

Morocco: A Country Profile

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Morocco is a lively African country with diverse history and eclectic style. From lush beaches to the sandy Sahara, snake charmers to camels, Morocco is a mesmerizing country. I hope this country brief provides some insight into this fascinating land.

Geography & Climate

Morocco's official name is The Kingdom of Morocco. Morocco's population reaches just over thirty million people. Its capital is Rabat, and other major cities include Casablanca, Marrakech and Fes. More than half of Morocco's population resides in urban areas. Casablanca is Morocco's largest city, while Fes is a major cultural center. Marrakech is a tourist hot spot with a large square, called "Djemma el Fna," where snake charmers and the like are commonplace. Morocco is located in the northwest part of Africa on the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. The total area of Morocco is just a bit greater than the state of California. Algeria borders Morocco to the west and south, while Western Sahara borders it to the south east.

The terrain of Morocco is quite varied. The interior of Morocco is largely mountainous, while the outskirts are made up of coastal plains. It is in these coastal plain areas in the north that the soil is rich and most precipitation falls; therefore, these areas are most favorable for agriculture. While Morocco does not have any major rivers, coastal streams provide an important source of water used for irrigation. Morocco's three mountain ranges: the High

Atlas, the Middle Atlas and the Anti-Atlas are commonly referred to as 'the Atlas.' They run parallel to each other across the country's interior.

The southern part of the country, south of the Atlas Mountains, is home to the Sahara Desert. While temperatures in other parts of Morocco are relatively pleasant, temperatures in the Sahara region can be extremely high. The average July temperature in Zagora, a city in southern Morocco, is 108 degrees Fahrenheit. Temperatures can reach extreme highs during the day, and become very cool at night. This area is also very dry, rainfall is rare, and desert winds can be incredibly strong. Only specific types of vegetation can thrive under these harsh conditions. Human life is also very trying in this region; therefore, most of Morocco's population resides to the north of the Atlas where the temperatures and terrain are more accommodating.

Culture & Customs

Morocco is a culturally rich nation with a great number of influences from Spain, France, the Middle East, Berber and Judaism. Family, immediate and extended, is of utmost importance in Morocco. One's actions are considered a reflection on one's entire family. Therefore one's public reputation is very important in Morocco. Honor and integrity are core values for the Moroccan people.

Food

Like its culture, Moroccan food is the culmination of many different influences. Much spice is used in Moroccan cuisine including saffron and mint. Oranges are very popular in

Morocco as are other citrus fruits. Couscous is very common in Morocco. Tanjine is another popular dish. Tanjine is typically a dish with various combinations of meats, vegetables and spices. A tanjine is actually a uniquely shaped bowl; the tanjine dish was named after the bowl it is served in. While chicken is the most commonly eaten meat in Morocco, other meat is served in Morocco that would be considered taboo in other parts of the world.

Meals in the home are typically served on a short table, about a foot off the ground. It is commonplace to eat with your hands in Morocco, as opposed to using utensils. Morocco is known for its mint tea, which is the nation's most popular drink. Mint tea is a very sweet tea and is served hot with a nice minty flavor.

Ceramics

Ceramics and pottery making is a long standing tradition in Morocco. Beautiful pieces are crafted from the clay that makes up much of Morocco's terrain. Clay is formed into shape by craftsman and left to dry in the sun before being fired in a kiln. The various colors of the pottery come from various minerals found naturally in Morocco. Skilled craftsman, who often study the skill from youth, paint intricate designs on the surface. Every major city has shops filled with these beautiful creations. Even in more rural areas one can find ceramic and pottery in small shops or stalls along the roadway.

Dress

The further south you travel in the country, the more conservative and traditional Moroccans typically dress. The traditional dress garment of Moroccans is called the djellaba.

This is a long, loose-fitting garment that resembles a robe. These garments have long sleeves and hoods. Women's djellabas are typically made with bright colored fabric and are often decorated with beads or gold thread. Men's djellabas are traditionally more subdued. Slippers are traditional footwear for men, while women's traditional footwear often has a heel. Turbans are popular in Morocco, especially in the Sahara region. Turbans serve to block the sun and wind; they are very useful during sandstorms in the desert.

In some of the bigger cities in the north you will find more contemporary western looking clothing. Some people even wear t-shirts and jeans. However, like many places in the world shorts are not commonplace. Generally women in all parts of Morocco dress more conservatively than western women. A woman who bears a certain amount of skin is often exposed to ridicule and harassment from traditionalists.

Music

Andalusian classical music, which can be heard throughout northern Africa, originated in Morocco. Berber folk music is also popular. It is not uncommon for Moroccans, especially in the more remote regions of the Sahara, to make their own instruments. Flutes and drums are often used to make Moroccan music. It is also common for the nomadic Berber tribes in the Sahara to have their own traditional dances.

Holidays

There are many different kinds of celebrations and festivals in Morocco. Often festivals are themed around local goods and crops. For example, in February there is a festival in

Morocco celebrating almonds. Animals, such as the camel or horse, that facilitate life in Morocco are also celebrated in festivals as well. Other celebrations are centered on religion including one at the end of Ramadan. Moussems are festivals which celebrate religious men that have passed away. Other Moroccan celebrations are in honor of a particular city or the state of Morocco itself such as National Day and Independence Day.

History

The history of Morocco is long and complex. However, it is important to understand the key actors in its history as they played an essential role in forming the Morocco we know today. The indigenous Berber people have resided in area we refer to as Morocco since the dawn of modern times. After a period of Roman rule, Arabs invaded the land in the seventh century. With them they brought the Islamic tradition which is still very much alive in Morocco today. With the fall of the Arabs came a long string of short-lived rulers over the territory. Many of these powers fell in Morocco because they could not sustain the support of the Berber people and Berber leadership.

Morocco enjoyed a period of self-rule in the late fourteen century. However, Morocco's strategic location along the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean was appealing to the powers in Europe, including Spain and France. Thus the fifteenth through the nineteenth century saw a struggle for power over the territory. After centuries of dispute and struggle, France was recognized as protector of Morocco in 1911 while Spain was granted rule over

several nearby islands. After previous failed attempts, France finally granted the request for independence and the Kingdom of Morocco was formed in 1956.

Language

The official language of Morocco is Arabic or more specifically, Moroccan Arabic which differs from traditional Arabic. Because of its historical ties with several different cultures many different languages are spoken throughout Morocco. In business affairs and political affairs French is often used. While almost half of the population speaks at least one of the three dialects of the Berber language. There are also Moroccans, largely in the northern regions that are geographically near Spain, that speak Spanish. Thus it is typical for Moroccans to speak more than one language fluently.

Lifestyle

Morocco is a developing nation and in many ways can be seen as a culmination of tradition and modernization. For example, it is common in Morocco to see donkeys or horses pulling wagons or goods even in urban areas. At the same time, large cities have cinemas and fashion boutiques. In Morocco a souk is a marketplace. Produce, spice and clothing are sold in stalls often in long alleyways off the city's main square. Bartering is common in the marketplace as prices are rarely posted.

An upsetting fact is that many Moroccans, especially in rural areas, live in extreme poverty. One in five Moroccans lives below the poverty line. This is mainly because of the

harsh terrain in some areas of Morocco. Due to its geography and terrain there is not an ample supply of water in Morocco. Morocco has often faced the hardship of significant droughts. Most of the water that is available is irrigated for agriculture, leaving a limited supply for use by the people. In rural areas it is common for Moroccans to walk great distances for water. Typically the poorest people are those who live in rural areas that do not have access to fertile land or irrigation. Many organizations including the World Bank and International Monetary fund have implemented policies to help alleviate this problem. There has been significant progress in reducing poverty in Morocco, but it still remains one of the nation's greatest challenges.

While many Moroccans reside in cities some Moroccans, mainly in the desert region, are nomadic. Some Berber tribes have a long tradition of moving around the Sahara. As one would expect in the hot temperatures of the Sahara, water is a necessity. There are wells in throughout the desert in Morocco. However, often only the Berber people that reside in the desert know how and where to locate them. Cars, though typically older models, are used to navigate in cities and throughout the country.

Travel

There are several modes of transportation in Morocco. There is a railway system which connects cities in the areas to the north and west of the mountains. The larger cities in Morocco have airports which allow travelers to travel domestically or internationally. Ferries are a typical means of transportation between Spain and Morocco. Livestock are used to transport goods in and around cities and in rural areas.

If one wants to travel from the north to the desert regions in southern Morocco it is common to take a series of taxis. Taxis in Morocco are typically older style Mercedes that travel from one town/city to another. One must change taxis several times if traveling long distances as there are laws prohibiting drivers from going into regions other than the one from which they originate. A taxi driver typically waits in a designated area of the city until he has a full car load, 7 people in most instances. This can get to be quite a hot journey considering the taxi is typically over capacity and most taxis do not have air conditioning. Each passenger pays the driver his share upfront. If a passenger does not want to wait for other passengers to make a 'full taxi' he must pay the driver for the empty seats.

As one might expect, camels are the preferred mode of transportation in the Sahara. They have a tremendous capacity to travel long distances in extreme conditions without water. They can carry heavy loads, and are adept to traveling through high winds and heat. Their eyelids have long hairs on the end which allow them to see and navigate even in the Sahara's infamous sandstorms. Because of their great usefulness in the desert, camels are expensive by Moroccan standards.

Religion

The vast majority of Moroccans practice Islam. Religion has a strong presence in Morocco and is reflected in nearly all aspects of Moroccan life. This is demonstrated by the fact that the king of Morocco is not only considered a political leader but a spiritual one as well. This Islam place of worship is the mosque. Morocco is home of some of the world's most

beautiful mosques. As part of the Islamic faith, Muslims pray five times each day and observe Friday as a holy day. Islam also calls for fasting for a month during Ramadan. During this time Muslims do not eat from sunrise until sunset. While not all Moroccans practice traditionally, religion remains an important part of life in Morocco. There is also a very small Christian population in Morocco which make about one percent of Morocco's total and an even smaller Jewish population present.

What Kids Do

While it is officially mandatory, many children in Morocco, especially those in more remote areas, do not attend school. The literacy rate is only about fifty percent in Morocco. Young girls are even less likely to go to school than young boys. Only about half the school aged girls in Morocco attend school; thus, women's literacy rates are less than forty percent. Children must work in order to help the family survive. It is commonplace to see young children alone on a donkey or on foot, traveling to or from the city or water well.

Unfortunately, child labor has been common practice in Morocco. Measures have also been taken to help eliminate child labor and increase the number of children in formal education in Morocco. One fifth of the government's spending has been allocated for education. As with poverty reduction efforts, progress has been made in these areas; however, both these issues are difficult to monitor in the more remote areas of the country.

Resources

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