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Travel To Morocco: Mavens Of The Maghreb

By Frank Johnson

Morocco is the essence of North African charm and the land of commingling horizons. Glittering

Saharan deserts of the south and east quickly become snow-capped mountains of the Atlas range, followed by the rolling green heartland, which drops down to the sparkling Atlantic and Mediterranean coastlines. Travel to Morocco and wrap yourself in the warmth of the enduring Berber, Arab and African people and 10,000 years of their most fascinating history; a history that could only occur where the spheres of Africa and Europe meet intimately and unavoidably upon the Strait of Gibraltar.

Charmed as a Snake One distinctive layer of Morocco is its great imperial Islamic cities. The central medina (old town) of each city is typically still walled in and houses the most ancient part of these treasured towns, including a minaret-tipped mosque. Open-air markets, snake-charmers, music performers and cafés are all spilling over with life every day of the week except Friday. Fez (or Fès), Morocco's former capital, is one of the largest and oldest medieval cities in the world and a perfect place to begin your journey through Moroccan history. The medina, Fez el-Bali, is an intricate piecework of 9400 twisting alleys where you may come across some of the finest leather and hand-craftwork among the many bazaars. The modern and traditional city of Marrakesh is home to the ancient square of Djemaa el-Fna, which outshines the rest of the medina at dusk with rhythmic drumbeats, women offering henna tattoos, aerial acrobatics and snakes aplenty. Make sure to catch a glimpse of the soaring Koutoubia Mosque minaret, visible from the square.

Sea Breeze, Sand Dunes and Snow Beyond Morocco's imperial cities, this Arab nation tends to be more relaxed about Islam than its eastern neighbors, particularly among the mountain and coastal regions. Casablanca is a giant metropolitan port city with unmistakable Moroccan flavor and international appeal. Casablanca is also a mixture of old and new, with the recently completed Hassan II Mosque, the second largest in the world, and a notably historic medina of its own. For a more Mediterranean flare, venture to the north where Tangier stands as the gateway for arrivals from Spain. French colonization of Morocco in the first half of the 20th century has left a large imprint on the culture here, which is intriguing against such backdrops as the fortified Kasbah at the top of the city's medina. Tangier is a fashionable and convenient resort destination for North Africans and Europeans alike, creating a unique cultural blend any time of year.

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Get close with the people and the land on a unique adventure that begins in the Saharan settlement of Merzouge. From here you can ride a camel out into the sand dunes and spend a night or more under the luminous stars of the Saharan sky. The serenity of Morocco's desert is not lost among the Atlas and Anti Atlas Mountain Ranges either. Visitors are attracted to these largely impenetrable mountains for the isolation and tranquility of their many Berber towns and the authenticity of Moroccan life they provide, not to mention some great skiing and trekking. Aït Benhaddou is most famous for its cinematic appearances, such as Lawrence of Arabia. The red walls of the Kasbahs, fortresses and village squares illuminate in an orange glow just as the sun finds its way to settle upon the ocean in the remote distance.

You Simply Don't Know `Til You Go Writers and film makers have attempted to capture the romance and charm of Morocco for centuries. The true essence of the nation and people is so distinctly defined by so many elements. Only once you have experienced Morocco can you really walk away with that indescribable understanding, at which point you may sit down at a café and sip your sweet mint tea in

peace.

For more information, visit

<http://www.cfares.com>

A Quick Guide To Morocco

By Chic Retreats

Morocco has something of an aura about it - created mainly by the major tourist destinations of Marrakech, Casablanca, Fez and Rabat.

Where is it?

Morocco is on the North West coast of Africa, just across the sea from the southern tip of Spain. This means that it's easy for most Europeans to reach by plane and even by road or train. Its proximity, mixed with its unique style and culture make it an increasingly popular destination.

Where can I stay?

There are a number of small, exquisite boutique hotels in Morocco. It seems to have the boutique style and attention to detail all wrapped up, making it difficult for the traveller to choose which unique hotel to stay in. There's the Dar Zemora in Marrakech which has just five rooms, but where the decoration, furnishing and service ensure that you have the best of both worlds - a perfect place to stay, with the many attractions of Marrakesh just around the corner. Alternatively, stay in the Kasbah du Toubkal in the Atlas Mountains, which reportedly has the best views in North Africa, and where your stay is

enhanced by the informal feel of the hotel and the services offered. Surrounded by the peaceful beauty of the landscape, it is a place that has inspired anyone who's stayed there. Whether you want to stay in the hustle and bustle of Marrakech, on the beaches of Essaouira or in the heart of the mountains, there's a perfect hotel waiting for you.

What can I see?

Wherever you're staying, you should make an effort to visit Marrakech. The coming together of civilisations, conquerors and craftsmen makes it a truly eclectic city, yet one that's bound together by the beauty of its buildings, the simplicity of its crafts and the awe of its visitors. Its souks, or markets, which are organised by trade, are a fascinating insight into the life of Marrakech's residents and an experience not to be missed. Spend some time in the Place Djemma El Fna - the city's main square, where regular entertainment keep the crowds amused, and then walk through the streets of the old town, taking in the magnificent medieval buildings and romantic gardens. The rest of Morocco holds its own delights - the whitewashed buildings in the simple coastal resort of Essaouira, the regal buildings of Rabat or the market town of Tata in the Sahara - you will find plenty of reasons to return to Morocco.

How do I get around?

You can hire a car in Morocco, as driving is fairly easy and it will let you explore more of the area around your chosen destination. Petrol can be expensive, so it may be wise just to hire a car for a day or two rather than for your whole stay. Morocco operates a system of shared taxis, which works out pretty cheaply and is fairly straightforward to use. Alternatively, try the bus network, which is generally comfortable and, although they may reach their destination later than a shared taxi, it will be a smoother, safer ride. If you're travelling between cities, then choose the trains, which are also comfortable and affordable.

Chic Retreats is a worldwide collection of cool, smart hotels with less than 30 rooms and an eye for design and style. Visit the website at

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