

## Morocco's Secret Sands



Martin Morrell

***On the windy coast southwest of Casablanca lies the beach town of Essaouira, onetime bohemian enclave and now the heart of modern Morocco's art and music scenes. Richard Alleman, a regular visitor since the 1970's, returns to the new cultural capital.***

From October 2004

By Richard Alleman

For the first hour out of Marrakesh, driving through central Morocco, the visuals are unremarkable: a monotony of cactus-studded plains broken occasionally by a scruffy olive grove or a dusty roadside village. If there is a highlight on this first leg of the journey to the Atlantic coastal town of Essaouira, it is the stop at Sidi-Moktar, where the highway from Agadir in the south joins the route to Marrakesh. Here a vast plaza is edged with cafés and filled with trucks, buses, and taxis. The specialty is *kefta*—grilled, cumin-spiced meatballs, made from beef that can be selected from the adjacent butcher stalls and ground before your eyes as strolling carpet salesmen and shoeshine kids vie for your attention.

Beyond Sidi-Moktar, low table mountains start to appear on the horizon. Once you've crossed these, everything is different: green, hilly, and amazingly tidy. Shepherds—very young boys, very old men—dressed in hooded djellabas tend flocks of sheep and goats. Camels and donkeys graze side by side outside adobe villages. Neat stone fences surround elegant olive groves. Cows lie in fields of purple wildflowers. Soon the sea comes into view, then a dazzling village of white cubic buildings with blue doors and windows, more Mykonos than Morocco. At a roadside overlook, camel drivers offer photo ops, but the best view is of the city itself, rising alongside an enormous crescent-shaped beach and a sparkling bay, dotted with the bright sails of windsurfers and the parachutes of kite boarders.

With its strong breezes, Essaouira—which bills itself as Wind City, Africa—is one of the world's top windsurfing and kite boarding spots. This North African beach town has a lot going for it besides water

sports, however. In recent years, the city has become a cultural center, a place where the calendar is studded with world-class music and arts events and where galleries show internationally known local artists. Meanwhile, the real estate market is booming, as savvy Moroccans—and Europeans who've tired of the scene in Marrakesh—buy and redo medina mansions, betting that Essaouira will be the next hot place in North Africa. All this is a far cry from my first visits here in the 1970's, when the town was basically just a day trip from Marrakesh, a good place to buy inlaid wooden boxes or woven baskets in a sweet small souk and dine on grilled sardines alfresco by a crumbling seawall.

Youth is a large part of the town's new spirit. "Essaouira is now fashionable among young Moroccans and the youth of the world," says antiques-shop owner and oral historian Miloud Ben Ahmed, a septuagenarian who was an extra in Orson Welles's *Othello* in the early 1950's. "This has always been a city of tolerance," he says. "It still is, and I think that attracts young people."

People like Amal and Maouna, cousins from Casablanca who run the hip Pizzeria Les Trois Portes, which is built within the ramparts of the medina. "At first we had some problems," Maouna says of their enterprise, a decidedly non-traditional one for two Muslim women, even in tolerant Essaouira. "People said some bad things—they think only men can take responsibility. But now they are adjusting."

These days, the main problems the cousins have are the normal ones associated with running a business. They'd like to build a roof terrace, for example, to compete with a rival café on the main square, but they have been refused a permit by the city because of their historic location. They were also disappointed when, in the spring of 2003, the Brad Pitt sword-and-sandals epic *Troy*, which was to have been shot in the area, was transferred to Malta and Mexico because of the Iraq war and a deadly terrorist attack in Casablanca. The incident affected film production and tourism, and shocked this moderate Muslim nation and longtime U.S. ally, whose popular young monarch, King Mohamed VI, has been aggressive in combating Morocco's Islamist radicals and has made a point of promoting tolerance and women's rights.

Some of the roots of Morocco's liberalism can be traced to the founding of Essaouira. Built in the 1760's by a visionary sultan, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdallah, the city was one of the world's first free ports. Ben Abdallah commissioned a French architect for the design, using the European grid system for its streets rather than the haphazard layout of traditional Moroccan medinas. The sultan also invited the country's most prominent businessmen and tradespeople to relocate to Essaouira; many of them were Moroccan Jews, who at one point made up close to 50 percent of the city's population. Finally, Ben Abdallah invited European governments to set up consulates in what was to become a thriving port for the next 150 years. Eager for contact with the world, the sultan was the first head of state to officially recognize a newly formed country some 3,000 miles across the Atlantic: the United States of America.

"It's a place where time stops," Bellinkx says. "You can drive twenty miles out, but that's as far as you can go. Afterward you're unhappy. Essaouira is like a mirage; you dive in and get caught up in the illusion, and you can't get out anymore."

Danish art dealer Frederic Damgaard was first seduced by Essaouira when he visited it as an art student in 1969. He returned frequently, and eventually bought a house by the sea. He also started collecting works by locals, impressed by their visual boldness and strong connection with the place and its age-old traditions, which are Berber and, often, animist. Damgaard not only collected the art, he encouraged the artists, eventually exhibiting them in the gallery he set up in 1988 on the ground floor of a stone mansion just inside the city walls. Today, Galerie Damgaard is one of the town's cultural landmarks, known in European art circles as the home of the Essaouira school of painting.

"But it's wrong to call it a 'school,'" Damgaard says. "Because most of these people are from the countryside and are entirely self-taught. They have never been to any school—much less an art school."

In Damgaard's spacious gallery, the power and unbridled energy of everything on view is palpable. There are fabulous monsters depicted in the dot paintings of the brothers Hamou and Youssef Aït Tazarin; the folkloric signs and symbols exploding on the canvases of Fatima Ettalbi, who got her start decorating women's hands with henna; the whimsical desks and chests of Saïd Ouarzuz, with their outrageous polychrome finishes and their surprise drawers and openings.

Damgaard is not the only game in town. A block away, down a narrow cul-de-sac, a bearded Belgian, Michel de Saint-Maux, oversees Espace Othello, which features another stable of young Moroccans, including the acclaimed Mohamed Zouzaf, who does haunting works on animal skins. And up along the passageway known as La Skala, local artist Ahmed Harrouz runs the city's most unusual gallery, Atelier Le Bastion-Ouest, a skinny multi-level affair housed within a turret of the ancient ramparts.

Essaouira is also fast becoming one of Morocco's most important centers for music. Long a home to troupes of mystical Gnaoua musicians—descendants of former African slaves known for their throbbing percussive sounds and hypnotic chanting and dancing—Essaouira inaugurated its Gnaoua & World Music Festival in 1998. "People here have realized that the Gnaoua are something to be proud of," says festival director Neila Tazi. The festival, held annually in late June, now attracts some 300,000 fans—from visiting Moroccans, many of whom camp out on the beach, to international music heavyweights such as Paul Simon.

Essaouira's newest annual event is the Festival of the Atlantic Andalusias, which debuted last October. Although its main emphasis is on music—Sephardic love songs, Arabic violin suites, Gypsy dances, flamenco rock, even Mexican folk music—the event features seminars and art exhibitions demonstrating the Andalusian contribution to the cultures of Spain, North Africa, and Latin America.

"Essaouira is the ideal city for this event," says Oumama Aouad Lahrech, a professor of Andalusian studies at the university in Rabat, "because it was founded to be shared by people of many cultures and religions—Jews, Muslims, Christians, Arabs, and Berbers."

While many in Essaouira are rediscovering their past, 21-year-old kite-surfing champion Soufiane Hamaini embodies the future. A surfer since he was in grade school, the blond, dreadlocked Hamaini first encountered kite surfing in 1999, when the young sport's second international championship was held in Essaouira.

"It's incredible," Hamaini says. "You don't just jump—you fly. Sometimes I'm in the air for seven seconds. You feel like a bird. Big freedom. Really big freedom." Last year, Hamaini trained in the kite-surfing center of Tarifa, Spain, and traveled abroad to international competitions. Recently, he's been doing publicity and photo shoots for his new sponsors—a U.S. kite company, a Spanish board maker, and a major Moroccan cell-phone operation. Despite all the excitement, Hamaini remains a devoted Essaouiran. "I've traveled all over Morocco and now Spain and Brazil," he says. "And there's nowhere like Essaouira. It's a theater. I sit in a café and have a coffee and I look around at everyone—and I have another coffee and I don't want to leave. We're all a big family here."

In the end, perhaps the essence of Essaouira's character is the sense of peace and harmony the city projects. "Essaouira is a light shining in the darkness," says André Azoulay of his hometown. "For the uncertainty of the times in which we are unfortunately living, Essaouira is a good answer."

*Richard Alleman is a frequent contributor to Travel + Leisure.*

Essaouira is a two-hour drive from Marrakesh (a taxi costs \$70, one way) and five hours from Casablanca. As of press time, the U.S. State Department had no travel warnings specific to Morocco in effect, but it has cautioned travelers to North Africa about the threat of terrorism in the region.

## **WHERE TO STAY**

### **Riad Gyvo**

DOUBLES FROM \$101

**3 RUE MOHAMED BEN MESSAOUD; 212-44/475-102; [www.riadgyvo.com](http://www.riadgyvo.com)**

### **Dar Loulema**

Charming *riad* (four doubles, three junior suites) on the edge of the seawall; wonderful views.

DOUBLES FROM \$92

**2 RUE SOUSS; 212-44/475-346; [www.darloulema.com](http://www.darloulema.com)**

### **Villa Maroc**

First and best known of Essaouira's riad hotels; 20 rooms and suites within four restored 18th-century medina mansions.

DOUBLES FROM \$96

**10 RUE ABDELLAH BEN YASSINE; 212-44/476-147**

### **Heure Bleue Palais**

Just-opened, 35-room luxury hotel within a former customs house in the Old Town.

DOUBLES FROM \$213

**2 RUE BEN BATOUTA; 212-44/783-434**

### **Sofitel Thalassa Mogador**

Big, modern, and attractive 117-room hotel across from the beach.

DOUBLES FROM \$246

**BLVD. MOHAMED V; 212-44/479-000; [www.sofitel.com](http://www.sofitel.com)**

### **Dar Mimosas**

Glorious compound of elegant villas amid beautiful gardens, a few miles south of Essaouira.

SUITES FROM \$397

**ROUTE D'AGADIR; 212-44/475-934; [www.darmimosas.com](http://www.darmimosas.com)**

### **WHERE TO EAT**

Pizzeria Les Trois Portes

DINNER FOR TWO \$22

**34 RUE LATTARINE; 212-66/784-171**

### **Taros**

Hip French-Moroccan restaurant on the main town square. The rooftop terrace is a prime dining spot on sunny days.

DINNER FOR TWO \$40

**2 RUE SKALA; 212-44/476-407**

### **Chalet de la Plage**

Legendary restaurant with a choice beachside location; excellent grilled fish.

DINNER FOR TWO \$22

**BLVD. MOHAMED V; 212-44/475-972**

### **GALLERIES**

#### **Galerie Frederic Damgaard**

AVE. OQBA BEN NAFIAA; 212-44/784-446

#### **Espace Othello**

**9 RUE MOHAMED LAIIACHI; 212-44/475-095**

#### **Atelier Le Bastion-Ouest**

**RUE SKALA; 212-64/024-300**

### **WIND- AND KITE-SURFING**

#### **Magic Fun Afrika**

**BLVD. MOHAMED V; 212-44/473-856**

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