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# Morocco: Oases, Kasbahs and Medinas

October 31 through November 15, 2010 (including travel days)

Experience the exotic and little-known Kingdom of Morocco. Populated by the fierce and indigenous Berbers and conquered by the Arabs 1300 years ago, Morocco is the bridge between Europe and Africa, the gate to Black Africa, a country where Jews and Muslims have flourished side by side for over 1,000 years. Morocco offers you a glimpse at the Sahara desert, its lush oases and earthen architecture. It offers the magnificent Atlas Mountains and the sophisticated Imperial Cities of Marrakech, Rabat, Meknès and especially Fès—often called the world’s best example of a living medieval city.



*The Kasbah of Ait Benhaddou silhouetted at dusk, and below, detail of a tile pattern at Volubilis.*

We will begin the 14 night trip (or 15 if you count the flight over) by leaving the US individually on October 31 to arrive in Europe on November 1 and connecting directly for a flight to Marrakech (if possible) or Casablanca (more likely) arriving the same day and where you will be personally met and escorted to our hotel in Marrakech. We will be there for four nights. We will then begin our journey through the country, crossing the Atlas mountains at the Tichka pass to stay for two nights at a quite fantastic place, Dar Ahlam, enroute to which we will stop and visit some of the old kasbahs the likes of which you might remember from having seen *Lawrence*



*of Arabia* or *The Sheltering Sky*. We will continue up a series of stunning valleys in the High Atlas, reaching Fez after one overnight stop enroute. In Fez we will be spending also four nights, which will give us plenty of time to explore its rich and teeming medina, and the many Medrasas (schools with rooms grouped around a courtyard) and old palaces. We will then go to Rabat for two nights, stopping on the way at Meknes and Vollubilis. The final day, of November 14 will be spent going from Rabat to Casablanca and seeing that more modern city before leaving on an afternoon or evening flight to Europe and home or spending that night of the 14th in



Casablanca and leaving on the morning of November 15 to do the trip home all in one day.

Our hotels have all been selected for their special and unique qualities, and for their intimacy. (we shun whenever possible the sorts of places that lots of large groups go to). In the case of Marrakech, Fez and Rabat they are converted houses or palaces all in the center of the old towns and should be quite special. Everything (except personal items, eg. laundry and communications) is included in the trip, once you step off the plane, and with the small group that we



will be, we can be flexible and respond to whatever our whims and preferences are at the moment.

**Important Note:**

For the development of this itinerary and for the provision of the required services, I have collaborated with New York and Morocco based Heritage Tours, who are established and renowned experts in private travel to Morocco: They will be providing our local transport and guide and have arranged for our hotels with my input.

## Detailed Itinerary

Day 1, Sunday, October 31, 2010 Transit from US

Depart individually from home cities, crossing the Atlantic and arriving in Europe to connect for flights to Casablanca or Marrakech. (Royal Air Maroc operates a non-stop flight JFK-Casablanca).

Day 2, Monday November 1 Arrival, transfer to Marrakech

Arrival at Casablanca's Mohammed V airport, where you will be welcomed and escorted south to Marrakech (about 2 1/2 to 3 hours).

Check in at the Villa des Orangers, an exquisite and unique Relais & Chateaux Boutique hotel.

Day 3, Tuesday, November 2 Marrakech

No longer the secret of the travel cognoscenti that it was ten years ago, Marrakech is now recognized as one of the world's great cities. With the design flair of Paris, the ethnic diversity of New York, the commercial heartbeat of Hong Kong, and a history to rival any city of



*The Souk in Marrakech (left and right below) is a warren of passageways lit from above. Views can be glimpsed through doorways of tile paved courtyards (above) .*

Europe, Marrakech is above all a city of heart and soul — a city of sunlight on rough pink walls, of fragrant, richly-hued spices, and of rose petals floating in slowly trickling fountains.

The defining landmark of Marrakech is the 12<sup>th</sup> century tiled minaret of the Koutoubia mosque, and there is no better place to begin our journey into this enticing city. From here we will begin our exploration on foot of the ancient pink-walled medina.

In the early evening, we will head towards the frenetic Djemaa el Fnaa, the greatest square in all of Africa — and perhaps the world. It was once the ultimate destination for traders from places as diverse as Venice, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia. Today, it provides ever-changing entertainment for Moroccans and foreigners alike, reaching its climax at sunset when the square is alive with storytellers, healers, snake charmers, acrobats, and countless food stalls. Walk through the square to experience its intensity and to perhaps enjoy the view from the terrace of a rooftop café. The entire Djemaa el Fnaa has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Space (one of only a handful in the world), due to its unique role in transmitting oral history and tradition from one generation to another.

Day 4, Wednesday, November 3 Marrakech

Today we will continue our walking and driving tour of Marrakech. We will begin at the tropical Majorelle Gardens, lovingly restored under the patronage of the late Yves St. Laurent. Following this we will visit the small, but excellent Islamic Art Museum located in the home of painter Jacques Majorelle.

Next, at the opulent Saadian Tombs, we will discover the mausoleum of a great dynasty which once ruled North Africa. This treasure was lost until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when aerial photographs of the medina revealed its existence.

We will wander through the Dar Si Said Museum of traditional crafts housed in a 19<sup>th</sup> century palace, and the nearby Maison Tiskiwin, a private collection of indigenous crafts started by a Swiss collector and now open to the public.

At the ruins of the Badi'a Palace, we will find the 800-year-old wooden minbar (pulpit) from the Koutoubia mosque restored by New York's Metropolitan

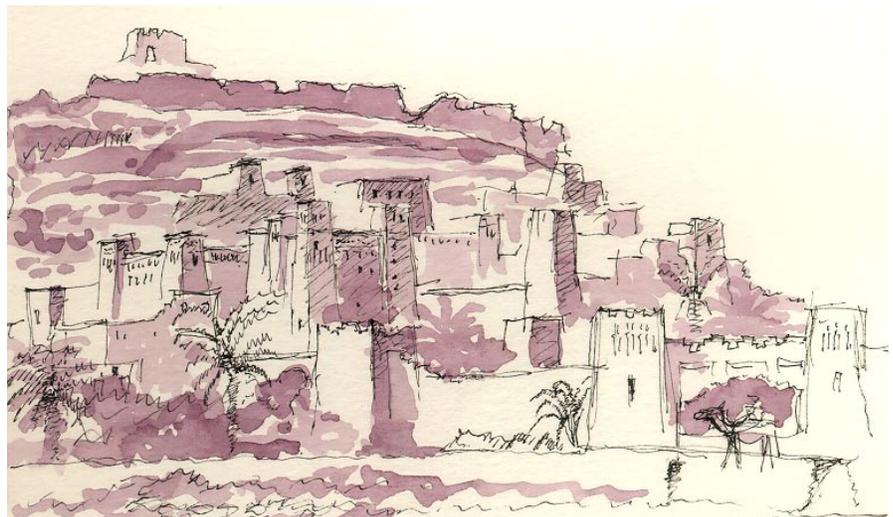


Museum of Art. *The New York Times* writes that the minbar “originally consisted of more than a million differently carved pieces of bone and colored woods, some pieces the size of sesame seeds.”

We shall have dinner at Le Fondouk, a chic bar-restaurant featuring Moroccan cuisine with a Mediterranean flare.

Day 5, Thursday, November 4  
Marrakech

Today is at leisure, and you will be free to explore independently or together Marrakech. Being such a sensual city, Marrakech is a designer and shopper’s paradise, and our agents will be happy to provide their own privileged list of the finest boutiques and artisans. Some are hidden deep in the souks; others are located in modern Gueliz, where you might wish to indulge yourself at one of the outstanding Franco-Moroccan patisseries and chocolatiers. They will also provide the address of a designer’s warehouse (no sign on the door — this place is by word-of-mouth only), where many designer clients do their shopping in quantity; you will often find objects



The Kasbah of Ait Benhaddou (above) and that of Telouet (below)

from this warehouse sold in Parisian boutiques and galleries at exorbitant prices.

We may have dinner at Tangia, a recently opened restaurant in the mellah (Jewish quarter) of Marrakech, featuring home-cooked Moroccan-style food. Tangia is considered the first Moroccan bistro.

Day 6, Friday, November 5 Marrakech to Skoura Oasis (near Ourzazate)

Today we will begin our journey around Morocco, leaving Marrakech over the

precipitous and lofty Tizn Tichka pass of the High Atlas mountains. Nestled among these craggy peaks and valleys are a number of pisé (rammed earth) Kasbah structures, which film buffs will be surprised to learn served as the setting for dozens of movies from *Gladiator* to *Lawrence of Arabia*. We will visit Telouet and the UNESCO restored Ait Ben Haddou before continuing on to Skoura Oasis (5-6 hours of driving). You will arrive at the Skoura oasis and transfer by desert-ready 4x4 to Dar Ahlam, an enchanted place in the form of a traditional Kasbah: it is likely to take its rightful place among the more special and memorable settings we will have experienced together. During our stay of two nights, everything will be provided here: All meals, snacks, and drinks, Hammam (Turkish bath), swimming pool, Jacuzzi; Guided 4x4 excursions (arranged by hotel) to nearby areas of great scenic beauty.

When we have had a chance to refresh and relax, a private dinner will be arranged for us.

Day 7, Saturday November 6  
Skoura Oasis

As befits the seventh day, and the approximate mid-point of our trip, this





*The old Riads of Fès are often packed with caprets for sale. The view of Fès as we approach it (below).*



will be a day at leisure to relax and enjoy the facilities and surroundings at Dar Ahlam.

Day 8, Sunday November 7 to Skoura Oasis to Erfoud

Today we will head east along the millennium-old trading route (total driving today is about five hours) to Erfoud, stopping in the Dades and Todghra valleys en route. The nearby Tafilalet Oasis once held an enormous

importance as the last stop on the trans-Saharan trading route before Timbuktu. This oasis is also the home of the dynasty of His Majesty King Mohamed VI, the Alaouite dynasty, which has ruled Morocco for the last four centuries. We will spend this night at the Xaluca Maadid Kasbah Hotel.

Day 9, Monday November 8 Erfoud to Fès

For those that wish, we can provide an early morning jaunt (about forty

minutes) to the legendary dunes of Erg Chebbi at Merzouga, on the edge of the Sahara. As you witness the sun rising from the east over the constantly shifting desert dunes in the Sahara—one of Morocco’s greatest sights, contemplate that ancient Morocco was at the very edge not only of the Islamic world, but of the known world. Maghreb, the Arabic name for Morocco, means the West.



We will head north to Fès through the scenic cedar forests of the Middle Atlas Mountains following the green Ziz River valley. (about six hours). Our home for the next four nights will be the Riad Myra, a 13-room traditional courtyard house from the turn of the last century. It has been chosen for its intimacy and fine details inspired by Andalusian architects and craftsmen.

Day 10, Tuesday November 9 Fès

Scholars, architects, historians and artists travel from all over the world to visit the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Fès, a remarkably preserved city which functions largely as it did in the Middle Ages when it was an important center of culture and famed for its university. Step back six centuries into the medieval world of Fès, whose cobbled streets are filled with ancient mosques, towering green-glazed minarets and crumbling fondouks (hostels for travelers and their animals). Narrow doorways offer glimpses into private worlds, revealing peaceful courtyards filled with carved cedar, brilliantly colored mosaic tiles and delicately carved stucco ornament. In Fès, veiled women hurry through the winding streets, donkeys, laden with

their wares, take their time, and proud artisans craft objects much as their forefathers did centuries ago.

Highlights of our full-day visit include the Bou Inania Medersa (koranic university), the Fondouk Nejjarine (which has an excellent museum), the shrine of Moulay Idriss II, countless souks and Fès' famous tanneries. We will also visit the Attarine, one of the city's most impressively beautiful medersas. It has been newly reopened after four years of careful restoration.

Day 11, Wednesday, November 10 Fès

Continuing with our visit to the sites of Fès, we will see the Dar Batha Museum, which has a particularly impressive pottery collection dating to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Next we will see the stunning gates to the royal palace and then the adjacent Jewish quarter and 17<sup>th</sup> century Ibn Dana Synagogue.

In the afternoon (pending availability), we will make arrangements to visit a privately owned palace, now in great decay, which belongs to one of the most famous historical names in Morocco. With a bit of imagination, you can

envision the sweeping grandeur of this crumbling palace's glorious past.

Day 12, Thursday, November 11 Fès

Today is planned as a day of leisure for independent exploration or shopping in Fès or we can opt to make a day excursion to either Volubulis or Meknes or both (these are planned to be seen the following day on our way to Rabat, but we can see one or both as day trips as well).

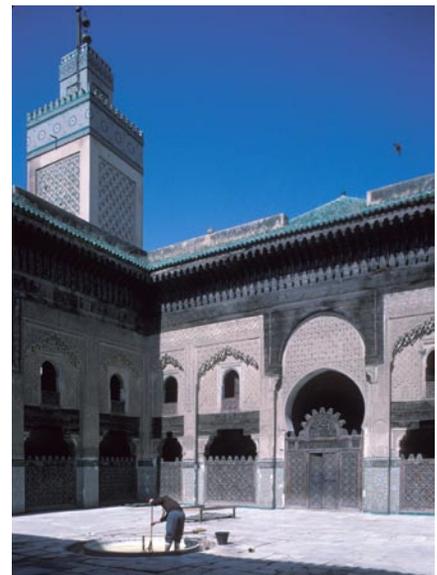
Day 13, Friday, November 12 Fès to Rabat

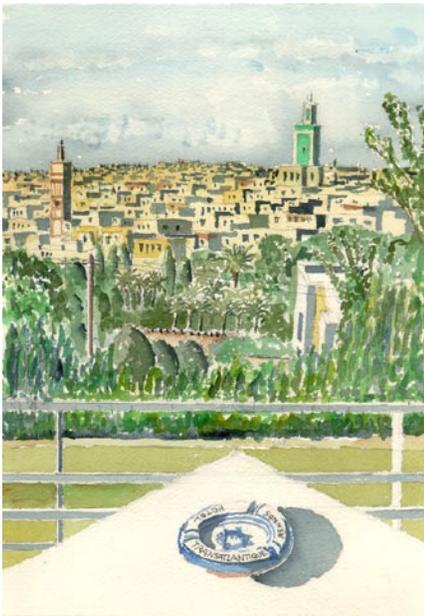
We leave Fès today for touring en route to Rabat, which includes the ruins of Volubulis and Meknes (total driving about three hours). Imperial Meknes, whose spectacular city gates are among the finest in the Arab world, was built by the once feared Moulay Ismaïl, who modeled his capital on the image of Versailles. We will see his tomb and other sites of interest, including the underground granaries and the vast imperial stables, which once held 12,000 horses.

Not far away are the extensive Roman ruins at Volubilis, the capital of the



Fès: Medersa Bou Anani (left and right), Najarine (below)





*Meknès from the terrace of the Hotel Transatlantique (left) and Volubilis (above and below)*

province of Mauritania. Here we will find a triumphal arch still standing and some outstanding mosaics still located in situ. Nearby is Moulay Idriss, the holiest Muslim site in Morocco. At its center lies the tomb (zaouia) of the

man who brought Islam to Morocco twelve centuries ago. (Note that as non-Muslims, we will not be allowed to enter into the holy precinct of Moulay Idriss.)

We have reached Rabat, the current political capital of Morocco. It and neighboring Salé were once notorious as havens to the feared Barbary pirates, who terrorized Atlantic and Mediterranean

trade, capturing prisoners to hold them for ransom. Our hotel for the next two nights is the 30-room boutique hotel, Villa Mandarine.

Day 14, Saturday, November 13  
Rabat

Our tour of Rabat will begin with the ancient necropolis of Chellah. A thriving city for nearly, 1,000 years, Chellah's



ruins date from the Roman through the Islamic periods and are a special favorite of bird watchers. Next we will visit the picturesque, labyrinthine Kasbah des Oudias overlooking the Atlantic Ocean and the lovely gardens outside the Kasbah. At the end of the day we will watch the sun setting over the Atlantic from the majestic Hassan Tower at the Mausoleum of Mohamed V. It was Mohamed V who brought independence to Morocco in 1956. His son, Hassan II, subsequently ruled Morocco for 38 years, and was buried here in 1999.

Day 15, Sunday, November 14  
Rabat to Casablanca

An hour away, Casablanca is a large thoroughly modern city, despite the romance that the eponymous film starring Humphrey Bogart may bestow upon it. It is both the center of contemporary art



*View into a courtyard in Meknès (above) and  
Sunset over Meknès (below)*

(and we will visit a number of galleries recently highlighted in *the New York Times*) and a showcase of early twentieth

century French colonial architecture. We will stay in a good example, the 1950's villa Jnane Sherazad. Some may choose to depart in the afternoon or late this evening on the Lufthansa flight, while others will take flights the next day.

Day 16, Monday, November 15  
Depart Casablanca

You will be transferred to the airport at Casablanca for your departing flight.

