

ESCAPE TO ESSAOURIA

By Caroline Phillips



Le Jardin des Douars

There's a man in a baseball cap and wellington boots opening and selling sea urchins beside the sand-coloured ancient ramparts. Call it African fast food. Nearby on the quay, a youngster is dragging a dead young shark into a lorry, and then pulling another finned specimen behind him and yet another Mini Jaws — taking them to a restaurant. There are piles of fishing nets waiting to be mended, and at the other end of the port, boats being built in the traditional style in which they have been constructed for centuries.

It's easy to get the 2000.2 miles here from the UK and it's well worth it, even for a long weekend. Welcome to Essaouria (pronounced essa-weera), the laid-back, hip, Atlantic-side Moroccan town. Somewhere known for its writers and musicians. The place that's also renowned for its bohemian vibe and wind. (It's dubbed the 'Wind City of Africa'). Except when I'm there in early October, there's not even a breeze: just a haze of fog playing over the beach and crashing waves.



Villa Basmah at Le Jardin des Douars

"Happy weather come this afternoon, inchallah," promises my driver Mohammed, who says he's known as 'Simone' on account of two of the other drivers in the hotel also being called Mohammed. I'm staying in Le Jardin des Douars, about 20 minutes from the medina. So I get to meet a few Mohammeds.

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So what of the town? My first impression is that the air is heady with the smell of salt and fish. It's also the sort of place that could be a location for *Game of Thrones*, and was. There are those fortifications with cannons, and there's an 18th-century medina with a fair bit of restoration going on. This turns out to be the local version of putting down a red carpet. "The King is coming soon to open the Jewish museum," explains Abdellatif, curator of the town's hippest gallery, Elizir Gallery (about which, more later). "The buildings have to look good." The museum will be in the 19th century Attia synagogue.



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There are also gates in Essaouria that are called 'babs,' the sort that look as if they need a Roman chariot driving through them — although the town was actually only founded in 1765. Plus there are narrow lanes with blue-trimmed houses and merchants selling rugs, leather jackets, spices and baskets; and pharmacies with fleur d'orange, saffron and prickly pear concoctions. Not to mention vendors with those regulation pouffes in ruby, amethyst and various shades of cow. And stalls spilling with pomegranates and Arabic flat bread. Nobody hassles me to buy anything. They're a gentle, solicitous people. I get lost and a guy leaves his shop to show me the way. "No money, just friend," he says. "I come from Sahara, 900 km away"

There are some great boutiques. One is even called a 'concept store' (Outside it there's a cardboard box in which ten cats and kittens are snoozing happily, but that is probably not the concept). Histoire de Filles sells Moroccan salt scrub to artisan jewellery and kaftans for around a hundred quid a shot. I do 'fooding and shopping' (as the business card proclaims) at trendy L'Atelier with its cool soaring ceilings and 'tapis union jack.' (That's a leather rug to you.)



L'Heure Bleue Palais

My favourite shop is the quirky Elizir Gallery which used to be the Elizir Restaurant. (Don't ask. Oh OK, Abdellatif got tired of cooking, serving and working all hours). It boasts an eclectic mixture of vintage and retro European and tribal African art and artefacts collected over 12 years and two floors. Think tribal masks, 1960s TV sets, modish fifties lighting — some purchased from the hotels and villas of Agadir and Tangier — and a gramophone on which he plays vinyl from morn until eve. Think also Haik blankets (worn by tribespeople before they make it onto Notting Hill's beds), bright Perspex chairs and historical Moroccan pottery. I leave having purchased an antique tent peg — everyone needs one.

I have lunch (with the new GM, the charming Eric Molle, who started at the hotel only a nanosecond before my arrival; oh, and I eat grilled prawns that are still flapping they're so fresh) on the roof terrace of L'Heure Bleue Palais, a hotel built into the medina walls. It's where Jimi Hendrix and Bob Marley used to chill — and understandably so. It has a kind of colonial vibe and courtyard with palm trees. For 350 dirhams (about £28), you can have a set lunch, swim, rooftop shower and loll for the afternoon. Afterwards I'm scrubbed, rubbed, pummelled and washed until I'm gleaming in its teeny black marble spa.



Hammam at Le Jardin des Douars

Outside again and sporting at least fifteen fewer layers of skin, I wander the streets once more enjoying the compact medina with its souk, cafés and wood-carving shops. I saunter past the maze of crumbling mansions of the erstwhile Jewish quarter to a pocket-sized synagogue. Then just outside the city gates, past the taxi rank of skinny ponies and traps, I visit the Old Jewish Cemetery, the guardian of which is an Arab gentleman. It's next to the Christian burial ground, has its marine sandstone tombs built above the ground and overlooks the Atlantic. There can be few better locations in which to end your days.

Later, I sit in a café and drink espresso as Arab women in indigo, beetroot and green scarves and dresses go about their business. Men pedal past on bicycles or pushing carts laden with eggs or stone slabs, but never the two together.



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Next day, I have lunch with Abdellatif in the port. We walk past eel, tiger prawns and toothless men. He picks cuttlefish, sole, sardines: sea-to-fork in under four hours...and lunch for less than a fiver. Then he takes it to Marssa Grillade, a beach shack with plastic chairs and cheery locals. They grill our 'catch' — call it BYO food — on their al fresco rusty barbecue. The fish scores 12 out of 10 in my books.

More glamorously, I dine at the Villa Maroc — formed of 18th century riads, one of which was once a bordello — with its view of the ocean and ramparts, and inside its characterful nooks, crannies and courtyard and lovely atmosphere. It could be the magazine cover for beautiful Moroccan living with its exotic hanging lamps, African antiques and bazaar pieces. I sit beside a roaring fire with flickering candles on my knee-high table, and dine on home-made bread with argan oil (all the rage around here) and crème de carottes dip with harissa, followed by Moroccan salads and sole: tasty family cooking.





The pool at Le Jardin des Douars

Back in the oasis that is my hotel, Le Jardin des Douars, I sit in its abundant gardens among cacti, bougainvillea, palms and a variety of look-at-me flowers in fluorescent colours of purple, orange and fuchsia. It's wedding central for bright young things from Europe and also attracts young families. It's nestled in the Essaouria hills above the wind of the town, so you can swim in two pools when it's too billowy below.

It offers peace, tranquility and authenticity. That is has no televisions, mini bars or phones in the rooms gets my vote, but might cause my teens to expire. I lie lazily on my bed with its Berber vintage fabric throw and gaze at the tadelakt (Moroccan plasterwork) walls and domed ceiling, prettily punctured with star shapes and coloured glass: the sun sending jewel-hued shafts into the room. Essaouria may be a Unesco heritage site. But my bedroom ceiling is pretty good too. And after all that walking in the medina, it's the place to be.



Le Jardin des Douars

For more information about Le Jardin des Douars in Essaouira, go to www.jardindesdouars.com. B&B priced from £150 per room, per night or £450 per villa, per night. There are over 90 flights a week between the UK and Morocco – find out more at www.muchmorocco.com/2017/07/up-up-and-away.

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WEEK

