

Pullout: the top 50 red wines

Part two of Jane MacQuitty's best bottles

Weekend

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Look great in
your trunks

3-week summer
fitness plan

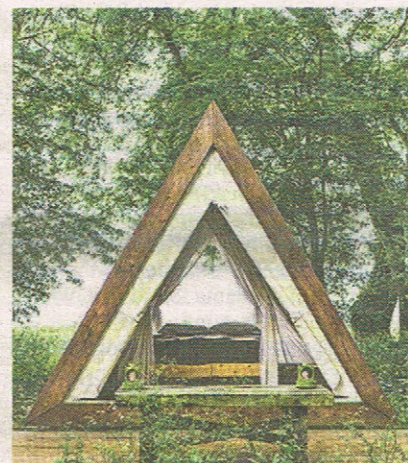
The top 20 glamping sites



A chic shepherd's
hut in Suffolk



A yurt with a hot
tub in Yorkshire



The coolest places
to camp in the UK

28 Travel



One of the bedrooms

Luxury travel

Spa, chauffeur, souk: the exotic villa in vibrant Marrakesh

Villa Azzaytouna in an ancient oasis on the edge of the city comes with plenty of extras. **Harry Mount** puts them to the test

I am in a remote corner of Marrakesh, getting the full-on hammam treatment. I've been hosed down with steaming water just the right side of a very hot bath. A young, muscular, taut woman then gives me a proper pummeling, just the right side of the pain barrier. She rubs into my skin a heady, intense balm, combining all the perfumes of Arabia, before I drench myself once more with hot water.

I'm not in an ancient bath in a Marrakesh souk. My hammam takes place in a purpose-built spa in a luxury villa in the Palmeraie, the ancient oasis of more than 100,000 palm trees a ten-minute drive outside the city walls. What's more, the hammam is free — or at least included in the overall price of the villa.

This combination of top-of-the-range treats bolted on to a smart villa is all the rage. Villa holidays are less about taking turns to do the washing-up (who needs to when a daily cleaner comes in, along with gardeners and chefs?) and more about cramming each day with activities and extras.

They can be customised to whatever suits you: from wine tastings and cookery lessons, to classic cars delivered to the door for a day's rental. The market for bolt-on luxury is so competitive that you can calibrate exactly how much washing-up you want to do and how much self-indulging, starting with airport transfers and car hire, and graduating to top chefs flying in for special occasion dinners and mega-yacht hire. Want to visit a secret garden when you're in Venice? Or perhaps a champagne dinner on the beach? You can do whatever floats your boat — or your stonking great yacht, for that matter.

And that's what I'm getting in Marrakesh: treat-filled days wrapped up in the inclusive price, with a private driver on permanent call as well as the spa. The Palmeraie is where the Moroccan mega-rich gather, and the international set too. Prince Bandar bin Sultan Al Saud, the former Saudi ambassador to the US, lived in the villa next to mine. It's always handy to have a Saudi prince living next door; his 24-hour security men on the front gate were bound to keep any terrorists from bothering me

in the neighbouring Villa Azzaytouna. Newly modernised Marrakesh has caught up with modern prices for mega-luxury villas, I fear. Azzaytouna shares its sprawling garden of palm, olive, orange and pomegranate trees with a much bigger villa, which costs a pretty steep £17,400 for three nights. Still, with a full house of 14 guests, that comes to a more manageable £1,242 per person. Take the smaller, newer Villa Azzaytouna and you can get that down to £1,000 per person for three days, if there are six of you staying. You get the same freebies as if you'd taken the big house (there's a separate hammam and treatment room in the small villa and you can have treatments round the pool or in your private courtyard).

Those freebies are pretty substantial: as well as all spa treatments, you get chauffeur service for local sightseeing, airport transfers, soft drinks and all your meals. The food is well matched to the November weather: light Moroccan dishes and salads for the high 70Cs of lunchtime, more substantial Moroccan stews for the plunging 50C lows of the evening. There's a pool table, a Moroccan drinks tent, a padel tennis court (a sort of miniature tennis-meets-fives game), two screening rooms and lashings of wifi.

What presumably does remain cheap in Morocco is labour. The standard of service — and the number of attendants — would have pleased Prince Charles at his most spoilt. It is a cliché, but no less true for

The pool at Villa Azzaytouna, Marrakesh



being one, that the wealthy are cash-rich and time-poor. Those House of Windsor levels of service mean every millisecond can be given over to pleasure, with never a moment of drudgery.

The villa has its own decent-sized pool, as well as a plunge pool all to myself in the backyard of my room, itself elegantly, subtly designed, with a few tasteful nods to Moroccan architecture in its domed roof and ogee-capped storm lanterns. All the villas are decorated with finds from the souk and Moroccan art, but it's tasteful — no Carry On up the Kasbah tat. Mine had Berber benches, carved wooden doors and Beni Ourain rugs.

Pores fully cleansed and perfumed, I took full advantage of the driver, heading for the Marrakesh medina first thing in the morning, before the tourists had got their act together.

A half-empty Marrakesh in the clear, low-intensity morning sunlight reminds you why this city, in the shadow of the Atlas mountains, has enchanted visitors for almost 1,000 years, since it was founded in 1062.

There is a magnificent simplicity to its great walls, its low-slung houses, no taller than the palm trees dotted around the place, the skyline punctuated by the minaret of the Koutoubia Mosque, a 12th-century mini Empire State Building. And all in the dusty pink colour of the soil below. It's as if Marrakesh has grown, of its own accord, out of the earth.

Later that morning I visited the Jemaa



A fireplace in one of the lounges



The sitting room

The dining room



el-Fnaa, the city's main square: part hippy hangout, part *Star Wars* cantina, crammed with snake charmers and unreliable guides to the rabbit warren of the souk's half-lit back alleys.

Still, you're pretty safe these days, even there. Marrakesh has cleaned up its act over the past decade, not least since the 2011 terrorist bomb in the Jemaa el-Fnaa, which killed 17. The subsequent security crackdown has been accompanied by a

general clean-up and a rounding-off of the city's rougher edges.

My second trip, the next afternoon, took me to a busier and more French city. The French Protectorate in Morocco lasted the blink of an eye, from 1912 to 1956. Yet it lent the country, and Marrakesh, its attractive layer of louche, illicit, Rive Gauche style.

Yves Saint Laurent added a whole extra layer of postwar French sophistication to

the city. Saint Laurent was born in Algeria, but he adopted Marrakesh as his dream African city.

Last year the Yves Saint Laurent Museum opened on the edge of old Marrakesh. The £12 million building was the brainchild of Saint Laurent's lover Pierre Bergé, who died only a month before the museum opened. The building is in that lovely Marrakesh pink, topped with curving chunks of brick. A bit short on windows, it looks more like a bank vault than a museum.

Still, inside, the full, multicoloured genius of Saint Laurent is on show. There are more than 5,000 couture dresses, including one formerly wrapped like clingfilm round the torso of Catherine Deneuve. His Mondrian dress, safari jacket and "le smoking" jacket are on view.

Next door is the garden of the artist Jacques Majorelle, saved by Bergé and Saint Laurent in the 1980s. It is a surreal place, with mammoth palms clustered round modernist pavilions in the distinctive, intense shade that the artist trademarked as Majorelle blue. Saint Laurent's ashes were scattered in the garden when he died in 2008, aged 71.

The gardens and museum are a splendid, gilt-edged spectacle, but Saint Laurent's Marrakesh is a high-end fashionista's dream, with every speck of dust swept out of sight. For a blast of real Morocco — and high-altitude air — the

villa driver took me 30 miles south to the Atlas mountains, where the peaks rise straight out of the plain, a darker pink than the urban pink of the city.

Marrakesh's economy may have boomed in recent decades, but the Atlas mountains remain largely unchanged. Rough roads connect a sparse necklace of farming villages. In between, there is zero development.

Well, almost zero. There are a few luxury oases, including the Kasbah Bab Ourika hotel. With its low, pink towers and connecting walls wrapped round a cool, sheltered courtyard, it could have been airlifted straight out of Marrakesh.

Perched on a low hill, the hotel overlooks the Ourika Valley. Our lunch table was laid on one side only, leaving an open view beyond the bowls of salad and light meat and fish dishes. Below our table the lush green valley floor tracked the meandering Ourika River, which winds from the High Atlas to the coast west of Marrakesh. On either side of the valley the low, crumpled mountains offer surprisingly easy walking, with nearly flat paths stretching for miles, threaded through the passes.

For hours on end you can be in a Morocco untouched by the modern age, free from wifi, massages and heated swimming pools. Still, it's an extreme comfort to know that they are only a short chauffeured drive beyond the next dusty pink mountain range — with no washing-up awaiting your return.

Need to know

Harry Mount was a guest of Villa Azzaytouna (ezzahra-morocco.com), which costs from £2,000 for six people a day (or from £1,500 for two people), including sole use and all facilities, swimming-pool heating as required, all meals, non-alcoholic drinks, laundry, all massage and beauty treatments and one return airport transfer for the group. A seven-seat vehicle with chauffeur is included daily from 10am to 8pm.