Morocco

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Introduction

Morocco, the “Kingdom at the Crossroads,” is where the Mediterranean meets the Atlantic, and where continents, climates, and cultures converge. Its landscape sweeps from the lush, temperate coasts to sunbaked Sahara dunes, from lively imperial cities to the quiet, remote valleys of the Atlas and Rif mountains. This intriguing geography, positioned on the northwestern edge of Africa, has for millennia made Morocco a place of contact and contest—between peoples, empires, and ideas.

Situated at the heart of the Maghreb, Morocco’s story begins with some of the oldest human traces yet found, and unfolds through the rise and fall of indigenous Berber kingdoms, Phoenician trading posts, and Roman provinces. The coming of Islam in the 7th century ushered in new dynasties, religions, and alliances, as well as centuries of artistic and intellectual splendor seen in cities like Fes and Marrakech. Morocco’s history is also marked by migrations and exchanges—Berber, Arab, Andalusian, Jewish, Sub-Saharan and European—which continue to shape its vibrant society today.

In more recent history, Morocco’s colonial experience under French and Spanish rule, its struggle for independence, and the evolution into a modern monarchy have set the stage for its prominent role in Africa and the Arab world. Its political system, combining deep-rooted traditions with continual reforms, is matched by a dynamic, if sometimes turbulent, economy. Rich in phosphate, fish, agriculture, and natural beauty, Morocco has emerged as a regional leader in manufacturing, tourism, and renewable energy.

At the core of Morocco’s identity, however, is its people—a diverse mosaic unified around a strong sense of hospitality, faith, and multicultural heritage. Moroccan daily life is woven through with local customs, family ties, religious festivals, music, and a world-famous culinary tradition. The medinas, souks, and kasbahs pulse with energy and color, while traditions such as tea sharing, henna rituals, and communal prayer reflect both continuity and adaptation.

Today, Morocco faces sizable challenges alongside its opportunities: reconciling rapid modernization with cherished heritage, promoting equitable education and healthcare, and addressing youth unemployment, gender disparities, and regional inequalities. It is also at the forefront of some of Africa’s most significant debates on climate adaptation, social reform, and sustainable growth. Initiatives for social protection, educational reform, and environmental stewardship are shaping Morocco’s path into the decades ahead.

This book invites you to explore Morocco in all its complexity—from its wind-swept

deserts to its mountain hamlets, from imperial capitals to coastal villages, and from the rhythms of daily life to the broader currents of history and change. The journey begins here—a portrait of a country as enduring as it is ever-evolving.

CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Natural Landscape

Morocco, often dubbed the "Kingdom at the Crossroads," is strategically nestled in the northwest corner of Africa, bordering both the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. This unique geographical position, shared with only two other countries (Spain and France), grants it dual maritime exposure. To its east, Morocco shares a land border with Algeria, and to the south lies the disputed territory of Western Sahara, which Morocco largely controls and refers to as its Southern Provinces. Beyond these continental borders, Morocco also lays claim to several Spanish enclaves and small islands off its coast, including Ceuta, Melilla, and Peñón de Vélez de la Gomera.

The Moroccan landscape is a dramatic tapestry woven from Atlantic and Mediterranean coastlines, towering mountain ranges, and the vast expanses of the Sahara Desert. The country's terrain is predominantly mountainous, dominated by two major chains that define its interior. These majestic ranges are not merely geographical features but are deeply intertwined with the country's cultural fabric, being primarily inhabited by the indigenous Berber people. Morocco itself covers an area of approximately 446,300 square kilometers (172,317 sq mi), which is roughly the size of California, excluding the territory of Western Sahara.

A significant portion of Morocco lies at high elevations, with an average of about 800 meters (2,600 feet) above sea level. The country's northwest is home to the Sebou River basin, a large alluvial plain known as the Gharb plain, which serves as a vital agricultural heartland. South of a line stretching from Rabat to Fès, between the Atlas Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean, lie a series of high plains collectively referred to as the Moroccan Plateau. These plains include the Saïs Plain near Fès and Meknès, the Tadla Plain northeast of Marrakech, the Haouz Plain west of Marrakech, and the broad Chaouïa, Doukkala, and Abda plains south of Casablanca.

Morocco boasts the most extensive stream network in North Africa. Most of these streams originate from the western slopes of the Atlas Mountains or the southern slopes of the Rif Mountains, flowing westward to eventually empty into the Atlantic Ocean. The Sebou River, for instance, is the largest North African river by volume and is crucial for the livelihoods of a quarter of the Moroccan population. It originates as the Guigou River in the Middle Atlas and flows northward past Fès before discharging into the Atlantic at Mehdya, a distance of 450 kilometers (280 miles).

The country's mountainous backbone is formed by the Atlas Mountains, which extend for about 2,500 kilometers (1,600 mi) across Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, effectively separating the Sahara Desert from the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts. In Morocco, this grand range is further divided into three distinct sub-ranges: the High Atlas,

Middle Atlas, and Anti-Atlas. The High Atlas, running diagonally across central Morocco for about 740 kilometers (460 miles) from the Atlantic coast to the Algerian border, is the tallest and most dramatic section. It contains several peaks exceeding 4,000 meters (13,000 feet), including North Africa's highest summit, Mount Toubkal, which reaches an impressive 4,167 meters (13,671 feet). The High Atlas acts as a significant climatic barrier, creating distinct weather patterns on either side.

North of the Atlas Mountains lie the Rif Mountains, a mountain chain that runs along the Mediterranean coast from Tangier in the west to the Moulouya River valley near the Moroccan-Algerian frontier in the east. The Rif Mountains, though part of the larger Gibraltar Arc that connects to the mountains of the southern Iberian Peninsula, are geologically distinct from the Atlas Mountain System. This mountainous and fertile region is characterized by its ruggedness and is the homeland of the Rifians and Jebala people. The western and central portions of the Rif Mountains receive more rainfall than any other region in Morocco, with some areas getting over 2,000 mm (78.74 in) of precipitation annually, leading to lush forests of Atlas cedar, cork oak, holm oak, and Moroccan fir. The higher peaks, such as Mount Tidirhine, which is 2,456 meters (8,059 feet), are snow-capped in winter.

Between the High Atlas and the Rif Mountains, the Middle Atlas extends over 350 kilometers (220 miles). This range is characterized by its more moderate elevations compared to the High Atlas and serves as a natural buffer between the arid plains to the south and the fertile coastal regions to the north. The Anti-Atlas range, also known as the Lesser Atlas, is located in southern Morocco and stretches for over 483 kilometers (300 miles) from the Atlantic Ocean towards the northeast. This range is known for its barren landscapes, rugged terrain, and arid climate, being sparsely populated with nomadic tribes and isolated villages. It also contains unique geological formations and rich mineral deposits, including silver and cobalt.

Morocco's extensive coastline, spanning both the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, plays a crucial role in its geography and climate. The Atlantic coast, stretching from past the Strait of Gibraltar to the west, is largely regular with few natural harbors. Before modern port constructions, navigation was challenging due to offshore sandbars and rocky reefs. The Mediterranean coastline in the north is also influenced by its proximity to the Strait of Gibraltar, a mere 13 kilometers (8.1 mi) span of water separating Africa from Europe.

Beyond the immediate coastlines and mountain ranges, Morocco’s topography diversifies further. East of the Rif and Atlas ranges, the Moulouya basin, a semi-arid lowland, has been sculpted by the Moulouya River. Further east, the High Plateaus (Hauts Plateaux) of eastern Morocco, with elevations generally between 1,200 and 1,300 meters (3,900 and 4,250 feet), extend from similar landforms in neighboring Algeria. To the south and southeast of the Atlas Mountains, the arid regions mark the northwestern boundary of the Sahara Desert, with a narrow transitional zone at the

base of the mountains known as the pre-Sahara. These desert and semi-desert areas, particularly in the extreme southeast, are characterized by aridity, with palm tree oases providing pockets of life in regions like Figuig and Zagora.

The geographical diversity of Morocco directly influences its varied climate. The country sits at the crossroads of temperate and tropical climates, experiencing the moderating influences of the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, and the dramatic effects of the Sahara Desert. The northern half of Morocco generally enjoys a Mediterranean climate, characterized by mild, wet winters and hot, dry summers. Rainfall tends to decrease from north to south, and the mountains create a significant rain shadow, leading to an abrupt transition to desert conditions east of the ranges.

Along the coastal plains, temperatures are moderated even in summer due to the effects of the cold Canary Current. Average daily summer temperatures in coastal cities typically range from 18 to 28 °C (64 to 82 °F). However, inland areas can experience significantly higher temperatures, with daily highs frequently exceeding 35 °C (95 °F) in summer. The *sharqī* (chergui), a hot, dusty wind blowing from the Sahara, can dramatically increase temperatures, sometimes reaching 41 °C (105 °F) in late spring or summer, and can cause significant damage to unharvested crops due to its desiccating effects.

In winter, the marine influence once again moderates temperatures in the coastal regions, with average daily temperatures ranging from 8 to 17 °C (46 to 63 °F). Away from the coast, temperatures drop considerably, occasionally dipping below freezing. In the Atlas Mountains, the climate becomes more continental with colder winters and hotter summers. At elevations above 1,000 meters (3,300 feet), the climate is typically alpine, featuring warm summers and cold, snowy winters. Average annual precipitation in the north can range from 500 to 1,800 mm (20 to 71 in), but this amount decreases significantly further south.

This rich tapestry of mountains, plains, rivers, and diverse coastlines, combined with a climate that shifts from Mediterranean to arid and alpine, has profoundly shaped Morocco. It has influenced settlement patterns, agricultural practices, and the very character of its people, fostering resilience and adaptability in the face of such natural variety. The land itself is a living testament to millennia of geological forces and atmospheric interactions, forming the fundamental canvas upon which Moroccan history and culture have been painted.

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