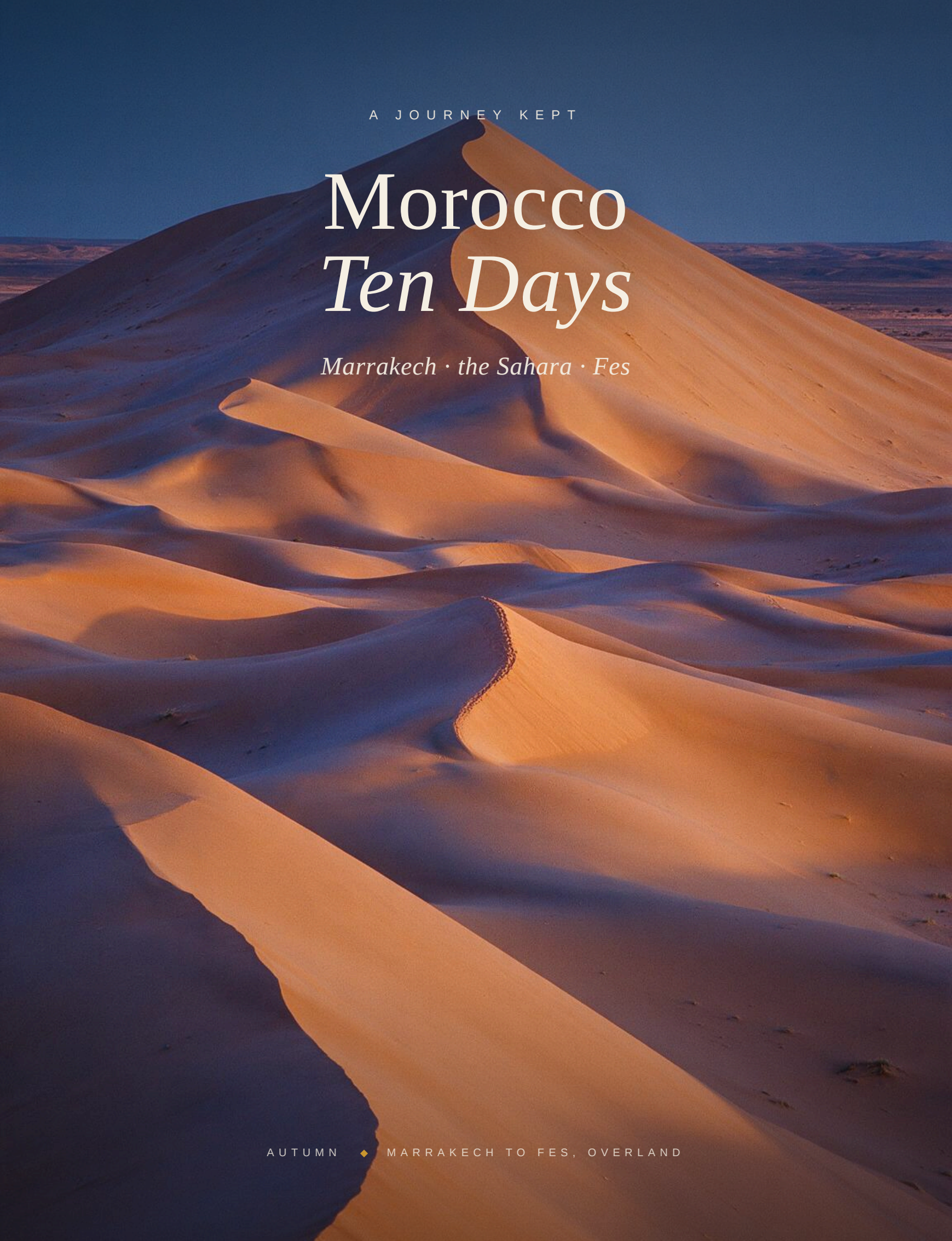




A JOURNEY KEPT

Morocco *Ten Days*

Marrakech · the Sahara · Fes

AUTUMN ◆ MARRAKECH TO FES, OVERLAND

Ten days, built around the *hours* that matter.

Two cities bookend a desert. Marrakech at the start, its souks and its light. Fes at the end, the oldest living medina on earth. Between them, three days across the High Atlas to the edge of the Sahara and one night on the dunes. The route runs one way, overland, and never doubles back.

THE SPINE

INTO

Marrakech (RAK) · 3 nights

ACROSS

The desert loop · Aït Ben Haddou, the gorges, Merzouga · 3 days, one driver

OUT OF

Fes (FEZ) · 2 nights, then home

SEASON

Late September into October — the sweet spot. The August furnace has broken; desert nights turn genuinely cool.

WHY IT IS BUILT THIS WAY

Eight real days, and Day One is a rest.

You fly a red-eye from Atlanta and connect through Europe, landing frayed in the afternoon. So Day One is protected as a soft landing by design: the riad courtyard, mint tea on the roof as the light goes gold, a quiet dinner close to home. The real medina begins on Day Two. Nothing on the first day asks you to be sharp.

THE CRAFT OF THE CLOCK

The best hours are scheduled, not left to chance.

The single finest hours of this trip are golden hour at the ksar of Aït Ben Haddou, sunset from a dune above the Sahara camp, and the Fes medina at dawn. Each is protected by *when* you arrive, not only what you see. That is the whole design.

THE UNHURRIED FEELING

Two regions, done properly. No fourth.

Cities and desert, given room. No coast, no Chefchaouen detour. Adding a fourth region to ten days would wreck the calm you actually came for. You never face two hard travel days in a row without a payoff between them.

Marrakech to Fes, the long way round.



THE OVERLAND SPINE

- 1 Marrakech — the medina, 3 nights
- ↓ Tizi n'Tichka pass · 2,260 m
- 2 Aït Ben Haddou — the ksar at golden hour
- 3 Dades & Todra — the gorges
- 4 Merzouga — Erg Chebbi, one Sahara night
- ↓ Azrou cedar forest · the Middle Atlas
- 5 Fes — the medina, 2 nights, then home

ONE DRIVER, THREE DAYS

The desert half runs on a single private driver-guide, the same man from Marrakech to Fes. Mountain switchbacks, long distances, and the difference between a good day and a wasted one is a driver who knows *when* to leave and *which* viewpoint is worth the stop.

There is no useful train on this route. The desert is entirely road, and the road is the drama.



01

MARRAKECH
ARRIVAL

The wash-out day, by design.

L and frayed, settle, breathe. You arrive from a red-eye and a European connection, genuinely wrecked, and the entire job of the first day is to absorb the fray. A driver meets you with a sign, because haggling a taxi at the airport jet-lagged is a poor first taste of the country. Then the riad does its work: the plunge pool, the quiet, mint tea on the rooftop as the light turns gold.

The furthest you go is the nearest square, and only if anything is left in you. No monuments, no souk maze, no guide. A quiet dinner close to home, then an early night. The real medina begins tomorrow.

WHERE YOU SLEEP • MARRAKECH, 3 NIGHTS

Riad de Tarabel NORTHERN MEDINA

A Grand Maison near Dar el Bacha: polished tadelakt, antique rooms, a courtyard plunge pool, a rooftop that works for breakfast and a sundowner alike, and a hidden in-house hammam. Medina-immersive yet genuinely comfortable — the landing pad a frayed first-timer needs. Ask for a room off the courtyard for quiet.

From **~\$250–400** / night, standard double, shoulder season. Arranges the airport transfer (~\$15–25).

◆ PIN THE NIGHTLY RATE AND ROOM CLASS AT BOOKING

02 MARRAKECH The souks, done properly.

GUIDE THE FIRST MORNING,
THEN LET LOOSE.

Here is the operator's move that makes the difference: book a good *licensed* guide for the first morning only, then you are free for the rest of the trip. The souks are a genuine maze, and first-timers either get overwhelmed or get herded into commission shops. A guide who knows the artisan quarters, and steers to no cousin's carpet, turns it from stressful to magical. Insist on the word *licensed*, and on no shopping-commission stops.

THE WALK

Enter from the north side of **Jemaa el-Fnaa** through Souk Semmarine, then peel off fast into the quarters most people miss.

HADDADINE

The ironworkers' quarter — the ring of hammers on metal.

SEBBAGHINE

The dyers' souk: skeins of just-dyed wool hung overhead to dry. The colour everyone photographs.

CHOUARI

The woodturners, then the covered Kissariat for finer goods, babouches, textiles.

ENDING

At the **Mouassine Fountain** and the Mouassine Museum, a restored fondouk, quiet, good for a design-minded eye.

LATER, AT YOUR OWN PACE

Le Jardin Secret MOUASSINE

A restored Islamic garden and riad; the tower climb gives a medina rooftop view.

Dar el Bacha MUSÉE DES CONFLUENCES

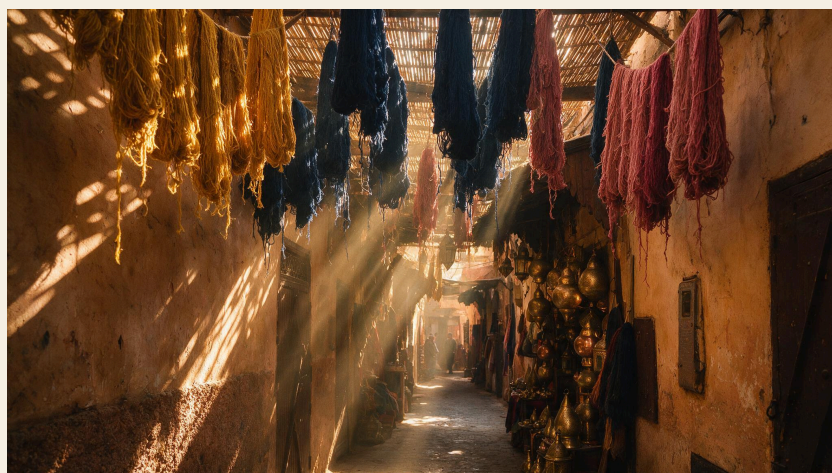
A jaw-dropping restored palace, and inside it Bacha Coffee, a tiled courtyard coffee room. A design moment, not just a caffeine one.

LUNCH

Nomad RAHBA KEDIMA

The rooftop table above the old spice square, modern Moroccan.

ORDER — *the crispy calamari and the spiced lamb*



SOUK SEBBAGHINE — THE DYERS' QUARTER, WOOL HUNG TO DRY IN THE SLATTED LIGHT.

DINNER • THE SPECIAL TABLE

Al Fassia GUELIZ

A Marrakech institution, run entirely by women since 1987. The place for the classic Moroccan meal done to a high standard. Reservation essential; it fills.

ORDER — *the slow-roasted lamb shoulder (mechoui), with pigeon pastilla to start*



MARRAKECH

03 Craft, then the hammam.

The day the design appetite gets fed hardest, and the day the hammam earns its place. A real artisan experience, not a shop: a workshop visit where you watch and try, in a working atelier, or the low-pressure fixed-price rooms of the **Ensemble Artisanal**, where metalworkers, weavers, and leatherworkers sit at their benches and nobody haggles you.

THE DESIGN DETOUR

Jardin Majorelle + Musée YSL + Berber Museum

The cobalt-blue garden Yves Saint Laurent restored, a serious museum of his work, and one of the finest Amazigh craft-and-jewellery collections in Morocco, all one complex.

Garden **170 MAD (~\$17)** · YSL a separate ~135 MAD · buy the combined ticket.

TICKETS ONLINE ONLY, TIMED, AND THEY SELL OUT. THE YSL MUSEUM IS CLOSED WEDNESDAYS — DO NOT SCHEDULE IT THEN. GO AT 8AM OPENING OR LATE AFTERNOON.

THE HAMMAM, DONE PROPERLY

Les Bains de Marrakech KASBAH

Book the private couples' ritual in a double cabin: the gommage scrub with black soap and a kessa glove, the rhassoul clay, then an argan-oil massage. Do it in the late afternoon so you float out relaxed — the perfect palate-cleanser before the desert drive begins.

The full private ritual, roughly **~\$60–120** per person.

◆ AFTERNOON SLOTS SELL OUT — RESERVE AHEAD, PIN THE PACKAGE PRICE

04

MARRAKECH → AÏT BEN HADDOU

The desert drama begins.

THE PASS

Depart by 8:30am, before the traffic thickens. Mid-morning, the **Tizi n'Tichka** at 2,260m: switchbacks, Berber villages on the slopes, big mountain views. Take the old N9 over the pass proper — the new expressway is faster and dull. The old road is the drama.

THE INSIDER STOP

Telouet Kasbah, the crumbling Glaoui palace off the main road — extraordinary painted ceilings and zellij inside a ruin, and almost no crowds. Ask the driver for the P1506 back way through the Ounila Valley, the more beautiful route to the ksar.

GOLDEN HOUR

Cross the river into the ksar late afternoon, when the day-trippers have gone. The low sun turns the whole earthen citadel amber. Walk to the top for the view back over the valley. Sleeping in the village, not Ouarzazate, is what buys you this hour — and dawn tomorrow.



TIZI N'TICHKA — THE OLD N9 SWITCHBACKS OVER THE HIGH ATLAS, A BERBER VILLAGE TERRACED ON THE FAR SLOPE. THE ROAD THAT CARRIED YOU HERE.

Why you stop here, and do not push on.

Aït Ben Haddou is the fortified mud-brick village you have seen without knowing it: *Gladiator*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Lawrence of Arabia* were all shot against these walls. Staying in the village rather than nearby Ouarzazate hands you two hours no day-tripper gets — the ksar amber at sunset, and the ksar silent at dawn, with the light coming up over the towers and no one else on the path.

Out here, dinner is at your lodging, and that is as it should be. A lamb or vegetable tagine, and if it is offered, a Berber madfouna — the stuffed flatbread of the region, baked in the embers.

THE DESERT LOOP IS ONE BILL

This night, tomorrow's gorge night, and the Sahara camp all fold into a single custom quote from one operator, **Sahara Services** — the private 4×4, the English-speaking driver-guide, both road overnights, and the Merzouga camp, together. It is the clean single-relationship way to run the desert half. See the budget page for how it lands.

WHERE YOU SLEEP · 1 NIGHT

Riad Caravane AÏT BEN HADDOU

VILLAGE

A small maison d'hôtes a few minutes' walk from the ksar, run by Andréa and Hassan: eight rooms, a pool, a shaded patio, and genuine, good food. Ask for a room facing the ksar.

Roughly **~\$115–150** / night, folded into the desert bundle.

◆ CONFIRM THE KSAR-FACING ROOM AND HALF-BOARD

THE TIMING CRAFT

~5 PM	The day-trippers leave. The ksar is yours.
SUNSET	The earthen towers glow amber. Climb to the top.
DAWN	Optional, and worth it: the ksar to yourselves at sunrise.

05 AÏT BEN HADDOU → TODRA

The Road of a Thousand Kasbahs.



DADES GORGE — THE SERPENTINE ROAD AND THE “MONKEY FINGERS” ROCK.



TODRA GORGE — 300-METRE WALLS CLOSE OVER THE RIVER. GO LATE, WHEN THE LIGHT RAKES DOWN.

A relaxed breakfast, then east through Ouarzazate — the “Hollywood of Morocco,” though the better half-hour stop is the Glaoui **Kasbah Taourirt** in town. On through the Skoura palm oasis and up the Dades valley, the Valley of Roses, past kasbah after kasbah the colour of the ground they stand on.

The two beats are the Dades switchbacks, best seen from the viewpoint above, and the Todra gorge, where you can walk the canyon floor through the narrowest section. Save Todra for late afternoon: the tour buses thin, and the sun rakes down one vertical wall while the other falls to shadow.

WHERE YOU SLEEP · 1 NIGHT

Chez Pierre DADES GORGE

A French-Moroccan auberge carved into the gorge, terraced gardens, a seasonal pool, and cooking worth planning the night around. Couples rate it 9.6. If the route instead sleeps in Todra, Dar Ayour or Kasbah Amazir face the gorge and the palmery.

Roughly **~\$90–150** (Dades) or **~\$70–130** (Todra), folded into the bundle.

◆ SMALL AND POPULAR — CONFIRM THE ROOM AND HALF-BOARD

Out here your lodging is the restaurant. At Chez Pierre in particular, that is a gift, not a compromise.

The dunes. The Sahara night.

The Erg Chebbi dunes rise out of the flat like a wall of orange. First sight of them is a genuine gasp.

THE PACING IS THE CRAFT

Arrive at the dune's edge mid-to-late afternoon, never in the heat of the day. The vehicle hands you to the camel caravan for the hour-long trek up and over the dunes into camp as the sun goes down. Sunset from the top of a dune above the tents is the single best hour of the whole trip.

THE NIGHT

Dinner in the camp, a tagine cooked in the sand. Berber drumming and a fire after. Then the stars, with no light pollution for a hundred miles. The camp wakes you for sunrise over the dunes; a camel or 4×4 carries you back out. If either of you cannot ride, the 4×4 does both legs.

The extra desert night, as asked.

This is the night the trip was built to reach. Not the backpacker bivouac and not a thousand-dollar bubble, but the tier in between: a private tent with a real bed and an en-suite bath, a proper dinner, and the erg out the door. The right kind of comfort, in the right kind of silence.

WHERE YOU SLEEP · 1 NIGHT

Sahara Services Luxury Camp

ERG CHEBBI

Private en-suite tents, a central dining tent, drumming around the fire, breakfast on the dunes. The same operator supplies your driver-guide for the whole desert loop, which is why the desert half is one relationship and one bill.

Luxury tent, camel trek in, dinner, breakfast — folded into the desert bundle. Standalone comparators run **~\$150–200** / person.

◆ CONFIRM THE LUXURY TENT, CAMEL + 4×4, AND THE FIRE/MUSIC EVENING IN THE QUOTE



A NOTE ON LIGHT — THE SAME GOLD THAT CLOSES A MARRAKECH ROOFTOP OPENS THE DUNES. THE TRIP IS A CHASE OF GOOD HOURS.



MERZOUGA → FES

07 The long road north, and why it beats the bus.

Sunrise over the dunes first, then out—the camel caravan or the 4×4, whichever you rode in on. From here the same driver-guide who carried you across the desert carries you all the way to Fes: one relationship, no station hand-off, roughly seven to eight hours with the stops that make the distance vanish. This is a travel day built so the travelling *is* the day.

SUNRISE

Over Erg Chebbi from the camp, then the ride back out to the vehicle.

ZIZ VALLEY

North through **Midelt**, then the green ribbon of the **Ziz**: a river of palms threading red canyon, the classic photo stop of the drive.

AZROU / IFRANE

Into the cedar forest of the Middle Atlas, where troupes of **Barbary macaques** come to the roadside. Ifrane itself is startling—an alpine-tiled town that looks airlifted from the Alps.

EVENING

Arrive Fes, settle into the riad, a quiet dinner in. The medina waits for the morning.

WHERE YOU SLEEP • FES, 2 NIGHTS

Riad Fès — Relais & Châteaux BATHA / MEDINA

A 14th-century riad restored to a serious hotel: courtyards, a rooftop with medina and Atlas views, a proper restaurant, spa, hammam, and pool. About 25 minutes from Fès-Saïss (FEZ). Book direct for breakfast and flexible cancellation.

Per night, taxes in: Classic **from \$242**, Deluxe **\$270**, Superior Deluxe **\$340**. The two nights together run roughly **~\$484–680**.

◆ PIN THE ROOM CLASS AND THE TWO-NIGHT RATE DIRECT — ASK IF THE “STAY 3 PAY 2” OFFER EXTENDS

FES • THE MEDINA

08

The oldest living
medina on earth.

*Nine thousand lanes, no cars, unchanged for
twelve centuries. You do not tour Fes el-Bali.
You are absorbed by it.*

FIRST

A licensed guide the first morning, no-commission clause on record. The medina is a maze on purpose.

THEN

The Chouara tannery for mid-morning light, the great madrasas, the working quarters.

THE CRAFT

Zellij and cedar at Al-Attarine and Bou Inania, coppersmiths at Seffarine.

TONIGHT

Nur, the destination table — chef Najat Kaanache's ten-course tasting. Booked ahead.

08 FES • THE GUIDED WALK

Inside Fes el-Bali.



THE CHOUARA TANNERY • THE HONEYCOMB OF STONE DYE PITS, WORKED BY HAND FOR NEARLY A THOUSAND YEARS, SEEN FROM A LEATHER-SHOP BALCONY. GO MID-MORNING FOR THE LIGHT; TAKE THE SPRIG OF MINT THEY HAND YOU AT THE DOOR.

THE GUIDE

The riad books a **licensed** guide, no-commission-shopping clause confirmed in writing. In a nine-thousand-lane medina this is orientation, not hand-holding.

CHOUARA

The tannery, mid-morning. The balconies of the surrounding leather shops give the view down over the dye pits.

AL-ATTARINE

The 14th-century Marinid madrasa, a jewel box of zellij and carved cedar. Reliably open to visitors.

BOU INANIA

The grander madrasa nearby — it occasionally closes for prayer or restoration, so the guide confirms it is open before you walk over.

AL-QARAWIYYIN

A courtyard glimpse of the world's oldest continuously running university, founded 859.

NEJJARINE

The restored caravanserai and its wood museum, then the rooftop café.

SEFFARINE

The coppersmiths' square, where the ring of hammers on metal has not changed in centuries.

DINNER • THE DESTINATION TABLE

Nur ZKAK ROUAH, MEDINA

Chef Najat Kaanache cooks a roughly ten-course dégustation, improvised from the morning market — the finest, most inventive table in Fes, and the meal the whole day builds toward. About two and a half hours. Dinner only, Tuesday to Sunday, 6:30 to 10, closed Mondays. Book through Tock the moment your dates are set; Nur is tiny and fills months ahead.

Splurge posture, roughly **~\$80–130** per person; wine pairing higher. No fixed price — it is a tasting menu.

◆ **BOOK ON TOCK, CONFIRM THE DATE IS NOT A MONDAY**

IF NUR IS FULL

The Ruined Garden RIAD IDRISY

John Twomey's roofless, plant-filled table. Open daily 13:00–21:30, no alcohol. The seven-hour lamb mechoui and the pigeon b'stilla must be ordered ahead.

Dar Roumana MEDINA

Refined Moroccan-French with a view — the second fallback.

09

Make something, then let go slowly.

The last full day earns its calm. The morning is hands-on — the blue-and-white pottery Fes is named for, or a cooking class that ends in the meal you cook. The afternoon is unhurried, the medina at your own pace, one more mint tea on the roof.

THE MORNING · FASSI CRAFT

Art Naji AIN NOKBI, OUTSIDE THE WALLS

A working pottery-and-zellij cooperative: watch the wheel, the painting of the blue-and-white Fassi ware, and the hand-cutting of mosaic tile chip by chip. The guide can arrange the visit.

If you would rather cook than watch, skip to the class at right — either fills the morning, not both.

OR · THE COOKING CLASS

A half-day class: a market walk for the day's vegetables and spices, then a tagine and fresh bread cooked and eaten. Run by **Palais Amani**, **Riad Laaroussa**, or the **Fez Cooking School**. If Nur stole your heart, chef Najat Kaanache teaches her own class, bookable through Tock, a lovely way to carry a little of that table home.

Roughly **~\$50–90** per person, market and meal included.

◆ BOOK ONE DIRECTLY ONCE THE DAY-9 PLAN IS SET

A LONG MEDINA LUNCH

The Ruined Garden RIAD IDRISSEY

John Twomey's roofless garden restaurant, open daily 13:00–21:30, no alcohol. If you did not dine here for dinner, come for a slow lunch. Order the b'stilla ahead, and on a Friday watch the couscous hand-rolled in front of you.

THE AFTERNOON

Nothing scheduled. The medina at your own pace, a last wander for the thing you will wish you had bought, a mint tea on the Riad Fès roof as the light goes long over the tanneries and towers. This is the day the trip finally slows to your speed.

DRAW A LITTLE CASH BEFORE THE SHOPS CLOSE · THE FONDOUKS AND SMALL ATELIERS ARE CASH-ONLY

DAY 10 · THE JOURNEY HOME

THE STRUCTURE

Fly an **open jaw**: into Marrakech, home out of **Fes (FEZ)**. No backtracking across the country you have just crossed.

OUT OF FES

FEZ connects through a European hub (Paris, Lisbon, Madrid) to Atlanta — one stop each way. This keeps a **relaxed morning departure**, so Day 9 evening stays whole.

THE CASABLANCA ALTERNATIVE

Only if the CMN fare is materially better: take the **ONCF train, Fes → Casablanca** (~3.5–4 hrs), the one leg where a train makes sense. It trims Day 9 evening, so choose it only for a real saving.

◆ PRICE THE OPEN-JAW AT BOOKING; LET THE BETTER FARE PICK FEZ OR CMN

The trip, in dollars — *honestly.*

Planning ranges for the two of you, in US dollars, for the late-September-into-October window. Every figure is a “from” number to confirm when you book. Nothing here is a locked bill, and the two lines that move most, the flights and the desert bundle, are called out as live.

READ THE DESERT LINE ONCE

The desert bundle is a **single bill**: the private 4×4, the English driver-guide for all three days, the Aït Ben Haddou night, the Dades or Todra night, and the Merzouga luxury camp, together. It is deliberately *not* broken into separate camp and driver and hotel lines below, because that would count the same money twice. One line, all three nights, folded.

FOR TWO TRAVELERS · USD

Flights, ATL open-jaw **\$2,000–2,900**

INTO RAK, HOME OUT OF
FEZ · THE SINGLE
BIGGEST LINE, LIVE

Marrakech riad, 3 nights **\$750–1,200**

RIAD DE TARABEL · ~\$250–
400 / NIGHT

Desert loop, 3 nights, bundled **\$1,300–1,700**

4×4 + DRIVER-GUIDE +
ALL 3 OVERNIGHTS, ALL-
IN

Fes riad, 2 nights **\$484–680**

RIAD FÈS R&C · CLASSIC TO
SUPERIOR DELUXE

Food & tables **\$500–900**

NUR SPLURGE, AL FASSIA,
EVERYDAY MEDINA MEALS

Experiences **\$450–850**

HAMMAM, TWO LICENSED
GUIDES, MUSEUMS, COOKING,
ARTISAN

Transfers, SIM, tips **\$250–450**

AIRPORT TRANSFERS, DATA,
GRATUITIES, LOCAL TAXIS

The couple, all in \$5,700–8,700

Planning ranges, every rate a “from” figure to confirm at booking. Flights are the most volatile line — re-price within days of your travel dates.

The practical ground, *covered.*

VISA & PASSPORT

US citizens: **no visa** for tourist stays up to 90 days — verified against the visa-policy record as of Aug 2026; re-confirm on travel.state.gov before you fly. You do **not** need an AEVM or e-visa. Carry a passport valid at least six months beyond entry, with a blank page or two.

PHONE & DATA

Buy a **Maroc Telecom** SIM at the arrival airport, about **\$16 for ~30 GB** — it has the best coverage in the desert and the Atlas, where the trip actually goes. An eSIM (\$10–35) is the swap-free alternative if you would rather not change SIMs.

MONEY

The dirham is a **closed currency**: get it in-country, not before. Cash rules the souks, taxis, guides, tips, and rural stops; cards work at riads and museums. Draw enough cash in **Marrakech before the desert stretch**, where ATMs are sparse. Tipping is customary — keep small notes handy.

DRESS

Modest reads better and draws less hustle: shoulders and knees covered in the medinas and rural areas, a light scarf useful for sun and sand. Comfortable closed shoes for uneven lanes. Pack a genuinely **warm layer** — desert nights turn cool in this season even after hot days.

SAFETY

Morocco is well-trodden and generally safe; the real friction is **medina hustle**, not danger — which is exactly why the licensed-guide-first-morning matters. Enroll in **STEP** for embassy updates, and glance at the US Embassy Morocco alerts page near departure.

WEATHER

Late September into October is the **sweet spot**: the August furnace has broken, cities are golden and mild, and desert nights are genuinely cool. Sandstorm risk is low but not zero. This is guidance, not a booking — pack for warm days and cool nights.

ONE LAST THING

Every rate, hour, and closure in this book was true when it was written and is worth a two-minute re-check when you book. The look for it is the small olive  mark: wherever it appears, that is the studio saying “confirm this the week you reserve.” Book Nur and the Majorelle tickets the day your dates lock; both sell out ahead.



THE END OF THE ROAD

Ten days, one long line across a country — and a last pot of tea poured slow.

You will come home with sand still in a shoe, the smell of cedar smoke on a jacket, and the particular gold of a dune at sunset that no photograph quite holds. That was the whole point of building the trip around hours instead of sights.

Keep this book on the shelf. It is a record of a route run once, one way, the long way round, from the souks of Marrakech across the High Atlas to the edge of the Sahara and up into the oldest medina on earth. Wherever the small olive ♦ asked you to confirm a rate or an hour, that was care, not doubt. The rest is simply yours to go and live.

A keepsake itinerary, composed from grounded, on-source research. Every named riad, table, guide, and rate reflects what was verified in August 2026; each is a “from” figure to confirm at booking. Imagery is representative of the real places named.

THE SPINE, ONCE MORE

Marrakech · 3 nights

Aït Ben Haddou · the ksar

Dades / Todra · the gorges

Merzouga · the Sahara night

Fes · 2 nights, then home

