

# M Experience MOROCCO

*Few places on earth evoke mystery, romance, and wanderlust quite the way Morocco does. Vibrant cities like Marrakech, Fez, and Rabat beckon with old-world charm, cultural heritage sites, traditions of artisanal cuisine and handmade goods, and ancient neighborhoods in which getting lost is part of the adventure. The magnificent dunes of the Sahara are a must-visit in their own right and ideal for an overnight stay. Here, our insider's guide to the wonders of the North African jewel.*



COURTESY OF LA MAMOUNIA (2)





*Reliably mentioned among the finest hotels in the world, La Mamounia in Marrakech is the pinnacle of luxury. Yet it also maintains a local flavor and personality that remind you of Morocco's magical beauty and intriguing history. With its array of five-star rooms and suites, four exquisite restaurants, world-class spa, and relaxing gardens, this gem of a hotel makes for an unforgettable Moroccan experience, and is the spot in which to rub elbows with the continent's elite.*



# Rabat

*The royal capital opens its arms to visitors*

In its more than eight centuries of existence, Rabat has seen it all. From its founding by Almohad caliphs, eager to utilize the city's proximity to Iberia for raiding, to its time under the control of Barbary pirates looking to dominate local shipping routes, Rabat has held strategic importance in the region.

When France created a protectorate in Morocco in 1912, the seat of government was moved back to Rabat from Fez, in partnership with Sultan Yusef Ben Hassan, an Alaouite who claimed the throne when his brother abdicated following the French treaty. When Morocco finally achieved independence in 1956, then King Mohammed V (grandfather of the current king, Mohammed VI) decided to keep his capital at Rabat, where it has remained ever since.

While Rabat is filled with archaeological wonders, it is worth noting that non-Muslims aren't permitted inside the majority of Morocco's mosques. But that doesn't stop tourists from beholding the historical and aesthetic wonders of such sites as the Hassan Tower and the Mausoleum of Mohammed V, near the Bou Regreg river. A minaret from an



## ROYALTY

King Mohammed VI has been the driving force behind Vision 2020, a modernization and tourism initiative intended to increase global awareness of and interest in Morocco. Vital parts of any global tourism campaign, hotel creation and infrastructure development are among Vision 2020's priorities. The project also places an emphasis on sustainable development, and is expected to help expand tourist visits beyond the traditional destinations of Marrakech and Agadir, opening entire regions of the country to visitors that have never before had the capacity to accommodate them. —*KG*



incomplete mosque whose construction began in the late 1100s, Hassan Tower survived a devastating earthquake in the 18th century, and now serves as a guidepost for the entire city. Meanwhile, the Mausoleum houses the tombs of Mohammed V and his two sons; be sure to take in its design flourishes, such as exquisite tile mosaics, marble floors, and ceilings crafted from cedarwood and gold leaf.

For a more immersive experience, don't miss the Chellah, a Roman settlement and later a Muslim necropolis, with some ruins preserved for more than a millennium. The site has now been restored as a beautiful garden and tourist attraction, and has hosted the superb Jazz au Chellah music festival since 2005. Nearby, take a little time to explore the Kasbah des Oudaias, with its laid-back vibe and central location. It is such an inviting area that many foreigners are putting down roots there.

To escape the hustle and bustle of the metropolis, nothing tops the Andalusian Gardens, a tranquil respite right in the city that is just as popular with locals and their families as it is with Instagram-snapping tourists; the Botanical Gardens are worth a visit as well. In fact, Rabat has been touted as a "green city" for its focus on environmental issues and the creation of copious verdant space.

But as the capital city of Morocco, Rabat

is also home to the king's nominal residence, known as Dâr-al-Makhzen or El Méchouar Essaïd palace. The current impressive compound was built in the mid 19th century, utilizing the finest French and local design concepts. Unless you're very well-connected, your visit will be akin to seeing the White House from Pennsylvania Avenue; you won't get on the grounds, but a talented guide can still provide a memorable experience with tales of historical and modern importance.

Luxury accommodations abound. Euphoriad offers authentically Moroccan design and decor, with massage treatments in a carved marble hammam overlooking the Rabat medina. At Sofitel Rabat Jardin des Roses, a Moroccan feel prevails, but with every possible modern luxury amenity on offer. While it's tempting to stay in your suite, the on-site garden is an attraction in its own right. Finally, for unmatched luxury service, Hôtel La Tour Hassan Palace is a must. With an aesthetic that balances the chic and the traditional, you'll never want to leave, which works out nicely, as the property has a handful of restaurants in addition to the laid-back yet refined Piano Bar; there's also a VIP lounge, ideal for an evening of dancing for those still energized after a day exploring one of Morocco's most fascinating destinations. —*Keith Gordon*



From top: View of the Kasbah des Oudaias; Mohammed VI, King of Morocco, right, with his brother Prince Moulay Rachid; the historic casbah of Rabat





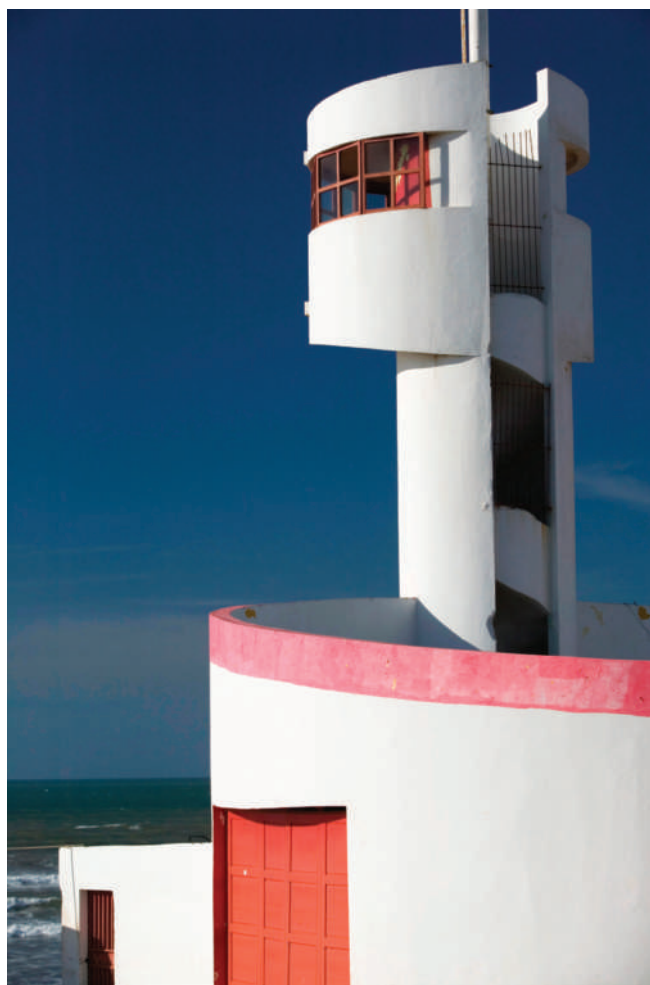
# Casablanca

*Discovering the city you thought you knew*

Casablanca. The name alone evokes images of beautiful, mysterious expats having passionate affairs and leading thrilling lives, but the true identity of the city today bears little resemblance to the Casablanca so many of us imagine. There's a Rick's Café, opened in 2004 and designed to resemble its namesake from the film, but to enjoy the city it's probably best to erase any preconceptions. While cities like Fez or Agadir may have more charm or personality, it's Casablanca, with more than three times the population of Marrakech, that is Morocco's economic and industrial powerhouse, and the backbone of the country.

Still, it is well worth a visit. One can stay at the Four Seasons Hotel Casablanca, which combines the opulent luxury of the hotel chain with all the Moroccan style, design, and culture one could wish for. Make it your beachfront home base, then check out the Old Medina neighborhood, with its winding streets and alleys, plus unique crafts. The nearby Marché Central is good for an array of spices and foods that will have your nose, and taste buds, encouraging you to experience Moroccan street fare at its finest. One should also schedule some time for a tour of the Hassan II Mosque. Not only is the mosque an exquisite modern representation of Islamic architecture, but upon its completion in 1993, it became the largest mosque in the nation. It's also the largest in Africa as of this writing, and one of few mosques in Morocco that allow non-Muslims to enter, offering guided tours throughout the day. So while the Casablanca you visit today might not match the city you've imagined since first seeing the Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman film all those years ago, it's got its own allure, and makes a great launching point for the rest of your Moroccan adventure. —KG

From top: *The Habous neighborhood of Casablanca; the Lifeguard Tower at Ain Diab Beach in Casablanca*



FROM TOP: COURTESY OF TUUL & BRUNO MORANDI/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF DANITA DELMONT/GETTY IMAGES

# Agadir

*Morocco's resort destination relishes the sun*

It's uncommon for a modern city built largely in the past half century to have an extensive and fascinating history, but little about Agadir is commonplace. Located on the shores of the Atlantic and one of the most visited towns in southern Morocco, it is a true tale of two cities: the one before 1960 and the one after. For it was in 1960 that a massive earthquake essentially wiped Agadir off the map, causing unprecedented destruction and erasing centuries of cultural and architectural history.

The main draw of laid-back Agadir today is the city's easily accessible and tranquil beach, whose blue-green water, raw natural beauty, and cleanliness attract visitors in spades. It's a must-see spot when in Agadir, especially when the waves reach epic heights, perfect for both adrenaline-junkie surfers and beach strollers looking for some entertainment.

But there's much more than just the beach to discover. For one, enter a city hammam, especially if you want to relax and socialize but need a break from the North African sun. These bathhouses are a cornerstone of Moroccan culture and community where visitors can receive world-class pampering or simply converse with locals and fellow travelers. While each has its own personality and amenities, the most luxurious experience can be found at the **Argan Palace**, which specializes not only in hammam bath treatments but services like a traditional Berber massage. And there's nothing quite like an argan oil massage in the place that gave the popular elixir to the world.

For more relaxing luxury, there are a number of hotels in Agadir to choose from.



Yet the Sofitel Agadir Royal Bay Resort offers the ideal balance of modern refined luxury and casbah-style design and architecture. With a full array of offerings, from water sports at the beach to golf, and environs punctuated with bright, colorful fabrics and elegant fountains, the place is a feast for the senses. While the rooms and suites are stellar, treat yourself to the Premium Deluxe villa, with three bedrooms and full butler

service. The property's four restaurants and nightclub may convince you to never leave during your stay.

But exploring Agadir is a must, and one stop has to be La Médina d'Agadir. A full-scale, open-air reconstruction of the city's former medina, which was destroyed by the earthquake, the new version was built using traditional techniques and serves as a museum, a piece of art in and of itself, and a

*Left: Hill of the old casbah in Agadir. Its walls and the Arabic inscription "God, Country, King" are illuminated at night.*





COURTESY OF HYATT PLACE  
TAGHAZOUT BAY

way to look back in time at the magnificent city before the tragedy of the 1960 earthquake. To learn more, stop by the *Mémoire d'Agadir*, a museum set amid gardens that's close to the beach and the city center. Though it lacks the modern, interactive exhibits typical of most museums, this one has walls plastered with photos, newspaper clippings, and other media instead, all of which allow visitors to fully grasp how

different the city was before the quake and how that event changed it forever.

Finally, it may be tempting to eat nonstop as you stroll through the *Souk El Had d'Agadir*, Agadir's bustling marketplace. But just as with its architecture and design, Agadir's finest Berber cuisine bears witness to the French influence that has inflected Moroccan traditions for centuries. Countless choices are available, but if you

want to skip the line and hit up the very best, make a reservation at *Pure Passion*. While gourmet menu options like foie gras and a Chateaubriand for two are enticing, the truly special offerings are from the sea. Exceptional shellfish of every sort is on offer, but make sure to try the oysters au gratin with smoked-salmon Mornay sauce, which may make you rethink your definition of great seafood. —KG

*A luxe cabana on Taghazout Bay in Agadir*

# Erg Chebbi

*There's nowhere better to experience Saharan Morocco's mesmerizing sand dunes*



Much of Morocco is about color and vibrancy, the energy of an ancient culture brought into the modern age. But one part of the country remains exactly as monotone and eerily quiet as it has been for centuries: the sand dunes that take up huge spaces between the cities and towns spread across the nation. Perhaps the most well-regarded of these is Erg Chebbi, still the home of Berber nomads who have inhabited the area for generations.

With unique, orange-colored sand and dunes that can rise to nearly 500 feet, it's exactly the image many have in mind when visiting Saharan Morocco. The adventurous traveler can explore the dunes on an all-terrain vehicle or 4x4, or strap a sandboard to

your feet atop one of the hills and do your best to make it to the bottom, like a snowboarder in a T-shirt and shorts. A more traditional trek involves a sunset or sunrise camel ride, a surprisingly fun and relaxing way to see the exotic beauty of the dunes in as authentic a manner as possible. The only drawback is the location; Erg Chebbi isn't close to any of the major towns or cities you're likely to visit. Which means one thing—an overnight visit.

For an area largely empty of civilization, there are a surprising number of places to stay, ranging from modern, high-end hotels to small campsites with traditional Berber hospitality. Either of these might fit your travel style and expectations, but we highly recom-

mend you combine the two and check out the **Merzouga Luxury Desert Camp**. This oasis in the desert offers deluxe accommodations that will change the way you think about camping. Its main camp offers 15 luxury tents and a fascinating social experience, while private camps are ideal for those desiring their own personal retreat. But for desert camping at its finest, **Desert Luxury Camp's Royal Camp** is a must. With the desert stretched out to the horizon, the Royal's massive tents, complete with top-tier amenities like handmade Moroccan rugs, comfortable king-size beds, full bathrooms, and a designated area for the group to eat, are the perfect places to relax and be pampered by the staff. —KG



*From top: Merzouga Luxury Desert Camp at night; inside one of the two tents at Desert Luxury Camp's Royal Camp, the ideal place for a private, tranquil Saharan glamping experience—modern-day amenities included.*

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