

Morocco: Marrakech, Foothills of the High Atlas & Essaouira

Air Package Itinerary

In a hillside village of terraced houses, a woman sits weaving at a tall outdoor loom. Nearby, others bake khobz in a communal clay oven, and men pack mud into wooden molds for bricks. A Berber family welcomes you for a lunch of flatbread and lamb cooked with cumin, cinnamon, and saffron. Afterwards your hosts brew fresh mint tea, pouring out each glass in a traditional gesture of hospitality. The country's uncommon charm is only ever a few steps away on this hiking tour of Morocco, whether following age-old caravan routes in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains or watching the sunset over the Atlantic in Essaouira. And while the country's iconic sights are truly indelible—bustling medinas, spice markets, hidden gardens—it's the generous welcome you'll remember most.



Highlights

- Trace salt-mine trails along an ancient caravan route in the foothills of the stunning High Atlas Mountains.
- Experience traditional Berber hospitality as you stroll into mountain villages and are invited to share mint tea or a lunch of vegetable tagine and fresh-baked bread.
- Thrill to a seaside jaunt astride a camel at sunset during your visit to Essaouira, former haunt of Jimi Hendrix, Cat Stevens, and countless other artists.
- Savor lunch and a wine tasting at one of Morocco's prestigious wineries, owned by a Rhône Valley expat whose two trusty dromedaries plow the fields.
- Relax in a traditional hammam or indulge in a herbal massage treatment at your remote hotel's

world class spa

On all Guided Adventures you can count on ...



Expert local guides to introduce you to the best of your destination.



Gracious accommodations that are a clean, comfortable home away from home.



Off-the-beaten-path places you'd never find on your own.



Experts to handle all the details.



A maximum of 18 fun-loving fellow travelers to share the journey.



Flight + Tour Combos include plane tickets, airport car service, and pre- and post-tour accommodations.



Delicious, authentic multi-course meals—virtually all are included.

Activity Level

Morocco is one of our Guided Walking Adventures, rated easy to moderate. Walks in the foothills of the High Atlas Mountains are on the moderate side, averaging 3 to 6 miles per day, with options on most days. There are daily ascents and descents, with climbing time on the ascents ranging between 15 and 40 minutes. The terrain varies from paved and cobblestone streets (during organized city tours and other

easy village explorations) to uneven, single-track trails that can be rocky, or laid with loose gravel and/or hard-packed dirt. Most trails are exposed with little coverage from the sun; depending on the temperature, this can increase the challenge of the tour. The pace is leisurely with stops en route to explore villages, engage with locals, and visit historical sites.

FLIGHT DAY

Depart from the United States or Canada

Your vacation is about to begin! Spend your first night aloft and arrive ready for an unforgettable trip.

ARRIVAL DAY

Arrive in Marrakech, Morocco

Start off your first day in Marrakech right by having a Country Walkers representative greet you at the airport. A complimentary car service will whisk you to your centrally located hotel. From here, you are perfectly positioned to explore this charming city at your leisure.

DAY 1

Join your *Morocco: Marrakech, Foothills of the High Atlas & Essaouira* tour

Marrakech; 2-4 miles, easy

After breakfast, meet your guides at 8:30 in the lobby of your hotel and set off to discover the colors, textures, and famously vibrant character of Marrakech on a guided walking tour. Bustling souks, fragrant spice markets, elegant architecture, and a heady bustle converge in this thrilling city that evokes the most adventurous Arabian Nights. This is unmistakably Africa, yet with a distinct carnival atmosphere you won't soon forget.

Visit the 12th-century Koutoubia Mosque, the city's largest, whose minaret soars 253 feet, adorned with various arch motifs. The mosque's founding dates to 1147, though the minaret was completed in 1195. You also tour the Bahia Palace, richly decorated in vivid geometric mosaics (*zellige*) and painted wood details (*zouak*). Be sure to look up: many of its ceilings are bursting with intricate design. Continue to the Maison Tiskiwin, housed in an intimate and historic riad. Its collection was curated by a Dutch anthropologist and provides a glimpse of Morocco's rural culture.

After lunch, you stroll pastel-colored pathways of the lush Majorelle Gardens, created by French painter Jacques Majorelle and later nurtured by Yves Saint Laurent, the famed fashion designer who kept a villa here. This peaceful haven is home to bamboo groves and gardens of cacti. Your tour concludes in the famed Place Djemaa El Fna, an intoxicating square where snake charmers, flame swallowers, acrobats, and Berber musicians vie for your attention amid smoke wafting from open-air grills. This is Marrakech at its most thrilling and authentic.

This evening, savor a welcome dinner at one of Morocco's most elegant and sophisticated restaurants, set in the historic district of Marrakech.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 2

Ouarzazate

2 miles, easy to moderate

This morning you travel into the High Atlas Mountains, where you may take in breathtaking views of Jbel Toubkal, the highest peak in North Africa at 13,650 feet. It's a three-hour journey to our lunch stop, with breaks along the way to stretch your legs. Our stunning route crosses over the Tizi n'Tichka Pass, the country's highest mountain pass at approximately 7,230 feet. From here, you pause to gaze out at the lunar-like landscape of the Anti-Atlas Mountain Range. To the south, the desert stretches out to the green fields and dense forest of the Marrakech Plains.

After lunch, continue to the magnificent Aït Ben Haddou, a UNESCO World Heritage site renowned for its earthen clay architecture. Piled upon a dark shaft of rock, the kasbahs in this village are among the most elaborately decorated and best preserved. Its authenticity has lured the movie industry to make period

films in its streets. Just as it is a stop for us, it was also a stop along the caravan route between Marrakech and the Sahara Desert. Explore its timeless lanes and alleyways for yourself during a one-hour walk.

Conclude your day in Ouarzazate, gateway to Morocco's deserts. This quiet town was built by the French as a garrison and administrative center. Spend the remainder of the afternoon and evening at your next hotel, relaxing by the pool, enjoying the gardens, or sipping a cocktail at the piano bar. This evening, sample more renowned cuisine, paired with Moroccan wines.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 3

Skoura palm grove

4-5 miles, easy to moderate

After a copious buffet breakfast, travel to Skoura. This quiet town rests on a fertile oasis that blossomed where several rivers and streams from the High Atlas Mountains converge. The centerpiece of Skoura is its *palmeraie*, or palm grove. Called the "Oasis of 1,000 Palms" – though surely there are more! – the protected trees get their water from an innovative *khattara*, an underground irrigation network of canals, levers, and locks dug centuries ago.

You begin your exploration under the canopy of the palm grove, at one of Morocco's grandest kasbahs, on the edge of one of the oldest Berber villages. Kasbah Amridil is a stunning example of Berber architecture, so beloved that it was once on the country's 50 dirham note. After time here, you walk through the palm grove, where the town of Skoura is woven into the understory. Our route leads us past scenes of daily life and, after about two hours, you pause for lunch with a welcoming Mahdaoui family.

After a relaxing afternoon back at your hotel, gather for a generous dinner of traditional couscous and an array of salads. Perhaps begin with *zaâlouk*, a smoky fried eggplant and tomato salad (*zaâlouk* literally means "crushed" in Arabic) and cooked baby carrots with coriander. Finish the meal with a sugary concoction and a glass of mint tea.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 4

Agafay Desert

3-4 miles, easy to moderate

After another hearty breakfast of locally sourced foods, you travel to the Agafay, a stunning stone desert with breathtaking views of the High Atlas Mountains. En route, you pause for lunch and for a scenic walk around Takerkoust Lac, also known as Lalla Takerkoust Lake. This scenic body of water is fed by rivers and streams from the High Atlas. But this is not its natural state; the French created it when they built a dam in the 1920s to provide power and water to Marrakech. Our walk follows its shores so you have a chance to take in the lovely vistas of this corner of Morocco.

Later, arrive at your Agafay encampment, a typical desert camp of tents strewn with gorgeous carpets, a dining tent, an open communal firepit, and genuine Berber hospitality. Some call the Agafay the last remaining stretch of true desert in Morocco. You have the chance to immerse yourself in its beauty during a guided walk. At your own expense, you might also enhance your experience during optional activities with the camp's staff. Perhaps indulge in a sunset camel ride, dune buggy excursion, or massage. Your guides will inform you what is available during your tour.

Tonight, savor a bountiful dinner, perhaps of lamb tagine with apricots, coriander, or garlic grilled chicken, or perhaps a savory vegetable couscous. Before retiring, be sure to spend time gazing into the sky, a glittering blanket of stars in the Moroccan night.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 5

Travel to Essaouira. Walking tour

City walking tour; 2-3 miles, easy

Linger over a leisurely breakfast and *café au lait* before departing the Atlas Mountains. This morning's drive (about 2.5 hours total) delivers you to the former Portuguese stronghold of Mogador on the Atlantic coast, known today as Essaouira.

You soon arrive in Essaouira, an important trading port since ancient times. Its vibrant medina and walls were designed in the 18th century by a French prisoner of the Sultan. His city plan won him his freedom.

Today, this fortress city, whose name derives from the Arabic word for “rampart,” is a treasure trove of art galleries and atmospheric passageways. Off its shores, kite-surfers take to the water. This afternoon you embark on a brief walking tour to orient yourself with the city. Your walk ends on the waterfront, where you might choose to savor the catch of the day for lunch. As the sun sets over the Atlantic, join your guides at the beach for an unforgettable camel ride on the sands.

Many of the city’s old *riads*—grand mansions built around a central courtyard—were converted into fashionable inns. You end your day at one of them—Heure Bleue Palais—your home-away-from-home in the heart of Essaouira. Step out for an early evening stroll to one of the many cafés or restaurants in town, or enjoy dinner on your own at one of the restaurants within your luxury hotel.

Included Meals: Breakfast

DAY 6

Essaouira

2-3 miles, easy. Vineyard walk; 0.5 mile, easy

Spend this morning exploring Essaouira on foot. Step into its medina directly from your hotel to take in its sensory delights: Watch for marquetry crafts carved from indigenous thuya wood and vibrant canvases painted by Gnaoua artists while they were under mystical trances. Fragrant spices, traditionally woven carpets, brass lamps, colorful Moroccan babouche slippers, and artwork from local artists are all on display. Oil made from the local argan nut, said to be an all-purpose beauty treatment, is also sold here. In the mellah, or Jewish quarter of the medina, you may step inside the synagogue, so long as the keeper of the key is in the neighborhood!

Later, you travel outside the town of Ounagha to tour and have lunch at Morocco’s first organic vineyard. This 128-acre winery was founded by Charles, a seasoned winemaker from France’s Rhône Valley—Châteauneuf-du-Pape, to be precise. He brings his expertise in the famed Rhône varieties to his vineyard and is also discovering the joys of Marselan, a Grenache-Cabernet hybrid. In all, he produces a range of red, white, and rosé labels, plus the typical *vin gris*, or gray wine, of Morocco. Many of his wines are offered on menus in Essaouira and Marrakech. Settle in to the onsite restaurant for a tasting with your lunch, enjoying sweeping views of the vineyard and olive groves. Perhaps the resident dromedaries will be out plowing the land to add to the ambiance.

This evening, gather for a sumptuous farewell dinner in a romantic candlelit restaurant. Depending on the season, your feast includes traditional flaky pastry *pastilla*, savory lamb with Berber couscous, or a freshly caught fish tagine, prepared with organically farmed vegetables and paired with fine Moroccan wines—perhaps from the vineyard you visited today.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 7

Your Morocco: Marrakech, Foothills of the High Atlas & Essaouira tour concludes

After enjoying a leisurely breakfast, and perhaps a final stroll through the medina or to the port, travel to the Hotel Sofitel Marrakech Palais Imperial for your post-tour overnight.

Lunch and dinner are on your own today. We provide detailed city information to help you plan your day.

Included Meals: Breakfast

DEPARTURE DAY

Departure

Wada'an! After an included breakfast this morning, complimentary transportation is provided to Marrakech's Menara Airport, based on your departure time.

Included Meals: Breakfast

What's Included

	Air Package	Tour Only
Exceptional boutique accommodations	✓	✓
16 on-tour meals: 6 breakfasts, 5 lunches, 5 dinners	✓	✓
Local guides with you throughout tour	✓	✓
Local wine and/or beer with dinner	✓	✓
Entrance fees and special events as noted in the itinerary	✓	✓
Telescopic walking sticks provided on tour	✓	✓
Roundtrip airfare	✓	
Two extra nights in Marrakech	✓	
Airport car service for arrival and departure	✓	
Pre- and Post- tour breakfasts	✓	
Business-class upgrades available	✓	