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Drama and colour in this intense city

ELISE BREWERTON relaxes with a massage and delicious food amidst the drama and intensity of Marrakech.

Everything about Marrakech is dramatic. The desert heat, the wail of the call to prayer from the Koutoubia mosque and the riot of colour that explodes from the carpets, pottery and robes for sale in the tangle of alleyways that make up the souks. I don't believe anything can really prepare you for the intensity of this city. Certainly not a guidebook.

We abandoned ours after spending two hours lost in the souks on the first night. We ended up outside the city walls and had to pay a young chap to take us back to the main square!

Next day we hired a guide, the avuncular Abdul Haque, who spent five hours with us, taking us to traditional bakeries and schools – the kind of places we would have missed if we'd been on our own. And all for just £5.

We made the journey to Yves St Laurent's former home, Majorelle Gardens, on the outskirts of city in a horse-and-carriage, which was great fun.

The home and gardens are beautiful, but admission cost around £5 and you can only spend 20 minutes there before you've seen every-

thing.

During the day the Medina is packed full of snake-charmers and old men dragging monkeys around to sit on the shoulders of tourists keen for a holiday snap.

Offensive to our British sensibilities, but there's no way of ignoring it here. Abdul was offended by our questioning of this practice.

The drama continues at night with orange juice sellers desperate for you to buy from their stall with plenty of banter.

The funniest, done in a Cockney accent, was: 'Come on love, it's Asda price!' It gave us the giggles.

The palaces are stunning and there is so much to learn about the Muslim and Berber culture.

Marrakech is intoxicating but non-stop. So our luxury hotel *Sirayane*, a 15-minute car ride away, was like an oasis in the desert.

Upon arrival at the new £5m hotel, we were greeted with mint tea and delicious crumbly almond biscuits. The atmosphere was so serene and quiet, perfect for pure relaxation.

The rooms are beautifully furnished with expensive modern Italian furniture in

muted tones.

Every day roses petals were scattered artfully across the bed and even though I was with my best friend it was probably one of the most romantic hotels I've ever been to.

The pool area is beautiful and the music and modern sun beds give it a very cool, LA kind of vibe.

The hotel restaurant held its own against the expensive restaurants we visited in upmarket Marrakech.

The tagines were sublime, full of juicy apricots and prunes and there was a good wine list. Expect to pay around £40 for two courses and a bottle.

The hotel has an incredible spa where I had the Relaxing Massage – just heaven.

But what really makes the hotel is the staff.

Nothing is too much trouble. We realised, after being upgraded to a suite on our last day (with a private pool, pure luxury) that the patio door lock was broken. It was 11pm and they fixed it immediately.

A bus service runs every few hours into the Medina. But beware, you must book and it won't wait for you if you're late. A taxi ride can

cost up to £12.

The owner, former investment banker Mehdi Bennani Smires, made a point of chatting to guests every evening.

It was a nice touch that made us feel very much at home in this little oasis of luxury in the desert.

ESSENTIALS

Rates at the Sirayane Boutique Hotel & Spa start from 160 euros per night for a double room with a private terrace on a bed and breakfast basis.

To book, go to sirayane.com, e-mail contact@sirayane.com or call +212 5 25 11 88 80. Staff speak very good English.

Elise flew with easyJet, which flies to Marrakech from Gatwick twice-daily, seven days a week.

Return flights start from £79.99 and include all taxes.

Go to easyJet.com to book.

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The main pool seen
from the Sirayane
Boutique Hotel & Spa,
Marrakech