

- Home
- Hotels
- Destinations
- Cruise
- Active
- USA
- Ski
- Family
- Deals
- Luxury

- UK
- Europe
- North America
- Central America/Caribbean
- S America
- Africa/Indian Ocean
- Asia
- Australia/Pacific
- Middle East

Morocco: MasterChef comes to Marrakesh

As the company behind the BBC cookery show branches out into the travel trade, Xanthe Clay gets a taste for Morocco and falls in love with the country all over again



"Before you ask, there's no Gregg or John on the tours, but I can't be the only one who'd be quite relieved by

that – 'holidays don't get tougher than this' would grate after a bit"

By Xanthe Clay

4:32PM BST 25 Apr 2014

Marrakesh and I have history. I spent a few days there, half a decade ago, and returned home half enchanted, half bruised. I loved the verve and bustle, the brightly coloured pottery, the vividly flavoured food and the exquisite architecture, but I was frustrated by the sense that I was missing too much, in part owing to my inability to read or speak Arabic (French works, but not always), in part because the culture is hard to decode. I was exhausted too, by trying to buy the covetable pottery in the souk, and needing an hour of haggling to bring it down from Knightsbridge prices to something tourist-appropriate. Add to that the aggressive self-appointed “guides” on every corner trying to extract payment for unwanted advice, turning from charming to abusive at the drop of a fez, and I was, let’s say, ambivalent about the Red City.

So when I heard that this year the MasterChef brand has branched into travel, with trips to the foodie hotspots of the world including Mexico, Thailand and, yes, Morocco, I was intrigued. And before you ask, there’s no Gregg or John on the tours, but I can’t be the only one who’d be quite relieved by that – “holidays don’t get tougher than this” would grate after a bit.

Instead, each tour is accompanied by a bona fide MasterChef contestant, so there’s a good chance of behind-the-scenes gossip along with the culinary know-how. At the same time the tour directors have been careful to include enough sightseeing and free time to keep less foodie partners happy. But could they make me fall in love with Marrakesh anew?

From the moment we arrived at our small, traditional hotel, a riad in the old city, just across the street from a royal palace, it seemed we were on to a winner. We were greeted with exquisite little Moroccan pastries and sweet mint tea – Morocco is not the place to go sugar-free – which we sipped sitting in the cool, dimly lit courtyard. The riad Dar les Cigognes – Place of the Storks – is a haven of calm, despite the thrum of motorbikes and the rattle of horse-drawn carts outside, and a reassuring blend of traditional and luxurious. It’s the sort of place where roses float in courtyard fountains and every night there is a poem on your pillow and milk and cookies on the bedside table. I’m not the only one to enjoy it – Yotam Ottolenghi stayed here when he filmed the Moroccan section of his Mediterranean

Feasts series. The hotel's owner, Eben Lenderking, a rangy, red-haired Anglo-American, acted as food adviser.

Video: drinking mint tea

That evening we sat on the roof terrace tasting high-class Moroccan wines while watching the sun set over the palace walls. Each of the riad's turrets is topped with a stork's nest, hence its name. Pierre, the *soigné* hotel manager, whose career has included five-star establishments, said: "You know, the storks have just one partner for their entire life," before adding with a toss of his head, "I am not a stork."

Keri Moss, joint winner of MasterChef: The Professionals in 2012, joined us for dinner under the stars, a feast of tagine, quail and couscous. She chatted happily about her MasterChef experiences – the terror of waiting for the swing doors to open and the judges to walk through, what it's like to be at the mercy of Michel Roux, how her final creation went wrong – but she's far too discreet to dish any real dirt.



On the subject of the local ingredients or cooking with the hotel's traditional cook, Fouzia, however, she lit up. Some of the ingredients, it has to be said, are not for the fainthearted: we gasped over stories of years-old fermented butter, part of the traditional Berber woman's trousseau, and gossiped about whether we were game enough to try camel.

Video: tasting sheep's hoof

The next two days brought more revelations. Lenderking, who has lived part-time in Marrakesh since he bought Dar les Cigognes on a whim in 2000, acted as our guide. A self-confessed food obsessive, he turned out to be the tour's secret weapon, a one-man Larousse Gastronomique of Morocco, someone who has been known to follow locals bearing food back to their homes and knock on the door to ask with characteristic charm if he can try their dishes.

Lenderking led us through the streets of the old city, showing us a neat shortcut through the public baths, where to eat the best local slow-cooked stew "tangia" (up a set of steps behind a stall stacked with sheep's heads), and how to make it through the souk unhassled. The secret, apparently, is to answer the hawkers with a briskly polite "pas aujourd'hui," "not today," which is code for "I might look European but I'm a local; don't bother me."



Moroccan spices are one of the best souvenirs for a cook, but it is easy to go wrong with unscrupulous traders, or simply become befuddled by the vast choice. Lenderking showed us the best spice shop, the wholesaler where the souk stalls go to buy supplies, and talked us through the stock, some familiar, some baffling – such as "nutmeg of the Sahara", dried pomegranate skins and smelling-salts-strong eucalyptus resin – and all unlabelled. We drank cups of tea scented with star anise and watched while the owner climbed nimbly over boxes to reach the shelves that stretched to the ceiling, packed with aphrodisiacs, beauty scrubs and herbal medicines.

Video: buying fermented butter

Making purchases was easy: as Lenderking's a regular there was no need to bargain. We bought argan oil, a sublime and expensive Moroccan nut oil, for an astoundingly good value £8 a bottle, as well as bags of the spice mix ras el hanout, and real saffron at knock-down prices.

We were taught how to be sure it was real saffron, by taking a single strand, dampening it and rubbing it on our palms. "If it goes orange, it is fake. True saffron turns your skin yellow," our guide explained.

As we strolled out with our bags, women walked purposefully past us carrying trays covered with clean cloths. Lenderking eyed them expertly and said: "This is bread, those are pies and these ones are cookies." He dived off down a narrow alley, and up a set of semolina-strewn steps to lead us through an unmarked doorway to the mosque-run bakery, where for one dirham – about 8p – locals can come and have their home-made goods baked. A man expertly used a 12ft-long paddle to whisk the flat, circular loaves, marked with dimples to identify them, in and out of the wood-burning oven. I would never have found this on my own.



We headed back to the bustle of the Djemaa el-Fna, where in the evening a mini-Soho of stalls springs up selling food to foreigners, while snake charmers and water sellers pose for photographs. But we didn't stop – this is tourist territory. Our goal was the stall in the corner, where a surly man sold us tubs of fermented butter, fragrant as blue cheese and laced with fragments of dried beef. "It's amazing," Lenderking promised.

Back at the hotel it was time to cook. With Fouzia and Keri we cooked ouarka (pronounced

warka), a tissue-paper-thin pastry that is a key ingredient in dishes such as bstilla, a delectable spiced pigeon or chicken pie. Then Saida, Fouzia's colleague, showed us how to roll couscous, rubbing the palms of our hands over a huge dish of semolina and flour until the characteristic fine clumps form.



Taking it in turns to help, we watched her make a seven-vegetable couscous dish, steaming the couscous three times to make it super light.

“When Yotam Ottolenghi came, he baked the couscous. They were scandalised, but it worked beautifully,” Lenderking confided.

Keri was no less revolutionary, taking the intense, butter-soaked dried beef and mixing it with cucumber and a fragrant orange zest and harissa dressing. It was delicious, like a spicy beef jerky salad. We ate the dishes at the long table on the terrace, and gossiped over our new discoveries. Holidays, I reflected, don't get better than this.

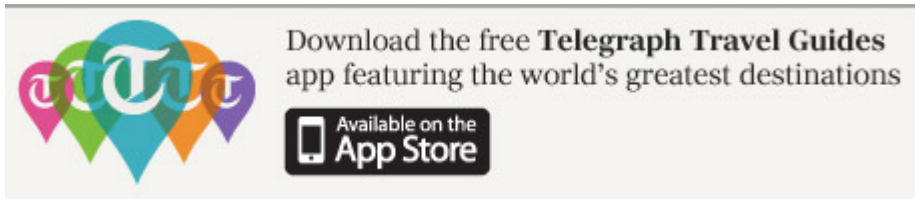
Xanthe Clay travelled with MasterChef Travel (020 7873 5005; mastercheftravel.co.uk), which has a four-night trip to Marrakesh, joined by Keri Moss, the joint winner of MasterChef: The Professionals 2012, from £1,395 per person including flights, transfers, excursions and accommodation with breakfast each day and some lunches and dinners.

MasterChef Travel also offers culinary tours, accompanied by various MasterChef finalists, to China, India, Italy, Mexico, Spain, Thailand, Turkey and Vietnam.

Video: a walking tour of Marrakesh

Watch Xanthe Clay's complete video diary of her culinary journey through the Red City.

Google Glass videos are produced in co-operation with Vistabee (www.vistabee.com)



How we moderate

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2014