

The Souss, Anti Atlas & Western Sahara



سو الأطلس الصغير و الصحراء الغربية

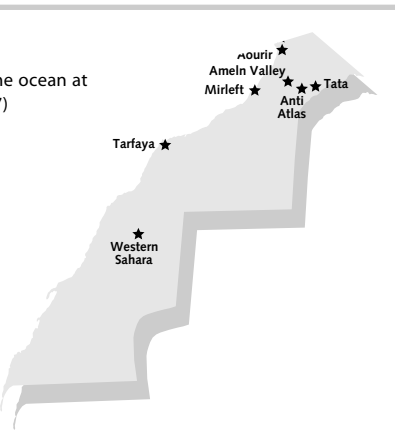
Cross the High Atlas to find a very different Morocco in the south. The dramatic changes of landscape are one thing, but the Souss and the Anti Atlas regions are also the most culturally distinct region of Morocco. Fiercely independent Chleuh tribes and desert nomads make up the majority of the population. Quite notable is the absence of the hassle often inescapable further north. Here the open spaces and rugged mountains have softened the sharp edges of the people, while the inhospitable environment has nurtured a legendary hospitality.

From Agadir, principal port of the south and Morocco's premier beach resort, the coast sweeps southwest for 300km, past the Art Deco splendours of Sidi Ifni, to the tiny town of Tarfaya, just north of the Western Sahara. In between are beaches galore, stunning wild coastlines and prime bird-watching opportunities. Inland the scenery of the Anti Atlas varies from the contorted slopes of Jebel Bani and the prehistoric rock carvings of the Akka oasis to the brooding, black slopes of Jebel Sarhro and the peaceful and idyllic Ameln Valley.

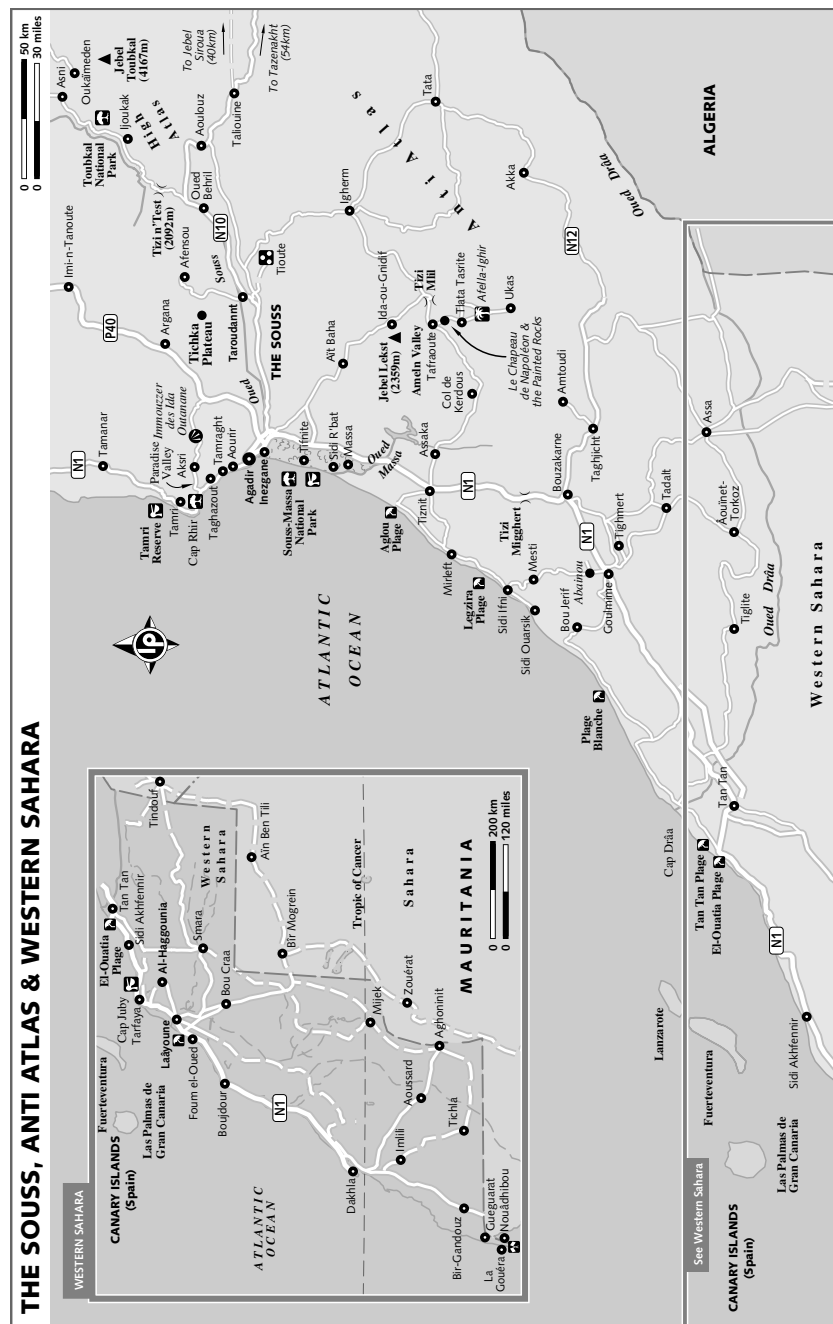
Further south stretch the disputed deserts of the Western Sahara. It's a vast, desolate and lightly populated tract of hammada (stony desert), characterised by free-spirited Saharawis (desert tribes), fishing communities and industrious Moroccans, watched over by the ever-present security forces. Beyond that is the desert proper and the Mauritanian border.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Ride killer waves or eat grilled fish looking at the ocean at Morocco's top surfing spot of **Taghazout** (p377)
- Watch the sun set over surreal shipwrecks rising out of the sea on **Tarfaya beach** (p399)
- Get your boots dusty around **Tata** (p396) and explore prehistoric rock engravings
- Hang loose in **Mirleft** (p386), the coolest spot in the south with six fabulous beaches
- Lose yourself among the pink-hued rock faces and lush green *palmeraies* of the peaceful **Ameln Valley** (p393)
- Trek or drive through the foothills of the **Anti Atlas** (p382), concertinaed like *millefeuille*
- Chill out at **Villa Mandala** (p376), Aourir, and engage with like-minded travellers and local projects
- Travel to the end of the road in the **Western Sahara** (p397) along the treacherous Cape Boujdour



THE SOUSS, ANTI ATLAS & WESTERN SAHARA



HISTORY

Dominating the Souss Valley and the foothills of the Anti Atlas, the industrious Chleuh tribespeople have a long history of dissidence and independence; many communities remained beyond central authority well into the 1930s.

Deeper south, the large desert tribes known collectively as Saharawi (constituting the indigenous population of the Western Sahara) were even more difficult to control, with their nomadic lifestyle and unique independent spirit, which ultimately manifested itself in the Polisario movement. The bid for autonomy for the Western Saharan province remains a thorn in the current government's side. For a deeper understanding of the situation today, read Toby Shelley's hope-inspiring *Endgame in the Western Sahara: What Future for Africa's Last Colony?* With input from Moroccan authorities, Polisario leaders and international diplomats, Shelley, an expert on resource politics, concludes that there may be an end in sight to the conflict.

CLIMATE

The south divides into three distinct geographical areas, each with its own microclimate. The semitropical, verdant Souss Valley is hot and humid, with temperatures ranging between 22°C and a steamy 38°C, when water vapour rises like a mist from the huge citrus groves that fill the valley. Climbing to altitude, the climate of the barren Anti Atlas veers between freezing winters and hot, dry summers, while the climate of the deep south is pure desert.

LANGUAGE

Arabic remains the lingua franca of all major cities in the south. However, the Souss is dominated by the Chleuh tribes who speak Tachelait, a Berber dialect, more noticeable in the villages of the Ameln Valley and the Anti Atlas.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Agadir remains the hub airport of the south, welcoming international flights, many of them European charter flights. It also operates local routes to Laâyoune and Dakhla (one flight per week), all controlled by Royal Air Maroc (RAM). However, direct flights from Agadir to the Western Sa-

hara are often more expensive than flights through Casablanca, so be sure to explore all the options.

There is no train service operating out of Agadir but Supratours (buses run by the rail network) run regular, fast buses to Marrakesh (four daily), Tiznit, Laâyoune and Dakhla. CTM also offers a range of routes including Casablanca and Essaouira.

GETTING AROUND

CTM has an office in Agadir and runs a whole range of local bus routes to Taroudannt, Tiznit, Laâyoune and Dakhla. Satas and other local companies operate an even wider network to more remote destinations such as Tafraoute. In Agadir buses leave from stations in Nouveau Talborjt, but many local buses leave from Inezgane, a large transport hub 13km south of Agadir.

Agadir is one of the better places to hire a car in Morocco and all the major agencies are represented.

THE SOUSS VALLEY

AGADIR

pop 679,000

Devastated by a terrible earthquake in 1960, Agadir has managed to rise from its ruins as Morocco's main beach resort. Rebuilt into a neat grid of residential suburbs and wide boulevards, the town feels strangely bereft of the sort of bustling life often associated with Moroccan cities. Its lure, however, lies in its huge sandy bay, more sheltered than many other Atlantic beaches. Safe swimming and 300 days of sun a year make it a winner with package-tour holidaymakers.

Agadir is worth a couple of days, not only for some good old-fashioned R&R, but for its gentle sights – the ruined kasbah, the undeveloped beaches further north, popular for surfing and windsurfing, and the Souss Massa National Park.

History

Named after the *agadir* (fortified granary) of the Irir tribe, Agadir has a long history of boom and bust. It was founded in the 15th century by Portuguese traders to trade with the Saharan caravans. From 1541, under the Saadians, the port became very prosperous from the export of local

sugar, cotton and saltpetre, and the products of the Saharan trade. This prosperity ended abruptly when the Alawite Sultan Sidi Mohammed diverted the trade north to Essaouira, and Agadir sank into total obscurity.

Subsequent French colonisation began to see the redevelopment of Agadir, but the devastating earthquake on 29 February 1960, which killed some 18,000 people, resulted in an apocalyptic aftermath of death and disease. Unable to disinter many of the bodies, the authorities decided to leave them and the ruined city where they had fallen. The entire town and its deceased inhabitants were buried, forming the mound now known as Old Talborjt, north of the modern city.

Since the earthquake Agadir has developed into a lucrative fishing port, with one of the largest catches of sardines in the world. It continues to grow as Morocco's top beach resort, and the development of a luxury marina complex is promising an even better economic future.

Orientation

Agadir's bus stations and most of the budget hotels are in Nouveau Talborjt (New Talborjt) in the northeast of the town. From here it's about a 15-minute walk down to Blvd du 20 Août, the main strip, which is lined with cafés, restaurants and big hotels. Most of the shops and offices, including the main post office, are along Ave du Prince Moulay Abdallah and Blvd Hassan II.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Newsstands along Blvd Hassan II, particularly near the junction with Ave des Forces Armées Royales (FAR) have a good selection of international papers (usually a day or two late) and magazines.

Crown English Bookshop (Map p370; Immeuble A, Ave Sidi Mohammed) Just off Ave Sidi Mohammed, near the Tourist Office, this small shop sells second-hand English books as well as new books on Morocco.

EMERGENCY

Most large hotels can recommend reliable English-speaking doctors.

Ambulance (☎ 15)

Police (☎ 19; Rue du 18 Novembre)

INTERNET ACCESS

There are dozens of internet places, all charging up to Dh10 per hour.

Futurenet (Map p372; Ave du 29 Février, Talborjt; per hr Dh8).

Internet Swiss (Map p370; Blvd Hassan II; per hr Dh10;

☎ 9am-11pm) The busiest, most conveniently located cybercafé.

MEDICAL SERVICES

The Syndicat d'Initiative posts a list of doctors and pharmacies on its door.

Clinique al-Massira (Map p370; ☎ 028 843238; Ave du 29 Février)

Night Pharmacy (Map p370; ☎ 028 820349; Ave Sidi Mohammed) In the basement of the town hall, next to post office.

MONEY

Most banks have ATMs, and there are exchange booths and ATMs at the airport. Large hotels change cash and travellers cheques. These banks have exchange offices.

Banque Populaire (Map p370; Blvd Hassan II)

Wafa Bank (Map p370; Blvd Hassan II)

POST

Main post office (Map p370; Ave Sidi Mohammed;

☎ 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Délégation Régionale du Tourisme (ONMT; Map p370; ☎ 028 846377; fax 028 846378; Immeuble Iguenouane, Ave Mohammed V; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Thu, 8.30-11.30am & 3-6.30pm Fri) The best place for local and regional information.

Information booth (☎ 028 839077; Al-Massira airport; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm).

Syndicat d'Initiative (Map p370; ☎ 028 840307; Ave Mohammed V; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-6.30pm) Useful for the list of doctors and pharmacies.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Carlson Wagonlit (Map p370; ☎ 028 841528; 26 Ave des FAR) Represents all major airlines.

Sights

The ruined old **kasbah** (Map p370), on a hill 7km to the northwest of the town, commands good views over the port. It was built in 1540 by the Saadian Sultan Mohammed ech-Cheikh, and restored and regarrisoned in 1752 by the Alawite Sultan Moulay Abdallah, who was responsible