The Reptiles and Amphibians of Morocco

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Fly Agadir
Days 2 – 7	Explore the magnificent, rarely-visited, habitats of southern Morocco
Day 8	Inbound flights

Departs

April–May and September–October

Focus

Reptiles and Amphibians

Grading

Important: please read the 'Tour Grading and Focus' section at the end of the document before booking.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code MAR09)

Highlights

- A chance to encounter Mediterranean Chameleon, Puff Adder and Egyptian Cobra
- Superb but little-known species include Northern Elegant Gecko, Desert Monitor and Moorish Viper
- Search for the rare North African Cat Snake
- Special amphibians may include Stripeless Tree Frog and Mauritanian Toad
- Exciting birds and mammals could include Lanner Falcon, Northern Bald Ibis, Golden Jackal, North African Sengi, Lesser Egyptian Jerboa and even Caracal is possible!







Mediterranean Chameleon (*Chamaeleo chamaeleon*), Stripeless Tree Frog (*Hyla meridionalis*), Egyptian Cobra (*Naja haje*) © D. Kane

Naturetrek

Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051 E: info@naturetrek.co.uk W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Introduction

Just a 4-hour flight from London and we land in Morocco, where more than 130 species of reptiles and amphibians call home! A great diversity of habitats, within a short distance of one another, allow for an impressive number of species to be seen in a short time, with humid tropical specialties including chameleons and egg-eating snakes living only an hour drive from spectacular desert specialists like the Desert Horned Viper.

Indeed, the south of Morocco is home to iconic and infamous species such as the Puff Adder and Egyptian Cobra – the former regarded as 'Africa's most dangerous snake' and the latter being the 'asp' Cleopatra was fabled to have used to take her own life. In addition to the amazing reptiles which we will see on this exciting expedition, with optional night walks at every opportunity, we can hope for a multitude of bird and mammal highlights including Lanner Falcon, Northern Bald Ibis, Moussier's Redstart, Golden Jackal and jerboa… even Caracal are possible! The wonderful food, hospitable people and incredible scenery will make this a most memorable wildlife holiday.



Desert Horned Viper (*Cerastes cerastes*)

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other 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 – 2 Fly to Agadir, travel south to Sidi Ifni

Today we fly to Agadir from London. Should you wish to join the holiday from another home country, please do get in touch and we will be very pleased to assist with such arrangements.

Depending on flight schedules, as we make our way south along the coast there should be ample time to stop at Oued Massa, home to Spanish Terrapin (*Mauremys leprosa* '*saharica*' subspecies), Stripeless Tree Frog (*Hyla meridionalis*) and over 100 bird species including Northern Bald Ibis, Greater Flamingo, Marbled Duck, Black-crowned Tchagras and one of the best places to see the stunning Moussier's Redstart. On our way further south we will see the vegetation change from the Argan groves typical of the Souss Valley to the succulent euphorbias on the Macaronesia coast. The charming fishing town of Sidi Ifni will be our base for the next two nights. The humid climate here, an effect of moisture-laden air cooled by the oceanic current running northwards along the coast meeting the warm air on the land, creates almost nightly fog and allows tropical relict species of reptiles to thrive. Puff Adder (*Bitis arietans*), Sahel Egg Eater snake (*Dasypeltis sahelensis*), Egyptian Cobra (*Naja haje*) and African House Snakes (*Boaedon fuliginosus*) – otherwise largely restricted to sub-Saharan Africa – are all possible on our first full day!

It is not uncommon to see birds of prey like migrating Short-toed Eagle and Little Owl here, as well. After lunch we have the option of hiking the plains and valleys along the coast searching for the amazing wildlife. Over 30 species of reptile and amphibians are known to live in this special location! Each evening there will be opportunity for an exciting nocturnal excursion, for those who wish.

Days 3 & 4 Guelmim and Assa

After breakfast we enjoy a morning search of the coastal plains for diurnal species before making the drive from Sidi Ifni to Guelmim, around 2 hours. Animals such as the Atlas Day Gecko (*Quedenfeldtia moerens*) and Stripeless Tree Frog (*Hyla meridionalis*) can be seen along the numerous dry stone walls in the mountains between these two towns. Guelmim itself full of delicious



Northern Elegant Gecko (*Stenodactylus mauritanicus*) © Dan Kane

street food, donkey-drawn carts and local markets. Just the other side of town we'll get to our hotel, situated in a much more dry landscape than the coast; this is where we start to encounter the superb desert-adapted reptiles including the iconic Moroccan Spiny-tailed Lizard (*Uromastyx nigriventris*) and the Desert Horned Viper (*Cerastes cerastes*). As the afternoon cools down, we will begin to search for these wonderful reptiles nearby. Dinner will be at the hotel, after which we can head out again for a few hours in search of nocturnal species such as the beautiful Northern Elegant Gecko (*Stenodactylus mauritanicus*).

The following day we'll adventure deeper into the desert and will likely take breakfast with us on the road. We'll make stops along the way to admire beautiful scenery and wildlife, both of which are plentiful here. After passing through a range of mountains we come to Assa, on the edge of the Sahara. We'll have a lunch in a local café and relax whilst the heat of the day passes. Assa provides a perfect opportunity to explore the stony plains and nearby mountains of the Sahara. Desert Monitor (*Varanus griseus*) and the White-bellied Carpet Viper (*Echis leucogaster*) are rare highlights here and the area is also home to at least seven different species of gecko as well as several skinks and a further 10 species of snake. Golden Jackal and Rüppels Fox can be common at certain times and we will certainly be keeping our eye out for these along the way.


Rüppels Fox

Just as the sun is setting over the desert we'll head out for a search just a few miles from town. This region is one of the best places to see the North African Cat Snake (*Telescopus tripolitanus*) which remains one of Morocco's most rarely-seen snakes. Aside from the cat snake, this location is home to the White-bellied Carpet Viper (*Echis leucogaster*), the delicate Algerian Thread Snake (*Myriopholis algeriensis*) and False Smooth Snake (*Macroprotodon brevis*) – a species usually restricted to more Mediterranean habitats but discovered here by a Naturetrek tour leader in 2018. Today will be an exciting but longer day and we shall be contently ready for bed after another superb day's herping.

Day 5 Tantan

After breakfast we move on to Tantan, approximately two and a half hours south. The southern coast of Morocco is home to a fantastic mixture of reptiles and is known as being another great place for finding the tropical relict species. Several endemic geckos live here including the tiny 6 cm-long Harris' Gecko (*Saurodactylus harrisi*), a species only formally described in 2019. We will have the chance to search for these and many more reptiles during the afternoon and evening

when we will explore the superb area where the Oued Drâa meets the sea, where on previous trips we have enjoyed fantastic numbers of geckos and jerboas.

Day 6 Khenifiss National Park

Today we will explore the Khenifiss National Park – a spectacular expanse of sand dunes and a coastal lagoon where many birds stop on their northern migration and waders stay to feed throughout the summer. This national park is also special to us for another reason – the Saharan Sand Viper (*Cerastes vipera*). Here is one of the only places in Morocco where this small viper, which moves across the shifting sand by sidewinding, can be found. After dark we will walk these dunes and use our torches to follow the tracks left by desert animals. Aside from the viper, other special species here include Mediterranean Chameleon (*Chamaeleo chamaeleon*), Helmeted Gecko (*Tarentola chazaliae*) and Duméril's Wedge-snouted Skink (*Chalcides sphenopsiformis*) – a nearly limbless lizard which can 'swim' beneath the surface of the sand.



Mediterranean Chameleon (*Chamaeleo chamaeleon*)

Day 7 Mirleft

We drive back north today, staying in a well-appointed hotel in Mirleft. Leaving the south after an early breakfast, this journey will take us until early afternoon. The rest of the afternoon is ours to spend at our leisure, with as much or as little activity as we like. This location provides a good chance to try for certain target species we may not have been fortunate enough to come across yet. A final group meal in our hotel will be a great opportunity to review our favourite finds and best memories from the week. We'll then have the option of a nocturnal excursion near the coast where we may come across further tropical relict species as well as a variety of geckos, mammals, invertebrates, and birdlife. A brilliant way to end our time in Morocco!

Day 8 Inbound flights

Depending on flight schedules, we hope to have time for a leisurely breakfast before heading north, back to Agadir, in time for our return flights. Please note that, depending on flight options available to us, we may instead take a morning drive back to Marrakech (150 miles) which will take us first across the scenic western end of the High Atlas and then across an area of dry stony arable steppe. Watching out for wildlife, we will make a last stop for coffee here before arriving in Marrakech in time for our flight back to London.

Tour Grading & Focus

On a typical day on our herpetology tours we'll begin searching in the field after breakfast, when the sun has warmed the substrates and landscapes, often getting into the vehicles at 9am and, after stopping for approximately one hour for lunch (which is often a continental-style picnic eaten in-situ), we'll continue into early-evening when we will stop for a rest and dinner. Most evenings it will be possible to do excursions in search of nocturnal species, which will on average be for three hours after dinner. With an equal percentage of the target reptile and amphibian species likely to be nocturnal, these night searches are an important part of the tour but are optional, with some participants preferring to rest on some of the days. On average, 5-8miles are walked per day.

We'll focus our time in the field on building an enviable list of reptile and amphibian species seen. Whilst searching, there is no doubt we'll come across a huge variety of amazing fauna and flora, of which we'll also take time to enjoy, but reptiles and amphibians will strongly remain our focus. Sensitively checking under stones, logs and other refugia is an effective way of finding many species. Some of the target reptile or amphibian species may require longer field hours to locate and therefore this tour is suitable, and most enjoyable, for experienced naturalists who, aside from wishing to see the region's rarely-seen reptiles and amphibians, relish being in the field searching for and identifying the vast array of birds, butterflies, invertebrates, and other wildlife which can be found sharing the wonderful habitats that we'll explore on the tour. Snakes do, of course, occur at low densities and are notoriously elusive, so it's unlikely that every species mentioned will be encountered. However, with the guidance of a leading herpetologist, your chances improve dramatically. A realistic goal might be to observe around 5-8 species – sometimes more, sometimes fewer – depending on conditions.

In summary, Naturetrek herpetology holidays are suitable, and offer tremendous value, for those of whom spending most of their holiday time in wildlife habitats and for whom seeing some of the world's superb reptiles and amphibians is the focus of their time away.

On this holiday we will of course often be walking on sandy or rocky terrain with some occasional hill ascents required.

Weather, Clothing & Equipment

The weather will be warm and pleasant, with a small chance of being overcast at times with occasional showers. It would be sensible to come prepared for some rainfall. Binoculars are not essential but will certainly be very useful. A strong waterproof torch is essential for the nocturnal excursions and amongst the options available a powerful head-torch will be most useful, which keeps your hands free for balancing.

What's Included

All meals and accommodation are included in the cost of this holiday, except for any meals required during travel, and starting with dinner on Day 1 and ending with breakfast on Day 8.

Extending Your Holiday

A visit to the High Atlas region of Oukaïmeden makes for a fantastic extension to this holiday where exciting birds and butterflies can be plentiful alongside the chance to see such exciting reptile and amphibian species as Mountain Viper, Moroccan Painted Frog, High Atlas Day Gecko, Moroccan Ocellated Lizard and more than 20 other species. It is also possible to arrange your flights to allow extra nights to spend time in Marrakech or Agadir. Please contact Dan Lay (dan@naturetrek.co.uk or 01962 733051) for further information and/or make sure to stipulate any interest in a possible extension upon booking.

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 at the time of booking.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.



The High Atlas region of Oukaïmeden makes for a fantastic extension to this holiday where exciting birds and butterflies can be plentiful alongside the chance to see such exciting reptile and amphibian species as Mountain Viper, Moroccan Painted Frog, High Atlas Day Gecko, Moroccan Ocellated Lizard and over 20 other species © Dan Kane