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DECEMBER 2023

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## **YOUR FESTIVE COOKBOOK**

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chestnut crumble • Topsy pork terrine • Christmas cake trifle



# MOROCCAN NIGHTS

Heading to Essaouira with her teenage son, **Tamsin Burnett-Hall** falls in love with the North African vibe

This image: night falls on the terrace at Le Jardin des Douars near Essaouira



**T**his is a 'say yes' holiday - opening ourselves up to new experiences. My son, Toby, and I are visiting Morocco for the first time, having flown to the picturesque Atlantic port of Essaouira (pronounced ess-uh-WEE-ruh). Known for the *alizee* coastal winds that entice kite-surfers, the city is rumoured to be less hectic than Marrakesh and easier to navigate than the medieval labyrinth of Fez.

We're aiming for relaxation plus a bit of adventure and are heading to Le Jardin des Douars hotel, around 20 minutes out of town. Driving through scrubland that's sparsely populated by goats and scrubby argan trees, we arrive to a literal oasis of lush gardens surrounding the hotel, near the steep gorge of the Oued Ksob river. But relaxation must be postponed as Toby



forgot to pack either swimming trunks or sunglasses, so we hop on the hotel shuttle to the medina.

### SPICE TRAIL

Wandering around the covered streets and lanes of the old town, we start to acclimatise to the hubbub and North African vibe.

Displays of ceramics, rugs and antiques spill out of tiny shops, with many invitations to 'come inside'. Having heard stories of being ripped off, my instinct is to feel suspicious, and I'm uncertain at the prospect of haggling, but I push through the discomfort to discover it's good fun. People here are genuinely friendly, and while of course they want you to visit their restaurant or shop, it's not high-pressured.

Hovering by a street seller roasting corn over charcoal, we get chatting to a local fisherman. He accompanies us as we walk back up the main street talking in a mix of English and French. He tells us about his village in the Atlas mountains, pointing out the produce that the farmers bring down to sell. And then, of course, comes the 'take tea with me at my friend's spice shop, the best in Essaouira!' pitch.

Leaning into the 'say yes' vibe, we arrive at an impressive-looking spice shop that I'd seen earlier and wanted to come back to. *Thé royal* is assembled for us from myriad jars of spices and dried herbs: a mix of 13 ingredients including rose petals, hibiscus, cinnamon and mountain thyme, brewed with honey and then poured from a great height into small glasses. Smelling fragrant *ras el hanout* being ground (a blend of 45 spices here), I can't resist a purchase along with some royal tea. It turns out that the price is per gram, and it soon adds up to a rather eye-watering total.



### THE DETAILS

Le Jardin des Douars ([jardindesdouars.com](http://jardindesdouars.com)) offers a selection of rooms, suites and villas. B&B is priced from around £160 per room, per night.

Villas are priced from around £580 per night, including breakfast, and sleep up to 14 guests.

Ah well, all part of the experience, I acknowledge. We finish our day at a sundowner restaurant inside the city walls, climbing several flights of stairs to emerge on the rooftop terraces. The fortified city walls and ramparts that have featured in films and series such as *Game of Thrones* provide backdrop for a sunset meal.

### AND... RELAX

We slow our pace and spend most of the next few days enjoying all that Le Jardin des Douars has to offer. Stone paths meander through the gardens, linking the pools, bars and terrace restaurant. Bougainvillea spills over ochre-hued walls, while tall palms catch the wind in a soothing rustle. The buildings have the curvaceous forms of traditional Moroccan architecture, while antique furniture and carvings are dotted around. It's a wonderful combination of calm, modern luxury and attentive service. We spend hours lounging poolside and on the palm-shaded terraces, punctuated by refreshing swims and cooling drinks (the kiwi and ginger smoothie is Toby's favourite, while I favour a G&T infused with cucumber and rose). Of course, we have to experience the hammam; we're



Clockwise from left: ceramics in the medina; the main pool at Le Jardin des Douars; each room has a unique decor; fresh sardine ceviche

lathered up on a marble table, sluiced with warm water, oiled and flipped over like our breakfast pancakes. Lunch on the terrace features lots of locally caught fish (the sardines are a must), while dinner offers both traditional tagines and modern cuisine.

### DAY AND NIGHT

Batteries recharged, we opt for a couple of active local experiences. First, a thrilling quad bike drive over rippling sand dunes, and then a more laidback camel ride along the wide beach, watching the bright sails of kite-surfers skip over the waves as we sway along.

Although we've run out of time to fit in a local cookery class, I want to seek out authentic Moroccan food. Tucked among the back streets of the medina, we choose a tiny family restaurant and opt for mystery dishes. Toby picks *seffa medfouna*: saffron chicken buried in a mound of spiced vermicelli, while I dig into *rfissa*: deeply savoury lentils and chicken on a bed of *msemmen* pancake 'noodles'.

As night falls, women and children emerge to shop, chat and play in the cooler air. We're amongst the locals, but don't feel out of place. Morocco is certainly very different to any other country that I've visited, but would we come back for more? Just one last time, we both say yes. ■