

The spice of life in magical Marrakesh...

Getting to grips with Moroccan cooking, camels and culture in the city of Marrakesh

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Colourful spices for sale at the souk.

Marrakesh, [Morocco](#), has been attracting curious explorers and visitors for centuries. Cosby, Stills and Nash sang about taking the express to Marrakesh in the 1960s and I've always wondered why people were so impressed with the 'red' city.

It wasn't quite the romantic train journey I'd imagined, but the Ryanair flight from Dublin to Marrakesh took only three and a half hours, so definitely hit the express note. [Morocco](#)'s cuisine has always tickled my taste buds too, so I was keen to learn the art of making tagine, the traditional dish cooked in a conical clay pot. My jewellery designer friend, Katrina Barker, was curious about the city's inspirational virtues and we were both game for a camel riding adventure to the Sahara desert.

Just five minutes from Marrakesh airport and we were driving alongside ochre-daubed walls with magnificent arched gates into the walled citadel that is the Kasbah. Our accommodation sent an escort who guided us on foot through a labyrinth of narrow winding streets, with horses and traps and people wearing long tunics with pointed hoods.

We checked into a riad, one of the city's traditional homes converted into a small hotel. Riad l'heure D'ete had clean, simple rooms, a courtyard and beautiful roof terrace with a Jacuzzi. On the advice of my seasoned Morocco-visiting friend, Una, we had pre-ordered dinner. This was an excellent plan, though we were a tad disappointed, especially with Katrina's vegetarian option. Breakfast was good and so too was the fact that we

had a hammam spa and beauty therapists on site.

Hot on the heels of Ali G and the British Ambassador, I checked into the cookery school at Café Clock (cafeclock.com), and was the only student on the day. Chef, Mohammed Enouichi, presented me with a menu from which to choose my dishes. I selected a bissara split pea soup, zalouk aubergine salad and fish tagine.

The class started with an Arabic lesson on how to order basic ingredients before we went to the souk (market) to purchase fish and vegetables. Daily shopping for fresh ingredients is customary in Morocco and it felt good to be with a local. En route we passed the halal chicken shop, where live chickens in pens were being selected by customers. As swift as lightening, the shopkeeper beheaded the birds and put them in a plucking machine. I can't give a full eyewitness account of this because I was too squeamish to watch. Mohammed informed me the chicken butcher is a holy man and prays several times a day. Thankfully I wasn't cooking a chicken dish.

On the way back from the market we visited the community oven. After descending a flight of stairs we arrived into an aromatic, dimly lit room, where a man shuffled breads in and out of a woodfired oven on a long-handled baker's peel. Abdelkabir Adaghiri told me he bakes every day and each morning the women bring their prepared dough at around 9am and pick up their fresh bread at 1pm for lunch. The skill with which he managed the large oven full of bread was mesmerising. Each family had fork prong patterns on their flat loaves so Abdelkabir knew who owned which bread, then restacked the fresh bakes on the appropriate trays.

Having watched a master at work, it was time to get cooking and we headed straight for the Clock Café rooftop kitchen. After a refreshing lemon mint drink, I was instructed to wash my hands and put on the apron. We started by putting the split peas and garlic into a pot of water to boil for the bissara soup. The aubergines for the salad were left to roast over naked gas flames as we got ready to make the fish tagine. Mohammed sliced potato, carrot, onion and courgette and I finely chopped fresh parsley and coriander.

I was then assigned the master task of making the charmoula marinade, which is the vital ingredient that defines the tagine's taste. With my bare hands I mixed together the chopped herbs, crushed garlic, olive oil, paprika, cumin, chilli powder, salt and lemon juice. Measurements were done by eye and the final blend determined by finger tasting and the further addition of spices. The vegetables were then layered onto the tagine and the marinated shark perched on top, before the conical lid was replaced and the dish was left to slow cook.

We blended the bissara soup in a sieve and served it with a drizzle of olive oil and freshly baked bread. The zalouk salad of smoked aubergine, garlic and coriander tasted similar to baba ganoush. The texture and flavour of the tagine was simply divine and definitely the best I had in Morocco.

Café Clock is renowned for its excellent modern Moroccan cuisine and one of the menu staples is camel burger cooked with rose petals and geranium, served with homemade tomato and cinnamon ketchup. Mohammed informed me camel butchery is more common in his home city of Fez and from Marrakesh he must travel to a market outside the city for the meat. This was distasteful news for my vegetarian travelling companion. The hump-backed animal was next on our to-do list as we had booked a Sahara desert tour with camel safari.

The four-hour drive over the Atlas mountains was a rollercoaster ride taking in high passes and spectacular scenery, but not everyone in our group of 13 found it easy on the stomach.

Everyone was ready for a stop by the time we reached the stunning Kasbah of Ait-Ben-Haddou, near Ouarzazate where 'Lawrence of Arabia' and numerous films have been made. After a further three-hour drive through the Draa Valley, our camels waited outside the town of Zagora, linked together by loose ropes so as not to stray. Even though our bodies were bus weary, the one-hour sunset camel ride to the desert camp was beautiful. A night of stargazing, dining and traditional music ensued before we settled into our Bedouin tent for a well-earned night's sleep.

Next morning we watched the sunrise before riding back to meet our bus and return to Marrakesh. This was a fantastic two day/one night experience for €65, but a stay in Ouarzazate city would have been more comfortable.

On return to Marrakesh, we were ready for luxury and relaxation so the legendary La Mamounia hotel beckoned. The rich and famous have been flocking to the five star since 1923. We didn't stretch to the €300-plus room rate, but enjoyed our €30 gin and tonics in the salubrious surrounds of the garden bar. Day passes to the hotel, which include use of the pool and spa, cost €100.

Peace and serenity was also on offer at the Marjorelle gardens, which were donated to the city by former resident [Yves Saint Laurent](#). Initially, we were disappointed to see tour buses outside, but the artistic gardens were shaded and fabulous and extremely inspiring for my arty friend who since wants to paint her world Moroccan blue.

Not so inspiring were the maddening crowds at the Jemaa el-Fnaa. Alas the cries of snake charmers and pushy restaurateurs at the famous square sent us running for reprieve down the myriad of little laneways filled with shops. Leather goods, colourful pointed slippers, jewellery, medicinal herbs, clothing and stunning lanterns were among the offerings.

Still, overall, Moroccan people are warm and welcoming, so I understand why visitors leave impressed with Marrakesh. I left with memories of camels, culture, cooking and an insight into the culture that has possibly put me off chicken for life.

Getting there

Ryanair flies from Dublin to Marrakesh twice a week, Wednesday and Sunday. See ryanair.com. [Aer Lingus](#) flies from Dublin to Agadir (October to April). See aerlingus.com

Where to stay

Luxury La Mamounia, from €350 per room per night; mamounia.com

Mid Dar Les Cigognes from €125. It also offers a cookery class; sanssoucicollecion.com

Budget Riad l'heure D'ete, from €50; lheure-dete.com

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