

OK!

INSIDE!
Cate Blanchett
Brad Pitt
Christina Aguilera
Adam Thomas
Ellie Goulding
Fashion, beauty,
food & more...

SOPHIE



**INSIDE HER SUMMER
BREAK WITH EDWARD**

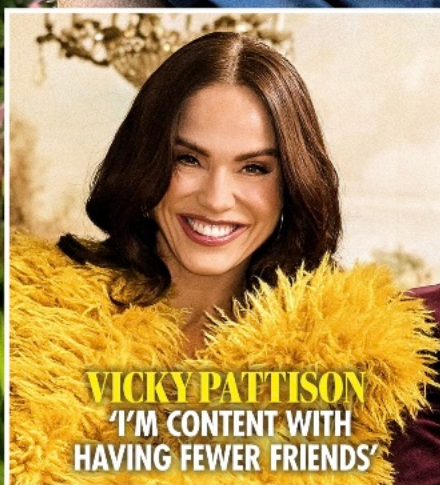
**'They have supported
one another through
very tricky times'**

**'They don't look for
luxury holidays - being
with the children is
what matters'**



CHANTELLE HOUGHTON

**'I THREW AWAY THE DRESS
I MARRIED PRESTON IN OUT OF
RESPECT FOR MY NEW MAN'**



VICKY PATTISON

**'I'M CONTENT WITH
HAVING FEWER FRIENDS'**

MAGICAL MOROCCO

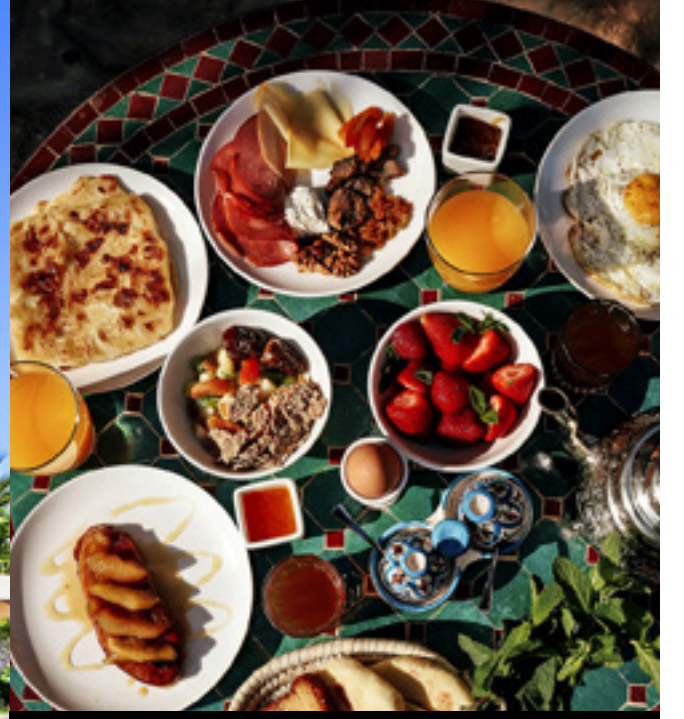
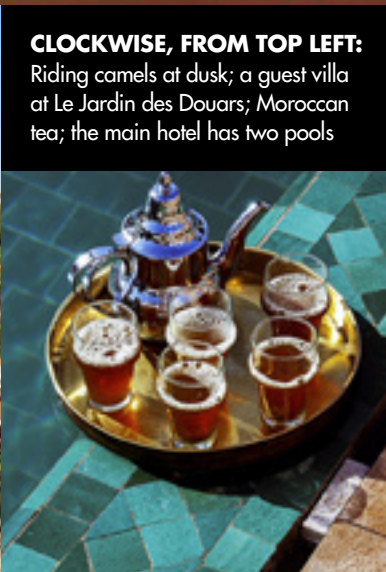
OK!'s Mia Bolton heads to Marrakech's calmer cousin, Essaouira, for the best souks, seafood and surf

Our host smiles and tells me to relax as I grip the saddle. We're part way through a camel ride along Essaouira beach and I'm acutely aware of the drop to the sand if Max, my animal companion for the evening, decides he's bored of me. Our guide, however, is far more chilled out, casually pointing out landmarks along the coast – the hotel where musician Jimi

Hendrix famously stayed in the 1960s and, further out to sea, the island of Mogador, a protected nature reserve.

Essaouira, on Morocco's Atlantic coast, is known as the 'windy city'. It's a paradise for windsurfers and the beach is alive with locals and tourists making the most of the summer breeze. The laid-back, bohemian spirit here is impossible to miss – and this easy-going charm runs throughout the entire city. ▶





CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: Riding camels at dusk; a guest villa at Le Jardin des Douars; Moroccan tea; the main hotel has two pools

ABOVE: French toast, Moroccan pancakes and fresh fruit are served at breakfast **BELOW:** Souvenirs in Essaouira's medina

A HIDDEN OASIS

Le Jardin des Douars is a short 10-minute drive from the airport, but it feels a million miles away from the outside world. The surrounding rugged terrain unfolds into lush greenery dotted with fuchsia and yellow flowers as our car winds through the hotel grounds. It really feels like a hidden oasis.

Inside my room, the welcome note reads, "No news, no blues, no formal shoes." Looking around, it's hard to imagine feeling blue here! The gorgeous zellige-tiled bathroom in our Pacha room has his-and-hers sinks, tasselled towels and a thoughtful pamper kit complete

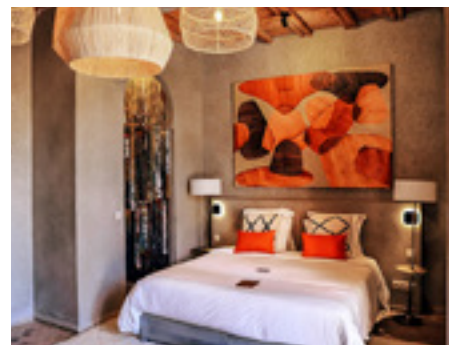
with a DIY mud face mask and an alum stone (just add warm water to use as a deodorant). But the real showstoppers are the rattan lighting pendants displayed in the bedroom, punctuated by colourful star-shaped windows on the domed ceiling.

There are two pools in the main hotel (one is adults only), a spa and a sports centre with padel courts and yoga sessions – but be sure to return to your sunlounger by 4pm, when the lovely poolside bartender comes round with refreshing mint tea and a slice of cake.

MORE TO EXPLORE

Unlike the chaotic mazes of the medina in Marrakech, Essaouira's – designed by a French architect – is easy to navigate without getting lost. The narrow, white-and-blue alleys are lined with cool art galleries and workshops selling local argan oil, handcrafted thuya wood and beautiful carpets. The colourful pottery on offer wouldn't look out of place on the shelves of a chic store like Anthropologie – though, of course, it costs a fraction of the price in the souk.

Fans of *Game Of Thrones* will recognise the medina's 18th-century ramparts as the



ABOVE: A Pacha room at Le Jardin des Douars **BELOW:** The hotel's luxury spa



WORDS: MIA BOITON PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES, MIA BOITON, STEPHANE LOUESDON

backdrop for the city of Astapor. They are first seen in the show when Daenerys Targaryen arrives and again during the 'walk of punishment'.

It's easy to while away hours weaving in and out of the boutiques, but thrill-seekers should make a beeline for the beach, where watersports, quad biking and horse riding are all on offer. Or, like me, embrace the slower (if not exactly relaxing) pace of life and take a sunset ride along the shore on a camel.

After a day of exploring, a trip to the hotel's spa is a must. There are massages and facials available, but I opt to shed the day (and any dead skin!) with a hammam – a centuries-old Moroccan bathing ritual. The treatment begins with the application of a black soap, followed by a visit to the steam room, before a deep exfoliation that leaves the skin fully refreshed.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Food at Le Jardin des Douars' main restaurant is a delicious blend of French and Moroccan flavours. I begin with a creamy shallot tarte Tatin, followed by a sizzling garden vegetable tagine served with traditional 'beldi' bread.

For dessert, it's a decadent chocolate fondant with orange blossom cream.

Meanwhile, down by the coast, fish and seafood take centre stage. Fresh from the morning's catch, you can buy sardines and white fish at the port-side stalls and have it grilled over charcoal right in front of you.

At breakfast, be sure to add a spoonful of amlou – a rich paste of argan oil, almonds and honey – to your yoghurt. You'll see amlou for sale in many souvenir shops, but my tip is to buy directly from women's cooperatives – helping to support fair trade and often getting better quality.

Most of my meals in Essaouira are washed down with Moroccan mint tea, poured theatrically from a silver teapot held high above the glass. Affectionately known as 'Berber whiskey', it's more than just a drink.

Made from a blend of Chinese gunpowder green tea, fresh nana mint and sugar, it's one of Morocco's most cherished daily rituals. It's usually served in three rounds, with the first glass given at the beginning of gatherings to welcome guests with warmth and hospitality – a sentiment that perfectly captures the spirit of my time in Morocco.



A garden vegetable tagine

HOW TO BOOK

Rooms at Le Jardin des Douars cost from around £160 per night, including breakfast, see jardindesdouars.com. Ryanair flies from London Stansted Airport to Essaouira on Sundays and Wednesdays, see ryanair.com. Alternatively, you can fly to Marrakech from multiple UK airports and make the approximately three-hour drive to Essaouira. For airport hotels, parking and travel insurance, see holidayextras.com.



Essaouira is a haven for kitesurfers