

# MOROCCO - NATURALLY PICTURE PERFECT

OB TIC12ceec **11DAYS/10NIGHTS**. CASABLANCA/RABAT/MEKNES-VOLUBILIS-MOULAYIDRISS-FES-/MERZOUGA (SAHARA)-TODRA GORGES/TINEHRIR/DADES GORGES-OUARZAZATE/MARRAKECH/ESSAOUIRA/CASABLANCA

DAY 1: **CASABLANCA**. You will be met on arrival at Casablanca's Mohamed V International airport and transferred to your



hotel. After check-in and a relaxing shower, to perhaps take a light lunch (optional) in the hotel, we shall set out around 1:30 at the latest on a visit of this the second largest city in Africa after Cairo. We shall 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 30<sup>th</sup> 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 m<sup>2</sup> of carved cedar wood; 67,000 m<sup>2</sup> of plasterwork and some 10,000 m<sup>2</sup> 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 where we stop for a light lunch before continuing on to the



seaside resort of Ain Diab and the elegant residential district of Anfa, the original site of Casablanca, with its green parks and Art Deco villas. Anfa hosted the Conference of Casablanca with President Roosevelt and Sir Winston Churchill, during which the date of the Allied landings on the French coasts was fixed for the spring of 1944 and where the somewhat difficult meeting with them and Generals Charles de Gaulle and Henri Giraud took place. Here, also, at Anfa, President Roosevelt received in secret the Sultan Mohammed V where the possible future of Morocco was discussed in depth and down via the King's Palace precinct to the Habous Quarter - the New Medina - a delightful 1920s souk and thence past the Mohammed V Square to the busy United Nations Square. Here, but a few yards from your hotel, under the walls of the old Medina at the

beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was but an empty space where the souk 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](http://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. LD.

DAY 2: CASABLANCA - RABAT & SALE: After breakfast we set out on an hour's drive to the administrative Imperial capital since 1912 of the Kingdom of Morocco, Rabat (R'bat al Fat'h) - one of the four Imperial Cities, founded in the 12th century (R'bat meaning fortified convent). Sightseeing here will start with a drive through this graceful city of parks and gardens along Victory Avenue to the Méchouar Precinct of the King's Palace. Regrettably, the Palace is not open to the public, but we can



savour and photograph its impressive arches, redolent of the finest Islamic architecture. Next we arrive at the Chellah, once a prosperous Roman enclave called *Sala Colonia* in their Mauretania Tingitane Province, to be abandoned late in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, thence to fall into ruins to be transformed, late in the 14<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of the Merinides Sultanate, into a vast cemetery, their Necropolis, where we find also some Roman excavations. This Necropolis was destroyed by the earthquake of 1755 and is today a beautiful garden of date and banana palm trees, hibiscus, bougainvillea, olive and fig trees. 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. 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 modelled on the minaret of another one of Jabir's designs, the Koutoubia Mosque in Marrakech. We shall proceed to the delightful 12<sup>th</sup> century Kasbah of the Oudayas in the ancient Medina at the heart of the military history of Rabat. 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 those corsair raiders; the Kasbah's alleyways are reminiscent of a delightful whitewashed Andalusian village.



We take a light lunch here as you enjoy the view over the Bou Regreg river and 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 cross over the river to Salé and our lunch on a boat moored in the estuary, after which we visit Rabat's sister town: Salé (from the Amazigh (Berber) word *asla*, meaning "rock"), Rabat's sister city and home to around 800,000 people, was once a self-contained, self-ruled Republic with international scope, is situated on the opposite mouth of the estuary - Wadi Sala - of the Bou Regreg River. Referred to as *Sala* by Ptolemy, Salé was apparently colonised around the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC and at approximately the same time that of Chellah by the



Phoenicians (whose name means "new town") and who were nicknamed "The Purple People" from the purple dye they manufactured in Mogador (present-day Essaouira) obtained by crushing the spiny dye-murex shell. The Greeks called them 'Phoinikes'; the Phoenicians called themselves Canaanites - also known as the 'Sea People' - and are the ancestors of today's Lebanese; Phoenicia in Latin is 'Punicus', therefore, Rome's wars with Carthage (a former province of Phoenicia) are often called the Punic Wars. The Romans were later to call the place Sala Colonia, when, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, it became part of their province of Mauritania Tingitane; Pliny the Elder mentions it in his great work *Naturalis Historia* as a desert town infested with elephants! The Vandals

captured the area in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD to leave behind a number of blonde, blue-eyed Berbers. The invading Umayyad Arabs (a Muslim dynasty ruling from 661 to 750 AD) from Babylonia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD kept the old name and believed it to have been derived from Salah, son of Ham, son of Noah; they maintained that Salé was the first city ever built by the Berbers. Early in the 10<sup>th</sup> century the area around Salé became the capital of the strong tribe of Beni Ifren. Berbers in Morocco call themselves some variant of the word *Imazighen* (singular *Amazigh*), meaning "free men". Historically Berbers have been variously known, for instance as Libyans by the ancient Greeks; as Numidians (202 BC - 46 BC) and Mauri (named after the tribe of the same name, after whom the Moors were named), by the Romans. The best known Berbers were the Roman author Apuleius, the Roman emperor Septimus Severus and St. Augustine.



Around 1630 Salé became a haven for Moriscos-turned-Barbary pirates. A *Morisco* (Spanish for 'Moor-like) was any Muslim in Spain or Portugal who converted to Roman Catholicism during the Reconquista of Spain. The term also became a pejorative regarding those 'Secret Jews' - Sephardic Jews - who, for form's and safety's sake, also became Roman Catholic converts to assimilate to society, but who were suspected of secretly practicing Islam. Those Converted Jews, or 'conversos', maintaining their ancestral traditions as crypto-Jews by publicly professing Roman Catholicism but secretly adhering to Judaism were called '*marranos*' which, in Spanish meant 'pigs' and in turn was derived from the Arabic word 'muharram' meaning "ritually

forbidden", stemming from the ritual prohibition against eating pork. In both Portuguese and Spanish, the term *marrano* acquired the meaning of "swine" or "filthy" (but in contemporary Spanish it has no further association with Jews).

These Muslim Barbary pirates, sometimes called Ottoman corsairs, operated from the North African ports of Tunis, Tripoli, Algiers and Salé from the time of the Crusades until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to prey on shipping in the western Mediterranean Sea. Their stronghold along the extensive stretch of northern Africa became known as the Barbary Coast. They continuously made raids, called *razzias*, between the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries on European coastal towns villages in Portugal, Spain, Italy, France, England, Ireland and even Iceland and North America to capture some 1 million Christians to sell as slaves. The impact of these raids was devastating - Spain, Portugal, France and England each lost thousands of ships, and long stretches of coast in Spain and Italy were almost completely abandoned by their inhabitants and were to discourage settlement along the coast until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Salé pirates (the well-known "Sallee Rovers") are those mentioned in Robinson Crusoe, Daniel Defoe's novel by the same name, whose hero spends time in captivity of the local pirates and at last sails off to liberty from the mouth of river. Salé has played a rich and important part in Moroccan history. The first demonstrations during the 1950's for independence against the French and their Protectorate, for example, were sparked off in Salé and the people of Salé, the *Slawis*, have always had a tribal sense of belonging, a sense of pride which developed into a feeling of superiority towards '*berranis*', i.e. outsiders.



The **Ramparts** surrounding the Medina of Salé are among the oldest defence works of Morocco. Flanked by towers and punctuated by urban gates in the pure tradition of the medieval enclosures of the Muslim occident, its principal gates are: Bab Maalaq, Bab Jdid, Bab Sidi Bou Haja (in the south), Bab Ferran giving access to the old arsenal (Dar es-Sana'a), Bab Fez also called Bab Khemis, Bab Sebta, and Bab Chaafa. The **Great Mosque in Salé** was first constructed under the orders of the Muslim Berber Almohad Yacoub el Mansour in 1163 and finished in 1196 whose dynasty ruled Morocco during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries following the downfall of the preceding Muslim Almoravid empire, a Confederation of 3 Berber tribes, the Lamtuna, Gudula

and Massufa of the zealous Sanhaja clan that had built a powerful empire in the Maghreb and Spain during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was later to be transformed and partly restored by Sultan Abou El-Hassan in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Entry to non-believers is forbidden though through its side doors, which open onto the surrounding streets, you can see a prayer room with colonnades and a profusion of carpets covering the floor. It is ranked high in its craftsmanship, being one of the finest buildings from its period of Moroccan history. Opposite the mosque is the **Zaouia of Sidi Ahmed El-Tijani** featuring a gate decorated with mosaics and a frieze of stalactite arcature. The Great Mosque also stands side by side with the Medersa Abou al-Hassan. Built in 1333 AD during the reign of the Merinides dynasty by Abou el Hassan in a purely Mauresque architecture style, the Medersa provided lodgings for students of the Koran. Small in size though it is, it is exquisitely balanced in its proportions. Among the inscriptions carved on its façade is one that celebrates the skills of its architects: "Mine is the form of a mighty palace and I shine forth like the pearls of a bridal necklace." From its readily-accessible roof, Salé appears as a sea of white terraces punctuated by the minarets of its mosques. The patron saint of the city of Salé rests in a 19<sup>th</sup> century building in the lower Medina the **Sidi Abdullah Ben Hassoun Marabout**. A marabout is a tomb, in Arabic qubba, of a venerated saint and such places have become holy centres and places of pious reflection. Every year, during the festival of Ashurâh (celebrated on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the New Muslim Year) boatmen, dressed in their best, visit the marabout to decorate it with brightly coloured candles sculpted with a thousand motifs. This tradition goes back to the time of the Barbary Coast, when those pirates of Salé made

offerings to their patron saint, prior to embarking on a long sea journey, to secure his protection. We cross back over the river to our overnight accommodation, perhaps to relax around the pool or dodge into the souqs with your guide before dinner. **BLD.**

**DAY 3: RABAT - 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). Here we shall visit the easily most beautiful Bab, or gateway, in all of the Maghreb -the Bab Mansour. From here to the El Heri es-Souani - the granary of huge vaulted structures and stables built by Moulay Ismail's soldiers next to a pool fed by underground channels that brought fresh water all the way from the distant Middle Atlas Mountains; The Christians' Prison, the precious Moulay Ismail Mausoleum and the Place el-Hedim. Time for lunch before leaving Meknes for to the wonderful Roman ruins at Volubilis, the Volubilis of really ancient olive presses, mansions, incredible mosaics, monumental arches and Corinthian columns where you'll have a real sense of Roman lifestyle and of that of a subsequent medieval Berber town. The site contains the Mansion containing the mosaic of the Labours of Hercules, the Baths of Gallienus and Baths of Forum with their fragmentary mosaics; the House of Orpheus and its Dolphin mosaic and Orpheus Myth; the Cortege of Venus many of whose mosaics we may only see from the outside yet will get to see the medallions of Bacchus, Diana and the Abduction of Hylas; the Gordian Palace with its bath house and pooled courtyards; the House of the Wild Beast, the House of Nymphs, the House of the Seasons, the House of Flavius Germanus, the Knights House with an incomplete mosaic of Dionysus Discovering Ariadne Asleep, the Triumphal Arch, the Capitol and the House of Ephebus with its pictorial mosaics, especially that of Bacchus Being drawn in a Chariot by Panthers.

We leave Volubilis behind to drive alongside the dark, outlying ridges of the Zerhoun Hills to stop for a visit of the town of Moulay Idriss, the holiest Islamic town in the kingdom of Morocco, where thousands of Moroccan faithful come on pilgrimage (*mousseem*) every August to pray at the tomb of this descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. Arriving at the elongated square we see above us the green-tiled pyramids of the Zaouiat with its two conical quarters on either side and stroll amidst the labyrinth of alleyways before leaving for the Imperial City of Fes and our accommodation, dinner and a well-earned rest. **BLD.**

**DAY 4: FES.** The exciting, fascinating and two thousand year old Imperial City of Fes, surrounded as it is by 9 miles of ramparts



situated in a narrow valley, strategically positioned on the old caravan crossroads which once connected the one-time Saharan empires with the Atlantic and Mediterranean trading routes to Europe. The city that was once, after Mecca and Medina, held to be one of the holiest cities in the Islamic world; the city whose merchants were travelling to China in the 15th century; the city that (of least importance) gave its name to the red cylindrical brimless hat.

Moroccans say that Marrakech, Rabat and Casablanca live in the present, but that Fes certainly lives in the past. No surprises here, for European chroniclers of the Middle Ages wrote with awe of this city that for several centuries was the most civilised Western outpost of the Semitic world. Its

scholars introduced astronomy and medicine to the West via Spain when that country was under Moorish rule. Historians of the time said that the writings of both Plato and Aristotle first reached Western Europe in Arabic translations - from Fes.

In 786, one hundred and fifty years after the death of the Prophet Mohammed Bin Abdullah Banu Hashim, his grandson was to set foot in Morocco. This man was Idriss Ibn Abdallah, destined to become Moulay Idriss, patron saint of Morocco and founder of Fes. Implicated in a failed rebellion against the Arabian Abbasids, he fled Baghdad to come with his bedraggled army to this 'Land of the Setting Sun', beyond which one could travel no further by land. Here, in Fes, on the eastern bank of the seasonal Qued 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 takes you to the bustling maze of alleyways of the fascinating medina and souqs 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.



Is it Fes or Fez? It is both; and neither. The Western name for the city is drawn from the Arabic *Fas* and, as there is no one correct way to transliterate Arabic words into Western characters, in the French language, the city is referred to as *Fés*, while Americans tend to use *Fez*. *Fassin*, or *Fassis* as the residents call themselves, use the pronunciation of *Fas*, so derived from three Arabic letters *fa* (f), *alif* (a) and *sin* (s). So everyone wins. As soon as you ready after breakfast, we make for the impressive *Dar el Makhzen* and a 15 minute stop at the Royal Palace with its magnificent seven bronze gates. From here we walk to and through the *Mellah* with its intense atmosphere and fine examples of *Mauro-Hispanic* architecture. We now drive to the *Borj Sud*, here to take in the panoramic view of the *Medina*. Off now down to start our *Walking Tour* of the labyrinth of the ancient *Fes Medina* (a *UNESCO World Heritage Site*); 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 16<sup>th</sup> century *Saâdien watchtower* at the *North Borj* and the *Dar Batha Museum* with its collection of *carpets and woodwork* to arrive back at our hotel or *riad* in time for dinner after a day full of contrasting culture and journey into some 1,200 years of history. **BLD.**

**DAY 5: FES - AZROU - MIDELE - ZIZ GORGES - er RACHIDYA - ERFOUD - MERZOUGA:**



This will be all of a 7½ hour drive, with en-route "comfort stops", lunch in Midelt and many photo-op opportunities. After some 30 minutes, we arrive at the small 1920s French-built hill station of *Imouzèr Du Kandar* (1220m). Here we may pause for ten minutes by the *kasbah* for a look at the little *Medina* and take in the pleasant *Saïss Plateau* and now-distant *Fes*, continuing on to the squeaky-clean Moroccan pseudo-Swiss town of *Ifrane* (1650m), with its slanted, russet-tiled roofs hidden amidst a forest of cedar, which cannot grow below 1600m. *Ifrane* is mainly a winter ski resort - and a summer hideaway for rich Moroccans wishing to escape the hustle and heat of the large cities. We now drive through to the first real town in the Middle Atlas - *Azrou* - which in the local *Tamazight* (Berber) dialect means "rock," for next to the mosque is the massive outcrop from which this town takes its name - was for a long time a strategic settlement established to effect some form of control of the independent mountain Berber peoples. We continue on now through the *Cedar Forests*, perchance to feed some of the resident *Barbary Apes*, to emerge at the *Oued Gigou Valley* and on through the mountains via the *Tizi n'Zad* (2178m). Down now through a bleak plain of scrub and desert to the Berber mountain town of *Midelt*, where we may stop for a light lunch at the *El Ayachi Restaurant*, the massive *Jbel Ayachi* (3722m) rising sheer and stark before us. *Midelt* is so far inland that its microclimate is one of extremes: bitterly cold in winter and oh-so-hot in summer. Our route takes us on through striking countryside, marking the change from mountains to desert. This region was once notorious for raids on caravans by the nomadic *Ait Haddidou* tribe, who were not pacified, with great difficulty, by the French until the mid-1930s. Now on through a lower Pass (*Tizi*) of the High Atlas - the *Pass of the She-Camel* - *Tizi n'Talreht* (1907m), on across a deserted plain through the town of *Ait Messaoud*, passing a *French Foreign Legion fort* with all the reminders of *Beau Geste* and then to the first southern *ksar* of *Ait Kherrou*, a river *palmeraie* (oasis) at the entrance to a small gorge. From here on in, *ksours* start to dot the countryside as we carry on down alongside the *River Ziz* (the Berber name meaning *Gazelle*). On now through the town of *Rich*, once an important fort during the era of the *French Protectorate*, on and through the *Tunnel Du Légionnaire*, built by the French to have ease of rapid access to the rebellious southern tribe of the *Ait Atta*, to have appear before us a scenic highlight of the really dramatic and majestic canyon of the *Ziz Gorges*, massive erosions of rock carving a passage through the mountains dominating startlingly green oases and ochre-coloured *ksours*. We emerge from the Gorges close to the *Barrage* (Dam) *Hassan Addakhil* to continue on to the French-built garrison town of *Er-Rachidya* (previously known as *Ksar es Souq*, after their *Foreign Legion fort*). This pleasant garrison town, alive in the evening with students from the *University and Lycée*, is still maintained after independence to forestall any further territorial claims from *Algeria*. Onwards still through the small palm grove at *Meski*, watered by a natural spring - the famous picture postcard image of *La Source Bleue* - and the final sector of the *Oued Ziz*. We cross an arid reddish belt of desert to drop, suddenly, into the valley and the *Tizimi Palmeraie* (Oasis) to arrive around 4pm at the French-built town of *Erfoud* which will give you your first impression of the overpowering proximity of the *Sahara*. We change here to a 4WD for our final stretch is to *Merzouga* where we stop to change our 4 wheels for the 4 legs of our ships of the desert - one person per beast- for some 2 hours ride across a sea of golden dunes. This is the only 'true' desert area of the kingdom of *Morocco* and an area where meteorites continue to be found, as were crocodile teeth, shark, pterosaur and *spinosaurus* fossils. We arrive at our carpeted Berber Nomadic camp where, first things first, a welcoming glass of mint tea whilst our packs are being unloaded. You'll need to stretch your limbs after your ride and one of the best ways is to clamber up to the top of the dunes to enjoy a magnificent panorama to witness Nature's incredible light show of sunset over ever-changing colours of dunes. You need to be a bit fit, but the slide down is oh so much easier! After a shower and our *tagine* dinner, dessert, tea or coffee, we sing and chat to our heart's content around the camp fire, accompanied by musicians and a dancer - more limbering up - and welcome. **BLD.**

our heart's content around the camp fire, accompanied by musicians and a dancer - more limbering up - and welcome. **BLD.**

DAY 6: MERZOUGA - ERFOUD - TINEHRIR - TODRA GORGES - BOUMALNE DU DADES - DADES GORGE - Q'LAAT DES M'GOUNA - KASBAHS OF SKOURA - OUARZAZATE: Our last brilliant Saharan sunrise, equal almost to last night's



unforgettable sunset, our breakfast tucked away, we set off now on a delightful drive westwards across the Marrah Plain passing the oases of Jorf and Mellab to Tinejdad with the low-lying Jbel Ougnat as a backdrop and on to the small town of Tinehrir, located at the mouth of the fabulous Todra Gorges, overlooked by a Glaoua Kasbah and which town boasts of the oldest Jewish cemetery in Morocco. Now we set out up the Oued Todra for some 15km into to the deepest, narrowest and most spectacular part of these further wonders of Mother Nature. Now ever-further west along the Route of 1000 Kasbahs to the small town of Boumalne Du Dadès situated at the mouth of the Dadès Gorge. Here we venture up between the wide, high limestone cliffs with their strangely-shaped erosions and green vegetation, ksours, kasbahs and pisé houses ranging in colours from dark red to greenish black and startling lime-white, passing the Glaoua kasbah at Ait Youl as far as a group of ksours at Ait Arbi built against a volcanic twist in the rocks. We return to the mouth of the Gorge and the Kasbah Tizzarouine for a light lunch before continuing westwards via Qlâa't Des M'Gouna (Citadel of the M'Gouna Tribe) where thousands of small, pink Damascene roses, first planted by French settlers, are grown to make the rose oil essence - "Eau de Rose" - so beloved of the Berber people, on through to the Kasbahs at the Skoura Oasis before carrying on, after a some 190km, to the new (1920s) once-garrison town of the French Protectorate - Ouarzazate - at the crossroads of the Dadès and Draâ Valleys, set between the High Atlas Mountains and the start of the Sahara region of oases and

sand - for our dinner and overnight accommodation at your hotel. After visiting the 18<sup>th</sup> century Kasbah of Taourirt, another of the Pacha's fortresses, the late afternoon is free for you to roam at will around the town which was, in the late 1980s, a bit of a tourist boom town; perhaps you could pay a visit to the Atlas Film Studios (where, everyone will tell you, Lawrence of Arabia, The Jewel of The Nile and many other Hollywood films were shot). This is all of a 6 hours' drive, including the two gorges. BLD.

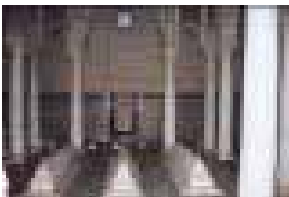
DAY 7: OUARZAZATE - AÏT BEN HADDOU - MARRAKECH: Refreshed, breakfasted and raring to go, we now set forth towards



the north alongside the Oued Ouarzazate via the Assif Ounila Valley to the Kasbah at Tiffoultoute and the magnificently exotic Kasbah and Ksour of Ait Ben Haddou, declared, and rightly so, a World Heritage Site. Here we alight from our vehicle to visit these various kasbahs, so closely-knit that they appear to be but one complete building, backed up against the looming mountain in a stretch of unforgiving Hamada. The thick, high, sheer, elaborately decorated pisé walls, stepped-up housing, turreted, crenulated ramparts, and balustrades and arched 'babs' are a sight not to be missed. One of the more spectacular sights in the Atlas ranges, set upon a rock above a reed-strewn assif, commanding the area for miles around, this kasbah, once home to employees of the Pacha El Glaoui - the "Lord of the Atlas", - controlled the route to Marrakech until the French blasted a road through the Tizi n'Tichka in the late 1920s. From here set off up into the High Atlas Mountains and the exhilarating hairpin bends to alight at the top of the Tizi n'Tichka (2260m) where we stop for a light lunch with a vista dominated by peaks of some 2500+m. Onwards, now, via Ait Ourir Taddert (1650m) and down across the Glaoua Plains to our hotel or riad in Marrakech. This has been a 4 hours' drive so, later in the afternoon after check-in, we shall go for a ride in a calèche around the magnificent ramparts, quite the best introduction to the Pink City, to the Majorelle Gardens and Museum of Islamic Art

of the recently-deceased fashion icon Yves Saint Laurent, thence into the Medina via the dramatic Almohad Koutoubia Mosque minaret to the Djmaâ El Fnaâ Square (the 'Assembly of the Dead'), where, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were traditionally displayed the severed heads of criminals. Now we see again 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 - to return to our hotel or riad. BLD.

DAY 8: MARRAKECH. With the touch of a journey back into time we set off into the bustling Kasbah to the lavishly-decorated



Saâdien Tombs - discovered in 1917 with some tombs dating from the middle 1550s; this is the ancient cemetery of the *shorfa*, the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. Here you see the Prayer Hall with its horseshoe arches, the tombs of the Alaouite princes from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and a large tomb of the Black Sultan, the Merinid Dynasty Abou Hassan. On into the Hall of Twelve Columns, the central mausoleum of Ahmed el Mansour, who died in 1603, with its colonnade of twelve decorated marble pillars and intensely carved upper stuccowork that looks like gilded lace. To his right is his son and successor Zaidan; to his left his grandson Mohammed ech-Cheik. There are 33 other tombs of Saâdien princelings. From here to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Bahia Palace (its name translates as 'The Brilliant') built by craftsmen from Fes for the black slave Si' Ahmed Ben Musa (or Bou Ahmed) after he had risen to power and wealth as the Grand Vizier of Sultan Moulay al-Hassan. The attractive, well preserved, Harem Courtyard has featured in many Big Budget Movies. It took nearly 15 years to complete; the rooms (nearly 150!), housed Bou Ahmed, his 4 wives and 24 concubines plus servants and guards. The Palace follows the patterns of typical Islamic architecture, with central courtyards, having rooms leading off them, with doorways that are placed so that you can't see beyond (providing privacy). Fountains and gardens are also typical features, along with the decorative stucco panels, tiled floors and zellige work. From here we

continue up to the Dar Si Saïd Museum. Formally a palace originally built by Mehdi Mnebbi (1894-1908), Moroccan ambassador to London, it was then bought by T'hami el Glaoui, the famous Pasha of Marrakech and 'Lord of the Atlas' during the French Protectorate. Restored in 1997, it houses both traditional and contemporary exhibitions of Moroccan arts and sculpture - the very quintessence of Moroccan art. The building is the work of Si Saïd, a half-brother of grand vizier Bou Ahmed who expanded the Bahia Palace. In fact, Dar Si Saïd is a smaller version of that Palace, with finer and more impressive decoration. On the ground floor you can find clothes, objects in beaten copper, beautifully decorated weapons, skilfully crafted traditional silver Berber jewellery from the southern Anti Atlas region, oil lamps and carvings in the special Tarouddant soft stone. Splendours from the past? Not at all, for many of the objects on display are still used and worn in mountain areas. Fountains sculpted from

pink marble decorate the tiled courtyards that are accented by the turquoise, greens and whites of the mosaic designs. The most important exhibit in the Museum is a marble basin dating back to the 10th century, brought to Marrakech from Cordoba by the Almohad Sultan Ali Ben Youssef. The first floor salon impresses with its Hispano Moorish decoration and elegant furniture in cedar wood. It is such an accurate reproduction that, at any moment you half expect to see a bride in her ceremonial dress return to the armchair and show herself off to all the admiring guests. Other rooms are filled with an abundance of intricate chests, ancient pottery from Safi and Tamegroute, worked leather from Marrakech as well as a remarkable collection of Berber carpets from the High Atlas and others that originate from every corner of the globe; some have made use of leather while others make use of textiles to create items that accurately reflect the regions from which they originate. Stop a moment to examine coming from the Sahara region, characterised by the use of embroidered leather, and large, pile mats evoking the dry beauty of the semi-desert. A remarkably impressive eighteenth and nineteenth-century collection of door and window frames is to be found around the courtyard, all encrusted with the most delicate and refined ornamentation. We continue up into the



Medina and the 14<sup>th</sup> 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 around a large courtyard with a central pool for ablutions. The buildings are made of carved cedar wood, exquisite stuccowork, and colourful zellige tiles. At the back is a sizable prayer hall where the most elaborate decoration can be found. The interior is covered in an abundance of pine cone and palm motifs used around

the mihrab to create a three-dimensional appearance. Throughout the Medersa are many Arabic inscriptions in stucco and zellige tile, the most common of which is the *bismillah* invocation: "In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful." Above the central courtyard are the small windows of the tiny student dormitories; over 800 students were housed in this Medersa, difficult to imagine. From stairs in the entry vestibule you can explore all the rooms and enjoy a nice view over the courtyard. The rooms are arranged around smaller inner courtyards, rimmed with fine wood railings. We shall go on to see the



Almoravid Dynasty Koubba; also called Koubba Ba'Adiyn, the oldest building in Marrakech and the only Almoravid building to remain standing in Morocco. The Almoravids (1062-1145) were reformers and monastic-type warriors from the desert nomadic Sanhaja Berber tribe in what is now Mauritania. After conquering their homeland, they expanded to Morocco in 1062 and eventually extended their empire all the way to Algiers. Probably an ablutions annexe for the Ben Youssef Mosque, for centuries it was covered over amid the many rebuildings of the mosque; it was only excavated in 1952. This little building is significant not only because it's very old, but because its style is at the root of all Moroccan architecture. Its motifs of pine cones, palms and acanthus leaves were used in the Ben Youssef Mosque and other later buildings; its beautifully-

shaped windows became the distinctive design of the Almohades and Merinids. Also highly influential on later designs are the koubba's pyramid-like battlements, the rib design on the dome, and the sophisticated interior support system, composed of a square and star-shaped octagon. In addition to the koubba itself, visitors can view a large water cistern and remains of fountains for performing ablutions. We now proceed to the Marrakech



Museum of Art and the Bert Flint Museum in the Maison Tiskiwin. Displayed in a riad constructed at the turn of the twentieth century in Hispano-Mauresque style, Bert Flint, a Dutch anthropologist and art historian, displays his excellent collection of costumes, jewellery, arms, basketwork, musical instruments, Moroccan art, popular traditions and artefacts, carpets and furniture collected over a period of 50 years as he travelled along the Gold Road from the Atlas Mountains to Timbuktu, crossing the regions of the Sahara and the Souss Valley. Flint was born in Groningen in Holland in 1931 and after studying Islamic and Hispanic art and culture moved to

Marrakech in 1957 where he taught art while continuing to study Andalusian-Arab culture. Over the years his focus had increasingly turned to rural culture shown here in all its glory and variety. We continue on through the labyrinth of narrow alleyways making up the renowned cool, colourful and aromatic Souqs of Marrakech - the Dyers' Souq being the last to be visited - finishing our guided visit in the Djmaâ el Fnaâ Square. Back at your hotel or riad, you may either lounge around in the late afternoon or decide to venture further into the bustle of this cosmopolitan city until dinner late this evening. **BLD.**

**DAY 9: MARRAKECH - ESSAOUIRA:** Checking out after breakfast, we now set out at around 8:30 for a 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 Mohammad 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. We shall check in to our hotel and then leave for a walk around this enchanting city 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 "sand castle"? You'll be pleasantly surprised to find what this artist-colony town has to offer. Perhaps even may take advantage - at an additional cost - of the Sofitel hotel's magnificent thalassotherapy spa and massage facilities. Your dinner is set in your hotel or riad this evening. **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 Safi, also known as Little Jerusalem. Safi 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. Continuing north alongside the Atlantic Ocean via Cap Beddouza to the seaside resort town of El Oualidia. El Oualidia is a simple place; time-forgotten, still civilization-forgotten though being "found" by those seeking peace and quiet, lying on the legendary Barbary Coast (according to the Romans, the realm of *barbariani* - those who spoke no Latin - a people we know today as Berbers), 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 hilltop Kasbah built by Sultan El Oualid in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. 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), its 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 a 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 - olive branch - 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. Perhaps later you'd like to stroll around the hotel precinct, or make a dash for the nearby old Medina and Souq with your guide for some last-minute shopping - again. **BLD.**

DAY 11: 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 you flight home, taking with you some certainly incredible memories of a land so full of remarkable contrasts and very friendly people. **B.**

To choose you hotel or ryad, please close this page and go to [Find a Hotel](#) or [Find a Ryad](#).

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

**OUR PRICES WILL INCLUDE:** Accommodation at specified hotels/riads or similar as *available at time of reservation* - including relevant taxes. Meals as detailed (excluding alcoholic drinks), or amended where required. Porterage on 1 piece of luggage per person in/out airports & hotels/riads. Private transportation in an air-conditioned vehicle from Casablanca to Casablanca. Sightseeing tours, including one by calèche in Marrakech, a dromedary ride to the overnight Sahara bivouac, 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, driver, cameleer and camp headman. 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' before you set out from Erfoud); personal toiletries; long trousers (dromedary ride); camera and Ziploc bags for your sensitive lenses; sunglasses, sunscreen and swimming costume (seasonal). For those who wear contact lenses, it could be a good idea to bring along a spare pair of glasses.