

travel

Gateway to North Africa

We always imagine Ingrid Bergman's luminous face in the dim shadows at Rick's Place, saying to Humphrey Bogart: "Victor Lazlo must not die in Casablanca." That's the Casablanca we love, but it's one that never existed. In fact, as Boca Raton discovered, many tour guides circumvent the city altogether for more interesting forays into other parts of Morocco.

Moroccan Musts

- [1] Although this is a largely Islamic country, there's no strict dress code. That said, dress respectfully, do not take photographs of anyone without permission, and be polite.
- [2] Tote your own toilet tissue; in many public places, you will have to pay for tissue and toilets.
- [3] Haggle. This is how purchases are made, and it's standard operating procedure. If you can't bargain, don't buy it—chances are, you'll get ripped off.
- [4] Having said that, do buy that rug. You will wish you had once you get home.

Cutline



ROAD TO MOROCCO, PART I

This romantic Arab country is both exotic—and accessible.

THE BACK STORY: Morocco has enchanted travelers for centuries—and Americans since the Summer of Love, when it was the end point for traveling ex-pats on the “hashish trail,” which started in Amsterdam and ended in Marrakech. Today, the country is a routine weekend destination for Europeans—and an increasingly popular vacation for a new generation of international visitors. It is exotic, inexpensive and has a wide range of diversions, from mountain climbing in the high Atlas range, to wind surfing at Essaouira to camel riding in the Sahara.

The country is marked by fertile hill towns and sunflower fields reminiscent of Tuscany, as well as crumbling pink adobe Kasbahs hundreds of years old rising from the rugged plains. There are men driving donkey carts, and Berber and Bedouin nomads who live in dark winged tents. The call to prayer wails through narrow winding alleys. The smell of spices and fish, raw meats and almond oil fills the souks (open-air markets). It is all Morocco, and all worth seeing.

LOVE AMONG THE RUINS: About a four-hour drive northwest of Casablanca is Meknes, the ancient Berber capital known as a “city of 100 minarets” and a World Heritage site as designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It’s lush and fertile, contrary to the country’s desert image, with olive groves, date palms, wild poppies—and canaries singing in stands of cedar. It’s also close to the Roman ruins of Volubis, which is a well-reserved

archeological site dating from 32 B.C. and distinguished by a commanding arch, a basilica, and several rooms with ornate mosaic floors in excellent condition.

FEZ FACTOR: Fez in northeast Morocco is the former capital, founded in 789 A.D., and now a destination for ceramics, copperware and embroidered linen. It also has a famous leather-tanning market with ancient dye pits. (When entering the leather market overlooking the dye pits, guests are given a fresh sprig of mint to offset the odor.) The medina, or market, is within a walled city center (no automobiles allowed) comprised of more than 8,000 ancient narrow alleyways twisting and turning, full of people, produce stalls, donkey carts and spices. Once a major trading post on the Barbary Coast, the old city retains a sense of mystery and embodies the heart of traditional Moroccan culture.

The Cuisine

Typical Moroccan food is cooked and served in a cone-shaped ceramic tagine and usually has layers of vegetables, lamb, chicken or beef, and rice or couscous. Olives are on the table with every meal, and sweet mint tea is served with a flourish afterward. There is an abundance of fine French food in the country, as would be expected since Morocco was a French protectorate from 1912 to 1946. **Our favorite?** Try Seffa Medfouna, a famous dish featuring saffron chicken, lamb or beef hidden within a dome of steamed couscous or broken vermicelli (chaariya). The couscous or vermicelli is sweetened with raisins, butter and powdered sugar and decorated with ground fried almonds, cinnamon and additional powdered sugar.



WHERE TO STAY/DINE

FEZ

RIAD FES, a Relais & Châteaux property, offers luxury accommodations in a dramatic Hispano-Moorish “guest palace” conceived in traditional riad style (which is a domicile surrounding a garden courtyard with water). This hotel is nothing short of stunning, with a dramatic grand open lobby and impeccably appointed rooms.

LE MAISON BLEUE is the oldest guesthouse and restaurant in Fez.

DESERT

An **ABERCROMBIE & KENT** (A&K) tented camp is the way to go; make arrangements with A&K through 800/652-7963.

MARRAKECH

The lush and luxurious **LA MAMOUNIA** is one of the legendary hotels of the world, a five-star experience that some have described as “mythic.” The **ROYAL MANSOUR**, built by the royal family and within the old city walls, maintains that it elevates “Moroccan living to an art form.” It may be the most luxurious property in the country, with individual three-story riads, each with its own “discreet” butler. The over-the-top **PALAIS NAMASKAR** is a new luxury five-star hotel designed with feng shui principles and a stunning water component. It is both contemporary and classic, with fine food, a spa, sumptuous individual pool villas and exceptional service.

LA MASON ARABE has both French and Moroccan cuisine, a romantic terrace, and a piano bar that only needs Peter Lorre with a martini to be perfect.



Cutline

ROAD TO MOROCCO, PART II

More adventures inside this exotic North African vacation spot.

MERZOUGA DUNES AND THE GREAT CAMEL RIDE: No trip to Morocco is complete without the desert experience, and Abercrombie & Kent provides a superlative one. The closest town with tourist hotels is Erfoud, where desert explorers wait until the sun slips lower in the sky and the desert becomes bearable. At 4 p.m., four-wheel drive vehicles head west toward the border of Algeria, and in no time the first pink dunes of the Sahara rise in the distance against a cobalt blue sky. After careening off road into the desert for about eight miles, the caravan arrives at its overnight accommodations: a line of festive African tents, each with its own shower-and-WC tent. There are Berber carpets on the floors, running water and comfy beds. A string of camels led by their Bedouin keepers shows up, and guests head off to watch the sun slip into the dunes over the Sahara. The camel ride is followed by a fine dinner in the communal dining tent—and a good night’s sleep under a star-choked sky so close you can touch it.

MARRAKECH EXPRESS: This is party city compared to Fez, with an international cachet and a festive atmosphere. The Djemaa el Fna Square and Market comes alive at night with cobra handlers, people with monkeys, acrobats, tribal food vendors and musicians. The vast souk is ground zero for shopping, with tourist baubles as well as substantial stores selling antique jewelry, rugs and home furnishings. A most-see stop is the Berber Pharmacy with its room of spices and teas, medicinal creams and mixes, Argon oil products and the magical Berber lipstick that changes color on every individual—to the perfect natural shade. Other points of interest in Marrakech are the Jardin Majorelle gardens, the Bahia Palace and The Saadian Tombs.

