



Marrakesh & Central Morocco

مراكش ووسط المغرب

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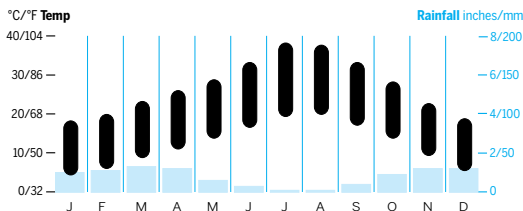
Why Go?

Marrakesh is most people's first taste of Morocco and what an introduction it is. Somewhere between the donkey-cart swerving souq action, the tilework and marble monument overload, and the hundredth time you find yourself lost amid the medina's doodling alleyways, this great city of the Maghreb will work its magic on you. But when you've finally found your way out of the old city, Marrakesh is a jumping-off point to some of Morocco's most stunning landscapes, set against the soaring peaks of the Atlas mountains.

Hike along craggy clifftops to tiny Berber villages in the High Atlas, or amid orchards and wind-whittled rock formations inside the lush Dadès Gorge. Then explore the palm-studded Drâa Valley and its slumping mudbrick kasbahs and *ksour* on your way east to the Sahara. Sitting atop a sculpted sand dune at sunrise is the perfect orange-hued curtain call to this extraordinary region.

When to Go

Marrakesh



Mar–Apr Mountains thaw, wildflowers bloom. Though skip Easter holidays in

Marrakesh when prices jump.
May–Jun Pull on your hiking boots and hit the High Atlas trails.

Oct–Nov Dune escapades beckon. Prime desert time with gentle breezes and dates galore.

MARRAKESH

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مراكش

Prepare for your senses to be slapped. Marrakesh's medina, wrapped within powder-pink *pisé* (rammed earth) ramparts, is a show-stopping muddle of crowded souqs where sheep carcasses swing from hooks next door to twinkling lamps, and squiggling ochre-dusted lanes lead to nowhere. The main artery into this labyrinthine web is the vast square of Djemaa el-Fna, where it's carnival night every night and musicians, acrobats, and slapstick acting troupes tap into the old city's frenetic pulse.

Raised, razed, and then raised again; almost 1000 years after its founding, Morocco's Red City continues to evolve. Today its caravanserais culture and craft heritage lay alongside a contemporary arts scene that brings festivals and design initiatives to its door. Chi-chi boutiques sit next to bazaar-stalls within the souqs, and the traders of old have long since been swapped for groups of tourists goggling at palace and mansion frippery where the one percenters of past centuries once lived.

Rapid growth though, has brought its attendant problems. Congestion, pollution and creeping urbanisation have become environmental issues while the recent economic downturn has exposed the fragility of tourism-driven economy. But this is a city that refuses to sit still and it's that abundant energy that will help steer Marrakesh forward.

More than anywhere else in Morocco, this is where tradition and modernity merge. Marrakesh will dazzle, frazzle and enchant. Put on your tassel-toed *babouches* (leather slippers) and dive right in.

History

The Berber Sanhaja tribe founded the Almoravid dynasty in the 11th century and swept through the south of Morocco, demolishing opponents as they rode north. They pitched their campsite on a desolate swath of land that would become Marrakesh.

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 *khet-tara* (underground irrigation system) and signature pink mudbrick architecture.

At the age of almost 80, Youssef ben Tachfine launched successful campaigns

securing Almoravid control of Andalusia. Marrakesh, once just a patch of dirt, became the operational centre of an empire that stretched right up to Barcelona's city limits.

Almohad warriors stormed the city in 1147 and left only the plumbing and the Koubba Ba'adiyn intact. Almohad ruler Yacoub al-Mansour remodelled Marrakesh with a fortified kasbah, glorious gardens, *qissaria* (covered markets), a rebuilt Koutoubia and a triumphal gate (Bab Agnaou). But the Almohads lost their showpiece to the Merenids in 1269, who turned royal attention to Meknès and Fez.

After centuries of playing second fiddle under Merenid rule, Marrakesh regained its crown in the 16th century, when the Saadians established their dynasty in the city. Marrakesh thrived as the crux of lucrative sugar-trade routes, and a trading centre for Christians and a protected *mellah* (Jewish quarter) were established 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.

The Saadian dynasty crumbled in the 17th century, paving the way for the Alawites to seize the reins. Alawite leader Moulay Ismail preferred Meknès to Marrakesh, and moved his headquarters there – though not before looting the Badi Palace. Stripped of its role as the imperial base, 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 *fondouqs* (rooming houses).

After 1912, when Morocco was handed to the French protectorate, Thami el-Glaoui was installed as pasha of Marrakesh. While he went to work terrorising southern Morocco, French and Spanish colonists were busy building themselves a *ville nouvelle* (new town) outside of Marrakesh's city walls.

After independence in 1956, Marrakesh was left without a clear role and resumed its fallback career as a caravanserai – becoming 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 as low-cost airlines delivered weekenders to brass-studded riad doors.