

YOUR holiday tips

MARRAKECH: by Luciano di Gregorio



MYSTIFYING yet tangible, Marrakech, Morocco's primary tourist destination, seems at once a manifestation of a desert fairytale from a children's book and an intimidating city where your wits are best kept about you.

Despite this, I took myself for an evening stroll to Djemaa el-Fna, the town's main square. A few years ago, UNESCO acknowledged this great spectacle of life as 'a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity'. Reading this square's description in a travel guide prior to departure and allowing the mind to wander childishly, I conjured up images of a mass of writhing human beings flitting across the scorching pavement of a crowded square.

The reality is not far from this but combines a blend of donkeys, horses and snake charmers; young girls carrying the family's daily bread on a tray above their heads and dancing men and women in 'traditional' dress (though what we dub 'traditional' would have the locals confused: they're just everyday clothes!).

Dusk is the only time of day the tourists leave the square in droves for the more 'comfortable' surroundings of dinner in a chain hotel and the locals converge on it in an attempt to reclaim their space.

For the third evening in a row, I immerse myself into the theatrics of the magical Djemaa el-Fna: the smoke of roasted meat, the smells of dried figs and apricots, the splashes of colour from the market stalls and the contradiction that is old fellows in Tuareg scarves and young women wearing the freedom of Moroccan Islam with an uninhibited display of pride.

It's not long before I begin to be gradually overcome with emotion. There's a sense of eeriness in the muezzin's hypnotising call to prayer, at once both mellow and imposing, as it resounds all over the city.

I travelled to Morocco cheaply with Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) and stayed at Riad Chouia Chouia, 40, rue Fahl Zefritt, El Ksour, Médina. Call 00212 62 09 36 29 or visit www.riad-chouiachouia.com