

The magic of Marrakech

The outskirts of Marrakech are home to an ever-growing collection of very fine golf courses. But as Rob Smith discovers, the ancient city itself has much to offer besides the golf...

Having visited Morocco several times in recent years to sample its golf in a number of locations, I was excited to return recently to try something new and different. Or more accurately, something *old* and different; the chance to stay for a few days in one of the refurbished riads dotted among the oldest part of the nation's fourth-largest city, Marrakech.

Getting on for almost a thousand years old, this bustling, lively, exotic metropolis has long been a draw for the more adventurous traveller. Now, with sub four-hour flights from all over the UK, it has become a firm favourite for visits of any duration. Its golfing portfolio has expanded rapidly to meet growing demand, and there is a pleasing variety of styles, with most courses benefiting from the beautiful backdrop of the Atlas Mountains.

At the heart of Marrakech lies the Medina, the age-old walled city from which everything else developed. This rabbit warren of narrow streets and alleyways is packed with ancient buildings, shops full to bursting, authentic restaurants and a number of surprising oases – its riads. From the Arabic for garden, they are essentially square buildings with a central open area that provides cooler air and shade away from the searing mid-summer heat.

You can stroll down almost any passageway oblivious to the fact that behind the doors and shuttered windows lie some of the city's most original and characterful properties, each offering a haven from the hustle and bustle outside. Many have been converted into small, boutique hotels, providing a compelling contrast to the more spacious and luxurious accommodation around the city, especially

for couples and small groups. I was fortunate enough to stay in Riad Lhenat a short walk from the main square. This delightful property, with excellent food and service, is part of the expanding but specialist Origin Hotels chain, offering something distinct and individual.

The main square is a beguiling mix of sights, sounds and smells, and is packed with vendors, showmen with their snakes and monkeys and food stalls serving delicious, inexpensive and authentic fare. This really is quite unlike the majority of mainstream golfing destinations and I was captivated by it all.

However, I was also here to play some golf. Dating back to the 1920s, the original 18 holes at Royal Marrakech were remodelled in 1933 by a group of golfers including 1907 Open champion Arnaud Massy. They run through mature woodland featuring pine, →



Royal Palm, Marrakech



eucalyptus, palm, olive and even orange trees. The newer Menara nine opened a few years ago, with the drive on the 4th playing over what looks like an old lido. There is a much-photographed and unique short hole, known for politically incorrect reasons as 'Brigitte Bardot' due to two large mounds protecting the entrance to the green. I was very pleased to finish with a two-putt par here.

Excellent newcomers

Assoufid has not been open long but is already recognised as a top-notch course. I was particularly taken with Niall Cameron's inviting, desert-style design. The holes blend naturally with the site's gently undulating, and seemingly secluded, location, and there are several standout holes. The par-4 7th is an excellent dogleg left; the 10th calls for a heroic approach over a dry river bed; the par 5s at 13 and 14 offer chances and I loved the short 17th from an elevated tee over a gully to a wide but shallow green, protected front and back by sand. Over a delicious lunch on the terrace, I determined that this was a new course destined to simply get better and better.

For some reason, I was expecting less from the relatively short nine-holer at Atlas, but how wrong I was. Presented in arguably the best condition of all on my trip, it is a charming course with cactus plants, beautiful shrubbery and very attractive ponds. With one long hole, three par 4s and five very varied short holes, it is an ideal 'start or end of tour' venue and a real joy. Even though we had played elsewhere that morning, I would happily have played a second nine here had time allowed.

The club is also blessed with a superb restaurant to which we returned that evening for a meal that would have thrilled the keenest of gourmets. Specialising in the tastiest regional dishes, everything was superbly



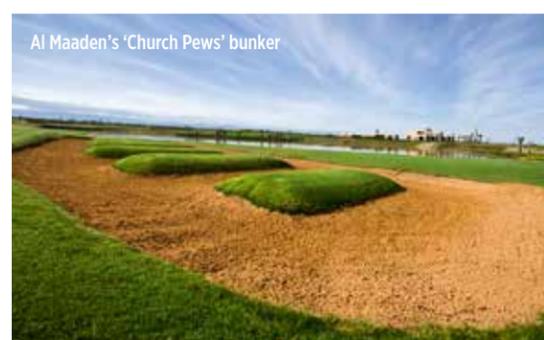
cooked and presented, and complemented by fine local wines.

One of today's foremost golf architects is Kyle Phillips, creator of both Kingsbarns and The Grove. His Al Maaden design features deep bunkers, and works its way round some angular water hazards, which also store water for irrigation. Maintained in tip-top order, it is generally regarded as one of the best in the area, and the closing hole is a real feature with trouble everywhere, including a replica of Oakmont's 'Church Pews' bunkers.

Another American with a highly respected course portfolio is Cabell Robinson. He designed the Blue and Red nines at Amelkis 20 years ago before adding the Green nine in 2009. Seven lakes and numerous bunkers provide the challenge, but it's never too punishing and will appeal to golfers of all levels.

Monty's Moroccan creation

Former Ryder Cup captain and now multiple Senior Major winner, Colin Montgomerie, has designed a new course, which bears his name, close to the airport. It will improve when the adjacent building works are finished and the grasses bed in more, but it is already a proper test of golf and a more than adequate challenge.



The par-5 3rd and short 4th are both flanked by water on the left, but elsewhere it is generally not too intrusive, though it did catch my pulled approaches to the closing two holes.

Two very new developments are also worth watching out for. Noria is a par-72 desert-style course designed by Hills and Forrest, which, as with Al Maaden, features some remarkable water hazards. The Troon-managed Ourika course looks set to offer yet more top-drawer golf, coming from the same team that runs Palm Golf, formerly known as Palmeraie.

Palm has three contrasting loops of nine with the original two (Jbilettes and Atlas) designed by Robert Trent Jones Senior in the

"At Royal Palm, the Atlas Mountains form a truly spectacular backdrop on one side"

early 1990s. The resident egret population is so vast, it's like golfing in a benign version of Hitchcock's *The Birds!* More recently Stéphane Talbot has designed a further nine (Tensift) on ground beyond an old flood barrier. Each of the three loops is distinct and highly enjoyable.

Arguably the toughest test in Marrakech is the slightly more undulating Jack Nicklaus creation at Samanah, his only Moroccan design. It features the trademark Nicklaus mounding, many large but attractive water hazards and excellent conditioning with superb but demanding greens. It is long off the backs, so choose wisely to maximise your fun.

The best of both worlds

Virtually next door is another Cabell Robinson design, the splendid Royal Palm. It opened less than two years ago and offers perfect holiday golf and more. There is terrific variety and it is enjoyably testing without being too penal, albeit with a handful of very challenging holes. I rate the excellent par 3s at 6 and 17 very

highly, and as elsewhere, the Atlas Mountains form a truly spectacular backdrop on one side. I was lucky enough to stay in its luxurious and extremely stylish hotel on a previous visit. With its exceptional restaurant, this makes for a top-notch, top-end golfing retreat.

With year-round sunshine and easy access from the UK, Marrakech offers a great deal for the travelling golfer; an alternative to continental Europe yet not much further away. The accommodation surrounding the city is plentiful and restful, but for the real deal, I would heartily recommend a few nights in one of the Medina's enchanting riads.

They offer something traditional and intriguing – a feeling that you have stepped back in time to somewhere unique and other-worldly. Better still, for the best of both worlds, split your stay between a riad in the throbbing heart of the city, and the more refined atmosphere on offer elsewhere. For the discerning golfer looking for something out of the ordinary, Marrakech is hard to beat.

Palm Golf



ESSENTIALS

Where to play

■ Al Maaden

W: almaaden.com

GF: £49

■ Amelkis

W: golfamelkis.com

GF: £49

■ Assoufid

W: assoufid.com

GF: £56

■ Atlas

W: atlasgolfmarrakech.com

GF: £40

■ Montgomerie Marrakech

W: prestigiagolf.com

GF: £46

■ Ourika

W: palmgolfourika.com

GF: £49 inc buggy with GPS

■ Palm Golf

W: palmgolfmorocco.com

GF: £43 inc buggy with GPS

■ Royal Marrakech

W: royalgolfmarrakech.com

GF: £43

■ Royal Palm

W: domaineroyalpalm.com

GF: £33 residents, £62 non-residents

■ Samanah

W: samanah.com

GF: £48

Where to stay

■ Origin Hotels

W: originhotels.com

For the authentic Medina experience, there are several small hotels in this chain, and golfing packages can be arranged.

How to get there

Many airlines including EasyJet (easyjet.com), Royal Air Maroc (royalairmaroc.com) and BA (ba.com) run services to Marrakech from various UK airports. Find out more at visitmorocco.com



A typical riad