



Travel

Marrakech *meets* MasterChef

Chris Caldicott tries out a new culinary tour of Morocco with 'tagine queen' and *MasterChef: The Professionals* winner, Keri Moss

PHOTOGRAPHS Chris Caldicott

MEET THE CHEF

I was on a trip to Marrakech with MasterChef Travel, the new culinary arm of Cox & Kings, which offers trips combining food and travel that are hosted by various past winners and finalists of the popular TV show. So you could go to India with 2010 winner Dhruv Baker or Italy with 2011 finalist Sara Danesin Medio. The host for my five-day trip to Morocco was Keri Moss, joint winner of *MasterChef: The Professionals* in 2012, who recently opened The Patch in East Dulwich, a sustainably run pub-restaurant, and also runs a private dining

company. Keri has no historic link with Morocco – her passion for its food is purely personal and goes back to her days in contract catering when she was known as the 'tagine queen'. She loves the community-orientated style of preparing and eating food there.

These trips are not designed to be too food-centric or in any way competitive, but rather to appeal to people (10-20 per trip) who, like me, consider food one of the most exciting things about travel and enjoy hands-on cooking lessons and shopping for ingredients in local markets.

Mine began with an olive- and wine-tasting session on the glorious flower-filled roof terrace of our riad, Dar Les Cigognes, as the setting sun bathed a spectacular horizon of snow-capped Atlas Mountains in golden light and silhouetted dozens of long-legged storks in giant nests along the wall of the palace next door.

Morocco is famous for its olives but not its olive oil, which is rather unsophisticated and rustic, but fine for dipping freshly baked bread in. The wine, however, was much more impressive. We did blind tastings to see if we preferred the Moroccan or French wines of the same grape variety and the home team did well.

WELCOME FEAST

As the call to evening prayer from neighbourhood mosques echoed around the rooftops and the night sky filled with a canopy of stars, we sat down to our first alfresco rooftop meal. This relaxed dinner hosted by Eben Lenderking, owner of Dar Les Cigognes and a passionate foodie himself, was a chance to get to know each other and Keri (who made a lovely light and creamy saffron-scented cauliflower soup as a starter) before tucking into a feast of Moroccan classics made by the female cooks (*dada*) in the riad's kitchen. Eben talked us through each course with infectious enthusiasm.

First up was *pastilla*, a pigeon pie where crispy warka pastry with a crunchy topping of fried almonds sweetened with orange flower water and dusted with sugar and cinnamon concealed succulent pigeon breasts in a savoury saffron sauce. Next came *seffa*, a dish from Fez with chicken and vermicelli. The highlight was *triaf*, a chicken dish with shredded pancakes, lentils and fenugreek seeds that was richly spiced with ras el hanout

– the ubiquitous Moroccan spice mix that translates as 'top of the shelf' and can include over 30 different spices. Every house and spice merchant has their own version, and this one was exceptional. I was really looking forward to having cooking lessons from the kitchen that made food as good as this.

TIME TO EXPLORE

The next morning we were on a guided tour of the city's palaces, gardens and souks. Without the guide's shortcuts and contacts, we would have only seen half of what we saw in one day. Every neighbourhood has its own mosque that runs a bakery to ensure everyone has access to affordable bread and a public oven, and a hammam with different sessions for men and women. The gallons of hot water and steam required to keep a whole neighbourhood washed every day are provided by massive ancient furnaces that double up as communal kitchens where people take their *tangias* (a urn-shaped version of the more well-known tagine) to slow-cook on the embers. For lunch we wove our way to a narrow lane on the edge of the souk popular with locals for its meaty dishes cooked in *tangias*.

The goats' heads and piles of hooves on display suggested that these cafes were not a regular feature of most tourist itineraries. We were led off the street, up some back stairs to a very basic room with simple tile-topped tables and paper tablecloths. Soon a sizzling dish of fresh from ovens and braziers on the street.

The plate of olives, bread and harissa that arrived first was fine, in fact the harissa – a fiery blend of chillies, spices, garlic and olive oil – was the best I had ever tasted. The mechoui lamb, roasted in an underground furnace for wonderfully crunchy crackling, was a bit fatty but very tasty, then came the sheep's hoof *tangia* – a rancid-tasting gelatinous pile of gristle and bone that was a step too far for all of us (except the guide who seemed to love it).

The next day, it was time to get cooking. Things kicked off with a trip to the spice, vegetable, meat and fish souks with Keri and Eben to choose all the raw ingredients we would be using. It was so much more fun going as a customer rather than just a tourist (and much easier to take photographs).

Saida, a *dada* at the riad, showed me how to roll couscous by rubbing flour and semolina together by hand between three sessions of steaming the mixture in a colander over a bubbling pot of spices >

It felt like a scene from an Indiana Jones film as I followed my guide into a narrow, dark passageway through the entrance to a public hammam. We squeezed past shadowy figures of cloaked men and women in burkas, declined offers of a steam and scrub, then emerged into splintered sunlight and another world. In a few seconds we were transported from the noise and chaos of the busy road to the muted sounds, faded pastel hues and unhurried pace of Marrakech's medieval medina. A labyrinth of winding lanes and unnamed passageways led to elegant riads (traditional townhouses with inner courtyards) hidden behind shabby doorways, opulent palaces fortified by high walls, and souks spilling over with everything from spices to tea pots around the busy square of Jemaa el-Fna, with its snake charmers and magicians.

Marrakech is a city full of secrets and many of them involve food. Moroccan cuisine is a fusion of culinary influences, from the indigenous Berber tribes, Bedouin Arab invaders, Andalusian Moors, excited Jews and French colonialists, all mixed up with spices from the east. To explore both the city and its food, you need a good guide.

A step too far?
Sheep's hoof *tangia*

'Marrakech is a city of secrets – and many of them involve food'

Shopping at the spice souk

Jemaa el-Fna square; above, dried roses at the souk

Keri mixes pan-seared aubergine and fennel

Cook Saida makes a tagine

MasterChef: The Professionals joint winner Keri Moss

Dar Les Cigognes

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Clockwise from left, Jemaa El-Fna market; *tagine* lunch; hammam furnace; Saïda teaches Chris to make couscous; camel *tagine*

TAGINE TRICKS
We also made three types of tagine – monkfish, vegetable and lamb – and learnt all about spice combinations and how to chop and stack the ingredients so they would be ready at the same time. The tagines slow-cooked for an hour absorbing all the flavours as they steamed away under the domed lid. While I learnt how to make *ouarka* pastry and fold it into samosa-like triangles filled with meat and vegetables and a variety of salads, Keri was busy in another part of the kitchen doing her magic. We didn't have hands-on tuition from Keri but she did talk us through her dishes as she made them – spicy preserved beef with glass noodle salad; a seared vegetable salad with almonds and fava beans; and a sensational dish of pan-seared aubergine with fennel in an orange blossom water and ginger dressing – and emailed us the recipes at the end of the trip.

It was mid-afternoon by the time we sat down to enjoy the fruits of our labours. Other dishes were brought out

and vegetables. It takes time and is almost unbearably hot to handle, but leaves your hands softer than any hand cream. By the end of the third steam and rub, the flour and semolina have magically merged to become a light and fluffy version of couscous so utterly delicious that I will never be able to eat the packet version again.

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that we hadn't cooked, like a camel meat and milk *tagine* that Eben had sent to be cooked in the embers of the local hammam. It was all completely brilliant. The food I learnt to cook that day was very much the sort of thing I'd make for a dinner party and none of it was particularly difficult to make or required ingredients you couldn't get at home.

We spent the next day out in the Ourika and Ansi Valleys in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains visiting an argan oil co-operative run by Berber women and a saffron plantation run by an eccentric Swiss woman where we had a fabulous saffron-inspired lunch in the shade of an orchard of peach trees.

Our final day was left free for shopping. I managed to find the shortcut through the hammam and headed for the spice and kitchen equipment souks where I couldn't resist stocking up on all the ingredients

Chris Caldicott travelled with MasterChef Travel (mastercheftravel.com), which has a four-night trip to Marrakech, joined by MasterChef: The Professionals 2012 joint winner Keri Moss, from £1,395 per person including flights, transfers, excursions and accommodation with breakfast and some lunches and dinners. The next Marrakech trip departs on 23 September 2014.

THREE MORE FOODIE CITY BREAKS TO TRY

Les Petits Fards, Nice
Named after her favourite Provençal vegetable dish, Nice-based, Cordon Bleu-trained, food writer Rosa Jackson runs brilliant one-day sessions. These combine morning market tours with hands-on classes back at her 17th-century apartment – you'll prepare a four-course lunch to enjoy, paired with fabulous wine, at her kitchen table. While Rosa doesn't provide accommodation, she is brimming with suggestions. From €195 per person, throughout the year (petitsfards.com).

Flavours of Oaxaca, Mexico
Join this inspired nine-day culinary tour of Mexico's gastronomic capital, a beautiful southern state with a buzzing colonial city of the same name. Sampling the region's culinary best, you will visit food markets, prepare Oaxacan dishes with top chefs and enjoy the area's extraordinary natural beauty and ancient heritage. From £2,195 per person including flights, the next departure date is 11 October and 19 October 2014 (triofast.com).

Lemongrass Trail, Bangkok and beyond, Thailand
This two-week private tour offers a unique culinary experience, including catching and cooking your own seafood and sourcing ingredients at the markets. You'll stay in your own little house in the garden of an English-speaking family in Bangkok and learn the basics of Thai cooking at the nearby Blue Elephant cookery school, then travel around Thailand to continue your foodie adventure. From £1,950 per person including flights (teitaitravel.co.uk).

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