

PAM AYRES ON WILLIAM WORDSWORTH



The **Oldie**

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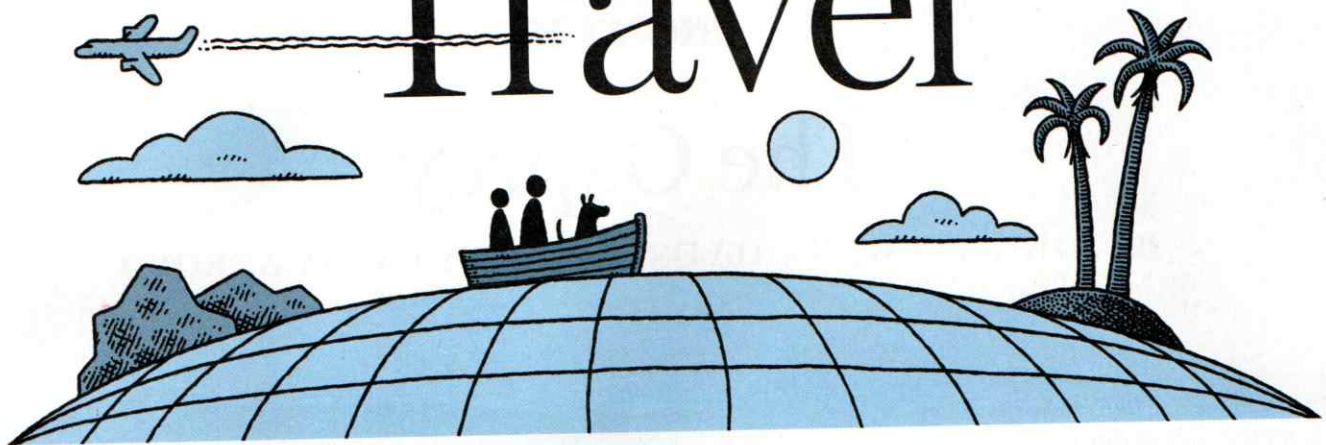


Hotels from Hell By Prue Leith

How I lost a fortune - Griff Rhys Jones on useless banks
RIP Barry Humphries, Dame Edna and Sir Les Patterson
Who Dares Wins - Mike Sadler, 103, on his SAS service



Travel



On the Road to Morocco – with Mum

A specially designed Marrakesh villa is ideal for *William Cook's* mother after a broken hip and long Covid

I'm standing in a crowded souk in the bustling centre of Marrakesh, watching my 81-year-old mother haggle over a pretty Moroccan plate. It's hard to hear above the frantic hubbub, but I can tell she's doing a lousy job.

The trick is to get the seller to name a price, offer a third as much and settle for just under half, but my mother is far too polite to haggle. She ends up paying almost the asking price. The vendor can't believe his luck.

Never mind. It's only a few quid. What's far more important is that my mum is having a great time. It's her first foreign trip since she broke her hip (followed by long Covid), and for a while we feared she might never go abroad again.

Yet here we are on the road once more, our first time together overseas since she took me on a day trip to Boulogne 50 years ago. Her stamina is finite, and she needs her rollator to get around, but otherwise she's doing fine.

But Morocco? Are we both mad? I must admit it wasn't my first choice. I'd been several times before and always found it fascinating. But it's an unpredictable, hectic place. Hardly the ideal destination for oldies with mobility issues, you might think.



Left: Villa Azeer, designed for guests with impaired mobility

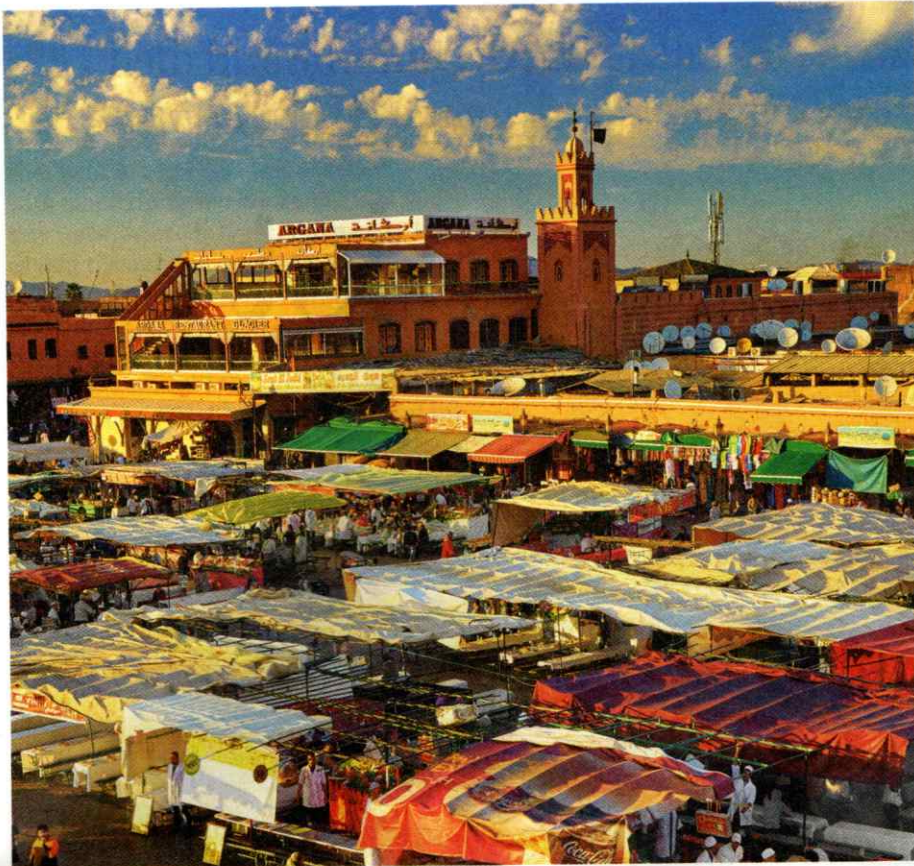


Below left: Celia James and William Cook, her son

Well, think again. I've never had a more relaxing week away, and my mother felt just the same. Granted, we were staying in a luxury villa that's way beyond my normal budget – but, as a jobbing travel writer, I've stayed in more expensive places, and none of them has been quite as nice as this.

I'm quite partial to a bit of pampering, while my mother's tastes are far more spartan. The last holiday we took together (and which I wrote about for *The Oldie*) was a youth-hostelling trip to glamorous Berwick-upon-Tweed. She would have been quite happy to settle for something similar this time round – but then I got a call from Brian Callaghan.

In Gibraltar, with his wife, Shirley, Brian ran the Caleta Hotel, famous for its



A bazaar trip: Jemaa el-Fnaa, Marrakesh

chess tournaments. In Marrakesh, they've built Ezzahra, a secluded complex of three plush villas in Palmeraie, a quiet, verdant hideaway a short drive from the city centre.

The Caleta closed last year, but Ezzahra is still going strong, and now Brian and Shirley have built a new villa here, called Azeer, specifically designed for guests with impaired mobility. Would my mum and I, Brian asked me, like a test drive?

Ezzahra doesn't provide specialist care. The staff are incredibly helpful, but they're regular hoteliers, not trained clinicians. If you need someone with nursing skills to help you, you'll have to bring them along. Yet if you're reasonably hale and hearty, but have some trouble getting about (like my mum), Azeer is an ideal base.

The first thing that strikes you about Azeer is how different it looks from the other villas. Ezzahra (the main villa, with seven double bedrooms) is fairly grand, and so are the two smaller villas, Azzaytouna and Alkhozama (three and two doubles, respectively). Azeer is more traditional – mud-brick walls flecked with straw.

The interior is surprisingly spacious – full of locally sourced fittings: Bejmat tiles; Tadelakt plasterwork; woodwork adorned with ornate Berber motifs. Conceived by Philip Hooper, of Colefax &

Fowler, it's supremely comfy and very restful on the eye.

The villa is step-free and wheelchair-friendly. If you're a bit wobbly on your feet, you'll find it easy to navigate.

There's a portable electric pool lift and an electric wheelchair. There are electric doors and sit-down showers with non-slip tiles, easy-grip taps and handles. There are support bars in the plunge pool. An electric, hand-held gizmo allows you to raise and lower the bed.

All these accessories are remarkably unobtrusive. Until you need to make use of them, you hardly know they're there. There are no trip hazards and no need to worry. The main thing it gave my mother was peace of mind.

The villa sleeps up to four people: two in the large, airy master bedroom, plus one or two more in a snug and cosy double. An ideal group would be an elderly couple in the main bedroom, plus a carer or a younger couple in the smaller room. Both bedrooms are en suite.

So what's the bottom line? £1,500 a night – pretty steep by any yardstick, but there's quite a lot thrown in: breakfast, lunch and dinner, plus spa treatments (my mother adored her massage, and her hammam), airport transfers and a bespoke guided tour of Marrakesh.

Ezzahra has had a lot of press, but *The Oldie* is the first to review the new villa.

Other writers rave about the luxurious setting, but the thing that makes Ezzahra so special is the personal service: a team of 20 at your beck and call, and they really know how to look after you.

I arrived with a touch of bronchitis – a doctor came and sorted me out straight away.

You need to book Azeer alongside another villa – so it'll work only if you're in a bigger group. Could I afford to come here regularly? If only. But for a big birthday or a landmark anniversary, I can't think of anywhere better.

Brian and Shirley's daughter, Tamara, runs regular Pilates residences. There's a painting course in September, led by artist Colin Watson (the six-night all-inclusive stay, with activities and one-to-one art tuition, costs £2,700 per person).

My mum said it was the holiday of a lifetime. She enjoyed her trip into Marrakesh, but she was happiest pottering around the lush gardens and chatting with the friendly staff. She lives alone, very simply, and she always puts other people first. If anyone deserves a treat, she does.

On our last day in Morocco, I wanted to take my mum back into Marrakesh – but she was too tired. So I went without her. I roamed the winding alleyways, starting off in the windswept Jewish cemetery – an oasis of gravestones in the Medina – and ending up in the Ben Youssef Madrasa, Morocco's ancient Islamic college – an intricate labyrinth of white marble, built in 1564. I wish my mother could have seen it.

As I wandered back through the souk, I found a tiny drapery selling rolls of cloth and I thought I might buy one for my mum. Most of the patterns were far too fussy for her simple tastes, but there was one I knew she'd like.

'How much?' I asked the draper. 'For you, 450 dirhams,' he said. I said I'd give him 150. He said he'd do it for 400. I said 200. He said 350. I walked away. I expected him to follow me and offer me 250, a price I would have paid, but he didn't. No worries, I thought – I'll find another one like it elsewhere.

I never found another one like it, and now I wish I'd bought it. I tried to retrace my steps to the shop where I'd seen it, but it proved impossible to find.

Back at the airport the next day, waiting for our flight home, I realised my mother was right not to haggle too hard, after all. 🍷

For information about Ezzahra, visit www.ezzahra-morocco.com