



Far from the Medina crowd

When it comes to Marrakech, escape the searing heat and teeming souk and instead seek refuge in gardens, country clubs and hammams, says **Leo Bear**

MARRAKECH might not immediately spring to mind when choosing somewhere to unwind. And to be sure, its main square Jemaa el Fna delivers noise, commotion, smoke and crowds, with tourists tripping over dancing monkeys and baskets of cobras to get to their next tagine. But there's another side to the pink city, away from the belly dancers and big nights out. One that offers unrivalled peace and tranquillity.

Six kilometres south of Marrakech's bustling medina, off a long bumpy dirt track lies a country club so beguiling and civilised that it literally smells of roses. Fifteen hectares of said flower surround it in every colour, variety and scent that God created. This breath of fresh air, known as Beldi Country Club, also boasts labyrinthine wild cactus gardens, two pools, a spa, two restaurants and, as an addition this September, 28 guest rooms. It is the perfect base from which to explore Marrakech's quieter side.

At Beldi, there's nothing snazzy about the rooms. The look is simple yet ornamental with traditional wood carvings, giant terracotta urns, stripy Berber bed-covers and antique Moroccan chests.

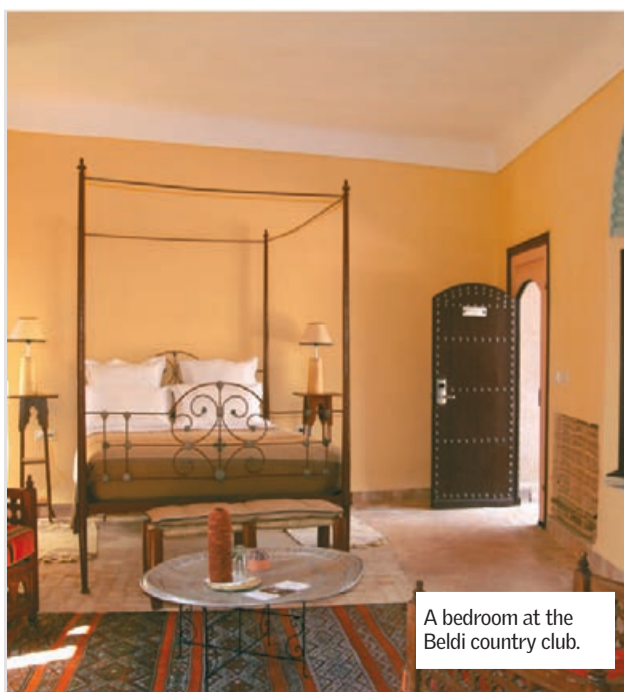
Don't expect a minibar, WiFi or even a telephone. Nothing whirrs or blinks here. In fact everything, from the mud-based pisé walls to the polished concrete floors, is inspired by the distant rugged Atlas mountains, designed to reflect the essence of "Beldi", which means "traditional" in Arabic.

And nothing is more traditional in Morocco than a visit to the hammam. So a trip to the spa is a must.

WASH DOWN

Now, for the uninitiated, hammams can be a shock to the system. However, to miss it, is to miss out. It goes something like this: 15-20 minutes of serious steaming (patience and stamina required here), then on your feet with arms outstretched for a rigorous scrubbing with black soap (wave goodbye to your dignity here), then a wash down courtesy of ladles of warm water (surrender to it), and to cap it off a nice relaxing massage (phew).

By time-up, you'll look a wreck, but you'll be cleaner than a whistle and your skin will feel softer than you ever imagined possible. One word of advice: don't be shy. The hammam is an intimate place,



A bedroom at the Beldi country club.

just go with the flow – these ladies are used to seeing naked people.

At Beldi, in keeping with the rest of the place, the spa is nothing short of heavenly, but there's no shortage of other places to go for a decent hammam. Within the walls of the medina, most of the luxurious hotels and riads offer reasonably priced spa/pool day passes or hourly sessions [see the box on the right for the top five].

TRANQUILITY

Post-spa, it would be a crime to get all hot and dusty in the sweltering souk. Much better to jump in a cab to the Majorelle gardens – another must when in Marrakech. Here you'll find a deliciously shady slice of tranquillity and a café kept permanently cool by spray misters.

The gardens, once owned by the late Yves Saint Laurent, were designed by the French artist Jacques Majorelle who settled in Morocco after the First World War. He was a master plant collector and the fruit of his passion is a jungle of more than 300 species representing five continents.

A further must is a trip to La Mamounia, Marrakech's most glamorous hotel. Originally built in 1922 and recently spruced-up by the flamboyant interior designer Jacques Garcia, it would be easy to while away hours sashaying up and down the vast marble lobbies marvelling at the ornately tiled



Far left, the Marjorelle gardens; left, the hammam spa at Beldi Country Club; below left, a patio at the country club.



WHERE TO STAY | DETAILS

Rooms at the Beldi Country Club start from €160 per room per night on a bed and breakfast basis.

+212 5 24 38 39 50, www.beldicountryclub.com

Flights: Royal Air Maroc offers flights to Marrakech from Heathrow or Gatwick from £162 per person including taxes. 020 7307 5800, www.royalairmaroc.com

For more information about Marrakech visit www.marrakech.travel

MARRAKECH | NEED TO KNOW

CULTURE: SOUK IT UP

A visit to Marrakech isn't complete without exploring the souk. Hire a guide and opt for a tour of the old town on the north side of the medina. In the As Wal quarter, you'll find a 16th-century fountain still providing locals with drinking water. Careful as you go though, there are men weaving Agave silk along the narrow winding passages – with strings of it hanging in the air. Poke your nose through enough small wooden doors and you'll spy a derelict old guesthouse just like the one in the Kate Winslet film *Hideous Kinky*. On your way home, stop off at a herbalist and marvel at all manner of lotions, potions and powders, every colour in a Pantone book, and be sure to stock up on anti-stress herbs, ginseng and argan oil. You'll need them when you return to the real world.

WHERE TO EAT

Les Jardins de la Medina

Dine among centuries-old palm, orange and jacaranda trees in this lovingly converted riad. www.lesjardinsdelamedina.com

La Fondouk

Hidden among the narrowest passages of the souk, a torchbearer leads you to the entrance of La Fondouk. Inside, there's plenty of buzz, and traditional Moroccan fare done well. www.fondouk.com

Le Pavillon

Top marks for romance. This is hands-down the best French restaurant in the city and one of the prettiest garden restaurants in north Africa.

Tel: +212 5 44 387 040

Le Comptoir

For pure entertainment, it has to be Comptoir with its hourly cacophony of musicians and belly dancers. Grab a shisha pipe in the outside courtyard if your glasses start to steam up.

www.comptoirdarna.com

TOP 5 HAMMAMS

Maison D'Arabe

Intimate, chic and luxurious. If you only choose one, choose this one.

www.lamaisonarabe.com

Isis Spa

Great for a no-frills traditional hammam experience in a homely riad.

www.spa-isis.com

Les Bains de Marrakech

Excellent massages and great value for money. Les Bains is a popular choice for all the right reasons.

www.lesbainsdemarrakech.com

Es Saadi Palace Spa

This brand-new spa boasts three storeys built around a central 100-year-old eucalyptus tree. It's huge and offers everything from traditional hammams to hydrotherapy and hair treatments.

www.essaadi.com

La Mamounia

This is the matt-black Ferrari of spas. Expect dark cavernous treatment rooms, fish swimming across flat-screen TVs and plenty of model-types padding around. Chic hooded robes and Havaianas provided on entry. www.mamounia.com

Left, Marrakech's famous souk.



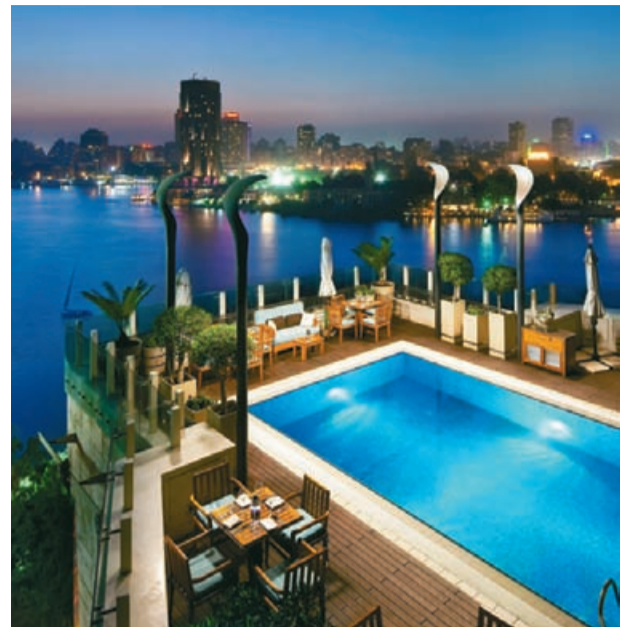
ceilings. Alternatively, take a stroll around La Mamounia's immaculate 18th century gardens, which once upon a time provided most of the fresh fruit and vegetables for the old medina. Today, the 700-year old olives trees are still standing, as are dozens of grapefruit and lemon trees. After a massive 21st-century rake-over, the vegetable garden now boasts neat rows of black radishes, white carrots and 13 types of tomato.

GREENERY

It's impressive stuff, especially considering its location in the middle of a desert. You can meander for hours, such is the extent of the greenery, but make sure you end your promenade at La Mamounia's bijou café/patisserie, Le Menzeh. Housed within an elegant stone archway, it was originally designed as a venue for garden parties, and serves excellent milk and almond ice-cream and wafer-thin French pastries.

It's hard to imagine such simple pleasures existing behind the glitzy exterior and strict dress codes of La Mamounia, and bearing in mind the imminent arrival of a host of ultra-luxe, big-name hotels in Marrakech – including a Mandarin Oriental, a Baglioni hotel with private villas designed by Jade Jagger, a W hotel and Rocco Forte's Samanah Country Club, all set to open in 2011 – it's reassuring to know that Marrakech will always have its little corners of calm.

TRAVEL NOTES | by Timothy Barber



Foody heaven in Cairo's plush new hotel

One of the more exciting hotels to open in the Middle East in the last few months is the Kempinski Nile Hotel – a place of truly swell luxuries that's also raising the culinary stakes for the Egyptian capital. Its rooftop restaurant, Floor 10, mixes modern French cuisine with spectacular views across the Nile, while there's also a Turkish restaurant inspired by the Ottoman empire, a restaurant with no set menu where each dish is tailored to the particular requirements of the diner, and a Chocolate Lounge with its own chocolate menu. Yum. Rooms from €208. www.kempinski.com/cairo



A cool Christmas in the country

Cowley Manor, a funky country house hotel in the Cotswolds with a bold line in colourful, retro-cool interiors, will be a fun place to spend a cosy Christmas. As well as falconry displays, festive movies and carols around the fireplace, it's also giving its Christmas weekend guests a free pampering treatment at its C.Side spa as a present. Beats a stocking with chocolate coins and a tangerine. There's also 55 acres of rolling Cotswold countryside to roam around.

Three nights, Christmas Eve to 27 December, including meals, £1,310 per room. www.cowleymanor.com



Glorious pampering at St Andrews

It may be beside the world's most famous golf course, but the Old Course Hotel at St Andrews is world class too, not least its spa. The Kohler Waters Spa is now partnering with leading US brand Skin Authority, launching a range of new treatments using products free from fragrances, dyes and animal testing, but incorporating new-fangled anti-ageing technology. That's alongside the 20m pool, rooftop hot tub, thermal suite, Japanese steam room and more. Rooms from £165, 24 hour Spa Break package from £502. www.oldcoursehotel.kohler.com