

YOUR MOROCCAN MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR

OBTC25mem. 16 DAYS/15 MAGICAL NIGHTS. MARRAKECH/OUARZAZATE/DADES GORGES/TINERHRIR/TODRA GORGES - MERZOUGA (SAHARA) - FES - MOULAY IDRIS/ VOLUBILIS/MEKNES/FES - RABAT/CASABLANCA

DAY 1: MARRAKECH: You will be met on arrival in the Imperial City of Marrakech by our English-speaking guide and transferred to your hotel or riad. Evening free for personal activities. **D.** Subject to arrival time Marrakech, the calèche tour mentioned may be made in the afternoon after check-in, leaving the next morning or late afternoon free.

DAY 2: MARRAKECH. This morning after breakfast and at an agreed time we shall now take a ride in a calèche around the magnificent ramparts, quite the best introduction to this Garden City. The city walls of the medina are huge and have some 200 towers and 20 *Babs*, or gates. First constructed in the 12th century, these ramparts form a neat circuit of six miles of *pisé* or rammed earth, the fortress taking on a pinkish tinge and glow in the setting sun. On now to the delightful Majorelle Gardens and Museum of Islamic Art designed by the French artist Louis Majorelle, now the property of the recently-deceased fashion icon Yves Saint Laurent, overlooked by the High Atlas Mountains with pavilions in a dynamic shade of blue; lush greenery, palm trees, cacti, still pools and shady nooks, all very Zen, indeed. With the touch of a journey back into time we shall trot into the Medina and on past the dramatic Almohad Koutoubia Minaret which for centuries has dominated the skyline of Marrakech. The Koutoubia 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. From here we'll arrive at the Djmaâ el Fnaâ Square - the 'Assembly of the Dead' - where, until the 19th century, were traditionally displayed the severed heads of criminals. Now we see 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. We'll take lunch overlooking the Square, later to enter the 12th century Kasbah and Mellah, here to visit the lavishly-decorated 16th century Saâdien Tombs - some dating from the middle 1550s; this is the ancient cemetery of the *shorfa*, the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. Here you see the Prayer Hall with its horseshoe arches, the tombs of the Alaouite princes from the 18th century and a large tomb of the Black Sultan, the Merinid Dynasty Abou Hassan. On into the Hall of Twelve Columns, the central mausoleum of Ahmed el Mansour, who died in 1603, with its colonnade of twelve decorated marble pillars and intensely carved upper stuccowork that looks like gilded lace. To his right is his son and successor Zaidan; to his left his grandson Mohammed ech-Cheik. There are 33 other tombs of Saâdien princelings. From here to the nearby Dar el Bahia Palace - once a 19th century residence built for the then Sultan - the word *bahia* means "brilliance" - and this was exactly the goal of Grand Vizier Ba Ahmed, who was Regent of Morocco from 1894 to 1900, with its higgledy-piggledy arrangement of close, intimate rooms, beautifully-decorated reception rooms all with their particular mosaics and ceiling decorations, stables, a bath or '*hammam*' and even a mosque; small gardens and courtyards; of these we get to see the apartments of the Sultan's favourite concubine, the magnificent Council Chamber and the central courtyard paved in marble and decorated with zelliges (intricate tile work), fountains and flowers - the inner courtyards were reserved for the Sultan's four wives and twenty four concubines. We now stroll to the precious Dar Si Saïd Museum and on now through the maze of alleyways to the 14th century Ben Youssef Medersa - one of the most beautiful buildings in Marrakech, This Koranic School could contain up to 900 pupils, whom they piled up in 132 cells. Built in 1570 by the Saâdiens and restored in 1960, this Koranic School is the largest in the Maghreb. It could take in up to 900 students housed in only 132 rooms! Unusually, these rooms, which are located on the upper floor, all have windows overlooking seven tiny internal courtyards. In addition, in opposition to the Hispano-Moresque architectural tradition, some of these windows overlooked the medina. The decoration is much more classical and no one should miss the cedar wood sculptures ceramic tiles and stucco ornamentation decorating this monument. We continue our trip into a magical past, with an Ali Baba seeming to be on every corner, to the oldest monument in Marrakech, the Koubba Ba'Adiyn, one of the early monuments to incorporate the particular Moorish style which then spread to North Africa and Spain - the Alhambra springs to mind. Located in the outer courtyard of the Ben Youssef Mosque, this small, two-story pavilion has a shallow pool used for ritual purification and is made up of a series of



arches supporting a dome, inside which are intricate carvings. On now to the Marrakech Museum of Moroccan Art and thence 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 and back to our hotel/riad. **BL.** As no dinner in the hotel has been arranged, you might like to go and chill out at the Le Pacha night club. (<http://www.pachamarrakech.com/pachaen.html>)

DAY 3: 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, 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. Your driver and guide will be at your disposition. **BL.**



You might just like to have a go at more shopping, and/or, perhaps take a delightfully-relaxing massage and treatment at Les Bains De Marrakech (www.lesbainsdemarrakech.com) (pre-reservation required).

DAY 4: MARRAKECH - AÏT BEN HADDOU - OUARZAZATE: Refreshed, breakfasted and raring to go, we now set forth towards south down across the Glaoua Plains via Aït Ourir Taddert (1650m) up into the High Atlas Mountains and the exhilarating hairpin bends to alight at the top of the Tizi n'Tichka (2260m) - the highest paved road in Morocco, which offers an impressive landscape in the heart of the Atlas Mountain chain. We'll see deep valleys and villages clinging to steep mountain slopes, with fields cultivated along the edges of the rivers in the valleys below. We stop for a photo-op of a vista dominated by peaks of some 2500+m to continue now into a totally different countryside, from mountains and plains into the Assif Ounila Valley to ochre earth, oases and the magnificently exotic and remote 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. Originally built circa 1703 by the Sultan Moulay Ismail from Meknes, the first King of Morocco, it was to become home to employees of El Haj T'hami el Mezouari el Glaoui (1879-1956), the last ruling family of the south (the 'Lords of the Atlas') and a strong contender for control over Morocco, they are 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



cross back over the oued to set off to the new (1920s) once-garrison town of the French Protectorate - Ouarzazate - at the crossroads of the Dadès and Draâ Valleys, set between the High Atlas Mountains and the end of the Sahara region of oases and sand. During the French Protectorate period, Ouarzazate expanded considerably as a Foreign Legion garrison town, administrative centre and customs post. It is still the arrival point of different cultures and crafts with a Sunday souq filled with henna, roses, caraway, distilled herb tea, Berber vases, objects in engraved stone, blankets and famous Ouzguita carpets of blue or resplendent gold with beautiful geometric designs. Here we shall visit the nearby Kasbah of Taourirt, the kasbah of the former caïd (meaning "master" or "leader,") and later the possession of the same Pasha El Glaoui 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 Sultan Mohammed V, great 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 Glaoui arsenal with a working 77-mm Krupp cannon, the only such weapon in Morocco outside the imperial army, which the Glaoui army used to subdue rival warlords and which is located still outside the kasbah's walls. From here we turn for our dinner and overnight accommodation. The late afternoon is free for you to roam at will around the town or pay an (optional) visit to the Atlas Film Studios (where, everyone will tell you, Lawrence of Arabia, The Jewel of The Nile and many other Hollywood films were shot.) **BD.**

DAY 5: OUARZAZATE - SKOURA KASBAHS & OASIS - Q'LAAT DES M'GOUNA - BOULMANE DU DADES - DADES GORGES - TINEHRIR: The late King Hassan II of Morocco once likened his country to a tree with its roots deep down in Africa and its leaves reaching up into the heady air of Europe. But here, south of the High Atlas Mountains, there is no doubting which continent you are in. The barren landscapes are an exact reprint of Namibia and as we drive back to Ouarzazate with the evening light falling across immense vistas of empty steppe and shadowy mountains one can feel the freedom that always comes with Africa's boundless horizons.



Bright and early after breakfast we set off today towards the south then south-east through what, until half a century ago, was still known as the Bled es Siba - the lawless land - to the Kasbah at the Skoura Oasis. We continue thence further east along the Route of 1000 Kasbahs. Built improbably of pisé - mud stiffened with palm fibre - these sun-dried citadels of clay rank among the greatest of Morocco's glories. We arrive at Qlâa't Des M'Gouna (Citadel of the M'Gouna Tribe) where thousands of small, pink Damascene roses, first planted by French settlers, are grown to make the rose oil essence - "Eau de Rose" - so beloved of the Berber people - you'd do well to purchase some of the beauty and



medicinal products sold here - and finally to the small town of Boumalne Du Dadès situated at the mouth of the Dadès Gorges. 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 Glaoui 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 to continue on to our hotel in the small town of Tinerhrir, located at the mouth of the fabulous Todra Gorges and overlooked by a Glaoua Kasbah. **BD.**

DAY 6: TINEHRIR - TODRA GORGES - ERFOUD - MERZOUGA (SAHARA). After breakfast, we shall 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's canyons. Onwards to the oasis town of Tinejad and the end of the Route of 1000 Kasbahs in the Dadès Valley. En route to the Tafilalt Oases we can see khattara - holes that have been dug to give access and air to old underground water canals - each owned by a family, but now largely redundant owing to new bore water pumping and storage. An impressive 300 km network of khattara was excavated in the Tafilalt basin beginning in the late 14th century. Some of these tap into the aquifer at the base of High Atlas Mountains along the western margin of the main oasis. Others exploit the shallow water tables adjacent to major stream channels which pass through the basin.

Eighty of these chains provided perennial water for 28 ksour (villages; sing. ksar) in the northern part of the oasis. The ksour and khattara simultaneously developed following the breakup of Sijilmassa. Ksour in the central and southern oasis - where the water table was and is much deeper - continued to rely on the same sources of water (wells and surface canals) for irrigation and drinking water that sustained Sijilmassa.

It is possible that khattara first came to Morocco from the Middle East following the Islamic revolution; the pattern of diffusion closely follows the historic dispersal of Islam. However, it is not certain if this technology was introduced by Muslims first to Morocco and later to Islamic Spain, or whether it first swept into Islamic Spain from North Africa, and then diffused back into Morocco. It appears that qanat technology had earlier diffused to Roman Spain from the Near East where the Romans, presumably borrowing Persian technology, had built and used qanats in Jordan and Syria, so there could have been an Iberian precedent to Morocco's filtration gallery systems. We arrive at the Saharan town of Erfoud. 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 and where we may visit a fossil factory. Here we'll change our vehicle for Land Cruisers to take us to the village of Merzouga and the Hotel Auberge Du Sud and now change 4WDs for our ships of the desert at around 3pm for a 7km ride into the highest dunes in Morocco – the extensive crescent-shaped dunes of Erg Chebbi. We arrive at our carpeted Berber Nomadic camp in a small oasis seemingly in the middle of nowhere to have our tagine dinner under canvas and, after dessert, tea or coffee, you might like to sing and chat to your heart's content under the star-filled heavens. **BD.**



DAY 7: MERZOUGA - ERFOUD - er-RACHIDYA - ZIZ GORGES - MIDELT - AZROU - FES: 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 of some 2½ hours to the Auberge Du Sud, where we'll take boarding our 4WD to now take us back up to Erfoud, then on north through the Tizimi palmeraie to continue up the valley to cross an arid reddish belt of desert and the beginning of the Oued Ziz, through the small palm grove at Meski, watered by a natural spring - the famous picture postcard image of La Source Bleue - 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. We 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. On now 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 the town of Rich, once an important fort during the era of the French Protectorate, to carry on



up alongside the River Ziz (a Berber name meaning Gazelle). We shall pass by the southern ksar of Aït Kherrou, a river palmeraie at the entrance to a small gorge, through the town of Aït Messaoud, passing a French Foreign Legion fort with all the reminders of *Beau Geste* and then on across a deserted plain and on through a lower Pass (Tizi) of the High Atlas - the Pass of the She-Camel



- Tizi n'Talrehmt (1907m), to a region once notorious for raids on caravans by the nomadic Aït Haddidou tribe, who were not pacified - and even then with great difficulty - by the French until the mid-1930s. The countryside changes back from ochre earth and palm trees to the strikingly stark High Atlas Mountains where we arrive at the Berber mountain town of Midelt, where we'll stop for a light lunch at the Kasbah Asmaâ 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. On now up through a bleak plain of scrub and desert to the Tizi n'Zad (2178m) and into the High Atlas and the Oued Gigou Valley into the Middle Atlas cedar forests, perchance to feed some of

the resident Barbary Apes and on 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 - for a long time a strategic settlement established to effect some form of control of the independent mountain Berber peoples. We now drive through 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. Down now to the small 1920s French-built hill station of Immouzèr Du Kandari (1220m) crossing the pleasant Saiss Plateau to arrive, after some 7 hours' drive (including "comfort" stops) at the ancient imperial city of Fes and our hotel or riad for 3 fascinating nights. **BLD.**

DAY 8: 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.

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.



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 and Mellah (a UNESCO World Heritage Site); of the Bou Inania Mosque and the Maimonides' clock; of the colourful es-Sabbaghine with its Street of the Dyers; of the brass workers at es-Saffarine; of the impressive al-Quarawiyyin Mosque and University (exterior only) and the el-Atterine Medersa (exterior only) passing the aromas of the Souq el-Atterine area of spices and groceries to the delightful el-Nejjarine Square with its fountain and caravanserai, stopping

nearby for a light lunch. On now to the renowned Tanneries on the bank of the Oued Fes and thence on to the potteries, perfumes and beauty products at the Souq el-Henna. Leaving the Medina from the Bab Boujloud, we tour the magnificent ramparts with its beautiful 'Babs' as we make our way to the 16th century Saâdien watchtower at the North Borj and the Dar Batha Museum with its collection of carpets, woodwork to arrive back at your hotel or riad after a day full of contrasting culture and journey into some 1,200 years of history. **BLD.**

DAY 9: FES - MEKNES - VOLUBILIS - MOULAY IDRIS - FES. After breakfast we shall now set out alongside a forest of cork-oak to the Imperial City of Meknes (whose Medina is a UNESCO World Heritage Site). Arab historians trace the origins of Meknes to the Roman occupation of Morocco from 3B.C. to 40A.D, 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 *Mekkassa 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. 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 and the Place el-Hedim. 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) AD, an event occurred that was to forever change the path of Moroccan culture. Idriss Ibn Abdallah (or Moulay Idriss I as he is called 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 and your hotel or riad for a well-earned rest. **BLD.**

DAY 10: FES - RABAT - CASABLANCA: After breakfast we set out on the final legs of our adventure on a 3 hours' drive eastwards across the plains 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). Our 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 modeled 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. We take a light lunch here as you enjoy the view over the Bou Regreg river and the one-time lair of famed Moroccan corsairs of the Barbary Coast at the Salé Fortress; the corsairs who raided shipping from the time of the Crusades until early in the 19th century; the corsairs who captured Miguel de Cervantes; the corsairs mentioned in Doctor Dolittle - the Moroccan Sultan Moulay Ismail actually made piracy a state monopoly in 1678. In 1783 the first



American ship was captured and ransomed for \$60,000 cash; over the next 10 years a further dozen American ships were captured, the crew being made slaves in Algeria, one of the reasons why the United States Navy was born in 1794 with 6 frigates. From here we turn down south for our final 1½ hours' drive to Casablanca - in Arabic - al Dar al Beida - The White House - built over the centuries on the site of what was once the ancient Carthaginian stronghold of Admiral Hanno who named it Anafa. Thence it was to become the capital of a Berber principality in the aftermath of Arab invasions during the 7th and 8th centuries, to become the *Casa Branca* of the Portuguese invaders who, in the XVth century, destroyed the original site, a base for raiding corsairs. Partially destroyed by the earthquake of

1755 to be abandoned by the Portuguese, it was reconstructed in 1770 by the Sultan Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah (King Mohammed III), who was to name it Casablanca so as to encourage trade from Cadiz and Madrid. The gleaming whitewashed, bustling metropolis of Casablanca had, in 1860, but 8,000 inhabitants; in 1907 it boasted 20,000; in 1912, at the beginning of the French Protectorate, there were 25,000 and, in 1930, when the French were asked to leave, there were some 106,000; now, with its population of more than 3 million, it is the Kingdom of Morocco's largest city and main centre of trade and industry, as well as being the busiest port in North Africa. Casablanca, the second largest town in Africa after Cairo, immortalised by Hollywood as a city of intrigue and romance, with its mixture of International and Moroccan restaurants, of French-designed boulevards and Parisian 1920s Art-Deco architecture, from the old Medina, the original Arab settlement, with its network of narrow cobbled alleyways, whitewashed buildings and lively souks to its film setting French-built new Medina, with its ensemble of impressive Moorish buildings and Brass workers souk, the Casablanca of old offers a captivating look at traditions uniquely Moroccan, casting an evocative blend of the old and the new, the familiar and the exotic, of Art Deco Europe and the essence of Arabia. On arrival here, you may wish just to relax, or



dodge into the souqs with your guide before dinner and Oriental show in the Basmane Restaurant overlooking the Ocean. **BLD.**

DAY 11: CASABLANCA: After a leisurely breakfast this morning we shall leave for a tour of this bustling metropolis to visit the colourful Central Market, thence on to the exterior of the Dar el Makhzen, or King's Palace precinct, with its magnificent doors; the delightful New Medina - or Habous area - designed by French architects in the 1930s to resolve a housing crisis and create a modern, twentieth century Kasbah - here to stroll through the reasonably-modern souk and on past the Pasha's Mahakma Court of Islamic Law. 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 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 venturing out for a dinner in one of Casablanca's many International restaurants, or to just take it easy in your hotel. **B.**



DAY 12: CASABLANCA - AZEMMOUR - EL JADIDA - EL OUALIDIA - SAFI - ESSAOUIRA: After breakfast today, we set off south along the Atlantic coastline 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). We continue to El Jadida, formerly called *Mazagan* by the Portuguese who seized the town in 1502 and, after 1541, was the only place to be held by Portugal in Morocco. Repeatedly besieged by the Moroccans, it was finally re-captured in 1769. Our first stop is at the old fortress inside which lies an ancient structure that escaped the destruction of the fleeing Portuguese - the misnamed 'Portuguese Cisterns', as they were actually built by the Romans originally to store grain, then used by the Portuguese as a fresh water cistern to withstand sieges, to be discovered by accident in 1977 by a Jewish spice merchant and where Orson Wells shot the riot scenes for his film *Othello*. We leave there to continue to the Porto do Mar (the Sea Gate) where we visit the communal bakery. A short walk will then take us to the Bastion of St Sebastian. Here is the old prison compound and the Tribunal of the Inquisition - we continue to the Mellah and an early 19th century synagogue, as the Star of David underneath a Moslem crescent on the wall testifies - surmised by some to symbolise the appreciation of the Jewish population of the time at being accepted by an Islamic country after fleeing Spain and persecution at the hands of the Inquisition and of their desire to integrate into Moroccan life. Integration was never really complete, however, as Jews here always lived under a different set of laws to those of Muslims (one was they were not allowed to wear shoes!). No Jews live here now, as they all left for Israel after the founding of the State, yet their centuries of tradition, artistry and culture are still quite tangible. From here ever-south to the seaside resort town of El Oualidia, a simple place; time-forgotten, still civilization-forgotten though being "found" by those seeking peace and quiet, lying on the legendary Barbary Coast (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 shall stop for a light seafood lunch before continuing on to Safi, which boasts of having the first Moslem Mosque in the kingdom, as well as Portuguese buildings dating back more than five centuries. The world-renowned Safi pottery pieces elaborately trimmed with tooled silver overlay are beautifully displayed with their rich designs, styles, and colours, each piece having been wheel-thrown and hand-finished by skilled artisans. We now continue on our final 5 hour drive through Morocco's Portuguese heritage to the ancient Phoenician town of *Mogador* – a corruption of the Berber word *Amegdul*, meaning 'well-protected' – and now, since Independence, called Essauaira - 'Little Picture.' Abandoned by the Portuguese in 1541, it was not until 1765 that the Alaouite Sultan Sidi Mohammed Ibn Abdullah transformed Mogador into a fortified city. The ramparts were never that effective in keeping out the marauding tribesmen but now, a charming artists' town with its old port and cannons overlooking the fishing fleet, Essauaira invites you to wander through the narrow alleyways which make up the Medina to witness artisans at work making their attractive wooden tables, boxes and sundry items in lemon or briar wood (*thuya*) 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. You may now wish just to relax in your hotel or riad, or take a stroll to the beach before dinner. **BLD.**



DAY 13: ESSAOUIRA: Day free for personal activities in this relaxing town, doubtless to leave for a walk around this enchanting city to enjoy a lunch (optional) of Essouaira's famed seafood, either on the quayside or in one of the several quaint cafés that decorate this charming, historical town. Perhaps a dip in the waters of the ocean? Some board, wind or kite surfing for which this town is also famous? A camel ride along the beach? A visit to Jimi Hendrix's sand castle? You'll be pleasantly surprised to find what this artist-colony town has to offer, perhaps one of which you may take advantage -at an additional cost - of the Sofitel hotel's magnificent thalassotherapy spa and massage facilities. **BD.**



DAY 14: ESSAOUIRA - MARRAKECH: Checking out before noon, we now set out at around for a 2½ hour drive east to the Garden and Imperial City of Marrakech (pronounced *Marrakch*)...Marrakouch – the land of the sons of Kouch, black African warriors from Mauritania – was created by the Almoravid Saharan chieftain Abou Bekr way back in 1062 when his army set up camp in the heart of the Haouz Plain to control the caravan trade north-south; once the capital of an empire stretching from Senegal to Toledo, the very name itself conjures up visions of colourful and aromatic souks bustling with people, fortune-tellers, snake charmers, street acrobats and peddlers to a background of drums and the tingling aromas of a multitude of spices. It is all here, surrounded by reddish-brown ramparts and palm trees, and the soaring peaks of the High Atlas Mountains towering through the summer haze. Marrakech Al-Hamra -



the 'Red City' - it's more like dark pink and ochre - is still one of the truly magical, mysterious and exotic places left in the world with its labyrinth of alleyways in the ancient Medina; secluded palaces, riads, museums, mosques, mosaics and markets. After check-in and a wash-and-brush-up, perhaps you'd like to venture out further to have a go at shopping, perhaps take a delightfully-relaxing massage and treatment at Les Bains De Marrakech (www.lesbainsdemarrakech.com) (*pre-reservation required*), or go as you please with your driver and personal guide. **B.**

DAY 15: MARRAKECH. Day at leisure and overnight at your Marrakech hotel or riad; your driver and guide remain with you to take you where you will within the city's precincts. **B.**

DAY 16: MARRAKECH - 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 Marrakech's 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.**

(FOR COUPLES OR SMALL FAMILIES, WE RECOMMEND CERTAIN RIADS BE CONSIDERED FOR MORE ATMOSPHERE AND PRIVACY)

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

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

OUR PRICES WILL INCLUDE: Accommodation at specified hotels/riads or similar as required and as *available at time of reservation* - including relevant taxes. Meals as outlined or modified according to your instructions. Porterage on 1 piece of luggage per person in/out airports & hotels/riads. Private transportation in an air-conditioned vehicle from Marrakech to Marrakech. Sightseeing tours, including one by calèche in Marrakech and dromedary ride to a Saharan bivouac; all related entrance fees as listed in the itinerary. An English-speaking Licensed National Guide throughout. Bottled water en-route. Medical and Accident Insurance.

OUR PRICES WILL NOT INCLUDE: Gratuities to waiters, guide and driver. Any expenditure of a personal nature. Bottled or gaseous water en-route, 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; sunglasses, sunscreen, swimming costume (seasonal). **For the desert safari:-** day pack; windcheater (seasonal), broad-brimmed hat (or you may purchase a 'Chèche ' before you set out from Erfoud); change of walking socks; personal toiletries; hygienic 'Wipes'; small First Aid kit; torch with batteries (non-essential); filled water bottle; water purification drops - usually iodine; sunscreen, sunglasses; nibbles and/or dried fruit. Drinking chocolate if preferred. Camera, film and plastic bags for lenses; for those who wear contact lenses, it could be a good idea to bring along a spare pair of glasses.

