

SUGAR AND SPICE

Learn how to cook a tasty Moroccan tagine while in the laid-back beach town of Essaouira

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Preparing a Moroccan feast

Essaouira

MOROCCO

Gorging myself on an extravagant meal while in the hippy town of Essaouira, I soak up the relaxed atmosphere and decide then and there that I want to learn to cook like a Moroccan.

COOK UP

I choose sleek yet authentic L'Atelier Madada, a cooking workshop in the lofty grounds of boutique hotel Madada Mogador, to learn the craft.

Our task is to prepare a lamb tagine, a flavoursome stew that is slow cooked in a conical-shaped dish also called a tagine, which is cleverly designed to seal in the spicy fragrances.

Instructions are provided by convivial chef Noureddine, while smiley Madame Mona, whose mother is a culinary legend in Morocco, shows us the ropes.

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Bob Marley visited Essaouira

CLAIM TO FAME

ESSAOUIRA'S CELEBRITY VISITORS

The coastal town of Essaouira has attracted a wealth of celebrities, including Bob Marley and Jimi Hendrix, over the years, thanks to its chilled-out hippy vibe, bohemian shops, sandy beaches and burgeoning arts scene.

Hendrix visited in 1969, prompting countless rumours, one being that he was moved to write *Castles Made Of Sand* after spending time at the Borj El-Berod ruins at the edge of the sea. Unfortunately, he wrote the tune in 1967, two years before he set foot in Morocco.

The town has, however, inspired film directors, providing the setting for Ridley Scott's *Kingdom Of Heaven* and Oliver Stone's *Alexander*.



Traditional tagine

TRADE SECRETS

The chefs share some trade secrets, telling us to remove the central stalk of the garlic clove to avoid bad breath.

We're also taught how to make the perfect cup of mint tea, a vital part of Moroccan culture served after every meal. The trick is to soak loose green tea in a teapot, then tip out the bitter water. We add more boiling water, a handful of mint leaves and a dollop of sugar.

HOT AND SPICY

After placing our tagines over a low flame, fragrant wafts of ginger and cinnamon fill the air, and we turn to our starter, zaalouk – a salad of mashed tomatoes, aubergines and spices, strikingly festooned with a tomato skin in the shape of a flower (Mona's creation: my tomato carving technique is abysmal). We then work on the finishing touches of our tagine: caramelised dates stuffed with almonds.

Our stomachs rumbling, we indulge in the fruits of our labour in an oriental-style dining room. We're all staggered by how delicious our tagines are, tasty fusions of exotic spices and succulent lamb, washed down with wine.

EXPLORING THE SOUKS

After stuffing ourselves stupid, we're taken on a tour of Essaouira's lively fish and spice souk (market), chock full of olive mountains, highly patterned tagine dishes, caged chickens and suspicious-looking medicines – herbal Viagra, anyone?

Much of what's on display is not for the faint-hearted: think blood-smeared decapitated rams' heads. One vendor takes delight in killing a chicken in front of us, breaking the bird's neck and deftly removing its feathers. Live turtles and hedgehogs are also up for sale, apparently for local women to use in magic potions.

We're led into a small spice shop, the shelves of which are stocked with an array of glass jars. I'm attracted to a sweet smelling perfume stick, which I'm told is gazelle musk, taken from behind the animal's ear. Unperturbed, I buy it, along with a clutch of spices to take home and impress my mates with in a traditional tagine – since I now hold the secrets to Moroccan cuisine.

» See page 14 for the Moroccan tagine recipe



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Essaouira

NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO Spring and autumn are best – summer can be very hot and winter too chilly.

GETTING THERE Fly to Marrakesh with Ryanair or EasyJet, then take a bus to Essaouira (three-hour trip) or a taxi (two hours). Or hire a car – see easycar.com/tntmagazine for a 5 per cent discount.

GETTING AROUND Essaouira is easily explored on foot, but taxis are another cheap way to get around.

VISAS South Africans need a visa to visit Morocco, while Australians and New Zealanders can stay for three months without one.

CURRENCY Moroccan dirham. 1 GBP = 12.88 MAD.

LANGUAGE French and Arabic, but English is widely spoken.

GOING OUT A pint of beer costs about 30 dirhams.

ACCOMMODATION A dorm bed at a hostel starts from 120 dirhams. A double room at a hotel is 600 dirhams.

SEE A four-hour cooking workshop at L'Atelier Mogador (lateliermadada.com) is 450 dirhams.

