# Exploring the Medina of Marrakech

AN ETERNALLY INSPIRATIONAL ATTRACTION FOR WRITERS, STORYTELLERS, PAINTERS AND FILM MAKERS

*By Mohammed Reza Amirinia*

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



**BAB DEBBAGH**
*The Eastern Gate*

**RIAD STAR**
*Josephine Baker's Refuge*

**BEN YOUSSEF MEDERSA**
*Morocco's Largest Medersa*

**JEMAA EL-FNA**
*The Square at Sunset*

THE RED CITY

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*Marrakech – a view from the rooftops*

The red city of Marrakech in Morocco is an eternally inspirational attraction for writers, storytellers, painters, photographers and film makers. The authenticity of the medina (an area of a city or town with narrow roads which is car free and can date back hundreds of years) has survived with its medieval heart largely intact despite the arrival of new modern cafés and restaurants. The refurbished and modernized riads (traditional Moroccan house or palace with a courtyard) in the heart of old medina have managed to capture the same vibe of old fifteenth century palaces by keeping their traditional architecture.

After a three and half hour flight from London, we arrived in Marrakech where it is only a ten minute drive from the airport to the high red walls surrounding the city. The drive is along a beautiful boulevard with tall palm trees and everything looks a warm shade of red.

*II*



*the narrow lanes of the medina*

We arrived just before midnight and, unfortunately, had to wait 20 minutes before our taxi arrived. It was a bit frustrating but eventually our driver collected us and we headed towards the medina. We drove around the illuminated high walls and passed many arched gates until eventually we arrived in the old city entering via Bab Debbagh in the east of medina. The taxi dropped us in a square, the closest he could get to the restricted pedestrianized zone near the riad in Kaat Bennahid District where we were to stay. The porter from our riad – called the Riad Star – helped us with our luggage along the seven minute walk to reception.

The Riad Star became famous and was an attraction for visitors because this is where the famed nightclub singer, Josephine Baker, stayed from 1941 onwards where she continued to aid the French resistance as she had in France. There are many memories of her stay and, when there is an event, they project her image on the wall in the courtyard. there are also images of her on some cushions. For that reason and for her exploits in gathering information she received the Croix de Guerre and the Rosette de la Resistance after the war.

*III*



*typical architecture of a riad*

We began our tour by exploring the alleys and narrow paths in our own neighbourhood. At the first cross section, there was a hamamm (the equivalent of a Turkish bath) for ladies. There was a mosque opposite Derb Alilich alley where Riad is located and, even though it was not prayer time, a few people were sitting in the small mosque reciting the Quran.

Further down the road it was difficult to pass by some monumental doors with stopping to gaze at them. The smile of a boy sitting by one of the open doors invited us to discover the newly opened Orientalist Museum of Marrakech. A big traditional riad had been converted into a museum, housing paintings and artefacts. The roof terrace of the house was a good location to get a panoramic view of medina.

After a tour of the museum, we continued our journey through the winding lanes and arrived in a T-junction where Rue Bin Lafnadek and Souk Ahl Fes met. We weren't in the souk yet, but on my way we noticed many little commercial properties such as grocery stores, a herbal shop and a bakery. It was not too far before the main and very busy souk appeared. The houses nestling closely with each other in the residential part of medina together with the shops in souks create a great sense of a warm community to any onlookers visiting the medina. It is an amazing journey through this maze, almost as if you were teleported back in time. As you go deeper into the medina and get lost in an urban environment unlike any other, you began to feel an extraordinary flow of energy that lifts your spirits.

*IV*



*the Orientalist Musuem*

We reached Place de La Kissariat Ben Youssef, a large square in the heart of the medina surrounded by several monumental buildings and intersections to souks. In the east side of the square, the Marrakech Museum, a museum of Moroccan art and history stands. The Dar Menebhi Palace, built in nineteenth century, a very good example of traditional Moorish architecture, houses this museum. This large courtyard with a café and a large wooden gate marks the main access to the Palace behind which you can find an atrium and fountain. It is best to allocate enough time (an odd hour isn't enough) to view all the modern and ancient Moroccan exhibits.

In the north side of Place de La Kissariat Ben Youssef, there is the eleventh century Mosque of Ibn Yusuf, the oldest ,mosque in Marrakech and around which the medina grew. Only open during prayer time instead we went to the Ben Youssef Medersa, an ancient Islamic School which is next to the mosque. This is the largest medersa (any sort of school or educational establishment) in Morocco with 130 dorm cells housing up to 900 students.

V



*the Marrakech Museum*

To the south of Mosque of Ibn Yusuf, there is the Almoravid Koubba, a small 12th century monument that was buried for a century before it was rediscovered and excavated in 1952. Hosting the oldest inscription in the Maghrebi script to be found in North Africa the building acted as a place where people could wash go about their toilet before entering the mosque.

We wandered around Place de La Kissariat Ben Youssef to get a better glimpse of the life in one of the important intersections of the medina. A man was busy laying several pieces of treated and dyed leather out to dry in the sun just outside the walls of the Mosque of Ibn Yusuf and just as his ancestors had probably done for hundreds of years. On the other side, there were fruit and vegetable carts selling their produce as tourists took pictures of the mosque and museum.

*VI*



*the busy souks which entice visitors from morning till late at night*

The square leads to souks through three connected alleys. In the west side, there were several shops along Rue Azbezt, selling traditional Moroccan clothing called Djellaba which is a long and loose costume designed with a hood and long sleeves. If you start a conversation with the storekeepers you'll find that they are very persistent in their efforts to sell you something and sometimes can be very assertive. Haggling is all part of a practiced game in the souk so be prepared to say no and walk away even if you really want to buy an item.

Our next stop in Rue Azbezt at the beginning of Lekbir souk was Herboriste la Sagesse, a herbal shop, selling Argan Oil and a variety of other traditional medicine and healthy products. The shop, which has been in business for generations, gives you a short presentation about the techniques of processing the oil and you can have a tour of products available. Argan oil has become a popular product in recent years thanks to the discovery of flowering plants growing in the semi desert of the Sous valley located in the south western part of Morocco. There are many shops in souks of Marrakesh, claiming to sell original Argan oil. But be careful. Be aware that as you walk in the souk, you will be approached by people who are on commission and persist in directing you to the shops selling Argan Oil.

## VII



Haj Brahim, the owner who inherited the shop from his father, talks about the purity of his Argan oils. He explained about the hard work of women villagers who work in mountains, grinding nuts and extracting Argan oils by hand. He has a small museum of herbal collections on upper floor of the building and asked us to join him to see a different view of the medina by climbing to the rooftop of the shop from where I could get a better view of minaret of the Mosque of Ibn Yusuf and the dome of the Almoravid Koubba and its courtyard.

We continued to stroll through busy souks, experiencing all the hustle and bustle of this moving city until we reached the vibrant Jemaa el-Fna at sunset. The square of Jemaa el-Fna, a hectic and animated marketplace, was lit by several stalls in all corners like the daylight and quite entrancing but dinner beckoned so we stayed for a shorter period than we would have wished.

## VIII



*tuk tuks are an easy way to travel through the medina*

After so much walking we decided to take a tuk tuk back to the hotel. For those who have never travelled on one, it is a very simple vehicle, but very handy to manoeuvre in the narrow and winding pathways of medina. The driver had to use his horn continuously to clear a path through the crowds for the evening brings out more shoppers.

We ended our day with some delicious Moroccan cuisine back in the hotel but Marrakech is full of restaurants so the choice is wide. Expect to see dishes that include aubergines, couscous, salads and rice in the first course with a tagine of some description to follow. Homemade desert and Moroccan mint tea tend to round off a meal.

## IX

*Whilst we would have liked to explore the medina, our brief stay was over. It was off to the Atlas mountains and that will be the subject of my next story.*

*Images and story © Mohammed Reza Amirinia.*

For more about Morocco, click here. Reza flew to Morocco courtesy of a direct Air Arabia Airlines flight from Gatwick to Marrakesh and stayed at the Riad Star, Riad EL CADI and Mövenpick Hotel Mansour Eddahbi.

For more of Reza's images of Marrakesh, go to http://www.purevisionjourneys.com/morocco/

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