

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.

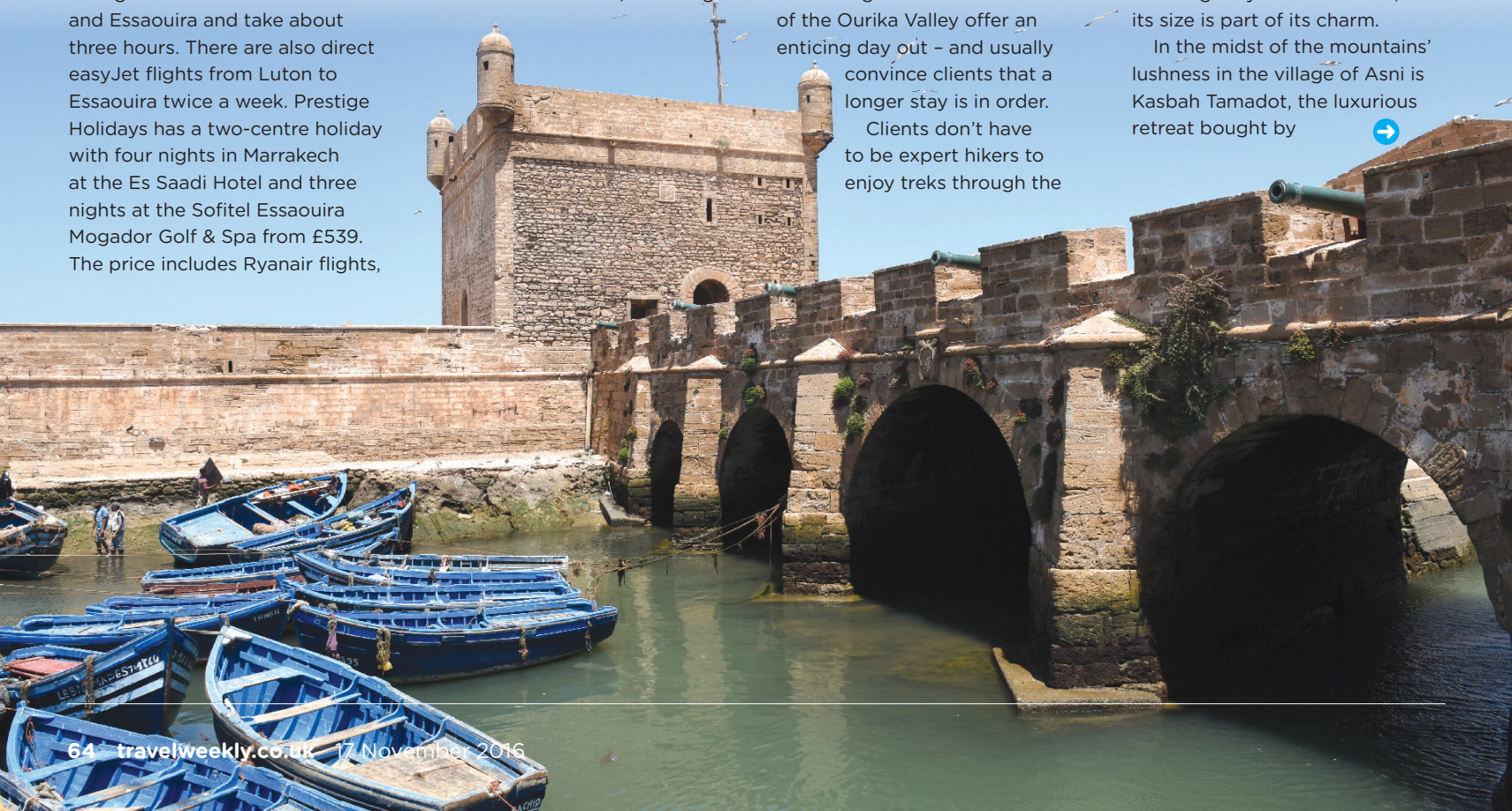
▶ ATLAS MOUNTAINS

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



→ Sir Richard Branson after his parents spotted it from a hot-air balloon. There are only 28 rooms, each decorated in sumptuous traditional Moroccan style. The views from the outdoor restaurants and pool are spellbinding. Classic Collection Holidays offers a two-centre trip that includes three nights at Kasbah Tamadot and three nights at the equally plush La Maison Arabe in Marrakech's medina. Prices start at £1,034 and include breakfast, flights and private transfers for a January 26 departure.



Most of the pleasure is just in exploring the lanes and souks, stopping for a glass of sweet mint tea

RIGHT: La Maison Arabe, Marrakech

BELOW: Chefchaouen



► CHEFCHAOUEN

Deep in the Rif Mountains in northern Morocco is one of the country's most exquisite towns. Chefchaouen is an enchanting blend of Moroccan and Andalusian architecture, with vivid blue-tinted houses in the shadow of the two peaks that give the town its name. The heart of the medina is Place Outa el-Hammam and the cafes that cluster around the terracotta-coloured kasbah, home to an ethnographic museum and small gallery. Next to the

kasbah is the Grande Mosquée, which dates from the 15th century and has an unusual octagonal shape. For a taste of Spain, head to the western side of town to the Ciudad Nueva (new town) where the main square, Plaza Mohammed V, was designed by Joan Miró.

As with Essaouira, life here is unhurried and relaxed, where holidaymakers browse the souks in search of hand-painted ceramics and Berber woollen blankets. Most of the pleasure

is just in exploring the brightly coloured lanes and the souks, stopping from time to time for a glass of sweet mint tea. The town is less than an hour's drive from the Unesco-listed Talassemtane National Park, a favourite area for hikers of all levels who take advantage of easily arranged day trips with local guides.

Travellers coming from Marrakech can take the overnight train to Tangier before getting a bus to Chefchaouen. The train is a safe, efficient and comfortable

service with a couchette car attached. Intrepid Travel includes Chefchaouen in its nine-day North Morocco Adventure that starts in Casablanca and goes on to Rabat and Fes before taking in Chefchaouen and Tangier. It ends with an overnight train to Marrakech for the final two days. The starting price of £530 includes B&B accommodation, two meals, train travel, private transfers and guided tours. Flights to Morocco are extra, and departures start in January. **TW**

Getting to Marrakech

Marrakech is served well by British airlines. EasyJet flies daily from Gatwick and twice-weekly from Manchester and Bristol. Ryanair has twice-weekly flights from Stansted, Luton and Liverpool. British Airways offers daily direct flights from Gatwick, and the choice from regional airports widens if clients are willing to change planes in one of the London airports or Madrid. This is useful for clients flying from Aberdeen, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow or Manchester. Royal Air Maroc flies daily from Gatwick but stops en route in Casablanca.