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Morocco is a land of incredible contrasts. Many visitors arrive thinking the whole country is desert, but that's far from the reality of the place. The gardens and fruit-growing areas of the north are rich and fertile as are many other regions throughout the country. Orange trees line the streets of almost every town and city. In the east and the south you get the traditional desert look – dry, barren and near lifeless, but never completely so. There's always life in a desert. And then there's the Atlas Mountain Range overlooking the vast plains and for much of the year covered in snow.

Morocco even boasts two ski resorts...Oukaimeden near Marrakech and Mischliffen near Fez. Mischliffen (2036m) is the smaller of the two resorts with just two pomas and a few limited runs. There's only one place to stay if you decide to spend time on the mountain but the family run Hotel Aghlias is quite a pleasant place to spend some time. Every room has wonderful views of the ski area and most have private balconies. There's a restaurant and bar with friendly staff and even a swimming pool, but it's empty during the winter months because it's uncovered and unheated. Rooms cost around the 400 dirham mark and are large and comfortable. The heating isn't what you might expect for a ski resort, due to lots of reasons. They have no double glazing, curtains or carpets and the heating is inadequate for the large cold tiled areas.

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Ski rental and lift charges are cheap. Expect to pay around 15 euros a day for an entire outfit plus ski pass. If you're an experienced skier however, one day will be enough. The resort at Oukaimeden is superior.

The towns and cities of Morocco vary just like anywhere else. Rabat, the capital is a pleasant small city with gardens and lots of the consulates. Casablanca has only its name to make it sound romantic. It's only claim to fame is Le Grande Mosque. Meknes and Fez in the north are also worth visiting but not necessarily for their beauty. Meknes is just a modern city, the highlights of which are tucked away in the medina, the old part of town.

They say it's an irresistible city. It's worth visiting but only for a day or two. The highlights of the town are Bab Mansour, the oldest city gate in all of Africa. Beyond is the dream of Moulay Ismail, a sultan who in the 17th century over a period of fifty years transformed the area into an imperial city where even the ruins are impressive. There's a palace, two mosques and twenty pavilions as well as a vast area of stables able to house 12,000 horses.

Accommodation ranges from the cheap 40 or so dirham in the vicinity of the medina to a 100 or so dirham in the new city for a single with shared bathroom. Those around the medina are a bit rough. Then of course there are the usual 5 star places. The pick of the bunch at the cheap end is The Majestic Hotel. It's about a one minute walk from the train station in the new part of town. The cost is

130 dirham per room per night with a shared bathroom and 220 if you want a private one.

Fez is a colourful city with an enormous medina area. The touts are a bit persistent here. Accommodation varies again from the cheap 40 dirham mark in the medina to the 90 dirham mark for the Hotel Royal in the new part of town. For 300 to 450 dirham, the Hotel Ibis right beside the train station can't be beaten.

Tangiers is simply an overcrowded seaside city. The hills near the coast where the Mediterranean and the Atlantic meet are the best part of the place.

Erfoud is a delightful point from which to embark on a journey into the desert. Sleeping overnight under the stars is a popular choice, as is sand-boarding and camel riding but there's a lot more to do out there.

Essaouira and Agadir are worlds apart. Essaouira is a delightful fishing town with a developing tourist industry, a bit more tasteful than Agadir which resembles the Riviera at its worst. For a truly memorable experience, combine a walk around the port of Essaouira, followed by dinner at the French run Les Chandeliers and then visit Mogador Furniture for some of the most unusual household items in all of Morocco.

Sidi Ifni in the south is laid back and apart from the plastic rubbish all over the place, is quite pretty. And it's where the surf picks up, so surfers from all over the world converge on this stretch of coast south of Agadir and into the Sahara region. Tafraout and Tiznit are just inland towns where it's hard to find beauty on every corner. Each though has its own charm and is a good place to visit for a short period if you've got the time.

Marrakech on the other hand is a thriving mix of centuries of culture, spectacular architecture and a souk and medina larger than any other in Africa. It's hard to put into words the feeling one gets here in this great city.

Again the contrasts are everywhere...from the impressive 5 star hotels and government buildings, new apartment blocks that seem to be springing up all over the place to the labyrinth of back streets and alleyways in the old part of town. It is here that you feel the true Morocco, the aromas of spices and the spectacle of a million olives lined up in dozens of stalls. Impressive is not the word. There's dozens of all varieties of stalls and shops, streets full of shoe shops, leather, clothing, lamps, carpets, meat, vegies, silver and gold jewellery. And there's a lot more. Open-air restaurants all year round selling beautifully displayed and freshly cooked foods, street vendors selling anything from individual cigarettes to cups of water, packets of tissues, and again clothing by the tonne. There are shoe shine boys on every corner and the horse-drawn buggies that transport people all over the city are beautiful.

There's an entire area of the market devoted to mobile stalls selling freshly squeezed orange juice. It's colourful, vibrant and friendly.

But there's a downside. Beggars are everywhere. It's a strange sight to see a group of tourists leave their table in the open-air market, and immediately have the street people move in for the scraps. And continually throughout your day, people ask for a single dirham, the equivalent of 10 euro cents.

There is also a problem with drainage in many Moroccan towns and cities. The Romans could get it right three thousand years ago. The Moroccans can't today. Even in the grounds of Club Med, the water forms in puddles from poorly laid pavers. Outside in the streets after even the gentlest of rain, the puddles are lakes.

Still though Marrakech, and in fact much of Morocco is a totally enchanting place, where the aromas of freshly cooked fish and spices mix with the tantalising music from the street musicians and snake charmers. In the Place Jamaa El Fna, there is a wide assortment of buskers, fortune tellers, magicians and just men who engage the crowd in deep and involved conversation.

One of the most interesting acts is of Mustafa the Magician, a young up-and-coming magician who is occasionally joined by members of his family. From the reaction of the crowd, his act continually pleases from one moment to the next.

Without a doubt, the friendliest group for travel arrangements throughout Morocco is the Sahara Expedition company located in Marrakech. Their email address is saharaexpe@menara.ma and their website is www.saharaexpe.ma

Accommodation varies from the 5 star hotels to the tiny no-stars-at-all type places, but even these offer hot showers, clean sheets and friendly service. One of the best is Hotel Imouzzer, located near the Place Jamaa El Fna just off Bab Agnaou. Tel: 212-44-445336, email: hotel_imozzar@yahoo.fr and website: www.hotel-imozzar.com

A brand new riad outside Marrakech has recently opened under the management of Sahara Expeditions. Sumptuously decorated in true Moroccan style, with precious artefacts adorning every room, this wonderfully relaxing home away from home is set amongst tropical palms half an hour from the city centre. It's an oasis, a tranquil haven, a sanctuary for birds, a garden full of roses.

Morocco is a fantastic place to visit in any season, the highlight of which for me is always Marrakech. It can get cold and a little unpleasant in the winter months around January and February especially when it rains, but otherwise it's a delightful destination in northern Africa.