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DECEMBER 2023

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MAGICAL MOROCCO

A true hidden gem, romantic rural hotel Jardin des Douars will make you feel like you are a million miles off the beaten track

Words by Penny Clements

Setting foot on Moroccan soil, it feels like we are arriving in an exotic new land, but after a mere four-hour flight from London, and with the minor adjustment of turning our watches forward by just one hour, it is reassuringly close to home. A short 20-minute drive from the bustling labyrinthine harbour city of Essaouira brings us to Jardin des Douars, a 19-room oasis that boasts six airy pacha suites and five domed villas set within a charming walled garden village.

We arrive in the pitch darkness, via a narrow road, feeling like we are travelling into the unknown. It soon becomes evident that we are driving into our own personal fairytale: we are welcomed by the sight of argan trees illuminated by glowing, low-lit lanterns lining the cobbled driveway, at the end of which, the hotel reveals itself like a shimmering oasis. From the outside, it doesn't give much away, encased by high fort-like walls as it is, but inside, it is a jewel box of a place. Designed to echo its surroundings, Jardin des Douars (French-Arabic for 'collection of dwellings') evokes the spirit of the red earthen kasbahs of the Atlas Mountains, giving the hotel an authentically Moroccan feel.

It may be late at night, but we are warmly welcomed and led through the gardens to our suite. The immaculate landscaping features cacti and vibrant tropical blooms; owls swoop between the palms and we are serenaded by the singsong of crickets and the occasional croak from a family of frogs gathered in nearby ponds under the glowing moonlight. This breathtaking setting provides a dramatic backdrop to the hotel's two chic restaurants, which specialise in North African and French cuisines cooked with local artisanal ingredients. There is also a sprawling bar terrace (perfect, we are told, for taking in the glowing sunsets), a rejuvenating spa, and two inviting jade green swimming pools.

We enter our suite through a heavy wooden arched door; it is the epitome of understated luxury. Mustard terracotta washed walls, neutral luxury linens and traditional minimalist sculptures decorate the space. Overhead, a beautiful wooden ceiling stretches the length of the room and a huge rattan pendant light shade serves as the perfect centrepiece above the king-sized bed. Below, cool stone flooring is cosied up by large Berber rugs and a fully functioning fireplace completes the picture. Through the



As the sunset starts to cast its warm golden glow, we find ourselves drawn to the allure of the hotel's restaurant for dinner. Anchored within the landscape, the restaurant proves itself to be a culinary delight. Blending rustic charm and refined elegance, the menu celebrates the essence of Morocco with local, fresh and seasonal offerings. A mezze-style selection of dips, sauces, breads and vegetables is devoured, after which, we opt for a classic fall-off-the-bone chicken tagine with juicy olives, delicate orange reduction and saffron. It is exquisite, and only trumped by the view. Come breakfast, you can watch the morning mist burn off, unveiling the gardens, and take in the panorama as you feast here – a delicious spread of local, regional, and French classics is served (the cooked eggs are divine).

The hotel is just 20-minutes from the hustle and bustle of Essaouira's majestic pint-sized medina, which is well worth a visit. And there's plenty more to do in this vibrant seaside city besides. An evening trip to the charming centre is recommended, not least for the food. The shopping is also eye opening – here, traditional Moroccan souks now coexist with hip young local designers. Further afield, we ride dromedary camels, exploring the hidden sand dune forests, and trek to the beautiful Atlas Mountains; the hotel staff are warm and knowledgeable, going the extra mile to help arrange curated excursions. However, Jardin Des Douars is a hotel that is so good that you really shouldn't feel guilty about not leaving it at all.

Our experience here is unsurpassed, indeed, the only disappointment we experience is when we have to leave. After a final late lunch of zingy ceviche – the fish landed fresh from the nearby Atlantic waters – and a perfectly mixed piña colada at the poolside, it is hard not to feel like we're being evicted as we make our way back to the reception, turning for a final glimpse of the paradise we are leaving behind. It's difficult to imagine a more idyllic place to spend a well-earned escape-from-it-all break, and there is no doubt that we'd be back in a flash, given half a chance. ■

DETAILS

Rates from £160 per room, per night, including breakfast. Villas are priced from around £580 per night including breakfast and sleep up to 14 guests. For more details, see jardindesdouars.com. Ryanair operates flights from London to Essaouira twice weekly.

The gorgeously landscaped grounds provide the ultimate setting for complete relaxation

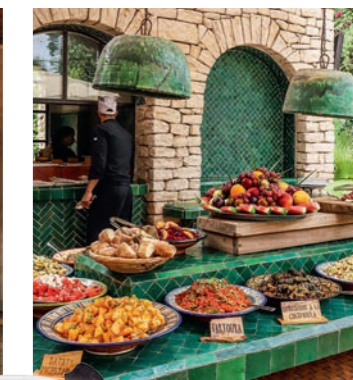
glass doors, a large private terrace is equipped with padded sun loungers: it looks like a great spot for chilling. The generously-sized bathroom features beautiful pearlescent tiling and toiletries come in refillable potion-like vials – a nod to the eco-ethos of Jardin des Douars. My favourite feature? In a bid to encourage guests to disconnect and digitally detox during their stay, the rooms intentionally lack televisions or any other high-tech mod-cons – the hotel is a true sanctuary for those seeking to switch off from the pressures of modern life.

The next morning arrives with a feeling of calm bliss, and with the first rays of sunlight comes the revelation of just how beautifully serene this place is. The buildings are enveloped by lush botanical landscapes, with each window framing a view featuring a vibrant kaleidoscope of colours. While the rooms are certainly to be admired, the gardens are the real star of this show. Our slow meander to breakfast under the shade of the trees leads us through sweetly fragranced plants, accompanied by murmuring wildlife under an azure sky. It's easy to forget that we are actually in a hotel and not amid an earthly paradise.

The mood lasts for the rest of the day, and we manage to do exactly what we came here for – calm down and come around. We spend this first day hunkered down at the adults-only infinity pool, just a stone's throw from our suite. It is an almost

bewilderingly quiet and contemplative space that has been beautifully orchestrated. This is no place for raucous parties; rather one for low gears and downtime. But for those with children, there is an equally beautiful family-friendly pool on the other side of the main house, fringed with olive and argan trees and offering views over the valley. We enjoy a sun-soaked afternoon doing purposeful laps of the pool, listening to the rustle of leaves in the breeze, watching the resident tortoise potter around, and sipping bottles of local Casablanca beer with immense satisfaction. It is a Sunday, which means that lunch takes the form of the most extravagant barbecue I've ever seen – with enough options of salads and sides for even vegetarians to feel spoiled for choice.

Later, feeling more relaxed than we have in a long time, we opt to up the Zen factor at the spa. While the setup is familiar, it is the attention to detail that really sets this space apart. Holistic and mentally stimulating, it appears that time is stopped, or perhaps elongated here. I opt for a personalised full-body massage, and, focusing on touch, gauging every tiny movement and using the purest local oils harvested by local women's cooperatives, the skilled therapist works out every knot. I emerge sixty minutes later feeling utterly reinvigorated, sweet-smelling, and as sleepy as this magical place itself.



From buffet spreads to à la carte options, the hotel's food makes use of local ingredients and is exquisite