

A Seaside Detour in Morocco

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COMING into Essaouira, after a straight, flat, dusty two-hour drive from Marrakesh, we were struck by the sudden change in the color scheme. One of a string of cities that punctuate the Atlantic coast of Morocco from Rabat to Agadir, Essaouira gleams refreshingly white and brilliant blue, with only occasional accents of the sandy pink terra cotta that dominate the inland cities.

The air, buffed by a light sea breeze, is clean and gentle. So is the city itself, making it one of Morocco's most enjoyable stops for the visitor who likes to stroll, to shop and to sample good food. It is worth an easy day or two's detour from Marrakesh or a stopover on the route along the coast toward Agadir.

The city is situated on a rocky promontory guarded on the seaside by heavy crenelated and turreted stone walls. (Essaouira is a Moroccan word for fortress surrounded by ramparts.) First settled by Phoenician and Carthaginian traders around the seventh century B.C., it became a source, in Roman times, of purple dye and salt.

It was long known as Mogador, the name given it by the Portuguese in the 16th century, reverting to its Arab name, Essaouira, in 1956, when Morocco became independent.

Today the visitor arrives by land, not by sea, coming to the first of three distinct quarters. The whitewashed new town with its shops, apartment blocks, government offices and a few modern hotels spreads into the landscape and along the beach outside the walls. Within the enclosures is the Old City, with its medina and small Jewish quarter called the mellah. Beyond the massive Marine Gate erected by Sultan Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah in 1769 lies the fortified port.

Our first stop was the comfortably appointed Hotel des Iles in a three-story white building on the broad boulevard Mohammed V facing the beach just outside the Old City. My husband and I checked in, entrusted our rental car to the attendant and headed on foot for the port, about a quarter of a mile.

Lunch in the port of Essaouira has the irresistible sizzle that transforms street food into a gastronomic experience. Rows of big wooden tables surrounded by benches are interspersed with stands where fishmongers display their freshly caught wares and cook them to order over open charcoal fires. Fresh sardines, Essaouira's cash crop, are the highlight.

But buying lunch, like buying almost anything in Morocco, calls for some spirited negotiating. We checked out several of the stands as their proprietors beckoned with calls of "best price," some going as far as dusting off a section of bench. Our choice was determined as much by which table had seats in the shade as by which fishermen offered fresh squid in addition to sardines, several other kinds of fish and shrimp.

First came a mound of grilled shrimp, then a pile of richly charred sardines were dumped on our plates. These were followed by tender, slightly smoky-tasting squid and a whole grilled pageot, an Atlantic fish similar to our porgy, which we shared.

ACCOMPANYING this feast, which set us back about \$9.50 (calculated at a rate of 9 dirhams to \$1) were hunks of thick, round Arab bread and a big plate of salad, the slices of ripe scarlet tomatoes with onions, parsley and succulent olives splashed with vinegar and oil. Beer would have been a nice accompaniment, but only bottled water, soft drinks and the inevitable mint tea were sold. Communal water jugs with spigots were available for the hand washing necessary after doing justice to every morsel.

An afternoon of walking was essential afterward. The broad, flat concrete dock area covered with tables and grills at lunch is surrounded by fishermen setting and baiting their hooks on their lines, tying bright yellow and orange flags to buoys and repairing nets and boats. The boats go out to sea in the evening and return in the morning, when the entire area turns into a raucous fish market.

There are stairways leading up to the broad fortified walls around the port. To visit the skala, the 17th-century section armed with cannon and turrets, requires paying an admission price of \$2.75 a person to the guard just inside the gate. He accompanied us on our visit to the gun batteries, which figured prominently in Orson Welles's 1952 film, "Othello," and pointed out the bronze Spanish cannon marked with the initials of Charles V.

If the skala's heavy stone walls and turrets overlooking the sea appear European, it is because they were designed in the style of the great French military architect Vauban. On ground level the thick walls accommodate a succession of woodworking studios and shops where craftsmen fashion thuya wood, a type of scrub oak that grows along the coast, into everything from napkin rings and bracelets to desks and armoires. Shoppers can find chess sets, jewelry boxes with secret compartments, picture frames and mirrors. Prices generally start at \$2 and can go into the hundreds.

Essaouira is the source of most of the woodwork sold in the souks throughout the country. The wood, which often has a lively burl, is polished to glassy smoothness and frequently worked intricately with marquetry and mother of pearl.

Two other crafts of Essaouira are knitting and weaving white and natural-colored wools and cottons. Some shops display bulky fisherman's knit sweaters in off-white to charcoal brown and gray as well as shawls knitted or woven in brighter tones. These cost from about \$5 to \$50.

Unlike other cities in Morocco, where the caftans worn by the women are often brightly colored and lavishly decorated, in Essaouira the Muslim women in native dress are enveloped in white from head to foot. The fabrics have a nubby, homespun weave. On several squares inside the medina are clusters of tailoring and dressmaking shops that specialize in these caftans or in simply, sometimes erratically cut dresses, jackets, skirts, tank tops and pants in similar fabrics.

Other shops sell silver Berber jewelry, glazed pottery from nearby Safi and the inevitable carpets. The whitewashed medina, where the doors of many of the buildings and shops are painted azure blue, was laid out in a simple grid of streets by the French in the 18th century, making it uncommonly easy to explore without a guide. Shopkeepers are genial even in spirited bargaining sessions.

In the evening we returned to the port area to Chez Sam, a fish restaurant highly touted by guidebooks as well as people we had met elsewhere in Morocco, and it was well deserving of the recommendations. From a long list of seafood specialties we selected fried calamari, fresh sardines baked with a spicy herb and garlic stuffing, sauteed red mullet and a brochette of monkfish. They were accompanied by a good bottle of Moroccan rose and bottled water and followed by caramel custard, Moroccan cookies and mint tea, all for about \$25 for the two of us.

The place has a homey atmosphere, with red checked tablecloths and accommodating service. Our table at the window overlooked the water so we could see the running lights of fishing vessels as the boats put out to sea.

We felt perfectly at ease strolling back to our hotel in the soft moonlight of the night, through the lantern-illuminated bustle of the port.

Having thoroughly explored the medina and its shops during our first afternoon and evening in Essaouira, we spent part of the following morning arranging for an excursion to the pair of

islands, called the Mogador Islands, that lie about a mile out in the bay and are now a protected sanctuary for the Eleanora falcon that migrates from England.

Permits to visit can be obtained from the governor's office in the new city, but it takes patience. Our inquiries at the hotel desk about making the arrangements resulted in the manager's sending someone with our passports to the governor's office to secure the permits and to help us find a boatman to take us. We wound up waiting nearly two hours in the hotel lobby instead of in the governor's office and also gave a tip.

THE boat trip and excursion on shore cost \$16.50. The small outboard craft took us first around the island, which is heavily inhabited by cormorants and gulls as well as the small, swooping falcons. Then we docked and the boatman met a security guard who took us on a short, interesting hike over the island to see the vestiges of a mosque and a prison. We returned to the dock in time for lunch.

This time we only wanted the sardines and ordered a dozen of them with bread and salad for 10 dirhams. The fishmonger gave us a "Moroccan price" on the sardines after we indicated that we knew the creatures he was calling langoustines were really cigales de mer, flat, prehistoric-looking mantis shrimp that yield bits of sweet meat only to the most determined pickers. He threw in some of those, too.

Thus fortified, we returned to our hotel, checked out and headed back to Marrakesh. Our visit to Essaouira had been spur of the moment; but we knew that on any future trip to Morocco we would make the seductive city a scheduled stop. A VISITOR'S GUIDE TO ESSAOUIRA Getting There

Essaouira is about 100 miles from Marrakesh along a fairly straight, flat highway. It is also about 100 hilly miles up the coast from Agadir. Car rentals can be booked from either city and there is also bus service from both cities. Visitors can also arrange for a car and driver, but having a driver or driver-guide is not really necessary. Where to Stay

The best hotel is the Hotel des Iles, Boulevard Mohammed V. It has rooms and suites with comfortable modern decorations, a pool, coffee shop and restaurant; telephone 472-2329. Rooms are \$60 to \$75 including breakfast.

Villa Maroc, 18 Rue Abdellah Ben Yasine, inside the Old City, is in an old, converted house that boasts ample charms with rooms around a small open court furnished Moroccan-style with

handicrafts; 447-3147. Not all rooms have baths and there are also no telephones in the rooms. Rooms are \$45 to \$75 including breakfast. There is a restaurant that serves Moroccan food.

Where to Eat

The festive open-air lunchtime scene at the port is a must for freshly grilled sardines, shrimp, squid, crabs, mussels, mackerel, monkfish, red mullet and other kinds of fish and shellfish. They are accompanied by excellent tomato and onion salads, Arab bread and olives.

With a soft drink or bottled water, the price for a massive amount of seafood should total no more than \$5 a person.

Chez Sam, Restaurant du Port, at the end of the port, is open for lunch and dinner every day; 047-3513. There is an extensive menu of well-seasoned, grilled, fried and sauteed seafood as well as spicy seafood tagines. Except for lobsters, main dishes are mostly around \$5. Credit cards are accepted.