

Moroccan moments

Between sun-baked deserts, cosmopolitan cities and age-old traditional crafts, travellers can cover a lot of ground on a guided tour of Morocco, finds **Alice Barnes-Brown**

Sunrise in Sahara
Desert, Morocco

REDFER: Shutterstock/muratart

morocco never stands still. One can meander through Marrakech's Djemaa el Fna square and hear everything from the hum of juice blenders to the melodic voices of storytellers. Likewise, the scenery is an ever-changing reel: visitors could be looking at sand dunes one day and snow-capped peaks the next.

With so much to explore, Morocco was an ideal fit for one of the first Exodus Adventure Travels tours back in 1976 – and, as part of the tour operator's 50th anniversary celebrations, I joined 50 travel

agents to explore the North African country. The megafam group was split across four itineraries to take in all corners of Morocco, before reconvening in Marrakech for a gala dinner.

TALE OF TWO CITIES

My tour began in coastal Casablanca with an early morning stop at the Hassan II Mosque. Having opened in 1993, this is one of the largest mosques in the world – capable of holding 25,000 people – and seems to float above the sea on a platform. ➤

DESTINATIONS

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca; fam group at Ait Benhaddou; a Moroccan feast of tagine, lentil soup and stew

PICTURES: Simon Clifford; Paul Philpott; Alice Barnes-Brown

AGENTS' views



"Exodus facilitates clients being able to see the destination in the best light, interacting with people and trying the cuisine. Small-group tours are great as you're sharing the experience."

Paul Philpott, partner,
Beacon Travel Service



"Exodus's use of local hotels, agencies and people on the ground, plus

what they put back into the country with their foundation, is important. I liked staying in the riads – they were full of character and peaceful little oases in the madness."

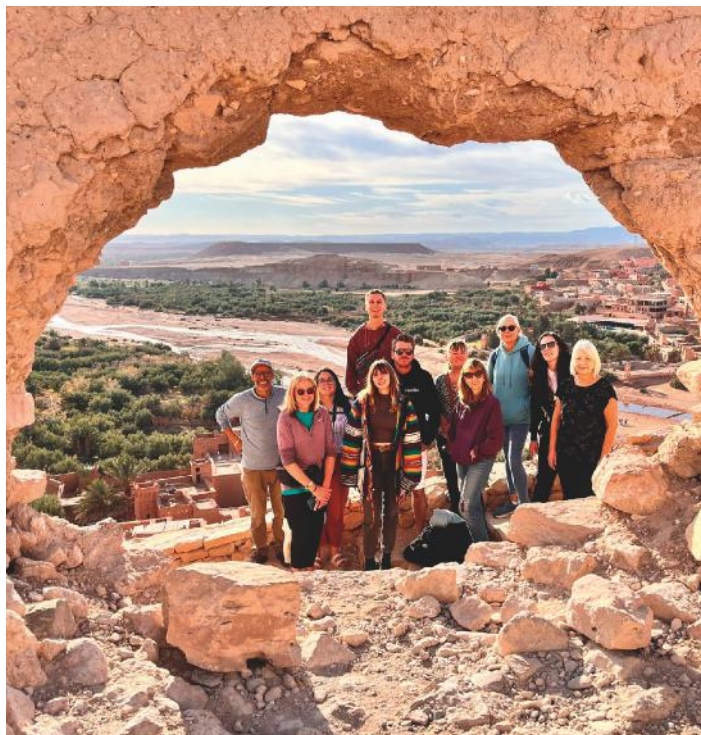
Lesley Knight, senior travel consultant,
Travel With Meon



"I loved the local guides; it's important to have knowledge

from someone who's lived there their whole life. I sell Exodus to people who want an immersive experience – it works for those who want authenticity."

Liz Cole, manager,
Dreamtime Travel



Ilham, our guide, greeted us with a warm smile as we marvelled at its massive, retractable wooden roof, carved with floral motifs and intricate Arabic calligraphy. She explained: "The wood is cedar from the Middle Atlas Mountains – which is the best. In the Qur'an, the throne of God was on the water, which is why they chose cedar for this mosque, as it resists the corrosion of the ocean air."

Leaving the Atlantic coast behind, a five-hour train journey to Fez brought us to Art Naji, a pottery studio specialising in the signature Moroccan craft of geometric *zellige* tiling. Ahmed, a designer, talked us through the process as we strolled through the dusty workshops, each housing a craftsman deep in concentration. One, who sat cross-legged and surrounded by bags of stone, laid little pieces of fired clay into the shape of an eight-point star. This would be painted then glazed and eventually form part of a mosaic for a fountain.

"It takes one year to make a handmade fountain background – and it costs \$29,000, even for a simple design," said Ahmed. Stepping into our beautiful riad with its own *zellige*-tiled fountain later that day, I had a newfound appreciation for the time and effort it takes to create this work of art, running my fingers over its glossy surface and counting each of the many colours.

Moroccan riads have rooms facing on to a pretty courtyard, often with a water feature. There are usually no windows to the outside world, where in Fez, a tangle of narrow alleys covered in carpets, spices and street art awaits. Dating to AD808, the Unesco-listed Medina of

Fez is home to some of the world's oldest tanneries, and Chouara has treated leather since at least the 11th century

Fez is an impenetrable maze of markets and *madrasas*. Without guide Mohammed, we may never have found the Chouara Tannery – though admittedly, we could have followed the pungent scent trail of the dyes and the ammonia given off by the process.

Fez is home to some of the world's oldest tanneries, and Chouara has been treating leather since at least the 11th century. A shopkeeper kindly handed each person a fresh mint leaf he dubbed a 'gas mask' (to hold in front of our noses) before we stepped out onto a balcony overlooking a honeycomb of interconnected pools – the first set filled with softening substances, including cow urine and pigeon faeces, the second with dyes. I watched as men, waist-deep in the stinky solutions, soaked and stirred animal skin using a system that has stood the test of time for 1,000 years.

ON THE ROAD

Morocco's small segment of the Sahara Desert is an eight-hour drive from Fez, through both the Mid and High Atlas Mountains – the view from the window moved through macaque-filled forests, deep canyons ➤

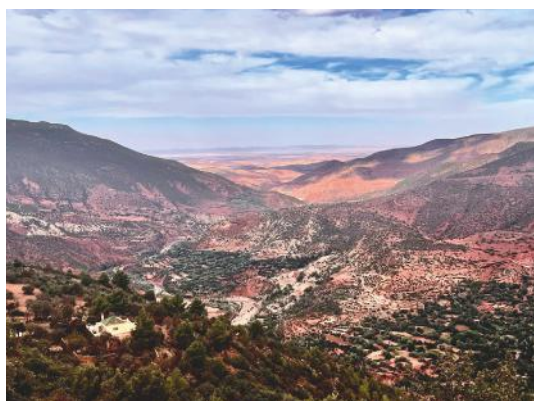
DESTINATIONS

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Chouara tannery; market in Fez; Erg Chebbi sand dunes; Atlas Mountains

PICTURES: Paul Philpott; Alice Barnes-Brown



with bottle-green rivers, date palm oases and, finally, unforgiving desert dunes.

As we drove, I noticed some women in the villages wore a distinct style of headscarf called a *tahruyt*. Tour leader Lahcen Hamyouny – Lah for short – explained that Morocco's population is a mix of Arabs and indigenous Amazigh communities, and women's clothing often reflects their ethnic group. "Some tribes have white fabric, some yellow, some dark blue or black, but usually all feature coloured embroidery. Only Arab women wear pure black".

The Amazigh make up most of the population in Morocco's deserts and our rustic inn at the edge of the Erg Chebbi sand dunes demonstrated Amazigh hospitality: we were welcomed with drums, mint tea (poured dramatically from a height) and copious amounts of piping-hot tagine.

Without Wi-Fi or the trappings of modern life to distract us, Lah took us to watch the sun slip past the horizon of the Mars-like landscape. The sand shifted with every step and grains carried on the whistling wind gave our skin more than a little exfoliation, but we were assured the hard work was good for us. Plus, the sight of sand as far as the eye can see – punctuated by the occasional shrub – was a powerful visual.

ROCK THE KASBAH

En route to Marrakech, we made stops at two natural wonders: the steep-sided Todra Gorge and the Valley of Roses. Both lie along the 'Road of a Thousand Kasbahs', but arguably Morocco's best-known kasbah

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collection can be found at Aït Benhaddou; a historic, fortified adobe village used to film *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Gladiator* and more.

Though most of the locals have moved into bigger houses across the road, Lah added that three families still live within Aït Benhaddou's mud-brick walls. We climbed higher and higher towards the hilltop, passing shopkeepers tending to their wares. "It's great for the locals when a movie comes to town," Lah said. "They get two incomes: one payment from being forced to close their shop and another from working as extras."

Speaking of Hollywood, Marrakech (where we rounded off our adventure) was as beautiful as a movie set, featuring a plethora of Moroccan hallmarks – from the rainbow of *zellige* tiles and stained-glass windows in the 19th-century Bahia Palace to the woven carpets and hand-painted tagine pots in the medina. As we sat down to a gala dinner and swapped stories with agents on the other itineraries, I reflected on a trip that was intense and informative in equal measure. This adventure was a fascinating insight into Morocco where every building, object and street has a story – and I returned with a few travel tales of my own. **TW**

BOOK IT

Exodus Adventure Travels offers a 15-day Highlights of Morocco itinerary from £1,025, including breakfast, some meals, ground transfers, riad and desert camp stays and listed excursions, but excluding flights. exodus.co.uk