

MOROCCO'S SAHARAN SYMPHONY

OBTOZZSS01m 5 DAYS/4 NIGHTS OUARZAZATE/ROUTE OF 1000 KASBAHS - TODRA GORGES -TINEHRIR/DADES GORGES - ERFOUD - MERZOUGA - ERG CHEBBI (SAHARA)/ ALNIF - N'KOOB - AGDZ - OUARZAZATE/ (MARRAKECH)

DAY 1: OUARZAZATE- KASBAHS AÏT BEN HADDOU & TAOURIRT- OUARZAZATE: You will be met on arrival and transferred



to your hotel or riad. After check-in, raring to go, we take a short tour of this '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 beginning 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. We now continue to 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.

On now to 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 somewhat despotic 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 take lunch at the restaurant of the Riad Dar Mouna before returning to your hotel or riad for dinner and overnight accommodation. The late afternoon is free for you to roam at will around the town or pay an (optional) visit of some 40 minutes of the Atlas Film Studios. In the early 1960s, *Lawrence of Arabia* film director David Lean was the first to take advantage of Ouarzazate's potential as a movie location, the town's exotic scenery, clear skies, and availability of "authentic-looking" locals providing an attractive location for all movies involving ancient, desert-based storylines. In 1983, Moroccan entrepreneur Mohamed Belghmi constructed this Atlas Film Corporation Studios on the outskirts of town. Other studios have since followed, and a string of Hollywood productions have spent time filming here including *Jewel of the Nile*, *Kundun*, *Gladiator*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Alexander the Great*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, and *Babel*; an almost surreal experience. LD.

DAY 2: SKOURA OASIS AND KASBAHS - 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 at Ouarzazate with the sun shining 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 Skoura Oasis with its magnificent kasbahs to 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 to and down the winding road 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 another of the Glaoua's Kasbahs. **BD.**

DAY 3: TINEHRIR - TODRA GORGES - TINEJDAD - ERFOUD - MERZOUGA (SAHARA). After breakfast, we shall set out up the



Qued 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 Tinejdad 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 Sijilmasa. 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 Sijilmasa.



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 4x4s 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 4: MERZOUGA - ERFOUD - RISSANI - SIJILMASSA - ALNIF - N'KOOB - AGDZ - OUARZAZATE: Our trip today takes us



on down further south for a quick dash again south to the town of Rissani, most of whose inhabitants live within the 18th century ksar (fortified kasbah) in a maze of dark almost troglodyte passageways. 5 minutes away are the ruins of the ksour of Sijilmasa. Established in 757AD, until the 11th century it was on the exit point for the important camel caravan trade from the Sudan, Mali and Ghana. Laid waste in 1056, rebuilt and again destroyed in 1363 to be rebuilt in the 18th century to be again destroyed, the result of discordant social forces contending for the region. And that's what we'll now see - the ruined town of Sijilmasa, recognised by the World Monuments Fund. Sijilmasa (A.D. 757-1393) was the North African head of the gold and salt trade across the Sahara in medieval times. A synthesis of fieldwork undertaken by geographers, historians, and archaeologists suggests the environmental and social structure of the ancient city and its surrounding oasis. Collaboration demonstrates geography's role in solving regional problems originating in history and archaeology. In reconstructing the geography of past place and the demise of place, one can see the knitting together the oasis landscape and environment; local water resources, agricultural production, and social organisation were key to the development of Islamic Sijilmasa. Drawing upon methodologies of oral tradition, field reconnaissance, remote sensing, historical documentation and archaeological fieldwork, medieval Sijilmasa emerges as a Saharan entrepôt founded in Islamic folklore; a landscape developed through diversion of a desert stream; and a city that walled its oasis to protect against Bedouin incursions from the east. The process of urban growth and decline were driven by socio-political forces and the allure of new hydraulic technologies. Sijilmasa remains an icon of sacred space in the landscape of contemporary Morocco. We shall also visit the Mausoleum of Moulay Ali Cherif, the founder of the Alaouite Dynasty, which rules Morocco to this day before continuing westwards on a different more southern route through stark Devonian limestone features with interbedded shales and mudstones between the Jbels Ougnat (1719m) and the volcanic Sarhro - the 'Dry Mountain' (2780m) - where it took the full military might of France to defeat 1,000 warriors of the Aït Atta tribe in the 1930s - to stop for lunch in the town of Alnif where everything is made of earth; people depend on it and get everything from it, they live in it, keep their food in it and play in it. Here you will find Palaeozoic fossils such as trilobites, starfish and echinoderms - the mountain range around Alnif, the Jbel Issimour, are called the Trilobite Mountains - before proceeding through up to Tazzarine to make a stop in another marble fossils site. We continue on through oases to N'Koob to the oasis region around Tansikht where we turn north into the dramatic Draâ Valley to stop



briefly at Agdz, a town short on vowels but offering a good line in mint tea. We make a stop at the ancient kasbah at of

Tamnoughalt near Agdz. This was the former capital of the Mezguita region and residence of former caïds (appointed heads of tribes). Its name means 'meeting point' in Tachelhit. The history of Tamnoughalt is connected with that of the oasis Mezguita of which it was the capital. When it was built is unknown and was possibly a garrison in the Saâdien Dynasty epoch. Its political and economic role began with the coming of the caïd of Taleb El Hassan who was made caïd by the Alaouite sultan in the 18th century. His sons succeeded in keeping the reign over their territory (as far as the Dadès and the Ksar Aït Hammou ou Saïd) until the independence of Morocco. In 1874 the caïd of Mezguita was driven out of the territory of Ouarzazate by a new caïd of a family of Telouet, the Glaoua Pasha Mohammed Ibibt. In 1884 Charles de Foucauld visited Tamnoughalt and observed that "it was the capital of the district, governed by the hereditary caïd Abderrahman Ben el-Hassan" and that "it was exclusively inhabited by Draoua (black-skinned people) like the whole Draâ valley." In 1907, Si Mohammed, caïd of Tamnoughalt offered his troops of Mezguita to defend the Sultan Moulay Hafid against his brother. Fed by the snows of the High Atlas, the Drâa is Morocco's longest river but seldom runs its full course to the Atlantic. Most years, it falters and dies in the desert somewhere beyond Tamegroute to the south, forming a linear oasis of date palms watched over by brooding kasbahs with ochre walls and towers. Driving north now from Agdz via dramatic mountains in coloured layers, we pass fields of bee hives before driving through the Tizi (Pass) n'Tiniffit and down the winding road to Ouarzazate, our dinner and overnight accommodation. **BLD.**



DAY 5: OUARZAZATE (- MARRAKECH): After breakfast and at an agreed time you will be transferred to the airport in accordance with your flight schedule, here to bid farewell - bi'salamma - to your guide and driver, taking with you some certainly incredible memories of a land so full of remarkable contrasts and very friendly people. Alternatively, we may set off north over the Tizi n'Tichka to the pink and ochre Garden City of Marrakech. **B.**

OUR PRICES WILL INCLUDE: Portorage on 1 piece of luggage per person. All meals as shown in the itinerary (not including alcoholic drinks). Private transportation in an air-conditioned vehicle from Ouarzazate to Ouarzazate (or Marrakech). Sightseeing tours, including a dromedary ride to the overnight Sahara bivouac and all related entrance fees as listed in the itinerary. English-speaking Licensed National Guide throughout the tour; bottled or gaseous water en-route; Medical and Accident Insurance.

OUR PRICES WILL NOT INCLUDE : Accommodation at selected hotel/riad including taxes, *subject to availability at time of reservation*. Gratuities to waiters, guide, drivers, cameleer and camp headman. Any expenditure of a personal nature, nor anything not specifically mentioned in the itinerary.

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IT IS RECOMMENDED YOU BRING WITH YOU: Good trainers; 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.

