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It seemed rather indulgent: was it really worth flying to Marrakech for only two nights? I asked the lady on the plane beside me.

"Oh yes!" she replied. "That's what people do nowadays. My daughter went to Barcelona for one night for a party - wish I could have done that in my day!"

Slightly reassured, I felt a thrill of anticipation as we walked out of the airport past a large bed of cacti. It was hot, the sky was entirely blue and



© E. Saadi Gardens and Riads



MARRAKECH MOMENTS

when we stopped into our taxi, the driver greeted us with a charming smile as he placed a container of cool bottled water by our feet.

Out of the taxi window I could see wide, dusty streets with low-lying houses of thick, pinkish walls. Men dressed in long robes, or *gandora* (as I later discovered they were called) were walking and riding bicycles.

This was my first visit to an Arab country - and it was excitingly unlike anything I had experienced before.

Our hotel was only a 15-minute drive from the airport, just outside the walls of Marrakech's old walled city or medina. Driving up to the main entrance, I thought we had taken a wrong turn and gone into the King's palace - but no, we were staying in a palace of our own - the Es Saadi Palace.

Es Saadi means "the happy one" and, as I soon found out, it would be a miserable guest indeed who could not find contentment within its walls.

Weary travellers, we probably failed to admire the two enormous metal horses by the entrance, complete with a white-robed Moroccan guard, his fearsomeness displaced by a disarming smile. The interior of the hotel was like a temple or mosque - a huge, domed

On a flying visit to the Moroccan city **Gillian Spickernell** finds the medieval hustle and bustle of the medina and the *mezze* feasts, fit for a sultan, quite unlike anything else she has experienced before



© Emma Elly

ceiling beneath which was a circular pool decorated with rings of fresh roses. In one corner, on a cushioned seat of red and gold cloth, sat a smiling man surrounded by silver platters and teapots, a tray of sweetmeats at his side. As he sprang up to greet us, his yellow pointed slippers peeped out from beneath his *gandora* as he poured some mint tea into coloured glasses for us.

Recognising that I was

being captivated by this exotic country, there wasn't much I could do to resist.

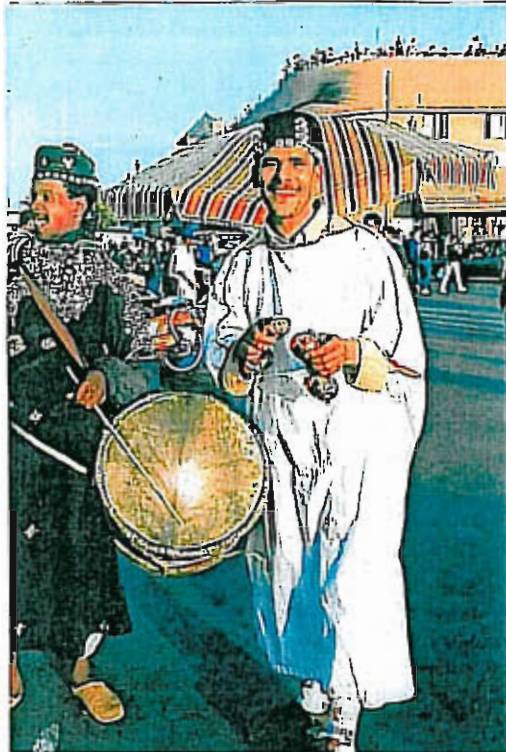
I could hardly wait to explore the medina but, first, that evening, there was to be a Moroccan feast - and feast is the only word fit to describe the succession of delicious *mezze* dishes brought for us to admire before being served.

Seated in the Es Saadi Palace's splendid domed restaurant, looking out on

to the dark Moroccan night, a selection of salads were presented - eggplant and tomato, peppers, onions and cucumbers. Then, shredded liver, tiger prawns and heaped vegetables, followed by bowls of fish, chicken with lemon, and lamb with almonds and dried fruits. Dish after dish flowed before me like a mirage - but my stomach confirmed that this was no illusion.

Behind us, a musician was

1. Es Saadi Gardens and Riads has 10 individually designed luxurious villas, each with its own pool
2. Enjoying a glass of reviving mint tea after a busy day's sightseeing in the city
- 3 and 4. A variety of entertainers, including musicians and snake-charmers, perform in Djema El Fna, the main square



playing a strangely shaped lute. His high-pitched voice called out plaintively as his fingers plucked at the strings. It was as if he had become an expressive instrument. Occasionally he would look up and smile, before his lute and song possessed him once more. It was past 11 pm when the dishes of crushed mint, whipped cream and ice were served. Our feast, finally, drew to a close



and sometime after midnight I returned to the calm of my balcony and listened to the sound of cicadas and croaking frogs. By now, the masses of swooping birds, so noisy at dusk, had returned to their trees and fallen silent. But the night's stillness evaporated in the noise and hubbub of the old walled city the following morning. We were taken there by horse and carriage and the slow pace gave us time to take in the groups of camels tied up (presumably while their masters went shopping). As we came closer, the impressive city wall rose up before us. Built of dried mud mixed with lime and six miles (10km) long, its dusky pink colour glowed under the bright sun. Birds darted in and out of its pitted holes. The carriage deposited us at one of the wall's eight entrances, or *babs*, where a group of old men sat in the

shade, weaving wool. What must they think of we tourists? Our guide, Aziz, explained that the urbanisation of the medina began in 1070 when mosques and fountains were built.

Privacy was of the utmost importance in architectural design and went hand-in-hand with modest behaviour. For example, when shopping, if you could afford an expensive item that your neighbour could not, then to spare his feelings, you would conceal it.

Turning into the medina's entrance we stepped back in time. From dark alcoves set into walls, meat, vegetables, fruit and spices were for sale. Moroccan housewives, covered from head-to-toe, assessed the produce, young boys pedalled past swiftly on bicycles and shopkeepers peered at us as they greeted Aziz.

"But this is not what it was," complained Aziz. "Now young people don't want to sell meat. They just want to sell souvenirs. No meat, just look!"

Around us were bewildering rows of multi-coloured leather slippers, mirrors, hats, wooden tables, trinkets and jewellery.

We turned left, then right, then into an alley that led to a smaller alley, which led into an even tinier one. It was exciting to be completely lost but to know at the same time that you were quite safe.

"Now I will show you the manufacturing district," Aziz announced and, suddenly, the smell of glue hit me, as boys stuck the soles on to slippers, and hacked and cut at leather to make belts and shoes.

Sparks fizzed in the dimness as one man welded a piece of ironwork. Another operated a lathe with his twisted foot to produce a chess-piece of cedar wood that, before I knew it, he had turned into a necklace for me. "Aziz - help!" I cried, for I hadn't had time to acquire any small change to pay him.

Our senses overwhelmed, we accepted the offer of mint tea in the basement of a rug merchant's shop where we were given a lesson on what to look for when buying.

A succession of designs was paraded in front of us and we were told by the owner that lambswool is the best - its fat keeps the wool plump

and it does not shrink or burn.

Reluctantly, we headed back across the main square to our awaiting carriage. It would have been wonderful to return here at dusk when the square comes alive with all kinds of strange characters, from snake-charmers to soothsayers, but we did not have time.

Back at the Es Saadi we had a Xi-gong lesson in the garden. Forming a circle and following the teacher's movements, we embarked on a series of slow exercises - a little like 'ai chi, and reputedly of benefit to the internal organs.

The day's events had worn me out and I escaped to sit by the pool, gazing up at the enormous palm trees and relaxing in the late-afternoon sun, gorgeously warm after a leisurely swim.

So big is the garden that amid the lush greenery it is hard to believe you are actually in the middle of a city of 1.2 million people (the coast is a two-hour drive away).

A buggy drives visitors to different parts of the garden, and we were taken to see 10 of the resort's opulent villas - each one built to a different design, and each one fit for a princess.

Two nights I had stayed in Marrakech - was it worth it? The answer is definitely yes, especially if, like me, you are lucky enough to stay at the Es Saadi Palace.

o Es Saadi Palace and Villas (part of the Es Saadi Gardens and Resort), Rue Ibrahim El Mazini, Hivernage, Marrakech 40000, Morocco (00 (212) 24 44 88 11; email: info@essaadi.com; www.essaadi.com). Room rates start at \$,200 (Dh) - approximately £361, including taxes - per room per night for a Junior Suite in the low season. Return airport transfer and breakfast is included. The Es Saadi Hotel is priced separately. o Moroccan National Tourist Office, 205 Regent Street, London W1 (020-7437 0073; or visit www.visitmorocco.org). o Tourism in Morocco (visit www.tourism-in-morocco.com). o For flights to Morocco, contact Royal Air Maroc (020-7307 5800; www.royalairmaroc.co.uk). o Marrakech. *Essaouira & the High Atlas* is published by Time Out Guides at £12.99. o Morocco by Walter M Weiss, about the social and geographical contrasts, is published by Haus Publishing at £12.99.