

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 Calaghan 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*

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James Hume



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 sleepheads can escape to far-off bedrooms

IS Ezzahra the ideal holiday home? Encased by a high wall in reassuring privacy, its large garden has 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 *hammam* and spa area with full-time masseuses. Traditional 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 street life in Marrakech's medina, but it's only a 15-minute drive from the excitements of snake charmers and carpet dealers in the centre of town.

Hotelier Brian Calaghan has been coming here with his wife, Shirley, since the 1960s, when they went climbing in the Atlas Mountains. 'We visited regularly and often came with friends. As the grandchildren seemed to enjoy it, too, I thought it was time to put down roots about 10 years ago. It's a delight to see the family enjoying the house. I love it here for the people, the climate and the mix of biblical and sophisticated styles 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, the bedrooms were put to one side, as in a *riad*, with the rooms embracing a central courtyard of traditional green glazed tiles. 'This works perfectly, as there's no noise problem when the young and not so young crank the dechels up. We wanted lots of covered terrace areas and odd corners in which to settle 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 Calaghan's neighbours include rich foreigners and

diplomats. 'I was gazumped so many times, but it's all been worth it when you see how much pleasure the house gives to visitors. It was my first ground-up 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 construction teams fully committed.'

The amount of beautiful craftsmanship is noticeable at Ezzahra, with large metalwork lanterns, wonderful stone inlaid tables and fine woodcarving. Hours, days and months were spent building relationships with local craftsmen. 'We agonised over nearly everything. The numerous mini 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 him off, as he has now built a smaller place for himself and his wife next door. It's 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, but with no other guests. Twelve staff may sound 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 hotel. Staff were instructed to tiptoe past his 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 without being over the top or too rich. Meat, salads and vegetables are simply cooked with a hint of Moroccan style. It is the ultimate hideaway. ➔

Travel Information

● CV Travel (020-7401 7045, www.cvtravel.co.uk) has a week's stay at Ezzahra (00 35 02 00 77 470; www.ezzahra-morocco.com) for 16 guests from \$19,000 (\$1,357 pp) or \$14,000 (\$1,750 pp) for a week for eight, including meals, drinks and spa treatments

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