

# Essaouira

IN MOROCCO





## Essaouira



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## Editorial



*Essaouira's fishing port. Fishing is one of the town's main activities – no surprise, as its waters are teeming with fish!*

### A town where the trade winds play

With the gentlest of touches, Essaouira stirs awake the artist that slumbers within each of us. The azure blue of its horizon, its rosy ochre fortifications, and white houses with their blue shutters make up a perfect watercolour. Behind its walls, protected from the wind, a timeless world goes about its business. Here, the architects of days gone by spark the creativity of new generations.

The fair enchantress weaves her arcane magic with delicate strength. It proud cannons facing the sea, it cannot but make an impression on all those who visit it. But come closer, look into it heart, and let yourself be spellbound by its subtleties. Let the heady scent of thuja wood lead you to its craftsmen, with their swift, nimble constant fingers at work. Seated around a table among newfound friends, glass of mint tea in hand, discover a new realm of conviviality.

Renowned for its culture and its festival, the town where the trade winds play is also a paradise for surfers from all corners of the world. And a much beloved bathing resort that attracts thousands of holidaymakers every year.

More than just a town, Essaouira is a muse, a source of undying inspiration.



*The Sea Gate*

# Mogador



*A town once much coveted by invaders, Essaouira is protected by an impressive defence system.*

Sheltered from the trade winds, the archipelago was discovered by the Phoenicians in the 7th century BC. Used as an anchorage by the Carthaginian sailor Hanno in 500 BC, it served for several centuries as an outpost on the route from Cap-Vert and the Equator. In 146 BC, the Romans conquered the island and turned it into a vassal state under the rule of the King of Mauritania. Towards the end of the 1st century BC, under Juba II, the great builder of Volubilis, it became a centre for production of salted fish and purple dye – for which latter the “Purple Islands” were famed up until the fall of the Roman Empire.

The Portuguese established a major trading post there in the Middle Ages, baptising the town Mogador. In 1541, it came under Saadian rule before falling into the hands of the Alaouites. The city was renamed Essaouira, and a new town was built there in 1765 by

Sultan Mohamed Ibn Abdallah. This was the beginning of a long period of prosperity, and the city remained a major centre for foreign trade until the early 20th century.

These days, Essaouira is a haven of peace that inspires artists from all over the world. Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, its medina remains untouched by the passing centuries, seemingly impervious to the ravages of time. Behind its walls hides a luminous city of winding alleyways, picturesque little squares and whitewashed houses. Used by Orson Welles as the location for his film of “Othello”, it has inspired and enthralled a host of later filmmakers. Ridley Scott, for one, recreated Jerusalem here for his film “Kingdom of Heaven”. In the 1960s and 70s it became a playground for Jimi Hendrix and numbers of his fellow musicians, and continues today to live to the hypnotic rhythm of Gnaoua drums.



*A view over the medina*



*Tourists arriving at the Sea Gate before the port was built (1910)*

## Not to be missed

Set off in search of magic in the footsteps of artists past and present... Wander through the medina and wonder at the decorative and architectural richness of its buildings. The splendid residences once inhabited by consuls to the city, sumptuously blending Moroccan style with European. Turn a corner, and you're sure to come across a painter, local or come from afar, struggling to capture the beauty of his surroundings on canvas. The city's renown as an artist's wonderland is perpetuated by a wealth of studios and art galleries. Once a much coveted prize, Essaouira is protected by an impressive defence system of fortified bastions. Built to

protect the port, the Sqala is lined with cannons, and you can walk the length of its ramparts and be rewarded by breath-taking views of the island of Mogador and the fishing port. Connecting the town to the port, the Sea Gate is of imposing grandeur. Built in 1769, this monumental freestone edifice is adorned with twin columns and a triangular pediment. Protecting the city from attacks by sea, the north bastion is a vast artillery platform surrounded by crenellated walls. Its terrace provides unparalleled views of the medina and the Sqala.



*A typical medina doorway*

## Essaouira's Azur horizon



*Luxury hotel infrastructures*

On the Atlantic coast, across from the medina, Mogador's seaside resort is set to rekindle the town's tourist spirit. An integral part of "Plan Azur" – a project that seeks to develop intelligent tourism – it includes a full range of infrastructures perfectly integrated into their surroundings. Authenticity, sport and culture are the key words here.

Luxury hotels and villas of real character stand ready for holidaymakers in an idyllic setting. Take to the pathways on foot or by bike, and get to know the seagulls that

have made their home on the resort's seven artificial lakes. Every step along the way reveals new aspects of the town of Essaouira, the dunes, and the ocean beyond.

Devoted to leisure and relaxation, the Mogador resort is equipped with three golf courses, each following the natural topography of their setting, with its dunes, golden sands and abundant plant life. Here, your every whim is accommodated. Tennis or golf to keep you in trim, spa for relaxation, and luxury shops for a holiday spree...



*Mogador Golf Club*



*Essaouira Beach*

## Experiencing the town



*A fisherman home from the sea*

### The medina riads

If you really want to experience life as lived by the Souiris, there's nothing to beat a riad. Many of these traditional residences in the heart of the medina have been renovated to provide guests passing through with every modern comfort. The typical riad stands around a central, sun-drenched patio, the living heart of the house. Often adorned with a fountain and planted with orange or olive trees, it becomes a shaded inner garden. Indoors, follow the corridors to your room, decorated in the purest Moroccan tradition and equipped with every modern convenience. The terrace provides 360° views, and is the ideal spot for casting an admiring eye over the medina.

### Essaouira's souks

What would Essaouira be without its souks! An unmissable destination for Moroccans and tourists alike, the

souks are alive with bustle and colour. From foodstuffs to craftwork, each of the medina's souks is a magical experience that carries you off into new worlds. The giddy scents of shimmering spices hang in the air along with the fragrance of worked wood, bringing the senses to joyous life once again. The displays of hand-woven fabrics and silver jewellery are a feast for the eyes. Wander at will among the shops – you won't come away empty-handed!

### Moulay Hassan Square

Moulay Hassan Square is Essaouira's nerve centre – the liveliest place in town! Situated in the medina, not far from the city walls and the port, this pretty tree-filled square is an ideal setting for enjoying a glass of mint tea. Sit back on one of its café terraces and watch the casual comings and goings of the passers-by.



*Strolling through the old medina's streets to discover its craftspeople and their know-how*



*The walkway along the Sqala ramparts*



*Grilled freshly caught fish in the port's little restaurants*

### Local gastronomy: Top restaurants and gourmet eating at the fishing port.

As elsewhere in Morocco, you can settle yourself down on a sofa or perch yourself on a pouf and share a delicious tajine or couscous in good company. But what Souiri gastronomy is best known for is its fresh fish. Essaouira is a city of fishermen, and makes the utmost of what the ocean provides. The port's open-air restaurants entice visitors with dishes prepared from the morning's catch – impossible to resist the inviting aroma of freshly grilled fish! And in the heart of the medina, the most demanding of gourmets will delight in the sophisticated cuisine and fairytale settings provided by the town's top restaurants. Treat yourself

to dinner in a former Kaidal residence or restored riad – a feast of exquisite flavours and delicate fragrances awaits you. Argan oil – famed for its many restorative properties and its fine almond and hazelnut taste – is much used in local cuisine to set off the subtle flavours of the dishes.

### The Sidi Mohammed Benabdallah Museum

Housed in a former seigniorial residence built in the 19th century, the Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah Museum presents the Province of Essaouira's cultural heritage. Visitors can find information on the history of the city and its region from pre-historic times to the present day. The museum also exhibits a number of collections focusing on the town's craft heritage.

## Souiri craftwork



Silver earrings in the shape of fibulae – a traditional Berber symbol

### Cabinetwork and thuja wood

Made use of by inlayers since time immemorial, these days thuja wood is a rare commodity and is only to be found in the workshops of the Essaouira region. With its golden-veined deep red colour and heady fragrance, it is used in the fashioning of a wide range of artefacts, including boxes, jewel cases, trays and statuettes.

### Painters

Essaouira continues to inspire painters galore. Strolling along the ramparts, you will come across richly coloured dark red, blue and yellow

frescoes, covering animal skins or strips of walnut bark. In the galleries, watercolours shimmer from canvases and panelling. Anything can be used as a support!

### Silver jewellery

Essaouira's silver jewellery is renowned for its quality and finesse. The craft owes its existence and fame to the Jewish silversmiths of the 18th century. Design and manufacturing techniques remain almost unchanged from those of days gone by, and the craftsmen's creativity is inexhaustible.



A painting by a Souiri artist



A thuja wood table created by the city's master inlayers



A young Gnaoua musician playing the krakebs (castanets)

### Musical instruments

Essaouira's stringed-instrument makers display unparalleled skill in the fashioning of such traditional instruments as the lute, the tambourine, the gumbri and the hajhouj. The gumbri is an age-old instrument, the foundation of Gnaoua music and dance, and its sometimes languid sometimes upbeat melodies have formed the background music to Morocco's artistic scene for some years now. Gnaoua soirées feature the Maalem (master gumbri

player) accompanied by fellow musicians playing the krakebs (large metal castanets) and a heavy drum.

### Creators

Sculptors, young designers, couturiers - creators of all persuasions have found refuge behind Mogador's ancient walls. Drawing inspiration from the city's traditional arts, they transform and revisit Souiri culture, bringing with them a touch of modernity and extravagance.





## Offbeat and upbeat



*Eleanor's falcon, which finds refuge in the Purple Islands*

### The Purple Islands, a bird sanctuary.

Located off Essaouira, the Purple Islands have been on the map since Antiquity. Fragments of pottery and ceramics dating back to the 7th century BC have been found there, bearing witness to the presence of the Phoenicians.

The little archipelago is made up of two main islands and a scattering of tiny islets. The largest island, which covers some 30 hectares, is known as "Pharaoh's Island" and contains an abandoned prison built in the late 19th century, a mosque, and an impressive fort. Long uninhabited by man, the archi-

pelago, which once knew glory as a producer of purple dye, now harbours a rather more volatile population. As a bird sanctuary, it provides refuge for gulls and seagulls, and for the very rare Eleanor's falcon, a protected bird of prey that comes to nest there from April to October before setting off to Madagascar. The site is currently closed to the public, but you may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the bird through binoculars from Essaouira beach, especially in the evening.



The Purple Islands owe their name to the purple pigment extracted from the murex, a type of shellfish. Applied as a dye, it turns fabrics a rich red colour with highlights ranging from maroon to violet. In Antiquity, red was the symbol of temporal and spiritual power, and the colour purple was much sought after by the Roman aristocracy.



*The patio of "Riad Al Medina", where the famous guitarist Jimi Hendrix stayed in 1969*



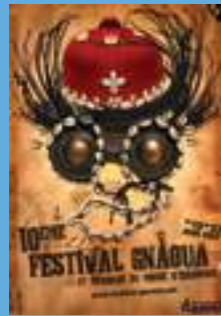
*The Purple Islands, a bird sanctuary*

### In search of Jimi Hendrix and Co.

In midsummer 1969, Essaouira received an unexpected guest. Jimi Hendrix, then at the height of his glory and suffering the ravaging effects of too much fame, decided to take a few days' holiday and flew off to Morocco. Arriving in Essaouira, he breathed in the air, set down his bags at the Hôtel du Pacha, now renamed Riad Al

Madina, and set about making new friends. Hardly had he got there; however, than it was time to leave, to rehearse for the festival of the year, Woodstock. His lightning but legendary visit will live on in the town's history forever!

# Festivals



Poster for Essaouira's  
Gnaoua World Music  
Festival

**The Gnaoua World Music Festival**  
Each year, as summer gets underway, Essaouira is transformed into a temple to music. Hundreds of thousands of festivalgoers abandon themselves to the bewitching rhythms of Gnaoui music. The greatest Gnaoua Maalêms (master musicians) carry their audience away on mystical cadences and resonances that have been known to induce states of trance. The event also welcomes musicians from all over the world, providing a joyous music and cultural mix. Open to all, the Gnaoua World Music Festival is also an opportunity for young local musicians to get themselves known to a wider public.

## Festival des Alizés

A date in every music lover's diary, the Printemps Musical des Alizés Festival

offers four days of multicultural music to suit all tastes. Symphonic music, classical and popular music, chorales and opera sonatas fill the air in idyllic surroundings. The festival has met with overwhelming success since it was first launched in 2001, and is now an unmissable event that welcomes famous musicians and great orchestras from all over the world.

## The Atlantic Andalusia Festival

This is a real Moroccan-Spanish cultural forum with Mediterranean and Latin American influences thrown in. Eclectic programming includes concerts, arts workshops, colloquiums, exhibitions, and more besides. The festival is an excellent opportunity to explore the roots and ramifications of the Andalusian cultural heritage.



The Gnaoua Festival, held every year in Essaouira, attracts a wide public

## Activities in the town



Natural cosmetic products produced from argan oil and used for body and beauty care

### Off the beaten track

#### Thalassotherapy

A true temple to well-being, Essaouira is the ideal spot for getting yourself back in trim, with a number of top-quality specialised centres providing relaxing treatments in tranquil surroundings. Making therapeutic use of such marine elements as sand, seaweed and seawater, thalassotherapy helps combat numerous bodily ills, including heavy legs syndrome, back problems, and joint and muscle pain. It fosters good health, relaxes the body and soothes the mind. Combining the ocean's many benefits with those provided by Essaouira's terroir, the city's well-being specialists provide the very best in natural body care,

including argan oil massages and sea mud and seaweed wraps. Programmes alternate relaxation, physical activity and tailor-made treatments, nudging you gently and surely back into shape again.

#### Surfing, kiteboarding and windsurfing

The wind blows hard across Essaouira Bay. And while others may appreciate the protection offered by the city walls, surfers, windsurfers and kiteboarders have no hesitation in taking to the water. Over the last few years, the town has become a highly popular destination among water board sports



The town is also famous for thalassotherapy



A kiteboarder skimming the waves. Each year, the town hosts an international kiteboarding competition



enthusiasts, hosting the final stage of the annual Kiteboard World Cup, an unmissable rendezvous for the world's best kiteboarders. And ever increasing numbers of young people are following in their board sports heroes' footsteps, with a range of schools offering lessons and courses dispensed by qualified professionals.

#### Water sports

There's no lack of activities to enjoy on Essaouira's immense beach. If you're looking for excitement, you might try your hand at waterskiing, jetskiing, or underwater diving.

#### Fishing

Fishing is a major Souiri activity. Tuna, sargue, bass, mullet, bream - rod fishers will enjoy dining on the fish they've caught earlier in the day. Underwater fishing, harpoon at the ready, is also a popular pastime, whether alongside the coast or on the high seas. You can obtain a permit for this sort of fishing through the local tourist office.

# The region

## The coast, from Safi to Agadir

### The best surf spots

Some of the world's finest surf spots are to be found along the coast that links Safi, Essaouira, and Agadir. The first surfers arrived in Taghazout in the 1970s, along with the hippies, and since then, the site's reputation has steadily increased, attracting ever growing numbers of water board sports fans. Today, the region is known worldwide for its powerful waves and its constant heavy swell from September to April.

Another area beloved of surfers, the Imessouane coast is an unspoilt miniature paradise of remarkable biodiversity where you can surf all year round. Heaviness of swell scarcely varies with the seasons, enabling experienced surfers and beginners alike to ride the waves at will.

### Safi

Safi overlooks the ocean from one end of the city to the other. The town boasts a rich historical heritage,

and many remarkably beautiful monuments are hidden away behind the wall that still encircles its medina. A city of major importance under the Almohad and Almoravid dynasties, Safi acted as Marrakech's principal port when the latter was Morocco's capital.

Capital of the Doukkala Abda region, the town is also famed for its pottery. To understand just how important the activity is, you must pay a visit to the Potters' Hill, where dozens of workshops are located, and where Safi's craftsmen continue to make good use of the age-old know-how handed down to them over succeeding generations.

If the city has plenty to offer history buffs, it also attracts surfing fans. The Safi Wave is listed among the 10 best "World Class Waves", and every year the greatest international surfers flock to the spot to take on its irresistible challenge.



*Surfing, an emblematic sport of the city*



*A pottery shop*



*A Portuguese-style doorway*



*The Portuguese fort, Safi*

## The region



*An argan tree – the tree is endemic to Morocco and only grows in the Essaouira region*

### The hinterland

Make the contrast – the Essaouira region boasts a wide variety of landscapes, great biodiversity, and a rich cultural heritage – to discover on foot, on horseback, or atop a camel....

### In the land of the argan and olive

The world's largest area of argan forest lies between Essaouira, Agadir and Taroudant – a national treasure and also, with its goats perched nonchalantly in the treetops, a highly popular excursion destination. Visitors here can enjoy unspoilt natural surroundings, where argan, almond, and olive trees grow wild side by side. And while you're in the area, you can admire the know-how of the women as they work at extracting argan oil, and appreciate the traditional hospitality of Berber culture.

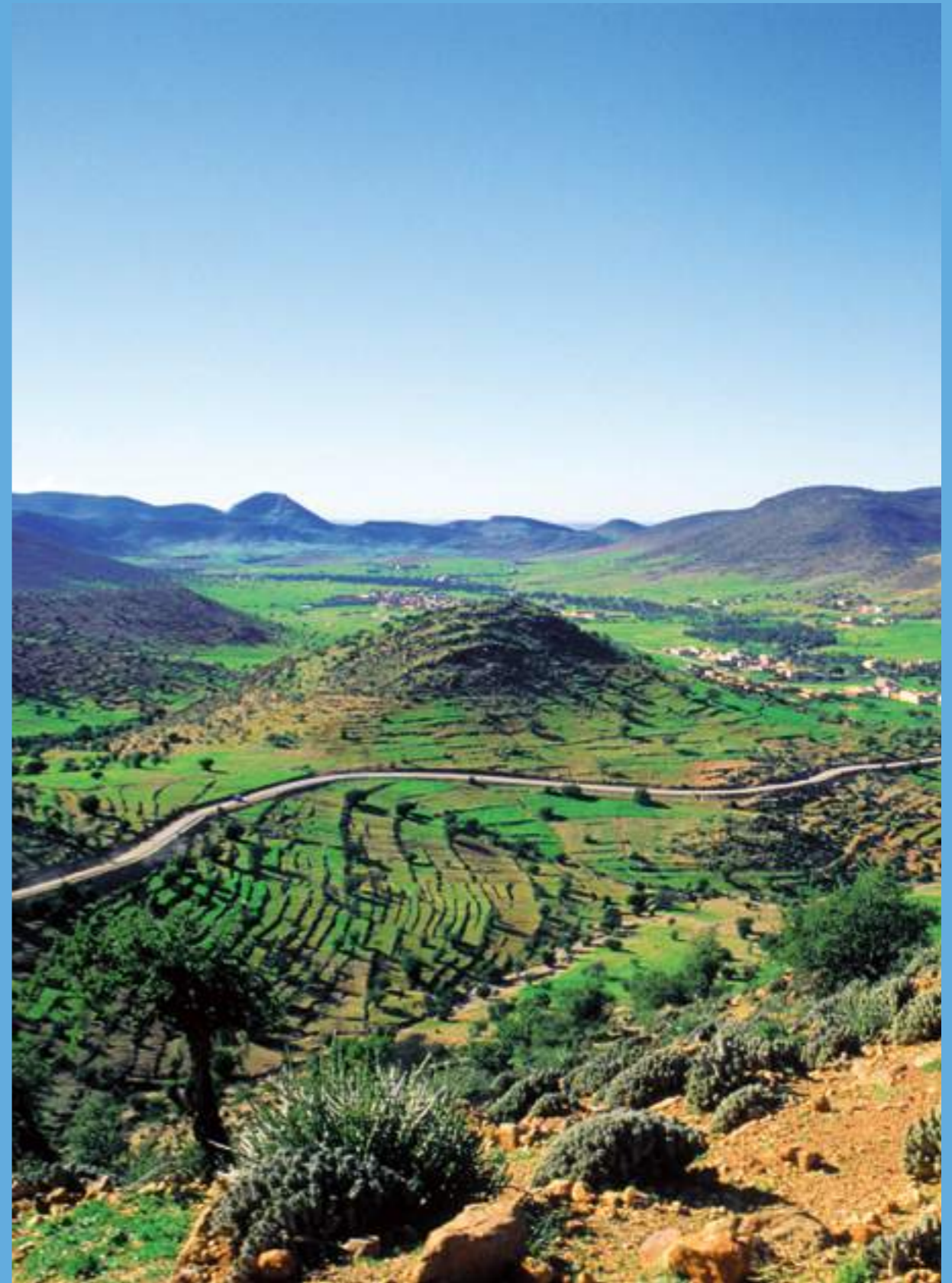


*A Berber woman works at extracting argan oil*

You can wander the length of the coast along cliffside pathways or white sandy beaches, in discovery of the little fishing villages that border the ocean.

### Towards Marrakech

Cross the great desert plains that separate Essaouira from Marrakech, and the giddy peaks of the Atlas Mountains stand towering above you. The Toubkal National Park makes a perfect setting for a gentle stroll or a more physically challenging spot of trekking, with its varied relief of plateaus, cliffs, steep gorges, ridges, water courses and lakes. Standing 4,167 metres above sea level, Djebel Toubkal is North Africa's highest peak. It's not too hard to climb, and local muleteers are on hand to ensure you don't overtax yourself!



*Essaouira's hinterland – argan tree country*

## Information and useful addresses

### Entry formalities :

A valid passport for a stay of less than 90 days is required. An identity card may suffice, depending on country of origin, if the trip is organised by a travel agency for a group of over 8 people. A visa is required for some nationalities – enquire at a Moroccan consulate or diplomatic representation in your country.

No specific vaccinations are required for entry into the Kingdom of Morocco. If you are bringing your pet along with you, however, you will need to be able to produce an anti-rabies certificate less than 6 months old.

### Changing money :

Moroccan currency is the dirham, made up of 100 centimes. Foreign currency must be exchanged at banks or other accredited establishments.

### Time zone :

Morocco is in the Greenwich time zone, and time is G.M.T.

### Event Calendar :

April : Printemps Musical des Alizés Festival  
 June : Gnaoua World Music Festival  
 June : Safi Surfing Tournament  
 August : Kiteboarding Cup  
 September : Atlantic Andalusia Festival

### Regional Tourist Office :

10, Rue de Caire BP 261 Essaouira  
 Tel: (00 212) 05 24 78 35 32  
 Fax: (00 212) 05 24 78 35 30

### 26 rue Imam Malek Safi

Tel: (00 212) 05 24 62 24 96  
 Fax: (00 212) 05 24 62 45 53

### Essaouira Provincial Tourism Council :

Boulevard Mohammed V, Hôtel des Iles  
 Tel: (00 212) 05 24 78 36 36  
 Fax: (00 212) 05 24 78 55 90

### ONCF Railway station :

Call center : 08 90 20 30 40  
 Website : [www.oncf.ma](http://www.oncf.ma)

### Airport :

Call center : 08 90 00 08 00

### Golf : Mogador Golf Club

[www.golfdemogador.com](http://www.golfdemogador.com)

### Weather forecast : [www.meteoma.net](http://www.meteoma.net)

### Office des Changes :

(Currency regulation authorities)  
[www.oc.gov.ma](http://www.oc.gov.ma)

### Emergency phone numbers :

Police 19  
 Fire Brigade 150  
 Directory enquiries 160  
 Road safety services 177



For further information: [www.visitmorocco.com](http://www.visitmorocco.com)





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