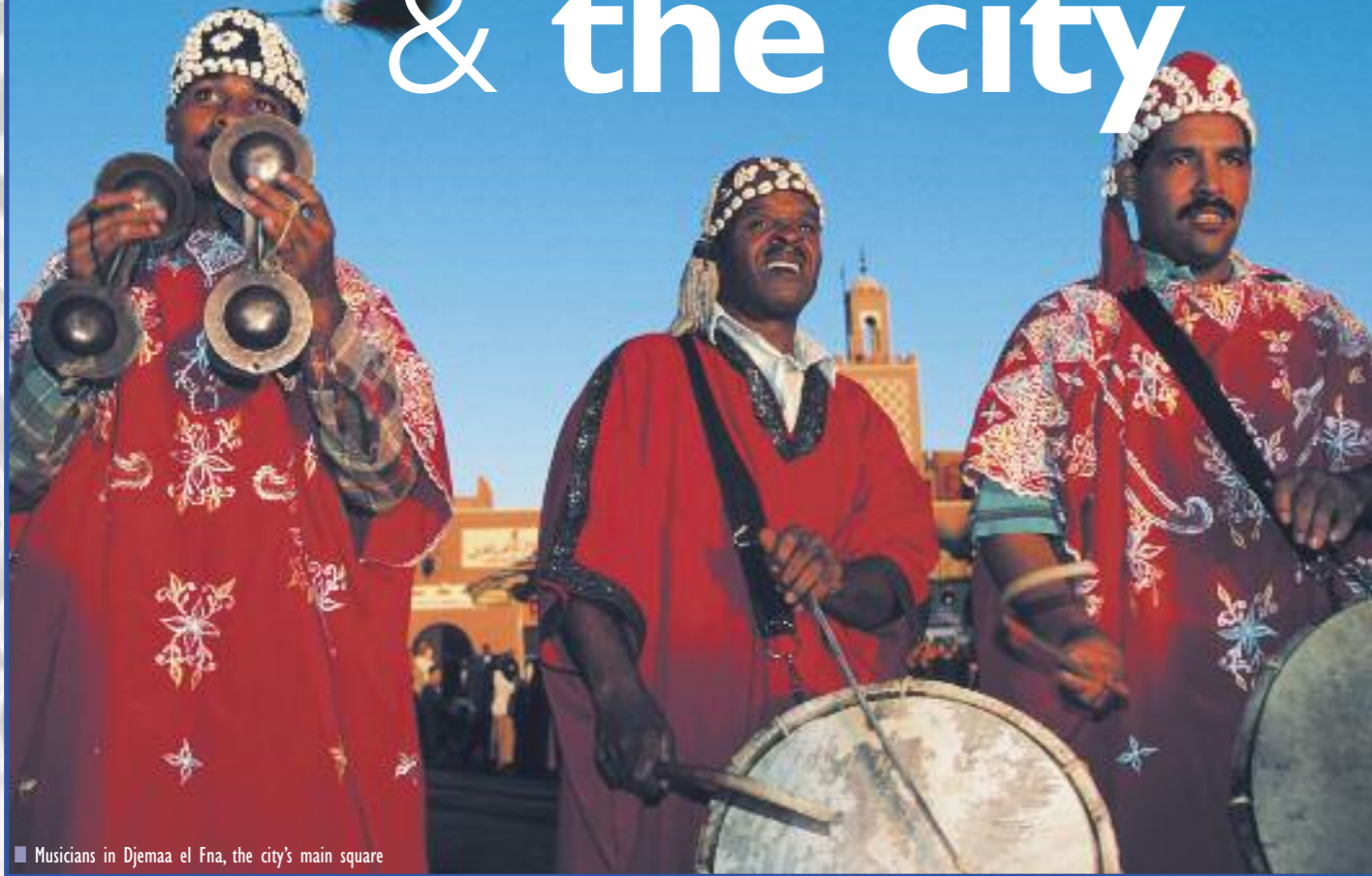


# Souks & the city



■ Musicians in Djemaa el Fna, the city's main square

Moroccan National Tourist Office

From its mesmeric souks and lively main square to its enchanting gardens, Marrakech is a feast for the senses, as **Debbie Ward** discovered. Except perhaps a tanning process using bird droppings...

“**P**eegeensheet”, my guide kept repeating, pointing at the stinking stone vats of Marrakech’s back street tannery where all around me animal hides were soaking. The phrase, and indeed the smell, seemed familiar but it was only when he resorted to the French expletive “merde!” that I was sure: the vessels were indeed filled with pigeon excrement.

Apparently, this unusual marinade helps season the hides in the early stages of their transformation into leather belts and bags. Working my way around the site I peeped at the results of this age-old process through the bunch of mint leaves I’d thoughtfully been given to sniff.

It’s behind-the-scenes in the famous souks of Marrakech’s Medina or old town where, if you’re prepared to get a little lost, you’ll find some of the most memorable sights (and smells). Elsewhere among the

crooked lanes I saw gates and lanterns being beaten out on blacksmiths’ forges and newly-dyed wool and cloth in bright oranges, pinks and greens being strung out to dry above the rickety roofs of the market stalls.

The labyrinthine souks of Marrakech spread from the north side of the city’s famous Djemaa el Fna square, its social and touristical heart, and browsing them is one of the greatest shopping experiences in the world.

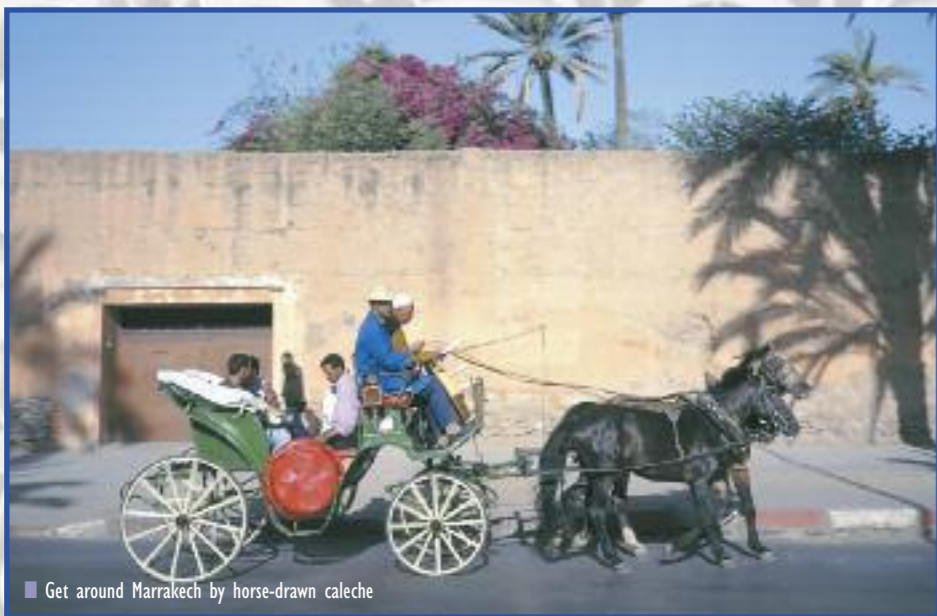
Once you’ve tracked down your purchases by heading for themed sections such as basketware or spices, the fun really begins because the locals excel not only in craftsmanship but sales. The general rule of offering around a third of a seller’s first price then haggling to a midway point has no truck in Marrakech. Most traders insisted I named a



Peter Ellegard



Guitar heroes, Marrakech style  
Peter Ellegard



Get around Marrakech by horse-drawn caleche  
Peter Ellegard



Spot the pots at Jardin Majorelle  
Peter Ellegard



Koutoubia minaret  
Peter Ellegard

## Top tips

When choosing your Marrakech accommodation, do consider a romantic riad. From boho B&Bs to plush boutique hotels, riads are converted from traditional homes with inner courtyards and are plentiful in the old town.

One particularly upscale homage to Moroccan design is the palatial La Mamounia hotel ([www.mamounia.com](http://www.mamounia.com)) which reopens this spring after major refurbishment. Notable for its location, the nearest major hotel to Djemaa al Fna (it's virtually on the square) is the all-inclusive Club Med Village Marrakech La Medina, one of three Marrakech resorts from this company ([www.clubmed.co.uk](http://www.clubmed.co.uk)).

Morocco is a Muslim country so if you're a light sleeper you may prefer accommodation in the new town, Ville Nouvelle, rather than the medina where a higher concentration of mosques sound the dawn call to prayer.



Orange juice stall in the main square  
Peter Ellegard

price first or they themselves picked a figure so outlandish I couldn't guess where they'd finally settle.

Quizzing other tourists on their purchases helps, as does the old trick of feigning only casual interest in a desired item and walking away if the price remains high. I finally emerged triumphant with a colourful glass necklace, two hand-woven baskets and, my visit falling just before Christmas, an array of chunky candles and metal patio lanterns for presents. The lanes are stuffed full of much more: handmade hats and bags, embroidered slippers, patterned pottery, silk rugs, even studded doors and swords. I almost literally bought the kitchen sink when a beautiful beaten copper basin drew my eye.

### Get high...

To really appreciate the world of the souk it's best to get high. Not in the way Marrakech's first wave of tourists, the hippies, did in the 60s and 70s but by finding a roof terrace.

Café des Epices ([www.cafedesepices.net](http://www.cafedesepices.net), French only) affords great people-watching opportunities over a small square within the souks. From here I viewed veiled women creating intricate henna tattoos on tourists' arms and a hat seller leading would-be purchasers back to his wares with the promise of his "best price".

As the sun starts to sink however, it's the terraces around the vast Djemaa el Fna (Café Glacier's is a top spot) that are the place to be. Here, with a sugar-laden mint tea, you can rest your camera on the balcony edge and

watch the epic transformation as carts stacked with metal poles swiftly become hundreds of food stalls strung with lights, and street performers appear to charm snakes, tell stories or pull themselves into impressive human pyramids.

When the giant outdoor nightspot is complete, slip down amongst the twisting charcoal smoke and you'll find the fresh orange juice and date purveyors of the day have been joined by rows of others selling bowls of snails (a legacy of French rule) and meze-style Moroccan delicacies.

"Jamie Oliver is my brother!" claimed the proprietor of one makeshift restaurant as I passed. It had the desired effect of making me stop and laugh and I was soon seated before a spread of bread, olives and spicy tomato

paste, watching my calamari, kebabs and melt-in-the-mouth aubergine slices being prepared "live" on a charcoal hob.

Like the ubiquitous Moroccan tagine of steamed lamb or vegetables with couscous, it's a dining experience not to be missed while in Marrakech, but do check you're paying for what you actually ate and politely query any discrepancies as substantial over-billing and short-changing is rife at eateries in and around the square.

### Palaces, mosques and museums

Handicraft shopping and food are key elements of the cultural experience of Marrakech but for finer arts head for some of its palaces, mosques and museums.

The 12th century built Koutoubia Mosque

with its towering minaret is a landmark near the Djemaa el Fna worth further exploration, as is 16th century Ali ben Youssef Medersa, Morocco's largest theological college, which is known for its fine stucco work. Also in the Medina, Bahia Palace, said to have once housed a harem, has 160 rooms boasting fine ceramic work and painted ceilings set around a series of courtyards.

You'll recognise the distinctive Moroccan decorative style from its humbler forms at home: star-shaped lanterns, coloured tea glasses, geometric patterned tiles and their like have evolved from student bed-sit clutter into fashionable home furnishings in recent years.

What you may not realise is Marrakech's influence on your garden. If any cobalt blue

plant pots grace your patio they will almost certainly have been inspired by the city's Jardin Majorelle ([www.jardinmajorelle.com/en](http://www.jardinmajorelle.com/en)), which was owned by fashion guru Yves Saint Laurent from 1980 until his death last year. The garden was once reproduced at Chelsea Flower Show and its bold blue fountains, walls and pottery sparked a wave of garden centre reproductions that continues to this day.

It's thanks to a centuries-old underground irrigation system that gardens like Majorelle, as well as the city's palm trees, can thrive in the arid landscape. You can wander and wonder at this cooling respite from the city with its shady paths and trickling water (and get a giggle from the much-photographed giant phallic cacti near the entrance).

## Beyond Marrakech

The Atlas Mountains, snow-capped in winter, make a scenic backdrop to Marrakech and the area around North Africa's highest peak, Toubkal, is near enough for a day trip.

Imlil, about two hours from the city, is a popular starting point for treks to Berber villages where you can join the indigenous people for tea in their homes or a haggle in a market. Alternatively, take a camel trek into the Sahara led by a Tuareg guide in distinctive blue robes or visit the scenic port of Essaouira, 180km from Marrakech, with its sweeping beach, white-washed houses and artisans workshops.

Excursions of a day or longer can be booked through UK tour operators or your Marrakech hotel, or you can arrange a "grands taxi" for a day-trip to Imlil.

### Scrub up clean

Another cleansing escape can be sought in a traditional hammam. The public version will see you scrubbed, massaged with oily soap and slogged with bucketfuls of very hot water (wear bikini bottoms, girls) in a tiled communal room with men and women divided by different sections or sessions. Among the public hammams near the square is Hammam da Pacha on Fatima Zahra, which has a traditional dome studded with light holes; it helps if you can speak French or Arabic to the rather grumpy attendants. For a more modern, gentler, spa experience still incorporating the traditional use of steam, look to your hotel or one of the private hammams you'll be handed flyers for.

Your skin aglow, you may decide you want a little more from a night on the town than Djemaa el Fna has to offer, in which case head for one of Marrakech's modern nightspots. Among the most popular is Pacha ([www.pachamarrakech.com](http://www.pachamarrakech.com)), a restaurant-cum-club sister to the Ibiza icon. It's a classy joint, with a swimming pool on its outside terraces; though be warned, you may find the drinks prices as hard to stomach as a whiff of peegeensheet. **TL**

Travel journalist **Debbie Ward's** top tip for Marrakech is don't trust guides who tell you to go the full monty in the hammam – attendants will take your towel and laugh...



Marrakech street scene

Peter Ellegard

## Marrakech facts

### When to go:

Spring and autumn have the most comfortable temperatures (it can reach up to 40°C in summer) though as winters are mild Christmas and New Year breaks are popular.



### Getting there:

Airlines serving Marrakech include Atlas Blue ([www.atlas-blue.com](http://www.atlas-blue.com)), British Airways ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)), easyJet ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)), Ryanair ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) and Thomsonfly ([www.thomsonfly.com](http://www.thomsonfly.com)).

### Accommodation:

Book accommodation through companies including Octopus Travel ([www.octopustravel.co.uk](http://www.octopustravel.co.uk)) and Hip Marrakech ([www.hipmarrakech.com](http://www.hipmarrakech.com)).

### Tour operators:

UK operators offering Marrakech and beyond include Explore ([www.explore.co.uk](http://www.explore.co.uk)), Classic Collection ([www.classiccollection.co.uk](http://www.classiccollection.co.uk)), The Adventure Company ([www.theadventurecompany.co.uk](http://www.theadventurecompany.co.uk)), Bales Worldwide ([www.balesworldwide.com](http://www.balesworldwide.com)), Ramblers Worldwide Holidays ([www.ramblersholidays.co.uk](http://www.ramblersholidays.co.uk)), Walks Worldwide ([www.walksworldwide.com](http://www.walksworldwide.com)) and Nomadic Expeditions ([www.nomadic.co.uk](http://www.nomadic.co.uk)).

### Excursions:

Local excursion operators include ItinerancePlus ([www.itineranceplus.com](http://www.itineranceplus.com)) and Berber Adventures ([www.berberadventures.com](http://www.berberadventures.com)).



### Getting around:

Many medina sites are walkable and taxis are readily available (check the meter is running). "Grands taxis" seating up to six can be hired for longer trips. A more atmospheric option is a horse-drawn carriage or caleche, available round touristy areas like the Djemaa el Fna.

### Tourist information:

Moroccan National Tourist Office: call 020 7437 0073, [www.visitmorocco.com](http://www.visitmorocco.com)