

# VILLA OF MY DREAMS

You'll want for nothing at this serene spot on the outskirts of manic Marrakech

VILLA holidays in France, Italy, Spain — even Turkey in happier times — have a familiar ring about them. But Morocco? Strangely, not, despite this bewitching country being little more than three hours away and where even in December you can eat outside without needing a jacket.

Which is why waking up at Villa Ezzahra on the plush outskirts of Marrakech is something of a revelation. The birdsong is sublime, the air soft and forgiving, and from my balcony I look out across to a swimming pool and, beyond that, a Berber tent filled with rugs, sofas, cushions and pouffes.

Scattered about the garden are orange trees, roses, palms, immaculate lawns and vivid banks of bougainvillea. It's just gone 8am and members of staff are sweeping up leaves that have fallen overnight.

What makes it especially captivating is knowing 15 minutes' away is Marrakech's manic medina — a glorious juxtaposition in a stable country with a much-loved king who has a genuine affection for the city and has done a lot to improve life for tourists and residents.

You still get hassled, but nothing like as much as ten years ago and the souk seems better organised, less intimidating. 'Looky my shoppy, Prince Charles,' says one trader. 'Genuine fakes,' says another.

How they all survive is hard to fathom, but this is the free market in all its improbable glory, a bizarre bazaar unlike anywhere else in the world.

Back at Villa Ezzahra, the kingpin is an engaging and sprightly 78-year-old Englishman called

by Mark Palmer

Brian Callaghan, who bought the plot in 1999 and set about creating this wonderful retreat.

He flits between Gibraltar and Morocco, and if you know anything about chess, you will know Brian. He is the founder and driving force behind the Gibraltar Chess Festival, for which he was awarded an OBE in 2012.

THE villa can sleep 14 and there are two further houses next door, with two and three bedrooms respectively, each with their own pools. Villa Ezzahra has a padel tennis court (a game that falls between proper tennis and ping pong, and is catching on fast throughout Europe), billiards table, spa and a number of cosy sitting rooms with fires.

'Some people never leave the place for a whole week,' says

Brian. Which is understandable — but tragic.

Not least because a decade after Yves Saint Laurent's death a museum in his honour has opened a few miles away, next to the Jardin Majorelle, which he and his partner Pierre Berge rescued from demolition and then used as a holiday home.

'Good clothing is a passport to happiness,' said YSL. I'm not sure about that, but looking at 200 of his outfits on display, including the iconic Le Smoking tuxedo, is a fine introduction to his winning ways.

Then there are the Atlas Mountains standing in the hazy distance — snow-capped in winter — with a 'come and get me' air about them.

And you should. Or at least you should plan an hour or two's walk on the baked red soil of the foothills and then reward yourself with a late lunch at one of the inviting kasbahs.

We did just that in the thrilling Ourika Valley, ending up at Bab Ourika, which is also owned by a



Picture: LUXURY RETREATS/GETTY

Dive in: Villa Ezzahra's pool and a trader in Marrakech's souk

Briton with itchy feet, Stephen Skinner, who proves that when it comes to Morocco, an Englishman's home is his kasbah.

The taxi ride back to Marrakech lasts about an hour — and the first 20 minutes takes you through tiny Berber villages where shoeless children play in the street, while the women wash clothes communally.

It's dark when we return to Villa Ezzahra. Lanterns are lit, the moon is out, wine bottles are opened, lamb tagine is about to

be served. This is a villa thriller like no other.

## TRAVEL FACTS

THREE nights at Villa Ezzahra ([ezzahra-morocco.com](http://ezzahra-morocco.com)) costs £17,400 for 14 guests (£1,243pp). Stay includes meals, non-alcoholic drinks, laundry, massage and beauty treatments, and airport transfers. A seven-seater vehicle with chauffeur is included daily from 10am to 8pm.

by Nicola Trup

AFTER fruitless trips to Canada and the Azores, I'd almost given up on whale watching. But finally, off Murcia, on Spain's south coast, I was rewarded.

A spurt of water pierced the horizon. We watched the three diving fin whales, rapt. They tired before we did and, once they were out of sight, we reluctantly returned to shore. Around 50 leaping striped dolphins accompanied us, as a sunfish splashed nearby.

This is the Costa Calida, the 'Warm Coast', and it lives up to its name, with summer temperatures in the low-30s (around 86f) and autumn in the mid-20s (77f). And it's far quieter than the Costa del Sol.

My road trip started in Cartagena, which has old Roman baths, a castle, cathedral and museums. But the star attraction is the Roman theatre, which dates back to the 1st century BC.

I made stops in more pretty cities:

## Whales and dolphins await off Spain's enticing 'Warm Coast'



Picture: ALAMY

Jump for joy: Leaping dolphins are known to accompany Murcia's boats

Aguilas (Playa Amarilla and Playa La Carolina are among the loveliest beaches here); Lorca, with its hilltop castle; and Caravaca de la Cruz, which

claims to have a piece of Christ's cross in its basilica. In Cabo de Palos, I went with Naranjito Diving Centre to the Cala Escalerica ('Ladder Creek') dive site.

There's a shipwreck nearby for seasoned pros. Later, I peeled off my wetsuit for a swim — the instructor laughed, saying it was too cold. Maybe for the Spanish, but not for us British. This is the Warm Coast, after all.

## TRAVEL FACTS

EASYJET ([easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)) flies to Alicante from around £70 return. Doubles at the Hotel NH Cartagena ([nh-hotels.com](http://nh-hotels.com)) from £67. Car hire with Holiday Extras ([holidayextras.co.uk](http://holidayextras.co.uk)) at Alicante costs from £57 a week. Whale watching costs from £45 ([rutasdelierraymar.com](http://rutasdelierraymar.com)) and dives from £38 ([naranjitobuceo.com](http://naranjitobuceo.com)).