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# The Best **Full-Day Tours**



# The Best in One Day

- 1 Koutoubia
- 2 Koutoubia Gardens
- 3 Ice Legend
- 4 Souks
- 5 Ali Ben Youssef Medersa
- 6 Musée de Marrakech
- 7 Koubba Ba'adyin
- 8 Jemaa el Fna
- 9 Al Ahab



**P**repare for sensory overload and know your **bienvenues** (welcomes) from your **baleks** (watch outs). Whether dodging mission-driven donkey carts in spice-scented souks, hearing the muezzin's otherworldly call rise above Koutoubia, or joining snake charmers at the twilight circus on Jemaa el Fna—you'll be spell-bound by Marrakech from day one. **START: Koutoubia.**



*Escape the crowds with a cool stroll around Koutoubia.*

**1 ★★★ Koutoubia.** Rearing above the hubbub of Jemaa el Fna and visible from riad rooftops throughout the medina, the 69m (210-foot)-tall minaret of Koutoubia instills awe with its scale and peerless symmetry. A sultan with an eye for aesthetics, Yacoub el-Mansour oversaw the completion of this 12th-century Almohad creation, the blueprint for architectural wonders such as Seville's Giralda. On closer inspection the rose-tinted, crenellated minaret reveals Moorish detail in its keyhole arches, green-white *zellij* (mosaic tilework), and fleur de lys-like *darj w ktarf* motifs. Five times a day, the muezzin's ethereal call to prayer rises from Koutoubia. ⌚ **30 min. Avenue Mohammed V. Closed to non-Muslims.**

**2 ★ kids Koutoubia Gardens.**

You can almost picture sultans swanning around these manicured gardens, fringed by roses, swaying palms, and orange trees. Today Marrakchis from all walks of life flock here for cool respite and neighborhood gossip. The traffic and clip-clop of *calèches* (horse-drawn carriages) on Avenue Mohammed V fade as you enter these birdsong-filled gardens. Keep an eye out for the resident storks. ⌚ **20 min. Avenue Mohammed V. Admission free. Daily 8am–8pm.**

**3 🍷 Ice Legend.** Clued-in locals gravitate toward here, a hole-in-the-wall ice-cream parlor off Jemaa el Fna. Bitter orange with a halo of whipped cream comes a close second to my personal favorite—zingy blackcurrant sorbet. **52 Rue Bab Agnaou. ☎ 0524-44-42-00. \$.**

**4 ★★★ Souks.** *Bienvenue mon ami!* Come drink mint tea! A chorus of cries greets you in the souks and the warren of covered alleys twisting north of Jemaa el Fna to Ali Ben Youssef Medersa. Bustling **Souk Semmarine** (p 49) is the main artery, where sunrays stream through the slatted roof to spotlight sequined *babouches* (slippers), embroidered *jellababs* (hooded robes), and twinkling lanterns. Take a serendipitous wander or make for must-see souks such as **Crée Berbere** (p 20) with its Aladdin-worthy carpets, hand-woven with Berber motifs, or the photogenic **Souk Sebbaghine** (Dyer's Souk, p 52),



*Haggle hard and dodge the donkeys in bustling Souk Semmarine.*

where skeins of vibrant indigo, saffron, and poppy-red wool dry between the sun-baked walls. Filled with color, spices, and banter, the souks are about haggling hard, dodging muleteers, and luxuriating in the everyday. ⌚ *1½ hrs. North of Jemaa el Fna. Most shops daily 10am–9pm; some close Friday.*

**5 ★★ Ali Ben Youssef Medersa.** Blissfully calm in the late afternoon, this former *medersa* (Koranic school) enlightens with 16th-century Saadian craftsmanship. Like the pages in the textbooks of the most diligent theology student, no space is left blank on these walls, which dance with geometric detail, swirly calligraphy, and lustrous *zellij*. Head upstairs for a snapshot of scholarly life in two recreated dorms complete with quills, bookstands, and obligatory tagines and tea sets. With mosque doors closed to them, this is as close to divine inspiration as non-Muslims can get in Marrakech. ⌚ *1 hr. Off Place de la Kissaria. Admission 40dh adults, 20dh children under 12, 60dh combined ticket with Musée de Marrakech and Koubba Ba'adyin. Daily 9am–6:30pm.*

**6 ★ Musée de Marrakech.** This late 19th-century palace was the not-so-humble abode of defense minister Mehdi Mnebhi. First up are the former kitchens, today a mosaic-tiled gallery showcasing modern art.

Rest a while in one of the nooks to marvel at the floral stucco and *zellij*, or take in exhibitions of traditional Moroccan arts from Berber carpets to glittering daggers. The womblike darkness of the hammam is both atmospheric and eerie. In the courtyard, many visitors gasp as they catch their first glimpse of the majestic lamp suspended above the marble fountains. ⌚ *1 hr. Place de la Kissaria. Admission 40dh adults, 20dh children under 12, 60dh combined ticket with Ali Ben Youssef Medersa and Koubba Ba'adyin. Daily 9am–6:30pm.*

**7 ★ Koubba Ba'adyin.** The Almohads grumbled that the mosque of their predecessors wasn't properly aligned with Mecca, and so they promptly tore it down and built the Koutoubia in its place. Thankfully this 11th-century *koubba* (cupola) with its graceful ribbed dome was spared a similar fate and stands proud as Marrakech's only **Almoravid** monument. ⌚ *30 min. Place de la Kissaria. Admission 10dh, 40dh combined with Musée de Marrakech, 60dh with Musée de Marrakech and Ali Ben Youssef Medersa. Daily 9am–6:30pm.*

**8 ★★★ Jemaa el Fna.** Storytellers hold audiences captive with tales

*Through the doorway to the Musée de Marrakech.*







*The smoke from the food stalls drifts above Jemaa el Fna every evening.*

delivered in rapid-fire lingo, frenzied Gnaoua beats, cobras hypnotized by magic flutes, and wizened fortune-tellers—Jemaa el Fna, translating as ‘assembly of the dead’, is very much alive. This vast open-air circus demands audience participation, so do your bit by posing for a DIY dentistry ad or embracing a monkey. Bolder than any circus, crazier than any carnival, this UNESCO-listed square is Marrakech through and through. Arrive as the sun drops behind the Atlas Mountains, when mopeds dart like fireflies through the crowds, and smoke rises from

grills where chefs are quick with their frying pans and witticisms. If you don’t want a henna tattoo or shoeshine, keep walking. 🕒 **1 hr.**  
**See p 60.**

🍷 **Al Ahbab.** For falafel with fries and the juiciest shawarma (spit-grilled meat) in the medina, follow your nose to this easygoing outpost just off Jemaa el Fna. Try to bag a table out front to people-watch as you chomp. **Rue Bab Agnaou.**  
☎️ **0671-37-71-46. \$.**

## Tipping: Practical Matters

**Morocco is a tipping culture and Marrakchis are the sharpest daggers** when it comes to extracting the tourist dirham. When you point your camera at a flamboyant water carrier or snake charmer, remember that this is how they make a living; no photo on Jemaa el Fna is for free. Although performers will persuasively ask for more, 10dh to 20dh is the going rate for a snap of a viper or macaque around your neck. Fix the price ahead and you won’t be taken for a magic carpet ride. Keep a few 10dh coins in your pocket and your wallet well hidden.

# The Best in Two Days


- 1 Riad Zitoun el-Jedid
- 2 Dar Si Said
- 3 Bahia Palace
- 4 Spice Souk
- 5 Earth Café
- 6 Saadian Tombs
- 7 Menara Gardens
- 8 Bab Agnaou
- 9 Place des Ferblantiers
- 10 Kosybar



**O**n your second day in Marrakech, you'll find Berber cures and banter on Riad Zitoun el-Jedid, traditional crafts at Dar Si Said, and a lavish harem fit for a sultan at the Bahia Palace. Glimpse the Atlas Mountains from the olive-lined Menara Gardens and see storks rock the Kasbah from Kosybar's rooftop terrace at sundown. **START: Riad Zitoun el-Jedid.**

**1 ★ Riad Zitoun el-Jedid.**

Stroll by offices with scribes busily penning letters and apothecaries boasting miracle cures on this thoroughfare that links the souks to the Kasbah. Carpenters shaving cedarwood in thimble-sized workshops, tailors knocking up tunics on century-old Singer sewing machines, and grocers selling freshly baked flat bread provide a fascinating insight into Marrakchi daily life.

 **30 min.** See p 55.

**2 ★★★ Dar Si Said.** Before heading to the souks, stop at this 19th-century mansion for creative inspiration. Showcasing the works of Morocco's *maâlems* (master craftsmen), Dar Si Said presents intricate Berber jewelry, High Atlas carpets, and a pristine collection of hand-carved doors. After an art overload, unwind in the courtyard of pomegranate and citrus trees.  **1 hr.** *Rue Kennaria. Admission 10dh. Sat–Thurs 9–11:45am and 2:30–5:45pm, Fri 9–11:30am and 3–5:45pm.*

**3 ★★★ Bahia Palace.** Bahia, meaning beautiful, is a fitting name for this sumptuous 150-room palace, bankrolled by grand vizier Si Moussa in the 1860s and extended by his successor Bou Ahmed. You'll be whisked back to an age of tittering courtesans gazing at diamond *zellij* floors, fancy stucco, and kaleidoscopic *zouak* (finely-painted) cedar ceilings; see p 55 for more. The reception room, with separate waiting rooms for Arabs, Berbers, and Jews, leads through to the grand vizier's quarters where the recurring inscription 'health forever' reveals his chief concern. Four wives and 24 concubines inhabited the harem, a lavish tribute to polygamy set around an arcaded courtyard. A fountain gurgles in the fragrant **Andalusian gardens** shaded by orange, pomegranate, and fig trees. Bahia saves the best for last: the chamber of the favorite wife is a fantasy of stained glass and *mashrabiyya* lattice screens to stop

*Admire the painted cedarwood and stucco of the Bahia Palace.*





*The Spice Souk offers plenty of variety.*

envious concubines from prying.

🕒 1½hrs. *Riad Zitoun el-Jedid.*

☎ 0524-38-95-64. Admission 10dh adults, 3dh children. Daily 8:45–11:45am and 2:45–5:50pm.

**4 ★ Spice Souk.** Ask Marrakchis to divulge their shopping tips and this spice souk usually makes the grade. Follow your nose to this colorful covered market, brimming with conical towers of Moroccan curry, the 35-spice mix to pep up your tagines, and saffron (the thick Moroccan kind is higher quality than the thin Spanish variety), alongside sacks of ginger roots, lentils, and beans. Indulge in neighborhood chit-chat and obligatory haggling.

🕒 30 min. *Riad Zitoun el-Jedid.*

**5 ★ Earth Café.** Bright sofas and Med-style soul food define Marrakech's first vegetarian and vegan café, which has a chilled vibe and impeccable eco-credentials. Whole-some daytime specials might include warm seasonal salads or vegetable-stuffed spring rolls. Barakat Naim's home-pressed olive oil, organic argan oil, and biscotti make ideal gifts. *2 Derb Zouak, Riad Zitoun el-Kedim.* ☎ 0661-28-94-02. \$.

**6 ★★ Saâdian Tombs.** Hailed 'the Victorious' for defeating the Portuguese, Sultan Ahmed el-Mansour (1587–1603) also had a bittersweet taste for trading sugar and slaves—activities that bankrolled these ornate Kasbah burial chambers (rediscovered in 1917). First you'll see the mausoleum where children were buried (those topped with marble slabs denote the sultan's offspring). The chamber of the sultan and his sons is a gilded frenzy of polychrome *zellij*, stucco as fine as piped icing, and calligraphy that curls around the walls. Citrus trees and 200-year-old date palms frame the courtyard where some 100 slaves and servants are interred. 🕒 1 hr. *Rue de la Kasbah.* *Sat–Thurs 9–11:45am and 2:30–5:45pm, Fri 9–11:30am and 3–5:45pm.*

**7 ★ Menara Gardens.** Take a horse-drawn *calèche* or petit taxi to these gardens for an afternoon amble amid the olive trees and palms. The centerpiece is a shimmering pool with a platform (the best vantage point for photos) and a grand 19th-century pavilion. In the afternoon, when the pool holds up a mirror to the snowy Atlas peaks, the gardens draw families and loved-up couples. 🕒 1 hr. *Avenue de la Menara.* Admission free to gardens, 10dh pavilion. Daily 8am–6pm.

*Savor healthy, vegetarian fare at the Earth Café.*





## Marrakech Express

**Petit taxis, aka clapped-out Peugeots, are ideal for zipping about town.** Either convince the driver to switch on the meter or negotiate a price ahead; pay maximum 20dh by day and 40dh by night (short journeys should cost half that). If you're staying in the medina, you'll have to walk the last stretch anyway, as most *derbs* (alleys) are inaccessible to cars. Before you arrive, ask your riad to arrange a porter to collect your luggage from the nearest taxi stand, and then tip him about 20dh. *Qu'est-ce que vous cherchez?* (what are you looking for?) is the beloved catchphrase of unofficial guides. If you're truly lost, expect to pay around 20dh to be shown the way. Alternatively, find a quiet corner or café to browse your map in peace.

**8 Bab Agnaou.** Almohads, Saadian sultans, and many a stubborn donkey—this 12th-century gateway to the Kasbah has seen it all. With its decorative, horseshoe-shaped arches sculpted from ochre-blue Guéliz sandstone (the precise color depends on the time of day), Bab Agnaou is the most striking of Marrakech's 20 city gates. The monumental entrance takes its name from the Berber for 'hornless black ram'. 🕒 15 min. *Medina rampsarts.*

**9 ★ Place des Ferblantiers.** When you see sparks fly, hear the rhythmic tapping of hammers, and smell the varnish, you know you've reached the Place des Ferblantiers (Tinsmith's Square). Using medieval-style tools, the tinsmiths here craft filigree, star-shaped, and bejeweled lanterns that cast extraordinary patterns. Even if there's no space left in my suitcase, I enjoy just poking around the workshops lining the palm-dotted square; some are veritable Ali Baba caves of home lighting. 🕒 45 min. *Place des Ferblantiers. Workshops daily 9am–9pm.*

**10<sup>2</sup> ★★ Kosybar.** The rooftop terrace here is the finest place for sundowners, as storks swoop down gracefully to their nests on the neighboring Badi Palace walls and a magenta sky silhouettes the contours of Koutoubia. Bring your camera, sip a glass of Moroccan wine, and catch some of the most bewitching views over Marrakech. *Place des Ferblantiers 47.* ☎ 0524-38-03-42. \$\$\$

*Kasbah mosque rises above the Saadian Tombs.*



## The Best in Three Days

- 1 Jardin Majorelle
- 2 Guéliz Boutiques
- 3' Amandine
- 4 Ensemble Artisanal
- 5 Cyber Park
- 6 La Maison Arabe Hammam
- 7' Villa Flore
- 8 Hivernage Nightlife



**M**y third full-day tour reveals a strikingly different side to Marrakech. Go west to admire Yves Saint Laurent's botanical collection in Jardin Majorelle, and then nibble French pastries and shop for couture kaftans in Guéliz. After an invigorating scrub in La Maison Arabe's candlelit hammam, it's time to party celebrity-style in Hivernage. **START: Jardin Majorelle.**



For quality carpets at fixed prices, head for Ben Rahal.

**1 ★★ Jardin Majorelle.** If gardens were people, this one would be a supermodel, not least because it was part of the stylish collection of late French designer **Yves Saint Laurent** (p 101). French landscape artist Jacques Majorelle (1886–1962) created the botanical haven in 1924, interspersing rare foliage with pots in mouthwatering orange and lemon hues, saving a final splash of color for an Art Deco villa in his trademark cobalt blue. The latter now harbors an intriguing Islamic Art Museum (p 26). A footpath weaves past cacti, rustling bamboo, lofty palms, and pools. Arrive early to beat the crowds and savor the calm. *1½ hrs.*

Off Avenue Yacoub el Mansour.

☎ 0524-30-18-52. [www.jardinmajorelle.com](http://www.jardinmajorelle.com). Admission 30dh gardens, 15dh Islamic Art Museum. Oct–May daily 8am–5pm; Jun–Sep daily 8am–6pm.

**2 ★ Guéliz Boutiques.** Hop into a horse-drawn *calèche* at Jardin Majorelle for a relaxed trot into Guéliz, where glass-fronted malls and marble-lined boutiques lit by Murano chandeliers are light years away from the medina's din and delirious colors. Refined and modern, Guéliz has style (and prices) to rival Paris. High-end **Rue de la Liberté** is where you'll find insiders' favorite fixed-price carpet shop, Ben Rahal (p 87), and Frédérique Birkenmeyer's floaty couture kaftans at Intensité Nomade (p 91). Bear in mind that most shops close on Sunday. ⌚ 1 hr. **Guéliz.**

**3 ★ Amandine.** The mention of this patisserie, tucked down a Guéliz backstreet, is enough to make sweet-toothed Marrakchis gush about chocolate-drenched bombes d'amour (love bombs), angelically light meringues, and crisp almond tarts. Drop by for strong espresso, people-watching, and the ultimate sugar rush. **177 Rue Mohammed el-Beqal.** ☎ 0524-44-96-12. \$.

**4 ★★★ Ensemble Artisanal.** Tired of haggling over every last dirham in the souks? This state-run craft complex is every polite Westerner's dream: full of quality

handicrafts at fixed prices. No bartering, no hassle. Each of the shops and workshops in the courtyard focuses on a different craft—from pointy *babouches* to hand-woven baskets, ceramics to carpets. It's interesting to see the artisans at work even if you have no intention of buying.

🕒 30 min. Avenue Mohammed V.

☎ 0524-38-66-74. Admission free. Mon–Sat 9:30am–7pm.

5 ★ **Cyber Park.** Royals once went a-strolling in these 18th-century gardens, now a magnet to teenagers who come for upbeat after-school jam sessions by the fountains, flirting under the orange trees, and free WiFi. Should you have no interest in checking your email, the manicured lawns and orange groves are a pleasure to stroll and an escape from the hubbub on Avenue Mohammed V.

🕒 30 min. Avenue Mohammed V. Admission free. Daily 9:30am–6:30pm.

## 6 ★★★ La Maison Arabe

**Hamam.** After three days in Marrakech, my dust-filled pores are crying out for La Maison Arabe's hamam. The steam clean takes place beside a rose petal-filled pool in a candlelit *tadelakt* (polished plaster) chamber. *Savon noir* (black soap) with eucalyptus is applied before an invigorating gommage (exfoliation) with a rough mitt to remove dead skin. *Rhassoul* clay with orange water leaves skin glowing and ready for a soothing 30-minute massage.

You'll leave silky smooth, sleepy, and walking on air.



🕒 1½ hrs. 1 **Derb Assehbe.** ☎ 0524-38-70-10. [www.lamaisonarabe.com](http://www.lamaisonarabe.com). Royal Session 800dh. See p 115.

7 ★★★ **Villa Flore.** Other top tables receive more hype, but this sleek riad achieves perfection in service, cuisine, and atmosphere at comparatively small prices. French architect, Jacques Gering, put his stamp on the light-filled interior, where oriental antiques, ruby-red chairs, and strategically placed roses catch the eye. Much-lauded chef Mustapha Benacher rises early to buy market-fresh ingredients for fluffy couscous infused with saffron and the most tender lamb I've ever eaten. 4 **Derb Azzouz.** ☎ 0524-39-17-00. \$\$–\$\$\$\$. See p 118.

8 **Hivernage Nightlife.** The über-cool lounge bars, velvet ropes, and glitzy shows in well-heeled Hivernage are not to everyone's

taste, but it's worth spending a night here to see a startlingly different side to

Marrakech. Gyrating belly dancers and DJs spinning lounge grooves entertain champagne-sipping socialites at hotspots such as Le Comptoir (p 128), while local tycoons fritter away their fortunes in the swanky casinos. Dress to impress fussy doormen, or head across to Café Extrablatt (p 124) for German aesthetics and relaxed beats.

🕒 2 hrs. **Hivernage.** ●

Marrakshi teenagers surf the web at Cyber Park.