

Morocco – High Atlas Butterflies

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Marrakech and transfer Ouirgane
- Day 2 – 7** Day trips from Ouirgane
- Day 8** Transfer to Marrakech and fly London

Departs

June

Focus

Butterflies & other wildlife

Grading

Grade B. Day walks only but in rough & mountainous country

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code MAR02)

Highlights:

- Nearly 100 species of Butterflies have been recorded in Southern Morocco and the tour is timed for maximum diversity.
- Targeting species that are endemic to the massif including Atlas Blue, *Berberia* Graylings and Silver-lines.
- Chance of other invertebrates including the endemic Atlas Goldenring and Barbary Featherleg.
- Visit Toubkal National Park, with its larger mammals including Mouflon and Cuvier's Gazelles
- Led by expert naturalist guides.



Plain Tiger, Rosy Grizzled Skipper & Tree Grayling © Martin Pitt



Introduction

Morocco is the most biodiverse country in North Africa and it brings together the general Mediterranean species with a number of African species plus those that are endemic to the Maghreb region itself. Although on the edge of the Sahara the local diversity is due, in part, to the range of habitats created by the High Atlas Mountains. These capture the wetter air from the Atlantic and together with increase in altitude that is peaked here at Jebel Toubkal (4167m) brings a range of micro-ecosystems and in consequence a wealth of different species.

We will fly to Marrakech and from our base at the foot of these mountains embark on a series of day trips that will take us to cross section of these habitats and elevations. In this way we should maximise the number of species that we can find.

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Ouirgane

Today we'll take a direct flight from London to Marrakech. From here we'll drive south to Ouirgane, a journey of just over an hour. We will arrive at our comfortable family run hotel and, depending on our arrival time, may have time to explore the immediate environs of the hotel and the river valley just below the hotel.

Day 2

Oued Nfis and Tiz n'Test

After a delicious Moroccan breakfast, we will head south-west from the hotel heading uphill. Along the first stage the road follows the dammed Nfis river by the Ouirgane Barrage. This should ensure that there is water in the area and we will look for any verdant areas and stop to see what is flying. Beyond the Barrage we climb more steeply to the Col at Tiz n'Test at just over 2000m.

This is the lower of the High Atlas passes and the area around here has been chosen as the release site for ungulates that used to be more common. It is possible to see both Mouflon and Cuvier's Gazelle in the area. Oued Nfis is also a site for Atlas Goldenring. Butterflies can be plentiful and we should see a mix of blues, coppers and skippers. Vaucher's Heath is a special target, and we will keep an eye out for the larger species, especially the fritillaries as a number of species occur.

We will return back and spend more time around the river line itself and other areas of nectaring plants to find Desert Orangetip and Moroccan Copper amongst others

Day 3

Imlil



Looking toward Tiz n'Tamatert from Imlil

Although initially we will head downhill, we will soon head south and upwards to the village of Imlil. We'll pass through an area of orchards and will briefly stop if we see flowering plants. We will then head up to village, which is at 1800m. The village is at the heart of the Toubkal trekking route and we will take the relatively easy trail to the col at Tiz n'Tamatert at 2,278m.

This area is in the sub-alpine zone and the initial part of the track runs through small scale agriculture and then pine woods. We then cross beyond the tree line and the local scree slopes are normally the haunt of Graylings. The col should give us views of Jebel Toubkal itself, the highest peak in North Africa at 4,167m and dependent upon time we may go further along the route that is the well-trodden trekking circuit. Alternatively, we will go back to Imlil and head directly south to an area of springs to see if we can add to our list.

Day 4

Oukaïmeden



Oukaïmeden valley

Today we head to the highest part of the trip and head to the alpine zone based around the ski station at Oukaïmeden. This enables us to access the alpine zone and at this time the snow should have melted and seasonal grazing of sheep and goats recently returned. We will head for the flat valley floor which is at around 2600m and follow the Marsh Orchid-lined stream looking especially for Atlas Blue and other skippers.

We will walk further into the Toubkal National park and to areas dominated by rocky slopes. These are the haunt of the high-altitude specialties including *Berberia* Graylings. In addition, this is the best area for a range of special birds, we hope to find Moussier's Redstart, Crimson-winged Finch, Horned Lark and both species of Chough.

Dependent on our success we will head down the mountains and stop at suitable places on the way down. The river valleys in the upper Ourika valley are both picturesque and attractive to invertebrates. We will look out for Odonata, perhaps including Ringed Cascader as well as more butterflies.

Day 5

Oued Nfis, Azzaden & Amizmiz

We will stay closer to the hotel today, and try the lower elevations around Ouirgane below the barrage and valley that heads to Azzaden. We will focus the walks to try and find the species that are more typical of the lowlands and the lower reaches of the mountains. Plain Tiger, Two-tailed Pasha, African Grass Blue and Babel Blue are all relatively common. A good range of fritillaries should also be possible, with Spotted being the most frequent, however we will keep an eye out for Knapweed Fritillary that recent DNA studies has shown to be the African form.

If there is water still in the streams the area is good for other invertebrates and we should also see a number of reptiles, odonata and birds including endemic Moroccan Wall Lizard, North African Ocellated Lizard, Barbary Featherleg and Barbary Partridge.

Day 6

Zat Valley & Tiz n' Tichka



The Tiz n'Tichka col is to the southeast of Marrakech and we will bypass the main N9 road and climb via the Zat Valley. The lower area around Tighedouine is a patchwork of low-level agriculture and grazing along a wide river. We will stop by the Zat River itself and explore suitable habitat for the lower elevation butterflies.

We will then climb through the valley stopping at key locations along the way where flowering plants indicate that there should be good populations of butterflies. The road eventually meets up with the N9, but in the last few kilometres it passes through an area of Juniper forest. This is a highly threatened habitat and the forest is open with grassland between. This is attractive to butterflies and we will attempt to find the species typical of this area.

Day 7

Ourika & Marrakech

Ourika is the last of the major valleys in this area of the High Atlas, and some proclaim it to be most beautiful. We will follow the Ourika river which is a mix of agricultural and wooded areas with scree slopes above.

Dependent upon how we have done at the high elevations to date we will head up to Sti Fadma which give the last chance to access the higher altitude species.

Day 8

London

After a final breakfast, we'll transfer to Marrakech for our return flight to London after a beautiful time in Morocco's Atlas Mountains.

Tour grading

This tour is graded B, consisting of day walks only. We will travel to each site by minibus, then take leisurely walks to explore the area, which is mountainous and some paths can be rough in places and much time will be spent in the field.

Weather

Although temperatures on the Marrakech plain can be high, we will spend most time in the mountains where temperatures are usually lower. They are expected to be in the range of mid 20s to low 30s degrees C and with low humidity. However, in recent years spikes in temperature have been experienced. In addition, rain is rarely encountered at this time of year. The evenings will be warm. Although biting insects can be an encountered, they are not normally an issue.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday starting with dinner on Day 1 and ending with breakfast on Day 8. Accommodation will be in a hotel with a swimming pool and spectacular

views. The comfortable rooms all have private facilities. The food is traditional Moroccan fare with a focus on seasonally available fare. Lunches will be picnics taken in the field.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.