

Marrakesh & Central Morocco

مراكش و وسط مراكش

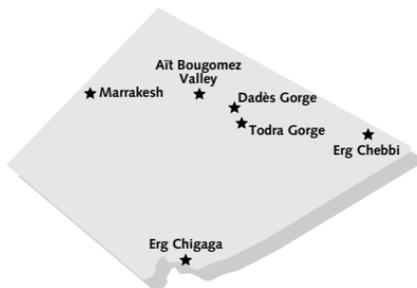


Through no fault of their own, maps can't do central Morocco justice. On a city plan, Marrakesh's walled medina looks like a neat bundle of streets, and the legendary Djemaa el-Fna like a glorified parking lot – but even the best satellite technology can't capture the meanderings of covered souqs and the mayhem of backflipping Gnawa musicians. Towering Jebel Toubkal pops up to the south, but there's no telling how those distant snowcapped High Atlas mountain ranges on both sides of Marrakesh cool the brain on a scorching summer's day. Only on trails between these peaks can you appreciate the treks kids walk to get to school in the isolated Zat Valley, or the tenacity of red-stone villages wedged into rocky crevices in the Ait Bougomez Valley.

Most of all, it seems impossible that so much life should exist so close to the expanse of desert just over the Tizi n'Tichka pass. What you can't guess from longitude coordinates is the burbling river interrupting the stony-faced Todra Gorge, or the rocks melting like wax candles into the green carpet of the Dadès Gorge. Just when all signs of vegetation seem to have dried up in the Ziz and Draâ river valleys, water seeps through fissures and erupts into oases until the landscape is taken over by the Saharan sand dunes of Erg Chebbi (Merzouga) and Erg Chigaga (M'Hamid). Mileage suggests you can return from the Sahara to Marrakesh in one day flat, but central Morocco is the place to put down the map, get lost and live a little.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Catch a command performance of the show that's played for 1000 years, and never gets old: Unesco-acclaimed street theatre in the **Djemaa el-Fna** (p298)
- Find next season's trends made with medieval tools by the crafty artisans in Marrakesh **souqs** (p321)
- Rediscover long-lost social graces behind austere pink walls at an authentic Marrakshi **riad**
- Walk through Morocco's Shangri-la, the stunning **Ait Bougomez Valley** (p329)
- Follow caravan routes on a camel and camp out in the rolling dunes at **Erg Chigaga** (p351)
- Spot red-rock villages balancing atop crags and extreme geological formations oozing into palm oases in the **Dadès Gorge** (p357)
- Witness the original monsters of rock: 300m sheer stone cliffs at **Todra Gorge** (p360)
- Hear the shifting sands sing in the magnificent rose-pink dunes of **Erg Chebbi** (p370) near Merzouga



HISTORY

If Dr Who were to muck about with local timelines, there would be a gaping hole in our time-space continuum. On a map Central Morocco appears isolated by mountains and desert on three sides, but it has made African, Arab and European history as the final leg of legendary trans-Saharan trade routes. Trading contacts with southern Morocco may have helped inspire Portugal's naval exploration of Africa's riches – voyages that kickstarted the age of exploration and later European colonialism. Without the Almoravids' power base here to expand their empire into Europe, there may never have been Muslims in Spain, let alone Moorish architecture. Without the sensational Saadian sugar-dealers and Jewish salt-traders here, European meals might have remained mediocally bland, and world history would certainly be a lot less spicy.

Marrakesh is often at the centre of this historical action, having served as the capital to three separate dynasties – more than the imperial cities of Fez and Meknès. But other regional players have had historical importance far out of proportion to their size or location. In the snowy High Atlas, climbers may stub their toes on petroglyphs showing signs of human civilisation from 1500 years ago. Songs and stories repeated in Berber village *moussems* (festivals) and the Unesco-recognised Djemaa el-Fna embellish histories of triumphant local heroes and tragic love affairs. In their day, mud-brick *ksour* (castles) and watchtowers along the Drâa Valley were more reliable than tracking numbers to make sure precious caravan cargo reached its destination. Tiny Glaoui mountain strongholds played huge roles in the history of French colonialism in Africa, and also in agitating for independence. Today the area is the centre of attention as Morocco's big draw for visitors and a multicultural Mid-Eastern milieu that's true to its history and promising for its future.

CLIMATE

With geography ranging from desert dunes and rocky plains to mountains rising more than 4000m above sea level, the climate of Central Morocco is one of extremes. Bitterly cold High Atlas winters start in September and last into June, and sweltering deserts will leave you panting for water by May.

Spring and autumn are the best times to explore, with temperatures averaging 20°C to 25°C. April is traditionally sandstorm season in the desert, when wind speeds of only 10km/h pick up the fine sand and dust, and whisk it across the plains. Storms often last three to four days, during which desert travel is inadvisable. If travelling in the desert in sandstorm season, allow a few extra days to ensure you get to see the dunes rather than just gritty brown haze.

LANGUAGE

In the High Atlas the main language is the Berber dialect of Tashelhit (with some pockets of Tamazight). Elsewhere Darija (Moroccan Arabic) and French are universally spoken.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Marrakesh is the transport hub of the region, well supplied by train, bus and air links. Direct flights from London to Marrakesh's Menara airport are now offered by low-cost airlines such as Easyjet, RyanAir and AtlasBlue, and frequent flight and train services from Casablanca further expands travel options. Royal Air Maroc (RAM) also runs daily flights to Ouarzazate (via Casablanca) as well as Marrakesh. However, you could consider flying Paris–Ouarzazate directly on one of several flights weekly. Marrakesh–Ouarzazate flights go rather nonsensically via Casablanca – it's faster to drive.

A direct three-hour rail service to/from Casablanca links Marrakesh to the major cities in the north. Supratours bus services continue on to Essaouira, Agadir and right down south to Laâyoune and Dakhla. Similar services are offered by CTM and other local bus companies, although these tend to be more crowded and less comfortable.

GETTING AROUND

Except for the line from Casablanca to Marrakesh, there are no rail links in Central Morocco. Buses are still the cheapest way to get around Central Morocco, but they're becoming more expensive to operate as the price of petrol soars – according to bus company officials, all prices may be expected to rise from those quoted throughout this chapter, so pad your budget if your plans include bus travel.

CTM provides adequate service, but Supratours and other private companies are now offering more frequent departures, air-conditioned coaches and reserved seating to tourist destinations. Shared grands taxis are an alternative, since there's now good sealed roads to nearly every destination featured in this chapter. Mountain regions are best traversed on foot, mountain bike, mule or 4WD (around Dh1200 to Dh1400 per day). Desert travellers will need to hire either a 4WD or camels (Dh350 to Dh400 per person per day) for that ultimate experience at the sand dunes of Erg Chigaga and Erg Chebbi.

MARRAKESH مراکش

pop 1,608,095

From the moment you arrive in Marrakesh, you'll get the distinct feeling you've left something behind – a toothbrush or socks, maybe? But no, what you'll be missing in

Marrakesh is predictability and all sense of direction. Never mind: you're better off without them here. Marrakesh is too packed with mind-boggling distractions and labyrinthine alleyways to adhere to boring linear logic. If you did have a destination, you'd only be waylaid by snake charmers, out-of-control donkey carts, trendy silver leather poufs and ancient Berber cures for everything from relationships to rent.

Start at the action-packed Djemaa el-Fna, and if you can tear yourself away from the castanet-clanging water-sellers and turbaned potion-sellers, head into Marrakesh's maze of covered market streets. Marrakesh's souqs are like a cold riad plunge pool on a scorching July day: nothing quite prepares you for the shock. Dive in headfirst at any street headed north off the Djemaa el-Fna, and with any luck you'll emerge exhilarated and triumphant some hours later, carpet in tow.

While you're in the heart of the medina, you may come upon a palace museum, stay

MARRAKESH IN...

Two Days

Get fresh with freshly squeezed orange-juice carts on the **Djemaa el-Fna** (p298), then dive right into the maze of souqs towards the Rahba Qedima where potion sellers promise cures for whatever ails you, from stubbed toes to broken hearts. Up the street, the glorious decor at **Ali ben Youssef Medersa** (p298) will raise eyebrows and lift spirits, Dar Bellarj will show you what Marrakesh's creative minds are up to lately, and the **Musée de Marrakech** (p301) crafts displays provide a point of reference for the work you'll find in the souqs. Shop your way over to **Souq Sebbaghine** (Dyers' Souq) where skeins of wool are hung out to dry, pass the gossipy **Mouassine Fountain** (p303) and unwind with a leisurely lunch at **Terrasse des Épices** (p316). Stop for a coffee or tea amid the Saadian splendours of **Dar Cherifa** (p317), then hit the **Djemaa el-Fna** to take in the sunset spectacle before dinner at stylish **Villa Flore** (p316).

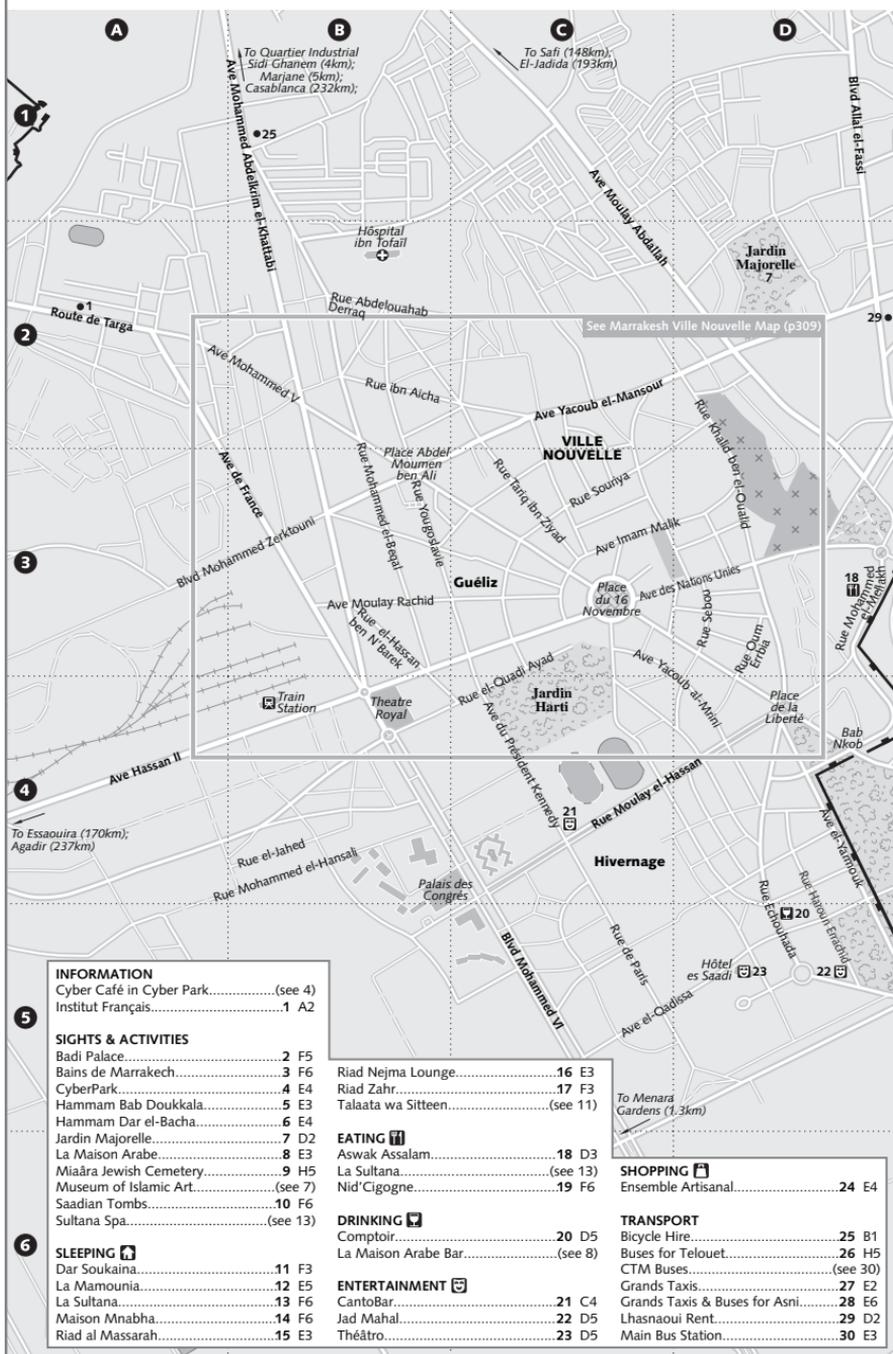
The next day go for the glitz at the **Saadian Tombs** (p300) before getting royally wowed by the woodworked ceilings at the **Bahia Palace** (p299). Grab some *mechoui* (roast lamb) to go from **Mechoui Alley** (p318) and enjoy your picnic feast in the technology-assisted splendours of the **Cyberpark** (p304). Post-*mechoui*, haggle your way into a cab to chill out at the **Jardin Majorelle** (p304), then troll the **galleries** off Rue Yougoslavie (p304) and **boutiques** along Rue de la Liberté (p321). Stop for a cocktail on the rooftop at ultracool **Kechmara** (p319), before your dinner at nearby **Al Fassia** (p317), and cap off the night with a toast in the company of smooth-talking diplomats and shimmying candle-dancers at **Comptoir** (p319).

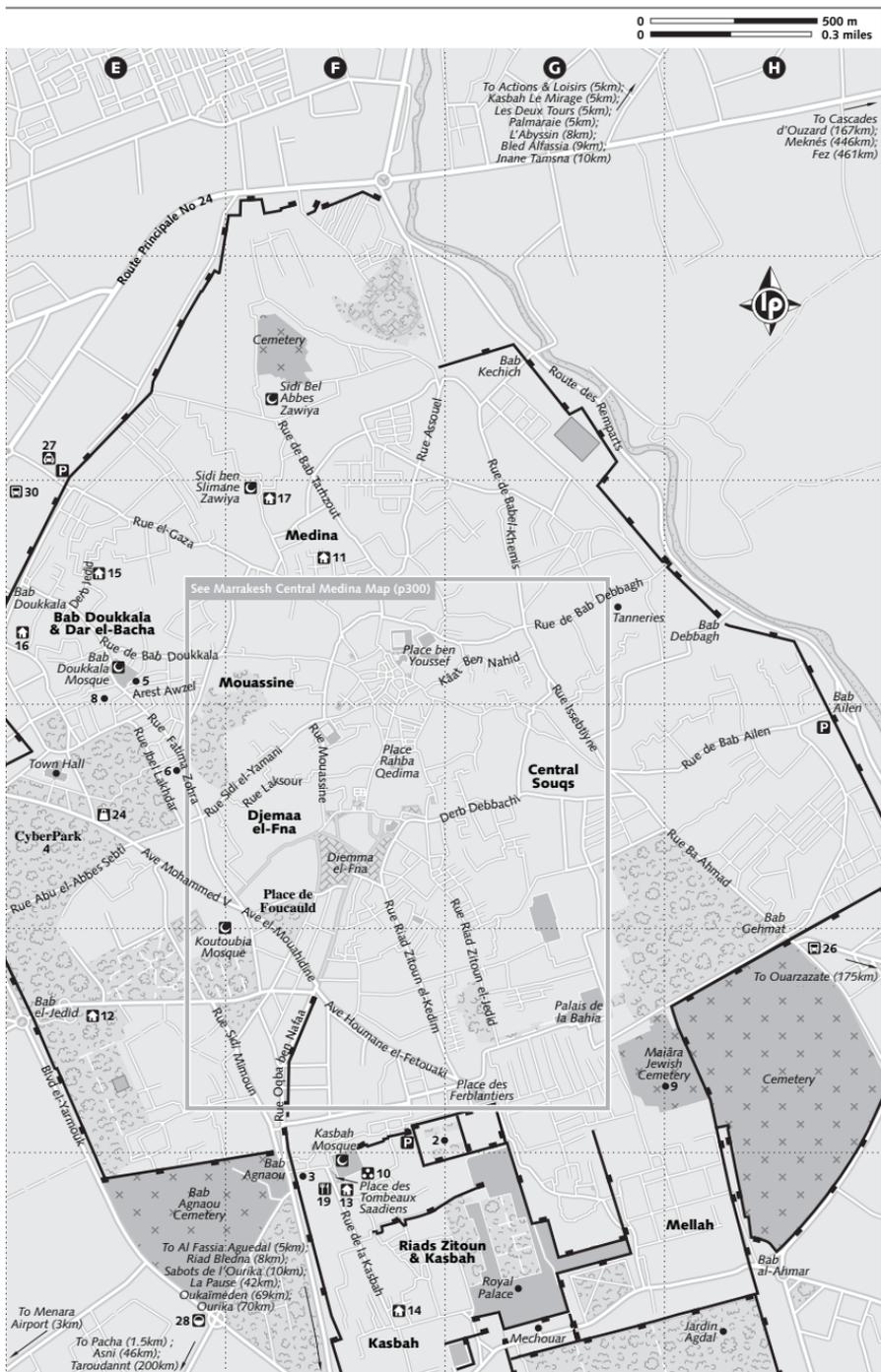
Four Days

Follow the two day itinerary, and on the third day take an easy day-trip to hike the High Atlas foothills around lovely **Imlil** (p334) wedged between snowcapped mountains and terrace-farmed hillsides. Return to Marrakesh in time for cocktail hour at **Kosybar** (p320) and finish up with an utterly memorable meal in **Djemaa el-Fna** (p298).

On the fourth day go for a **cooking course** (p307) or Palmeraie **cycling circuit** (p305), then get steam-cleaned in one of Marrakesh's legendary **hammams** (p305). Finish in style, strutting your stuff at **Pacha** (p320).

MARRAKESH





in a riad guest house, and venture a dish of piping-hot snails. But it's worth leaving the charms of the old city occasionally for dinner, drinks, art galleries and fixed-price boutique shopping in the ville nouvelle (the new town). Go with the flow, and become an honorary Marrakshi *bahja* (joyous one).

HISTORY

Many desert caravans passed through this outpost before Almoravid Berber leader Youssef ben Tachfine and his savvy wife Zeinab recognised its strategic potential, and built ramparts around the encampment in AD 1062. The Almoravids established the city's *khattara* (underground irrigation system) and signature pink mud-brick architecture. But when Almohad warriors stormed the city like a marauding construction crew, they left only the plumbing and the Koubba Ba'adiyn intact. Almohad Yacoub el-Mansour remodelled Marrakesh with a fortified kasbah, glorious gardens, *qissariat* (covered markets), rebuilt Koutoubia and Kasbah mosques, and a triumphal gate (Bab Agnaou). But the Almohads soon lost their showpiece to the Merenids, who turned royal attention to Meknès and Fez.

Life became sweet again in the 16th century, when the Saadians made Marrakesh the focal point of their lucrative sugar-trade route. With the proceeds, Sultan Moulay Abdullah rebuilt the Almoravid Ali ben Youssef Mosque and Medersa, established a trading centre for Christians and a *melah* (Jewish quarter) outside the kasbah in 1558. His glitz-loving successor, Ahmed el-Mansour Eddahbi (the Victorious and Golden), paved the Badi Palace with gold and took opulence to the grave in the gilded Saadian Tombs.

Alawite leader Moulay Ismail preferred docile Meknès to unruly Marrakesh, and moved his headquarters there – though not before looting the Badi Palace. High-maintenance Marrakesh slid into disrepair, and Marrakesh entered its Wild West period, with big guns vying for control. Those who prevailed built extravagant riads, but medina walls were left to crumble, once-grand gardens filled with garbage, and much of the population lived hand to mouth in crowded *fondouqs* (rooming houses). In 1912 the French Protectorate granted Pasha

Glaoui the run of southern Morocco and several medina palaces, while French and Spanish colonists built themselves a ville nouvelle. After the independence movement reduced the pasha to snivelling before King Mohammed V, independent Morocco got organised. Rabat would be the nation's capital, Fez remained the spiritual centre, and Casablanca was business as usual – but what would become of Marrakesh?

Without a clear role, Marrakesh resumed its fallback career as a caravanserai – and became the nation's great success story. Roving hippies and spiritual seekers built the city's mystique in the 1960s and '70s, and visits by the Rolling Stones, Beatles and Led Zeppelin gave the city star power. Fashion arrived in fierce force with Yves St Laurent, Jean-Paul Gaultier, sundry *Vogue* editors and gaggles of supermodels, all demanding chic digs. In the 1990s private medina mansions started being converted as B&Bs, just as low-cost airlines delivered masses of weekenders to brass-studded riad doors. The city doubled in size, and now Marrakesh eagerly awaits your arrival: the city invested US\$2 billion in tourism infrastructure in 2007. Meanwhile in the Djemaa el-Fna, Gnawa musicians are tuning up three-stringed banjos and megawatt grins, just as they have every night for a thousand years.

ORIENTATION

Count on a 30-minute walk from the centre of the ville nouvelle to Djemaa el-Fna, the main square in the heart of the old city. Since the blocks are long and boring until you enter the medina, you may want to take a bus or taxi.

The main areas of the ville nouvelle are **Guéliz** and **Hivernage**. Most midrange and top-end hotels and nightclubs are in the Hivernage, while most budget hotels, restaurants, cafés, galleries and boutiques are in Guéliz around Ave Mohammed V. The train station is at the southwest edge of Guéliz on Ave Hassan II, a few long blocks from central Place du 16 Novembre. The main bus station is just outside the medina at Bab Doukkala, a 15-minute walk northeast of Place du 16 Novembre or a 20-minute walk from Djemaa el-Fna.

Most budget hotels cluster along narrow streets heading south from the **Djemaa el-**

Fna. West of the Djemaa el-Fna is the city's major landmark and handy compass needle: the minaret of the Koutoubia Mosque. The main souqs, mosques and *zawiyas* (saints' shrines) are north of Djemaa el-Fna, while most palaces are to the south along the **Rue Riad Zitoun el-Jedid**. Continue along this street and you'll bump into the **mellah** (Jewish quarter; Map pp294-5). Turn west at the covered Mellah Market, then head south along the ramparts until you reach Bab Agnaou, the triumphal arch leading to the royal **kasbah** (Map pp294-5) containing the gilded tombs of Saadian princes, the current royal palace (closed to visitors), and 16 acres of royal gardens dating from AD 1166.

Guides

Having a guide to the souqs takes away their adventure and mystique, but if you want to cover specific landmarks in an hour or two, you may want one. Just don't go expecting any sweet deals: guides get commissions on whatever you buy, which inflates prices. Some riads and most travel agencies can also arrange guides (see Tours, p308), and official guides can be booked for Dh250/400 for a half/full day at the tourist offices (p298) and in bigger hotels.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

International newspapers can be bought from stands around town, notably those outside the main tourist office and at the **Marché Municipale Ibn Toumert** in Guéliz, and in front of **Hôtel CTM** on Djemaa el-Fna.

ACR Libraire d'Art (Map p309; ☎ 024 446792; 55 Blvd Mohammed Zerkouni, Guéliz; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm Mon-Fri) Splashy coffee-table books about Moroccan gardens, arts and architecture in French and English, plus handy DIY books on cookery, mosaics and *tadelakt* (lime plastering).

Café du Livres (Map p309; ☎ 024 432149; 44 Rue Tariq ibn Ziad, Guéliz; ☎ 9.30am-9pm Tue-Sun) A bookish beauty, with walls of used books in English and French to browse, with cushy seating, book events and poetry readings, plus free wi-fi and tasty food (see p318).

MarraBook Café (Map p300; ☎ 024 376448; Derb Kabada 53, off Ave des Princes; ☎ 9am-9pm) Paperback books in French and English on the ground floor, photo exhibitions upstairs, tea and coffee on the terrace and welcome calm around the corner from the Djemaa.

Cultural Centres

American Language Center (Map p300; ☎ 024 447259; <http://marrakesh.aca.org.ma>; 3 Impasse du Moulin, Guéliz; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) English-language institute featuring a bookshop, lending library and café where Moroccan students greet you with Hollywood accents.

Institut Français (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 446930; www.ifm.ma, in French; Route de Targa, Guéliz; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Sat) Offers French language courses and hosts worthwhile concerts, films and dance performances.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 024 443724)

Brigade Touristique (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 384601; Rue Sidi Mimoun; ☎ 24hr)

Fire (☎ 15)

Police (Map p309; ☎ 19; Rue Ouadi el-Makhazine)

Polyclinique du Sud (Map p309; ☎ 024 447999; cnr Rue de Yougoslavie & Rue ibn Aicha, Guéliz; ☎ 24hr) Private hospital for serious cases and emergency dental care.

Internet Access

Many hotels and riads offer free internet access or wi-fi, and wi-fi is free with purchase at **Café du Livres** (left). Cybercafés ringing the Djemaa el-Fna charge Dh8 to Dh12 per hour; just follow signs reading 'c@fé'. Most open by 10am and close around 11pm.

Cyber Café in CyberPark (Map pp294-5; Ave Mohammed V; per hr Dh10; ☎ 9.30am-8pm) Surprise: 15 terminals with fast connections amid the olive trees in the CyberPark, near the entry across from **Ensemble Artisanal** (p322).

Hassan Internet (Map p300; ☎ 024 441989; Immeuble Tazi, 12 Rue Riad el-Moukha; per hr Dh8; ☎ 7am-1am) A bustling place near the Tazi Hotel with 12 terminals.

Left Luggage

The main **bus station** (Map pp294-5; Bab Doukkala; bag storage per day Dh8; ☎ 24hr) has a left-luggage facility, and there are lockers with padlocks at the **train station** (Map p309; Ave Hassan II; per day Dh10; ☎ 24hr) until the station remodel is complete.

Pharmacies

Phar (Map p300; ☎ 024 430415; Djemaa el-Fna; ☎ 9am-midnight) Central location and covers all the basics.

Pharmacie de l'Unité (Map p309; ☎ 024 435982; Ave des Nations Unies, Guéliz; ☎ 8.30am-11pm) Open late for all your imported drugs, homeopathic remedies and aromatherapy needs. Located opposite **Marché Municipale Ibn Toumert**.

Money

Most banks change cash or travellers cheques and there's no shortage of ATMs. *Bureaux de change* (exchange bureaux) also offer the official state-set exchange rate and don't charge commission.

Crédit du Maroc Ville Nouvelle (Map p309, 215 Ave Mohammed V); Medina (Map p300, Rue de Bab Agnaou; ☎ 8.45am-1pm & 3-6.45pm Mon-Sat) Offers after-hours exchange facilities.

Voyages Schwartz (Map p309; ☎ 024 437469; 1 Rue Mauritanie, Immeuble Moutawakil, 2nd fl, Guéliz; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat) Represents American Express.

Post & Telephone

Public card phones are widely available, especially near Rue de Bab Agnaou in the medina and Ave Mohammed V in Guéliz, and cards can be bought from news vendors and *téléboutiques* (private phone offices).

DHL (Map p309; ☎ 024 437647; www.dhl.com; 113 Ave Mohammed Abdelkrim el-Khattabi, Guéliz; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.20pm Sat) International courier service; insurance subject to surcharge.

FedEx (Map p309; ☎ 024 448257; 113 Ave Abdelkrim el-Khattabi, Guéliz; ☎ 8am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12.15pm Sat) International courier service.

Main Post Office (Barid al-Maghrib; Map p309; ☎ 024 431963; Place du 16 Novembre, Guéliz; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Mon-Sat) Poste restante is at window 3 and the parcel office is around the corner on Ave Hassan II. Parcels should not be wrapped as they must be inspected.

Post Office (Map p300; Rue de Bab Agnaou; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Fri) Branch office facing the Djemaa el-Fna.

Toilets

When nature calls in the medina, try the downstairs toilets at Les Terrasses de l'Alhambra (p318), or make an OJ pitstop at the Café des Épices (p317). Along Ave Mohammed V in Guéliz there are dozens of spiffy cafés where you can nip to the loo.

Tourist Information

Office National Marocain du Tourisme (ONMT) (Map p309; ☎ 024 436179; Place Abdel Moumen ben Ali, Guéliz; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 3-6pm Sat) Offers boosterish official pamphlets and numbers of licensed guides, but not much else.

SIGHTS

Medina

Most monuments in Marrakesh are inside the medina ramparts (a 16km circuit). If

you do wander off-course exploring the **souqs** (Map p300; ☎ 9am-7pm, many shops closed Fri afternoon) and palaces, ask someone to point you back towards the Djemaa el-Fna (preferably a shopkeeper – kids like to mislead tourists) or head towards the Koutoubia minaret (the tallest in town).

DJEMAA EL-FNA

Think of it as live-action channel-surfing: everywhere you look in the **Djemaa el-Fna** (Map p300; ☎ about 9am-1am daily, later during Ramadan), Marrakesh's main square and open-air theatre, you'll discover drama already in progress. Snake-charmers frantically blast oboes to calm cobras hissing at careening Vespas; water-sellers in fringed hats clang brass cups together, hoping to drive people to drink. On the upper balcony of a café, star-crossed young lovers furtively plot their next meeting, while downstairs, not-so-incognito Hollywood celebrities slurp fresh-squeezed orange juice in sunglasses and studio-logo baseball caps. But Gnaoua musicians inevitably steal the show, working groovy rhythms that get fez tassels spinning and passersby grinning. To see what comes next, you don't need to tune in tomorrow – applause and a couple of dirhams ensure an encore.

The hoopla and *halqa* (street theatre) has been non-stop in the Djemaa ever since this plaza was the site of public executions c AD 1050 – hence its name, which means 'assembly of the dead'. 'La Place' sees action from dawn until well after midnight, and though you may be wary of makeshift food stalls, pickpockets, and horse-drawn-carriage traffic, stick around at sunset to watch 100 small restaurants set up shop right in the heart of the action. Find the barbecue stall displays with the freshest raw ingredients, pull up a bench and enjoy the show.

Some of the best Djemaa dinner theatre acts haven't changed much in a millennium, including astrologers, healers and cross-dressing belly dancers. Storytellers recite ancient tales alongside dentists' booths displaying jars of teeth. For bringing urban legends and Morocco's oral history to life nightly, Unesco declared the Djemaa el-Fna a 'Masterpiece of World Heritage' in 2001.

Ali ben Youssef Medersa

When faced with something too magnificent for words, Moroccans say *allahuakbar*,

meaning God is great – and *allahuakbar* describes the **Ali ben Youssef Medersa** (Map p300; ☎ 024 441893; Place Ben Youssef; admission Dh40, with Musée & Koumba Dh60; ☎ 9am–6pm). Look up in the entry hall, and feel suddenly small under intricately carved cedar cupolas and *mashrabiyya* (wooden-lattice screen) balconies. Enter the *medersa's* (theological college) courtyard, and you're surrounded by Hispano-Moresque wonders of five-colour, high-lustre *zellij* (mosaic) and ingenious Iraqi-style Kufic stucco, with letters intertwined in leaves and knots.

Founded in the 14th century under the Merenids, this Quranic learning centre was once the largest in North Africa and remains one of the most splendid. This centre is affiliated with the nearby **Ali ben Youssef Mosque** (Map p300; closed to non-Muslims), and once 900 students in 132 dorm rooms studied religious and legal texts here. A couple of 2nd-floor 3-sq-metre dorm rooms on the west side of the courtyard show how students lived. The original 10th-century marble basin that used to adorn the *medersa* courtyard has now been moved to the Dar Si Saïd museum (p301).

The school was updated in the 19th century, but the limited bathrooms proved a persistent problem. As it declined, the Ali Ben Youssef Medersa lost students to its collegiate rival, the Medersa Bou Inania in Fez (p236). But the *medersa* still exudes magnificent, studious calm – and now that tourists have the run of the place, the green-and-white *zellij* bathrooms are top-notch.

The Koutoubia

Five times a day, one voice rises above the Djemaa din in the *adhan*, or call to prayer: that's the muezzin calling the faithful in all four cardinal directions atop the minaret of the **Koutoubia Mosque** (Map p300; cnr of Rue el-Koutoubia & Ave Mohammed V; ☎ mosque & minaret closed to non-Muslims, gardens open 8am–8pm). The Koutoubia minaret is the ultimate Marrakshi muezzin gig. This 12th-century 70m-high tower is the architectural prototype for Seville's La Giralda in Spain and Rabat's Le Tour Hassan (p121), and it's a monumental cheat sheet of Moorish ornament: scalloped keystone arches, jagged merlons (crenellations), and mathematically pleasing proportions. Originally the minaret was sheathed in Marrakshi pinkish plaster, but

experts opted to preserve its exposed stone and time-tested character in its 1990s restoration.

When the present mosque and its iconic Moorish minaret were finished by Almohad Sultan Yacoub el-Mansour in the 12th century, 100 booksellers were clustered around its base – hence the name Koutoubia, from *kutubiyin*, or booksellers. In the recently refurbished gardens outside the mosque, you might still notice a recent excavation that confirmed a longstanding Marrakshi legend: the original mosque built by lax Almoravid architects wasn't properly aligned with Mecca, but the mistake was noticed by pious Almohads, who levelled it and built a proper one. The Koutoubia mosque is off-limits to non-Muslims, but the gardens are fair game, and a prime location to hear the Koutoubia *adhan* (call to prayer) up close.

Bahia Palace

Imagine what you could build with Morocco's top artisans at your service for 14 years, and here you have it: the **Bahia Palace** (Map p300; ☎ 024 389564; Rue Riad Zitoun el-Jedid; admission Dh10; ☎ 8.30–11.45am & 2.30–5.45pm Mon–Thu & Sat–Sun, 8.30–11.30am & 3–5.45pm Fri). Located near Place des Ferblantiers, *La Bahia* (The Beautiful) boasts floor-to-ceiling decoration begun by Grand Vizier Si Moussa in the 1860s and further embellished in 1894–1900 by slave-turned-vizier Abu 'Bou' Ahmed. The painted, gilded, inlaid woodwork ceilings still have the intended effect of subduing crowds, while the carved stucco is cleverly slanted downward to meet the gaze.

Though only a portion of the palace's 8 hectares and 150 rooms is open to the public, you can see the unfurnished, opulently ornamented harem that once housed Bou Ahmed's four wives and 24 concubines. You can also see the large Court of Honour, once packed with people begging for the despot's mercy. Enemies and wives of the grand vizier stripped the palace bare of its opulent furnishings before his corpulent body was cold. Warlord Pasha Glaoui entertained European friends at the Bahia from 1908 to 1911, when his French guests booted their host and installed the protectorate's *résident-généraux* here. King Mohammed VI is more careful about his choice of royal guests, who range from dignitaries to rapper Sean 'Diddy' Combs.

INFORMATION					
Brigade Touristique.....	1 A5	Hôtel Central Palace.....	27 B4	Restaurant Place Ferblantiers.....	59 C5
Crédit du Maroc (ATM & Bureau de Change).....	2 B4	Hôtel de Foucauld.....	28 A4	Ryad Jama.....	60 C4
French Consulate.....	3 A4	Hotel Essouira.....	29 B4	Terrasses des Épices.....	61 B1
Hassan Internet.....	4 B4	Hôtel Sherazade.....	30 C4	Tobiss.....	62 A3
MarraBook Café.....	5 B4	Hôtel Souria.....	31 B4	Villa Flore.....	63 A2
Phar.....	6 B3	Jnane Mogador.....	32 B4		
Police Station.....	7 C4	Le Gallia.....	33 B4	DRINKING ☑ ☑	
Post Office.....(see 7)		Riad Akka.....	34 D4	Aqua.....	64 B3
Post Office.....	8 B3	Riad Eden.....	35 C5	Café Arabe.....	65 B2
		Riad el Borj.....	36 C3	Dar Cherifa.....	66 B2
		Riad Farnatchi.....	37 C1	Kosybar.....	67 C5
		Riad Julia.....	38 A1	Piano Bar Les Jardins de la Koutoubia.....	68 A3
		Riad L'Orangerie.....	39 A2	Restaurant/Bar du Grand Tazi.....	69 B4
		Riad Magi.....	40 C2	Ryad Tamsna.....	70 C4
		Tamkast.....	41 C1		
		Tchaikana.....	42 C2	ENTERTAINMENT ☑	
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES				Cinéma Eden.....	71 C3
Ali ben Youssef Medersa.....	9 C1	EATING ☑			
Ali ben Youssef Mosque.....	10 C1	Bougainvillea.....	43 B2	SHOPPING ☑	
Bahia Palace.....	11 D5	Café Argana.....	44 B3	Al-Kawtar.....	72 A2
Dar Attajmil.....	12 A3	Café des Épices.....	45 B2	Assouss Cooperative d'Argane.....	73 B2
Dar Bellarj.....	13 C1	Chegrouni.....	46 C3	Cooperative Artisanale Femmes de Marrakech.....	74 B2
Dar Si Said.....	14 D4	Dar Moha.....	47 A1	Creations Pneumatiques.....	75 C5
Koubba Ba'adiyn.....	15 C1	Dar TimTam.....	48 C2	Jamade.....	76 C4
Koutoubia Mosque.....	16 A4	Fast Food Alahbab.....	49 B4	Kif-Kif.....	77 A3
Maison Tiskiwini.....	17 C4	Foodstalls.....	50 B3	L'Art du Bain Savonnerie Artisanale.....	78 B2
Mellah Market.....	18 C5	Haj Mustapha.....	51 B3		
Mouassine Fountain.....	19 B2	La Maison du Couscous.....	52 B4	TRANSPORT	
Museum of Moroccan Arts.....(see 14)		Le Foundouk.....	53 C1	Calèche Stand.....	79 B4
Musée de Marrakech.....	20 C1	Les Terrasses de L'Alhambra.....	54 B3	Local Buses.....	80 A4
Rahba Kedima.....	21 C2	Mechoui Alley.....	55 B3		
Souk Cuisine.....	22 C2	Narwama.....	56 A3		
Synagogue.....	23 D5	Pâtisserie des Princes.....	57 B4		
		Qissaria Food Stalls.....	58 B3		
SLEEPING ☑					
Dar Attajmil.....	24 A3				
Dar Tayib.....	25 D1				
Hotel Belleville.....	26 B3				

mother's large mausoleum with intricate woodwork spandrels in the courtyard, exposed to the elements but vigilantly guarded by stray cats.

El-Mansour died in splendour in 1603, but a scant few decades later, Alawite Sultan Moulay Ismail walled up the Saadian Tombs to keep his predecessors out of sight and mind. Accessible only through a small passage in the Kasbah Mosque, the tombs were neglected by all except the storks until aerial photography exposed them in 1917.

The tombs are signposted down a narrow alleyway at the southern edge of the Kasbah Mosque. You can wander around the compound solo, or get a guide at the entryway to accompany you and explain what you're seeing for a modest tip (Dh15 to Dh20).

Dar Si Said

A monument to Moroccan *mâalems* (master artisans), the **Dar Si Said** (Map p300; ☎ 024 389564; signposted from Riad Zitoun el-Jedid, near Rue Kenaria; admission Dh30; 🕒 9am-noon & 3-6pm Wed-Mon) highlights Marrakesh's graceful riad architecture and local craftsmanship – though artisans from Fez must be credited for

the spectacular painted woodwork in the domed wedding chamber upstairs. Grand Vizier Bou Ahmed's brother Si Said apparently didn't mind living in a construction zone, and gave his *mâalems* (master artisans) time to refine the Dar Si Said into a model of restrained 19th-century elegance.

Fittingly, this crafts showplace now houses the Museum of Moroccan Arts. Don't miss the carved door and inlaid dagger collections on the ground floor, joyous flower-painted musicians' balconies inside the 1st-floor wedding chamber, vaguely threatening kitchen implements in the 2nd-floor *douira* (kitchen), and views over the lovely *zellij* harem courtyard (currently undergoing restoration). Explanations are in Arabic and French, but Anglophones can read place names and dates and enjoy well-crafted objects d'arts on their own merits.

Musée de Marrakech

Maybe the rumours are true of a curse on the Mnebhi Palace, now home to the **Musée de Marrakech** (Map p300; ☎ 024 441893; www.musee-demarrakech.ma, in French; Place ben Youssef; admission Dh30; 🕒 9am-6.30pm). These low walls and

light, spacious arcaded inner courtyard left no place to hide for Mehdi Mnebbi, minister of defence during the brief, troubled 1894–1908 reign of Sultan Moulay Abdelaziz. While Minister Mnebbi was called away from home to receive a medal from Queen Victoria, sneaky England conspired with France and Spain to colonise North Africa. In Mnebbi's absence, autocrat Pasha Glaoui filched his palace – but after independence, it was seized by the state. The palace became Marrakesh's first girls' school in 1965, but upkeep and bathrooms proved a problem.

The palace's fortunes finally turned around in 1997 with an elegant restoration as a museum by the Omar Benjelloun Foundation. Rotating traditional arts displays include Rabati embroidery, Moroccan Jewish artefacts and High Atlas carpets, plus the usual orientalist artwork in the original hammam. Occasional concerts in the grand courtyard are not to be missed, the courtyard café features tasty omelettes and intriguing contemporary Moroccan art, and the bookshop offers a small but superior selection of art books, maps and postcards.

Badi Palace

As 16th-century Sultan Ahmed el-Mansour was paving the Badi Palace (Map pp294-5; near Place des Ferblantiers; admission palace/palace plus Koutoubia minbar Dh10/20; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm) with gold, turquoise and crystal, his court jester wisecracked, 'It'll make a beautiful ruin'. That jester was no fool: 75 years later the place was looted. Today it's hard to guess the glories of *el-Badi* ('the Incomparable') from the stark courtyard. The main attraction here (well worth the additional Dh10 fee) is the Koutoubia *minbar* (prayer pulpit), its cedarwood steps intricately carved and inlaid with marquetry and minute gold and silver calligraphy by 12th century Cordoban artisans and a *maalem* named Aziz – the Metropolitan Museum of Art restoration surfaced his signature under the inlay.

Check out the stork's-eye view of Marrakesh atop the pisé ramparts, and keep an eagle eye out for concerts and events held here. Bryan Ferry recently headlined a lounge music festival here, and the stately setting adds instant atmosphere to events at

the Marrakesh Popular Arts Festival in July (see p464) and the Marrakesh International Film Festival (see p308).

To reach the palace entrance, head through the gate at the back of Place des Ferblantiers and turn right along the ramparts. The entrance and ticket booth are straight ahead.

Dar Bellarj

Flights of fancy come with the territory at **Dar Bellarj** (Map p300; ☎ 024 444555; 9 Toulalat Zaouiât Lahdar; Dh15 for special exhibits; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 2.30-6pm), a stork hospital (*bellarj* is Arabic for stork) turned into Marrakesh's premier arts centre. Each year the non-profit Dar Bellarj Foundation adopts a program theme: in 2007 it was storytelling through film (the centre briefly closed to host a Moroccan film academy) and 2008 focused on women's twin traditions of textiles and storytelling. Arabic calligraphy demonstrations, art openings, crafts exhibits and arts workshops are regular draws for locals and visitors alike; mint tea is graciously offered free with admission. It's located at the corner of Ali ben Youssef Medersa. See also boxed text, opposite.

Mellah

The **mellah** (Map pp294-5; east on Rue Riad Zitoun el-Jedid), situated south of Bahia Palace, is the historic home to most of Marrakesh's Jewish community. Only a few Jewish families remain in these narrow *derbs* (alleys) – most moved to Casablanca, Israel or France in the 1950s – but you can still spot Star of David symbols proudly emblazoned on old doors, and witness cross-alley gossip in progress through wrought-iron *mellah* balconies.

Local guides may usher you into the local **synagogue** (Rue Talmud Torah; Dh20-30 donation per person requested), still in use, and the **miaâra** (Map pp294-5), or Jewish cemetery, where the gatekeeper will let you in to see bright whitewashed tombs topped with piles of rocks for remembrance (Dh10 tip expected). But to see the vibrant living legacy of *mellah* spice traders and artisans, check out the Mellah Market and artisans' showrooms in and around Place des Ferblantiers.

Maison Tiskiwin

Travel to Timbuktu and back again, via the private art collection of Dutch

MAHA EL-MADI

Dar Bellarj Foundation program director, native Marrakshiya and cultural force to be reckoned with.

Changes in the medina: I was born and raised in these *derbs* (alleys), and I can see that everything's changing, and at the same time nothing ever changes. The souqs and *zawiyas* (religious shrines, usually dedicated to a saint) are still here, and life in the *derbs* continues with our *farmatchis* (communal ovens) and *fondouqs*. You'll see people making pilgrimages next to travellers doing their shopping, which was true hundreds of years ago too. Lots of people say the medina is changing, but really, it's us who are changing.

Watch this space: When visitors come to Marrakesh now, they want to see riads, and though they are wonderful they're not our defining features. Our main monument, the Djemaa el-Fna, isn't a building or piece of real estate: it's an open space for exchange and ideas. It belongs to Marrakesh, but it belongs to the world, too. I think we are aware of that in the medina. The history of trade, religion, art and power that you see all around you here is the world's history too.

A sense of place: Our mothers told us stories about our neighbourhoods, our local saints and heroes – ordinary people who did things no one expected of them. These were the stories that told us who we are, what we could become and about our medina. Our mothers' stories remind us that we create our own narratives every day. Now when women get together for those long hours it takes to finish a piece of embroidery or weave a piece of fabric, we repeat stories we've heard on TV – usually *telenovelas* from Spain or Hollywood movies. But what do these stories say about us? When we lose our stories, we lose our sense of place.

Weaving traditions together: This year at Dar Bellarj, we decided to focus on weaving the strands back together of women's crafts and women's storytelling traditions. We've brought in storytellers from the Djemaa el-Fna and from our neighbourhoods, and they fill in details to stories we barely remember. Even when we sell the carpet or embroidery we make, we keep the stories we listened to and told while making them. We must guard these stories carefully, because they are our children's inheritance.

anthropologist Bert Flint on display in his house, the **Maison Tiskiwin** (Map p300; ☎ 024 389192; 8 Rue de la Bahia; admission Dh15; 🕒 9.30am–12.30pm & 3–5.30pm). Each room represents a region of Morocco with indigenous crafts, from well-travelled Tuareg leather camel saddles to fine Middle Atlas carpets – the gold standard by which to judge the ones in the souqs. See if you can spot such recurring motifs as the *khamisa* (hand of Fatima) and the Southern Cross, the constellation that guided desert travellers. Flint lives in another section of the house, and Maison Tiskiwin gives the impression of a traditional Marrakshi home, complete with tantalising aromas of home cooking.

Koubba Ba'adiyn

No one knows why the Almohads spared the **Koubba Ba'adiyn** (Map p300; across from Ali ben Youssef mosque; admission Dh15, with Medersa & Koubba Dh60; 🕒 9am–7pm). They destroyed everything else their Almoravid predecessors built in Marrakesh, yet they overlooked one small, graceful 12th-century *koubba* (shrine),

probably used for ablutions. This architectural relic reveals what Almohad Hispano-Moresque architecture owes to the Almoravids: keyhole arches, ribbed vaulting, interlaced carved arabesques and a domed cupola on a crenellated base.

Mouassine Fountain

The medina had 80 fountains at the start of the 20th century, and each neighbourhood relied on its own for water for cooking, public baths, orchards and gardens. The **Mouassine Fountain** (Map p300; Rue Sidi el-Yamani, near Rue Mouassine) is a classic example, with carved wood details and has continued its use as a neighbourhood wool-drying area and gossip source.

Fondouqs

Since medieval times, most Marrakshis in the medina lived not in fancy riads but **fondouqs** (Map p300; 🕒 9am–7pm generally; individual artisan's studios vary), rooming houses with artisans' studios at ground level and camel parking in the courtyard. If you ever wonder where

Marrakesh gets its wild ideas and creativity from, check out some of the 140 *fondouqs* that remain in the medina. Look for doors propped open to sprawling *fondouqs* near Place Bab Ftueh, Rue Dar el-Bacha, Souq el-Fassi (near the Ali ben Youssef Medersa) and Rue Mouassine.

Ville Nouvelle

If the medina starts to wear down both your nerves and shoe leather, escape to **Guéliz** to the art galleries around **Rue Yougoslavie**, fixed-price boutiques and hip cafés on **Rue de la Liberté**, and the perennially fashion-forward **Jardin Majorelle**. At the southwest end of the ville nouvelle, **Hivernage** offers restaurants and clubs on and around **Ave el-Qadissa** (Map pp294–5) where you can make an evening of it.

For a quick getaway just 20 minutes from the city, try a cooking class, hammam, drinks or an overnight stay in the **Palmerie**.

Jardin Majorelle & Museum of Islamic Art

Other guests may bring flowers, but Yves Saint Laurent gave the entire **Jardin Majorelle** (☎ 024 301852; www.jardinmajorelle.com; cnr Ave Yacoub el-Mansour & Ave Moulay Abdullah; garden Dh30, museum Dh15; ☎ 8am–6pm summer, 8am–5pm winter) to Marrakesh, the city that adopted him in 1964 after a sequence of events that included in rather unfortunate order: launching hippie fashion; fame as a groundbreaking gay icon; and an obligatory stint in the French military. Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergère bought the electric-blue villa and its garden to preserve the vision of its original owner, acclaimed landscape painter Jacques Majorelle, and keep it open to the public. Per his instructions, Yves Saint Laurent's ashes were scattered over the splendidly restored Jardin Majorelle upon his June 2008 passing.

Thanks to Bergère, Saint Laurent and Marrakshi botanist Abderrazak Benchaâbane, the botanical garden Majorelle began cultivating in 1924 is now a psychedelic desert mirage of over 300 plant species. Fuchsia bougainvillea explode from lemon-yellow terracotta planters, skinny cacti slouch against cobalt-blue plaster walls like wasted rock stars, and goldfish flit through pale-green reflecting pools in shocking orange flashes.

Majorelle's art-deco villa is now the Museum of Islamic Arts, which houses Saint Laurent's collection of decorative arts plus Majorelle's elegant lithographs of southern Morocco scenery. A small boutique features a fragrance inspired by the garden and developed by Benchaâbane, and a new café on the premises offers drinks and fresh lunches at high-fashion prices – but you can't argue with the view.

Other Gardens

Marrakesh has been famed for its gardens since Almoravid times, and though real-estate speculation has filled in many ville nouvelle gardens with high-rise apartment buildings, a few standouts remain besides Jardin Majorelle. Stop and smell the roses while checking email at the **CyberPark** (Map pp294–5; Ave Mohammed V, near Bab Nkob; ☎ 9am–7pm; ☑ wi-fi), an 8-hectare royal garden dating from the 18th century that now offers free wi-fi. Wait your turn for free outdoor kiosk access on park benches alongside teenagers and nervous internet daters, or pay to use the swanky air-conditioned cybercafé (per hour Dh10; see above).

Local lore tells of a sultan who seduced guests over dinner, then lovingly chucked them in the reflecting pools to drown at the **Menara Gardens** (off Map pp294–5; Ave la Menara, Hivernage; garden admission free, picnic pavilion Dh20; ☎ 5.30am–6.30pm). Nowadays dunking seems the furthest thing from the minds of couples canoodling poolside amid these royal olive groves, and clear days bring families for picnics in a stately 19th-century pavilion. Stay for sunsets against the Atlas Mountain backdrop, but skip the evening sound-and-light show, a 65-minute flag-waving version of Marrakshi history featuring lasers and interpretive dance.

Galleries

What will relentlessly creative Marrakesh dream up next? To find out, take a quick tour of the emerging Marrakesh art scene on and around Rue Yougoslavie. Start with **Galerie Noir sur Blanc** (Map p309; ☎ 024 422416; 48 Rue Yougoslavie, 1st fl; ☎ 3–7pm Mon–Fri, 10am–1pm & 3–7pm Sat), a showcase of major Moroccan talent, including elemental calligraphic paintings by Marrakshi Larbi Cherkoui. Across the street and on the right along the Passage Ghandouri pedestrian corridor

you'll spot the polished black-marble front of **Matisse Art Gallery** (Map p309; ☎ 024 448326; www.matisse-art-gallery.com; 43 Passage Ghandouri, off 61 Rue Yougoslavie; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm Mon-Sat), where you'll be greeted by ethereal figures in beeswax and natural pigments by Marrakesh's most famous artist, Mahi Binebine, and henna paintings evoking Berber *baraka* (blessings) by Farid Belkahlia.

Once you've seen major Moroccan artists, head across Ave Mohammed V and down Rue Ibn Toumert to check out next-generation art stars at **Galerie Ré** (Map p309; ☎ 024 432258; http://editmar.free.fr; Résidence Al Andalou III, cnr Rue de la Mosquée and Rue Ibn Toumert; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 3-8pm Tue-Sat, 11am-6pm Sun). Keep an eye out for Amina Benbouchta's hieroglyphically minimalist paintings, Mauoal Bouchaïb's petroglyph-inspired etchings, editions of poetry illustrated by gallery artists, and gallery opening soirées (always packed, always fabulous).

ACTIVITIES

Cycling

Bikes can be rented in Marrakesh from most budget hotels around the Djemaa el-Fna or at the large hotels along Ave Mohammed Abdelkrim el-Khattabi in the ville nouvelle for about Dh70 to Dh80 per day. For mountain bikes, racing bikes and biking trips through the High Atlas and desert, contact **Actions & Loisirs** (off Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 430931; actionsportloisirs@yahoo.fr; Tikidia Garden Hotel, Palmeraie; 2hr/half-day Dh140/350), **D&O** (☎ 024 421996) or UK-based **CycleActive** (☎ 44 1768 840 400; www.cycleactive.co.uk). To escape city traffic, head for the Palmeraie, the palm-shaded district 5km northwest of the centre where you'll spot mud-brick villages and celebrity villas.

Hammams

For the authentic experience at a bargain price, head to your local neighbourhood hammam – you'll find one near most major mosques, since hammams traditionally share a water source with ablutions fountains. Here entry costs less than Dh10, massage costs from Dh50 to Dh100 and *gommage* (scrub) Dh15 to Dh20. Two of the more impressive historic hammams are the vast **Hammam Dar el-Bacha** (Map pp294-5; 20 Rue Fatima Zohra; admission men/women Dh7/7.5; ☎ men 7am-1pm & women 1-9pm) and the 17th-century **Hammam Bab Doukkala** (Map pp294-5; Rue Bab

Doukkala, southeast cnr Bab Doukkala Mosque; admission Dh7.5; ☎ women noon-7pm, men from 8pm). Bring your community hammam kit: towel, flip-flops, plastic mat and a change of knickers (you'll be expected to wear yours).

Some riads and hotels have their own private hammams in-house. You usually need to book your slot in advance, as it can take a couple of hours to heat the hammam. Community hammams are a greener option, since less water and fuel is required per person to get squeaky clean.

Marrakesh also offers more upscale spa experiences with Moroccan trappings. The best-value treatments are the hammam/*gommage* treatment for Dh160 in the sleek graphite-*tadelakt* hammam inside an art-deco villa at **Les Secrets de Marrakesh** (Map p309; ☎ 024 434848; 62 Rue de la Liberté; per couple Dh150 each; ☎ 9am-7pm) and massages run Dh350 per hour at **Bains de Marrakech** (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 381428; www.lesbainsdemarrakech.com; 2 Derb Sedra, Bab Agnaou, medina; ☎ 9am-8pm), but treatments should be booked at least two weeks in advance.

For sheer decadence, try **La Maison Arabe** (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 387010; www.lamaisonarabe.com; 1 Derb Asshebe, Bab Doukkala), where the basic treatment marinates you in local herbs and minerals with a hammam, *gommage* and *masque* of clay, crushed rose petals and geranium oil for Dh300; massage runs Dh600 per hour. More opulent still is the **Sultana Spa** (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 388008; www.lasultanamarrakech.com; Rue de la Kasbah, next to Saadian Tombs; ☎ P ☎), where you can book hammam treatments in the subterranean all-marble spa (basic hammam Dh200, cinnamon *gommage* Dh350) and four-hand amber-oil massages on the roof terrace overlooking the Saadian Tombs (starting from Dh750).

Swimming

Medina riads are restricted to plunge pools, since leakage from larger pools could endanger mud-brick foundations. Given Morocco's water shortage and the pollution caused by industrial-strength chemical pool cleaners, this is a good thing for the local environment. Olympic-sized pools and water parks in parched central and southern Morocco are emphatically discouraged by Lonely Planet.

To swim laps with a clean conscience, go for lunch and a dip at **Jnane Tamsna** (off Map

pp294-5; ☎ 024 329423; www.jnanetamsna.com; Douar Abiad, Palmeraie; admission incl organic three-course lunch with wine Dh400), where the pool is filtered and shaded by aromatic organic gardens. Swimmers might also consider offsetting their 'wet footprint' with a visit and donation to a local charitable organisation (see p335).

WALKING TOUR

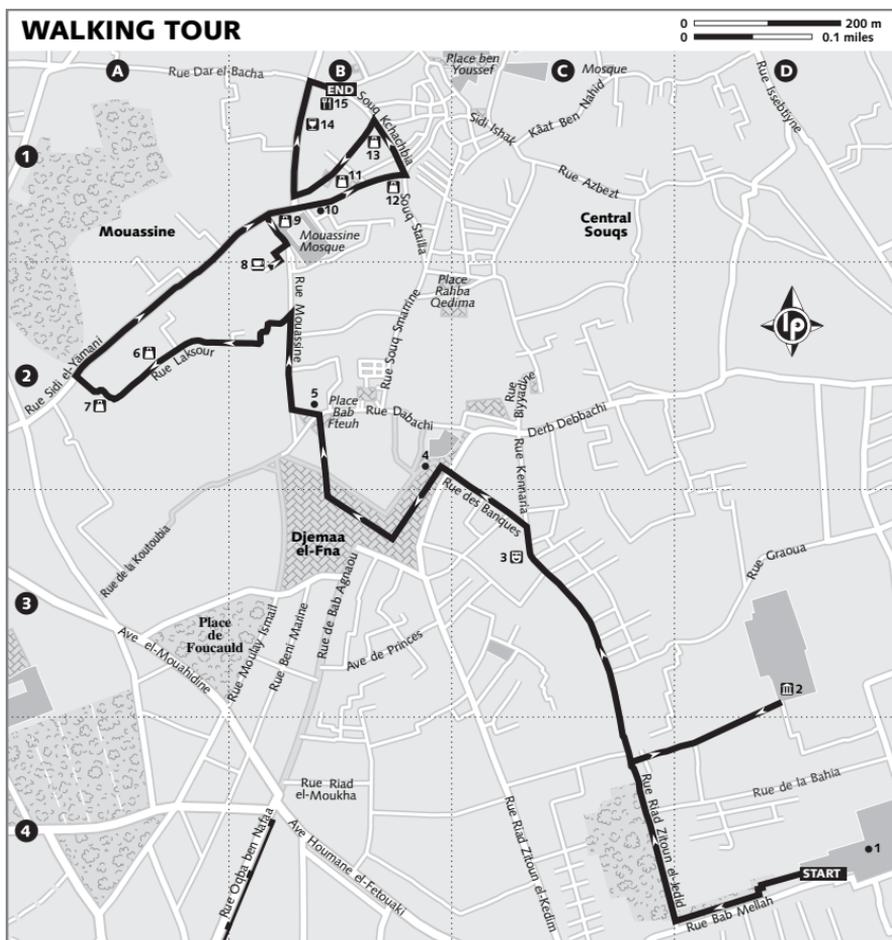
To discover the medina's hidden hotspots, you don't need to get hopelessly lost in the souqs (though it's highly recommended) or hit the *derbs* running at dawn. After lazing around the riad or sunning on your hotel terrace, begin your leisurely afternoon stroll at the **Bahia Palace (1; p299)** around 2.30pm, just as the palace reopens and before the crowds

converge. After ogling the Bahia's intricately painted ceilings, head up Rue Riad Zitoun el-Jedid and follow the signs to the right under an archway for **Dar Si Said (2; p301)** where the painted dome of the wedding chamber will blow what's left of your Bahia-added mind.

Head back to Rue Riad Zitoun el-Jedid and follow the road north past the broken-tile-paved entrance and Bollywood posters

WALK FACTS

Start Bahia Palace
End Terrasse des Épices
Distance 4.25 km
Duration four hours



of the **Cinéma Eden (3; p321)** on your left to look sharp to dodge scooters, horse carriages, slithery snake charmers and henna tattooists who consider your hands blank-canvas begging for art. Head for the mint stalls in the northwest corner, swing right towards Place Bab Fteuh, and cross the plaza towards the covered entrance of Rue el-Mouassine. On your right is the **Bab Fteuh Fondouq (5; p303)** where you can glimpse jewellery and trays being hammered out in crammed artisans' studios.

Follow Rue el-Mouassine north until you reach an intersection with Rue el-Ksour, which heads left under an arch. Here you can take a shopping detour loop west along Rue el-Ksour to **Al-Kawtar (6; p321)** and **Kif-Kif (7; p322)** and back to Rue el-Mouassine via Rue Sidi el-Yamani. Otherwise, continue north past the Mouassine mosque entrance on your right and look for a sign for **Dar Cherifa (8; p317)** at your next left. Signs will point you left, then right under an archway to this 15th-century showplace, where you can enjoy mint tea in Saadian-stuccoed splendour. Retrace your steps to Rue Mouassine, and go left a few steps to the intersection with Rue Sidi el-Yamani.

Turn right, and the second shop on your right is **Assouss Cooperative d'Argane (9; p322)**, tempting passersby with free samples of Fair Trade argan oil and *amelou* (argan-nut butter). Further ahead is the **Mouassine Fountain (10; p303)**, where you can admire the woodwork or pretend to as you eavesdrop on local gossip. Head through the archway and enter the picturesque **Souq Sebbaghine (11; Dyers' Souq)** with skeins of yellow and red wool hung out to dry overhead against the brilliant blue sky. The right fork leads through workshops where felt is made, and just ahead on the right you can follow your nose to the fragrant artisanal soap shop **L'Art du Bain Savonnerie (12; p322)**. Take your next left onto Souq el-Attarine, and follow this market street as it curves left until on your left you spot **Cooperative Artisanale Femmes de Marrakesh (13; p321)**. Hook around the next corner, and follow this street to the left back towards Souq Sebbaghine and the Mouassine Fountain.

Turn right back onto Rue el-Mouassine, and just ahead you can stop for cocktail hour on the terrace at **Café Arabe (14; p319)**,

or continue north past restored *fondouqs* on your right to the intersection with Rue Dar el-Bacha. This is where you follow your rumbling stomach to the right, and heed signs for **Terrasse des Épices (15; p316)** on your right. Go right to the top floor, flop on a couch, and watch the sunset on your glorious afternoon in Marrakesh.

COURSES

Cooking

Many riads in the medina organise sessions with their cook, where you can learn to cook a basic tajine or couscous. Learn to cook as the *dadas* (chefs) do at **Souk Cuisine** (Map p300; ☎ 073 804955; www.soukcuisine.com; Zniquat Rahba, 5 Derb Tahtah, medina; per day incl meal & wine Dh350), where you shop in the souq for ingredients with your English-speaking Dutch hostess Gemma van de Burgt, work alongside two Moroccan women wedding-feast chefs, then sit down to enjoy the four-course lunch you helped cook.

Other hands-on cookery workshops are available at **Jnane Tamsna** (☎ 024 329423; www.jnanetamsna.com; Douar Abiad, Palmeraie; course incl meal Dh550) where you cook with organic produce from the garden; **Bled Alfassia** (off Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 329660; www.bledalfassia.com; Route de Fez, Palmeraie; rates upon request) where you'll learn the secrets of the chefs behind Al-Fassia restaurant (p317); and **Dar Attajmil** (Map p300; ☎ 024 426966, 064 235954; www.darattajmil.com; 23 Rue Laksour; courses incl meal Dh500).

Languages

The **Institut Français** (p297) offers private classes in Arabic and French any time (Dh250 per hour), an intensive French course in July (Dh850), and courses in Moroccan dialect (Dh1600) and French (Dh850) during term time. To learn the local lingo, you can also get connected with a private teacher through **Study Arabic in Marrakech** (☎ 011 921065; studyarabic@menara.ma).

MARRAKESH FOR CHILDREN

This fairy-tale city makes perfect sense to kids, and the labyrinthine layout gives their imaginations room to run wild. Harry Potter and the Hogwarts crowd might shop for school supplies from the potion-sellers in the **Rahba Qedima** (Map p300), and snake charmers and snail-sellers will give them reasons to squeal with grossed-out glee in the **Djemaa**

el-Fna (see p298). Many souq stalls cater for little ones, and in a single day dotting merchants might spoil your kids rotten with free treats, toys and sweets. When grown-up company gets old, steer them to the nearest park to meet and mingle with other kids.

If you have tiny tots, you might want to think twice about staying in a riad. Plunge pools and steep stairs aren't exactly child-proof, and sound reverberates through riad courtyards. Most riad owners and staff dote on babies, but the same can't always be said of sleep-deprived fellow guests giving you the evil eye over breakfast.

For family adventures with built-in holiday card photo ops, go for a camel ride. Camels usually camp out in the Palmeraie; a 15-minute traipse-about is Dh30 to Dh50. **Kasbah Le Mirage** (off Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 314444; Ouahat Sidi Brahim, Palmeraie; 1½-hr camel ride Dh290) organises dromedary rides through the Palmeraie with Moroccan pancakes at the end. Marrakesh also has a wide choice of horse and pony stables, but the **Sabots de l'Ourika** (off Map pp294-5; ☎ 06 031110; Km11 Ourika Rd; 1-/3-hr walk Dh250/550) specialises in one- to three-hour horse-rides in the countryside. For a horse ride closer to the hotel, flag down a horse-drawn carriage (see p324).

TOURS

Most travel agencies have offices on or near Ave Mohammed V, west of Place du 16 Novembre in Guéliz. Most riads and hotels can arrange excursions or refer you to a reputable agency. For a good, safe time had by all, always request licensed, insured guides and specify English-speaking guides as needed.

Inside Morocco Travel (off Map pp294-5; ☎ 061 182090; Riad Bledna, Palmeraie; 🕒 9am-noon & 3-7pm Mon-Sat) Get the insider's view of Morocco on custom-designed, green-savvy adventures with Mohamed Nour, the Marrakshi eco-tourism expert and geologist who with his multilingual team knows every secret Hidden Atlas nook and hidden Sahara oasis.

Mountain Voyage (Map p309; ☎ 024 4219965; www.mountain-voyage.com; Ave Mohammed V, Immeuble El Batoul, 2nd fl, Guéliz; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 3.30-7pm Mon-Sat) This British-owned company based in Marrakesh provides licensed, English-speaking guides for tailor-made Marrakesh tours, sustainable tourism excursions in the Middle Atlas and High Atlas excursions with stays at its own property, the Kasbah du Toubkal (p336).

Diversity Excursions (☎ 024 329423; www.diversity-excursions.co.uk) Eye-opening tours in and around Mar-

BOOK YOUR STAY

Need a place to stay? Find and book it at lonelyplanet.com. More than 30 properties are featured for Marrakesh – each personally visited, thoroughly reviewed and happily recommended by a Lonely Planet author. From hostels to top-end hotels, we've hunted out the places that will bring you unique and special experiences. Read independent reviews by authors and other travellers, and get practical information including amenities, maps and photos. Then reserve your room simply and securely via Hotels & Hostels – our online booking service. It's all at www.lonelyplanet.com/hotels.

rakesh led by Moroccan experts on local culture, history, botany and ecology are organised by the Global Diversity Foundation, and might include visits to private gardens and one of the foundation's projects.

Desir du Maroc (☎ 061 163585; www.desirdumaroc.com) Marrakshi Abdelhay Sadouk has 30 years experience introducing visitors to Moroccan culture: leading history- and culture-tours from Marrakesh to the coast, desert and mountains. Yoga and t'ai chi workshops and English-language guides available.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Marrakesh Marathon (www.marathon-marrakech.com; fee €25 half-marathon, €40 full marathon) Run like there's a carpet salesman after you: 5000 marathoners cross the finish line at Djemaa el-Fna at the annual road race in January.

Contemporary Dance Festival (www.maghrebarts.ma/musique.html, in French) Get inspired by this January showcase of modern dance styles from around the world, and hit the dance-floor like a Moroccan Martha Graham.

Rencontres Musicales de Marrakech (☎ 066 102729; www.maghrebarts.ma, in French) East meets West on stage in March with free concerts and events held at Palais de Bahia, Jardin Agdal and the Djemaa el-Fna.

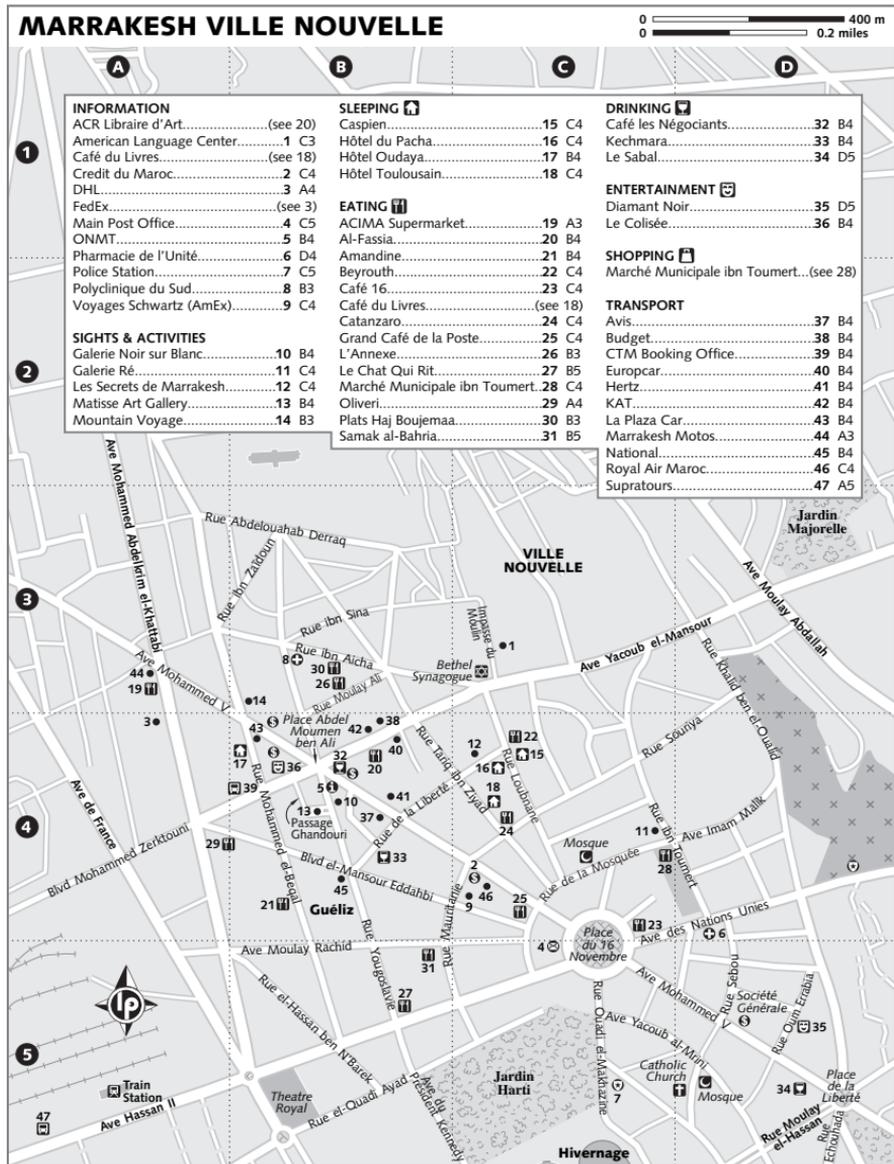
Festival of Folklore (☎ 024 446114; www.maghrebarts.ma/musique.html, in French) Over 40 years old and proud, Marrakesh's premier festival was declared by Unesco a 'masterpiece of cultural patrimony' in 2005 for highlighting diverse dance, music and storytelling traditions from across Morocco each July.

International Film Festival (☎ 024 420200; www.festival-marrakech.com) Stars from Hollywood, Bollywood and across the Maghrib make this week-long festival in December a cosmic event (see boxed text, p61).

SLEEPING

Marrakesh has it all: you can sleep anywhere from the funkiest fleapit to the most amazing palace straight out of your orientalist Hollywood fantasy. The first decision is where you want to be: right in the heart of the souqs down a hidden medina *derb*; in the ville nouvelle, where you'll find hotels

ranging from budget to business-class; or in the Palmeraie, for a villa retreat amid the swaying palms. Many people mix it up, spending a day or two in a ville nouvelle or Djemaa el-Fna budget hotel, splashing out for one of Marrakesh's unbelievable riad guest houses, then heading for the tranquility of the Palmeraie or nearby High Atlas.



RIADS ON A BUDGET

Staying in a riad guest house lets you experience the Marrakshi art of hospitality, and gain an understanding of Marrakesh behind those brass-studded medina doors. But all is not always what it seems from websites with retouched glamour shots of candlelit riads promising locations '5 minutes' from the Djemaa el-Fna. Some are located in remote medina neighbourhoods far from restaurants, taxis and other traveller amenities, down winding, covered *derbs* (alleyways) that can seem dark and forbidding even in broad daylight. Price is also no guarantee of an idyllic riad experience. Even some high-end riads have only skeletal staffs of underpaid employees, who are kept so busy with cleaning and basic upkeep they have no time for the social graces that give Marrakshis such pride in their hosting tradition.

Rates at most licensed, reputable riads are not especially cheap, since riads can only accommodate a few guests at a time, upkeep is a non-stop undertaking, and the hard-working, mostly local staff deserve decent salaries. Breakfasts are typically included in the price, and will carbo-load you for the souqs with Moroccan and European pastries, yoghurt, fresh-squeezed orange juice, coffee or tea and sometimes fruit or eggs.

For the best choice and sweetest deals, avoid high season during major European holidays – especially Christmas–New Year, Easter/Passover, and the end of April/first week of May around the May 1 workers' holiday. During high season you'll need to reserve a month in advance and expect to pay almost double low-season rates for popular riads. Low season is usually summer (mid-June to August) and winter (mid-January to mid-March). Mid-season rates cover most of spring and autumn, and are indicated in this chapter.

It pays to be flexible with riads. In the off-season you can usually obtain better rates by contacting the riad directly to ask if there's anything available in your price range within a certain date range. If you're staying a week or more you might get rates of up to 30% off; these are often posted on the riad website. Renting out an entire riad in exclusivity with friends or family is also an option; rates usually start around Dh5000/8000 per night in low/high season for up to six rooms and 15 people.

Work the web to your advantage too. Lonely Planet's accommodation website at www.lonelyplanet.com/accommodation is, naturally, your first point of reference for Marrakesh riads screened by independent, value-minded, and, yes, nit-picky Lonely Planet authors, alongside Lonely Planet travellers' ratings. Last-minute and package deals are listed on several Marrakesh accommodation websites, many in French but with buttons to click for the English version: www.terremaroc.com, www.ilove-marrakech.com, www.riadsmorocco.com, www.riadomaroc.com and www.splendia.com. Riad and villa rentals available by the day, week or month can be found at www.marrakech-riads.net, www.marrakech-medina.com and www.habibihomes.com.

Wherever you go, know that the rates for Marrakesh accommodation are more expensive than anywhere else in Morocco. Prices are continuing to rise, as the value of the dirham fluctuates against the Euro, the state levies additional taxes on guest houses. Even so, more travellers are coming back for their second, third and seventh helpings of Marrakshi hospitality.

The licensed riads in this chapter have been selected not on looks alone, but for convenient locations, gracious staff and home-cooked Moroccan meals. Lonely Planet recommends riads that promote environmentally sustainable practices, fair compensation, time off, cultural exchange and genuine Moroccan hospitality. You can help: send your candid riad feedback

to talk2us@lonelyplanet.com. The best riads set standards for environmental stewardship and workplace standards, and offer some must-have Marrakesh experiences: made-to-order Moroccan feasts from an ingenious *dada* (home chef); *hammam* (traditional spa) treatments; courses on everything from cooking to mosaics taught by a local *maâlem* (expert); and arranging excursions to mountain villages and the Sahara beyond. For 'riad' guesthouses outside the medina, see Palmerie & Outskirts of Marrakesh (p314).

Medina BUDGET

There are dozens of budget hotels in the lanes immediately south of Djemaa el-Fna. Apart from location, staff professionalism,

degree of cleanliness and the shower situation, there's often not much difference between them. Since they are small, the best ones fill up really quickly, so it's worth calling ahead. Some will let you sleep on a mattress on the terrace for around Dh50 if you're really stuck.

Hotel Essaouira (Map p300; ☎ 024 443805; www.jnanemogador.com/hotelessaouira-marrakech.htm; 3 Sidi Bouloukat, near Jnane Mogador; s/d Dh90/140, Dh30 for mattress on roof, Dh10 extra for shower) Elusive and quite the colourful character, this 30-room hotel hides out on a *derb* off Riad Zitoun el-Qedim, just five minutes from the Djemaa el-Fna. This former family home was converted to a hotel back in the 1960s, and the original psychedelic polychrome stucco hints at its wild past. Rooms have merrily mismatched decor and the odd sink but no private bathrooms – expect a wait for showers and toilets.

Hotel Souria (Map p300; ☎ 024 445970; 17 Rue de la Recette; s/d Dh130/170) 'How are you? Everything's good?' Even if it's been mere minutes since you last saw them, the women who run this place expertly never fail to ask. The sentiment is straightforward and so are the rooms – 10 no-frills rooms with shared bathrooms around a garden courtyard, with a patchwork-tiled terrace – but somehow it's all so heartfelt. Be sure to book ahead.

Hotel Central Palace (Map p300; ☎ 024 440235; hotelcentralpalace@hotmail.com; 59 Derb Sidi Bouloukat; d Dh155, with shower/bathroom Dh 205/305) Sure it's central, but palatial? Actually, yes. With 40 clean rooms on four floors arranged around a burbling courtyard fountain and a roof terrace lordling it over the Djemaa el-Fna, this is the rare example of a stately budget hotel. In summer, book cooler 1st-floor rooms.

Hôtel Sherazade (Map p300; ☎ 024 429305; www.hotelsherazade.com; 3 Derb Djemaa, Riad Zitoun el-Kedim; s/d with shared bathroom Dh180/230, s with private bathroom from Dh220-640, d with private bathroom from Dh270-690; ☎) Conversation comes naturally in this laid-back riad run by a Moroccan-German family, with 22 rooms and a magnetic central yellow courtyard with a trickling fountain and floor pillows. Room rates vary according to air-con, decor and bathroom – a couple have slinky *tadelakt* tubs. Between the rooftop backpacker-scene and the gruff muezzin next door, terrace rooms with shared bathrooms call for earplugs.

Hôtel de Foucauld (Map p300; ☎ 024 440806; Ave el-Mouahidine; s/d Dh220/250; ☎) One block from the Djemaa el-Fna, the Foucauld offers spacious, frayed rooms with private bathrooms and a surprisingly good restaurant at the right price. It's a good place to ask trekkers and bikers converging on the buffet breakfast (Dh25) for tips on exploring the High Atlas. Though it may seem counterintuitive, ask for rooms overlooking the street and Place Foucauld, or you'll wake up at 5am convinced you're sharing your room with the Koutoubia's muezzin.

Hotel Belleville (Map p300; ☎ 024 426481; 194 Riad Zitoun el-Kedim; s/d/tr incl breakfast Dh250/300/400) Tucked right behind the Djemaa el-Fna, but with nicer digs and more attentive service than you'd find at bigger budget hotels. What the nine rooms lack in size they make up for in personality: think bathrooms with *zellij* fixtures, curtained beds and high ceilings. Light sleeper alert: get the rooms away from the busy street, and bring earplugs.

Talaata wa Sitteen (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 383026; www.tlaatawa-sitteen.com; 63 Derb el-Ferrane, Riad Laârous; r per person with shared/private bathroom Dh280/445) Effortlessly charming, with stools pulled up to pine-wood tea tables, canvas-covered chaise longues on the terrace, starkly chic rooms, and straw mats and sunhats strewn about casually. Not far from Ali ben Youssef Medersa, though a hike from the Djemaa – but chatty, tasty dinners here are a highlight, and the shared *tadelakt* bathrooms are spiffier than you'd find at any Djemaa budget hotel. Breakfast is included.

Le Gallia (Map p300; ☎ 024 445913; fax 024 444853; www.ilove-marrakesh.com/hotelgallia; 30 Rue de la Recette; s/d incl breakfast Dh320/500; ☎) Sprawl out in the air-conditioned/heated comfort of one of 17 rooms around two leafy courtyards, enjoy a leisurely breakfast you could eat off the sparkling art deco-tiled floors, and soak up the rays on the tiled terrace listening to caged songbirds below. Cheerfully run by the same French family since 1929, the Gallia is constantly packed with repeat visitors, so you'll need to book at least a month ahead by fax.

Jnane Mogador (Map p300; ☎ 024 426323; www.jnanemogador.com; Derb Sidi Bouloukat, 116 Rue Riad Zitoun el-Kedim; s/d/t/q Dh360/480/580/660; ☎) An authentic 19th-century riad with all the 21st-century guest-house fixings: prime location, in-house hammam, double-decker roof terraces and owner Mohammed's

laid-back hospitality. A favourite with visiting diplomats and artists; book well ahead and enjoy fascinating conversation over breakfast (Dh40 extra, and worth it).

Riad Julia (Map p300; ☎ 024 376022; www.riadjulia.com; 14 Derb Halfaoui; d incl breakfast Dh495-715; 🍷 🍷) Each room is a tribute to a Marrakesh handcraft, from a mother-of-pearl inlay to chip-carved cedarwood. Five of seven rooms have AC, but all are well-kept and comfy, including bathrobes and soft Berber wedding blankets with coin fringes for good luck (wink, wink). English-speaking Ziad arranges excursions, henna tattooing, and dinners under the Berber roof tent. Babysitting service is available.

Riad Eden (Map p300; ☎ 072 046910; www.riadeden-marrakech.com; 25 Derb Jdid, Rue Riad Zitoun el-Kedim; d incl breakfast Dh490-1090; 🍷 🍷) Generous cooks, a homey living room and energetic young French family owners make the Eden a magnetic, sociable spot. Pull up a chair in the air-conditioned kitchen and watch culinary magic happen. Standard rooms are more snug and sweet than the suites, especially the African-inspired Fig room and the rooftop Orange room.

Riad Nejma Lounge (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 382341; www.riad-nejmalounge.com; 45 Derb Sidi M'Hamed el-Haj, Bab Doukkala; d incl breakfast Dh495-795; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Lounge lizards chill on hot-pink cushions in the whitewashed courtyard, while wan club kids soak up rays on the all-red roof terrace. Graphic splashes of colour make wood-beamed guest rooms totally mod, though the rustic showers can be temperamental. Handy to ville nouvelle restaurants and shops, but don't miss tasty meals here or shopping tips from the young, hip staff.

Dar Tayib (Map p300; ☎ 024 383010; www.riad-dartayib.com; 19 Derb Lalla Azzouna; d Dh500-850, ste Dh600-950; 🍷) Marrakshi owner Latifa and French architect husband Vincent bring on the Berber charm, from good-luck-symbol carpets to winking tinwork lamps. The Yasmina room beats love potions with a canopy bed, tub and mood lighting, and clever rooftop-hideaways end writer's block. Vincent leads excursions, and Latifa organises dinners and cooking classes.

MIDRANGE

Many moderately priced riads are slightly off the tourist path in more residential sections of the medina. The best way to ensure

you don't get hopelessly lost with luggage in tow en route to your riad is to make arrangements with the riad for an airport transfer, so that a representative from your riad meets you at the airport, whisks you into a taxi and delivers you to a guide with a pull cart who will lead you to your riad. This service usually runs Dh150 to Dh200, plus a small tip. If you already know your way around Marrakesh but not to your riad, ask your riad to have someone meet you at a convenient landmark; a tip for this service and any help with luggage will get your stay off on the right foot.

Riad Zahr (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 389267; www.riadzahr.com; 14 Derb El Kori, Sidi Ben Slimane; s Dh540, d Dh870-1100; 🍷) A study in contrasts: a chrome table atop *tadelakt* floors, white Verner Pantone plastic loungers on simple red Berber rugs. Not easy and something of a shock to find a mod Zen bolthole on the pilgrimage route to an ancient *zawiya*, far from any tourist landmark – but taxis are only a few minutes away.

Tamkast (Map p300; ☎ 024 384860; www.riad-tamkast.com; 10 Derb Sidi bou Amar; d incl breakfast Dh600-960) Eccentric, exclusive and eco-friendly, with just four rooms, organic vegetarian cuisine, a shoes-off policy at the front door and shockingly reasonable rates. One room has a piano and parquet floors but a bath across the hall; another has a bathroom you could live in. Tucked behind the Ali ben Youssef Mosque, but the neighbours are French pop stars and Italian *Vogue's* editor.

Riad Magi (Map p300; ☎ 053 634230; www.riad-magi.com; 79 Derb Moulay Abdelkader, Derb Debbachi; s/d incl breakfast Dh650/930; 🍷) Six rooms in shiny lime, lemon and blueberry *tadelakt* you'll be tempted to lick. The souqs are just around the corner, but the rest of the world seems miles away under the lemon trees in this serene blue-and-yellow courtyard. Ask the English-speaking manager about on-site cooking classes and restaurants; food is a favourite topic here.

DarSoukaina (Map pp294-5; ☎ 061245238; www.darsoukaina.com; 19 Derb el-Ferrane, Riad Laârouss; s/d/tr incl breakfast Dh790/970-1400/1150; 🍷 🍷) His'n'hers riads: the original is all soaring ceilings, cosy nooks and graceful archways, while the newer extension across the street is about sprawling beds, the grand patio and handsome woodwork. Omar keeps both houses running like clockwork and can give you insider tips on Marrakesh. A 20-minute

walk from the Djemaa, and nearest gate, but worth the discovery.

Maison Mnaabha (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 381325; www.maisonmnaabha.com; 32-33 Derb Mnaabha, kasbah; d incl breakfast Dh830-1150, tr incl breakfast Dh1800; 📶 📺) Treasure-hunters seek out this 17th-century kasbah hideaway edged with stucco and brimming with elusive finds. In the antique-filled salons, the celebrity chefs, famous authors and other regulars ooh over Khadija's seasonal cuisine. English brothers Peter and Lawrence and manager Aziz are a wealth of impartial antiques advice and cultural insight (Peter holds a PhD in kasbah history), and arrange restorative massages, henna tattooing and eco-conscious desert adventures.

Dar Attajmil (Map p300; ☎ 024 426966; www.darattajmil.com; 23 Rue Laksour; d incl breakfast Dh880-1100; 📶 📺 wi-fi) This riad is rosy and relaxed, and you will be too after a few days within these Marrakshi pink *tadelakt* walls hidden in the heart of the souqs. Lucrezia and her attentive staff offer a warm welcome and an even warmer rooftop hammam, plus scrumptious Moroccan-fusion dinners, cooking classes, *zellij* workshops and Essaouira escapes.

Riad el Borj (Map p300; ☎ 024 391223; www.riadelborj; 63 Derb Moulay Abdelkader; d Dh935-1540; 📶 📺 📺) Once this was Grand Vizier Madani Glaoui's lookout, and now you too can lord it over the neighbours in the suite with original *zellij*, double-height ceilings and skylit tub, or the tower hideaway with the rippled ceiling and book nook. Loaf by the pool in the 'Berber annex', let off steam in the hammam or take advantage of mountain excursions. There's a babysitting service available.

Tchaikana (Map p300; ☎ 024 385150; www.tchaikana.com; 25 Derb el Ferrane 25; d incl breakfast Dh1100-1800) To give you a sense of the scale and sensibility here, one room has a boat hull suspended from the ceiling, and another has Tuareg tent posts. Everything is cushy, creative and eco-friendly: nubby natural fabrics, organic cuisine, and fans instead of air-con. Arriving here via the winding, dark *derb* is only intimidating the first time, but the English-speaking Belgian owners can have staff walk you at night.

TOP END

Riad Akka (Map p300; ☎ 024 375767; www.riad-akka.com; 65 Derb Lahbib Magni, near Rue Riad Zitoun el-Jedid; d

incl breakfast Dh1200-1500; 📶 📺 wi-fi) With Arabic sayings about cross-cultural understanding painted around the patio and ingenious graphite-*tadelakt*-guest rooms, the Akka's decor is impeccably hip, cosmopolitan and upbeat – and the same can be said about the staff. Trust manager Mbarka for restaurant- and shopping-recommendations, and splash out for the in-house hammam.

Riad Almassarah (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024383206; www.riadalmassarah.com; 26 Derb Jedid; d incl breakfast Dh1200-2000; 📶 📺 📺 wi-fi) The ultimate feel-good hideaway: British-French owners Michel and Michael redesigned this ancient riad to maximise comfort and sunlight, and minimise electrical and water use and eco-impact. Offers top-notch hammam, massages, cooking lessons and eco-excursions – all while donating to local nonprofits and providing full benefits to a staff of five.

Riad L'Orangerie (Map p300; ☎ 061 238789; www.riadorangerie.com; 61 Rue Sidi el-Yamani; d incl breakfast Dh1430-1870; 📶 📺 wi-fi) Smooth and suave, with perfectly buffed *tadelakt* walls, massaging showers (the best in town), a generous pool and sprawling rooms. This place has all the right moves, with five employees looking after seven rooms, a car and driver on call, excellent breakfasts and soothing hammam treatments.

Riad Farnatchi (Map p300; ☎ 024 384910; www.riadfarnatchi.com; 2 Derb el-Farnatchi, Ka'at Benahid; ste incl breakfast Dh3400-4750; 📶 📺 📺 wi-fi) Everything here aims to please: private salons aglow with skylights and fireplaces, sumptuous suede coverlets begging a snuggle, magically appearing cookies and canapés, and a jellaba and slippers in your size to lounge around the riad and take home. Before you describe your dream five-star vacation, Canadian director Lynn Perez and her expert English-speaking staff have already arranged it: chauffeured cars, personal shoppers, in-house hammam, massages, projected movies with popcorn, the works.

Ville Nouvelle

BUDGET

The ville nouvelle has a few budget options off Ave Mohammed V, near Blvd Mohammed Zerktouni, Rue Tariq ibn Ziad and Rue ibn Aicha.

Hôtel Toulousain (Map p309; ☎ 024 430033; www.geocities.com/hotel_toulousain; 44 Rue Tariq ibn Ziad; s/d with shared bathroom Dh140/190, s/d with private shower

& shared toilet Dh150/200, s/d with private bathroom Dh180/230, all incl breakfast) An easygoing budget hotel run by a kindly Moroccan-American family in the heart of Guéliz. The 31 rooms aren't glamorous and 1st-floor rooms can get stuffy in summer, so guests hang out in the tranquil patios under the banana trees. Here you're surrounded by boutiques and inexpensive, tasty restaurants, and next door to a literary café.

Hôtel du Pacha (Map p309; ☎ 024 431327; fax 024 431326; 33 Rue de la Liberté; s/d Dh275/360; 🚽) Novels practically beg to be set in this period-piece colonial hotel, with balconies and tall French windows to catch the breeze and neighbourhood gossip. Rooms are high-ceilinged and old-fashioned; the stuccoed entry, Bogart-style bar and courtyard add *noir*-novel charm. Skip the Dh30 breakfast and head down the street to gorgeous patisseries.

Hôtel Oudaya (Map p309; ☎ 024 448512; www.oudaya.ma; 147 Rue Mohammed el-Beqal; s/d/tr incl breakfast Dh380/500/690, ste incl breakfast from Dh720; 🚽 🚿) What looks like a Soviet kasbah on the outside opens into a grand courtyard draped with bougainvillea with a swimming pool and grassy knoll. All 77 rooms have hotel hammam- and pool-access plus marble bathrooms and geometric-pattern wood trim.

Caspien (Map p309; ☎ 024 422282; www.lecasprien-hotel.com; 12 Rue Loubnane; s/d Dh440/560; 🚽 🚿) Central yet quiet location, sharp staff and not so big that you get lost in the shuffle of tour groups in this newish hotel. Painted archways, *zellij* on floors, pierced-brass lamps and balconies add Marrakesh atmosphere. For maximum quiet, choose upper-floor rooms overlooking the pool.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

On the edge of the ville nouvelle are more than enough big, gleaming, characterless hotels to keep tour groups and conference delegates under quarantine. The bulk of the midrange hotels are in Guéliz or in the quieter and more leafy Hivernage area. Most of the larger hotels with swimming pools in this category are cheaper when booked as part of a package including flights; search online for deals.

For lower rates, riads offer a much more memorable Marrakshi experience – but if you're in town strictly for business, you'll

find the usual chain hotels clustered along Ave Mohammed VI (near the Palais des Congrès) and further out of town on the road to Casablanca. At the time of writing, the art-deco grande dame of swanky Marrakesh hotels, **La Mamounia** (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 388600; www.mamounia.com; Ave Houmane el-Fetouaki; 🚽 🚿), was still closed for refurbishment despite a promised 2008 reopening date; check the websites for updates.

Palmeraie & Outskirts

When the medina seems a bit much, villas in the Palmeraie let you chill out in a palm oasis. Once your blood pressure dips and you begin to miss the madness of Marrakesh, you're within a 30-minute drive from the heart of the action. A taxi drive into town is the easiest way, but is rather costly (Dh150 to Dh250) since you often have to pay for the driver's round-trip to fetch you. The ideal combination would be to stay in a hotel or riad in the medina for a few days, then have a few days of luxurious bliss away from it all.

MIDRANGE

Riad Bledna (☎ 015396 20195; www.riadbledna.com; 2km, Route de Ouarzazate; d incl breakfast Dh600-800) A sweet eco-retreat run by a Moroccan-British family who've thought of your every comfort, as well as the environment, too. Four bright, welcoming, solar-powered guest rooms are set amid 4 acres of organic gardens, putting compost and water to use and yielding scrumptious meals. A wide range of English-language Moroccan arts courses are offered, including weaving, *tadelakt*, *zellij* and *zellij*-patchwork quilting. Stays can be combined with a day trek, river hike to remote Berber villages, or picnic in a desert ghost town.

our pick La Pause (☎ 061 306494; www.lapause-marrakech.com; Douar Lmih Laroussiéne, Commune Agafay; d half-board from Dh1100; 🚿) Skip off the grid to a desert getaway 45 minutes from Marrakesh (chauffeured transport to/from Marrakesh provided with rates). Play a round of turf-free golf or all-terrain disc golf using available clubs or Frisbees, or hang out in a hammock under olive trees by the filtered swimming pool. Days are for exploring the desert on foot, bike, Arabian stallion, or dromedary, and night brings starry skies and candlelit organic feasts in Berber tents.

Sleep in generous Berber tents with foam mattresses, thick carpets and outdoor showers overlooking the riverbed, or read by firelight in your own minimalist-chic, solar-powered mud-brick abode.

TOP END

Les Deux Tours (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 329525; www.les-deuxtours.com; Douar Abiad, Circuit de la Palmeraie; s/d incl breakfast Dh2120/2240, ste s/d from Dh2620/2740; 📶 📺 📶 wi-fi) Tunisian architect Charles Boccara's modern Moroccan guest house started the Palmeraie villa trend and the hotel hammam craze – but few of its cookie-cutter neighbours in this oasis can match its amenities and distinctive style. Set in secret gardens are mazes of guest rooms with private balconies and hidden passageways, the legendary hammam spa and the traditional reflecting pool that makes cocktail sipping loungers seem both larger and skinnier than life.

Jnane Tamsna (off Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 329423; www.jnanetamsna.com; Douar Abiad, Palmeraie; d incl breakfast from Dh2200, ste incl breakfast from Dh3700; 📶 📺 📶 wi-fi) A-list celebrities like Brad Pitt, Giorgio Armani and David Bowie flock to this North African nirvana, a jigsaw of elegant patios and intimate terraces amid a 6-acre organic farm. Meryanne Loum-Martin raises the bar for responsible tourism with water-conserving plants, filtered pools, all-organic cuisine, a Fair-Trade design boutique and cultural immersion 'Diversity Excursions' run by her English ethnobotanist husband, Gary. Cooking classes, yoga retreats and literary salons here are runaway successes – Booker Prize winner Kirin Desai taught a recent workshop, with proceeds going to local literacy programs.

EATING

Slow-roasted lamb cooked in a hammam, spiced briny green olives, cumin-spiked roasted-eggplant caviar, hearty white bean soup...Marrakesh's traditional specialties are mouthwatering enough, but that's only the first page of the menu in Marrakesh. Sundrenched local produce, Mediterranean inspirations and a craze for Asian flavours have added unexpected twists to the local menu – think Corsican pizza with Atlas Mountain herbs, duck breast salad drizzled with argan oil dressing, Thai curries with Moroccan mint and more.

If you're staying at a riad, home-cooking is another tempting option. Many riad chefs are *dadas* who once cooked for Marrakesh's high society, so the meals you enjoy on your riad terrace may very well be wedding-worthy by local standards.

The least thrilling part of the Marrakesh dining experience is the arrival of the bill. Marrakshis don't eat out often, and with Dh65 to Dh80 for a scrawny chicken tajine on the Djemaa and set-price restaurant menus starting at Dh300-plus, you can see why. Good-value restaurants can be found, especially in the ville nouvelle, but they're struggling to keep prices down. Local cooking methods are labour-intensive, and ingredients are becoming more expensive as fuel prices rise.

Medina

Around sunset, donkeys descend on the Djemaa el-Fna hauling gas canisters by the cartload and all the makings of a hundred small restaurants. Within the hour, the restaurants are up and running, with chefs urging passersby to note the cleanliness of their grills, the freshness of their meat, produce and cooking oil, and their aromatic spice mixes. The grilled meats and cooked salads are cheap and often tasty, and despite alarmist warnings, your stomach should be fine if you use your bread instead of rinsed utensils and stick to bottled water. Adventurous foodies will want to try steaming snail soups, sheep's brain and skewered hearts – always go for the busiest stalls with the freshest meats.

Budget

Haj Mustapha (Map p300; east side of Souq AbIueh; tangia with bread & olives Dh35-50; 🕒 6-10pm) As dusk approaches, several stalls set out paper-sealed crockpots of *tangia* (lamb slow-cooked all day in the ashes of a hammam). This 'bachelor's stew' makes for messy eating, but Haj Mustapha offers the cleanest seating despite dire bachelor decor (eg faded photos in shattered picture frames). Use bread as your utensil to scoop up *tangia*, sprinkle with cumin and salt, and devour with olives.

Chegrouni (Map pp294-5; near Rue des Banques; tajine Dh50-70, omelette Dh25-35; 🕒 8am-11pm) You're expected to write down your own order, but your server could probably guess it anyway:

you're either a foodie here for the classic Dh50 tajine with chicken, preserved lemons and olives; a vegetarian in for flavourful vegetable-broth-only seven-vegetable couscous; or a tajine-weary traveller in dire need of a decent omelette with superior chips.

Bougainvillea (Map p300; ☎ 024 441111; 33 Rue Mouassine, cnr Rue Sidi el-Yamani; sandwiches Dh25-60; ☎ 11am-10pm) Recharge for your next lap of the souqs in this centrally located, arty fuschia riad with fresh-squeezed juices and serviceable sandwiches near the wall-of-water *zellij* fountain.

Nid'Gigogne (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 382092; 60 Place des Tombeaux Saadiens; meals Dh40-85; ☎ 9am-9pm) Get up close and personal with the storks across the way at the Saadian Tombs in this rooftop eatery. The grilled *kefta* (meatball) sandwiches, light salads and tajines are passable, but the view is memorable and service pleasant considering those steep stairs.

La Maison du Couscous (Map p300; ☎ 024 386892; 53 Rue Bab Agnaou; couscous Dh65-85; ☎ 11.30am-10pm; ♿) With its couscous-shaped fountain and Arctic air-conditioning, this place screams 'tourist trap' – but locals come for properly fluffy couscous infused with fragrant *smen* (seasoned clarified butter). The Atlas chicken couscous is sweet-savoury with onions, and at the risk of inflaming local rivalries, the spicy Tunisian with Merquez sausage and meatballs (Dh85) is even better.

Midrange

Ryad Jama (Map p300; ☎ 024 429872; 149 Toulalat Kennaria; meals Dh70-90; ☎ 11am-4pm) À la carte lunches at realistic prices served in a family-run riad restaurant. Generous lamb tajines with prunes and almonds are graciously presented in the leafy garden for only slightly more than you'd pay for a skimpy version shoved your way in the dusty Djemaa.

Dar TimTam (Map p300; ☎ 024 391446; Zinkat Rahba, near the Rahba Kedima; salads Dh65, lunches Dh120-150; ☎ 11.30am-4pm) Head through the dim restaurant and into this 18th-century riad's innermost courtyard, where rejuvenating mint tea and a generous assortment of salads makes a fine light lunch amid the songbirds.

our pick Villa Flore (Map p300; ☎ 024 391700; www.villa-flore.com; 4 Derb Azzouz; mains Dh80-120; ☎ 12.30-3pm & 7.30-11pm) Dine in an art-deco-fabulous black-and-white riad on reinvented Moroc-

can salads and aromatic, meltingly tender lamb and duck, all presented in neat circles by stylishly suited waiters. Pull up a sofa near the French doors or sit in the sunny courtyard and unwind with a glass of wine, right in the heart of the souqs.

Le Foundouk (Map p300; ☎ 024 378190; www.foundouk.com; 55 Souq el-Fassi near Ali ben Youssef Medersa; mains Dh90-160; ☎ noon-1am Tue-Sun) An enormous, spidery iron-chandelier lit with candles sets the mood for offbeat à la carte choices, including beef with wild artichoke and orange-carrot soup. When the food lives up to the decor, it's fabulous, and when not, well, at least you got your money's worth for atmosphere. Terrace seating is scenic but chilly, and you'll need to call well in advance for sought-after downstairs seating.

Terrasse des Épices (Map p300; ☎ 024 375904; 15 Souq Cherifia; set meal Dh100-150) Head to the roof for lunch on top of the world in a mud-brick *bhou* (booth). Check the chalkboard for the Dh100 fixed-price special: Moroccan salads followed by scrawny but scrumptious chicken-leg tajine with fries, then strawberries and mint. Reservations are handy in high season.

Narwama (Map p300; ☎ 024 442510; 30 Rue el-Koutoubia, near Djemaa el-Fna; mains Dh80-140; ☎ 8pm-1am) Opposites attract at Narwama, true to its name (fire and water) with unconventional combinations: Thai green curries and almond-and-cream *bastilla* (pastry), a DJ spinning Brazilian/Italian/Arabic tunes, and the best Moroccan mint mojito in town, all in a 19th-century riad with 21st-century Zen decor. Alcohol is served here.

Top End

Dar Moha (Map p300; ☎ 024 386400; www.darmoha.ma; 81 Rue Dar el-Bacha; Dh220 lunch, à la carte dinner from Dh250; ☎ lunch noon-3pm & dinner 7.30pm-midnight Tue-Sun) Chef Mohammed Fedal gives tastebuds a tweak with clever variations on Moroccan ingredients: a '*zellij*' of grilled seasonal vegetables with Berber herbs, a pear topped with saffron sorbet and toasted almonds. The set Dh220 lunch menu is a more traditional feast, with dish after irresistible dish of orange-flower scented cucumbers and spice-rubbed grilled lamb chops. Alcohol is served here.

Tobsil (Map p300; ☎ 024 444052; 22 Derb Moulay Abdellah ben Hessaïen, near Bab Ksour; 5-course menu incl

wine Dh600; ☎ 7.30-11pm Wed-Mon, booking required) In this intimate riad, 50 guests max indulge in button-popping five-course menus with aperitifs and wine pairings, as Gnawa musicians play in the courtyard. No excess glitz or bellydancers distract from upstanding *mezze* (salads), *bastilla*, tajines (yes, that's plural) and couscous, capped with mint tea, fresh fruit and Moroccan pastries.

La Sultana (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 388008; www.la.sultanamarrakech.com; Rue de la Kasbah; à la carte main Dh200-plus, set meals Dh450-600; ☎ lunch & dinner) Do you dine in the intimate cloisters, or on the roof overlooking the Saadian Tombs? Would you prefer the French duck that's more tender than your last love affair, or the Moroccan *pastilla* so light it could blow away in rooftop breezes? Prices are high, service is slow and reservations essential, but the food and setting are sublime. Alcohol is served here.

VILLE NOUVELLE

The majority of restaurants in the ville nouvelle serve international cuisine, but you can also sample some fine Moroccan fare in this European oasis. All of these places serve alcohol.

Budget

Catanzaro (Map p309; ☎ 024 433731; 42 Rue Tariq ibn Ziyad, Guéliz; pizzas or pasta Dh60-80, mains Dh80-120; ☎ noon-2.30pm & 7.30-11pm Mon-Sat; ☎) Where are we, exactly? The thin-crust, wood-fired pizza says Italy, the wooden balcony and powerful air-con suggest the Alps, but the spicy condiments and spicier clientele are definitely mid-town Marrakesh. Grilled meat dishes are juicy and generous, but the Neapolitan pizza with capers, local olives and Atlantic anchovies steals the show.

Le Chat Qui Rit (Map p309; ☎ 024 434311; 92 Rue Yougoslavie; pizzas Dh50-80, set menu Dh150; ☎ 7.30-11pm Tue-Sun; ☎) Come here for proper pasta: al dente, tossed with fresh produce and herbs, and drizzled with fruity olive oil. Corsican chef/owner Bernard comes out to ask about everyone's pasta with the delight of a chef who already knows the answer. Seasonal seafood options are also a good bet, with fixings just in from the coast daily.

Midrange

L'Annexe (Map p309; ☎ 024 434010; www.lannexemarrakech.com; 14 Rue Moulay Ali; lunch set menu Dh80-120,

mains Dh100-140; ☎ noon-3.30pm Sun-Fri & 7-11pm Mon-Sat) French lunches in a mirrored café-bistro setting, handy to all the ville nouvelle boutique action. A welcome switch to light, clean flavours after the umpteenth tajine: *duck confit* (duck slowly cooked in its own fat) atop salad, tuna tartare and a mean *crème brûlée*.

Beyrouth (Map p309; ☎ 024 423525; 9 Rue Loubnane; mains Dh80-160) Bright, lemony Lebanese flavours, with a mix-and-match *mezze* that's a feast for two with tabouli, spinach pies and felafel for Dh160. The smoky, silky baba ghanoush (eggplant dip) here gives Moroccan eggplant caviar serious competition for the best Middle Eastern spread.

Grand Café de la Poste (Map p309; ☎ 024 433038; www.grandcafedelaposte.com; Blvd el-Mansour Eddahbi, cnr Ave Imam Malik; starters Dh75-120, mains Dh80-190; ☎ 8am-10pm; ☎) Recently restored to its flapper-era, potted-palm glory, La Poste boasts star power in the kitchen as well as the dining room (hello Tom Hanks and Lawrence Fishburne). Mediterranean chef Cyril Lignac and Moroccan chef Sana Gamas blend cuisines in roast chicken with wild Berber thyme and olives, and a lipsmacking salad with local goat cheese and citrus-herb vinaigrette. It's located behind the main post office.

ourpick Al-Fassia Guéliz (Map p309; ☎ 024 434060; 55 Blvd Mohammed Zerktouni, mains Dh120-180; ☎ noon-10.30pm Wed-Sun; ☎) Zone Touristique de l'Aguedal (Al Fassia Aguedal; Map p309; ☎ 024 383839; www.alfassia-aguedal.com; MH 9 Bis, Route de l'Ourika) Glassy-eyed diners valiantly grip morsels of bread, scraping the last savoury caramelised onion from what was once a Berber pumpkin and lamb tajine. The *mezze* of nine starters alone is a proper feast, but there's no resisting the legendary mains, cooked Middle Atlas style by an all-women team who present the dishes with a heartfelt *B'saha!* (to your health).

Cafés, Patisseries & Ice-Cream Parlours MEDINA

Café des Épices (Map p300; ☎ 024 391770; Place Rahba Kedima; breakfast Dh25, sandwich or salad Dh25-50; ☎ 8am-9pm) Watch the magic happen as you sip freshly squeezed OJ overlooking Rahba Kedima potion-dealers. Salads and sandwiches are fresh, but bland – all the more reason to skip to the sweets.

Café Argana (Map p300; ☎ 024 445350; 2 Djemmaa el-Fna, near Place Bab Fteuh; mains Dh80-100; ☎ 7am-11pm)

Claim your seat early for the spectacular view of the Djemaa at sunset, when restaurant stalls start grilling and belly dancers begin to wriggle. The top floor is for couples sharing rather tasteless ice cream; the 1st-floor balcony has back rows for snacks, and front seats for tajines; coffee and ice-cream cones are downstairs.

Les Terrasses de L'Alhambra (Map p300; Djemaa el-Fna; meals Dh100-150; ☎ 8am-11pm) Shaded balconies offer a prime view over the storytellers and potion-sellers and respectable Italian espresso besides. The pizza is flimsy and underseasoned, but a serviceable carboload for your next lap of the souqs.

Pâtisserie des Princes (Map p300; ☎ 024 443033; 32 Rue de Bab Agnaou; ☎ 5am-11.30pm; ☎) This is one of the city's most famous patisseries, and with good reason. The seductive array of local delicacies, cakes and ice creams will sate any sweet tooth. The small café at the back is a welcome respite for women, or anyone in search of a quiet coffee.

VILLE NOUVELLE

our pick Café du Livres (Map p309; ☎ 024 432149; 44 Rue Tariq ibn Ziad, Guéliz; breakfast Dh40, dishes Dh55-80; ☎ 9.30am-9pm Tue-Sun; wi-fi) A dream retreat, complete with free wi-fi, upstanding cappuccino, walls of used books in English and French to thumb through, plus gorgeous goat-cheese salads and chocolate cake (Michelin-starred chef Richard Neat consulted on the menu).

Café 16 (Map p309; ☎ 024 339670; 18 Place du 16 Novembre; cakes Dh25-50, ice cream Dh20-50; ☎ 9am-12am) The blonde-wood decor and the prices may seem European, but the welcome is Marrakshi and so are intriguing ice-cream flavours like mint tea and *kaab el-gazelle* (almond cookie). The home-made gold-leafed chocolate-coffee cream cake and raspberry-mousse cake are standouts.

Amandine (Map p309; ☎ 024 449612; 177 Rue Mohammed el-Beqal, Guéliz; breakfast Dh40-50; ☎ 6am-11pm) Observe local internet daters lingering over their coffee or knocking it back in record time at the marble-top espresso bar, and then pop over to the sunny desert salon for flaky croissants or velvety chocolate-mousse cake studded with raspberries.

Oliveri (Map p309; ☎ 024 448913; 9 Blvd el-Mansour Eddahbi; ice cream from Dh15; ☎ 7am-10pm; ☎) Thermometers aren't necessary in Marrakesh; all you need to gauge the heat are

the lines at Oliveri. Ice creams have been made on these parlour premises for 50 years, and while the seasonal fresh fruit varieties are admirable, it's the pistachio that inspires repeat pilgrimages.

Quick Eats

MEDINA

At lunch time, before the stalls on Djemaa el-Fna get going, much of the same fare is available on Rue Beni Marine and in the *qissaria* (covered market) on the north side of the square. You'll find several vendors sharing a central kitchen whip up meals for under Dh50, including such as *tangia*, fried fish, lemon chicken and French fries. Eat whatever looks fresh and tasty, even if you have to wait for a free stool. Just around the corner from the Koumba Ba'adiyn are more labyrinthine *qissariat* with stalls serving tajines, steaming snails and the occasional stewed sheep's head for lunch.

our pick Mechoui Alley (Map p300; east side of Souq Ablueh; quarter-kilo lamb with bread Dh30-50; ☎ 11am-2pm) Just before noon, the vendors at this row of stalls start carving up steaming sides of *mechoui* (slow-roasted lamb), as though expecting King Henry VIII for lunch. Point to the best-looking cut of meat, and ask for a 'nuss' (half) or 'rubb' (quarter) kilo. Some haggling might ensue, but should procure a baggie of falling-off-the-bone delicious lamb with fresh-baked bread, cumin, salt and olives (though you're better off picking out your own across the souq).

Fast Food Alahbab (Map p300; Rue de Bab Agnaou; salads Dh15-25, sandwiches Dh20-30; ☎ 7am-11pm) The awning boasting 'recommended by Lonely Planet' must be 25 years old now, and still we stand by our initial assessment of the Dh35 *shawarma* accompanied by four sauces and just-right French fries, though the avocado milkshake is best avoided.

Restaurant Place Ferblantiers (Map p300; west entrance Place des Ferblantiers; tajines Dh45-65; ☎ lunch) Pop down on a plastic chair in the courtyard, and have whatever's bubbling away on the burner. The meat and produce are fresh from the Mellah Market across the street, and the chef whips up dishes in front of you.

VILLE NOUVELLE

For bottom-rung local food, head for a group of hole-in-the-wall places on Rue ibn Aicha, where a solid meal of rotisserie

chicken or brochettes, French fries and salad will cost around Dh35 to Dh60. Check out the fresh meats at the refrigerated counter, and just point at whatever parts strike your fancy.

Another local secret hiding in plain sight is the cheerful stretch of sidewalk stalls selling fresh fish from the coast and chips on Ave Moulay Rachid near the corner of Rue Mauritanie.

ourpick Plats Haj Boujema (Map p309; 25 Rue ibn Aicha; Dh35-75 ☎ noon-8pm Tue-Sun) A reliable option where you can grab a stool under a sidewalk umbrella and trust the Haj to cook the meat of your choice to perfection. But be advised that even when properly cooked until golden, sheep's testicles have a floury texture that's hard to get over, not to mention stringy bits that stick in your teeth. That said, the chips are fantastic.

Samak al-Bahria (Map p309; Ave Moulay Rachid, nr Rue Mauritanie; seafood with chips Dh30-80; ☎ noon-10pm Tue-Sun) The best option along this stretch of sidewalk stalls, al-Bahria serves fresh fish and perfectly tender fried calamari with generous chunks of lemon, plus salt and cumin.

Self-Catering

For a solid selection of fresh produce, dried fruits and nuts, try the new **Marché Municipale ibn Toumert** (Map p309; Rue ibn Toumert, off Ave Mohammed V). The souqs are also filled with food stalls selling olives, dates and sweets, and carts loaded with fruit and vegetables; prices are better in the Bab Doukkala food souq than right off the Djemaa. For staples such as cheese, cereal and alcohol (often difficult to find elsewhere), a few markets in the ville nouvelle are useful; otherwise head for the supermarkets, **ACIMA supermarket** (Map p309; 109 Ave Mohammed Abdelkrim el-Khattabi, Guéliz) and **Aswak Assalam** (Map pp294-5; Ave du 11 Janvier, Bab Doukkala) or the huge shop **Marjane** (off Map pp294-5; Casablanca road), 4km out of town.

DRINKING

Cafés

ourpick Dar Cherifa (Map p300; ☎ 024 426463; 8 Derb Cherfa Lakbir, nr Rue el-Mouassine; tea/coffee Dh15-25; ☎ noon-7pm) Revive souq-sore eyes at this serene late-15th-century Saadian riad, where tea and saffron coffee is served with contemporary art and literature downstairs, or terrace views upstairs.

Aqua (Map p300; ☎ 024 381324; 68 Place Djemaa el-Fna) The most romantic of the cafés ringing the Djemaa, with candles, smart modern decor and service that's attentive but not intrusive. Stick with coffee, tea and sweets, as salads and mains are oddly flavourless.

Café les Négociants (Map p309; ☎ 024 435762; 110 Ave Mohammed V; ☎ 6am-11pm) Watch all of Marrakesh stream past over espresso or *nus-nus* (half coffee, half milk) at this prime corner location across from the tourist office. The crowd is mostly male, but women are increasingly taking over the tables on the Blvd Mohammed Zerktouni side.

Bars

As elsewhere in Morocco, the traditional bars in Marrakesh are mostly male and definitely seedy. Trendy upscale bars are more accommodating and appealing for women, especially ones that offer women free entry and/or free drinks midweek or on Sundays – go now, before they do the math. Most of the women you'll see queuing up to claim their freebies will be Western, but Moroccan girls do increasingly go out on the town together. Many bars also serve food and may turn into party places later at night, such as Le Foundouk (p316) and Café de la Poste (p317).

Kechmara (Map p309; ☎ 024 434060; 3 Rue de La Liberté, Guéliz; set menu Dh80-120; ☎) Pull up a Saarinen tulip chair and stay awhile in this smartly contemporary café with a hip Marrakshi crowd, local art, groovy music and a low-key cocktail bar on the silvery *tadelakt* terrace. The selection of reasonably priced sandwiches and Moroccan-Mediterranean mains and excellent espresso make that chair hard to leave.

Comptoir (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 437702; Rue Echouhada, Hivernage; ☎ 8pm-1am; ☎) Never mind the restaurant downstairs; the flash lounge upstairs is the place to be for dashing diplomats, visiting fashion designers and married Casa playboys to mingle over cocktails or bottles of wine. There's no avoiding the belly dancers, who descend en masse every other hour like scantily clad chaperones to break up all that flirting.

Café Arabe (Map p300; ☎ 024 429728; www.cafe-arabe.com; 184 Rue Mouassine, medina; ☎ 10am-midnight; ☎) Gloat over souq purchases with cocktails on the roof at sunset or a glass of wine next to the *Zen-zellij* courtyard fountain.

The pasta is limp and bland, but the lamb tajines are tasty, and wine prices are down to earth for such a stylish place.

Kosybar (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 380324; <http://kozibar.tripod.com>; 47 Place des Ferblantiers, medina; ☎ noon-1am; ☎) The Marrakesh-meets-Kyoto interiors are full of plush, private nooks, but keep heading upstairs to low-slung chairs on the rooftop terrace. At the aptly named Kosybar you can enjoy wines with a side of samba as storks give you the once-over from nearby nests; skip the cardboard-tasting sushi and stick with bar snacks.

La Maison Arabe Bar (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 387010; www.lamaisonarabe.com; La Maison Arabe, 1 Derb Assahbe, Bab Doukkala; ☎ 8pm-1am; ☎) Could be the 20-year single-malt scotch talking, but fellow drinkers look Hemingway-esque in leather club chairs by the fireplace within these hand-carved wood walls. The fusion tapas vacillate between bland and deep-fried, but their cocktails hit the spot after your Maison Arabe hammam (p305).

Piano Bar Les Jardins de la Koutoubia (Map p300; ☎ 024 388800; www.lesjardinsdelakoutoubia.com; Les Jardins de la Koutoubia Hotel, 26 Rue de la Koutoubia; entry free with drink; ☎ 5pm-1am) You won't be the first to tell the pianist 'Play it again, Sam', but he'll gamely play 'As Time Goes By' anyway. This is a classy joint, from the natural cedar ceilings to the plush Berber carpets, and the terrace restaurant serves a decent Indian curry when you get the munchies.

Restaur/Bar du Grand Tazi (Map p300; ☎ 024 442787; Ave el-Mouahidine, cnr Rue de Bab Agnaou; ☎ 7pm-1am) Raucous but not sleazy, serving Dh25 local beer to throngs of travellers and Marrakshis just off work in the souqs. The tales take a turn for the outrageous as the evening wears on, but then some of us enjoy that kind of thing.

L'Abbyssin (off Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 328584; www.pal.aisrhoul.com; Palais Rhoul, Dar Tounsi, Route de Fès, Palmerie; ☎ 8-11pm Tue, noon-3.30pm & 8-11pm Wed-Sun; ☎) Stay cool and look cooler lounging in white canvas pavilions set in the garden of the Palais Rhoul villa and spa. Once you've made your grand entrance down the reflecting-pool runway, you'll want to make an evening of it here, and the Mediterranean and Moroccan food will see you through dinner (try the duck).

Le Sabal (Map p309; ☎ 024 422422; www.le.sabal.com; Ave Mohammed V, Place de la Liberté, Guéliz;

☎ noon-2am) Days turns into nights spent in this retrofitted 1925 villa with sunny garden seating and a tent-bar downstairs, and plush, purplish nocturnal lounge upstairs. Now under hip Marrakshi management, the scene is more casual and local, drawn by reasonably priced drinks and an appealing à la carte menu.

ENTERTAINMENT Nightclubs

Sleeping is overrated in a city where the nightlife begins around midnight. Most of the hottest clubs are in the Hivernage, or in a new zone outside the city along Blvd Mohammed VI in the new Hotel Zone Aguedal extension of the Hivernage. Admissions range from Dh150 to Dh350 including the first drink, but those who arrive early and dressed smartly midweek may get in free. Each drink thereafter costs at least Dh50. For out-of-town clubs like Pacha, remember that a taxi back can be really expensive – taxi drivers know they've got you stranded.

Pacha (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 388405; www.pachamarakech.com; Complexe Pacha Marrakech, Blvd Mohammed VI, Hotel Zone Aguedal, Hivernage; admission before/after 10pm free/Dh150-200 Mon-Fri, Dh200-300 Sat & Sun; ☎ 8pm-5am; ☎) Pacha Ibiza was the prototype for this enormous clubbing complex that's now Africa's biggest, with DJs mashing up international and Magrebi hits for huge weekend influxes of Casa hipsters and raging Rabatis. The complex includes two dazzling restaurants and a pool to lounge away afternoons until the party starts. Since they charge big for drinks, savvy clubsters smuggle in water. Pacha doesn't come close to hitting its 3000-people occupancy during the week, so bring your own entourage and you might get in free.

Diamant Noir (Map p309; ☎ 024 434351; Hôtel Marrakech, cnr Ave Mohammed V & Rue Oum Errabia, Guéliz; admission from Dh100; ☎ 10pm-4am) For its rare gay-friendly clientele on weeknights and seedy charm on weekends, the gravitational pull of 'Le Dia' remains undeniable. The dark dance-floor thumps with hip hop and gleams with mirrors and bronzer-enhanced skin, while professionals lurk at the shady end of the upstairs bar. Cash only.

Jad Mahal (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 436984; 10 Rue Haroun Errachid, Hivernage; free admission with drink/dinner; ☎ 7.30pm-2am) Through the restaurant at

the far end of the courtyard, the Jad Mahal's bar is a local favourite spot to linger over cocktails by the bronze elephant until staff crank up the volume on a catchy song, the house cover-band arrives or diners break into spontaneous dance moves over an '80s tune, whichever comes first.

Théâtre (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 448811; Hôtel es Saadi, Rue Qadissia, Hivernage; admission Dh200; 🕒 11.30pm-5am) Don't bother schmoozing the bouncer for entry to the boring VIP area, because the dance floor in this converted theatre is where the action is: packed, sweaty, care-free, fabulous. Saturdays are white nights, with white-clad clubbers grooving til dawn on the signature mix of house, techno, R'n'B and Morocco-pop.

CantoBar (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 42335038; Ave Moulay Hassan, cnr Ave President Kennedy, Guéliz; free admission with dinner/drink; 🕒 7.30pm-4am) Located behind el-Harti Stadium within staggering distance of Le Sabal bar and Diamant Noir disco, CantoBar completes the night-out trifecta with karaoke and kitsch. Decent mojitos and dark lighting let you quit worrying about going off-key, and afterwards you can collapse on red armchairs shaped like high heels.

Cinema

For a good selection of French and sometimes Moroccan films check out the program at the Institut Français (see p297), where films are usually in French or subtitled in French.

Le Colisée (Map p309; ☎ 024 448893; Blvd Mohammed Zerkouni, nr Rue Mohammed el-Beqal, Guéliz; stall/balcony Mon Dh15/25, Tue-Sun Dh25/35; 🕒 3pm, 7pm & 9.30pm) The plushest cinema in town, Le Colisée is plenty comfortable, with great sound and a mixed male-female, Moroccan and expat crowd. Films are sometimes in the original language (including English) and subtitled in French.

Cinéma Eden (Map p300; Derb Debachi, near Rue des Banques, medina; Dh15; 🕒 shows at 3pm, 6pm & 9pm) The crowd here is rowdy, local and all-male, and where Bollywood sing-alongs reign supreme. Films are usually dubbed into Darija, except for the songs.

SHOPPING

Medina

Calling all shoppers: Marrakesh will leave you cursing carry-on restrictions, especially in the medina. The souqs are crammed with

household items you can't possibly live without – sand-worn Berber cedar chests, ingenious teapots with dromedary humps, dramatic iron floor lanterns – but given shipping and insurance rates (see p471), you may have to settle for some hand-carved jewellery boxes, *tadelakt* soap dishes and candle-holders made from recycled anchovy tins. More than a few stylish expats you'll meet are design fanatics who couldn't resist, and ended up buying riads as places to house their souq finds.

That said, there are plenty of knick-knacks you might not mind leaving behind – all those ceramic Koutoubia mini-minarets and uncomfortable bolster pillows fringed, tasselled and mirrored beyond all recognition. Be selective, chat before you begin bargaining for items you're sure you want and buy only from shopkeepers who are pleasant in return – that way, you'll have a great story to accompany your scores, and not wind up hot and bothered in the souqs.

SUSTAINABLE SHOPPING

No matter how you're faring elsewhere in the souqs, you can count on feel-good retail experiences from medina outlets supporting non-profit causes, boutiques that sell items made by cooperatives and businesses that engage in Fair Trade with hard-working artisans – and even better, the prices at these stores are fair and fixed.

Cooperative Artisanale Femmes de Marrakesh (Map p300; ☎ 024 378308; 67 Souq Kchachbia; 🕒 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm) A hidden treasure worth seeking in the souqs. Here you'll find breezy cotton clothing and household linens made by a Marrakesh women's cooperative and a small annex packed with items made by non-profit and women's cooperatives from across Morocco, including sustainably harvested thuyya wood bowls from Essaouira, Safi tea sets and small Middle Atlas rugs.

Al-Kawtar (Map p300; ☎ 024 378293; www.alkawtar.org; Rue Laksour 57; 🕒 10am-6pm) Another wonderful nonprofit boutique, where you can find luxe household linens minutely embroidered along the edges for less than you'd pay for plain cotton back home. You can also get fabulous hand-stitched Marrakesh-mod tunics, dresses, shirts and pants off the rack or tailored to fit you –

there's no extra charge for alterations. All the items here are made by disabled women, and your purchases pay for their salaries, training programs and a childcare centre.

Assouss Cooperative d'Argane (Map p300; ☎ 061 729678; 94 Rue el-Mouassine, cnr Rue Sidi el-Yamani; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Sat-Thu, 9am-noon Fri) For pampering and foodie finds, this is the Marrakesh retail outlet of a women's argan cooperative outside Essaouira. The all-women staff will ply you with free samples and proudly explain how their ultra-emollient cosmetic oil and gourmet salad oils are made.

L'Art du Bain Savonnerie Artisanale (Map p300; ☎ 068 445942; www.lartdubain.com; Souq Lebbadine, nr Souq Sebbaghine; ☎ 9.30-7.30pm) Also sells argan oil from an Essaouira cooperative alongside handmade soaps made with fragrant blends of local herbs, flowers and spices.

Kif-Kif (Map p300; ☎ 061 082041; www.kifikifbystef.com; 8 Rue Laksour, near Bab Ksour; ☎ 10am-8pm) A hip boutique that engages the city's most inventive artisans to come up with clever gifts. These include tote bags made of pop-art awning fabric, rings with interchangeable felt baubles and adorable striped-jersey baby jellabas – and 15% of the price on all kids' items goes to a local nonprofit organisation supporting disabled children.

Jamade (Map p300; ☎ 024 429042; 1 Pl Douar Graoua, cnr Rue Riad Zitoun el-Jedid; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm) Also sells locally designed items at fixed prices, including some hip, hand-sewn coasters and placemats from Tigmi women's cooperative.

Tadert Titbirine (☎ 024 377416; titbirine@menara.ma) Contact Fair Trade–design entrepreneur Brigitte Perkins for a visit to this textile atelier which brings a contemporary edge to traditional Moroccan techniques of hand-weaving and embroidery. It has been recognised by the state for raising Moroccan handicraft standards with handwoven, custom-embroidered silk wraps and limited-edition organic Rif cotton household linens for the likes of Calvin Klein.

To buy crafts directly from Marrakesh's favourite recycling artisans, head over to Riad Zitoun el-Kedim and check out the items cleverly fashioned from recycled tyres: Michelin mirrors, well-travelled footstools, man-bags with street cred. There are several to choose from, but there's usually

a good selection among the framed Bob Marley posters at **Creations Pneumatiques** (Map p300; ☎ 066 091746; 110 Rue Riad Zitoun el-Kedim; ☎ 7am-10pm).

Ville Nouvelle

To get a jump start on the souqs, savvy shoppers visit the **Ensemble Artisanal** (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 443503; Ave Mohammed V, across from Cyber Park; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat) to glimpse artisans at work and see the range of crafts and prices Marrakesh has to offer. The set prices are higher than in the souqs and the selection is obviously more limited, but it's hassle-free shopping and the producer gets paid directly.

Upscale fixed-price boutiques worth checking out in the ville nouvelle for gifts, fashion and household linens are on and around **Rue de la Liberté** in Guéliz, and the nearby **Marché Municipale ibn Toumert** (Map p309; Rue ibn Toumert, off Ave Mohammed V, Guéliz; ☎ 8am-7pm) offers jewellery and ceramics at reasonable prices if you're prepared to bargain.

Modern Moroccan design fanatics hire taxis in the morning or late afternoon to scour the local designer factory outlets 4km outside Marrakesh at **Quartier Industriel Sidi Ghanem** (off Map pp294-5; km 4, Route de Safi; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat); negotiate a set rate of Dh150 to Dh250 for the ride there and back from the medina. Score a map of the quarter at an open showroom, or just troll the lanes to find which outlets are open (hours are erratic).

In the Palmeraie, one boutique featuring gorgeous design and local art is at **Jnane Tamarna** (off Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 329423; www.jnaneatamna.com; Douar Abiad, Palmeraie), which supports Fair Trade with local artisans.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Six kilometres southwest of town is the recently expanded and quite spiffy **Menara airport** (☎ 024 447865; ☎ information desk 8am-6pm). The airport has an information desk in the check-in hall and there are some banks where you can exchange currency.

Royal Air Maroc (RAM; Map p309; ☎ call centre 090 000800, 024 436205; www.royalairmaroc.com; 197 Ave Mohammed V, Guéliz; ☎ 8.30am-12.20pm & 2.30-7pm) has several flights daily to and from Casablanca (round trip from Dh650, 40 minutes),

where you can pick up connections, as well as a direct weekly flight to Agadir (round trip from Dh1100, 35 minutes). It is advisable to reconfirm your flight with their 24-hour call centre. RAM also operates direct international flights to London (3½ hours) and Geneva (three hours) six days a week and daily flights to Paris (3¼ hours).

Atlas Blue (☎ 082 009090; www.atlas-blue.com; Menara airport), the sister company of RAM, has cheap flights to Marrakesh from London, Paris, Amsterdam and many other European cities. Other carriers include **Air France** (<http://www.airfrance.co.ma/>), which flies to Paris at least once a day. **Easyjet** (www.easyjet.com) flies to Marrakesh daily from London Gatwick and **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) has at least four flights from London Luton to Marrakesh weekly.

Bus

Most buses arrive and depart from the **main bus station** (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 433933; Bab Doukkala) just outside the city walls at Bab Doukkala, a 25-minute walk or Dh5 to Dh10 taxi ride from Djemma el-Fna. The large main building is lined with booths covering local and long-distance destinations; get tickets for early-morning departures the day before as some booths aren't open first thing. Buses leave most frequently between 4am and 7pm.

The bus station has handy **left-luggage facilities** (small/big bag per day Dh5/8; ☎ 24hr), but the smoky cafés, frightening toilets and pushy touts are all best avoided.

A number of companies run buses to Fez (from Dh130, 8½ hours, at least six daily) and Meknès (from Dh120, six hours, at least three daily).

Buses to Asni (Dh10) also leave from the southern side of the medina outside Bab er-Rob. There's at least one bus a day to Telouet (Dh50, four hours) that leaves in the afternoon from Bab Gehmat in the medina's southwest wall.

CTM (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 434402; www.ctm.co.ma; Window 10, Bab Doukkala bus station) operates daily buses to Fez (Dh160, 8½ hours, one daily) via Beni Mellal (Dh70, 2½ hours), Ouarzazate (Dh75, four hours, one daily) and Tan Tan (Dh195, six hours, five daily) via Tiznit (Dh120, five hours). There are also daily services to Agadir (Dh90, four hours, nine daily), Casablanca (Dh85, four

hours, three daily) and Laâyoune (Dh290, 14 hours, four daily). CTM services to Essaouira (Dh80, three hours) fill up quickly so it is best to purchase your ticket the day before.

Tickets can also be bought at the **CTM Office** (Map p309; ☎ 024 448328; 12 Blvd Mohammed Zerkouni, Guéliz). This is also the arrival and departure point for their international buses, including Paris (from Dh1000, 48 hours) and Madrid (from Dh900, 36 hours), on Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday.

Supratours (Map p309; ☎ 024 435525; Ave Hassan II) is west of the train station. You can catch a bus from here to Agadir (Dh90, four hours, five daily), Dakhla (Dh420, 25 hours, one daily), Essaouira (Dh65, 2½ hours, three daily), Laâyoune (Dh280, 15 hours, two daily) and Tan Tan (Dh180, 10 hours, two daily). Supratours also offers connecting buses to trains; for schedules and connections, see p324.

Car

Local car-rental companies often offer more competitive deals than international operators, with quoted rates starting at around Dh400 per day with unlimited mileage, possibly cheaper if you take it for a minimum of three days. For 4WD rentals, count on Dh700 to Dh1000 per day with minimal insurance. However, you should be able to negotiate a 10% to 20% discount normally and even more in the low season (October to mid-December and mid-January to the end of February). If you'd rather look at the scenery than the road in the mountains or desert, you can hire a car with a driver through a local car-rental agency (see p308) starting at Dh1350 plus tip per day all-inclusive for a 4WD or a small minibus, though English-speaking drivers aren't always available.

INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES

Avis (www.avis.com; Ave Mohammed V Map p309; ☎ 024 432525; 137 Ave Mohammed V; airport ☎ 024 433169)

Budget (www.budget.com; Blvd Mohammed Zerkouni Map p309; ☎ 024 431180; 80 Blvd Mohammed Zerkouni; airport ☎ 024 438875)

Europcar (www.europcar.com; Blvd Mohammed Zerkouni Map p309; ☎ 024 431228; 63 Blvd Mohammed Zerkouni; airport ☎ 024 437718)

Hertz (www.hertz.com; Ave Mohammed V Map p309; ☎ 024 439984; 154 Ave Mohammed V; airport ☎ 024 447230)

National (Map p309; www.nationalcar.com; Rue de la Liberté ☎ 024 430683; 1 Rue de la Liberté; airport ☎ 024 437846)

LOCAL AGENCIES

La Plaza Car (Map p309; ☎ 024 421801; www.laplaza-car.com; Immeuble 141, 23 Rue Mohammed el-Beqal)

Lhasnaoui Rent (Map pp294-5; ☎ 024 312415; www.lhasnaouirent.com; cnr Blvd Allal el-Fassi & Yacoub el-Mansour, 15 Immeuble el-Omairi)

KAT (Map p309; ☎ 024 433581; http://membres.lycos.fr/katcar; 68 Blvd Mohammed Zerktouni)

Taxi

Departing from outside Bab er-Rob near the royal palace are grands taxis to destinations in the High Atlas, including Asni (Dh18), Ijoukak (Dh20), Ouirgane (Dh35) and Setti Fatma (Dh35).

Those serving destinations further afield gather on a dirt lot to the north of the main bus station. Destinations include Agadir (Dh120), Azilal (Dh75), Beni Mellal (Dh110), Demnate (Dh55), Essaouira (Dh130), Ouarzazate (Dh90) and Tarou-dannt (Dh110).

Train

From the **train station** (Map p309; ☎ 024 447768, 090 203040 information only; www.onct.ma; cnr Ave Hassan II & Blvd Mohammed VI, Guéliz) you can take a taxi or city bus (bus 3, 8, 10 or 14, among others; Dh3) into the centre.

There are nine daily trains to Casablanca (2nd-class rapide, Dh84, three hours) and Rabat (Dh112, four hours). There are direct trains to Fez (Dh180, seven hours, eight daily), Meknès (Dh162, 6½ hours), and Safi (Dh25, three hours, one daily). Overnight trains to Tangier (Dh190, 10½ hours) leave once daily. For sleeping berths to Tangier the ticket costs Dh350, or Dh650 for a single sleeping car compartment; book at least two days in advance.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

A petit taxi to Marrakesh from the airport (6km) should be no more than Dh60 by day or Dh80 by night, but you may have difficulty convincing the driver of this. As with any taxi trip, the taxi should use the meter to determine the price. Alternatively, bus 11 runs irregularly to Djemaa el-Fna. Airport transfers arranged through hotels

or riad guest houses in the medina or ville nouvelle should cost Dh150 to Dh200, or Dh150 to Dh250 to the Palmeraie.

Bus

Local buses (Map p300; ☎ 024 3433933; all fares Dh3) leave for the ville nouvelle at seemingly random intervals from Place Foucauld near the Djemaa el-Fna. Key bus lines are:

Nos 1 & 20: medina-Guéliz (along Ave Mohammed V)

Nos 2 and 10: medina-Gare Routière

Nos 3 and 8: medina-train station

No 11: medina-Menara Gardens

Calèches

These are the horse-drawn green carriages you'll see at Place Foucauld next to the Djemaa el-Fna. They're a pleasant way to get around, if you avoid the rush hours (8am, midday and 5.30pm to 7.30pm). One-way trips within the medina officially cost Dh15; otherwise, state-fixed rates of Dh100 per hour apply. Expect a tour of the ramparts to take 1½ hours, and allow three hours for the Palmeraie. In the Hivernage, calèches linger outside major hotels along Ave el-Qadissia and Rue Echouhada.

Car & Motorcycle

Your feet are the best way to get around the medina, which is mostly closed to car traffic. Driving in Marrakesh is an extreme sport, with scooters zooming from all sides and traffic roundabouts the meek may never escape – best to leave the driving to unfazed taxi drivers whenever possible. For day trips, you might rent a bike, car or a motorcycle. **Marrakesh Motos** (Map p309; ☎ 024 448359, 061 316413; 31 Ave Mohammed Abdelkrim el-Khattabi; ☎ 9am-10pm), located about 2km out of the town centre on the Casablanca road just beyond the Goodyear garage, rents out scooters and 125cc motorcycles for Dh250 to Dh300 per day.

If you do rent a car or motorcycle, there are often parking places near the gates and entrances to the medina. There are public parking lots near the Koutoubia Mosque and just south of Place de Foucauld on Ave el-Mouahidine; expect to pay Dh20/40 during the day/24 hours. If you find street parking, a guardian will expect a Dh10 tip for keeping an eye on your car; look for the guy in the blue coat, and pay your tip afterwards.

Taxi

The creamy-beige petits taxis around town charge Dh5 to Dh15 per journey. They're all supposed to use their meters, but you may need to insist, especially coming from the train station or airport. If your party numbers more than three you must take a grand taxi, which requires some negotiation.

EAST OF MARRAKESH

After a few especially hot days, Marrakesh can leave you feeling as cooked as a kebab left too long on a Djemaa el-Fna grill. For a dramatic, restorative change of scenery, head for the picture-perfect Ait Bougomez Valley and the sparkling waterfalls of Cascades d'Ouzoud.

DEMNATE

دمنات

Who knew that an authentic immersion experience in Berber culture and cuisine could be found less than 1½ hours from Marrakesh? A foodie and cultural hub for centuries, Demnate is today often overlooked by bus tour hordes rushing to get to the Cascades d'Ouzoud – conveniently leaving intrepid travellers room to see, hear and taste Demnate's indigenous Berber culture. As in other towns ruled by the ruthless Glaoui, the once-grand Glaoui kasbah and mud-brick ramparts have been left to crumble and the triumphal gate has been pulled down, yet Demnate's fascinating heritage has survived and thrived against the odds.

Sights & Activities

At the heart of town is a **mellah**, with an entry about 150m on the right after the town's main gate. Hundreds of Jewish families from Morocco, France, Israel, Canada and the United States come here each July for the country's most historic **Jewish moussem** (festival), a week-long mystical event that is said to offer miracle cures for longstanding ailments. Demnate also has two *zawiyas*, making the annual **Hamdouchi Moussem** in September twice as raucous. Each *zawiya* literally follows the beat of its own drummer, dancing to different rhythms in an all-day dance-off and music festival in the centre of town before going their separate ways in 3-hour parades leading to the *zawiyas*. Sometimes the *moussem*

peaks in blood purification, with dancers cutting themselves on the scalp in a dramatic act of ritual cleansing.

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

Between the *moussems* and raucous weddings all summer, the local music scene is quite happening. To hear for yourself, Demnate's local self-help association, **Complexe Association de l'Entreaide Demnate** (☎ 068 131304 in French, 068 909801 in English; ettajmi@yahoo.fr; Ave Mohammed V, near gate; dinner concerts requested donation of Dh300-550 per person all-inclusive, depending on number of diners; ⚠ by prior appointment), can arrange a dinner concert catered by the local women's catering cooperative, with explanations of the Berber lyrics in French or English. Proceeds underwrite an impressive range of community assistance programs, which you might arrange with kindly director Mr Mohammed Ettajmi to see in action at the Complexe. Among the inspired local initiatives housed in the Complexe are literacy classes, catering training courses, women's entrepreneurship classes, community childcare and a computer lab. Donations are appreciated for any visit to the Complexe.

If you'll be passing through around tea-time, you can arrange tea with a local family through **Association Attadamoun Pour les Handicapés** (☎ 068 909801; handicadem1@yahoo.fr; Demnate), another wonderful nonprofit organisation providing schooling, job training and essential life skills to disabled youth throughout the region. The association's director, Mr Hassan Khallaf, speaks fluent English and is extremely knowledgeable and proud of Demnate's mixed Muslim/Jewish heritage. By prior arrangement he gives wonderful historical tours of Demnate's *mellah*, passing through souqs and *fondouqs* and ending in a local elementary school supported by interfaith foundations. Proceeds for teas, *mellah* walking tours, and overnight stays in the association's cheerful salon (Dh100 to Dh300 per person suggested) support the association's heroic efforts to extend essential support services and educational opportunities to all.

The Association de l'Entreaide Demnate's catering cooperative have teamed with local wildlife guides to launch a new program: nature hikes and strolls through olive and almond groves surrounding Demnate, with

gourmet picnics delivered to a scenic hill-top or cool riverside location. Demnate's fragrant hand-rolled couscous made of barley, corn or wheat is available upon request. Arrangements should be made at least two days in advance through the association (see p325), with proceeds funding the association's catering and women's business development programs.

NATURE & HIKING

Once you're in Demnate, detour 6km to the east to **Imi-n-Ifri** ('Grotto's Mouth' in Berber), a natural bridge over a gorge that looks like a monster's yawning mouth. You can clamber down into the gorge and pass through this toothy maw by yourself – the paths are clearly marked and recently levelled – but it's worth paying a small tip (Dh20 to Dh30) to a local guide to help you over some tricky boulders and explain the local lore associated with this travertine bridge formed some 1.8 million years ago.

The two sides of the bridge are said to represent two local lovers whose families kept them apart, so this Romeo and Juliet held hands and turned to stone. On the south side of the gorge is a spring with water rich in natural mineral salts, where brides come for pre-wedding rites; in summer you may hear women singing and playing drums and tambourines for Berber bachelorette parties. On the other side of the gorge is a freshwater spring said to cure acne, which explains the number of teens hanging out here. Pass under the bridge, and suddenly you're in a *Lord of the Rings* setting, with flocks of crows swooping down from dramatic stalactites overhead.

Along the road that forks to the left at Imi-n-Ifri is one of the most breathtaking and pristine valleys in the High Atlas foothills, leading into the Ait Bougomez Valley. It's like driving into an Impressionist painting: golden wheat fields ripple in the breeze, dotted with red poppies in spring and women in pinafores and polka-dotted kerchiefs cutting wheat with a scythe. Mountains are striped gold, green and purple with wheat growing on stone-walled terraces, and red-stone villages cling to iron-rich red cliffsides like architectural chameleons. The road here is fairly new, so the valley seems untouched by time.

Follow the road 6km from Imi-n-Ifri to the village of Iouaridene, and you're in pre-historic territory. Signs point you towards what geologists claim are **dinosaur footprints** dating from the mid-Jurassic period, about 170 million years ago. Quadruped and carnivorous dinosaurs once roamed this area, and the local kids do a mean impersonation of a T Rex. At the time of writing the bridge beyond Iouaridene was washed out, but exploration of this spectacular valley portal to Ait Bougomez may be possible on foot or with a 4WD in dry season.

The 100-year-old olive groves climbing over the hillsides around Demnate produce what is widely considered to be Morocco's best olive oil, with trace mineral salts and terrace-farming methods yielding a golden colour, and subtle flavour variations that compare favourably with Tuscan varieties. Almonds are another renowned local product, and the flowering of the local trees makes March a good time to visit.

Sleeping

Other than overnight stays at the Association Attadamoun Pour les Handicapés (p325), pleasant, good-value lodging is available 500m to the left at the fork in the road at Imi-n-Ifri at the new **our pick Riad Aykbalou** (☎ 023 507498; www.iminifri-riad.com; 2km Imi-n-Ifri, 8km Demnate; s half-board with shared/private bathroom Dh120/150, d half-board with shared/private bathroom Dh250/280). Rooms are simple and cheery with splashes of bright colour, pine furnishings and henna lamps, and the seasonal tajines make good on Demnate's culinary reputation with fresh herbs, flavourful vegetables and meats (nonguests pay Dh80 for tajines, Dh20 for salads). A more upscale option is the ecologically minded **Kasbah Timdaf** (☎ 023 507178; 15 min from Demnate on road to Azilal; GPS coordinates N 31°46,50 W 007°01,13; s Dh495, d Dh660-880, q Dh1650), with spacious rooms and *tadelakt* bathrooms in a stone and mud-brick farm surrounded by almond and olive groves.

Eating

The clear sign you've arrived in a foodie capital is the 40 restaurant stalls lining the main street – that's about one for every 50 people in town. The stiff competition means Demnati cooks must attempt to deliver the freshest, tastiest tajines starting at just Dh20; try whatever place seems to be winning the

crowds over that day, or go with reliable **Café d'Ouzoud** (☎ 023 456087; Ave Mohammed V), a couple of hundred metres before the main gate into Demnate. For a more leisurely dining experience complete with a refreshing dip in the restaurant pool, head to **Café-Restaurant Al Jazeera** (☎ 044 458239; nr Gare Routière, Demnate; ☎ 8am-8pm; 🍴); call ahead to try Demnate's signature fine-grain couscous drizzled with local olive oil.

Shopping

The Sunday weekly **souq** 10 minutes south of town is an opportunity to taste-test local olives, olive oils and almonds, and see Demnate's local woodwork, wool outerwear and simple pottery with Berber good-luck symbols in henna to enhance your cooking efforts. The potteries are located 2km outside town in the village of Boughlou, turning right at the mosque and heading 4km off-road; you might hire a guide through Demnate's Association de l'Entreaide (p325) to take you, and explain the painstaking process used to fire pots and glaze them a distinctive natural-yellow hue.

Getting There & Away

Grands taxis to Marrakesh (Dh55) and Azilal (Dh45) leave from the main gate. Buses leave for Marrakesh (Dh25, 1½ hours) every couple of hours until 6pm from the bus station (take the road to the right before entering the main town gate).

CASCADES D'OUZOU

شلال دت أزوز

Some 167km northeast of Marrakesh and a world away from the city heat are Morocco's waterfalls, one of the most popular day trips from Marrakesh for tourists and Moroccans alike. Here the Oued Ouzoud drops 110m into the canyon of Oued el-Abid in three-tiered falls. Though drought has reduced the water lately, the view from the mouth of the falls is still impressive, and it only gets better as you descend into the cool of the canyon, past the late-afternoon rainbow mists and the pools at its base. The falls are most dramatic from March to June when there's more water, but young Moroccans often camp here in the heat of summer on terraces facing the falls.

To reach the falls, walk past the signs for Riad Cascades d'Ouzoud (see right) towards

the precipice, where converging paths wind down towards the falls. To the left of the town square is a path lined with souvenir stalls and cafés. For lunch at eye-level with the falls, stop at **Chez Amis Salah** (☎ 8am-6pm) where salad and bread accompany tajines for Dh80 or omelettes for Dh60; several other neighbouring cafés offer similar fare and prices, but the cliff's-edge seating sets this one apart. Bathrooms shared by several cafés are out back past the bleating goats, and are best braved before you have lunch.

Locals might try to 'guide' you into the gorge for a few dirham, but you can follow the well-trodden paths. At the bottom, you can hike along the riverbed or cross the river to another path leading up to the village. Barbary apes clamour for attention and food along this path, but a signpost advises not to feed them.

If you continue downstream, there are small, reasonably clean pools where you can swim. To see the picturesque Berber village of Tanaghmelt, follow the path by the lower pools up past a farmhouse and up the slopes for about 1.5km. For longer treks, follow the course of the river to caves (two hours) and the Gorges of Oued el-Abid (another two hours).

Many cafés lining the falls offer shady camp sites for Dh15 with rather dire hole-in-the-ground toilet facilities. If hygiene is a priority, camp sites and Berber tents are available with indoor toilet facilities and showers at **Dar Essalam Hotel** (☎ 015 972385; camp site without/with rented tent Dh20/40, s/d/tr Dh50/100/150) on the town square facing the falls; bare-bones rooms with shared bathrooms are available as well.

Riad Cascades d'Ouzoud (☎ 062 143804; www.ouzoud.com; s Dh510-610, d Dh710-810, tr Dh 950, ste Dh1050-1150, all incl breakfast) offers a rustically stylish retreat within view of the falls, with solar-heated showers, Berber-style carved-wood furnishings and doors, and a family-style welcome from local staff. The riad offers treks led by a local guide, who can also arrange kayaking, river-sliding, visits to rural souqs and tea with local families.

Getting There & Away

From Marrakesh, it's easiest to get transport direct to Azilal, from where grands taxis run when full to Ouzoud (Dh25 per person, or Dh250 for the whole taxi, return). Don't

leave it past 4pm to try to begin your trip back to Azilal.

AZILAL

أزيلال

This tidy centre for regional development is mainly of interest to travellers as a handy

transport hub between Demnate, the Cascades d'Ouzoud and the Aït Bougomez Valley. A good pit stop for Dh30 lunches of tasty grilled chicken and chips is **Ibnou Ziad Restaurant** (Ave Hassan II), though football fans might be delayed by matches shown on

HAPPY VALLEY GOODWILL TOUR

Take in spectacular scenery and bring the happiness home with you after supporting 11 worthy local causes on this four-night, five-day adventure:

Day 1

- Depart Marrakesh; nature hike and picnic outside Demnate arranged by local-guide program and women's catering collective at **Association de l'Entreaide Demnate** (p325).
- Tea with local family or **mellah** tour arranged by Demnate's **Association Attadamoun Pour les Handicapés** (p325).
- Dinner concert organised by Association de l'Entreaide Demnate (p325).
- Overnight at Association Attadamoun Pour les Handicapés or **Riad Aykbalou** (p326) at Imi-n-Ifrri.

Day 2

- Depart Demnate; lunch at **Ibnou Ziad Restaurant** (above) in Azilal.
- Optional off-road side trip for **Association Assamer** (opposite) carpet cooperative and country-style tea at **Hassan Benkoum** (opposite).
- Visit to wood carvers' studio at **Association Ighrem Atelier du Sculpture** (p330).
- Sample goat cheese, walnut-butters and mountain honey at **Cooperative Tikhiouine** (p330).
- Dinner & overnight at **Ecologie Dar Itrane** (p330).

Day 3

- Morning hike to **Zawiya Sidi Moussa** arranged through **Association Renaissance de Aït Bougomez** (p330).
- Lunch at **Café des Amis** (p331) in Tabant.
- Teach one-hour after-school English program at Tabant girls' boarding school (p330).
- Off-road to Zaouiat Ahansal; visit women's weaving collective and training program at **Atelier du Tissages de l'Association du Zaouiat Ahsal** (p331).
- Dinner & overnight at gîtes **Sidi Ahmed Amahdar** (p321).

Day 4

- Drive to **Reserve Naturelle de Tamga** for rock-climbing at **La Cathédrale du Rocher**, a wild-flower hike, or bird-watching organised by **Association Renaissance de Aït Bougomez** (p330).
- Lunch at **Gîte le Cathedrale** (p331).
- Drive to Ben Ouirgane; overnight stay at eco-friendly **Little Morocco** (p332).

Day 5

- Return to Marrakesh via Cascades d'Ouzoud; lunch at **Chez Amis Salah** (p327) in Cascades d'Ouzoud.

TV here. Market day is Thursday, and the town's **Complexe Artisanal** (on right across from town hall) occasionally hosts regional arts-and-crafts showcases.

This is the last internet outpost before heading into Aït Bougomez; email addicts can check one last time at **Cyber Adrau** (Ave Hassan II, next to Hôtel Assoufou; per hr Dh8; ☎ 8am-midnight). ATMs and credit-card machines are also scarce for miles around, so you might want to use the cash machines at **Banque Populaire** (Ave Hassan II) located next to the police station.

Across from Ibnou Ziad Restaurant is the laid-back **Hôtel Souss** (☎ 072 328495; s/d with shared bathroom Dh35/70, Dh5 hot showers), which offers a friendly welcome, spacious rooms, thick blankets and oddly endearing child-sized desks; a video arcade with Playstation is upstairs.

Buses run between Azilal and Marrakesh (Dh45, two to six daily). Plenty of grands taxis run from the taxi lot behind Marrakesh's bus station to Azilal (Dh70) and, less frequently, from Azilal to Demnate (Dh34).

AÏT BOUGOMEZ VALLEY

وادي عيت بو غومز

Arguably the best-kept secret in Morocco is the region known as the 'happy valley', which until 2001 was snowbound four months a year and largely inaccessible except on foot or mule. Though some roads are still accessible only by 4WD, paved roads have given unprecedented entry to High Atlas foothills faceted with mud-brick towers and signature *ighremt* (stone-reinforced houses) in reddish rock with windows outlined in white stone. Here you can escape the reach of mobile phones, bosses and the countless other minor irritants of modern living, and spend days happily absorbed by orchards in bloom, mysterious petroglyphs and barley rippling in the breeze. This valley is nature's answer to Prozac, especially for trekkers seeking the performance highs of climbing M'Goun Massif (see p436).

But more than just natural beauty, Aït Bougomez has a remarkable resourcefulness that never ceases to impress. Even steep mountainsides are used for terrace farming, so you'll spot tiny plots of wheat on nose-bleed-inducing high-altitude walled terraces. Villages are built with rock and clay

quarried on the spot, so they often blend in mimetically with their spectacular backdrops. Since the nearest medical dispensary is in Tabant, mountain plants are collected to make wildcrafted herbal remedies.

The Aït Bougomez may be a happy place, but people here have to work hard just to make ends meet and send their children to school. To ensure the happiness of future generations, locals here have undertaken ambitious initiatives – woodworkers' collectives, girls' schools, organic farming and ecotourism – and they would be very happy indeed if you stopped by and showed your support.

Aït Bououli

From Azilal you'll arrive at Aït Mohamed, where you can follow the road leading southwest through hills marking geologic time in stripes of red, purple and white mineral deposits. Before you reach Agouti along this road, adventurers equipped with 4WD and steely nerves can detour into a steep red-clay gorge to Aït Bououli, which until a couple of years ago was inaccessible even by mule for months at a time. In this remote outpost 14km off the main road, there's a souq selling wild mountain herbs on Saturday, petroglyphs to explore with the help of a local guide and a stopping place for tea with homemade bread and butter, a cold drink or a tajine with a valley view at **Chez Hassan Benkoum** (tajine Dh70-100, tea with bread and butter donation).

Some 2.5km beyond Aït Bououli is a picturesque trio of villages built right into the two-toned rock bluff. At the far end of the triple town is a football pitch and a building housing the **Association Assamer** (☎ 8am-noon) that supports a women's cooperative that weaves carpets using some locally produced natural dyes. Enquire at the association whether you can see carpets, and you may be shown work on the premises or led to cooperative members' homes to see their work in progress.

Agouti

A trekker's haven, Agouti offers a range of *gites d'étape* (rustic hotels) and family-style guest houses, many with stellar views and down-to-earth Berber hospitality. The first on your left is **Filou** (☎ 024 343796; tam-silt@menara.ma; dm with shared bathroom Dh50, s/d with

private bathroom with half-board Dh120/150) with clean dorm rooms for trekkers (two with mountain views), doubles with hand-painted red beds around the rear courtyard, savoury meals and clean, updated bathrooms with blessedly hot water. Among the many more basic *gîte* options lining the road is **Chez Daoud** (☎ 062 105183; dm Dh50), a short walk down from the road beside barley fields, with rudimentary washing facilities.

Agouti is also home to a woodworkers' collective, the **Association Ighrem Atelier du Sculpture** (500m from Fililou, on left) which offers a glimpse of woodworkers honing their craft by day and the opportunity to buy spoons, bowls and honey dippers hand-carved of fragrant juniper wood directly from the artisan. Part of the proceeds goes to the collective for its vocational training outreach programs.

Another notable local initiative is **Cooperative Tikhouine** (☎ 023 459736), 5km along the main road from Agouti in the village of Timmit (follow the signs from the road 50m downhill to the centre). Formed in 2005 by plucky young women over the protests of their parents and other naysaying locals, this women's cooperative secured EU funding to start its business cultivating organic walnuts, making mountain honey, selling locally cultivated saffron, and even making their own mild, aged goat-cheese. At the cooperative's centre, you can sample and purchase these products. 'Food-packaging companies are capitalising on our local produce, and we wanted to prove we could make better products for a fair price by producing them artisanally and packaging them ourselves', explains the dynamic, precocious president of the collective, aged 21. 'At first some people didn't want their daughters involved, but now there are 60 of us, and since we've won an award from Morocco as a model collective, every family wants to be involved'.

Tabant

The heart of the valley in more ways than one, Tabant attracts adventurers, ecotourists and visitors eager to preserve and support this spectacular remote region. This town is the sole official school for mountain guides, and though there is no official *bureau des guides* (tourist office) here, treks through the valley and to the mountains beyond

can be arranged through Mr Brahim Ait-sri, the tourism director responsible for the regional self-help association, the **Association Renaissance de Ait Bougomez** (☎ 061 497001, 023 459085; ausf_maroc2@yahoo.fr). Suggested treks range from two- to three-hour valley strolls birdwatching or collecting Berber medicinal herbs, to four-day trans-mountain treks following ancient nomad routes with dromedaries. Other popular excursions include hikes up the cone-shaped hill to the *zawiya* of local *marabout* (saint) **Sidi Moussa**, which may or may not cure infertility as promised, but certainly offers stirring, romantic views over the valley. A portion of tour proceeds supports the association's projects, including women's literacy, water purification projects and a maternal and child-health program.

The association also runs a boarding school for girls who live in villages without schools. The school can be visited by prior arrangement with the school's English teacher, Merzouk Farami (☎ 072 180937; farami1982@hotmail.com; donation appreciated). Visitors can also donate basic English-language books to the school and/or volunteer to teach an after-school English lesson to the students, who are eager to practice with native speakers.

SLEEPING

In Tabant, the *gîte* of **Ait Oliqdim Mohamed** (☎ 023 459326; dm Dh50) is clean and offers cold showers and a delicious tajine if warned in advance. Of the three *gîtes* in the nearby village of Ikhf-n-Ighir, **Outaghloute Benassar** (☎ 023 459175; dm Dh50) has clean dorm rooms, outside toilets and a selection of maps and books.

One highly appealing accommodation option just outside Tabant in Imelghas village is **our pick Ecodge Dar Itrane** (☎ 010 086930; www.origins-lodge.com; Imelghas; half-board per person Dh440) where seemingly opposing ideas happily coexist: ecological and comfortable, rural and hip, internationally owned and locally engaged. Eighteen impeccable rooms in a former *gîte* have been kitted out with handmade Berber-style furnishings, plus bathrooms in gleaming *tadelakt* and hammered brass with solar-powered hot showers. The open organic kitchen invites the curious, the hydro-electric-powered hammam soothes the weary and downtime

can be whiled away in the library of books and videos on Berber culture or browsing the boutique of locally made goods. With Dh22 donations from guests, Dar Itrane is helping to restore the Zawiya Sidi Moussa.

EATING

Among Tabant's attractions are its bustling regional **Sunday souq**, with a fresh produce market along the main street next to the used-donkey sales lot, and the **Café des Amis** (50m down main street), just across from the post office. For just Dh20, they'll whip up a scrumptious tajine in 30 minutes with garden-fresh vegetables, free-range meat and wildly aromatic mountain herbs.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses occasionally run from Azilal to Tabant (Dh40, three hours) in the morning when full, from near the central mosque. You can sometimes find a grand taxi for Dh60 per seat. There are plenty of trucks that head to Azilal on Thursday for its Friday market.

ZAOUIAT AHANSAL

زَاهَنْسَال

You'll need a 4WD to head over the 40km of *piste* and the 2629m-high Tizi 'Tirghist to Zaouiat Ahansal. At the northern end of Imelghas, there's a *piste* that leads to the left towards Zauoiat Ahansal, and about 15km along atop a rocky hill, there's another fork in the road at a yellow sign where you'll take the right-hand road for Zaouiat Ahansal. Stretches of this road are currently being paved, but it's slow going along these twisting mountain roads, especially on Monday market day. Once you get to Zaouiat Ahansal, cross the bridge towards the magnificent mud-brick towers of the **ancient douar** (village) atop a steep hill; this structure once housed the entire 300-person community.

Just past this landmark on your left is the **Atelier du Tissages de l'Association du Zaouiat Ahsal** (☎ 1-6pm Tue-Sun), a women's weaving centre and after-school vocational training program. Here you can watch carpets being woven by apprentices as well as weaving *mâalems* (expert artisans) whose hands are a blur as they work with pronged antique carpet tools that could easily put an eye out in lesser hands. To give everyone a laugh,

ask to give it a try yourself – just don't be offended if they take out your knot. The carpets are for sale, and part of the proceeds support the weaving training program and the village association's medical dispensary; the rest goes directly to the woman who made it, no middlemen involved.

Sleeping

The association also runs the *gîte d'étape* of **Sidi Ahmed Amahdar** (☎ 023 459393; Dh20), which offers hot showers, clean shared bathrooms and a clamorous welcome from the women who run the place; proceeds support the adjoining medical dispensary and women's weaving school. There are more *gîtes* in the surrounding villages of Agoudim, Amezrai and Taghia, the latter being two hours' walk upstream. North of town is Ouauizarht (wah-ri-zat), which has a hotel and a Wednesday market.

Getting There & Away

If you're on a schedule, your only reliable bet is 4WD. Otherwise, there are trucks from Tabant to Zaouiat Ahansal on Sunday, and regular minivans run between Zaouiat Ahansal and Aït Mohammed (Dh40) and less frequently to Ouauizarht via Tilouguite.

CATHÉDRALE DES ROCHER & RESERVE NATURELLE DE TAMGA

Continuing north along the main road from Zaouiat Ahansal leads you to the natural splendours of **La Cathédrale des Rocher**, the 'rock cathedral' with sheer stone faces that are a climber's ultimate challenge and delight, and the **Reserve Naturelle de Tamga**, a vast national reserve consisting of eight separate parks. Bird-watchers will have a field day (or several) observing the 107 species of birds, including some rare and endangered species. A small **botanical garden** 3km from the sign marking the park's entry offers a microcosm of the park's diverse plantlife, including fragrant North African wild thyme and medicinal herbs said to cure rheumatism. Overnight stays are possible 2km after the sign for the Cathédrale at **Gîte le Cathedrale** (per person half-board for dm or camping Dh 150; lunch/dinner Dh50/60). Bring a flashlight, because the solar-powered lighting here goes off early and the way to the shared bathroom is pitch black.

BIN EL-OUIRGANE

Once you've come as far as the Cathédrale, you can head back to Azilal via the paved road leading to Bin el-Ouirgane. Confusingly, a lake, the dam that created the lake and the town on the shores of the lake all share the same name. The dam provides the majority of the electricity available in the region, and though the water levels dropped in recent drought years, the lake is still quite a sight for dry eyes. Accommodation is available here at the eco-friendly (and just plain friendly) **Little Morocco** (☎ UK 44 0 1239 820951, Morocco 063 42373; www.littlemorocco.co.uk; outside Ben Ouidane village, see website for map & directions; s/d with half-board Dh300/600), a responsible-tourism joint venture between a British family and a local Berber family. Rooms are available in a traditional stone and mud-plaster home (cleaned without harmful chemicals) with hammam access included in the room rate. Climbing expeditions, mule rides, country souq visits, folkloric musical evenings and kayaking can be arranged through Little Morocco.

IMILCHIL

املسيل

Just another striking Middle Atlas Berber village most of the year, Imilchil is flooded with visitors during its three-day September *mousse*m. At this huge fair, local Berbers stock up for long months of isolation in winter, and while they're at it, scope the scene for someone to marry. Women strut their stuff in striped woollen cloaks and elaborate jewellery, and boys preen in flowing white jellabas.

The festival usually runs Friday to Sunday the third or fourth week of September; dates are posted at tourist offices throughout the country. Organised tours to the event are available from major cities in central Morocco, and the new paved road from Rich to Imilchil has brought busloads of tourists to eye prospective spouses. With hustlers, *faux guides* and souvenir stalls eyeing the tourists, onlookers are beginning to outnumber the young lovers – but there's no denying the voyeuristic fascination of the event.

During the festival, the area is covered in tented accommodation; otherwise, there are two basic hotels, a few simple refuge-style places and several café/restaurants.

To get to Imilchil from Marrakesh, head northeast by bus or a series of grands taxis

SOUQ DAYS

In the Ourika Valley, around Jebel Toubkal, and towards the Tizi n'Tichka pass, local market days featuring local crafts, fresh produce and donkeys include:

- Monday: Tnine de l'Ourika
- Tuesday: Tahanaoute, Ait Ourir
- Wednesday: Tirdouine
- Thursday: El-Khemis
- Friday: Jemaa Rhemat
- Saturday: Asni
- Sunday: Setti Fatma

to Kasba Tadla. From there you need to get another grand taxi to El-Ksiba. From El-Ksiba there is a daily bus to Aghbala. The turn-off for Imilchil is near Tizi n'Isly, about 10km before Aghbala. From there, 61km of paved road leads south to Imilchil. Around here there are a few grands taxis or souq lorries for transport, especially on Friday and Sunday market days.

If you have plenty of time, it's also possible to get to Imilchil (a breathtaking 160km by souq lorry or 4WD) from Boumalne du Dadès or Tinerhir. Minivans leave Imilchil for Tinerhir (Dh50 to Dh55) on Saturday.

SOUTH OF MARRAKESH

OURIKA VALLEY

وادة اوريكة

Easy on the eyes and city-stressed nerves, this bucolic blooming valley just 45 minutes by car or grand taxi from Marrakesh is the city's escape hatch. Temperatures are cooler here in the shadow east of Jebel Toubkal, and the sight of snow-capped High Atlas peaks puts the pressures of city living in proper perspective. A patchwork of fields runs downhill towards Marrakesh like a green carpet, providing places to camp, picnic or just loll and listen to your blood pressure drop. The valley is especially mood-altering February to April, when almond and cherry orchards bloom manically and wildflowers run riot.

Popular destinations in the area are the ski resort of Oukaïmeden (especially during peak snow season, November to March), the village and waterfalls of Setti Fatma further

east, and the terraced town of Imlil, wedged into a crevice below Jebel Toubkal. But the area is full of hidden valleys, cliffside villages, ancient petroglyphs, moonscape plateaux and trickling mountain streams that reward travellers for packing their walking shoes. To get the lay of the land, stop by the **Centre d'Informations Touristique Ourika** (☎ 068 465545; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-1pm Sun), in the village of Tnine 33km from Marrakesh. This office is operated by a local NGO and provides information and a map of valley vista points. When trekking in winter, be advised that the valley has occasional flash floods; a particularly devastating flood in 1995 resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives.

If you're passing through Tnine on Monday, you can't miss the weekly souq along the main road. Another worthwhile stop in Tnine following the signs off the main road to the left before the bridge is the organic botanical garden at **Nectarôme** (☎ 024 313800; www.nectarome.com; ☎ 10am-5pm), a Franco-Moroccan natural cosmetics and skin-care company that combines traditional Berber herbal remedies and hammam treatments with modern aromatherapy. Whether or not you're an aromatherapy believer, the garden certainly smells great, and a foot bath and foot massage with organic essential oils here (Dh100 to Dh200) is just the thing after a long trek.

Garden picnics with mountain-views await approximately 8km after Tnine towards Setti Fattma and across the bridge over the river at **Timalizene** (☎ 024 484059, 063 564656; www.timalizene.com, in French; garden entry Dh15, lunch Dh120, booking recommended), a wild aromatic garden and guest house (s/d incl breakfast Dh275/380) that also offers botanical treks and visits to Berber villages.

About 45km from Marrakesh a warm welcome awaits at the eight-room **Auberge le Maquis** (☎ 024 484531; www.le-maquis.com, in French; Aghbalou; per person half-board Dh450), a family-style getaway and launching pad/finish line for bikers and trekkers. The local management makes meals feel like casual dinners among friends, and they dote on kids: children under 12 get half-board for the cost of dinner only. The auberge arranges treks to Yaggour plateau petroglyphs and mule treks for little ones. Nonguests can use the pool for Dh80, and there's a play-yard where kids can cut loose.

Another 5km along the road to Setti Fatma is the charming **ourpick Ourika Garden** (☎ 024 484441; www.ourika-garden.com; Aghbalou; s half-board Dh660, d half-board Dh770-960), a guest house set amid a gardener's dream: organic terraced plots of aromatic herbs, succulents and vegetables with footbridges and valley vistas in between. Breakfasts on the terrace are sumptuous feasts featuring fresh local goat-cheese and olive oil, and the attentive staff are so full of smiles it's a wonder there are no pulled muscles.

Oukaïmeden

اوکيڤدين

Best known as Morocco's only ski resort, Oukaïmeden (elevation 2650m, 75km from Marrakesh) is also a handy trekking base to explore local rock carvings; the Club Alpin Français (CAF) can point you towards trailheads. In peak snow season, skiers will find seven runs from nursery to black, six tows and the highest ski-lift in Africa (3243m). Gear, passes and lessons are available in town at prices that will delight skiers used to European and American rates.

Peak season has historically been late January to March, but in recent years snow has been scarce by March, and there is environmentally oblivious talk of manufacturing snow to artificially extend the season. Given Morocco's scarce water supplies and the energy output required to create snow, eco-savvy skiers are best advised to 'snowboard' the dunes in Merzouga instead (p370) when snow is low.

SLEEPING & EATING

CAF refuge (☎ 024 319036; www.caf-maroc.com; CAF or HI members/nonmembers per person Dh69/92; hot showers Dh5) offers dormitory beds, a few private rooms, a bar-restaurant (Dh18 for breakfast) and a well-equipped kitchen, but you'll need your own sleeping bag. They can arrange group pickups from Marrakesh (Dh300 to Dh400 for up to four by grand taxi or Dh700 to Dh900 for nine to 12 by minibus or 4WD), and onsite they sell a selection of French trekking- and mountaineering-guidebooks.

The **Hôtel Chez Juju** (☎ 024 319005; www.hotelchezjuju.com; full-board s/d Dh390/680) has a reliable Alpine-styled bar-restaurant and wood-ceilinged rooms with drippy showers curtained off in the corner and communal toilets. Sticking out amid the snowcapped

mountains like a fake tan in winter is the orange-tinted, high-rise **Hotel Kenzi Louka** (☎ 024 319080; fax 024 319088; www.kenzi-hotels.com; s/d Dh750/900; breakfast Dh90; ♿ ♿), with 101 bland rooms and equally bland international restaurant. Still, the place has a following among snow-bunnies who prefer their mountain views from chairs alongside the indoor swimming pool.

Your best bet to get to Ouakaïmeden is to arrange transport through CAF. Otherwise you can charter a grand taxi (Dh600 return from Marrakesh), or take a Setti Fatma- or Aghbalou-bound bus and try hitching up the mountain from there.

Setti Fatma

سستي فتما

A little village that's seen a whole lot of tourist action in the past decade, Setti Fatma is still a scenic stop for lunch by the river running through town, and has hikes to the seven waterfalls in a nearby hidden valley. The village is neatly nestled in a canyon beneath the High Atlas mountains at the far end of the Ourika Valley road, 24km south of the Oukaïmeden turn-off. Prime times to visit are in early March where the cherry and almond trees are in bloom, or in August for the four-day *mousslem*, with its fair and market at the *koubba* of Setti Fatma. During the summer the place is clogged with heat-struck visitors from Marrakesh gasping for air; to cool down without the crowds, head instead to the lesser-known and splendidly untrammelled Zat Valley (p337).

Waterfall hikes range from an easy 20-minute stroll to arduous stream-hikes; ignore the *faux guides* and find a licensed guide to lead the way on foot or mule at the **bureau des guides** (☎/fax 024 426113) 200m beyond the Hôtel Asgaour. The *bureau des guides* can also offer advice on treks further afield (see p433), including hikes east to Tourcht, north to Imi n'Taddert, to Anammer and Tizi n'Oucheg in the Aït Oucheg Valley, and from the Yaggour Plateau into the Zat Valley.

Kitted out colourfully as a Marrakshi water-seller, **our pick** **Hôtel Restaurant La Perle D'Ourika** (☎ 061 567239; d incl breakfast Dh200-450; set meals Dh80-100) is smartly run by the motherly Ammaria, who will ply you with piles of her legendary seasonal couscous dishes, including wild mushroom. **Hôtel Asgaour** (☎ 066 416419; r for up to 3 people with shared/private bathroom

Dh150/100) has simple but airy, clean rooms with slightly lumpy pillows and communal showers (Dh5). The restaurant downstairs serves set-price meals with bubbling, well-caramelised tajines for Dh50 to Dh60.

Both sides of the river at Setti Fatma are lined with rustic café-restaurants offering tajines priced to move. Two of the better choices are **Café-Restaurant Imlil** (on left side near the parking at the end of town), and **Café-Restaurant Azrrabzou** (opposite river) over a rickety plank bridge in a patch of almond trees. Both offer set meals with salad, tajine and bottled water starting at Dh50, or generous tajines for Dh30 that could satisfy two famished trekkers.

Grands taxis to Setti Fatma leave frequently all day from Bab er-Rob in Marrakesh (Dh35) and there are less-frequent minibuses (Dh15 to Dh25). Transport returns when full.

JEBEL TOUBKAL

جبل توبقال

For pure mountain air that cuts through the heat and makes you giddy, don't miss the highest mountain in North Africa: snow-capped Jebel Toubkal. Mountain trails, criss-crossing the High Atlas (p423) head up and away from base camps at Imlil, where there's a handy and highly informative **bureau des guides** (☎/fax 024 485626). Travel agencies in Marrakesh can also arrange multiday treks with English-speaking guides.

Asni

اسني

The Saturday souq is the major draw for travellers at this junction of the Marrakesh-Taroudannt road and the Mizane Valley road to Imlil, 47km south of Marrakesh. Sellers lug fruit, vegetables and livestock over the Atlas Mountains to sell here, but increasingly you'll find jewellery, rugs and souvenirs among the donkeys. From Asni there's an old mule track running through the Mizane Valley and past tiny stone Berber villages to Imlil; the route takes about six hours.

Imlil

إمليل

The sleeper hit of the Mizane Valley, tiny terraced Imlil (elevation 1740m) has become a favourite hitching post for trekkers and overheated Marrakesh escapees. The paved road ends here, and it's a five-hour trek to the base of Jebel Toubkal. You could make a day trip of it with a mountain stream

HIDDEN OASES GOODWILL TOUR

Follow your bliss and find new sources of inspiration at 10 terrific community ventures on this four-night, five-day eco-adventure:

Day 1

- Depart Marrakesh; nature hike and overnight in Zat Valley with **L'Association des Amis du Zat** (p338).

Day 2

- Zat Valley river hike; lunch provided by **L'Association des Amis du Zat** (p338).
- Head over Tizi n'Tichka pass to Telouet; tour **Glaoui kasbah** (p338).
- Plant tree in Tighza with **Baraka Community Partnerships** (p338).
- Dinner & overnight in Tighza with **Homestays Morocco** (p338).

Day 3

- Depart Tighza to Telouet and onwards to visit **Aït Benhaddou kasbah** (p339).
- Lunch overlooking kasbah at **Auberge Cafe-Restaurant Bilal** (p340).
- Ouarzazate Fair-Trade shopping excursion to **Coopérative de Tissage** (p344), **Ensemble Artisanal** (p344) and **Horizon Artisanat** (p344).
- Onwards to Agdz to visit **Association Development Hart Chaou community garden project** (p345).
- Dinner & overnight in Zagora at eco-friendly **Dar Raha** (p348).

Day 4

- Browse for crafts in **Amzrou Mellah** (p349) and **Arc-en-Ciel women's cooperative** (p349).
- Depart for desert trip to Erg Chigaga arranged through sustainable tourism agency **Inside Morocco Travel** (p308).
- Campfire dinner & overnight under the stars in **Erg Chigaga** (p351).

Day 5

- Depart desert via **Foum Zguid** (p352).
- Optional carpet-shopping at community weaving collectives **Cooperative Ahilal des Tapis** (p353) and **Iklane Association** (p353).
- Lunch at **I Rocher** (p338), or optional overnight.
- Evening return to Marrakesh.

hike, but the real attraction here is waking up in a High Atlas nook surrounded by flowering trees in spring and snowcapped Jebel Toubkal in the heat of summer.

En route to Imlil, stop for a refreshing Berber tea and visit to the nonprofit herb garden and school at **Dar Taliba** (El Hanchane near Imlil; donations appreciated & used wisely). This ground-breaking girls' school gives rural girls access

to middle-school education and keeps essential Berber botanical knowledge alive.

SLEEPING & EATING

Rustic cold-water accommodation options here have gotten spiffier of late, both in Imlil proper and in *gîtes* lining the lush terrace-farmed valley to the east of Imlil. During major European holidays it's best

to reserve, but otherwise you can try your luck at the *gîtes* once you get to town. Prices increase by at least 15% in high season between April and October; some places close in the cold off-season between November and February.

Budget

Hôtel el-Aïne (☎ 024 485625; rooftop beds Dh30, r per person Dh45) Get the light, pleasant upstairs rooms clustered around a tranquil courtyard with an old walnut tree; expect hot showers and shared toilets.

CAF Refuge (☎ 024 485612; www.caf-maroc.com; dm CAF & HI members/nonmembers Dh35/58, camping per person/per tent Dh6/12) A climbers' hostel offers dorm-style bunks, cooking facilities, and first-aid equipment; show your Lonely Planet guidebook to get the HI rate. CAF also offers camping.

Hotel Café Aksoual (☎ 024 485612; s/d/tr/q Dh70/80/100/120) One of the larger hotels in town, with clean comfortable rooms, hot showers and reliable trekking advice from manager/guide Hassan.

Hôtel Etoile de Toubkal (☎ 024 485618; s/d/tr Dh120/160/230, d with bathroom Dh250) Not exactly a scenic view of the parking at the village entrance, but the reasonable rooms each have a balcony and some have a bathroom.

Atlas Gîte Imlil (Chez Jean Pierre; ☎/fax 024 485609; d with half-board Dh170; ☒ mid-Feb–end Oct) Four basic rooms with communal bathrooms, cosy sitting areas, and a bar and restaurant serving Moroccan food with a hint of Burgundy.

Dar Adrar (☎ 070 726809; <http://toubkl.guide.free.fr/gite>; d incl breakfast/half-board Dh220/330) Sitting on top of the world and Imlil, Dar Adrar has simple rooms that don't distract from the mountaintop views, an in-house hammam (Dh40, book ahead) and an invaluable resource in owner and expert Atlas Mountain guide Mohamed Aztat.

Café-Hotel Soleil (☎/fax 024 485622; d incl breakfast without/with bathroom Dh170/220, per person without/with bathroom half-board Dh170/220) Spartan but clean, with beds or mattresses on the floor, hot showers and meals on the terrace overlooking the river. Located opposite the *bureau de guides*.

Top End

Kasbah du Toubkal (☎ 024 485611, 061 343337; www.kasbahdutoubkal.com; incl breakfast d/tr Dh1430/2750, ste

Dh3410-4850) This converted historic kasbah (1800m) lords it over Imlil with panoramic views of snowy peaks and verdant valleys. The UK-based ownership and local Imlil staff run the place with the environment and community in mind, and levy a 5% community tariff on stays that has helped build a local girls' school and purchase an ambulance. Eleven bedrooms range from quaintly cute to kasbah cool, and three 'Berber salons' with sleeping lofts allow families and groups to bunk communally. At guests' disposal are a traditional hammam (book ahead), board games for playing fireside, local staff who seem genuinely glad to see you – no snootiness here – and excellent meals (Dh180 to Dh250).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Frequent local buses (Dh15, 1½ hours) and grands taxis (Dh30, one hour) leave south of Bab er-Rob in Marrakesh (south of the medina) to Asni. Local minibuses and very occasional taxis travel the final 17km between Asni and Imlil (Dh15 to Dh20, one hour). Expect a car journey from Marrakesh to Imlil to take at least 2.5 hours.

TO THE TIZI N'TEST

Even with white knuckles and gritted teeth, you'll have to admire the route to Taroudannt as it winds through the High Atlas, careens over the Tizi n'Test at 2092m, then swoops down onto the Souss plain. As if the road weren't enough of an adventure, the weather is subject to sudden changes. Heavy clouds and mist often cut visibility to near zero at the top of the pass and you might find your way blocked by snow in winter, so check weather conditions before leaving.

Along the way, you might stop for an overnight stay at the pretty town of Ouirgane, 15km south of Asni, or forge onward to visit ancient **Tin Mal mosque**. Tin Mal village is on the right of the road coming from Marrakesh, just past a kasbah perched on a rocky outcrop to your left. The village's Almohad-era mosque was built in 1156 in honour of the dynasty's strict spiritual leader, Mohammed ibn Tumart, who left a trail of smashed wine jugs and musical instruments in his wake. The mosque is still used for Friday prayers, but on other days the guardian will usher you through its

massive doors and rose-coloured archways into the serene prayer hall (Dh10 to Dh20 tip expected).

A former French Legionnaire's retreat, **Au Sanglier Qui Fume** (☎/fax 044 485707; www.ausanglierquifume.com; km 61, Route de Taroudannt; s incl breakfast/half-board Dh325/420, d incl breakfast/half-board Dh415/605, d ste incl breakfast/half-board Dh505-655/Dh695-845; 🍽️) has been run by the same French family since 1945. All 15 rooms and 10 suites have private bathrooms, and most have fireplaces or wood stoves. The chronically restless can initiate tournaments of billiards, table tennis and darts, and take horse-riding excursions and mountain-bike trips (rental Dh100 per day).

Nature lovers flock like Barbary sheep to environmentally minded **Dar Tassa** (☎ 079 886081; www.dartassa.com; Douar Tassa Ouirgane; d Dh605, ste Dh660-770), in the mountain hamlet of Tassa Ouirgane (1300m) adjoining the Takherhort nature preserve near Ouirgane. Ask about excursions and treks in the preserve to see Barbary sheep, Amaseen gazelles, and other rare and endangered species. Afterwards, weary trekkers will appreciate Jacuzzis in the suites, and rest easy knowing that a percentage of the room rate helps the High Atlas Foundation plant trees locally.

Romantic enough to soften the flintiest cynic, **Chez Momo** (☎ 024 485704; www.aubergemomo.com, in French; Route de Taroudannt, 62km, 150m off main road in Ouirgane town centre; d/ste half-board Dh650/880; 🍽️) has six get-cosy rooms with wrought-iron beds and suggestive lighting overlooking the wildflower garden and pool; suites have fireplaces.

Grands taxis (Dh25 per person) run to Ouirgane occasionally from Bab er-Rob in Marrakesh.

TO THE TIZI N'TICHKA

Higher than the Tizi n'Test to the west but an easier drive, the Tizi n'Tichka connects Marrakesh with the pre-Sahara oases – when the weather cooperates. In winter check with the **Gendarmerie of the Col du Tichka** (☎ 024 890615) whether the pass is open; in 2005, several tourists stranded on the pass died in their car.

Soon after Ait Ourir and the road leading to the Zat Valley, the ascending road takes a turn for the scenic amid oak trees, walnut groves and oleander bushes. Past the village

of Taddert, the road gets steeper and the landscape is stripped of colour, except for hardy wildflowers and kids along the road selling geodes dyed shocking red and green. At the top of the Tizi n'Tichka pass, reward yourself with a bracing espresso and views at café-restaurant **Assanfou** (☎ 061 132130; ☎ 9am-7pm). You can also reach the Tizi n'Tichka on foot through the spectacular Zat Valley.

Once over the pass, you descend into the lunar landscape of the Anti Atlas and the desert beyond. Instead of staying on the paved road from Tizi n'Tichka to Ouarzazate, those with a 4WD or mountain bike could follow the 36km of rough *piste* south from Telouet along the Ouadi Ounila through Anmiter and Tamdaght to Ait Benhaddou. Most hotels in Telouet can arrange guides and mules for the walk for around Dh250 to Dh300 per day.

Zat Valley

For decades trekkers have jealously guarded the secret of one of the most pristine hidden valleys in the High Atlas, but the Zat Valley isn't about to let fame go to its splendid trailhead. When Marrakesh is sweating it out just 50km to the northwest, breezes are rippling through barley and swaying poplar trees along the footpaths of this charmed river valley.

To get here, take the N9 to Ouarzazate until it crosses the Oued Zat at Ait Ourir, then head south towards the transport town of Tighdouine at the near end of the valley. Tighdouine has tasty roadside tajines and a peculiar frontier feel as the last stop before entering Zat's land of make-believe: gardens built right into cliff faces, stone houses with bright-blue doors and white-framed windows, and movie-star-beautiful families leaning out to say hello.

This is all best appreciated on foot or mule. There's a road winding above the valley floor, but only physicist drivers able to calculate clearance in millimetres should attempt it. Development has been further limited by the designation of airspace over the Zat Valley as a national security zone that must be left clear of electrical stations and cell towers. Time seems to have forgotten the Zat Valley, which is a mixed blessing: some small villages here are without running water or access for medical

emergencies, and children walk upwards of 8km one way to reach the nearest school.

But without spoiling the local landscape, the local self-help association has come up with a home remedy: two- to five-day walking tours, with mules for anyone who gets weak in the knees from the Zat Valley's natural beauty. **L'Association des Amis du Zat** (☎ 024 485543; azat96@yahoo.fr) organises scenic walking tours of the valley for groups of six or more. Suggested donations for treks including trail guide, meals, overnight stays and mules as needed are on a sliding scale from Dh400 to Dh750 per day.

Hikers stay overnight at picturesque stopping points along the valley at any of three *gîtes* run by the association and built by local villagers with donations from the many trekkers besotted with this valley over the years. When villagers who eke out a living from tiny terrace plots invite you home for their best homemade bread, butter, walnuts and wild sage tea, the hardest hearts melt like snow on the High Atlas mountains visible from the Zat Valley. In terms of etiquette, it's fine to offer a small monetary token of appreciation, but don't press the issue if refused – and save larger donations for the association, who use it wisely on such critical community projects as bridges, reforestation, literacy programs and a medical dispensary.

Telouet

Before 1928 there was no avoiding this stop on the trans-Saharan caravan route: anyone passing through the Tizi n'Tichka paid tolls to local warlords for the privilege. But Telouet's privileged position ended in 1953, when native son and French collaborator Pasha Glaoui was ousted by the Moroccan Independence movement. Legend has it that when the imposing doors of Telouet's Glaoui kasbah were thrown open at last, locals who had mysteriously disappeared from their villages years before stumbled dazed onto Telouet streets, having spent years locked in the Glaoui basement. But the new state was ambivalent about the Glaoui clan's hometown, and with little outside investment and a paved road bypassing the town entirely, Telouet seems arrested in time half a century ago.

The once-glorious **Glaoui kasbah** (admission by donation, Dh10 suggested) has been left to

crumble, and the best indication of Telouet's former position as the centre of a trading empire is the 2nd-floor receiving court. No less than 300 artisans were recruited (if that's the word) to complete salons faced with stucco, *zellij* and painted cedar ceilings that make Marrakesh's royal Bahia Palace seem like a freshman artisan effort. See this architectural masterpiece while you can – ceilings have already collapsed in the many rooms marked with a red X.

SLEEPING & EATING

Along the narrow river valley oases beyond Telouet are more crumbling Glaoui kasbahs, ancient fortified villages such as **Anmiter** (11km from Telouet, accessible by bus) and sudden flashes of green and silver along the river below. The best way to visit these is through **ourpick Homestays Morocco** (☎ 77840487; www.homestaysmorocco.net), which arranges overnight stays with local families in and around the village of Tighza to provide much-needed income to this remote subsistence farming community 21km from Telouet by *piste*. The family-welcome received by guests is that of a minor football hero, meals are farm-fresh and embarrassingly generous, and the stars seem within reach at night. Tighza native Mohamed El Qasemy and his British wife Caroline (yes, they met on vacation) run this program, and at the time of writing are finishing a new solar- and wind-powered kasbah guest house in Tighza (call ☎ 77840487 for availability and rates), and manage **Baraka Community Partnerships** (www.barakacommunity.com), which organises volunteers to build schools, plant trees and supply basic medical care (see p477).

In Telouet, **Auberge Lion D'Or** (☎ 024 888507; mattress on roof Dh25, d half-board Dh250) has 16 rooms with private bathrooms, simple pine beds and a convenient location on the kasbah's doorstep. They also make filling *panachés* (fruit smoothies), although the deluxe version with almond milk, avocado, banana and imported kiwi is perhaps too much of a good thing. For other meals, try the restaurants around Telouet's central square, where you'll find Dh40 tajines and Dh30 Berber omelettes (with tomato, olives and mountain herbs).

Halfway between the turn-off for Telouet and Aït Benhaddou is **ourpick I Rocha** (☎ 067 737002; www.irocha.com; Tisseldi, Ighrem N'Oudal; d half-

تلوات

Before 1928 there was no avoiding this stop on the trans-Saharan caravan route: anyone passing through the Tizi n'Tichka paid tolls to local warlords for the privilege. But Telouet's privileged position ended in 1953, when native son and French collaborator Pasha Glaoui was ousted by the Moroccan Independence movement. Legend has it that when the imposing doors of Telouet's Glaoui kasbah were thrown open at last, locals who had mysteriously disappeared from their villages years before stumbled dazed onto Telouet streets, having spent years locked in the Glaoui basement. But the new state was ambivalent about the Glaoui clan's hometown, and with little outside investment and a paved road bypassing the town entirely, Telouet seems arrested in time half a century ago.

The once-glorious **Glaoui kasbah** (admission by donation, Dh10 suggested) has been left to

board per person Dh460; 🏠), a cliffside guest house that lifts you and your travel-worn spirits way up over the green river valley below. The 10 rooms have easygoing Berber charm, with painted ceilings, folk art on reclaimed Styrofoam and slinky *tadelakt* walls. Owners Ahmed and Katherine provide a family-style setting and terrific French-Moroccan dishes with herbs fresh from the terrace garden; guests can learn how to cook them for Dh350. To unwind after guided hikes to the Fint Oasis and nearby natural springs, go for a hammam (Dh80) and dip in the small pool.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From the N9 Marrakesh–Ouarzazate Rd, the turn-off to Telouet is a few kilometres beyond the pass. There's a daily bus from Bab Gehmat in Marrakesh (Dh55), which returns to Marrakesh at 7am. A bus leaves Ouarzazate at noon, also returning at 7am (Dh40 to Dh50). Grands taxis may be an option for Dh50 to Dh70 per seat, but you might get stuck renting out all six seats.

AÏT BENHADDOU

آيت بنحدر

Introductions aren't strictly necessary, since you'll probably recognise this red mud-brick kasbah 32km from Ouarzazate from such films as *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Jesus of Nazareth* (for which much of Aït Benhaddou was rebuilt), *Jewel of the Nile* (note the suspiciously Egyptian tapered gate towers) and *Gladiator*. Like certain Botoxed stars, this UNESCO-protected kasbah seems a little too frozen in time; with the help of Hollywood touch-ups it still resembles its youthful days in the 11th century as an Almoravid caravanserai.

From the Hôtel la Kasbah, head down past the souvenir stalls and you'll see the kasbah on the other side of the parched Oued Ounila riverbed. But where are all the people? In recent years the population of the Aït Benhaddou kasbah has dwindled, giving the place the eerie feeling of a deserted stage-set around sunset. The few remaining residents make a few dirham providing you access through their family homes to the kasbah (Dh10 tip customary). Climb the kasbah to see a ruined *agadir* (fortified granary) with magnificent views of the surrounding *palmerie* and unforgiving *hammada* (stony desert).

A less retouched kasbah can be found 7km north along the tarmac from Aït Benhaddou: the **Tamdaght kasbah** (Dh10 tip to caretaker), yet another crumbling Glaoui fortification topped by storks' nests.

Sleeping

Auberge Baraka (☎ 024 890305; fax 024 886273; mattresses on terrace Dh30, s/d Dh100/170) When convenience is paramount, the Baraka offers simple, serviceable rooms with private bathrooms and a Moroccan restaurant (set menu Dh80) in the middle of town.

Riad Maktoub (☎ 024 888694; www.riadmaktoub.com; Aït Benhaddou; d half-board Dh500, ste half-board Dh600-1100) Within these pisé walls are several rooms overlooking the garden courtyard and four with fireplaces. The suites seem a tad overdressed for the desert with fussy heavy fabrics and movie-prop knick-knacks; the snug, spare doubles with comfy new mattresses are the sweet deal here.

Kasbah Ellouze (☎ 024 890459; www.kasbahellouze.com; Tamdaght; s/d half-board with shared bathroom Dh528/704, s/d half-board with private bathroom Dh737/924, ste half-board Dh1364) Situated in Tamdaght, 7km north of Aït Benhaddou, this new pisé guest house blends in with the ancient Glaoui kasbah, located within the adjacent walled village and overlooking almond orchards (*luz* means almonds). Tower rooms with shared bathrooms are great value, while the green-tiled suite is spiffy but not any more special than the stylish air-conditioned doubles in the annex across the alley.

Dar Mouna (☎ 028 843054; www.darmouna.com; s/d incl breakfast Dh480/600, s/d half-board Dh720/840, ste incl breakfast/half-board Dh780/960; 🏠 🚿 🚽) An elegant pisé guest house that threatens to steal scenes from the movie star of a kasbah directly across the valley. Light, high-ceilinged rooms facing the valley are the ones to get, though split-level suites are ideal for families. Meals feature herbs grown in the garden, home-made honey, home-baked bread and a priceless terrace view. Amenities include a bar, hammam, oversized chlorinated pool and on-site rental for bikes, mules and dromedaries.

Eating

Auberge SouSou (near the entrance to the kasbah; meals from Dh30), this roadside eatery serves a no-fuss Dh30 sandwich, Dh40 Berber

omelette and variable Dh40 to Dh60 tajines on dusty yet cheerful garden furniture.

Auberge Cafe-Restaurant Bilal (☎ 068 248370)

For lunch with a view, pull up a patio chair and gaze at Ait Benhaddou across the way. Set menus with salad, plat du jour and dessert are Dh90 for individuals or Dh65 for groups.

Getting There & Away

To get here from Ouarzazate, take the main road towards Marrakesh as far as the sign-posted turn-off (22km); Ait Benhaddou is another 9km down a bitumen road. Cycling from Ouarzazate takes around three hours.

Grands taxis run from outside Ouarzazate bus station when full (Dh20 per person) and from the turn-off (Dh120 one-way or Dh250 to Dh350 half-day with return). Minibuses run from Tamdaght to Ouarzazate in the morning when full.

OUARZAZATE

pop 79,000

Strategically located enough that it didn't have to be scenic, Ouarzazate (war-zazat)

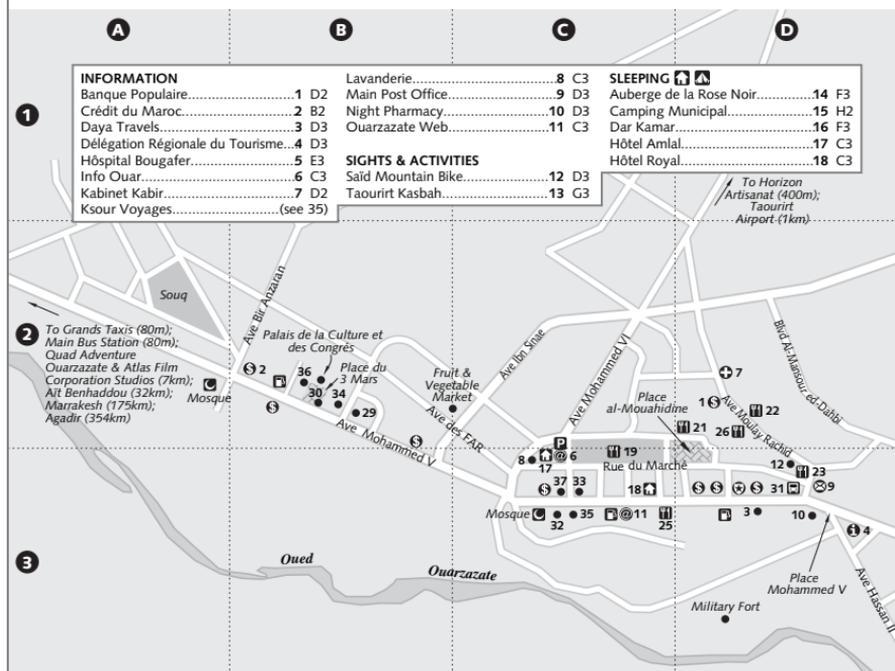
ورزازت

has historically gotten by on its wits instead of its looks. The sprawling Taourirt kasbah was built on prime commercial real-estate, and for centuries it was where people from the Atlas, Drâa and Dadès valleys converged to do business. The modern town you see today was built as a French garrison town in the 1920s so that the protectorate could keep a watchful eye on its business interests. The movie business gradually took off in Ouarzazate after the protectorate left in the 1950s, and the region of Ouarzazate has since built quite a résumé as a body-double for Tibet, Rome, Somalia and Egypt.

Ouarzazate is always ready for action, with well-stocked supermarkets where you can pick up essential desert supplies from wet wipes to whisky. With scores of travel and rental agencies offering bikes, motorbikes and camels, this is an ideal launching pad for the mountains, desert and gorges. But from November to March, come prepared for icy winds that can come whipping down from the High Atlas Mountains without warning.

Business-savvy Ouarzazate has traditionally catered to captive package tourists

OUARZAZATE



instead of independent travellers, and as a result it's been seen as a holding pen for tourists chomping at the bit to get to the dunes. But now that King Mohammed VI has been spending time here and fixing up the roads, Ouarzazate is working hard to rebuild its desert mystique. The new brick plaza at the centre of town is having its intended effect of drawing locals and visitors for balmy desert evening strolls, and the golf course on the east end of town has been wisely left to resume its life as a desert. Still, if Ouarzazate really wants to get in touch with its caravanserai roots, the generic condo-hotel complexes under construction may need rethinking.

Information

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 190; Ave Mohammed V)

INTERNET ACCESS

Info Ouar (per hr Dh10) Around the corner from Hôtel Amlal.

Ouarzazate Web (Ave Mohammed V; per hr Dh10) Centrally located and professionally run.

LAUNDRY

Lavanderie (Rue du Marché; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-8pm; washers Dh30, dryers Dh20) Near Hôtel Amlal, has modern washers and dryers.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hôpital Bougafer (☎ 024 882444; Ave Mohammed V) Public hospital east of the tourist office.

Kabinet Kabir (☎ 024 885276) More reliable private clinic used by resident expatriates.

Night Pharmacy (☎ 024 882490; Ave Mohammed V; 8am-1pm & 3.30-11pm)

MONEY

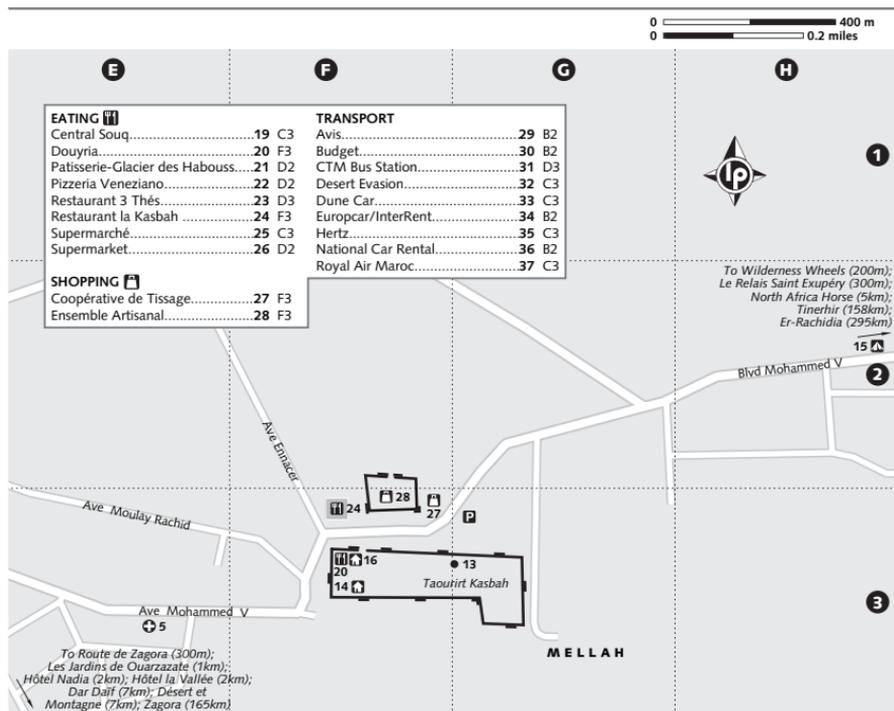
There are plenty of banks on the northern end of Ave Mohammed V, all with ATMs.

Banque Populaire (Ave Moulay Rachid; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 2.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 3-6pm Sat, 9am-1pm Sun)

Crédit du Maroc (cnr Ave Mohammed V & Ave Bir Anzaran) At the western end of town; offers cash advances on your credit card.

POST & TELEPHONE

There are numerous téléboutiques in the centre.



Main post office (Ave Mohammed V; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat) Postal services and a direct-dial international phone.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Délégation Régionale du Tourisme (ONMT; ☎ 024 882485; fax 024 885290; Ave Mohammed V; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Unusually sharp and helpful tourist office.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Daya Travels (☎/fax 024 887707; www.dayatravels.com; Ave Mohammed V) English-speaking Dutch-Moroccan owners organise desert excursions, rent mountain bikes and provide free bike-trail maps.

Desert Dream (☎ 024 885343; www.sahara-desert-dream.com; 4 Blvd Al-Mansour ed-Dahbi) Budget-minded, friendly agency offers fixed-rate, all-inclusive excursions to the desert or the gorges by camel, 4WD or on foot. Located opposite from Berber Palace Hotel.

Désert et Montagne (☎ 024 854949; www.desert-montagne.ma, in French) Morocco's first female mountain guide and her company organise trips designed for women and families to meet Berber women in the mountains. Other options include walking and 4WD trips in the High Atlas, desert trips of three to 15 days, and longer trips following caravan routes. Operates from Dar Daïf (see opposite).

Ksour Voyages (☎ 024 882840; www.ksour-voyages.com; 11 Place du 3 Mars) Books flights and organises trips from mountain hikes to 4WD desert excursions with English-speaking drivers; also rents mountain bikes.

Sights

Unlike other Glaoui kasbahs, **Taurirt Kasbah** (Dh10; ☎ 8am-6.30pm) escaped ruin by taking a gig as a Hollywood backdrop in *Star Wars* and attracting the attention of Unesco, which has carefully restored small sections of the Glaoui inner-sanctum, including unfurnished reception areas and living quarters. You can also wander through the village inside the kasbah walls, and crafty bargainers may be able to cut some good deals in these backstreet shops.

Movie buffs and their kids might get a kick out of **Atlas Film Corporation Studios** (☎ 024 882212/23; www.atlastudios.com; adult/concession Dh30/15; ☎ 8.30-11.50am & 2.30-5.50pm, guided tours every 30-40 minutes), where you can see sets and props from the famous movies filmed at the first 'Ouallywood' studio, including *Jewel of the Nile* and Martin Scorsese's *Kundun*. It's 5km west of town on the Marrakesh road, but easily accessible on the yellow STUDID bus (see p345). Who knows, you may even get discovered by a talent scout looking for

extras – though as locals point out, the Dh40 to Dh100 day rates for extras aren't exactly Screen Actors' Guild pay.

Activities

Though many agencies and hotels still offer them, quad bikes cause considerable damage to the fragile local desert ecosystem and are not recommended. Already quad use is being restricted in Merzouga, and with growing awareness of the environmental issues they raise along with inevitable clouds of dust, Ouarzazate, Zagora and Mhamid may follow suit.

Said Mountain Bike (☎ 062 869324; www.saidmountainbike.com; Ave Moulay Rachid cnr Rue de la Poste; per day/week Dh220/990) keeps a fleet of 43 mountain bikes in top condition, and offers mountain biking-, mule- and dromedary-excursions into the mountains and desert.

For professionally guided off-*piste* motorbike tours throughout southern Morocco, contact British-run **Wilderness Wheels** (☎ 024 888128, in Marrakesh 024 330443; www.wildernesswheels.com; 44 Hay al-Qods, excursions starting at 3 days/2 nights for Dh8470) just off Ave Mohammed V. Prices include overnight stays, complete riding gear and a support car for up to 20 bikes. The company can also arrange for tours to start in Marrakesh from its Marrakesh office.

North Africa Horse (☎ 024 886689; www.northafricahorse.fr, in French; Route de Skoura, opposite Royal Golf Ouarzazate), located 20km from Ouarzazate, arranges stunts with horses and dromedaries for Hollywood productions and organises five- to six-day horse and camel trips. They sometimes put on a touristy horse show with re-enactments of stunts the proprietors performed in *Kingdom of Heaven*, *Gladiator* and *Alexander the Great*.

Festivals & Events

Within Ouarzazate itself, the *moussem* of Sidi Daoud is held in August. **Marathon des Sables** (www.saharamarathon.co.uk) is a seven-day ultramarathon in the desert where you can only take what you can carry on your back (besides water). The course changes each March/April, and is revealed when runners converge in Ouarzazate.

Sleeping BUDGET

Most of the good hotel deals in town can either be found on and around the main

drag of Ave Mohammed V or 1km to 2km along the Route de Zagora.

Camping Municipal (☎ 024 888322; camping per person Dh15 plus per car/tent site Dh10/5) Signposted next to the 'Tourist Complex' off the main road out of town about 3km from the bus station, alongside the Oued Ouarzazate. Mostly for motor-homes but there are spots for tents under trees, new bathrooms, hot showers (Dh6), a basic restaurant and electrical hookups for Dh20.

Hôtel Royal (☎ 024 890042; 24 Ave Mohammed V; s/d/tr no shower & shared toilet Dh45/80/100, shower & shared toilet 70/100/140, private bathroom Dh90/120/160) Central and far more pleasant than you'd expect for the price, though bring earplugs for rooms facing the street. The terrace and courtyard are traveller hangouts with fresh juices, good coffee, passable pizza (Dh 45) and tajines (Dh40).

Hôtel Nadia (☎ 024 854940; km 2 Route de Zagora; s/d incl breakfast Dh180/200; 📶 📺 📺) With shiny new tiled bathrooms and guestrooms, bouncy new beds, chipper staff and a suitably modest pool, this place is a welcome switch from the usual dusty budget hotels and faux kasbahs.

Hôtel Amlal (☎ 024 884030; www.hotel-amlal.com; 24 Rue du Marché; s/d/tr/q Dh200/250/300/350; 📶) A block north of Ave Mohammed V, Hôtel Amlal is surprisingly calm, cordial and dustless. Rooms have iron bedsteads, teensy TVs and endearingly quirky decor-schemes.

Hôtel La Vallée (☎ 024 854034; www.la-vallee.mezgarne.com; 2km on Route de Zagora; s/d 100/120 with shared bathroom, s/d/ste with private bathroom Dh160/300/350; 📶 📺) Trekkers, bikers and families easily fill these 41 rooms, and live musical accompaniment makes the meal-time race to the poolside Berber tent buffet even more madcap (breakfast Dh20). Stuccoed ceilings, desert murals and reliably hot showers add that something extra.

MIDRANGE

Les Jardins de Ouarzazate (☎ 024 854200; www.lesjardinsdeouarzazate.com; 1km Route de Zagora; d incl breakfast/half-board Dh440/550; 📶 📺 wi-fi) Overlooking a *palmeraie*, this hotel is less starkly urban than its neighbours. The lobby is an overwhelming 21-gun salute to Moroccan decor schemes and there's an ostentatiously huge chlorinated pool, but the 27 rooms are more serene, and the wi-fi-enabled

garden tents let you email amid bucolic splendour.

TOP END

ourpick Dar Kamar (☎ 024 888733; www.darkamar.com; 45 Kasbah Taourirt; s Dh880-1078, d Dh1100-1320; 📶) You'd never guess this warm, exuberant pisé guest house was a stern 17th-century Glaoui courthouse in its former life. Even the decor has a sense of humour: upturned tajines serve as sinks, rope pulleys become banisters and local ironworkers went wild on the bathrooms (a hammam is in the works). The staff delight in making cultural connections, and organise village photography excursions that benefit the village self-help association so that when cameras click, photographers really connect with their subject.

Auberge de la Rose Noir (☎ 024 882016; Quartier de la Mosquée, Hay Taourirt; d Dh850-950, ste Dh1350) Hidden inside the kasbah in a pisé house across the *derb* (alley) from her grandfather's house, owner Rose Hitti has created a romantic seven-room getaway with mood lighting, generous beds and gossamer fabrics. Bonuses include babysitting services and a direct-trade exposition of carpets by local women at prices set by the weaver (Dh200 to Dh2000).

Dar Daïf (☎ 024 854232; www.dardaif.ma, in French; Douar Talmasla; d/tr incl breakfast Dh370/814, ste incl breakfast Dh1166-1661; 📶 📺) Right on the edge of the *palmeraie* near the ruined Kasbah des Cigognes, this reinvented pisé kasbah is a maze of courtyards, hideaway guest rooms, private suite terraces and a terrace pool. The hammam is free, but dinner is compulsory (adults/children Dh188/110). To get here, head 1.5km along the road to Zagora, take a left turn at the sign after Hotel la Vallée, and follow signs along the 5km *piste*.

Eating

Pâtisserie-Glacier des Habous (Rue du Marché; ☎ 6am-10pm) The magnetic appeal is irresistible on balmy evenings, when all strolls lead here for French *éclairs* (Dh7) and Moroccan pastries and ice cream. In the mornings, trekkers and locals alike line up for good fresh baguettes (Dh10), *croissants* (Dh2.5) and coffee.

Pizzeria Veneziano (☎ 024 887676; Ave Moulay Rachid; pizzas Dh30-45, ☎ noon-9.30pm) A bright, good-value place, Veneziano serves tasty

thin-crust pizzas with some good local toppings like desert herbs and goat cheese, plus the usual pastas, real Italian espresso and a large menu of *panachés* (Dh15).

Restaurant 3 Thés (☎ 024 886363; cnr Ave Moulay Rachid & Rue de la Poste; mains Dh30-55; ☎ lunch & dinner) The wrought-iron sidewalk seating and get-cosy interiors say Paris café, but the menu says tasty vegetarian tajines (Dh30), cheeseburgers (Dh35), meat tajines with figs, prunes and almonds (Dh55).

Restaurant la Kasbah (☎ 024 882033; Ave Mohammed V; mains Dh60-80, set menus Dh98; ☎ lunch & dinner) With pleasant terraces overlooking the Taourirt Kasbah, this restaurant is inevitably popular with exhausted sightseers, and makes a well-spiced beef couscous.

Douyria (☎ 024 885288; 72 Ave Mohammed V; mains Dh80-110; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Try this for romance: candlelit dinner in a nook lined with purple and green cushions, all on a terrace atop the Taourirt Kasbah. Go with the specialty couscous and vaguely sweet milk *brik* (pastry) for dinner, and come back together tomorrow for breakfast under the umbrella – ouch, those ironwork chairs get hot.

Le Relais Saint Exupéry (☎ 024 887779; www.relaisaintexupery.com; 13 Blvd Moulay Abdallah; set menu Dh90-260, dinner mains Dh90-130; ☎ lunch & dinner, closed Wed lunch & Jul) No, that's not a desert mirage: you really do have a choice of grilled duck with wine-mustard reduction or the dromedary meat special. If you find it odd to come across such adventurous gastronomy in a suburb near the Ouarzazate airport, that's the point: this airport was an inspiration to *Little Prince* author and pilot, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

SELF-CATERING

The **Supermarché** (Ave Mohammed V) carries all the desert essentials: water, toothpaste, lip balm, packaged soups, cookies, film, vodka and argan anti-cellulite lotion. There's another larger **supermarket** (Ave Moulay Rachid) with imported European foods. Fresh cheese, meat and vegetables can be found at the daily **central souq** (Rue du Marché).

Shopping

Opposite the entrance to the kasbah is the **Coopérative de Tissage** (Weaving Cooperative; ☎ 024 884057; Ave Mohammed V), where you can glimpse local women artisans at work on

hanbels (locally woven carpets) and embroidered straw mats, and take one home at fixed prices of Dh550 to Dh750 per sq metre. Next door is the **Ensemble Artisanal** (☎ 9am-noon & 3-6.30pm), the state-run showroom with stone carvings, pottery and woollen carpets woven by the region's Ouzguita Berbers. On the north side of town, **Horizon Artisanat** (☎ 024 882415; 181 Ave de la Victoire; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) sells handmade pottery, metalwork and carpets produced by the local Horizon Association, which works to integrate disabled children and adults into the community.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Two kilometres north of town is **Taurirt airport** (☎ 024 882383). There is no bus into town, but a taxi should cost Dh35 to Dh60.

Royal Air Maroc (RAM; ☎ 024 885102; 1 Ave Mohammed V) has daily flights direct to Casablanca (from Dh1690, one hour), morning flights to London via Casablanca and multiple flights daily to Paris via Casablanca, as well as regular charter flights from Belgium, France and Germany.

BUS

The most convenient way to arrive is with **CTM** (☎ 024 882427; Blvd Mohammed V), as its station is bang in the centre of town near the post office. It has buses to Marrakesh (Dh65, five hours, three daily) and Casablanca (Dh135, 8½ hours, one daily).

At the main bus station, 1.5km north-west of the town centre, Trans-Ghazala has buses to Marrakesh (Dh65, four to five hours, six daily) and Satas has a bus to Er-Rachidia (Dh75, six hours) at 11am. There are frequent departures to Agadir (Dh115, four to five hours, six daily), Boumalne du Dadès (Dh25, five daily) and Taroudannt (Dh75, five hours, five daily); one of these goes via Tazenakht (Dh20), Fom Zguid (Dh45, four hours) and Tata (Dh60, five hours). Services also go to M'Hamid (Dh70, seven hours, four daily) via Zagora (Dh45, four hours).

CAR

To stop at will at splendid *ksour* (castles) along the Drâa Valley en route to the desert, you might want to rent a car (from Dh350 per day). In a bus or grand taxi you'll sim-

ply speed past and arrive in Zagora disappointed. Most of the car-rental agencies are on Ave Mohammed V and Place du 3 Mars, and include:

Avis (☎ 024 888000; www.avis.com; cnr Ave Mohammed V & Place du 3 Mars)

Budget (☎ 024 884202; www.budget.com; Ave Mohammed V & airport)

Desert Evasion (☎ 024 888682; www.desert-evasion.net; lmm El Ghifari, Ave Mohamed V) 4WD with local drivers for custom itineraries at set rates (Dh1250 to Dh800 depending on car type). Payment due upon receipt of keys.

Dune Car (☎ 024 887391; fax 024 884901; Ave Mohammed V) Reliable and much cheaper than the international agencies; also has 4WDs.

Europcar/InterRent (☎ 024 882035; www.europcar.com; Place du 3 Mars)

Hertz (☎ 024 882084; www.hertz.com; 33 Ave Mohammed V)

National Car Rental (☎ 024 885244; Place du 3 Mars)

TAXI

Taxis leave from outside the main bus station to Agdz (Dh30), Aït Benhaddou (Dh20), Boumalne du Dadès (Dh40), Marrakesh (Dh90 to Dh110), Skoura (Dh15), Tinerhir (Dh55) and Zagora (Dh70).

Getting Around

There are shared petits taxis that run up and down Ave Mohammed V for the flat rate of Dh5 per person (based on three people sharing). The yellow STUDID bus (Dh5) runs a half-hourly service up and down Ave Mohammed V.

DRĀA VALLEY

وادة درعة

Until you see the desolate Drāa Valley, there's just no way to comprehend the amazing feat of Morocco's existence. Before the Almoravids could conquer territory from Marrakesh all the way up to Barcelona, and Saadians could seize control of the Saharan sugar and gold trades, first they had to get past unassailable gorges, mud-brick watchtowers and fiercely autonomous oases. Today a well-paved road and cushy hotels make the going considerably less rough, yet still there's something about this landscape so exposed to the elements that it seems wildly adventurous.

From Ouarzazate the N9 plunges south-east into the Drāa Valley, formed by a narrow ribbon of water from the High Atlas that carved through the rock and occasionally seeps into the sand before emerging triumphantly in a lush oasis. The lushest and most fascinating section of the valley lies between Agdz and Zagora, a stretch of about 95km. Beyond that, a road takes you 96km further south to M'Hamid, a town 40km short of the Algerian border that recently opened as a major desert tourism destination and still has a no-man's-land feel.

The drive to Zagora takes three to four hours. With a 4WD, you can take the slower, more scenic route on the *piste* that runs parallel to the road and the river from Tamnougalt to Zagora.

AGDZ

Travellers who zoom from Ouarzazate to Zagora are missing out on Agdz (ag-dez), a classic caravan oasis with a still-pristine *palmeraie*, mud-brick kasbah, clever gardens, Thursday farmers' market (October–November) and great lodgings heading east off the paved main road onto narrow *pistes*. The tajine-shaped Jebel Kissane overlooks the town, and 20km away is the 1660m Tizi n'Tiniffitt. Agdz crafts traditions include carving, pottery and basket-weaving, and you might find some examples along with saffron-coloured carpets, from nearby Tazenakht in shops along the main thoroughfare.

One fascinating stop for passionate gardeners on the way out of town is the **Association Development Hart Chaou community garden project** (☎ 076 872842; tasawante@hotmail.com; Hart Chaou, km 1 south of Agdz; donation appreciated; ☎ call ahead for entry). In the past decade, this small agricultural village bypassed by time and tourism faced droughts and tough times. Several families had no land, water or other means to support themselves – so the village rallied, and designated a vacant lot near a functioning well as a community garden. Villagers took turns using the water and communal compost pile, and two years later, this small organic garden provides 80% of the nutritional needs of the village's 114 families. To see this amazing oasis, call gatekeeper Mohammed Moussas (☎ 076 872842) at least a couple of hours ahead, and he'll meet you by the main road and lead

اكاذ

you to the garden. Try some garden-ripe fava beans or a tomato, exchange gardening tips, have some tea at the nearby school the association has started and consider a donation to help buy next year's seeds (tip: Dh200 plants an entire plot of beans or onions, and Dh800 plants tomatoes).

Sleeping & Eating

Casbah Caid Ali (☎ 024 843640; www.casbah-caidali.net; Rue Hassan II; with/without breakfast d Dh229/209, tent Dh15, Dh20 vehicle, per person plus Dh13; 🚻) Off the main road to the east is this former kasbah of the local *caïd* (leader), whose descendants have opened their historic family home to guests. Salons around the partially restored kasbah courtyard have been converted to large guestrooms with Berber motifs on the curved ceilings and simple wood and wrought-iron furnishings, all quite comfortable, with shared bathrooms. Meals (set menu Dh65 to Dh85) are served in Berber tents by the small spring-water pool (water is reused in the garden). Camp sites are available in the garden under the palms.

Rose du Sable (☎ 024 886452; www.rosedusable.com; s/d/tr Dh462/627/792; 🚻) Like a rock star in the desert, this eight-room guest house keeps a low profile but can't help but stand out, with trippy yellow stained-glass windows, Flintstone-esque inlaid-granite walls, and fully wheelchair-accessible guestrooms. The Jolie-Pitts recommend this guest house, and who are we to argue?

Dar Qamar (☎ 024 843784; www.locsdmaroc.com; Agdz; s Dh440-715, d Dh550-880, tr Dh770-990; 🚻) Red-stained pisé walls, Tinherir-tiled walkways and fish in the fountain to eat mosquitoes: much about this organically chic guest house makes you wonder why no one thought of it ages ago. You can rent bikes, explore the *palmeraie*, enjoy a glass of wine and local dates in the garden, use the in-house hammam or be led to the historic community hammams nearby.

At the entry to town on the left, there's a gas station with a kasbah convenience store and café, the **Kasbah Total** (🕒 8am-9pm, sometimes closed in summer & winter), where you can fuel up on good espresso and packaged snacks galore.

Getting There & Away

CTM and several other buses stop here en route between Ouarzazate and Zagora,

though you're not guaranteed a seat. Otherwise, occasional grands taxis go to Ouarzazate (Dh25) and Zagora (Dh28).

AGDZ TO ZAGORA

The mother of all *ksour* (castles) is the 16th-century fortified village at **Tamnougalt** (admission Dh 10; guide compulsory Dh50), one of the oldest mud-brick *ksar* still standing and an essential stop on any Moroccan architecture pilgrimage. The maze of rooms leads through a sizable *mellah*, dips underground with strategically placed skylights and candle nooks, and emerges into dazzlingly bright courtyard stables lined with horseshoe arches. See if you can distinguish between the Arab, Andalusian and Berber Jewish motifs that blend so seamlessly here.

To reach Tamnougalt turn left off the main road 4km past Agdz, then 2km east up a bumpy *piste*. **Chez Yacoub** (☎ 024 843394; www.chezyacoub.com; km 4 Route de Zagora, Agdz; half-board per person Dh250) is next door to the main *ksar*, and offers five unfussy, snug rooms arranged around a torchlit courtyard with shared bathrooms, capped by a large terrace overlooking the kasbah and the *palmeraie*. Set menu meals are Dh80.

Nearby at the edge of the *palmeraie* is **Kasbah Itrane** (☎/fax 024 843614; merrsana@gmail.com; Route de Zagora, 5km south of Agdz; per person half-board without/with bathroom Dh200/220; 🚻) with less character but clean rooms, a garden with chlorinated swimming pool and a set menu for Dh80.

If you really want to (all together now) rock the kasbahs, check out the prime specimens along the main road at Timiderte, **Kasbah Said Arabi** at Ouled Atman and the kasbah at Tinzouline, where there's also a memorable Monday souq. You'll know you're getting close to Tinzouline when you see people selling sweet local *boufeggou* dates to passing motorists. At Tansikht, about 30km before Zagora, look out for the old watchtower guarding the *palmeraie*, signposted 'Oasis Du Drâa'.

With a 4WD there are several excursions you could make along the far (north) side of the Drâa. These are signposted as '*circuitus touristiques*' from the road. From Tamnougalt you can parallel to the Drâa following a dirt road through villages, fields and splendid river vistas all the way to Zagora.

Camel rides are not only still possible in Zagora, but practically obligatory. Long camel treks in the desert might sound wildly romantic, but before you commit, try a short trek around the oasis and make sure these swaying, rocking 'ships of the desert' don't leave you sore and seasick. Cost-compare at agencies on Blvd Mohammed V before you commit (prices should start at about Dh350 per person per day) and ask about water, bedding, toilets and how many other people will be sharing your camp site.

Caravane Desert et Montagne (☎ 024 846898, 066 122312; www.caravanedesertetmontagne.com; 112 Blvd Mohammed V) partners with local nomads to create adventures off the beaten camel track for individuals and groups no larger than eight.

Other reliable agencies are:

Caravane Hamada Drāa (☎/fax 024 846930; www.hamadadraa.com, in French; Blvd Mohammed V) English-speaking guides.

Découverte Sud Maroc (☎ 024 846115; www.geocieties.com/decoussudma) Run by English-speaking, Zagora-born Mohamad Sirirou.

Irahalen (☎ 024 846178; www.iraahalen.com; Hotel Zagour, Route de M'Hamid, Amezrou) English-speaking guides by prior arrangement.

Excursions Kasbah Tifawte (☎ 024 848843; www.tifawte.com) This kohl-eyed owner was one of the first official guides in the south.

Sleeping BUDGET

Hôtel la Rose des Sables (☎ 024 847274; Ave Allal Ben Abdallah; s/d Dh50/60, with bathroom Dh60/90) Off-duty desert guides unwind in these basic, tidy rooms right off the main drag, and you might be able to coax out stories of travelers gone wild over tasty tajine meals at the sidewalk café (set menu Dh40 to Dh50).

Camping Prends Ton Temps (☎ 024 846543; <http://campingauberge.skyblog.com>, in French; Hay El-Mansour ed-Dahabi, 300m off Blvd Mohammed V to left; camping per person Dh10 plus per tent Dh5, fixed tent s/d Dh40/60, hut per person Dh30, hut with shower & toilet s/d Dh80/100) Huts, tents and shady plots to pitch your own tent. Breakfast (Dh20) and good simple meals available (Dh60).

Camping les Jardins de Zagora (☎ 024 846971, 068 961701; Amezrou; Berber tent Dh40, camping for 2 incl tent & car Dh50, r with private bathroom d Dh150) Unwind in the shade of this clean, flowered camp site next door to the hotel Ksar Tinzouline

overlooking Jebel Zagora. Beds in Berber tents come with electricity, and tajines are cooked to order (set menu Dh80).

Auberge Restaurant Chez Ali (☎ 024 846258; www.chezali.prophp.org; Ave de l'Atlas Zaouiate El Baraka; garden tents per person Dh40 & showers Dh5, r per person with breakfast/full-board Dh100/260, with terrace breakfast/full-board Dh200/360) The peacocks stalking the garden can't be bothered, but otherwise the welcome here is very enthusiastic. The skylit-rooms upstairs have new pine furnishings and tiled floors, though some mattresses are a tad lumpy. Meals are homestyle Berber cooking, and wildly popular overnight trips are run by friendly English-speaking guides Mohamed and Yusuf (book ahead).

Hotel Zagour (☎ 024 846178; www.zagour.com; Route de M'Hamid, 600m before bridge, Amezrou; d incl breakfast/half-board Dh250/400; 🚽) Ceramic castles hold remote-controls, camel reins repurposed as a towel rack, new mattresses and paint touch-ups make up for prior guests who were a tad rough on the place. Meals are by the terrace pool or in a pastel stuccoed restaurant where Marie Antoinette might feel right at home.

Hotel la Fibule du Draa (☎ 024 847318; www.zagora-desert.com; 50m to right off Route de M'Hamid, Amezrou; s/d/tr incl breakfast Dh380/430/700; 🚽) A sharp hometown team run this place like an extension of their own houses. All 24 two-tone green-cream rooms come with small fridges so you can cater your own meals and beer lugged from Ouarzazate; choose views over the pool or garden, and take full advantage of the buffet breakfast.

MIDRANGE

Ourpick Dar Raha (☎ 024 846993; <http://darraha.free.fr>; Amezrou; s/d incl breakfast Dh220/410, half-board Dh300/550) 'How thoughtful!' is the operative phrase here, from the heartfelt hello and half-price rates for kids aged five to 12 years old to oasis-appropriate details like local palm mats, recycled wire lamps and thick straw pisé walls eliminating the need for a pool or air-con. Enjoy home-cooked meals and chats in the kitchen, and check out the expo of local paintings and crafts; studio visits can be arranged here in the heart of the Amezrou *mellah*.

Kasbah Sirocco (☎ 024 846125; www.kasbah-sirocco.com; Amezrou; s/d/tr & q incl breakfast Dh425/660/957, half-board s/d Dh616/990; 🚽 🚿) The torchlit raw-pisé hall makes a dramatic

entry to light, easygoing rooms overlooking the *palmeraie*. Added attractions are savoury Moroccan cooking, especially the *mechoui* (slow-cooked lamb, Dh120; mains Dh60 to Dh70) and excursions including camel treks, desert camping and trekking. Cool off with cocktails by the needlessly huge chlorinated pool or better yet, in the subterranean stone cave bar.

Villa Zagora (☎ 024 846093; www.mavillaaushara.com; Amezrou; incl breakfast Berber tent Dh220, d with shared/private bathroom Dh286/365, ste Dh495, d half-board with shared/private bathroom Dh418/506, ste Dh638; ♿ ♿) Light, breezy, and naturally charming, with staff that fuss over you like the Moroccan aunts and uncles you never knew you had. Meals here are marathons of dishes made with the freshest ingredients; pace yourself, so the chef can show off her considerable talents. The pool is suitably small and its water is wisely used on the aromatic gardens; forget camels and read the day away on the verandah.

TOP END

Riad Lamane (☎ 024 848388; www.riadlamane.com; Amezrou; walled 'tent' half-board Dh350, bungalows per person half-board Dh600-800; ♿ ♿ wi-fi) Two-storey round mud-brick bungalows and upscale buffed-*tadelakt* 'tents' set in a pretty, wi-fi-enabled garden with a dashing handsome African-style bar. Follow the track along the irrigation canal 100m past La Fibule.

Eating & Drinking

All hotels have their own restaurants and will provide Dh100 to Dh150 set meals to nonguests by prior reservation. Moroccan fare with less flair can be had at cheap, popular restaurants along Blvd Mohammed V. Picnic makings can be found at market produce stalls, the supermarket at the northern end of town with limited supplies (no alcohol) and a bakery. The local dates are famous in Morocco, but are becoming more scarce because of the Bayoud disease, a fungus that has killed many palms across North Africa. For a stiff drink, head to La Fibule du Draa's bar (opposite) by the pool, the wine cave at Kasbah Sirocco (opposite) or the African bar at Riad Lamane (above).

Shopping

The picturesque **Amezrou Mellah** has a few silver workshops still working in the tradi-

tion started here by Jewish artisans. At the crossroads for Amezrou, **Arc-en-Ciel Women's Cooperative** (Route de M'Hamid; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-7pm) sells folkloric tote bags, baby clothes and funky fleece jumpers made from fabric remnants.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Plans had been announced to open the new Zagora airport to domestic and international flights last year, but fuel prices have apparently delayed the plan.

BUS

The **CTM bus station** (☎ 024 847327; Blvd Mohammed V) is at the south-western end of Mohammed V, and the **bus station** and grand taxi lot is at the northern end. There's a daily CTM bus to Ouarzazate (Dh50, four hours), which continues on to Marrakesh (Dh100, 9½ hours) and Casablanca (Dh175, 12½ hours).

Other companies have at least one run a day (either morning or around 9pm) to Boumalne du Dadès (Dh75), Casablanca (Dh175), Erfoud (Dh85), Er-Rachidia (Dh125), Marrakesh (Dh90, two daily), Ouarzazate (Dh40) and Rabat (Dh180). There are buses to Rissani (Dh80) via N'Kob (Dh 20) and Tazzarine (Dh30) three times a week. A bus passes through headed to M'Hamid (Dh20, two hours) in the morning. More frequent minibuses run to M'Hamid (Dh25) throughout the day when full.

TAXI

Grands taxis are more regular early in the morning. Destinations include Agdz (Dh30, 1½ hours), Ouarzazate (Dh62, three hours), M'Hamid (Dh30, 1½ hours), Tazzarine (Dh45, 2½ hours) and N'Kob (Dh38, 1½ hours).

SOUTH OF ZAGORA

Tamegroute

تامكروت

Stressed out? You've come to the right place: Tamegroute's **Zawiya Nassiriyya** is said to cure anxiety and high blood-pressure, thanks to the post-mortem calming influence of Sidi Mohammed ben Nassir – founder of the influential and very studious Nassiri brotherhood in the 17th century. While non-Muslims can't visit his green-roofed

tomb, from Saturday through Friday in the mornings and later afternoons, anyone can visit the library and enter the *medersa* for Quranic scholars, associated with Sidi Mohammed ben Nassir's shrine (donation for upkeep expected). Among the library books on these glassed-in shelves are ancient medical, mathematics, algebra and law texts, in addition to Qurans dating from the 13th century and written on gazelle hide.

Besides relieving tension, Tamegroute is known for its labyrinth of *ksour* connected by dark passageways, which you can explore by yourself to test the powers of your internal compass or with a local guide. If you look lost, locals will probably direct you towards the **collective pottery studio** (☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri), where the distinctive rustic green Tamegroute pottery is made and painted with *baraka*-enhancing symbols in henna. To get there by the road, just follow the signs for the *Cooperative des Potiers*. Tamegroute also has a Saturday souq.

If the *zawiya* is working its mellow charms, head across the road to **Auberge-Restaurant-Camping Jnane Dar Diafa** (☎ 024 840622; www.jnadedar.ch, in German; s/d with shared bathroom Dh125/170; s/d/tr/ste with bathroom from Dh200/300/400/600) for a leisurely lunch made with vegetables grown on the premises in the breezy gazebo restaurant amid the gardens. You can also crash overnight in the seriously scuffed but mystically winsome upstairs rooms overlooking the garden. Ask for the Comsa room with mosquito nets over the beds or the Malika with the star-patterned decor.

Tinfou Dunes

The great inland sea of dunes in Merzouga or Erg Chebbi can make this small patch of two to three big dunes seem like a kiddie sand box by comparison, but the Tinfou Dunes offer a sneak preview of Sahara sand. As you're heading 8km south of Tamegroute, you'll spot them on your left. On busy days it can feel like a playground here, but it's still fun to climb and run down the big dunes.

Tinfou to M'Hamid

If a taste of dunes at Tinfou leaves you craving more, you could head east to the mighty pink dunes of Merzouga (see p370) or make a break for the open desert at Erg Chebbi

via M'Hamid. The road south disappears into the sand at M'Hamid, 96km south of Zagora and some 40km from Algeria (the southern border is still a contentious issue between the two countries). The journey to M'Hamid takes you through a dauntingly bleak landscape of sun-scorched rubble, and just as it's getting monotonous, the road ascends up and over the Tizi Beni Selmane pass. The village of Tagounite has petrol, several cafés and the *ksar* of Oulad Driss for a worthwhile pitstop before the final 5km run into M'Hamid.

M'Hamid

المحاميد

pop 3000

Once it was a lonesome oasis, but these days M'Hamid is a wallflower no more. Border tensions between Algeria, Morocco and the Polisario had isolated this once-thriving caravan stop until the 1990s, when accords allowed M'Hamid to start hosting visitors again. Today the road is flanked with hotels to accommodate travellers lured here by the golden dunes at nearby Erg Chigaga, experience the perverse thrill and metallic light of sandstorms, and see the road disappear into nowhere.

This one dot on a map actually covers two towns and five different ethnic groups: the Harratine, Berber, Chorfa, Beni M'Hamid and the fabled nomadic 'Blue Men'. M'Hamid Jdid, the prematurely aged 'new' town, has a mosque, roadside café-restaurants, small, mostly grim hotels, a few hodge-podge craft shops and a Monday market. The old town of M'Hamid Bali, 3km away across the Oued Drâa, has a well-preserved kasbah.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

M'Hamid's main attractions begin where the buildings end and relentless desert takes over, despite woven-palm barriers to keep it at bay. There's a frontier-town feel here, with tough guys in a *shesh* (turban) and sunglasses hanging around M'Hamid Jdid at dusty cafés, swapping stories about the tourist who got lost in the desert only to turn up years later, married with children. Have you heard the one about the tourists who declined a local guide's services, and were lost to a sandstorm just 2km from town? Stick around, and you will – sales ploys come with the territory here, but

WHICH DESERT?

Watching the sunset over rolling Sahara dunes is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that can actually be found two places in Morocco: Erg Chebbi (next to Merzouga) and Erg Chigaga (near M'Hamid). Here's how the two destinations match up on key dune-going criteria suggested by Lonely Planet traveller feedback:

- **Natural beauty:** Both. Merzouga's rose-gold dunes are set off by the sun-blackened hard-packed *reg* (hard-packed desert) that surrounds it. Erg Chigaga's dunes are yellow-gold, and surrounded by sun-bleached *reg* and sandier *sahel* (a mix of soft and hard sand) dotted with pretty, poisonous caltropis trees.
- **Dromedary trips:** Merzouga. Within half an hour's dromedary ride from downtown Merzouga, you can be inside rolling dunes, while it takes a two-hour 4WD drive to get you that close in M'Hamid.
- **Calm:** Erg Chigaga is more remote and farther from city noise. Merzouga is finally limiting the use of quad bikes on the dunes, after all the noise and dune deterioration got locals riled and turned off tourists. But both regions need to work on restricting 4WD access to the *sahel* at the dunes, since dromedary rides lose a certain magic when cars are roaring past, and 4WD arrivals after sunset rudely interrupt stargazing.
- **Romance:** Erg Chigaga has the edge here, with fires and candles setting the mood without hindering nighttime visibility in the desert. In longer-established Merzouga, some longstanding encampments actually have streetlights that affect stargazing and romantic prospects with their brash fluorescent glow.
- **Convenience:** Merzouga, but it's a close call. In Merzouga, you can stay at a comfy hotel with a fabulous view onto the dunes, and take in the scenery on a two-hour camel ride. Erg Chigaga is faster to get to from Marrakesh, but it involves a trek after you get to M'Hamid that takes at least 2½ hours by 4WD with a guide.
- **Environmental awareness:** Neither. Nothing spoils that perfect sunset dune dreamscape faster than the sight of litter blowing across the pristine sand. If every visitor who loves these dunes packed up their litter and picked up a few stray plastic bags and bottles, the sunsets and environmental outlook here would be that much rosier. But agencies must also do their part at their desert encampments to curtail waste – flush toilets are worrying, since water treatment plants are far from here.
- **Child-friendliness:** Both. Since sound travels in the desert, you'll need to switch off electronic games and anything else that bleeps to preserve the dunes' tranquil timelessness. But no matter: this is nature's own playground, where kids really cut loose and frolic. With any luck, they'll sleep the whole ride back to Marrakesh.

don't be reeled in by *faux guide* scare tactics. Treks on foot, camel or 4WD to Erg Chigaga with reliable, licensed guides can be arranged in Marrakesh, Zagora or right here in M'Hamid.

The star attraction is **Erg Chigaga**, a mind-boggling 40km stretch of golden Saharan dunes up to 300m high some 56km from M'Hamid that can take up to 2½ to three hours to reach by 4WD in good conditions on the *reg*. The best way to get there is in classic movie style: by camel, which takes five days or a week (from Dh380 per day) round-trip. If you've got the hang of camel-riding by now, you might consider the epic

12-day camel trip to Fom Zguid via Erg Chigaga.

Otherwise you'll need to shell out for a 4WD, which costs around Dh1300, plus another Dh250 for the camp. Many agencies offer guides and/or drivers, which is a good idea – even local drivers familiar with desert conditions have been known to stray off-course or get stuck in the sand. For all-inclusive trips to desert camps via camel and 4WD, local **Sahara Services** (☎ 061 776766; www.saharaservices.info; Kasbah Sahara Services, M'Hamid, 300m on right after M'Hamid entry) has the cushiest offering: round-trip to an encampment for mud-brick walled Berber tents in

Erg Chigaga with dinner and music by fire-light in the dunes, dromedary rides from base camp, and unlikely mod-cons: flushing toilets, hot meals, even hot showers. This agency is not to be confused with competitor Saharia Services, a competing agency without the same reputation for professionalism. Another recommended agency is **Zbar Travel** (☎ 068 517280; www.zbartravel.com), which offers similar trips to an Erg Chigaga encampment or sleep-outs under the stars (winds permitting), sand-boarding, dromedary and walking treks to Erg Ezahar (a tall 'screaming dune' that wails eerily when the wind kicks up), and insights on Saharawi culture and botany.

Many overnight camel treks (from Dh300 per person) from M'Hamid go 10km north of town to **Erg Lehoudi** (Dunes of the Jews), which has 100m-high dunes dotted with semipermanent bivouacs and is badly in need of rubbish collection. With a 4WD, you can drive out there along a *piste* off the main road 18km before M'Hamid, but a guide is advisable. Other possible destinations include the **Iriki oasis**, a tiny plot not far from Erg Chigaga near a vast desert mirage that looks like a lake, or some of the smaller dunes at Mesouria, 8km from M'Hamid.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Tabarkat (☎ 024 848688; www.tabarkat.com; Douar Ksar Bounou BP 35, M'Hamid; s Dh450, d Dh580-670; 🍴 🛏) The main kasbah is pretty enough, with art-deco posters of Morocco – but the best deals are out back in the cactus garden. 'Garden rooms' are actually freestanding mud-brick houses, with Tamegroute green-tiled bathrooms, unfussy furnishings and African mudcloth decor.

Dar Azawad (☎ 024 848730; www.darazawad.com; Douar Ouled Driss, M'Hamid; tent/d/ste half-board Dh500/700/900; 🍴 🛏) The eight 'nomad tents' here are ideal for Armani-clad nomads with cleverly designed mud-brick walls, yellow stained-glass windows and full bathrooms with hot showers. With highly original ironwork (including an iron-lung shower), palm-wood ceilings, and beige *tadelakt* walls, the 10 spacious regular rooms are as nice as the five suites, which have terraces and tubs. Bonus amenities include a spa, bar and boutique with upscale crafts.

Camping Hammada du Drāa (☎ 024 848080; camping per person Dh15 plus per car Dh20, Berber tents

per person Dh50) This cheerfully run camp has clean communal facilities.

Kasbah Sahara Services (☎ 061 776766; www.saharaservices.info; Kasbah Sahara Services, M'Hamid, 300m on right after M'Hamid entry; half-board per person tent/r Dh150/240) Six cocoonlike rooms with their own bath and shower, and Berber tents out back, plus a tasty restaurant offering generous portions of salad, kebabs and chips for Dh80.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There's a daily CTM bus at 4.30pm to Zagora (Dh25, two hours), Ouarzazate (Dh70, seven hours), Marrakesh (Dh120, 11 to 13 hours) and Casablanca (Dh205, 15 hours). Private buses to Marrakesh (via Zagora and Ouarzazate) leave at around 7am and 2pm (Dh120, 15 hours).

FOUM ZGUID TO TIZI N'TICHKA

If you go to Erg Chigaga by 4WD, instead of backtracking to M'Hamid to get to Marrakesh you can exit the desert heading north to Marrakesh via Foug Zguid. En route through the *sahel* and *reg*, you'll pass the **Iriki oasis** under an imposing plateau on your right, with a lone café offering cool drinks and tea on deck chairs with a view across a vast lake with a few thirsty birds and gazelles along the edge. But look again: 'Lake Iriki' is actually a mirage with deceptive silhouettes of poisonous calitropis bushes.

Another 30km or so from Café Iriki you'll turn north, and as you near a plateau on your left what you'll swear is a hotel (another illusion of geography) is the guardhouse for Foug Zguid, where you may be asked to show your passport. Foug Zguid is still a strategic military base, so you may hear reports from nearby watchtowers break through radio static. The town itself is a crossroads with all the necessities: water, petrol, a public phone, serviceable omelettes and coffee from cafés on the right after the town's major/only intersection, and a foosball table across the street.

For a more satisfying meal, head out of town north 8km towards Marrakesh to the turnoff for the *piste* to Zagora/Amezrou on your right, and you'll spot **Maison d'Hôte Hiba** (☎ 015 727282; 8km Foug Zguid) a rock-studded restaurant with cave-man charm and some very tasty set meals of tajine, salad, and

fruit for Dh80 served on the scenic terrace. Follow the *piste* another 2.5km along, and you'll come to **Cooperative Ahilal des Tapis**, where you'll find carpets made on clean, well-equipped premises plus tajine-shaped baskets and *lugnâa*, a local-style wrap with graphic abstract flower patterns in bold colours on plain white-and-black-fabric. Prices are set, with a small percentage going to the association for overhead, equipment, training and childcare, and the rest going directly to the women who made the item. This project provides essential support for families in this rocky Anti Atlas terrain, so any purchases you make will be met with sincere thanks.

Your next stop en route to Tizi n'Tichka is Tazenakht, the last stop for a quick bite, coffee, petrol and carpets. This town has a couple of intersections and several carpet shops that mostly sell to trade, but the best option is to buy from the source 4km outside of Tazenakht at **Iklane Association** (Irkane Village, km 4 on Tazenakht Rd). Here the association takes 8% of reasonable retail prices for initiatives like the community clean-up program (hence the immaculate village); the rest goes to the carpet maker.

ZAGORA TO RISSANI

Desert-bound travellers often make a bee-line from Ouarzazate to M'Hamid, but tack on another day or two and you could take a more scenic route to the desert at Merzouga. The roads that encircle the stark mass of the Jebel Sarhro make it possible to complete a loop from Ouarzazate to Zagora over to Rissani and Merzouga, returning via the Todra and Dadès gorges. The Zagora–Rissani route with the most photo ops goes through the castle-filled village of N'Kob, heading 98km back up the Drâa Valley before turning off (by Restaurant la Gazelle) towards Tazzarine.

Grands taxis run between Tazzarine and Ouarzazate (Dh70), between Tazzarine and Alnif (Dh25), and Alnif and Rissani (Dh30), so you can cobble together transport. There's also a bus between Rissani and Zagora via Alnif, Tazzarine and N'Kob on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday. If you're driving, there are Ziz petrol stations along the way, though they sometimes run out of fuel. A full tank should easily see you through from Zagora to Rissani.

N'Kob, Tazzarine & Alnif

نيكوب تزارين و النيف

One of Morocco's best-kept secrets is the oasis village of N'Kob, where no less than 45 mud-brick *ksour* (castles) will make you stop and stare. Better still, you can stay overnight in a couple of castles converted to guest houses (see below). Wander through N'Kob's fascinating architectural or geological history on day hikes arranged by the **Bureau des Guides** (☎ 067 487509) on the main street or take a longer trek of the Jebel Sarhro region (see p446), otherwise stick around for the Sunday market: this desert detour is a destination in its own right.

Beyond N'Kob, Tazzarine (150km from Rissani) is a scruffy crossroads town where the roads from Zagora and Agdz meet and drivers brake for internet cafés, lunch, petrol and a Tuesday market. Further on, you'll reach the oasis town of Alnif and one of Morocco's richest seams of fossils: the Mairdir basin, packed with trilobites, the ancestors of crabs. You'll see fossils for sale along the roadsides, but beware of convincing fakes sculpted out of resin. The genuine article is for sale at fixed prices at **Ihmadi Trilobites Centre** (☎ 066 221593; trilobites@caramail.com; Alnif), and the geologist owner also leads short trips to local fossil sites (Dh180 for the afternoon). To pack in a few more oases en route to Rissani, you could head from here onto a *piste* heading north 47km to link up with the main Ouarzazate–Er-Rachidia road (information and maps available at Ihmadi Trilobites Centre). Otherwise, the paved main road is a straight shot 100km or so across the *hammad*a to Rissani.

SLEEPING

Auberge Restaurant Ennakhil (☎ 024 839719; N'Kob; s/d/tr Dh90/130/160; breakfast Dh30 mains Dh50–80) Berber *baraka* all around: cute rooms with wedding blankets and Berber good-luck symbols carved into palm ceilings, clever sinks that are upturned water jars and palm-stump seating on the terrace for views onto the village and Jebel Saghro.

Kasbah Baha Baha (☎ 024839763; www.bahabaha.com, in French; N'Kob; Berber tents s/d/tr Dh80/150/210, s/d/tr with shared bathroom Dh200/300/400, s/d with shower Dh300/400) All the makings of home, if your home happened to be a gorgeously restored kasbah with a vast garden, its own wood-fired bread oven and ethnographic

museum, and a 360-degree view of an oasis and neighbouring castles. Unlike other upscale places, staff are at ease here, cracking jokes and stopping to chat with guests.

Ouadjou (☎ 024 839314; www.ouadjou.com; 2km before N'kob; tent without/with half-board Dh50/150, without/with half-board s Dh130/200, d 240/360; (P) (🚰)) This new camping complex 1.5km before you enter N'kob has tents that are as nice as the rooms, with end tables and reading lamps plus linens and blankets. Facilities include hot showers, electrical hookups, and a clothes-washing sink and clothes line; lunchtime visitors can use the pool for an extra Dh30.

Camp Amastou (☎ 024 839078, per person half-board Dh150; (P) (🚰)) Follow signs pointing south into Tazzarine's oasis to the best budget accommodation in the valley. In this peaceable *palmeraie*, you'll find a gorgeous walled garden featuring four large wool Berber tents and a small pool. Pull up a goatskin bench and swap life stories with fellow travellers, or call it a night on your narrow tent bed with clean linens.

ourpick Ksar Jenna (☎ 024 839790; www.ksarjenna.com; 2km before N'Kob; per person half-board Dh550; (🚰) (🚰)) Holds its own with top Marrakesh riads for style at a fraction of the price, with just seven designer-fabulous rooms, memorable meals under the splendid painted dining-room ceiling and aperitifs or excellent espresso in the garden bar (it's a Moroccan/Italian venture).

Kasbah Imdoukal (☎ 024 839798; www.kasbahimdoukal.com, in French; N'Kob; d/tr/ste Dh770/990/1100; (🚰) (🚰)) Berber pride meets Bordeaux cool: think Berber carved wood furnishings and luxurious pillows, Amazigh friezes atop *ta-delakt* guest room walls, Berber village excursions with poolside lounging after, and dinners of *madfouna* (Berber calzone) with a glass of wine.

EATING

For meals, try your guest house or stop at a couple of worthy eateries en route:

Kasbah Meteorites (☎ 035 783809; www.kasbahmeteorites.c.la, in French; Alnif; meals Dh70-80; (🚰)) A pleasant pitstop for filling set lunches and a dip in an oversized chlorinated pool. Also offers basic accommodation.

Kasbah Riad Du Sud (☎ 024 886453; www.hotelriaddusud.com; Tamsahlte via Tazzarine; set lunch Dh100; reservations essential) If you're leaving Merzouga

in the morning and don't want to leave lunch to chance, call ahead for a memorable millet couscous or a goat or dromedary tajine at this gastronomical oasis. Pricy rooms are also available.

DADÈS VALLEY & THE GORGES

سهول داداس و المضايق

Nomad crossings, rose valleys, two-tone kasbahs and melting rocks: on paper, the Dadès River Valley sounds a little unbelievable. Stretching from the daunting High Atlas in the north to the rugged Jebel Sarhro range to the south, the valley is dotted with oases and mud-brick palaces that give the region its fairy-tale nickname – Valley of a Thousand Kasbahs. Some of the best views can be had only on foot, along hidden passageways between the Dadès and Todra gorges and rough *piste* nomad routes to the Middle Atlas.

SKOURA

سكورة

Architectural marvels in mud-brick are hidden at every turn of this huge, labyrinthine oasis, just 39km from dusty Ouarzazate but a class apart in architecture and accommodation. The easiest kasbah to access is family-owned **Kasbah Amerdil** (admission by donation Dh15), signposted just a few hundred metres from the main road, where the owner will show you around the castle featured on Morocco's Dh50 note, plus his family's prize collection of ancient tools. To get a sense of Skoura's splendours from the inside out, stay overnight in a converted kasbah, and explore the *palmeraie* on bike tomorrow.

SLEEPING & EATING

Kasbah AitAbou (☎ 024852234; www.chez.com/kasbahaitabou; signposted in red inside Palmeraie de Skoura; per person half-board Dh180) You don't have to be loaded to live like a *caïd* at this family kasbah, built in 1825 with a 25m-high mud-brick tower that's an engineering marvel and the largest still standing in the region. Rooms are plenty big and cool, water is hot, and candlelight dinners in the courtyard and breakfast in the garden are highlights.

Chez Talout (☎ 062 498283; www.talout.com; sign-posted 7km northwest of Skoura; d with shared/private bathroom half-board Dh400/500, ste half-board Dh800; ♿) This locally owned landmark makes a scenic, rejuvenating stop for lunch (Dh100) on the terrace overlooking the oasis, overnights in wood-beamed rooms featuring the work of local artisans, and outings on foot, horse and mountain bike. A percentage of proceeds support a local artisans' self-help organisation.

Maison d'Hôtes Amerdil (☎ 024 852279; next to Kasbah Amerdil; d half-board Dh400-500) Wake up overlooking the kasbah next door in the tower rooms of this new mud-brick guest house. The private bathrooms have showerheads over toilets for obsessive multitaskers; tower rooms are much nicer than dim, cavelike ones downstairs. The plasma TV downstairs detracts from the romance, but draws sports fans from miles around.

our pick Sawadi (☎ 024 852341; www.sawadi.ma; signposted in green on north end of Palmeraie de Skoura; s half-board Dh500-690, d half-board Dh950-1250, up to 7 people in large house Dh2800-3250; ♿ ♿) Extravagantly friendly to guests and the planet too, with pisé bungalow hideaways and family-friendly villas among organic vegetable and herb gardens with an ingeniously salt-filtered pool. Let your hosts ply you with homegrown organic food and spoil you silly with attention here, or arrange memorable excursions exploring the region's natural wonders (including 100 bird species).

Kasbah Aït ben Moro (☎ 024 852116; www.aitbenmoro.com; s/d with shared bathroom & half-board Dh350; s/d/tr with private bathroom & half-board Dh700/1000-1100/1350; ♿) An 18th-century kasbah given a stylish makeover in 2000 remains true to its desert roots with the original palm-beam ceilings, moody low-lit passageways, cactus gardens, naturally cool courtyards, Berber blankets, and water-conserving savvy (hence no pool). The three tower rooms are the best deal, with a shared bath and stunning views over Skoura.

Jardins de Skoura (☎ 024 852324; www.lesjardinsdeskoura.com; Palmeraie de Skoura; r/ste incl breakfast Dh880/1200; ♿ ♿) The originator of the low-key, high-romance Skoura style, with intimate seating nooks carved from pisé walls, locally produced crafts and cross-roads chic Indian sari curtains, and set-price meals (Dh130 to Dh180) featuring Moroccan mains and French desserts.

There are regular but infrequent buses from Ouarzazate and Tinerhir (Dh40), but a grand taxi from Ouarzazate (Dh25) is a better option.

KELAÂ M'GOUNA

قلعة مكونة

Although it takes its name from the nearby M'Goun mountain, the small town of Kelaâ M'Gouna is famous for roses and daggers. You can tell you're approaching town some 50km from Skoura when you see pink roses peeking through dense roadside hedgerows, and once you arrive, you can't miss the bottles of local rosewater for sale in every self-respecting local establishment. You can tell the local rosewater by its pure, heady scent; the sickly-sweet synthetic stuff from Casablanca is a bottled headache. Around May harvest-time you'll see rose garlands everywhere, especially during the town's signature rose festival (first weekend of May). On Wednesday market days, you can load up on dried edible roses.

But life in Kelaâ M'Gouna must not always have been so rosy, because the region also has a long tradition of dagger-making. There's a set-price showroom with hundreds of styles at **Cooperative Artisan du Poignards Azlag** (☎ high season 9am-5pm, some close for lunch), on the main road at the eastern edge of town, where ceremonial daggers sell from Dh200 to several thousand dirham. Enter the trinket-filled courtyard boutiques beyond at your own risk; browsers are pushed to buy and bargaining sessions here feel oddly like duels.

If you really want to stop and smell the roses with a nature walk, ask at the **bureau des guides** (☎ 061 796101, 062 132192) 1km west of town or book official guides through local hotels. For more information on trekking in the M'Goun Massif, see p436.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel du Grand Atlas (☎ 024 836838; Ave Mohammed V; s/d/tr Dh50/100/150) Chipped but still chipper, with dinged walls, soft beds, decent shared bathrooms, an in-house hammam (Dh10, massage Dh50), popular café/restaurant (omelette breakfast Dh25) and a cheery management who can hook you up with official hiking guides.

Kasbah Itran (☎ 024 837103; www.kasbahitrان.com; El Kelaâ M'Gouna BP 124; d half-board shared/private bathroom Dh350/500) A maze of private terraces

and nine snug rooms with fireplaces, most with views over the M'Goun river to the nearby Ang Ksar and Kasbah des Glaouis. Trekkers flock here to wolf down hearty tajines and head off on natural history hikes arranged on site with local guides. Minivans from town run past the kasbah en route to the village of Torbis (Dh5).

Rosa d'Amaskina (☎ 024 836913; www.rosad-amaskina.com; meals Dh70-120) Stop and smell the roses overflowing the courtyard rose garden at this restaurant 6km before town, and enjoy seasonal Moroccan meals on the riverside terrace.

Otherwise, you grab a bite at any café-restaurants in the centre of town that looks respectably crowded, or rely on **Hôtel du Grand Atlas** (Ave Mohammed V) for a set Dh80 meal of soup, tajine, dessert and tea.

Getting There & Away

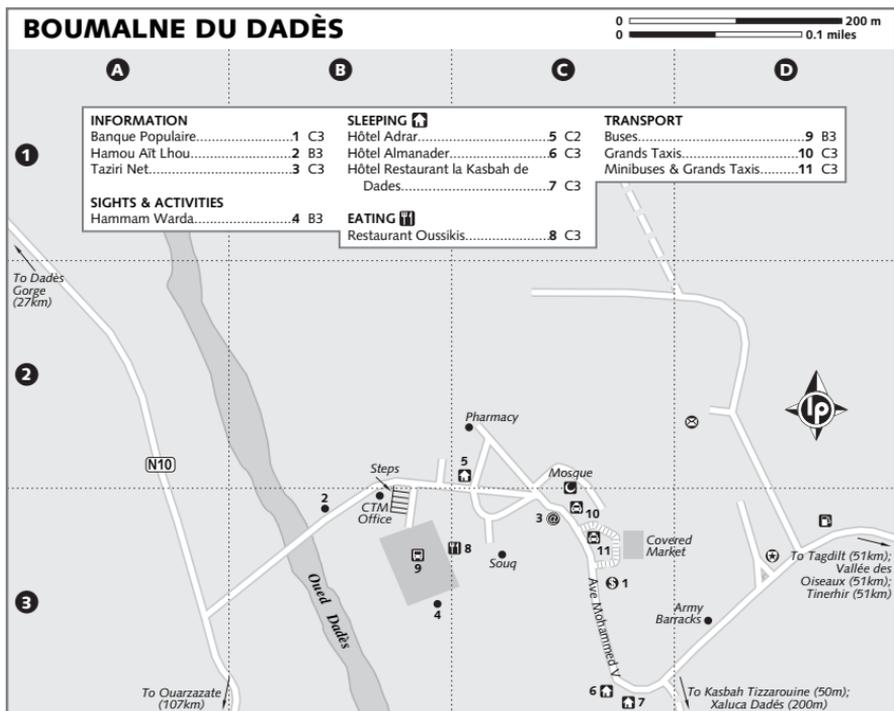
Buses run between Ouarzazate and Tinerhir and beyond, but are often full. You can catch a grand taxi to Ouarzazate (Dh30), Skoura (Dh10), Boumalne du Dadès (Dh7) and Tinerhir (Dh6).

BOUMALNE DU DADÈS بومالنه داده

At the crossroads of the Dadès Valley, Boumalne has river valley views and handy amenities like banks, internet cafés, bike rental and a public hammam. Head 24km northeast of Kelaâ M'Gouna until you reach a fork: the main road continues over the river to the hillside town of Boumalne du Dadès, while the left branch leads up the stunning Dadès Gorge. Market day is Wednesday.

If you think this place is for the birds, you're right: the *hammada* and grassy plains immediately south of Boumalne du Dadès offer some rewarding birdwatching opportunities. Take the *piste* leading off the main road beyond town south towards the village of Tagdilt and Vallée des Oiseaux (Valley of the Birds) to look for larks, wheat-ears, sandgrouse, buzzards and eagle owls.

Most visitors come to town to take care of business before plunging into the Dadès Gorge. The **Banque Populaire** (Ave Mohammed V) changes money and has an ATM. On the same street there's internet access at **Taziri Net** (per hr Dh5; ☎ 9am-11pm). Treks can be



arranged through some hotels or through knowledgeable official guide **Hamou Aït Lhou** (☎ 067 593292; hamou57@voila.fr; Ave Mohammed V), who leads trips on foot or on mountain bike and rents mountain bikes (Dh120 per day).

Through the gate to the souq and at the opposite end of the plaza is **Hammam Warda** (admission Dh8 plus tip for attendant; ☎ 8am-8pm), which serves both men and women.

Sleeping

Hôtel Adrar (☎ 024 830765; Ave Mohammed V; d incl breakfast/half-board Dh150/250; ♿) Handy to the bus station yet clean, with meals at the popular local restaurant downstairs. With all the commotion, you might want earplugs, or book one of the six air-con rooms so you can keep the windows shut.

Hôtel Almanader (☎ 024 830172; Ave Mohammed V; half-board d/tr Dh360/520) Bigger in personality and smaller in size than its neighbour la Kasbah, the Almanader has 12 tidy, quirky rooms with tiny terraces, candy-coloured stucco decor, bare light bulbs and easygoing staff.

Hôtel Restaurant la Kasbah de Dades (☎ 024 830505; http://kasbahdedades.com; Ave Mohammed V; per person half-board Dh200; ♿) Hanging over the valley, la Kasbah has 32 recently repainted rooms with balconies and dingy tour-trampled carpet but shiny tiled bathrooms, plus a respectable restaurant with a view and an espresso bar.

Xaluca Dadès (☎ 035 578450; sign posted at top of hill on Ave Mohammed V; half-board s/d/ste Dh1054/1518/2028; ♿ ♿ (P)) The only hotel in Boumalne that qualifies as a destination, the Xaluca turned a 1970s hilltop hotel fabulous, with African folk art and torches, a corridor remodelled into a mine shaft, and rock walls and mud-cloth bedspreads in the 106 snappy guestrooms, each with its own balcony and view over the valley. Other amenities include a hammam (Dh100), bar with a billiards table, a panoramic terrace swimming pool and Jacuzzi, and a loud, active gym.

Eating

Restaurant Oussikis (☎ 066 641421; Place de Souk, Boumalne Dades; Dh70-90) The best option for a meal is through the gate to the souq plaza and on your left at where you'll spot trained chef Fadil Faska in a spotless open kitchen turning fresh local ingredients into consist-

ently savoury *kefta* (spiced meatballs) and tajines; call ahead for his float-away-flaky *bastilla* (pastry).

For more basic eats, the restaurant below **Hôtel Adrar** serves a filling meal of tajine or brochettes with salad and a drink for about Dh35 to Dh70, including local specialty of *gallia* (local hen) tajine. The restaurants of the **Hôtel al-Manader** and the **Hôtel Restaurant la Kasbah de Dades** also both have good menus (Dh70 to Dh100) and great views.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Buses leave daily to Ouarzazate (Dh40), Zagora (Dh65), Tinerhir (Dh25), Fez (Dh135), Casablanca (Dh150 to Dh190) and Rabat (Dh195), and multiple times daily to Er-Rachidia (Dh45), Erfoud (Dh60) and Marrakesh (Dh70 to Dh90).

TAXI, TRUCK & MINIBUS

You may have to wait a while for a grand taxi or minibus to fill up; fares are Dh50 to Ouarzazate, Dh30 to Tinerhir and Dh15 to Aït Oudinar (the start of the Dadès Gorge).

DADÈS GORGE

مخنف ا مفیق ا دادس

Those art-deco tourism posters you'll see all over southern Morocco showing a striking pink-and-white kasbah in a rocky oasis aren't exaggerating: the Dadès Gorge really is that impressive. Some of the most impressive scenery can be seen just 6.5km into the gorge at **Aït Arbi**, where almond and fig trees provide a lush green valley backdrop for two-tone kasbahs and *ksour*.

But many of the best views in the Dadès Gorge aren't immediately visible from the road. A couple of kilometres past Aït Arbi, the road crosses an *oued*, and this river valley offers a sneaky back way to Kelaâ M'Gouna on foot. After another 5km and over a small pass, the hidden **Gorge de Miguirne** (Sidi Boubar Gorge) joins from the right. The small gorge has springs and rock pools and makes a good half-day hike involving some wading.

Another 4km brings you to extraordinary **red rock formations** that appear to be melting right into the green carpet of the *palmeraie* below. Further on where the gorge suddenly narrows, you'll find the village of Aït

Oudinar, with a few shops and a Sunday souq. About 2km beyond Ait Oudinar the road takes a turn for the harrowing, with hairpin bends inside the canyon. When the road eventually flattens out again, you might take that as your cue to turn around: you've already seen the best gorge scenery you can see without a 4WD.

The road is sealed all the way to Msemrir (63km), but you'll need a 4WD beyond that – especially for the *piste* that leads east and then south into the Todra Gorge. Many of the *pistes* are impassable in winter or after heavy rain, and even in good weather it can be rough going. If you're up for a challenge, you could travel north from Msemrir into the heart of the High Atlas and beyond to Imilchil. It's a long way, but it's feasible, thanks to the well-beaten path of market-bound trucks and minivans. Market day in Msemrir is Saturday.

Most hotels in the gorge and in Boumalne du Dadès can put you in touch with hiking guides (from Dh170 to Dh220 per day), arrange 4WD trips to the Todra Gorge and hire out bicycles (Dh70 to Dh100 per day). For more challenging walks, explore the smaller gorges west and east of the Oued Dadès, some of which lead up to nomad pastures. There's a good trail heading northwest, which begins just across the river from the cluster of hotels 28km from Boumalne du Dadès.

Sleeping

Most of the accommodation options listed here are within 28km of Boumalne du Dadès, and the kilometre markings here refer to the distance from Boumalne. Nearly all will let you sleep in the salon or on the terrace (even in summer you may need a sleeping bag) for around Dh25, or camp by the river for around Dh10. Msemrir offers a choice of two basic hotels: the cheerful **Hôtel El-Ouarda** (☎ 024 831609; r per person Dh70) or the **Café Agdal** (r per person Dh70).

Café Mirguirne (☎ 068 763804; km14; mattresses on terrace Dh20, d with stand-up/sit-down toilet Dh70/100; 🚻) A rosy outlook on the gorge is offered from this pinkish perch high above the gorge, where hardy trekkers converge and local staff exude enthusiasm for visitors. Rooms have straw-mat floors and soft beds with crisp sheets, but only six of the nine have sit-down toilets. Dinners are a good

value (tajine/couscous Dh35/26) and internet use is available for Dh5.

Auberge des Gorges du Dadès (☎ 024 831719; www.aubergeaitoudinar.com; 25.5km; camping per person Dh15, r per person incl breakfast/half-board Dh120/200) A bubbly personality overlooking the river, the Auberge has 12 en suite rooms with splashy Amazigh motifs and big bathrooms plus a pleasantly shaded camping area. The trek leader speaks English, French and Spanish and has more than 23 years' experience.

Hôtel le Vieux Château du Dadès (☎ 024831261; fax 024 830221; 27km; r per person half-board downstairs/upstairs Dh150/220) River views, good value and a terrace restaurant amid the chirping songbirds make this hotel worth going the extra mile to find. The tiled rooms upstairs have better views, but the snug pisé-walled downstairs guestrooms carved with auspicious Amazigh symbols bring on Berber *baraka*. Hikes and natural henna tattoos can be arranged at the front desk (tattoo Dh35 per hand).

Les 5 Lunes (☎ 024 830723; 23km, Ait Oudinar; d with shared bathroom incl breakfast/half-board Dh200/360, tr with private bathroom breakfast/half-board Dh300/540) Romance is in the air in this snug treehouse-style berth teetering above valley treetops, with four plain but pretty doubles and one triple and a hewn-stone bathroom. Book ahead for dinner next to the restaurant fireplace, followed by stargazing through the courtyard telescope.

our pick Kasbah de Mimi (☎ 024 830505; mimi.kasbah@laposte.net; 12km, Ait Ibrine; per person half-board Dh440; 🚻) Save yourself the trouble of cultivating friends with fabulous country houses, and book a weekend at one of four rooms in Kasbah de Mimi instead. At this painstakingly restored cliffside getaway, everything is in excellent taste: the original Berber *baraka* painted on living room walls, the *paté hors d'oeuvres*, the water-conserving terrace gardens and grand piano in the fully stocked library. The cliff-hanger of a driveway is harrowing; leave your car at the top by the sign and walk down.

Chez Pierre (☎ 024 830267; <http://chezpierre.iframe.com>; 27km; per person half-board Dh570, 2-person minimum; 🚻) This rock-climbing hotel has eight airy rooms and one apartment shimmying right up the gorge. Decor is kept simple to focus attention on what really matters: the view over the valley from flowering terraces and poolside sun decks. Picnics and hikes with official guides can be arranged.

Eating

Most hotels offer half-board rates and dinner, which may be followed by local Berber music. Since there aren't a lot of shops in the gorge, pack in some trail snacks from Boumalne or Ouarzazate.

Restaurant Isabelle (15km; menu Dh70) Enjoy your meal on the terrace with a side of stupefaction at the sight of melting rocks across the valley. Your choice of a hearty omelette or tajine comes with salad and a drink.

Restaurant Panorama (☎ 024 831555; www.berge-panorama.sup.fr; 10km, Ait Ibrirne; mains Dh60-80) If you don't have time to stay overnight in the gorge, you can always take in the view over a meal just inside the gorge at the Panorama. Dishes include flavourful vegetarian options, a good homemade couscous, and the local speciality kebab of minced *gallia*.

Getting There & Away

Grands taxis and minibuses run up the gorge from Boumalne and charge Dh15 per person to the cluster of hotels in the middle of the gorge (near Vieux Chateau) and

Dh30 to Msemrir; ask to be dropped at your chosen hotel. To return, wait by the road and flag down a passing vehicle. Hiring a taxi for a half-day trip into the gorge should cost around Dh200.

The energetic could combine the Dadès and Todra gorges by crossing between the two (a two- to three-day walk); otherwise you'll need a 4WD.

Minibuses run up to Msemrir fairly frequently; the last one back to Boumalne leaves around 4pm. Trucks go to Tamtattouchte and Ait Haini on Saturdays, and continue the next day to Imilchil. There's accommodation in Tamtattouchte (see p362) but none in Ait Haini (souq on Thursday).

TINERHIR

تنرهير

Lingering in this dusty mining town doesn't make much sense when the Todra Gorge awaits just 12km away. But if you need a break after the 51km drive from Boumalne du Dadès, there are a couple of places where you can stop for a meal or an inexpensive overnight stay.



There are several banks with ATMs in the west of town, including **BMCE** (Ave Mohammed V) and **Crédit du Maroc** (Ave Mohammed V). **Tichka Internet** (Rue Zaid Ouhmed; per hr Dh6; ☎ 7am-9.30pm), is next to the Hôtel de l'Avenir. The old town is immediately southeast of the modern centre, with a souq and interesting old *ksar*. An enormous souq is held about 2.5km west of the centre on Monday, and there's a smaller livestock souq in town on Saturday.

Sleeping

Hôtel de l'Avenir (☎ 024 834599; www.avenir.tineghir.net; 27 Rue Zaid Ouhmed; mattress on roof Dh30, s/d/tr Dh30/100/150) A sociable spot, with cafés lining the plaza outside and 10 rooms grouped around a chatty dining area inside (breakfast Dh25). All the signs of a well-loved travel hub are here: piles of donated books, travel photos and postcards on the walls, mountain-bike hire and enough advice to last a lifetime of Todra trekking.

Hôtel l'Oasis (☎ 024 833670; Ave Mohammed V; per room without/with bathroom Dh100/150, d with half-board Dh350) Rooms are clean and surprisingly quiet, given that the Total station is next door, and the community-minded management sells crafts made to benefit the local Association des Handicapés (handicap assistance association). Meals here are a cut above other options in town, and not just because they're on the upstairs terrace – the food is so reliably tasty that many local wedding receptions are held here.

Hôtel Tomboctou (☎ 024 834604; www.hotel.tomboctou.com; 126 Ave Bir Anzarane; s/d terrace room with shared bathroom incl breakfast Dh210/320, half-board Dh280/460, s/d/tr/q incl breakfast Dh500/590/780/920, half-board Dh570/730/990/1200, ste half-board Dh1400; ☎ ☎) Quirky, rosy little rooms in a renovated kasbah built in 1936 for the local *caïd*. Bathrooms are quite splashy with pink marble sinks, solar-heated water and Jacuzzis in the suites, but the big perk here is the full bar by the courtyard pool. Mountain trekking and bicycle trips can be organised.

Eating

Several simple restaurants line Ave Hassan II, including **Café des Amis** (Ave Hassan II), which serves excellent brochettes, **Café Central** (Ave Hassan II) and **Restaurant Essaada** (Ave Hassan II) – and they all serve simple Moroccan dishes. You'll find more choices along Ave Moham-

med V. The restaurant at Hôtel l'Oasis offers reliable three-course meals for Dh80 to Dh100. The restaurant **l'Avenir** (27 Rue Zaid Ouhmed), in the same building, but not connected to the hotel, serves good grills and salads.

For more upscale dining, head 3km out of town on the road to Todra, and on your left you'll spot **Chez Michéle** (☎ 024 835151; www.chez-michele.com; mains Dh90-140; ☎ lunch & dinner), where dapper servers ceremoniously present dishes of game-hen with fresh morels and tender beef with quince.

Getting There & Away

BUS

In the centre of town, buses leave from the Place Principale, off Ave Mohammed V to Marrakesh (Dh105, five daily) via Ouarzazate (Dh45), and to Casablanca (Dh165), Erfoud (Dh30, three daily), Meknès (Dh115, six daily), Rissani (Dh45) and Zagora (Dh80). Anything westbound will drop you in Boumalne du Dadès (Dh15).

TAXI & MINIVAN

Grands taxis to Ouarzazate (Dh55) and Er-Rachidia (Dh45) leave from the eastern end of the gardens. This is also the place to hunt for a ride (taxis, lorries or pick-up trucks) up to the Todra Gorge (Dh8) and beyond.

An 8am minivan runs to Tamtattouchte (Dh15 to Dh20) and Aït Haini (Dh25 to Dh30) and to Imilchil (Dh30 to Dh40); check for additional departures in the afternoon.

TODRA GORGE مخنف امفياق اتودرعة

Being stuck between a rock and a hard place is a fantastic experience to have in the Todra Gorge, where the massive fault dividing the High Atlas from the Jebel Sarhro is at some points just wide enough for a crystal-clear river and some trekkers to squeeze through. The road from Tinerhir passes green *palmeraies* and yellowish Berber villages, until 15km along, high walls of pink and grey rock close in around the road. The approach is thrilling and somehow urgent, as though the doors of heaven were about to close before you.

Arrivals at the Todra are best timed in the morning, when the sun briefly alights on the bottom of the gorge, providing your shining golden moment of welcome. In the

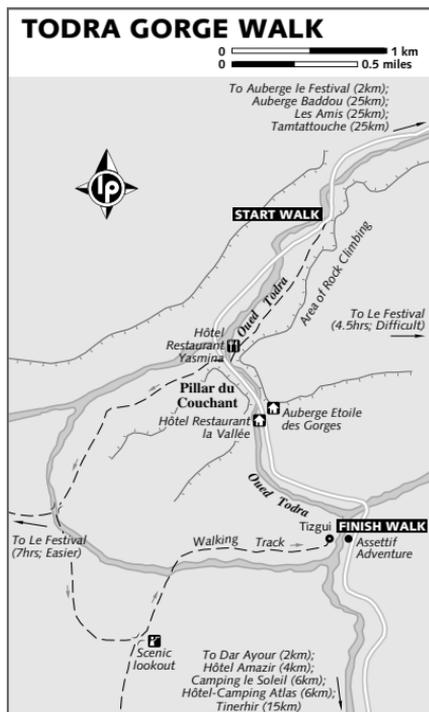
afternoon it gets very dark and, in winter, bitterly cold. If you pass through the gorge and keep heading up the road, you'll reach the end of the tarmac at the stunning Berber village of Tamtattouchte.

Activities

TREKKING & CLIMBING

About a 30-minute walk beyond the main gorge is the Petite Gorge. This is the starting point of many pleasant day hikes, including one starting by the Auberge-Camping le Festival, 2km after the Petite Gorge.

For a more strenuous hike, you could do a three-hour loop from north of the gorge to Tizgui, south of the gorge. The walk starts after leaving the main gorge (Map p361); as the road heads right (northeast), take the track leading up the hill to the left (southwest). Regular donkey and mule traffic keep this path well-defined for most of the route. Head to the pass, and from there, ascend southeast to the next pass. This would be a good place to stray from the main route to look over the rim of the gorge – but be careful, as the winds get mighty powerful



FROM GORGE TO GORGE

The 42km from Tamtattouchte to the Dadès Gorge should only be attempted by 4WD during the summer months (May to September). The tough five-hour journey might threaten to shake a few teeth loose, but with a stunning landscape of twisted hills and the boulder-strewn valley of Tizgui n'Ouadda, it's certainly easy on the eyes.

In May, many nomadic Berbers with homes in Aït Haini head to this valley to pitch their tents and graze large herds of sheep. If you stop, women might invite you into their tent for tea to find out your story and tell you theirs.

About midway on this route, you'll crest the 2639m-high Tizi n'Uguent Zegsaoun before a bone-rattling descent to Msemrir. The crossing is prone to flash floods in the early spring and you should always seek up-to-date advice on the state of the *piste* before setting off. The turning for the *piste* is just after Tamtattouchte, below the auberge on the top of the hill. Since the track is very difficult to follow, a local guide is recommended.

up here. From the second pass, descend to the beautiful village of Tizgui, where you can walk back through the *palmeraies* to the gorge.

With all the ruined kasbahs in the *palmeraies* to the south of here, this area is a photographer's dream. If you want to push on, you could walk back to Tinerhir through the *palmeraies* in three or four hours.

Rock-climbing on the vertical rock face of the gorge is becoming increasingly popular. There are some sublime routes here (French grade 5), some of them bolted. Pillar du Couchant, near the entrance to the gorge, offers classic long climbs; the Petite Gorge is better for novice climbers, with some good short routes. Most hotels can provide further information, but the guides with the most experience usually speak Spanish and not much English.

Assettif Adventure (☎ 024 895090; www.assettif.org, in French), located 700m before the gorge, Assettif arranges treks and horse riding (day trip Dh500), and hires out bikes (per day Dh100) and mountaineering equipment. You can also do an overnight horse trek with

guide and food for Dh800. Advance booking is recommended, especially for overnight trips and during busy periods.

A network of difficult *pistes* heading into the High and Middle Atlas provides a lifeline to villages that are otherwise still largely inaccessible. The two most popular trips are the rough *pistes* west to the Dadès Gorge (see the boxed text, p361) and north to Imilchil. You'll need a 4WD for either trip, and it's best to ask locals about current conditions along these roads before leaving, even in spring and summer.

Sleeping & Eating

Auberge Étoile des Gorges (☎ 024 895045; fax 024 832151; s/d/tr with shared bathroom Dh50/70/100, r with private bathroom Dh120) A plucky little budget hotel in the mouth of the mighty gorge, featuring six simple rooms with orthopaedically stiff beds, solar-heated showers and minor road noise easily ignored on a roof deck with a close-up view of the gorge and reasonable meals (three-course meals Dh60 to Dh70).

Hôtel Restaurant la Vallée (☎ 024 895126; d with shared bathroom Dh120, d with private bathroom incl breakfast/half-board Dh150/300) Overlooking the river on one side and facing the gorge on the other, this simple hotel is all about the views from the 2nd-floor rooms. Nine of the 12 rooms have private bathrooms, with showers rather awkwardly over the toilet but plenty of light.

our pick Dar Ayour (☎ 024 895271; www.darayour.com; 13km Gorges du Todra, Tinghir; r with shared/private bathroom Dh100/150, rinc breakfast/half-board Dh200/350) Riads have arrived in Todra with this warm, artsy five-story guest house that's all Middle Atlas rugs, winking mirrorwork blankets and pillows, and colourful abstract paintings. The 2nd floor is a three-room suite that can sleep a family of seven, the third storey has three en suite guestrooms, and breakfast (Dh35) with a view is served up on the terrace.

Hôtel Restaurant Yasmina (☎ 024 895118; www.todragorge.com; s/d incl breakfast Dh160/250, half-board Dh250/400) Tucked beneath the sheer rock walls at the heart of the gorge, the Yasmina has fairly small, functional rooms and a good terrace restaurant (set menu Dh70 to Dh100) to take in the views. The prime location does have its downside: it's overrun by tour groups during the day.

Auberge Le Festival (☎ 061 267251; http://aubergefestival.com; main house half-board s/d Dh300/460, tower room s/d Dh400/700, cave room d/tr Dh700/900) Get in touch with your primal instincts in a cave guestroom dug right into the hillside, or do your best Romeo and Juliet impersonation on your private wrought-iron tower balcony. Meals are tasty and innovative – who knew a tajine would be good with melted cheese? – and the charming multilingual owner can arrange trekking and climbing.

Hôtel Amazir (☎ 024 895109; d/tr incl breakfast Dh400/600, half-board Dh600/800; ☎ ☎) Don't be fooled by its stern, stony exterior: inside, this place is relaxed, with pretty, unfussy rooms, a pool terrace surrounded by palms, and the lulling sound of the rushing river below. It's on a bend in the road at the southern end of the gorge, 5km before you enter, away from gorge-gawking crowds.

CAMPING

Along the road to the gorge, about 9km from Tinerhir, is a line of camp sites, all with basic rooms but benefiting from a gorgeous setting amid the *palmeraie*. One of the best and friendliest is **Camping le Soleil** (☎ 024 895111; camping per person Dh15, plus per tent/car/campervan Dh15/15/25, d without/with bathroom 120/240), which is also the first site you come to. Facilities include a good restaurant, clean hot showers, shady sites and a washing machine (per load Dh20). Also recommended is **Hôtel-Camping Atlas** (☎ 024 895046; per person/tent/car/campervan Dh10/15/15/20; s/d Dh100/140). Hot showers are included in the fee; meals cost Dh20 for breakfast and Dh70 for dinner.

Since the road to the top of the gorge was paved, you could head all the way to Tamattouchte for deluxe camping at the shockingly pink, long-established **Auberge Baddou** (☎ 072 521389; with private bathroom s Dh60-110, d Dh110-220, tr Dh220-320, camping with own tent/camping in nomad tent per person Dh20/30) or the new **Les Amis** (☎ 070 234374; amistamt@yahoo.fr; camping per person/camper van Dh15/35, d or tr half-board per person Dh200).

Getting There & Away

See p359 for transport to the gorge.

Transit minivans head northwards most days from Tinerhir to Aït Haini (market day Thursday); from there you'll have to

hitch. A sealed road now runs all the way to Aït Haini (paving in progress towards Imilchil) beyond which the *piste* continues over the Tizi Tirherhouzine to Agoudal (the highest village en route; basic accommodation is available) and on to Imilchil, just over 100km from the gorge.

GOULMIMA

غولميمة

Goulmima is a centre of Berber culture and makes a more interesting sightseeing stopover than Er-Rachidia, which has better sleeping options. Market days are Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Most facilities, including ATMs, internet and cafés, can be found along the main street.

The main attraction is the labyrinthine **Ksar Aït Goulmima**. Unlike many *ksour* and kasbahs in the region, this walled village is still home to several hundred people. A guide can lead you to the 500-year-old mosque and through the **mellah** into the *palmeraie*.

To get to the *ksar*, head through the main part of town and turn right at the roundabout to/from Er-Rachidia. After 500m, you'll pass the Maison d'Hôtes les Palmiers. Another 800m further along is the turn-off left to the youth hostel; the *ksar* is straight on.

The peaceful converted home of a French-Moroccan couple, **Maison d'Hôtes les Palmiers** (☎ /fax 035 784004; s/d/tr/q Dh180/260/330/360, per person half-board Dh250) sits in a mature garden on the edge of the *palmeraie*. Rooms are spacious and spotless, with tiled baths; all are heated in winter, but only one has air-conditioning. The mostly Moroccan dinner menu is fabulous (dinner Dh95). Trekking information and guides for the *ksar* are available.

In another converted family home a Moroccan family runs the **Youth Hostel** (☎ 066 908442; www.aub.ht.st, in French; Hay Othmane Secteur 3, No 4 Ksar Goulmima; mattress/d per person Dh50/100). You could crash anywhere in this walled garden complex and find a soft place to land on the grass or piles of rugs, floral upholstered mattresses and mirrored pillows. It has a couple of double rooms, shared showers with off-and-on hot water, and a kitchen. Meals cost Dh20 for breakfast, Dh50 for lunch/dinner.

Grands taxis run from town when full to Er-Rachidia and Tinerhir.

ZIZ VALLEY & THE TAFILALT

وادة زيز و تافالالت

The Oued Ziz brings life to this barren landscape, running past the small town of Rich and carving out a valley that continues south beyond Merzouga. Along the road to Er-Rachidia you'll see the spectacular Jurassic geography of the Ziz Gorges, beginning 20km south of Rich at the French-built Tunnel du Légionnaire and marking thousands of years of geologic time with their exposed strata. This route nips through palm-fringed towns and past several *ksour* and a series of dams, including the Barrage Hassan Adakhil with turquoise water visible from the main highway. Beyond Er-Rachidia, the road heads past the fertile Source Bleue de Meski before plunging into the desert and rolling dunes of Merzouga.

The tough Tafilalt was one of the last areas to succumb to French control under the protectorate, with tribes putting up sporadic resistance until 1932. Two years later Morocco was officially considered 'pacified', but just to be on the safe side, Erfoud was built as an administrative and garrison town to keep a watchful eye on the Tafilalt tribes.

ER-RACHIDIA

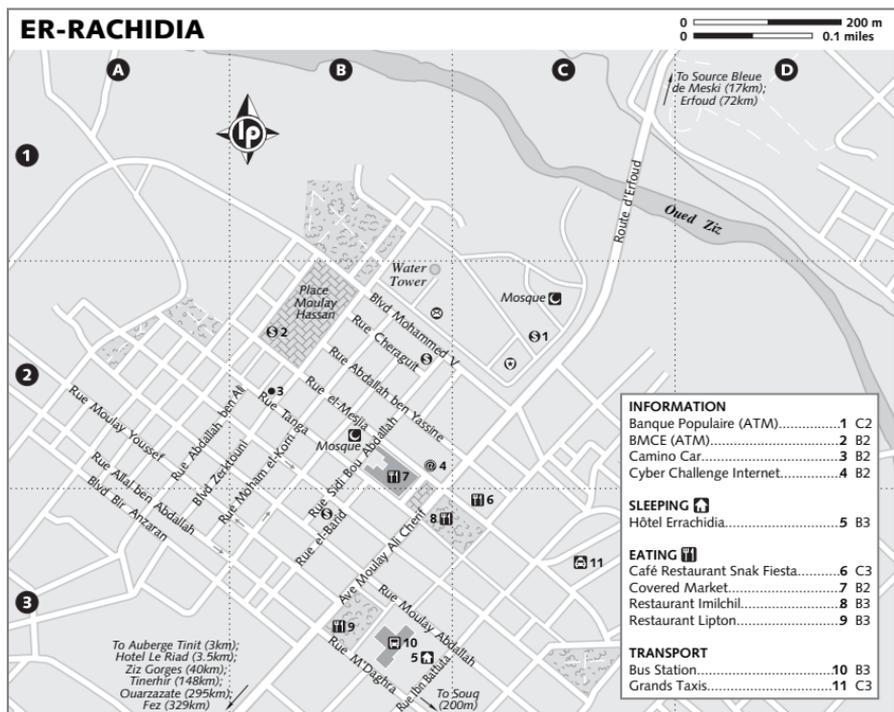
الراشيدية

Garrison towns aren't generally known for their charm or culture, but Er-Rachidia is trying to change that. Along with some nicer accommodations it now has an enormous theatre, and every May since 2003 has been host to performers from throughout the Sahara at the **Festival du Desert** (www.festivaldudésert.ma). Market days are Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday.

Information

There are at least four banks in town, including a **BMCE** (Place Moulay Hassan) and a **Banque Populaire** near the main street heading out to Erfoud, both of which have ATMs.

Cyber Challenge Internet (Rue Sidi Bou Abdallah; per hr Dh5; ☎ 7am-midnight) is on a 2nd floor near the covered market. If you've taken transit this far but want to drive to the desert, one of the last agencies until Merzouga is **Camino**



Car (☎ 035 574947; 102 Blvd Zerktouni 1st-fl, Er-Rachidia; daily rental Dh300-350).

Sleeping

Hôtel Errachidia (☎ 035 570453; hotellerrachidia@yahoo.fr; 31 Rue Ibn Battuta; s/d/tr Dh250/320/410; 🚗) Don't be fooled by the setting behind the bus station (handy for early or late arrivals), or the Soviet-style concrete exterior: inside are 26 perfectly comfortable rooms with sparkling white bathrooms, most of which face away from the street and are quite peaceful. Note that only 10 of the 21 rooms have air-con.

Hotel le Riad (☎ 035 791006; www.hotelleriad.com; Route de Goulmima, Er-Rachidia; s Dh600, d & tr Dh70; 🚗) A true business-class hotel has landed in Er-Rachidia, with all the fixings: internet access, sprawling suite guestrooms, marble bathtubs, an absurdly huge pool and suited stampedes of pharmaceutical conferences. Exceedingly comfortable and reasonably priced, given the high standard of service.

Eating

Opposite the **covered market** where you could scrounge up picnic makings, **Restaurant Imi-**

lchil (☎ 035 572123; Ave Moulay Ali Cherif), provides a ready-made alternative: good tajines on a big terrace (set meal Dh70).

Right across Rue el-Mesjia is **Café Restaurant Snak Fiesta** (Rue el-Mesjia; 🍽️ lunch & dinner), which serves fresh Moroccan salads (Dh15) and sandwiches (Dh20) at the right price. Near the bus station is the faded but friendly **Restaurant Lipton** (Ave Moulay Ali Cherif).

Getting There & Away

BUS

Buses operate out of the central **bus station** (Rue M'Daghra). **CTM** (☎ 035 572024) has departures to Rabat/Casablanca (Dh140/170, 10/11 hours, one daily), Fez (Dh105, 8½ hours, one daily) and Meknès (Dh90, seven hours, six daily).

There are also private buses that run to Fez (Dh85, five daily), Marrakesh (Dh125, 11 hours, three daily), Ouarzazate (Dh65, six hours, three daily), and Rissani (Dh18, two hours, nine daily) via Erfoud (Dh15).

TAXI

Most grands taxis depart from a lot located about three blocks northeast of the main

bus station. The main destinations include Azrou (Dh80, five hours), Erfoud (Dh20, one hour), Fez (Dh130, five hours), Meknès (Dh110, five hours), Tinerhir (Dh40, 1½ hours), Rissani (Dh25, 1½ hours) and Merzouga via Rissani (Dh50, 1½ hours).

AROUND ER-RACHIDIA

Source Bleue de Meski

عين مسكي الزرقاء

This natural spring spilling into a swimming pool 17km southeast of Er-Rachidia has become a weekend draw for heat-plagued locals from Er-Rachidia. During the week, it's not a bad place for a quick dip (Dh5), though you may feel self-conscious with villagers watching you strip down to your skivvies. If you want to work up a sweat before you take the chilly plunge, there's a nice hike from the camping area to the deserted Ksar Meski on the far side of the *oued*.

The spring is about 1km west of the main road and signposted. Public buses travel from Er-Rachidia to a terminal just above the spring between 7am and 9pm (Dh3). Alternatively, any bus or grand taxi to Erfoud or Aufous can drop you off at the turn-off. When leaving, you should be able to flag down a grand taxi or hitch from the main road. If you're driving south to Erfoud, there are great photo opportunities of the *Ziz palmeraies* just north of Aufous, when the road turns a corner on the desert plateau to reveal a green gorge below.

Down in this *palmeraie* is the a wonderful find: **ourpick** **Maison d'Hôtes Zouala** (☎ 072 144633; http://labrisenet.free.fr/maison_zouala, in French; 30km on the Er-Rachidia–Erfoud road, in centre of Douar Irgroum; per person half-board Dh250). This pisé house was the owner's ancestral home, and now he's extended his family's welcome to guests in this peaceful hideaway with private and shared bathrooms, home cooking (they bake their own bread), and local touches like women's embroidered shawls for curtains, and jugs as lamp bases. Bikes are available to explore, but ask also about treks to hidden springs and visits to local homes during date and olive harvests. A portion of proceeds helps fund the village association's literacy program.

At the edge of the *palmeraie* just before the town of Aufous is **Camping Tissirt** (☎ 062 141378; tissirtziz@yahoo.fr; per person/car/car-

camping/caravan Dh15/15/20/30, d half-board Dh15 plus tent/shower/electricity/water/meal Dh15/10/15/20/Dh60-70), a comfortable and scenic stopping point under the palms en route to the Merzouga dunes. The pisé bungalows are especially appealing, with tile floors and palm-stump end tables, and meal offerings include *madfouna* (local Berber calzone). While you're here, wander around Asous, which offers useful services – food, petrol and phone – and has some stunning pisé buildings and an impressive ruin of a kasbah above. The weekly souq is on Thursday.

ERFOUD

إرفود

pop 24,000

Fossilised bathtubs and moist, sweet dates are Erfoud's claims to fame, but this wasn't always the case. Until recently Erfoud was the end of the road, and the boisterous staging point for desert tours. But now that the tarmac goes right up to the base of the dunes in Merzouga, you can sit at a sidewalk café here and just hear the swoosh of 4WDs gunning it past Erfoud to hotels with dune views just down the road. The Merzouga road is clearly marked, so you don't need to stop to hire a guide, but it's still worth a pause here for coffee, pizza, fossils and fresh dates during the September to October harvest.

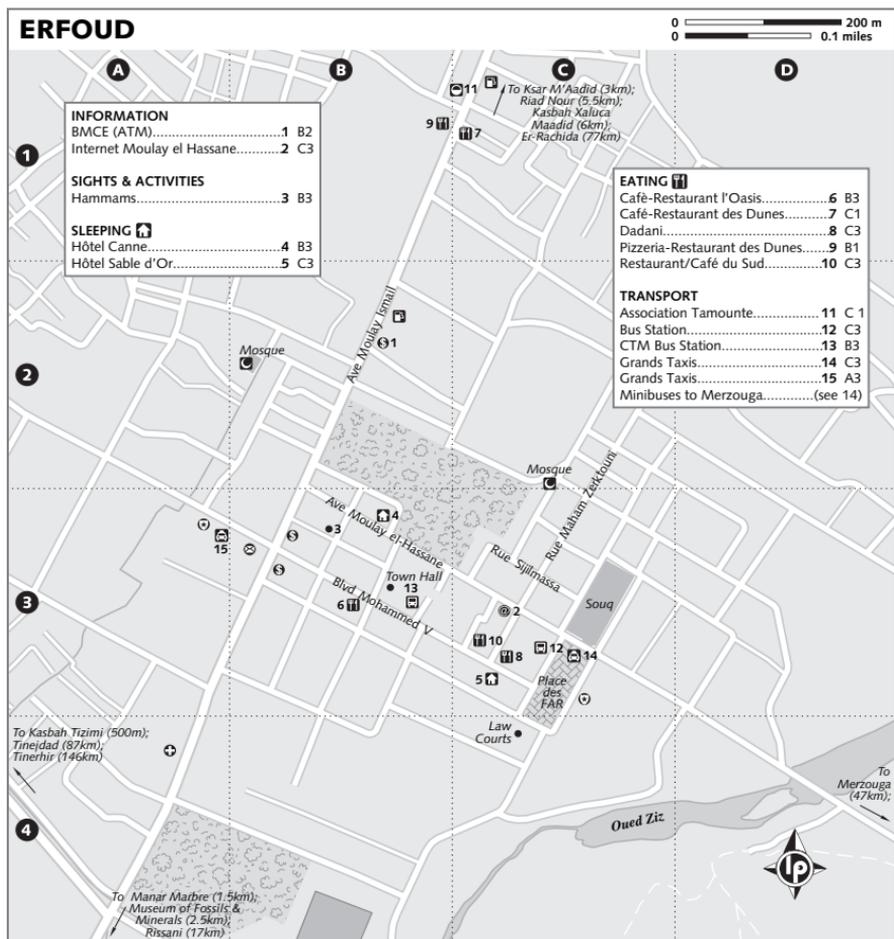
Information

There are several banks in town but only the **BMCE** (Ave Moulay Ismail) has an ATM. Internet access is available at **Internet Moulay el Hassane** (Ave Moulay el-Hassane per hr Dh5; ☎ 10am–1am).

Sights & Activities

There's more history to Erfoud than immediately meets the eye. Just 5km north of Erfoud is the impressive **Ksar M'Aadid**, well worth a look if you have your own transport.

It takes some digging to find Erfoud's other claim to historical fame: shiny black fossilised marble, which is quarried nearby in the desert. You can watch it being cut into prehistoric sinks at **Manar Marble** (☎ 055 578125; Route de Jouf; ☎ 9am–6pm), the marble factory between the town and Kasbah Tizimi, and scour the showroom downstairs for prehistoric bookends and



trilobite earrings. The display is more fun and the prices are better at the **Museum of Fossils & Minerals** (☎ 061 425927, 068 757563; brahimitahiri@hotmail.com; 3km on the Rissani road; 🕒 8am-7pm), which has prize fossils in museum display cases not for sale, and others in the boutique you can buy: tiny fish frozen in a final flip and ingenious carved black marble espresso cups studded with ancient ammonite fossils.

In September or October Erfoud has an increasingly well-attended **date festival**, with dancing and music. But if it's been awhile since you've had a good, juicy date and can't wait until October, the souq at the southern end of town sells some of the town's famous dates along with fresh produce.

Hammams (Dh7 entry) for men and women are located behind Hôtel Sable d'Or.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Hôtel Canne (☎ 035 578695; fax 035 578696; 85 Ave Moulay el-Hassane; s/d/tr Dh150/180/240; 🚻) The sharp team of women who run this centrally located place are rightfully proud of the reputation the Canne has earned as the best women-friendly budget hotel for miles around. Aqua-blue bathroom fixtures betray no trace of toothpaste spatter, and the clean linens are on so tightly you may have to wrestle yourself into bed.

Hôtel Sable d'Or (☎ 035 576348; Blvd Mohammed V; s/d Dh150/170) On a street lined with cafés,

this easygoing place offers simple rooms with private bathrooms, peeling paint, tiled floors and clean linens.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Riad Nour (☎ 035 577748; <http://riad-nour.iffance.com>; 5km before Erfoud on right; s/d Dh240/590; 🍷) The next-door neighbour to the glitzy Xaluca, but they probably don't run in the same circles. Inner peace is the goal here, with 12 guestrooms in white with touches of blue, wrought-iron beds and framed calligraphy. There's a pool out back you can splash around in and a fully stocked bar in front, and the main garden courtyard attracts nesting songbirds and lovebirds.

Kasbah Xaluca Maadid (☎ 035 578450; www.xaluca.com; 5km before Erfoud on right; s/d Dh740/900, junior/royal ste Dh2000/2900; 🍷 🍷) Exactly the kind of flashy pool-party scene where they film music videos (and in fact a Moroccan music video request show was filming at our last visit to the Xaluca). Junior suites are the rock stars here, with fossilised marble bedsteads and mineral lamps; suites are a bit frilly with chintz dust ruffles on four-poster beds.

Eating

Don't miss the chance to try the local speciality *kalia*, minced mutton with tomato, peppers, egg, onion and 44 spices (no, you can't count them) served in a tajine.

Restaurant/Café du Sud (19 Ave Mohammed V; mains Dh30-50) Next to the Hôtel Ziz, this is one of the most popular local eateries. The *kalia* (Dh30) is excellent and *madfouna* (Dh45) is available if you order in advance.

our pick **Pizzeria-Restaurant des Dunes** (☎ 035 576793; Ave Moulay Ismail; pizza Dh40, set menu Dh80-100) Do not adjust your GPS: you're about to experience authentic wood-fired pizza right here in the desert, including a stunning pizza margherita with local anchovies, olives and fresh oregano for just Dh40. Bet you'll be heading here on your way back from the dunes, too.

Café-Restaurant des Dunes (☎ 035 576793; Ave Moulay Ismail; meals Dh60) Pull up a cushioned ironwork throne at a sidewalk table, and enjoy some rays with your fresh-squeezed orange juice at this sidewalk café for just Dh5. The same family owns the top-end Kasbah Zaluca Maadid and the pizza restaurant across the road.

Two other popular places are the new **Dadani** (Ave Mohammed V; menu Dh70, mains Dh40-45, breakfast Dh20) and **Café-Restaurant l'Oasis** (Ave Mohammed V; mains Dh35-45), both of which serve solid Moroccan dishes for reasonable prices.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The **CTM station** (☎ 035 576886; Ave Mohammed V) runs a service twice daily to Fez (Dh95, seven hours) via Er-Rachidia (Dh15, 1½ hours), Marrakesh (Dh135, 11½ hours), Midelt (Dh59, five hours), Meknès (Dh125, 6½ hours) and Rissani (Dh5, 20 minutes).

Other busses leave from Place des FAR. There are services to Tinerhir (Dh30, twice daily), to Ouarzazate (Dh70, three daily) and Fez (Dh97, three daily).

A local bus runs to Zagora (Dh75, six hours) at 8.30am on Tuesday and Thursday. A minivan runs sporadically to Merzouga (Dh15 to Dh20) from the parking lot in Place des FAR. The driver might try to steer you towards whichever auberge pays commission, so stand by your guns if you have a particular place in mind. Minibuses can drop you off at any auberge en route.

TAXI

Grands taxis are, as a rule, a more reliable bet. Some leave from Place des FAR and others from opposite the post office for Merzouga (Dh30, one hour), Rissani (Dh7, 20 minutes), Er-Rachidia (Dh20, one hour) and Tinerhir (Dh60). Since the road was laid to Merzouga, the price of hiring a 4WD and driver, formerly the only certain way of getting over the *piste*, has dropped.

Association Tamounte (☎ 035 577523; 5 Ave Moulay Ismail) rents car and driver for Dh450 a day, plus the cost of diesel.

RISSANI

الريصاني

Many visitors are tempted to pass straight through the town of Rissani, but photographers, history buffs and architecture aficionados could spend days wandering through decrepit *ksour*, artfully crumbling kasbahs, a *zawiya* open to all and recently opened *ksar* museum along these well-worn caravan tracks. Rissani is the point where Oued Ziz quietly ebbs away, but historically fortunes flowed through here in gold and slaves from caravans from the *sahel*. Rissani

was so strategic that the Filali (ancestors of the Alawite dynasty that rules today) used it as the staging ground for their epic battle to supplant the Saadians as the ruling dynasty in Morocco.

The centre of Rissani is quite small and manageable and still has a significant *ksar* at its heart, including important Alawite monuments. Travellers will find most of their practical needs satisfied along the northern edge of the souq, which becomes a bustling hive of activity every Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday.

Information

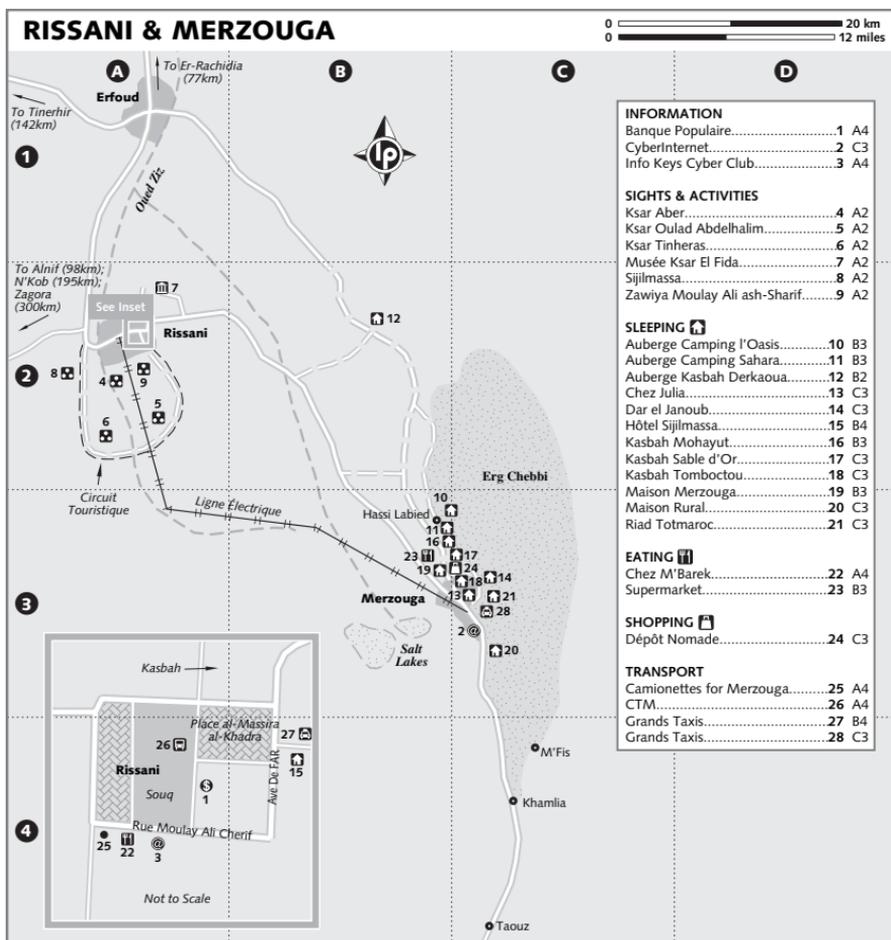
There's a post and phone office at the northern end of the medina walls, and a

Banque Populaire with an ATM opposite the souq. **Info Keys Cyber Club** (per hr Dh5) is one of several internet places.

Sights & Activities

For a tour of Rissani's ancient architectural splendours, famed *palmeraie* and glimpses of life on the edge of the desert, try this 21km loop (Map p368) along a circuit south of Rissani. Look sharp: Some sights are along bumpy roads that lead you past several ruined *ksour* and the scant ruins of the fabled city of Sijilmassa.

From Rissani's centre, head north from the souq and follow the main road west. About 2km to the southeast is the cheering yellow **Zawiya Moulay Ali ash-Sharif** (open



to non-Muslims; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm), built to honour the founder of the Alawite dynasty that still rules Morocco today. Behind the *zawiya* along a dirt track you'll see the fantastic crumbling towers of 19th-century **Ksar Aber**, which formerly housed the dynasty's disgraced or unwanted members and like those black sheep, has been abandoned to its ruination.

About 1km or so past the *zawiya* on your right is **Ksar Oulad Abdelhalim**, built around 1900 for Sultan Moulay Hassan's elder brother. Walk through the wooden door into the walled compound, then veer right, left and right again into the ruin of the palace once called the 'Alhambra of the Tafilalt'. There's little left intact beyond some painted ceiling beams and carved stucco, but plenty to fascinate a photographer – extra memory cards may come in handy here.

Back on the road, you'll continue past another group of *ksour*, some of which are still inhabited by members of the Filali. There are good views from **Ksar Tinheras**.

You come to the ruins of **Sijilmassa** just before you reach Rissani. This was the capital of a virtually independent Islamic principality adhering to the Shiite 'heresy' (see *About Islam*, p57) in the early days of the Arab conquest of North Africa. Sijilmassa's foundation is lost in myth – some speculate it was in AD 757 – but certainly by the end of the 8th century it played a key role as a staging post for trans-Saharan trade. Caravans of up to 20,000 camels crossed the sands to the remote desert salt mines of Taodeni and Tagahaza (in modern-day Mali), then continued to Niger and Ghana, where a pound of Saharan salt was traded for an ounce of African gold.

But as the Berbers say, where there's gold, there's trouble. The inevitable internal feuding led to the collapse of the fabled city in the 14th century, and Sijilmassa is now a ruin with little to indicate its past glories beyond two decorated gateways and a few other partially standing structures. With all this glorious decay, album cover photo shoots fairly beg to be set here.

There are other *ksour* in the region including Ksar al-Beidha, Ksar Haroun and several *ksour* on the road to Merzouga; look for signposts on your left heading south out of town. Just 2.5km south of town you'll also

see signs for a Musée, which is worth the detour. **Musée Ksar El Fida** (☎ 061 847817; Rissani; entry with guide Dh10) is an enormous restored Alawite kasbah built from 1854–72 that shows how life was lived within these walls in the 19th century, from their elaborate costumes to the contents of a 19th-century toolbox.

Sleeping & Eating

Since most tourists stay in Erfoud or Merzouga, accommodation in Rissani is limited and the standards mostly poor.

Hôtel Sijilmassa (☎/fax 035 575042; Place al-Massira al-Khadra; s Dh80, d Dh140-160; 🚽) is located near the bus and grand taxi station for early/late arrivals. En suite rooms here are clean and comfortable, though the bathrooms that lead you through the shower to reach the toilet are odd. All rooms have air-conditioning except one, and the downstairs restaurant features a hearty *kalia*.

our pick **Chez M'barek** (☎ 067 501658; pano rama72003@yahoo.fr; 7 Rue Moulay Ali Chrif, Rissani; breakfast Dh15, set menu Dh40) serves authentic *kalia* that is rich in tomato and meat, or a well-spiced *madfouna* that will feed at least four (Dh80) in the cool basement or breezy terrace. Call in your *madfouna* order two hours beforehand so that it will be ready when you arrive.

Shopping

If you have time on your hands, Rissani has a few carpet and jewellery shops with some interesting stock along the main square. On market days it's also worth looking around the souq for a solid-quality jellaba or burnous, plus crafts and the occasional piece of sand-worn old jewellery.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave from the new *gare routière* 400m from the square, on the road to Erfoud. There are services to Fez (Dh110, two daily, 13 hours) via Meknès (Dh100, nine hours) and Marrakesh (Dh150, one daily, 10 hours), plus an evening run to Casablanca (Dh150, one daily, 15 hours). Buses run occasionally to Zagora (Dh80, five hours) and Tinerhir (Dh50, six hours); check station for departures. There are six buses a day to Er-Rachidia (Dh20, three hours) via Erfoud.

CTM (☎ 066 367006; Place de la Marche Verte) has an office in the centre of town, and

runs one bus a day at 8pm to Fez/Meknès (Dh135/125, eight to nine hours) via Er-Rachidia (Dh30, 1½ hours).

Grands taxis run frequently from opposite the Hôtel Sijilmassa to Erfoud (Dh12), Er-Rachidia (Dh28), Tinerhir (Dh65), Merzouga (Dh15) and occasionally to Taouz (Dh30).

You can also reach Merzouga by *camionnette* (minivan; Dh10), which leaves hourly from outside Chez M'Barek.

ERG CHEBBI, MERZOUGA & HASSI LABIED

Of course a sight this extraordinary has to have its own local legend: when a wealthy local family didn't offer hospitality to a poor woman and her son, God was offended, and buried them under the mounds of sand 50km south of Erfoud now called **Erg Chebbi**. Erg Chebbi rises above the towns of **Merzouga** and **Hassi Labied**, where you can stay at hotels with spectacular dune views. Sunrises and sunsets alone don't reveal the versatility of the *erg* (sand dune), which is constantly shape-shifting to reach heights of 160m and even in the flat light of midday glows a stunning shade of rose gold. Imperceptible shifts in sunlight tint the dunes orange, yellow, pink or purple; silhouetted by moonlight, they look even more immense.

Sights & Activities

Most hotels offer excursions into the dunes, which can range from Dh80 to Dh200 for a couple of hours' sunrise or sunset camel trek. Overnight trips usually include a bed in a Berber tent, dinner and breakfast, and range from Dh300 to Dh650 per person. Outings in a 4WD are more expensive, up

to Dh1200 per day for a car taking up to five passengers.

For birdwatchers, this is perhaps the best area in Morocco for spotting many desert species, including desert sparrows, Egyptian nightjars, desert warblers, fulvous babbler and blue-cheeked bee-eaters. Sometimes in spring (dependent on rainfall) a shallow lake appears northwest of Merzouga, attracting flocks of flamingos and other waterbirds.

But in recent years, birds and tourists have begun to stray further from the beaten path in **Merzouga**, put off by the same concern: noise. The constant pounding of quads was levelling dunes, and their reverberating vibrations were becoming a deterrent to wildlife, travellers and local residents. The town has begun to rally, posting a sign prohibiting quad use in the dunes. Better yet, the demand for quads seems to be dropping as travellers become more attuned to the issues (and dust) they raise.

On the subject of annoyances: as you may notice, Merzouga doesn't like to miss any opportunity to be of service to travellers. Surely you must need a guide? A dromedary trip? A place to stay? If you show up in town unaccompanied by a guide, you can anticipate these refrains, but try to keep it in perspective: since getting by in the desert is notoriously tough, you might get a little pushy sometimes too. Just don't get talked into anything you don't want, and if you feel like you're being pressured, step away from the interaction.

Information

Merzouga may be a tiny village, but does have *téléboutiques*, general stores, a mechanic

CAMEL QUERIES

Before you agree on a camel trek, here are a few key questions to ask the guide:

How big is your camp, and how many people are headed there tonight? The cheaper treks often congregate in the same spot, so if you have a romantic notion of being alone in the dunes under the stars, you need to find an outfit with a separate camp or set up a longer trip.

How far is it to the camp site? Not every fit is cut out for dromedary-riding – it can make some people seasick, and others chafe. If you're going on a long trek, you might bring motion-sickness pills and cornstarch or talcum powder.

Does the trek guide speak English, or another language I know? This is important in the unlikely case of emergency in the desert, and to avoid those awkward hand-gesture explanations when you need to use the bathroom.

and, of course, a couple of carpet shops. It also has an internet place at the town centre, signposted **CyberInternet** (Dh5 per hr; ☎ 9am-10pm). Even smaller Hassi Labied has the **Dépôt Nomade**, a former desert caravan trading centre turned carpet shop.

Sleeping & Eating

Purists lament the encroachment, but a string of hotels now flank the western side of Erg Chebbi from the village of Merzouga north past the oasis village of Hassi Labied. On the upside, many of these places have spectacular dune views from rooms and terraces. Most offer half-board options, and often you can sleep on a terrace mattress or in a Berber tent for Dh30 to Dh50 per person (and up at swankier resorts). Sand toys (snowboard, skis etc) and bicycles are free to use at many hotels.

In May 2006, heavy rains caused a freak flash flood in Merzouga that took six lives, 300 homes and a dozen hotels. At the time of writing, some of these hotels are still in the process of rebuilding. Sometimes a taxi driver may insist that the hotel where you want to stay was lost in the flood, but if it's in this guidebook, that's clearly not the case. There's an easy way to resolve this with a mobile phone: call and ask hotel staff to explain to the driver where you want to go.

Many hotels are reached along a series of *pistes* that run 1km or more east off the tarmac road. Since they're not all close together – Hassi Labied is 5km from Merzouga, and some of the hotels listed here are far beyond that – it's worth calling ahead to make sure hotels have space.

To pack a picnic for the desert or load up on snacks, the supermarket 2km before Merzouga on the left provides most necessities.

HASSI LABIED

This tiny village 5km north of Merzouga and a way off the tarmac has a good range of accommodation.

Auberge Camping Sahara (☎ 035 577039; s half-board Dh110, d/tr/ste half-board with bathroom Dh140/170/250, terrace camping per person Dh20) Basic but spotless rooms and Turkish toilets in a friendly Tuareg-run place backing right onto the dunes at the southernmost end of the village. The auberge organises excursions and will even help you buy your complete Tuareg outfit in the market.

Kasbah Sable d'Or (Chez Isabelle & Rachid; ☎ 035 577859; <http://kasbah-sable-dor.co>; half-board per person with shared/private bathroom Dh140/170) When the goat bleats welcome, you know you've come to the right place. Rachid and Isabelle offer four rooms in their home with hand-painted murals on the doors, fans instead of air-con and tasty home-cooked dinners in the family salon. You can also camp in a Bedouin tent (Dh25), have a private overnight camel trek (Dh300 to Dh500), or get up early to watch the sunrise atop a camel (Dh150).

Kasbah Mohayut (☎ 066 039185; www.mohayut.com; s/d/ste per person half-board Dh350/300/250; 🍷) Find your niche at the Mohayut in sculpted-*tadelakt* guestrooms, in the shade by a small pool, or on the roof overlooking the dunes. All the old doors, Berber rugs and painted-wood bed boards add charm, but the mattresses and showerheads need replacing. Standard rooms are nicer than the lacy suite; angle for a double with a fireplace and salon.

Maison Merzouga (☎ 035 577299; fax 035 578428; s/d incl breakfast Dh350/540, half-board Dh500/600) Unlike places nearer the dunes, this 14-room family-run guest house focuses on Berber hospitality instead of desert-themed decor. Lounging in your guestroom or the in-house hammam seems like a lost opportunity, when your hosts invite you into the open kitchen to learn how they bake bread, or to the *palmerie* to explain how ancient irrigation systems work. The best room here is the cheapest tower room, with dune views.

ourpick Dar el Janoub (☎/fax 035 577852; www.dareljanoub.com; d standard/large/ste per person Dh500/600/700; 🍷 🍷) Neighbouring hotels take the 1001 *Nights* approach to hospitality, but Dar el Janoub is an Amazigh haiku. That splashy graphic pattern on the lobby wall is the Berber alphabet, and the architect stuck to elemental building shapes, because when you're facing the dunes, why compete? Rates are on the high end, but for the price you're getting that million-dirham view, half-board, a chlorinated pool, and pure poetry.

Kasbah Tomboctou (☎ 035 577091; fax 035 578449; www.xaluca.com; s/d & tr/ste half-board per person Dh1045/764/1014; 🍷 🍷) The statue of kissing camels by the door pretty much tells you what you're in for here: Moroccan extravagance with a wink. It's laid out like a *douar*

(village), complete with signposts towards the spa and hammam, pool, and huge restaurant. Guestrooms are surprisingly plain pisé but with colourful canopied beds and *tadelakt* bathrooms; suites are pretty much the same, only bigger.

MERZOUGA

Most places are south of the scruffy village centre.

Maison Rural (☎ 035 577871; with own tent & electricity Dh20, in Berber tent in dunes with camel ride Dh250, per person half-board with shared bathroom Dh150, per person half-board with private bathroom Dh200) A rural room with a view. All 10 rooms around this sleepy courtyard have orthopaedic beds, fans and heating (no air-conditioning). Some rooms have dune views – ask for the corner room. Camping with a guided camel and tent in the dunes is a sweet deal here.

Chez Julia (☎ 035 573182; s/d/tr/q Dh160/180/200/230) Pure charm in the heart of Merzouga, Chez Julia offers nine simply furnished rooms in soft, sunwashed colours with immaculate white-tiled shared bathrooms. Every element shows signs of gracious co-existence with often harsh elements: sun-bleached doors, bristling straw-textured pisé, and lovingly worn antique mantelpieces. The Moroccan ladies who run the place can cook up a storm of delicious Moroccan meals and Austrian dishes like schnitzel and apfelstrudel, too (meals Dh100; breakfast Dh38 to Dh50).

Riad Totmaroc (☎ 070 624136; www.totmaroc.com; Merzouga; per person half-board Dh350) A mod kasbah that provides instant relief from the white-hot desert with five guestrooms in bold, eye-soothing shades of blue and green, shady patios looking right onto the dunes, an open kitchen turning out tasty meals, and dromedary overnights with an experienced official local tour leader.

NORTH OF HASSI LABIED

Auberge Kasbah Derkaoua (☎ /fax 035 577140; www.aubergederkaoua.com, in French; half-board per person adult/under 16 Dh500/275; ☹ closed Jan, some of Jun-Aug; 🚗 📶) The furthest north of the auberges (one of the first signs when coming from Rissani), A former Sufi centre is just the place to retreat from society and contemplate the meaning of the desert in your private bungalow in this walled garden compound. When you're ready to rejoin the world, head off

on intrepid excursions on camel, horse and 4WD arranged in-house. The food is a delicious combination of French and Moroccan and is served beneath the starlit sky in the gardens, or a nearby tented camp.

Getting There & Away

Thankfully, the sealed road now continues all the way to Merzouga and 25km beyond it to Taouz, releasing travellers from the clutches of *faux guides*.

Most hotels are located at least 1km off the road at the base of the dunes, but they're all accessible by car. The *pistes* can be rough and there is always a possibility of getting stuck in sand, albeit remote, so make sure you have plenty of water for emergencies and a mobile phone.

Without your own transport you'll have to rely on the grands taxis and minivans that sporadically run from Merzouga to Rissani and Erfoud and back. All minibuses will pick up or drop off in Hassi Labied – your auberge can make arrangements. Minivans run from Merzouga between 7.30am and 9.30am in high season.

Grands taxis leave from Merzouga centre, opposite Dakar Restaurant, heading north to Rissani (Dh12) and south to the end of the road at Taouz (Dh100 round-trip with 45 minutes to look around).

TAOUZ

تاووز

Come to Taouz if you want to see the desert close in at the end of the road. The only sight in this desolate village, beyond the pull of rocky desert, hidden minerals and occasional dinosaur remains, is **Casa Taouz**, a house beyond the village that offers tea and occasionally food.

The village of Khamlia is between Merzouga and Taouz. Its inhabitants are thought to be descended from slaves brought from south of the Sahara who somehow evaded export and settled here. The place looks like just another frontier town, but it's home to several Gnawa musicians. The most famous of these is Les Pigeons du Sable: some of their music is available on CD in Europe, and they occasionally perform here and at the annual Festival du Desert (see p363). Ask at their house (marked by a banner) for details.

If you have a 4WD, there are several places to stay in the desert around Taouz. Signposts along the road include their GPS locations.

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