

Winding Down On Essaouira's Shore

By TRACIE ROZHON

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IT was deep twilight as we drove, exhausted, across the summit of the coastal ridge and made a switchback as the last light was fading over the western horizon of the Atlantic. In the distance, the lights were just coming on in the walled city of Essaouira, but it was still bright enough to make out the silhouettes of the ruined buildings on the prison island of Mogador in the harbor; indigo phantoms on a sapphire sea.

We had driven just over 100 miles due west of Marrakesh, fleeing the thousands of short-shorted tourists and snake charmers and caftan salesmen, looking for sunshine and a salt-swept dose of history. The guidebooks had told us about this sardine-fishing, blue- and white-painted village; about eating fresh-caught fish that costs next to nothing, grilled while-you-wait along the docks; about Jack's postcard kiosk in the square, where lonesome American tourists send faxes home for \$6 a page.

When we arrived, my friend and I were seeking the Cap Sim, a hotel -- we were to learn to use the word loosely -- recommended by the concierge at the Sherazade, a delightful pension down several alleys near the grand square in Marrakesh.

In Essaouira at last, we paid an attendant what he asked -- \$1.50 a day -- to watch our car for the three days we wanted to stay. ("Watching the car" is a major occupation for much of this country's young and not so young, and, yes, there is an implied threat that something bad could happen to your car if you don't pay.) We then hired another young man, Said, to lead us down a labyrinth of fast-darkening passages to the Cap Sim, where we asked the price: \$15 a night, at 9 dirham to the dollar -- the few rooms with baths for \$24 were occupied.

Our room was a cubicle with a double bed and a plywood box with a curtain for a closet, and one shuttered "window" overlooking the interior court. It was just a step up from a youth hostel, but it would be for only one night. The next morning, we agreed, we would be checking into the romantic-sounding Villa Maroc, which we'd read about in the guidebooks. We'd tried to call from Fez but, for some reason, never got through.

So, treating the whole thing as yet another adventure (after all, could this be as bad as my losing the rental car keys in the Roman ruins of Volubilis?), we headed for one of the seafood restaurants toward the end of the pier, where we chose some red fish listlessly swimming around

in a big tank of muddy water. As we ambled home in the pitch dark, we could make out groups of men on the quay, busily smoking and mending their nets, as the surf thrashed around the breakwater.

The morning dawned bright. There was no hot water at the Cap Sim, but we didn't care. We headed for the Place Moulay el Hassan, Essaouira's main square, gleefully instructing the concierge in high school French to get our bill ready.

After quick and cheap cafes au lait in the square, we dashed to the Villa Maroc, just around the corner, to book our room. The white-washed facade with bright blue trim was subtle, there was just a small sign, but inside we felt as if we'd stumbled into a boutique hotel off the Faubourg St.-Honore. There was a small lobby with a burnished center table, topped by a silver vase overflowing with yellow and red roses. We asked to be shown around.

A porter led us to a wonderful room on the second floor, decked out with colorful bed hangings and rugs. On the next floor, we glanced up and spotted the Chambre de la Tour, where a cleaning woman was shaking out starchy white sheets. It was not so much a room as a penthouse sky box: the three arched windows overlooked the bay and the battlements. The clerk said that the room, at the top of its own set of steep plaster stairs, was not for everyone: there is no private bath and the shower is on the floor below, private but in the open air, behind a skimpy partition. And the room itself, although possessing the best view in the city, was not much bigger than the double bed it contained. But we loved it, and its price: \$60. The more luxurious second floor accommodations were \$67.

But the price didn't matter. We couldn't have either of them. If the management had only known such distinguished visitors had desired to stay at their humble hostelry . . . , the clerk droned. Translation: no room.

We were crushed. Where else then? We girded ourselves for another night at the Cap Sim. The young woman at the desk laughed. We were perfectly welcome to stay another night, she said in French. We could even have the same room.

We took to the parapets. Built in the late 18th century by Sultan Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdullah (and designed by a French engineer he had captured), the town ramparts are in remarkable condition, with superb bronze cannons, some dark green with burnished patina and Portuguese crests; booty from long-ago wars. These days, Essaouira is a friendly place, called the "blue and

white town" by Moroccans for its white-washed buildings trimmed and shuttered in the brilliant azure blue of its skies.

The town has always been a place for artists and musicians, and down the side streets off the main square are several small art galleries with paintings that try, mostly in vain, to capture the romantic vision at the end of the town's great scimitar of a beach. Instead of seeking the imitations, we decided to explore the beach front itself. We threw on some bathing suits, donned our newly bought djellabas and set off for the eroded ruins of the Palace Dar Soltane, made famous in the 1960's when Jimi Hendrix wrote a song about it, "Castles Made of Sand."

We passed a lighthouse with Moroccan touches; it looked almost like a mosque. We were soon alone, and getting closer to the ruins. But others were there before us: one couple was kissing passionately in the middle of the ruins and a passel of youths smoked and stage-whispered behind. We nestled down in front, and tried to ignore everything but the waves breaking hundreds of feet farther out. My friend decided to brave the surf and, just as he started his hike to the water, a camel driver, trailed by a mother camel and its baby, passed by on his way home after a hard day of carrying vacationing Moroccans. (In Essaouira in March, there are very few foreign tourists, in contrast to Agadir 100 miles to the south.) He tossed me a wan, vaguely questioning look, then smiled with relief when I shook my head no. Next, one of the guys from around the back of the castle materialized out of nowhere (it's hard to hear footsteps in the sand), and asked if I could spare a cigarette. I said I didn't smoke. I thought he was going to ask me for money, but he surprised me. He asked if I had ever been to Brooklyn.

The walk back seemed longer than the way out. One elderly man was taking a dip; he was the only person actually swimming. The rest ignored the water: teenaged boys played sand soccer and little Moroccan girls, all dressed up in party frocks, walked demurely with their mothers, well away from the laughing, shouting athletes.

BACK at the Cap Sim, we noticed that there was a basket full of cards for the Cafe Taros, which turned out to be one of the best restaurants we visited in Morocco and one we never would have found on our own. There was a rooftop patio, and a skylighted drawing room with tiled tables and carpet-covered banquettes, lined on three sides with books. We initially asked for drinks and appetizers, but after a smorgasbord of Moroccan crudites -- and a glass of excellent port for \$2 -- we decided to see what the Taros could do with the omnipresent chicken and lemon tagine. Sure enough, it was not the usual dry chicken breast with a dollop of lemon and onion sauce; the chicken had obviously been marinated in the lemon mixture, and the moist dish was redolent of

the country's best spices -- for \$7. Our fellow diners were also a treat: to our left was an elegant Vietnamese woman, surrounded by a party of French men, all trying to outdo each other for her attention. To our left, two rather prim-looking women both wearing sturdy brogues were reading and not talking, oblivious to the gaiety a few tables away.

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We also noticed the shops on the street below the Taros; the next day we came back to browse through the jewelry emporiums, which sold some silver pieces with multicolored beads; a type we hadn't seen before. But the prices were exorbitant -- about \$125 for an elaborate necklace -- and we were bargained out.

Essaouira has the usual array of stalls selling carpets and tinware, but the town is the point of origin for most of the veneered woodenware in the country. It's fun to visit the antique woodcarving souk along the Rue Sqala, where small shops are built into the ramparts and feature items made of thuya wood, a type of scrub oak that grows in the nearby Atlas Mountains. Here, even the marked prices are about a third of those in Rabat: small boxes, trays, frames, obelisks, inlaid with ebony and lemon wood. (Small boxes, for instance, were about \$2 here, compared with \$8 in Rabat -- where we had, alas, bought about a dozen for gifts.) Making the boxes has been a principal handicraft for generations.

Just before we drove off for Casablanca, and the airport, we strolled down to see the boat builders one last time. In a very small place by the breakwater at least 20 trawlers were being

refitted, scraped and painted a raucous variety of colors: oranges, blues and greens. We walked under the precariously looming teak hulls; one pair of tourists was eating a box lunch, perched on a pile of freshly cut lumber. Toward the water's edge, several new boats were being built from the keel up. There was even a small sawmill on the pier. In the midst of all this activity, sardine fishermen were docking, and dragging out their nets; around noon, the vendors started hawking their fresh-cooked fish. (About \$2 apiece if you order from the menu; we got conned by the waiter into trying the red snapper. We didn't ask the price and it turned out to be closer to \$10.)

At the end of our three days, we didn't need to discuss it: we liked Essaouira better than any place else we visited during our 10-day trip to Morocco. The shopping wasn't as good as it was in Marrakesh -- and maybe if we had gone to Essaouira first, we would have felt we were missing something (the snake charmers and caftan salesmen, maybe, but certainly not the tourists in short shorts). But we didn't, and Essaouira was just the antidote: a fresh, vibrant place without the beggars and would-be tour guides who haunted us in Marrakesh.

When we go back, we want to hire a boatman to row us to the Mogador Islands. We want to hire donkeys and trek in the High Atlases, a couple of hours to the east.

And afterward, at least a week in the Chambre de la Tour.

At leisure by the water

The most delightful things in Essaouira are free, or almost free. Climb into a recess in the fortifications and gaze across the bay. Walk down to the beach and watch boat builders while snacking on fresh grilled fish.

Hotels and Other Haunts

Hotel Cap Sim, 11, rue Ibn Rochd, (212-44) 78 58 34 phone and fax, charges \$14 for a double with shared bath, \$23.50 for a double with private bath and breakfast, at the current rate of 11 dirham to the dollar.

Villa Maroc, 10, rue Abdellah Ben Yassine, (212-44) 47 61 47, fax (212-44) 47 58 06, www.villa-maroc.com, has 21 rooms and is the place to stay; for \$61 you get a large double room with bath -- and great atmosphere. For \$54.50, stay in the heavenly Chambre de la Tour, without a bath but with the best view in town.

Cafe Taros, 2, rue Sqala (212-44) 47 64 07, fax (212-44) 47 64 08, has a high-ceilinged, tiled drawing room lined with books and excellent food. A meal with wine is about \$11.

Jack's Kiosk, 1, place Prince Moulay El Hassam, (212-44) 475-538, fax (212-44) 47 69 01, has postcards and used books. TRACIE ROZHON