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Şaharâ Dreaming

ADVENTURES IN MOROCCAN PARADISE

VIENTIANE

From Street Eatables to Modern Dining

PEOPLE, WINDOWS, AND WALLS

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SAHARA DREAMING


Adventures in Moroccan Paradise

Words & photos by Dave Stamboulis

“When I first came to Morocco some 25 years ago, I was transported into some Arabian Nights fantasy from a childhood book; replete with snake charmers, camels drifting over Saharan sand dunes with mud brick kasbahs tended over by Berbers in flowing djellaba robes and turbans. In Marrakech and Fes, a labyrinth of alleys and narrow lanes full of donkey carts and mint tea proffering merchants enticed one to get lost through the ancient medinas, where the various scents of the olive, spice, argan oil and henna souks wafted through the air. Of course along with this fantasy came the brutal awakening of bumpy roads full of dust, back breaking transport, plumbing prior to the Middle Ages, and a living definition of travelling rough.”







That was more than two decades ago, and while the snake charmers, sand dunes, and spices still remain, the Saharan fantasy now comes along with some of the world's best and most unique luxury accommodation, good roads and transportation, along with some of the world's top gastronomy. More simply put, Morocco is one excellent place for a holiday.

Now accessible by multiple budget airlines, with its fantastic accommodation and restaurant deals, not to mention an abundance of sights and activities to do in a climate with over 300 days of sunshine per year, Morocco has become the darling of Europe. However in Asia it still flies under the radar, often getting erroneously lumped in with those unsafe Middle East or Arab countries, which could be nothing further from the truth, as Morocco is the crossroads of Africa, Europe, and the Arab world, a colorful spice bazaar whose scents and flavors wow visitors time and time again.



:: a horse carriage in the ancient medina





:: mint and sugar tea glasses en masse at the Djemma el Fna

MARRAKECH

Marrakech remains one of the most exotic other worldly cities on the planet, a former desert caravanserai which lured the Beatles, Stones, Led Zeppelin, hippies, models, and Yves St. Laurent amongst others to its open air public square, the Djemma al Fnaa, where Gnawa musicians compete with snake charmers, acrobats, orange juice and date sellers, and horse carriages for audience attention. Over the past decade, hundreds of old merchant mansions have been restored and refurbished and converted into boutique riads for visitors, matching the city's rise to fame as a UNESCO declared World Heritage Site.



:: a snake charmer at the Djemma el Fna







:: a midget violinist at the Djemma el Fna Square in Marrakech




:: leather babouche slippers for sale in the souks of the ancient medina

FES

Further north, the same is happening in Fes and its ancient medina, a labyrinthine tangle of alleyways and passages and world's largest car free maze, where life goes on more or less as it did a thousand years ago. Here one can see (and smell!) one of the world's oldest and hardest professions, the leather tanneries, where workers stand waist deep in chemicals, dyes, pigeon poop, and cow urine in order to create durable high end leather to be turned into shoes, jackets, and bags for boutiques around the globe.

Everything in Fes comes from the ground up, as the goats are slaughtered, the skins carried on donkey back through the medina, processed in the tanneries, and then sent to the thousands of master craftsmen throughout the old city, who turn the skins into some of the top leather products in the world.



:: the thousand year old leather tanneries in the ancient medina



:: a worker in the thousand year old leather tannery
in the ancient medina of Fes





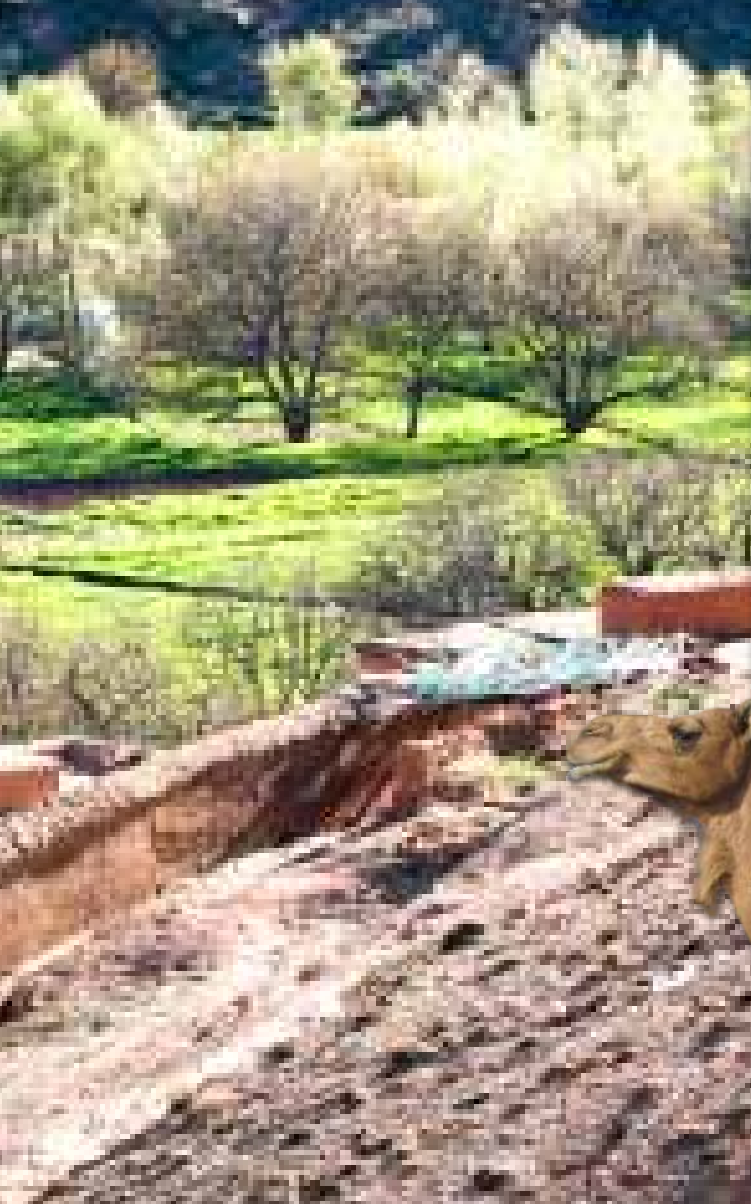




ATLAS MOUNTAINS

South of Marrakech, the often snowbound Atlas Mountains rise up to 4000 meters and separate the rest of the country from the start of the real desert, where the Dades and Draa Valleys drift down into the Sahara proper. The land here is desolate and barren, but every so often hits river tributaries flowing from the Atlas, giving rise to dramatic gorges and canyons which surround fertile green oases, where Berbers earn a living growing roses and dates.

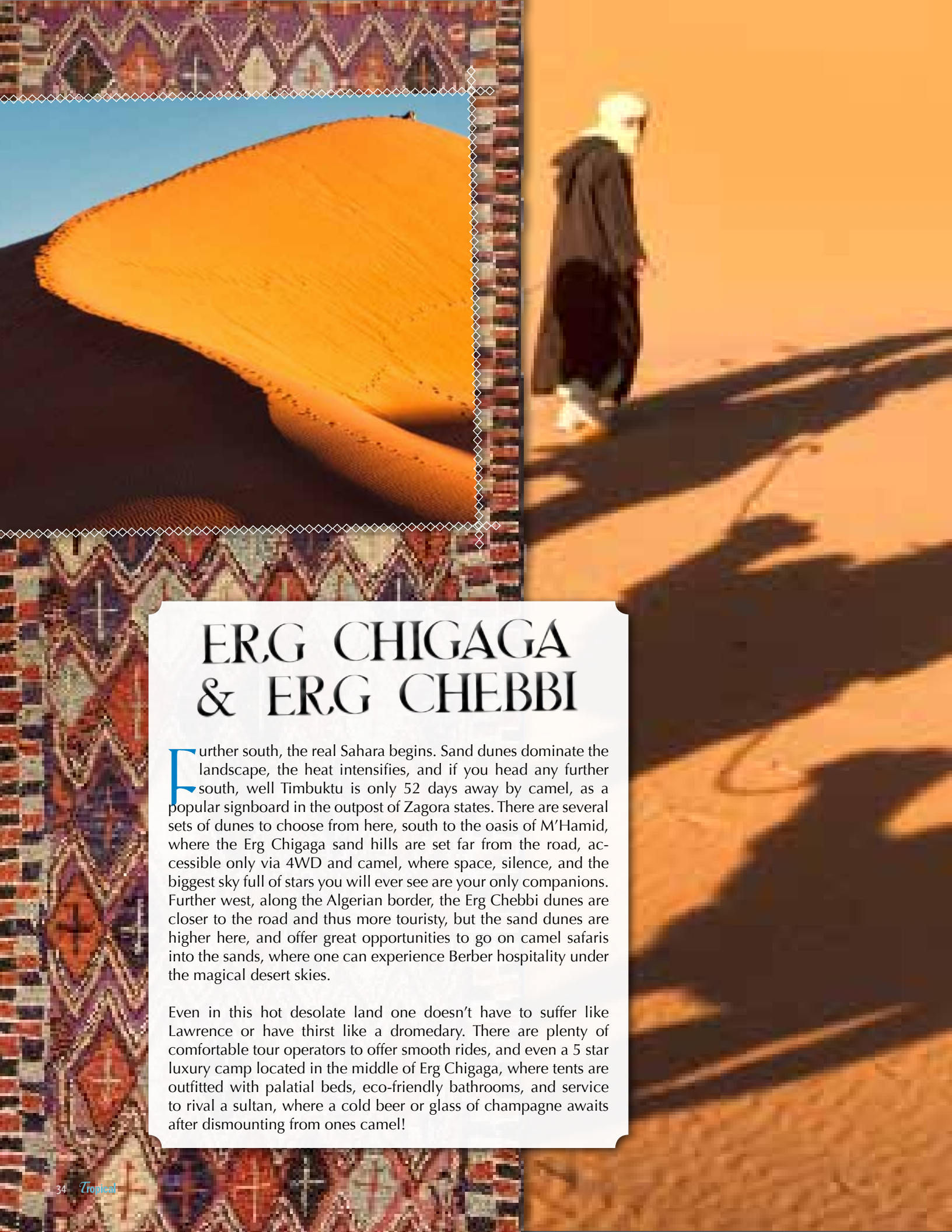
This for many visitors is the quintessential Morocco, where ancient ksour (castles) and kasbahs dot the landscape, made of mud brick and glowing orange brown to fit in with the desert sun. Many of these, such as the UNESCO preserved one at Ait Benhaddou, hail from the 11th Century and are commonly used as backdrops to major Hollywood releases these days, such as Lawrence of Arabia, Gladiator, The English Patient, and Babel to name but a few. Add a few hooded figures in djellaba robes, and it comes as no surprise that much of the original Star Wars was filmed here.



:: a woman carrying brush for firewood







ERG CHIGAGA & ERG CHEBBI

Further south, the real Sahara begins. Sand dunes dominate the landscape, the heat intensifies, and if you head any further south, well Timbuktu is only 52 days away by camel, as a popular signboard in the outpost of Zagora states. There are several sets of dunes to choose from here, south to the oasis of M'Hamid, where the Erg Chigaga sand hills are set far from the road, accessible only via 4WD and camel, where space, silence, and the biggest sky full of stars you will ever see are your only companions. Further west, along the Algerian border, the Erg Chebbi dunes are closer to the road and thus more touristy, but the sand dunes are higher here, and offer great opportunities to go on camel safaris into the sands, where one can experience Berber hospitality under the magical desert skies.

Even in this hot desolate land one doesn't have to suffer like Lawrence or have thirst like a dromedary. There are plenty of comfortable tour operators to offer smooth rides, and even a 5 star luxury camp located in the middle of Erg Chigaga, where tents are outfitted with palatial beds, eco-friendly bathrooms, and service to rival a sultan, where a cold beer or glass of champagne awaits after dismounting from ones camel!







ACCOMMODATIONS

Coming from the Arabian word for garden, riads are traditional merchant homes which emphasized interior beauty and privacy, with rooms clustered around a beautiful central courtyard and fountain. Somewhere during Morocco's tourist boom, people realized that these exquisitely crafted properties were worth restoring and turning into boutique accommodations, and they have now become all the rage in Marrakech and elsewhere. No visit to Morocco is complete without a stay in one, and for many visitors, a riad holiday is often a reason in and of itself for making a Saharan pilgrimage. Celebrities, such as U2's Bono, have often ensconced themselves for months at a time in these gorgeous fit for a king palaces, and they is no reason why you shouldn't as well.

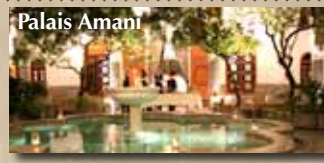
MARRAKECH

- **Riad Enija** : a fabulous restored 280 year old building that belonged to a silk merchant located in the heart of Marrakech's medina. Full of Berber carpets, artwork, and truly a place to experience a 1001 Arabian nights fantasy. www.riadenija.com
- **Dar de Cigognes** : a boutique designer set of riads with private courtyards filled with fruit trees and fountains, and whose terrace overlooks the daily spectacle of storks nesting on the neighboring Badi Palace, as well as a complete escape from the chaos of the medina outside. www.lescigognes.com
- **Angsana Riads** : a collection of six chic heritage riad lodgings offering one of Morocco's best hamman spa treatments. www.angsana.com
- **Riad Dyor** : Well known European fashion designer Alberto Cortes has brought his Ibiza chic style to Morocco, creating a luxury riad with amosaic-tiled courtyard with six suites, overlooking the ancient medina and Atlas Mountains on clear days. www.ryaddyor.com



FES

- **Palais Amani** : A gorgeous and opulent riad with Art Deco design and garden courtyard set around a mosaic fountain inside the Fes medina, with the best restaurant in town. www.palaisamani.com
- **Sofitel Palais Jamaï** : not a riad but a 5 star hotel featuring stylish Moorish and Arabic architecture set overlooking the labyrinth of the medina and a fantastic place to unwind www.sofitel.com



Desert Camp Morocco

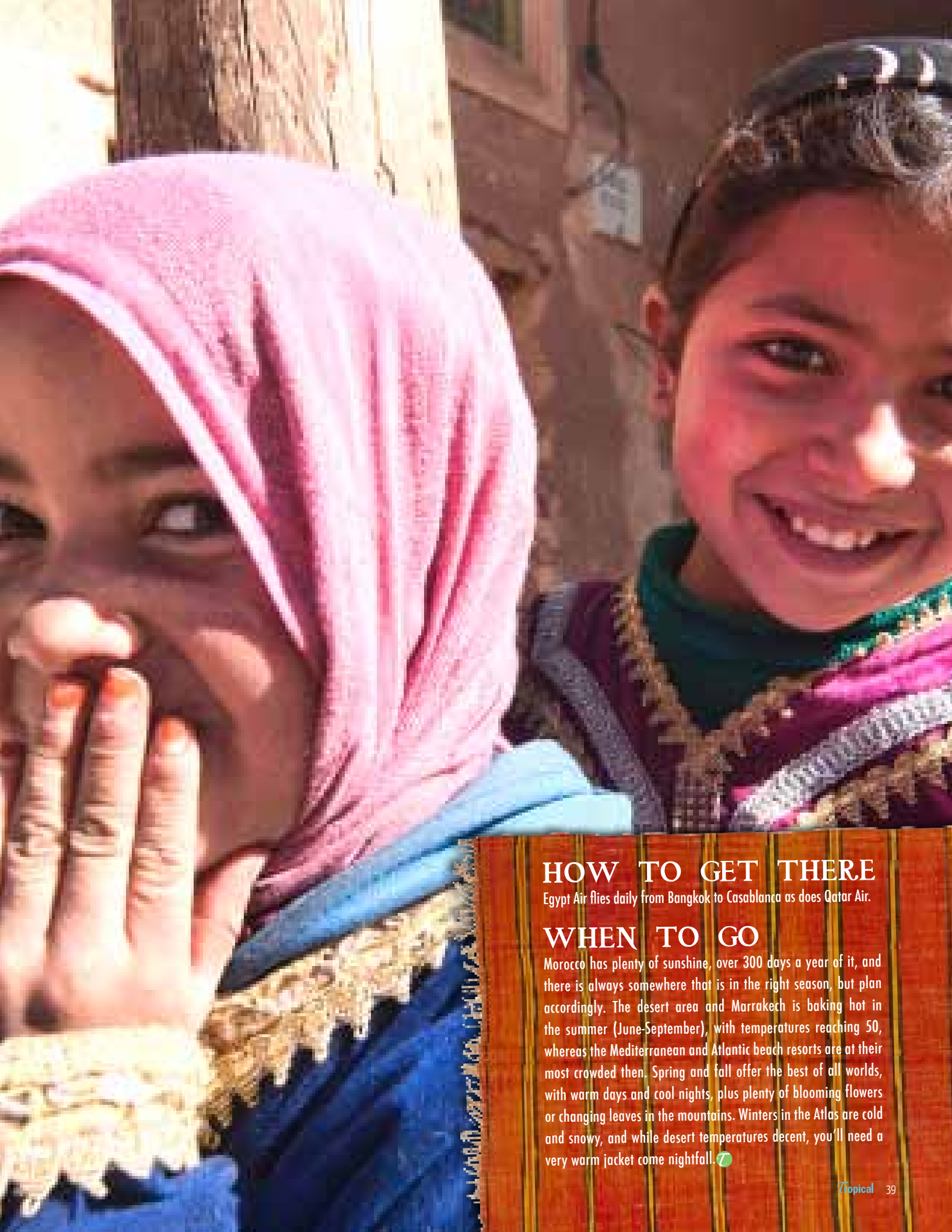


Blue Men of Morocco



SAHARA DESERT

- For the ultimate in desert pampering, Erg Chigaga Luxury Camp offers 5 star pampering amidst the dunes, and if one is pressed for time, is even reachable via helicopter! www.desertcampmorocco.com
- For desert and other travel, Blue Men of Morocco can arrange camels, guides, vehicles, and just about anything else a traveler might want, and have a hotel and camel safari camp in the dunes of Erg Chebbi www.bluemenofmorocco.com



HOW TO GET THERE

Egypt Air flies daily from Bangkok to Casablanca as does Qatar Air.

WHEN TO GO

Morocco has plenty of sunshine, over 300 days a year of it, and there is always somewhere that is in the right season, but plan accordingly. The desert area and Marrakech is baking hot in the summer (June-September), with temperatures reaching 50, whereas the Mediterranean and Atlantic beach resorts are at their most crowded then. Spring and fall offer the best of all worlds, with warm days and cool nights, plus plenty of blooming flowers or changing leaves in the mountains. Winters in the Atlas are cold and snowy, and while desert temperatures decent, you'll need a very warm jacket come nightfall. 