



On the Road



Follow your nose from the Djemaa el-Fna, the mesmerising main square in Marrakech's medina – its chaos and cacophony fed by a frenzy of hawkers, hustlers, henna tattoo artists and snake charmers – to Mechoui Alley. On the edge of a spider's web of claustrophobic passageways and dark dead ends in the old quarter, the smoky aroma of slow-roasted lamb seeps out, drawing you in.

It's the lunchtime rush and vendors at the street-food stalls dish up tender strips of lamb, roasted in deep clay pits in the ground and devoured with bread, a sprinkling of cumin and salt, and sweet mint tea. Alongside this mechoui, another local speciality is tangia – urn-like clay pots stuffed with lamb, vegetables and olive oil, and slow-cooked over coals until the meat is falling off the bone – and a more niche delicacy: roast sheep's head.

It might be just a date stone's throw from the stalls piled high with gaudily painted tagines and tourist trinkets but these are the authentic flavours of Marrakech. Flavours which, in this North African country, have their roots in French, Arabic and indigenous Berber culture.

I'm hungry but I drag myself away, snaking through the medina to **Le Trou au Mur**, sleek sister restaurant of luxury riad hotel Le Farnatchi, where mechoui is also on the menu (letrouaumur.com). I find the door and climb the stairs, emerging into a vibrant room ringed with lime-green banquettes, a vivid black-and-white-tiled

floor and a roaring fire. Another set of stairs leads up to a roof terrace and tables with views over the magical middle of the medina.

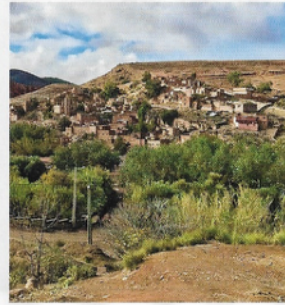
The restaurant's design might be starkly contemporary but its ethos is bedded in ancient traditions, the menu showcasing old family recipes passed down from generation to generation. It's an eye-opener for diners who imagine Moroccan cuisine starts and ends with tagine (the slow-cooked classics of chicken with olives and lemon, or lamb with prunes and almonds).

Cherchma is a mix of beans and lentils in a spicy sauce, served with couscous and fed to young children while they're teething; tride are shredded pancakes with lentils, chicken and a saffron sauce that's traditionally eaten by women after giving birth.

I tuck into chermoula sardines, marinated in a pungent paste of coriander, cumin and lemon, and stuffed with spicy ratatouille-style vegetables. And then, the mechoui, cooked in the restaurant's traditional clay oven – the shoulder cut is a mound of melt-in-the-mouth meat. For dessert, I can only manage a few spoonfuls of the sweet and creamy berkoukes: imagine a rich rice pudding made from mini Moroccan pasta.

Marrakech, with its ancient medina and French colonial new town, is now liberally laced with boutique hotels, those in the old quarter converted from riads (traditional houses built around an internal courtyard or garden) but I'm staying half an hour outside the city in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. **Kasbah Angour** is a tranquil hilltop retreat built in Moroccan style by English expat =

ABOVE: MARRAKECH'S FAMOUS DJEMAA EL-FNA MARKETPLACE IN THE CITY'S MEDINA QUARTER



Paul Foulsham and run by a team of local Berbers (kasbahangour.com). The property is surrounded by 10 acres of meticulously manicured grounds with a backdrop of snow-capped peaks. There are just 25 rooms

The hotel offers a range of excursions, from half-day hikes to more strenuous whole-day treks with a local guide and the opportunity to visit the weekly souk at Tahnaout. On a hillside surrounding the market, Berbers from the

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honey and homemade jams, and a different Moroccan 'discovery' each day. Chorba, for instance, is a traditional vegetable soup served with eggy flatbread; harcha is unleavened bread made with durum wheat, cooked in a cast-iron pan and served with cucumber, tomatoes and olive oil. For dinner you can choose from the local market menu or signature dishes from the à la carte. I can't resist the pastilla, a flaky filo pastry parcel of chicken and almonds dusted with icing sugar and cinnamon.

One evening I wind my way to the other side of the medina to the Clock Café, a laid-back labyrinthine restaurant with a programme of cultural events on the rooftop terrace – and camel burgers on the menu; I opt for earthy chicken rfsisa with flatbreads, lentils and ras el hanout (cafeclock.com).

On Palais Amani's roof terrace, meanwhile, there's a lounge bar, and cookery school. Meeting the chef, Housman, in the courtyard, we go donkey dodging through the souk to buy fresh ingredients – all but the chicken, thankfully already marinating (they kill and clean the birds in front of you in the souk to guarantee freshness).

Weaving through the throng, our chef seems to be a local celebrity, chatting to all the stallholders. We buy bunches of fresh mint, aubergines and spices, before stopping for breakfast at a street-food stall. Cramming around a small table, the owner ladles out bowls of bissara soup made from fava beans and garlic with olive oil, chilli, cumin and a squeeze of lemon. Before heading home we stop for another snack, sfenj. These devilishly good deep-fried doughnuts are eaten hot, dipped in butter and honey.

Back at the hotel we don aprons to cook lunch. First zaalouk, a smoky aubergine and tomato salad. We char the aubergines on an open flame, grate tomatoes, chop coriander and garlic, and add them all to the frying pan with olive oil, cumin, paprika and salt. Next, the chicken tagine.

Later, as we tuck into our culinary creations on the sun-dappled roof terrace as the haunting call to prayer echoes around the medina, I decide that, while there is far more to Moroccan cuisine than the king of one-pot cooking, sometimes the classic is the best way to go.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BREAKFAST CHORBA AT PALAIS AMANI; A VIEW OF FEZ'S MEDINA FROM THE HOTEL'S ROOF TERRACE; SFENJ SERVED WITH HONEY AND BUTTER

HOW TO DO IT

Air Arabia operates flights from London Gatwick to Marrakech and Fez from around £50 each way, and from Marrakech to Fez from £24 each way (airarabia.com). Doubles at Kasbah Angour start at £113, b&b (kasbahangour.com), and at Palais Amani from £162, b&b (palaisamani.com). For more info, see visitmorocco.com. Follow Lucy on Twitter and Instagram @lucygitmore.

PHOTOGRAPHS: LUCY GILLMORE



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"We don't use lemons in the marinade. Our kebabs are simply meat, onions, ground spices and fresh coriander." Near the fishmongers selling crates of silvery sardines from Essaouira, he points out a smoking conical mud and straw oven. "Mechoui," he says. "it's been cooking for five or six hours already."

We are heading back to the hotel on foot along the river valley from Douar Azrou, a Berber village. A jumble of stone houses, bedded into the red rocks, it was once on an important caravan trade route and is now protected by UNESCO. Today, some 25 families live here – one of them, I soon learn, is Abdul's.

Bumping into his cousin we get a taste of Berber hospitality as she invites us in for hot mint tea and homemade barley, honey and olive oil biscuits. Waving goodbye, we weave our way through the terraced landscape. Each family, Abdul explains, has grazing for one or two cows and a vegetable plot. We pass orchards of pomegranate, quince, peach and apricot trees alongside an irrigation canal, rows of silvery olive trees and a local olive press.

It's approaching midday as we wander into the next village to find a group of women chatting around a communal bread oven. They feed the flames with twigs and, smiling, offer us one of the flat round loaves to take with us. Hot from the oven, its crust burns our fingers and lips but we tear it apart, devouring the deliciously soft, doughy centre.

The next day I'm leaving the Atlas Mountains behind and travelling north to Fez, once the country's imperial capital and around six or seven hours by road – or a 45-minute flight on Morocco's low-cost airline, Air Arabia. Fez remains more off the beaten track than Marrakech, mass tourism yet to make its mark, although with twice weekly Air Arabia flights from Gatwick that might soon change.

Here, too, there is a new town built by French colonists but the ancient medina, dating back to the ninth century, and the largest in Africa, is still home to 200,000 inhabitants and a vibrant local community. From the famous tanneries established in the 16th century by Spanish migrants from Córdoba (the stench from the vats and the view of the skins drying on the rooftops is unforgettable) to the hammering of coppersmiths, life goes on much as it has for centuries.

My base for the next few days is Palais Amani a 17th-century palace restored and converted into an 18-suite hotel by husband and wife Abdel Ali Baha and Jemima Mann-Baha (palaisamani.com). Behind the huge wooden doors they've created an oasis of calm around a citrus-shaded, ornately tiled courtyard, a bubbling fountain at its heart. They retained many of the original features but added a heavenly candlelit underground hammam.

Food is also a highlight, breakfast a feast of fruit from the garden (sliced oranges picked from their trees, with pomegranate and mint), flatbreads with olives, cheeses, »

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: TAGINES AND DECORATIVE BOWLS FOR SALE IN MARRAKECH'S MEDINA; SARDINES DEEP-FRYING; OLIVES AND ALL MANNER OF JARRED GOODS; A MECHOUÏ STREET STALL; A BASKET-LADEN DONKEY; THE STEAMING CONTENTS OF A TAGINE UNVEILED; MOROCCAN-STYLE KEBABS; VEG STALLS AT TAHNAOUT'S WEEKLY SOUK; AZROU VILLAGE, NEAR KASBAH ANGOUR; BERKOUKES AT LE TROU AU MUR