

A lasting affair

Marrakech has attracted many distinguished visitors over the centuries, but there was one famous guest who simply couldn't get enough of the place: Winston Churchill. 'If you have one day to spend in Morocco, spend it in Marrakech,' he famously said. And Churchill, who christened the city 'the Paris of the Sahara', knew what he was talking about. He first visited the city in 1935, and returned almost every winter for the next 20 years.

On his first visit, a working holiday, he wrote newspaper articles and discussed politics with Lloyd George in the winter sun, but soon became distracted by the glorious sunsets and painted seven canvases. On subsequent visits, he mostly stayed at the Mamounia Hotel where he would sit on his balcony with the view of the Atlas Mountains and his box of watercolours.

'I am captivated by Marrakech,' he wrote on one visit. 'Here in these spacious palm groves rising from the desert the traveller can be sure of perennial sunshine, of every comfort and diversion, and can contemplate with ceaseless satisfaction the stately and snow-clad panorama of the Atlas mountains. The sun is brilliant and warm but not scorching; the air crisp, bracing but without being chilly; the days bright, the nights cool and fresh.'



Churchill immortalised in the French language:

Churchill's most famous visit occurred in 1943, after a wartime conference in Casablanca with Franklin D Roosevelt. After the conference had finished, the US president was all set to return to America. Churchill was horrified. 'You cannot come all this way to North Africa without seeing Marrakech,' he insisted. 'Let us spend two days there. I must be with you when you see the sun set on the Atlas Mountains.' Roosevelt agreed, and before long the two were gazing at the purple hills from the balcony of their villa. As the sun went down, the American president – who was reclining on a divan at the time – was so moved by the scene he said to Churchill, 'I feel like a sultan: you may kiss my hand, my dear.' After their blissful break in Marrakech, the two leaders said their goodbyes and Churchill embarked on a truly punishing work schedule, zigzagging across the globe for war talks. As the year progressed, the exhausting workload took its toll on the statesman's health. Diagnosed with pneumonia, his doctor insisted on a three-week convalescence. When asked where he would like to recuperate, Churchill didn't hesitate: Marrakech. 'It is the most lovely spot in the whole world,' he said.

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