

# MOROCCO'S IMPERIAL CITIES, MOUNTAIN VALLEYS AND PORTUGUESE ENCLAVES

OBTIC15cesc **13 DAYS/12 NIGHTS**. CASABLANCA/RABAT - MEKNES - VOLUBILIS - FES/MARRAKECH/-OUIRGANE/-  
ESSAOUIRA/CASABLANCA

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



National Guide and, after clearing Immigration and Customs we shall leave for an hour's drive to the administrative Imperial capital since 1912 of the Kingdom of Morocco, Rabat (R'bat al Fat'h) - one of the four Imperial Cities, founded in the 12th century (R'bat meaning fortified convent). Sightseeing here will start with a drive through this graceful city of parks and gardens along Victory Avenue to the Méchouar Precinct of the King's Palace. Regrettably, the Palace is not open to the public, but we can savour and photograph its impressive arches, redolent of the finest Islamic architecture. Next we arrive at the Chellah, once a prosperous Roman enclave called *Sala Colonia* in their Mauretania Tingitane Province, to be abandoned late in the 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 garden of date and banana palm trees, hibiscus, bougainvillea, olive and fig trees. Legend has it that Jews came to Sala Colonia five centuries before the Carthaginians, in the days of Solomon, to purchase gold. On now to the **Archaeological Museum**. Built in 1932 and enlarged a few years later to display the finds resulting from intense archaeological research, this museum has housed the National Museum collections since 1986. It is one of the most sumptuous in Morocco and should certainly not be missed. The prehistoric section brings together human remains from the middle Palaeolithic period (probably Neanderthals) to the Neolithic (4000 B.C.), proving the continuity and size of the population at this time. The Islamic archaeology section is constantly growing with finds coming from the excavations of



VIIIth and IXth century sites, enabling us to have a clear idea of their potters, herdsmen, surgeons and bakers who have left us the legacy of their tools, while their womenfolk have left us their jewellery and the animals their harnesses. There is a collection of superb bronzes recovered from the excavations at Volubilis, the Romano-Berber capital of Mauritania Tingitana. When Rome ordered the evacuation of Volubilis in the third century, the citizens, expecting to return shortly, buried their works of art outside the city, where they were to remain undisturbed for 17 centuries. These pieces are kept apart in the Salle des Bronzes. Pre-Roman and Roman civilisations are particularly well-represented by some of the finest pieces to have survived from those periods. there is a first-rate collection of Hellenistic-style bronzes, so exceptional that it is difficult to know where



to look first: the "Drunken Donkey", passionately lyrical, an incomparable masterpiece from the time of the Emperor Augustus; the "Volubilis Guard-Dog" (centre-piece of a fountain) with its stunning realism, the "Young man Crowned With Ivy", a marvel of elegance and grace; the Rider and the busts presumed to be those of Cato the Younger and the young King Juba II of Mauritania Tingitana - the "Heads of Young Berbers" in marble, remarkable for their technical perfection and the vigorous strength of their expression. From here we continue to the Mohamed V Mausoleum, located on the southern side of the Great Mosque guarded by the mounted Royal Household Guard, the last resting places of the late King Mohammed V and of his son, the late King Hassan II. Napoleon Bonaparte's tomb at Les Invalides was the inspiration for the interior's modern Islamic design. It was the King Mohammed V who prevented the mass deportation of Moroccan Jews in the early years of World War II. We visit also the minaret of the Great Mosque, known also as the Hassan Tower. Begun in 1195, the tower was intended to be the largest minaret in the world along with the mosque, also intended to be the world's largest. In 1199 Sultan Yacoub el Mansour of the Almohad dynasty died, and construction on the mosque stopped. The tower only reached 44m (140ft), about half of its intended 86m (260ft) height. The rest of the mosque was also left incomplete, with only the foundations of several walls and 200 columns being constructed. Instead of having stairs, the tower is ascended by ramps with 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 Udayas 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 Udayas 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 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 we turn to our delightful accommodation for this night. LD.

**DAY 2: RABAT - MEKNES - VOLUBILIS - MOULAY IDRIS - FES:** After breakfast and check-out, our excursion to 2,000 years



in the past starts at 9 o'clock when we drive east to the Imperial City of Meknes (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 prison of the Christian slaves; the Moulay Ismail Mausoleum and the Place el-Hedim where 12,000 Arabo-Berber ('Barb') horses were once stabled at the same time. On now north to the wonderful Roman ruins at Volubilis, the Volubilis of really ancient olive presses, mansions, incredible mosaics, monumental arches and Corinthian columns where you'll have a real sense of Roman lifestyle and of that of a subsequent medieval Berber town. The site contains the Mansion containing the mosaic of the Labours of Hercules, the Baths of Gallienus and Baths of Forum with their fragmentary mosaics; the House of Orpheus and its Dolphin mosaic and Orpheus Myth; the Cortege of Venus many of whose mosaics we may only see from the outside yet will get to see the medallions of Bacchus, Diana and the Abduction of Hylas; the Gordian Palace with its bath house and pooled courtyards; the House of the Wild Beast, the House of Nymphs, the House of the Seasons, the House of Flavius Germanus, the Knights House with an incomplete mosaic of Dionysus Discovering Ariadne Asleep, the Triumphal Arch, the Capitol and the House of Ephebus with its pictorial mosaics, especially that of Bacchus Being drawn in a Chariot by Panthers.



We leave Volubilis behind for lunch at the Volubilis Inn Restaurant with its panoramic view of the ruins, thence to visit of the town of Moulay Idriss, the holiest Islamic town in the kingdom of Morocco, where thousands of Moroccan and Sub-Saharan 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 rebuilt by Moulay Ismail. On, now, to leave for our hotel or riad in Fes where, over dinner here, doubtless you'll discuss all the drama, scope and beauty of our visit forever indelibly imprinted in our memory. BLD.

**DAY 3: FES:** The exciting, fascinating and two thousand year old Imperial City of Fes, surrounded as it is by 9 miles of ramparts situated in a narrow valley, strategically positioned on the old caravan crossroads which once connected the one-time Saharan empires with the Atlantic and Mediterranean trading routes to Europe. The city that was once, after Mecca and Medina, held to be one of the holiest cities in the Islamic world; the city whose merchants were travelling to China in the 15th century; the city that (of least importance) gave its name to the red cylindrical brimless hat.



Moroccans say that Marrakech, Rabat and Casablanca live in the present, but that Fes certainly lives in the past. No surprises here, for European chroniclers of the Middle Ages wrote with awe of this city that for several centuries was the most civilised Western outpost of the Semitic world. Its scholars introduced astronomy and medicine to the West via Spain when that country was under Moorish rule. Historians of the time said that the writings of both Plato and Aristotle first reached Western Europe in Arabic translations - from Fes.

In 786, one hundred and fifty years after the death of the Prophet Mohammed Bin Abdullah Banu Hashim, his grandson was to set foot in Morocco. This man was Idriss Ibn Abdallah, destined to become Moulay Idriss, patron saint of Morocco and founder of Fes. Implicated in a failed rebellion against the Arabian Abbasids, he fled Baghdad to come with his bedraggled army to this



'Land of the Setting Sun', beyond which one could travel no further by land. Here, in Fes, on the eastern bank of the seasonal Oued Fes, after a set-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 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.



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're 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, woodwork to arrive back at our hotel or riad to relax before dinner here tonight after a day full of contrasting culture and journey into some 1,200 years of history. **BLD.**

**DAY 4: FES:** At leisure to go where you will within this medieval city, accompanied by your driver and guide. **B.**

**DAY 5. FES - BENI MELLAL - MARRAKECH.** This morning we set out southwards for a six hour drive into the Middle Atlas range of mountains, passing through *Imouzzar-du-Kandar*, the Swiss Alpine-like town of *Ifrane*, to *Azrou*, on through the *Cedar Forest*, perchance to feed some of the resident *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 6: MARRAKECH:** After breakfast we shall go for a ride in a *calèche* around the magnificent ramparts, quite the best introduction to the *Pink City*, on to the *Majorelle Garden and Museum of Islamic Art* of the recently-deceased fashion icon *Yves Saint Laurent*. Today, beautiful shaded grounds, an impressive collection of exotic plants and trees and an *Islamic Art Museum* (*Musée d'Art Islamique*) make this garden one of the must-see attractions in *Marrakech*. The gardens were once the home and haven of French painter *Jacques Majorelle*, born in 1886 to a renowned cabinet maker in *Nancy, France*. Travels to *Spain, Egypt* and the *Mediterranean* all pulled him away from his native country, but it was *Morocco* that beckoned *Majorelle* most strongly. In 1924 *Majorelle* settled in *Marrakech* on a property that would become known as *Majorelle Garden* where he created a retreat with a stunning home, spacious work studio, and vast garden in which he could indulge his botanical interest by growing plants and trees from around the world. *Majorelle's* passion for *Morocco* - especially the south - became evident in his paintings. Later travels to *Sudan, Guinea, Niger, Senegal* and the *Ivory Coast* were also to influence his work. Although *Majorelle* opened his property to visitors in 1947, the garden began to deteriorate following his death in 1962. Restoration of the *Majorelle Garden* began after *Yves Saint Laurent* and his partner *Pierre Bergé* purchased *Majorelle's* former home in 1980. The house itself is not open to the public. Partially hidden by the foliage of trees, its majestic architecture can be seen from certain vantage points in the garden. Further improvements were made in 2000, including an irrigation system which reduced water costs by 40 percent. Today, the grounds of the *Garden* are beautifully maintained and create an atmosphere of lush tranquillity. Winding walkways, quaint bridges, gurgling fountains, and shady gazebos add to the landscape. Home to hundreds of exotic plant and tree specimens brought from five continents, these include cactuses, bamboos, palms, blooming potted plants, and aquatic plants. Bird lovers will appreciate seeing the many species of local birds which inhabit the garden amongst which you may spot *Pied Wagtails, Kestrels, Storks, Collared Flycatchers* and more. The green roofed building that gets most of the attention, however, is the bright cobalt blue (referred to as *bleu Majorelle*) and yellow building that *Majorelle* used as a studio workshop from 1931 now houses the *Museum of Islamic Art*. The same cobalt blue -- is used with bright yellow to add colour and contrast throughout the garden. This small museum houses a tasteful collection of *Islamic art*, good examples of *Moroccan tribal art* - some hundreds of years old - textiles, weapons, carpets from all over *North Africa*, jewellery, furniture. Some of *Jacques Majorelle's* art work and engravings of local scenes in *Morocco* is also on display. There are also exhibitions of marriage curtains and fabrics, embroideries, manuscripts and many other masterpieces. On now down into the *Medina* to the dramatic *Almohad Koutoubia Mosque* (entrance to the Mosque is prohibited to non-Muslims), one of the major architectural triumphs of the *Almohades*, the 12th century dynasty responsible for one of the worst periods of *Jewish persecution*. The *Koutoubia Mosque* is the tallest mosque in *Marrakech*, its construction decided in 1158 by the *Almohad Sultan Abdel Moumen* soon after his conquest of *Marrakech*, occupying the square of a former *Almohavid palace* whose mosque was destroyed, supposedly as it did not face *Mecca*. Completed in 1199 with the construction



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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 19<sup>th</sup> century, were traditionally displayed on stakes the severed heads of criminals. We take lunch at the Al Baraka Restaurant overlooking the Square to see from above stalls of goods, from fruit to alarm clocks; snake charmers and water sellers; fortune tellers and public scribes; tumblers and *nakkachat* - women with syringes full of henna - soothsayers and *gnaoua* musicians. With the touch of a journey back into time we set off into the bustling Kasbah to the lavishly-decorated **Saâdien Tombs** - discovered in 1917 with some tombs dating from the middle 1550s; this is the ancient cemetery of the *shorfa*, the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. Here you see the Prayer Hall with its horseshoe arches, the tombs of the Alaouite princes from the 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 **El Badii Palace**. The remnants of a magnificent palace built by the Saâdien Sultan Ahmed Ibn Moussa al-Mansour in 1578(?) designed by Mohammed el-Heqqq under the influence of the Alhambra in Granada, which took some 16 years to complete, was named 'Badi' (the Incomparable), one of the 99 names of Allah (moreover, *ksar l-bdi* in Moroccan Arabic means 'the porcelain palace', which could refer to the rich ceramic panels that

profusely decorated the building). Montaigne, in his *Voyage en Italie*, reported that Italian craftsmen near Pisa were cutting 'for the King of Fes in Barbary', 50 very tall Italian marble columns which were paid for in sugar, weight for weight. Workmen from different countries, including in Europe, were recruited to execute the work. For three-quarters of a century, the Badi was the venue for all of the great ceremonies and parties given by the Saâdien Sultans and ended up with a reputation, more or less deserved, for excess and debauchery. This was the main reason why the Alaouite Sultan Moulay Ismail (1672-1727) ordered the complete destruction of the once fairy tale building and used the materials to decorate his own palace in Meknes. Consequently all that remains today is a section of the 2 metre-thick outer wall, the esplanade, with remains of its pools and orchards, one of the pavilions with its columns and some decorative elements (stucco, marble, zellige - small tiles). However, excavations carried out in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the discovery of two drawings of the palace (one Portuguese and one English) and the reports of contemporary chroniclers and foreign visitors give us a reasonably precise idea of how the Badi would have been in its heyday. The palace, thought to have consisted of 360 rooms, was symmetrically planned around an enormous rectangular courtyard measuring 135 m by 110 m, including a long central pool measuring 90 m by 20 m that contained a monumental fountain and had hollows on either side planted with trees and flowers and four small rectangular basins at the ends whose ceramic mosaic paving is still visible. The east side of the palace looked out over a large garden known as 'the Crystal Garden'. Two pavilions measuring 15m by 16m were built halfway along the shorter sides of the courtyard and two more measuring 23m by 15m in the middle of the longer sides. Truncated-pyramid towers stood in the corners of the courtyard. The pavilions were crowned with domes whose ceilings were encrusted with gold from Sudan and precious *muqarnas* (honeycomb work) supported by marble



columns with capitals covered with golden leaves. The floors and walls were covered with faience mosaics, the doors were made of sculpted cedar wood and, throughout, the fountains gushed water from the mouths of lions, leopards and pythons sculpted in solid silver. It also has a small, underground, tunnel-like jail with about four cells where the king kept his prisoners. From here to the late 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 on a large courtyard with a central pool for ablutions. The buildings are made of carved cedar wood, exquisite stuccowork, and colourful zellige tiles. At the back is a sizable prayer hall where the most elaborate decoration can be found. The interior is covered in an abundance of pine cone and palm motifs used around the mihrab to create a three-dimensional appearance. Throughout the Medersa are many Arabic inscriptions in stucco and zellige tile, the most common of which is the *bismillah* invocation: "In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful." Above the central courtyard are the small windows of the tiny student dormitories; over 800 students were housed in this Medersa, difficult to imagine. From stairs in the entry vestibule you can explore all the rooms and enjoy a nice view over the courtyard. The rooms are arranged around smaller inner courtyards, rimmed with fine wood railings. We shall go on to see the Almoravid Dynasty Koubba; also called **Koubba Ba'Adiyn**, the oldest building in Marrakech and the only Almoravid building to remain standing in Morocco. The Almoravids (1062-1145) were reformers and monastic-type warriors from the desert nomadic Sanhaja Berber tribe in what is now Mauritania. After conquering their homeland, they expanded to Morocco in 1062 and eventually extended their empire all the way to Algiers. Probably an ablutions annexe for the Ben Youssef Mosque, for centuries it was covered over amid the many rebuildings of the mosque; it was only excavated in 1952. This little building is significant not only because it's very old, but because its style is at the root of all Moroccan architecture. Its motifs of pine cones, palms and acanthus leaves were used in the Ben Youssef Mosque and other later buildings; its beautifully-shaped windows became the distinctive design of the Almohades and Merinids. Also highly influential on later designs are the koubba's pyramid-like battlements, the rib design on the dome, and the sophisticated interior support system, composed of a square and star-shaped octagon. In addition to the koubba itself, visitors can view a large water cistern and remains of fountains for performing ablutions. We now proceed to the **Marrakech Museum of Contemporary Art** and the **Bert Flint Museum** in the **Maison Tiskiwin**. Displayed in a riad constructed at the turn of the twentieth century in Hispano-Mauresque style, Bert Flint, a Dutch anthropologist and art historian, displays his excellent collection of costumes, jewellery, arms, basketwork, musical instruments, Moroccan art, popular traditions and artefacts, carpets and furniture collected over a period of 50 years as he travelled along the Gold Road from the Atlas Mountains to Timbuktu, crossing the regions of the Sahara and the Souss Valley. Flint was born in Groningen in Holland in 1931 and after studying Islamic and Hispanic art and culture moved to Marrakech in 1957 where he taught art while continuing to study Andalusian-Arab culture. Over the years his focus had increasingly turned to rural culture shown here in all its glory and variety. We continue on through the labyrinth of narrow alleyways making up the renowned cool, colourful and aromatic Souqs of Marrakech - the Dyers' Souq being the last to be visited - finishing our guided visit in the Djmaâ el Fnaâ Square. Back at your hotel, you may either lounge around in the late afternoon or decide to venture further into the bustle of this cosmopolitan city until dinner late this evening. **BLD.**



**DAY 7: MARRAKECH:** Day at leisure to go where you will within this famed cosmopolitan city, accompanied by your driver and guide. **B.**

**DAY 8: MARRAKECH - OUIRGANE:** This morning we shall drive south for about an hour across the plain towards the High Atlas Mountains you'll have seen from your hotel's terrace, to pass up alongside the Moulay Brahim Gorges to Asni, a Berber market town and on to the region of Ouirgane, home to many small Berber hamlets and one of the more breathtaking parts of the Atlas Mountains. Here the gentle summer breeze ensures that summer is cooler than in the city with hills and valleys covered with dense, virgin forests; fruit orchards that carry the gentle fragrance of lime, grapefruit and orange into the air, whilst the gardens here are a sea of roses. It is this scenic beauty and magnificent calm that makes this region one of the popular tourist destinations in Morocco and it should come as no surprise that the valley is also known as a "Happy Valley", thanks to its natural beauty. It is here that you will find your peaceful



retreat, a haven amongst rose gardens, olive trees and lime and lemon groves. The entire area is a haven for horse riding, trekking, walking and bird watching. **BD.**

**DAY 9: OUIRGANE:** Day at leisure to go where you will around the villages, or perhaps to drive accompanied by your driver and guide for around 45 minutes via Asni, thence south through the steep, forested river valley of the Assif Aït Mizane and the awe-inspiring Toubkal Massif, passing by the Berber hamlets and villages of Tagadirt n'Aït Ali, Imi Ourghlad, Aguersiouâl and Taddart with their ancient terraced fields clawed from the mountain sides to arrive at Imlil, some 1740 metres above sea level, a charming little Berber trailhead village - known as Morocco's 'Little Chamonix' - set in the upper level foothills of the Western High Atlas Mountain range of the Toubkal (Adrar N'Dern in Berber) National Park - whose pinkish houses line a one-horse (or mule) street, all unevenly arranged in between numerous walnut trees. **BD.**



**DAY 10: OUIRGANE- MARRAKECH -ESSAOUIRA:** Checking out after breakfast, we now set out for a 3 hours' drive north via Marrakech, thence 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 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 welcoming 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. BD.



**DAY 14: 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 12: 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, known also 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 negligible. 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. 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. BL.

DAY 13: 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)

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**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 required and as *available at time of reservation* - including relevant taxes. Meals as detailed (excluding alcoholic drinks), or as required by your market needs. 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 and all related entrance fees as listed in the itinerary. An English-speaking Licensed National Guide throughout the tour. Bottled water en-route. Medical and Accident Insurance.

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

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

