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TRAVEL



MOROCCO

A match made in heaven

Chess fan William Cook takes a masterclass in Marrakech

I'm sitting by the pool in a lush Moroccan garden playing chess with Nigel Short, and I feel like an amateur boxer who's stepped into the ring with Mike Tyson. This is the man who took on World Chess Champion Gary Kasparov. He could destroy me in an instant. Actually, there's no need. In a few moves I've destroyed myself. After this chess weekend at Ezzahra, a chic retreat in Marrakech, I'd hoped to show Britain's greatest grandmaster how much I've learnt. Instead, I end up playing like a complete idiot.

Thankfully Nigel is a perfect gent, accepting my abject resignation with good grace, and my humiliation is soon forgotten over a delicious dinner on the poolside terrace. Having followed his career from afar, from child prodigy to elder statesman, I was worried he'd be a bit nerdy, but it turns out he's supremely clubbable — a droll raconteur with a dry wit and a keen interest in the world beyond the

chess board. There are about a dozen of us round the dinner table, including five keen amateur players and their (very patient) wives — people from all walks of life. The wine and conversation flows. The evening sails by.

This intimate masterclass is the brainchild of Brian Callaghan, a debonair Englishman who built Ezzahra. When he's not here in Marrakech, Brian runs the Caleta Hotel in Gibraltar, where he hosts the Gibraltar Open, widely regarded as the world's best chess tournament. He built Ezzahra as a holiday home, then he started renting it out to visitors, and this year had the bright idea of inviting enthusiasts to come here to learn from the world's top players. The next masterclass is in May with Vishy Anand, five times world champion. If you do decide to come, what can you expect?

Well, the biggest shock for me was that all these participants were so good — miles better than me (which

isn't difficult). That didn't stop me getting a lot out of this weekend, though. Watching Nigel go through one of his old games, move by move, was fascinating, and I was amazed to find I could actually follow quite a lot of it. Like all the brightest people, he makes the trickiest concepts seem simple. 'Most strong players are optimists,' he tells us, and his optimism is infectious (a bit too infectious in my case, but never mind).

Nigel's co-host (and co-star) is an old friend and fellow grandmaster, Stuart Conquest. Stuart was World Youth Chess Champion when he was 14 and became a grandmaster in his early twenties, but he wears his laurels lightly. As well as running the Gibraltar Open, he teaches chess to children, and has a rare talent for putting any player of any ability (even me) at ease. He takes us through some classic games and asks us what moves we'd make and why. I'm elated when I get an answer right. All right, so it was a lucky guess, but who cares? 'Chess should inspire us,' says Stuart, and his teaching is inspirational.

This weekend would be a treat in any setting, but the location is what makes it so special. A quartet of elegant villas in landscaped grounds on the outskirts of Marrakech, Ezzahra feels more like a family

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home than a commercial property. The buildings are modern, but they're all built in traditional Moroccan style, and decorated with local artworks and antiques. After a nourishing breakfast of dates, pomegranates and freshly baked flatbreads, Brian drives me into town to show me where he found this authentic decor. I follow him through the narrow alleys of the Medina, in and out of dusty workshops piled high with delicate woodwork and metalwork. These cramped ateliers are full of craftsmen, busy turning lumps of wood and metal into intricate works of art.

If you've never been to Morocco, Marrakech is the best place to start. Sure, it's a lot more touristy than Tangier or Essaouira, but you don't have to venture far to escape the crowds. In the heart of the Medina, where the hustlers and hawkers gather, there are streets which have hardly changed in centuries — it's like a window on to a medieval world. On a clear day you can see the majestic Atlas mountains; snowcapped peaks framed by palm trees, the recurring cliché of a million snapshots but still a stunning spectacle when you see it for the first time.



Marrakech was once the capital of an empire that stretched from the Niger Delta to the Pyrenees yet, unlike a European capital, its historic sites are all hidden. Its palaces are concealed behind high walls, secret oases in the city centre. The most splendid of these hideaways is the Ben Youssef Madrasa, an Islamic college built way back in 1565. 'I was built for science and prayer by the prince of the faithful, descendant of the seal of the prophets, Abdallah the most glorious of the Caliphs,' reads an ancient inscription above the doorway. With its fountains, mosaics, and

On the market: you'd be mad to miss Djemaa el Fna. Opposite: room and board in the elegant grounds of Ezzahra

ornate and fragile plasterwork, it's a tranquil contrast with the frenetic souks outside.

Marrakech has always been a crossroads, where the Maghreb meets the Sahara. Djemaa el Fna, its vast marketplace, is full of dancers, snake charmers and storytellers — black, Arab and Berber. It's Morocco's biggest tourist trap, but you'd be mad to miss it. Despite the swarms of sightseers it's still a wild and vibrant place. I saw a stall piled high with seashells. When I came closer, I realised they were in fact human teeth. The grinning stallholder wielded a pair of pliers. He was a DIY dentist, happy to wrench out a nagging molar for a few dirhams. Welcome to the third world.

Back at Ezzahra, I was grateful for a slow swim and a cold beer before supper. I've never been anywhere so chaotic, yet so serene. Edith Wharton called it 'dark, fierce and fanatical'. Sacheverell Sitwell called it 'the last place of repose and coolness.' I'd say I'd seen a bit of both today. Time for another game of chess.

The next Chess Masterclass at Ezzahra (www.ezzahra-morocco.com) runs from 4 to 8 May, and costs £2,400 per person.



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