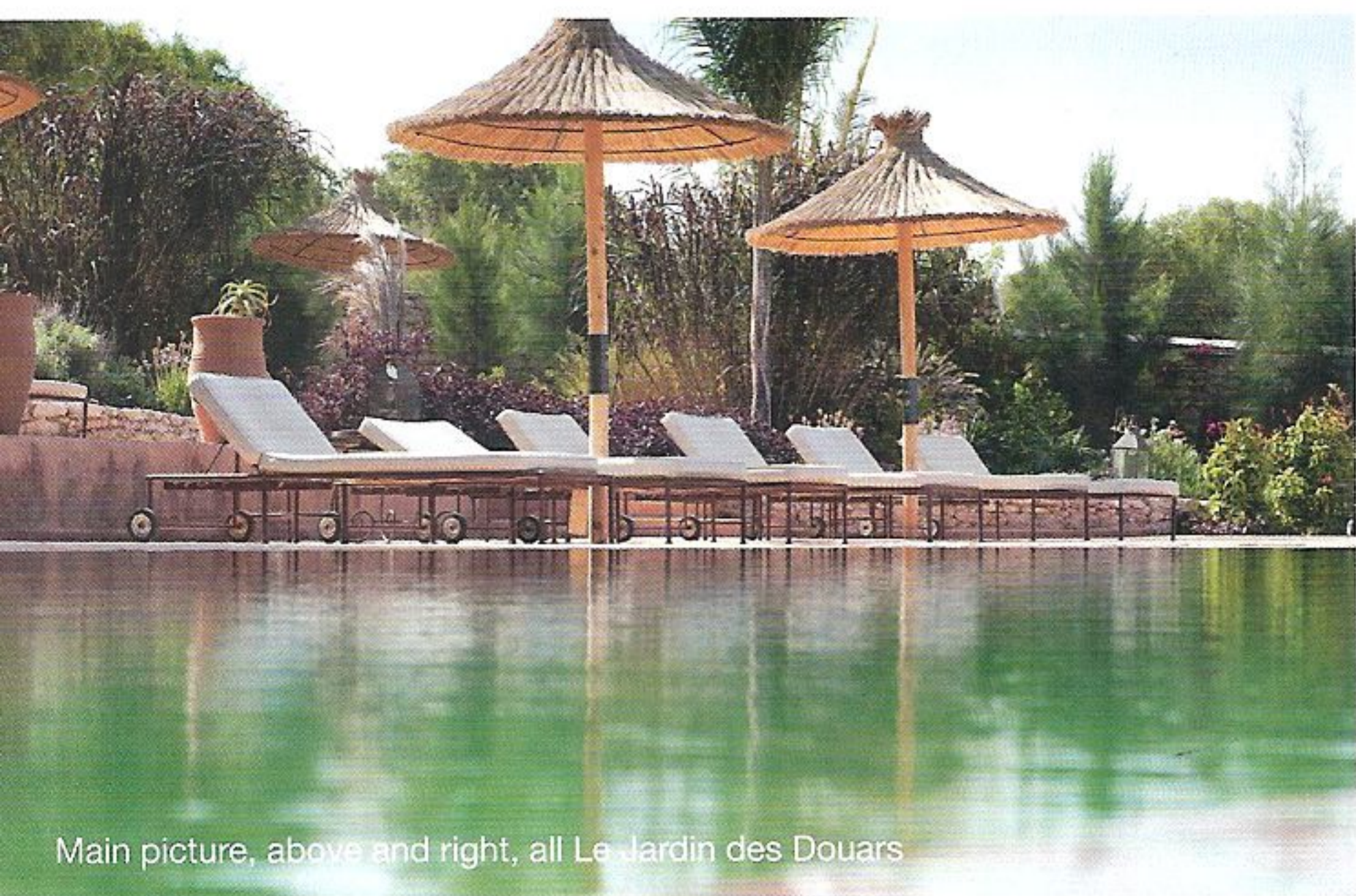


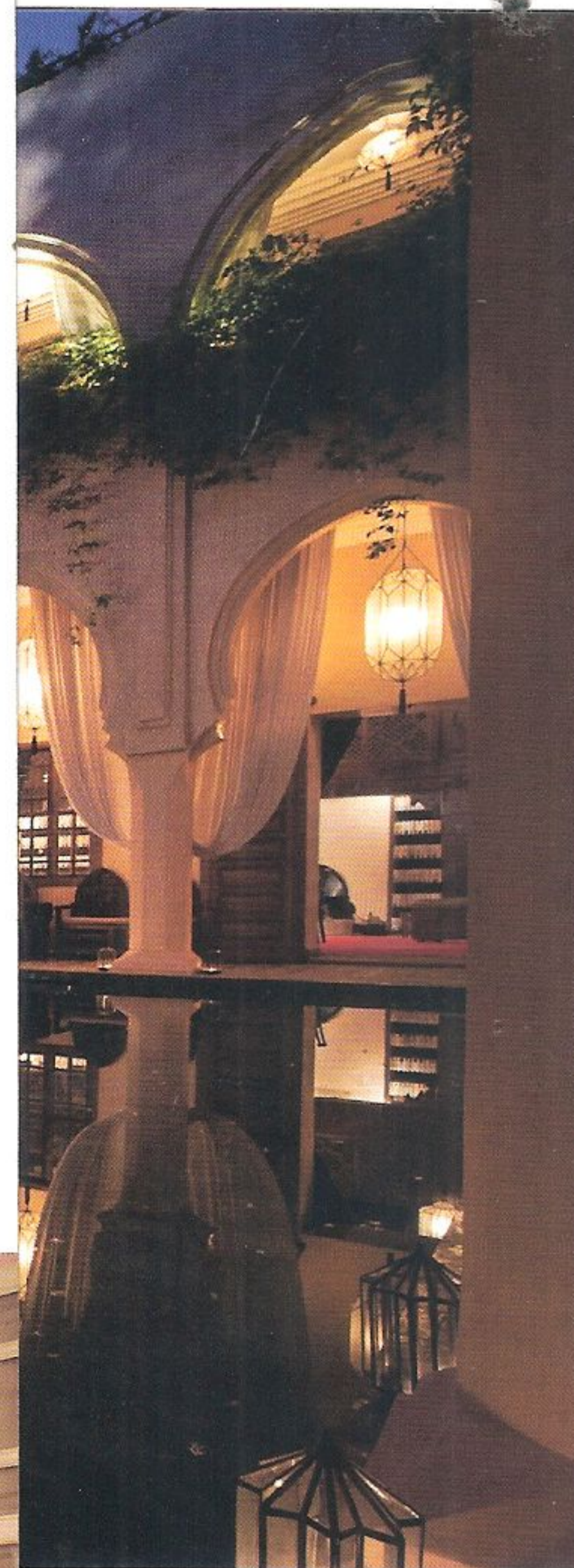
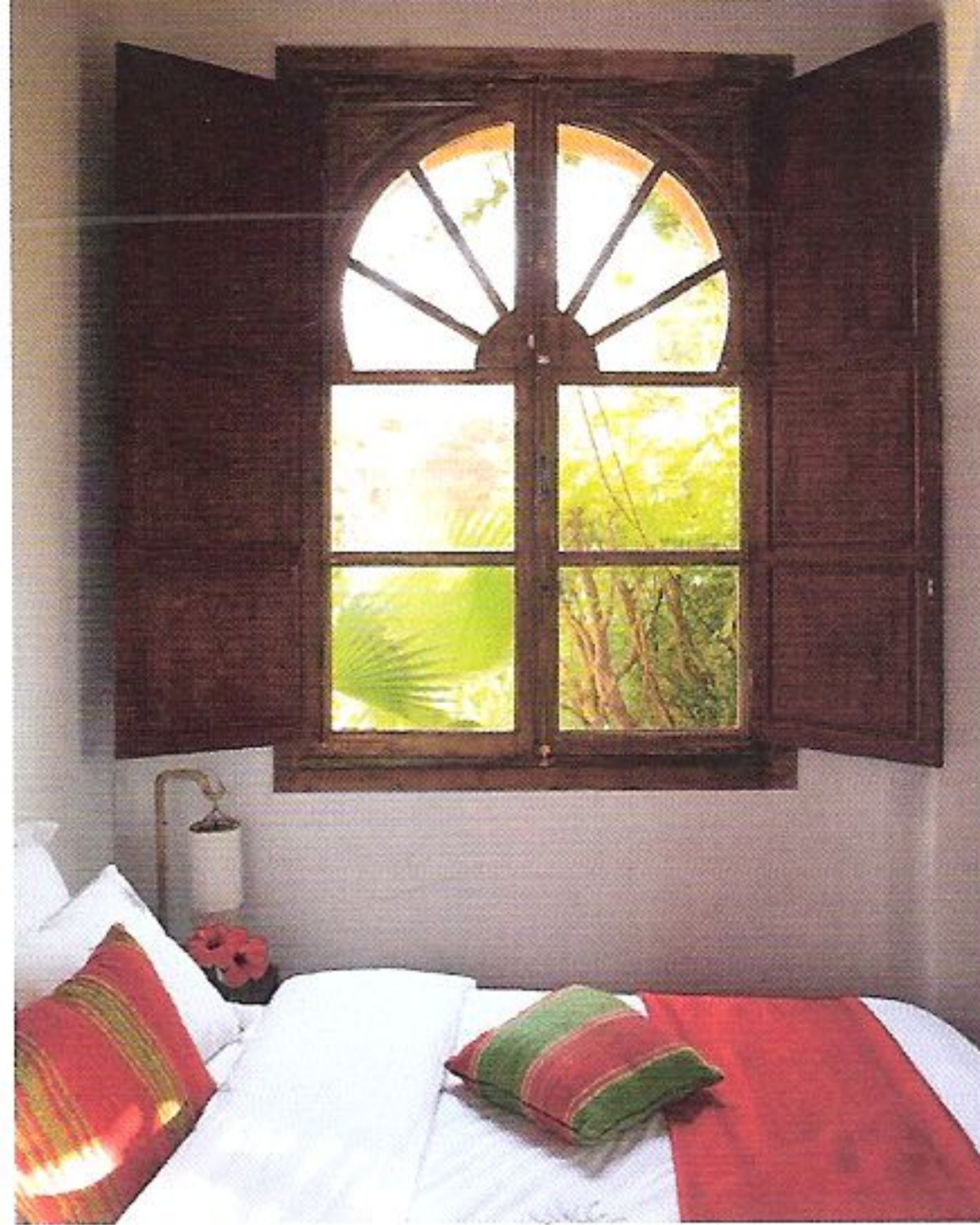


bustle & *bohemia*

A trip to Morocco isn't all about medinas and the mad milieu - Katie Thomson took the short hop over for relaxation, great food and culture



Main picture, above and right, all Le Jardin des Douars



How amazing it is that after only three hours on a plane, one can arrive in a country as beguiling, exhilarating and so far from the familiar as Morocco. This is a country famed for its mazes of souks, beautiful coastlines and dramatic scenery, and we were hoping to take in as much of it as possible in only 6 days.

When planning a visit to Morocco, most people swarm straight to the buzzing souks of Marrakech or the beaches of Agadir, leaving the wonders of Essaouira undiscovered. Immensely popular with French holidaymakers, this Bohemian seaside resort has much more to offer than the sum of its parts. Culture lovers can still get their taste of the medina, visiting some of the artisanal craftsmen who have plied their trade here for hundreds of years. There are boundless interesting sights too, including the fishing port, a photographer's dream with its white washed walls and cerulean blue boats, and the old port with its sea battered fortress walls. The constant breeze, which makes sunbathing here so pleasurable, is amplified on the coast, where watersports like windsurfing and paddle boarding are enduringly popular.

Our home for our time in Essaouira was the lovely Le Jardin des Douars. The hotel, located about 20 minutes from the centre of the town, is an oasis of tranquility, and there are not many places (certainly in Morocco) that you can truly say that about. The hotel is a collection of traditionally built buildings, connected with winding paths of beautiful greenery and flowers, where a gentle breeze moves you from one glorious zone to another and birdsong is omnipresent. The vibe here is chilled, and deliberately so. It is a place to come and switch off - leave the wifi, emails, smart shoes and life admin behind to truly relax. The staff are happy and always ready for a joke, nothing is too much trouble and they continue the lovely sense that you can really feel at peace here.

The hotel's spa continues this quest for wellbeing, with a selection of classic Moroccan treatments on offer. My partner and I opted for the black salt hammam, a truly soothing yet uplifting treatment that

warned us to the bone and purified the skin. The treatment is also far gentler than the famous baths where you can get scrubbed to within an inch of your life - but if your partner isn't a fan of slipping into a charming paper thong, it might be better that they stay by the pool!

The kitchen takes inspiration from a variety of sources - notably classic French dishes, Moroccan staples and most impressively, seasonal vegetables direct from their garden. The chef and his team make the most of the abundant produce grown in the kitchen garden and for this season introduced a healthy and nutritious menu of vegetarian dishes for those that want to use the hotel as a detox zone, both from food and technology. Or, if you are a complete glutton like me, you can fully indulge in some truly excellent cooking - perfect tagines, melt-in-the-mouth lamb shanks, fresh seafood and decadent puddings.

Whilst it can be difficult to tear yourself away from the pool, a trip into Essaouira is certainly worthwhile. It's a great place to get used to haggling and just to soak in a culture so different from our own. Spend the day and

really walk the streets - when you get tired of shuffling from stall to stall, you can head up to one of the many rooftop cafés and restaurants to soak in the panoramic sea views and enjoy the cool breeze. There are loads of lovely foodie spots - we particularly liked Taros Cafe with its great views and lively atmosphere with local band heralding the start of the evening's fun. After we had clocked up some serious miles and bought some fabulous pieces for home, we were duly whisked up by the hotel and returned to our sumptuous bedroom.

After a lovely dose of relaxation at Le Jardin des Douars, the madness, medina and music of Marrakech was beckoning. We were transferred back to the coach station ready for our three hour return journey. The coach is a really convenient way to hop between cities and a great chance to experience the undulating terrain and pockets of civilisation in the vastness of the Moroccan landscape - not to mention a great way to spot camels grazing idly. Before long, the palms and more manicured areas of modern Marrakech came into view, and we prepared ourselves for the next leg of the adventure.



The Almaha Hotel, Marrakech

- spiced meat and apricots are wrapped in crisp filo pastry and finished with cinnamon sugar - an utterly delicious sweet and salty combination.

Marrakech is of course famed for its labyrinthine souks, where you can find some truly splendid items, handcrafted by local artisans. But there is a lot more to the city than the shopping and the bustling madness of the Jemaa el-Fnaa main square. It is sometimes easy to forget that Marrakech is an Islamic city and one that is also considered to be a holy pilgrimage site. The Qur'an was traditionally taught at a madrasa (religious school) and spectacular

to run by Suptours and tickets can be purchased in advance or on the day from the offices in each area. You can only buy them in person, so it is worth buying your return at the same time as your outbound ticket. Tickets are from 80 Dirham each way - about £7.

- Arabic might be beyond many of us, but some conversational French will get you a lot further than English and locals will appreciate the effort.

- We all know that you have to haggle in the souks, but many people recommend starting at half the price the shop owner quotes. From my experience, that is still too high. A good deal is generally about a

ere you can learn about its amazing history and Saadi Dynasty - coincidentally the only place in the city where you can see storks nesting on the walls.

ou have never visited Morocco, I dare you to do so. It is a country that offers the traveller so many experiences of wonderful hospitality, true relaxation, a glimpse into tribal life, the bustle of city life and centuries of history.

d of the price they start with. If there are certain items you want, do your research beforehand and get a gauge of what you should expect to pay. The bottom line? If you love it, just buy it - you'll forget that you overpaid by £10 and you'll have a memento to treasure forever.

- We flew from Luton, who offer the most regular flights. The morning flight times can be eye-watering though, so start the holiday early with a stay at Hampton by Hilton and sort your airport parking at the same time! We arrange ours through www.holidayextras.co.uk

Hotels:
Le Jardin des Douars
www.jardindesdouars.com
Almaha Marrakech
www.almahamarrakech.com/en