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TRAVEL

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Your guide to Morocco, the star of Hollywood’s latest epic

The cinematic backdrop for Gladiator II has captivated visitors for centuries – we promise you’ll be entertained

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Paula Hardy
Destination expert
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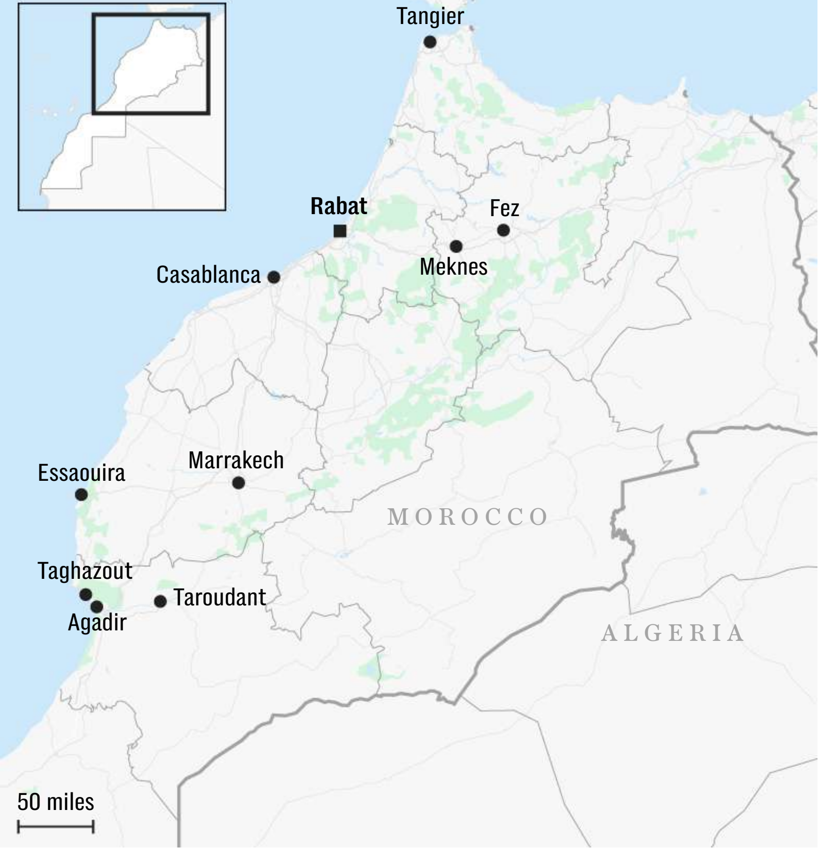
With Hollywood heavyweights Paul Mescal, Pedro Pascal and Denzel Washington swaggering onto our screens in *Gladiator II*, in which they slug it out with rhinos, sharks and each other in a reconstructed Colosseum built in Ouarzazate, Morocco’s film city, now is a good time to take stock of the similarly surefooted moves that have made the Kingdom of Morocco Africa’s number-one tourist destination in 2024.

“Ouarzawood”, as it’s been dubbed, has long been a favourite for top-drawer filmmakers such as Ridley Scott, Martin Scorsese and David Lean thanks to its stunning desert scenery and cinematic light, but with direct flights from 14 UK cities, Morocco is increasingly attracting a swath of British visitors as well as Europeans, who arrived in record numbers this year – fanning out from hotspot Marrakech to the hiking trails of the High Atlas Mountains, the beaches and golf courses of Agadir, the whitewashed medinas of the Atlantic Coast, the beach resorts of the Mediterranean, and the cultural capitals of Fez, Rabat and Casablanca.

The increase in tourist arrivals (18 per cent in the year to date) is down to some savvy investments in new flights and routes – Jet2 plans to offer 17 weekly flights throughout winter 2024-25 (a high-octane tourism campaign glossily showcasing Morocco’s diversity) – and an emphasis on the country’s culture and creativity.

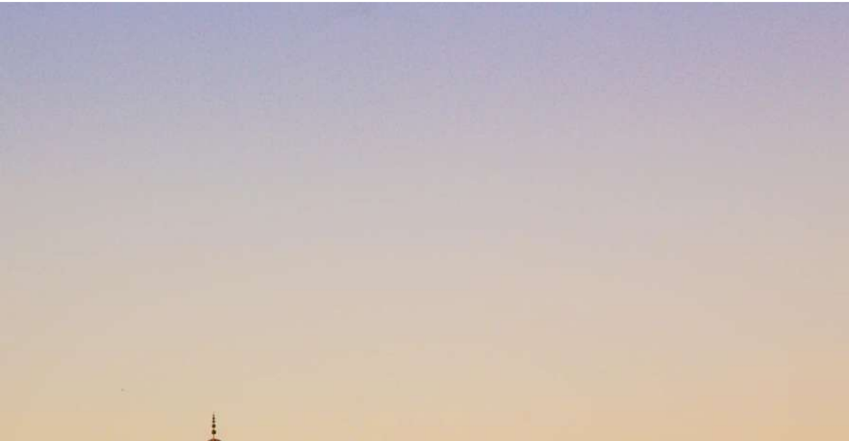
In October, French first lady Brigitte Macron landed in the capital to inaugurate the Grand Théatre de Rabat, the stunning last project of starchitect Zaha Hadid, which could become as iconic as the Sydney Opera House.



It's just the latest in a series of eye-catching openings, festivals, music gigs and events that are helping Morocco successfully surf the cultural zeitgeist. As Denzel Washington's wily Numidian warlord, Macrinus, crows: "That, my friend, is politics!”

With the Marrakech Film Festival on November 29 and the World Cup arriving in 2030, now’s the time to consider an adventure to this thrilling North African kingdom, where the Amazigh Roman Emperor, Juba II, once reigned with the daughter of Anthony and Cleopatra in the city of Volubilis in a previous era of prosperity.

We promise you’ll be entertained.



Marrakech is a modern medieval city | CREDIT: Getty Images

Where to go

Marrakech

With its snake charmers, astrologers, storytellers, acrobats and Gnaoua trance dancers, Marrakech's mad-cap Djemaa El Fna is a match for any Roman circus. This modern medieval city, with its rose-red medina and creative verve, puts on an endless round of exhibitions, parties, music festivals and art fairs.

In October the *Vogue* Arabia Fashion Awards brought the fashion crowd to town, while celebrities will soon fly in for the film festival. On New Year's Eve, parties will dazzle the rooftops of the city, followed shortly after by February's 1-54 Art Fair.

Marrakech's fascinating Djemaa El Fna market Credit: Alamy Stock Photo

While it's fun to hop around Marrakech's design-forward riads, there are a growing number of chic retreats on the city's doorstep, making it easy to combine urban pleasures with hiking in the Ourika and Ouirgane valleys or romantic getaways in tented camps in the Agafay Desert.

Art-filled Izza Marrakech *(double rooms from £216) is a swish newcomer with a £5 million art collection, impressive facilities and an events ambassador who can arrange anything. Relais & Château's* Villa des Orangers *(doubles from*

£410) exudes old-world elegance in a stunning Arabo-Andalucian mansion, while bucolic Berber Lodge *(double rooms from £250) is a charming, village-like retreat set in an olive grove just outside Marrakech.*

The High Atlas

Welcome to North Africa's highest mountain range, known to the native Amazigh tribes as Idraren Draren (Mountain of Mountains), they rise to the south and east of Marrakech like a mighty rock curtain running for 1,000km (620 miles) and summiting at 4,167m in Jebel Toubkal. Snow falls regularly between November and April, the meltwaters greening the valleys of Zat, Ourika, Mizane and Ouirgane that run towards Marrakech.

Imlil is the gateway to Toubkal and it's easy to head out from Marrakech to hike, mountain bike and horse ride along old mule tracks in the Toubkal National Park. The road less travelled lies to the east in the idyllic Aït Bougmez Valley, otherwise known as "Happy Valley", where spring brings fields of wildflowers and villagers tend golden wheatfields and vegetable patches seemingly untouched by the passage of time.

Kasbah Toubkal *(doubles from £166) is a magnificent hilltop kasbah and a sustainability-focused mountain retreat framed by high peaks. For more haute luxe, haute montagne pampering, book Richard Branson's* Kasbah Tamadot *(doubles from £819), which has just opened six new family-friendly riads. And for a dash of Soho House style with the most lovely views of the Ourika Valley, try* Kasbah Bab Ourika *(doubles from £175).*

Find panoramic views in the foothills of the Middle Atlas | CREDIT: Getty Images

The Imperial Cities & Middle Atlas

Morocco's Imperial Cities are the country's four royal capitals: Fez, Meknes, Rabat and Marrakech. Other than Marrakech, most cluster in the centre of the country in the shade of the Middle Atlas cedar forests.

The Romans grew wealthy on grain and garum (fermented fish sauce) at Volubilis, where Moulay Idriss, the great-grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, found sanctuary in the 8th century, establishing the country's first Islamic dynasty. He also founded high-minded Fez, Morocco's spiritual and culinary capital, which was followed by the monumental palace-city of Meknes (just fresh from a multimillion-dollar restoration) and kasbah-crowned Rabat, which sits astride the Bouregreg river and remains the country's cultured contemporary capital.

Bustling Fez is one of the country's royal capitals Credit: Getty Images

You can zip between them on high-speed Al Boraq trains, and then head into the vine-clad foothills of the Middle Atlas to visit vineyards and artisanal weavers in Sefrou, trek trails beneath the ancient cedar trees in the Tazekka

National Park, or go skiing at the Michlifen Ski Resort.

In Fez, check in to 1001-fantasy Riad Laaroussa *(doubles from £141), where you get great bang for your buck. Sleek, contemporary* Fairmont La Marina Rabat-Salé *(doubles from £300) sits at the mouth of the Bouregreg river in Rabat. In the Middle Atlas, try wine retreat* Château Roslane Boutique Hotel *(doubles from £217) or Alpine-style* Michlifen Resort & Golf *(doubles from £190), where you can hike, golf, cycle and horse ride.*

Coastal Essouira is surrounded by medieval walls | CREDIT: Getty Images

The North Atlantic Coast

Throughout Morocco’s dramatic arc of history, the north Atlantic seaboard has played a crucial role as a cosmopolitan melting pot and commercial gateway. The seafaring Phoenicians landed and settled in Essaouira and Safi, while the Romans preferred the port of Lixus near Larache, and all along the coast at

El Jadida, Casablanca, Rabat, Tangier and Asilah, the Portuguese, Spanish, French and various medieval Moroccan Dynasties built and reinforced coastal citadels much like the one Marcus Acacius (Pedro Pascal) assails in the epic opening of *Gladiator II*.

Yet, despite centuries of sieges, Morocco's coastal fort-cities remain remarkably well preserved and people still live within their mighty medieval walls. What's more, in recent years, they've all undergone sensitive restoration work, making them not only picture-perfect film locations but fantastic stage sets for a string of festivals such as Rabat's Chellah Jazz Festival amid the Roman ruins, Essaouira's Gnaoua & World Music Festival, the Street Art Festival in Asilah and Casablanca's blow-out international and world music festival, Jazzablanca.

The fabulous art deco Royal Mansour Casablanca *(doubles from £475) won best new* *hotel in this year's Telegraph Awards and is a hit with Casa's creative scene; In El Jadida, vintage-vibe* l'Iglesia *(doubles from £119) is housed in a former church and a previous American consulate. But the big revelation is* La Fiermontina Ocean *(self-catered Village House from £290 and suites from £585) perched on a piece of pristine coastline that looks almost Puglian.*

The white-washed walls of Tangier | CREDIT: Getty Images

Tangier & the Mediterranean Coast

Tangier is the beguiling gateway to Africa, sitting just eight nautical miles from southern Europe across the Straits of Gibraltar. You can nip across on a ferry in an hour or fly into Tangier Ibn Battouta Airport, named for the world's greatest explorer, who wandered 75,000 miles in the 14th century and hailed from this outward-looking coastal entrepôt.

Its Spanish-flavoured white-washed medina is full of smart art museums, galleries and design shops, vintage cinemas and tapas-style restaurants, while in its hilly suburbs hide luxurious Moorish-Andalucian and Modernist villas, where you can retreat to balconied rooms with views over the Straits. All around are long sandy beaches, the bosky Cap Spartel headland and the moody Rif Mountains, where you can hike to waterfalls or the blue city of Chefchaouen.

Chefchaouen is famous for its striking blue painted walls Credit: Getty Images

In summer, head further east to the Moroccan Riviera, where the country's finest hotel, Royal Mansour, has just opened a super-luxe beach resort on Tamouda Bay. Here and at neighbouring Cabo Negro you can spend the summer boating, water-skiing and yachting – just don't miss a visit to Tetouan, the most perfectly preserved medina in the country.

Jasper Conran's revamped 1940s Villa Mabrouka *(doubles from £375) in Tangier continues to be the talk of the town with its peerless sea views and garden. Or opt instead for the magnificent medina mansion* Hotel Nord-Pinus *(doubles from £175) with its old-world boho charm. Then, when spring arrives, make a beeline for spa-hotel extraordinaire* Royal Mansour Tamuda Bay *(doubles from £355) on a mile-and-a-half private beach.*

Ait Benhaddou is a Unesco World Heritage Site | CREDIT: Getty Images

The Southern Oases

Head southwest of Marrakech and cross the Tizi n'Tichka pass and you'll descend into the dry river valleys of the Drâa, Dadès and Ziz once plied by camel caravans bringing gold, salt and enslaved people from Timbuktu.

They present the storybook image of Morocco, lined as they are with date palm oases and mud-brick kasbahs such as Amridil, Taourirt and Unesco-heritage Aït Benhaddou.

Discover dramatic ruins in the river valleys Credit: Getty Images

Now you can sleep in comfortable beds in these ancient desert fortresses and rise to a breakfast of fresh bread and dates, before heading out to cycle the shady paths of Skoura oasis or hike the crags of Jebel Saghro.

At the end of the long road south, the Tarmac peters out with a sigh in the soft dune fields of Erg Chigaga, from where Tuareg and Amazigh guides can lead you and your dromedary through the Iriqui National Park.

The rammed-earth kasbah Dar Ahlam *(rooms from £840) in Skoura is one of Morocco's most magical hotels, where you'll feel like you're starring in your own movie.* Kasbah Tamsna *(doubles from £121) offers similar vibes, a stunning view and pool, in film city Ouarzazate. Deep in the desert, glamp in the romantic canvas tents of Umnya Dune Camp (doubles from £350).*

Agadir & the Anti Atlas

The Souss Valley, where goats climb argan trees to nibble their superfood fruit, draws a line across Morocco from the family-friendly beach resort of Agadir to the mini Marrakech-style medina of Taroudant and on into the wrinkled Anti Atlas Mountains. Here, Imazighen tribes farm almonds, saffron and the rare etrog citrus (*Citrus medica*), and travellers hike trails to see prehistoric rock art and extraordinary igoudars (ancient granaries that acted as an early banking system).

In winter, the Atlantic swell and sunshine ensure Agadir's beachside resorts are full of families, golfers and spa junkies, while farther south surfers flock to yoga retreats and surf clubs in Taghazout and Spanish-flavoured Sidi Ifni.

Agadir's beach resorts are a favourite for surfers Credit: Alamy Stock Photo

Billions of dollars' worth of investment has seen the upgrade of roads, cycle paths, parks and city infrastructure, and swish new hotels have arrived in the form of the Hyatt Regency and Fairmont. New flights have seen tourism arrivals at Agadir's airport leap 34 per cent this year. A sense of somewhere fresh and undiscovered gusts through the region like the spring winds – head south: you'll be surprised.

Settle in for seaside fun at beachside Fairmont Taghazout Bay *(doubles from £246) where kids are welcome and the spa is divine. The cool crowd flock to arty* Amouage *(doubles for week-long stays £882 per person) for dawn yoga and afternoon surf sessions and nestled in Taroudant's ancient medina is jasmine-draped* Dar Zahia *(doubles from £71) while* Dar al Houssoun *(doubles from £185) has the most spectacular desert garden and country-style rooms.*

Scanned with CamScanner

You can fly to Morocco from the UK in under four hours | CREDIT: Getty Images

How to do it

How to get there

Morocco is easy to reach. You can fly there from 14 UK airports with a choice of 28 airlines. The most popular routes are from London Gatwick to Marrakech Menara Airport or from Gatwick or Heathrow to Casablanca's Mohammed V's Airport. The flight time is around 3.5 hours.

The main carriers are British Airways, easyJet, Ryanair, Jet2, Wizz, Tui, Royal Air Maroc and Air Arabia, while Aer Lingus flies from Dublin.

For those heading to the desert who don't want to spend time in Marrakech, consider the Ryanair flight from London Stansted to Ouarzazate (Sundays only) as this eliminates a lot of road travel.

In Casablanca, a train connects the airport to the city centre, taking half an hour, otherwise, all hotels offer an airport pick-up service which is the most convenient option in Marrakech, Fez and Agadir.

Taxis are also available and in Marrakech you can now book and pay for your taxi ride (100-150Dh/£8-12) at an automated machine in the parking lot, thus avoiding any haggling.

The Volubilis archeological site is located near the city of Meknes Credit: Getty Images

When to book

Easter, October half term, Christmas and New Year are the busiest times in Morocco, particularly in Marrakech, where accommodation needs to be booked months in advance and Christmas sees five-day minimum stays enforced.

Coastal resorts, particularly on the Mediterranean coast and around Tangier, are also very busy in July and August, and local tourists flock to Marrakech despite the typically 45C temperatures.

The Muslim fasting holiday of Ramadan (February 28 to March 30 in 2025) doesn’t affect tourism services, although it's good to be aware of it and bear in mind that at sunset everything stops for a couple of hours as people break their fast.

Eid Al Fitr and Eid Al Adha (dates change annually according to the lunar calendar) are Morocco's two biggest holidays – many places close for a five-day break during the latter feast.

When to go

Morocco has a huge diversity of landscapes, each with a distinct climate, so consider where to go carefully. April, May, September and October are the prime months, although April can still be quite cool in the far north, while June is perfect. In July and August, temperatures in Marrakech and the south regularly exceed 40C and desert travel pauses between May and September. Between November and February, it snows in the High Atlas but southern cities enjoy sunny days and cool nights. Coastal regions experience less variance, with temperatures hovering between 15C and 27C.

Wander through the souks to find handcrafted souvenirs to bring home
Credit: Getty Images

How much does it cost?

Morocco is an affordable destination. Food, public transport, museum fees, taxis, all-inclusive resorts and car rental are generally inexpensive. There’s also plenty of reasonably priced accommodation in small guesthouses that cost anywhere between £60-180 per night. However, prices rise dramatically in popular destinations such as Marrakech and Tangier and the business hub of Casablanca. Here anything goes, with boutique riads (courtyard houses) and brand hotels offering stratospherically expensive experiences. The trick is to balance a bit of both and you’ll find you can travel well for around £1,400 a week.

On a budget

If you want to travel on a budget, it’s easy to do so in Morocco with rooms in well-reviewed hostels and budget hotels going for as little as £10-20 a night in Marrakech. Eating at local restaurants and fast food stalls is also very cheap, with meals costing £3-8. Medinas are also full of fruit, veg, juice, cheese, olive and sweet stalls. The country’s bus and train network are reliable and efficient. Buses are cheapest with CTM and Supratours the two main operators. The bus ride from Marrakech to Essaouira costs just £6, while the high-speed train from Rabat to Tangier costs around £17.

Holiday packages can include camel rides in the desert or cooking classes in the medina | CREDIT: Getty Images

What to book

The Ultimate Moroccan Adventure

For the ultimate Moroccan exploration, put yourself in the safe hands of [Inclusive Morocco](), which specialises in crafting unique and meaningful travel through its network of exclusive contacts. Its 14-night Ultimate

Moroccan Adventure takes you the length and breadth of the country, from Tangier to the Middle and High Atlas and down into the desert. En route it introduces you to the country through brilliant guides, welcoming cookery classes, behind-the-scenes private tours (including of the film studios), off-beat hikes, dune buggy rides and more. Or it can craft a shorter eight-day journey focused just on the south and the famous film-shoot locations. For the former, prices start at £5,100 per person while the latter costs £2,705, excluding flights.

Majestic Morocco

Morocco has enough culture to rival any ancient world empire, and Cazenove+Loyd is offering a new 10-day Majestic Morocco road trip through central Morocco exploring the rich tapestry of history and culture in the imperial cities of Fez, Meknes, Rabat and Marrakech. In Fez you'll dive into the food scene with tasting trails and cookery classes with a local family; in Rabat you'll gasp at the lovely Chellah ruins and wander the Andalucian gardens in the Kasbah of the Oudayas; and, in Meknes you'll explore unique Arabo-Moorish monumental architecture and exquisite Moroccan craft at the mausoleum of Moulay Ismail. Then, you'll head south to Marrakech to finish on a high in the city's electric souks and smart restaurants. Prices start at £5,250 per person, excluding airfares.

Family adventures

Morocco is a fantastically family-friendly destination with an endless array of thrilling adventures and novel sights and sounds – kids absolutely love it. All Epic Travel's trips are bespoke and it knows a thing or two about crafting family adventure. Its 10-day Golden Triangle tour swings around Marrakech, the Agafay Desert and High Atlas to end in Essaouira, and involves vintage sidecar tours through the medina, camel rides and quad biking in the desert, paragliding and mountain biking; or gentler options such as cooking, perfume making and craftwork. The highlight, though, is gliding over the desert in a hot air balloon. Get in touch to discuss options. Prices start at £3,300 per person, excluding flights.

Enjoy wandering through the medina in Tangiers and Fez Credit: Getty Images

The Atlantic surf scene

Surf season in Morocco is from September to April, when the fishing village of Taghazout, just south of Agadir, hums with laid-back activity and markets, live music and exhibitions pop up all over the place. Surf Maroc is the most experienced outfit with three different properties where it offers surf coaching packages to beginners and advanced surfers and premium surfboard hire. Alongside the surf options, there's a serious open yoga studio and an endless list of in-house events.

Prices for fully inclusive surf coaching packages start from £1,750, excluding flights.

Desert trails

Wild Morocco's expert team of desert-born Sharawi guides lead amazing off-grid hikes into the Iriqui Park, the only national park in the Moroccan Sahara. Their seven-night Across Iriqui safari departs M’Hamid into the sand seas past the Monument-Valley-lookalike Medouar mountains with a dromedary caravan carrying the kit for wilderness camps in the curve of towering dunes or miniature palm oases. The light is spectacular in winter due to the low angle of the sun, and you can add a night in a fixed glamping camp midway. You can cross right through Iriqui to end in Taroudant or loop back to Ouarzazate if you flew in on the new direct Ryanair flight. Prices start from £955 per person (based on two people travelling privately).

Morocco is one of the safest African countries for travellers | CREDIT: Alamy Stock Photo

Know before you go

Visas are not required for British travellers for visits up to 90 days, but your passport must be valid for at least six months from your date of entry to Morocco. Morocco is one of the safest African countries for travellers and Moroccans are hospitable and generous people.

Tourism is also a major contributor to the economy, which Moroccans are keenly aware of, and the Moroccan government prioritises tourist safety, as do all hotels, DMCs and tour operators.

In terms of the current Middle East conflict between Israel and Hamas, London is closer to the conflict zone than Marrakech, and Morocco maintains diplomatic ties with Israel while also condemning attacks against Palestinian civilians and civilian infrastructure. That said, there is significant support for Palestinians' plight within the country, and peaceful protests have taken place in major cities such as Rabat and Casablanca. These are heavily policed and tend to concentrate near official buildings, away from tourist sites and resorts.

Languages spoken in Morocco include English, French, Arabic and Spanish Credit: Getty Images

Insider tips

Morocco is a big country overlaying both France and Spain from tip to toe. Don’t try to cover too much ground.

English is only widely spoken in Marrakech. However, many Moroccans speak either French or Spanish.

Avoid expensive roaming charges by picking up a prepaid sim card from Marco Telecom or Orange at the airport, or get an e-sim such as Saily.

The Moroccan dirham is a restricted currency and is not available abroad. Currency exchange is well regulated and rates do not vary that much between banks, so it’s fine to stock up on cash.

Most restaurants, cafés and shops in major towns and cities accept cards, but in smaller and more rural areas, and for taxis, you'll need cash.

Tipping is an integral part of Moroccan life, and almost every service warrants a small tip. Hoard small bills and tip baggage handlers and porters Dh10 to Dh20 (under £0.50), and add 10 per cent to the bill in restaurants as well as for guide services.

If you get lost in the medina, ask a shopkeeper for directions or just follow the flow of people. The most common scam is young boys telling you you're walking in the wrong direction or that the street you're heading up is closed. They then offer to guide you to your destination and demand a tip on arrival. Just ignore them and carry on walking.

What to pack

Morocco is a cold country with a hot sun, which means layers. While it’s usually sunny in the day, in autumn, winter and spring, evenings get cold once the sun goes down and in high-walled medinas it stays cool in the shade until the sun’s up.

In the mountains and on the north coast, a waterproof jacket is useful in winter and early spring, while from May to October a sun hat and suncream are essential. Swap this for a woolly hat in mountainous areas and the desert in winter.

For resort and beach holidays at major brand hotels regular swimwear is fine, although having a kaftan or cover-up is handy for wandering around. Otherwise, in towns and rural areas dressing modestly in consideration of local culture is appreciated and makes for a more comfortable experience. One pair of supportive shoes, trainers or sandals is also handy for dusty or cobbled medinas.

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