

# Buying a Carpet in Morocco



The VERY little I know about Moroccan carpets and how to buy them in Morocco is explained below.

Disclaimer: This work is not 100% mine. I have kludged together some of the work and wisdom of others that has helped me in the search for my own carpets and added my own thoughts, ideas, and text here & there.

I will say that the statements below are not purely academic: I have perused Medinas and souks in Marrakesh, Fez, Casablanca, Essaouira, Rabat, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi. I have purchased rugs from multi-generational vendors who spoke every conceivable language – especially the numbers – and who have seen every bargaining trick known to man. You have not lived a full life until you have seen a mustached Moroccan man and a tiny Chinese lady in serious heated discussion over a quoted piece of Beni-Mguild, wildly gesturing with their hands while barking in Mandarin at each other.

I have also walked away from deals after bargaining for a couple of hours. There is a hanbel (kilim is the Turkish word) in Essaouira that I left folded on the floor there that still calls to me. Every so often my wife will say, “Remember that rug...” and we both get a little sad. I do not claim that I am the world’s greatest negotiator or that I have never been taken advantage of by a market seller – I have.

If there is someone out there reading this that feels my info – any of it - is wrong or misleading, write me, tell me what I need to know/change. I will update this doc and list them as a primary source in an endnote/footnote. I can be reached at: [matt\(at symbol\)drivenoutside\(dot\)com](mailto:matt(at symbol)drivenoutside(dot)com)

~Matt Talley October 2014

---

Moroccan carpets can be loosely grouped into rural or urban, Berber or Arab. In general and as a sort of rule, urban carpets are influenced by the fine, oriental designs of the Middle East and are intricately detailed.

## THE URBAN CARPET

The Urban carpet has two sub-categories. Although these sub-categories are of the same origin, each type has achieved its special identity over the years. Both types can be classified as fine quality carpets. Of purely Eastern-Arabo-Persian origin, each has undergone profound

transformation in the last century and taken on its own stamp. New designs and juxtapositions of colors have been added to enrich a very diverse 'language' of the textiles. Except for extra high quality carpet, which is 100 percent wool, these carpets are made of wool knotted on a warp and weft of cotton yarn.

1. THE RABAT RBATI CARPET - PRONOUNCED RA-BA-TEE

- a. Introduced by the Gharnatis, who were expelled from Andalusia, these rugs reflect that region in their floral and animal motifs(not usually seen in Arabic textiles in other regions). The Rbati carpet is identified by its wide ornate border around a rather free red central field containing either a medallion and grain motifs or a large cartouche, called the Koubba. The execution and selection of colors are carried out with particular care. The average size of these carpets is three meters high by two meters wide, although custom sizes can be ordered for a princely sum.

2. THE MEDIOUNA CARPET - PRONOUNCED MED-E-OO-NA

- a. Also of Eastern origin, this rug is noted for the attention given to its central field. Unlike the Rbati carpet, the Mediouna carpet often contains several medallions, leaving very little room for the border. The average size of these carpets are 2.12 meters high by 1.7 meters wide, but other sizes can be found.

Both Urban carpet varieties are judged the same relative to quality and price. There are typically four quality standards:

1. Standard

- a) The Standard Quality, also known as Moyen Atlas (Middle Atlas), uses a wool/cotton blend yarn, has approximately 20,000 knots per square meter, and has the lesser-defined crispness in its design motifs. Select standard quality Moroccan rugs for basic wool and cotton blend yarns. Because of the looser weave, the rug designs are not as intricate as higher quality Moroccan carpets.

2. Medium

- a) Few carpet cooperatives offer the Medium quality as it is so similar to the Standard quality and is used in the souks as a price elevator.

3. High

- a) The High Quality grade uses a better quality of wool/cotton blend yarn, has approximately 90,000 knots per square meter (3.3 feet), and has more defined sharpness/crispness in its design motifs than those classified in the standard quality category.

- b) Ask to look at two similar designs of Medium and High Grades side by side on the seller's floor. View them from standing and close-up to get an idea of the difference for yourself.
4. Extra High
- a) The Extra High Quality uses premium grade wool, has approximately 160,000 knots per square meter, and has stunning design motifs. Because of the dense knotting of the rugs, the designs are the most intricate of the crop above.

## **THE RURAL CARPET**

Rural Berber carpets (arguably more interesting if you are after the street level, day to day flavor of Morocco) are hand-woven into abstract patterns and symbols that tell the stories of a tribe and are expressions of Moroccan tribal tradition. Rural rugs are usually made in the regions surrounding Marrakech and the Atlas Mountains and foothills. Because these areas had little exposure to Mediterranean influences, the weaving designs represent "authentic" Moroccan traditions. Rural rugs have no backing, and the back of the rug displays the intricate knotting and weaving of the carpet.

Possessing a tribal look, the design, colors and motifs of rural rugs are chosen by each artisan. The textures and weaving materials of the rugs vary by region; and can feature high pile, loosely knotted wool weaves in colder climates, or low pile, tightly knotted cotton weaves in warmer climates.

Carpets from the Middle Atlas – zanafi – have a deep, woolen pile to keep out the cold and are usually long and narrow. The creamy shedwi carpets of the High and Middle Atlas Beni Ourain and Beni Mguild tribes are decorated with simple black or dark brown patterns. The Haouz carpets of the west, between the Atlas and the Atlantic, have free-floating shapes and bright colours.

Kilims (Turkish word), or hanbels (in the Moroccan tradition), from Chichaoua, are flat-woven rugs with detailed geometric designs and usually colored in black, white, Orange (modern), and yellow on a red background.

Berber carpets – with their unique, irreverent, free-form designs – are informal and fun and tend to work well in modern, western decors – think Mid-Century Modern to Minimalism. As such, certain types of Moroccan carpet – the Beni Ourain and Beni Mguild in particular – have recently become the height of fashion in some western urban style meccas and the prices reflect this popularity.

## **Before Buying**

1. Before heading out on your trip/shopping excursion, measure the room or area where the rug will be displayed/live – floor/wall. The measurements typically should allow for a border of flooring to show along the outside perimeter of the rug – you don't want your carpet to hit the walls or be wedged against the furniture.

Consider several different sizes for each room. Areas like entryways, hallways and dining rooms may not allow flexibility with sizing. However, bedrooms and living rooms usually allow you to consider several carpet sizes based on various furniture arrangements in the rooms. The greater the range of possible rug sizes, the more choices you will have when purchasing a hand-woven carpet.

As this is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and everyone and their grandmother has a giant-screened super resolution Smart phone; take pictures of the furniture/room/other carpets to match with

2. Determine a budget for your carpet purchase as rugs are available in a wide range of prices, from a few hundred dollars to several thousand dollars. Factors like the rug size and materials affect the price. Urban rugs are generally more expensive than rural rugs.

The big question of course is what is a fair price? The answer: What you are willing to pay is **the right price**. Keep a figure in mind and stick to it.

To get an idea of prices I suggest visiting government run artist cooperatives before shopping in earnest, which are typically listed in the usual suspects of guide books. They have fixed prices and the quality is consistently good but the prices will be higher than if you successfully bargain, but cheaper than you will find on the internet or in your home country. Shopping in these spots will mean, of course, that you will miss out on the experience of the souks, the tea, the haggling. You want that experience, even if only once. It is a thing that adds flavor to your life story and good or bad, should be on every bucket list. I once told the story of my first rug purchase at a party and the whole place was transfixed. Not saying that out of ego; it is an awesome story.

3. Select a Moroccan Carpet Dealer
  - a) An expert dealer can provide information about the quality, fiber content and region of origin for each rug and a reputable dealer will provide comparisons between different rugs and won't try to persuade you to purchase a specific rug or type.

- b) Look for a Moroccan carpet dealer who specializes in hand-woven Moroccan rugs, and provides a large selection of rugs available in the store. This is an easy task in the souks or Medina and sellers will raid other sellers for JUST the item you are looking for, carpets and money go back and forth between the stalls and rooms all day.
- c) Ask each prospective rug dealer about where the rugs were made. There are 45ish Moroccan tribal groups that make rugs and each tribal group has its own distinctive design and weaving styles. An educated carpet dealer will be able to provide insight into where the rug was created and details of the producers. But know that the more he talks before the deal is struck the more he will use the “special” nature of the rug to up the price.

#### 4. Evaluate the Quality of the Rug

- a) Determine if the rug is hand-knotted. Authentic Moroccan carpets are hand-knotted (unless loomed). It can take months for an artisan to complete 1 hand-knotted rug.
- b) Consider the general categories of Moroccan carpet quality. Rugs are made in several density categories. The higher the knots per inch, the finer the weave of the rug. Intricate designs require higher knots per inch. More knots = higher price.
- c) Request information about the material from which the rug is constructed. Most rugs are made of wool and cotton blends.
  - a. Choose 100 percent wool rugs for the highest quality product. Wool is the most durable fiber, but there are many grades of wool. For the softest grade of wool, look for rugs crafted from live wool, which is sheared from a live sheep (ask after the bargaining process has begun).
  - b. Select wool and cotton blend Moroccan rugs. Wool and cotton blend rugs are the most popular type of carpet. The rugs are durable, and the blended materials allow for design flexibility.
  - c. Avoid rugs made of synthetic materials. Because they are hand woven with natural materials readily available in the local geographic area, authentic Moroccan carpets are rarely made with synthetic materials.
- d) Inquire whether natural or synthetic dyes were used on the carpet's fibers.
  - a. Purchase a rug made with natural dyes for greater “authenticity”. Rural rugs are typically made with all natural dyes. The natural dyes from from indigo plants, poppy flowers, and saffron provide rich colors. However, the natural dyes may fade over time.

- b. Buy a rug made with synthetic dyes for a wider range of colors. Some urban rugs contain synthetic dyes, especially those custom-ordered in specific shades (Purple, Orange, Pink, Light Blue, Green...). Often, synthetic colors can appear harsh on a hand-woven rug, so ensure the color palette is pleasing before you purchase the rug. Synthetic dyes do tend to hold their color over time better than natural dyes.
5. In the medinas of Morocco, business is still conducted like it has been for centuries and an integral part of that is bargaining. While a way of life in many cultures where price tags are non-existent, haggling can be intimidating for the uninitiated.

Marrakesh is hardcore and one of the worst places in Morocco to buy a carpet. It's a tourist mecca, resulting in a higher price to fleecing ratio. But since most first time visitors go to Marrakesh during some point of their trip, I'll focus on them and the tactics used/seen there. It's the extreme end of the spectrum, but if you can haggle successfully there you can haggle anywhere and at any other dealer in Morocco. Casablanca is calmer, but you still have to follow the rules and "dance" described below.

Upon entering any carpet shop you will be offered a warm welcome and asked a series of questions, disguised as small talk, which are used to calculate how high your starting price will be. The carpet merchant, like any good salesman, is qualifying your spending potential. Here are some of the typical questions and a translation of their underlying meaning:

Where are you from?

If you are from North America, Japan, Western Europe, the U.K. or Australia the starting price will be higher.

Wherever you say, they will have a friend from there, have been there themselves or have a child/grandchild studying close by. This is a "shared Experience" tactic and is meant to gain your trust.

Have you been to Morocco/Marrakesh before?

If you say no, the price goes up and you are now considered an ATM. Seriously.

How long have you been in Marrakesh/Fez/Caza/Rabat/\_\_\_\_\_?

The less time the higher the price.

How long have you been in Morocco?

Again, the less time the higher the price.

### Is this your 1<sup>st</sup> carpet?

If you say yes or even look like it is a possibility, then Cha-Ching!!

### What do you do for a living?

The answer doesn't really matter unless you are an engineer, banker, doctor, lawyer, then you are perceived as having more to spend. Mostly it is just to get you/keep you talking as part of the time investment you will have in the purchase

Haggling is a friendly dance that requires time, patience, and humor. You can easily spend a few hours from start to finish buying a carpet. During this time a plethora of them will be unfolded and placed at your feet for you to admire. There will be mint tea to drink – a lot.

Tell the seller roughly what color and size you are looking for – more if you know more. After a significant array of carpets has been displayed, the process of elimination begins. Naturally don't be overly enthusiastic when you've found something you like. While carpets you have given the thumbs down to are taken away.

When the initial elimination is complete it's time for the grand finale--the big price reveal of your potential purchase. Expect to hear: "For you my friend, a special price!" and/or "Tell me which one you like, you are my first customer of the day so I'll give you a special price and it will bring me good luck," and similar variations – it is all part of the dance. An outrageously high figure will be quoted. Exasperation and anger will get you nowhere except out the door. Offer 1/8 – 1/4 of that price, but do so with humility. Your offer will possibly be met like an insult, with incredulous looks and a song & dance about the fine quality of the workmanship, the woman who worked six months weaving, and other psychological warfare ploys to tap your guilt vault and have you open your wallet. It's all part of the game. Keep your smiling poker face and keep your cool and give a smiling nod periodically while the dramatics continue. They will be followed by a better price, at which point you up your ante a bit – but just a bit, don't give away the farm. This process is repeated until a price is agreed.

One of my favorite ploys is:

*"Five women worked on this rug for a month and one went blind doing it. Think of those women. They are supporting families so this rug will feed 30 people, the Wool from this rug came from 100 sheep and it takes 50 people to herd, feed, and shear those sheep. Think of their families. The poor devils dying the wool and their families.... This rug supports 900 people and you offer me that?!"*

If, however, you reach an impasse on price there is one last move. Thank the merchant for his time, the good tea, apologize for not being able to afford his quality goods, pack your gear, and walk to the door. If you are still in the ball park then about 98% of the time he will come after you asking your "final" best price or lowering his. Know that he still has a little headroom to go down, but if you try to seize the opportunity and really cut the offered price, then he will take offence and you get to dance and drink tea with someone else.

### Bargaining Tips:

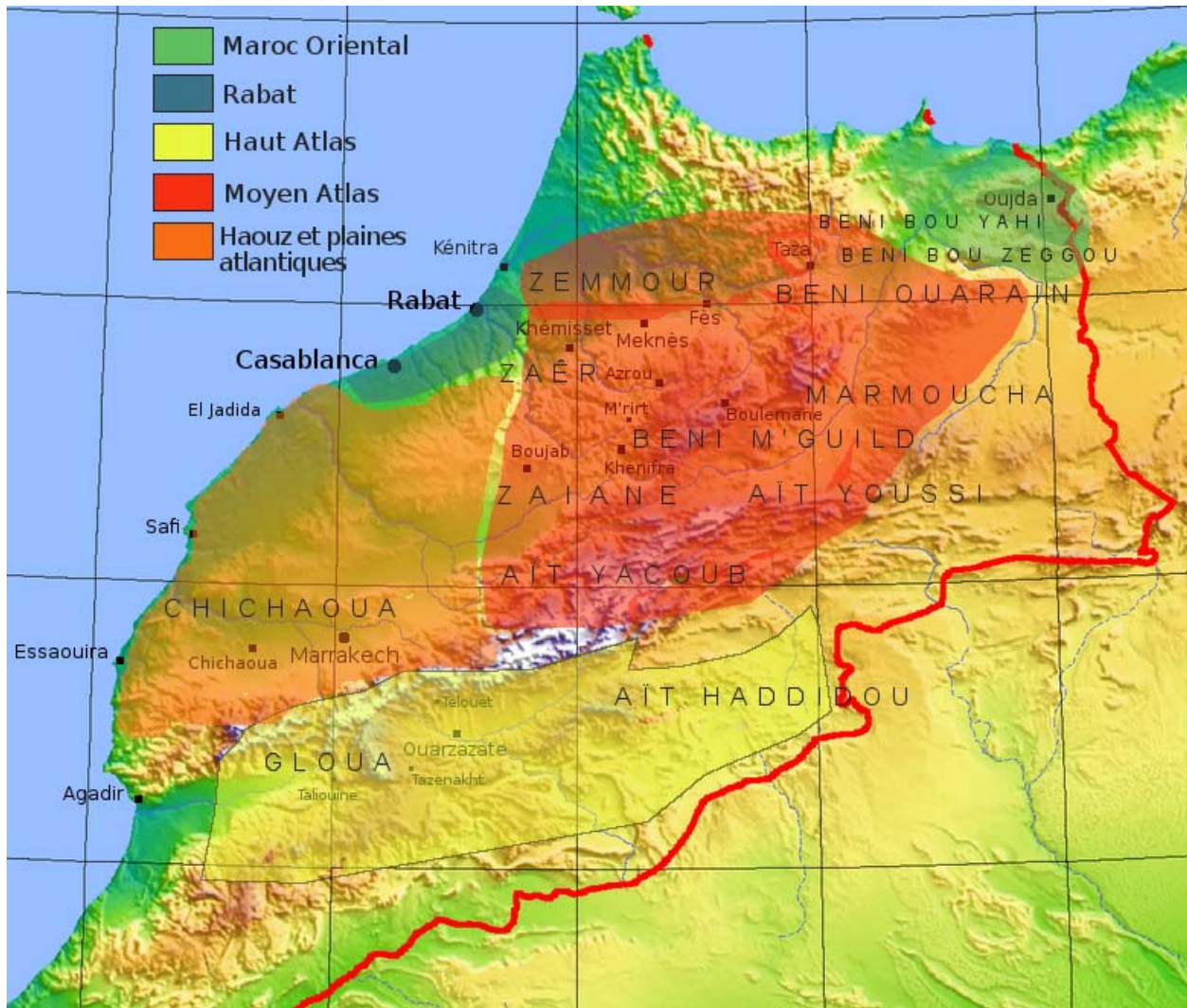
- Know what your budget is and don't exceed it.
- Do not read/glace at a couple of books and think that you are an expert or even a novice in the carpet world.
- Check out artists co-operatives to get an idea of price (the very upper limit)
- During the initial screening don't say you just got to town or that this is you 1<sup>st</sup> trip or last day... remember the above
- Leave your tourist accruements behind. No backpack and no camera around your neck. Put good shoes on – you are here to shop and bargain and not sight see
- Take a calculator – not your phone, but a bulky easy to read calculator – use it in the negotiations so there are no misunderstandings.
- Do not pretend to be an expert at anything concerning carpet. You will be seen through in about 3 seconds.
- No religion or politics shall be discussed or inferred
- If you like something don't show it
- Keep your cool no matter how hard it is
- Be polite and smile
- Never go down on a price you have stated you are willing to pay. Super faux-pas! Once it is out there, it has to stay on the table or the deal is dead. Really.
- The dealer will NEVER sell at a loss.
- Don't let the guilt tug at your purse strings – the seller's watch and shoes cost more than yours – remember that.
- If you are quoted an overly outrageous price, chuckle a little and come back with an outrageously low counter offer (remember to smile) to start the process all over again, maybe in earnest this time
- Prepare to spend a few hours and drink a LOT of tea
- If you agree on a deal, have your seller educate you about the carpet and the tribe, etc... Take your picture with him and the rug.
- Finally, if you really don't want to purchase something, then don't - no matter what drama might ensue
- Tell your host, apologetically, that you cannot afford his very fine wears, that you are not rich and only a \_\_\_\_\_. Say goodbye and thank you.



A Moroccan map showing the major cities and provinces:



## A couple of different Tribal rug maps as well as the historic regions of Morocco:





# Quick and Dirty Guide to what the different carpet styles from the different regions look like:



1900 beni ouarain handira cape



Ait Ouaouzguite pile Jebel Siroua region



ait-bou-ichaouen



ait-ouaouzguite-camels



azial-carpet-k



azial-carpet-grid



beni alaham-pillow



Beni M'guila#1



Beni M'guila#2 (1)



Beni Ourain Genuine #8



beni-bou-yahi



beni-mguild-blue-diamond



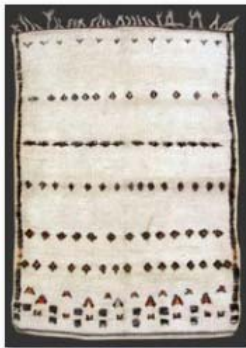
beni-mguild-blue-mono



beni-mguild-kilim



beni-mguild-tree



beni-mguild-white



beni-mtir-carpet



beni-mtir-kilim



beni-ouarain-leopard



Berber Chorouk



Boucherouite #1



glaoui-coltrane



glaoui-yellow



jeldassen-old



Marmoucha #1



marmoucha-carpet



marmoucha-carpet-viola



modern Handira



NICE Beni Ouarain



Old Beni Ouarain #8



ouaouzguite-square



rabat-1800



rabat-transylvanian



rehamna-gtifa



rehamna-zarbia



tamassine



Zaiane #3



Zanafi #1



Zemmour #1



Zemmour 80yrs



Zemmour all wool



Zemmour C-W



zenaga-checker-colored



zenaga-grey



zenaga-TM-879



Zian #11



zkara



### **Print References:**

Pickering, Brooke - Moroccan Carpets - Laurence King Pub, New York - 1998 - 160 pgs - 1856691462 - Print

Barbatti, Bruno - Berber Carpets of Morocco: The Symbols Origin and Meaning – A.C.R edition - 2867701848 - 2009 - 344pgs - Print

Hull, Alastair and Jose Luczyc-Wyhowska - Kilim, The Complete Guide: History, Pattern, Technique, Identification Paperback – Chronicle Books - 0811828883 - 2000 - Print

DK Eyewitness Travel Guide: Morocco Paperback – DK Publishing - 0756685818 - 2012 - 408 pgs - Print

Jacobs, Daniel and Keith Drew and Thomas Hollowell - The Rough Guide to Morocco – Rough Guides - 1409362418 - 2013 - 624 pgs - Print

Shah, Tahir - The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca – Bantam - 0553383108 - 2006 - 368 pgs - Print/e-Book

*(Nothing to really do with Moroccan carpets, but a great book about life in modern Morocco. Read before you go)*

York, Jillian - Morocco - Culture Smart!: the essential guide to customs & culture - Kuperard – 1857333373 - 2006 - 168 pgs - Print

Khatibi, Abdelkebir and Ali AmahanFrom - Sign to Image: The Moroccan Carpet – Antique Collectors' Club Pub. - 9981871044 - 1997 - 187pgs - Print/e-Book

Allane, Lee - Kilims: A Buyer's Guide – Thames & Hudson, 0500278415 - 1995 - 144 pgs - Print

Gomersall, Susan and Bruce M. Waters - Kilim Rugs: Tribal Tales in Wool - Schiffer Publishing – 0764311581 - 128 pgs - Print

Eiland, Murray - Oriental Carpets: A Complete Guide – Bulfinch - 0821225480 - 1998 - 352 pgs - Print

Stone, Peter F. - The Oriental Rug Lexicon - Thames & Hudson - 0500279497 - 2003 - \_\_\_pgs - Print

### **Web Sources:**

The View From Fez,

<http://riadzany.blogspot.fr/p/beginners-guide-to-moroccan-carpets.html>

October 25, 2014

<http://riadzany.blogspot.fr/search/label/Carpets>

October 25, 2014

### Insite Guides

<http://www.insightguides.com/destinations/africa-middle-east/morocco/marrakech/cultural-features/buying-a-moroccan-carpet>

October 25, 2014

<http://www.insightguides.com/inspire-me/blog/morocco-how-to-haggle>

October 25, 2014

### Berber-Arts

<http://www.berber-arts.com/berber/index.php/editorial/vintage-moroccan-berber-rugs>

October 25, 2014

### h2g2 The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: Earth Edition

[http://h2g2.com/edited\\_entry/A87809142](http://h2g2.com/edited_entry/A87809142)

October 15, 2014

### Oaxaca Cultural Navigator : Norma Hawthorne

<http://oaxacaculture.com/2013/10/morocco-journal-8-land-of-a-million-carpets-and-a-magic-ride/>

January 18, 2014

### The Planet D

<http://theplanetd.com/carpet-sellers-scam-fes-morocco/>

October 14, 2014

### WikiHow

<http://www.wikihow.com/Buy-Moroccan-Carpet>

October 24, 2014

### Nazmiyal Collection

<http://nazmiyalantiquerugs.com/antique-rugs/moroccan-rugs-vintage-carpets/>

October 24, 2014