

Marrakech Travel Guide

& Travelling Tips!

by Baba Souk

Travelling tips to Marrakech, what you need to know before leaving.

Traveling tip no 1: Book your flight with Royal Air Maroc. This is not unanimous, some friends of mine experienced late flights and cancelled flights but my argument is pretty simple, you are allowed TWICE the amount of luggage which you'll need to bring back all your treasures. I usually take two big 23kg suitcases. Make sure to bring along a big empty suitcase.

When to go: The best time of the year to visit Marrakesh is from March to June. However I would avoid the Ramadan period because the city really slows down. Depending on which year you go, Ramadan won't be at the same period so you will need to look it up. March to June are ideal months to travel because the weather is perfect and it's not too hot at that time of year. You'll enjoy 28-32 degrees celsius every single day. And most importantly, the bougainvillia are in bloom everywhere and it adds so much beauty to the city! It's so hot in the summer that everything dries up. I do not recommend going from July to September, temperatures are so high, you won't even be able to get out in the afternoon. Temperatures get chilly in the winter months.

How long should you stay?: If you're planning to visit Marrakech only, I'd say at least 1 week. Any shorter than that and you'll end up missing out on too much! If you want to visit Morocco a bit and spend a few days at the beach, I'd say at least 2 weeks. But the longer the better ;)

Will you like it?: It's hard not to fall in love with Marrakech, but I have to admit, it may not be for everyone. I would not recommend this city for first time travellers. Let's be honest here, as much as I love this amazing city, it will not be your easiest trip. It's an experience, an adventure! So if you're worried about it, you probably should not go. You will get lost, you will be annoyed by the souk vendors and you'll probably end up with a few stomach cramps. That being said, you will be blown away by the sweetness of the people and by the magical vibe Marrakech has to offer.

Spoken language: Mostly Arabic and French. Very basic English can be understood.

Currency: While travelling to Morocco, you will need cash. Many, many places don't accept credit cards. If you're lucky, your hotel and restaurant will accept your credit card but you will need some dirhams for everything else! Including all your souk finds. I suggest bringing some cash with you and then changing your money on the spot. The best place to change your money is Hotel Ali, which is located at one of the entrances to Place Jama El Fnaa. (Just ask, everybody knows where it is.) Believe it or not, the exchange rate there is better than the rates you'll find at banks. If you don't feel safe travelling with lots of money on you, don't worry, you will be able to withdraw cash at Moroccan banks with your bank card. It's just that the fees will add up. Always carry small change, it's very handy.

Getting around: If you're planning to stay in Marrakech and enjoy the city for a while, you do not need to rent a car. The traffic is heavy and hectic, and finding your way around is a pain. Take a cab! Taxis are cheap. Don't ask for how much your ride will cost. Just ask the driver to start rolling the meter and remember that you should never pay more than 50 dirham to go anywhere around the city. If he insists, tell him you are not a tourist and you know what the rates are.

That being said, the very best way to explore the city is by driving a scooter! Ok, I have to admit, I'm not the one driving when we travel, but it's so much fun! No wonder there are so many scooters. If you're travelling with an experienced scooter driver, I highly recommend renting one. It's much faster to get around the city! The traffic is quite heavy in Marrakech but luckily there is a reserved line for bikes and scooters.

I've never tried, but I'm guessing travelling around on a bike could be fun too! Experienced bikers only.

Most of your sightseeing will probably be in the old part of the city which they call the "old medina". Cars are not allowed in that part of the city. Sure, you will see scooters and even cars in there, but believe me, you don't want to try it.

Phone and Internet: If your cell phone is "unlocked" I highly recommend buying a "Moroccan chip" for your phone. It's cheap and super convenient. For less than \$10 you will have a Moroccan phone number and a medium speed Internet connection. (I kind of gave up on finding high speed Internet!) To buy a chip, go to a Inwi flagship store, they are everywhere. Otherwise, don't be surprised if your Internet just freezes in the middle of trying to find your way on Google map. It's part of the adventure! ;) You will find free WIFI in most hotels and coffee shops.

My last but favorite tip, be generous: When leaving Marrakech, you'll probably feel very lucky that you were even able to travel that far and see such a marvelous city. The poverty is not that obvious because Moroccans are really good at helping each other out. If someone helps you out during your trip, please don't hesitate to give back. People warn you so much to be careful not to get gypped while in Marrakech that tourists focus on that and often forget to be kind.

Visiting Marrakech, The Old Medina

Where to start?: Yes, it's a tourist spot but you won't regret the view from the "Café de France". Go all the way to the top. I recommend going there on your very first visit to Place Jemma El Fnaa just to get an idea of how the souk is organized. It also makes the most convenient meeting point if your travelling with other people and want to meet somewhere.

It's located in the heart of the Place Jemma El Fnaa. A must to soak in Marrakech's magical vibe. For me, it's the starting point to discover the old medina.

Best place to shop:

The souk market of course! Get started in one of the labyrinths surrounding Place Jemma el-Fnaa and just stroll down kilometers of handcrafted goodies. Kilim pillows, rugs, lanterns, tea glasses, leather "babouches" slippers. The colors are just so amazing. Get lost in the souk, shop until you drop, negotiate and have fun with it. It's a cultural thing, they are not trying to gyp you, it's their way of selling their stuff, they won't like it if you don't negotiate. Pay what you think you're buying is worth. The vendors might be a little annoying but just smile and be polite, they will appreciate.

After all, you really want that rug don't you? How much are you willing to pay for it? Negotiate until you reach that price. If you don't get your price it, just walk away. Also, one of the best tips I can give you is this: Don't start negotiating until you are sure you want something real bad. Just say "I'm just looking" then ask for the price and start negotiating once you are sure you want that marvelous treasure. Before you start, set the price you want to pay in your head, it will help you greatly in the process. If you start negotiating, they will play the game until they convince you and then at the end, you might feel you have to buy it. Don't show your interest until you are sure about your buy. In general, you can expect to pay around a third of the starting price.

Don't be afraid to get lost in the souk because you will! When you're done shopping, just ask your way to Place Jemma El Fnaa. I suggest making it your starting /ending point.

Best place to enjoy some tea:

After a long day at the souk, you will absolutely need a bit of silence and a break from the crowd. You'll find a little hidden gem in the heart of the souk, it's a rooftop terrace called "Terrasse Des Épices" (Not to be confused with "Café des épices" which is cool but less relaxing.) To find it, just ask someone (or a few people) to show you the way. It's the perfect place for a late lunch. The decor is very baba cool so you can chill for a few hours sipping on a delicious cinnamon infusion. Try a wonderful tajine and don't you dare skip dessert!

Also, I was pleased to learn that they now serve alcohol (which can be hard to find in the souk). Makes it a wonderful option for happy hour too ;) Once you begin climbing the stairs to the café, you'll notice some cute little shops. These are little shops from local up-and-coming designers. They call it "Souk Cherifia". You might find some cool stuff, have a look before you go up to the terrace.

Best Place to eat in the old medina:

If you're staying at a riad, that is where you'll find the best homemade authentic Moroccan food. Trust me. You need to inform your host in the morning, if you're planning to eat at your riad. They need to book the cook and do grocery shopping. Otherwise, these are my favorite places to eat:

Riad El Fenn, Terrasse des Épices, Café Arabe, Le jardin, Nomad.

Try them all, they are all worth it! And don't forget to make reservations. If you didn't make reservations, try anyways. It might be your lucky day.

Best place for happy hour:

Muslim people usually don't drink, but there are many super cool places to enjoy a drink in Marrakech. One of my faves is the rooftop terrace of the "Café Arab". The setting is perfect. And the vibe is absolutely delightful. I also recommend this place for dinner. You might want to ask your hotel or riad to make a reservation for you if you want to make sure to get in. It's seems to be a hot spot right now. If you show up and they say it's full, insist. They might surprisingly find a spot for you.

Best place to stay:

Don't book a big chain hotel, please don't. If you're planning a visit to Marrakesh, you need to stay in a typical guesthouse called a "riad". This will make your experience much more authentic. There are many awesome riads in the heart of Marrakesh's old medina, booking.com is a good place to explore your possibilities. I have 2 suggestions for you depending on your budget:

If you have a bit of spare change ;) I recommend booking at Rial El Fenn, it means "the home of art" and it is just mind blowing. With it's incredible art collection and amazing decor, Riad El Fen is sure to keep your artistic soul content. Every corner of this guesthouse is brilliantly styled with attention to detail and an added touch of art in every corner. Each room is completely different and quite stunning. The little boutique has some very unique finds, the spa is a little heavenly spot and don't get me going about it's magnificent rooftop terrace with a breathtaking view overlooking the Koutoubia. It's the perfect spot to enjoy a drink and the hippest place to stay.

Even if you did not book at the Riad El Fenn, you still need to go! The rooftop terrace is stunning, the food is amazing. Go for happy hour or for dinner, you won't regret it. You might want to reserve to make sure you don't miss out. It's the perfect place to enjoy sunsets and daydream over the soothing sounds of the call for prayer.

If you have a smaller budget but still want to pamper yourself in a typical guesthouse, I would recommend the beautiful riad called "Riad Dom Baraka". My friends stayed there with their 8 year old daughter on our last trip and they really loved it. I've been to the riad myself a few times and the place is very lovely. A expat French lady who's very nice owns it. You can see she loves Marrakech and wants to make her guests feel at home. She has really taken care of creating an authentic guesthouse and the decor is absolutely gorgeous. She's super friendly with kids and she has a Moroccan lady cooking so the food is traditional and delightful.

Book A Hammam:

I also recommend experiencing the art of the “Hammam” at Riad El Fen. Their spa is just divine! Try the “Traditional Hammam” treatment. “Experience the magic of the traditional Moroccan black soap body scrub followed by a ghassoul clay application”. Heavenly!

Monuments:

I must admit I’m not the monument type but this one is really worth it. Visit The Ben Youssef Madrasa, a 14th century Islamic college, a great representation of traditional Islamic architecture. You’ll see stunning, colorful and abundant mosaics made of fine geometric patterns and finely engraved Arabic inscriptions. You’ll be able to visit the ancient student dormitory cells and feel the special vibe of the courtyard of this superb medersa.

Visiting Marrakech, outside the Old Medina:

Nightlife:

I’m no longer the clubbing type (Ha! Believe me, I used to be fun before being a mom!) ;) but the nightlife in Marrakech is bustling. I think the restaurant “Le Comptoir, the “Jad Mahal” club or the “So Lounge” would be sure bets if you’re looking for a festive night out. A bit further away from the center is the famous Club 555 if you’re looking for something epic. The thing to know is that clubbing does not start early in Marrakech, don’t be surprised to find the clubs still empty at 11PM. It will eventually get crowded, don’t even worry about it! Oh and, people really do get dressed up, so grab your high heels, you’re in for a wild night.

If you prefer a relaxing evening sipping a drink on a rooftop terrace like I do, try The “Extrablatt’ rooftop terrace, it’s one of our faves for a romantic night out.

Best place to get inspired:

The Majorelle Garden! It’s a wonderfully amazing, stunning place. I wrote an entire post about it over here. You can’t leave Marrakech without a visit to Yves Saint-Laurent’s Majorelle blue garden. I highly recommend to go early, I mean really early, when it opens, at 8AM in the morning. You won’t regret avoiding the crowds and taking the most awesome pictures. Last time I went to Marrakech, I went twice! I can’t get enough of that garden.

Best place to shop outside the souk:

What? Are you tired of negotiating already? Ok, ok, then you need to go visit a very hip concept store named Majorelle 33. They carry some very cool products, mostly handmade by local contemporary designers. Plan your visit to this boutique right after seeing the Majorelle Garden, it’s just across the street. There is a pretty cute café in the shop too if you’d like to take a little break.

What to do Outside Marrakech:

If you’re looking for a relaxing day out of the city:

Rent a car and have a picnic at the “Ourika Valley”, the scenery is amazing and the atmosphere is super hippie. Everybody’s having a picnic! You should too. No need to bring all your stuff, you’ll find the perfect setting and cook waiting for your arrival. There are many cute spots all ready for impromptu picnics.

If you feel like hitting the beach:

A 2-3 day road trip to Essaouira is always a good idea! It’s like a small version of Marrakech but with a coastal more relaxed beach vibe. We stayed at a super cool guesthouse last time we went and we had a blast. The riad is called “Chez DarMa” and I highly recommend it. The decor was so good that I really wanted to move in forever. You can rent the entire place if you’re travelling with a group. The rooftop terrace is so good, you will love it. Essaouira has a lovely beach, we love to hang at a café called “Vagabond”, it’s directly on the beach. Kids will love the camels on the beach. Essaouira is also called “The wind city”, if you’re a kite surf fan, you’re in for a treat!

The water is good for a swim from April until the end of September. If you're not into the beach thing, it's still a very fun little city to visit. You can walk in the old medina for hours and hit the harbor at noon as they pull out the fresh fish from the water.

If you have a least 4 spare days:

You should definitely head for the desert. It's a very unique experience. It's quite a ride and only for the most adventurous peeps, but it's worth it. You'll go all the way up the High Atlas Mountains (the roads are pretty scary!) but the scenery is out of this world. Once you've made it to the top, you will need to go all the way down, which by itself is quite the experience. Then you'll cross many little towns and get to have a peek into real rural life. You will eventually get to the desert. I said eventually...

If you've made it this far, and arrived in Merzouga, then definitely hire a guide, he'll show you the best hidden gems of the desert and he'll bring you for a camel ride. You should sleep under the stars at least one night, it's quite magical. The cool thing is you don't need fancy equipment, they have all sorts of bivouac setups with tents and pillows, you'll be super comfy and your guide will prepare a delicious tajine for you. Don't be afraid, desert people are really honest and peaceful.

If you have lots of time on your hands:

This would be a very very long drive from Marrakech but I've heard Chefchaouen is amazing. It's been on my to do list for way too long! It's an all blue city and it feels so special. It's about a ten-hour drive from Marrakech and I'm pretty sure it's worth it. Stay tuned for an update on this one!

What to make sure to bring back with you:

As overwhelming as it might be, you probably want to hit the souk in search for the perfect Moroccan rug or the perfect kilim pillow but the things you might forget and you really don't want to leave without are spices, tea cakes and olives! You will find the most amazing spices in Morocco, nothing like you've tasted before! Grab at least 250gms of ground cumin, paprika, curcuma, cinnamon and ginger. These are the basics that you won't regret. You'll have such good memories while cooking at home, plus, they make the most awesome travel gifts. So grab plenty! As for the cakes, yes you need to eat more, hit the souk and find the impressive pile of honey cakes. They all taste a bit the same but you will miss them badly while sipping your mint tea back home. Then hit the olive souk and get some in every color. Spices, tea cakes and olives can all be found at the famous Marrakech souk market. And yes! You need to bargain for them. Have fun with it!

Well that's it for now. Although I'm sure I forgot something. This little travel guide will be evolving every time I visit Marrakech and I plan to add some of my favorite spots and tips along the way. Make sure you come back for the updated versions once in a while!

Safe travels! -Stephanie

