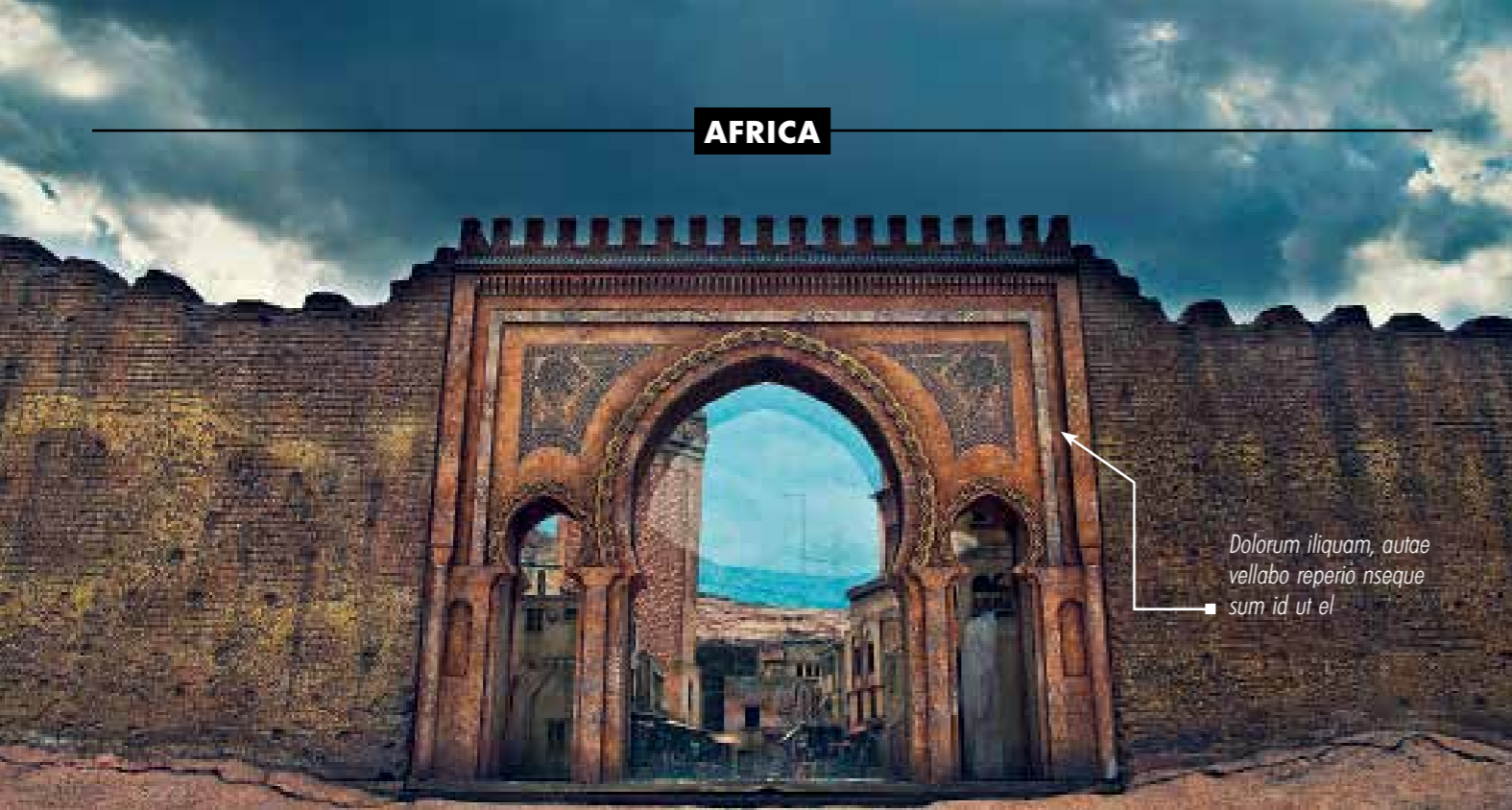


AFRICA



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# FIND *magic* in Morocco

From the winding lanes of its ancient medinas to the snow-capped Atlas Mountains, and some of the world's most delicious food, Morocco is a longstanding traveller's favourite

BY JAMES BAINBRIDGE

**F**ez tanneries, the call to prayer sounding over Marrakech, camels disappearing into the Saharan dunes, Berber carpets and glasses of mint tea – and that's just the first page of the brochure. But what makes up this mystical North African kingdom, and what are the highlights of this Maghrebi gem covering just over a third of South Africa's total area?

In the far north, the city of Tangier can be reached in under an hour by ferry and catamaran, across the Strait of Gibraltar from southern Spain. On clear days, from the battlements of the 15th-century Portuguese fortress enclosing the medina, you can see the hazy outline of Europe across the treacherous waters at the meeting of the Mediterranean and Atlantic. Its position at the

gateway to Africa made Tangier a popular destination in the 20th century, when everyone from painter Henri Matisse and the American Beat poets, to spies and '60s hippies, explored the medina lanes and Ville Nouvelle boulevards. You can get a sense of this heritage in the Tangier American Legation Institute for Moroccan Studies, as well as the El Minzah Hotel's photos of the city's celeb visitors – and don't miss the medina and souks.

Throughout Morocco, souks are medina marketplaces where you'll find everything from fresh produce, brought by mule from fertile oases and mountain slopes, to vibrant carpets with symbolic motifs and patterns. With souks often specialising in crafts such as silver Berber jewellery and woodwork, these bazaars are great spots to





# FAST Know this FACTS

## LOCATION

Morocco borders Algeria and Mauritania in northwest Africa.

## WEATHER

Morocco follows European seasons. Visit in spring (March – April) or autumn (October – November) for moderate weather.

## SAFETY

Although street hustlers are common, Morocco is one of the safest African countries for travellers. Women should dress conservatively in this moderate Islamic country. Beware of pickpocketing and other petty crime in medinas and bus stations.

## CURRENCY

Moroccan Dirham. R10 = DH706.

## GETTING THERE

Airlines including Emirates link South Africa to Morocco's main airport, Casablanca Mohammed V International Airport, via the Middle East or Europe.

## GETTING AROUND

Moroccans drive on the right; you can hire cars through the likes of Economycarrentals.com. CTM and Supratours coaches are good quality and there is a train network in the north.

## VISAS

South Africans must apply for a visa in advance; visit [embassyofmorocco.co.za](http://embassyofmorocco.co.za).



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bag souvenirs and photos. In Fez – the next must-visit Moroccan city as you travel south from Tangier – the multicoloured dye pits of the tannery area are ringed with leather shops, their stock (and sales techniques) perfected over millennia.

With its twisting alleyways, mosques and madrasas sprawling over two hills, Fez's map-defying medina is the planet's largest living Islamic medieval city and its biggest car-free urban environment. You could spend several days here (especially if you get lost), but there are more historic sights to discover in this part of Morocco. Volubilis, with its ruined triumphal arch and mosaics, was once an outpost of the Roman Empire, while nearby Moulay Idriss is a hilltop pilgrimage town housing the mausoleum of the Prophet Mohammed's great-grandson. Up in the Rif Mountains, no filter is required in Chefchaouen's gorgeous blue-walled, red-roofed medina, a fusion of Moroccan and Andalusian influences.

Continuing south, Morocco's famous landscape goes into overdrive, as the forests and waterfalls of the Middle Atlas rise to the gnarly peaks and windswept plateaux of the High Atlas. This elemental kingdom is home to the indigenous Berbers, friendly people who can be found farming or sipping tea in tiny villages atop tortuous mountain passes.

The ranges offer authentic experiences of rural Moroccan life, whether hiking the Todra or Dadès Gorge, trekking up Jbel Toubkal, Morocco's highest peak at 4 167 m, or poking around relics such as the mudbrick kasbah at Aït Benhaddou. Along the way, be sure to say *ahlan* (hello in Tachelhit, Morocco's main Berber language) and pass the time of day in broken French among the sun-dried clay walls of ramshackle

villages. Market days are colourful events, drawing people from miles around on foot or crammed into old Mercedes grands taxis, and annual fixtures include September's Imilchil marriage festival, the Berbers' answer to *Boer Soek 'n Vrou*.

The ochre Anti-Atlas range leads south, beneath ever bluer skies, to oasis villages and crumbling kasbahs on the Sahara's fiery fringes. Like the Berber and Tuareg nomads in their flowing blue robes, local animals have uniquely adapted to the harsh environment; in the Souss Valley, look out for agile goats climbing frizzy Argan trees to munch on the nuts.

To plunge further into the mighty desert, point your camel to the dune-backed village of Merzouga, where turban-wrapped guides lead dromedary expeditions to encampments beneath the twinkling stars. Nearby Erg Chebbi, a rippling sand sea reaching up to 160 m above the surrounding flats, is popular for generating some static on a sand board.

The best place to end an adventure in the Moroccan wilderness is the beautiful city of Marrakech, where you can gaze at the distant High Atlas from a rooftop

restaurant. Try a tagine – the meat, fish or vegetable stew cooked in the conical earthenware pot of the same name, which keeps sizzling at the table. At sunset, hit main square Jemaa el-Fnaa for a great carnival, where snake charmers, contortionists, acrobats, belly dancers, orange juice squeezers and brochette grillers gather, as they have for a thousand years, in a ritual acclaimed by Unesco as a masterpiece of intangible heritage.

Marrakech, with its cool riad courtyard hotels, genuine Hammam steam baths, and medina shopping for current Maghrebi fashion, is an exciting fusion of ancient and modern. Try to make it to the Jardin Majorelle, an electric-blue villa and psychedelic garden, left to the city by fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent.

Another great spot for holiday lounging is the Atlantic coast, where the Essaouira medina, once a major port on the trade route between Timbuktu and Europe, recently featured in *Game of Thrones*. Adventure seekers should head south from here to the likes of Taghazout and the atmospheric outpost of Sidi Ifni, where whitewashed art deco relics built by the Spanish overlook the waves. ✦