss Ibn Abdallah (or Moulay Idriss I as he is called 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, some 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 - BENI MELLAL - MARRAKECH. This morning we set out southwards for a six hour drive into the Middle Atlas range of mountains, passing through Imouzzer-du-Kandar, the Swiss Alpine-like town of Ifrane, through the Cedar Forest to Azrou, perchance to feed some of the relatively wild Barbary Apes, to continue south southwest through Khenifra and Kasbah Tadla and into the town of Beni Mellal, situated between the Plain of Tadla and Jbels (mountains) of Tassemit (2248m) and R'Nim (2411m) where we stop for lunch at the Hotel Chems. We now enter into the region of the High Atlas Mountain Ranges, with Jbels Azourki (3690m) and Irhil M'Goun (at 4071m the second-highest peak in North Africa) to our left, thence to pass alongside the low hills of the Jbilet into Imperial City of Marrakech, the Pink City for our three nights' stay. **BL.**



DAY 5: MARRAKECH. Red is the official colour in Marrakech - the colour red symbolises the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, as displayed on the official flag - and all of the buildings are an ochre colour. Like Fes, it is famous for its Medina. Built within ancient city ramparts, the Medina is crowded with people living in and walking through an Escheresque maze of narrow streets, lanes and alleys filled with a little of everything. Among the shops, stalls, and vendors are barber shops, banks, butcher shops, pharmacies, bakeries, restaurants, cafes, vegetable stands, fruit stands, mosques, jewellery stores with gold and silver, candy stalls, leather goods, cyber cafes, and just about anything conceivable. *Marrakech* - one possible origin of its name could be from the Tamazight (Berber) words *mur (n) akuch*, which means "Land of God"; others claim it stems from *Marra kouch*, or "the sons of Kouch", the grandson of Noah mentioned in Genesis from the Hebrew word meaning 'black' and an eponym for the Kouch peoples from the Horn of Africa, a land mentioned in the Old Testament as neighbouring the Garden of Eden. Prior to the advent of the Almoravids (a Berber dynasty in the 11th century, reformers and monastic-type warriors from the nomadic Sanhaja Berber tribe in what is now Mauritania who, after conquering their homeland and Senegal, expanded to Morocco in 1062 to eventually extended their empire all the way to Algiers) the area around Marrakech was ruled from the city of Aghmat, an important medieval Berber town in southern Morocco which is known today as the archaeological site of "Joumaâ Aghmat", situated approximately 30 km east of Marrakech on the road south at Ourika. The initial "A" of the name may be unvocalised and the name sometimes spelled "Ghmat" or even "Rhmate" (as it appears in the Michelin Guide). The Almoravid leader, Abu-Bakr Ibn Umar, appointed General of the Almoravid sect by its leader Abdallah Ibn Yasin, decided Aghmat was becoming overcrowded and decided to build a new capital; being a nomad from the Sahara, he decided to build it in a plain away from the mountains and rivers and chose the site of Marrakech as being in neutral territory between two tribes who were then vying for the honour of hosting the new capital. Work started in May 1070, but Abu-Bakr was recalled to the Sahara to put down a rebellion in January 1071 and the city was completed by his deputy and eventual successor, Yusuf Ibn Tachfin, the powerful black Berber Almoravid Dynasty leader described by an Arab chronicler Abou Mohammed Salah ibn Abd Allah el-Halim in his *Roudh el-Kartas* (History of the Rulers of Morocco), published in 1326, 218 years after Tachfin's death (he lived, some say, to be 101), as being of "brown colour, middle height, thin, little beard, soft spoken, black eyes, straight nose, lock of Mohammed falling on his top of his ear, eyebrow joined, woolly hair", and is generally accepted to have come from what is now Nigeria. He brought in an army composed largely of "pure Negroes" to completely subject what is now known as Morocco, the Western Sahara and Mauritania. His favourite wife was a white Christian captive, called Fadh-el-Hassen, or 'Perfection of Beauty', the mother of his



frizzy-haired son and successor, Ali. In 1080, he conquered the kingdom of Tlemcen (in modern-day Algeria) and founded the present city of that name, his rule extending as far east as Oran. In 1086, he was invited by the Muslim princes in the Iberian Peninsular (Al-Andalus) to defend them against Alfonso VI, King of Léon and Castile, so he crossed the straits to Algeciras and inflicted a severe defeat on the Christians at the az-Zallagah (near Badajoz). Arabic sources indicate that 4000 black soldiers participated in this famous battle. During the succeeding Almohad dynasty, the rulers had a private garrison of black soldiers, who also served as royal guards and during the rule of the Caliph Muhammad an-Nasir, around 1200 A.D., their numbers reached 30,000. He had succeeded his father, Youssef al-Mansour in 1198, to die in 1213. He had to deal with a crusade proclaimed by Pope Innocent III where he was defeated by the Christian coalition, at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa. Some say during this period, King John of England, brother of King Richard the Lionhearted, had been excommunicated by Pope Innocent III and, with parts of the country in revolt because of his burgeoning taxes and the threat of a French invasion. Writing some two decades after the events, Matthew Paris, an early 13th century Benedictine monk and chronicler, claims that, in desperation, King John sent envoys to an-Nasir asking for his help. In return John is said to have offered to convert to Islam and turn England into a Muslim state. But an-Nasir was so disgusted by John's grovelling plea that he immediately sent the envoys away. During this dynasty, the recruitment of enslaved blacks in the government became institutionalised, to become known as *'Abid al-Makhzen*, meaning "servants, or slaves, to the governing elite."

Yusuf Ben Tachfin was prevented from following up his victory by recurring trouble in Northern Africa which he had to settle in person. When he returned to Al-Andalus in 1090, it was avowedly for the purpose of deposing the incumbent Muslim princes and annexing their states. He had in his favour the majority of the inhabitants, who had been worn out by the oppressive taxation imposed by their detested native Muslim spend-thrift, "decadent" princely rulers of indifferent religious belief. Their religious teachers, as well as others in the east, gave Yusuf a *fatwa* - a scholarly opinion on a matter of Islamic law. But since there is no hierarchical priesthood or anything of the sort in Islam, a fatwa is not necessarily "binding" on the faithful. He took this, however, to the effect that he had good moral and religious right to dethrone the rulers, whom he saw as heterodox and who did not scruple to seek help from the Christians, whose habits he claimed they had adopted. By 1094, he had removed them all, except for the one at Zaragoza; and though he regained little from the Christians except in Valencia, he re-united the Muslim power, and gave a check to the reconquest of the country by the Christians. In 1097, after friendly correspondence with the caliph at Baghdad, whom he acknowledged as *Amir al-Mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful), he assumed the title of *Amir al Muslimin* (Commander of the Muslims - a title held by the deceased Alaouite King Hassan II and the current ruler of Morocco, King Mohammed VI). Before he died in 1106, when he was reputed to have reached the age of 100, the Moorish empire then included all North-West Africa from Senegal as far as Algiers, all of Iberia south of the River Tagus to the Balearic Islands. He must have been quite a man and, like the despotic Sultan Moulay Ismail in Meknes, utilised a great many Africans in his armies. The descriptions available of him leave no doubt that he was Black African. Abu Yusuf Ya'qub al-Mansour Billah, also known as Moulay Yacoub, recorded as "*the son of a Negro woman*", born around 1160 to reign from 1184 until his death in Marrakech in 1199, was the third Almohad Amir (Emir). The Almohades were a confederation of the dark-skinned Berber Sanhaja, Zanata and Masmouda tribes. The Sanhaja settled first in the northern reaches of the Mauritanian Sahara where, after the arrival of Islam into Morocco, they spread out from their base in Kairouan in Tunisia into the Sudan to as far as the Senegal and the Niger Rivers to control what was known as Ifriqiya.

During his reign, he undertook several major projects. He built the unrivalled Koutoubia and the El Mansouria mosques here in Marrakech and added the Kasbah in the southern part of the Medina accessed by the Bab Agnaou and Bab Ksiba. He attempted to build what would have been the world's largest mosque in Rabat, for its construction stopped after al-Mansur died with only the beginnings of the mosque had been completed, including the Hassan Tower.

Under him, trade, architecture, philosophy and the sciences flourished, as did military conquests. In 1191 Ya'qub al-Mansur retook the hilltop strategic Paderne castle and the Moorish small kingdoms called 'taifas' in surrounding territory near Albufeira in the Algarve which had been in the control of the English Christian mercenary army (Crusaders) of King Sancho I 'the Populator' since 1183. On July 18, 1195, during the Battle of Alarcos he defeated the Castilian King Alfonso VII and, following this victory, he took the title *al-Mansur Billah* ("Made Victorious by God"). The battle is recounted by the same historian Abou Mohammed Salah ibn Abd Allah el-Halim in his *Roudh el-Kartas* (History of the Rulers of Morocco) of 1326. The castle remained in the control of the Almohades for 57 years until 1249 when the forces of King Alfonso III, the fifth King of Portugal and the Algarve, under the command of Dom Paio Peres Correia, Grand Master of the military Order of St. James the Sword, finally conquered the castle to massacre all of the inhabitants and end Muslim control of the region.

Marrakech is a world apart, a gathering place over the centuries of cultures and races and certainly different to the northern cities so closely allied to Arab influences. When the Englishman Robert Cunningham-Graeme visited Morocco in 1897, he wrote in his classic account *Maghreb al-Aqsa*:... "but none of them enter into your soul as does this heap of ruins, this sand heap desert town metropolis of the fantastic world which stretches from its walls across the mountains through the oases of the Sahara." Indeed, on entering the Medina through the Bab Agnaou - or Gate of the Blacks - built by the Almohad Sultan Abdelmoumen in 1150, this gateway once marked the ceremonial entrance to the Royal Palace. If the ancient chronicles are to be believed, the heads of those tortured to death were also displayed there. Its motifs, made up of arabesques framed with cursive writing in Arabic, bear the distinct architectural stamp of the Almohad dynasty.



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 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-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 late 16th century richly decorated **Saâdien Tombs** - discovered in 1917 when they were



discovered on a French aerial map - the second of two mausoleums, built by Ahmed I al Mansour in place of an existing pavilion over the tombs of his mother and of the founder of the Saâdien dynasty, Mohammed ash-Sheikh. His mother's tomb is below the dome in the outer chamber and most of Mohammed ash-Sheikh's is in the inner chamber - he was murdered in the High Atlas Mountains by Turkish mercenaries and his head put on public display in Istanbul. In the primary mausoleum are the later tombs of the 18th century Alaouite princes and a large tomb of the mid 14th century **al-Sultan Aswad** -

- the Black Sultan, the Merinid Dynasty Abou el-Hassan Ali. 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. There are 33 other tombs of Saâdien princelings.

The Saâdi Dynasty originated with the Bani Zaydan tribe in south-western Morocco, to begin with the reign of the dark-skinned Sultan Mohammed ash-Sheikh al-Draâoui (*"the Black"*) al-Tagmadert in 1554. The Sharifian movement (direct descendants through a grandson of the Prophet Mohammed - Hassan ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib - serving as protectors of the tribe and its assets) on which the Dynasty was to be built began when the Sultan Mohammed's father Abu Abdallah al-Qaim Bi Amrillah, whilst on a visit to Medina, dreamed of two lions entering a tower with a crowd of people close behind. Taking his vision to a Sufi sheikh he was told that his two sons would have an important future in his country. Upon returning to his tribal lands in Morocco's south around Zagora he broadcasted his vision among his people, who believed him because of his reputation for honesty and he adopted the Mahdist title "al-Qaim bi Amrillah" (the one called by God). The name Saâdi or Saâdien was given to the Bani Zaydan by later generations and rivals for power, who tried to deny their direct descent by claiming that they only came from the family of Halimah Saadiyya, Mohammed's wet nurse.

The family's village of origin in the valley of the River Draâ was Tidzi (a ksar, or fortified village) some 10 km north of Zagora close to Tagmadert in the Fezouata district between Zagora and Tamegroute. Although there is still a village called Timidert today, some historians think Tagmadert was situated at today's Amezrou, a Touareg village next to Zagora. From 1509 to 1554 they had ruled only in the southwest of Morocco.

The sixth and most famous of all Saâdi rulers was Ahmad I al-Mansour (the Victorious) Eddahbi (the Golden), third son of Sultan Mohammed ash-Sheikh al-Draâoui, who reigned from 1578 to his death in 1603,, builder of the El Badii Palace in Marrakech and contemporary of Queen Elizabeth I of England. In 1600 Ahmad al-Mansour sent his Secretary Abd el-Ouahed (the first) Ben Messaoud as ambassador of the Barbary States to the Court of Queen Elizabeth to negotiate an alliance against Spain. One of their most important achievements was when Sultan Mohammed ash-Sheikh al-Draâoui, from his new base in Tarouddant where he had built the ramparts and great mosque, ousted the Portuguese from their Atlantic coastal enclaves in Morocco and defending the country against the Ottoman invasion, after which they moved their capital to Marrakech.



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 'Badii' (the Incomparable), one of the 99 names of Allah (moreover, ksar *l-bdii* 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 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 Badii 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 on to the late 19th century **Bahia Palace** - its name translates as 'The Brilliant' - built by craftsmen from Fes to house the family retinue of 4 wives, 24 concubines and countless offspring of the onetime black slave Si' Ahmed Ben Musa (or Bou Ahmed) 'The Iron Chancellor' after he had risen to power and wealth to become the Grand Vizier of Sultan Moulay al-Hassan. Its splendour so much aroused the envy of the Sultan Moulay Abd al-Aziz IV - deposed in 1908 - that he had the palace looted on the day Si Ahmed Ben Musa died in 1900. The attractive, well preserved, Harem Courtyard has featured in many Big Budget Movies. With close to 150 rooms, it took nearly 15 years to complete and 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 to provide 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 11th century 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 were reformers and monastic-type warriors from the desert nomadic Sanhaja Berber tribe in what is now Mauritania. Founded by the theologian Abdallah Ibn Yasin (died 1059), his creed was mainly characterized by a rigid formalism and a strict adherence to the dictates of the Qur'an. "Almoravids" is a transcription of "*Al-Murabitun*", though the exact meaning of "*Murabit*" remains still a matter of controversy. Some have suggested that the word might be derived from the Arabic *ribat* meaning fortress, from which Morocco's capital Rabat

derives, though others maintain that it refers to *ribat* meaning "ready for battle" or "*jihad*". Under this 11th century dynasty, the Moorish empire extended over present-day Morocco, the Western Sahara, Mauritania, Gibraltar, Tlemcen (in Algeria), Spain and Portugal and a great part of what is now Senegal and Mali. At its greatest extent, the empire stretched 3,000 kilometres north to south, effectively taking control of the entire lucrative desert trade route. Some historians would have it that the Almoravids conquered the Ghana Empire sometime around 1075 AD.

Probably an ablutions annexe for the Ali Ben Youssef Mosque, for centuries it was covered over amid the many rebuildings it stands next to the Museum of Contemporary Art and about 40 meters south of the mosque of Ali Ben Youssef, it was restructured in the both the 16th and 19th centuries, to be rediscovered in 1948 and excavated in 1952, after having being buried beneath one of



the outbuildings of the Ali Ben Youssef Mosque. At the entrance and at the top of the prayer room is the oldest inscription in the distinctive cursive Maghrebi calligraphy referring to Abdallah Ibn Yasin, founder of the Dynasty who gave homage to Ali Ibn Youssef, the building's patron who reigned from 1106 until 1142: "*I was created for science and prayer, by the prince of the believers, descendant of the prophet, Abdallah, most glorious of all Caliphs. Pray for him when you enter the door, so that you may fulfill your highest hopes.*" The dome covers a rectangular basin once used for ablutions before prayer which relied on the revolutionary hydraulics of khetaras, or drainage systems, and also had a system of toilets, showers and faucets for drinking water. The interior frames of marble and cedar wood are richly decorated with floral

patterns of pine cones, palms and acanthus leaves. 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 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 6: MARRAKECH - OUARZAZATE - TAMEGROUTE - ZAGORA. After an early breakfast we set off around 7:30 towards the



south-east across the Haouz Plain on an exhilarating drive up the twisting bends of the road across Morocco's highest mountain pass of the Tizi 'n Tichka (2260m) in the High Atlas to continue gently down alongside the Assif Inini to the former French Foreign Legion 'Beau Geste' city of Ouarzazate (which translates to "Where no noise (or confusion) is heard"), a soothing and very airy city, once a small crossing point for the African caravan trade of salt, gold and slaves seeking to reach the northern shores of Morocco and thence to Europe. During the French Protectorate period, Ouarzazate (pronounced *warr azzat*) 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. From here we continue our exhilarating journey through the delightfully dramatic valley of the Draâ River, the longest river in Morocco (Draâ translates to 'Black'), passing many kasbahs and oases to the edge of the Sahara and the desert 'Hamada' town of Zagora. There is a sign here telling us the number of days by camel to Timbuctou - "Tombouctou 52 Jours" - by foot or by dromedary to Timbuktu in Mali. The farther you drive, everything becomes brown; the mountains, the people and the buildings. The Berber houses you see are rectangular in shape with square towers and made of mud and straw (pisé or adobe). The farther you drive, the more African the people became. These are 'Black Berbers', descendants of the Almoravid Dynasty; the Touareg, who were and are the principal inhabitants of the Saharan interior of North Africa - the name Touareg was applied to them by early explorers and historians since Leo Africanus. They call themselves variously *Kel Tamasheq* or *Kel Tamajaq* ("Speakers of 'Tamasheq'"), *Imuhagh*, *Imazaghan* or *Imashaghen* ("the Free People"), or *Kel Tagelmust*, i.e., "People of the Veil". The origin and meaning of the name Touareg has long been debated with various etymologies advanced, although it would appear that Touareg is derived from the "broken plural" of *Tārgi*, a name whose former meaning was "inhabitant of *Targa*" (the Touareg name of the Fezzan region in Libya. *Targa* in Berber means "drainage" or "channel" and have a little-used but ancient script known as the *Tifinagh*. Traditionally, Touareg origin myths suggest that they descended from Lemta, the ancestress of the Berbers who lived around Ghadames in Tripolitania to form the Lamtuna Berber tribe of the Sahara regions. Another myth has it that the most famous Touareg leader was a woman, Ti n'Hinan, heroine, matriarch and spiritual leader, the first to unite the Touareg world and to found a legendary kingdom in the Ahaggar Mountains of western Algeria, close to the border with Morocco. She is believed to have come from Tafilalet oasis in the foothills High Atlas Mountains in the area of modern Morocco just to the north of Erfoud, Gateway to the Moroccan Sahara. About this famous ancestress of the Touaregs following story is told: Ti n'Hinan came in the company of her maid-servant Takamat from Tafilalet to the Hoggar in Algeria. There she became the first *Tamenokalt* (Queen) of the Touaregs and her fame was so great, that even today the Touaregs call her "Mother of Us All". Abalessa, the ancient capital of the Ahaggar Mountains or Hoggar region, is the location of a famous archaeological site known as the Tomb of Ti n'Hinan where excavations have

revealed the skeleton of an unusually tall woman about 40 years old, wearing seven gold and eight silver bracelets and buried with a Roman cup and a wooden cup with a Constantian monograph. She was lying on a leather covered wooden bed. The structure, possibly a dwelling converted to a tomb, is dated to the second half of the 5th century A.D. The identity of the skeleton is unknown though presumed to be hers and which is now to be found in the National Museum of Bardo in Algiers.



These nomadic Saharan Touareg today are found mostly here and in and around Erfoud and Merzouga and in sub-Saharan regions of the Sahel and northern West Africa. We shall take a break here for a late lunch at La Fibule du Draâ hotel before continuing on south to visit 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) was later 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 who had travelled 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 sedentary black Africans, nomadic dark, olive-skinned Berbers and lighter-skinned Arabs decided to found a university of the Koran (Qur'an). When Ahmad 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-Khwarizmi, the acknowledged father of algebra - the words algorism 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 one can walk 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. However, today Tamegroute is a little village again, 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 our kasbah-like hotel set in a palmeraie - oasis - to spend the night here in Zagora, this dusty, one horse (dromedary) town almost at the end of the line south from Marrakech, 100 miles from Ouarzazate down the endless palm groves and kasbahs of the dramatic Draâ Valley, set in a delightful oasis and 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. Once called 'Tazagourt' the singular of plural 'Tizigirt', a Berber word for 'twin peaks' referring to the almost volcanic form of the wind-eroded 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 the town itself was only built in the mid 20th century. 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. Close to the hotel is the Kasbah Amazrou, once a Jewish enclave and now inhabited by black Berber families to where you might like to take a stroll to chat with them. **BLD.**

DAY 7: ZAGORA - AÏT BEN HADDOU - MARRAKECH. After breakfast, you might like to take a 1 hour (optional) dromedary ride



around the oasis before we set off at around 10 o'clock back up north through this remarkably amazing Draâ Valley, perhaps to stop at the ancient kasbah at Agdz or other en-route points of photo-opportunity. On now to visit the remarkable UNESCO World Heritage Site of the magnificently exotic Ksour of Aït Ben Haddou (guide not included and not really necessary). Here we alight from our vehicle to visit these various still-inhabited stepped up kasbahs, one half plainly-built Jewish section, one half decorated Berber and so closely-knit that they appear to be but one complete building, backed up against the looming hills in a stretch of unforgiving Hamada. The thick, high, sheer, elaborately decorated pisé (rammed earth - adobe) walls, turreted, crenulated ramparts, balustrades and arched 'babs' are a sight not to be missed. Obviously, here Hollywood has shot many of its films, including, as everyone will tell you, "Laurence of Arabia". One of the more spectacular sights in the Atlas ranges, set upon a rock above the reed-and-rock strewn Assif, commanding the area for miles around, this Kasbah controlled the caravan route to Marrakech until the French blasted a road through the Tizi n'Tichka in the late 1920s. We'll stop nearby for a light lunch here at the Haj Tibou Restaurant before continuing ever - further north



over the Adrar n'Deren range of High Atlas Mountains to arrive around 9pm at your hotel or riad in Marrakech after a really incredible journey into Morocco's sub-Sahara. **BL.**

DAY 8: MARRAKECH-ESSAOUIRA: After a late breakfast, we shall ride our mules back to Imlil where our car is awaiting us to



take us back down this delightful valley to Marrakech, stopping where you will for more photo-opportunities, to continue for a further 2 hours' drive west to the Atlantic coast and 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 Mohammed Ibn Abdullah transformed Mogador into a fortified city. 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 wooden tables, boxes and sundry items in lemon or briar wood inlaid with mother of pearl - the purple dyes 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. Essaouira is home to the Gnaoua (pronounced ga-now-wa), where the blues from black Africa have a brother. Heirs to a musical and spiritual tradition brought north across the Sahara centuries ago by black slaves, the Gnaoua are enjoying new fame as their hypnotic rhythms hook listeners across the world. The Gnaoua brotherhoods have long scraped a living on the margins of Moroccan society by offering to restore health or good fortune through séances of trance and incantation to symbolise the rich cultural mix of a country at the crossroads of Africa, Europe and the Arab world, so much so that many Moroccans say they are part of their national identity. Black Africa flows in the veins of Morocco. Originally slaves who started to arrive in the 15th century with the gold and salt camel caravans from Guinea and the Western Sudan, the Gnaouas gathered into brotherhoods which continue to practice rituals of hypnotism and exorcism, borrowing as much from pre-Islamic culture as from the rituals of their original African divinities. The Gnaoua, named for their origins in "Guinea", have been in Morocco as long as anyone can remember to perform in public throughout



Morocco and also at their own religious festivals, since they form their own, separate, brotherhood in Islam. We shall check in to our hotel and then leave for a walk around this enchanting city first to the Battery with its ancient Portuguese cannons and on to enjoy a lunch (not included) of Essaouira's famed seafood, either on the quayside or in one of the several quaint cafés that decorate this charming historical town. Through now to the Mellah and the synagogue, thence, perhaps, a welcome dip in the waters of the ocean? A camel ride along the beach? A visit to Jimi Hedrix's "Castles of Sand"? You'll be pleasantly surprised to find what this artist-colony town has to offer. Your dinner is set in your hotel this evening. **BD.**

DAY 9: ESSAOUIRA. Today is at leisure to explore more of this fascinating seaside town with both of us, your guide and driver to



accompany you where you will within the town's precincts, though perhaps you'd just like to relax on the beach, have a go at surfing, wind or kite surfing. Back in the 1960s, hippy travellers and local residents built an almost unique relationship that persists to this day, making Essaouira one of the friendliest and most laid-back beach resorts anywhere. The beach dominates the Essaouirans' leisure time. Although the strong wind and currents makes relaxed tanning and swimming a little difficult at times, with good winds for most days of the year, Essaouira is a water sports paradise. The best spots are reported to be Essaouira Bay, Sidi Kaouki, Cape Sim and Moulay Bouzertoune. Equipment can be hired from various

hire centres on the beach front. Fishermen sell their catch through market hall and you can get it cooked in small stands nearby. For a relaxing drink, or two, it'll be hard to beat the terrace bar of the *Taros* (2, Rue de la Sqala) for its view over the lively Place Moulay el Hassan and the harbour. **BD.**

DAY 10: ESSAOUIRA-SAFI-EL OUALIDIA-EL JADIDA-AZEMMOUR-CASABLANCA: After breakfast today, we set off up north along the Atlantic coastline to stop first at the town of Safi which boasts of having the first Moslem Mosque in the kingdom, as well as Portuguese buildings dating back more than five centuries. The world-renowned Safi pottery pieces elaborately trimmed with tooled silver overlay are beautifully displayed with their rich designs, styles, and colours, each piece having been wheel-thrown and hand-finished by skilled artisans. We continue north alongside the Atlantic Ocean via Cap Beidouza to the seaside resort town of El Oualidia, a simple place; time-forgotten, still civilization-forgotten though being “found” by those seeking peace and quiet, lying on the legendary Barbary Coast, whose seawall gazes out at a picture-perfect lagoon. The Atlantic laps the biscuit-coloured sand on the rounded shore, a small breach separating the tidal lagoon from the Atlantic, a blue bobbing line between the rocky bluffs reaching out from either side of the mainland. We shall see a 16th century hilltop Kasbah built by Sultan El Oualid. At the foot of the hill, there are the ruins of the once-elegant summer palace of Sultan Mohammed V (the grandfather of the current King Mohammed VI), with regal steps descending to within a few feet of the lagoon. Surrounded by a vista of lofty dark-green stone pines and tumbled down for half a century now, the palace has a perfect panoramic view of the whole lagoon and the distant narrow breach into the Ocean. Oualidia’s well-kept secret is the oyster beds; from here, oysters are sent out all over Morocco. We may see a fleet of candy-pink fishing boats lies high on the dunes as we eat our fish lunch overlooking the ocean, perhaps to see avocets, cormorants, oystercatchers - of course - stilts and stints, whimbrels and redshanks. We now continue to El Jadida -‘The New One’; founded in 1513 by the Portuguese as Mazagão - their first and last possession in Morocco, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and called Morocco’s Deauville, it is a small, delightful coastal town with several 3 metre-thick bastions – L’Ange, Saint Sebastian, Saint Antoine and Saint Esprit which were destroyed in 1769 by the same Portuguese when they were forced to leave Morocco, but which were subsequently restored to their former armed state. Taken back from the Portuguese in 1769, Mazagan was to become a Jewish Mellah (or Quarter). Our first stop is at the old fortress inside which lies an ancient structure that escaped the destruction of the fleeing Portuguese - the misnamed ‘Portuguese Cisterns’, as they were actually built by the Romans originally to store grain, then used by the Portuguese as a fresh water cistern to withstand sieges, to be discovered by accident in 1977 by a Jewish spice merchant and where Orson Wells shot the riot scenes for his film Othello. We leave there to continue to the Porto do Mar (the Sea Gate) where we visit the communal bakery. A short walk will then take us to the Bastion of St Sebastian. Here is the old prison compound and the Tribunal of the Inquisition - we continue to the Mellah and an early 19th century synagogue, as the Star of David underneath a Moslem crescent on the wall testifies - surmised by some to symbolise the appreciation of the Jewish population of the time at being accepted by an Islamic country after fleeing Spain and persecution at the hands of the Inquisition and of their desire to integrate into Moroccan life. Integration was never really complete, however, as Jews here always lived under a different set of laws to those of Muslims (one was they were not allowed to wear shoes!). No Jews live here now, as they all left for Israel after the founding of the State, yet their centuries of tradition, artistry and culture are still quite tangible. On now to Azemmour, in the Berber language - wild olive - and *not* the perfumes of Crabtree & Evelyn) for our short tour of this delightful once-Carthaginian, once-Portuguese strategic natural port (*Azama*) where the ochres of Morocco change to white, blue and yellow, where violet bougainvilleas challenge the purplish ramparts; where the Dar el Baroud (powder storage house of the Portuguese) bastion guards the now-ruined kasbah, the Arab Medina and Jewish Mellah (the synagogue of Rabbi Abraham Moul Niss is still frequently used). On now on our final leg to the White City of Casablanca and your hotel. **BLD.**



DAY 11: CASABLANCA: After a late breakfast, we shall set out on a visit of this the second largest city in Africa after Cairo drive to the truly magnificent Hassan II Mosque 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; From here on via the Corniche running alongside the Atlantic Ocean to break for lunch before continuing on to the seaside resort of Aïn Diab and thence down past the Parque de La Ligue Arabe and the Notre Dame de Lourdes Cathedral with its stained glass window by Gabriel Loire, chief glassworker of Chartres to the King’s Palace precinct the Habous Quarter - the New Medina - a delightful 1920s souk and thence past the Mohammed V Square to the busy United Nations Square. Here, about 100 yards from your hotel, under the walls of the old Medina at the beginning of the 20th century, there was but an empty space where the souq was held. It very quickly became the heart of the modern town. You should be back in your hotel by five pm and your guide will be at your side to advise you on any other points of interest you may care to visit. Perhaps a drink at Rick’s Café (www.rickscafe.ma) - “Casablanca” without ‘Rick Baines’, Ingrid Bergman, Clause Rains and Peter Laurie before dinner and Oriental show in the Basmane Restaurant overlooking the Ocean. **BLD.**

DAY 12: CASABLANCA - HOME: After breakfast and in accordance with your flight schedule home (check-out from your hotel is at 12:00) you will be transferred to Casablanca's Mohammed V International airport in time for your 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 your 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 MARRAKECH COVERING THE PERIOD 24 DECEMBER TO 05 JANUARY.

OUR PRICES WILL INCLUDE: Accommodation at specified hotel or riad or similar as *available at time of reservation* - including relevant taxes. Meals as detailed (excluding alcoholic drinks), or as modified in accordance with your instructions. Porterage on 1 piece of luggage per person in/out airports, hotel and/or riad. Private transportation in an air-conditioned vehicle from Casablanca to Casablanca. Sightseeing tours, including one by calèche in Marrakech and 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 chauffeur. Any expenditure of a personal nature, nor anything not specifically mentioned in the itinerary.

IT IS RECOMMENDED YOU BRING WITH YOU: Good trainers; for the Saharan sortie: day pack; broad-brimmed hat (or you may purchase a 'Chèche' in Zagora); personal toiletries; 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.

