

# Marrakech magic

It took 24 hours before **HILARY SCOTT** fell in love with Marrakech. Here's why...

**I**HAVE never taken 15 minutes to cross a street before. Not even in New York.

But early evening on the dusty Avenue Echouhahada en route to the main square in Marrakech and I was stumped for a full quarter of an hour.

Cars, more motorcycles than I've ever seen, donkeys, dogs, drinks carts, you name it – all kept me from exploring this wonderful city no further. Eventually I decided on that old adage 'follow a local'. The family of five I chose didn't turn a hair as I practically grabbed their shirt tails, but it worked!

But my travails were not over.

Early evening is when everyone comes out in Marrakech – especially in the blistering heat of July when we were there – and to stroll the shopping areas before nightfall and visit the souks is no easy feat with the large crowds.

But, like everything in this quirky city, when you get used to it, it's fun.

The first 24 hours in Marrakech are most certainly a culture shock.

It's everything you've ever heard, and more – loud, dusty, busy, smelly, colourful, a mishmash of cultures and a hotchpotch of life.

If you like people watching there's plenty of them to eye, from the residents to the tourists who flock from all corners of the world.

It's not just in your face, Marrakech assaults your ears, nose, mouth and more. I was hesitant – did I like this? But after 24 hours I was a convert to this crazy place.

The secret to a good time in Marrakech is, I believe, having an oasis of calm to retreat to – so ensure you book your accommodation accordingly.

Les Borjs de la Kasbah is a riad (a traditional Moroccan multi-storey house with an interior garden or courtyard) and had been recommended to us – about a 20 minute walk to the square and just inside the old medina (city) walls in the Kasbah quarter. It's peace personified. From the moment you walk through the heavy front doors which shut out the noise and dust you start to relax. Trickling water from the courtyard's fountain and the tweet of birds are the only noises here as the efficient staff drift by with fresh iced

orange juice, mint tea and deliciously dainty Moroccan cakes and pastries to serve to you. (But of course you can tweet, too, with wi fi available in communal areas.)

Les Borjs is a boutique-style hotel which has been

developed by craftsmen over a period of four years from a complex of six town houses and one riad. The bedrooms are typical Moroccan style with dark wood furniture and tiled floors and the dining room is divided into an open area and an inside for whenever the weather turns (not often I assure you).

And Les Borjs has the prettiest swimming pool to cool off in after a hot day out in the streets or to lounge around for a day off from sightseeing – and there's a snack bar too.

Nothing is too much trouble for the staff. The spa is a haven, too, with fabulous treatments – try the hammam, a session in a traditional steam bath involving a washdown and numerous dousings with hot water and concludes with an, erm, invigorating bucket of cold. This is followed by a 'gommage' (a scrub-down using black soap made from olives and eucalyptus leaves) and then by a gentle massage of back, neck and shoulders. You can also have the usual list of beauty treatments as well as an assortment of other massages.

Les Borjs also offers cookery lessons and you can learn how to make salads flavoured with rose and orange flower water, a chicken tagine, and a briq pastry dessert layered with cream and pistachios – all the while fortified by copious mint tea (and you're given the technique for making it too) before sitting down to lunch on your efforts.

The food in Marrakech is delicious, from the cheap, unlicensed cafes where you can snack on pitta, olives and salads to upmarket restaurants in the new town to everything in between. But you must eat in the square, Jemaa El Fna, where they still all talk like Jamie Oliver (after his visit for his show) and the smoke and smell of caramelised meat and spices fill the air. Spicy soup, a kebab or a huge hunk of lamb, pitta, salad and side dish plus a soft drink is typically around £3-4 a head. You may queue to grab a seat at the communal tables but spot where the locals are and it will be worth it even when it's served on a polystyrene plate.



Just off the main square and near the famous Cafe de France is another oasis of calm with, on the top floor, the most spectacular views of the city. Visit Restaurant Le Salama, a glittering and sumptuous restaurant with surprisingly good prices, early evening and watch the sun go down to the sound of the call to prayer at the mosque. It's magical and the food's pretty good too. This is the place to try a local delicacy, the pastilla, a crisp pastry parcel like a samosa. But have the typically Moroccan pigeon-filled one – the soft pigeon meat is flavoured with spices and icing sugar but it tastes amazing.

Start with the Assortment de Fines Salades Marocaines which are brilliant value – but be warned portions of everything here are generous so best to wait until you are really hungry. Or simply sip a few cool drinks and watch the entertainment from a small orchestra to belly dancers which turn out to be authentic, not touristy at all. Le Salama is also a good spot for those who have

#### SPICE UP YOUR LIFE:

Top left: Jemaa El Fna square; the glittering Le Salama restaurant; lounge in comfort at Les Borjs de la Kasbah in one of the public areas. Below, the cool interior of Les Borjs with its fountain and a chicken tagine made at one of its cookery lessons



**What to buy in the souks**  
**Babouches**, the richly coloured, pointy and soft slippers  
**Basketware**  
**Scarfs and shawls**  
**Metalwork**, especially with Islamic patterns  
**Spices**, from ras el hanout to cinnamon



maybe had enough of the souks and want to grab a beer while other members of their party shop. Even I, a shopping lover, had to admit defeat sometimes when the heat (it's sweltering inside those souks), the noise and the bartering got the better of me.

La Mamounia, the hotel the celebs favour and which Churchill described as the "most lovely spot in the world", is worth a visit to gawp at the sheer opulence of the place and the £15 a cocktail price is worth it for a good nose around.

Nearby are the Majorelle Gardens, designed by fashion guru Yves St Laurent, another retreat from the bustle as is the El Badi Palace, The Saadian Tombs and The Tanneries.

And hopping in and out of the busy streets is definitely the secret to a great trip to Marrakech. Find plenty of boltholes and book a calming riad or hotel and you've got Marrakech made.

Now all I need to do now is learn the real secret for crossing the road.

■ Hilary stayed at Les Borjs de la Kasbah, Rue du Méchouar, La Kasbah, Marrakech, [www.lesborjsdelakabah.com](http://www.lesborjsdelakabah.com), 00 212 524 381 101/06, info@

[lesborjsdelakabah.com](http://lesborjsdelakabah.com)  
 ■ Restaurant Le Salama, 40 Rue Des Banques, Jemaa El Fna, Kennaria Medina, [www.lesalama.com](http://www.lesalama.com) 00 212 (0) 524 391 300

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