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MOROCCO SANS MARRAKECH

10 Days to Discover Five Hidden Gems

by Joseph Reaney

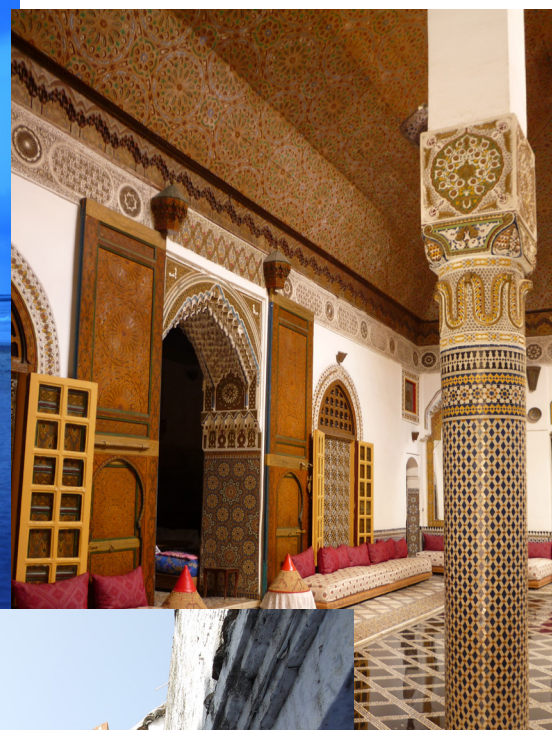
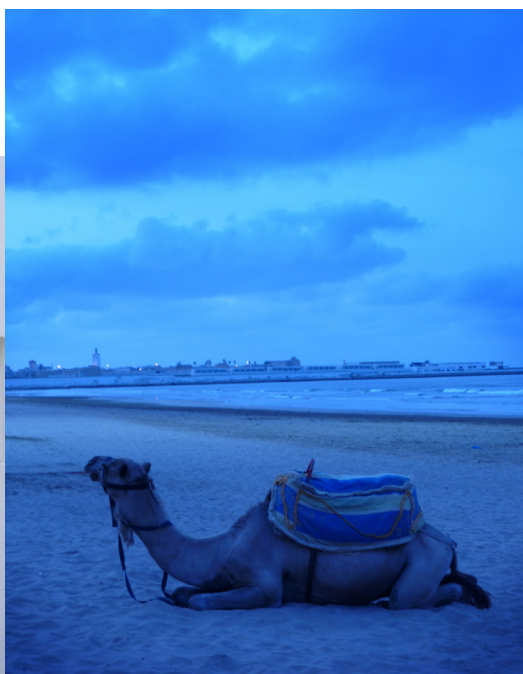
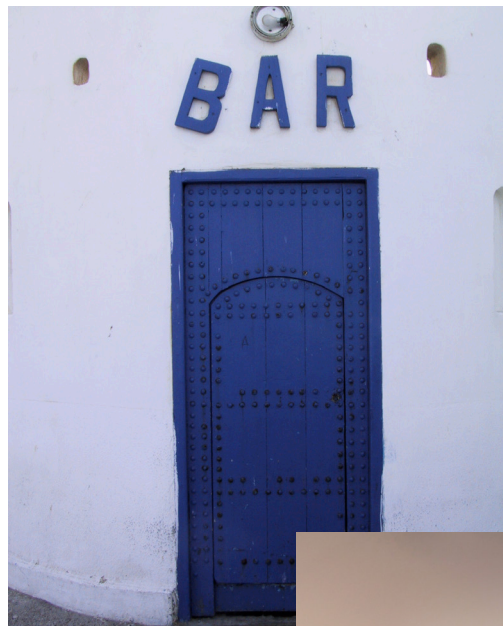


In the last few years, Morocco has become an increasingly popular backpacker destination. New budget flights from Europe, through airlines like Easyjet and Ryanair, mean thousands of travelers now enjoy breaks in some of the country's most tourism-friendly cities, from cultural Marrakech to beachside Agadir. Yet despite this influx of tourists, there remain many attraction-packed Moroccan destinations tucked just off-the-beaten-path – many of which sit along, or within easy reach of, the Atlantic coastline.

Overland Magazine's Joseph Reaney took a 10-day trip to discover five of Morocco's finest hidden gems.



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Clockwise: Beach scene
Asilah. Riad Casablanca.
Chefchaouen the blue city.
Mosque Tower, El Jadida.
Bar, Essouira.

Asilah

My journey began at the northern tip of the country. Having arrived by passenger ferry from Gibraltar, I journeyed down the coast to spend my first night – and the following day – in a quiet town called Asilah.

The history of the town dates back more than three-and-a-half millennia, to when the Phoenicians set up a trading centre here around 1,500 BC, but the modern municipality was mostly shaped by events of the last 600 years. The Portuguese conquered the city in 1471 AD, but later abandoned it in 1549, and in 1692 it was captured by the Moroccans, under the leadership of Moulay Ismail. It has remained part of the Saharan

state ever since; though often under the protection of pirates, rather than Morocco's rulers.

Walking around Asilah on my first day, I was surprised by what I saw. The most promoted features of the town are its unblemished fortification remains, yet I hadn't expected these to look quite so European. As I walked, I realised the city's long history of European occupation, along with a location just 50 miles from the Iberian Peninsular, had led to a clear Mediterranean European feel. Flat-roofed houses, narrow streets, thriving art galleries and seaside promenades... every turning revealed a new slice of Old World.

After seeing such European influence, I spent my final afternoon in search of something unmistakably Moroccan – and discovered the medina. A beautifully historic part of town, it is renowned for the pretty, constantly-refreshed murals covering its walls, circling its windows and hugging its doors. Murals, a delightfully intricate form of graffiti that has made Asilah a very popular artistic hub, and something truly Moroccan.

Chefchaouen

I woke up early on the third day to head 70 miles inland to the historic city of Chefchaouen. Founded in 1471 and located amid the Rif mountains, the city also has a strong Spanish influence – from the unusual name



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(‘Chaoua’ means ‘Horns’ in Moroccan, relating to the shape of the pointed hills behind) to the slender paths and wide squares. This influence is most clearly rendered in an observably different way from Asilah; namely in the part-whitewashed, part blue-rinsed properties found on every street in town.

It is a variation on a very Andalusian theme, but in the context of Africa, it made for an odd sight. I found myself wondering why on earth a collective decision had been made to splash the town in so many shades of blue. Then I discovered Chefchaouen is one of the largest producers of cannabis in the region!

After spending the first day enjoying some of this bright southern Spanish architecture – including taking in a dazzling blue hammam in the center – I spent the next morning exploring some less retina-singeing attractions, including the beautiful medina and the Great Mosque at Place Uta Hammam; and then the next afternoon hiking up into the mountains and through sprawling marijuana fields. The farmers were keen for me to try the produce – at a price – but I determined to keep a clear head to keep on schedule.

Casablanca

From Chefchaouen, I headed back to the west coast then continued down to Casablanca. Despite being the country’s largest city – and the setting of one of the greatest movies in history – it is a destination often overlooked by



PHOTOS: ROUF MACGEMER



Streets of Morocco Top: Palm Trees, Casablanca. Bottom Left: Wall Painting, Asilah. Bottom Right: Mother and Child, El Jadida



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Chefchauen the old town is painted in blue everywhere you look ...





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backpackers from the West. From the moment I arrived, I couldn't understand why.

This bustling city is home to a plethora of popular daytime attractions, so during my short stay I busied myself taking in sights like the gargantuan and glorious Hassan II Mosque; the dusty, palm-fringed Parc de la Ligue Arabe; and the dazzlingly white Roman Catholic Cathedral. Yet what soon became clear was that the best side of Casablanca, like all truly great world cities, only shows once the sun has gone down.

My evenings in the defacto Moroccan capital were unforgettable. They started at 9pm with a delicious meal – I went back twice for the pigeon pastilla – followed by meeting the locals in a variety of dingy but atmospheric drinking holes. On the last night, I was shepherded into an after-hours Turkish Bath by my new found friends. It transpired to be an ideal mid-trip detox before continuing southwards to El Jadida.

El Jadida

From a bustling city to a charming town; rolling into the historic port felt like finding another Morocco. The town, originally known as Mazagan, was invaded and occupied by the Portuguese in 1502 – then held until 1769. At that time, it was conquered by Sultan of Morocco Mohammed ben Abdallah, and its Portuguese-speaking inhabitants were evacuated to Brazil. Its this 'interchange of influences between European and Moroccan cultures' that led to UNESCO declaring El Jadida a World Heritage Site in 2004.


My first day was spent exploring the two attractions highlighted as particular treasures by UNESCO. The first, the Church of the Assumption, was built in the 'Manueline style' (a kind of late Gothic architecture) in the 16th century, and its magnificent features, from the main nave to the sacristy to the bell tower, are remarkably well preserved. The second, the Portuguese Cistern, was built even earlier – in 1514 – and is renowned for its dimly lit underground chamber of decorative stone pillars, complete with a thin layer of water on the floor. This water reflects the cistern's historical features, creating startling visual effects.

On my second day, I determined to see some less-heralded sights, so I headed to the pretty star-shaped fortress on the hill, the Municipal Theater, and the Old Port. I managed to fill the entire day with these interesting sights, yet as I left the following morning I felt I had seen most of what El Jadida had to offer.

Essaouira

Having continued down the R301, I arrived in the fortified town of Essaouira just before lunchtime. One of Morocco's most enchanting coastal resorts, it has a growing following with backpackers, though tends to be overlooked by the package tourists. The town is home

to several interesting sights, from museums to mosques, but as it was my last day-and-a-half I decided to forego these and do what everybody else does when they come to Essaouira: enjoy the seaside. The strong currents made swimming a challenge – though the windsurfers seemed to be having a ball – but I was quite content lying on the golden sands.

It was on this beach that I would see out my remaining hours. It was a very touristic way to conclude my journey, but with 10 days of lesser-seen Moroccan sights behind me, it was one I felt I could justify... 

Joseph Reaney is a freelance travel journalist specialising in cultural travelogues. He is also the editor-in-chief of the expert travel writing service WorldWORDS.

Find out more at www.josephreaney.com/travel

Morocco at a Glance

Capital	Casablanca
Currency	Dirham
Population	32,878,400
Language	Arabic, Berber
Electricity	220V/50Hz (European plug)
Country code	+212
Time Zone	UTC +0
Visa	No
Budget	US\$70 to US\$550 a day

