

Morocco's dream palaces

Make yourself at home in Marrakesh's desirable villas, says **John Arlidge**

To Marrakesh's undisputed ability to give the highest ratio of exotic culture shock to hours travelled from the UK, it can now add some of the greatest luxury available from a short-haul destination. No other city has such a collection of private homes for rent, mostly built by wealthy investors who snapped up land in the Palmeraie, a quiet area away from the medina, and in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains, and used western architects and local craftsmen to create East-meets-West palaces.

None of the properties is more than half an hour's drive from the airport and they can be used pretty much year round: winter daytime temperatures can reach 18C. Only August is tricky, when it can exceed 40C.

The finest new property in Morocco is Dar JL. There are two main villas and a tower, in *casbah moderne* style, set in a 12-acre garden in the Palmeraie. Each

has its own pool, kitchen, terrace and staff. The spa and outdoor gym are shared. You can take one villa or the whole place, and the staff get the balance just right between attentiveness and intrusion. A week here feels like an entire summer. Nearby Ezzahra is a large gated

private residence that is staffed with cooks, gardeners and therapists. It has a 52ft x 19ft swimming pool, tennis court, private cinema and its own hammam. There is no television — on purpose — but the villa does have broadband internet. It sleeps up to 16 guests.

Designed by French husband-and-wife team Nicole and Patrick Le Villair, the 12-suite Ksar Char-Bagh, in the Palmeraie, is a sumptuously chic boutique hotel that doubles as a private villa. The palm-dotted Persian-inspired gardens, Moorish courtyards and natural-toned bedrooms have lured the

likes of Giorgio Armani. Traditional mosaic tiling makes the hammam room an extraordinary spot to get steamed and scrubbed by the on-site therapists.

Outside town in the Atlas foothills is Kasbah Tamadot. Sir Richard Branson bought the place in 1999, turning it into a luxury hotel using local craftsmen. Each of the 18 rooms comes with its own terrace, and you can hire the whole place. Everything — tennis, a faecal, horse-riding, hot-air ballooning — is possible, but doing nothing is very much allowed.

■ *Dar JL*, from about £8,750 per day, 00 212 6121 0549, darjl.com; *Ezzahra*, £183 pp per night based on 14 guests sharing, 00 212 2432 8688, ezzahra-morocco.com; *Ksar Char-Bagh*, £10,000 per day, 00 212 2432 9244, ksarcharbagh.com; *Kasbah Tamadot*, from £22,000 per night, 020 8600 0430, kasbahamadot.virgin.com. *EasyJet* (easyjet.co.uk) and *Atlas Blue* (atlas-blue.com) fly from London to Marrakesh.



Ksar Char-Bagh, top left, and Ezzahra offer their guests privacy, comfort and all manner of upmarket facilities

How to get the best for less

■ Use a tour operator. Many five-star hotels offer their best rates to operators who buy in blocks.

■ Negotiate a price cut. Look online for firms that have started to discount. Ask questions

before you mention the possibility of a lower price. Once you have secured their best offer, call a rival and see if they will better it.

■ Rethink your travel dates. Hotels in rural settings are usually

cheaper in midweek, while city hotels can be a steal at weekends.

■ Eat smart. Trading up from B&B to full board can work out cheaper than spending on meals at your destination.

■ Keep an eye on the

currency markets. Brazil, South Africa, eastern Europe and Turkey are destinations where a relatively low cost of living coupled with a favourable exchange rate means holidays are good value right now.