



Morocco

Cities & empires

27 March–7 April 2026 (MM 908)

12 days/11 nights • £5,990

Lecturer: Dr Iain Shearer

From Rabat to Marrakech, including the imperial cities of Fes and Meknes.

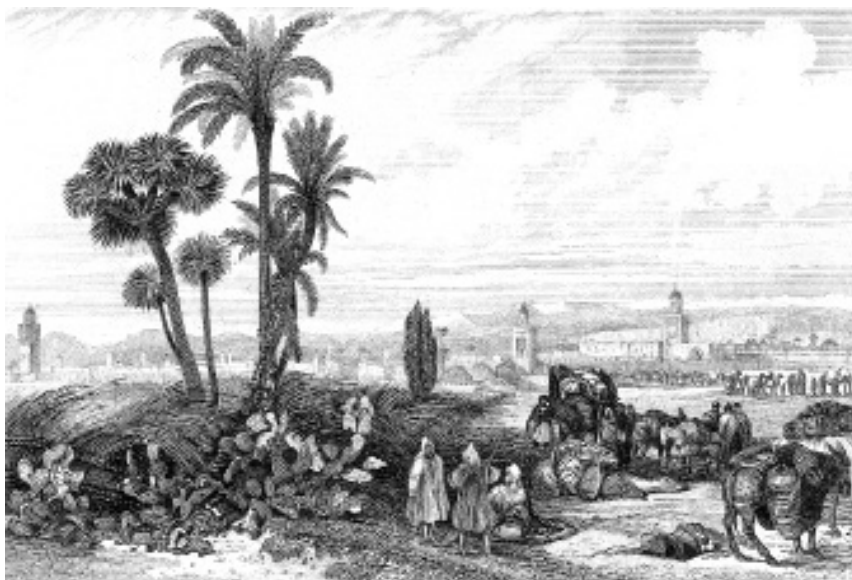
Spectacular landscapes: the Atlas Mountains, valleys, palm groves, woodland, desert.

See the sun set over the sand dunes at Merzouga and visit the magnificent Roman ruins at Volubilis.

Morocco, just a cannon's shot from Gibraltar and the ports of Spain, has always commanded the respect of Europe and fascinated its imagination. It was one of the last nations to fall under colonial occupation in 1912 and the first to win its independence from the French in 1956. The very same Grand Vizier who greeted the first French Governor had the satisfaction of ushering out the last colonial ruler before his death.

Even to fellow Muslims, it was the near legendary 'al-Maghrib al-Aqsa', the land of the setting sun, perched on the north-west corner of the African continent where the known world ended and the sea of darkness began. Its boundaries are defined by four mountain ranges which shelter the fertile Atlantic plains and by three seas: the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the sand sea of the Sahara.

Unlike some parts of the Middle East and North Africa, Morocco was not heavily settled by Arabs after the Islamic conquest in the late seventh to early eighth century. Instead the indigenous Berber tribes of the area, often called the Berbers, converted gradually to Islam and created cities and empires with a uniquely Moroccan flavour. One of the first of these cities was Sijilmasa in the Tafilalet oasis, a tribal watering hole which became a thriving Saharan port city from whence camel caravans set out for West Africa laden with salt from mines in the desert and other northern products, which were exchanged in ancient Ghana and Mali for gold, slaves, ostrich feathers, ivory and gum. From Sijilmasa, caravans wended their way north and east to the great entrepôts of North Africa, Egypt and the Middle East. Within a couple of decades, Fes was founded in North Morocco as a rival political centre and another stage in the great caravan trade across the Maghreb. Marrakech emerged in the same way around 1070. This rich trade could not help



Marrakech, steel engraving c. 1840.

but attract Christian European attention and in the early fifteenth century, the Portuguese captured Ceuta, hoping for a share of the profits. Spain, England, the Netherlands and even the Scandinavian countries were quick to follow, using Mediterranean and Atlantic ports like Rabat-Salé to access the riches of Morocco. Sultanates rose and fell on the profits of this trade, which finally dwindled in the nineteenth century.

The sites along the tour's route tell of the medieval Islamic empires of Morocco, founded by the Berbers of the region and Arab newcomers, and of the European trading powers lured to Africa by tales of gold and other exotic treasures. The long drives, often winding along the ancient trade routes, reveal the dramatic landscapes of Morocco, from fertile olive groves to snow-capped mountains and long deep green palm oases that trail down from the Atlas mountains like ribbons tapering into the Sahara desert.

Itinerary

Day 1: Rabat. Fly at c. 11.30am from London Heathrow to Casablanca via Madrid (Iberia), with onward travel to Rabat by private coach (c. 2 hours). Dinner is served on arrival at the hotel. First of two nights in Rabat.

Day 2: Rabat. Rabat on the Atlantic coast is the successor to the Roman town of Sala Colonia which became a major city under the Almohads

in the twelfth century, an independent pirate republic in the sixteenth century and the capital of modern Morocco in the twentieth century. Massive gateways, the striking Tour Hassan Mosque, and the Qasaba of the Udaya on a cliff above the sea, remain from the twelfth century, along with the fourteenth-century necropolis of Chellah, and a plethora of modern museums.

Day 3: Rabat to Fes via Meknes, Volubilis.

Meknes was a small walled provincial town nestling in olive groves until the seventeenth century when the Alawi sultan Mawlay Ismail founded a vast imperial city to house his army of enslaved sub-Saharan Africans, the Abid al-Bukhari. The ruins of this city dominate the town which also houses a beautiful Marinid madrasa and a museum of music in a nineteenth-century mansion. To the north, on the edge of the olive-covered Zarhoun hills, lie the ruins of Volubilis, the capital of Roman Morocco, with triumphal arch, basilica and mosaics. First of three nights in Fes.

Day 4 & 5: Fes. Two full days to explore the extraordinary walled medieval city of Fes that stands at the heart of Moroccan culture. The old city (Fes al-Bali) was founded in the eighth century and expanded considerably by the Marinids in the fourteenth century, who also built New Fes (Fes al-Jadid) not to be confused with the French ville nouvelle. Highlights include views from the north and south bastions, the Qarawiyyin Mosque, the Attarin Madrasa, the Bu Inaniyya Madrasa as well as

Morocco
continued

the markets, warehouses and pungent tanneries in Old Fes. In New Fes, we see the façade of the royal palace and the Jewish quarter (Mellah) and its cemetery.

Day 6: The Middle Atlas; Fes to Erfoud. Pick up the old caravan trail south, stopping at Midelt before crossing the nomad-grazed high plateau of the Middle Atlas and descending along the Ziz valley to the Tafilalt oasis on the edge of the Sahara. First of two nights in Erfoud.

Day 7: The Tafilalt Oasis, Merzouga. Visit Tafilalt, the ancestral home of the current kings of Morocco, including the exposed mounds and ruined mud walls that were once the glittering medieval caravan city of Sijilmasa. Evening excursion to see the sunset over the sand dunes of the desert of Merzouga. Second night in Erfoud.

Day 8: Erfoud to Ouarzazate. Follow a chain of palm-filled valleys west, crossing through the old market town of Tinghir and the Dades valley. See the extraordinary tapered towers of the kasbahs dotted along the route. Leave the main road for the Todra Gorge with its vividly contrasting colours of bright green vegetation set against red, brown and orange rock faces. Overnight Ouarzazate.

Day 9: The High Atlas; from Ouarzazate to Marrakech. Visit the Taourirt kasbah in Ouarzazate, home of the infamous Glawi Pasha, and the celebrated kasbah of Aït Benhaddou. Cross the High Atlas via the twisting Tiz-n-Tichka pass. Descend through woodland on the north face of the mountains down to the red city of Marrakech for the first of three nights.

Day 10: Marrakech. The Almohad Kutubiyya Mosque minaret, standing 70m high, is the oldest of the three 12th century mosque towers constructed in Marrakech, Rabat and Seville. It stands in the medieval royal quarter where the fine, stone-carved Agnaw Gate can also be seen. This area was used for elite residences such as the Bahia Palace, belonging to the chief minister Ba Ahmad, until the 19th-century. In modern Marrakech, we see the Majorelle gardens, famous for their colourful blue buildings, bamboo and cacti. The Yves St Laurent Foundation is next door.

Day 11: Marrakech. A morning devoted to the architectural achievements of the sixteenth-century Sa'di dynasty, financed by the sale of sugar produced at Chichaoua to the west. The Sa'di tombs celebrate the dynasty in finely decorated pavilions that give a taste of the original decoration of their vast palace, the Badi', which was stripped by their successors. The spacious and elegant Bin Yusuf madrasa is also a Sa'di building at the heart of Marrakech next to its oldest monument, the 11th century Almoravid Pavilion. In the afternoon visit the world-famous markets and Djemaa el-Fna Square.

Day 12: Marrakech to London. Fly from Marrakech to London Heathrow (British Airways), arriving at c. 4.45pm.

Lecturer

Dr Iain Shearer FRAS is an archaeologist who has worked in the UK, Afghanistan, Caucasus, North Africa, Balkans, Israel/Palestine, Central Asia, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, China, Italy, Pakistan, India, and the Middle East over the last 25 years. Educated at University College London's Institute of Archaeology, he is the former Sackler Scholar for Afghanistan and Iran at The British Museum and was appointed a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 2008. Iain has also led numerous lecture tours for The British Museum and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge across the Maghreb, Middle East, Turkey, Balkans, Syria, China, Greece, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Cyprus, and Central Asia.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £5,990 or £5,540 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £6,680 or £6,230 without flights.

Included: flight with Iberia and British Airways (economy class), airport transfers from Casablanca (Day 1) and to Marrakech (Day 12); private air-conditioned coach; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 8 lunches and 9 dinners with wine or soft drinks (not all restaurants serve alcohol), water, coffee or tea; all admissions; all tips; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and local guides.

Visas: not required for nationals of the United Kingdom, Australia or United States for tourist stays of up to 90 days. Nationals of other countries should check their requirements.

Accommodation. MGallery Le Diwan Rabat (all.accor.com/hotel/2820/index.en.shtml): a 4-star boutique hotel, minutes from the city's historic monuments. **Riad Dar Bensouda, Fes** (riadarbensouda.com): restored 17th-century riad near the Qaraouyne Mosque. **Kasbah Hotel Chergui, Erfoud** (hotel.chergui.com): traditional 4-star hotel outside the town centre. **Berbere Palace, Ouarzazate** (hotel-berberepalace.com): modern 5-star, in an excellent location. **Les Borjs de la Kasbah, Marrakech** (lesborjsdelakasbah.com): comfortable 4-star boutique hotel, in the heart of the Medina.

With the exception of Le Diwan Rabat and the Riad Dar Bensouda, all hotels have swimming pools.

How strenuous? This is a fairly demanding tour with a lot of coach travel and five hotels. There is a lot of walking through narrow streets and busy markets, and on rough, steep and slippery ground on archaeological sites. Average distance by coach per day: 80 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.