

MOROCCO'S BRIGHT LIGHTS

The easy-to-reach, shimmering city of Marrakech will lift your spirits

ATRIO of motorbikes whizz past clipping the tip of my shoes. Ahead, men with goats draped round their necks, carefree children and cart-laden, braying donkeys cross the road with ease. I stand paralysed, ink from the map clutched in my hand imprinted on my fingers and the bedlam of Marrakech ringing in my ears.

The Red City yanks you from the 21st century immediately. So much so, it seems impossible that my day began in gloomy London. I am not the first to discover the delight of swapping a grey city for the bewitching sounds, smells and colours of Marrakech, which is only a four-hour flight from the UK.

Its arresting exoticism has captured many in the past — the Rolling Stones in the 1960s were among its most notorious visitors (tales of their infamous stays at La Mamounia make up a large part of the hotel's guided tours). Sir Winston Churchill was another regular — he came to regard the imperial city as his winter home.

Churchill is in my mind on the first evening when I see the expansive Jemaa el Fna square. Arabic music,

bartering and snake charmers' flutes drum up an orchestra that reverberates around one of the world's biggest open-air restaurants.

What would the great statesman have made of this urban clearing? I feel part of a Mexican wave. Waiters from the 50-odd food stalls run rings serving hundreds of customers a steaming selection of meat, fish and vegetables from their roaring barbecues.

In the background, herbalists, storytelling halakis and belly-dancers do their best to compete

with the deafening sound of excited children and motor engines, while plying their trade nearby.

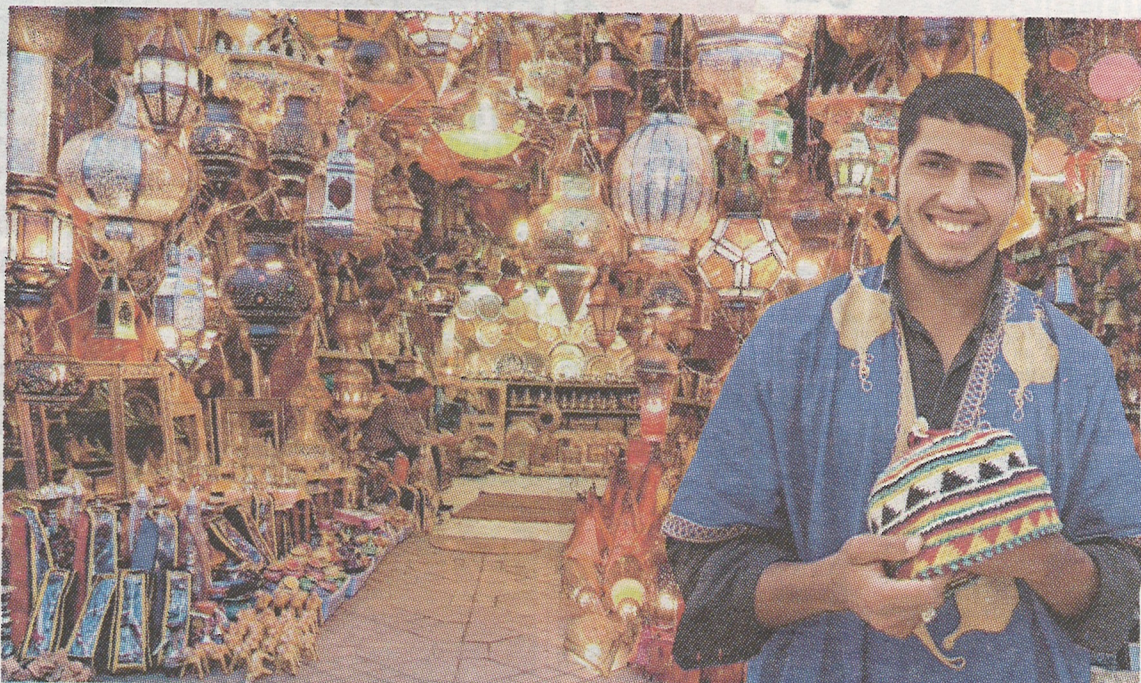
In a city that seems effervescent at all hours, visitors can at least be thankful for the tranquillity of its Riad guesthouses. There are now said to be more than 1,000 of these serene city sanctuaries built into the cool walls of the Old City, each with courtyards, exotic greenery and heart-shaped fountains.

I seek refuge at the superb Dar Les Cigognes, which sits quietly behind a gold-studded door along an other-

wise anonymous street. Breakfast on the roof in view of les cigognes — the storks that live in gargantuan nests atop the 16th century former Sultan's residence, Palais el-Badi — is a daily treat.

El Fna, by day, is quiet. To the north of this now empty space are the labyrinthine alleys that make up Morocco's most celebrated experience — the souks.

'Souk Safari' is now on offer at all of the district's entry points. I turn down a guide's help, deciding instead to wander solo down the



Aladdin's cave: The souks in Marrakech are packed with beguiling baubles and glitzy lanterns

Picture: ALAMY

maze of shops and stalls. It's hard not to be taken in by the hand-welded musical instruments, fabrics and spices I am sure to have no use for back home.

But the sellers never fail to entice with their smiles and mocking repartee. 'Come and have a butcher's,' one hollers in perfect Cockney.

Shopping, though, is not restricted to the souks. On another ramble through the Medina, I spot a man ushering people down an almost obscured corridor.

Inside is a vast seven-room, two-storey emporium of handmade lanterns, pots, belts, candles, leather-bound mirrors and hulky armchairs. I don't escape empty handed.

The French colonial new town Le Gueliz is a sparkling contrast. It is full of high-rise malls, cafe culture and coach tours.

This Westernised area — overrun with international brands and modern apartment complexes — lacks the thrill of the Medina. It might be awash with luxury hotels and golf resorts, but the result is sterile.

For me the scruffy, ancient streets of Marrakech hold greater appeal. And there can be no better tonic in the chill of winter than this feverish Moroccan jasmine-scented city — even with its hullabaloo.

PRISCILLA POLLARA

TRAVEL FACTS

DAR LES CIGOGNES has rooms from £153 (00 212 524 38 27 40, sanssoucicollection.com)
BA flies from London Gatwick to Marrakech from £139 return (0844 493 0787, ba.com)