

PANAMERA

MARRAKECH EXPRESS

By Reiner Schloz
Photos by Steffen Jahn

It does not always have to be couscous. A lively tour of Marrakech and its environs is a superb way to develop an appetite for all things Moroccan. This city is the insiders' tip for fans of the Orient.





Arm's length:
Nothing deters
two-wheelers in the Old
City of Marrakech

For men from the mountains, we have an abundance of engine power. But the muscle in our six-cylinder car can't hurt. Even in the Atlas Mountains, one is never completely alone. Fully laden trucks, which appear to be dangerously close to a breakdown at times, struggle from village to village on serpentine roads with breathtaking switchbacks. The well-built roads seem out of place in this ever more austere landscape—if only they weren't narrow and unsecured at times on the side that drops down to the valley. When they widen, the Panamera seizes the chance to leave the trucks behind. But there's usually not a lot of time for that. Fractions of a second, in fact, in which bursts of adrenaline and torque battle for the pole position.

We move along. The Moroccans, who work hard for their living up here, wave from the sides of the road. Children run after us, laughing. Safety alone calls for an appropriate speed. And sometimes manners as well. Who wants to startle camels, especially as we've no idea what mood they're in at the moment? And then the donkeys, which we might describe as anything from principled to obstinate, as well as the mulish goats, which are quick to demonstrate who is actually at home here. They don't leave the road; or rather, they leave only when they feel like it.



Local color: A camel driver neglects his charges to inspect the Panamera

This is our “Marrakech Express.” It rolled along quite differently for rock star Graham Nash. When he took the train from Casablanca to Marrakech in 1966, he treated himself to a first-class ticket for once. But that was too boring for him, so he switched cars and settled in “with the ducks, pigs, and chickens,” as he later reported. This was the genesis of his song “Marrakesh Express,” one of the first big hits by Crosby, Stills & Nash.

We arrive at the same destination, but from the other side. We’ll see as little of Casablanca as Humphrey Bogart did, who looked into Ingrid Bergman’s eyes but never saw the city. That classic anti-Nazi film featuring a Bergman gaze hot enough to smelt steel was made in Hollywood. We, however, are in the middle of southern Morocco under a mild sun. Our excursion is taking us through the Ourika Valley. There’s a huge temptation to simply set off in the direction of Oukaïmeden. Somewhere up there, at an altitude of over 10,000 feet (3,200 meters), lies the largest ski region in North Africa, with chairlifts, five-star hotels, and maybe even enough snow now in early March. But we have to head back to Asni and continue on toward Marrakech. The red city is drawing us, the perennial insiders’ tip with its fusion of the traditional and the modern.



Ever closer: Brief break in the medina of Marrakech

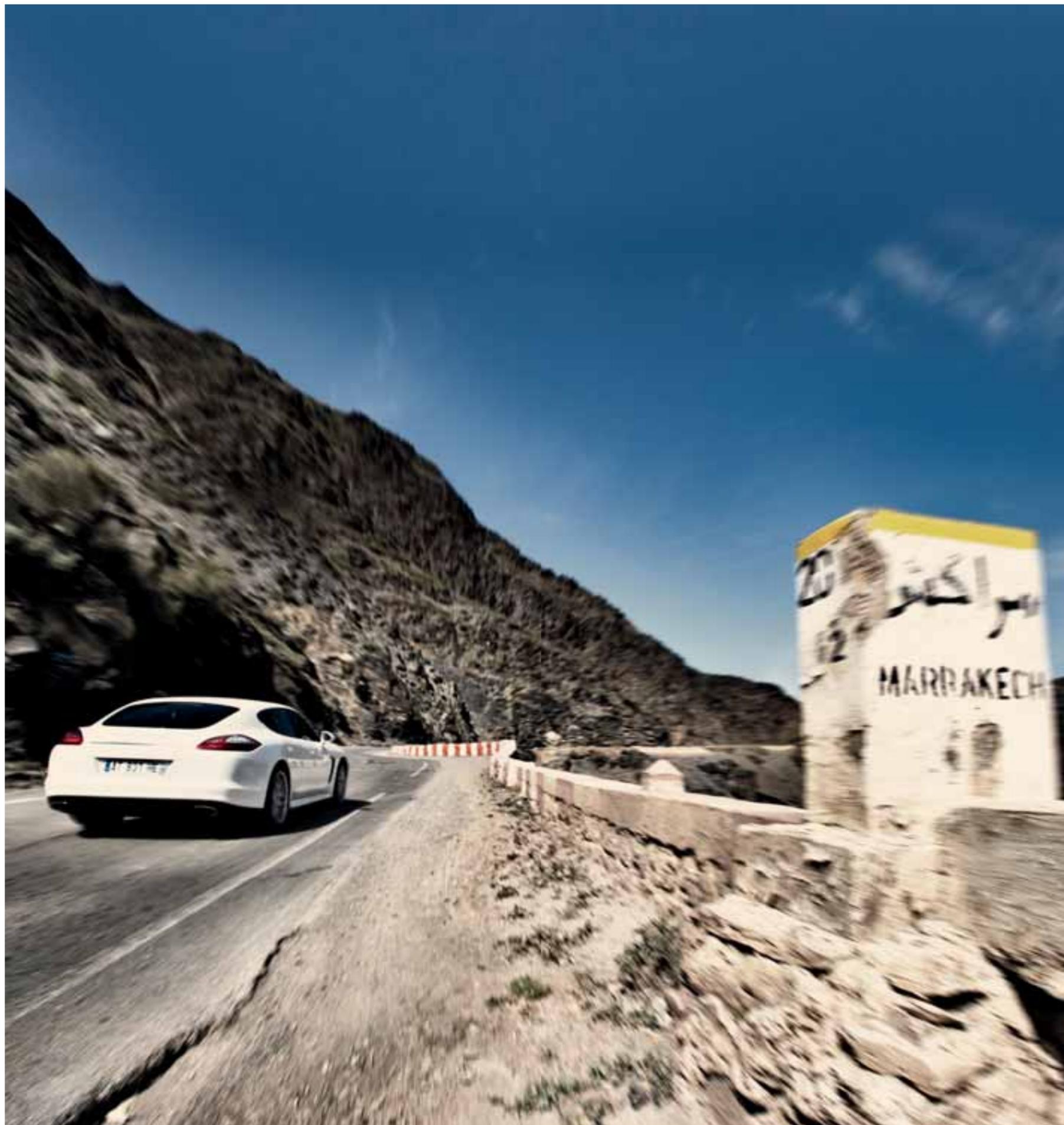


Across the mountains: Wherever the Panamera appears, mopeds are already there

Morocco's flags wave proudly in the wind. The king is in the city. Mohammed VI is making use of its mild climate to think through important decisions behind the walls of his private palace. There is unrest in the entire region, and the king has announced far-reaching constitutional reforms to reinforce democracy and the rule of law. In Morocco things run differently than in the rest of North Africa. This is especially evident in Marrakech, which is why the city has always exerted a magical attraction. For Winston Churchill, once a regular guest at the Hotel La Mamounia on Boulevard El Yarmouk, Marrakech was the "most beautiful place in the world." Writer and visionary George Orwell (of *Animal Farm* and 1984 fame) sought its mild climate in 1939, on medical advice to recover from tuberculosis, and in the process gained inspiration for an essay.

In the Majorelle Garden there is a commemorative plaque for Marrakech fan Yves Saint Laurent. The fashion designer bought this beautiful garden from the French painter Jacques Majorelle in order to rescue it from reincarnation as a tenement house. To this day, the city is famous for its parks and gardens. A lot of work is underway here now in the spring, so that the plants can unfold their full richness over the coming summer. The green is already creating an enchanting contrast to the pale red coloring throughout the city. No other place lends so much form to a hue. The red comes from the pigments in the ground here, which is mixed into a traditional building material. Although this packed clay had to give way to cement and other modern materials in the twentieth century, even the French colonial rulers preferred to see red or shades thereof, and ordered that all new buildings be painted in a hue of rose.

The medina branches out behind the Koutoubia Mosque and conveys more than a touch of the Orient.



We cruise along the edge of the newer part of the city across Avenue Mohammed V. Our guide, Rabia Talhimet from Morocco's national tourist office, directs us from Guéliz toward Hivernage, past the stunning train station. This area used to be called "Hippieville" when the Beat generation poured into the city and sought less pricey accommodation than the fashionable Hotel La Mamounia. Mr. Nash was in the best society. The Stones dwelled in Es Saadi; writer William S. Burroughs preferred Toulousain. Robert Plant and Jimmy Page from Led Zeppelin came to Marrakech for the first time in 1975. For the presentation of their *No Quarter* album, they showed videos of the night market on the Jemaa el Fna square.

The square can't be much further away. We can already see the 230-foot (70-meter) tower of the Koutoubia Mosque, behind which the medina spreads out and conveys more than a touch of the Orient. By day, the Jemaa el Fna appears almost orderly. Some of the locals can hardly be distinguished from tourists, whereas others wear exotic robes that might show their eyes only. In the tangle of fruit and spice stands, horse-drawn carts, mopeds, pedestrians, vans, and taxis, we are no more an impediment than anyone else. One shouldn't look for traffic regulations here, but rather move resolutely to the fore. Maintaining distance is a matter of judgment, and Moroccans excel in it. Spatial relations take on an entirely new meaning here. The action on the streets continues to swell as schools disgorge their pupils, and Rabia Talhimet notes proudly that "two-thirds of our population is under 18 years of age." She adds that "we have more women than men," which doesn't seem to please her as much.

Directional aid:
Weather-beaten
pointer in the Atlas
Mountains

We venture ever deeper into the medina. Has the entire population of this million-strong city decided to gather here and bring all their vans and mopeds with them? As relaxed as they are friendly, people show us the way without even being asked. Long before it dawns on us, they know we're in over our heads. It just happens to be easier to drive into the medina than out again. We have a whale of a time with a few U-turns, accompanied by the non-stop beeping of the parking sensors and no shortage of well-intentioned advice. The Old City of Marrakech and a new Porsche get along famously. People here have no problems with the attractions and culture of the West. The king is even said to be a rap fan. In 2002, the musician P. Diddy (formerly Puff Daddy) had 300 guests flown in from New York and Paris to celebrate his 33rd birthday. It must have been a wild party, for which the king was pleased to make available the Bahia Palace.

The city wears brilliance and glamour with ease. For years now Mohammed VI has sponsored the Marrakech International Film Festival, which has long since attained global stature. Its red carpet has seen the likes and entourages of Sigourney Weaver, Martin Scorsese, Sean Connery, and Leonardo DiCaprio. And it's no contradiction that the city adorns itself as happily with such names and events as it does with the mysterious Old City with its exotic fragrances and figures.

We've now left the medina behind us and are giving the Panamera the all-clear on the broad avenues to the new part of town, which is witnessing the construction of vacation homes for wealthy Moroccans and Europeans. Once again we drive toward the mountains. Morocco's red flags wave in farewell. The king is in the city.

PANAMERA

Engine: V6
 Displacement: 3,605 cc
 Power: 300 hp (220 kW) at 6,200 rpm
 Maximum torque: 400 Nm at 3,750 rpm
 0–100 km/h: 6.8 (6.3*) sec.
 Top track speed:
 261 (259*) km/h (162/161 mph)
 CO₂ emissions: 265 (218*) g/km
 Fuel consumption
 – City: 16.4 (12.7*) l/100 km
 – Highway: 7.8 (6.9*) l/100 km
 – Combined: 11.3 (9.3*) l/100 km
 * These values are for the Porsche double-clutch transmission (PDK).

DRIVING THROUGH MOROCCO WITH PORSCHE TRAVEL CLUB



A completely different way to experience the Orient: The Porsche Travel Club takes vacationers to Marrakech and its fabulous surroundings for five days. The agenda of this discovery tour is both sports-oriented and opulent. Each Porsche Cayenne carries two tour members, who get to know the most attractive corners of the Atlas Mountains south of Marrakech, both on- and off-road. Stunning roads like that through the Tizn'Test Pass—one of Morocco's highest, which connects the Marrakech region with its backlands—also dip down into green valleys. Tour members spend one of the four nights in a luxurious Berber tent at the river oasis of Fint, a truly idyllic location in a bizarre landscape of rock formations and desert. The other three nights are spent under more standard conditions, at Marrakech's newly opened Four Seasons Hotel which adjoins the splendid Menara Garden.

On the second evening, members explore the magic of the Jemaa el Fna market. Street artists, snake charmers, and fortune tellers gather every evening at this square in the heart of Marrakech—which contains everyone and everything that might fit in a dream from *One Thousand and One Nights*.

The last route leads through a slate-gray moonscape past the provincial capital of Ouarzazate to Ksar Ait-Ben-Haddou. Featuring spectacular views, this drive continues on over gorgeous mountain roads to the casbah of Telouet. The tour finally returns over the Tizn'Tichka Pass to Marrakech—the starting point and destination of an utterly unforgettable journey.

Reservations are still available for the following tours:
 October 6–10, 2011,
 October 11–15, 2011,
 October 16–20, 2011.
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