

# Condé Nast Traveller

WIN  
A LUXURY  
MALDIVES  
HOLIDAY

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

DECEMBER 2011 £3.95

## Indian Ocean

Coral reefs and white sands in the Seychelles

### Authentic Morocco

The sleepy seaside  
town of Essaouira

### Northern Lights

Where to see  
the natural world's  
greatest wonder

Melbourne  
Christmas  
markets

Insider Miami



## Escape the crowds

The Canary Islands, but not as you know them

on a dusty hill only a few miles from Essaouira, with the ruins of an abandoned mansion on the deserted beach below, almost swallowed up by sand dunes. Bizarrely, Jimi Hendrix holed up here for a few weeks in the 1960s, as the flyblown cafés adorned with hippy graffiti and faded newspaper cuttings attest. There's nothing much to see or do, but the attraction of Diabat is its laid-back solitude, although this tranquillity may prove to be short-lived: a new golf course is being built here, and a virtual village of hotels and holiday homes is already springing up around it. I'm sure this development will be a great success, bringing in lots of foreign revenue and improving local living standards no end, but as in any destination on the fragile boundary between independent travel and mass tourism, something precious may well be lost along the way.

In the afternoon, we drove on and on, past camels grazing untethered in uncultivated meadows and old men tilling fields with wooden ploughs pulled by donkeys, to the beach at Sidi Kaouki. A strange combination of religious site and surfers' paradise, it's one of the oddest places I've ever visited. There's a ruined mausoleum on the beach, the burial site of the holy man who gave this shrine its name. Behind is a shantytown of surf shacks – cafés, shops and hostels. Two worlds collide on a single stretch of beach. It felt like a perfect metaphor for Essaouira, and Morocco, too, for that matter: a place on the cusp between past and present, torn between isolation and integration. 📍



## Essaouira The lowdown

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Heure Bleue Palais

Built in the 19th century as a palace for the city governor this grand old Relais & Châteaux property feels more like a private members' club than a hotel.

Bedrooms are discreetly furnished, but it's the suave common rooms – bar, library, billiard room – that make this elegant hideaway seem like a colonial home from home. The rooftop pool is a sunlit sanctuary above the old town, and the leafy courtyard is a wonderful place to read or snooze. Head chef Ahmed Handour gives a fresh twist to Moroccan staples, and the hammam will give you a bracing massage and scrub down; but it's the service that sets this place apart. French director François Laustriat is passionate about his adopted home, and his team provide an insider's introduction to the city. 00 212 524 78 34 34; [www.heure-bleue.com](http://www.heure-bleue.com) Doubles from €300

#### Villa de l'O

Housed in an 18th-century building beside the ramparts of the Kasbah, this 12-room riad has been converted into an idiosyncratic boutique hotel by two French sisters who clearly share a keen sense of fun and a sharp artistic eye. The communal spaces are tastefully decorated with sepia photos of the harbour, but the quirky bedrooms are the pièce de résistance. Ask for the Opium

Room, with its sunken bath and marvellous beachside views. 00 212 524 47 63 75; [www.villadelo.com](http://www.villadelo.com). Doubles from €120

### WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

#### Elizir

'I call it hippy chic,' says Abdellatif Rharbaoui, proprietor of what resembles a 1970s junkshop transported from the Portobello Road. After the trash-aesthetic decor, his menu seems quite conventional: oriental classics with an Italian flourish, a legacy of the nine years he spent in Bologna. Order organic chicken with fresh figs, and lemon sorbet with vodka. About €35 for dinner for two. 00 212 524 47 21 03

#### Le Chalet de la Plage

A local landmark since 1893, this light and airy seafront restaurant serves great seafood with bay views. Your jolly host Jeannot is a patron of the old school, straight out of the cast of Casablanca. Ask for a table on the terrace. Set menu about €22. 00 212 524 47 59 72

#### Café Taros

As well as a bar, boutique, gallery and library, Taros has a kitchen serving nourishing Moroccan food (try the chicken tagine with prunes and almonds); but this is a meeting place as much as a café, and its rooftop is the place to be seen. Cocktails from about €5. Two-course meals about €15 for two. 00 212 524 47 64 07; [www.taroscafe.com](http://www.taroscafe.com)

### WHERE TO GO

#### Coopérative Féminine Marjana

Buy culinary or cosmetic argan where Moroccan women make it, just 15 minutes by car from Essaouira. 00 212 664 69 87 82

#### Les Domaines du Val d'Argan

Enjoy a meal in the bodega or buy a bottle to take away (from €5) at southern Morocco's only vineyard, a half-hour drive from Essaouira. 00 212 524 78 34 67; [www.valdargan.com](http://www.valdargan.com)

#### Musée Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdallah

A former pasha's palace, filled with Roman ruins, Jewish artefacts, Moroccan costumes and musical instruments. 00 212 524 475300

### GETTING TO ESSAOUIRA

**Royal Air Maroc** ([www.royal-airmaroc.co.uk](http://www.royal-airmaroc.co.uk)) flies to Marrakech from Heathrow. **EasyJet** ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)) flies there from Manchester and Gatwick, and **BMI** ([www.bmi.co.uk](http://www.bmi.co.uk)) flies from Heathrow. Most hotels will arrange transfers to Essaouira for around €100 each way.

✈️ **Journey time** About a 3.5-hour flight to Marrakech from London, then a 2.5-hour drive to Essaouira

### WEATHER TO GO

☀️ Essaouira is a good year-round destination, though March–Oct is the most rain-free period.

For more, see our essential guide to Essaouira at

[www.cntraveller.com/essaouira](http://www.cntraveller.com/essaouira) 📱



*Battered by the ocean, bleached by the sun and worn smooth by the tides of history, Essaouira is an archaic curio, strange and spectacular*

prized as a lotion, but I didn't know you could also eat it, and I had no idea that this stretch of coast is the only place where it grows in Morocco. Argan trees grow wild all across this hillside – I realised now that I'd mistaken them for olive trees on the drive in from Marrakech. Small and stunted with pale thin leaves, they do look similar from a distance, but the fruit they bear is completely different: a hard little nut, which the locals bring here to make argan oil. Turning these nuts into oil is painstaking work, a process that has hardly changed in millennia. Half a dozen women sit on the floor with huge piles

of nuts, shelling them with sharp pebbles, mashing them into a pulp and squeezing the thick paste into oil. The farm is a female cooperative, providing a fixed income for local women and a fixed rate for their crop. The farm shop sells bottles of the stuff, for cooking or cosmetics. As a dip or as a dressing, it tastes a bit like peanut butter – but these women assured me fervently that it's far healthier.

We drove on to a vineyard some 20km from Essaouira. Wine has a long history in Morocco, but large-scale cultivation only really arrived with the French colonists 100 years ago. This vineyard, Les Domaines

du Val d'Argan, is the smallest in Morocco and the only one in the south. It was founded by a Frenchman 17 years ago. Today, he has about 35 hectares under vine, yielding well over 100,000 bottles a year. After a walk through the fields, we ate lunch at the bodega – the only one in Morocco (so far), with stunning views over the countryside. Sitting on the shaded terrace sipping a glass of cool white wine, overlooking the vines, I felt I was in the South of France rather than North Africa.

On my last day we drove south along the coast to the splendid beaches of Djalut and Sidi Kaouki. Dhabut is a steeply village



Cafe Taros, as much a rendezvous point as a café. Opposite, Sidi Kaouki beach, south of Essaouira