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Essaouira – Morocco’s Windy City

BY SERENA BHANDARI

Essaouira (pronounced essa-weera), is a city on Morocco’s Atlantic coast. Known as the ‘Wind City of Africa’, it is bypassed by hoards of sun-worshipping tourists each year due its strong “Alizée” trade winds, the same winds which make the city’s beach popular for surfing, windsurfing and kitesurfing. This port city has plenty of traditional culture and character to experience, as Serena Bhandari finds out on her recent visit...



Essaouira is known as Morocco’s windy city, and stepping off the plane it was obvious why. Essaouira experiences on average 320 days of sunshine a year, but it would seem that due to its coastal location the majority of those days are accompanied by significant winds – which lends to its reputation for windsurfing, kite-surfing and watersports. Thanks to the recent launch of Ryanair flights twice weekly from Stansted, I was able to head out and experience the joys of Essaouira for myself.

The trip began at Le Jardin des Douars, a luxurious hotel just outside Essaouira set within its own botanical garden on the Ksob River. The hotel boasts two heated swimming pools as well as three dining areas – a large open plan restaurant, unique couples dining room and outdoor terrace area – and its own hammam and spa. Upon arrival I was ushered towards a large seating area by the restaurant’s grand fireplace and, with sesame pastries and a warm cup of Moroccan mint tea in hand, I began to plan my time in Essaouira.

Obviously a must-see on my list was the town of Essaouira itself. Home to a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the form of its 18th century medina. Only a 12 minute shuttle from the hotel, Essaouira is full of market stalls selling traditional furnishings, colourful woven clothing and

aromatic street foods. You could spend hours shopping about for bargains in the marketplaces of the medina, seeking out the perfect gifts for friends and family back home; in contrast to the hustle and bustle of Marrakech, local traders are much more relaxed about bartering and are very happy to engage in long discussions with visitors to their town.

Whilst Essaouira has pop culture ties to Jimi Hendrix, who visited the town in the late 1960s, a more recent link comes in the form of Essaouira’s role in Game of Thrones. It acted as the setting for Season Three’s Astapor, the town where Daenerys Targaryen meets the Unsullied – and luckily the most recognisable locations are accessible to visitors. The appeal of climbing up the Skala du Port won’t be lost on those who aren’t Game of Thrones fans however, as the fort itself provides scenic views of the sea, as well as the city’s famous bright blue wooden fishing boats.

At the end of a day’s sightseeing in Essaouira, dinner will almost definitely be in order. During my time in the city, I ate at chic hangout spot The Loft; my squid and shrimp tagiatelle was to die for, the portions were large, and whilst it was perhaps pricier than other Essaouira food options, this was reflected in the quality of the meal.



At the end of my time in Essaouira, I felt satisfied, sun-tanned and filled with good food; and that is the sign of a trip well done.

Heading back to the hotel, however, one is also greeted with numerous culinary options. Jardin des Douars provides a different set menu every day – whilst I was there, options included various tagines, soups and delicious looking desserts – as well as an a la carte menu providing traditional Moroccan food alongside Western fare. The real highlight of Jardin des Douar’s cuisine, however, was the Sunday barbecue buffet. Heading down to the terrace dining area I was met with assorted grilled meats and seafood, a huge variety of salads and traditional cold dishes and more desserts than I could even imagine. A personal favourite of mine were the monkfish skewers, whilst my travel companion was more than impressed by the potato and shrimp salad – but we both agreed that overall it was a delightful

culinary experience, only made better by the warm weather and beautiful surroundings.

Next up was a trip to the hotel’s hammam steam room, where I was scrubbed and pampered with local oils and scrubs until my skin was the softest it’s ever been. For the remainder of the second day in Essaouira, I headed down to the beach at Sidi Kaouki to relax with some great seafood. I wasn’t disappointed by our restaurant of choice, La Mouette et les Dromadaires, choosing to eat a seabass tartare and a selection of vegetarian salads. After this little snack it was time for a wander down the beach. If you wanted to you could ride camels or horses across the sand, but we chose not to do this for fear of wasting our lunch!

On our final day, for the highlight of the trip we took a recommendation from the hotel and headed back into town and to the L’Atelier Madada for a Moroccan cooking course. Having eaten a fair amount of tagine during our stay, we weren’t done yet as we opted into learning to make a harira vegetable soup and a beef, date and almond tagine. The workshops cater for up to eight attendees but when we booked, my companion and I were the only ones in the class. Led by a friendly team of two, a talented chef and trilingual presenter, we were taught the importance of using a traditional tagine, as well as techniques for making tagine sauce from onions, skinning tomatoes and caramelising dates amongst other things. Following this, the presenter took us down to the marketplace for

a guided explanation of the key spices used in Moroccan cooking; this made for a nice touch and a good way to make use of the time prior to our dishes being complete. The final product was to die for, and luckily they provide the recipes for use back home – I will definitely be preparing that beef tagine again.

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Travel Information

Ryanair fly between London Stansted and Essaouira twice per week on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Essaouira airport is located 15 minutes from Le Jardin des Douars and a shuttle service is available. Marrakech is about three hours away. www.ryanair.com/gb/en

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