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## THE SMART SHOPPER

# MARRAKECH

It was the sight of about a dozen yellow-eyed speckled snakes surrounded by turbanned men swaying to the sound of cacophonous pipes and drums that brought me to a standstill in the bustling expanse of Jemaa el Fna square. For a moment I felt as if I'd been transported to another age, to some exotic place of intrigue and adventure – and that I wasn't simply a 21st-century traveller who'd just arrived on EasyJet.

The snake-owners were nomads, desert dwellers who have learnt to live with snakes – and, in towns, to use them to extract money from fascinated onlookers. Around them, life went on as it has done for centuries. Groups of men squatted around storytellers. Traditional water-sellers in garish red outfits hung with brass mugs shouted into the smoky night air. Laden donkeys trotted through the crowds, their owners exhorting people to make way. The scent of the oranges on sale mingled with the pungent smell of animals and smoke.

Being there, right then, felt like being on the set of a movie. But then, that is what Marrakech has become: a destination reeling out real and manufactured fantasies; part-ancient, part-Disney, where Africa meets Arabia, where fortune-tellers and open-air dentists live cheek-by-jowl in a seething stew of humanity with American heiresses, Italian fashion editors and busloads of tourists led by flag-waving guides.



Go prepared The maze of shops and stalls in Marrakech is enticing – and bewildering

## 10 TOP SPOTS

- 1 Mustapha Blaoui** A warehouse packed with treasures, from lanterns and shawls to leather-clad cabinets.
- 2 L'Art du bain** Home of beautiful handmade organic soaps scented with local flowers and spices.
- 3 Herboriste Avicenne** Century-old herbalist with shelves lined with oils, fragrances, herbs and spices.
- 4 Amira** Chic, minimalist store with candles of every shape and colour, from wax bowls to sets of tiny wax-filled coloured tea glasses.
- 5 Akbar Delights** For delectably embroidered, beaded or finely tucked clothing, notebooks and bags.
- 6 Karim Tassi** Fashionable local boutique near Katabatic, for jewel-coloured jersey and cotton separates, and Florence Teillet, for gossamer-thin cotton and silk shawls and throws.
- 7 Aya's** Where Sarah Jessica Parker buys kaftans in linen, cotton and silk.
- 8 L'Art du Bois** Tiny stall specialising in wooden implements hand-made on site: orange squeezers, spoons, moulds, and ornate kebab sticks.
- 9 Jardin Majorelle** Boutique by Yves St Laurent's garden and lily pond, with babouche slippers crafted from crisp blue-and-white Liberty print.
- 10 Atelier Moro** Quiet space selling covetable gifts, from striped silver coffee spoons to intricate bracelets.

# SECRETS OF THE SOUKS

At last, says **Lisa Grainger**, the confusing labyrinth has been charted in a new book

In the 1950s and 60s, when Churchill brought Roosevelt here to take in the desert scenery, when James Stewart and Doris Day hung out at La Mamounia with Alfred Hitchcock, and when the Rolling Stones were photographed here by Cecil Beaton, this square and the surrounding souks were where local people came to meet and shop. Today, while locals still throng the streets, many of the souk's stalls are clearly designed for foreigners.

And there are hundreds of them, in convoluted mazes: cave-like spaces in which men hammer, weld, sculpt wood, sew and, of course, cajole and seduce passers-by. For the first day or so, getting lost in the maze, taking in shelves stacked with intricately inlaid cedar boxes, glimmering silk babouche slippers, bottles of spices, tribal jewellery, and carefully wrought iron lamps, is a treat. But then confusion sets in. How to tell real from fake? Just where does one find the best?

For the past decade or so, most serious shoppers have relied on a band of fashion-conscious expats – Laetitia Trouillet, Elena Masera, Maryam Montague – to guide them through the souks and source delectable, not-too-ethnic wares. Trouillet is the best-known, the woman called on to take visitors such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Sarah Jessica Parker round the most elegant stores, who knows where to get soft-as-butter shoes in the style of Tod's or Prada (Atika); cool cowboy boots patched with

Berber weaving (Michèle Baconnier); understated modern kaftans in rough white and cream silks (Moor); and seriously hip bags (Trouillet's own boutique).

But since the official local guides recently took exception to foreigners muscling in on their well-paid patch, these expat shopping experts have been legally restricted to running just their own shops or riads and dispensing advice on a non-official basis. Which is why the publication of a new book by American writer Susan Simon, *Shopping Marrakech*, is a godsend to visitors wanting advice from non-partisan sources rather than the official guides, many of whom are paid by touristy shops to bring in custom.

The little book is split into seven walks, each listing a range of shops to stop off at, a recommended lunch stop, and clear directions. It's utterly brilliant. For those who have just one day, I would recommend Walk No 3, into the heart of the old souk. For fashionistas who want high-class fashion, No 7 is best.

Having spent four days walking the souks in search of the city's gems, taking in the advice of guides, fashion editors, local blogs and clued-up residents – as well as frequently looking at the book – I now have an idea of the very best shops [see top right]. Most will ship goods, but getting something sent home often doubles the price.

A smarter idea is simply to take a large empty suitcase.

## HOW TO DO IT

### Where to stay

At a small, owner-run riad in the heart of the city. One of the most charming is **Riad El Cadi** (riadelcadi.com), previously home to the German ambassador, now managed by his daughter, Julia Bartels. Made up of six former houses, three of which can be rented individually, it has shady courtyards, a plunge pool, and among the friendliest staff in the city. Double rooms cost from £120 to £260. For a riad with a private hammam, try **Dar Les Cigognes** (lescigognes.com) or the smaller **Riad Kaiss** (riadkaiss.com). Book through Cazenove & Loyd: three nights' b&b at **Riad El Cadi** costs from £675 per person, including flights from London and airport transfers (020 7484 2332, cazloyd.com). Gatwick/

Marrakech flights cost from £125 return (easyjet.com).

### Where to eat

At **Le Marocain** restaurant in La Mamounia hotel (mamounia.com), overlooking the 17-acre, 200-year-old gardens, serenaded by traditional instrumentalists. For lunch in the souk, head to the chic, casual **Terrasse des Epices** (terrassedeseepices.com), where guests are cooled with fine mists from rooftop sprays.

### And don't forget...

To bargain. Stallholders start high and will negotiate. Decide what you're prepared to pay – and stick to it. Get advice from Laetitia Trouillet (lalla.fr) and find your way around with the indispensable *Shopping Marrakech* by Susan Simon (£12.99, The Little Bookroom).

