

COLOURS OF MOROCCO

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COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

The people of Morocco take inspiration from the natural colours around them. The golden sands of the Sahara Desert, the blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean and the living green of oasis palms. This richness of colour is matched only by their diversity of cultures.

Marrakech is the heart of Morocco for travellers. Just a few hours flight from European cities you are quickly immersed in Arabic and Berber trading souks. The narrow winding lanes are famous for exotic wares made of silver and brass, leather and textile, glass and pottery. The souks extend from the main square, the Djeema El-Fna, where the fall of dusk invites story tellers, dancers, musicians, and stalls filled with fruit, samovars and freshly prepared. The air is filled with Moroccan spices and beating drums, until the evening wears thin and locals retire to their riad-style homes for the night.

The fishing port of Essaouira is readily accessible from Marrakech, by bus or car, and appeals to anyone who enjoys seafood markets and dining. Stalls setup near the fishing pier every lunchtime; just look for the flocks of sea-gulls hovering in the wind.

Travel a few hours in the opposite direction and you find yourself nestled deep into the High Atlas Mountains. The village of Imlil is a popular choice for people who want to enjoy a blend of the old and the new. A few hundred metres above the township, and 1800 metres above sea level, sits the Kasbah du Toubkal, a magnificent example of citadel architecture. For those with an allergy to comfort and luxury you will find more communal-styled accommodation at one of the 'gits' scattered further along the valley.

Even if you do not intend to stay at the Kasbah, it's worth having lunch or just a Moroccan mint tea in order to steal a moment with its commanding views and tasteful interiors.

Heading east across the Atlas mountain range the colours of spring crops recede into the rock and dust that borders the Sahara. It's a long journey before you reach the desert itself, so an overnight stay in a town like Ait Benhaddou is essential. One of the more famous Kasbahs in Morocco, this heritage listed site has benefited greatly from its popularity with major film productions. Palms trees line the outer walls of the Kasbah near the river. When the water is low the river bed becomes a preferred route for camels and donkeys.

As you approach the main gates expect textile traders and snake charmers to be on hand, ready to negotiate a bargain. Fortunately, they are more harmless than they look. Once inside the ancient city the locals have taken to artistic expression to tempt to the tourist eye. The view from the highest point, however, is far more compelling than any water colour to be bought.

The golden sands of the Sahara Desert lie just a few hundred miles further east. The dunes themselves are the real attraction. Riding a camel for a couple of hours gives you a sense of respect for the Berber tribesmen who call this region home. The traditional blue turban is worn with great pride, a genuine reflection of cultural heritage. It also makes it easy to see the leader as your camel-train wanders over and down the maze of dune hills. Spending the night in the dunes is not really a hardship, but the woven tents and camel droppings do give an adventurous feel to the scene.

Leaving the dunes to the north will take you to some remarkable cities. Chefchaouen is famed for its brilliant blue walls, Volubilis for its ancient Roman mosaics and Fez for its medieval medina; Fez El-Bali is by far the easiest place in Morocco to get lost in the souks. Deep in the heart of the medina you will find the tanneries still in action, adding colour to raw leather using the most pungent of concoctions of vegetable products and farm manure.

If your navigation skills are not that good, just follow your nose. If you still can't find the tanneries then perhaps head up the hill and relax with a cocktail at the Sofitel Palais Jamai. The view from the balcony overlooks the old city in a most harmonious junction between east and west.

