

= HOTEL REVIEW =

## ***Le Jardin des Douars, Morocco***

This boutique riad just outside the relaxed port town of Essaouira is as serene as the nature that surrounds it, writes **Rob Hastings**



**R**iad means garden. At least, it does in the original sense of the Arabic word. In general terminology, you probably know it as a traditional Moroccan home built around a courtyard – one of those beautiful zellige-tiled spaces filled with the soft tinkle of water in a fountain, adorned by pot plants.

The fact that Morocco's houses came to be known by the word for garden probably encapsulates the importance of keeping the natural world central to life here. If an Englishman's house is his castle, a Moroccan's is his oasis.

No matter what your nationality, anyone would feel at home at Le Jardin des Douars. This boutique hotel, a 15-minute drive from the port town of Essaouira, doesn't surround a garden; here it's the trees and flowers and bushes that do the surrounding. They envelop the self-contained lodgings, as do the sounds of the countryside: the rustle of leaves in the breeze, the singsong of swallows and wagtails swooping between the palm trees, and the occasional croak of a frog.

Arrival might seem unprepossessing, especially at night, as potholes stud the approach. But then we see the lanterns illuminating the lane to the romantic hideaway.

We're led on a pathway through the garden to our cosy abode. The door opens to a living room that's rustic in the best way: white-

washed walls decorated by Berber handbags, a carved wooden table sitting on a rug, a log fireplace.

With morning light comes the revelation of just how beautiful the garden is, high on the southern bank of the Ksob river. Paths lead between cacti, argan trees and vibrant purple blooms along with more than 100 types of plant. The terraced grounds were laid out in 2004 by Jean Secondi, a landscape designer who transformed it from a stony patch of land before opening the hotel, which is now run by a husband-and-wife team.

Before a breakfast of msemmen crepe, creamy French toast and scrambled eggs, I go for a swim in one of the two pools. One is reserved for families, where children can splash with glee as much as they like. Which means I'm left in peace as I step down into the teal-tiled pool reserved for adults, happily wading into the warmest waters ever to host my breaststroke.

Time for a taxi into town. Essaouira, the small port town that provides Marrakech tourists with a welcome break from the big city, has a similarly laid-back tone to our hotel. The backstreets of small shops and stalls have plenty

of jewellery, spices and decorative plates, but not nearly as many overbearing salesmen desperate for your dirhams. Wandering through the medina and taking in the coastal views from the small citadel makes for a relaxing day.

Once you've spent an afternoon in Essaouira, you needn't leave the confines of Le Jardin des Douars again. It's perfectly feasible to spend your whole day, or several, unwinding. You can

even sample a traditional hammam – Morocco's equivalent to a Turkish bath – at the spa.

We choose a Sunday to remain in the grounds for lunch, and enjoy the most extensive barbecue I've seen, with enough salads and sides for even vegetarians to feel spoilt for choice.

Food is also a reason to stay in the evening. With three dining rooms as well as patio tables, dinner feels different each night, and not purely because I alternate between succulent lamb shank and delectable beef wellington.

Le Jardin really is perfect for a weekend retreat. The roadway leading to it may be in need of repair, but once inside, the tranquillity means you'll feel a long way from the metaphorical beaten track.

**B&B from £125 per room per night (jardindesdouars.com)**

