

Cruising to Morocco on the Seabourn Odyssey

by Janice Mucalov



A snake charmer threatens to wrap a cobra around my neck. “La shokran!” (no thank you) I manage to squeal. The town square pulsates with activity – acrobatic entertainers, fortune tellers, Berber musicians; it feels like one huge carnival. From the square, a labyrinth of narrow alleys fans out into the souk (market), which brims with brassware, pyramids of colored spices and pointy beaded shoes.

I’m visiting the medina (old quarter) of Marrakesh on a shore excursion while on a

Seabourn cruise. Our ship, the Seabourn Odyssey, is sailing from Lisbon to Barcelona, calling in at Madeira, the Canary Islands and Morocco. Our two full days in Morocco are the most exotic part of this itinerary – and while it’s thrilling to get a taste of such a different culture, I’m ready to shed the sensory overdose when we return to the luxury and calm of our ship at night.

Our first port-of-call is Casablanca. There, I could tour the world’s largest mosque, the Hassan II Mosque. But how could I give up

the chance to see Marrakesh? The three-hour bus ride is admittedly long. But it’s comfortable on a high-speed highway. And the almost biblical scenery – farmers herding sheep with sticks and donkeys pulling hay-filled carts – keeps my face glued to the window.

Magical Marrakesh

Entering Marrakesh, we pass the famed La Mamounia. A former centuries-old palace, it was once the vacation haunt of Winston



Churchill, who declared Marrakesh the “last paradise on Earth.” Though it’s now one of the world’s most exquisite hotels, its façade is relatively unassuming; I wish we had time to peek inside.

And then, we see it – the huge red brick walls of the medina. They stretch 19 kilometres around the old city, soaring up to 12 metres high. And those holes in the walls? “Some say they were formed by canon blasts,” says our guide. “But the holes were actually made to allow the walls to breathe.” Whatever the explanation, it’s obvious pigeons like to roost in them.

Once inside the medina, our group leaves the bus for the 19th century Bahia Palace. Commissioned by Si Moussa, a slave who became a sultan’s powerful Grand Vizir, it’s a mind-boggling tangle of some 160 rooms.

Where to look? At the intricate ceilings with their painted inlaid woodwork? At the floors? They’re decorated with hand-made tiles, coloured blue, mustard, green and white to represent the four seasons. At the trickling fountains and gardens blooming with orange trees? Off one courtyard, four doors lead to four rooms, one for each of the wives of Si Moussa’s son; I note that the favorite wife’s room is bigger and has a higher ceiling. If only the furnishings were still around; unfortunately, when Si Moussa’s son died, his wives and sultan snatched the art and valuables to adorn their own palaces.

I’d like to dawdle and soak up the atmosphere but lunch awaits. We’re escorted to the Dar Rizhane hotel for lunch in its fountain-filled garden courtyard. I feel like Scheherazade as we dine on course after course of salads, couscous, fragrant lamb tagine and almond delights, finishing off with mint tea.

After, we’re taken to a Berber pharmacy to sample genuine Moroccan oil skin and hair products. Then we’re given some free time to wander the souk on our own. (That’s where I encounter the snake charmer.)

Returning back to the ship, Jen, a fellow passenger we’ve befriended, finds her cabin stewardess has drawn her a hot bath, sprin-

kled with rose petals, and left her a sweet note: “Welcome back. I thought you’d like this after your long day.” Not unusual on Seabourn. The line, which is famous for its unlimited complimentary champagne and caviar, is also known for its exceptional service. Jen tells us about her surprise treat the next morning as we leave for our tour of Tangier (our second Moroccan port-of-call) and Tetouan.

Tangier and Tetouan

In Tangier, we first drive past villas owned by Arabic magnates – eye-popping in their opulence – then stop at the Caves of Hercules. According to Greek mythology, the demigod Hercules is said to have rested here in these caves after finishing his 12 labours. An astonishing large gap in the rock wall is the highlight of the main cave. It’s perfectly outlined in the shape of a reverse Africa; looking through, I marvel at the breathtaking view of the blue sea beyond. There are also fascinating inscriptions made by early Phoenicians on the rock walls, believed to be maps of the surrounding area.

Then we drive an hour through green hilly fields to Tetouan. One of the oldest cities in Morocco, Tetouan receives far fewer international tourists than Marrakesh. The souk in its medina, stuffed with 40,000 shops, feels more authentic. (In fact, apart from our small group, I don’t see another Western face among the throng of locals.)

Our guide warns us: “If you get lost, I’ll never find you!” And so we follow him single file, sticking to each other like glue as we navigate the souk. A kaleidoscope of psychedelic scenes rapidly unfolds one after the other – live chickens, cobblers hammering shoes, sardines on ice, colorful veggies and even goat heads hanging on hooks.

Later that evening on the Seabourn Odyssey – over a fine dinner of Dover sole meuniere in the specialty Thomas Keller Grill restaurant, washed down with a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, of course – I chat with my mother (and cruise companion) about our brief introduction to Morocco. The excursions involved two long days. But visiting Morocco has been a highlight of our Seabourn cruise.



Now we look forward to the next day’s adventure.

About Seabourn

Seabourn is a luxury cruise line with five, small, all-suite ships. Seabourn Odyssey carries 458 guests. Specialty dining, WiFi, liquor and 35+ premium wines are included complimentary in the rates. Several Western Europe itineraries call in at both Casablanca and Tangier. ■

WWW.SEABOURN.COM

Other Cruises That Visit Morocco

Oceania Cruises

Known for its excellent cuisine at sea, Oceania Cruises serves up Tangier on several European itineraries and Miami-to-Barcelona repositioning cruises. Shore excursions include a 5-hour tour of Tetouan as well as a half-day tour of Tangier.

Royal Caribbean

The Independence of the Seas visits Agadir, Morocco, on two “Canaries and North Africa” cruises in 2020. In Agadir, you can rock the 1541 kasbah (citadel) and visit the souk.

MSC Cruises

The line that gives you cruising with an Italian flair – MSC Cruises – includes a day in Casablanca on several cruises that dock in Spain, Italy and France. MSC Orchestra, for example, offers 13-night roundtrip cruises from Barcelona in October; MSC Preziosa sails from Marseille on 9-night trips in November.

