Morocco

Morocco - Atlas & Sahara (Relaxed)



Moussier's Redstart by David Hoddinott

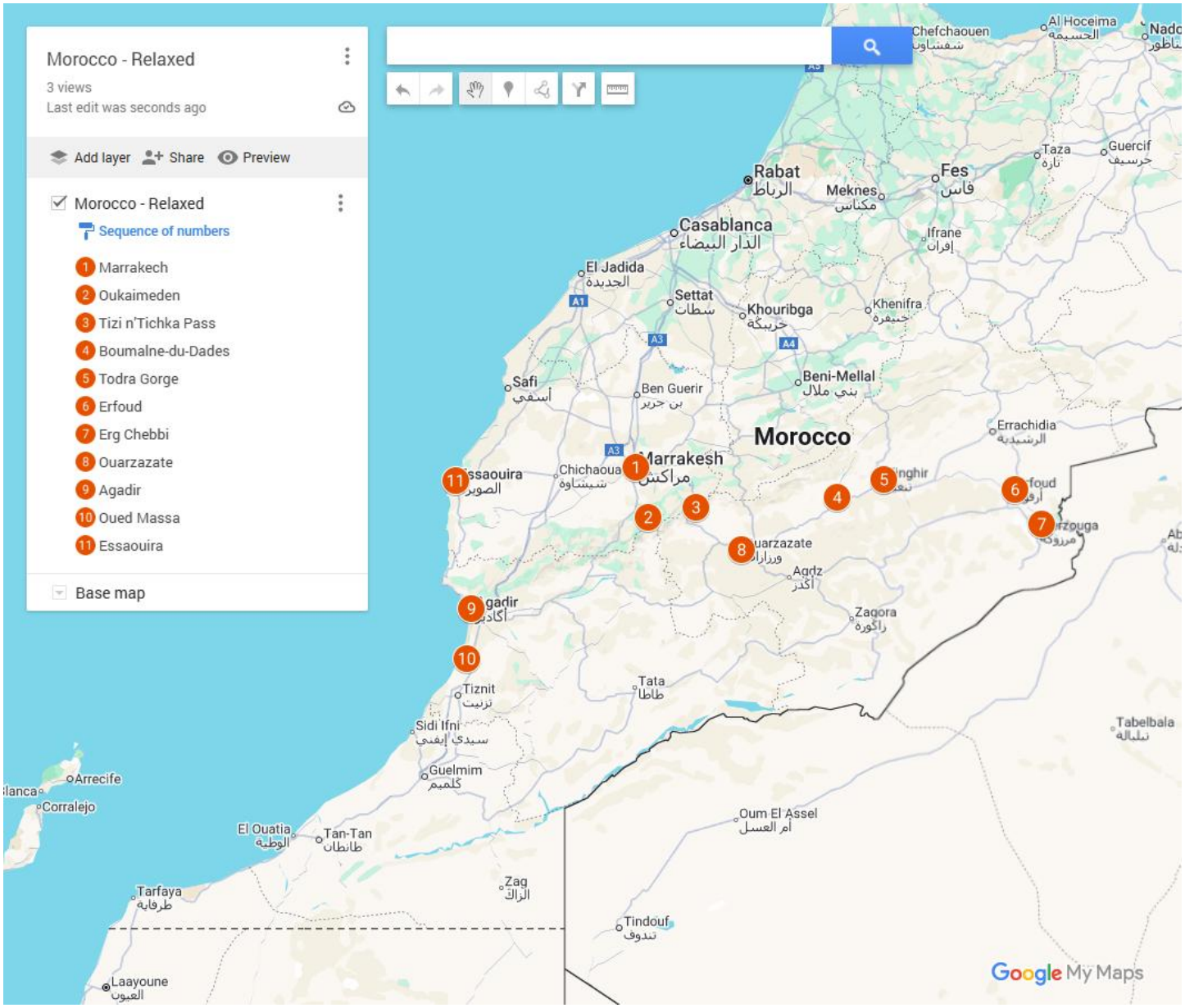
Morocco, with its breath-taking scenery, delicious food, rich history, and fabulous birding, is an essential destination for all birders and travellers. As an independent country after French rule, few Muslim countries offer the combination of such a friendly atmosphere complimented with strong cultural beliefs and few restrictions on visitors. Interesting habitats are found in the various geo-physical regions and vary from low-lying woodlands to scrub-covered gravel plains, vegetated wadis, 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 and African Blue Tit.

One of our many target species is the Northern Bald Ibis or Waldrapp, one of the world's most endangered bird. Our time on the stony, gravel plains and sandy deserts are likely to be rewarded with the magnificent Pharaoh Eagle-Owl, the dainty Cream-colored Courser, up to four species of sandgrouse, Desert Sparrow, African Desert Warbler, and numerous larks, including Greater Hoopoe-Lark, as well as Temminck's, Maghreb and Thick-billed Larks.

Itinerary & Map

Day 1	**Arrival in Marrakech**
Day 2	**Day trip to Oukaimeden**
Day 3	**Marrakech to Boumalne-du-Dades via Tizi N'Tichka Pass**
Days 4 & 5	**Tagdilt Track & Dades Gorge**
Day 6	**Boumalne-du-Dades to Erfoud via Todgha Gorge**
Day 7	**Erg Chebbi and Merzouga**
Day 8	**Erfoud to Ouarzazate**
Day 9	**Ouarzazate to Agadir**
Day 10	**Oued Massa & Oued Souss**
Day 11	**Pelagic & Agadir area**
Day 12	**Agadir to Essaouira & Oued Ksab**
Day 13	**Essaouira & Oued Ksab**
Day 14	**Essaouira to Marrakesh & final departure**


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Birding sites in detail



Crowned Sandgrouse by David Hoddinott

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. Around the ski resort, we should see flocks of swirling, coughing choughs representing both Alpine and Red-billed at close quarters. We'll also find several Horned Larks, of an isolated, resident population. Other target species at this high elevation include small flocks of the lovely African sub-species of Crimson-winged Finch (a very localized bird whose numbers around the resort are directly correlated to snow levels), Mistle Thrush, Eurasian 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.

Tizi n'Tichka Pass. This high pass takes us above the treeline and then drops into beautiful, wooded valleys. Here we will search for any additional woodland species we might have missed earlier in the trip. These could include the striking Common Firecrest and Short-toed Treecreeper and this site also provides our best chance for Red Crossbill. We may also obtain further sightings of Levaillant's Woodpecker, while Northern Goshawk is a species worth keeping an eye out for. We'll make one final stop at a local Argan Oil store en route back to Marrakech.

Dades Gorge. 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 Peregrine Falcon has bred in the gorge, sometimes seen in flight, or perched on the cliff face.



Greater Hooepoe-Lark by Clayton Burne

Tagdilt Track. We have plenty of time to 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 and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Cream-coloured Courser, Greater Hoopoe-Lark, Temminck's, Mediterranean Short-toed and the very special Thick-billed Lark, Red-rumped, White-crowned and Desert Wheatears, Great 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.



Trumpeter Finch by Glen Valentine

Todgha Gorge. Today we'll spend a few hours at the equally impressive Todgha Gorge, where we will search for similar species as at Dades Gorge.

Erfoud. The French-built administrative town of Erfoud is a small and relatively modern town dotted with both fresh produce and a few handicraft stalls. While not particularly impressive, the town is surrounded by some of the most attractive 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, we may head out to make our first forays for African Desert Warbler and Pharaoh Eagle-Owl.

Erg Chebbi. 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, and Spectacled Warbler.



African Desert Warbler by David Hoddinott

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! This evening we will visit a known stake-out for the majestic Pharaoh Eagle-Owl.

Merzouga. 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.



Desert Sparrow by Clayton Burne

Barrage El Mansoor Eddabhi. Depending on water levels, we might pay a short visit to the nearby Barrage El Mansoor Eddabhi, situated at the edge of town. Here we are likely to see large numbers of waders such as Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers with a reasonable chance of Common Snipe. Western Yellow and White Wagtails are abundant at the water's edge, and even Bluethroat is possible, while large numbers of Northern Shoveler and Ruddy Shelduck are also usually present. We may also find a few of the lake's rarer species such as Black Stork or the *subpersonata* race of White Wagtail.

Ouarzazate. This former French Garrison and administrative centre has retained its traditional style despite recent development. The Kasbah serves as an excellent example, with the smouldering red-brown walls of the towering façade making for an impressive and memorable site. A fabulous White Stork nest rests right on the walls of the Kasbah.



Pharaoh Eagle-Owl by David Hoddinott

Agadir. This is a delightful beachfront city 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!

Oued Massa. 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, 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.



Northern Bald Ibis by David Hoddinott

Searching further upriver where the water is less brackish may still reveal Northern Pintail, Tufted Duck, 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. Mew and Audouin's Gulls, while Sandwich and Caspian Tern may also appear. 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 Eurasian Stone-curlew, Osprey, Black-winged Kite, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Little Owl, Cetti's and occasionally Subalpine Warbler, Maghreb Magpie, Black-crowned Tchagra and seedeaters including Spanish Sparrow, Common Linnet, European Serin and European Goldfinch.

A nearby site could produce Sedge Warbler, Brown-throated and Sand Martins and Marbled Duck. Barbary Ground Squirrels often occur in good numbers, and we may well encounter other small mammals and reptiles.

Oued Souss. Access to this fabulous estuary has been significantly reduced in recent times and has consequently lost most of its birding appeal. We may visit the site in the late evening to search for Red-necked Nightjar.



Mediterranean Shearwater by Clayton Burne

Agadir Pelagic. This enjoyable pelagic seabird trip off Agadir is likely to produce several pelagic species such as Northern Gannet, Great Skua, European Storm Petrel, and the Critically Endangered 'Balearic' sub-species of Mediterranean Shearwater. We also stand a reasonable chance for Manx Shearwater, Common Scoter and Parasitic and Pomarine Jaegers, while Cory's Shearwater, Razorbill, Black-legged Kittiwake 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!

Tamri. The region just north of 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 occurs naturally 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. 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.



Eleonora's Falcon by David Hoddinott

Essaouira. Inhabited since prehistoric times, modern Essaouira has significant interests in argan oil production, fishing and tourism, primarily kite and windsurfers who make excellent use of the broad beaches and strong trade winds. The medina is still protected by its 18th century seafront ramparts lined with old brass cannons. The town is often considered a more laid-back version of Marrakech, allowing for more relaxed investigation of souk markets, locally handcrafted rugs and a multitude of art and handcrafts. Red-necked Nightjars are known to hawk insects from local streetlights on occasion.



Levaillant's Woodpecker by David Hoddinott

Oued Ksab. This small tree-lined river flows into the Atlantic Ocean not far from Essaouira. Our primary reason for being here, are the large numbers of Eleonora's Falcon that breed on Mogodor Islands just offshore. However, it is in the river pools that the falcons spend time bathing, allowing for excellent observation and photographic opportunities.

The surrounds are also host to several other specialities such as Marbled Teal, Moussier's Redstart, Plain Martin, and Barbary Partridge. Several species of gull such as Lesser Black-backed, Mediterranean, Audouin's, Yellow-legged and European Herring can be seen from on the broad beaches.

Tour Grading & Key

Overall Ease		Moderate. Suitable for most birding / wildlife interest levels.
Birding Ease		Mostly easy. Majority of species provide good visuals in open conditions.
Accommodation		Good to comfortable.
Walking / Trails		Mostly short walks, some on stony/gravel ground, some soft sand (beaches & deserts). Whilst unlikely, snow/ice underfoot is also possible.
Vehicles / Roads		Good quality tarred roads for the most part. Comfortable minivan/minibus depending on group size. Several long drive. Lots of 'birding from the bus' due to habitat & distance.
Photography		Good to very good. Lighting can be challenging. No dedicated hides or feeders
Annoyances		Some long drives. Temperatures can be variable. Pelagic has potential to be rough.

Financial Arrangements and Important Notes

Tour dates, prices, single supplement, approximate flight costs and tour spaces are displayed on our website.

Tour inclusions:

- All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 14;
- All lodgings;
- Drinking water;
- All ground transportation during the tour;
- All reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services;
- Agadir Pelagic;
- Tips for local guides, drivers and services.

Tour exclusions:

- Visa fees;
- ANY flights;
- Any beverages (including mini-bar charges at hotels);
- Optional excursions;
- Special gratuities;
- Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature.

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.

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 you feel that they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them at your discretion.

- **Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is 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. The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates.**
- **Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registrations, a small group supplement will be offered to confirm the tour.**
- **Tour prices are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.**
- **The designated tour leader/s may be changed at short due to unforeseen circumstances.**
- **The itinerary is indicative only. Changes may need to be made to the order in which the tour is conducted, or some of the venues we visit closer to departure. We will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.**

Our Relaxed series of tours are designed to focus on having an enjoyable holiday with a bird and wildlife focus. Where possible; we have reduced or removed long drives, single night stays and poor/rustic accommodation. We have also sought to reduce or remove difficult hikes, narrow/muddy trails and otherwise oppressive environmental conditions. Early starts and night birding are mostly optional, and we will not spend much time searching for difficult and/or skulking species. These tours are not suitable for hardcore birders and listers, or dedicated photographers.

- 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 some long distances 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.
- High temperatures can be expected at some locations on this tour. We do not however have any strenuous walks, and it is generally easily manageable.
- Nights and early mornings can get very cold in the desert and High Atlas Mountains so please make sure you bring enough layers.

Arrival and Departure Details

The tour starts in Marrakech on day 1 with a group arrival dinner, you are free to arrive at any time. The tour will conclude in the late morning of day 14 in Marrakech after a road transfer from Agadir.

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.

Marrakesh Menara International Airport, Marrakesh (IATA: RAK) is the main port of entry and exit for this tour and is well serviced by several airlines.

Visa requirements differ by country, nationality of the traveller and duration and purpose of your intended stay. It may be necessary to obtain a visa or an electronic travel authorization in advance of your travel. It is therefore vitally important that you check with your travel agent/consulate/embassy for exact visa requirements.

DO NOT book any flights until the Rockjumper Team have officially confirmed the tour.