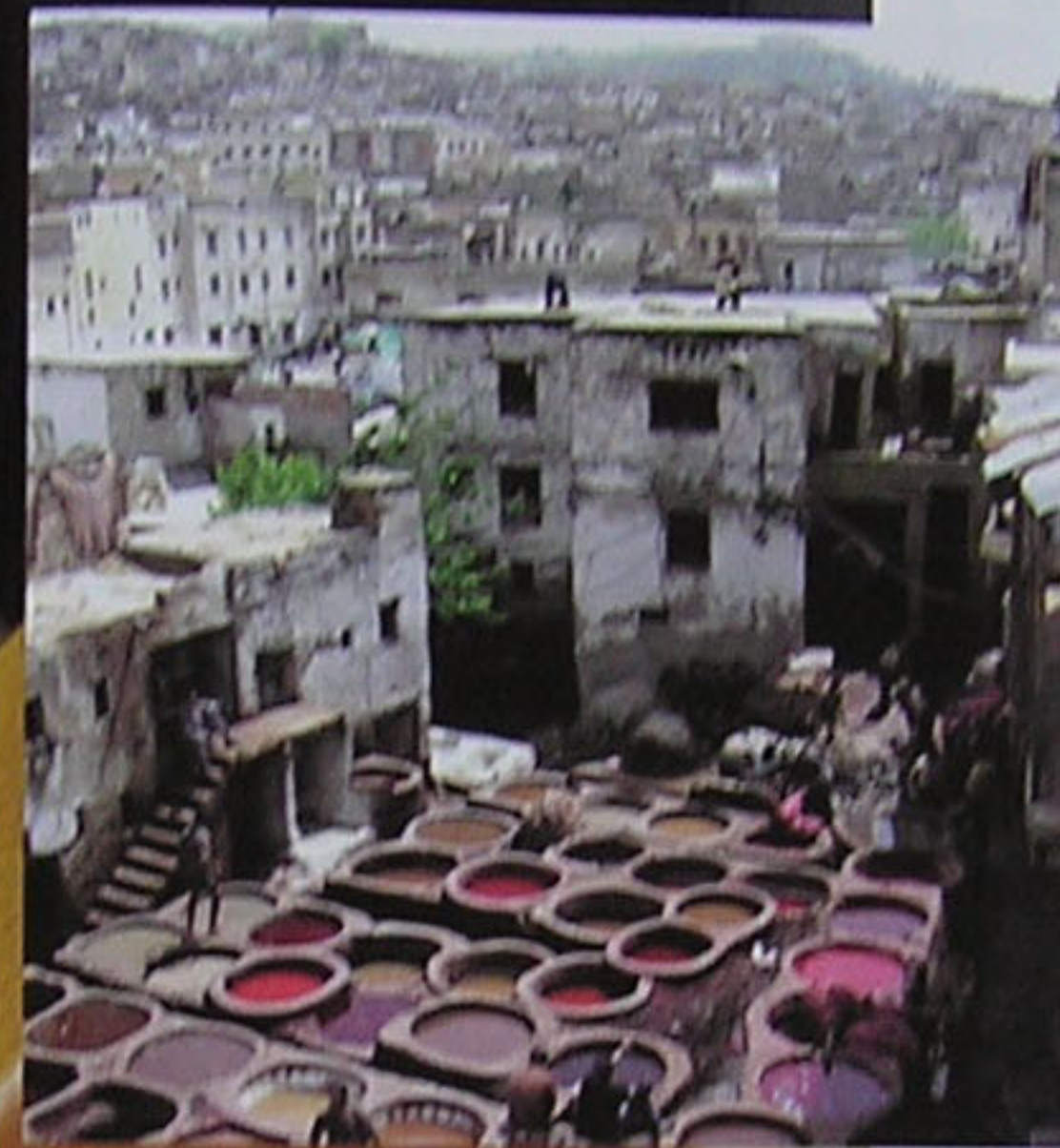


MOROCCO UNDER £15

by Luciano Di Gregorio

No need to take an organised tour: set aside just six days and a £15 train fare for a peek into the mosques, medersas and medinas that dominate this colourful country.



DAYS 1 – 2

Start off in peach-hued Marrakech. Several airlines offer scheduled flights from London to the city's airport, conveniently just six kilometres from the city centre. You will be spoilt for accommodation choices in the country's primary tourist destination, but the key here is to have accommodation lined up before you arrive. Not only does this give you peace of mind, it enables you to avoid some of the touts and scammers all after their share of the tourist dirham.

For the true Moroccan experience avoid the large chain hotels and head straight for an authentic Moroccan house, called a riad. Colourfully decorated and usually situated around a charming courtyard, the riads offer accommodation with a personal touch, which more often than not includes rounds of mint tea with the owner and breakfasts to die for. They are spread all over the city and help to fast-track your immersion into the local culture in a way that a chain hotel simply doesn't.

The thriving hub of Marrakech is Djemaa el-Fna, the city's main square. During the day, activity here is mostly driven by tourism, but at night the place comes alive with locals. Billows of smoke waft through the air from roasted meat stalls; carts sell a vividly-coloured cornucopia of nuts, spices, apricots and figs; men and women dance to the sound of clapping, and snake charmers work their magic on deadly cobras. These tableaux, set to the soundtrack of scooters, donkeys and horses trotting here and there, led UNESCO to list the marketplace as "a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity."

The city's souks, endless narrow lanes of market stalls, branch off from the main square and into oblivion. Keep your wits about you while meandering around here but do take time to soak up the sheer spectacle that is daily life in Marrakech. Remember that bartering is the order of the day. While you're busy bargaining, take time out to absorb the charming Koutoubia, one of the tallest minarets in the world, and its emotive call to prayer which echoes throughout the city at dusk.

DAY 3

Catch a morning train from Marrakech heading for Fès – aim for a window seat to take in some exquisite semi-arid desert scenery en route. Skip Casablanca, with its slightly brutal edge and dearth of attractions, and instead alight after four and a half hours in the country's European flavoured capital, Rabat.

While Rabat's small medina wants some of the colour and character of its older counterparts in Marrakech and Fès, the Kasbah, the oldest part of the city, is its highlight. After admiring the striking views from the Kasbah, head straight for the Tour Hassan, adjacent to the architectural masterpiece that is the Mausoleum of Mohammed V. The imposing minaret was meant to have been the tallest of its time, but construction was never finished.

DAY 4

Next stop is the old imperial city of Meknès, an easy two-hour train journey from Rabat and often overlooked on Moroccan itineraries. The city houses a moderately sized medina which is a great place for shopping without the intimidating hassle of the bigger cities. Meknès is also an ideal base for a half-day trip to the ancient Roman city of Volubilis and the pilgrimage town of Moulay Idriss. The best way to get there is by hiring a grand taxi for about £20: a driver will take you to the sites and wait for you.

Allow around two hours at Volubilis, the most intact ancient city in the country, boasting beautifully preserved and intact mosaics. Next stop should be Moulay Idriss, the namesake tomb town of an Islamic saint and founder of the nearby city of Fès. Here, a guide will come in handy and should be easy enough to find in the square where taxis stop.



DAYS 5-6

Back in Meknès, it only takes an hour by train to reach the magical Fès. Narrow and full of life, its market streets are lined with goods, traditional and otherwise, made right in the thick of it all. Take a peek into the communal bakeries, the bronze working shops and, best of all, the leather tanneries where you can witness in action a process dating back to the 10th century. Finally, what better way to cap an inspiring journey than with some well-earned R&R in a traditional hammam (bath-house).

When to Visit

The best time of year to visit Morocco is spring, particularly April to May when temperatures hover in the mid-twenties. Avoid the months of July and August, when temperatures can soar to 45°C, especially inland. Winters can be deadly here, so if you plan to visit the desert areas in November-February, make sure you are well equipped.

Getting There

Ryanair fly to Marrakech and Fès. Flights leaving Morocco usually cost less than ones arriving, due to taxes. Amongst other airlines to service the country are EasyJet, British Airways and Air France. Prices with Ryanair start at £0.01 plus taxes of approximately £50, though this can be considerably less when special deals are available. Prices for flights back to the UK can be as low as £6 including taxes.

Train Journeys

The country's rail network is run by ONCF (www.oncf.ma). The website has a journey planner that lists train times and costs according to your search parameters. Trains are usually comfortable, with air-conditioning in both first and second-class cabins. Tickets can be purchased from stations upon arrival, and most clerks speak excellent English. Keep in mind, however, that trains between the major cities can be quite packed at the weekends. Prices are a dream compared to travel in the UK.

The following are based in second-class travel:

Marrakech – Rabat: 4.5 hours, £6.80

Rabat – Meknès: 2.5 hours, £3.60

Meknès – Fès: 1 hour, £1.10

Accommodation

Accommodation costs vary considerably, but your pound goes further here than anywhere in Europe. For £30 a night, expect a clean double room in a hotel, breakfast included. However, we recommend the riads. For the same price and often less, you will get friendly, personal service and a double room with traditional breakfast. The following riads are worth checking out:

Marrakech: In a city that certainly has no shortage of riads, Riad Chouia Chouia (www.riad-chouiachouia.com) is an excellent option. As it is relatively hard to find at first, the manager will offer to meet you, usually at Café Arcana in the main square, Djemaa el-Fna.

Rabat: Riads are a little scarce in the capital city, given the relatively young medina. However, Riad Oudaya (www.riadoudaya.com) is a more upmarket choice and there are excellent hotels for around £30 scattered all over the new part of town.

Meknès: Riad Bahia (www.ryad-bahia.com) is well priced and right in the heart of the old town.

Fès: Riad Louna (www.riadlouna.com) is an excellent option and great value for money considering its location.

You can get hostel beds from about £5 a night: do your research as the quality varies wildly. Check out www.Maroc-Selection.com, www.morocco.com and www.riadsmorocco.com for more accommodation information.