

## Essaouira: A Moroccan antidote to winter's gloom

With fine food and lots of bargains, the charming Moroccan port of Essaouira is ideal for a warm getaway, says Louise Roddon.

By Louise Roddon  
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### WHY GO?

Because the old fortified coastal town of Essaouira offers an ozone-punchy, authentic alternative to the mayhem of Marrakech. This tiny, friendly place, where the smoky tang of grilling fish competes with the thrashing boom of Atlantic rollers, enjoys a laid-back atmosphere redolent of its celebrated hippy past.

Behind crenellated ramparts lies a fairy-tale medina, where turreted Arab architecture and authentic souks mix with blue-shuttered and whitewashed houses. There are few "sights" beyond the souk, the port and the beach. The latter is where windsurfers skim the waves year round and footballers enjoy the extensive sands. Essentially, Essaouira is tailor-made for relaxing, eating, shopping and soaking up the atmosphere of the town's lovely riad guesthouses.



Essaouira is tailor-made for relaxing, eating and soaking up the atmosphere

Go now for a crowd-free, pre-Christmas break. And with the chance to snap up original and affordable gifts, it's the perfect antidote to credit-crunch gloom.

### TRAVEL BY...

Air with Atlas Blue (020 7307 5800, [www.royalairmaroc.com](http://www.royalairmaroc.com)), which flies four times a week from Gatwick to Marrakech from £240 return; with easyJet (0905 821 0905, [www.easyJet.com](http://www.easyJet.com)) from Gatwick, from £95.98 return. Thomson Airways (0871 231 4787, [www.thomson.co.uk](http://www.thomson.co.uk)) flies Mondays and Fridays from Gatwick and Manchester, from £119 return. Essaouira is 110 miles from Marrakech and takes about two and half hours by "Grand Taxi" (around £46 one way). Pre-booking is advisable – try Mohamed Ouballa (00212 661 28896; [essaouira.taxi@gmail.com](mailto:essaouira.taxi@gmail.com)). Audley Travel (01993 838420, [www.audleytravel.com](http://www.audleytravel.com)) arrange tailor-made breaks mixing Essaouira with Marrakech from £980pp for a week, including transfers, b&b accommodation and flights.

### STAY AT...

L'Heure Bleue Palais (2 rue Ibn Batouta, 00212 247 83434, [www.heure-bleue.com](http://www.heure-bleue.com)). Close to one of the city gates, this 35-bedroom Relais et Châteaux establishment is considered Essaouira's finest address. A theatrically grand riad, it has

sumptuously furnished rooms and suites. On sunny days, the extensive roof terrace, with its sea views, bar, heated pool and chic recliners, offers a calm alternative to the souks. There is also a traditional hammam, restaurants, and cosy lounge bar; b&b doubles from £265.

Newly opened Villa de l'O (3 rue Mohamed Ben Messaoud, 00212 244 76375, [www.villadelo.com](http://www.villadelo.com)) is well-placed for Place Moulay Hassan – Essaouira's lively, café-lined square. This friendly, incense-fragranced riad has 12 colonial-chic themed bedrooms. Breakfast in the plant-filled internal courtyard is accompanied by the hotel's love birds chirruping along to Vivaldi; b&b doubles from £94. Deep in the heart of the medina is the quirkily authentic Ryad Watier (16 rue Ceuta, 00212 244 76204, [www.ryad-watier-maroc.com](http://www.ryad-watier-maroc.com)). A former school, it was converted by artist-owner Jean-Gabriel into an intimate 10-bedroom guesthouse. Rooms are generously sized, with log fires, paintings and Moroccan artefacts. There is a small library, roof terrace, and comfortable public rooms; b&b doubles from £73.

### **SPEND THE MORNING...**

Trawling the medina. Three souk-flanked "avenues" criss-cross Essaouira's grid layout. Head north from Bab El Minzah to Souk Jdid – one of the most un-touristy sectors, where motor parts and trainers are sold alongside barouche slippers and dazzling rugs. The spice market, where stalls display colourful pyramids of pimento, cumin and harissa, is supremely photogenic, and prices are generally cheaper than elsewhere. Then take a pre-lunch stroll to the harbour, where Captain Pugwash-style ships bob alongside blue-painted fishing boats and fishermen gut the morning's catch, while watchful cats snoop for scraps.

### **LUNCH ON...**

Freshly caught langoustines, prawns and sole at one of the open-air fish shacks – an Essaouiran institution – decked out with blue-and-white awnings opposite the port. Prices are based on weight: about £5 buys a salad, bread, water and grilled sole. For a light bite, try the plushly cushioned Restaurant Laayoune (4 rue El Hajjadi, 00212 244 74643). With its low-level tables and decorative-tiled interior, this friendly establishment offers Moroccan soups, salads, and couscous; around £4. Enjoy a spot of people-watching, sardines and fish soup for around £5.50 upstairs at café-restaurant Bab Laachour (Place Moulay Hassan). The square is the hub of the annual Gnaoua music festival in June – a mix of west African trance, jazz and blues.

### **STROLL AROUND...**

The cannon-bristling battlements of the northern ramparts, where Orson Welles filmed the opening shot of Othello in 1952. Beneath, visit the town's woodworkers. Richly grained Thuya wood is turned into intricate marquetry boxes and knick-knacks. Then pop into a gallery or two; Essaouira has spawned many talented artists. Try Alliance Franco-Marocaine (9 rue Mohammed Diouri), whose exhibition of Strange Art runs until January 24; or Galerie Othello (9 rue M. Layachi).

Take coffee at the Gelateria Dolce Freddo café (Place Moulay Hassan), and snap up delicious pastries from the boys who trail the square with laden trays.

### **BUY...**

Thuya marquetry goods (around £2.50 buys a pretty inlaid box) or barouche slippers for around £5 from the souks. For spices, teas, and precious Argan oil, visit Chez Makki (Souk Laghzal 221).

### **HAVE DINNER AT...**

Atmospheric Le Chalet de la Plage (Boulevard Mohamed V, 00212 244 76419, [www.lechaletdelaplage.com](http://www.lechaletdelaplage.com)), and indulge in plump sardines, sea urchins, and other fishy delights. This characterful 1890s establishment overlooks the sea, so bag a table by the window; menus from £13.80 excluding wine. Ryad Watier guests should consider eating in; choose what you fancy from the market, then feast in convivial company around the fire on aromatic tajines and spicy salads; from £12 for three courses. Saturday night is live Gnaoua night at Dar Loubane (24 rue de Rif, 00212 244 76296), a charming riad-

restaurant specialising in tajines and couscous. Dine Moroccan-style on low-level banquettes in one of the attractive alcoves; menus from £7.30 excluding wine.

### **STAY UP LATE...**

At chilled rooftop club Taros. (Place Moulay Hassan, 00212 244 76407, [www.taroscafe.com](http://www.taroscafe.com)). Comfortable candlelit corners overlook a dance floor, and cocktails cost around £5. If you fancy a chicha pipe, head for Le Mechouar (Avenue Oqba Ben Nafia, 00212 244 75828), a stylish late-night bar with cool sounds and friendly young staff.

### **RECOVER WITH...**

A traditional hammam steam and massage. All the hotels listed feature hammams; expect to pay around £30.

### **AT ALL COSTS AVOID...**

Paying by credit card. Most establishments whack on a surcharge. There are plenty of ATMs.

