



Morocco

Cities & empires

11–22 April 2024 (MK 232)

11 nights • £4,940

Lecturer: Professor Amira Bennison

From Marrakech to Tangier, including the imperial cities of Fez 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 and fascinated the imagination of Europe. 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 converted gradually to Islam and created cities and empires with a uniquely Moroccan flavour. One of the first of these cities was Sigilmassa in the Tafilalt 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 Sigilmassa, caravans wended their way north and east to the great entrepôts of North Africa, Egypt and the Middle East. Within a couple of decades, Fez was founded in North Morocco as a rival political centre and another stage in the great caravan trade across the Maghreb. In the late eleventh century Marrakech emerged in the same way. This rich trade could not help but attract Christian European attention and by the



Tangier, steel engraving from The Chaplet 1845.

fifteenth century, the Portuguese had captured Ceuta, hoping for a share of the profits. Spain, England, the Netherlands and even the Scandinavian countries were quick to follow, using the Mediterranean ports like Tangier 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 Arab conquerors and the Berbers of the region, 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 taper into the desert like ribbons trailing from mountain to desert.

Itinerary

Day 1: Marrakech. Fly at c. 11.30am from London Heathrow (British Airways) to Marrakech. Some time to refresh before dinner in the hotel restaurant. First of three nights in Marrakech.

Day 2: Marrakech. The Koutoubia minaret is the oldest of the three Almohad towers constructed in the 12th century in Marrakech, Rabat and Seville, and it stands 70 metres high. The late-19th-century Bahia Palace of the chief minister Ba Ahmad shows the continuity of

artistic styles from the Saadian era. In the afternoon visit the world-famous markets and Djemaa el-Fna Square.

Day 3: Marrakech. A morning devoted to the architectural achievements of the Saadian dynasty, paid for by the sale of sugar produced nearby. The dazzling decorative excess of the Saadian tombs and the gaunt simplicity of the ruins of the El Badi Palace are balanced by the calm munificence of the Ben Youssef Madrasa, recently reopened after more than five years of restoration works. There is an optional visit to the Marjorelle gardens, with its bamboo groves and date plantations.

Day 4: The High Atlas. Ascend through woodland from Marrakech on the northern slopes. Cross the High Atlas stopping at the celebrated kasbah village of Aït Benhaddou and Taourirt before twisting through the high passes. Overnight Ouarzazate.

Day 5: Ouarzazate to Erfoud. 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. Follow a chain of palm-filled valleys north-east, crossing through the old market town of Tinerhir and the Dades valley. See the extraordinary tapering towers of the kasbahs dotted along the route. First of two nights in Erfoud.

Morocco continued

Day 6: The Tafilalt Oasis, Merzouga. Visit Tafilalt, including the exposed mounds and ruined mud walls that were once the glittering medieval city of Sigilmassa. Evening excursion to see the sunset over the sand dunes of the desert of Merzouga. Second night in Erfoud.

Day 7: The Middle Atlas; Erfoud to Fez. Ascend the Ziz valley to the Tafilalt oasis on the edge of the Sahara, before crossing the nomad-grazed high plateau of the Middle Atlas. Pick up the old caravan trail north. First of three nights in Fez.

Day 8: Fez. A full day to explore the extraordinary walled medieval city of Fez that stands at the heart of Moroccan culture. Highlights include the Bou Inania Madrasa and the Karaouyne Mosque, as well as the pungent Tanneries. Afternoon tour of the city walls and free time.

Day 9: Volubilis, Meknes. In impressive isolation on the edge of the olive-covered Zerhoun hills lie the ruins of Volubilis, the capital of Roman Morocco, with triumphal arch, basilica and mosaics. Though it boasts an old walled trading city, a Merenid Madrasa and an intimate palace museum to rival Fez, Meknes is yet overwhelmed by the vast ruins of the 17th-century imperial city established by the powerful Sultan Moulay Ismail to house his Black Guard slave army.

Day 10: Tetouan, Chefchaouen, Tangier. The heirs of Granada. Drive north to Chefchaouen to visit the Kasbah. Continue over the Anjera hills to the city of Tetouan, settled by refugees from Andalusia, whose Moorish culture is clearly identifiable in the streets of the old city and the products of the artisan school. First of two nights in Tangier.

Day 11: Tangier. A morning walk investigates both the traditional walled Muslim city and the relics of the famous turn-of-the-century international city. Visit the Anglican Church, the Kasbah quarter, including the museum, the Petit Socco square and the Mendoubia garden. Some free time.

Day 12: Tangier to London. Fly from Tangier to London Heathrow, arriving at c. 5.15pm.

of Magdalene College. Amira's publications include *The Almoravid and Almohad Empires* (2016), *The Great Caliphs* (2009) and *Jihad & its Interpretations in Precolonial Morocco* (2002) as well as numerous articles on the political, social and cultural history of the Islamic western Mediterranean.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £4,940 or £4,640 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £5,720 or £5,420 without flights.

Included: flight with British Airways (Euro Traveller, Airbus 320) and Iberia (economy class), airport transfers from Marrakech (Day 1) and to Tangier (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. Les Borjs de la Kasbah, Marrakech (lesborjsdelakasbah.com): comfortable 4-star boutique hotel, in the heart of the Medina. **Berbere Palace, Ouarzazate** (hotel-berberepalace.com): modern 5-star, in an excellent location. **Palais du Désert, Erfoud** (palaisdudesert.com): a 5-star hotel situated among the dunes and palms. **Riad El Yacout, Fez** (riadelyacout.com): a 4-star hotel situated in the heart of the medina. **Grand Hotel Villa de France, Tangier** (villadefrancetanger.com): a 5-star hotel with extensive gardens in the former diplomatic quarter. *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.

Lecturer

Professor Amira Bennison. Professor in the History and Culture of the Maghrib at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow