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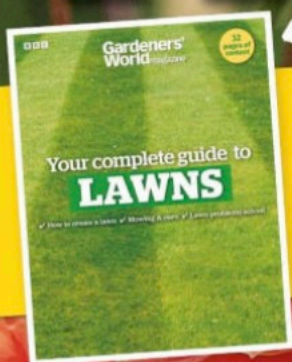
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Garden globetrotting: Morocco

From the desert landscape of Essaouira to the palmeraies and High Atlas Mountains in and around Marrakesh, Morocco is proof that where there's water, there's a way. Sonya Patel Ellis took the tour.

The city walls in Marrakech, surrounding the historic Medina district



Sonya Patel Ellis
Senior Content Creator

A week visiting the gardens of Essaouira and Marrakesh with a friend was an exciting prospect in itself – swapping the freezing late-November streets of London for warm, sunny climes in less than half a day was a welcome bonus.

Flying into Essaouira gave little clue to the lush, green oases that awaited, the plane window revealing a largely barren landscape of baked red earth with the faint swell of the city on the coast. Just 20 minutes' drive

out into the desert however, and we were suddenly travelling down an avenue of multi-hued bougainvillea and palm trees, to arrive at our first destination: the botanical paradise of Jardin des Douars.

A tour of the hotel's stepped garden following a network of bejmat (handcrafted clay) tiled paths led to an impressive array of plants: sky-blue plumbago, crimson hibiscus, gigantic African milk trees (*Euphorbia trigona*), red hot pokers and swathes of red-tinted fountain grass (*Pennisetum*). We spotted a dried-up riverbed in the distance – had water for the plants been diverted from

there? In fact, it comes from a well-situated underground water source first harnessed when the grounds were laid out.

Ingenious ways to divert or capture water, coupled with drought-tolerant planting schemes and the ever-present echo of earth in the form of tiles, pots and adobe walls, is a recurrent theme in the riads and roof-top gardens of Essaouira and, indeed, Morocco. We sought shade in the banana-leaved courtyard of L'Heure Bleue Palais hotel and walked down sherbet-coloured streets to reach a huge buttress-rooted Ficus tree, a symbol of the city's rooted, open-armed

stance: all faiths are historically welcome here. It's also worth a trek, or horse or camel ride south to the vast sand dunes, Dar Sultan Palace ruins, and eucalyptus and mimosa forest of Diabat.

The three-hour drive to Marrakesh took us past rows of olive and argan trees, and the goats that climb the branches to chew the fruits and spew out the oil-rich kernels. An argan oil cooperative along the way is the ideal place to buy the famed golden oil.

The streets into the city are lined with nurseries of native plants that will go on to furnish gardens near and far, including our

next botanical base – the ochre-walled Jnane Tamsna hotel set within the centuries-old Palmeraie. With plant-inspired interiors by Meryanne Loum-Martin and grounds by her American ethnobotanist husband Gary Martin, there's plenty to explore. This includes a raised serpentine walkway lined with agaves, aloes, prickly pears and rose geraniums (try the infused margarita from the bar!) and an olive tree-lined courtyard. This is the perfect place to recharge after a day exploring the many vibrant and culturally significant gardens, or agave and juniper-strewn High Atlas Mountains

and Ourika Valley of Marrakech (just an hour's drive away), or to visit the garden.

■ ESSENTIAL INFO

For warm (not hot) weather and fewer crowds visit Sept-Nov or March-May. We stayed at Jardin des Douars (jardindesdouars.com), Essaouira and Jnane Tamsna (jnanetamsna.com), Marrakech. We travelled with Inclusive Morocco (inclusivemorocco.com), which arranged a bespoke botanical itinerary. Gardens: jardin-bioaromatique-ourika.com; anima-garden.com; jardinmajorelle.com; lejardinsecretmarrakech.com