

Winter WAYS

Be as active or lazy as you like on a winter break to North Africa, says Aby Dunsby

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Anyone who has ever holidayed in North Africa will have been struck by the warmth and friendliness of the locals, the richness of cultures, and the fantastic food and drink.

Though this corner of the world has been stricken with problems that have seen tourist numbers dwindling, the magic of countries

such as Morocco and Egypt still remains, and as long as clients play it safe, they will benefit from fewer crowds, cheaper prices, and glorious sunshine over the UK's chilly winter months.

While flights to Sharm el-Sheikh are still on hold for Brits, Egypt's other Red Sea resorts of Hurghada and



SUN



SIGHTS



SPORTS



PICTURE: ROB SCHREUDER; UGURHAN BETIN

Winter 3 WAYS

→ Marsa Alam, along with buzzing capital Cairo, are very much open for business.

Fellow north African nation Morocco boasts many well-developed beach resorts that lay on heaps of activities, making it perfect for winter sun or an active break, while its ancient sites reveal a great deal about its past.

Jonathan May, Explore's product manager for Africa and the Middle East, says: "North Africa is a great choice for a winter holiday destination as not only is it a short flight from the UK, it is also warm year-round and has a wealth of culture and activities on offer."

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If it's beachside lazing they're after, clients will find plenty of it in both Morocco and Egypt, whose countless sun-drenched resorts are ideal for topping up a tan in winter, when average temperatures hover around 22C even in January.

"Morocco offers a long-haul cultural experience but with a short-haul flight," says Jo Colchester, purchaser for Morocco at Classic Collection. "And it is very good value for money, as the pound still buys a lot of Moroccan dirham, and the climate is consistently good."

Colchester recommends late November and early December as the best time to visit for cloudless, blue skies, warm rather than hot weather, and cool evenings, making it the perfect time for families or older couples to enjoy the destination.

Agadir is Morocco's best beach destination, offering soft golden sands



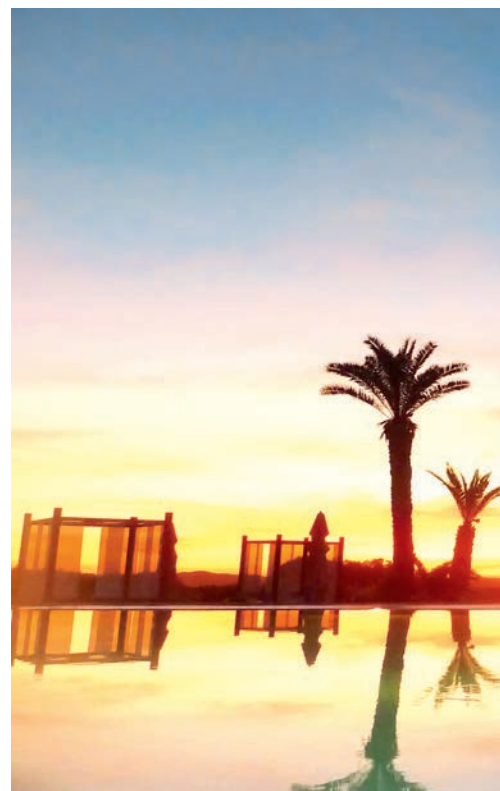
Morocco offers a long-haul cultural experience with a short-haul flight, and it is very good value for money

that stretch for more than five miles, and for those that wish to venture outside the confines of their resort, there's the lively city to discover, with the spice-scented markets of Souk El-Had and trendy beachside restaurants.

For clients who like the royal treatment, suggest a stay at the palatial Robinson Club Agadir, which is located on the beach and offers amazing views of the Atlantic Ocean, with the Atlas Mountains as a dramatic backdrop. There are two restaurants, including a WellFood station for clients trying to keep their waistlines in check.

Marrakech is the perfect location for clients who want to explore the maze of souks, wander past the crumbling, russet-hued buildings of the walled medina, and enjoy some mouth-watering cuisine in a vibrant selection of restaurants. Clients can embrace the culture while escaping the hubbub by staying in an authentic Moroccan riad.

Boutique hotel Les Jardins De La Medina is set in a historic building and is right in the heart of the medina.

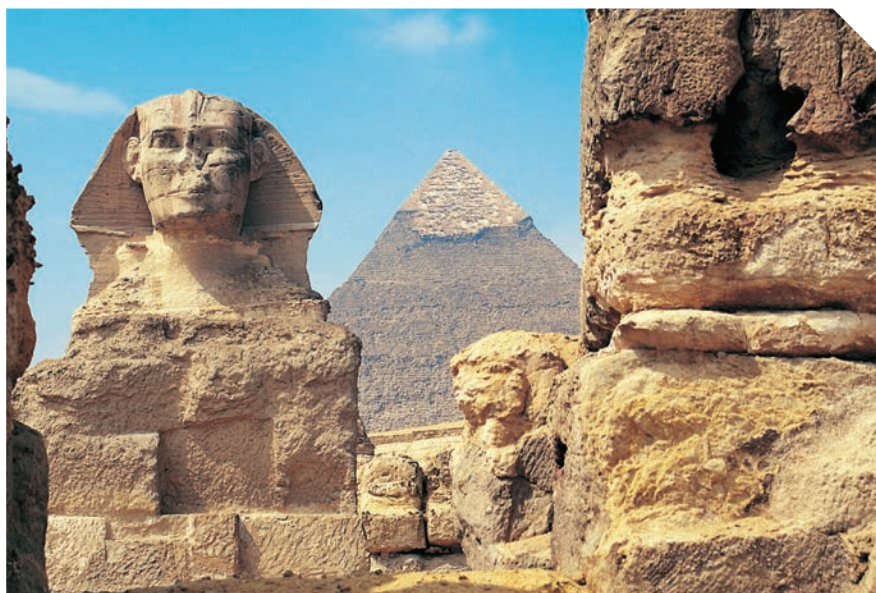


Bedrooms are spread out among the olive and orange trees, and the focus is very much on wellness and relaxation, with a beautiful tranquil pool set in the gardens, and a wellness centre offering an array of treatments. The hotel also runs a cookery school, where clients can learn how to blend flavours under the guidance of Moroccan chefs.

For those that wish to combine sun and sights, Classic Collection Holidays offers a twin-centre with three nights at La Maison Arabe and four at Kasbah Bab Ourika. La Maison Arabe is home to 26 uniquely decorated rooms, flower-filled courtyards and a swimming pool, with all the sights and sounds of Marrakech on the doorstep.

Next, a 50-minute drive from Marrakech will take clients to the hilltop retreat of Kasbah Bab Ourika, where easy walks, picnics and treks to national parks can be arranged, or clients can choose to do very little but enjoy the sunshine and mountain air.

The sunny beaches of Egypt's Marsa Alam are only five hours away by plane, and the Red Sea resort has a wide-ranging appeal, from family-friendly sandy beaches and clear, coral reef-filled waters teeming with marine life, to upscale couples-only resorts. Iberotel Coraya Beach Resort fits into



LEFT:
The Sphinx and
Pyramids, Cairo



ABOVE: Somabay

LEFT: Robinson Club Agadir



the latter category, and boasts its own private beach, three outdoor pools, and an open-air amphitheatre with live shows in the evenings.

► SIGHTS

No trip to Egypt would be complete without seeing Cairo's awe-inspiring Pyramids and the mesmerising Sphinx of Giza. Do Something Different offers a private half-day tour to these ancient sites from Cairo for £41 per adult and £20 per child.

For those staying in a beach resort, there's the option of taking a full-day trip from Hurghada including the short flight to Cairo and a full day of sightseeing for £292.

Clients looking for a conveniently located hotel for exploring Egypt's sights should consider the upscale Mövenpick Hotel Cairo Pyramids, which is two miles away from both the ancient Egyptian Khufu ship and the Pyramid of Khafre, and boasts views of the Pyramids from some rooms.

A trip along the mighty River Nile is like a journey back in time to discover Egypt's glorious heritage, with many spectacular monuments standing near the river's edge. A river cruise remains the best way of seeing the country's myriad tombs and temples, plus clients

who visit now have the advantage of seeing them all without bus-loads of tourists getting in their way.

In Morocco, Marrakech is a good base for seeing the country's most famous sights and enjoying the vibrant atmosphere. Do Something Different's private half-day tour takes in historical sights and colourful markets, including the Koutoubia Minaret, Saadian Tombs, Bahia Palace and Djemaa el Fna Square, from £29 per person.

A tour through the Atlas Mountains will take clients to discover the original inhabitants of Morocco, the Berbers. Clients can visit traditional mud-built villages dotted along the mountainside on Viator's one-day tour, which includes a sunrise hot-air balloon trip, a ride in a 4x4 through the mountains, a Berber breakfast and a camel ride (£180).

For a more extensive tour of Morocco's main sights, Explore's Highlights of Morocco itinerary includes visits to the three imperial cities of Marrakech, Meknes and Fes, plus visits to the Atlas Mountains and the Todra Gorge, Morocco's 'Grand Canyon'.

► SPORTS


Clients who can't sit still will have plenty to keep them occupied at the family-friendly Mazagan Beach & Golf

Resort, based near the Moroccan city of Casablanca.

Sports lovers can keep in shape with running, cycling, archery, football and tennis, with professional courts, pitches and instructors on hand to lead classes.

On the five-mile private beach, the hotel also hosts daily beach volleyball and soccer tournaments, while those who are more interested in practising their swing can tee up at the 18-hole links golf course. Set alongside two miles of white-sand beach, the course was designed by Gary Player, one of the all-time greats of the game.

Back in the city, Club Med's Marrakech La Palmeraie is an enjoyably sporty option, offering activities for all the family including mountain biking, basketball, golf, tennis and horse riding. For the more adventurous there's the resort's flying trapeze school, which runs circus activities.

Egypt's Somabay is recognised as one of the top three places in the world for kite surfing and among the top 10 in the world for scuba diving, so there's plenty for active clients to enjoy. The Red Sea resort is also home to another Gary Player-designed championship golf course, which has recently been refurbished. 

Cyplon offers seven nights' full-board on an Emilio Nile cruise, plus two nights' B&B at the Mövenpick Cairo Pyramids, and five nights' all-inclusive at the Baron Palace, from £1,800 including flights and excursions, departing January 16, 2017. cyplon.co.uk

Explore's 10-day Highlights of Morocco trip starts from £790, including flights, six nights' hotel, one night in a kasbah and two nights' auberge accommodation on a B&B basis, with departures in November and December 2016 and March 2017. explore.co.uk