

The Weekend *Travel*

Moroccan magic

A lot of people know Marrakech, but how about heading for a more chilled out Moroccan experience on the coast? If you want a taste of exotic north Africa within a short distance, Essaouira is only a three-hour flight from the UK, as **Caroline Moody** found out



■ A woman at the Co-operative Marjana cracks open argan kernels



■ Caroline's room at Le Jardin des Douars



■ Above: The view from a rooftop restaurant across Place Moulay Hassan



■ Right: Ottmame preparing tea in the traditional way



■ Throws, scarves and cushion covers on sale



■ One of the swimming pools at Le Jardin des Douars

Travel details

- Caroline Moody and her husband stayed at Le Jardin des Douars in Essaouira, for three nights. Prices start at £100 per night (jardindesdouars.com).
- Go on an ecotour to see the 'real' Morocco countryside, with the specialist company Ecotourisme et Randonnées (essaouira-randonnees.com).
- The currency is the dirham. 100 dirhams is currently equivalent to just under £8.
- EasyJet fly from Luton to Essaouira twice a week, on Saturdays and Tuesdays (easyjet.com).



■ The main building of Le Jardin des Douars, with the bar and restaurant terrace in front



■ Caroline finds her own unique viewpoint



■ Greg and Nanie Aubron

BESAHA. Santé. Cheers. We raised our small glasses of sweet mint tea and heard more about the Moroccan way of life. We were sitting on cushions on the floor of a traditional Berber living room. Simplicity itself.

Thick walls kept the heat of the midday sun out, though in winter the same walls will act as insulation against the cold.

We had been walking for a couple of hours, on stony ground through a sparse forest of argan trees in Essaouira, a mausoleum seemingly in the middle of nowhere and past an old sugar factory which dated to the 16th century.

Our guide Ottmame told us more about his fascinating country while he prepared the tea in the traditional way, the way he had been taught as a child. It's not just a matter of putting boiling water on some mint leaves, but boiling, rinsing and aerating. Apart from getting the brew just right, this allows time for talking. It's a blessing from the gods, he says, that in Morocco, they have forgotten time.

Essaouira, he explains, is sometimes called the windy city, and its third name is the city of cats. Cats are everywhere, scavenging food from the fishermen who come back on their blue boats into the port of Skala, with sardines, squid and bream, to sell in the Medina or on the portside. Restaurants adorn the port – some with names like St Malo and La Rochelle. Everyone speaks French here and everyone was laidback and welcoming. 'Bonjour. Ca va?' is the universal greeting.

My husband and I stayed at Le Jardin des Douars, a 15-minute drive from the small airport. We had flown in from London Luton Airport and, when we landed, our easyJet aircraft was the only plane on the tarmac. Even the welcome from customs officers and passport checkers was friendly. Thanks to being in the same time zone as the UK (at least while we are on BST), you arrive fresh and ready to drink your first gin fizz in the sun by 5 pm.

Le Jardin des Douars [douar being a small traditional village] was built as a private residence in the wonderful Moroccan terracotta style. It has been run for the last five years by the charming Greg and Nanie Aubron who hail from Lille in the north of France.

The food was consistently good, from breakfast outside on the terrace where you could have fresh fruits and Moroccan crepes, to a succulent grilled tuna steak at lunchtime and chicken tagine with lemon and olives for dinner.

We also enjoyed exploring the hotel's luxuriant botanical gardens, where frogs

sit on lily pads most of the day. Many plants wouldn't survive here but for the river which runs behind the gardens.

From Le Jardin des Douars, it was a 15-minute shuttle taxi to the Medina. For anyone who has been to Marrakech, it is impossible not to draw a comparison between the shopping experience in the souks there and that in the Medina in Essaouira. Marrakech can be brash, in your face, tiresome and intimidating. Hagglng there is just not much fun any more. In Essaouira, however, the shopkeepers smile and say a genuine hello. Not once did we have to shake off a pushy salesman – they really do take 'non, merci' for an answer. The shops are packed with colourful scarves, jewellery, art and marquetry, but there is so much more.

This is also where the locals shop, for their food and other goods. At night the locals certainly outnumber the westerners, and yet even at night-time we felt like we could take any turning down walled alleyways and not feel lost or in danger. You're never far from the two main streets. Your senses are bombarded by the smell of barbecued sardines, fresh mint and spices. Admittedly there was the occasional whiff of sewer but I have smelled far worse, and the toilets in cafés and restaurants, although small, were consistently clean.

Of course, you can't go away without buying some argan oil, in any of its forms – cooking oil, massage oil, soaps, even a deliciously nutty paste, described to us as 'Berber Nutella'. It was so good I bought some from the Women's Co-operative Marjana that we were visiting and where we saw the women breaking open argan kernels between stones. The argan tree is a true symbol of the region.

Another side of Essaouira is the more modern waterfront (some of which is still a bit of a work in progress). It's an area well known for its watersports, surfing, windsurfing and kitesurfing, thanks to those winds that breeze in off the Atlantic. There are also plenty of activities such as horse-riding and mountain-biking.

For us, though, it was more about relaxation, and Le Jardin des Douars does that perfectly. It has two

swimming pools, one for families, one for adults but keeping the peace and quiet is encouraged.

And if you want relaxation and you're in Morocco, you have to have a traditional hammam.

It's not for the fainthearted, as you stand naked with nothing but a skimpy disposable stringy thing that is almost not worth wearing, especially when it gets wet. You lie on black marble to be doused with buckets of deliciously hot water, you are basted with patchouli oil, scrubbed for your 'blacksoap exfoliation', flipped over occasionally, and sponged down with some warm soapy bubbles.

Despite the nakedness, I did my best to relax, though my (unfounded) fear was that the next bucket of water might be a freezing cold one. And do be advised that if you shift position, the sound produced by the combination of marble, water and bare flesh is likely to spoil the mood.

The only way to follow that is another gin fizz on the terrace in the evening sun. Besaha!

Luton Airport

With £110 million being spent on its redevelopment, London Luton Airport is growing faster than any other UK airport and passenger numbers are expected to double to 18 million in the next four years. It is still significantly smaller than somewhere like Gatwick, making it easy and

pleasant to navigate. It still has plenty of eateries and duty-free shops. From central London, trains go every 15 minutes or so from St Pancras station, and take about 40 minutes. In terms of timings, you do also need to factor in taking a free regular shuttle bus, which takes

no more than ten minutes from the train station to the airport. And there are airport hotels between the two. It's also useful to know that trains run directly between Luton Airport and Gatwick Airport. With a few stops on the way, ours took about 1 hour 40 minutes.

Star of the current *Chaine 5* series about the S.A.S.

AN EVENING WITH **PHIL CAMPION**
ROYAL MARINES • PARA'S SAS • AFGHAN HERO
"THE REAL BEAR GRILLS"

HOLIDAYS FOR **HEROES** JERSEY

6th Annual Combined Services Ball
Saturday 15th October 2016
Royal Yacht Celestial Hall

After Dinner Q&A with Phil Campion
Formal Champagne Reception with 4 Course Meal • Black Tie
After Dinner Entertainment with Local Band 'Take This'
Auction Compered by Phil Campion

TICKETS ONLY £70 PER PERSON

Tickets from the Dog & Sausage: Tel: 730982 / 07797 851 565
or Email: stusullivan2@googlemail.com