



Images from left, clockwise: Le Trou au Mur at Riad Farnatchi, the terrace at Le Jardin, food at Le Trou au Mur, food at Nomad.

Overleaf, top to bottom: Terrasse des Épices, Le Trou au Mur and spices in the Medina

# A CULINARY JOURNEY TO MARRAKECH

Thanks to its rich cultural heritage, Marrakech offers one of the most eclectic food scenes in North Africa. Lisa Kjellsson goes in search for the gastronomic highlights of the Red City

As a melting pot of Arabic, Berber and Mediterranean influences, Morocco is a truly diverse and culturally abundant country and this is very much reflected in its cuisine. Wandering around the food stalls in the Marrakech medina can quickly lead to sensory overload – a soundtrack of lively bartering in French and Arabic; delicious wafts of grilled meat and freshly baked pastries;

stacks of dates and roasted nuts among a sea of colourful spices. It would be a shame to leave without *ras el hanout* – the ubiquitous Moroccan blend of a couple of dozen spices that varies slightly from one seller to another but tends to include cardamom, cumin, cinnamon and coriander and is used to season both savoury and sweet dishes.

Some of them, such as lamb and beef tagine, are on the menu at Terrasse des Épices, the first stop on my culinary journey. The signature dish here, however, is *tanjia Marrakchia*, a beef shank stew that's typical of Marrakech and cooked for six hours in a ceramic urn in a wood-fired oven used to heat a hammam, the traditional Moroccan bath. The table next to me left me in no doubt of its deliciousness, while I opted for a selection of Moroccan salads – poached beetroot; lentil and tomato; baked red pepper; cumin- and coriander-infused carrot; candied tomatoes; and aubergine caviar – followed by the fish tagine which has been cooked to perfection. I savoured each bite, and every moment of what turns out to be a rather magical evening with live French-Moorish folk music under the stars.

The next day I have lunch at the much-hyped Nomad, set in a former carpet store with a sun-soaked terrace overlooking the spice square of Rahba Kedima. The vibe is fun and

relaxed, with the young international crowd taking selfies against the colourful backdrop. I cool down with a refreshing melon gazpacho, then tuck into a plate of calamari in a cumin-infused anchovy, ginger and harissa sauce served with braised fennel, and can't resist a slice of flourless orange cake to finish.

In the evening I move on to Nomad's sister restaurant, Le Jardin, a leafy green oasis in a 16th-century building that is worth visiting as much for the interiors as for the food. I spot groups of friends chatting and laughing in the courtyard and on the terraces, while couples are enjoying candle-lit dinners in the cosy alcoves. The service is slapdash but the food is moreish. I order red mullet and an artichoke salad, followed by a fish tagine, and for dessert I try *m'hanncha*, filo pastry stuffed with almond paste and sprinkled with pistachios, which is as delectable as it sounds.

On the last evening of my trip I reflect on how well I've eaten in Morocco, and I also discover that in my search for the true flavours of Marrakech I needn't have looked any further than across the street from my hotel, the eminently chic Riad Farnatchi. The owner, British hotelier James Wix, had been itching to open a restaurant and has poured his passion into Le Trou au Mur. Tucked away on a quiet side street in the Old Town, at first glance it appears to be a "hole in the wall" as the name suggests, but closer inspection reveals a bright and airy first-floor dining room and a roof terrace that is bathed in that famous golden light close to sunset – the perfect spot to enjoy a pre-dinner martini.



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When designing the menu, Wix set out to rediscover traditional Moroccan family recipes and asked his staff for their “favourite food their grandmothers used to cook”. The result is dishes such as the Berber speciality *berkoukesh*, handmade pasta mixed with a fresh herb and tomato sauce, which I can attest is delicious. The most popular dish on the menu is *meshoui* – lamb slow-cooked with herbs and fermented butter for up to eight hours in a fire pit until the meat is so tender it literally melts in your mouth.

As my waiter talks me through the menu I gain a fascinating insight into Moroccan culinary traditions. Take *tride*, for example, a thinly shredded pancake with lentils, chicken and a saffron and herb sauce. This, I’m told, is a dish Moroccans feast on halfway through the month of Ramadan, and also to celebrate the birth of a new baby. Another poultry dish, baby chicken stuffed with vermicelli and sultanas in a harissa sauce, is traditionally served to grooms on their wedding day “to give them strength”.

For pudding there is a choice between traditional pastries, both the almond variety and a fresh fruit *pastilla*, and *berkoukesh* makes a reappearance. It’s the first time I’ve seen *pastilla* on a dessert menu, and I’m intrigued to learn it’s made with a sweet, creamy sauce spiced with cinnamon, creating a warming dish that’s especially popular during the colder winter months. It sounds delicious but having already tried the savoury version I decide to forego it on this occasion. Luckily I’m returning to Marrakech later in the year, and I’ll be making a beeline for that dessert.

### WHERE TO EAT

- Terrasse des épices - [terrasedeseepices.com](http://terrasedeseepices.com)
- Le Jardin - [lejardinmarrakech.com](http://lejardinmarrakech.com)
- Nomad - [nomadmarrakech.com](http://nomadmarrakech.com)
- Le Trou au Mur - [letrouaumur.com](http://letrouaumur.com)

### WHERE TO STAY

Riad Farnatchi, a beautiful 10-bedroom luxury riad with an adjacent spa. Rooms start at £250 and include breakfast and complimentary airport transfer from Marrakech airport. [riadfarnatchi.com](http://riadfarnatchi.com)

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