





Morocco

Beyond Marrakesh

Long a popular destination for travellers, Morocco continues to attract visitors in increasing numbers. Our specialists explore some of the options available for those wanting to escape the crowds and get under the skin of the country.

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Beyond Marrakesh



Fishing boats in Essaouira

► *THE BEATING HEART of Morocco, Marrakesh, is a magical, evocative city that offers a tantalising introduction to North Africa. With budget airlines flying here regularly it's also very accessible and a short stay of three to four nights is quite feasible. Yet it would be a shame to come this far without exploring beyond the city walls. Within a short drive of Marrakesh you'll find stunning mountain landscapes, rippling desert sands, Roman ruins, historic cities and relaxed yet cosmopolitan coastal towns.*

With new routes to Marrakesh and Casablanca with BMI and British Airways it's now possible to travel in more comfort and have more flexibility on itineraries. Opt for a circuit between these two cities and you can include all of Morocco's major highlights for a comprehensive first time visit. Alternatively, use Marrakesh as a hub and in the space of a relaxed week explore the city, see North Africa's highest peak and sample some of the delicious seafood on the coast.

Here our Morocco specialists describe their favourite destinations outside the Red City and offer tips on where and how long to stay.



Fiona Miller
Essaouira

Essaouira is a picturesque city on the west coast, only a three-hour drive from Marrakesh. Perfect for a two to three day break, it offers a complete change of scenery and pace after the bustle of Marrakesh. Essaouira's laid-back atmosphere is as yet unspoiled by mass tourism but the city boasts an enviable collection of charmingly restored riads (traditional Moroccan homes) offering visitors a wonderful choice of accommodation.

Unusually for Morocco, Essaouira has always had something of a relaxed, hippy vibe. Jimi Hendrix was a regular visitor in the '60s and the city's ramparts are a popular film location; recently seen in Ridley Scott's Kingdom of Heaven and Oliver Stone's Alexander. Orson Welles was so enamoured with the place that he chose to film Othello here in the 1950s. His legacy lives on, with a monument to the actor and director in the centre of Orson Welles Square, just outside the walls of the medina (old town).

Essaouira boasts a number of excellent seafood restaurants, a quaint souk (market), a wild beach for walking, horseriding and kite surfing and a handful of laid-back bars offering live music. En route from Marrakesh you can stop off at a Women's Cooperative to see how argan oil, produced from the kernels of the argan tree and valued for its nutritive, cosmetic and medicinal properties, is made.



Megan Shaw
The High Atlas Mountains

The snow-capped peaks of the High Atlas are so close to Marrakesh that they are clearly visible from the roof terraces of most of the city's riads. Within an hour's drive you can be in the scenic Ourika Valley; bartering at the local market, enjoying gentle hikes and staying at one of my favourite places, the Kasbah Bab Ourika. With just 15 beautiful rooms, leafy gardens and stunning views this hotel is difficult to beat if you are looking for a mixture of activity and relaxation during your stay. Despite being at the very foot of the range there are some jaw-dropping views around the Ourika Valley such as those down the rugged valley or up to the shimmering peak of Jebel Toubkal, North Africa's highest mountain.

Moving higher up, there are a couple of wonderfully scenic, serpentine mountain passes that you can drive: the Tizi-n-Tichka and my favourite, the Tizi-n-Test. A short detour from the latter is the historic 12th-century Almohad mosque in the small mountain village of Tin Mal. Naturally the mountains make spectacular walking territory with many hikes launching from the Berber-run eco-property, the Kasbah du Toubkal. The views here are fabulous and you can try anything from a relatively gentle stroll around the village of Imlil to a full-on assault on the 4,000 metre summit of Jebel Toubkal.



Above: Man and cart, Essaouira Below: The High Atlas Mountains



A Memorable Experience

Dawn in Skoura, Steve Howes

One of my most memorable moments in Morocco was in Skoura. I was lucky enough to be staying at the beautiful Dar Ahlam Kasbah and after an early start I was guided to the rooftop to sit amongst the numerous cushions. As dawn approached I sipped a strong coffee and watched the sun come up, revealing the High Atlas Mountains in all their splendour. Below clouds of mist hung around the foot of the date palms and crumbling kasbahs, while a donkey stirred for work and roosters competed to see who could crow the loudest. This serene oasis made a memorable start to the day before a scenic drive to the Sahara.



FACTfile

In ten days ...

A nine night trip to Morocco with stays in Marrakesh, the High Atlas Mountains and Essaouira costs from £1,185 per person, including international flights.

In two weeks ...

A 14 night grand tour of Morocco, taking in Casablanca, Rabat, Fez, the Erg Chebbi (Saharan sand dunes), Skoura, Essaouira, Marrakesh and the High Atlas costs from £2,700 per person, including international flights. For more information please contact our Morocco specialists on 01993 838 420.

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► Morocco
Beyond Marrakesh



Doorway in Meknes



Souk in Fez



Ait Benhaddou



Kasbah Tamadot, Atlas Mountains



Riad Fez



Dar Ahlam, Skoura



Natalie Hudson
Fez and the Imperial Cities

Regular visitors to Morocco will tell you that while Marrakesh is undoubtedly worth a visit, Fez is the real deal. Step foot inside the medina walls and you are instantly transported back in time. A mystifying warren of tight alleyways and medieval structures, it makes the Marrakesh markets seem like child's play. The bustling souks are more tailored to locals than visitors but there is still some fantastic shopping to be done and the colourful tanneries have to be seen to be believed. A full day guided tour introduces you to the main sights of this historic city and will help you to get your bearings for further exploration on your own.

Fez, like Marrakesh, has a host of excellent new riads offering a variety of levels of style and comfort, but its atmosphere is timeless and more authentic, making it a perfect accompaniment to a trip to the Red City.

Not far from Fez you can visit the historic city of Meknes, the capital Rabat and the impressive Roman ruins of Voloubilis.



Steve Howes
Skoura and the south

Morocco's south is a heady combination of snow-capped mountains, verdant palm groves and wide open plains. The pace of life here is slower and the backdrop of lush valleys and crumbling kasbahs is picture perfect.

Skoura is a small town close to the Dades Valley, the 'Valley of a Thousand Kasbahs'. Many of these historic kasbahs are in a state of disarray but others are much better preserved. Seeing a traditionally-dressed local leading a donkey past a deep red ruin set against an emerald palm grove is a classic Moroccan scene.

Although there is not much in Skoura itself, it is a great base for exploring the south. The rugged Dades and Todra Gorges are just a couple of hours away, while nearby Quarzazate is Morocco's answer to Hollywood, with a modern film studio that you can explore. Immortalised in both *Gladiator* and *The Jewel of the Nile*, nearby Ait Benhaddou is possibly the most impressive of all of Morocco's kasbahs. But perhaps the best reason to visit Skoura is that it also possesses one of Morocco's finest places to stay, Dar Ahlam, the House of Dreams.

Our favourite places to stay

Kasbah Tamadot, the Atlas Mountains

Richard Branson's Kasbah Tamadot showcases some of the finest examples of traditional Moroccan art and design. No expense has been spared in restoring this remarkable building and each of the 18 rooms and suites has been individually furnished. It has indoor and outdoor swimming pools, a luxurious spa and is just an hour's drive from Marrakesh.

Dar Ahlam, Skoura

Hidden away in Skoura, Dar Ahlam is reached by a series of small tracks winding their way through the palm grove. Based around a labyrinthine early 20th-century kasbah, this luxurious property consists of nine suites and three private villas set in attractive gardens. The main kasbah is a warren of scented corridors, alcoves and grand archways, very deliberately creating an authentic and discreet atmosphere. Each meal is taken privately in a different location either inside the kasbah or outside in the two hectares of gardens, so you will never have to repeat the same view or experience.

Riad Fez, Fez

Fassis - residents of Fez - say that from outside the city walls you will never understand Fez but once inside you will get to know and love the real city. This sums up the Riad Fez perfectly as it is located in one of the medina's narrow alleys, the high blank walls refusing to give any clues to what lies inside. Once through the door however, a delightful paradise opens up with a beautiful courtyard at the heart of the hotel.

Heure Bleue Palais, Essaouira

The Heure Bleue Palais, a beautifully renovated riad located in Essaouira's medina has an impressive inner courtyard with the surrounding rooms decorated in a mixture of African, Portuguese and English colonial style. A Relais et Chateaux property, the hotel provides many extra facilities that the smaller riads do not, such as a pool, spa, restaurant and bar while the roof terrace has wonderful views over the port and beach.