A guide to five of Morocco’s most popular destinations

These cities offer historical landmarks as well as shopping, dining and partying options

Tangier: Northern port enjoys boom after decades of neglect

This city on Morocco’s northern coast has long been a crossroads of cultures and a destination for writers and musicians. It was an international zone — and hotbed of smuggling, spying and free living — administered by France, the UK and Spain until 1956.

The government has poured investment into the city, which is now enjoying a boom after decades of neglect. The project that has had the most impact is the Tanger-Med port, opened in 2007. This shipping hub is connected to four free-trade zones where customs duties are not imposed.
Other changes are under way, designed to further integrate the north into the rest of the country. The first section of a high-speed train route scheduled to open in 2018 will connect Tangier to the town of Kenitra. Further work on connections to Rabat and Casablanca should eventually allow for a total journey time of just over two hours between these commercial hubs.

In downtown Tangier, where one can gaze at Spain across the Strait of Gibraltar, old landmarks such as the bookstore Librairie des Colonnes and the movie house Cinema Rif have been lovingly restored. New boutique hotels and restaurants have opened in the medina. The rundown port area is being renovated. Though the city’s suburbs are expanding rapidly, its landmarks remain largely unchanged. These include the Grand Socco — the sloping oval marketplace between the new French city and the old medina, which is a place to meet and to be seen. In the nearby quiet colonnaded fabric market, one can see weavers produce typical striped cloth. At the Café Hafa, you can drink mint tea on a steep terrace suspended before the sea.

Casablanca: a working city that also knows how to play

Morocco’s modern business capital is its largest, liveliest city. It has some of the country’s worst slums and traffic but is nonetheless home to local and foreign business elites who swear by its shopping, dining and partying options.

Casablanca has the country’s biggest international airport, its second most important port and is where most national and foreign companies have their headquarters. The city is also the centre of Morocco’s small but growing tech sector. TechnoPark is a government-backed cluster of IT businesses that is now home to about 250 companies.
Casablanca is in the process of revamping its charming but rundown city centre that dates back to the decades of the Belle Époque preceding the first world war. Next door to the new Casa-Port train station, the Casa Marina is the up-and-coming business area. Almost 90 per cent of the development’s office space has been leased to companies such as Philips, Centrale Danone, Mitsubishi, BNP Paribas and Microsoft. The project will include dining and shopping areas as well as residential units.

The centrepieces of Casablanca’s latest bout of rejuvenation will be a renovation of its historic Parc de la Ligue Arabe and the construction of the new Grand Théâtre de Casablanca, scheduled to open in 2018. It will be home to a 1,800-seat concert hall and a 600-seat theatre as well as rehearsal spaces for artists.

Visitors can enjoy time spent at the city’s seaside promenade, dotted with clubs, restaurants and swimming pools, and the largest shopping centre in the country, the Morocco Mall.

Marrakesh: gateway to the Berber south and Atlas Mountains

Morocco’s top tourism destination, the ochre-tinted city boasts an enormous souq in which one could wander for days shopping for textiles, pottery, jewellery and leatherwear.

On its edge, Jemaa El Fna square bustles with food stalls, storytellers and itinerant performers.

The city is the gateway to Morocco’s Berber south and it is from here that expeditions into the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara desert depart.
Trendy restaurants, nightclubs and stunning golf courses with views of the Atlas Mountains have made Marrakesh a modern destination for the international jet-set as well as budget travellers. Boutiques featuring local fashion and home furnishings designers dot the medina and the up-and-coming Gueliz neighbourhood.

The city’s large number of hotel rooms and year-round sunny and dry weather make it an ideal location to stage a variety of events. In recent years it has hosted everything from music festivals to the COP 22 international climate change summit of 2016. After a $100m renovation, the Mövenpick Hotel Mansour Eddahbi now offers the largest convention centre in north-west Africa, Marrakesh’s Palais des Congrès.

The city is home to a growing number of art galleries and museums. These include a photography museum, a museum of modern African art and the recently opened Yves Saint Laurent Museum.

It is next door to the Jardin Majorelle, a garden created by the French painter Jacques Majorelle, which fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergé beautifully renovated in the 1980s.

Fez: a living laboratory of Morocco’s crafts

The city’s 540-acre medina is the best-preserved and most extensive medieval walled city in the Arab world today. It contains innumerable palaces, public fountains, mosques and schools, including the oldest continuously functioning university in the Arab world, the University of al-Qarawiyyin, founded in AD859 by a wealthy woman, Fatima al-Fihri. The Nejarine Museum of Wooden Arts and Crafts is housed in a beautifully restored caravanserai, a roaming house for travelling merchants.
Fez is a jewel of architectural heritage but also a living laboratory of Morocco’s crafts. Shopkeepers in the medina sell the fabric and hand-woven buttons for djellabas (traditional Moroccan outer robes); the traditional blue and white patterned Fez pottery; and the bright yellow pointed leather slippers for which the city is famous.

At the bottom of the medina, near the river, one can survey the pungent and colourful tanneries, in which leather is still dyed manually using traditional methods.

As in Marrakesh, many of the medina’s beautiful riads — traditional homes with inner courtyards — have been bought by foreigners or transformed into boutique hotels. Their renovation, as well as the government-backed restoration of many landmarks, has ensured continued work for thousands of master craftsmen who specialise in ceramic tiles, woodwork, metalwork and plaster decorations.

Every spring the city hosts the Sacred Musical Festival, featuring performers of religious music from around the world.

**Meknès: imperial treasures built on historic agricultural wealth**

![Grand entrance: mausoleum gate](image)

Fez’s neighbour is another of Morocco’s four historic “imperial cities”. Less visited than Fez, Meknès has stunning sites including the mausoleum of Sultan Moulay Ismail, who made the city his capital in the 17th century.

An admirer of Versailles, the sultan spent five decades building a majestic walled city whose richly ornamented gates include the extraordinary Bab El Mansour.
The enormous ruins of the sultan’s stables are well worth visiting, as is the Dar Jamai Museum, a 19th-century palace that offers a glimpse of the lifestyle of one the kingdom’s most powerful families. Today, it houses a collection of rare ceramics, jewellery and textiles.

An hour’s drive outside Meknès is the ancient Roman site of Volubilis, whose surviving mosaics attest to the city’s ancient wealth, based on the export of olive oil.

The best vantage point for surveying the region’s fertile plains is the nearby holy city of Moulay Idriss, founded by a great-grandson of the Prophet Mohammed.

The region has also been home to vineyards since antiquity. The winemaking industry is small, but well-established and growing. There are eight vineyards operating in the country today and the sector produces an estimated 35m bottles a year and employs up to 20,000 people.

Outside Meknès, one can visit the Château Roslane vineyard. Visitors can view the winery’s modern plant and historic cellar and taste a wide array of wines. Domaine de la Zouina, another vineyard that occupies a 1930s French colonial villa, offers tastings of its wines and award-winning olive oil.