

My kind of town: Essaouira

Ian Wilson is a writer and the chairman and founder of the travel company Wexas. He has been visiting Essaouira for more than 30 years.

Why Essaouira?

A mixture of Arabic and European colonial architecture is rarely found so well blended. The town is nicely preserved and the living is good without being luxurious.

What do you miss most when you are away?

The wonderful warm, dry climate, which is especially good from October to March, the genuinely friendly locals and almost total absence of crime.

What's the first thing you do when you return?

Check into a riad - a different one each time in order to try them all - then I head for Chez Sam (Porte de peche; 476513) for an evening meal (the sardine and tuna are great) followed by a walk around the port.

Where's the best place to stay?

Accommodation (and restaurant) prices are still low compared with Marrakesh. The best places with a Moroccan atmosphere are the Riad Desdemona (12-14 rue Youssef el Faffi; 00212 44 472227) and the Riad al Madina (9 rue Attarane; 475907), both reasonably priced at around £45, based on two sharing, including breakfast. Riads are usually former homes of wealthy Moroccans turned into intimate hotels built around a courtyard and have lots of local character.

Where would you meet friends for a drink?

There are good bars around the Place Moulay Hassan, located on the edge of the port area, where you can sit outside (or inside) and watch the world go by.

Where are your favourite places for lunch?

Chalet de la Plage (1 boulevard Mohammed V; 475972), which serves excellent seafood and Moroccan dishes; four courses will set you back about £5.

And for dinner?

Chez Georges, where you eat on a terrace under the balmy night sky, or the less expensive Chez Sam on the docks, which offers a set and à la carte menu ranging from about £5 to £12. The service is very friendly, the atmosphere lively, and impromptu musical performances are not uncommon. After that, try El-Minzah (3 avenue Okba Ibn Nafia; 475308), where a three-course meal will cost around £3; or Essalam on the Place Moulay Hassan (no phone), which offers an excellent four-course meal from £2.50.

Where would you send a first-time visitor?

For a walk on the 18th-century fortified sea walls and to Essaouira Island, a short boat trip away, which has a bird sanctuary and the ruins of a 19th-century prison.

What would you tell them to avoid?

I've never been taken with coarse Moroccan rugs or brass teapots, though I love the piping hot mint tea that comes out of them.

Public transport or taxi?

It's a small town and you can easily cover all the interesting places on foot - even the mile-long beach should not be a problem. Take a bus from the station to get to Agadir or Marrakesh. If you want to go out of town, rent a car or take an inexpensive private taxi (a petit taxi in Morocco).

Handbag or moneybelt?

Safety is a minor issue but as Essaouira grows in popularity, the risk of minor crime is likely to grow, so it will pay to keep valuables locked away at your hotel, and to wear a moneybelt under your shirt. Handbags are unlikely to be snatched, but don't put them down or lose sight of them.

What should I take home with me?

One street in the medina between Darb Laalouj and Prince Moulay el Hasssan has most of the tourist shops. They all sell the same stuff, so competition is stiff. You should bargain, but remember that this is a developing country and it doesn't hurt to leave the seller a little profit, especially as prices are low anyway. Local art, sculpture and glasswork are excellent, and there are many small galleries in the medina's back streets.

And if I only have time for one shop?

Buy a pair of babouches, or Arab sandals, which are like leather slippers and very comfortable. You should be able to get a good-quality pair for about £10. Incense is inexpensive, though you will have to hunt a little to find it.