

# MARRAKESH

## ENCOUNTER

ALISON BING

Marrakesh Encounter

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## ALISON BING

When she's not methodically sampling every *mechoui* lamb roast in Marrakesh, diligently inspecting riad rooftop sunsets or personally testing hammam steam levels, Alison co-authors Lonely Planet's *Morocco, California, USA* and *Italy* guides. Alison has a background in Islamic art, architecture and North African political economy from the American University in Cairo, and holds a masters degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, a program of Tufts and Harvard Universities – respectable diplomatic credentials she regularly undermines with opinionated art, food and culture commentary for newspapers, magazines and radio.



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**Cover photograph** A local stands in the front entrance of a house in Marrakesh / Bruce Bi / photolibary.com. **Internal photographs** All photographs by Lonely Planet Images, and by Marco Flavio Marinucci except p25 Tim Barker; p19 Olivier Cirendini; p70, p110 Brian Cruickshank; p14, p109 Huw Jones; p28 bottom Holger Leue; p130 Jean-Pierre Lescourret; p4, p6 top left, p6 bottom, p8, p15, p18, p23, p28, 98, 104, 125, 136, 139 Doug McKinlay; p73 Mohamed Nour and p10 Geoff Stringer

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It's never a chore, shopping at this small establishment that's like many found in the backstreets

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# THIS IS MARRAKESH

Within minutes of arrival in Marrakesh's Medina (Old City) you'll learn a new word: '*Balek!*' Roughly, 'Move it or lose it, donkey coming through!'

Donkey carts may not inspire the same adrenaline-rushing alertness as careening Vespas loaded with oranges, taxi drivers who mistake their Fiats for Formula 1 cars, and carpet sellers in hot pursuit of customers with their absolute last price. But once you glimpse the carts painted with good-luck symbols hurtling headlong through narrow souqs (covered market streets), you too will leap to the sidelines and watch in awe as Marrakesh rushes ahead by all available means.

Where is the city headed in such a hurry? Marrakesh has a hot date – with you actually. King Mohammed VI proclaimed that by 2020 Morocco will welcome 20 million visitors, with Marrakesh as the main point of entry. Since in a long weekend a traveller may spend about £775, or three to four months' salary for most Moroccans, every visitor is a VIP in Marrakesh. Luckily, showing guests a good time comes readily to the *bahja*, or joyous ones, as Marrakshis are known. The Djemaa el-Fna has enchanted visitors for a millennium, with its chorus of 100 chefs singing their own praises, Gnaoua musicians banging out funky freedom songs on *ginbris* (three-stringed banjos) and potion-sellers' chants promising cures for rheumatism and heartbreak. Guests get the royal treatment in traditional hammams (bathhouses) and authentic riads, elegant mudbrick courtyard mansions that make the Medina a Unesco World Heritage Site.

The Pink City promises a rosier future for Moroccans – 40% of whom subsist below the poverty line – because travellers today are seeking the inspiring, culturally enriching, gourmet travel options Marrakesh has to offer. Given its 1000-year history of hospitality, a 2011 cafe bombing came as a shock to cosmopolitan Marrakesh. But after surviving historic triumphs and tragedies with its spirits and pink mudbrick walls marvelously intact, this city knew what to do. Marrakesh dried its tears, gathered its legendary wits, and put on another pot of welcoming mint tea. For up-to-date information about Morocco, see [www.lonelyplanet.com/marrakesh](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/marrakesh).

**Top left** Painted door in the central courtyard of Musée de Marrakesh (82) **Top right** Ancient Berber symbols feature in this design at Ministero del Gusto (p103) **Bottom** One of the many colourful food stalls (p72) set up each afternoon on the Djemaa el-Fna