

# Marrakech:

*where seeing is believing*

Words by Laura Bartlett







Kasbah Tamadot



**F**orget all those all inclusive beach breaks that can be summed up on a postcard, the madness and magic of Marrakech leaves you with holiday photographs that demand further explanation.

How did you wind up sipping green tea with the locals, shedding your skin in a hamman and busting Berber inspired dance moves under the Atlas Mountains with random new friends from New York?

I explored Marrakech recently with Discerning Collection, a tour operator that take the hassle out of everything. At the end of each day I'd think back over the days experiences in my mind; from dodging donkeys to stumbling across hidden gems in the winding alleyways, the whole trip was one big adventure.

Arriving in Marrakech after sunset, we were collected from the airport by our jolly driver who pointed out hot spots during our journey to our first home, from the snow-capped peaks of the Atlas Mountains, the medina, the Koutoubia Mosque and its famous minaret. Then you'll sense the vibrancy of the Jemaa el-Fna Square, the heavy

scents of the spice market and the throbbing music of the souks. Instantly you feel a magic and a madness at the same time. It's bustling and busy yet intriguing, interesting and mysterious, luring you in to explore.

Our car pulled up on a busy street with locals everywhere and horses pulling carriages, making me feel like I had gone back in time. After a little walk down an alleyway we stopped outside a rather pretty door, pressed on the bell and out came the staff to usher us inside the Riad Assakina.

Owned by husband and wife duo Grant and Michele, this is a true hidden gem, worthy of such title that gets batted around far too much. Once a dilapidated old Riad in the Mellah, the ancient Jewish quarter of the Medina, Grant and Michele have now transformed it into an exquisite guesthouse, perfectly combining traditional Moroccan design and detail with modern comforts you would expect these days. It's boutique with just seven rooms and suites and the attention to detail is something they should brag about. The streets outside are bustling and manic but the minute you step over the door into their Riad it's a different story, and peace is restored.

Surrounding the cool, spacious courtyard and





Riad Assakina

pretty plunge pool area is the salon, dining room, two bedrooms and a 'b'hous' – a traditional Moroccan seating area. Upstairs are four more rooms, whilst the owners occupy the suite on the pretty roof terrace; the perfect place to lounge with a cool drink watching the sun set over the minarets of the ancient Medina.

The following morning we were collected by a tour guide, organised by Discerning Collection, who took us out to explore. First stop, the Souks; a place that people always tell you that you must visit when in Morocco. From wool turned into shimmering carpets, sheets of copper and tin transformed into lanterns beneath the smith's dancing hammer, and wood carved to become as intricate as lacework. We even saw a man making ornaments using just his feet. It's mesmerising and you can get lost in the winding streets for hours. With the different sellers trying to usher you in to sample the delights that they're selling, it can get overwhelming. Thankfully our guide was well known in the area and people respected our space.

We explored the markets, witnessed men trying to put monkeys on peoples shoulders, donkeys being whipped through the narrow streets, beggars pretending to help us find out way and then



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hassling us for money, saw truck loads of oranges being freshly pressed to sell to the shoppers and saw a man playing with his snake in public (a fact, not a euphemism). The whole day was crazy and wild and something we will never forget.

The following day we were collected to spend the night at Kasbah Tamadot, another hotel represented by Discerning Collection, which is an hour drive away from the city. As you make your way higher up the Atlas Mountains you spot Kasbah Tamadot perched dramatically on a hilltop surrounded by the mountain peaks.

Owned by Richard Branson, this is the place to go when seeking the ultimate luxury in the heart of Morocco's most spectacular setting. The extensive gardens are carefully landscaped with mature rose, fruit and cactus plants, the courtyards hold a 5-star spa with indoor pool, and the suites combine contemporary design with colourful Moroccan

antiques. Outside, a cluster of astonishing Berber-style tents offer that north African luxe safari vibe. When we were told that we would be staying in one of the tents I had visions of camping in a tiny two man tent and me, covered in mud like a Glastonbury horror story. It could not have been any more the opposite.

We opened the door to our 'tent' to be greeted by a vast room, decorated traditionally and colourful, with a living space, sofa, bed, free standing bath in the large bathroom and our own private garden with a hot tub. It does not get more luxurious than this, if this is what tent life is like I wish I started camping years ago!

What sets Kasbah Tamadot apart from anywhere else I have stayed is their attention to detail. From the complimentary mini bar, ear plugs so you can get a good nights sleep, candles by the side of the bath, rubber duck, binoculars so you can see















right up the mountains, the staff that are dressed impeccably there really is nothing that they haven't thought of. Probably down to how well travelled Branson is, picking up tips and tricks along the way to make sure that his property is the best of the best.

A destination in itself, we relished unwinding beside the stunning infinity pool, gazing over the snow-capped mountains and dining in the innovative restaurant. We wanted to stay in our 'tent' all night but there was so much on offer. From the shop that offers all kinds of traditional treats to the pool room where we had a few games whilst piping away on mint Shisha with glasses of wine from the honesty bar.

We made friends with a newlywed couple who were on their honeymoon from the states and we spent the night laughing and swimming in the heated pool until the early hours, quite possibly the

most surreal night of my life but at Kasbah Tamadot and in Marrakech, anything can happen.

Discerning Collection ensure your trip runs seamlessly, from the perfectly timed transfer drivers to the arranging tour guides, they have everything under control take the hassle away. They are a truly specialist tour operator, offering unique boutique hotels, private villas with pools, rural retreats and select apartments in unspoilt resorts. Whether you're looking for a suite built within caves, a romantic rooftop terrace or your own private infinity pool, the Discerning Collection will have you covered.

All of the properties which they represent have been hand-picked by their team of travel professionals.. Their goal is to provide all of their guests with a dedicated personal service and hotels, riads and private villas that will not only satisfy your needs but hopefully make you want to come back time and time again. And they achieved exactly that for #TeamCoco.

Returning home I had to explain the bruises on my knees, chipped toe nail polish, hilarious henna and the excessive amount of pottery that I had acquired but I wouldn't swap the experience for anything.

Profoundly Moroccan, joyously cosmopolitan, Marrakech is the city that inspires all the dreamers.

#### **RIAD ASSAKINA**

3 nights in a Standard Room on B&B basis (2 sharing), including flights from Gatwick or Manchester (with pre-booked seats and hand luggage), and private airport transfers from £415pp.

#### **KASBAH TAMADOT**

3 nights for the price of 2

3 nights in a Superior Room on B&B basis (2 sharing), including flights from Gatwick or Manchester (with prebooked seats and hand luggage), and private airport transfers from £675pp.

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