

Arabian delights

THE MODERN WORLD HAS SHRUNK; AMERICA AND EUROPE SEEM MUCH NEARER NOW THAN THEY USED TO. IT IS ONLY WHEN WE SET FOOT OUTSIDE OUR COMFORT ZONE OF THE WESTERN WORLD THAT THE DIFFERENCES REALLY BECOME APPARENT

Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/800 sec, f4.5, ISO100



Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/1250 sec, f2.8, ISO100



FACING THE POPULAR Spanish resorts of Malaga, Majorca and Alicante, on the other side of the Mediterranean, is North Africa. At its narrowest, the Strait of Gibraltar separates Spain from Morocco by just 13km (8 miles), but travelling this short distance will take you from the western world of clubs and bars, to the Arabic world of mosques, riads and bazaars.

Morocco became a protectorate of France in 1912 and French is still the most widely spoken language after Arabic and Berber. Independence came

in 1956, and in the 50s, 60s and 70s a sort of louche glamour pervaded Moroccan tourism, with the likes of William S. Burroughs, Joe Orton and Kenneth Williams visiting to experience the 'exotic'.

Marrakech, one of the great cities of Morocco, is centred on a large fortified old town, the Medina. This dates back to the 11th century and many of its streets are too narrow for horse-drawn carts let alone cars or buses. Regulations prohibit the building of any structures taller than a palm tree and all exterior walls must be painted the same shade of ochre, leading to Marrakech being affectionately known as the Red City.

After travelling by modern jet, followed by an air-conditioned car, arriving in Marrakech came as a bit of a shock, it's a bit like stepping back to medieval times. The best way of getting around is on foot, but watch your back as motorbikes and bicycles speed along the alleyways and they don't stop for anyone. On arrival our luggage was

Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/1600 sec, f3.1, ISO100



taken up winding allies on a handcart, before we were dropped off at a large wooden doorway which opened to welcome us into our riad.

Riads are popular alternatives to hotels in Morocco. These often luxurious buildings are traditional houses built around a central garden or courtyard. This inward looking design leaves exterior walls bare, making many buildings appear featureless from the outside. Inside however they are havens of calm and tranquillity furnished with rich carpets and intricate hanging metal lamps. Riads became popular with the rise of Islam as, apart from offering protection from heat and noise, the inward focus gave privacy and the lack of any ostentatious display of wealth showed sensitivity to the feelings of less affluent neighbours. These days, many riads have been turned into restaurants, or are available to rent as holiday homes complete with cooking and cleaning staff who can also be called on to arrange local guides and excursions.

The best way to see the Marrakech is to take one of the 300 horse-drawn carriages, or caleches, in the city. These can be found queued up near the main square, the Place Djemaa el Fna, and being painted bright green are easily spotted. They bomb along at a fare speed, so take care as not much thought seems to be given to safety. When our driver was in a shop, the horse pulling our caleche bolted taking us with it. If it wasn't for the quick thinking of my travelling companion who grabbed the reigns we might have caused a pileup.



Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/1600 sec, f3.5, ISO100



Olympus E-410, 35mm Macro lens, 1/20 sec, f3.5, ISO400

Place Djemaa el Fna

Marrakech's irregularly shaped main square is fascinating during the day when it is home to snake charmers and acrobats, and market stalls selling everything from slippers to spices. It really comes alive when the sun goes down and dozens of food stalls spring up. Tempting though they are, it is best to avoid eating prepared food from market vendors, as sometimes, even if the food has been prepared safely, plates will have been washed in dirty water increasing the risk of food poisoning.



Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/1000 sec, f4, ISO100



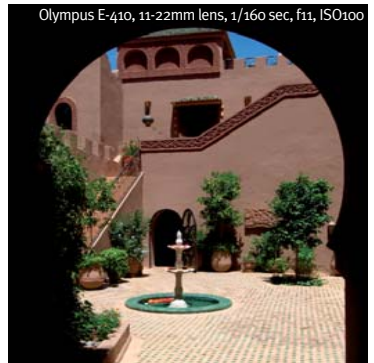
Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/4 sec, f16, ISO100



Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/60 sec, f11, ISO100

Ali ben Youssef Medersa

Dating from 1565, this theological school is the oldest and largest of its kind in Morocco. Whilst no longer used for religious teaching, it retains an atmosphere of tranquillity and holiness. Grand marble courtyards decorated with intricate plasterwork and mosaics are connected by cool corridors and stairwells of ornately carved cedar wood.



Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/160 sec, f11, ISO100



Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/10 sec, f2.8, ISO400, 6000K White Balance

Jardin Majorelle

Often referred to as the Yves-Saint Laurent Gardens, these are thought by many to be the most beautiful gardens in Marrakech. They were originally created by the French painter Jacques Majorelle and first opened to the public in 1947. The designer Yves-Saint Laurent bought the gardens in 1980 and founded a small museum of Islamic art. This lush subtropical garden combines statuesque palms, ornamental ponds and towering cacti with traditional Moroccan architecture, much of which is painted the signature 'Majorelle blue'.

Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/800 sec, f4, ISO100



Olympus E-410, 14-42mm lens, 1/40 sec, f4.5, ISO100

Kasbah Tamadot

Near the village of Asni in the High Atlas Mountains is Kasbah Tamadot. Temptingly billed as 'Sir Richard Branson's Moroccan Retreat', Tamadot is a magical walled complex of courtyards and rose gardens that affords spectacular views across the mountains and the valley below. Offering first class cuisine and spa treatments that include a traditional hammam – a sort of a sauna in which you get covered in mud – Tamadot is possibly the ultimate riad and a wonderful place to stay.

Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/15 sec, f2.8, ISO800





Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/160 sec, f9, ISO100

The Atlas Mountains

The Atlas Mountains are the backbone of Morocco and trips can usually be arranged through your guide, hotel or riad. Take extra care when on mountain walks or when pony trekking, the terrain can be very rough and it is easy to fall. Remember to take bottled water to avoid dehydration. Always check that suitable safety equipment is supplied when booking excursions.

The souks

With fabulous handmade carpets, piles of spices and fossils from the Sahara, Marrakech's maze of covered alleyways lined with stalls looks like something from the pages of The Arabian Knights. Great bargains can be had, if you are prepared to haggle. Market traders are nowhere near as pushy as they used to be, but if you stop to browse expect to be pounced on!

Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/2000 sec, f3.5, ISO1600



toptips

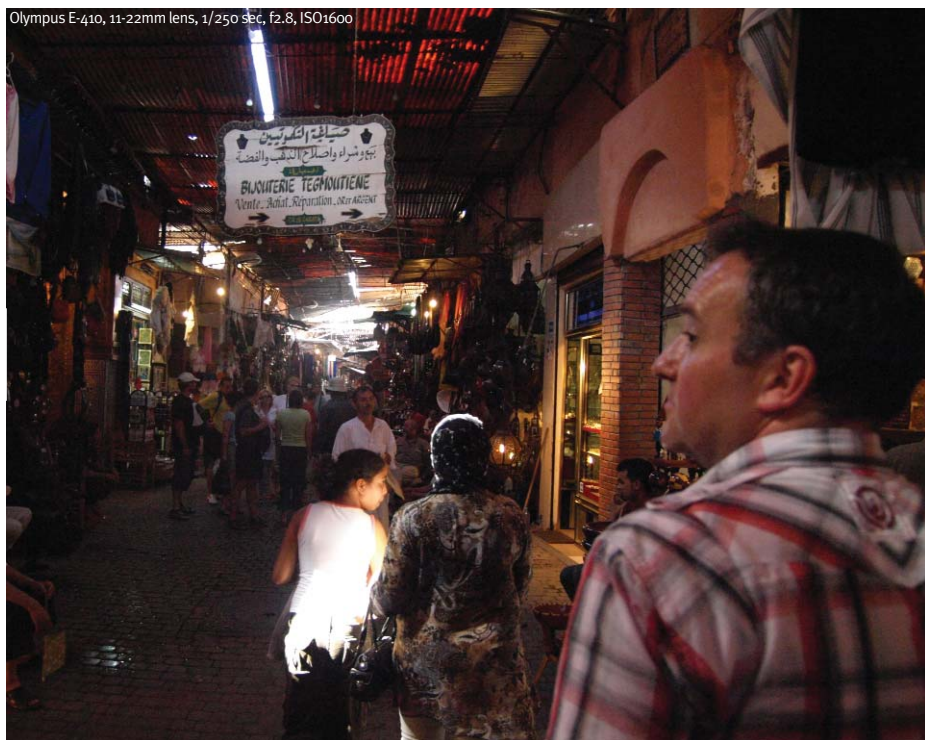
Here are our top tips for getting great photos in the souks

- 1** On visiting the souks for the first time try to resist the temptation to rush out with your camera straight away, give yourself a few hours to explore and get to know your subject first.
- 2** Stall holders, snake-charmers, and other locals may expect payment in exchange for allowing you to take their photos. This is an important way for them to supplement their incomes and paying just a few Dirham could mean that you get some great photographs.
- 3** Just putting a camera up to your eye can be enough to trigger unwanted attention, so try shooting from the hip instead. Just hang your camera loosely around your neck as if you aren't taking photos, holding it against your body with one hand. Then, as you walk along, you can point it roughly in the right direction to get your photo and discretely press the shutter release.
- 4** Digital SLRs can be quite bulky and noticeable in very busy crowded environments; you may find that using a compact camera is both more comfortable and quicker.
- 5** Souks can be very dark and using a tripod simply isn't practical as it would get in the way of the crowds. So use a high ISO setting to give shutter speeds that are fast enough to hand hold.

Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/250 sec, f9, ISO100



Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/400 sec, f2.8, ISO1800



Olympus E-410, 11-22mm lens, 1/250 sec, f2.8, ISO1600