

Mountain high

Move on from Marrakech
with these easy add-ons,
suggests Mary Novakovich



Marrakech is pure magic – if a bit manic – and it's one of the most compelling reasons to visit Morocco. Holidaymakers are instantly drawn to the medina, a dizzying maze of souks making and selling traditional goods.

In the heart of all this colour is Djemaa el Fna, Marrakech's main square and non-stop carnival – particularly at night when the food stalls add their barbecue smoke to the heady atmosphere.

Outside the medina, Marrakech's Ville Nouvelle has more of a French look with wide boulevards and Western shops.

It also contains one of the city's highlights, Jardin Majorelle, Yves Saint Laurent's luxuriant gardens set among cobalt blue pavilions.

Head a few miles north to reach La Palmeraie, an ancient palm grove that's since become home to chic hotels, a golf course and an outpost of the trendy club Nikki Beach.

Visitors have a wide choice of flights to Marrakech, which makes it easy to visit even during the quieter winter months (see *Getting to Marrakech*, page 66).

As the city's popularity shows no sign of slowing down, the idea

of combining a second or even a third destination is a highly attractive one and gives clients a chance to discover some of Morocco's many sides.

▶ ESSAOUIRA

The easy-going resort of Essaouira has always been a coastal haven from the madness of Marrakech, and even more so since the 1960s when it became part of the hippie trail. Eighteenth-century, Unesco-listed ramparts curve round the whitewashed and blue-shuttered medina, where the pace of life in

the souks is agreeably mellow. Clients can explore the souks for spices, jewellery, ceramics, souvenirs and handicrafts without the hassle they would expect in Marrakech.

Start in the main square, Place Moulay Hassan, where cafes and patisseries take up the northern side. For a true taste of Essaouira, clients should head to the southern side of the square where the open-air fish stalls, grillades, line up under blue and white awnings. They simply choose their freshly caught fish and wait for it to be grilled



Kasbah Tamadot



LEFT:
Place Moulay
Hassan,
Essaouira

RIGHT:
Sofitel
Essaouira
Mogador Golf
& Spa

BELOW:
Essaouira



→ before tucking in at one of the communal tables.

Just beyond the fish stalls is Essaouira's harbour, a lively scene in the afternoons when blue fishing boats come in with the day's catch. To the west is the long stretch of sand that makes up Essaouira's main beach. Stiff Atlantic breezes make the beach a prime spot for windsurfing and kite-surfing, and it's hard to find a time of day when a game of football isn't going on – even at night when the lights go on.

Regular buses link Marrakech and Essaouira and take about three hours. There are also direct easyJet flights from Luton to Essaouira twice a week. Prestige Holidays has a two-centre holiday with four nights in Marrakech at the Es Saadi Hotel and three nights at the Sofitel Essaouira Mogador Golf & Spa from £539. The price includes Ryanair flights,



The Berber villages, olive groves and cool waters of the Ourika Valley offer an enticing day out

breakfast and transfers. Clients also have the choice of a three-night break only in Essaouira at the Sofitel from £229, including

easyJet flights from Luton and breakfast. Both breaks are for December 3 departures.

▶ ATLAS MOUNTAINS

The sight of the Atlas Mountains looming to the south of Marrakech is inescapable – and their allure is just as hard to escape. Day trips from Marrakech are popular, particularly in the hot summer months when the crisp air of the mountains and the fertile valleys are irresistible. The Berber adobe villages and the olive groves and cool waters of the Ourika Valley offer an enticing day out – and usually convince clients that a longer stay is in order.

Clients don't have to be expert hikers to enjoy treks through the

foothills and valleys of the Atlas Mountains, especially along the gentle routes in the Ourika Valley. But those who want more of a challenge can use the village of Imlil as a base for hikes to Mount Toubkal, North Africa's highest peak. Holidaymakers who fancy a chance to ski in the Atlas Mountains can visit Oukaimiden, the highest ski station in North Africa. The ski season generally runs from December to February, and clients can hire equipment in the village. It's a small affair, covering only about 12 miles, but its size is part of its charm.

In the midst of the mountains' lushness in the village of Asni is Kasbah Tamadot, the luxurious retreat bought by

