

# Marvelous Morocco

North Africa offers once  
in a lifetime experiences



Morocco is full of unexpected surprises, starting with the (relatively) short seven-hour direct flight from New York's *JFK* to *Casablanca*. And no matter what they might actually be saying to each other in Arabic or French, locals seem genuinely happy to be hosting American visitors. The food's good, the weather's wonderful and the history is fascinating. In a nutshell, it's a memorable travel destination.

Most visitors start in *Marrakech*, visiting its great souq, or marketplace, that's surrounded by ancient ramparts. Also on most itineraries is *Fez*, the country's cultural capital, with a labyrinthine old town and amazing shopping. If you visit, hiring a local guide is a good idea to keep from getting lost in its maze.

No matter where you decide to travel within the country, the experience will certainly be enhanced if you can include one of the country's many *moussems*-or festivals-that take place year round. Travel experts say the best time of year to explore Morocco is in the spring, from March through May. A lot of people find the summer months very hot, but Fez holds a huge international music festival in June, and in August, there's the *International Arts Festival in Asilah* that's an art lover and shopper's paradise.

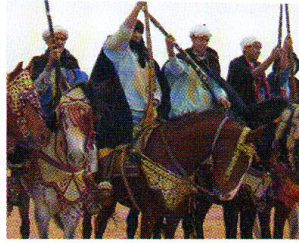
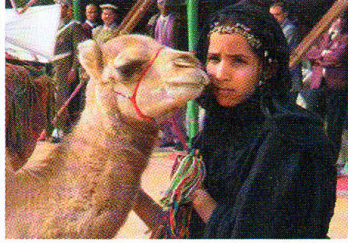
In May you can find the *Rose Festival*, which celebrates the harvest of Persian roses. The *Moussem of Ben Aissa* is one of the country's largest moussems and takes place in *Meknes*. It's a festival held to honor local saints and is full of pageantry straight out of medieval times. Every month there are various celebrations that will offer an interesting insight to the culture and people.

My trip took me to the *Berber festival, Moussem de Tan-Tan* in December, which felt almost like stepping into a Hollywood back lot. And right on cue, there was even a Saharan sand storm that left me wondering if *Lawrence of Arabia* might come flying over a dune at any moment.

Set in the desert of *Hmada*, in the southern part of the country, the moussem is the largest gathering of nomadic tribes in Northern Africa. A makeshift city with tents as far as the eye can see suddenly pops up in the barren landscape. Two huge camel cutouts overlook the temporary town. And aside from the nearly 1,000 tents where families are living, there are also cultural displays about Saharan life, the teaching of the Koran and craft demonstrations, all of which have earned it a place as one of UNESCO's world heritage sites.

In a huge center arena, groups of ten or twelve horseman, dressed in flowing blue robes on ornately adorned horses come thundering forward, guns high in the air. They will come to a sudden stop and fire in unison. It's a heart-stopping display of pageantry, followed by hundreds riding on the backs of camels and even more young nomads displaying their impressive skills on even more horses.

Women in traditional costumes are singing, camels are traded, and even potential marriages are being brokered between families. Even Prince Moulay Rachid, brother of Morocco's King Mohammed VI, arrives to give his royal seal of approval. Forget *Ringling Brothers*, this is clearly the best show on earth. But instead of being an overly commercialized circus with *Tan-Tan* t-shirts for sale, the experience seems authentic, designed to serve the nomads who have traveled here from the countryside and beyond, not for camera-snapping tourists like yours truly.



### GOATS IN TREES?

Why they're nuts for nuts No—that's not a giant bird foraging for nuts at the top of a tall tree—it's a goat! One of the most interesting and curious sights you'll come across in Morocco are sometimes herds of goats up in the Argan trees in the *Souss Valley* near *Agadir*. Argan trees are only found in this part of the world and their nuts are used in traditional Moroccan medicine, for cooking and in cosmetic products. On the tree, the nuts kind of look like green olives and the shells are irresistible to goats that climb in order to forage on the higher limbs. It may look a bit silly, but it's also pretty amazing at the same time.

PHOTOS BY LISA ARCELLA

Food is served communally. Everyone, whether sitting at one of the VIP tables or on a blanket with new friends, takes their food from one center dish. Diners take their fair share of the pigeon pastilla (yes, it's pigeon, but also surprisingly delicious) or a stew of chicken and vegetables steamed in an earthenware tagine.

The previous evening I spent a comfortable night in my own tent about a half an hour's drive away. In the midst of the sand dunes, a goat wool "tourist" tent-city was set up complete with a walkway of gorgeous Berber carpets and comfortable beds with crisp linens. Not exactly the *Four Seasons*, but hardly roughing it. Somehow, there was

even running water and flushing bathrooms.

Dinner was served on a huge dune overlooking the Atlantic, while musicians pounded on giant drums, playing traditional music. I even managed to get up and dance with some of the folk dancers.

As I retire to my tent for the night, a slight wind has filled the night air with the intense aroma of spices and I can hardly believe my good fortune to be having an experience worthy of *Scheherazade*. **BN**

For more travel information on Morocco go to:

[www.visitmorocco.org](http://www.visitmorocco.org)

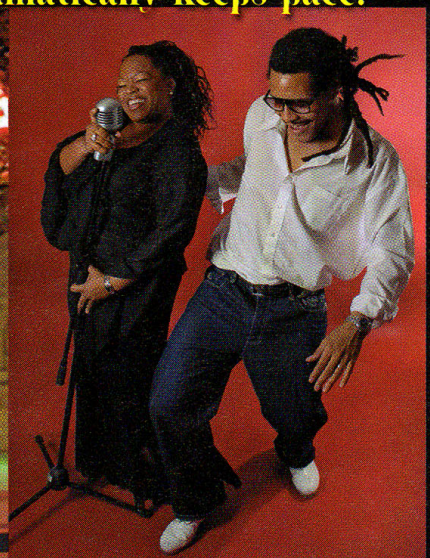
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