

WHERE MAGIC LIVES

From imperial cities to towering dunes, Morocco is evocative, diverse and colourful

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Slowly the doors swing open, one by one. Shopkeepers sprinkle water on their doorsteps for good luck, and to settle the dust kicked up by thousands of feet, carts and pedalos that flow through the narrow alleyways. The medina of Marrakech is waking up to a new day, gently and with timeless ceremony.

Marrakech, its walls tinged red from the sands of the nearby Atlas Mountains, has a heady atmosphere. The Djemaa el Fna square is at the heart of it, with the whole imperial city radiating outwards from here. Impromptu circus acts and buskers make a living from Dirhams dropped by curious onlookers and snake charmers sway in unison with their charges. Acrobats perform unlikely stunts with no safety nets and monkey handlers perform quirky tricks with their trained pets. There are jugglers and Berber chemists, orange juice sellers and ice-cream hawkers – all earning an honest living on the square.

Leading off Djemaa el-Fna is a web of souks, or markets, selling everything from aphrodisiacs to zany leather shoes in a rainbow of

colours. There is the blacksmith souk, selling intricate metal lamps; the dyers, carpenters, coppersmiths and leatherworkers; and lest we forget, the jewellers, who tinker out traditional Berber jewellery in rough silver. There are textiles, wool and, of course, carpets in every shade of red, and depicting symbols of the area from which they hail.

“Just feel how soft it is,” says the carpet seller, as we stop to marvel at the myriad designs. “It’s a good carpet for drinking mint tea. Just sit down and relax, I’ll pour the tea.” While we sip the tea the bargaining begins. “Everything is negotiable in Morocco, except stamps, medicine and taxes,” smiles the carpet seller, Omar Mohammed. “You can even negotiate about negotiating.”

Then, in the late afternoon, Marrakech grows quiet until evening falls. Marrakchis are reenergizing for the evening, but when the call to prayer rings out from the majestic Koutoubia mosque, everyone comes to life again. After prayers, men, women and children pour into the streets and back into the square to enjoy the evening food market – world renowned, fresh and



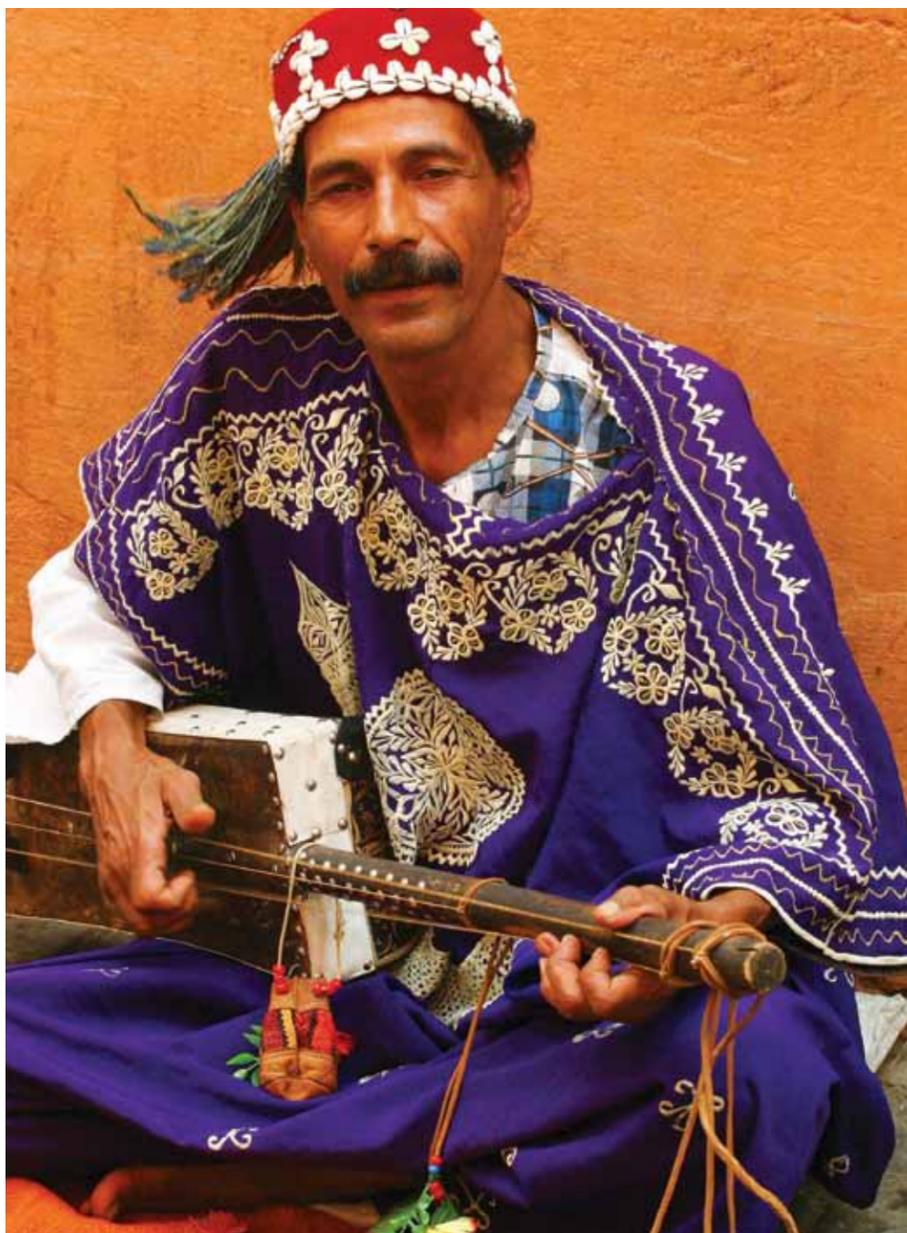
scrumptious. As the sun sets, the entertainment acts disperse and the square is transformed into a massive food market, serving freshly cooked traditional food for dinner. This is where everyone mingles and meets, like colourful threads of a carpet. People chat, eat, socialise and shop, dodging bicycles, carts and purring mopeds. And tomorrow they will do it all again, with the effervescent warmth and friendliness for which Marrakchis are known – somehow they are always in a good mood.

After a lip-smacking street dinner of kofta, salad and flatbread, we wend our way back to the *riad*, like sniffer dogs through the alleyways. We pass the dozens of shops we visited through the day, and stop to listen to a traditional Gnawa

musician strumming his homemade guitar to a mesmerising tune. He nods his head hypnotically and has us momentarily entranced, too.

As in Marrakech, the medina of Fes is the soul of the city. It’s intoxicating, seems suspended in time, and reflects a microcosm of daily life. Fes El Bali is one of the biggest medinas in the world and home to over 200 000 Fassis. The city of Fes also boasts being the most complete medieval city in the whole Arab world. It’s also Morocco’s oldest imperial city, dating back to the 9th century.

Thoroughly beautiful and achingly elegant, Fes is sprinkled with green-roofed mosques, intricate mosaics, elaborate palaces and evocative architecture. Standing



in the shadows of the Rif and Middle Atlas mountain ranges, the city also has a distinctly sophisticated air and aloofness.

Abdel Hafid was born in Fes Medina. Now he lives in a new area of the city because his wife prefers it, yet his greatest wish is to “move home to the medina”. As we stand on a balcony overlooking the Dyers’ Souk, where cauldrons in different colours appear as a massive artist’s palette, Abdel adds: “This is the real Fes, the most ancient and beautiful city of all. I could never leave here.”

Saffron for yellow and poppy flowers for red, all the leather dyes are natural and dyers stain the skins by hand; sinewy men who stomp and turn the hides to colour them evenly. Bags, babouches and belts are made from the leather, renowned for its softness and striking natural colours. Every Moroccan wears coloured leather shoes, and since visiting there so do we.

In the medina of over 9 400 alleyways, we are again rent mesmerised, not by a musician this time but by the kaleidoscope of colours, smells and sights that mingle in the old town. Every crack in the wall is a tiny shop making and trading, same as they always have. Tailors in dimly-lit rooms sit bowed and sewing, bakers drip sweat from the heat of their open wood ovens and shovel flat breads onto shelves to cool, blacksmiths solder intricate creations, and bicycle baskets and donkey carts carry loads of fresh mint in the narrow alleyways. It’s an ancient scene – much like the camel caravans that traverse the Sahara near Merzouga.

Here, ochre-coloured dunes tower heavenwards in the Great Sand Sea that is the Sahara, while the single-file camel train winds through it like a slow-moving snake. They could be going to Algeria, Mauritania or even as far as Timbuktu in Mali, an epic 52 days by camel across the desert. Yet this is everyday life for Tuaregs, who survive by trading with their neighbours. And the great dunefield of Erg Chebbi at Merzouga is just the beginning of their journey. Only in imagination can we create the life they live, surrounded by silence, searing heat and shifting sand, navigating their sandy ocean by stars.

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And so is the mountain village of Moulay Idriss, the most holy of Morocco’s towns, with a little taste of Rome on its outskirts. The mountainside town rises up unexpectedly like a chocolate cake iced with white houses. Deep inside the town, we wander its earthy alleyways past low-door homes decorated with the symbolic Hand of Fatima for protection. Some also have horse-shoes for luck and random art works of mosaic at the entrance.

In the market square we buy rough chunks of honey nougat – since this is the home of Moroccan nougat – and arrive at Volubilis nearby, well spiked with sugar. It is said that 25 000 people lived in this Roman city in its heyday some 20 centuries ago, and today the two aqueducts, grand arch and perfect floor mosaics are evidence of a well-ordered and genteel people, who were also adept craftsmen.

Romans, Arabs and Africans have all left their lust for life imprinted on Morocco. In the music and medinas, the food and fine shopping, the romantic raids and rustic landscapes, this is a place to experience and savour slowly, for pure magic lives here. ✪

Ed’s note: The best time to visit is October/November and March/April. The weather ranges from deep snow in the High Atlas in winter to 50°C in the Sahara in summer. Remember that South African passport holders do require a visa. Visit www.sandsafaris.com for more info.

