

Moroccan mojo

- By Kalpana Sunder

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From the terrace I saw a sea of terracotta roofs and satellite dishes, the minaret of the Koutoubia Mosque, the tallest building in the city silhouetted against a crimson sky and nesting storks. The muezzin was calling the faithful to prayer. A pit-stop for caravans laden with spices and slaves, Marrakesh was on the 1960s hippy trail and has been a favourite of VIPs and statesmen as well as rock stars and actors for generations. Sir Winston Churchill loved the place and called it the 'Paris of the Sahara' and often came here to do some painting.

I was in Marrakesh on a culinary holiday organised by Master Chef Travel (operated by Cox & Kings Ltd) to enjoy the delights of Moroccan cooking. And every day of my stay at the Riad Dar les Cigognes, a traditional town house with arched cloisters, pots of tangerine bougainvillea and tiled courtyards, was a culinary adventure. There are more than 1,400 riads around the town, where large joint families used to live under one roof. Many of the riads have now been converted into atmospheric boutique hotels. I loved the narrow stairways, illuminated with dappled lamp lighting, which are tucked into the building's corners, with a hammam and private rooms on the higher level.

Food was certainly the leitmotif over the next few days. I learnt to roll out wafer-thin pastry shells and try my hand at making couscous the traditional way, (steaming it and then hand-mixing it several times) from a bonafide dada—a traditional female cook—who learnt her recipes from her mother and grandmother. I would start my day with breakfast on the terrace of the riad, with piles of the yeast-ed semolina pancakes known as beghrir, served with perfumed honey, butter and amlou—a mix of argan oil and honey that is akin to peanut butter—fresh fruit and a variety of flaky breads.

In the Jewish market, it was exciting to discover pyramids of artichokes and dates, fat aubergines, just cut parsley and coriander, oversized lemons and grapefruits, sugar glazed treats, jars of pickled olives and mounds of dark red strawberries, which looked so fresh that I could imagine them sitting pretty in the soil just a few hours ago. I watched young boys roll out thin sheets of filo pastry, and mint tea being served almost everywhere. After a day spent in the melee of the city, I was glad to walk through the tall heavy doors of the riad where I entered a world of serenity with a Moorish ambience—tinkling fountains, greenery and my room facing the courtyard with mint tea and pastries at hand.

Another afternoon I walked through the Spice Market with Lise, an American expat who conducts cookery classes at Dar Les Cigognes. "Each region has its own version and the spice blends are part of an identity," explained Lise. A wake-up call for your taste buds is Ras al hanout—the Moroccan version of our own garam masala. I visited stalls where rows of jars brimmed with 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 showed me a natural scarlet paste made of poppy flowers and rose water that serves as a lipstick. I took bags of Ras al hanout, sachets of green and mint tea-leaves and several bottles of argan oil, of course. Back in the riad I learnt to make a simmering pot of tagine from scratch with Keri Moss, the joint winner of the Master Chef UK, 2012. We worked in groups and when the cooking was done we reclined on the terrace with the fruits of our labour. First, we are served a medley of refreshing salads, then the tagine and couscous accompanied by a glass of Moroccan rosé.

I explored the medina encircled by thick ancient walls built out of rammed earth and punctuated by 18 gates. Narrow amber passages wound their way like capillaries, unfolding mysteries. In the courtyard of the Ben Youssef Madrasa, the 14th-century Islamic university in the heart of the old city, I was entranced by the mosaics, calligraphy and cedar

panels, and small monastic cells where the boys studied—all geometric patterns because Islam forbids the representation of the human form in art. At the Saadian Tombs, colourful tilework and gold leafing caught my eye. Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur built these tombs for himself and family in the late 16th century.

My senses went into overdrive at the Jemaa el Fnaa, one of the largest market squares I have seen with open-air food stalls that come alive at night creating a film-set like ambience. Water sellers with their distinctive headgear of multi-coloured tasselled hats and brass drinking vessels, veiled henna artists and snake charmers all make this human tableau lively. Mammoth stalls offered dried apricots, dates and figs, cups of slimy snails in a sauce, fresh orange juice that is almost ambrosial and halwa shebakia—pretzel-shaped deep-fried dough dipped in honey and sprinkled with sesame seeds. Aggressive food stall owners were trying to persuade customers to enter their stalls. Men with huge saucepans ladled broad bean soup into terracotta bowls that are served with chunks of crusty, fresh bread.

Taking a breather from the tourist hotspots, I enjoyed my Zen time at Jardin Majorelle, a botanical garden created by the French painter Jacques Majorelle and later owned by Yves Saint Laurent. Salmon-pink walls, azure tiled fountains, banana trees and succulent cacti offered a striking contrast to the startling blue buildings. The carefully-curated Berber Museum at the heart of the garden is filled with treasures, from heavy Berber bracelets and chunky silver jewellery to daggers and voluminous robes.

On the last day, my driver took me to Menara Gardens close to the airport, for a slice of local life. I watched families who had come there for picnics in the olive groves, to ride camels and watch sunsets. It is a great place to enjoy the cool breeze blowing off a big tank where legend says that soldiers learnt swimming in the 12th century.

When I think of Marrakesh, I remember the whirlwind of colour and have my own one thousand and one stories to tell.

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