

AFRICA/Morocco

Building a dream in Marrakech

Exotic and accessible, Marrakech is the perfect place for a holiday house. Rupert Uloth travelled there to meet a man who has created his own



The delights of Ezzahra



If you can stifle your giggles, staff will massage your feet on your own terrace



Gallons of mint tea fortified Brian Callaghan as he bargained for Ezzahra's treasures

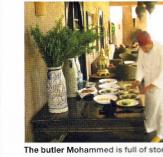


A Berber tent is the perfect spot to curl up and delve into a copy of *Lords of the Atlas*



Janez Balcan

The 120-year-old olive trees were bought elsewhere and transported into the garden



The butler Mohammed is full of stories of serving Winston Churchill at La Mamounia



The search for the ideal location in the Palmeraie area paid off with Ezzahra



Midnight revels may shake the garden, but sleepyheads can escape to far-off bedrooms

Is Ezzahra the ideal holiday home? It's a huge, 10-acre garden with olive and palm trees dotted about and several areas in which to hide and relax. The house is roomy with balconies, a sublime swimming pool and an underground *hamman* and spa area. It's a massive project, still mostly in construction. It could be the home of a tribal elder but for modern comforts, such as a screening room. It was only completed in 2003. Once there, you feel removed from the bustle of life in Marrakech's streets, but it's also less than a drive from the experiments of snake charmers and carpet dealers in the centre of town.

Hotelier Brian Callaghan has been coming here with his wife, Shirley, since the 1990s, when they went climbing in the Atlas Mountains. They visited regularly and often came with friends. As the couple decided to move to enjoy it, too, I thought it was time to put down roots about 10 years ago. It's a delight to see our family enjoying the house. I love to see people family groups, or groups of friends, who have come to stay. It's a bit like a tribal and sophisticated style of life. Perhaps above all, people still have time!

Designed as a place for his family to stay together, it retains Arabic influences, but there is an emphasis on modern comforts. Hence, a central courtyard with a *hamman*, a *sauna* and a *spa*, with the rooms embracing a central courtyard of traditional green glazed tiles.

This works perfectly, as there's no noise problem when you're young and not so young cracking the teethills up.

We wanted lots of covered terraces, so we could sit outside in the evenings, settled with a book. Lots of water, but with the pool as far from the main house as possible.

It hasn't been straightforward, and although the affluent Palmeraie area just outside the city is where some of the best houses are, it took him time to find the right plot. The king has a house there, and Mr Callaghan's neighbours include rich foreigners and

diplomats. 'I was gazzumped so many times, it's like a new world. I've had to learn many lessons, and the house gives me confidence. It was my first green-field project, and a serious learning curve. I assumed that the Arabic builders would be experts on water features and they're not, but I've always found the contractors very good.'

The amount of beautiful craftsmanship is noticeable at Ezzahra, with large metalwork lanterns, wonderful stone inlaid tables and fine woodcarving. Hours, days and months are spent building relationships with local craftsmen, who work over nearly everything. The numerous mint teas that go with bargaining are fun, but it's always best to leave and go back later. It's all very well sitting on the floor, but, after half an hour, my back begins to protest. The experience didn't put us off, though. We've never been asked for money and his wife next door is full of inventiveness, too; one bedroom has its own waterfall, which doubles as a shower.

Staying in Ezzahra is like staying in a top hotel, with all the facilities. Two or three of us would be excessive for our little group of four, but Ezzahra can handle 14 guests with ease. The butler worked at La Mamounia for many years. Discreet and urbane, he has fond memories of Churchill's visits to that iconic residence, and fond recollections of the room when the great man was painting.

If you don't want a full hammam session, the staff in the subterranean spa, who are available all day, will come and massage your feet when you're reading a book by the pool. The food is delicious, but not over the top or too rich. Meat, salads and vegetables are simply cooked with a hint of Moroccan style. It is the ultimate hideaway.

Tourist Information
• CVTravel (0800 790 0945; www.cvtravel.co.uk) has a week's stay at Ezzahra (06 25 02 00 77 276) www.ezzahra-morocco.com for 14 guests (from \$19,000 (\$1,357 pp) or \$14,000 (\$1,750 pp) for a week for eight, including meals, drinks and spa treatments)