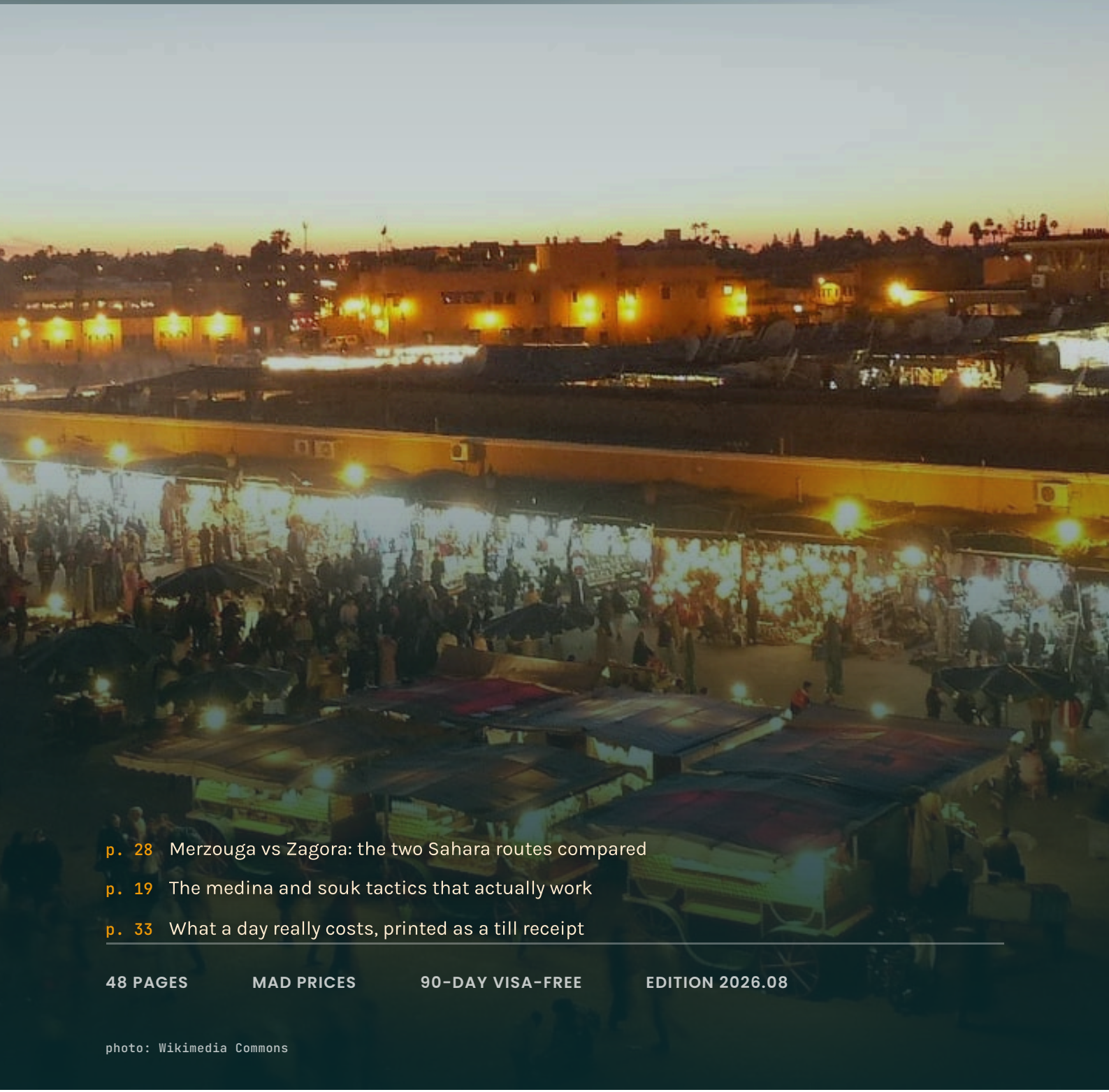
PACK LIGHTLY

FROM THE MEDINA TO THE DUNES

Morocco

Which desert route actually suits your time, what the souk tourist tax looks like, and what to book before you land.



p. 28 Merzouga vs Zagora: the two Sahara routes compared

p. 19 The medina and souk tactics that actually work

p. 33 What a day really costs, printed as a till receipt

48 PAGES · MAD PRICES · 90-DAY VISA-FREE · EDITION 2026.08

photo: Wikimedia Commons

Start here

the shape of a Morocco trip, what it costs, what to sort first



Morocco splits into three trips that rarely fit in one visit: the imperial cities (Marrakech, Fes, Meknes), the Sahara routes out of the Atlas, and the Atlantic coast towns (Essaouira, Casablanca). This guide is built around picking one combination and doing it properly rather than rushing all three. Medina navigation, the two main desert routes compared, and the handful of things worth booking ahead, all offline in your pocket.

The shape of a trip

Most first trips run Marrakech to the Sahara and back over 7 to 10 days, or extend north to Fes and Chefchaouen over two weeks. The medinas reward slow mornings before the heat and the tour buses arrive.

What a day costs

Budget travel runs about 35 USD a day, mid-range around 85, captured August 2026. The full breakdown, riad to dinner, is on page 33.

Sort before you fly

Most EU, UK, US, and Canadian passports enter visa-free for 90 days. Add travel insurance and an eSIM before landing. Page 35 lists what is worth locking in early.





HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

Contents

tap a line to jump straight there

01 The country 06

02 Where to go 09

03 The medina, worked out 18

04 Stay and go deeper 22

05 Routes and itineraries 26

06 When to go, what it costs 31

07 Practical 34

08 Safe and smart 39

09 Tools, print cards, sources 43

QUICK JUMPS

Merzouga vs Zagora, the Sahara routes compared 28

Souk tactics that actually work 19

What a day really costs 33

Your trip on one page

10 days · 35 to 85 USD/day · best Mar to May or Oct to Nov

If you read nothing else, this page is the trip. The classic first-timer route runs Marrakech to the Sahara and back over 7 to 10 days; add Fes and Chefchaouen to the north for a fuller two weeks. Budget from the bars below, not from riad rack rates in the medina center. Book the desert route and the first two nights right before you fly; everything else is easier to arrange once you land in Marrakech.

THE ROUTE

Marrakech, day 1-3 — 8h desert road — Merzouga, day 4-5 — 9h return road — Marrakech, day 6-7 — 3h drive — Essaouira, day 8-10

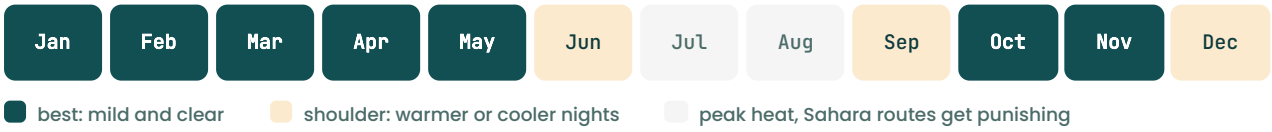
BUDGET PER DAY



BOOK FIRST

01	International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out	Skyscanner
02	First two riad nights in Marrakech, 3 to 4 weeks out	Stay22
03	eSIM, install before departure	Saily

BEST MONTHS



Morocco at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

Tourist infrastructure	65
Safety	70
Budget friendly	75
Nature	80
Food and drinks	80
Culture	90

Budget travel	35 USD/day
Mid-range	85 USD/day
Luxury	250 USD/day

CULTURE · ADVENTURE · BEACH · WELLNESS

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-08

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP













01

The country

What Morocco is, what it is not, who goes, and the four regions worth knowing before you pick a route.

IN THIS CHAPTER

One country, four regions, four readers 07

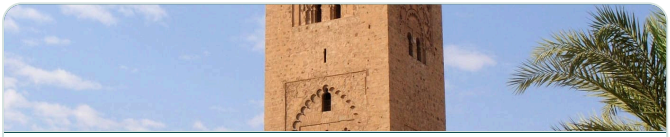
What Morocco is

37M people · 4 regions · Africa's most-visited country

A constitutional monarchy of 37 million people, the northwest corner of Africa, 14 kilometres from Spain across the Strait of Gibraltar. Rabat is the political capital; Casablanca is the economic one; Marrakech is where most trips actually start. Morocco is Africa's most-visited country and the infrastructure shows it: a fast train links Tangier to Casablanca, grand taxis and buses cover everywhere else, and riads exist in every price bracket. The trade-off is exactly that popularity. Marrakech's medina runs a well-drilled tourist economy, with a souk tax on anyone who looks like a first-time visitor. This guide shows you the version that still works once you know the moves.

CAPITAL	POPULATION	CURRENCY	BEST MONTHS
Rabat	**37M**	**MAD**	**Mar-May**
political capital	99% Muslim	closed currency, exchange on arrival	mild, before the heat

FOUR REGIONS, FOUR CHARACTERS



Marrakech and the Atlas

gateway city · mountains at the door · hot Jun-Aug

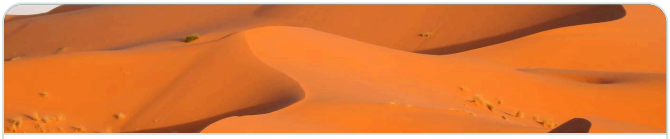
Where almost every trip starts. The medina, the souks, and a one-hour drive to Atlas foothill villages and Toubkal trailheads.



Fes and the imperial north

oldest medina · mild spring/autumn · cooler winters

The medina UNESCO actually means it about: no cars, 9,000 alleys, and the leather tanneries that show up in every feed.



The Sahara: Merzouga, Zagora

desert camps · cool nights year-round · brutal Jul-Aug days

Two routes in from Marrakech, compared in full on page 29. Both end in a desert camp; only one crosses the highest pass in North Africa.



The Atlantic coast

wind and surf · cooler year-round · Essaouira, Casablanca

Trade wind city with a walkable medina and a fraction of Marrakech's hustle. Three hours from Marrakech, a full change of pace.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

First-time North Africa
7 to 10 days, mid-range, the Marrakech to Sahara loop.

Photographer or hiker
Atlas trailheads, Chefchaouen light, Toubkal in season.

Solo backpacker
35 USD a day, riad dorms, shared desert tours to split costs.

Couple escaping winter
A short direct flight from Europe, Marrakech plus the coast.

photos: Wikimedia Commons

02

Where to go

Four cities, one desert, and the coast. Pick your combination before your dates: Sahara in July is a different trip than Sahara in November.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Marrakech 09

Fes 10

Chefchaouen 11

Essaouira and the coast 12

The High Atlas and Toubkal 13

Off the beaten path 14

Religious landmarks, access rules 15

Beaches and surf towns 16

Casablanca, briefly 17

Marrakech

gateway city · 3 nights minimum · best Mar-May, Oct-Nov


THE SOUKS, MARRAKECH MEDINA

Marrakech is the trip's engine room: almost every route in or out of Morocco touches it, and the medina is built to keep you spending. Jemaa el-Fnaa runs a different show at every hour, food stalls by night, snake charmers and orange juice carts by day. The souks north of the square sell everything from lamps to leather, at a price that assumes you have never haggled before.

Three nights is the minimum to see past the tourist loop. Book a riad inside the medina walls for the atmosphere, or Gueliz for a modern, calmer base with easier taxis. The Bahia Palace and Jardin Majorelle both reward an early slot, before the tour groups arrive around ten.

April through September, midday heat pushes past 35C. Do the medina before 11am and after 5pm; nap or pool in between.

A stranger who says the square or a landmark is "closed for a festival" is starting a shop-tour pitch. Nothing in the medina closes like that. Walk on.

Jemaa el-Fnaa

Go at sunset for the food stalls, midday for the quieter square and shade.

Bahia Palace

19th-century courtyards and zellige tilework; arrives at opening, before the coach groups.

Jardin Majorelle

Yves Saint Laurent's cobalt-blue garden; buy timed tickets online, queues run long.

Gueliz

The new town: fixed prices, easier taxis, a calmer base if the medina overwhelms.

GO DEEPER

The full Morocco best-places ranking and the souk-specific tactics on page 19 cover the rest of the medina in more depth than fits here.

Fes

oldest medina · 2-3 nights · best spring, autumn



CHOUARA TANNERY, FES EL BALI

Fes el Bali is the largest car-free urban area on earth, roughly 9,000 alleys that have run the same way since the 9th century. It is quieter than Marrakech's medina and harder to navigate without a guide for the first pass; hire one for the first morning, then walk it alone once the shape clicks. The Chouara tannery is the famous shot, but the leather souk around it is worth more time than the viewpoint itself.

Two nights covers the medina highlights; three lets you add the Merenid tombs at sunset, above the city walls, without rushing. Fes runs noticeably cooler than Marrakech in summer and colder in winter, worth checking against your dates.

A first-time visitor gets lost in Fes el Bali within twenty minutes. Screenshot your riad's location and the nearest gate before you set out.

Mint sprigs are handed out at the tannery viewpoint to offset the smell. Take one; the pits are working leather vats, not a stage set.

Chouara Tannery

Best light mid-morning; entry through a leather shop is standard, no obligation to buy.

Al-Attarine Madrasa

14th-century Marinid tilework, smaller crowds than the tannery, genuinely worth the ticket.

Merenid Tombs

Free viewpoint above the walls; arrive 45 minutes before sunset to claim a spot.

Bab Boujloud

The blue gate marking the medina's main entrance; a reliable landmark to navigate back to.

READ ON Access rules and opening hours for the mosques and madrasas that allow visitors are in the religious landmarks breakdown.

Chefchaouen

the blue city · 2 nights · Rif mountains, cooler air



Every wall, step, and doorway in the old medina is washed in a shade of blue, a practice with several competing origin stories and no single confirmed one. It photographs better than almost anywhere else in the country and draws crowds accordingly by mid-morning; the earliest light, before nine, is when the empty-alley shots actually happen.

Chefchaouen sits in the Rif mountains, a five-hour drive from Fes or six from Marrakech, which makes it a detour rather than a stop on the main loop. Worth it if the north is already on your route; skip it if the Sahara and the coast are the priority and time is tight.

Arrive by 8am for empty-street photos. By 10am, the main lanes fill with day-trip groups from Tetouan and Tangier.

Some residents ask for a small fee before you photograph their doorway. It is a reasonable ask; carry small notes.

Plaza Uta el-Hammam

The main square, ringed by cafes; a good base point for looping the blue alleys.

Spanish Mosque viewpoint

A 45-minute uphill walk above town; go for sunset over the whole blue medina.

Ras el-Maa

A waterfall at the medina's edge where locals still wash wool; quiet in early morning.

Kasbah Museum

Small 15th-century fortress and garden; the tower gives a second rooftop view of the town.

MORE ON THE SITE

The off-the-beaten-path guide covers Rif mountain routes beyond Chefchaouen for travelers with extra days in the north.

Essaouira and the coast

Atlantic wind · 2-3 nights · cooler year-round



THE FISHING PORT, ESSAOUIRA

Essaouira runs at a different speed than Marrakech: a walkable, walled medina, a working fishing port that sells the day's catch grilled at plastic tables on the harbor, and a trade wind that makes it one of Africa's better windsurfing and kitesurfing bases. Three hours from Marrakech by road, it is the most common coastal add-on to a desert-and-medina trip.

Blue fishing boats, white ramparts, and gulls fill the port at midday; the medina itself is compact enough to see properly in a day, leaving a second day for the beach south of town or a surf lesson. Nights run cooler than Marrakech even in peak summer, which makes it a natural heat escape.

The wind is near-constant April through September. Pack a layer even on a hot day; the harbor cools fast once the trade wind picks up.

Grilled-fish stalls at the port quote a price per kilo, not per plate. Agree the weight and price before they start cooking.

Skala de la Ville

Ramparts with cannons overlooking the Atlantic; the classic Essaouira photo, best at golden hour.

The fishing port

Grilled sardines and sea bass at plastic tables, priced by weight, fresh off the boats.

Windsurf and kitesurf beach

South of town; lessons run half-day for beginners, board rental by the hour for the experienced.

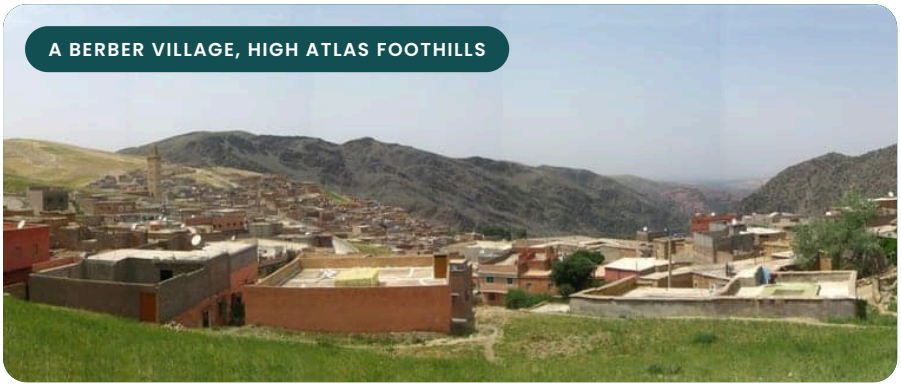
The medina souks

Thuya wood carving is the local specialty; prices run gentler here than in Marrakech.

GO DEEPER Wind and swell windows for the whole coast are broken down in the surf and wind beaches guide, and island detours near the port are covered on the Morocco islands page.

The High Atlas and Toubkal

mountains · day trip or 2-day trek · best Apr-Jun, Sep-Oct



A BERBER VILLAGE, HIGH ATLAS FOOTHILLS

The High Atlas starts less than an hour outside Marrakech and holds Jebel Toubkal, North Africa's highest peak at 4,167 metres. Most visitors do a day trip to Imlil or the Ourika Valley for waterfalls, mule rides, and a Berber village lunch. The Toubkal summit itself is a two-day trek with an overnight at Refuge du Toubkal, not a technical climb but a genuine altitude effort.

December through February brings snow to the summit route, which then requires crampons and an ice axe. April through June and September through October give the clearest paths and the most reliable weather window for a two-day attempt.

A licensed guide is required for the Toubkal summit route, arranged through Imlil's guide bureau, not optional or a formality.

Ourika Valley day trips from Marrakech run 3 to 4 hours round-trip in traffic. Leave by 8am to beat both the heat and the tour buses.

Imlil

The trailhead village for Toubkal; guide bureau, gear rental, and mule hire all arranged here.

Ourika Valley

Setti Fatma's seven waterfalls, a common half-day trip from Marrakech.

Refuge du Toubkal

The overnight stop for the summit trek; book ahead in peak season, basic dorm-style rooms.

Berber villages

Traditional lunch stops on the day-trip circuit; a genuine income source for foothill communities.

READ ON

The full trekking rundown across all ten parks, including Toubkal National Park's access points, sits in the national parks guide.

Off the beaten path

Erg Chigaga, Tafraoute · for a second or third trip



The Zagora to Erg Chigaga track is unpaved and rough. A 4x4 transfer, not a standard car rental, is the realistic way in.

Erg Chigaga sits roughly 60 kilometres past Zagora, reached by a rough track rather than sealed road, and sees a fraction of Merzouga's traffic. The dunes run taller and the camps sit further from any town's light pollution, at the cost of a longer, rougher approach. Worth the detour on a second Morocco trip, not a first one on a tight schedule.

Tafraoute, in the Anti-Atlas south of Agadir, offers pink granite rock formations and painted boulders that draw almost no tour traffic. Both destinations reward travelers with extra days and a preference for quiet over convenience.

Erg Chigaga

The quieter dune field, reached via Zagora; camps here see far fewer overnight groups than Merzouga.

Tafraoute

Pink granite valleys and painted rocks in the Anti-Atlas; a base for almond-blossom season in February.

MORE ON THE SITE

The complete off-the-beaten-path guide maps out both routes in full, with village stops along the way.

Mosques, madrasas, and access rules

15 landmarks · most closed to non-Muslim visitors



Hassan II Mosque tours pause for the five daily prayer times. Check the schedule at the ticket booth before planning your visit around it.

Most working mosques in Morocco are closed to non-Muslim visitors, including landmark ones like the Koutoubia in Marrakech, which can only be viewed from outside. The exception that matters most: the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, one of the few mosques in the country that offers guided tours to all visitors outside prayer times, with tickets sold at a booth beside the mosque.

Madrasas are a different category and often open to all, since they historically functioned as schools rather than active prayer sites. The Al-Attarine and Bou Inania madrasas in Fes, and the Ben Youssef Madrasa in Marrakech, are the three worth planning a visit around.

Hassan II Mosque

Casablanca; guided tours for all visitors, the only mosque of this scale open to non-Muslims.

Ben Youssef Madrasa

Marrakech; open to all, intricate 16th-century tilework in a compact courtyard.

Bou Inania Madrasa

Fes; a working mosque and school, one of the few with a viewable prayer hall for visitors.

Koutoubia Mosque

Marrakech's tallest landmark; exterior and gardens only, closed to non-Muslims inside.

GO DEEPER All 15 sites, with exact access rules and opening hours, are ranked in the religious landmarks guide.

photo: Wikimedia Commons

Beaches and surf towns

Atlantic swell · Taghazout, Essaouira, Sidi Kaouki



Water temperature rarely tops 22C, even in August. Rent a full wetsuit rather than a shorty, whatever the air temperature says.

Morocco's Atlantic coast runs a consistent point-break swell that has built Taghazout, near Agadir, into one of Africa's better-known surf towns, with year-round breaks suited to intermediate and advanced surfers. Sidi Kaouki, south of Essaouira, offers gentler waves and a stronger beginner scene, plus the same trade winds that make Essaouira good for windsurfing.

Water stays cool year-round, in the high teens to low twenties Celsius, so a wetsuit is standard even in summer. Surf camps in Taghazout run week-long packages with board and accommodation bundled, the most straightforward way to learn.

Taghazout

The main surf hub; consistent point breaks, a full range of camps and board rental.

Sidi Kaouki

Gentler beginner waves south of Essaouira; also a solid windsurf and kitesurf base.

Anchor Point

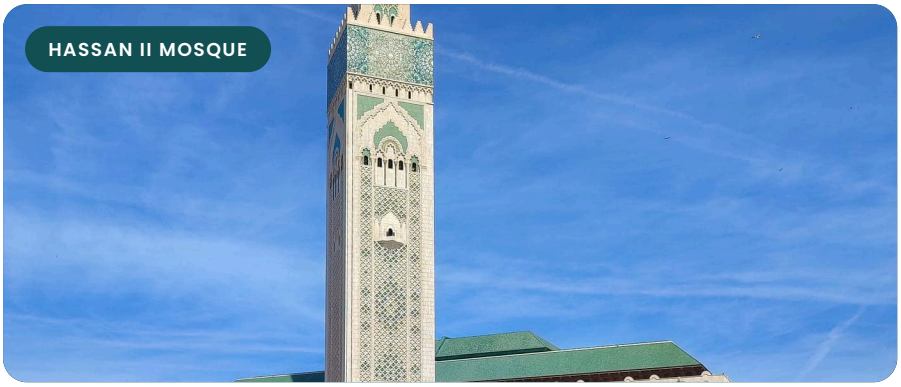
One of Morocco's most consistent right-hand point breaks, for experienced surfers.

READ ON

Swell windows and full beach-by-beach detail sit in the surf and wind beaches guide.

Casablanca, briefly

economic capital · 1 night, or a layover stop



Casablanca is Morocco's largest city and its economic engine, not its tourist draw. Most visitors pass through on the way to or from the airport, which handles the bulk of international arrivals. The Hassan II Mosque is the one genuine landmark worth a stop: the world's tallest minaret and one of the only mosques in Morocco open to non-Muslim visitors.

One night covers it: the mosque tour, a walk through the Art Deco downtown, and dinner at Rick's Cafe, a recreation inspired by the 1942 film rather than a historical site. Most itineraries skip Casablanca entirely and fly directly into Marrakech, which is a reasonable call if time is tight.

03

The medina, worked out

Navigation, haggling, and the tactics that separate a good souk visit from an expensive one. No other trip prepares you for this the way Morocco does.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Getting un-lost, on purpose 19

Souk tactics that actually work 19

Haggling, done properly 20

Riad etiquette and what to expect 21

Souk tactics that actually work

Marrakech and Fes, the two medinas that run the hardest sell

Every souk in Marrakech and Fes runs a well-drilled economy aimed at first-time visitors, and the tactics below cost nothing and take no special skill, just the willingness to use them. None of this is about distrust of the medina itself; it is about not paying the beginner tax on a trip you will likely only take once.

NAVIGATION

Screenshot before you enter

Phone signal drops in the deepest medina alleys. Screenshot your riad's location and the nearest main gate before you set out.

Getting lost is normal, not a crisis

Fes el Bali alone has roughly 9,000 alleys. A wrong turn costs ten minutes, not the day. Walk toward noise and light; both lead to a main street.

Unofficial guides offering directions

A friendly stranger who insists on walking you somewhere "closed today" is starting a paid detour, not helping. Decline and keep walking; nothing in the medina is closed like that.

BUYING

Mint tea is not an obligation

A shopkeeper offering mint tea is standard hospitality and a sales opener at once. Drinking it does not commit you to buying anything.

The first price is a starting point

Opening prices in tourist-facing stalls commonly run two to four times the expected sale price. Treat it as the opening move, not the number.

Fixed-price shops exist

Cooperative shops (argan oil, women's weaving collectives) usually post fixed prices and do not expect haggling. Read the signage before you start negotiating.

GO DEEPER

The full haggling walkthrough continues on the next page; city-specific medina layouts are in the Morocco best-places guide.

Haggling, done properly

a script, not a guessing game

Haggling in a Moroccan souk follows a predictable rhythm once you have done it twice. It rewards patience and good humor far more than aggression, and walking away is the single most effective tool in the exchange, used correctly rather than as a bluff.

STEP	WHAT HAPPENS	WHAT TO DO
1. Opening price	Seller quotes a number well above the expected sale price.	Do not react. Ask the price of two or three similar items to calibrate.
2. Your counter	The seller expects a counter-offer, not full acceptance.	Offer roughly a third to half the opening price. It will seem low; that is the point.
3. The dance	Both sides move toward a middle number over two or three rounds.	Move slowly. Smile. Comment on the craftsmanship, not just the price.
4. The walk-away	If the gap stays wide, the seller often calls out a better number as you leave.	Walk toward the door genuinely, not as theatre. If the price does not improve, that was the real price.
5. Closing	A number both sides accept, usually 40 to 60 percent of the opening quote.	Confirm the final price out loud before paying, in the currency you intend to pay in.

approach: standard medina haggling pattern, Marrakech and Fes, 2026

Riad staff can quote a fair local price for a taxi or a common souvenir before you leave for the day. Ask; it costs nothing and calibrates every negotiation after.

Grand taxis between cities have posted or widely known shared rates. A driver quoting well above that rate for a shared seat is testing a first-time visitor.

Riad etiquette and what to expect

the medina's answer to a hotel

A riad is a traditional house built around an interior courtyard, converted into a small guesthouse, and it runs differently from a standard hotel in ways worth knowing before you arrive. Most sit deep in the medina, reachable only on foot; a porter service to carry bags from the nearest accessible point is standard and usually included or cheap to add.

Breakfast is typically served on the rooftop terrace and included in the rate: bread, msemen, olive oil, honey, and mint tea. Riads are quieter and smaller than hotels, often four to eight rooms, so book ahead in peak season (March to May, October to November) rather than assuming a walk-up room will be available.

READ ON

Stay-area picks with live pricing for Marrakech, Fes, and the desert camps sit in the next chapter, starting on page 24.

04

Stay and go deeper

Where to sleep in each region, and the tours worth paying for instead of arranging piecemeal on the ground.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Marrakech and the Sahara camps 23

Fes and Chefchaouen 24

Essaouira and Casablanca 25

Where to stay: Marrakech and the Sahara

prices per night, double room · book the first two nights, decide the rest there

Book only your first two Marrakech nights ahead, then decide on the ground; walk-in riad rates often beat online ones outside peak weeks (March to May, October to November). Merzouga desert camps are the exception: those book out in high season and are worth securing before you leave Marrakech.

Marrakech

hostel **12 USD** mid **35 USD** comfort **90 USD**

The medina for atmosphere and walking distance to the souks, Gueliz for a calmer modern base with easier taxis. Check what a riad costs near Jemaa el-Fnaa before you commit; dorm beds run through Hostelworld.

Merzouga (Sahara camps)

shared camp **25 USD** private tent **65 USD** luxury camp **140 USD**

Book the desert camp as part of a tour, not separately; nearly every overnight includes camel transfer, dinner, and the return drive. Compare hotel options in Merzouga village if you would rather sleep in a bed before or after the camp.

Riads and hotels across both regions, filtered to what is actually bookable tonight. **Find Stays**

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Agafay desert sunset tour from Marrakech

from 71 USD
5.0 (108 reviews)
6 hours

Marrakech food tour with a local guide

from 40 USD
5.0 (63 reviews)
3 hours

Merzouga quad bike and sandboarding session

from 34 USD
5.0 (81 reviews)
1 hour

Live Viator tours, prices captured August 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

Where to stay: Fes and Chefchaouen

prices per night, double room

Fes

hostel 10 USD mid 30 USD comfort 75 USD

Stay inside Fes el Bali for the full effect, close enough to a main gate that a porter can meet you. Compare riads near Bab Boujloud, or check dorm rates through Hostelworld.

Chefchaouen

hostel 9 USD mid 28 USD comfort 60 USD

A room with a rooftop terrace overlooking the blue medina is worth the small premium here. See what a terrace room costs tonight before booking the first option that comes up.

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Fes medina and tannery guided tour

from 18 USD
5.0 (83 reviews)
4 hours

Chefchaouen blue medina night walking tour

from 20 USD
5.0 (38 reviews)
2 hours

Moroccan cooking class with a local family

from 59 USD
5.0 (44 reviews)
3 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured August 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

Where to stay: Essaouira and Casablanca

prices per night, double room

Essaouira

hostel 11 USD mid 32 USD comfort 70 USD

The medina is compact enough that any riad here is a short walk to the port and ramparts. Check tonight's rates inside the walls, or find a dorm bed through Hostelworld.

Casablanca

hostel 13 USD mid 40 USD comfort 95 USD

Stay near the mosque or the Art Deco downtown rather than the airport zone if you have the one night. See what is available near the coastline before defaulting to an airport hotel.

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Beginner surf lesson in Essaouira

from 35 USD
5.0 (200 reviews)
2 hours

Moroccan cooking class in Essaouira

from 53 USD
5.0 (65 reviews)
2 hours

Casablanca sunset ATV beach ride

from 79 USD
5.0 (25 reviews)
2 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured August 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

05

Routes and itineraries

Eight paths by persona and budget, the two Sahara routes compared, and a 10-day route worked out day by day.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Pick your trip 27

Merzouga vs Zagora, the Sahara routes 28

The 10-day route, day by day 30

Pick your trip

three dimensions, eight paths · find yours, jump to the matching itinerary

Who you travel with, how long you have, and what you spend per night decide the route before any list of sights does. Find your row below; the 10-day route on the next spread covers path two in full.

SOLO · 5D · BACKPACKER

Marrakech to Merzouga loop

USD 300 · shared desert tour

- Marrakech 2n: medina, souks
- 3-day shared Sahara tour
- Back to Marrakech

SOLO · 10D · BACKPACKER

Marrakech, Sahara, Essaouira

USD 550 · hostels and camps

- Marrakech 3 · desert loop 3
- Back to Marrakech 1
- Essaouira 3: coast finish

COUPLE · 10D · MID

Marrakech, Sahara, Fes, Chefchaouen

USD 1,900 for 2 · riads

- Marrakech 3: riad + souks
- Desert loop 3: private tour
- Fes 2, Chefchaouen 2

COUPLE · 7D · COMFORT

Marrakech and the coast, 4-star

USD 2,600 for 2 · resorts

- Marrakech 4: riad suite
- Essaouira 3: boutique hotel

FAMILY · 10D · MID

Marrakech, Atlas day trips, coast

USD 3,600 · family of 4

- Marrakech 5: pool riad
- Ourika Valley day trip
- Essaouira 4: calm finish

FAMILY · 5D · COMFORT

Marrakech only, no desert

USD 2,100 · family of 4

- Marrakech 5: pool hotel
- Camel ride, Agafay day trip

HIKER · 12D · MID

Marrakech, Toubkal trek, Sahara

USD 1,300 · guide included

- Marrakech 2 · Imlil 1
- Toubkal trek 2 (with guide)
- Desert loop 3

RETIREE · 14D · COMFORT

Marrakech, Fes, Sahara, no buses

USD 4,800 per couple

- Marrakech 4: 5-star riad
- Fes 3: private transfers
- Desert 4: luxury camp

WORTH A READ

Full day-by-day versions online: the 7-day route and the 14-day route.

Merzouga vs Zagora: the Sahara routes compared

both leave from Marrakech · only one is worth a third day

Two roads run from Marrakech into the Sahara, and nearly every tour operator sells one or the other under a generic "desert tour" listing. They are not interchangeable: Merzouga reaches Erg Chebbi, the tallest and most photographed dune field in Morocco, while Zagora ends at a smaller, closer dune field that many operators use to cut costs on the same advertised itinerary.

ROUTE	DRIVE TIME (ONE WAY)	DUNE FIELD	BEST FOR
Merzouga	8-9 hours via Dades Gorge	Erg Chebbi, dunes up to 150m	Anyone with 3+ days to spare; the road itself, over the Tizi n'Tichka pass, is the best scenery of the trip.
Zagora	5-6 hours via Draa Valley	Erg Lehoudi, smaller and closer to town	Tight schedules; a genuine desert night on 2 days total, at the cost of smaller dunes.

route data: Pack Lightly Morocco cluster, 2026-08

A tour listed simply as "3-day Sahara desert tour" without naming Merzouga or Zagora is very likely the shorter Zagora route. Ask before booking if the dune size matters to you.

The Merzouga road crosses Ait Benhaddou (a UNESCO kasbah used in several film productions) and the Dades Gorge. Build in stops rather than treating the drive as dead time.

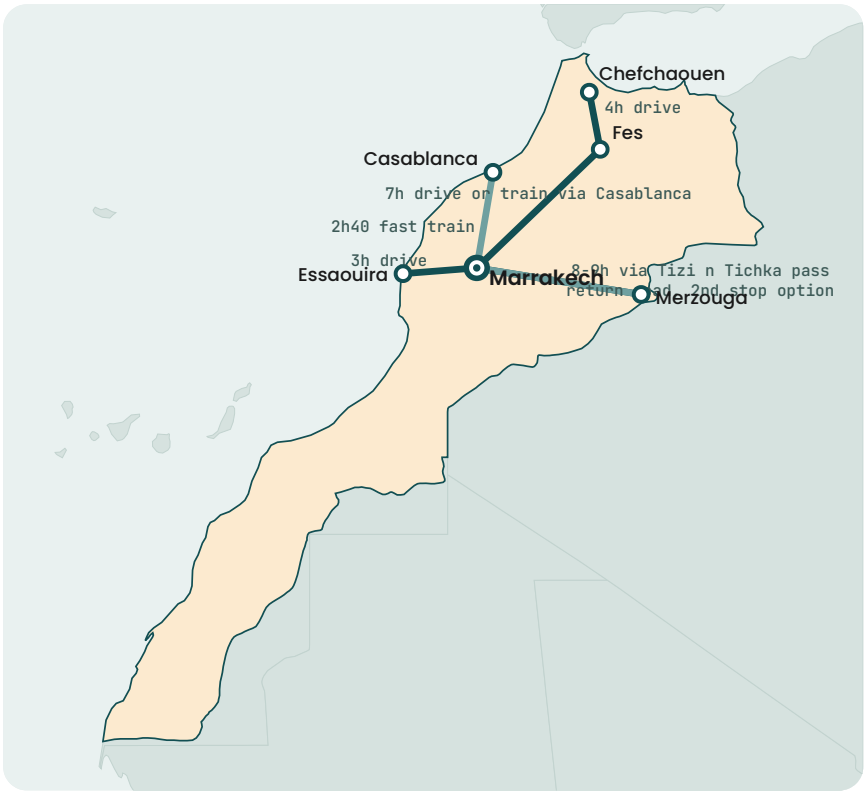
GO DEEPER

Landscape and viewpoint detail for both routes sits in the best-places guide; quieter dune alternatives are on the off-the-beaten-path page.

The classic loop, as a map

Marrakech out to the Sahara, west to the coast, north to Fes

Grand taxis and private transfers cover the desert legs; the ONCF train handles the Marrakech to Casablanca to Fes corridor at a fraction of the road time. Book the desert route and the Casablanca-bound train a few days ahead in high season.



The 10-day route, day by day

Marrakech, the Sahara, Essaouira · the fullest first-timer loop

1-3MarrakechLand, settle into the medina, souks and Jemaa el-Fnaa, Bahia Palace and Jardin Majorelle at opening.
4Road to MerzougaOver the Tizi n'Tichka pass, stop at Ait Benhaddou and the Dades Gorge en route.
5Merzouga, the dunesCamel transfer into Erg Chebbi at sunset, overnight desert camp, sunrise over the dunes.
6Return roadDrive back toward Marrakech, second stop in the Dades or Todra Gorge if time allows.
7MarrakechRecovery day: hammam, a slower souk pass, or a half-day Ourika Valley trip.
8-10EssaouiraThree hours to the coast, ramparts and the fishing port, a surf lesson if the wind cooperates.

READ ON

The full 14-day route extends this loop north to Fes and Chefchaouen for travelers with extra time.

06

When to go, what it costs

Weather, crowds and prices by month, then a day's spending itemized at three travel styles.

IN THIS CHAPTER

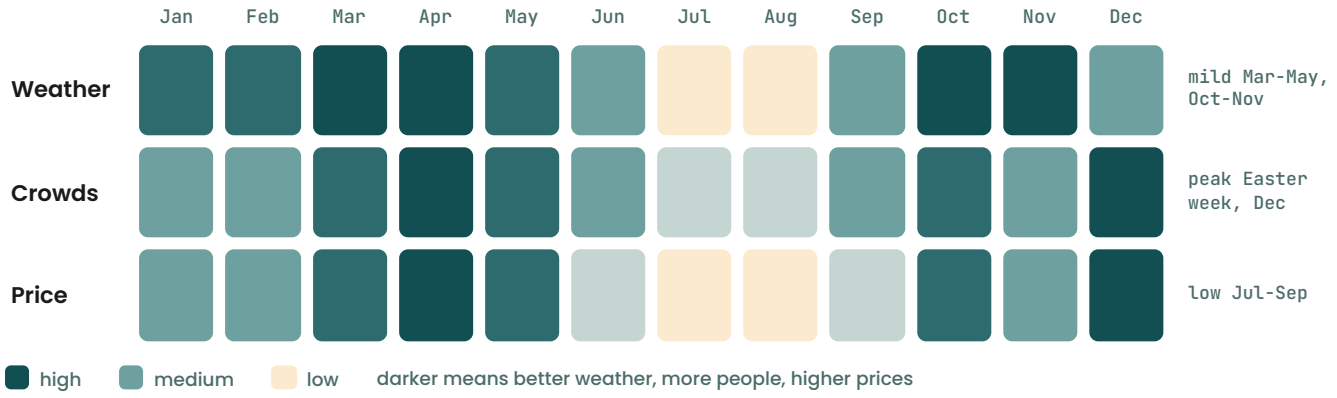
Weather, crowds, price 32

What a day really costs 33

Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · Marrakech-weighted

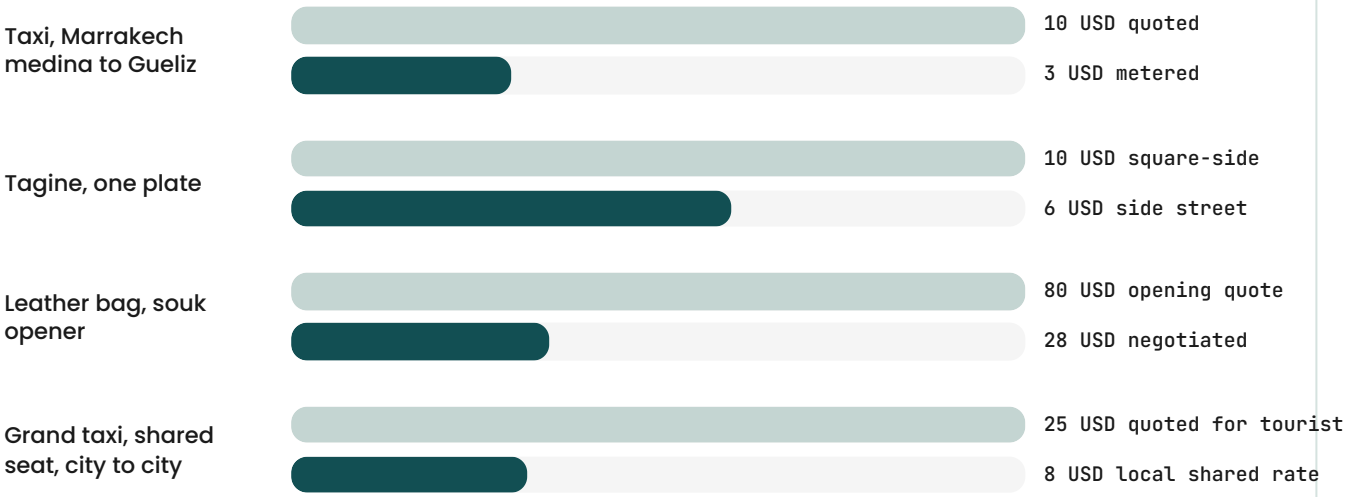
Morocco's year splits around the heat rather than rain: mild and clear from March through May and again October through November, with a brutal midsummer stretch in July and August when Sahara routes get genuinely punishing. Crowds and prices track the mild months closely, with a hard peak around Easter week and the Christmas to New Year stretch.



source: best-travel-time dataset · captured 2026-08-15

WHAT THINGS COST: QUOTED VS PAID

SAMPLE DATA



pack-lightly.com

What a day costs

three travel styles · printed the way the day spends it

Daily budgets hide in averages, so here is the day itemized instead: a bed, three meals, getting around, one thing worth doing, and the mint tea at the end. Three real versions of the same Tuesday in Marrakech.

A DAY IN MOROCCO

* backpacker *

riad dorm bed	12.00
msemen + mint tea breakfast	2.00
harira + bread lunch	2.50
tagine dinner, side street	6.00
walking + petit taxi	2.00
Bahia Palace entry	1.50
fresh orange juice, twice	1.50
water + snacks	1.50
TOTAL / DAY	**~35 USD**

budget-calculator data · 2026-08-15

A DAY IN MOROCCO

* standard *

3-star riad double, half	35.00
rooftop breakfast, included	incl.
cafe lunch	8.00
dinner with drinks	15.00
petit taxis, half day	6.00
guided medina walk, split	10.00
hammam, 1 hour	11.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~85 USD**

budget-calculator data · 2026-08-15

A DAY IN MOROCCO

* comfort *

5-star riad suite, half	180.00
hotel breakfast	incl.
restaurant lunch	18.00
dinner, good table	35.00
private driver, half day	25.00
spa treatment	incl. above
rooftop cocktails x2	18.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~250 USD**

budget-calculator data · 2026-08-15

Run the same numbers for your own dates, group size and currency in the free budget calculator on pack-lightly.com.

Open the Budget Calculator

The gap between tiers is the room, not the food. Eating well costs roughly the same at every level; the riad is where the budget triples.

MAD is a closed currency; exchange on arrival, not before. Pull cash from bank ATMs inside cities, not the standalone ones near tourist strips.

07

Practical

Visa, money, transport, eSIM, health, packing. The boring parts you only read once. Done right, you never think about them again.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Book in this order 35

Money and transport 36

Bed, bag, signal 37

Health basics 38

Book in this order

four things before you fly · everything else on the ground

Morocco rewards booking the desert route ahead and leaving the rest loose. Most nationalities enter visa-free for 90 days, so the visa step is a five-minute check, not an application. Four things genuinely reward locking in early, in this order.

8 wk before

International flights

Fares to Marrakech bottom out six to eight weeks ahead for the March-May and October-November windows. Direct routes from most of Europe run under 4 hours.

Compare fares on Skyscanner

4 wk before

Insurance + visa check

Buy travel insurance before the desert leg specifically; standard policies sometimes exclude off-road 4x4 transfers. Confirm your entry rule: most EU, UK, US, and Canadian passports enter visa-free for 90 days, but check yours before flying.

Check entry rules per passport

2 wk before

First riad nights + desert tour

Book your first two Marrakech nights and the Sahara route (Merzouga or Zagora, see page 28). Desert camps fill up in peak season; everything else can wait until you land.

Book the first nights on Stay22

1 wk before

eSIM

Install before departure, activate on the plane. Coverage thins out in the deep Sahara, so download offline maps before you leave Marrakech regardless.

Set up a Saily eSIM

Passport rule: six months validity beyond arrival, plus one blank page. Check it now; embassy renewals run slow in peak season.

Tell your bank the dates before you fly. Moroccan ATMs sometimes flag a first foreign withdrawal and freeze the card.

Money and transport

cash and card · trains for the cities, grand taxis for everywhere else

Cash and card both. The dirham (MAD) is a closed currency, meaning it cannot be bought or exchanged outside Morocco, so exchange happens on arrival, not before. Card works at hotels and larger restaurants; cash covers the souks, grand taxis, and small cafes.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	COMFORT
Riad dorm / private double	USD 12	USD 35	USD 90
Street meal / restaurant	USD 2.50	USD 15	USD 35
Mint tea, cafe	USD 1	USD 2	USD 4
Hammam, 1hr	USD 6	USD 15	USD 45
Petit taxi, short hop	USD 1.50	USD 3	USD 8

verified 2026-08-15 · per-category numbers in the budget guide

TRANSPORT: WHAT BEATS WHAT

The ONCF train network covers the coast well: Casablanca, Rabat, Fes, Tangier, all connected by a fast, comfortable service worth booking a day ahead in peak season. Between everywhere else, grand taxis (shared, fixed-route Mercedes sedans) are the backbone; a shared seat costs a fraction of a private hire, though a full private taxi is worth it for the desert legs and early starts. Petit taxis handle short hops inside cities; agree the price or insist on the meter before you get in. Inside the deep Sahara, tours arrange their own 4x4 transfers, which is the only realistic way to reach a desert camp.

Petit taxis are legally required to run the meter within city limits. If a driver refuses, get out and find another; it is common enough to not be worth an argument.

Airlines and long-distance bus firms are named without links where no partner relation exists; book them direct through the operator's own site.

THE FULL PICTURE

Full itinerary transport options sit in the 7-day itinerary and 14-day itinerary.

Bed, bag, signal

riads · packing for medina and desert · eSIM, the three solved problems

BED

For mid-range and above, Stay22 wins on free-cancellation policy and inventory depth across riads and hotels alike. For dorms and social hostels, Hostelworld has the deeper review pool. For small riads in Marrakech's medina or Fes el Bali, message the owner directly; a 5 to 10 percent saving on a direct booking is common.

BAG: THE 10-DAY CARRY-ON LIST

- [ ] Layers: light tops for the medina heat, one warm layer for desert nights
- [ ] Closed shoes for uneven medina cobblestones, sandals for riads
- [ ] Starter med-kit: loperamide, paracetamol, electrolytes
- [ ] SPF 50, lip balm with SPF (Sahara sun and wind both burn)
- [ ] Type C/E plug adapter
- [ ] 20,000 mAh power bank (limited outlets in desert camps)
- [ ] Two payment cards in separate pockets
- [ ] Passport copies in three places: phone, print, email
- [ ] Scarf or shawl: sun cover in the desert, modesty cover at religious sites
- [ ] Small notes and coins for tips and shared taxis

Signal. Buy the eSIM the day before you fly and activate it on the plane. A 5 GB plan covers a week; 10 GB covers ten days of maps and uploads. Coverage drops in the deep Sahara, so download offline maps before leaving Marrakech.

Set up a Saily eSIM

07

GO DEEPER The full 10-day and 14-day route breakdowns, including packing notes per stop, live in the 14-day itinerary.

Health basics

no required vaccines for most travelers · heat and stomach are the real risks

Morocco requires no mandatory vaccinations for most travelers arriving directly from Europe or North America; routine vaccines (MMR, tetanus, hepatitis A) are the standard travel-clinic recommendation, not a legal entry requirement. The two genuine risks are heat exhaustion on desert days and travelers' stomach from unfamiliar food and water, both manageable with basic precautions.

PRACTICAL BASICS

- [ ] Tap water: bottled or filtered is the safer default outside major hotels
- [ ] Heat: carry water on every medina walk and desert excursion, more than feels necessary
- [ ] Sun: the Sahara sun burns fast even with a hat; reapply SPF every two hours outdoors
- [ ] Pharmacies (marked with a green cross) are well stocked and staff often speak French or English
- [ ] Travel insurance with medical evacuation cover matters most for the desert and mountain legs

MORE ON THE SITE

The off-the-beaten-path guide covers remote-route health basics (limited pharmacy access, water sourcing) for the Sahara and Anti-Atlas legs.

08

Safe and smart

The medina scams that have not changed in years, the etiquette that matters, and the language minimum that changes how locals respond.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The scams that still work	40
Etiquette: do and do not	41
Emergency numbers + phrases	42

The scams that still work

constant in medina tourist zones, absent outside them

Morocco is safer than the headlines suggest and more scam-adjacent than the brochures admit. Violent crime against tourists is rare. What is constant is a small set of grifts that run on first-time visitors in Marrakech and Fes specifically. Knowing three of them protects most of the money tourists actually lose.

SCAM 01

The unofficial "guide"

A friendly local offers directions or claims a landmark is closed, then walks you toward shops that pay a commission for tourist traffic. The tour ends with heavy pressure to buy.

The fix: nothing in the medina closes like that. Decline politely, keep walking, use your screenshot map instead.

SCAM 02

The fixed-price switch

A shop quotes a firm price during negotiation, then the final bill includes "extras" like packaging or shipping that were never mentioned.

The fix: confirm the total, all-in, out loud before handing over payment. Walk if the number changes.

SCAM 03

The henna hard sell

A woman in Jemaa el-Fnaa grabs an arm and starts applying henna before agreeing a price, then demands a high fee once the design is half done.

The fix: agree the exact price before any henna touches skin, or decline entirely and keep hands visible and moving through the square.

BONUS

The "meter broken" petit taxi

At the airport or a busy medina gate: "meter broken, fixed price". The quoted fare often runs three to five times the metered rate.

The fix: step away, find another petit taxi, and insist on the meter before getting in.

MORE ON THE SITE

Souk tactics and haggling are covered in full starting on page 19; the broader etiquette rundown continues on the next page.

Etiquette: the short list

first four are load-bearing · last four save you money and awkwardness

Eight things that matter. The first four cause real offense if ignored; the last four mostly smooth the day. Everything else is atmosphere.

DO

Dress modestly outside resorts

Shoulders and knees covered reads as respectful in medinas and smaller towns, for all genders.

DO NOT

Eat or drink in public during Ramadan daylight

Most locals fast sunrise to sunset. Visitors are not required to, but doing it in view of others is discourteous.

DO

Greet with a right-hand handshake

A light handshake, sometimes followed by a hand to the heart, is the standard greeting between men and between women.

DO NOT

Photograph people without asking

Ask first, especially in medinas. Some vendors and performers expect a small tip for a photo; agree it beforehand.

DO

Use your right hand for eating and giving

The left hand is considered less clean traditionally. Pass money, food, and gifts with the right.

DO NOT

Enter a mosque uninvited

Nearly all are closed to non-Muslims except the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, which offers guided tours (page 15).

DO

Haggle at souks, not fixed-price shops

Cooperative shops with posted prices do not expect negotiation; read the signage first.

DO NOT

Ride the camels at unregulated roadside stops

Choose desert-tour operators with visible animal-welfare standards, particularly around water access and load limits.

Patience and good humor win every medina negotiation. Raising your voice signals you can be worn down, not the opposite.

Tipping (10 percent at restaurants, small notes for porters and guides) is expected in tourist-facing settings, unlike in some neighboring countries.

KEEP READING Access rules for mosques and madrasas sit on page 15 in the religious landmarks guide.

Emergency numbers and eight phrases

save the numbers now · the phrases change how locals respond

POLICE
19
nationwide

TOURIST POLICE (MARRAKECH)
+212 524 384 601
French and English

AMBULANCE (SAMU)
15
nationwide

FIRE / CIVIL PROTECTION
15
shared line

US EMBASSY RABAT
+212 537 637 200
citizen services

CLINIQUE INTERNATIONALE MARRAKECH
+212 524 448 000
private, English-speaking staff

EIGHT PHRASES THAT CHANGE HOW LOCALS RESPOND

ENGLISH	DARIJA (PHONETIC)	NOTES
Hello	salam	short for "as-salamu alaykum"
Thank you	shukran	works everywhere, French "merci" also understood
Yes / No	iyeh / lah	"lah" also declines a sales pitch politely
How much?	bshhal?	essential for souks and taxis
No, thank you	la shukran	the standard, firm decline for hawkers
Where is the bathroom?	fin l'hammam?	note: also means the bathhouse, context clarifies
Sorry / excuse me	smehli	universal apology
Help!	'awnuni!	emergencies only

Save your riad's address in both English and Arabic script in your phone before the first medina walk.

French is the second language in most cities; a few French phrases go further than English in smaller towns.

09

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, the cut-out cards for your wallet, and the sources behind every number.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you 44

Print cards: cut, fold, take 45

Sources and methodology 46

A note on the links 48

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same Morocco data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

Morocco: 35 USD/day backpacker, 250 USD/day comfort.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/



Country Map

Every stop in this guide mapped, from Chefchaouen to Merzouga.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/country-map/



Best Time to Travel

Best: Mar-May, Oct-Nov. Month-by-month weather for 140+ countries.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/



Visa Checker

Most EU, UK, US, and Canadian passports: visa-free 90 days.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/visa-checker/

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale · credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

DARIJA · ESSENTIALS

Hello	salam
Thank you	shukran
Yes / No	iyeh / lah
How much?	bshhal?
No, thank you	la shukran
Where is bathroom?	fin l'hammam?
Help!	'awnuni!
Sorry	smehli

pack-lightly.com

EMERGENCY · MOROCCO

Police	19
Ambulance (SAMU)	15
Tourist Police (Marrakech)	+212 524 384 601
US Embassy Rabat	+212 537 637 200

My riad: _____

Address: _____

Insurance #: _____

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live Morocco hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/morocco/

Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the riad.

Ask your riad to write the name and address in Arabic script on the back. Petit taxi and grand taxi drivers read it in one glance.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source



WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Performance-marketing background, data-led travel writing. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; if a price moves more than 15 percent, the next edition flags it.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Riad and hotel pricing: Stay22 and Hostelworld snapshot 2026-08-15, Marrakech medina and Gueliz districts.
2. Currency rates: ECB reference rates, 2026-08-15.
3. Visa policy: Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs portal, retrieved 2026-08-15.
4. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last update 2026-07.
5. Climate: best-travel-time dataset, 10-year averages, captured 2026-08-15.
6. Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured 2026-08-15.
7. Pack Lightly Morocco cluster pages, retrieved 2026-08-15: hub · best places · religious landmarks · off the beaten path

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, re-scored every six months. Budget figures come from the live budget-calculator dataset, climate verdicts from the best-travel-time dataset, both stamped with their capture date where they appear.

What changed in edition 2026.08: first release on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: February 2027. Not covered here: cruise stopovers, group coach tours, medical tourism.

Photo credits. Every photograph is sourced from Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons or public-domain license. The full per-image list, with each photographer and license, is on the next page. The cover shows Jemaa el-Fnaa, Marrakech.

Image credits

every photo, its author and license

All location, food and wildlife photographs come from Wikimedia Commons. Each is reused under the Creative Commons or public-domain license noted below, with attribution to the photographer. Under CC BY-SA, this list and any reuse carry the same share-alike terms. Click any title to open the original file on Commons.

1. **Berber village, High Atlas foothills**. NikoSilver, Public domain.
2. **Blue alley in Chefchaouen**. Adrian Farwell, CC BY 3.0.
3. **Camp in Erg Chigaga, the quieter**. Angela Stefanoni, CC BY 3.0.
4. **Chouara Tannery dye pits, Fes**. Uwe Brodrecht, CC BY-SA 2.0.
5. **Erg Chebbi dunes, Merzouga**. Bjorn Christian Torrissen, CC BY-SA 3.0.
6. **Fishing port, Essaouira**. Elgaard, CC BY-SA 4.0.
7. **Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca**. Petar Milosevic, CC BY-SA 4.0.
8. **Koutoubia Mosque minaret, Marrakech**. Rol1000, CC BY-SA 4.0.
9. **Marrakech at dusk, Koutoubia and Jemaa**. YoTuT, CC BY 2.0.
10. **Spice stall in a Marrakech souk**. Angeline A. van Achterberg, CC BY-SA 4.0.
11. **Surf beach at Taghazout**. Heather Cowper, CC BY 2.0.

Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured August 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links in this guide

disclosure · why this guide is free

This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a flight, a tour, or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. A stay area or a transport option is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain link still points there. A scam pattern is still called out plainly, and a cheaper option that beats the famous one keeps the slot. The commission funds the guide, it does not choose for it.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: Skyscanner · Stay22 · Hostelworld · 12Go · Saily · Viator · Sherpa

Links can outlive a print run. If one stops working, the live version of every page in this guide sits under pack-lightly.com/morocco.

This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update lands February 2027 and replaces this file at the same download.

09