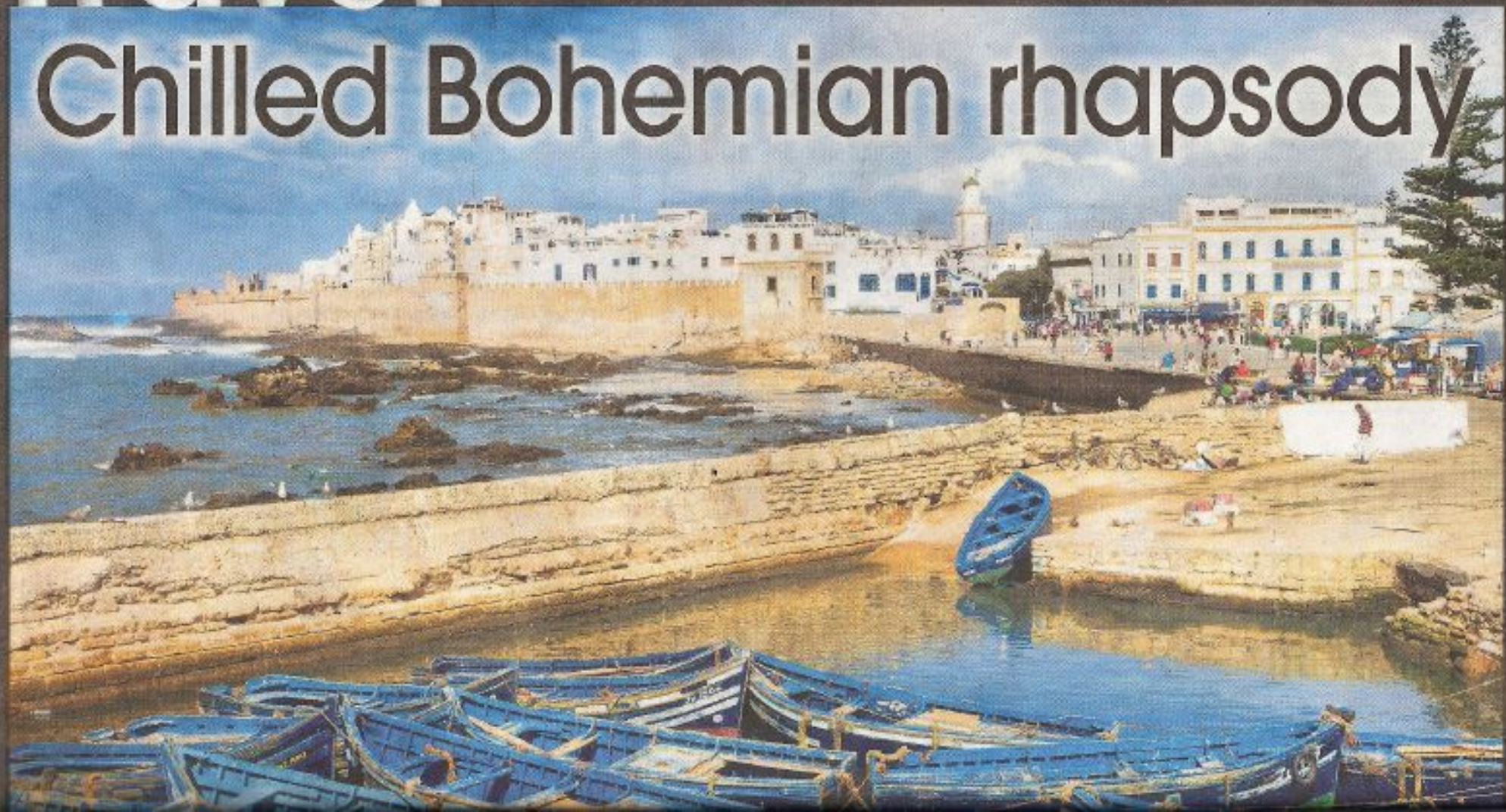


Travel

Edited by Jane Memmler

Chilled Bohemian rhapsody



UNSULLIED: Essaouira's fortress walls played a starring role in the action-packed series Game Of Thrones but in contrast everyday life in the Moroccan port city is a relaxed affair with plenty of time to explore

IMPOSING fortress walls, recognisable to millions of Game Of Thrones fans and originally erected by the occupying Portuguese in the early 1500s, still enclose the hub of the relaxed Moroccan resort of Essaouira.

Set on a wide arc pristine beach, it is a world away from the magnificent mayhem of Marrakech. It is also where you'll find the lovely Le Jardin des Douars, a luxurious and peaceful kasbah-type oasis set in the Marrakech-Safi hillside by the Keob river.

There's no chain-style uniformity at this unique privately-owned boutique hotel. Terraced built in the style of a ksar (Arabian castle), each of its 25 rooms (and three family villas) is as diverse as the hotel's guests, who hail mostly from France, Belgium and Britain but who may just as easily be travellers from China or Australia.

Its location and grounds are magnificent, including the wide variety of date palms – from the tall and majestic to the charming and squat. A comprehensive crop of cacti and dazzling display of flowers produce a kaleidoscope of colour. It's no surprise to learn one of the hotel's owners is a skilled landscape gardener; the place is a riotous explosion of exotic blooms and greenery that hedge every inch of the winding pink footpaths leading guests to their rooms.

The large rooms are plush – housed in one, two or three-unit

suite dreams

GREG MORGAN heads to Morocco's ancient walled city of Essaouira

pressed earth, domed-citadels – and are all furnished in traditional Moroccan style.

Our huge luxe bedroom had typically Moroccan stone floors with thick Berber rugs, a step-down, shoulder-deep and decadent sunken tub, stylish hand-hammered pewter sinks and mirror frames and an impressive cupola punctured by eight star-shaped openings, covered

with coloured glass. This pretty ceiling detail flooded the room with brilliant hues when the sun shone through... and boy did it shine.

African prints and artefacts abound and I'm not sure if there's such a thing as a sultan-size bed but ours was huge and when combined with heavy curtains and the lack of a phone and TV, it provided the perfect night's rest. Breakfast, a relaxed affair

disturbed only by the occasional braying donkey in the nearby fields of argan orchards, is served at the hotel's hub; a coral-pink traditional building that also houses the kitchens and a gorgeous intimate restaurant, perfect for candlelit dining. It's beyond sumptuous with locally-sourced dates, figs and prunes plus fresh honey and smoked salmon.

Then it was a short wander to the adults-only infinity pool, finished in an eye-catching tiled mosaic of green shades with cranberry-red edging.

There's also a petanque pitch, a ping-pong table, a lounge and small library to help you while away the hours. Golf, sailing,

windsurfing and other assorted water sports can all be arranged for you by the hotel, as can horse and camel rides and quad bike safaris.

There's a host of treatments available at the first-class spa and heavenly hammam and just when I thought I couldn't feel any more relaxed, I left a black-soap exfoliation and hydrating session feeling as loose as a slow-cooked goose. Marvellous stuff.

Speaking of slow-cooked geese, perhaps topping the list of this fine hotel's many attractions is the food... it's fabulous. Lunch and dinner are all cooked from scratch under the keen eye of a

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



TRANQUIL: The hotel's lush gardens offer space to soak up the sunshine

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Travel

A feast for the senses

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

reassuringly perfectionist Senegalese chef.

Fancy crunchy pan-seared foie gras, beetroot carpaccio as a starter? Or melting lamb shanks, with pea puree and Parmesan chips? Or how about beldi (traditional) chicken tagine with olives, orange reduction and saffron?

Take your pick from dozens of dishes available daily on the imaginative lunch and dinner menus that fuse Morocco's exotic spices and herbs with the finest in French cuisine.

Dine inside the intimate

restaurant or alfresco, under the stars, enjoying the background music in the long, warm Moroccan nights. Literally, midnight at the oasis.

THE KNOWLEDGE

Le Jardin des Douars (dialling from the UK: 00 212 524 47 4003/jardin-desdouars.com) offers doubles from £150. B&B, easyJet (0330 365 5000/easyjet.com) offers return flights from Luton to Essaouira from £43. Morocco tourism: visitmorocco.com



SUMPTUOUS: Take breakfast in the peaceful oasis