# Marrakesh

## The Charm of Southern Morocco



Marrakesh is perhaps the most famous ancient city in Morocco, its sites and attractions expressing the country's glorious history. It was established in 1062 by order of Youssef Ben Tashfin when the el-Murabitoun first arrived. These were wanderers who came to Marrakesh, an oasis in the Middle of the el-Houz Plain on the Atlantic Ocean, from far-off desert lands. Within less than half a century it became capital of a great kingdom that stretched from Andalusia in Spain to the borders of Sudan. Its influence spread over the whole Arab Maghrebian countries, and its destiny was to be strongly tied to the different successive civilizations, as well as political, economic and cultural traditions, of this region.

In the 12th Century, after nine months of bloody warfare, Abd al-Mu'men el-Muwahadi dispensed with the description, el-Murabitoun, and acceded to the throne. He made the city the centre of his reign and established its pre-eminence on the caravan crossroads, its name eventually becoming deeply connected with the gold and Ivory trade. He re-established the city in the el-Muwahiddin style. However, in the following century the city faced a terrible political catastrophe after the destruction of the El-Muwahidin throne when the el-Merinin came to power in 1269. The latter neglected the city for more than two-and-a-half centuries, moving their abode to the city of Fez instead.

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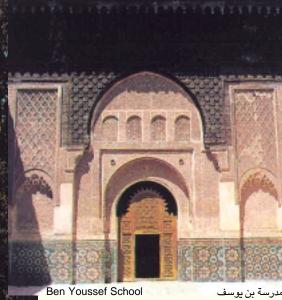


El Sadeyoun revived the glory of Marrakesh during the reign of Sultan Muhammad El-Mahdi in 1555. Sultan Ahmad el-Mansour in particular had a great passion for the city, taking it as the capital for his kingdom and building luxurious palaces therein, one of the most important being the fascinating El-Badia' Palace built towards the end of 1578. Its establishment lasted around 25 years till 1603. This palace expresses a unique legendary architectural beauty and efficiency, as well as reflecting the accuracy of the workmen involved in its construction. It

houses wonderful treasures and masterpieces, including great mosaics. el-Mansour also made great efforts in reconstruction and re-establishment of many mosques and madressas that attracted large numbers of religious and scientific scholars. It was said, especially during the period of the 17th Century, that Sultan Moulay Isma'il asked Shaykh el-Hassan el-Youssi to elect seven such scholars to reside under his reign, and to be buried after their death in the graveyard of the city, so that the city would be surrounded by a holy

atmosphere. Thanks to such fame, a cultural/religious festival is celebrated here annually, known as the Season of the Seven Men

After the collapse of el-Saadian the city, with all its attractions and libraries, the latter were by now teeming with precious rare



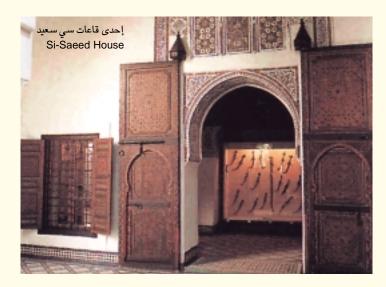
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manuscripts, was completely forgotten and in fact largely effaced. By the end of the 17th Century, the city once again regained its former glory during the reign of the Alawites who took great care of its environment and legacy.

During the French colonial occupation of Morocco, in 1913, Marrakesh witnessed a considerable development in various fields, such as the establishment of new quarters in different architectural styles - crowded with high buildings and grand hotels side by side with the older constructs. The city itself ever became more cosmopolitan, increasingly comprising a wealth of different nationalities, ethnicities and races representing various civilizations. This mixture added to the city's inherent charm and it was therefore known as Morocco's tourist capital, attracting huge numbers of visitors from all around the world. Indeed, it remains an unforgettable and fascinating experience.

Marrakesh is known as the Pearl of the South, located about 150km from the sea, and about 200km from the financial capital, Casablanca. Visitors enter the city via the >

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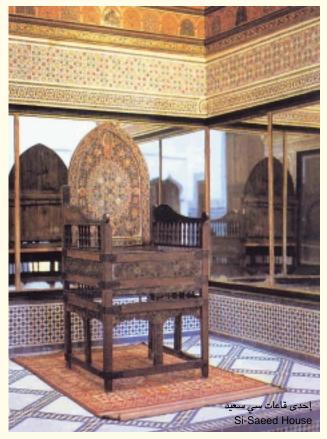
Aknou Gate which was built during the reign of El-Muwahidin to protect the city from attacks on the caravans.

#### El-Katabeya Mosque

"Red" Marrakesh is very much a city under the sun, surrounded by high walls of deep yellow and red. In the middle of the city is the outstanding el-Katabeya Mosque, a living example of the Spanish Moorish architecture. This was established by order of Abd al-Mu'men and finalized by order of Ya'qoub el-Mansour between 1184 and 1189. It is 77m high, its beauty and architectural style one of a kind. It is also the original blueprint for the el-Hassan Hall which was built later on in Rabat in 1195.

Many paintings decorating the halls of the Katabeya Mosque which is surrounded by a wide yard whose base is comprised of a number of columns, each one 2m high, a few meters from the yard of the el-Fana Mosque. This yard is similar to a theatre stage (around 150m x 100m) with a fascinating view. It is an open-air theatre full of displays and shows, always open to visitors, with vendors and musicians adding to the colourful display, as well as snake-charmers and folk dancers in traditional costumes.

There is a remarkable scent of spices in the air mixed with the aromas of delicious foods from restaurants housed in tents offering Moroccan and North African delicacies. There are also fortune-tellers here and the place attracts scholars of literature, researchers, film directors, painters, and artists not only from Morocco but from all over the world, especially Europe.



### Sidi Ben Youssef Mosque

In the north of the city is the Ben Youssef Mosque which dates back to the 12th Century. It is distinguished by its 40m high walls, whose ceiling is covered with green tiles. Next to it is the Ben Youssef School, one of the most important Qur'an schools in Morocco. To the south are the tombs of el-Saadian which can be reached through one of the narrow streets. It was discovered in 1917 hidden for several years behind protective walls built by order of Sultan

Moulay Isma'il. The walls themselves were built by Sultan Moulay Ahmed el-Mansour (1574-1603) following the death of his mother in 1591. The tombs are located in several galleries that have huge doors made of engraved (decorated) wood, overlooking a wide garden and a prayer hall. Each gallery is based on a number of marble columns. To the east is El-Manara, a garden complex containing olive trees on a space 1200m long x 800m wide. In the middle of this is a large pool (150m x 20m) established by el-Muwahidin at around the 12th Century. el-Manara was, in the past, a private shelter for kings who would find relaxation and comfort here. Nowadays, it is a fascinating tourist attraction for visitors who enjoy watching the charming sunset.

In 1919, the famous French draughtsman, Jacques Macgaural, visited it and became infatuated. In 1924, he decided to buy a piece of land which later became one of the most fascinating public gardens in the city. After his death, in 1962, the garden was neglected and would almost have completely lost its glamour but for another Frenchman, the fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent, who gradually enabled that lost glamour to return, buying the area and building a gallery on a part of it, which was to become a museum of Islamic arts displaying a rare collection of statues,

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antiquities and carpets from the various successive civilizations. The garden also comprises many rare trees and plants from all over the world, as well as a rare aviary collection.

#### Si-Saeed House

Anyone who visits Marrakesh should not miss Dar Si-Saeed, located a few kilometres from El-Bahia Palace and containing the Ethnographic Museum. This house was built by order of Moulay Abd al-Aziz and finalized by order of his brother, Si-Saeed, after whom the house was named. It was reconstructed in 1978. The house is one of the most charming palaces in the city, and has been a museum since 1932. It consists of a great number of halls wherein collections of rare and old weaponry, carpets, and other antiquities are displayed. At the entrance, the visitor will find a detailed map of all halls of the palace, as well as a big hall displaying collections of antique jewellery, pottery and copper pots, furniture, weaponry and musical instruments.

The "Red Door" is located on the southeastern side of the city, through which the visitors enter a wide yard consisting of Dar el-Makhzan and the Royal Palace established in the 12th Century, as well as fascinating gardens called Akdal. In the far south end of the city, on the former road of the caravans leading to Werzazat on the Atlantic Ocean and located at 2,260m above sea level is Tezze Tishka, main entrance to the Barbarry area of Clawa and Talout, the last abode of the last Barbarian prince, el-Haj el-Tohami el-Kallaway. Although it was forgotten for several years, it still hides behind its walls two magnificent halls of ancient palaces with high walls that are covered with coloured mosaic paintings, its ceiling made of cedar wood. The decoration of these huge walls took around three years to complete, involving more than 3,000 workers and craftsmen. Close to this place are roads leading to dispersed villages on surrounding the city, the mountains including Ayt Benehdou, an area classified by UNESCO as an international heritage site which should be protected reconstructed.

To the south, upon leaving the city, is a road overlooking a valley leading to Zakoura opposite the curvaceous Dara'a Valley surrounded by charming nature and a dense oasis, magnificent waterfalls, engraved rocks, little scattered villages, and close to the golden Sahara.

خارطة مراكش وما حولها A map of Marrakesh and its surroundings

