

Morocco: Berber villages, a good scrub down and iron-willed haggling in the souks

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Speeding through the centre of Marrakech early on a Friday morning, it was as chaotic as I had expected.

Our taxi sped around crumbling terracotta walls, dodged small motorbikes with entire families on them and swerved mules carting round an improbable variety of goods, from televisions to watermelons.



It was the first time my girlfriend and I had been to Morocco's fourth largest city. It was an unusual choice for us as we usually prefer relaxing in the sun on the beach; escaping the madness of the city that we live in, London.

As we drove 20 minutes west to our hotel, the bedlam petered out. The final leg of the journey was down a rocky road, complete with modest family homes, tethered mules and children playing football on the barren landscape - all wearing a colourful variety of international team shirts. We wondered what we had let ourselves in

for.



But the fears soon evaporated as we reached our destination - Les Cinq Djellabas.

The resort consists of ten huts each complete with air conditioning, four-poster bed, rain shower and a standalone bath. The hut was tastefully styled with plenty of traditional touches, such as a zebra-print seat, pointed beamed, thatched roof and huge fireplace (for the winter months). We had truly arrived in tranquil North Africa. The huts are scattered in a circular fashion in the complex with a long luxurious swimming pool in the middle and appropriately expensive sunbeds surrounding it.

There are plenty to go around, so there is no stressful fight, while the pool is a 10-second walk from each hut. Who needs the beach when you have this on your doorstep?

Glorious green grass and beautiful palm trees add to the peace and we were fully relaxed on our first afternoon.

The hotel can organise transport to Marrakech if you can prise yourself away from its splendour. We spent our first evening at Le Foundouk restaurant, one of the oldest restaurants in Marrakech. The streets were so narrow in the heart of the city that we were escorted to the restaurant by an old gentleman sporting a traditional fez. Here, we sampled some fantastic tagines - pots filled with a variety of meat,



Marrakech centre itself was a baptism of fire when we went shopping the next day - a mixture of rip-off tourist traps and locals who can be testing; pushing and probing for every scrap of your money. But you have to embrace it. We shopped in the Jemaa el-Fnaa souk - essentially an open-air market - and were lost within minutes in narrow lanes of stalls selling everything from rugs to pet chameleons. In the end, we managed to walk away with a beautiful turquoise tagine, deciding lizards wouldn't make it through customs. After the stress of the city centre, we couldn't wait to get back to our hotel. It truly is a tranquil oasis of calm.



We must mention the hotel staff - they served up the right balance of attentive and politeness that made breakfast, lunch and dinner a joy every time. It felt like we were the only guests.

On the Sunday, we took a trip to the Atlas Mountains, roughly an hour and a half away from Marrakech, a must-do excursion.

A local Berber - an ethnic group indigenous to North Africa - who could speak excellent English, despite not being able to read and write, took us through the steep village of Imilil, dodging mules and saying hello to friendly locals.

The village is overshadowed by the highest point in Northern Africa and our guide, Malabek, took us for mint tea on the roof of his house. It was incredibly peaceful and learning about the Berber life in the mountains was fascinating - while there was hardly another tourist in sight. We then dined at the Kasbah Du Toubkal hotel - wonderful tagines and couscous were washed down by mint tea as we sat on cushions with awe-inspiring views of the surrounding mountains.

We also had a hammam, a steam room where Moroccans habitually go each week to cleanse themselves, at Heritage in the middle of Marrakech. We were slightly

hesitant after bad spa experiences in the past, but there was no need to be.

The host was happy we had come as a pair and explained that they had adapted their offering to cater for couples. We were led into a hot room, covered in our choice of oil, scrubbed down, then smothered in a volcanic ash substance.

After this, we were given massages - the perfect reward for our long trek through the mountains. Another surprise for us was visiting the impressive five-star La Mamounia hotel, where our former prime and wartime hero Winston Churchill famously was a regular visitor. We went for a cocktail facing its majestic gardens - a huge space filled with exotic plants - and imagined other political giants wandering among the peaceful refuge.

But after all these activities in three days, the Les Cinq Djellabas was calling us back all the time.

With the temperature in the mid-30s, a bottle of reasonably priced local wine chilling in the ice bucket and the fantastic pool, the hotel was like a magnet.

Marrakech wasn't our first choice but it proved to be a relaxing and interesting destination compared to many parts of neighbouring Spain and it's still less than three hours away from home. The culture, the sun and diversity of activities made it a winning destination for us. We'll be back.

Travel facts -

A hut at Les Cinq Djellabas (www.hotel-les5djellabas.com) starts from £198 per night, which includes breakfast, return to and from the airport - and if you stay more than three nights, return transfers to and from Marrakech.

EasyJet fly to Marrakech from £43 each way, visit www.easyjet.co.uk.