This land of dramatic contrasts invites us to encounter its ancient ruins and sacred mosques, endless desert and storied mountains, imposing kasbahs and spirited souks. As we travel from the imperial cities of Rabat, Fez, and Marrakech to the High Atlas and vast Sahara, we open our eyes and hearts to a truly foreign land, and age-old culture, and genuinely hospitable people.

ACTIVITY LEVEL: Level 3

SCHEDULE BY DAY

TUESDAY, MARCH 11
DEPART FROM HOME CITY

This evening, we depart the U.S. for Morocco with a connecting flight to Casablanca.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12
ARRIVE CASABLANCA / RABAT

We arrive this afternoon in Casablanca, Morocco’s chief port, economic capital, and largest city. After clearing customs and picking up your luggage, PLEASE PROCEED TO THE AIRPORT MEETING POINT. This meeting point is marked by a sign in English and is adjacent to the airport exit; you will be met by either your tour director or a local representative after exiting the airport through this door (as only passengers are allowed inside the airport). After a one-hour transfer to Rabat, we check in at our elegant, well-located hotel near the famed Hassan Tower. We have a short time to rest and refresh ourselves before meeting our fellow travelers at a welcome briefing and enjoying dinner at the hotel.

Overnight: La Tour Hassan Palace (D)

THURSDAY, MARCH 13
RABAT

Capital of the French Protectorate of Morocco from 1912 to 1956, and Moroccan capital since independence, Rabat resembles several celebrated European cities, yet maintains an Islamic character all its own. We spend the entire day touring this unique locale that also served as one of the four ancient capitals, or imperial cities, starting inside the vast square of Dar al-Makhzen, the primary home of Mohamed VI, the king of Morocco. We then visit the Roman site of Chellah, where we see the remnants of Sala Colonia, a port that was abandoned in 1154. The gardens, pavilions, and ruins here are spread out over multiple levels, and now house a number of curious cats and majestic storks. Please note: the Chellah site is currently closed but may re-open sometime in 2024. Your tour director will update you on its status.

Continuing our tour of the city, we visit the Museum of Moroccan History and Civilization and Rabat’s impressive new Mohammed VI Modern and Contemporary Art Museum before crossing the river to Sale, where we enjoy lunch in a private home. After lunch, we admire the stunning architecture of the Mausoleum of Mohamed V, built for the grandfather of the current king. The tilework and attention to detail of the building are extremely impressive, as is the setting: it stands across a wide plaza from the 12th-century Hassan Tower. From here, we visit the fortified Kasbah des Oudaias, which calls to mind Santorini with its signature blue and white buildings lining narrow streets, beautiful Andalusian Gardens, and a wide plaza overlooking the mouth of the Bou Regreg River. We finish our day with a short walk through the medina, or old city, the first of many that we encounter on this tour and a UNESCO site. Late afternoon, we return to the hotel before enjoying dinner together at Dinarjat, an acclaimed restaurant in Rabat’s Old Town serving traditional Moroccan fare.
FRIDAY, MARCH 14
RABAT / VOLUBILIS / MEKNES / FEZ

This morning we depart by motorcoach for Fez, with a few stops along the way. First, we visit Volubilis, the largest of the Romans’ 17 colonies established in Morocco between the 1st century BCE and the 2nd century CE. The excavated ruins here are particularly noted for their colorful mosaics, and the hilltop setting is a photographer’s delight, with freestanding columns and archways framing lovely views across the Moroccan countryside. While learning the history from a local guide, we have ample time at this UNESCO World Heritage Site to explore and take photos. Then, we continue on to Meknes, Morocco’s youngest Imperial City and a UNESCO World Heritage site whose construction was dominated by the Sultan Moulay Ismail, one of Morocco’s most powerful leaders. Despite his reputation as a ruthless warrior, the Sultan was also a builder, and during his 55-year reign he developed Meknes from a small town into a majestic capital with gigantic ramparts, monumental gates, more than 50 palaces, and 15 miles of exterior walls. After lunch at a local restaurant, we see the impressive Bab el Mansour gateway and visit the Dar Jamai Museum, which houses a collection of traditional Moroccan handicrafts such as ceramics, jewelry, textiles, metalwork, and cedarwood craft. Then it’s on to Fez, where we arrive late this afternoon. Tonight, we enjoy a traditional Moroccan dinner together at our hotel perched on a hill overlooking the Fez medina.

Overnight: Hotel Sahrai (B, L, D)

SATURDAY, MARCH 15
FEZ

Known as the “Athens of Africa” for its wealth of cultural, educational, and religious institutions, Fez is the country’s oldest imperial capital, and perhaps its most fascinating. “The history of Fez,” writes author Walter Harris, “is composed of wars and murders, triumphs of arts and sciences, and a good deal of imagination.” A more captivating city you won’t find anywhere, as we discover on our full-day tour. This morning we start with a tour of the old Mellah (Jewish quarter) and its 17th-century synagogue, cemetery, and royal gates. Then, we take a comfortable walk in the medina to discover some hidden treasures, including the Blue Gate, the most picturesque of all the Old City’s historic gates; the medieval school of Bouanania; the 12th-century home of Jewish scholar Maimonides; and the authentic food market. The medina is truly the highlight and heartbeat of this ancient city; its 540 acres contain some 156,000 residents, as well as thousands of twisting, narrow streets; food, spice, and plant markets; and shops selling almost everything imaginable. Donkeys and the occasional scooter break up the flow of pedestrians – with its streets too narrow and crowded for automobiles, the medina here is believed to be the largest car-free urban area in the world. We enjoy lunch in an interesting property hidden within the medina, then continue this afternoon to visit the quarter where Fez’s renowned pottery and ceramics are made. Here, artisans create the complex blue-and-white geometric patterns of traditional “bleu de Fez” household and decorative objects. Tonight, we enjoy a private dinner at an intimate family-run riad in Fez.

Overnight: Hotel Sahrai (B, L, D)
**MONDAY, MARCH 17**
**FEZ / MIDELT / ERFOUD**

Today's transfer from Fez to Erfoud in the Sahara Desert is long, but our reward is the breadth and beauty of the passing scenery. Traveling inland, we cross the fertile plains beyond Fez and continue through the Middle Atlas Mountain range and its cedar forests, where we may see the local Barbary apes in their natural habitat. We cross the Ziz River, passing rows of sky-scraping palm trees and fortified villages before reaching our kasbah-style hotel on the outskirts of Erfoud late in the day. Built by the French as an oasis fort, Erfoud is now a sizable city and the gateway to the Sahara. Dinner tonight is at our hotel.

*Overnight: Le Palais du Désert Hotel & Spa (B, L, D)*

**TUESDAY, MARCH 18**
**ERFOUD / RISSANI / MERZOUGA**

This morning we visit the city of Rissani, sitting on the edge of the Sahara and formerly the last staging post on the southern caravan route. Traders would stop here before embarking on the journey across the Sahara to sub-Saharan Africa and across to the Levant. Once the seat of the Alawait dynasty, Rissani boasts some striking architecture with its 18th-century ksar, a virtually impenetrable warren of alleys. After our touring here we enjoy lunch together, then set out in a caravan of 4x4s for the breathtakingly beautiful dunes of Merzouga, on the edge of the Sahara, and one of the highlights of our tour. We reach Morocco's only Saharan dunes late this afternoon where, in the enormous silence, we watch the sun set over the desert as we take a camel ride along the erg. Following this experience, we have dinner together in this desert setting before returning to our hotel tonight.

*Overnight: Le Palais du Désert Hotel & Spa (B, L, D)*

**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19**
**ERFOUD / TINEHIR / DADES OR TODRA GORGE / OUARZAZATE**

With a fairly long travel day ahead of us, we leave Erfoud this morning bound for Ouarzazate in the snow-topped High Atlas Mountains, passing one scene of natural beauty after another. We first pass through Tinehir, a stunning mountain oasis rising on a series of lush riverside produce gardens accented by palm trees and dominated by ornate clay villages. Continuing our drive, we visit either Dades or Todra Gorge, two spectacular natural chasms with sheer rock faces rising from both sides of a narrow river. After enjoying lunch at a local restaurant, we continue on to El Kelaa des Mgouna, Morocco’s “rose capital,” before beginning our journey along the “Route of a Thousand Kasbahs,” a region of fortresses with elaborately decorated façades. We arrive in Ouarzazate (the “door of the desert”) late this afternoon; dinner tonight is at our hotel.

*Overnight: Sofitel Marrakech (B, L, D)*

**THURSDAY, MARCH 20**
**OUARZAZATE / AIT BEN-HADDOU / MARRAKECH**

We leave Ouarzazate for Marrakech today, stopping en route at uninhabited Ait ben-Haddou, one of southern Morocco’s most recognizable villages since it is often used as a location for fashion and film shoots (including Gladiator). A UNESCO World Heritage site, the village’s old section consists of deep red kasbahs so tightly packed together they appear as a single building. Because of the fragility of the buildings – and their state of conservation – along with the difficulty in negotiating rough terrain within the city proper, we limit our visit to a panoramic stop to view the city from a nearby hill. Then as we descend from the High Atlas Mountains, we pass through typical villages with fortified walls and stone houses with earthen roofs. In Tizi N’Tichka, we traverse the Pass of the Pastures (alt. 7,415 feet), where life is much as it was centuries ago: shepherds bring their flocks to the high pastures every summer, then return with them to their villages in autumn. Late this afternoon we arrive in fabled Marrakech, an ancient intersection of Berber, African, Mediterranean, and Asian cultural and artistic influences. Considered Morocco’s most cosmopolitan city – and some would say its most beautiful – Marrakech boasts a spectacular location surrounded by rich farmlands and high mountains. We dine tonight at our hotel.

*Overnight: Sofitel Marrakech (B, L, D)*

**FRIDAY, MARCH 21**
**MARRAKECH**

Although its origins are disputed, it is believed Marrakech was settled in the early 11th century;
five centuries later it was one of Morocco’s dominant centers of art and culture. Today Marrakech is the nation’s fourth largest city, with an exciting blend of modern architecture and an ancient walled Medina. We start by traveling via horse-drawn carriage from Menara to the lush Majorelle Gardens, a botanical garden in the heart of the city. French artist Jacques Majorelle created this masterpiece, known for its cobalt blue accents, in 1924 during Morocco’s colonial period as a protectorate of France. Here we are likely to see many of the 15 species of birds native to North Africa. Following a tour of the gardens, we visit the Yves St. Laurent Museum directly adjacent to Majorelle, where we have time to wander through and learn about the famed French designer and his deep connection to Morocco. We return to our hotel for lunch, then set out mid-afternoon to explore the city’s souks, including those of yarn dyers, wrought iron and lantern makers, herbalists, and wood carvers and painters. Next, we venture to Djemaa El Fna, the heart of Marrakech where our fantasies of Morocco come to life. Here are snake charmers, storytellers, acrobats, and musicians asking only a few dirhams to enlighten, fascinate, and entertain. It’s a circus atmosphere that has existed since the city’s earliest days, serving as a mecca for both locals and tourists who come here for food, for fun, or to find a brief respite from daily life. Dinner is on our own in this exotic city.

Overnight: Sofitel Marrakech (B, L)

SATURDAY, MARCH 22 MARRAKECH

On today’s excursion we concentrate on Old Marrakech, taking in the Koutoubia Mosque with its distinct 282-foot minaret, an architectural highlight visible from miles away; the relatively contemporary (19th-century) El Bahia Palace with its Andalusian influence and fascinating harem quarter; and the ruins of 360-room Palais El Badii, built in 1578 in the style of Granada’s Alhambra and lavishly decorated with Italian marble and gold. The palace took 15 years to construct and its name translates to “the incomparable palace,” but none of that mattered to Moulay Ismail, the warrior king who brought Meknes to prominence, when he looted the palace less than 100 years after its construction to enhance his palace. Though robbed of its opulence, El Badii’s massive footprint and infrastructure still impress. On the way back to the hotel, we stop to see the oldest historical gate of Marrakech, Bab Agnaou, built in the 12th century. The afternoon is at leisure before dinner tonight at a local restaurant in the city’s Old Town.

Overnight: Sofitel Marrakech (B, D)

SUNDAY, MARCH 23 MARRAKECH / CASABLANCA

We leave Marrakech this morning for the 3½-hour motorcoach ride to storied Casablanca, Morocco’s largest and most sophisticated city, combining French and Moroccan influences. On this afternoon’s tour we visit the Grand Mosque of Hassan II, the world’s second largest Islamic house of worship, with a 656-foot minaret and a prayer hall three times the size of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. A stunning architectural achievement, the mosque boasts an equally stunning setting on the banks of the Atlantic shoreline. It is also Morocco’s only functioning mosque that is open to non-Muslims and our tour affords us the opportunity to see the palatial interior with its polished marble floor, Venetian chandeliers, and Moorish arches with 70 cedar-paneled cupolas. We also may have time to visit other highlights of Casablanca, including Notre Dame de Lourdes, a Catholic church boasting impressive stained glass. Tonight, we gather for a farewell dinner at a local restaurant to celebrate our Moroccan adventure.

Overnight: Le Casablanca Hotel (B, D)

MONDAY, MARCH 24 DEPART FOR U.S.

After breakfast this morning, we transfer to the Casablanca airport for our return flight to the U.S.