

Morocco

For many travellers Morocco might be just a short hop by ferry from Spain or by one of the myriad budget airlines but, culturally, it's a much further distance to travel. The regular certainties of Europe are suddenly swept away by the full technicolour arrival of Africa and Islam. It's a complete sensory overload.

Tangier – that faded libertine on the coast – has traditionally been a first port of call, but the winds quickly blow you along the Atlantic coast to the cosmopolitan, movie-star famous Casablanca and the whitewashed fishing-port gems of Asilah and Essaouira. Inland the great imperial cities of Marrakesh and Fez attract visitors in droves, as they have done for centuries. The winding streets of their ancient medinas hold enough surprises to fill a dozen repeat trips. Away from the urban beat, you'll find Roman ruins and craggily dramatic valleys to distract you.

If you really want to escape from everything, Morocco still has a couple of trump cards. The High Atlas mountains seem custom-made for hiking, with endless trails between Berber villages, and North Africa's highest peak to conquer. Or, if you prefer someone else to do the walking, simply saddle up your camel and ride straight into the Sahara, to watch the sun set over an ocean of sand.

Morocco can feel like another world, but you don't need a magic carpet to get there.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 446,550 sq km (710,000 sq km if you include Western Sahara)
- **ATMs** Throughout the country except in small villages
- **Borders** Algeria closed; Mauritania open, but no public transport
- **Budget** US\$25 to US\$60 per day
- **Capital** Rabat
- **Languages** Moroccan Arabic (Darija), French, Berber
- **Money** Dirham (Dh); US\$1 = Dh7.83, €1 = Dh11.33
- **Population** 33.2 million
- **Seasons** Hot (June to August), cold (November to February)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 212; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visas** 90-day visas issued on entry for most nationalities



HOW MUCH?

- **Pot of mint tea** US\$1
- **Local hammam** US\$1.30
- **Petit-taxi ride** US\$0.65 to US\$1.30
- **City bus ride** US\$0.25 to US\$0.40
- **Local SIM card** US\$3.85

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L bottled water** US\$0.75
- **Bottle of Flag Beer** US\$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$1
- **Grilled brochette** US\$2.55 to US\$3.85

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Marrakesh** (p177) Dive into the clamour and endless spectacle that is Morocco's most dynamic city.
- **Fez** (p169) Lose yourself in the exotic charms of a medieval city replete with sights, sounds and smells.
- **Essaouira** (p165) Laze by the sea in Morocco's coolest and most evocative resort.
- **High Atlas** (p182) Trek deep into a world of stunning scenery and isolated Berber villages.
- **Drâa Valley** (p185) Explore Morocco's richest collection of kasbahs and then soak up the solitude of the Sahara.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Morocco is at its best in spring (mid-March to May), when the country is lush and green, followed by autumn (September to November), when the heat of summer has eased. At other times, don't underestimate the extremes of summer heat and winter – particularly in the High Atlas, where snowcapped peaks persist from November to July. If you are travelling in winter, head for the south – but be prepared for bitterly cold nights. The north coast and the Rif Mountains are frequently wet and cloudy in winter and early spring.

Apart from the weather, the timing of Ramadan (the traditional Muslim month of fasting and purification, which will occur during August or July during the life of this edition of this guidebook) is another important consideration, as some restaurants and cafes close during the day and general business hours are reduced.

ITINERARIES

- **Two Weeks** From Tangier (p147), head to Tetouan (p152) or the mountains around chilled-out Chefchaouen (p153), where you'll end up staying longer than you planned. Then make a beeline for Fez (p169) and Marrakesh (p177), imperial cities in the Moroccan interior that deserve as much time as you can spare. If you've time, a detour to artsy Essaouira (p165) is a wonderful way to step down a gear after the onslaught of Morocco's most clamorous cities.
- **One Month** Follow the itinerary above, but on your way south check out cosmopolitan Casablanca (p161), imperial Rabat (p157) or laid-back Asilah (p156), depending on your inclination. Save time also for a detour to Meknès (p175) while you're in Fez. Count on a three-day round trip from Marrakesh to trek up Jebel Toubkal (p183), and four or five days to explore Aït Benhadou (p185), Todra Gorge (p187), Dadès Gorge (p186), the Drâa Valley (p185), and the sand dunes around either Merzouga (p188) or M'hamid (p186).

HISTORY**The Berbers and Romans**

Morocco's first-known inhabitants were Near Eastern nomads who may have been distant cousins of the ancient Egyptians. Phoenicians appear to have arrived around 800 BC. When the Romans arrived in the 4th century BC, they called the expanse of Morocco and western Algeria 'Mauretania' and the indigenous people 'Berbers', meaning 'barbarians'.

In the 1st century AD, the Romans built up Volubilis (p177) into a city of 20,000 (mostly Berber) people but, fed up with the persistently unruly locals, the Roman emperor Caligula declared the end of Berber autonomy in North Africa in AD 40. But, whereas the Vandals and Byzantines failed to oust the Romans from their home turf, Berbers in the Rif and the Atlas ultimately succeeded through a campaign of near-constant harassment – a tactic that would later also put the squeeze on many an unpopular Moroccan sultan.

As Rome slipped into decline, the Berbers harried and hassled any army that dared to invade, to the point where the Berbers were free to do as they pleased.