

Best beaches: Essaouira, Morocco

For Mediterranean charm and a bohemian feel, head for Morocco's Essaouira beach.

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THE BEACH

There's a special magic about Essaouira, and it isn't just the fairy-tale ramparts or the blue-shuttered, whitewashed houses, nor even the charming little fishing port, the gaggle of art galleries or the annual Gnaoua (African Sufi) music festival. Back in the 1960s, hippy travellers and local residents built an almost unique relationship that persists to this day, making Essaouira one of the friendliest and most laid-back beach resorts anywhere.



Essaouira – one of the most laid-back beach resorts anywhere

WHO GOES?

Nowadays it's the Bohemian element among Morocco's more well-heeled visitors who dominate the tourist scene, drawn by the town's beautiful riad guesthouses and increasingly fine cuisine, while windsurfers come here for perfect conditions nearly all year round.

WHAT IS THERE TO DO?

Windsurfing aside, lots: stroll down the beach, climb the ramparts, explore the back streets, check out the fishing port, watch artisans work the fragrant local thuya hardwood, visit the art galleries, shop for hippy-type clothes in the souks, or just hang out on the main square with a cup of mint tea and watch the world go by. And in June there's the Gnaoua Music Festival (www.festival-gnaoua.net).

BARS AND BITES

The fish shacks by the port are the place to eat – choose your fish from the stall and watch them grill it for you then and there. For something more refined, you can dine on excellent French and Moroccan cuisine while admiring the quirky collection of objets (not necessarily d'art) at Dar Loubane (24 Rue du Rif; 00212 44 476 296), which puts on Gnaoua music on Saturday evenings.

GETTING THERE

The best way is on the rail company's Supratours bus (www.supratours.ma) from Marrakesh, which connects with trains from Casablanca, and with the night train (the "Marrakesh express") from Tangier (check fares and schedules at www.oncf.ma). Otherwise, Essaouira is easily reached by bus from both Marrakesh and Agadir, or you could charter a Mercedes grand taxi from the airport in either city (around £40 for up to four people comfortably, or six at a squeeze).