



Marrakesh & Central Morocco

مراكش وسط المغرب

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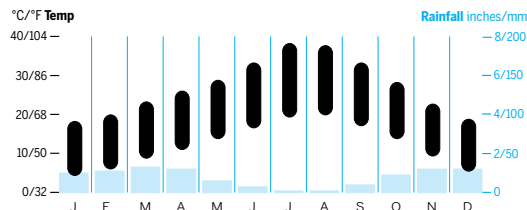
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Why Go?

The central region of Morocco is the most exciting and diverse destination in the entire country. The biggest draw-card is the pink city of Marrakesh. Founded almost 1000 years ago, it is one of the great cities of the Maghreb and its spectacular setting against the snow-capped High Atlas mountains lingers long in the minds of most travellers.

Somehow this vibrant, bursting-at-the-seams city exists on the edge of the Sahara, hemmed in by cloud-busting High Atlas passes. You'd never guess from GPS coordinates that beyond them a burbling river interrupts stony-faced Todra Gorge, or rocks melt like wax candles into the Dadès Gorge. Just when the rocky Ziz and Drâa Valleys seem utterly barren, water seeps through fissures and bursts into exuberant palm oases. In the far southeast, the sculpted sand dunes surrounding Merzouga and M'Hamid provide the perfect pink-hued curtain call to this extraordinary region.

When to Go Marrakesh



Mar–Apr Mountains thaw, desert blooms. Skip Easter holidays when prices jump.

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

Oct–Nov Prime desert time: gentle breezes, dates galore.

MARRAKESH

POP 1,070,800

مراكش

From the moment you arrive in Marrakesh, you'll get the distinct feeling you've left something behind – a toothbrush or socks, maybe? But no, what you'll be missing in Marrakesh is predictability and all sense of direction. Never mind: you're better off without them here. Start at action-packed Djemaa el-Fna and head north into Marrakesh's maze of souqs, where Berber tribes once traded slaves, gold, ivory and leather, and where modern tourists scour people-packed alleys for carpet bargains and *babouches* (leather slippers). Look carefully, and you'll also spot a number of creative new boutiques and galleries. They signify the evolving face of the medina as a new generation of craftspeople and artists try to connect the city's hankering for modernity with its traditional craft heritage.

Beyond the souqs, the medina is an ideal place to explore private palaces and riad mansions, many of which now provide the city's most atmospheric accommodation. But it's worth leaving the old city occasionally for dinner, drinks and art galleries in the ville nouvelle (new town), mountain bike rides in the *palmeraie* (palm oasis) or horse-riding and weekend retreats in the Agafay Desert and Ourigane.

History

Many desert caravans passed through this outpost before Almoravid Berber leader Youssef ben Tachfine and his savvy wife Zeinab recognised its strategic potential, and built ramparts around the encampment in AD 1062. The Almoravids established the city's *khattara* (underground irrigation system) and signature pink mudbrick architecture. But when Almohad warriors stormed the city, they left only the plumbing and the Koubba Ba'adiyn intact. Almohad Yacoub el-Mansour remodelled Marrakesh with a fortified kasbah, glorious gardens, *qissariat* (covered markets), a rebuilt Koutoubia and a triumphal gate (Bab Agnaou). But the Almohads soon lost their showpiece to the Merenids, who turned royal attention to Meknès and Fez.

Life improved again in the 16th century, when the Saadians made Marrakesh the crux of lucrative sugar-trade routes, established a trading centre for Christians and a protected *mellah* (Jewish quarter) in 1558. Ahmed al-Mansour ed-Dahbi (the Victorious

and Golden) paved the Badi Palace with gold and took opulence to the grave in the gilded Saadian Tombs.

Alawite leader Moulay Ismail preferred Meknès to Marrakesh, and moved his headquarters there – though not before looting the Badi Palace. Marrakesh entered its Wild West period, with big guns vying for control. Those who prevailed built extravagant riads, though much of the population lived hand to mouth in crowded *funduqs* (rooming houses). In 1912 the French protectorate granted Pasha Glaoui the run of southern Morocco, while French and Spanish colonists built themselves a ville nouvelle.

Without a clear role post-Independence, Marrakesh resumed its fall-back career as a caravanserai – and became the nation's breakaway success. Roving hippies built the city's mystique in the 1960s and '70s, and visits by the Rolling Stones, Beatles and Led Zeppelin gave the city star power. In the 1990s private medina mansions were converted into B&Bs, just in time for low-cost airlines to deliver weekenders to brass-studded riad doors.

Marrakesh was amid a major tourism boom in 2008 when the global financial crisis started to wreak havoc in European markets, which account for over 80% of the city's visitors. Hot on the heels of this fiscal collapse, an Islamist militant disguised as a guitar-carrying hippie walked into Café Argana on the Djemaa el-Fna and planted two bombs that killed 17 people in April 2011.

Confidence in the Red City plummeted: tourists cancelled bookings and investment tumbled. But while economic growth hit the skids, dropping from 4.9% in 2011 to 2.9% in 2012, Morocco's circumspect handling of Arab Spring tensions saw a gradual return to growth in 2013. What's more, the city's dynamic entrepreneurs are determined to put Marrakesh back on track with audacious plans for Africa's largest contemporary art museum scheduled for completion in 2016.

Sights

Medina

Most monuments are inside the medina ramparts (a 19km circuit). If you wander off course exploring souqs and palaces, ask someone to point you towards Djemaa el-Fna (preferably a shopkeeper – kids sometimes mislead tourists) or head towards the Koutoubia minaret, the tallest in town.