

# Demystifying Morocco

Story and Photos by Kristy Alpert

**S**teeped in ancient traditions and perfumed with an air of exotic adventure, Morocco offers an immersion into a world where mystery is still alive and fantasy becomes reality. The country is carpeted by soaring dunes in the desert, rocky outcroppings by the sea, snowcapped peaks in the mountains, and urban escapes amid rustic villages, but the heart of this African destination rests in the rich culture that's been preserved over the centuries.

Morocco sits at the northern tip of Africa, and is bordered by both Atlantic and Mediterranean coastlines. While Arabic and Berber are the official languages of the country, its proximity to Europe has made French and Spanish widely known throughout most major cities. The unique fusion of Arab, African, European and Berber influences has seasoned this country with its own exotic blend of culture and personality.

"The Kingdom of Morocco is primarily a hospitable country, where people are smiling and welcoming," says Olivier Deschamps, manager of Sahara Experience, a top-rated travel agency that specializes in organizing trips for clients working with any price range. "I love Morocco for its authenticity, its

traditions, its values, its landscapes, and for its culture, craft, and community ... and its gastronomy, of course!"

A Frenchman by birth, Deschamps moved his family to Marrakech more than a decade ago to work with Sahara Experience and to open his children's world up to new experiences. His passion is to help visitors experience the sides of Morocco they have always dreamt to see. "Morocco is a kaleidoscope," he adds. "Landscapes, colors, smells, cultures, music, seasons ... it's all an invitation to travel, and it will mark your memory forever."

Unfortunately the fear of the unknown has kept many people from journeying out to this exciting country, despite the fact that Marrakech was just rated TripAdvisor's number one Traveler's Choice destination for 2015. But like Deschamps said, the invitation has been extended, and there's no better time to use your overseas-living advantage to visit this phenomenal country. From the soaring dunes of the Sahara to the winding alleys of the souks in Marrakech to the ancient fishing ports lining the surfer's paradise of Essaouira, here are three top places to visit on your next trip to Morocco.

## Marrakech

Referred to as the Red City, Marrakech is an exotic destination with an aroma and flavor equally as vibrant as the hue for which it's known. Manicured rose bushes and fragrant orange trees scent the air as you walk through the streets toward Jemaa el Fna (the main square that transforms into a lively night market), and ancient walls set apart the lively souks (i.e. shopping markets), colorful food markets, and charismatic riads of the old city from the trendy cafés, gorgeous gardens (like Yves Saint-Laurent's garden Jardin Majorelle) high-end shopping, and luxury accommodations of the new city.

Many of the city's historic buildings have been converted into riads and boutique hotels, like the Riad Star where American-born French dancer and singer Josephine Baker once called home in the 1920s. The riad is attached to what used to be the old palace, and offers seven guest rooms with an authentic hammam and tons of modern amenities. For luxury accommodations outside the city, the Palais Namaskar is a destination in itself and definitely worth the splurge. This five-star resort is a member of the Leading Hotels of the World and features 41 guest rooms, suites, villas and palaces with sumptuous soaking tubs and outdoor plunge pools.

Dining in Morocco is an event, characterized by multiple courses of colorful dishes. If you're adventurous, you can't go wrong eating anything that strikes your senses in the souks and street markets (tagines, grilled brochettes, fresh orange juice, etc.). But for more formal fare, check out Café des Epices in the medina for fresh sandwiches, salads and hot tea served Moroccan style with fresh mint and a heap of sugar, or book a table at Dar Moha Restaurant where famous acts like Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder once dined poolside.

## Sahara

No trip to Morocco would be complete without a taste of Bedouin culture, and the Sahara is the best place to dive in for an authentic immersion. But sleeping in the sand may not be everyone's cup of tea, which is why Sahara Experience arranges trips for its guests to check out – and check in to – the Erg

Chigaga Luxury Desert Camp. Getting to the camp takes almost a full day from Marrakech, but the scenic drive through the lush Atlas Mountains – past Berber villages, dilapidated kasbahs, and exotic landscapes – is worth the trip in itself.

Once you arrive to the base of the desert, the journey picks up where your driver will navigate through the unpaved dunes to reach this secluded camp. The camp is set up with 10 spacious tents, each equipped with plush rugs, a king-sized bed, and en-suite bathroom facilities (shower, sink and toilet). Once you've settled in, the camp then becomes your glamorous home base for a range of activities that include sunset camel rides, quad biking, guided hikes, sandboarding, picnicking and stargazing. At nights, the culinary team prepares a traditional Moroccan feast outside of the camp's central "Berber Lounge" under the stars, with piping hot tagines, ice-cold drinks, alcohol for adults, and live entertainment for guests.

## Essaouira

Famous for kitesurfing and windsurfing, this coastal town is a two-hour drive from Marrakech, and is one of the best-kept secrets in Africa ... despite the fact that it has long been a favorite hippie refuge for names like Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa, Cat Stevens and more. The city was once enclosed in towering fortress walls, and remnants of the fortress remain, having been turned into boutique shops, charming cafés and trendy restaurants.

Today, the city is home to a vibrant fishing harbor, a UNESCO World Heritage rated medina (where shopping ranges from intricate silver creations to surf gear and Berber textiles), and tons of street musicians playing Gnawa music to passersby. The Riad Zahra is a hip place to stay while in town, and the hotel is located near the medina and only two minutes to the beach on foot. The staff also arranges surf lessons for guests, or can provide transfers into the city where guests can get a taste for the local life at restaurants like La Clé de Voute (French and Moroccan fusion) and Chez Sam (fresh seafood served Moroccan style).

For a truly unique experience, make a side trip for lunch on the drive back to Marrakech to visit the Val d'Argan Restaurant. The restaurant is located just outside



Essaouira within the only organic vineyard in Morocco (and the only vineyard in the world that's plowed by a camel), owned by French winemaker, Charles Mélia, of Font du Loup in Châteauneuf-du-Pape fame. Not only is Mélia producing some of the best wines in Morocco, but his Moroccan culinary team creates an incredibly affordable lunch menu that celebrated wine and food writer Jancis Robinson once called "my best meal of the year." ■

For more information or to book your custom Marrakech vacation, visit [sahara-experience.com](http://sahara-experience.com).