

Marrakech: A Sensual Delight
Moroccan city saturates the senses

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Smoke rises like thin clouds above the Jemaa El Fna, the public square at the center of Marrakech. It is dusk, and white-robed food vendors tame hissing flames as they grill kebabs, simmer sheep heads and saute snails.

The music is hypnotic. Berbers, the original inhabitants of Morocco, play long, mystical strains of a percussive groove, while the Gnawa, descendants of the Sudan, draw throngs of tourists with their drum-and-bass beats. Snake charmers and transvestite belly dancers compete for the camera, while a shoeless girl begs for money.

The scene is the most intense blend of sights, sounds and scents I have ever witnessed, and it is the first thing I tell friends who ask me if I think North Africa is for them. If you are a foodie who loves to shop, you must go to Marrakech. The cuisine is cheap and delicious, and you can design an apartment in "Arabian Nights" chic for less than half what it would cost in the United States. At press time, the exchange rate was eight dirhams per dollar.

However, if you hate being harassed and don't even slightly desire a photograph of yourself with a Barbary monkey on your arm, you should probably stay away.

Regardless, the numbers indicate that Marrakech is reviving its 1960s reputation as North Africa's hot spot. In 2006, the Moroccan government invested \$2 billion in tourism-centered projects, such as five-star hotels. The city gussied up riads (guesthouses), and designated a tourist police force to patrol the Medina to tamp down overly aggressive merchants (although you'll still be hassled). The changes seem to be working. A total of 1.5 million tourists -- more than the population of Marrakech -- hit the city in 2006.

Perfect blend

My fiancé, Joel, and I arrived this past April via Paris. Morocco has always intrigued us, from its cumin-tinged cuisine to its brazen openness. For an Islamic country, it is tolerant and mixed. Gays blend easily on the streets with bearded mullahs and veiled women. As the call to prayer fills the Jemaa each night, gaggles of scantily-clad girls whiz by the 12th century Koutoubia Mosque.

We stayed at Dar Zouar, a riad in a Medina residential alley, 15 minutes north of the Jemaa. It was quiet, free of peddlers and owned by Thierry, a Frenchman who staffs it with locals.

He has decorated Dar Zouar using the finest housewares available in Marrakech. But it was Amina, the cook and hostess, who won us over with her tagines of chicken, almonds and apricots. Breakfast, which was included, consisted of yogurt, breads, jams, and freshly squeezed orange juice. Mint tea, which Moroccans take with three times more sugar than mint, was served around-the-clock.

The best thing a riad's staff can do is direct you to the Jemaa, which means walking through the snaking, 500-year-old souk (or market). Thierry tried. In French and broken English, he used maps and landmarks to help us navigate the narrow labyrinth of 15,000 vendors. Yet, each time we tried to follow his directions, we failed, winding up in some alley admiring slippers and tea sets.

Unexpected pleasures

Getting lost is obviously the point. The deeper you go in the souk, the more lost you become and the more likely you are to give up and shop. And, despite how confused and cranky we'd get, the souk was still the most authentic part of the Marrakech experience: Taking in the brilliant colors of leather goods, the craftsmanship of lanterns, and the free sesame candies, while donkeys, the "working class," as Morrocans call them, trot by with slabs of concrete on their backs.

Remember, just when you think you've found the silk shawl of your dreams, keep walking. The deeper you go into the souks, the higher the quality of the wares. Also, don't forget to bargain. Merchants expect it.

By the time we actually made it to the square, we were ready to stay awhile. We timed our arrival for the late afternoon, so we could enjoy a cold drink from one of the many terraced cafes -- or grab a glass of orange juice from a stand for about 30 cents -- before deciding on dinner. Once the grilling began, competing busboys would fight over our patronage, luring us to their grillmaster's picnic tables with promises of vegetable couscous or lamb tagine. Two people can eat in the square nightly for as little as \$6.

Before and after meals, we would wander around the square, watching acrobats, listening to storytellers in Arabic, or observing strange phenomena. For instance, pliers and old teeth were spread out on cloths before dentists offering services in the square.

If you're not a roamer, Marrakech may not be for you. Eating, walking and shopping are core activities. There are a few sites to visit, such as the Musee de Marrakech, Badi Palace and Medersa Ben Youssef, North Africa's oldest Koranic school. But they leave much to be desired. These spots are cool and quiet, so tourists use them mostly as respites from the heat and noise.

Untouched beauty

After four days of soaking, we were ready to get out of the city. We hopped a Supratours bus (65 dirhams one-way) for Essaouira, a coastal hamlet three hours west of Marrakech.

You know you're approaching the sea when the arid heat of Marrakech shifts to cool breezes and the pink and coral buildings give way to blue and white ones. Jimi Hendrix and Cat Stevens put Essaouira on the map with visits in the late 1960s, and it has managed to retain its laid-back, hippie charm despite decades of commercialism. Films including Ridley Scott's "Kingdom of Heaven" and Oliver Stone's "Alexander" were shot here.

There is a Medina, which includes a souk and a daily market, but the essence of this town is its untouched beauty. A sizable fishing port is surrounded by French piazzas and the Place Moulay Hassan, a social epicenter filled with cafes and views of bobbing, cornflower blue fishing boats. In many ways, Essaouira reminded me of a modest Mykonos, the Greek island. It had the same brilliant sunlight bouncing off the whitewashed buildings.

Since it was too cold to tan on the beach -- Essaouira is famous for windsurfing, not sunbathing -- we ate our way through town. Our favorite meal and experience was buying freshly caught fish at one of the stalls along the port, where fishermen gather on the docks in the mornings. We selected bass and sole from the wide array of fish and walked it over to one of a dozen grilling stalls, where a chef cooked it with lemon juice over hot coals. For 60 dirhams, it came with salad and bread and was definitely the healthiest meal of our trip.

Quiet respite

While I loved the kinetic energy of Marrakech and the sleepiness of Essaouira, it was a short road trip through the Ourika Valley and into the tiny village of Setti Fatma, with its modest waterfalls, that made me fall in love with Morocco. With the help of Thierry, we hired a driver to take us an hour south of Marrakech and into the snow-capped Atlas Mountains and the pre-Sahara Desert.

Again, the landscape drastically shifted to lush, rolling valleys dotted with wildflowers. Almond trees were in full bloom, and the only signs of life were the occasional casbah, a fortified family mansion, or a Berber tribe crossing streams on its way down the mountain to the verdant valley floor.

As much as I like shopping, turns out my happy place was not bargaining down a fabulous leather handbag in the souk. Instead it was sipping cloyingly sweet mint tea after a hike through the countryside -- perhaps the most sensual experience in Morocco.