

# When a Stranger travels to Marrakesh

>Text and Photos  
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"The Red Pearl of the South", "The Pulsing Heart of Morocco", "The Stage of the Orient", "The Feast of Delicacies": when people talk about Marrakesh, and in particular their favorite square –Djemaa el-Fna– European travel guides cannot help using superlatives. Can the city meet the expectations the travel guides have created?

For the many who have never been there before, the place has a magical aura – a city full of the scents of the Orient, a place where ancient Arabia still exists. But even for the insiders who have been to Africa and are knowledgeable about the Arab world, stepping into this singular square means being enchanted by the sounds of the drummers, the movements of the acrobats and snake charmers. The term "The Stage of the Orient" describes the scenery you will experience there best. Why? Because the term "Orient" is artificial. It describes how authors and poets from the West view a foreign country. And what term would better describe Djemaa el-Fna than a stage? This square is by anyone's definition a stage. This spot has everything tourists desire; but one thing it certainly is not is Morocco. The adventuresome who veer from the beaten tourist path, will not necessarily find what they are looking for based on one-hundred years of travelogues – of course not, Marrakesh is a modern metropolis – but they will find that Marrakesh is a city offering unique things to discover. Not the unadorned and totally un-Arabic square which in daylight appears rather boring but was nevertheless classified by UNESCO as World Cultural Heritage, but the enormous Old Town. And if there is a point of interest one shouldn't miss, it is Marrakesh itself that should be discovered rather than following what a travel guide suggests.

The description "Red Pearl of the South" ▶



Narrow alley south of Djemaa el-Fna

زقاق ضيق في جنوب ساحة جامع الفنا



الحاوي في ساحة جامع الفنا

Snake charmers at Djemaa el-Fna attract tourists



Fresh orange juice

عصير البرتقال الطازج

is not from a modern-day travelogue but from the 12th century Andalusian poet Hafsa Bint el Hadj. She was deeply impressed by the city, which even at that time was being praised by Arab travelers for the singular and characteristic colors and for its size. It was a symbol of the power of the Almoravid Commander Youssef ibn Taschfin (1009 -1106) whose kingdom extended to Northern Spain. He founded the huge city in 1070 on a barren spot. And it is true – the Medina is huge even by today's standards; the wall encircling it is more than 13 kilometers long. It contains the largest souk in the world. To explore the entire Old Town would take weeks, and only a small part of it is really familiar to the average tourist.

### Souks

More than a few historians claim that the word "market" which is used in all European languages is derived from the market in Marrakesh and this form of commerce which reached Europe by way of Spain. The person entering a souk for the first time might see it as a confusion of lanes, a labyrinth, but within a few hours one begins to see the logic behind it and the helpful path finding signals. Many of the traditional craftsmens' lanes nowadays direct their offerings to tourists. Modern department stores may have been erected,



Food stall offering dates

محل في السوق يبيع التمر

but the majority of inhabitants make their purchases in the souk. From the north side of Djemaa el-Fna you come to the main gate of the market with the souks selling pottery and thus to Rue Souk Smarine where textiles are sold and where behind Rahba Kedima Square it splits into the Rue Souk Attarine and the Rue Souk el Kebir. In many of the narrow side streets there is not much hustle and bustle. Here it is possible to observe the craftsmen at work. It is particularly interesting to view the souks of the carpenters and the blacksmiths, and while enjoying a laitai

banana you have the opportunity to get in contact with the locals.

### Mosques & Madrasahs

The largest mosque within the Medina is the Ali Ben Youssef Mosque. The Friday Mosque Ali Ben Youssef was built in 1120 and was restored in the 19th century. The Madrasah of the same name is from the 14th century and was once the largest Quranic school in the Maghreb. The 70 meter minaret tower of the Koutoubia Mosque is visible from a great distance and is the landmark of the city. The square minaret was the model for ▶



Late afternoon atmosphere in the heart of Marrakesh

فترة ما بعد الظهر في قلب مراكش

both the Giralda in Seville and the Hassan Tower in Rabat. The minaret is crowned by four copper globes. Legend claims the globes were once made of pure gold. The remains of the green-glazed mosaic tiles on the bottom of the battlements provide us with an inkling of the former glory of the tower. More than 1200 believers can pray inside at one time. Through the Bab Agnou in the south of the city, the most beautiful Gate of the Medina, one enters the Kasbah quarter with the Saadier graves, the Bahia Palace and the King's Palace.

On the south side of the Kasbah Mosque we come to the graves of the Saadier. The majestic Burial Mosque of Sultan Ahmed el Mansour is, in contrast to the Kashbah Mosque - not a burial place but a museum which can be visited. A walk around the King's Palace, the Bahia Palace and their grounds with the Atlas Mountains as backdrop is certainly worthwhile.

Also a "must" are the Museum of Marrakesh, the Museum of Islamic Art, and the Museum of Moroccan Art. And if you have the time, don't miss one of the impressive Arab gardens.

Even if what one sees here is not exactly typical of modern-day Morocco, it is nonetheless a place with reasonable accommodation. And it is the ideal place to begin to accustom oneself to exciting and unfamiliar surroundings. ■



Souk near Rahba Kedima Square

سوق قرب ساحة الرحبة القديمة