

Marrakech of Marrakesh

– Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Marrakech from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

...known as the “Ochre city,” or the “Red city,” or the “Pink city,” depending on which guidebook you’re using, is the most important **former imperial city** in **Morocco**’s history. The city of Marrakech lies near the foothills of the snow-capped **Atlas Mountains**. It is the second-largest city in Morocco, after Casablanca.

Like many **North African** cities, the city of Marrakech comprises both an old fortified city (the **médina**) and an adjacent modern city (called **Gueliz**) for a total population of 1,070,000. This Wikipedia page was accessed various times over the course of October and November 2011. According to a wide array of local sources, the city’s population is approximately twice what Wikipedia claims it to be. Have you noticed the growth here? Enormous half-built luxury communities sprawl to the northeast, the east, the south.

It is served by **Ménara International Airport (IATE code: RAK)** and a rail link to **Casablanca** and the north. On the train to Casablanca, I sat next to a middle-aged tourist guide in a rumpled black suit over an almost threadbare cream turtleneck. He wore knock-off designer eye-glasses, and was headed to Casablanca to meet a group of American tourists: he would take them around Casablanca, **Rabat**, **Fez**, **Meknès**, and finishing in Marrakech, where they would go shopping. He’d been out of work for eleven years until he started his own business as a guide. He asked me if there was a way to advertise on the Internet. I said I thought there was. “The real money here,” he said to me, “isn’t in taking some Americans around to buy some pairs of cheap leather slippers in the **souk**. When people complain that Marrakech has become touristy, a ‘tourist Mecca,’ they say. *Ha!* As if we are anything like **Mecca**. They point to the Americans and the Europeans wandering around in la Place, the square, eating some **merguez** and buying a **tajine**. No. That is not the story, or the money. The real money is in the Arabs, the Emiratis, and the Saudis who come for the drink and the women. They are all behind the big walls, and you are not seeing them. You are never seeing them. Everything they are wanting, they are being brought.”

There was a third man in our carriage, short and elderly and wearing a faded **fez**. After a few hours, he took a folded square of dot-matrix printer paper from his pocket and showed it to the tour guide. He spoke for a minute in Berber. The tour guide examined the piece of paper for a moment, then handed it back with a short reply. The tour guide turned to me, “The old man is on his way to Rabat, the capital, to pay a special professional tax. He drives a horse-drawn cab. He needed me to read the letter for him. What are you doing here?”

“I’m writing something about a biennial here.”

“What’s a biennial?”

“It’s a big art fair.”

“We are Muslims. We do not represent figures. Our tradition is craft and ornament. We have no use for art.”

Marrakech has the largest traditional market (**souk**) in Morocco and also has one of the busiest squares in **Africa** and the world, **Djemaa el Fna**. The square bustles with acrobats, storytellers, water sellers, dancers, and musicians. By night, food stalls open in the square, turning it into a huge busy open-air restaurant. It is also a very popular place for **cruising**.

Name

The city is spelled *Marrakech* in French, or *Marrakesh* in English, *Marraquech* in Spanish, *Marrakesch* in German, and *Marakeş* in Turkish. The probable origin of its name is from the **Berber** (Amazigh) words *mur (n) akush* (ⵎⵔ ⵏ ⴰⵏⵓⵛ), which means “Land of God.” A young Berber man I met in the square said that’s what they tell tourists, and that’s what you’ll read in a guidebook or on Wikipedia, but that Berbers know it really comes from the words for “pass through quickly,” because it was notorious as a place of theft.

Until a few decades ago, Morocco was widely known as “Kingdom of Marrakech” to Arabs, Persians, and Europeans. The European names for Morocco (Marruecos, Marrocos, Maroc, Marokko, etc.) are directly derived from the Berber word *Murakush*, and in many South Asian languages the country is in fact still known as *Marrakesh*. Conversely, the city itself was in earlier times simply called *Marocco (City)* by travelers from abroad. The name of the city and the country diverged after the **Treaty of Fez** placed Morocco **under French influence**, but the old interchangeable usage lasted until about the interregnum of **Mohammed Ben Aarafa**. The latter episode set in motion the country’s return to independence, when Morocco officially became *al-Mamlaka al-Magribiyya* (المملكة المغربية) (“The Western Kingdom”), and its name no longer referred to the city of Marrakech.

History

Prior to the advent of the **Almoravids** in the eleventh century, the area was ruled from the city of **Aghmat**. The **Almoravid** leader, **Abu-Bakr Ibn-Umar** decided **Aghmat** was becoming overcrowded and chose to build a new capital. He decided to build it in the plains near the **Tensift River**. He chose the site of Marrakech, because it was in neutral territory between two tribes who were vying for the honor of hosting the new capital. Work started in May 1070, but Abu-Bakr was recalled to the Sahara to put down a rebellion in January 1071, and the city was completed by his deputy and eventual successor **Yusuf ibn Tashfin**. The city experienced its greatest period under the leadership of **Yaqub al-Mansur**, the third Almohad sultan. A number of poets and scholars entered the city during his reign and he began the construction of the Koutoubia Mosque and a new kasbah.

Prior to the reign of **Moulay Ismail**, Marrakech was the capital of **Morocco**. After his reign, his grandson moved the capital back to Marrakech from **Meknès**.

For centuries, Marrakech has been known for its “seven saints.” The seven saints (*sebaatou rizjel*) is now a firmly established institution, attracting visitors from far and wide, but you probably won’t have time to visit them while you’re here; you’ll be busy, and, besides, you’re not allowed into mosques, or at least most of them. The French outlawed this, actually; they forbade non-Muslims from visiting mosques. They were afraid their colonists might be converted. For some reason, Morocco kept this tradition post-independence, but there are signs that it’s changing. The seven saints include **Sidi Bel Abbas** (the patron saint of the city), **Sidi Muhammad al-Jazuli**, **Sidi Abu al-Qasim Al-Suhayli**, **Cadi Ayyad ben Moussa**, **Abdelaziz al-Tebaa** and **Abdallah al-Ghazwani**.

Marrakech was dominated in the first half of the twentieth century by **T’hami El Glaoui**, “Lord of the Atlas,” and **Pasha** of Marrakech.

In his *Lords of the Atlas: Morocco, the Rise and Fall of the House of Glaoua* (1966), the Scottish naturalist and adventurer **Gavin Maxwell** wrote of the legendary T’hami:

Above all he cultivated the grand manner towards Europeans—vast banquets; hospitality that included the bestowal of almost priceless gifts; a delicately handled air of omnipotence. Despite the pomp and splendor there was no vulgarity; his manners had become exquisite, his clothes a refinement of tradition, for he would wear nothing that was not woven to his order by the women of his own tribe. He knew, even then, that his status as a second Sultan in the South depended on the French, and he knew that the French had no alternative

but to depend utterly on him.... To European guests T'hami gave, literally, whatever they wanted, whether it might be a diamond ring, a present of money in gold, or a Berber boy or girl from the High Atlas. Nothing was impossible, for he was already at work on building his own myth. In the 1920s, T'hami had become, among many Europeans, a fashion, like American jazz, or the Charleston dance, or the new art form of cubism. To be aware of "The Glaoui," and to be able to speak of him with familiarity, was equivalent to what was known forty years later as being "with it." It was fashionable to quote his *bon mots*, as, for example, his comment upon M. Daladier, at that time the French Minister of War: "He is like a dog without a tail — there is no way of telling what he is thinking."

An anecdote from Maxwell's book:

T'hami had invited to dine at the palace some French residents in Marrakech, and with them a young Parisian woman who was visiting Marrakech for the first time. The *pièce de résistance* of the meal was a whole roast sheep (*mechoui*), and in accordance with general Islamic custom, T'hami, as host, removed a succulent morsel with his fingers and held it out to her. Believing that he neither understood nor spoke French, she expressed herself freely to her companions, saying that this legendary figure was after all nothing but a pig. She added that she wouldn't mind having the enormous emerald ring that decorated his right hand. At the end of the meal, T'hami drew her aside and said softly and in excellent French, "Madame, a stone like this emerald was obviously never made for a pig like me. Permit me to offer it to you."

Demographics

Marrakech had an official population of 1,070,838 people in 2010. There is a very large international community, consisting mainly of retired Europeans, estimated at 10,700 people.

I went to visit an artists' residency at the thirteenth kilometer of the Ourika Valley road. A French artist, recently arrived from Berlin, offered to drive me back into town. He had to make a stop first, he said, at the grocery-store mall complex, with the Carrefour, near the unfinished blocks of luxury. "We go to the Ballardian place," he said.

Marrakech is flanked by Ballardian places.

Cocaine Nights, J.G. Ballard's take on Spain, might as well be about the communities surrounding Marrakech's Carrefour:

The Hollingers' mansion, Cabrera told me, was one of the oldest properties at Estrella de Mar, its timbers and roof joists dried like biscuit by a hundred summers. I thought of the elderly couple who had retreated from London to the peace of this retirement coast. It was hard to imagine anyone finding the energy, let alone the necessary malice, to bring about their deaths. Steeped in sun and sundowners, wandering the golf greens by day and dozing in front of their satellite television in the evening, the residents of the Costa del Sol lived in an eventless world.

As I neared Estrella de Mar the residential complexes stood shoulder to shoulder along the beach. The future had come ashore here, lying down to rest among the pines. The white-walled pueblos reminded me of my visit to Arcosanti, Paolo Soleri's outpost of the day after tomorrow in the Arizona desert. The cubist apartments and terraced houses resembled Arcosanti's, their architecture dedicated to the abolition of time, as befitted the ageing population of the retirement havens and an even wider world waiting to be old.

Searching for the turn-off to Estrella de Mar, I left the Malaga highway and found myself in a maze of slip-roads that fed the pueblos. Trying to orientate myself, I pulled into the forecourt of a filling-station. While a young Frenchwoman topped up my tank I strolled past the supermarket that shared the forecourt, where elderly women in fluffy toweling suits drifted like clouds along the lines of ice-cold merchandise.

I climbed a pathway of blue tiles to a grass knoll and looked down on an endless terrain of picture windows, patios, and miniature pools. Together they had a curiously calming effect, as if these residential compounds—British, Dutch, and German—were a series of psychological pens that soothed and domesticated these émigré populations. I sensed that the Costa del Sol, like the retirement coasts of Florida, the Caribbean and the Hawaiian islands, had nothing to do with travel or recreation, but formed a special kind of willed limbo....

Already thinking of a travel article, I noted the features of this silent world: the memory-erasing white architecture; the enforced leisure that fossilized the nervous system; the almost Africanized aspect, but a North Africa invented by someone who had never visited the Maghreb; the apparent absence of any social structure; the timelessness of a world beyond boredom, with no past, no future and a diminishing present. Perhaps this was what a leisure-dominated future world would resemble? Nothing could ever happen in this affectless realm, where entropic drift calmed the surfaces of a thousand swimming pools.

Main sights/Plopping

Sights nearby Marrakech include the valley of the [Ourika River](#) in the Atlas Mountains, the valley of the [Draa River](#) in the south, near the Sahara desert, the Waterfalls of Beni Mellal, and [Essaouira](#) on the [Atlantic](#) ocean.

I spoke with the curators of this biennial, and with some of the artists. Most of them came out against *plopping*. “The usual model,” they said, “of any given biennial—in Venice or whathaveyou—is that the whole cast of artists and curators and gallerists and collectors all plop down into the given city, and their experience in the city has nothing to do with the city itself. The idea of this show is that it’s not about *plopping*, it’s about engaging with the place as it is.”

But what if the place as it is has always been about various forms of *plopping*?

Gavin Maxwell, again (if you can find a copy of this book, you ought to pick it up, I’m telling you):

By its geographical position the town became the great marketplace not only of the Haouz but of all the lands between the High Atlas and the Sahara, the clearing-house of the camel caravans from all the remote oases of the south with their loads of walnuts and oranges, grain and hides, spices, dates and precious metals. It was the largest slave market in all Morocco; by the time of T’hami’s reign, the recent disappearance, at least from the public eye, of that weekly auction, was the only external departure from the traditions of the city as they had developed over nearly ten centuries. Marrakech was much as Europeans visualize the Baghdad of The Thousand and One Nights, but more beautiful than Baghdad ever was, for Baghdad lacked the savage glories of the Atlas as a background to the jewels of palace and garden, orchard and lake, and the glittering green-tiled minarets of the mosques. Over every traveler who visited it, Marrakech cast its strange heady spell—a spell that to many has survived the short French occupation and the partial westernization of the unique and essentially African city. Marrakech is accessible, it has become perhaps the greatest tourist

attraction of all North Africa, but the tourists, however great an impression Marrakech makes upon them, make little impression upon Marrakech.

Perhaps, then, the idea of *plopping* is itself a fantasy of power, of relevance: to fear what you might do via the plop is to accept as a given your prerogative in any place.

But Marrakech has always been roomy, and to come to Marrakech was to come with a particular purpose. Without a particular purpose, there was no reason to come to Marrakech. It's a market town, a bazaar, a place for needs and barter. Marrakech has always been a vast stage for encounters with ready purpose.

Marrakech was not only the marketplace of all the southern riches; since early times it had become a pleasure town for the distant tribespeople who carried them there. The city had a perpetual floating population of some twelve thousand people: wild, pale-skinned Berbers from the mountain villages, black men from the edge of the desert, Arab tribes such as the Rehamna from the plains to the north and the west; they came, they sold their goods, and had money to spend, so that the city became a sort of perpetual funfair. Close to the tall Koutoubia mosque, one of the grandest in the country, a great irregularly shaped open space of beaten earth, the Place Djemma el-Fna has from very early times been given up entirely to the use of public entertainers, around each of whom would form a dense circle of spectators, its circumference touching that of the next ring, so that the effect in looking down upon the scene from some elevated building is that of a formally-patterned carpet made of some fifteen thousand human beings. The sound of human voices comes up like the muted rumble of some vast engine, an undertone to the perpetual staccato urgency of drums, the wailing of reed pipes, the clang of cymbals, the shrill tinkle of water-sellers' bells, the endless calling of the beggars—"Allah! Allah! Allah!" The fluid circles form and dissolve and reform around the snake-charmers and sword-swallowers and fire-eaters, all of the Essaoui sect, their hair falling in blue-black cascades over their shoulders; gaudily dressed acrobats from Taroudant forming towers of multicolored unidentifiable limbs; conjurers and mimers, and storytellers who hold a circle of a hundred solemn-faced children in hypnotized silence; Berber dancers from the mountains, their white-robed lines swaying in rhythmic advance and withdrawal; whirling black Gennaoua dancers from the Sudan, whose little conical caps, tasseled and embroidered with cowrie shells are spun fifty feet into the air as each dancer reaches the climax of his performance; troops of Chleuch boy dancers with painted faces, wagging hips, and clicking castanets, their bare feet flicking through the intricate pattern of the dance while their eyes rove the circle for evening clients; performing monkeys, fortune tellers, clowns—all these and their exotic audiences have been part of the Djemma el-Fna for hundreds of years.

So, please, feel free to plop, but plop with a sense of purpose: knowing what you want is the only way to begin to understand what you might, in turn, come to give up. Commerce is the name we give to the most efficient way of finding out what other people might want. Too often the critics of plopping want to make the case that we ought to arrive somewhere having prepared ourselves for what the people of that place want, when it ought to be, in fact, just the opposite: the only way to discover what your hosts want is to arrive knowing your own aims.

There was some talk, for example, of translating this text into Tamazight, the Berber language. What a nice thing to do to avoid plopping, having this available in Tamazight! But Tamazight has been a standardized written language for less than a decade; children in primary schools now, since 2006, are the only ones who are in the process of being taught to read and write it. It is with the best intentions that this would be translated—that is, the intentions of self-effacement—but it

would be a meaningless gesture: it would fill no need but our own, our own need to feel virtuous and accommodating. It is self-congratulation masquerading as self-effacement. Marrakech doesn't care just because you're pretty sure it ought to. We are all so well trained! But sometimes our fear of what might seem orientalist prevents us from putting in the real effort of serious interpretation. We're so afraid to offend that we talk only to ourselves.

It is a folly to think Marrakech cares about our gestures. Marrakech cares only about what you bring to it and what you want to take away: it is an encounter for people of purpose and need.

I spent a day in the mountains with Issam, a local guide. A brilliant guy; funny and thoughtful in five languages. We hiked together for five or six hours through Berber villages. At the end of the day I said to him, I need to write this text, and I want you to add something to it. He asked what he ought to add. I said if he had one paragraph in which to say the most important things he could think of to an international art audience, a crowd that plops in and out of half a dozen events like this in half a dozen cities a year, what would he say? I gave him my e-mail address. A month later this is what I got:

Different landscapes, different people, different languages, and different traditions—all in the same country. That is the special thing about Morocco. It is a country with a very rich history, delicious food, and beautiful fine art that can be seen everywhere, not only in art galleries but also in the architecture and furniture and even in the streets. Visitors to Morocco should take every opportunity to get out and about and learn about Moroccan culture. You can have dinner in the food stalls, visit tropical gardens, or simply wander around Djemaa el-Fna square and be part of the greatest open-air theater, all the while experiencing the great contrast that is this amazing country.

—Issam El Hadri

I wrote back and I said, really? This is what you want to say? You can say anything you want, and what you wrote was like a tourist brochure, or a Wikitravel page. I wrote back and asked if he wanted to say anything harder or sharper. He never answered. A few weeks went by and I thought, well, this was what he wanted to say, and I promised to let him say it. Who am I to think he should be angrier, or more confrontational?

Loneliness

Sometimes there's nothing lonelier than being in a place where people know, or think they know, what they want from you.

I am of indeterminately Mediterranean aspect. When I'm in Spain, people speak to me in Spanish; in Turkey, Turkish; in Israel, Hebrew. And so on. I decided to walk from the [medina](#), past [La Mamounia](#) and the walled bastions of the [Hivernage](#), to the [Menara Gardens](#). About halfway, I passed a Northern European couple, tourists with cameras and fanny packs. I wanted to know how much further the gardens were.

"Excuse me," I said. They didn't look over.

"Excuse me," I said, louder now. They kept walking.

"Do you speak English?" I asked. The woman waved me off, shook her head.

Exasperated, I said, "Do you know how far it is to walk to the Menara Gardens?"

They stopped. The man turned around, smiled, and with a faint Dutch accent said, "It's only about another kilometer."

The woman looked at me and bowed her head. “I’m so sorry.
You see, I thought—”
I cut her off. “I know what you thought.”

Climate

Marrakech features a [semi-arid climate](#), with mild wet winters and hot dry summers. Average temperatures range from twelve degrees Celsius in the winter to twenty-three degrees Celsius in the summer. The wet winter/dry summer precipitation pattern of Marrakech mirrors precipitation pattern found in [Mediterranean climates](#). However the city receives less rain than is typically found in a Mediterranean climate, hence the semiarid climate classification.

Month	Avg. high °C (°F)	Avg. low °C (°F)	Precip. mm (in)
January	18.4 (65.1)	5.9 (42.6)	32.2 (1.268)
February	19.9 (67.8)	7.6 (45.7)	37.9 (1.492)
March	22.3 (72.1)	9.4 (48.9)	37.8 (1.488)
April	23.7 (74.7)	11.0 (51.8)	38.8 (1.528)
May	27.5 (81.5)	13.8 (56.8)	23.7 (0.933)
June	31.3 (88.3)	16.3 (61.3)	4.5 (0.177)
July	36.8 (98.2)	19.9 (67.8)	1.2 (0.047)
August	36.5 (97.7)	20.1 (68.2)	3.4 (0.134)
September	32.5 (90.5)	18.2 (64.8)	5.9 (0.232)
October	27.5 (81.5)	14.7 (58.5)	23.9 (0.941)
November	22.2 (72.0)	10.4 (50.7)	40.6 (1.598)
December	18.7 (65.7)	6.5 (43.7)	31.4 (1.236)

In popular culture

“[Marrakech](#)” is a song by [ATB](#) on the album [No Silence](#).

“[Marrakesh Express](#)” is a song by [Crosby, Stills and Nash](#) on their first album. In it, the narrator sees cows, ducks, and pigs out the window. The closest pig is almost certainly in Spain.

Marrakech Express is a 1989 Italian film directed by [Gabriele Salvatores](#).

[Alfred Hitchcock](#) filmed the opening scenes of [The Man Who Knew Too Much](#) (1956) on location in Marrakech with [Doris Day](#) and [James Stewart](#).

The book [Hideous Kinky](#), as well as its movie adaptation, are for a large part situated in Marrakech in the early 1970s.

“Marrakech” is a title of a chapter, as well as the chapter’s main setting, in [James Michener’s](#) [The Drifters](#). It’s unclear who would ever care about this.

“Marrakech” is a track from [Hybrid](#)’s 2003 album *Morning Sci-Fi*. Presumably Hybrid, whoever they are, put that here themselves.

“Marrakesh Night Market” is a song from the album [The Mask and Mirror](#) by [Loreena McKennitt](#). No idea what that is, either.

German hip hop band [Ancient Astronauts](#) released a song titled “Lost in Marrakesh” as part of their 2009 album [We Are To Answer](#).

The [Absolutely Fabulous](#) episode “Morocco” takes place in Marrakech. Apparently this one is a real scream, FYI.

[Derren Brown](#) transported a subject to Marrakech without his knowledge or prior warning for episode 1 of the first series of his television show, [Trick or Treat](#), which was broadcast in April 2007.

A map featuring Marrakech exists for the video game *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*.

“Marrakech” is a short essay written by *George Orwell*.

A scene from the movie *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was set in Marrakech.

In the *William Gibson* short story “*New Rose Hotel*” the narrator and Fox purchase “an old heroin lab that had been converted to the extraction of pheromones” for the purpose of providing a lab for Hiroshi in the old city of Marrakech, the *Medina*.

In a segment of *The Simpsons* episode “Treehouse Of Horror 2,” Marrakech is where Homer buys a monkey’s paw which grants wishes, based on *The Monkey’s Paw* by *W. W. Jacobs*.

“Marrakesh” is a track by *New Model Army* from their 1990 album *Impurity*.

Die Stimmen von Marrakesch (The Voices from Marrakech) is a novel by *Elias Canetti* in which he describes his experiences in Marrakech. It won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981.

By all accounts it’s very, very boring. I’d go with the Maxwell instead.

It’s the national destination of *America’s Next Top Model, Cycle 16*.

Similarly mythic places

Samarqand

Kashgar

The Lost City of Z

Timbuktu

Meshed