

Marrakech with my own MasterChef, Sunday Times

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TRAVEL 8

Laura Goulден goes from drooling over the dishes of a winning TV chef to feasting on them

Marrakesh with my own MasterChef

Perfect ingredients from the ranges of a fresh fish. See us work in the real, honest spots. Below, Morocco

wouldn't usually order camel stew, or dried beef soaked in fermented butter, but I'm taking into both because it's not every day you get dinner cooked by a television chef. Keri Moss, winner of MasterChef: The Professionals in 2012, has also whipped up some less challenging dishes, such as orange and sage-roasted salmon, and we're eating them on the rooftop of a bougainvillea-draped riad in Marrakech.

I'm on holiday with Keri because this most popular of cookery shows has branched out into travel, taking fans to ordinary hotspots to tour with winners and finalists.

The group trips include masterclasses, visits to markets and dinners in the best restaurants. You'll even sleep somewhere food-focused. Eben, the owner of the Riad Les Oligoques riad, where I'm staying, has written a cookery book. He's so enthusiastic that he has been known to follow nice-looking guests home from the communal ovens that many Moroccans still use and piled with their owners for the recipe.

The UK's addition to cookery shows is a strange, masochistic thing. MasterChef stars at sea, so during the 2012 series, I'd dived over Keri's roast rump of lamb with feta

and her risky potato cake — while settling down to an underdone jacket potato. In Marrakech, I got to watch Keri cook, then feed my face with her creations, which is a much more satisfying model for a food show. Mortifyingly, she was eating things I'd made, too.

A few hours before the rooftop feast, I was down in the tiny riad kitchen, being taught how to squeeze carrots (cut them in half lengthways and you can pop the tough core out) by the bread cook, Mista. The hotel's manager, Pierre, translated as Hussa fluffed boiling-hot couscous with her bare hands. Turns out the dusty couscous we buy in the UK is a horrible Moroccan steam the stuff these times.

Eben and Pierre booked us tables at the best restaurants and organised a trip into the Atlas Mountains, as well as lunch at a saddle farm. But they were at their most useful in the souks. I'd been in Marrakech before, and had been thrilled by the markets for five minutes, then soon lost the will to live every now and then as a mirror image of the last, every donkey cart a potential death trap. With Pierre as a guide, it was a totally different experience.

He showed us the glades of the communal bread ovens, taught us where to buy the best preserved lemons and singled out the free-range chickens from the battery ones — disturbingly still alive and struggling by their feet.

Pierre was also a useful bargaining tool for the stallholders here he meant business.

"It's thick, it's fresh," he said as he slapped a fish against a wall.

He herded us past one spice stall and into another, where the proprietor explained how to tell real saffron from fake (the good stuff has unimpacted ends and stains red on your hands), then loaded us up with cinnamon sticks for stirring coffee, muck away moths and gnat

as a celebrity chef. She prefers Greg Wallace to John Fornale and rates Yotam Ottolenghi, but she loves Lorraine Pascale.

Keri has also cooked for the Beckhams and for Elton. I reckon that, after one too many grey widies (a local speciality), you could find yourself with a group-cousin scoop.

But I've got the sort of cherty bone who wants to spend all day in the kitchen, this isn't the cooking holiday for you. MasterChef Travel trips are about seeing a destination through food, in other words, you'll do more looking and eating than cooking — it's a holiday, after all. And although Keri was the star of the show, having some locally based foodies to show us around was a revelation.

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THE BRIEF
Laura Goulден was a guest of MasterChef Travel. Its next trip to Marrakech with Keri Moss departs on November 16.

prices start at £1,395pp for four nights, including flights, some meals and excursions. A two-night Vale of Glamorgan tour with the 2011 finalist Sara Danesin Medio starts at £595pp and an eight-night tour of Malaysia, inspired by 2014's winner Ping Coombes, at £2,175pp; both B&B, with some other meals (020 7873 5005, mastercheftravel.co.uk)

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us that the secret to good cooking is contact. It's ready when it's ready," she explained as she demonstrated how to roll pastry as thin as clingfilm and wrap it around spicy mince to make fish-worms (sort of Moroccan spring rolls). Despite my best efforts, Keri didn't have much trouble telling apart my pile of attempts from the pro's neat twists.

Apart from the food, the other good thing about going away with a MasterChef winner is the gossip. As we wandered between spa-like characters and orange juice stalls on the main square, Djamal Hina, Keri gave us a snapshot of life

Richen aids
Lara's wish

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