



The eastern side of the iconic Kasbah of Ouday.

(Saad Guerraoui)

Discovering Rabat's hidden charms

Saad Guerraoui

Rabat

If asked about their capital, Rabat, most Moroccans would describe it as quiet and dull, less lively than its rival, Casablanca.

However, for those who know where to look, Rabat is an amazing place to explore, full of hidden charms and historical significance. In 2013, the imperial city was ranked the second top travel destination by CNN.

Setting foot in Rabat, one feels the transformation the city has undergone since King Mohammed VI took the throne in 1999. The city boasts an efficient tram network, making it easy to access the historic quarters and upscale neighbourhoods. Accommodations for the physically disabled to visit sites are also ever-present.

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Like all of Morocco's imperial cities, Rabat is both ancient and modern, with history dating to eighth century BC when the Romans settled modern-day Chellah. The ruins of Chellah, a short walk from Rabat's medina, are a wonderful historic site to visit and show that Roman civilisation once thrived in Morocco. The town was designated a UNESCO world heritage site in 2012.

Inside the town, visitors can find an ancient site with marble columns, statues and scenic gardens, reflecting the Romans' extravagant

taste in architecture.

The Almohad and Merinid dynasties also left their mark, converting the town into a Muslim necropolis. During the Merinid dynasty, residents built towering walls and a gate – which stand today – to fortify themselves from the Spanish.

Heading towards the medina one arrives at the Hassan Tower site, a 6-minute drive from Chellah. The site houses the Mohammed V Mausoleum, where the tombs of King Mohammed VI's father and grandfather lie. The structure is one of the Alaouite dynasty's greatest architectural achievements and displays the artistic style of traditional craftsmen.

Several metres away stands the Hassan Tower, which was erected in 1195 by Sultan Yacoub al-Mansur of the Almohad dynasty. The structure was designed to be the world's tallest minaret and largest mosque but construction was halted on several of its columns and walls after the sultan's death in 1199. The tower's unfinished look gives it a unique air, attracting hundreds of visitors each day. Despite its unfinished condition, the tower dominates Rabat's landscape and it is one of the city's tallest structures.

Opposite the site is a series of gardens, where visitors can view the city landscape, which is separated into historical and modern sections by the Bouregreg river. On one side is the walled Kasbah of Ouday and, on the other, the city of Sale, where a state-of-the-art marina is being built on the river bank.

After a short break lying in the garden, I took the 10-minute walk to the medina, beginning my tour from the main gate of the Jewish quarter, known as Mellah. There was only a small Jewish presence in the quarter, apart from a house



The Mohammed V Mausoleum in Rabat.

(Saad Guerraoui)

near Mellah's synagogue that is visited by dozens of Jews.

Adjacent to Mellah is Rue des Consuls, one of the capital's most popular ancient streets. It is said that foreign diplomats were once required to reside there, while foreign pirates and corsairs captured on the coast were resold near El Ghazal Souk.

Walking down the long street, one can find bazaars selling all kinds of Moroccan handicrafts: Carpets, pottery, handbags, slippers, wooden and stone objects and silver jewellery. For those looking to make purchases, haggling is necessary to avoid being over-charged.

The end of Rue des Consuls leads to the iconic Kasbah of Ouday, which feels like a city within the city of Rabat. Built in the 12th century by the Almohads, the kasbah has preserved its historical character and remained isolated from the rest of the medina.

If entering the kasbah from the magnificent Bab Al-Oudaya – also known as Bab El Kebir – one notices the Andalusian design. With lime-covered walls painted in blue, clean, cobble-stone alleys full of plants, large doorframes with colourful mouldings, wrought iron and plaster, the place is reminiscent of Spain.

Strolling through the lower area leads to a garden, a museum and the Maure café.

The café is a spectacular spot overlooking the Atlantic, Sale and the Hassan tower site. It offers Morocco's delicious almond-made pastry samosas for 80 US cents and famous mint tea for about \$1.

Near the café, is the garden, where beautifully laid paths ornamented with flower beds and fountains reflect the Andalusian style.

The best time to visit Rabat is mid-May, when the city's annual *Mawazine* music festival takes place. The festival, which is to be headlined this year by Lauryn Hill, has previously attracted some of the world's most renowned singers, including Jennifer Lopez and Justin Timberlake. It will take place May 12th-20th and the majority of shows are free to the public.

For art lovers, paintings by Pablo Picasso will be exhibited in the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art starting April 19th.

From *riads* to 5-star hotels, tourists have plenty of options when visiting Rabat. Dar Mayssane *riad*, in the medina, is a perfect place to stay for those hoping to explore Rabat history. The *riad* has five personalised rooms, including *La Concubine* and *Le Sultan*, with prices ranging from \$80-\$135.

Across from Dar Mayssane is the trendy Dar Rbatia, Rabat's first Moroccan restaurant. The restaurant offers fine Moroccan dining at prices ranging from \$25-\$35.



Agenda

Luxor:
Through March 22nd

The *Luxor African Film Festival* is an annual event in Egypt. In its sixth year, the festival will screen long and short films produced in African countries in competitions for Long Narratives, Long Documentaries and Short Films.

Muscat:
Through March 24th

The first *Festival of India* in Oman includes Indian classical and folk dances, Indian instrumental music, an exhibition of Indian calligraphy, an Indian food festival and fashion show. The festival presents the diverse Indian culture, representing various traditions of Indian heritage. Events are scheduled for Muscat, Salalah, Sur and Sohar.

Haifa:
March 20th-25th

In its second year, the *Haifa Independent Film Festival* stretches over several Palestinian venues in Haifa, including Al Midan Theatre, Khashabi Theatre, Kabareet and Al Yakhour. The festival screens newly released movies in addition to older films, focusing on local cinema.

Tunis:
March 21st-April 9th

The 12th *Jazz à Carthage*, an annual music festival, brings together renowned international and local musicians for concerts, lectures, exhibitions and nightly jam sessions.

Marrakech:
March 23rd-April 2nd

The fourth *Marrakech Dance Festival* hosts dance teachers and participants from around the world for workshops, dance classes, conferences and live performances.

Zammour:
April 6th-9th

The first of *Zammour Fest* takes place in a Berber village in the Tunisian Sahara. Over four days and three nights, visitors camp in Bedouin tents, trek or bike in the village, visit mountains, attend folklore parties and enjoy traditional food.

Dubai:
April 7th-13th

Grease the Musical follows the budding romance of Danny and Sandy with their rebellious high school friends' help. From the 1950s-inspired costumes and hairstyles to the rock 'n' roll songs, *Grease the Musical* brings the music of the hit movie to the stage. The musical will be performed at the Dubai World Trade Centre.

Algeria:
During May

The 18th *European Cultural Festival* in Algeria brings together artists from more than a dozen countries to perform traditional rhythms, jazz and flamenco. It takes place in Algiers, Tlemcen and Constantine.

We welcome submissions of calendar items related to cultural events of interest to travellers in the Middle East and North Africa.

Please send tips to:
editor@thearabweekly.com



The Hassan Tower, one of Rabat's tallest structures.

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