

MARRAKECH WITHOUT THE MADNESS

Beyond the notorious mayhem of the medina, the Moroccan city takes it easy...



A visit to the Red City doesn't need to be a frantic, fleeting one – linger for longer than the obligatory weekend and you can have a proper holiday, poolside naps and all. Pick a pretty riad to hide away in – the grand Moroccan houses were built to provide privacy, so you'll always find a peaceful hammock or daybed – and dip in and out of the fantastically-barmy medina at your pace.

By Laura Goodman

WHAT TO SEE & DO

● To get your bearings, check your hotel's proximity to the Koutoubia Mosque (① on map), and use it as a homing device. It's a beautiful landmark, which makes Marrakchi sunsets doubly special. **Before you immerse yourself, observe the madness of the main square, Djemma el Fna** (②) from its perimeter – Café de France (Place Jemaa; ③) has a perfect roof terrace: order a mint tea and relax.

● Majorelle Garden (00 212 524 313047, www.jardinmajorelle.com; £3; ④) is stunning, calming and captivating, even if you lack green fingers. Yves Saint Laurent bought the oasis-like space in 1980, renovated it and opened it to the public. **Pots and pathways are painted electric blue, with the odd flash of yellow and turquoise**; you'll need to do at least two loops to take in flowering cacti, fan-like palms, shady huddles of bamboo and pretty lily ponds.

● There is no point trying to approach the souk logically (⑤) – there are hundreds of stalls within the covered maze. Start of trading hours is the quietest time (around 9am); simply get stuck in. Keep some change on you though – for the young guides who will rush to help you if you get lost. **Leather pouffes, silk slippers, glass lamps and ceramics are among the best buys** – the same sell for quadruple the price at markets back home.

● Skip the touristy tagine classes – Edwina Golombek hosts educational feasts. Spend a day at her riad, cooking and eating **twice-rolled couscous, honeyed aubergines, tomato jam, rosewater meringue and saffron custard**. She'll take you to the traders' market so you don't get ripped off, and teach you how to make proper mint tea (Riad Zitoune Lakdim, Derb Jdid 81; 00 212 524 386537, www.houseoffusionmarrakech.com; £95 for a day; ⑥).

● At every opportunity, locals make for the mountains. The Ourika valley (⑦) begins to stretch out an hour's drive from the city – it's **wonderfully-majestic, dotted with villages, rug emporiums, waterfalls and wildflowers**. Hire a taxi for the day from Marrakech for around £30 – tour guides wait in Ourika village, at the foot of the valley, or you can hop in and out of the car at will. If you can stay, Kasbah Bab Ourika is a hilltop haven (00 212 661 252328, www.babourika.com; doubles from £130, B&B).

● Marrakech's mosques, mosaics and gardens pack in plenty of colour and pattern to inspire, and new galleries are popping up all the time. **See a selection of modern art from artists all over the world at the serenely-chic David Bloch Gallery** (8 Bis Rue des Vieux Marrakchis; www.davidblochgallery.com; ⑧). It's set in a once-derelict building in Gueliz (the new town), northwest of the medina.

Spice whirl: from left, the dreamy pool at La Mamounia; a rare quiet moment in the medina; the Koutoubia Mosque is a towering central landmark; tour the markets on Edwina Golombek's cooking course

● La Mamounia (Avenue Bab Jedid; 00 212 524 388600, www.mamounia.com; ⑨) is Morocco's *grande dame* hotel, fresh from its big-bucks 2009 refurb, and **still gleaming from its part in *Sex and the City 2***. Dabble in its decadence at La Menzeh, the tranquil pavilion cafe, which serves candied-lemon sorbet, fig and almond pastries, and dark-chocolate dates.

● Spend a day at Les Bains de Marrakech (2 Derb Sedra; 00 212 524 381428, www.lesbainsdemarrakech.com; ⑩) and submit to **the swish version of a traditional hammam experience**. Book into a private cabin, and add pampering extras such as algae body wraps, black-soap scrubs and clay masks. From £60pp a day. >

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WHERE TO STAY

Riad Chi-Chi (12 Derb el Anoub; 00 212 524 389857, www.riadchichi.com; 11). Calm amid chaos like only Marrakech knows how, Riad Chi-Chi is a picture of cool, quiet elegance, next to the souk. There's light linen and peachy marble, a canopied chill-out area on the roof, a petal-speckled plunge pool, and just enough tassels and teapots. Doubles from £65, B&B.

P'tit Habibi (59 Bis Taoula Sidi Ghanem; 00 212 524 378887, www.ptithabibi.com; 12). This 'Little Darling' is a boutique beauty in the medina, run by Abdelouafi, the city's most helpful man (his ability to spot landmarks so you never get lost is exceptional). Stunning mirrors, fabrics, plates and art dot the hotel. Doubles from £85, B&B.

Riad Madani (64 Derb Moulay Abdelkader; 00 212 524 441884, www.riad-madani-marrakech.com; 13). If you favour palatial, this diamond was once the home of a 'Grand Vizier'. There are mosaics, antiques and ornaments aplenty in a discreet setting, surrounded by jungle-like courtyards. Doubles from £85, B&B.

Riad El Fenn (Derb Moulay Abdullah Ben Hezzian; 00 212 524 441210, www.riadelfenn.com; 14). Behind thick walls, this townhouse is divided up into courtyards and 21 suites, full of squishy spaces, hammocks and pools. The art collection is brilliant – ask for details at reception. Breakfast includes divine spiced porridge on the roof. Doubles from £125, B&B.

Riad Joya (26-27 Derb el Hammam; 00 212 661 051676, www.riadjoya.com; 15). A team of Italian hoteliers is responsible for this chic, soothing, all-white riad. Each of the seven rooms is dedicated (subtly) to a different aspect of Morocco's history (Berber, Roman, Ottoman, Greek). Big bronze baths and white wicker chairs are firmly 2012. Doubles from £170, B&B.

Four Seasons (1 Blvd de la Menara; 00 212 524 359200, www.fourseasons.com/marrakech; 16). Among the deluge of big-brand hotels flooding the city's environs (Marrakech has space to grow outwards for miles), the Four Seasons is the most peaceful. Spend time dipping between enormous, pretty pools and lazing in the spa. Doubles from £320, B&B.

WHERE TO EAT
Catanzaro (42 Rue Tarek Ibn Ziad, Gueliz; 00 212 524 433731; 17). Locals adore this cheap and cheerful Alpine-style Italian in the new town, serving thin-crust pizzas from wood-fired ovens, plus steaks and a few French classics to appease the masses. Book ahead. Mains around £4.

LOCAL FLAVOUR
Chez Chegrouni (46 Djemma el Fna; 00 212 246 547615; 18). Many of the lunch spots on the square are regrettable, which makes this place all the more exciting. Seek it out from the riff-raff, and be rewarded with relative calm, mountains of couscous and spot-hitting tagines. Mains around £5.

COOL SPOT
Terrasse des Epices (15 Souk Cherifia, medina; 00 212 524 375904, www.terrassedeseepices.com; 19). For a snack, there's nowhere cooler to stop (literally – there are intermittent water spritzings). This roomy rooftop space is sleek, with huge booths strewn with cushions. The menu is a simple selection of grilled meats, salads and pasta. Mains around £7.50.

Al Fassia (55 Blvd Mohammed Zerkoutni, Gueliz; 00 212 524 434060, www.alfassia.com; 20). Rather uniquely for Marrakech, you can order à la carte at this charming spot (most places offer daily set-price menus). Locally-made lampshades give off low, dappled light, and refined tagines include chicken with lemon and olives. Save room for mint tea and homemade biscuits – a treat. Mains around £12.

Grand Café de la Poste (Angle Blvd El Mansour, Gueliz; 00 212 244 33038, www.grandcafedelaposte.com; 21). The restaurant everyone's still talking about (it opened five years ago, to widespread thrills) looks like a French brasserie from the '20s, but with potted palms, pergolas and a cushioned, Moroccan-style deck. It serves coffee and croissants as well as deluxe dinners of oysters, monkfish carpaccio and steak. Mains around £17.

La Pause (00 212 661 306494, www.lapause-marrakech.com; 22). Dine out properly – with astonishing views of the wilderness – at this firelit oasis in the Marrakchi desert (40 minutes from

Cool off: from left, lounge in the courtyards at hotel Riad El Fenn; stylish rooftop dining at Terrasse des Epices; local, traditional dishes are served up in the desert at La Pause

the medina). Tagines are brought to your tent, alongside fresh salads with just-pressed olive oil. They'll send a driver to pick you up, and if you like, you can stay over (doubles from £150, full board). Dinner from £45.

WHERE TO SNACK IN DJEMMA EL FNA

Put together your own gourmet meal for pennies on the main square (2) at night, but each of the 100 stalls has a pushy person whose job it is to lure you in. Just make a beeline for the dependable stall numbers below.

Number 5. Grab a bowl of *harira* – a tomato, lentil and chickpea soup, flavoured with saffron and ginger. Ignore the bread and sauce on the table and you won't have to pay for it (soup, 77p).

Number 26. Chez Saida has your big hitters: chicken couscous (£2.30), brochettes (£1.15) and the legendary *pastilla*, a pigeon-filled pastry, sprinkled with cinnamon (£1.50).

Number 31. Savvy travellers get merguez sausages in fresh bread 'to go' because the grill gets smoky and the benches busy (£1.15).

Finish with a cup of fiery ginseng, ginger and cinnamon tea from the carts on the front of the square – each vendor has his own blend (25p). ■

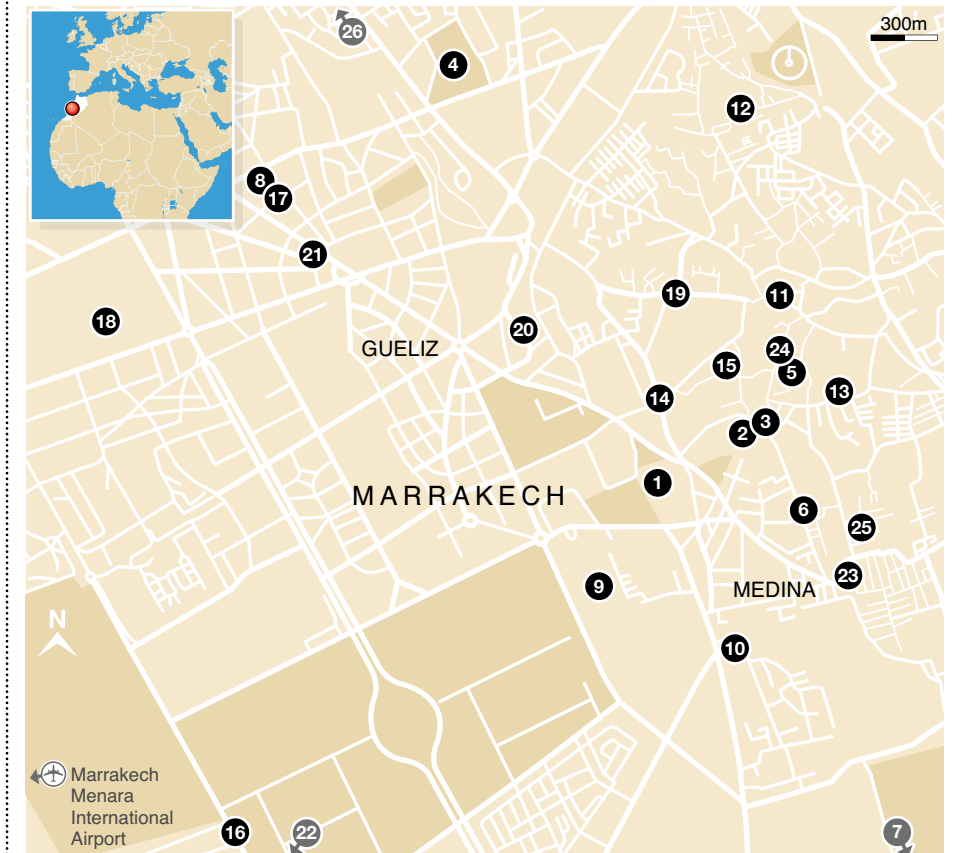
Ask the local



Edwina Golombek runs House of Fusion, a riad and cooking school (see 6). She has lived here for eight years

'The singer Prince recently bought several kaftans from my friend Nawal's shop, Aya's (11 Bis Derb Jdid Bab Mellah; 23); she sells fine silks and linens, embroidered by local women. **And I filled my riad with**

wonderful, fairly-priced leather carpets from Art Quarzazate (15 Rue Rahba Kdima; 24). At Souk Shkayria (ask for directions in the souk), Hassan Makhad at number 161 has the best leather journals – we use them for recipes. Cactus silk (actually rayon) is a speciality and holds dye beautifully. I love the blankets and throws at Mustapha Nait M'Barek (1 Imm Biaz, Kannaria; 25), **a cave in which you can watch the spinning and weaving.** If you don't mind brusque service, Sens de Marrakech (18ZI, Sidi Ghanem; www.lessensdemarrakech.com; 26) has beautiful oils and lotions.'



Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT

Royal Air Maroc (020 7307 5800, www.royalairmaroc.com) flies from Heathrow, via Casablanca, from £222 return. **EasyJet** (0843 104 5000, www.easyjet.com) flies from Gatwick and Manchester from £54. **Ryanair** (0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com) flies from Luton, Stansted, Bristol, East Midlands and Edinburgh from £46.

GO PACKAGED

Thomson (0871 231 4691, www.thomson.co.uk) has a week in a four-star hotel from £319pp, all-inclusive, including flights. **Kuoni** (0844 488 0327, www.kuoni.co.uk) has three nights in a five-star, from £402pp, B&B, with flights and transfers.

GETTING AROUND

Taxis are cheap and easily hailed. Most drivers refuse to

use the meter, but you can try and insist. Many will expect you to share with other people, and often expect you to barter. Journeys around the medina cost about £1.15 (15 dirhams), rising to £2.30 (30 dirhams) if you're travelling between the Old Town and the new. The trip to the airport is about £10.

FURTHER INFORMATION

See www.visitmorocco.com.