

## A Moorish delight

A verdant Moroccan guesthouse offers the perfect base to explore the laid-back charms of the coastal city of Essaouira

**T**he goats are in the trees. It sounds like something from Salvador Dali's imagination. But in the Essaouira countryside, they really do exist, with the arboreal billies regularly seen clambering up gnarly argan trees to reach its prized fruit.

Walk around Essaouira and you'd think the wind had blown them up there. Perched on Morocco's Atlantic coast, the city's sandy beaches and sugar-cube houses are battered by the *alizée* – face-slapping coastal gusts of such ferocity, they've apparently driven people crazy. No surprise this so-called windy city of Africa is a magnet for windsurfers and kitesurfers.

They've come here since the 1960s, a time when Essaouira was a hippy haven – rumour has it Jimi Hendrix wrote *Castles Made of Sand* after being inspired by the crumbling Borj El Berod watchtower. Today Essaouira retains a free-spirited feel that's tangible in the naïf artists painting 'dreams' in the harbour and in the souks of its Unesco-listed medina, comparatively hassle-free compared with Marrakech.

The boho-chic theme continues at sybaritic oasis Le Jardin des Douars. It originally started life as a botanical garden. From the second you step into the guesthouse's medley of argan and

palm trees, cacti and croaking frogs, you can understand why. Inside this labyrinth of terracotta domes, its seven rooms and four suites are telephone and TV-free, with baths so deep the water reaches chest height.

This relaxed air extends to the restaurant. Guests can waft into the kitchens whenever they fancy a snack, while Jardin des Douars is split into two halves: one for R&R-seeking adults, the other for (possibly noisier) families.

Pool-side lounging aside, daytime activities are anything but easy-going. *Director* spent one afternoon bouncing across sand dunes during a quad bike excursion, thundering along with the Sahara on one side and the raging Atlantic on the other.

Then there's Morocco's *hammam* (steam room) experience. Having disrobed, for two hours we were pummelled, scrubbed and exfoliated, alternating between sweating on heated marble slabs and having buckets of cold water chucked at us. It worked: by the end of our stay it wasn't only the goats that were levitating – we were, too. **D**



For more information on the guesthouse and its daily excursions, visit [jardindesdouars.com](http://jardindesdouars.com)



[easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)



Clockwise from main picture: the view from the guesthouse; a family room; stairway to heaven; a local dish; the hammam

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