ROCKJUMPER

Worldwide Birding Adventures

Morocco

Atlas to Sahara in Spring

11th May to 23rd May 2023 (13 days)



White-headed Duck by David Hoddinott

Morocco, with its breathtaking scenery, delicious food, rich history and fabulous birding, is an essential destination for all birders and travellers. As an independent country after French rule, few Muslim countries offer the combination of such a friendly atmosphere complimented with strong cultural beliefs and few restrictions on visitors. Interesting habitats are found in the various geo-physical regions and vary from the high snow-covered Atlas Mountains, to low lying woodlands and the red sand dunes of the great Sahara desert. Cities and towns bustle with activity, where mud-walled buildings line souks (long narrow alleyways) that are filled with bazaars selling carpets and crafts, and laden with exotic spices. What's more, Morocco is also home to numerous special birds and several North African endemics including the beautiful Moussier's Redstart, Tristram's Warbler, Barbary Partridge, Levaillant's Woodpecker, Fulvous Babbler, African Blue Tit and African Crimson-winged Finch. Our main target however is one of the world's most endangered birds, the Northern Bald Ibis or Waldrapp, now restricted

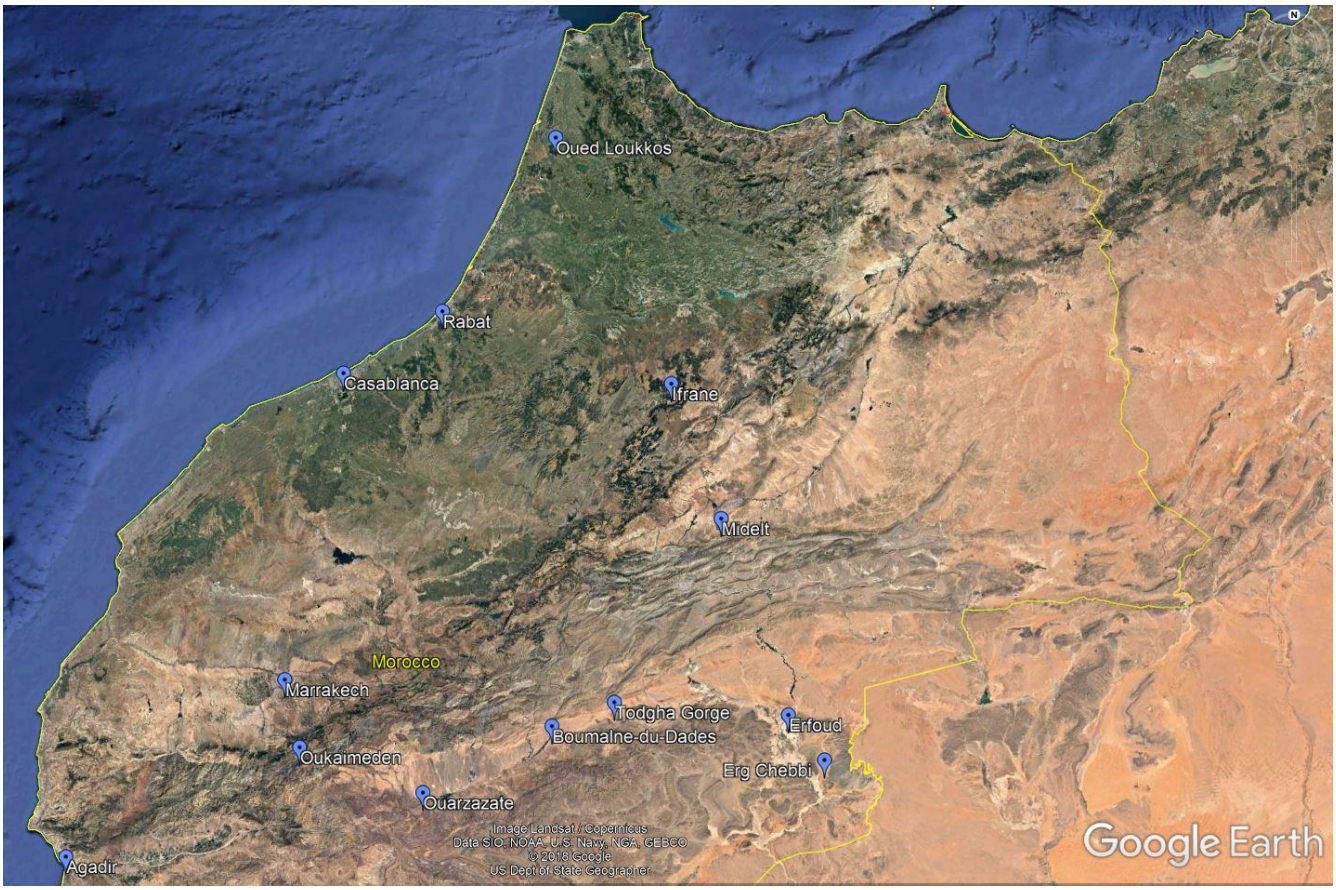
to only two colonies in Morocco and a recently introduced breeding colony in Spain. We take a pelagic trip off Agadir to see the Critically Endangered Balearic Shearwater before heading into central and eastern Morocco. Our time on the stony gravel plains and sandy deserts are liable to be rewarded with Pharaoh Eagle-Owl, dainty Cream-colored Courser, up to four species of Sandgrouse, Desert Sparrow, African Desert Warbler and numerous larks, including Temminck's, Maghreb, Thick-billed and the Western Palearctic's most difficult species Dupont's Lark. Heading further north, we stop in the pine and oak woodlands near Ifrane for Atlas Pied Flycatcher before continuing onwards to wetlands near Casablanca for the rare White-headed Duck, Moustached Warbler and recently split Western Swamphen. We compete our tour with an early morning trip to a known stakeout for Double-spurred Francolin.

THE TOUR AT A GLANCE…

THE ITINERARY

Day 1	**Marrakech to Oukaimeden**
Day 2	**Oukaimeden to Agadir via Tizi n'Test Pass**
Day 3	**Seabird trip off Agadir and Tamri**
Day 4	**Oued Massa and Oued Souss**
Day 5	**Agadir to Boumalne-du-Dades**
Day 6	**Tagdilt Track and Dades Gorge**
Day 7	**Boumalne-du-Dades to Erfoud via Todgha Gorge**
Day 8	**Erg Chebbi and Merzouga**
Day 9	**Erfoud to Midelt**
Day 10	**Midelt to Ifrane**
Day 11	**Ifrane to Rabat**
Day 12	**Sidi Bourhaba and Oued Loukkos**
Day 13	**Rabat to Casablanca via Zaër and depart**

TOUR MAP…



THE TOUR IN DETAIL…

Day 1: Marrakech to Oukaimeden. We depart Marrakech early this morning after breakfast heading for the quieter climes of Oukaimeden. Situated at an elevation of 2,600m in the High Atlas, Oukaimeden is a popular ski resort surrounded by snow-capped mountains and conifer-covered slopes. As we travel up the High Atlas Mountains, the road winds through impressive scenic passes and we will be treated to breathtaking and dramatic views of the surrounding valleys and quaint villages perched atop steep mountainous slopes. En route we will enjoy some birding stops, the first of which will give us a chance of Western Jackdaw, here at its southern limit. Other species often seen at this site include the unique Moroccan subspecies (*subpersonata*) of White Wagtail, House Bunting and various egrets and herons. As we wind our way up to



Levaillant's Woodpecker by David Hoddinott

higher altitude we will keep watching for the rare Golden Eagle, coveys of Barbary Partridge, Pallid Swift, and two North African endemics; Levaillant's Woodpecker and the stunning Moussier's Redstart. In stands of juniper trees we hope to find African Blue, Great and Coal Tit, Common Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper and Hawfinch. Fat White-throated Dippers reside along the region's fast flowing streams and, if we are fortunate, we may find the uncommon Ring Ouzel or Alpine Accentor.



Horned Lark by David Hoddinott

Finally arriving at the ski resort, we should see flocks of swirling, coughing choughs representing both species; Alpine (Yellow-billed) and Red-billed at close quarters foraging in the fields. An isolated population of resident Horned (Shore) Lark occurs here in good numbers. Other target species at this high elevation include small flocks of the lovely African Crimson-winged Finch (a very localized bird whose numbers are directly correlated to snow levels), Mistle Thrush, Eurasian (Winter) Wren, Eurasian Jay, Black Redstart, European Robin, Common Wood Pigeon, Cirl and Rock Buntings, Rock Sparrow, Great Spotted Woodpecker, and raptors including Long-legged Buzzard, Peregrine Falcon, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and Bonelli's Eagle. We will overnight at a lodge in the Ourika Valley of the Atlas Mountains where we have a chance of locating the *mauritanica* sub-species of Tawny Owl, unique to NW Africa.

Day 2: Oukaimeden to Agadir via Tizi n'Test Pass. After breakfast we drop down the Ourika Valley before starting our traverse of the spectacular Tizi n'Test pass into the Dades Valley. Once again we will pass through spectacular scenery, quaint mountain villages, rushing streams and great birding spots. We will keep a lookout for any High Atlas species we may have missed, while even Barbary Sheep are possible along this pass. We will also stop off at Tinmel Mosque, high in the Atlas Mountains. This 11th century edifice is one of the few mosques that are open to Westerners. In the past a co-operative Tawny Owl could sometimes be found here, and though it has been a few years since it was last seen, we will give the mosque a cursory look just in case. Golden Eagle has been recorded soaring over the surrounding mountains, so we shall certainly keep our eyes over head for a repeat performance.



African Crimson-winged Finch by Clayton Burne

Arriving at the bottom of the pass, we will enter the great Dades Valley and follow it to Morocco's Atlantic coast. The valley offers great birding and spectacular geological formations before we bottom out and see our first Argan Trees. The unique Argan Tree is one of the oldest trees in the world, endemic to just a small region of only 8000km2 in south western Morocco.



Barbary Sheep by Clayton Burne

Upon arrival in Agadir we will transfer to a comfortable hotel in the city. Agadir is a delightful beachfront resort in southern Morocco, host to one of the largest of the King's palaces with modern facilities and a superb shoreline. For centuries it has been an important transport hub, an essential port of call for ships and camel caravans and, more recently, for birdwatchers! Should we have sufficient time, we will make a visit to Oued Souss and indulge in the numerous gull species, whilst also attempting to find Red-necked Nightjar.

Day 3: Pelagic seabird trip and Tamri. This morning we will depart on a pelagic seabird trip out of Agadir. The most likely pelagic species we will see are Northern Gannet, Great Skua, European Storm Petrel and the Critically Endangered Balearic Shearwater. We also stand a reasonable chance for Manx Shearwater, Common Scoter and Parasitic Jaeger, while Cory's Shearwater, Razorbill, Atlantic Puffin and Sabine's Gull would require exceptional luck. The diversity and numbers of species varies greatly and we can never be sure quite of what to expect; however, we are bound to see something interesting!



Balearic Shearwater by Clayton Burne

The region around Agadir is one of the few localities where it is possible to find the Critically Endangered Northern Bald Ibis or Waldrapp. Once common across central Europe, northern Africa and the Middle East, today this strange bird only breeds in two areas along the Moroccan coast - just north and south of Agadir (the population is estimated at slightly over 500 individuals as of 2017), and at a recently introduced breeding colony in Spain. This afternoon we will visit Oued Tamri and the surrounding coastal regions, one of the best known areas for this species and, with a little luck, secure a sighting of one of the world's rarest and most endangered birds. Oued Tamri also offers us an excellent opportunity to find not only Northern Bald Ibis, but also

gives us our best views of Audouin's Gull, while the surrounding scrub is good for the beautiful Moussier's Redstart, Spotless Starling, Blue Rock Thrush, Sardinian Warbler and Spanish Sparrow.



Moussier's Redstart by Markus Lilje

Day 4: Oued Massa and Oued Souss. This morning we will visit Oued Massa where the River Massa, at the end of its journey from the Atlas Mountains spills into a wide estuary teeming with birdlife. We will search the reed-lined shores and sandbanks for Little Bittern, Eurasian Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Greater Flamingo, Squacco and Purple Heron, Common Crane, Western Marsh Harrier and Common Kingfisher amongst other species. Large numbers of waterfowl used to roost here; however, since the river breached and connected once again with the ocean, the waterfowl numbers have subsequently declined. Searching further up river where the water is less brackish may still reveal Tufted Duck, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler and the highly sought-after Marbled Duck. Good numbers of waders may also be seen including Eurasian Oystercatcher, Pied Avocet, Little Ringed, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper, Common Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit. A large gull and tern roost should include Yellow-legged, Mediterranean, Slender-billed and Audouin's Gulls, while Sandwich and Caspian Tern may also put in an appearance. With a good dollop of luck, we may find the skulking and notoriously difficult to see Water Rail or flush a roosting Red-necked Nightjar. Other species we will search for include Western Osprey, Black-winged Kite, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Little Owl, Cetti's and occasionally Subalpine Warbler, Eurasian Magpie, Black-crowned Tchagra, Eurasian Wryneck and seedeaters including Spanish Sparrow, Common Linnet, European Serin and European Goldfinch.



Thick-billed Lark by Markus Lilje

A nearby site could produce Sedge Warbler, Brown-throated and Sand Martins and Tufted Duck. Barbary Ground Squirrels often occur in good numbers, and we may well encounter other small mammals and reptiles. After lunch we will then spend time at the fabulous Oued Souss estuary near Agadir. Teeming with waders, gulls, terns, egrets and herons, this is one of the few sites that regularly produces good waders on our route. Some of the species we are likely to encounter include Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Black-winged Stilt, Grey, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwit, Eurasian Curlew, Common and Spotted Redshanks, Common Greenshank, Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Little Stint, Dunlin, Ruff

and even Pied Avocet, while the late evening calls of Eurasian Stone-curlew are sure to be heard from the nearby gold course. Amongst the gulls we may spot Mediterranean, Audouin's and Slender-billed, while Mew Gull is occasionally seen. Some freshwater ponds away from the main estuary give us another chance for waders as well as the desirable Marbled Duck. At dusk we will keep a careful watch for Red-necked Nightjar.



Greater Hoopoe-Lark by Clayton Burne

Day 5: Agadir to Boumalne-du-Dades. After an early breakfast, we will leave the coast and further explore the wooded slopes of the Dades Valley as we head towards the town of Boumalne-du-Dades. Gradually the trees will become scrubbier and the countryside dryer until we reach the "Hollywood of the desert", Ouarzazate. Here we will enjoy lunch with lovely views overlooking this impressive city. Birding along the way, we will finally arrive at the quiet town of Boumalne-du-Dades for a two-night stay.

Day 6: Tagdilt Track and Dades Gorge. This morning we will visit the bird-famous Tagdilt track to search for hardy species that make these stony deserts their home. The high, snow-covered Atlas Mountains contrasting with the stony desert below, makes for dramatic scenery and a memorable morning's birding. The area holds exciting birds including flocks of Black-bellied and occasionally Crowned Sandgrouse, Cream-coloured Courser, Greater Hoopoe-Lark, Temminck's, Lesser Short-toed and the very special Thick-billed Lark, Red-rumped, White-crowned and Desert Wheatears, Southern Grey Shrike and Trumpeter Finch. Large diurnal gerbils called Fat Sand Rats are common here, often seen scuttling to their burrows, mouths stuffed with vegetation.



Cream-colored Courser by Clayton Burne

The amazing Dades Gorge, scarred by bizarre limestone erosion, decorated with impressive fortified villages and a stunning 1,000m deep cutting flanked by pink cliffs, is where we will spend the afternoon hours. The impressive Bonelli's Eagle, Red-rumped Swallow, Eurasian Crag Martin, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear, Grey Wagtail and the lovely Tristram's Warbler are all possible here. Little Owl can often be seen perched on buildings in this area and Barbary Falcon has bred in the gorge, sometimes seen in flight or perched on the cliff face.

Day 7: Boumalne-du-Dades to Erfoud via Todgha Gorge. This morning we depart early for the equally impressive Todgha Gorge, where we will search for similar species as at Dades Gorge. Thereafter we will drive east to Errachidia, watching the fascinating scenery pass by our windows. On this journey the landscape becomes increasingly desolate and arid. Birds that we will be on the lookout for include Desert Lark and the social Fulvous Babbler. We will also stop to check out an area for the localised Streaked Scrub Warbler, now placed in its own monotypic family.



Northern Bald Ibis by Adam Riley

Leaving Errachidia, we head south following valleys thronged with palms, oases and traditional villages. By late afternoon we will reach the French-built administrative town of Erfoud, a small and relatively modern town dotted with both fresh produce and a few handicraft stalls. Erfoud, while not particularly impressive in its own right, is surrounded by some of the most impressive scenery in Morocco. The area to the south has extensive palm groves and lush gardens that eventually give way to vast stony plains, wadi beds and the spectacular red sand dunes of the great Sahara Desert. Should we have time this afternoon, we shall head out to make our first forays for African Desert Warbler and Pharaoh Eagle-Owl.

Day 8: Erg Chebbi and Merzouga. Today will be an exciting one indeed as we explore the great sand dunes and surrounding stony deserts, cultivated oases and villages in 4x4 vehicles. First we head towards the spectacular Erg Chebbi dune-fields (the largest in Morocco, and said to be the highest free standing dunes in the world). Here we search for the rare and declining Desert Sparrow whilst we have further chances for other gems such as the stunning Cream-colored Courser, Bar-tailed Lark, Greater Hoopoe-Lark Spectacled Warbler.



African Desert Warbler by Markus Lilje

Other specials in the area include African Desert Warbler and, if we are extremely fortunate, the endangered Houbara Bustard. This bird was hunted to near extinction by Arab falconers, but improved protection and reintroduction projects have boosted their populations a little. Chances also exist for various sandgrouse species including Pin-tailed, Crowned and Spotted. Our last few tours have even found Egyptian Nightjar in this

area; though this is by no means an expected species!

A nearby freshwater lake (when it has water) is a magnet for migrating ducks and waders, which may include Marbled, Ferruginous and Tufted Ducks, Black-necked Grebe, Black-tailed Godwit, Dunlin and Yellow Wagtail. We should also see Brown-necked Raven while driving through the desert, as well as the recently split Maghreb Lark. Date palms and orchids clog the oases and clumps of Tamarisks in the dune-field hold overwintering and migrating passerines. These may include the beautiful Bluethroat, Lesser Whitethroat, Spectacled Warbler, Eurasian Blackcap and Common Chiffchaff. This evening we will visit a known stake-out for the majestic Pharaoh Eagle-Owl.



Desert Sparrow by Ignacio Yufera

Day 9: Erfoud to Midelt. This morning we will bid farewell to the desert and retrace our steps northwards to Errachidia. We will spend the afternoon birding at or near the Barrage Al-Hassan Addakhil Dam where we may find Great Crested Grebe, Ruddy Shelduck, Ferruginous Duck and Gadwall amongst others. Raptors are particularly well represented in the area and we will keep our eyes peeled for Short-toed Snake and Bonelli's Eagles as well as Lanner Falcon, while the surrounding scrub can be good for Spectacled Warbler. The surrounding scrub has even turned up the uncommon Mourning Wheatear in the past. In the late afternoon we will arrive in the rather featureless town of Midelt, in the shadows of the Middle Atlas Mountains where we will overnight.



Dupont's Lark by Markus Lilje

Day 10: Midelt to Ifrane. Well before dawn we will brave potentially sub-freezing temperatures and drive the short distance to the desert plains around Zaida. This patch of gravel desert, interspersed with tall Halfa grass is the best site in Africa to look for the rare and localized Dupont's Lark. We will walk across the desolate plains in the dawn light listening out for calling birds, trying to locate these fast and shy larks that have a beautiful oriole-like song. Typically, the larks only sing during these cold hours, and this will give us our best opportunity of hopefully seeing this difficult species. Other great birds in this area may include Eurasian Skylark, both Greater and Lesser Short-toed Larks, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Fulvous Babbler and possibly rarer species such as Crowned Sandgrouse.

After our lark experience we will head north to Ifrane. En route we travel through farming country and here we may

see Booted Eagle, White Stork, Western Cattle Egret, Lesser Kestrel, Calandra Lark and Spotless Starling. Time permitting, we may make our first exploration of the surrounding woodlands.



Trumpeter Finch by Markus Lilje

Day 11: Ifrane to Rabat. Ifrane is situated in the middle atlas and the surrounding habitat consists predominantly of pine and oak woodlands. Some key North African endemics occur here and these include the delightful Moussier's Redstart and Levaillant's Woodpecker. We will also try to find the very distinctive Seebohm's Wheatear (a distinctive race of Northern Wheatear which may well be split in future).

However, our biggest target is the recently split Atlas Pied Flycatcher which should have begun nest building in the area. Other species we may encounter here include European Scops Owl, Wood Lark, Tawny Pipit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Firecrest, Hawfinch, Common Chaffinch, Cirl Bunting, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Skylark, Common House Martin, Eurasian Wren, European Robin, Common Redstart, Mistle Thrush, Coal and Great Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Jay, Western Jackdaw, Common Raven, European Greenfinch and Common Linnet. We may also find Barbary Macaque which is quite often encountered in this area. We then head north west to the coastal city of Rabat for a two night stay.

Day 12: Sidi Bourhaba and Oued Loukkos. After breakfast we will depart for Lake Sidi Bourhaba, where we hope to find the scarce White-headed Duck and recently split Western Swamphen. Other waterfowl species we may encounter include the sought after Marbled Duck, Gadwall, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Ferruginous Duck and Common and Red-crested Pochard. We may also encounter Common Moorhen, Red-knobbed Coot, Little and Great Crested Grebe, Great Cormorant, Black-crowned Night Heron, Little Egret, Eurasian Hobby, Common Sandpiper, Lesser Black-backed and Yellow-legged Gulls, Sand Martin, Zitting Cisticola and Cetti's Warbler. In the evening we will have the option to watch for Marsh Owl which is sometimes seen hunting over the reed beds.



Moustached Warbler by Markus Lilje

Oued Loukkos is a fantastic waterbird site, occasionally host to such rare gems as Spotted Crake. Most of our time here will be spent searching for two prime targets, Moustached Warbler - a rare and localised breeder in Morocco as well as the recently



Erg Chebbi dunes by David Hoddinott

split Western (Purple) Swamphen. Moustached Warbler may take a little patient, though we can expect to find several Western Swamphen. Commoner denizens include Glossy Ibis, Squacco Heron and Red-knobbed Coot, while smaller numbers of Garganey, Marbled Teal and Red-crested Pochard are typically present. Shorebirds are numerous with large numbers of Black-winged Stilt, Black-tailed Godwit, Greenshank and Ruff, while a few Northern Lapwing and Green Sandpiper normally put in an appearance. Other species we may come across include Black Stork, Caspian Tern, Common Kingfisher and possibly Plain Martin.

Day 13: Rabat to Casablanca via Zaër and depart. This morning we will head to the cork oak forests of the Zaër region. Here we shall target the scarce Double-spurred Francolin, Barbary Partridge, Black-winged and Black Kite, Crested Lark, Sardinian Warbler, African Blue Tit, Eurasian (Maghreb) Magpie, European Serin, Common Kestrel, Common Wood Pigeon, Eurasian Collared and European Turtle Dove, Common Cuckoo, Eurasian Golden Oriole, Common Swift, Barn Swallow, Common Nightingale, Common Blackbird, European Goldfinch and Corn Bunting.

All good things must come to an end unfortunately, and after our morning at Zaer, we shall drive south to Casablanca where the tour will come to an end.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:

Tour dates, prices, single supplement rates, approximate flight costs and spaces available for this tour are displayed on our website. Please see under IMPORTANT NOTES below.

This includes:

- All meals from lunch on day 1 to lunch on day 13;
- Bottled drinking water;
- All lodgings as per the itinerary;
- Ground transportation;
- Pelagic Boat Trip;
- All entrance fees;
- All guiding services; and

- Tips for local guides and services.

The tour fee does not include:

- **ANY** flights (see above);
- Visa fees;
- Any drinks;
- Telephone calls, laundry and items of a personal nature; and
- Special gratuities.

Single Supplement: The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

a) Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is however fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing (usually 4 months before the tour.) The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates, which are also quoted in the respective fixed currency.

b) Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration a small party supplement will have to be charged.

c) Furthermore, these costs are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.

d) Lastly, we may be forced to change or alter the itinerary and / or the designated Rockjumper leader/s at short or no notice due to unforeseen circumstances; please be aware that we will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.

Tipping: As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If, therefore, you feel that he/they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them.

Special Notes:

- **Morocco is a Muslim country. The drinking of alcohol is strictly restricted to certain tourist hotels and may only be sold to non-Muslims. It is an offence to consume alcohol outside of these specified hotels, or in view of the public. We therefor do not permit participants to purchase or consume any alcoholic drinks for consumption outside of these hotels.**
- Much of our time is spent in vehicles, as we do have to cover long distances in order to get to the best areas for birds. The more luggage you pack the less room there is in the vehicle, so it is important for the comfort of your fellow travellers that you do not over-pack. Kindly stick to 20kg (44lb) for check in luggage and 8kg (18lb) for hand luggage.
- It is important for you to be aware that it can sometimes get quite hot on this tour. We do not however have any strenuous walks on this tour and it is generally easily manageable. Nights and early mornings can often get very cold in the desert and high Atlas Mountains so please make sure you bring enough layers.

ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE DETAILS:

This tour **does not** include **ANY** airfares. The tour will depart early in the morning of day 1 from Marrakech International Airport (IATA: RAK). As we are due to depart Marrakech by **06:00.** It is thus recommended that you plan to arrive the previous day. The tour will conclude in the late afternoon of day 13 at Mohammed V International Airport, Casablanca (IATA: CMN) and return flights home should not be booked before **19:00**.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your **Tour Confirmation** package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

FLIGHTS:

Marrakesh Menara International Airport, Marrakesh (IATA: RAK) is the main port of entry for this tour and is well serviced by several airlines. **Please DO NOT book any flights until you have consulted the Rockjumper office for confirmation on the status of the tour.**