

MOROCCO'S IMPERIAL CITIES AND JEWELS OF THE SOUTH

OBTIC18cc **14 DAYS/13 MAGICAL NIGHTS.** CASABLANCA/RABAT-MEKNES-MOULAY IDRISSE-VOLUBILIS-FES/AZROU - MIDELT - ZIZ GORGES - er RACHIDYA-ERFOUD /- MERZOUGA-ERG CHEBBI/- TINEHRIR-TODRA GORGES - BOUMALNE DU DADES - DADES GORGES - Q'LAAT DES M'GOUNA - SKOURA KASBAHS - OUARZAZATE/AÏT BEN HADDOU-MARRAKECH/ESSAOUIRA/ - SAFI - EL JADIDA - AZEMMOUR - CASABLANCA

DAY 1: CASABLANCA. You will be met on arrival Casablanca airport by your English-speaking National Guide and transferred to your hotel. As your arrival may be rather early, we shall arrange for you to check-in and relax after your long journey until 11:00 when you will be taken for a tour of this bustling metropolis to visit the exterior of the Dar el Makhzen, or King's Palace, with its magnificent doors, the New Medina - or Habous - designed by French architects in the 1930s to resolve a housing crisis and create a modern, 20th century Kasbah - here to stroll through the reasonably-modern (1923) souk and on past the Pasha's Mahakma Court of Islamic Law. A visit may be made (previous advice required) to the Beth-El Synagogue, one of the largest and most beautiful noted for its stained glass windows, in the style of Marc Chagall. Sunlight, tinted by stained glass, bounces off a gigantic crystal chandelier creating thousands of shimmering rainbow mosaics on every surface. The ark, the most important thing in the synagogue, houses the Hebrew scrolls and these are dressed in exquisitely embroidered velvet mantles. The walls are inscribed with gilded quotes from the Bible and the ceiling is equally decorative. We continue on to 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. On now to the Corniche where a stop will be made for lunch overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Once more back into our vehicle to visit the interior (on Fridays only at 9 am) of the amazingly-beautiful Hassan II Mosque, the second largest mosque in the Islamic world after the Masjid al-Hamra in Mecca. This architectural masterpiece, a symbol of an Islam open to the world, took 7 years to complete using 50 million man-hours and inaugurated on the 30th August, 1993 was built partially on the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, on the farthest western point of the Maghreb. Conceived by the French architect Michel Pinseau (1924-1999), the Mosque employed 3,300 craftsmen from all over Morocco; has 53,000 m² of carved cedar wood; 67,000 m² of plasterwork and some 10,000 m² of sculpted ornamentation and writings; it contains on the ground floor an oblong Prayer Hall of perfect symmetry measuring 200 x 100m. Supported by seventy-eight pillars where granite, marble and onyx mix their respective reflections, this vast room supports a retractable roof covered with emerald green tiles – the symbolic colour of Islam, representing Mother - to welcome to prayer 25,000 believers inside and 80,000 on the adjoining esplanade. Embedded in the axis of the southern facade, a 210 metre-high minaret, boasts a laser beam of 30km reach pointing towards Mecca. This magnificent Mosque also encompasses a Medersa (School of Koranic learning), a Library, a National Museum and immense lecture halls, all beautifully decorated by artisans from all over Morocco: frescoes and zelliges in traditional geometrical motives, painted and sculptured woods, stuccos of intricate designs, arabesques in decorative drawings and writings in brilliant colour inaugurated in 1992 and a masterpiece of Moroccan architectural design and craftsmanship. The last part of our tour takes us to the busy United Nations Square. Under the walls of the old Medina, at the beginning of the 20th century, there was but an empty space where the souk was held. It very quickly became the heart of the modern town. We may make a stop here for shopping, should you so wish, before returning to your hotel. Perhaps you might like later have a drink at the American-owned Rick's Café, (www.rickscafe.ma) complete with mahogany, wicker and ceiling fans – all without 'Rick Blaine' Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, Peter Lorre and Claude Rains - before dinner and Oriental Show in the Basmane Restaurant overlooking the Ocean. **LD.**



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DAY 2: CASABLANCA - RABAT - FES. After breakfast, bags packed, we set out around 8.30 for a 1½ hours' drive north alongside the Atlantic Ocean to the Imperial City Rabat, 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 5th century, thence to fall into ruins to be transformed, late in the 14th 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 12th 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. From here 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 19th



century; the corsairs who captured Miguel de Cervantes; the corsairs mentioned in Doctor Doolittle - the Moroccan Sultan Moulay Ismaïl 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 continue on the highway directly to our hotel or riad in the medieval Imperial City of Fes.

Fes, the city that was once, after Mecca and Medina, held as one of the holiest cities of the Islamic world; the city whose merchants were travelling to China in the 15th century; the city that, least in importance, gave its name to the red cylindrical, brimless hat used over most of the Moslem world. Moroccans say that Marrakech, Rabat and Casablanca live in the present, but that Fes definitely lives in the past. It should come as no surprise. European chroniclers of the Middle Ages wrote with awe of the city that for several centuries was the most civilized Western outpost of the Semitic world. Its scholars introduced astronomy and medicine to the West via Spain when it was under Moorish rule. Historians of the time said that Plato and Aristotle first reached Western Europe in Arabic translations - from Fes. Welcome to a different world. With its two hundred mosques and holy shrines, Fes contains more places of worship than any other Moroccan city. At its peak, early in the thirteenth century, Fes el-Bali alone boasted almost eight hundred mosques and mausoleums for its 125,000 inhabitants.



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 our professionally-guided visit will take you to the bustling maze of alleyways of the fascinating medina and souks offering every possible combination of beautiful pottery, Berber carpets, Fassi brassware, Jewish-originated silverware, traditional and modern jewellery, beautiful leather goods all amidst the pungent aromas of spices, herbs and oils. Take in with us the ancient living monuments this city of One Thousand and One Nights has to offer the serious tourist. Fes, one of the pillars of Islam, harboured the most celebrated of Jewish communities and scholars.



Is it Fes or Fez? It is both; and neither. The Western name for the city is drawn from the Arabic *Fas* and, as there is no one correct way to transliterate Arabic words into Western characters, in the French language, the city is referred to as *Fés*, while Americans tend to use *Fez*. *Fassin*, or *Fassis* as the residents call themselves, use the pronunciation of *Fas*, so derived from three Arabic letters fa (f), alif (a) and sin (s). So everyone wins.



After check-in, we make for the impressive Dar el Makhzen and a 15 minute stop at the Royal Palace with its magnificent seven bronze gates. From here we walk to and through the Mellah with its intense atmosphere and fine examples of Mauro-Hispanic architecture. We now drive to the Borj Sud, here to take in the panoramic view of the Medina. Off now down to start our Walking Tour of the labyrinth of the ancient Fes Medina and Mellah (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and an Escheresque jumble of alleyways; of the Bou Inania Mosque; of the colourful es-Sabbaghine with its Street of the Dyers; of the brass workers at es-Saffarine; of the impressive al-Quarawiyyin Mosque and University (exterior only)

and the el-Atterine Medersa (exterior only) passing the aromas of the Souq el-Atterine area of spices and groceries to the delightful el-Nejjarine Square with its fountain and caravanserai, stopping nearby for a light lunch. On now to the renowned Tanneries on the

bank of the Oued Fes and thence on to the potteries, perfumes and beauty products at the Souq el-Henna and back to your hotel or riad for dinner after a day full of contrasting culture and journey into some 1,200 years of history. **BLD.**



DAY 3: FES - MEKNES - VOLUBILIS - MOULAY IDRIS - FES. After breakfast we shall now set out to the Imperial City of



Meknes (whose Medina is a UNESCO World Heritage Site). Arab historians trace the origins of Meknes to the Roman occupation of Morocco from 3BC to 40AD, perhaps as a forward post for the neighbouring Roman city of Volubilis during the search for timber and volcanic rock required for construction which the nearby Middle Atlas Mountains must have provided in plenty. Recent archaeological finds, however, do not offer convincing proof that there was a virtual Romanisation of this settlement that would later develop into the great capital of legendary King Moulay Ismail. This, one of our kingdom's four Imperial Cities, was developed in the 10th century by the Zenata tribe of the Mekkassa Berbers as *Meknassa es - Zeitoun* ("Meknes of the Olives"), a group of villages among olive groves around Takarart, an 11th

century Berber Almoravid citadel. Situated west of the Saiss plain between the pre-Riffian elevation of Zerhoun and the foothills of the Middle Atlas, Meknes was chosen by Moulay Ismail in 1672 to be the capital of his empire. Enjoying a strategically-central position vis-à-vis other regions in Morocco, Meknes sits on a plateau serving as a virtual cross roads for the South-North camel caravan traders and settlers. Throughout its history, its importance grew due to the location, clement weather, abundant water supplies and surrounding fertile plains. The city's unity of style lends it undeniable charm, unchanged for centuries, enhanced still further by the beauty of the surrounding countryside. Moulay Ismail's creation was to be much talked of in the East and in Europe, most especially at the French court of King Louis XIV and was once called "the Moroccan Versailles". Here we shall visit its 40 km



of Ramparts and monumental gates such as the easily most beautiful Bab, or gateway, in all of the Maghreb - the Bab Mansour el Alj. From here to the El Heri es-Souani - the granary of huge vaulted structures and stables - once accommodating the Sultan's 20,000 Arabo-Berber 'Barb' horses - 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 splendid Moulay Ismail Mausoleum, the Place el-Hedim and the Dar Jamaï Museum. Before housing the Meknès collections, the Dar Jamaï had a number of different uses. Built in 1882 to be the residence of the illustrious Jamaï family, which included two of Sultan Moulay el-Hassan's ministers (1873-1894), it was used as a military hospital after 1912, only becoming the Museum of Moroccan Art in 1920. Today, the palace still displays much of its wealthy beginnings, with a luxurious garden that has been landscaped in an Arab-style and features fruit trees and beautiful cypresses. The building boasts elegant painted windows, detailed tiles, painted wood and even sculptured plasterwork. It still oozes a feeling of luxury and is a symbol of the wealth and

prosperity that was enjoyed by the Jamaï family. The elaborate decoration with sculpted plaster and painted wood as well as the Andalusian garden planted with cypress and fruit trees, gives an accurate idea of the degree of luxury enjoyed by the prosperous bourgeoisie of Meknes. Wrought iron work, wooden sculpture, weaving, leather working, brass and copper ware, metalwork, a museum is devoted to the crafts of the region.

Local talent and skill of the craftsmen of Morocco are displayed through vast and colorful exhibits of painted wood panels, decorated chests, moucharabieh and breathtaking pottery pieces decorated in the use of rich colours and in the magnificent multi-hued embroidery for which they are so famous. You'll no doubt be astounded at the detail and time-consuming effort that is evident in every piece of wrought iron, brass, woodcarving, ceramics, metal work, coppersmith items and leatherwork. This museum also has a wonderful collection of jewelry, traditional costumes and rare carpets.



We leave Meknes for to the wonderful Roman ruins at Volubilis, the Volubilis of really ancient olive presses, mansions, incredible mosaics, monumental arches and Corinthian columns where you'll have a real sense of Roman lifestyle and of that of a subsequent medieval Berber town. The 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 Cortège of Venus many of whose mosaics we may only see from the outside yet will get to see the medallions of Bacchus, Diana and the Abduction of Hylas; the Gordian Palace with its bath house and pooled courtyards; the House of the Wild Beast, the House of Nymphs, the House of the Seasons, the House of Flavius Germanus, the Knights House with an incomplete mosaic of Dionysus Discovering Ariadne Asleep, the Triumphal Arch, the Capitol and the House of Ephebus with its pictorial mosaics, especially that of Bacchus Being drawn in a Chariot by Panthers. We shall break for lunch at the Hotel Volubilis inn with its panoramic view of the ruins to leave Volubilis behind and drive alongside the dark, outlying ridges of the Zerhoun Hills for a panoramic view of the town of Moulay Idriss, the holiest Islamic town in the kingdom of Morocco, where thousands of Moroccan faithful come on pilgrimage (*moussem*) every August to pray at the tomb of this descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. This small hilltop town was named after the Sultan Moulay Idriss the Elder, who oppressed the resident Jews, forcing many of them to convert. It was he who also founded Fes. 70 years ago, it was prohibited to non-Muslims to enter the town. In 788 (or 787) A.D, an event occurred that was to forever change the path of Moroccan culture. Idriss Ibn Abdallah (or Moulay Idriss I as he is called here in Morocco), the great-grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, had fled west from Baghdad to settle in Morocco. The heir to the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus, Moulay had participated in a revolt against the Abbasid dynasty which had usurped the leadership of the Umayyad dynasty to precipitate the split between the Shia and Sunni



sects. Forced to flee Abbasid assassins, Moulay initially found asylum in Tangier but soon thereafter tried to establish himself in the old Roman city of Volubilis. Before long he moved to the nearby region of Zerhoun, where he founded the town that is now called either Moulay Idriss or Zerhoun. The local Berber tribes, passionate neophytes of Islam, were convinced of Moulay's power

to lead as both sultan and *iman* (spiritual guide) and his exemplary conduct soon ensured his lordship over many of the Berber tribes. We shall see the elongated square, the green-tiled pyramids of the Zaouiat with its two conical quarters on either side and the labyrinth of alleyways before returning to the Imperial City of Fes where we could continue our visit of this city, should you so wish, as we make our way to the Saâdien watchtower at the North Borj and its Weapons Museum. Hard to miss since it is housed in a 16th century fortress that towers above the city, its stark walls clearly visible over quite a distance. The fortress was once a



northern tower that formed part of the walled fortifications that surrounded Fes in times gone by. Built in 1582 at the command of Saâdien Sultan Ahmed El Mansour Eddahbi as part of efforts to ensure that Fes was adequately protected, no better location for the museum could have been chosen since the building itself is a testimony to the evolution of military warfare and architecture. Here you will find weapons from virtually every age and corner of the country. The majority of the collection has been donated by royalty and as a result, there are even a number of rare pieces included in the displays. Overall, there are more than 5000 different arms in the collection which include 775 military items. All these articles are displayed

in a series of 13 different rooms and collections include everything from pre-historic weaponry to rifles with their inlaid butts to modern day rifles. The collection is also not limited to only Moroccan artifacts and includes Indian, European and Asian articles.

The most outstanding portion of the museum simply has to be the Moroccan weaponry, which is not only dangerous, but decorative too. Daggers are encrusted with precious stones and rifle butts are carefully shaped and inlaid with jewels. These articles are so beautifully decorated that they hold appeal for art lovers too. The largest piece in the collection is a cannon that was



used during the Battle of the Three Kings (Battle of the Wadi Al-Makhazin). This massive weapon is five meters long and weighs a whopping 12 tons! Weapons specialists will appreciate the development of techniques while art lovers will be impressed by the splendour of the objects. We continue to the Dar Batha Museum, an Hispano-Mauresque palace dating from towards the end of the 19th century housing some admirable collections of traditional art from Fes. Most traditional forms of art were also practical in nature so they usually took the form of furniture that was given a decorative touch. Therefore you can expect to enjoy intricately carved wooden furniture, wrought iron with decorative finishing touches,

carpets, embroidery and jewelry. Of course, there were also less functional pieces, such as artwork made from sculpted plaster or other decorative materials. Sculpted wood, wrought iron, sculpted plaster or decorative materials that are in fact works of art in their own right. Embroidery, carpets, jewellery and coins compete with one another to attract your attention. But the museum's centrepiece is to be found in the pottery room where you will find an unbeatable display of ceramic objects that have been masterfully crafted by Fez craftsmen through the centuries. Of particular interest are the articles dating back to the 10th century which contain items of 'Fes blue'. At the time, this relatively groundbreaking way of coloring pottery involved the use of cobalt to obtain the bluish coloring. Typical ceramics feature a white enamel background with stylized floral motives interweaved on them in brilliant shades of blue. The floral motifs are both sophisticated and harmonious and are a delight to behold. Not to be missed are the astrolabes – a display featuring a variety of fascinating astronomical instruments that were created and perfected by learned Arabs. They are not only functional, but wonderfully decorative with intricately worked metal and inset jewels. We return to your hotel or riad for dinner. **B.L.D.**

DAY 4: FES: A day you have at leisure; perhaps just (eventually) to revisit the Medina and bargain for some brassware or,



perhaps, strike out further to the east for a day trip to Taza, some 120km from Fes as part of the little-visited "Cirque Du Jbel Tazzeqa" (1980m) where you'd visit this town, one of the oldest in Morocco, founded by the Berbers in the 5th century as a strategic fortress guarding the pass "'Trouée de Tazi" from Algeria to Morocco's fertile valleys, perched impressively at 600m on the edge of a plateau where the Rif Mountains transition to the Middle Atlas Mountains. A town of Almohad Dynasty ramparts; of the Bab er Rih (Gate of the Winds) and a Medina of partially-covered souqs and grand houses with beautiful, heavy wooden doors and ornate window grills; of the Jamâa el Kbir Mosque and the Medersa Abou el Hassan

(built in 1323), a town where many meteorites have been found. The circle trip would take you to the waterfall at Ras el Oued; to the Caves at Chikr and at the Gouffre Du Friouato - some 180m deep - and an impressive winding road alongside gorges and escarpments. **B.**

DAY 5: FES - AZROU - MIDELT - ZIZ GORGES - ER-RACHIDYA - ERFOUD - MERZOUGA: After breakfast we now set off south



to the Sahara, This will be all of a 6½ hour drive, with "comfort stops" and many photo-op opportunities. After some 30 minutes, we arrive at the small 1920s French-built hill station of Immouzèr Du Kandari (1220m). Here we may pause for a few minutes by the kasbah for a look at the little Medina and take in the pleasant Saiss 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 - which in the local Tamazight (Berber) dialect means "caves" - is mainly a winter ski resort and a summer hideaway for rich Moroccans wishing to escape the hustle and heat of the large cities. 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'll 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 Aït 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'Talrehmt (1907m), on across a deserted plain through the town of Aït



Messaoud, passing a French Foreign Legion fort with all the reminders of *Beau Geste* and then to the first southern ksar of Aït Kherrou, a river palmeriaie (oasis) at the entrance to a small gorge. From here on in, ksour start to dot the countryside as we carry on down alongside the River Ziz (a 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 Aït 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 and the French-built town of Erfoud which will give you your first impression of the over-powering proximity of the Sahara. We change here to a 4x4 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.**

DAY 6: ERG CHEBBI - MERZOUGA - ERFOUD - TINERHRIR - BOUMALNE DU DADES - DADES GORGE - Q'LAAT DES M'GOUNA - KASBAHS OF SKOURA - OUARZAZATE:



Our last brilliant sunrise, equal almost to last night's unforgettable sunset, our Bedouin breakfast of tea, 'sand' bread, jam and cheese tucked away, our dromedaries having been saddled up for the return stage, we set off back across the plain around 8:30 for our final Méharée to the Auberge Du Sud, where we'll take a shower before boarding our 4x4 and our drive back to Erfoud to now set off on a delightful drive westwards across the Marrah Plain passing the oases of Jorf and Mellab to Tinejdad with the low-lying Jbel Ugnat as a backdrop and on to the small town of Tinerhrir, 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. Returning back to Tinerhrir we stop at the French-owned Restaurant Chez Michel for a light lunch. 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 Aït Youl as far as a group of ksours at Aït Arbi built against a volcanic twist in the rocks. We return to the mouth of the Gorge before continuing westwards via Qlâa't Des M'Gouna (Citadel of the M'Gouna Tribe) where thousands of small, pink 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 Skoura and the living museum of Amerhidl before carrying on, after a total of around 170km., to the new (1920s) once-garrison town of the French Protectorate - Ouarzazate - which was, in the late 1980s, a bit of a tourist boom town - for our dinner and overnight accommodation at your riad. **BLD.**

DAY 7: OUARZAZATE - KASBAHS TAOURIRT & AÏT BEN HADDOU - MARRAKECH:



Refreshed, a late breakfast and raring to go, after paying a visit to the nearby kasbah Taourirt of the former caïd (meaning "master" or "leader,") and later the possession of El Haj T'hami el Mezouari el Glaoui (1879-1956), the last ruling family of the south (the 'Lord of the Atlas') and a strong contender for control over Morocco who had this palace built in Ouarzazate - but never lived there. Once Pasha of Marrakech from 1912 to 1956, he allied himself to the French in Morocco during the Protectorate and conspired with them in the overthrow of the king Sultan Mohammed V, grandfather of the actual king of Morocco. Until the second half of the 20th century, Moroccan society was in a state of feudalism very close to that which pertained in Europe during medieval times. At the top was the sultan, who held the two positions of king (temporal ruler) and imam (spiritual leader). His court, or central government (Makhzen), was headed by a Grand Vizier. The next tier of government was provided by a large number of Pashas (from the Persian *padshah*, literally: Viceroy and caïds (the equivalent of European dukes, barons etc) whose responsibilities were to collect taxes and keep order, to which ends they often kept private armies. Under them were the mass of ordinary commoners whose responsibilities were to pay taxes, obey their local master and provide him with troops when necessary. In the autumn of 1893, the then ruling Sultan Moulay Hassan and his army were crossing the High Atlas Mountains after a tax-gathering expedition when they were caught in a blizzard. They were rescued by Si Madani and T'hami and the grateful Sultan bestowed on Si Madani *caïdats* from Tafilalet to the Souss Valleys. In addition, he presented the Glaoua arsenal with a working 77-mm Krupp cannon, the only such weapon in Morocco outside the imperial army, which the Glaoua army used to subdue rival warlords and which is located still outside the kasbah's walls. We now set forth towards the north alongside the Oued Ouarzazate via the Assif Ounila Valley to the magnificently exotic Kasbah and Ksour of Aït Ben Haddou, declared, and rightly so, a World Heritage Site. Here we alight from our vehicle to visit these various kasbahs, so closely-knit that they appear to be but one complete building, backed up against the looming mountain in a stretch of unforgiving Hamada. The thick, high, sheer, elaborately decorated pisé walls, stepped-up housing, turreted, crenulated ramparts, and balustrades and arched 'babs' are a sight not to be missed. One of the more spectacular sights in the Atlas ranges, set upon a rock above a reed-strewn assif, commanding the area for miles around, this kasbah controlled the route to Marrakech until the French blasted a road through the Tizi n'Tichka in the late 1920s. We shall take a light lunch at the Riad Dar Mouna on the opposite side of the oued offering a magnificent view of the kasbah and surrounding area before continuing on up into the High Atlas Mountains and the exhilarating hairpin bends to alight at the top of the Tizi n'Tichka (2260m) with a vista dominated by peaks of some 2500+m. Onwards, now, via Aït Ourir Taddert (1650m) and down

across the Glaoua Plains to your hotel or riad in Marrakech. **BL.** Your guide will certainly be able to recommend and take you to and from any number of International or Moroccan restaurants in which you could dine on any of the evenings you stay here.

DAY 8: MARRAKECH. After breakfast we shall go for a ride in a calèche around the magnificent ramparts, quite the best introduction to the Pink City, on to the Majorelle Garden and Museum of Islamic Art of the recently-deceased fashion icon Yves Saint Laurent. Today, beautiful shaded grounds, an impressive collection of exotic plants and trees and an Islamic Art Museum (*Musée d'Art Islamique*) make this garden one of the must-see attractions in Marrakech. The gardens were once the home and haven of French painter Jacques Majorelle, born in 1886 to a renowned cabinet maker in Nancy, France. Travels to Spain, Egypt and the Mediterranean all pulled him away from his native country, but it was Morocco that beckoned Majorelle most strongly. In 1924 Majorelle settled in Marrakech on a property that would become known as Majorelle Garden where he created a retreat with a stunning home, spacious work studio, and vast garden in which he could indulge his botanical interest by growing plants and trees from around the world. Majorelle's passion for Morocco - especially the south - became evident in his paintings. Later travels to Sudan, Guinea, Niger, Senegal and the Ivory Coast were also to influence his work. Although Majorelle opened his property to visitors in 1947, the garden began to deteriorate following his death in 1962. Restoration of the Majorelle Garden began after Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergé purchased Majorelle's former home in 1980. The house itself is not open to the public. Partially hidden by the foliage of trees, its majestic architecture can be seen from certain vantage points in the garden.



Further improvements were made in 2000, including an irrigation system which reduced water costs by 40 percent. Today, the grounds of the Garden are beautifully maintained and create an atmosphere of lush tranquillity. Winding walkways, quaint bridges, gurgling fountains, and shady gazebos add to the landscape. Home to hundreds of exotic plant and tree specimens brought from five continents, these include cactuses, bamboos, palms, blooming potted plants, and aquatic plants. Bird lovers will appreciate seeing the many species of local birds which inhabit the garden amongst which you may spot Pied Wagtails, Kestrels, Storks, Collared Flycatchers and more. The green roofed building that gets most of the attention, however, is the bright cobalt blue (referred to as *bleu Majorelle*) and yellow building that Majorelle used as a studio workshop from 1931 now houses the Museum of Islamic Art. The same cobalt blue is used with bright yellow to add colour and contrast throughout the garden. This small museum houses a tasteful collection of Islamic art, good examples of Moroccan tribal art - some hundreds of years old - textiles, weapons, carpets from all over North Africa, jewellery, furniture. Some of Jacques Majorelle's art work and engravings of local scenes in



Morocco is also on display. There are also exhibitions of marriage curtains and fabrics, embroideries, manuscripts and many other masterpieces. On now down into the Medina to the dramatic Almohad Koutoubia Mosque (entrance to the Mosque is prohibited to non-Muslims), one of the major architectural triumphs of the Almohades, the 12th century dynasty responsible for one of the worst periods of Jewish persecution. The Koutoubia Mosque is the tallest mosque in Marrakech, its construction decided in 1158 by the Almohad Sultan Abdel Moumen soon after his conquest of Marrakech, occupying the square of a former Almohavid palace whose mosque was destroyed, supposedly as it did not face Mecca. Completed in 1199 with the construction of its famous minaret ordered by the Sultan's grandson, the

Caliph Yacoub el-Mansour who died the same year, this minaret (from the Arabic word *menara* or lighthouse) was later used as model for Giralda of Seville then for the Hassan Tower of Rabat. The main function of the minaret was to provide a vantage point from which the muezzin can call out the *adhan*, calling the faithful to prayer. In most Mosques these days, the *adhan* is called not from the minaret, but in the *musallah*, or Prayer Hall, via a microphone and speaker system, the role of the minaret is now largely for traditional and decorative purposes. A jewel of Hispano-Moresque art made up of 16 outlying naves and one larger central nave, its name is derived from the Arabic *al-Koutoubiyyin* for "bookseller", or "librarian", since it used to be surrounded by the stalls of sellers of manuscripts and books and by scribes. This square tower in finely-worked dressed stone is 77 metres tall, (as high as the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris) including its lantern. Considered to be the *ne plus ultra* structure of its kind, decorated with ceramic tiles forming different patterns on each side, it boasts of six rooms, one above the other, with a ramp leading up around them by way of which the muezzin could ride his horse (or mule) up to the balcony. It is built in a traditional Almohad style and the tower is adorned with four copper globes. According to legend, they were originally made of pure gold, and there were once supposed to have been only three. The fourth was donated by the wife of Yacoub el-Mansour. As compensation for her failure to keep the fast for one day during the month of Ramadan she had her golden jewellery melted down to fashion the fourth globe. We continue into the Djmaâ el Fnaâ Square (the 'Assembly of the Dead'), where, until the 19th century, were traditionally displayed on stakes the severed heads of criminals. We take lunch at the Al Baraka Restaurant overlooking the Square to see from above stalls of goods, from fruit to alarm clocks; snake charmers and water sellers; fortune tellers and public scribes; tumblers and *nakkachat* - women with syringes full of henna - soothsayers and *gnaoua* musicians. With the touch of a journey back into time we set off into the bustling Kasbah to the lavishly-decorated Saâdien Tombs - discovered in 1917 with some tombs dating from the middle 1550s; this is the ancient cemetery of the *shorfa*, the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. Here you see the Prayer Hall with its horseshoe arches, the tombs of the Alaouite princes from the 18th century and a large tomb of the Black Sultan, the Merinid Dynasty Abou Hassan. On into the Hall of Twelve Columns, the central mausoleum of Ahmed el Mansour, who died in 1603, with its colonnade of twelve decorated



marble pillars and intensely carved upper stuccowork that looks like gilded lace. To his right is his son and successor Zaidan; to his left his grandson Mohammed ech-Cheik. There are 33 other tombs of Saâdien princelings. From here to the El Badii Palace. The remnants of a magnificent palace built by the Saâdien Sultan Ahmed Ibn Moussa al-Mansour in 1578(?) designed by Mohammed el-Heqqq under the influence of the Alhambra in Granada, which took some 16 years to complete, was named 'Badii' (the Incomparable), one of the 99 names of Allah (moreover, *ksar l-badi* 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 Badii was the venue for all of the great ceremonies and parties given by the Saâdien Sultans and ended up with a reputation, more or less deserved, for excess and debauchery. This was the main reason why the Alaouite Sultan Moulay Ismail (1672-1727) ordered the complete

destruction of the once fairy tale building and used the materials to decorate his own palace in Meknes. Consequently all that remains today is a section of the 2 metre-thick outer wall, the esplanade, with remains of its pools and orchards, one of the pavilions with its columns and some decorative elements (stucco, marble, zellige - small tiles). However, excavations carried out in the 20th century, the discovery of two drawings of the palace (one Portuguese and one English) and the reports of contemporary chroniclers and foreign visitors give us a reasonably precise idea of how the 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 19th century Bahia Palace (its name translates as 'The Brilliant') built by craftsmen from Fes for the black slave Si' Ahmed Ben Musa (or Bou Ahmed) after he had risen to power and wealth as the Grand Vizier of Sultan Moulay al-Hassan. The attractive, well preserved, Harem Courtyard has featured in many Big Budget Movies. It took nearly 15 years to complete; the rooms (nearly 150!), housed Bou Ahmed, his 4 wives and 24 concubines plus servants and guards. The Palace follows the patterns of typical Islamic architecture, with central courtyards, having rooms leading off them, with doorways that are placed so that you can't see beyond (providing privacy). Fountains and gardens are also typical features, along with the decorative stucco panels, tiled floors and zellige work. From here we continue up to the Dar Si Saïd Museum. Formally a palace originally built by Mehdi Mnebbi (1894-1908), Moroccan ambassador to London, it was then bought by T'hami el Glaoui, the famous Pasha of Marrakech and 'Lord of the Atlas' during the French Protectorate. Restored in 1997, it houses both traditional and contemporary exhibitions of Moroccan arts and sculpture - the very quintessence of Moroccan art. The building is the work of Si Saïd, a half-brother of grand vizier Bou Ahmed who expanded the Bahia Palace. In fact, Dar Si Saïd is a smaller version of that Palace, with finer and more impressive decoration. On the ground floor you can

find clothes, objects in beaten copper, beautifully decorated weapons, skilfully crafted traditional silver Berber jewellery from the southern Anti Atlas region, oil lamps and carvings in the special Tarouddant soft stone. Splendours from the past? Not at all, for many of the objects on display are still used and worn in mountain areas. Fountains sculpted from pink marble decorate the tiled courtyards that are accented by the turquoise, greens and whites of the mosaic designs. The most important exhibit in the Museum is a marble basin dating back to the 10th century, brought to Marrakech from Cordoba by the Almohad Sultan Ali Ben Youssef. The first floor salon impresses with its Hispano Moorish decoration and elegant furniture in cedar wood. It is such an accurate reproduction that, at any moment you half expect to see a bride in her ceremonial dress return to the armchair and show herself off to all the admiring guests. Other rooms are filled with an abundance of intricate chests, ancient pottery from Safi and Tamegroute, worked leather from Marrakech as well as a remarkable collection of Berber carpets from the High Atlas and others that originate from every corner of the globe; some have made use of leather while others make use of textiles to create items that accurately reflect the regions from which they originate. Stop a moment to examine coming from the Sahara region, characterised by the use of embroidered leather, and large, pile mats evoking the dry beauty of the semi-desert. A remarkably impressive 18th and 19th century collection of door and window frames is to be found around the courtyard, all encrusted with the most delicate and refined



ornamentation. We continue up into the Medina and the 14th century Ali Ben Youssef Medersa - one of the most beautiful buildings in Marrakech that housed the Islamic equivalent of a monastery; the tranquillity within contrasts with the chaotic pace of life outside in the Medina. Founded by the Merinid Sultan Abou el Hassan in the 14th century, it was almost completely rebuilt during the Saâdien Dynasty who made their distinctive mark in its architecture and art. The Medersa centres on a large courtyard with a central pool for ablutions. The buildings are made of carved cedar wood, exquisite stuccowork, and colourful zellige tiles. At the back is a sizable prayer hall where the most elaborate decoration can be

found. The interior is covered in an abundance of pine cone and palm motifs used around the mihrab to create a three-dimensional appearance. Throughout the Medersa are many Arabic inscriptions in stucco and zellige tile, the most common of which is the *bismillah* invocation: "In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful." Above the central courtyard are the small windows of the tiny student dormitories; over 800 students were housed in this Medersa, difficult to imagine. From stairs in the entry vestibule



you can explore all the rooms and enjoy a nice view over the courtyard. The rooms are arranged around smaller inner courtyards, rimmed with fine wood railings. We shall go on to see the Almoravid Dynasty Koubba; also called Koubba Ba'Adiyin, the oldest building in Marrakech and the only Almoravid building to remain standing in Morocco. The Almoravids (1062-1145) were reformers and monastic-type warriors from the desert nomadic Sanhaja Berber tribe in what is now Mauritania. After conquering their homeland, they expanded to Morocco in 1062 and eventually extended their empire all the way to Algiers. Probably an ablutions annexe for the Ben Youssef Mosque, for centuries it was covered over amid the many rebuildings of the mosque; it was only excavated in 1952. This little building is significant not only because it's very old, but because its style is at the root of all Moroccan architecture. Its motifs of pine cones, palms and acanthus leaves were used in the Ben Youssef Mosque and other later buildings; its beautifully-shaped windows became the distinctive design of the Almohades and Merinids. Also highly influential on later designs are the koubba's pyramid-like battlements, the rib design on the dome, and the sophisticated interior support system, composed of a square and star-shaped octagon. In addition to the koubba itself, visitors can view a large water cistern and remains of fountains for performing ablutions.



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



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

DAY 9: MARRAKECH - OURIKA VALLEY - MARRAKECH. After breakfast, we shall make a 90 minute excursion south to the beautiful Ourika Valley in those High Atlas Mountains you can see from your hotel or riad, whose stream meanders through orchards, ancient terraced fields, gardens and small pisé (adobe) villages clawed from the mountain sides by the independent Berber tribesmen. We shall continue on up to the last trailhead village in the valley – Setti Fadma. On returning to Marrakech, we shall stop halfway back down the valley at the hamlet of Aghbalou to take lunch at the restaurant Ramuntcho overlooking the oued (river) with the remainder of afternoon at leisure in Marrakech. Your driver and guide will be at your disposition. **BL.**



DAY 10: MARRAKECH: Free for personal activities with your driver and guide at your disposition. **B.** As an excellent finale to any stay in Marrakech, is an (optional) visit to (somewhat touristy) Chez Ali is truly a 1001 Nights' experience - http://www.ilove-marrakesh.com/chezali/index_en.html. The journey this evening would take you out of the heat of the city on a road to palm groves, where twinkling lights beckon us out of the darkness to a magnificent spectacle. Reclining on fat cushions in one of the Chieftain's tents, or in the kasbah, As the evening progresses, various folklore groups pass through the nomad tents singing and dancing to their throbbing music. The highlight comes at the end of your meal, accompanied by performances of Moroccan dances and songs, when you are invited to witness charging robed warriors on horseback in a display of their old tribal power as, standing in their stirrups, they shout and fire off their muskets and muzzle-loaders, bringing their horses to a sudden halt before you. Above you, in the night sky, Scheherazade and her Prince fly to the heavens on their magic carpet ride whilst fireworks light the sky as your evening of magical splendour comes to an end.

DAY 11: MARRAKECH - ESSAOUIRA: After a late breakfast, we shall ride our mules back to Imlil where our car is awaiting us to take us back down this delightful valley to Marrakech, stopping where you will for more photo-opportunities, to continue for a further 2 hours' drive west to the Atlantic coast and the ancient Phoenician town of Mogador - a corruption of the Berber word *Amegdul*, meaning 'well-protected' - and now, since Independence, called Essaouira - 'Little Picture.' Abandoned by the Portuguese in 1541, it was not until 1765 that the Alaouite Sultan Sidi 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 welcome dip in the waters of the ocean? Another camel ride along the beach? A visit to Jimi Hedrix's



"Castles of Sand"? You'll be pleasantly surprised to find what this artist-colony town has to offer. Your dinner is set in your hotel this evening. **BD.**

DAY 12: 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 13: 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. 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 16th 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 - 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. **BLD.**

DAY 14: CASABLANCA - HOME: After breakfast and in accordance with your flight schedule home (check-out from your hotel is by 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.**

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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 or similar hotels/riads of your selection including taxes *and as available at time of reservation*; meal schedule as shown (excluding alcoholic drinks), or as modified to your specific instruction - except that Half Board is obligatory in Erfoud, Ouarzazate and Essaouira. Portorage on 1 piece of luggage per person at airports and hotels. Private circle trip transportation in an air-conditioned mini-bus with English-speaking driver from Casablanca to Casablanca. H24 Emergency Call Service. Sightseeing tours and all related entrance fees as listed in the itinerary including a calèche tour in Marrakech and a dromedary ride to overnight in a Berber nomad deluxe version bivouac. An English-speaking Licensed National Guide throughout the tour. Bottled water. Medical and Accident Insurance.

OUR PRICES WILL NOT INCLUDE: Gratuities to waiters, guide, driver, camp headman and cameleer. 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.

