

## Moroccan Holidays

Holidays in Morocco are extremely important and festive occasions. Women and girls have henna parties and come out of their houses to celebrate. Visitors are entertained and gifts are exchanged among friends. Particular religious rites are performed. Special sweets and foods are washed down by glass after glass of mint tea as everyone gets caught up in the socializing and celebrating.

### Religious Holidays

There are both religious and civil holidays in Morocco. The Gregorian calendar, based on solar computation, is used for civil purposes. This is the calendar Westerners generally use.

The Islamic calendar, based on lunar computation, divides the year into twelve months which reoccur in varying relationship to the Gregorian year and complete their cycle every thirty years of 355 days. These thirty-year cycles consist of nineteen years of 354 days and eleven years of 355 days. Thus, the Islamic calendar gains 10 to 11 days a year on the Gregorian year.

This calendar is called the Hegiran calendar because its starting point was the hegira, when Mohamed fled from Mecca in 622 of the Gregorian calendar. This calendar is used for religious purposes in Morocco.

Month	Transcription Name	Arabic	Festivals
1 <sup>st</sup>	muḥarram	مُحَرَّم	10 <sup>th</sup> of the month: εašura
2 <sup>nd</sup>	šafar	صَفَر	
3 <sup>rd</sup>	rabiε l-luwl	رَبِيع اللّوّل	12 <sup>th</sup> of the month: εid l-mulud
4 <sup>th</sup>	rabiε t-tani	رَبِيع التّاني	
5 <sup>th</sup>	jumada l-luwla	جُمادى اللّولة	
6 <sup>th</sup>	jumada t-tanya	جُمادى التّانية	
7 <sup>th</sup>	rajab	رَجَب	
8 <sup>th</sup>	šaεban	شَعْبَان	15 <sup>th</sup> of the month: šεbana
9 <sup>th</sup>	ramaḍan	رَمَضَان	
10 <sup>th</sup>	šuwal	شَوّال	1 <sup>st</sup> of the month: l-εid ṣ-ṣḡir
11 <sup>th</sup>	du l-qiεda	دو القبيدة	
12 <sup>th</sup>	du l-hijja	دو الحجّة	10 <sup>th</sup> of the month: l-εid l-kbir

Here are descriptions of the major festivals:

#### εašura

عاشورا

muḥarram, the first month of the Islamic year, is in Morocco called šhr εašura, the month of the εašura. It has derived this name from the feast on the tenth day of the month. This day, called nhar εašura is the Islamic New Year's Day. It is said that Allah created Adam and Eve, heaven and hell, and life and death on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

The month of εašura is rich in magical qualities. The ninth and particularly the tenth day are blessed days, and on the latter, many sacred or wonderful events are said to have taken place in the

past. In Morocco, baraka is also generally ascribed to those days. Magic, good, or evil is extensively practiced on the **εašura** day and on the preceding night which is said to favor witches. People gather and many wear masks and costumes and speak in disguised voices on the night before the **εašura**. It is believed that magic practiced at this time of year will produce an effect which lasts for the whole year.

Good food has a place in the rejoicing of **εašura**, in accordance with the traditional saying of the Prophet, “Who give the plenty to his household on the **εašura** day, God will bestow plenty upon him throughout the remainder of the year.” Cow, bullock, goat, sheep, dried dates, and eggs are fixed according to local custom. Visits to the graves of relatives and alms-giving are common at this time.

Of great interest are the fire and water rites practiced at **εašura**, to which purificatory and other beneficial effects are ascribed. On **εašura** eve, “the bonfire night” fires are built throughout the town and the people sing and dance around them. The chief object of the rite is to purify men and animals or to protect them from evil influences, since there is “baraka” (blessings) from those fires.

Similar effects are attributed to the water rites which even more frequently are practiced on the following morning. It is a general belief that there is baraka in all water on this morning. To take a bath on the morning of the **εašura** day is a very wide-spread custom, and in many cases it was expressly said that it must be done before sunrise. Children are traditionally involved in this festival. They dress-up, play small drums, and are given gifts during this holiday.

### **εid l-mulud**

### عيد المولد

In Morocco, the third month of the Islamic year is called **šhr l-mulud**, the month of the **mulud**. These names are given because of the feast celebrating the birth of the Prophet which commences on the twelfth day of the month and lasts for several days. The **mulud** is a particularly blessed month and all children born during it are considered fortunate.

The Prophet's Birthday has more significance in Morocco because Morocco is a Kingdom rather than a republic, and King Mohamed VI is a descendant of the Prophet. The anniversary is brilliantly celebrated at the Imperial Palace in Rabat and in the evening in Sale a great procession of candles takes place.

In Meknes the Aissaoua brotherhood has its own unique celebration worth seeing. Followers of the holy man, l-hadi Ben Aissa throng to Meknes and play music, dance, celebrate and make what is called “the small pilgrimage” to nearby saints' tombs.

### **šεbana**

### شعبانة

The eighth month of the Moroccan year is called **šεban**. On the fifteenth day a festival known as **šεbana** takes place. According to legend, this is the day that Allah “registers all the actions of mankind which they are to perform during the year and all the children of men who are to be born and die in the year.”

Traditionally, barren women gather in homes in the neighborhood and cook a couscous meal with special spices. This meal is eaten by the women and children at home or in the mosque. The barren women in the group hope this will help them to give birth during the upcoming year.

**šεbana** is also the month before the month of fasting, Ramadan. People think of the difficult month ahead and have a feast. Craftsmen guilds often have parties on this night involving music and feasting.

### **laylatu l-qadr**

### ليلة القدر

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic year. The most important feature of Ramadan is the complete abstinence from food, drink and sexual activity from daybreak to sunset. Every Muslim who has reached the age of puberty must fast. Pregnant women, menstruating women, travelers, and those who are ill are exempt from fasting, but should make it up at a later date.

According to Islam, there is one night in Ramadan which is more important than any other, namely, *laylatu l-qadr*, “the night of power.” The Koran is said to have been sent down to the Prophet on that night. This night is one of the last ten nights of Ramadan, but its exact date has not been discovered by anyone but the Prophet himself. Tradition fixes it to be one of the odd nights—the 21<sup>st</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, or 29<sup>th</sup>—and in Morocco it is celebrated on the 27<sup>th</sup> day.

On the night of the 27<sup>th</sup>, the men go to the mosque to pray. From sundown to daybreak, the imam (the prayer leader) reads the Koran. The complete Koran is read before the sun rises. It is believed by some that the sky will open up during this night and wishes will ascend directly to Allah and be granted. During the night, special meals of couscous are prepared and brought to the mosques. Those unable to go to the mosque eat specially prepared meals at home. Each family gives part of the meal to the poor.

### l-عيد الصغير

العيد الصغير

Immediately following Ramadan is *l-عيد الصغير*, or “the little feast.” Everyone stays up very late hoping to hear the announcement that the new moon has been sighted and Ramadan and fasting are over. When it has officially been sighted, a three-day festival ensues in which alms-giving plays a major role. The alms usually consist of food items like wheat or barley, and each family does the best it can. The chief religious rite of the feast is a prayer service at the mosque.

### l-عيد الكبير

العيد الكبير

On the tenth day of the month *du l-hijja*, the last month of the year, the Islamic world celebrates its yearly sacrificial feast. In Morocco it is known as *l-عيد الكبير* or “the great feast.” This is the central feast in Islam, comparable to and derived from the feast of the atonement, Abraham’s substitute sacrifice, for the remission of sins. Hence, the animal sacrificed must be mature and without blemish.

Every family must have its own sheep just as Americans need turkeys for the proper celebration of Thanksgiving. Those who cannot afford a sheep buy a lamb or another less expensive animal. In Morocco, the animal cannot be slain until the King has killed his sheep. Then in each household, the head of the family kills the sheep (sometimes a butcher is asked to come to the house and perform the ritual). The sheep is eaten in an orderly fashion determined by local custom. For example, on the first day, the liver, heart, stomach, and lungs are eaten. On the second day, normally the head and feet are eaten. However, the head and feet can be eaten on the first day if that is the local custom. There are purification and sanctification customs and rites that prepare the people for the holy feast and its principal feature, the sacrifice. People must purify and sanctify themselves in order to benefit from the holy feast and its sacrifice. Personal cleanliness should be observed. Men and boys visit the barber and often make a trip to the hammam as well.

Henna is used not merely as a cosmetic, but as a means of protection against evil influences. Women paint their hands with it and, in many cases, also their feet. Among some ethnic groups, henna is also applied to domestic animals.

Alms-giving and prayer are two other purification rites practiced during the great feast. Gifts are exchanged between family members and a portion of the meal is given to the poor. The day begins with prayer. The chief praying ceremony takes place in the morning at the mosque.

## Moussems

Many Moroccan communities commemorate local saints, or “marabouts,” in a yearly festival or “moussem.” Most moussems are held near the tomb of the marabout and involve music, dancing and fantasia. For a very famous marabout’s moussem, people will come from very far away. Some very famous moussems celebrate Moulay Bouchaib (near El Jadida), Moulay Brahim (near Marrakech), Moulay Ya<sub>ع</sub>qub (Fes), and Moulay Idriss (Moulay Idriss). Many towns have their own moussems known only to those in the region.

## National Holidays

In addition to the religious holidays, some important civil holidays commemorating significant events in Morocco's recent history are celebrated. The most important of these are Independence Day, the Throne feast, Green March Day, and King Mohamed's birthday.

The Festival of the Throne, or *عيد 1-عرش*, is the biggest of the civil holidays. This festival commemorates the coming to power of the King on July 30, 1999. Celebrations including parades with nationalistic anthems, usually occur in the cities with local government officials, like the governor, making appearances. Traditionally during this holiday, country people come to visit their city relatives, who are expected to feed and house them for the duration of the festival. There is often a special emphasis on improving the appearance of the town prior to this holiday. City employees clean streets and paint walls, and townspeople are sometimes required by government officials to paint their doors, whitewash their houses, and display flags.

Green March Day is also celebrated by large parades in most of Morocco. This day commemorates one of the greatest achievements of King Hassan II: the mobilization of 350,000 Moroccans for the march into the Sahara territory. On November 6, 1975, the first Moroccan marchers, under the leadership of the then Prime Minister Ahmed Osman, set out from Tarfaya and entered the Spanish territory. During the celebration, those who went on the actual march once again dress up in green and re-enact the march.

Independence Day, or *عيد 1-istiqlal*, commemorates the November 18, 1956 return of Mohamed V from his French-imposed exile in Madagascar. This day gives rise to receptions at the Imperial Palace and parades and celebrations all over Morocco.

The last of these major national holidays celebrates the King's Birthday, August 21, 1962. There are many organized celebrations in Rabat and broadcasts on the radio praising the King.

## Regional Festivals

There are also many regional festivals which are centered around a particular product in which a region specializes. The product is displayed and sold; music and other activities take place in an atmosphere similar to a country fair.

Some famous regional festivals are the Cherry Festival in Sefrou, the Date Festival in Erfoud, the Rose Festival in El-Kelaa M'Gouna (near Ouarzazate), the Marrakech Folklore and Music Festival, and the Immouzer Honey Festival (near Agadir).

One of the most interesting festivals in Morocco is the re-enactment of an ancient market in the High Atlas mountains. At one time, these very isolated High Atlas tribes would gather yearly at a specific point near Imilchil where many mountain paths met for the yearly "market." Provisions for many months were bought and sold and at one time one of the reasons for coming was to acquire a bride. Men would meet a girl for the first time and pay her dowry then take her home. Some say this practice still exists and others say it is just a re-enactment for tourists, but in any case, it is a large market where many Berbers still buy many of the coming year's provisions.

Religious, civil, and regional festivals are an excellent chance to get out and see interesting things, meet people on an informal basis, and have fun. Dates of these celebrations can be obtained from the national tourist office branches in many cities, but people in your community will usually provide you with the information about your region.

It should be noted that the same festival may be celebrated somewhat differently in various sections of the country. For example, in Errachidia Province, a far greater emphasis is put on Green March Day than in other sections of Morocco because that province provided the first contingent for the march.

Be sure to check out the expectations of your community for a particular holiday, particularly in terms of visitation, entertaining, gift-giving, and participation, so you can get as involved as possible and enjoy the holidays.