

## Morocco: Coastal defence

Morocco's seaside is unfairly overlooked, for beyond the ugly resort of Agadir are miles of empty beaches and beautiful, unspoilt towns. Sarah Shuckburgh reports

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Most visitors to Morocco make for Marrakesh, Fez or the Atlas Mountains. Few head to the coast, and those that do tend to concentrate on Agadir or Casablanca. Agadir - flattened by an earthquake in 1960, and rebuilt in ugly concrete - is Morocco's main package-tour resort, predominantly for holidaymakers who like nightclubs, burgers and beer. Casablanca is Morocco's largest and most cosmopolitan city - a financial, industrial and commercial centre with multi-storey office blocks, boulevards jammed with traffic, and businessmen and women in European dress.

But between these two crowded cities stretch 400 miles of undisturbed Atlantic coast, with surf thundering onto empty beaches, tranquil estuaries and lagoons teeming with birds - and 300 days of sunshine every year.

Much of this coast is virgin territory, but dotted along it are architectural reminders of a long and varied history, with harbours and medieval walled medinas, Roman ruins, and fortresses built by successive Hispano-Moorish, Portuguese and French colonisers. This coast is also the homeland of several tribes of Tashelhit-speaking Berbers, who were farming this land long before Arabs arrived. These rural Berbers have been little affected by colonialism or tourism - their traditional lifestyles survive, and many have found no need to learn French, or even Arabic.

Autumn and spring are perfect times to explore this beautiful coast. The weather is sunny but not too hot and the landscape is benign and pretty - there is also a good chance of witnessing a local saint's day festival, or moussem.

With one or two exceptions (see Morocco basics below), Moroccan hotels are inexpensive, and you will rarely pay more than £50 for a double room.

### **AGADIR TO ESSAOUIRA**

North of Agadir, there are sheltered bays at Taghazoute and Amesnaz, but elsewhere huge waves and a strong undertow make for superb surfing - and perilous swimming. The road hugs the shore as the Atlas Mountains loom up and finally meet the ocean at Cap Rhir, the historic boundary between the Ida-Outanane Berbers to the south, and the Haha Berbers to the north.

The kingdom of Haha is perhaps the most dramatic part of the coast - much of it inaccessible except on foot or camel. The road twists through rugged hills of red earth, scarred by flash floods. Sea mist rises in steep gorges,

revealing glimpses of deserted beach. Not much grows on these rocky hillsides except argans - trees that are found nowhere else and whose oil locals use for cooking, skin care and treating infertility.

Occasional tracks lead towards remote hamlets and fortified Berber granaries, or agadirs. One turning winds down to a crescent of fine, golden sand below Cap Tafelny headland. The tiny hamlet has a grocery kiosk, a two-table cafe, and a dozen blue wooden fishing boats, beached near a row of dilapidated huts.

Tamanar and Smimou are workaday towns, with arcaded main streets lined with cafes serving spicy harrira soup, and fish, lamb or chicken stews cooked on smouldering charcoal in blackened tagines. Weekly markets throng with men buying and selling dates, olives, honey, bananas, argan oil, and other produce displayed on the ground.

The men sip mint tea while their donkeys drink from shallow oueds. Later the men trot their donkeys home, perched sideways on bulging saddlebags. Others squeeze 10 or 12 at a time into shared taxis, each one a rusty jalopy with belching exhaust and creaking suspension, with sacks and parcels protruding from the boot and tied to the roof.

This is one of the poorest areas of Morocco, with few sources of income apart from subsistence farming on arid land. A woman's place is at home or on the family plot of land.

Fifteen miles before Essaouira, a turning leads to the shrine of Sidi Kaouki, and another perfect surfing bay.

The Hotel des Cascades near Agadir is a peaceful place to stay before embarking on the coastal drive. It is at Immuouzer des Ida Outanane, 30 miles inland, up a dramatic, winding road through banana plantations (00212 4882 6016). South of Essaouira, the Residence Le Kaouki has plain rooms but good food (4478 3206).

## **ESSAOUIRA**

If you only visit one place along this coast, choose Essaouira. It is an enchanting fortified fishing port, built by successive Berber, Portuguese and French colonisers on a rocky promontory, almost at sea level. The harbour is a hive of activity - veiled women sit on upturned buckets watching as their menfolk unload their catch, mend nets, sort fish-hooks, and tip cartloads of ice into grimy wooden boats.

Locals in hooded cloaks and pointed slippers sit on their haunches by the harbour wall, inspect rows of strangely shaped, twitching fish displayed on the cobbles, or tuck into seafood dishes, cooked to order on outdoor grills. Boat builders hammer at curved wooden hulls, gulls squawk overhead, and there is an all-pervading smell of fish.

Inside the ramparts, you'll find beige and white-walled houses with sky-blue paintwork. Local women waft down covered alleys, mysteriously enveloped in haiks - white, sheet-like shrouds that cover everything except their sandals and surprisingly colourful socks. Artisans hammer and carve in tiny, fragrant workshops. Local thuya wood polishes up like walnut, and the inlaid tables, solitaire sets, chess boards and tissue boxes have a golden, marbled glow.

In contrast to other Moroccan souks, there is no hard sell here - a calm atmosphere of tolerance and respect prevails, and this is reflected in the kaleidoscope of facial features. Even the many stray dogs and cats seem to get on well.

Outside the walls, a windy crescent of sand stretches south, backed by a straggle of new hotels. Here you can ride camels or horses, windsurf and sand-yacht, or watch impromptu games of evening football. Out in the bay, the Mogador islands are breeding grounds for a colony of the rare Eleanora's falcon. At the far end of the beach, tucked into the sand dunes across the Ksob river, is the Berber village of Diabat, which became notorious in the 1960s after a visit from Jimi Hendrix.

In the medina, Villa Maroc is a glamorous and comfortable riad hotel, with sitting and eating areas around two 18th-century courtyards (book well in advance on 4447 6147). For a longer stay, rent a furnished apartment overlooking the ramparts (4447 5538). For comfort, choose Dar Mimosas just outside Essaouira. Dotted about a mimosa-filled garden are eight immaculate villas, painted in vivid shades of blue and terracotta, and furnished with Moroccan art and antiques (4447 5934).

## **ESSAOUIRA TO SAFI**

The coast road linking Essaouira with Safi has only recently been built, and its smooth, straight path through the sparsely populated region of the Regrada Berbers makes for stress-free driving. Jackals, wild boar and mountain fox live in the limestone hills of the Jbel Hadid, which are covered with the scrubby thuya trees used by local craftsmen for marquetry and carving. Dry-stone walls surround tiny boulder-strewn fields, where families, bent double, hack at clods with wooden hoes. In spring, agave flowers stand 20 feet tall, and meadows gleam with marigolds. Beyond the dunes is the endless arc of the ocean, with surf pounding onto miles of empty windswept sand. Here and there a small track leads from the main road to a village of roughly thatched houses made of sun-baked mud and stone - with strangely few ground-floor windows. Women appear in doorways to douse their steps with buckets of water. Sea spray blows on to a little minaret and groups of men loll against turquoise fishing boats.

After the road crosses the Tensift river, there are hints of comparative prosperity - a camel pulling a wooden plough, women leading an ox or a horse on a rope, and, swaying along the verge, a donkey cart, with a small boy sitting astride a heap of greenery.

## **SAFI**

As you approach from the south, Safi (or Asfi) may seem unappealing, with red slag heaps, railway sidings, chimneys belching smoke, and an all-pervading stench of fish. Built in a steep river valley, the town is a modern industrial centre and fishing port, with one of the world's biggest sardine fleets.

Don't be put off. Make your way through the soulless new town to the old fortress - the "Castle on the Sea" - and stroll through the crowded souk in the medieval medina to the extraordinary hillside potteries just beyond the medina walls. Here, burrowed out of the pinkish-red earth, networks of dark tunnels and cramped caves house dozens of workshops. A boy may volunteer to guide you through the stages of production, each in a separate subterranean hovel too low to stand in, where potters crouch on low stools, and Moroccan music crackles from dusty radios. Nowhere in Morocco will you find cheaper pottery, and it will be hard to leave Safi without a brightly decorated piece.

For accommodation, your best bet is the slightly faded Atlantide (4446 2160).

## **SAFI TO OUALIDIA**

The ancient kingdom of the Doukkala Berbers is, if possible, even more beautiful than the land of the Haha. The road is again smooth and empty as it crosses stony plateaus and gently undulating land, past sandhills and limestone cliffs, beyond which waves thunder ceaselessly upon miles of astonishingly empty sand, including the

lovely Lalla Fatna beach 10 miles from Safi. There are few houses, but smiling children appear as if from nowhere at the side of the road selling huge shells, or holding aloft a shiny fish.

Cap Beddouza lighthouse is visible from miles away, rising from its eccentric green and white fortifications on a rocky headland. Every day, at dawn and dusk, the keeper climbs to the top of the lighthouse to draw a curtain round the lamp, so that the fierce African sun cannot shine through the prism and set fire to neighbouring houses. Nearby fields are full of caves and potholes, leading to a network of largely unexplored tunnels that locals claim stretch for miles.

For accommodation, the Auberge Cap el Beddouza (4462 5843) has basic rooms. It's also a good spot for lunch or a mint tea.

## **OUALIDIA**

This place is beautiful and unspoilt. Running parallel to the shore is a narrow spit of land that sends fans of spray soaring as waves crash against it. The tide gushes in through two gaps in this reef, but on the sheltered shore-side is a calm, glittering lagoon, edged by a curve of fine sand. Dolphins are a common sight. Fishermen like to walk out along the spit, and stay there, cut off by the tide as it rises, on occasion joined by flamingos. A hundred yards inland is Oualidia's main street, full of locals going about their daily lives. Beyond the reef, miles of untouched beach stretch away into the distance, with waves rolling in towards high sandhills.

Spend a few nights at the Hippocampe (2336 6108), where simple but clean cabins are set in a terraced garden of hibiscus and palms. After a lunch of fish soup and local oysters, eaten on the terrace in the shade of a fig tree, it's a few steps to the lagoon for a cooling swim.

## **OUALIDIA TO EL-JADIDA**

The coastal lagoons continue for many miles north of Oualidia. There are glimpses of surf behind the sand bar, but the road is less pretty than before. Small cafes, sandwiched between road and sea, are tempting stops for a meal and a swim. But the hillsides of argan trees have given way to a sandy plain covered in castor oil shrubs - source of the poison ricin. Farther on, the small village of Moulay-Abdallah lies inside the ramparts of the 11th-century holy city of Tit. Built to repel Vikings, Tit became an important shrine of Islam, but was abandoned in the 16th century. Today a handful of farmers and fishermen live here.

Le Relais (2334 5498), perched just above the crashing waves, is a simple inn with a good seafood restaurant 15 miles south of El-Jadida. Ask for a room overlooking the sea. Seven miles farther south, alongside the lagoon, is the modest six-room Villa La Brise (2334 6917).

## **EL-JADIDA**

El-Jadida is the capital of the Doukkala province, with a dauntingly noisy, sprawling new town. Its urban beach front is full of traffic and crowds in summer, and in winter becomes a bleak promenade with wind-blown litter and deserted cafes. But the walled medina is something else. Built in 1502, it is arguably the best-preserved Portuguese fortress town in Morocco, but few tourists explore the rambling lanes and cobbled alleyways, which still retain their Portuguese street names. A local boy may offer to show you the wide ramparts, and will point out the disused Catholic church and synagogue, and Morocco's only five-sided minaret (which was once a lighthouse). Most memorable is the Portuguese Cistern, a 16th-century vaulted cellar, used as an arsenal and later as a fencing school, before becoming a water tank. It was rediscovered only in 1916. The brick floor is kept flooded with a few inches of water, and a bright shaft of sunshine creates spectacular reflections.

Accommodation ranges from the luxurious Royal Golf Hotel, overlooking both sea and golf course (2335 4141), but a more charming choice is the dilapidated Palais Andalous, once the residence of a local pasha, with elaborately tiled rooms round an open courtyard. (2334 3745).

## **EL-JADIDA AND CASABLANCA**

Just north of El-Jadida is Azemmour, another little-visited 16th-century Portuguese fortress town, which provides a unique opportunity to witness everyday life. Grizzled shopkeepers peer out from their cupboard-sized shops and adjust the bundles of vegetables heaped on upturned boxes. Veiled women disappear down cobbled alleys of whitewashed houses and children stop kicking a stone to try out their elementary French.

Beyond Azemmour, the wilderness of dunes gives way to straggling groves of eucalyptus and pine, and then scrubby farmland. The sea is nearby, but hidden from the coast road by sandhills. The main road, farther inland, is probably the better bet for this last stretch of coast through the traditional region of the Chaouia Berbers.

Note that big-city Casablanca can come as a shock after the quiet of the coast, so you might consider spending your last night in El-Jadida - but allow plenty of time for navigating the busy roads near Casablanca's airport.

## **MOROCCO BASICS**

The Best of Morocco (01380 828533; [www.realmorocco.com](http://www.realmorocco.com)) can tailor-make trips to the Atlantic coast and elsewhere. An itinerary with flights from Heathrow to Agadir and returning from Casablanca to Heathrow costs £635 per person, assuming two people sharing, and also includes transfers and two nights' half board at Des Cascades, two nights' b & b at the Villa Maroc (Essaouira), two nights' half board at the Hippocampe (Oualidia) and one night's half board at the the Royal Golf Sofitel (El Jadida). Car hire for five days with unlimited mileage, CDW insurance and all local taxes costs, delivery and collection, can be added for £174.

Abercrombie & Kent (0845 070 0612; [www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)) offers three nights' b & b in a garden-view suite at Dar Mimosas from £455 per person, including flights and transfers from Marrakesh. The company can also tailor-make fly-drive itineraries along the coast.