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WEEKENDER

# ESSAOUIRA

Centuries of cultural exchange have made this Moroccan city a haven for lovers of food, music and design. Let its winds blow you coastward, where a deep-rooted arts scene gives way to legendary surf. Words: Karlina Valeiko

According to local lore, when Jimi Hendrix visited Essaouira in July 1969, he was so taken with the Moroccan port city that he tried to buy the neighbouring village of Diabat. How much of that's true has been lost behind a veil of purple haze, but Essaouira's bohemian spirit lives on, attracting travellers keen to soak up the creative energy and laid-back atmosphere that made Morocco a key stop on the hippy trail of the 1960s and 1970s.

Hippies weren't the only ones to feel Essaouira's pull. Over the centuries, the city's famed Atlantic breezes have blown in French, Portuguese, Spanish and even British influences, which have blended with Arabic and Amazigh traditions to establish the windswept citadel as a centre for Moroccan art and design.

Today, Essaouira moves to the beat of its own drum — one rattled by the rhythms of Gnawa, a traditional music originally practised by people brought together by the trans-Saharan slave trade. For three days every June, the sound of strummed lutes, rhythmic castanets and hypnotic vocals fills the streets during the Gnaoua and World Music Festival. Like the five towering gates, or *babs*, that open onto the city's medina, these spiritual rhythms may seem like portals into Morocco's past, but Essaouira has a modern side, too. Wander its souk-filled avenues and you'll find contemporary boutiques, artisan patisseries and co-working spaces where nomadic creatives continue to chase that countercultural lifestyle.



IMAGES: GETTY; LE JARDIN DES DOUARS; GEOFF SIMPSON

## DAY ONE CULTURAL KICKS

### Morning

Essaouira's medina follows a rough grid system, making the UNESCO-listed old quarter easily navigable on foot. Head down Rue Skala towards Bayt Dakira, a local history museum that houses sacred texts and other artefacts from the city's once sizeable Jewish population. Then take your time exploring the medina's main thoroughfares — twin strands running north to south — where shop owners sell ceramics, ornate wood carvings and jewellery studded with precious stones. Along the way, stop by Chaim Pinto Synagogue, a 19th-century riad-turned-place of worship, before trying the city's most popular snack at Crêpes Essaouira, a crepe stall near the main square, Place Moulay Hassan. [instagram.com/crepes\\_essaouira](https://www.instagram.com/crepes_essaouira)

### Afternoon

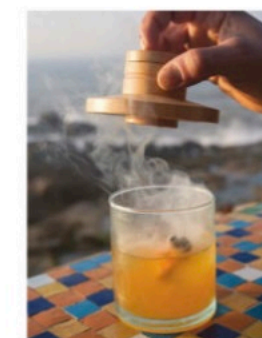
For a window into Moroccan cuisine and its influences, head to l'Atelier. Occupying a former almond warehouse on the medina's outer edge, this cafe and concept store runs cooking workshops every day except Sunday. You'll explore the historic core's various markets, sourcing ingredients and learning the names of aromatic spices, before returning to cook a traditional meal. The menu's largely dictated by what's fresh in the harbour and souks, but expect to enjoy starters such as *zaalouk* (aubergine and tomato dip) followed by more regional dishes like sardine meatball tagine (known as *souiri*). For those with a sweet tooth, there's also a pastry and mint tea masterclass. [latelieressaouira.com](https://www.latelieressaouira.com)

### Evening

Head deeper into the medina to get a flavour of the local arts and design scene. Stop by Le Real Mogador, a sprawling mansion whose rotating exhibition of contemporary Moroccan works is set around a tranquil inner courtyard. Gallery Kasbah is well worth seeing, too. Filled to the brim with sculptures, carpets and paintings, this renovated 18th-century riad showcases an eclectic mix of local art. For dinner, book a table at neighbouring Dar Baba, a candle-lit space serving Moroccan-Mediterranean dishes, then end the night by joining the bohemian clientele at D'Jazy's for cocktails and live fusion jazz. [instagram.com/lerealmogador](https://www.instagram.com/lerealmogador) [galerielakasbah.net](https://www.galerielakasbah.net) [dar-baba.com](https://www.dar-baba.com) [instagram.com/djazy.essaouira](https://www.instagram.com/djazy.essaouira)

From left: Essaouira's historic ramparts; hotel Le Jardin des Douars offers rooms just outside the city; a cocktail on the rooftop of Salut Maroc

### TOP FIVE Rooftop hangouts



#### SALUT MAROC

A riot of multicoloured tiles, this boutique hotel's rooftop bar has an extensive cocktail menu. Order a rose blush — prosecco, rose syrup and rose water — and gaze over the rooftops as the sun sets. [salutmaroc.com](https://www.salutmaroc.com)

#### TAROS

A tropical-themed restaurant-bar that sees DJs spin funk, house and contemporary Gnawa tunes long into the night. Grab a Casablanca beer and let the music take hold. [instagram.com/lesterrassesbytaros](https://www.instagram.com/lesterrassesbytaros)

#### LE PALAZZO

This newly remodelled hotel on the medina's southern edge has a rooftop restaurant with beach views. For oysters and guest DJ sets, don't miss the Oyster Disco on certain Thursdays. [lepalazzohotel.com](https://www.lepalazzohotel.com)

#### IL MARE RESTAURANT

Il Mare serves local seafood to the pulse of live Gnawa. If you just come for a drink, you'll get a table on the lower terrace, so order food for top-floor views. [instagram.com/restaurant\\_ilmare](https://www.instagram.com/restaurant_ilmare)

#### HUNGRY NOMAD

Lit by string lights, Hungry Nomad is a good spot for watching the markets wind down for the day, and there's a daily changing menu featuring fresh fish from the harbour. [instagram.com/hungry.nomad](https://www.instagram.com/hungry.nomad)



Below: Head to Skala du Port to watch the fishing boats come in

## DAY TWO ACTIVE ADVENTURES

### Morning

Prepare for the day with a cinnamon bun from Pumpkin, an artisanal patisserie on Avenue de l'Istiqlal, the medina's main drag. Then, embrace the wind with a walk along Skala de la Ville. Designed by French architect Theodore Cornut, the city's ramparts — aided by 19 bronze cannons shipped in from Spain — protected it from invaders and unforgiving Atlantic waves. Wander towards Skala du Port as the fishing boats return with the day's catch. Originally a small trading port, Essaouira's harbour once handled as much as half of Morocco's foreign trade. While you're here, don't miss out on fresh sardines cooked over hot coals on 'grill street', a row of stalls on the water's edge.

[instagram.com/pumpkin.essaouira](https://www.instagram.com/pumpkin.essaouira)

### Afternoon

Year-round winds have made Essaouira a top surfing and kitesurfing destination since the 1960s. Walk south from the harbour towards Essaouira's main beach, where Ion Club offers equipment rental, windsurfing and kitesurfing lessons, and even wingfoil courses, during which learners skim the water clutching hydrofoil sails. Summer's smaller waves are better for beginners, while more experienced surfers may want to face the large winter swells. Those who'd rather watch the action from the shore will find several beach clubs and restaurants along the promenade. Beach and Friends has sunbeds, parasols and a restaurant serving local seafood and classic cocktails. [ion-club.net](https://ion-club.net) [instagram.com/beachandfriends\\_essaouira](https://www.instagram.com/beachandfriends_essaouira)

### Evening

Morocco's Atlantic coast enjoys breathtaking sunsets. As the sky grows pink, head to Palma Quad on Essaouira Beach for the final adventure of the day: a guided quad-biking tour out of the city. After a short test drive, you'll spend a couple of hours riding on tracks surrounded by desert shrubbery to seemingly forgotten sections of Essaouira's coastline, watching the sky turn a blazing orange. Return to the medina for dinner beneath the exposed brick arches of Triskala, a farm-to-fork restaurant occupying one of the oldest houses in Essaouira. The menu changes daily, but expect to feast on fragrant seafood tagines, and be sure to order the fennel bread to mop up the juices. [palmaquad.com](https://palmaquad.com) [instagram.com/triskalaessaouira](https://www.instagram.com/triskalaessaouira)

### TOP THREE Beaches

#### ASSAFI BEACH

Beyond the city's northern fringes, Assafi Beach is a great place to escape the high-season crowds, with its dunes remaining blissfully visitor-free even in summer. Fewer people mean fewer facilities, so if you're planning on spending the whole day here, come prepared. Check the tide times, too, as some portions of the beach get cut off as the waves sweep in.

#### DIABAT BEACH

South across the Oued Ksob river, less than four miles from Essaouira's main beach, Diabat offers quieter sands and a small selection of surf schools, such as KiteflyMaroc. It's an especially peaceful place to watch the sun set over Essaouira and its bay. [kiteflymaroc.com](https://kiteflymaroc.com)

#### SIDI KAOUKI

A 25-minute drive south from Essaouira, Sidi Kaouki beach, backed by a sleepy, whitewashed village, offers more advanced surf and golden sands. La Mouette et Les Dromadaires has a casual restaurant and rooms right on the beach. [lamouetteetlesdromadaires.com](https://lamouetteetlesdromadaires.com)







### And action!

Essaouira has long been a favourite among Hollywood directors, with the city serving as a filming location for a range of movies and television shows, including Orson Welles' 1951 classic *Othello*. You may recognise the ramparts and port area from cult TV series *Game of Thrones*, in which the old town was used to depict Astapor.

## THREE MORE TRADITIONAL CRAFTS

### Wood carving

Rooted in Essaouira's age-old timber trade, wood carving is a point of pride among the city's many artisans. It takes great skill, time and attention to detail to create the intricate pieces, many of which are made from *thuya*, a type of cypress native to the Atlas Mountains. Prized for its rich colour and unique patterns, the wood is dried, carved, polished and then inlaid with lemonwood or mother of pearl. Most wood carvers in the medina won't hesitate to show curious travellers how the pieces are made and explain the processes. You'll find one such place on Rue Ibn Rochd, where you can watch workshop owner Abdel Jalil in action and buy sculptures, boxes and other decorative items to take home.

### Pottery

Essaouira has numerous studios and shops selling everything from small trinket plates to tagines. The largest concentration can be found near Bab Skala, the gate connecting the medina to its towering ramparts. Pop into Minimal Bazar – a high-end store with contemporary pottery crafted by local artisans – or pick up hand-painted bowls from nearby Koulchi Concept. Bear in mind that it's customary to haggle in Morocco – rarely are you expected to pay the price initially stated. Alternatively, try crafting your own pottery and ceramics with a class at Atelier by Lo, a whitewashed studio around 10 minutes' drive from the medina. [minimal-bazar.com](http://minimal-bazar.com) [instagram.com/koulchi\\_concept](https://www.instagram.com/koulchi_concept) [instagram.com/atelierbylo](https://www.instagram.com/atelierbylo)

### Textiles

The Îles Purpuraires, or Purple Islands, are a set of gnarled islets located just off the coast of Essaouira. It was here, surrounded by the churning Atlantic, that ancient Romans harvested and crushed molluscs to make Tyrian purple, the prized dye used to colour their imperial togas. Today, Mogador, the largest of the islands, is a sanctuary for Eleonora's falcons, but its legacy as a source of vibrant dyes lives on, with Essaouira's weavers using traditional methods to produce vibrant handwoven rugs, throws and cushion covers. In the medina, you'll find several textile shops around Place Chefchaoui. Maison Berbere, packed floor-to-ceiling with stacks of patterned rugs rich in reds and oranges, is a standout. [D](#)

### HOW TO DO IT

Ryanair flies to Essaouira twice weekly from Stansted, flight time around 3h40m. Alternatively, Essaouira is a three-hour drive from Marrakech if you'd like to combine the two cities for a longer break. [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)  
A peaceful oasis just a 10-minute drive from Essaouira's medina, Le Jardin des Douars has terraced gardens and comfortable rooms and suites, many with private terraces. From 7,904 MAD (£160), B&B. [jardindesdouars.com](http://jardindesdouars.com)  
See also [visitesaouira.com](http://visitesaouira.com)

Above: Craftspeople abound in the medina