

getaway



Making the most of your time off

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'I could not have been more wrong'

MOROCCO was never on my radar to visit and like many travellers I had read negative reviews on travel forums and had made up my mind.

I thought it was more or less like every other North African travel destination: too hot, lots of harassment and with bucket loads of unnecessary haggling. I could not have been more off the mark.

Apart from the flight with the national carrier Royal Air Maroc, which was poor, (luckily you have a choice and now even EasyJet fly there) it exceeded all my expectations. With a flying time of less than three and a half hours Marrakech is perfect for a long weekend or more if you have the time.

I was staying at the Palmeraie Golf Palace & Resort, which is a few miles to the north east of Marrakech and 25 miles from the airport. Do not be put off just because it has golf in the hotel name, as this is foremost a luxury resort. With three separate hotels and more than 300 rooms and private villas for hire, it has something to match all budgets.

The resort has seven restaurants and one of them has two Michelin stars as well as three bars, a beach club and two swimming pools. There is a 4,000sq metre spa offering a wide range of treatments – both eastern and western. For the less adventurous you can walk or cycle around the grounds of the hotel that are back-dropped by the magnificent Atlas Mountains.

If golf is your game, the hotel has a 27-hole golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones. Having played it I can tell you that it would suit all levels of play, although I lost a few golf balls (10

NICK BATEMAN discovered Marrakech was not the North African nightmare he imagined

in total!)

Marrakech is known as the Red City and like most cities in the region it has the old fortified city next to the modern city known as Gueliz. Marrakech has a population of just over one million people, with around 10,000 of these being retired Europeans, and you can see why. The city seems very calm; there is no visible police presence.

I recommend hiring a guide to talk you to death on the history of the old city and take you around the souks or you will get horribly lost. The souk within the fortified city is the biggest in Morocco. The streets are very small

and young adults whizz through on mopeds at quite a pace. The souks sell everything from bread and jewellery to iron works and tourist tat.

On one street you can have locals making shoes, when in the next street it has well-known designer branded shops.

Far from being hassled in the souks I found you were often ignored walking through them and surprisingly enough there is no smell apart from foods being cooked.

You are expected to haggle for all goods in the market, with the greatest discounts at the various carpet shops. If you want, they will courier the rugs home to you.

The centre point of the old city (medina quarter) is the market square called Djemaa el Fna. This translates in Arabic as the very cheery 'assembly of the dead'. But this name is a paradox. The square is very much alive with storytellers, snake charmers, pick pockets, orange juice and general food stalls.

Having a photo taken with either a snake charmer or a monkey means giving them a tip and if you do not tip

You are expected to haggle for goods in the market



SMELL THE MAGIC: Inside the amazing market in Marrakech. Below, the Atlas Mountains overlook the luxury Palmeraie resort



enough they will tell you so. Hold your ground and do not be tempted to give them too much.

When the sun goes down the snake charmers and the monkey handlers go home and the square turns into a massive food hall. Unfortunately I did not have time to taste what was on offer as I had been booked into a restaurant called Le Tanjia, an Oriental/Moroccan roof top restaurant with views towards the city. I recommend you ask the manager to bring you a selection of food to taste the full range of delicacies.

There was time for some more golf

the next day at the Al Maaden Golf Resort course designed by Kyle Phillips. Another first rate course that again caters for all levels.

And talking of catering, dinner that evening was in a boutique hotel called Les Cinq Djellabas where I tried the local specialty, lamb tagine, cooked in a special pot for over eight hours. Superb – and that just about sums up the whole trip!



FACTFILE

- The best time to visit Morocco is from September to late June.
- Royal Air Maroc flights to Marrakech are from £150 return (www.royalairmaroc.co.uk).
- Palmeraie Golf Palace & Resort rates are from £95 per night (www.palmeraiemarrakech.com).
- Golfing at Al Maaden Golf Resorts and Palmeraie Golf Palace & Resort is £41 per round excluding the hire of buggies and caddies, visit (www.almaaden.com).