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# The Observer Magazine

## How did I get here?

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Feather brained: the new pigeon fanciers  
Could you work with your spouse? Meet the power couples who do  
'I drank and made a fool of myself for 35 years'

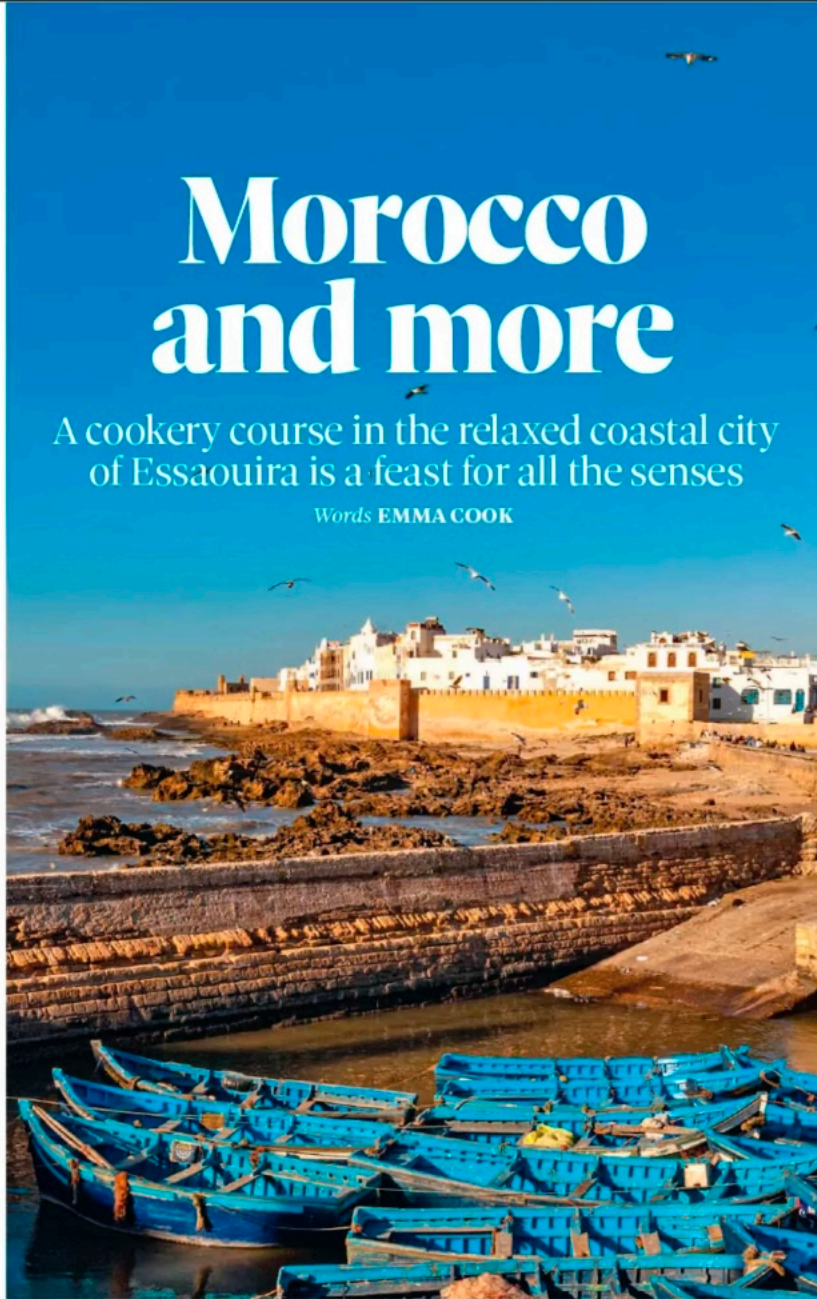
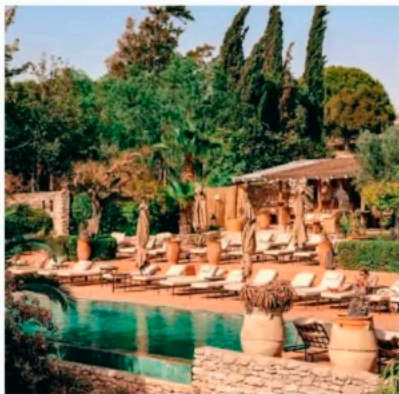
# Morocco and more

A cookery course in the relaxed coastal city of Essaouira is a feast for all the senses

Words EMMA COOK

It is early morning on the edge of Essaouira's medina and the famous Atlantic winds are picking up. The sea looks tawny and wild, the sky is darkening by the minute. It begins to rain, heavily. Even the windsurfers who flock here all year round seem to have vanished. Market traders huddle and the place seems deserted. What better time to stay inside and learn about the ancient and warming Moroccan art of making tea?

We are at L'Atelier Madada, a kitchen studio offering cookery classes in what used to be an old almond warehouse. Now it is all exposed brickwork, concrete floors and steelwork surfaces along with a kitchen shop and café known for its great coffee. Classes here are about a lot



Blue is the warmest colour: (clockwise from above) Essaouira; a cookery class at L'Atelier Madada; the city's spice market; and the pool at Le Jardin des Douars

more than tajines and couscous, although they cover those, too. You can master pastillas (traditional flaky pastry chicken pies) and gazelle horns (crescent-shaped pastries filled with almond paste and orange blossom water). And, of course, there is mint tea, a symbol of tradition, hospitality and friendship, served all day long and after every meal.

Maryam, our guide for the morning raises an ornate silver teapot high in the air. "Mint tea is a big deal in Morocco," she explains. "And the ritual of how to make it is even bigger." She raises her arm a little further in the air, the teapot hovering at least 12in above the pretty gold glasses below. In swift movements, up and down, she trickles the tea into them, her aim steady. "You can't pour it too high," Maryam says, because the higher you pour, the greater your hospitality. Height also means bubbles, or foam, on the surface, which is a mark of its quality." It also adds a certain theatrical flourish to proceedings – and is a lot more difficult than it appears. As is making the tea itself. First, make a stove pot of Chinese green gunpowder tea, then empty this into a separate glass. Rinse the pot well (to avoid a bitter taste from the green tea leaves) and pour back the original liquid, along with sugar and fresh mint. Boil until the sugar dissolves. Easy.

Next we prepare a vegetable tajine, frying the onions for the base, then slicing carrots and parsnips, ending with

**The souk here is small and relaxed, with more cats than tourists**



a layer of potatoes on top. We learn how to sculpt a rose from a large tomato. With intense concentration, we peel one long circular strip of skin from the fruit and roll it up until it resembles a flower, its uneven edges resembling fleshy red petals. While our tajines gently simmer away on the hob, Maryam takes us out for a quick tour of the souk.

We are still reeling slightly from three nights in Marrakech and its usual riot of noise, heat and activity. Essaouira is a world apart, a sleepy town of white-washed buildings, cobalt-blue shutters and fishing boats. The souk here is a smaller, more relaxed affair and during our stay there are more cats around than tourists. Up to 3,000 according to recent estimates, making the most of the daily fish hauls. Everywhere we glance, they are there, curled up on crates and in doorways, stretched out on window sills.

We follow our guide to a spice shop behind the fish market owned by Mohamed Seddiki, an expert in herbal medicine who has been practising here all his life. Floor to ceiling shelves are crammed with every possible herb in ancient-looking pots and jars. Customers come here to buy spices for their cooking, but also herbal remedies for common ailments, from migraines to menopause.

Back at Le Jardin des Douars, where we're staying, the rain has stopped and finally the sun has come out. Overlooking the Oued Ksob river in the Essaouira

hills, it is delightfully secluded yet only 15 minutes by bus from the beach and medina. Built in traditional Moroccan style, it's a labyrinth of plant-filled courtyards and lush botanical gardens. It is almost too easy to laze away the day here with its two emerald-green swimming pools, table tennis and outdoor lounge bar.

Our room is spacious and stylish, a mix of old and new with Berber rugs, Moroccan sculpture and traditional Zellige tiling. French windows open out on to a generous terrace with panoramic views across the gardens and hills beyond.

The real joy, however, is a stroll before sunset through the lush botanical gardens full of giant cacti, palms and succulents. Wandering the grounds, my daughter also spots some resident tortoises, frogs and chameleons. The buffet breakfast each morning of Moroccan crepes, coffee and scrambled eggs is another highlight and there's a tasty seafood menu in the evenings, including seared squid, gravlax salmon, lobster risotto and Moroccan oysters from Dakhla.

When we do finally manage to tear ourselves away, we're drawn back to the winding alleys of the medina, which may not be as big as Marrakech, but the variety is impressive. Along with the usual rugs and leather goods, there's also an art quarter and a jewellery souk. Contemporary concept store L'Atelier



is great for homeware and Histoire de Filles is full of pretty dresses, scarves and jewellery. There's also a thriving café scene: the Mandala Society is great for brunch – its vegan buddha bowl and falafel are highly recommended, as is the seabass in a salted crust at La Table de Madada.

However, nothing quite beats sitting in L'Atelier's dining area, eating your own freshly cooked vegetable tajine, garnished with a rose, and washed down with a glass of local wine. ■

B&B at Les Jardin Des Douars is priced from £140 per room ([jardindesdouars.com](http://jardindesdouars.com)). For more details on cookery classes and pastry workshops at L'Atelier Madada, go to [lateliermadada.com](http://lateliermadada.com)