



# Marrakesh & Central Morocco

## مراكش ووسط المغرب

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### Why Go?

Through no fault of their own, maps can't do central Morocco justice. Even the best satellite technology can't capture the meanderings of covered souqs and back-flipping Gnawa musicians in the legendary Djemaa el-Fna. Topographic maps duly note Jebel Toubkal, but fail to convey how its snowcapped summit cools the brain on a hot day.

Somehow, all this vibrant life exists on the edge of the desert. You'll never guess from remote GPS coordinates that a burbling river interrupts stony-faced Todra Gorge, or rocks melt like wax candles into the green carpet of the Dadès Gorge. Just when the rocky Ziz and Drâa Valleys seem utterly barren, water seeps through fissures and bursts into exuberant palm oases. Mileage suggests you can return from the Sahara to Marrakesh in one day, but central Morocco is the place to put down the map, get lost, and live a little.

### Best Places to Eat

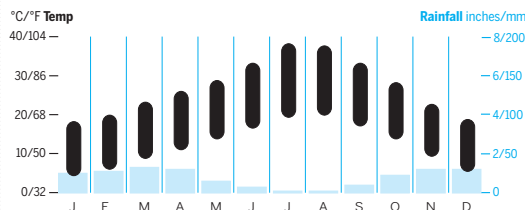
- » Mechoui Alley (p80)
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### Best Places to Stay

- » Erg Chigaga dunes (p136)
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### When to Go

#### Marrakesh



**March–April**  
Mountains thaw; desert blooms. Fresh fruit. Skip Easter holidays when prices jump.

**May–June**  
Ideal High Atlas hiking: hot, not scorching. Accommodation and souq bargains.

**September–October**  
Prime time in the desert; gentle breezes, dates galore.

## History

Imagine our world minus the outsized contributions of Central Morocco over the past millennium. How would the world look, taste, and sound?

Without the ambitious Almoravids expanding their empire from Marrakesh into Europe, Moorish arches may not have uplifted buildings from Spain to California. Without Saadian sugar dealers and Jewish salt traders moving product into Europe and beyond, meals might've remained mediocrally bland – and insatiable sugar cravings might not have driven colonial traders as far as the Dominican Republic. Without trade routes through desert oases, bluesy Gnawa inflections may not have echoed from the Sahara into musical traditions worldwide, from slave spirituals to Led Zepelin's rock anthems.

True, you might not miss certain movies filmed locally with the help of Ouarzazate movie studios (though *Sex and the City II*, *Prince of Persia*, *Alexander* and *Ishtar* do have their defenders) or the alarming resurgence of harem pants abetted by Marrakesh fashion merchants. But to witness cultural developments in the making, Central Morocco remains a must.

Even in the snowy High Atlas at Oukaïmeden, climbers may stub their toes on petroglyphs from 1500 years ago. Since then, Marrakesh has served as the capital to three separate dynasties – more than the imperial cities of Fez and Meknès. Watchtowers of mudbrick *ksour* (castles) dotting desert oases were the satellite radio towers of the Middle Ages, spreading news from Mauretania to Spain via Skoura, Zagora and Rissani. Glaoui mountain strongholds played pivotal roles in French colonialism in Africa, and also in independence movements. Today Central Morocco is Morocco's main draw for visitors, building its future while remaining true to its history as a cultural crossroads.

## Climate

Spring and autumn are the best times to explore, with temperatures averaging 20°C to 25°C. Cold High Atlas winters may start in September and last through April, while sweltering deserts will leave you panting for water by May. April is sandstorm season in the desert, when wind speeds of only 10km/h kick up fine sand and dust; allow a few extra days for dune visits to ensure visibility.

## Language

In the High Atlas the main language is the Berber dialect of Tashelhit, with some pockets of Tamazight. Elsewhere Darija (Moroccan Arabic) and French are widely spoken. You'll hear some Spanish and English, and possibly German and Italian – especially when there's a carpet deal at stake.

### **i** Getting There & Away

Marrakesh is the transport hub of the region, with train, bus and air links. Direct flights from London to Marrakesh's Menara airport are offered by low-cost airlines such as easyJet, Ryanair and Thompson Air plus British Airways, and frequent flight and train services from Casablanca expand travel options. Royal Air Maroc (RAM) also offers flights to Marrakesh and Ouarzazate, though delays and lost luggage in transit are worryingly common.

A direct three-hour rail service to/from Casablanca links Marrakesh to major northern cities. Supratours buses link Marrakesh to the southern Atlantic coast, from Essaouira and Agadir to Laâyoune and Dakhla, plus key Saharan oases and gorges, including Ouarzazate, Zagora, Boumalne du Dadès, Kelaâ M'Gouna and Merzouga. Similar services are offered by CTM and local bus companies, though these tend to be more crowded and less comfortable.

### **i** Getting Around

Except for the line from Casablanca to Marrakesh, there are no rail links in Central Morocco. Buses are the cheapest way to get around Central Morocco, but they're becoming more expensive to operate as the price of petrol soars. According to bus company officials, current prices may be expected to rise, so pad your budget if your plans include bus travel.

CTM provides adequate service, but Supratours and other private companies are now offering more frequent departures, air-conditioned coaches and reserved seating to tourist destinations. Shared grands taxis are an alternative, since there are good sealed roads to most destinations in this chapter. Mountain regions are best traversed on foot, mountain bike, mule or 4WD (around Dh1000 to Dh1500 per day). Desert travellers will want either 4WDs or camels (Dh350 to Dh400 per person per day) for that ultimate experience at the sand dunes of Erg Chigaga and Erg Chebbi.