



Romancing The Riad: A MasterChef Culinary Travel Tale

Posted by: Guest Blogger
in Africa, Culinary Holidays, Destinations, Guest Posts, History & Culture, Luxury Travel, Marrakech, Morocco, Themes / Activities
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Kalpana Sunder travelled with Cox & Kings on a *MasterChef Travel* tour of Marrakesh. She recounts the wonders of the exotic city and the culinary delights she experienced



Olive oil tasting

There is something fascinating about walking straight into the belly of a city... a sensory overload of pyramids of artichokes and dates, bouquets of deep green parsley, fat aubergines, just-cut mint, oversized lemons and grapefruits, sugar glazed treats, jars of pickled olives and mounds of dark red strawberries...I am in Marrakesh on a culinary holiday organised by Master Chef Travel (operated by Cox & Kings Ltd) with a bunch of food writers and Keri Moss, the joint winner of MasterChef: The Professionals 2012, to enjoy the delights of Moroccan cooking. My home away from home is Riad Dar les Cigognes, a traditional town house with arched cloisters, pots of tangerine bougainvillea and tiled courtyards. A maze of narrow stairways, illuminated with dappled lamp lighting are tucked into the building's corners, with a hamaam and private rooms on the higher level. The riad is like a comfortable home—there are small thoughtful touches which make me feel pampered—poems on the white sheets every night, along with a thoughtful plate of cookies and a jug of milk.

The Riad, A Bakery, And A Hamaam

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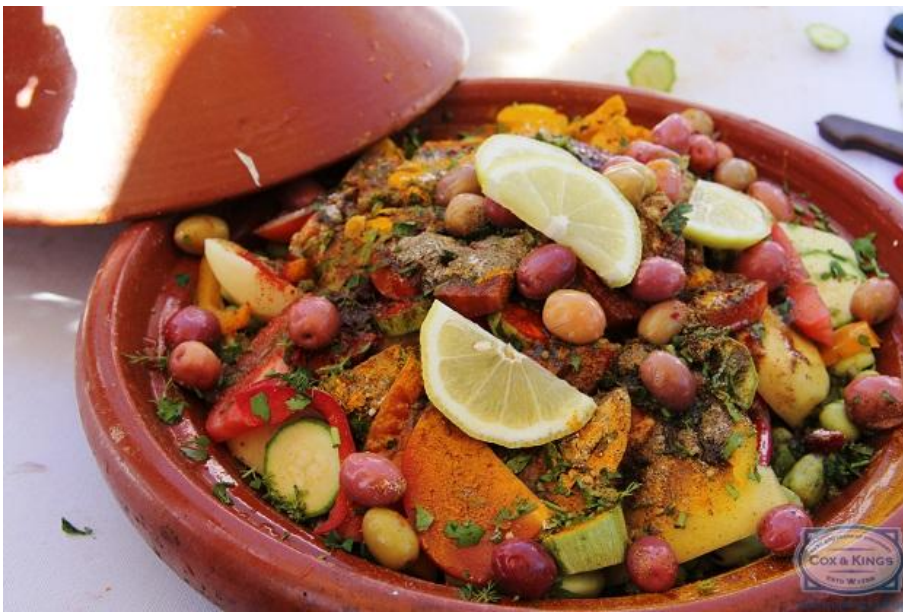

Eben Lenderking and wine tasting on the terrace of our riad

On the first evening, in the magical setting of the terrace of our *riad*, turning a burnished orange with the last rays of the sun, Eben Lenderking, the owner of the *riad* and a passionate foodie takes us through a tasting of some Moroccan wines, followed by a range of olive oils made from Picholine and Arbequina olives from the Ourika Valley. The dry rose wine produced in the region around Meknes appeals to my amateur palate. Eben is the perfect companion to uncover the insider secrets of this city—he confesses to having followed a local up to her home to discover a certain recipe! He takes short cuts through a public hamaam and leads us down a flight of stairs to see how bread is baked in the communal fires of a mosque-run bakery. We watch as a man expertly whisks the loaves on a flat paddle in and out of the oven—each family has its own identifying mark.



At the communal bakery

We follow this up with a visit to the hot ashes of the local hamaam where the *farnatchi* or the man who stokes the hamaam fires watches over traditional meat and *tagines* which are left to cook slowly in the hot ashes before being collected at the end of the day.



A tagine in the making

The Spice Market In Marrakesh

Lise, an American expat who runs the cookery classes at Dar Les Cigognes, takes us to the Spice market where every sight is a visual stimulus. Shops stock potions and powders, fragrant rose petals, dunes of cumin and turmeric, brick red paprika, shards of mace, star anise and rolls of cinnamon. The shopkeeper teaches me to distinguish between real and fake saffron. "Rub it on your palm, if it turns yellow, then it is real saffron," he cautions me.



In the Spice Market

Dinner By Candlelight



Breakfast on the terrace of Riad Dar Les Cigognes

Food remains the central motif of the next few days—the setting is as important as the meal itself. I learn to make the softest couscous, the traditional way from Fouzia and Saida, the cooks at the *riad*, put together a fragrant vegetable tagine using local spices, cooked on charcoal and roll out wafer-thin sheets to make a kind of local samosa called *briaout*. The soft flicker of candlelight, the splash of fountains, soothing music and the perfume of roses and jasmine in the air enhance the quality of every meal. A meal on the terrace of Dal Les Cigognes serenaded by musicians, another sea food meal at Riad Kaiss, the sister property of our *riad*, where we enjoy the cool nip of the evening breeze and a sensual belly dance in a dramatic open courtyard with a shallow pool and musicians behind niches. One of the most stellar experiences is at Dar Yacout, a luxurious restaurant with discreet waiters in red fezzes serving course after course of a delicious Moroccan feast.



Local musicians at dinner

Djemaa El Fna

Party central is of course Djemaa El Fna, one of the largest market squares that I have seen with open-air food stalls that come alive at night creating a dramatic ambience. Veiled henna artists, snake charmers, and stalls that offer dried apricots, dates, and figs, cups of slimy snails in a sauce, fresh orange juice and pretzel-shaped deep fried dough dipped into honey and sprinkled with sesame seeds.



One of the largest open air food market and a UNESCO site- Djemaa El Fna

Moroccan “Gold”

To escape the frenetic pace of the city we drive to the Ourika Valley, a region of orchards and groves in the shadow of the snow capped Atlas mountains. We stop at an argan factory, where the famous Moroccan oil that is now an international fad, is made. Argan oil is now known as the 'olive oil of the hip'. Its nutty flavor brings to life meals and salads. "In the old days they say that Berbers would harvest the fruit of the argan tree, feed it to goats that would digest it and then they would retrieve the seeds from the dung and extract oil from it", explains our guide. People now pick the fruit and grind it to make the oil and most of the oil is made in women's co-operatives. I watch the women crack open the nuts of this Moroccan "gold" and press out the edible insides. Other women sitting on colorful carpets knead the thick, chocolate-covered paste, then press out the oil from the kernel mass by continuously adding lukewarm water. It's like an assembly line for argan oil. Business is booming, especially since the cosmetic industry has also discovered the properties of this product with the rich, nutty aroma.



At an Argan oil Co-operative in the Ourika Valley

We drive to Le Paradis du Saffron, run by Christine, a lively Swiss lady. She walks us through her hectares planted with fruit trees, saffron patches and even a nature trail where you can walk on a path with wood, pebbles and stones of different textures that stimulate your nerve endings and a peaceful rest area at the end where you can dip your feet in tubs of water with herbs! I pick up trivia like 2,00,000 saffron flowers are needed to obtain 1kg of saffron!



At Paradis du Saffron with the owner Christine

Lunch is amidst the greenery on low stools and tables watching local bread being baked. It's the ultimate antidote to the clutter and madness of Marrakesh...two worlds, both as enjoyable...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kalpana Sunder is a freelance travel writer and blogger based in Chennai, India. She believes life is too short to do just one thing and has dabbled with various careers, company law and Japanese language among others. She has snorkeled on the Barrier Reef; flown in a microlight over the Victoria Falls, snowmobiled in Lapland, and floated on the Dead Sea, in her search for a good travel tale. She believes in the power of a hug and in always eating dessert. She lives in Chennai, India with her entrepreneur husband and two children. Her ever growing travel wish-list is a topic

of discussion with her family and friends!

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