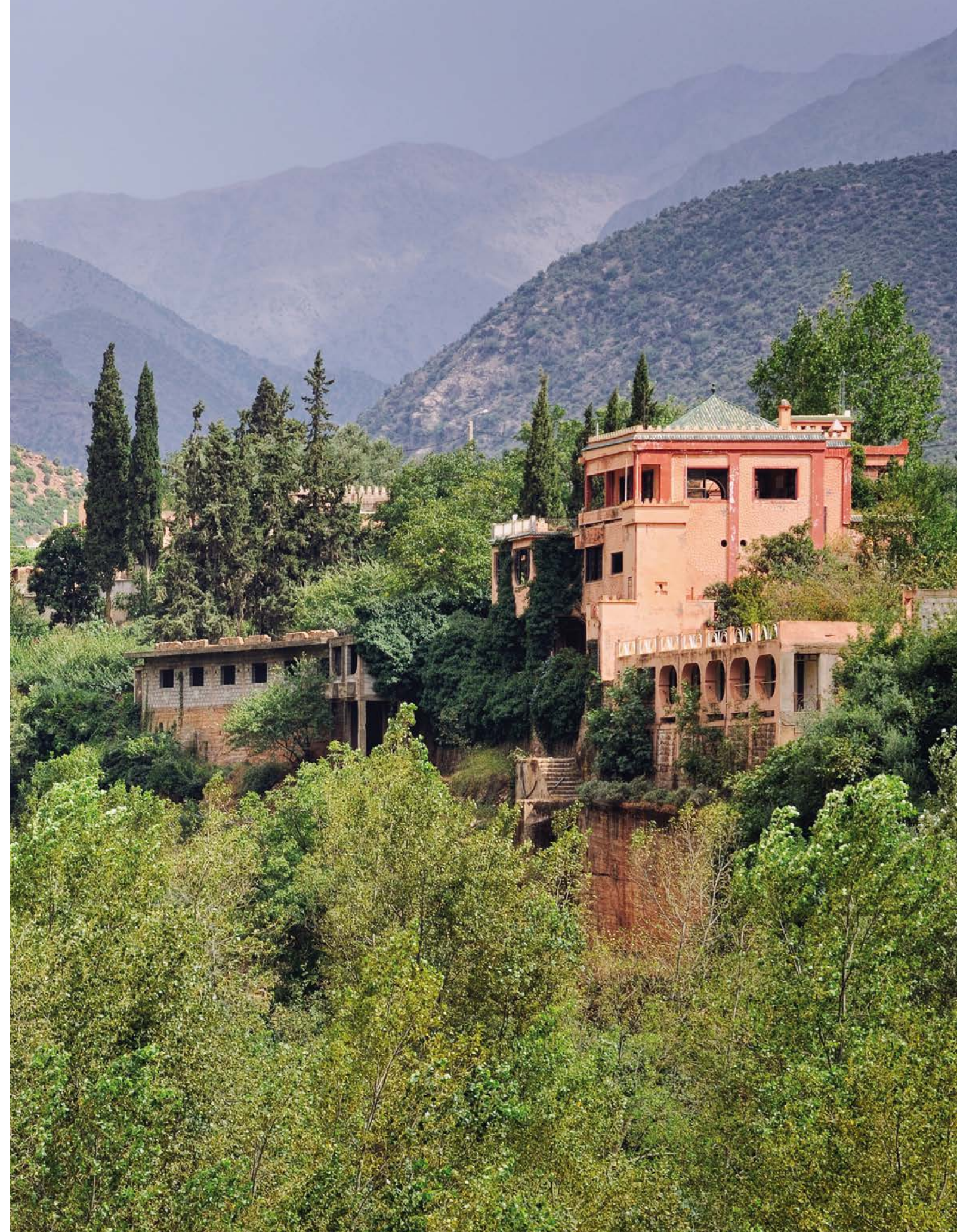


*Trip
of a
lifetime*

MOROCCO

A feast for the senses and soul, Morocco offers a melting pot of experiences – from laid-back luxury to active adventure; cultural exploration to restorative wellbeing. Emma Winterschladen travels back to the colourful chaos of Marrakech's markets, the serene peace of the Atlas Mountains, and the quiet joy of long days in the sun...





Memories, by their very nature, are ethereal. You can't quite touch them, but you can feel them, and you can live in them too. Never has this felt more true, more necessary than now, with the world – and our own place in it – feeling a little smaller than usual.

If I close my eyes though, I'm transported back to Morocco. I can hear the souks of Marrakech buzzing with the sounds of humanity, elbow-to-elbow in a way that's currently unthinkable. I can taste the tagines – sweet, salty and spiced – steaming in their pots. I can see, bright in my mind, the baked terracotta slopes of the Atlas Mountains, stitched with verdant green, in the same way I can breathe in its air, clear and crisp. These things exist in my mind as a vivid snapshot of another life – a reminder of what was, and a hopeful vision of what will be again soon.

We arrived at Villa Mauresque in the late afternoon sun. It was just me and my two closest girlfriends, here for a week of reconnection. Just 22km from Marrakech, this property looks like something out of a glossy interiors mag. A warm welcome awaited us from Madja, our resident chef for the week, whose delicious homegrown, home-cooked food we'd soon be well-acquainted with. But first: a tour.

Known traditionally as a *dar*, the villa is designed around a central sun-drenched courtyard, wrapped with a cloistered walkway with rooms coming off it. The courtyard itself is adorned with a fountain, a round table (for writing postcards) and wallfuls of flowers. Although often mistaken in style for the riad townhouses of Marrakech's Medina – a *dar* is distinguished by its courtyard from the riad's interior garden and balconies. This country property also boasts more space than its urban counterpart, luxuriously stretched as it is across one level.

Inside, the decor is best described as English countryside chic with an ode to Moroccan craftsmanship. Influences from owner Trudi Fowler's past career at Colefax & Fowler (the English textile and wallpaper company) abound, seen nowhere more than in the elegant drawing room. Think sumptuous sofas, large lampshades, carved wood, bright rugs, board games and books, a traditional stone fireplace, and – what would soon become our favourite spot – the adjoining shaded veranda, complete with climbing columns of vines and woven-cane furniture.

Our bedroom suites were private sanctuaries of their own. Stylish and spacious, each had a luxuriously large bed, an en-suite bathroom and a walk-in wardrobe. Double-height French doors open out onto an individual sun terrace, each looking towards perfectly manicured lawns dotted with orange, lemon, pomegranate and mature olive trees. At the bottom of the generous garden sits an earth-coloured tadelakt-clad swimming pool –



The quiet, shady corners of Villa Mauresque



'Perfectly manicured lawns, are dotted with orange, lemon, pomegranate and olive trees'



‘Terracotta pottery and patterned plates were piled high against a watercolour-perfect backdrop that reached out into the distance’



still, ready and waiting for our daily strokes and half-submerged reading sessions. The three of us soon disappeared to refresh and settle in, agreeing at Madja’s recommendation to meet on the rooftop for sundowner gin and tonics. It’s only when you climb the villa’s alfresco stairs to the roof, with its 360° panorama, that you realise quite how embedded in the countryside you are. Marrakech’s bustling centre may be just 30 minutes away, but here the Atlas Mountains wrap themselves around you, calling you to their snowy peaks.

The next morning we heeded their call, but not before a leisurely breakfast. Fresh pots of steaming coffee, just-picked fruit salad, honey, bread, yoghurt and cereals awaited us outside – laid out beautifully by Madja. Well-fed and caffeinated, we set off towards the mountains, passing local Berber villages along the way. Roadsides were populated with vegetable stalls and smiling faces; terracotta pottery and patterned plates piled high against a watercolour-perfect backdrop that reached out into the distance. We stopped at Jardin Bio Aromatique de l’Ourika – a local botanical garden growing over 50 aromatic and medicinal plants – and watched as argan kernels were hand-ground into oil. We left after a head

massage and with a bottle each of this local vitamin E-rich elixir.

Eventually we reached the Berber village of Tiguemi n’ Oumzilet Tnine. Water at the ready, we commenced our morning hike – over the river Assif Ourika, through olive groves and up to the village of Akhlij, with its baked ochre buildings carved into the landscape. The route took us up to the hamlet of Tafza at 1,150m, home to pottery workshops and a *ksar* (fortified village), which is now a museum. We trekked higher in the rising midday heat, one foot in front of the other, through more mountain hamlets where children played and women sat weaving carpets. We stopped only for hellos and to drink in the view. Above us the mountainsides were barren, kissing the blue skies; below, we could see lush irrigated valleys, and in the distance we spotted the peak of Adrar n’Bou Tazete at 3,050m.

We found our way to Setti Fatma, sitting at 1,740m in the Ourika Valley. In the foothills of High Atlas, this once-Berber village is now orientated to the traveller crowd, and it’s where we stopped for lunch. The river is the focal point, shaded by weeping willows and poplar trees, and replete with open-air restaurants. Brightly coloured

tables and chairs sit along its banks and shallows, as if nature herself designed the river as a lunch spot for bohèmes. We were soon reclining on cushions and rugs under sun-bleached umbrellas, water rushing past our tired feet. Freshly squeezed orange juice arrived, followed by *brochettes* (skewers) with juicy lamb and veg, and ceramic pots of chicken tagine, baked in earthy herbs, spices and preserved lemon. Just the fuel we needed for the rest of our afternoon spent trekking to a handful of Setti Fatma’s seven cascades (you need to dedicate the whole day to do them all).

To reach the waterfalls, we weaved our way up the steep narrow valley, climbing past stalls selling homemade energy bars and shops selling rugs. Once we reached the final waterfall of the day, we spent time quietly soaking it all in (and taking photos). It was hard not to try and imagine the rich history beneath our feet – from the silk roads to the shepherds’ trails of years gone by.

Back at our villa that evening, we enjoyed one of many meals cooked by Madja (see page 64 for Moroccan recipes, inspired by the chopped salads and aromatic



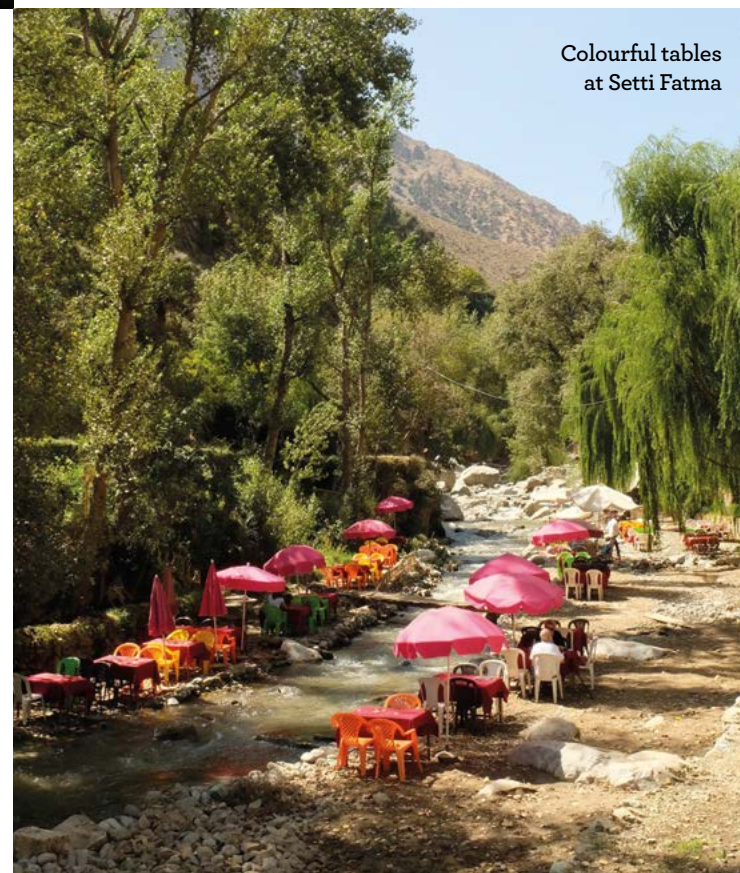
Hammam at La Maison Arabe

dishes of this trip), finishing our day with her tart à l’orange and a nightcap. The next day, it seemed only right to balance out movement and mountains with massages and mint tea. For this we headed to La Maison Arabe, a five-star boutique hotel and spa tucked down a side street in Marrakech. Famous for being one of the city’s original riad hotels, it is owned by Count Ruspoli and inside is every part aristocratic luxury. We were headed downstairs though, to its subterranean spa – a cloistered haven of tranquillity.

It’s perhaps strange then that our experience here remains one of my most animated of the trip. For it was after a relaxing aromatherapy massage that the three of us were ushered, naked but for a towel, into one of the traditional Moorish steam rooms. Three *tellak* (therapists) followed, ready to introduce us to our first-ever hamman. From there we were simultaneously washed down, scrubbed, lathered and steamed – from top to toe. Using a traditional ‘kessa mitt’, our skin was rubbed clean before being wrapped in an orange blossom honey body mask. We moved silently to the rhythm (and direction) of the staff, who worked with such efficiency it was easy to just submit, safe in the knowledge we were being well looked after. The room itself was hot like a hug, and time seemed to stretch out as we all let ourselves just melt into the moment, emerging soft, serene and slightly bewildered – forever connected by our shared strangely intimate ‘public’ bathing experience.

The rest of our days were mostly spent in the sun and shade – reading, swimming, eating and chatting. We were living the Moroccan proverb ‘Few desires, happy life’ – the irony of course being that it took being at Villa Mauresque, surrounded by such beauty and comfort, for us to appreciate that the real luxury was time

Colourful tables at Setti Fatma



and space – time to go slow and space to enjoy small moments with special people. That was until we decided to take a trip to the Red City itself – the place of many desires and people, and where slow doesn't exist.

Saffron stalls. Soft slippers. Sticky pastries. It's hard not to be seduced by Marrakech. A vibrant patchwork of flavours, textures, sounds and smells, it welcomes you with greedy arms. Nowhere is this more true than in its pink beating heart, the Medina. Shabby and chic sit side by side – intricately carved windows and doors on crumbling walls, washing lines draped with freshly-dyed cloth, extravagantly woven rugs hanging over rooftops. Bakers and basket-makers, craftsmen and artists, all coming together on its cobbled lanes in a rich cultural dance. The three of us were in awe – totally immersed in its frantic energy and charm. We walked for hours, arm in arm, exploring the medina's labyrinth of alleyways, sipping fresh pomegranate juice and nibbling baklava.

We escaped its hot, sticky streets only to visit Le Jardin Secret – a hidden botanical oasis in the northwest of the city on Rue Mouassine. Once over the threshold,



The alleyways of Marrakech's medina



we were transported to a world of cool and calm in the form of this 19th-century Islamic garden and palace. There was nothing to do but wander its turquoise-tiled gardens to the soundtrack of fountains and tweeting birds, before we ended up on the roof terrace with a virgin mojito each. It was peaceful and pleasant, but we soon felt drawn back to the souks and souls just outside its walls.

I open my eyes and suddenly I'm home. The spring sun warming my face, my cup of coffee still hot. Outside my own walls the daffodils sway in the wind and the birds are singing. Small moments, suddenly more magical – whether in Morocco or here. 🌿



Le Jardin Secret botanical garden

TRAVEL DETAILS

Emma stayed at Villa Mauresque in Morocco. This four-bedroom villa sleeps up to eight and is set in extensive lawned gardens with a large private pool. A week's stay is priced from £326pp (£2,609 total), including a daily maid service and resident cook. Flights, transfers and ingredients are extra. For more information, contact CV Villas on 0207 261 5410 or visit cvvillas.com

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Words: Ellie Smith

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Hosted by Adam Brazier and David Speed, this podcast features inspiring interviews with creative people who have rebelled against the nine to five. Tune into their episode with Liz as she shares her journey and gives advice for those treading a creative or entrepreneurial path.

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Marie

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Jonahughes

The best podcast yet

'I love all your podcasts but the one with Dr Rangan Chatterjee was outstanding. The simple steps, compassionate attitude and positivity were a tonic to listen to. Thank you.'
DaffersT