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TRAVEL

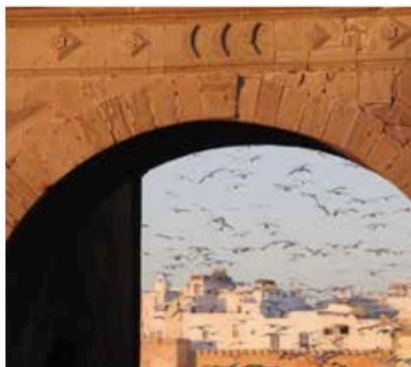
Essaouria, Morocco, Featuring The Hotel, Le Jardin Des Douars



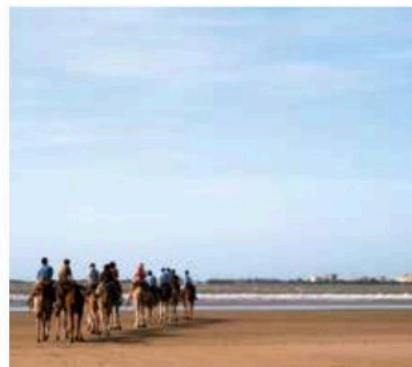
For those wanting a lovely peaceful break from the dreary UK weather, I can totally recommend Essaouria, a port on the Moroccan coast, which is a mixture of historical port, bustling Medina, and top-notch hotels, all with an all-year-round warm climate.

The easiest way to get to the tiny airport of Essaouria from the UK, is to get a Ryanair flight from Stanstead (flights on Tuesdays and Saturdays), but there are other options with other airlines, but they have longer transfer times.

Unlike the other Moroccan coastal resorts Essaouria has retained its traditional culture and character, mainly due to the winds that blow throughout the year, but don't let that put you off coming, as the winds don't always blow and the beach next to the town is large and sandy and is a lovely place to experience a horse or camel ride.



Essaouria was a significant port in its time, and there is still a strong fishing presence where the fishermen still mend their nets, and fish from their traditional boats. Built to protect the port, and another site to visit, is The Sqala of the Kasbah, built in 1765. The Sqala consists of a number of rooms to store the ammunition and weapons, and is equipped with a beautiful collection of Spanish cannons dating from the 16th century. The real star is, however, the Medina, with its dramatic ramparts protectively surrounding the narrow streets bustling with street vendors selling clothes, souvenirs, food and of course Argan Oil. We happily spent a morning wandering through the stalls and shops haggling occasionally to get the best price on our purchases, and to see life as the locals live, because this isn't just for tourists, as it also sells fruit, vegetables, chicken and fish.



Essaouria has always been a city that attracts artists and that hasn't changed over the years, so when you visit there will certainly be a number of exhibitions to enjoy.

Essaouria is also blessed with a number of wonderful restaurants all serving traditional food in a traditional environment dotted around the Medina, and there are a number of rooftop bars where you can enjoy the sunset whilst sipping on a cold drink.

For our more active readers, Essaouria is known as the windy city of Africa, and so is a kite- and wind- surfing mecca for part of the year, and there is a wonderful Gary Player designed 18 hole championship golf course, which makes the most of the contours of the rugged landscape and just oozes quality and wonderful sea views.



Less than a fifteen-minute drive from the airport, and up an unmade, dusty road, almost in the middle of nowhere, is an oasis of calm and tranquillity in the form of the hotel, Le Jardin des Douars.

The hotel is independent and privately owned by three couples, which may be why the hotel has such a friendly, personal feel to it, and it still remains an absolute mystery to me that the official star rating for the hotel is 3, when personally I would rate it 5, and everyone who has been there agrees with me!

The gardens surrounding the property are what first make you feel like you are in a very special place, as they are beautifully kept and are abundant in their numbers and species of plants. On the way from the airport our driver told us about the protected forests of argan trees which line the roads, and whose fruit yields Essaouria's "gold": Argan Oil. Argan oil has subtle properties scientifically recognised for their effects on skin and beauty, and many botanists have tried to plant argan trees around the world, all the way to Asia. However, all attempts

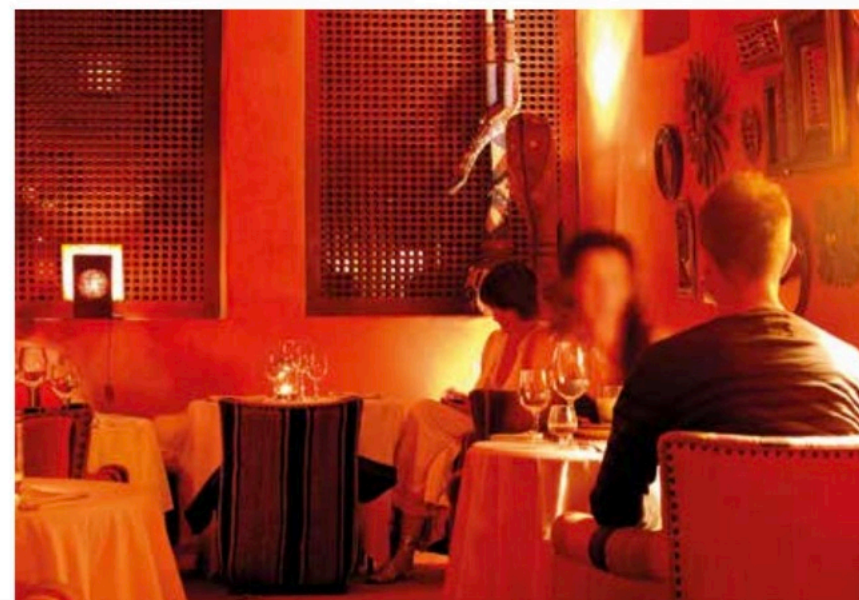
have failed, so seemingly the tree prefers its native land of Essaouira above all others.

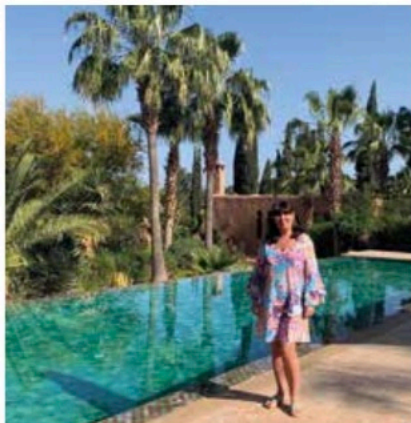
As you enter the property, there are six stunning villas, each with three, four or five bedrooms, that are available to rent, and believe me, are breath-taking. The décor is warm and welcoming and their outdoor areas are perfect, each with large, separate swimming pools, comfortable, padded sun loungers, and their own beautiful gardens, just right for family holidays or trips with a group of friends. Each villa has its own staff member, who will come in every morning and make breakfast, and can then also cook dinner for you at an extra charge, or you can choose to eat in the hotel, or cater for yourselves in the well-equipped kitchen - (there are large supermarkets a short drive away).

The hotel itself is built in the Moroccan style, with a number of outer buildings surrounding the main 'palace', all with rustic, terracotta walls, floor tiles and bedrooms, which all have en-suite bathrooms and their own private outdoor space. Some of these spaces are more

private than others, and our room included a secluded rooftop terrace with wonderful views of the sunset over the dusty Moroccan countryside, which I would whole heartedly recommend. All the buildings are no more than two stories high, and are built on different levels, so they are not imposing at all, and blend well with the ambience of the entire hotel. The bathrooms have showers, and some have large, tiled baths, that do take quite a long time to fill up, as they really are large, but well worth the wait if, like me, you are a bath lover! The towels aren't the usual soft fluffy type, but traditional cloth which adds to the authenticity of the hotel and its commitment to sustainability.

Although not a large hotel, indeed many refer to it as a guesthouse, there is a wide selection of rooms to choose from (19 bedrooms, 6 suites and 6 villas) and all are individually decorated in an authentic style giving the guests that Moroccan feel, and the suites are perfect for that extra bit of luxury for a couple or a joint space for a family.





Le Jardin des Douars has two restaurants, one for families, with a large glass tiled wall looking out on to beautiful scenery, and a comfortable communal area around the open fire, whilst the other adult only restaurant (which offers the same menu), has a quieter, more intimate atmosphere. There is also a fabulous outdoor terrace and dining area that is used for lunchtimes, and is a great place to enjoy a drink whilst chatting to fellow guests and listening to the call of the frogs in the rockpool, before enjoying the Moroccan cuisine.

Each evening there is a set menu on offer, as well as the à la carte menu, and the same options are available for lunchtimes, although the menus are different. We thoroughly enjoyed all our meals at the hotel, that included flatbreads with a guacamole dip, smoked salmon, an onion tart tatin, vermicelli with chicken, linguine with green vegetables, a crispy prawn burger, pavlova with fruits and chocolate pie. All were beautifully presented and reasonably priced for a hotel that has no other restaurants within walking distance, which made it easy to continue the relaxation, as the quality and variety of the food is so good that there is no reason to have to head into town for dinner.

Breakfast is taken in the family restaurant, and is continental in style, offering cereals, cold meats, cheese, breads, jam, and fruit, and then there are four extra options to choose from the menu, including Moroccan Pancakes, French Toast, Eggs and Omelettes (the Moroccan pancakes are highly recommended, and very popular!).

There are two immaculate swimming pools at the hotel, one for families overlooking the Ksob Oued River, and the other, an adult only infinity pool, both with stylish turquoise tiling. Both have a sunbathing terrace with thick sun loungers, towels and sun hats, and a bar with waiter service should you require a drink. At around 4pm, Moroccan tea and cake are served to guests by the pool, which incidentally is heated to a very acceptable level, which is not always the case in some hotels who leave their pools unheated throughout the year. In fact, the pool was at such lovely temperature it was a total pleasure to swim in, and was never crowded.

There were also enough sun loungers for all the guests, so there was no need to get up early to reserve them!

The hotel does have a spa which offers treatments such as the traditional Hamman treatment, as well as massages. I braved the traditional black soap Hamman, and having been wound up by my wife about me being scrubbed to an inch of my life (which would remove all of my tan), entered the heated room with great trepidation. This unease increased when I was asked to lie face up on what was a marble alter and was rubbed down with black soap and left to lie there whilst the soap opened the pores on my skin. Thoughts of Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom and the sacrifice scene flashed through my mind, but I needn't have worried, as after a few minutes the lady returned and my whole body was gently scrubbed down and the rejuvenating soap washed off with hot water. This is how the Romans and others used to bathe, and I can see the appeal, as when I left my skin was renewed (and my tan still intact) and I felt refreshed and relaxed as well as being spotlessly clean. My wife had a sports massage which was expertly done by one of the masseurs in a candlelit room that was beautifully scented with shafts of daylight shining through tiny holes in the wooden windows, creating a very relaxing and calming atmosphere.

The hotel is an oasis a few miles from Essaouira, and so to get into town the hotel offers a shuttle service, should you wish to go shopping, dine in one of the local restaurants or visit the UNESCO World Heritage listed Medina with all its colourful stalls, which those devotees of Games Of Thrones will recognise as the home of the Army of the Unsullied.

The pace of life in Essaouira is gentle and laidback, and from the moment you land at the airport you just feel relaxed and at one with yourself, and that feeling of peace and relaxation permeates throughout the whole hotel and sets the perfect backdrop for a relaxing, luxury holiday.

For further information please visit www.jardindesdouars.com

