



TAZA

On the Edge of the World

During the reigning era of the Almohad and Merenid dynasties, Taza was the capital of Morocco. Because of its key location directly in between the Rif Mountains and the Middle Atlas, those who controlled this city, also controlled the trade going on in between them. The area in between the two mountains is known as the Taza Gap and was pinpointed and captured by none other than Moulay Idriss before he headed through Fez and resided in his fortress in Meknes.

Taza is a city in northern Morocco, about 100 km east of Fez. It has a population of 139,686 (2004 census) and is the capital of Taza Province.

Located south of the Rif Mountains, the city is composed of two formerly separate towns built on separate terraces overlooking a mountain valley. The old town (medina) is at an elevation of 1,919 feet (585 m) above sea level and is surrounded by fortifications; the newer town, established by the French in 1920, is located in a fertile plain at an elevation of 1,460 feet (445 m). Fossil remains indicate that caves in the area were inhabited as early as the Paleolithic Period.

The city is located in a mountain pass known as the "Taza Gap", through which successive waves of invaders moved westward onto the Atlantic coastal plains of northwestern Africa. Taza was founded by Miknasa Berbers (approximately at the time of the late 7th century Arab Muslim conquest), who gave allegiance to the Idrisids in 790 and later joined with the Fatimids of Kairouan. The Almoravids took over Taza in 1074 and were replaced by the Almohads in 1132. In 1248 the city was captured by the Marinids. Although Taza barred the route of Turks from Algiers seeking conquest in what is now Morocco, it fell to the French in 1914. The medina houses barbican monuments, mosques, and a 14th-century madrasah (school). Population in 1982 stood at 77,216. Population now estimated about 160,000.

Sights

The old town's main thoroughfare is enlivened by the Grain Market and the Souks where wickerwork, tapestries, jewellery, and a great variety of Berber handiwork from the mountains are offered for sale. The road terminates at a square doubling as a parade ground which sports the Al-Andalous Mosque. The Mosque's minaret, constructed in the 14th century, is wider at the top than at its base. Bab el-Qebbour Street crosses the Kissaria (covered marketplace), then leads on to the Market Mosque where it meets up with Bab Jamaa gate, the main point of entry of Taza. Somewhat further south, across from Bab el-Rih, the Wind Gate, a bastion dating from the 16th Century closes the ring around the kasbah. Taza's city walls, raised in the 12th Century and frequently enlarged on later occasions were equipped with a Borj or fortified tower 26 metres (85 ft) wide at the base by the Saadi Ahmed el-Mansour in the 16th Century. The gate with iron grate and the casemates with terraced roofs are clearly influenced by European military architecture of the time.

Great Mosque of Taza

The Great Mosque of Taza (Jamaa El-Kbir) is the most prominent building in the medina of Taza, not far from the Bab er-Rih ("Gate of the winds"). It was built by the Almohad sultan Abd al-Mu'min in the period after 1142. According to the Kitab el Istisbar



the walls were completed in 1172. The mosque was enlarged during the reign of the Marinid dynasty in 1292-1293.

The mosque is a one of the last remaining examples of Almohad excellence in architecture. With the general public it is also known for its large chandelier (with inscription) weighing approximately 3 tons.

The Spectacular Underground World of the Friouato Caves

Near the town of Taza lies one of the most breathtaking natural attractions in Morocco. The Friouato Caves, or Gouffre de Friouato, make up the largest known cave system in Northern Africa and the site has become increasingly popular with visitors and tourists. Gouffre de Friouato was first explored by Norbet Casteret in the year 1930.

The amazing "Gouffre du Friouato" can be reached going up the mountain passing Ras ElMa direction Merhraoua. These caves are 800m off the road from Taza turning right up the hill. You pay 3DH to go inside the upper level (40m high) of the caves which is already very interesting to see. It can be a bit cold so bring a jacket; you can get a guide for 40Dh that will take on a 3km trip down the Earth on an unforgettable journey. These caves are said to be the

biggest in Northern Africa.

The road leading to the Friouato Caves is quite steep, but is fortunately tarred for most of the way. All guests and visitors to the caves will be led on this amazing journey by a guide who will take them safely through the cave system. To enter the caves, visitors need to descend down a hundred-meter shaft to reach several large chambers. It is also recommended that visitors take their own flashlights with them as the caves are extremely dark inside. A warm jacket should also be worn since many find the caves to be a little cold. Comfortable and sturdy walking shoes are advisable since a little climbing and navigation through rocky and slippery areas form part of the cave exploration journey.

The Friouato Caves stretch for kilometers underground, with the deepest cavern being 150 feet deep. Some parts along the way tend to be quite narrow but the few struggles along the way are definitely worth the effort. The caves are decorated in beautiful stalagmites and rock features. Their true beauty can be seen when shining a flashlight on them and seeing them sparkle in the light. Water and many slimy rocks and stones are also found in the cave. And, as with any cave system, the Friouato Caves are home to a large family of bats.

Professional cave explorers have ventured as far as 272 meters deep into the caves and it is believed that there is an underground river that flows near the Grottes du Chiker. This cave system stretches for 3.8 kilometers and is it is not advisable that inexperienced cavers attempt to explore it.

Gouffre de Friouato is definitely worth the visit. The caves are an amazing experience and give visitors the rare opportunity to discover this hidden world of darkness. Surrounding the caves are magnificent landscapes that form part of a nature reserve. This is just another of the spectacular attractions in Morocco.

Practicalities

HOTELS AND ALTERNATIVES

In the medina, where you might have wanted most to stay, there is only one hotel. And it is very basic, and not terribly charming, nor as cheap as it should be. In the modern town, there are more opportunities, but still you do not have much to choose from. Standards are disappointing, and even those with some money to spend will not get much in return in terms of standards and charm.

RESTAURANTS AND ALTERNATIVES

Not much to choose from, most places are quite simple, and not overly exciting.

NIGHTLIFE

Little, even if there are some hotel bars. These tend to be full of men, only, and a bit seedy.

CHANGE MONEY

Taza has the necessary banks for changing money.

TRANSPORT

There are plenty of buses, trains and shared taxis that will bring you to your next destination. These include Nador, Al-Hoceima, Oujda, Fez, Meknes, Rabat and Casablanca.