Morocco

Atlas to Sahara in Spring II

14th May to 26th May 2024 (13 days)



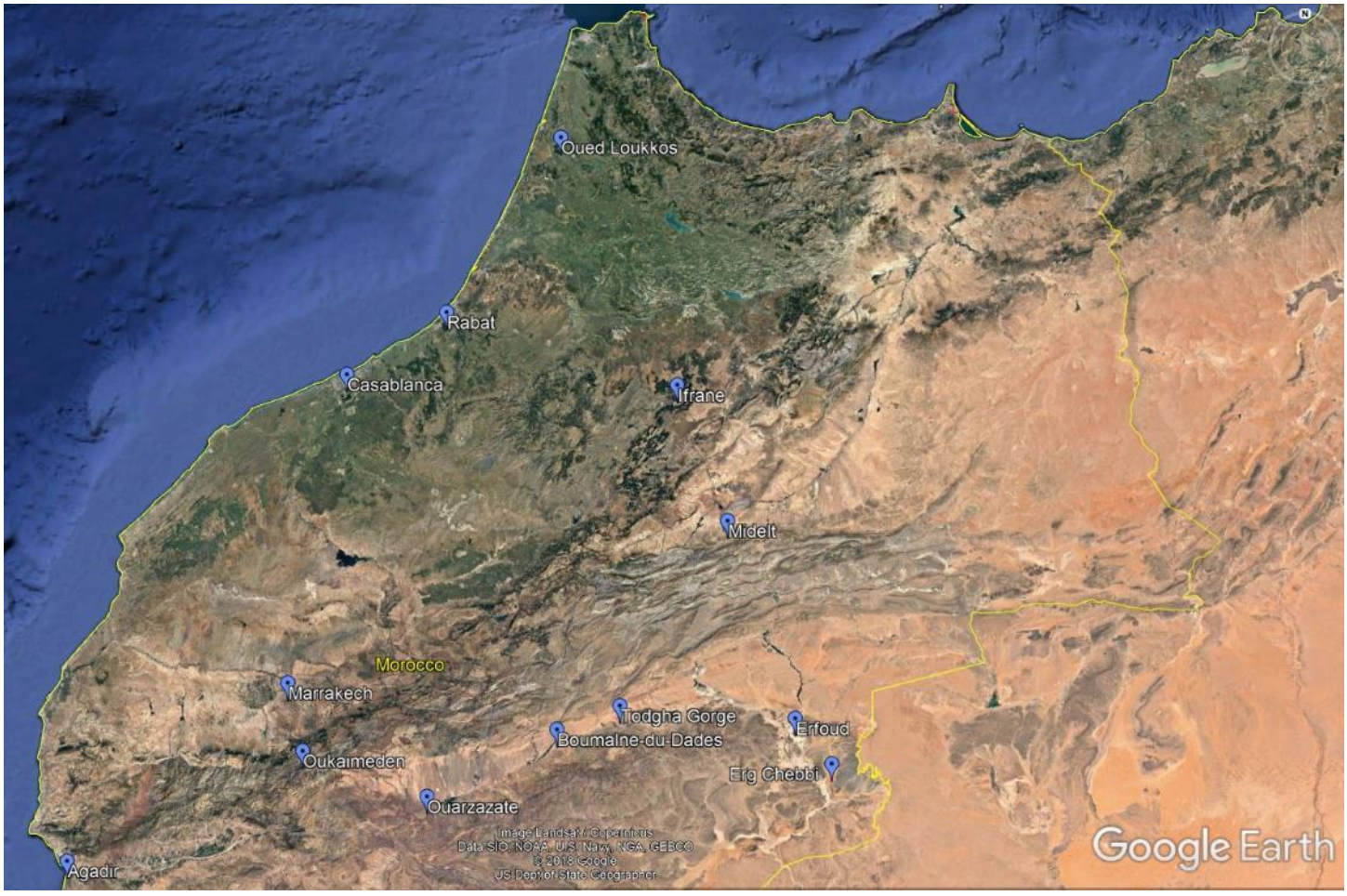
White-headed Duck by David Hoddinott

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. 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 and recently split Western Swamphen. We compete our tour with an early morning trip in search of Double-spurred Francolin.

Itinerary & Map

Day 1	**Marrakech to Oukaimeden**
Day 2	**Oukaimeden to Agadir via Tizi n'Test Pass**
Day 3	**Pelagic off Agadir & Tamri**
Day 4	**Oued Massa & Oued Souss**
Day 5	**Agadir to Boumalne-du-Dades**
Day 6	**Tagdilt Track & Dades Gorge**
Day 7	**Boumalne-du-Dades to Erfoud via Todgha Gorge**
Day 8	**Erg Chebbi & Merzouga**
Day 9	**Erfoud to Midelt**
Day 10	**Midelt to Ifrane**
Day 11	**Ifrane to Rabat**
Day 12	**Sidi Boughaba & Oued Loukkos**
Day 13	**Rabat to Casablanca via Zaër & Dayat Dar Bouzza, final departure**



Birding sites in detail



Moussier's Redstart by David Hoddinott

Ourika Valley & Oukaimeden ski resort. 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 slopes. En route we will enjoy some birding stops, the first of which will give us a chance of the unique Moroccan subspecies (*subpersonata*) of White Wagtail, House Bunting and various egrets and herons. As we wind our way up to 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 Common and Blue Rock Thrushes.

Arriving at the ski resort, we should see flocks of swirling, coughing choughs representing both species; Alpine and Red-billed at close quarters foraging in the fields. An isolated population of resident Horned 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 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 where we have a chance of locating Maghreb Owl, endemic to northwest Africa.



Maghreb Owl by David Hoddinott

Tizi n'Test Pass. This incredible pass allows us to access 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 make a stop at the 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 Maghreb Owl could



African Crimson-winged Finch by Clayton Burne

sometimes be found here, and though it has been a few years since it was last seen regularly, we will give the mosque a cursory look over just in case we missed it earlier on the tour. Golden Eagle has been recorded soaring over the surrounding mountains, so we shall certainly keep our eyes over head for a repeat performance.

Dades Valley. We'll follow the Dades Valley all the way to the 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 8 000km^2 in southwestern Morocco. If we are fortunate, we may find Western Orphean Warbler in the area.

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!

Agadir Pelagic. We'll head out early to try for Red-necked Nightjar before making our way onto a pelagic seabird trip off Agadir. The most likely pelagic species we will see are Northern Gannet, Great Skua, European Storm Petrel, Cory's Shearwater, and the Critically Endangered Balearic Shearwater (though winter is more reliable for them). We also stand a reasonable chance of seeing Manx Shearwater and Parasitic Jaeger, while Sabine's Gull, White-faced Storm Petrel and White-winged Tern 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



Barbary Sheep by Clayton Burne



Northern Bald Ibis by Adam Riley

the surrounding scrub is good for the beautiful Moussier's Redstart, Spotless Starling, Blue Rock Thrush, Sardinian Warbler and Spanish Sparrow.

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.

Searching further upriver where the water is less brackish may still reveal 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 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 Sassa. The fabulous Oued Souss estuary is hose to a plethora of 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,



African Desert Warbler by David Hoddinott



Greater Hoopoe-Lark by Clayton Burne

Common Greenshank, Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Little Stint, Dunlin, Ruff and even Pied Avocet, and if fortunate Red Knot. Amongst the gulls we may spot Mediterranean, Audouin's and Slender-billed, while Little 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.

Agadir to Boumalne-du-Dades. Today 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 before continuing onwards to the quiet town of Boumalne-du-Dades.

Tagdilt Track. Today 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 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.

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



Erg Chebbi dunes by David Hoddinott



Pin-tailed Sandgrouse by David Hoddinott

perched on buildings in this area and Peregrine Falcon has bred in the gorge, sometimes seen in flight or perched on the cliff face.

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.

Errachidia. In this area, 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, recently placed in its own monotypic family.

Errachidia to Erfoud. Departing Errachidia, we head south following valleys thronged with palms, oases, and traditional villages. 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 after arriving, 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.

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.



Levaillant's Woodpecker by David Hoddinott



Pharaoh Eagle-Owl by David Hoddinott

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.

Barrage Al-Hassan Addakhil Dam. If the dam has sufficient water, we'll spend a short time birding for Great Crested Grebe, Ruddy Shelduck 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.

Zaida Plain. Well head out just before dawn, brave potentially below-freezing temperatures and drive the short distance from Midelt 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 Mediterranean Short-toed Larks, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Fulvous Babbler, and possibly rarer species such as Crowned Sandgrouse or Houbara Bustard.

Ifrane. This town is situated in the middle Atlas Mountains, 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 Atlas Wheatear (a distinctive form of Northern Wheatear that has recently been split.)



Desert Sparrow by Clayton Burne

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,



Atlas Pied Flycatcher by David Hoddinott

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.

Lake Sidi Boughaba. Here we hope to find the scarce White-headed Duck and recently split Western Swamphen and if we are particularly fortunate, Water Rail. Other waterfowl species we may encounter include the sought after Marbled Duck, Gadwall, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Ferruginous Duck and both Common and Red-crested Pochards. 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.

Oued Loukkos. This 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 split 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 can normally be found. Other species we may come across include Black Stork, Caspian Tern, Common Kingfisher, Collared Pratincole and possibly change Brown-throated Martin.

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, 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.

Dayat Dar Bouazza. This is a superb wetland that will give us further chances for Western Swamphen, Little Bittern, Squacco Heron, Red-crested Pochard, Garganey and both Alpine and Little Swift amongst others.



Double-spurred Spurfowl by David Hoddinott

Tour Grading & Key

Overall Ease		Moderate. Suitable for most birding / wildlife interest levels.
Birding Ease		Moderate. Most species provide good visuals in open conditions, but several target species that may require repeat efforts.
Accommodation		Comfortable.
Walking / Trails		Mostly short walks, some on stony/gravel ground. 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. Some long drives.
Photography		Good to very good. Lighting can be challenging. No dedicated hides or feeders
Annoyances		Pelagic has potential to be rough, some long drives. Temperatures can be variable.

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 lunch on day 1 to lunch on day 13;
- All lodgings;
- Drinking water;
- All ground transportation during the tour;
- Pelagic boat trip off Agadir;
- All reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services
- 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.**

- 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 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 early in the morning of day 1 from Marrakech, we recommend that you arrive the previous day. The tour will conclude in the late afternoon of day 13 in Casablanca.

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) and Mohammed V International Airport, Casablanca (IATA: CMN) are the main ports 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. The following website provides detailed information about visa eligibility and assistance with online applications options where viable: Visa HQ for Travel

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