

# At the Crossroads of Worlds in Morocco—The Tale of Marrakesh and Essaouira, Two Cities, Two Stories! Extraordinary!

Level A2-B1-B2

## MARRAKESH AND ESSAOUIRA: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

**Topic:** Join me as I show you two Moroccan cities with two distinct personalities. What sets Marrakesh and Essaouira apart? What brings them together?

*"Cities were always like people, showing their varying personalities to the traveler."*

~Roman Payne, Author of [Cities & Countries](#)



## MOROCCO IN MOTION: Two Cities, Two Rhythms

Whenever I visit a city, I often look for its soul. Most of the times I am lucky. Most cities are easy to read and I often succeed in my quest without any major difficulties.

However, Marrakesh in Morocco, proved to be a tough nut to crack. For days I tried to define the city. Was it traditional? Modern? Calm? Chaotic? What made its heart beat?

First, my quest took me into the streets. I observed the traffic and the incessant honking of cars reminded me of Saudi Arabia. The scarcity of traffic lights and chaos when crossing roads took me back to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. The almost run-down petrol stations made me think of Malawi. Lastly, the architecture and inscriptions dropped me in the streets of Paris, not to mention the French language that many people were using.

I was baffled. Where was I? Was I in the Middle East, in Africa or in Europe?

Later in the evening, I had dinner in an Italian restaurant where I ate baked aubergine with all the ingredients that you would find in *la bella Italia*. Earlier on I had spotted McDonald's and KFC restaurants. This was where the modern buildings were. Marrakesh was surely playing with my senses.

The second day saw me discovering riads and the famous Jemaa el-Fnaa square by night. The spectacle blew my mind with its food stalls, fruit juice stands, musicians and performers. I imagined village and communal life being played out in this public space.

Here, the medina, Marrakesh's old city and UNESCO World Heritage Site, fulfilled its promises. I felt transported back to the Middle Ages and could see myself a few centuries back, shopping in the same streets and seeing the same faces. It was surreal.

Horse and hand-drawn carts passed by and reinforced this feeling before reality jostled me back to my senses when I saw young people on motor scooters. Motorbikes were a common sight too and I wondered what they were doing in this ancient place.

Other signs of modernity reminded my husband and I that we were living in the twenty-first century. We used Google Maps to navigate our way through the narrow, winding streets and paid some of the merchants with credit cards.

Majorelle Garden was my next stop the following day. The garden's beauty exceeded my expectations. As I strolled through the garden and took many pictures, I thought of Jacques Majorelle, Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé's influence in this place. These were Frenchmen who had left their countries to live in Morocco, leaving behind them an incredible legacy.

The following day saw me touring the city by horse carriage. I wanted to see more, feel more of this city that seemed to reveal its treasures at each turn. The horseman let me sit beside him and gave me explanations about the things I saw. This was like a private, luxurious tour and I was immensely grateful for this opportunity.

What a thrill it was to discover one of Marrakesh's rich neighbourhoods with its casinos, international hotels and grand boulevards lined with palm trees. The kasbah was another great site to see and I simply could not get enough of the city.

The cooking lesson was the cherry on the cake and I felt at last satisfied.

Marrakesh was slowly unveiling its secrets to me but I had not yet discovered its soul. The fickle weather did not seem to help. When it was cold, I saw myself back in Warsaw and when the sun reappeared, I felt as if I were somewhere on a Mediterranean beach. The Atlas Mountains, with their snowy peaks, only sowed more confusion.

I needed to get out of the city and visit another one in order to unravel the puzzle.

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We left Marrakesh for coastal Essaouira at around 8:30 on a Saturday morning. We were expected to arrive about three hours later. I was part of a tour group, and the van comprised at least twelve people, the majority of them Italian. It was such a pleasure to hear the lively Italian banter during the trip.

I was a bit apprehensive when I saw the dark clouds and then the rain. We were heading towards the Atlantic Ocean and the beach. Would we have to stay under a restaurant roof and not enjoy Essaouira at all? What if it stayed grey and gloomy?

Luckily enough, the skies cleared as we neared our destination. When the sun came out, it felt symbolic, almost like the city was welcoming us. It was such a huge relief.

As we arrived, I noticed the long beach and the people walking on it. Our driver stopped near the entrance of the medina and our guide gave us final instructions. We got out of the van excitedly. Essaouira was waiting for us.

I was intrigued by this city. There were many people, especially families. I felt as if I lived in Marrakesh the whole year and it was normal to come here for the weekend.

The medina felt busy, yet somehow calm. Unlike Marrakesh, there were no cars honking or motorbikes rushing past. I saw a single cart being pushed through the crowds. There were a few bicycles. Generally speaking, the atmosphere was lively but gentle.

Most of all, the medina stood out with its white walls and touches of blue scattered across the old city. Walking through the narrow streets revealed boutiques selling colourful clothes, jewellery, tapestries, leather goods and ceramics. Some patterns resembled those I had seen in Marrakesh and I wondered about their origins.

One traditional almond-butter grinding machine caught my attention and I could not resist filming it. The vendors here were less persistent than in Marrakesh, which added to the relaxed mood.

We took our time, stopping now and then to greet the many cats that live here. The cats looked very pretty and not sickly.

My greatest find in Essaouira was the Skala De La ville, the historic eighteenth-century fort. The ancient ramparts and cannons pointing toward the ocean brought vivid images of pirates, sea battles, defeats and triumphs.

I could easily imagine a ship arriving and picture the face of an inhabitant standing on those very walls. Was he afraid? Did he wonder where the vast waters led? How many people had left Essaouira, never to see its shores again?

The flaky paint on the façades told its own story. It made the medina feel timeless and memorable, sharply contrasting with Marrakesh's modern neighbourhoods.

Later, I learnt that Essaouira was previously called Mogador until the 1960s. Foreign nations had tried to conquer it several times since the 16th century: the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English and then the French.

Today, Essaouira is actually a popular tourist destination and was even used as a filming location for the TV series [The Game of Thrones](#).

Essaouira kept surprising me and I found myself repeatedly saying: "Oh, look at that! Oh my God, what's that?"

At the port, the presence of seagulls was unforgettable, especially near the fresh fish stalls and restaurants. While I was watching them, a musician began to play soulful music and moved both my husband and me to tears. For your own information, Essaouira is known to be home to [Gnawa](#) music which is supposed to soothe the soul.

Later, as I walked along the beach, someone started feeding the birds with bread. What a spectacle followed. The seagulls jostled and squawked in a chaotic frenzy above my head. I could not help thinking of a Hitchcock movie.

The fishermen's boats captivated me because they seemed almost artisanal. Time seemed to stop once again and I could see the port two hundred years before: local fishermen going about their business amongst European, Arabic, Jewish and African traders.

On my way back to Marrakesh, it dawned on me that I should never look at these two cities through the prism of a single identity.

Just like the whole country, Marrakesh and Essaouira were at the crossroads of world cultures. Morocco's geographical location allowed it to have constant connection with European, Arab, African and the western world. Marrakesh lay inland but Essaouira's coastal location exposed it to outside dangers, explaining its strong defensive ramparts.

Essaouira felt like a city frozen in time. The peeling paint, narrow cobbled streets and wind-swept forts gave it an almost eternal quality. Standing on the ramparts, it was easy to imagine the port centuries ago, alive with merchants and sailors from distant lands.

Marrakesh, by contrast, seemed to move with its times and stubbornly refused to be simplified. The French boulevards and Andalusian courtyards mingled with riads and souks in the medina. The red city was intense and I felt its intensity everywhere I went.

While Essaouira's airy ocean breeze soothed my senses, Marrakesh stimulated them and I felt incredibly energised.

Despite their differences, it seemed to me that both cities reflected Morocco's rich cultural influences. Each offered unforgettable food and warm hospitality. Each boasted a medina that was a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Each showed the importance of tradition in everyday life in Morocco.

This was the first time I had trouble finding the soul of a place. Marrakesh challenged me and taught me something very important.

Patience is needed in order to understand a place. Each city has its history and personality.





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