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ROAD TO CASABLANCA

Sea, sky and legends on Morocco's Atlantic coast

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Clockwise from bottom left: Traditional Moroccan mint tea; old medina in Tangier; a street in the medina of Asilah; Caves of Hercules; Hassan Tower in Rabat; ceramics in Asilah medina; a Moroccan net fisherman; La Fiermontina Ocean resort. **Pictures:** Getty Images; Shutterstock; supplied. **ON THE COVER:** Coastal ramparts and mausoleum, old Asilah medina. **Picture:** Getty Images



BEST MOROCCAN BEDS

Moroccan hospitality can be spectacular. Try this "best of" selection of the country's northeast coast retreats.

Grand Villa de France, Tangier: This elegant Belle Epoque dame (pictured, above) overlooks the Tangier medina and hums with history - Henri Matisse slept and painted here. Kasbah views, big sunny pool and cocktails on the terrace. *From \$285; grandvilladeFrance.allhotelsmorocco.com*

Villa Mabrouka, Tangier: Jasper Conran's superb garden estate has mansion and villa accommodation. Palms frame its emerald pool and the Strait of Gibraltar. There's fine dining, plus the legendary kasbah at your doorstep. *From \$725; villamabrouka.com*

La Fiermontina Ocean, Larache: On an endless dune coast this upscale Italian-influenced oasis is all about finesse, Berber culture and the freshest food. There are not many places like this in the world. *From \$855; lafiermontinaocean.com*

Vila Bea, Moulay Bouselham: A private boutique retreat where your suite has an infinite view of the Atlantic. Add French-Moroccan home cooking, endless sands and a blue pool. *From \$225; vilabea.com*

Villa Mandarin, Rabat: Lush private gardens surround this stately Andalusian-style mansion hotel in the capital's diplomatic area. Orange trees, a library and peacocks in the garden. *From \$340.*

Coastline of legends

IBN Battuta was a hard act to follow. A native of Tangier - a so-called Tangerine - in 1325, at age 21, he set out from Morocco and didn't come home for 29 years.

His very long lap of Arabia, Africa, India, Asia, Iberia and China earned Battuta the title of the world's greatest traveller, but his own take on wandering the earth was more measured: "Travelling gives you a home in a thousand strange places, then leaves you a stranger in your own land."

As a stranger in Battuta's hometown, I wandered the tangled alleys of the Tangier medina looking for his reputed tomb, only to find it closed. For prayers or repairs, or the day? No-one knew.

Open, however, was the nearby Cafe Baba, where for decades blow-ins like the Rolling Stones, celeb chef Anthony Bourdain and countless others had come to smoke kif hashish. Today, same as it ever was, the waft of herb is in the air. Beer is a no-no at Baba's so when the waiter arrives, I go herbal too: "Mint tea, please."

I spend a couple of rarefied nights in room 35 of the historic Hotel Grand Villa de France. It's the former studio of French painter Henri Matisse. The magical view towards the kasbah fortress that he painted from this window in 1912 is still there.

On my last evening, having hiked for hours around the hilly city, all I want is a long, hot bath. But something's missing. What do you call a Matisse bathtub minus its plug? A shower.

Barbary pirates and movie stars have plied this luminous Moroccan stretch from Tangier to Casablanca. JOHN BORTHWICK follows in their path.

Barbary coasting

My driver, a young Moroccan named Badr, arrives early next day. We hit the road to Cap Spartel where the Atlantic and Mediterranean meet at the north-western tip of Morocco. In fact, of Africa. It's Sunday and hundreds of tourists are queueing to visit the shoreline's legendary Caves of Hercules. Long lines, too crowded. We keep rolling.

For centuries this Maghreb coast had been the haunt of infamous Barbary corsairs, Muslim slavers who raided European shores up until the 1830s. A savvy Tangier octogenarian had given me a new take on them: "Think of the Barbary pirates as North Africa's payback for the Inquisition and expulsion of the Moors." I hadn't. It makes sense. History flipped.

Many Morocco travellers head inland to either the "Blue City" of Chefchaouen, the Atlas Mountains or old capital, Fez. Others follow the echoes of rock music to Essaouira which still trades on Jimi Hendrix's brief visit in 1969. Or to Marrakech that has drawn musicians like Led Zeppelin and Crosby, Stills and Nash. But I'm going coastal. Doing a Bogart, heading to Casablanca for the waters, following the Atlantic coast for four days and 340 kilometres on a bespoke itinerary arranged by Sydney-based Morocco specialists By Prior Arrangement Travel.

We pull into Asilah, "the Pearl of Morocco", 30 kilometres south of Tangier. The coast is dotted with Arabian-Iberian fortress towns like this that date back to Phoenician founders more than 3000 years ago. They later became home to Berbers, Romans, Carthaginians and Arabs, followed by centuries of tug of war between colonial Portuguese, Spanish, French and local forces.

Everywhere you look, Asilah is a photograph-in-waiting. Within its kasbah maze the whitewashed alleyways seem to have been half-dunked in a pot of blue ink. Where its fortress walls rise from the sea, the sound of breaking waves echoes, amplified between the walls. The street markets are appropriately touristic, complete with Berber

sombreros and striped djellabas you'll never wear at home. But the vibe is sunny and, despite my dire expectations, aggressive touts seem to be an extinct breed.

We lunch on crisp prawn croquettes and juice so fresh that the oranges were probably on a tree until yesterday. Back on the highway we're soon amid an almost edible landscape of avocado, citrus, potato, blueberry and strawberry fields that seemingly run forever. The ground's so fertile that the highway divider is actually an olive grove.

Land of wine and pirates

Larache, a fishing port on the Loukkos River, seems shabby compared to the brilliant blues and blinding whites of Insta Asilah, but it's also more real; lived-in. An old European fortress squats four-square on the seafront, with its weathered battlements a testament to epic real estate disputes between brawling occupiers, foreign and local. In 1829 these pirate shores were even bombarded by a fleet from land-locked, alpine Austria.

Spain, Larache's last colonial ruler, departed in 1956 but left a spacious central plaza where I try the local speciality, grilled, salted sardines. The town name derives from the Arabic term for a trellis of grape vines, so I sample an OK regional cabernet which is followed, like almost everything in Morocco, by mint tea. French playwright and poet Jean Genet greatly preferred snoozy Larache to the stoned "Interzone" scene up in Tangier. So

much so that in 1986 he opted to pass eternity here in the local cemetery.

Badr drops me north of town at an extraordinary oasis overlooking an immense shoreline. The new La Fiermontina Ocean resort, surrounded by wild hills and olive groves, occupies 150 hectares of Atlantic desert coastline. Its green-blue, earth-sea-sky vistas are mesmerising. As befits its 13 stone-clad villas (think Frank Lloyd Wright 1934 gone Morocco 2024) each with an infinity pool, subtle deco interiors and an aromatic garden.

I spend two fortunate days here, a captive of the view, the ocean, books, time, privacy and even a hammam massage. Add to that meals like lemon and saffron chicken tajine stew, or tuna takti. The "secret", for me, of most Moroccan dishes - even the bread, eggs and fruit - isn't in any hermetic complexity or esoteric ingredients but plain, unprocessed, "same day" freshness. It helps, of course, that La Fiermontina has 7500 olive trees and vast fruit orchards.

On my last morning I'm invited to the village of Dchier for a down-home Berber breakfast. Served on a family's front porch, this glorious heart-starter includes a tangy fava bean bissara, outrageously succulent strawberries and cream cheese. I could easily let breakfast stretch into brunch and my stay

into another day, but Badr's prompt arrival zaps that fantasy. Soon, we're bowling down coast highway A5 again.

Between sea and sky

I've arrived too late for the annual bird migration at my next stop, little Moulay Bouselham village. The mass influx here of feathered FIFOs is, I'm told, spectacular. Each year the lagoon and Ramsar Convention wetlands of nearby Merja Zerka National Park become the winter layover for thousands of pink flamingos, sheldrakes, herons, gannets and many other species.

I gaze across the glittering marshes, imagining this wondrous conference of the birds. But, spotted by the locals, I'm taken for a calendar-challenged birdwatcher, a rare out-of-season money-backed twitcher. Eager fishermen move in, offering me dinghy excursions out to see where the flamingos used to be. Time to migrate to my accommodation.

Vila Bea is an eight-guestroom private boutique hotel that overlooks kilometres of near-empty beach. In front of it, the Atlantic sighs rather than roars on a wide sandbar, which then forms a tidal pool. I take a good, albeit chilly dip there before climbing the dunes back up to the two-storey villa.

The owners, Parisian couple Bea and Stephen, who happen to be in residence, are fine dinner company. Living up to the Moroccan saying, "The guest brings his stomach with

him", I choose from the blackboard menu the hachis parmentier, a crusty, meaty French version of shepherd's pie prepared by the chef, Aicha. Over Moroccan vin gris, a blend of dry rose and white, we converse for hours.

By next afternoon I'm in Rabat, the national capital, where an amiable local guide, Frank ("I like Australians, you haven't gone all woke") steers me through Rabat's "greatest hits", so to speak. And they are great, including the World Heritage-listed Oudayas Kasbah, an intact 12th-century citadel famed for its ramparts, gardens and riverfront cafe.

I ask why this kasbah lacks the vivid Santorini-like blue-white colour scheme I've seen in other towns. "Authenticity," explains Frank. "They removed the blue because it's not an indigenous heritage colour." Sorry, Asilah, Tangiers, Chefchaouen ...

A visit to the grand mausoleum of King Mohammed V and the huge, unfinished Hassan Tower mosque wraps up my brief tour of Rabat. I spend the night at Villa Mandarin, an elegant Iberian mansion extended to a luxury hotel. My solo "farewell Morocco" feast is a slow-cooked fish tajine and a glass of gris. Then, pack quick, sleep fast, wake-up and go.

You must remember this

Badr collects me and we hit the highway to Casablanca airport, the setting for one of cinema's most famous farewell scenes and coolest one-liners. The movie of course is Casablanca. Its climax sees Humphrey Bogart's character, Rick, helping the woman he loves (played by Ingrid Bergman) to escape from pursuing Nazis by boarding a last-minute flight out of Casablanca.

