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TRAVEL

JUNE 18, 2014

SOUKS AND THE CITY

Text by Kalpana Sunder

Marrakesh in the African nation of Morocco, sends you into an Arabian Nights fantasy while feeding your desire for great cuisine, both local as well as international, stoked by visits to exotic souks and course after course of a delicious Moroccan feast



Fragrant dried flowers in the souk

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With a political agenda to change

Remember the scene in *Sex and the City 2* where Sarah Jessica Parker and her friends walk through a brashly colourful and crowded souk? That is Marrakesh, the blush-coloured city in the shadow of the snow-covered High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, once a stop-off point for caravans crossing the great desert and later a hippie haven in the '60s. I was in Marrakesh on a culinary holiday organised by MasterChef Travel to enjoy the delights of Moroccan cooking. Staying at the Riad Dar Les Cigognes, a traditional townhouse hotel with arched cloisters, pots of tangerine bougainvillea and tiled courtyards, each day was a culinary adventure. I learnt to make simmering pots of tagine as well as rolled out wafer thin pastry shells and tried my hand at creating couscous the traditional way. Over the next few days with Eben Lenderking, the charismatic owner of the riad, I discovered outdoor vendors making mechoui – lamb slow cooked in underground ovens and in traditional paper sealed clay tanjias with preserved lemon and spices.

I walked through the twisted alleys of the Mellah, the Jewish quarter which literally translates as the 'place of salt' referring to the monopoly that the Jews used to enjoy over the salt trade. "The Mellah is a testimony to the religious tolerance of the kings who built this quarter beside the Royal Palace so that they could afford protection," explained my towering Berber guide Abes, whose name translated to 'lion'. I walked through the covered Jewish market stacked with huge triangles of luscious tomatoes, peppers as well as perfect pyramids of pungent spices and pickled olives. Peppering the narrow streets were hammams or local bathhouses which Abes called the 'local Facebook'...where women spent hours gossiping and emerged with cleansed bodies and glowing skin. Four-wheeled horse carriages called caleches ferrying tourists clip-clopped around the city, armed with special licenses that declared the health of the horses.

History whispered from every corner of the city. At the lavish Bahia Palace I enjoyed the ambience of the shady arcades blooming with oranges, and pavilions that once housed the Grand Vizier's wives and concubines and their

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children. Today it's a pleasure walking through its reception halls with vaulted ceilings, admiring the blue mosaic walls and tile work. "If a wife was the favourite then her building was more decorated," quipped Abes. I experienced an art high at the Ben Youssef Madrasa, a Koranic school from the 14th century, with stucco, carved cedar panels, Carrara marble that was traded for sugarcane, calligraphy and multicoloured tiles with geometric motifs. I spent an atmospheric afternoon in the ruins of the El Badi Palace which long ago was gilded with gold, inlaid with ruby and turquoise and intricate tile work. Princes and visiting diplomats were guests at this 350-room sprawling place with sunken gardens, subterranean passages and vast pools till it was completely sacked by King Moulay Ismail to build his new capital of Meknes. Today, hundreds of storks lord over the picturesque ruins and from the terrace I caught a panoramic sweep of the snow-covered Atlas Mountains silhouetted against the cobalt blue Saharan skies and the minarets of the pink town.

A perfect antidote to the chaos of the city was Majorelle Gardens, a 12-acre botanical garden with rare flora from five continents, where cactus meets couture. It was a leafy paradise – buildings in shades of cobalt blue, lemon yellow and terracotta cluster around ancient cacti that tower above you. I walked through bamboo groves, pools dappled with sunlight and darting carp with the constant soundtrack of songbirds. A peek into the Berber Museum here was rewarding as I saw traditional woven costumes, chunky silver jewellery, even kohl containers for eye makeup as well as traditional pots and vessels used in cooking. For lovers of fashion this is a pilgrimage, as the ashes of fashion icon Yves Saint Laurent were scattered here and there's a small memorial as well as a boutique.

Over the next few days the omnipresent motif was food, as I uncovered the insider secrets of this exotic city: how bread was baked in the communal fires of hole-in-the-wall bakeries with a wood fire oven where each family had its own identifying mark, how traditional meat and tagines were left to cook slowly in the hot ashes of the communal hammam before being collected at the end of the day. I

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watched young boys in a warka stall – where dough was dabbed with élan on a hot plate forming a circle like a discus, and then buttered and layered onto the next making up a thick sheaf of edible paper. I experienced an over-the-top dining extravaganza at Dar Yacout tucked inside the medina, with discreet waiters in white djellabas and red fezzes serving course after course of a delicious Moroccan feast.

Walking through the souks was an assault on the senses: I basked in the fragrance of baskets of rose petals and potpourri of mountain flowers. "Forget Google maps and just lose yourself in the alleys," advised a local friend. I shared the narrow space redolent with the smell of spices, with women in filmy veils, donkey carts laden with vegetables, kamikaze mopeds and cycles. I watched tribal Gnawa musicians from North Africa (who practice healing therapies) play hypnotic trance music. I walked through lanes, sub-divided by trade from jewellery to herbs and spices, reviving with syrupy-sweet mint tea served in glasses, crunchy almond macaroons and blood-red prickly pear served on toothpicks. There was the Berber Auction – a lair of rug merchants today which used to be the venue in yesteryears for the sale of slaves kidnapped from West Africa, for a camel or horse in exchange! In the Souk de Teinturiers I passed vats of dark liquid and coloured sheaves of dyed wool drying on walls and men with stained hands. Orange sparks flew and the din of striking hammers rose from the cavern-like workshops of the Souk of Iron workers – metal frames, lanterns with filigree and grilles all emerged from the talented hands of the blacksmiths.

Come dusk, as the muezzins called the faithful to prayer, I headed to the gargantuan square Djemaa El Fna and perched myself on the terrace of a bustling café with a cocktail in hand and watched the drama unfold as the square transformed into a mobile eating centre with tents and makeshift benches, offering everything from smelly snails to fresh orange juice. This open air party is a UNESCO World Heritage site for its oral and intangible heritage. Snake charmers, henna painters, acrobats, towering Berber and Tuareg merchants in their signature blue turbaned

and ruddy merchants in their signature blue, turbaned storytellers made this gigantic stage come alive. The fizz and sizzle of cooking fires and steaming cauldrons, accentuated by the kerosene lamps that were ablaze, the cacophony of voices and the cries of the vendors trying to lure passers-by aggressively to their stalls, enlivened this space. As I watched the sky turn a vivid scarlet, a brilliant contrast to the terracotta city walls, the Koutoubia minaret gleamed in the distance, creating the perfect palette for an *Arabian Nights* fantasy.

FAR AND AWAY

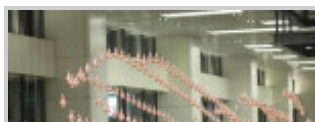
Get there Fly Emirates to Casablanca through Dubai and connect to Marrakesh either by road (about three hours) or a Royal Air Maroc flight.

Stay Get comfortable in a riad – a traditional courtyard house, at least for a few nights. Stay at [Dar Les Cigognes](#), a charming riad near the Jewish market with stunning rooms furnished with traditional fabrics and designs and offering Moroccan cookery classes. You can alternatively stay at [the same group's other riad](#) a stone's throw from the Djemaa El Fna. If you want to splurge stay at the lavish [Royal Mansour](#), the personal project of the King of Morocco. With Andalusian courtyards and pools, the hotel has riad style town houses with silk panelled walls.

Eat Sample tajines, couscous, meat dishes like mechou , tanjias and pigeon pastilla, traditional desserts like spice cakes and milk pastilla and drink local wine and mint tea as well as fresh orange juice.

Buy Fill your suitcases with leather and kilim bags and belts, colourful pottery and tajine dishes, spices and pickled olives and local argan oil, hand blown glasses and traditional carpets.

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