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Exotic but Cozy, A Moroccan Port Is a Second Home

By GISELA WILLIAMS

IT'S the kind of place one first hears about in a yoga class, discussed in heated whispers between sun salutations. Or while eavesdropping on two model types with French accents in a cafe. About 10 years ago that place might have been Tulum, Mexico, but these days it's Essaouira, a tiny white-walled port city on Morocco's Atlantic coast.

While Marrakesh is increasingly attracting stylish travelers from all over Europe to North Africa, the stylish expatriates of Marrakesh drive two hours to Essaouira (pronounced ess-ah-WEER-ah) for the weekend to escape the crowds. "I think of Essaouira as the beach of Marrakesh," said an American transplant, Nancy Bridger, over coffee in Pâtisserie Driss, known for its brusque service but Paris-worthy croissants.

Ms. Bridger, a former film set designer from Los Angeles, arrived in Essaouira five years ago, searching for a new life after divorce. She tried Martinique and then the south of France, but when she arrived at this intimate seaside city with its "cast of characters," she said she fell in love it.

"Within two weeks, I had found a ruin out in the countryside, bought it, renovated it, and lived in it for two years," Ms. Bridger said, adding that she has since sold that house to a British couple who are using it as a second home.

Ms. Bridger is just one of many free spirits who in the last few years have become so captivated by Essaouira that they dropped their old lives to move here. But if you ask them what it is about the place that instigated such a dramatic life change, the answers can be frustratingly vague.

"I felt something very special," said Cyril Ladeuil, a former commercial engineer in Paris, while sipping mint tea in the living room of the eccentric hostel he owns, La Maison des Artistes. "When I returned to Paris after my first visit here, I thought every day of living here."

Anne-Marie Dupré, an artist from Paris, said much the same. Surrounded by her fairy-tale collages in her colorful Moroccan tiled apartment, she admitted that the low cost of living was a big part of it.

"Sometimes I work a lot, sometimes I spend the day walking along the beach," she said. "In France, as an artist I couldn't eat, but here if I don't sell my work I can still survive."

It's easier to understand the city's appeal by wandering along its picturesque ramparts (the name Essaouira is thought to be derived from the Arabic word for "ramparts" but translates as "little image") or while people-watching from one of the cafes on the Place Mouley Hassan, which looks out onto the port's animated fish market and stalls. Seagulls are continuously wheeling overhead, their cries occasionally silenced by the muezzin's call, and the backdrop of the azure sky contrasts appealingly against the white buildings and sand-colored fortifications.

There is a gentle breeze of Europe about Essaouira; it has more open spaces and wider streets than most Moroccan cities. In fact, much of its footprint was laid out and designed in the mid-1700's by a French architect, Théodore Cornut, by order of Sultan Sidi Mohamed ben Abdallah.

While the medina hums all day long with spice, food and crafts sellers, it is relatively small, easy to navigate and hassle free. ("No one has ever been rude to me," Ms. Bridger said. "Essaouira is as safe as pie.") And thanks to a decree against vehicles in the streets, Essaouira's medina is considered the cleanest in the country.

"It's Morocco at its most easy and relaxed," said Mariangela Catalani, a cheerful tourist from Florence digging into fresh lobster at a table in Les Bretons du Sud, or Ali's, as everyone knows it, a tented fish stall by the harbor.

Just a block or two inland from the fish market is a tiny garden square featuring a bust of the filmmaker Orson Welles, a monument to the city's occasional brushes with fame. Welles was one of the first international personalities to be lured by Essaouira's charm; in 1949 he spent several months here filming scenes along the ramparts for "Othello" and waiting for financing at the bar of Hotel des Îles (the bar at this hotel, once grand but now faded, is named after him, as is the town square).

Two decades later, Essaouira became an important stop on the hippie trail; both Cat Stevens and Jimi Hendrix spent evenings strumming guitars around bonfires on the beach. It's said that the inspiration for Hendrix's anthem "Castles Made of Sand" is a decayed ruin sinking slowly into the waves across the bay. Eight years ago, the birth of the annual Essaouira Festival of Gnaoua and World Music (from June 23 to 26 this year; see www.festival.gnaoua.co.ma) brought musicians back in force.

Then, American filmmakers started to return. In 2003, the filming of Oliver Stone's "Alexander" brought such stars as Angelina Jolie and Colin Farrell to town, and last year "Kingdom of Heaven," directed by Ridley Scott and starring Orlando Bloom, was partly filmed in and around Essaouira.

"They hung out here a lot," confided Emma Wilson, who moved here from Britain, about the cast and crew of "Kingdom of Heaven" over dinner at Taros, Essaouira's hippest meeting point. "Especially on the terrace, which is a complete scene when the sun is out."

As if on cue, she and her partner, Graham Carter, were joined by Taros's bon vivant proprietor, Alain Fillaud. "The best party is the one we are having now," he proclaimed. "And I will say the same tomorrow."

Mr. Fillaud took over the two-story restaurant in 2002 and has been on site ever since, chatting up and charming first-time guests and regulars alike. Talk soon turned to the topic of the moment: a conglomeration of hotel groups, including Accor, which owns the Sofitel chain, has purchased almost 900 acres across the bay to develop a golf course, holiday villas and apartments and six upmarket hotels -- a total of 8,000 beds -- by 2010.

Ms. Wilson and Mr. Carter, although opposed to the project, are waiting to see how it develops. (They own two homes in the medina that they rent out to visitors.)

"The big draw here is definitely the people," Ms. Wilson said. "But if things change, we can always sell and move somewhere else."

Later, Mr. Fillaud said he was cautiously optimistic about Essaouira's future. "It won't turn into Agadir," Mr. Fillaud said, referring to Morocco's mass-tourism beach destination. "But it might be a St.-Tropez or a Mykonos."

But for now, it's still Essaouira.

WEEKENDS OF SOUKS AND SAND CASTLES

Getting there

Royal Air Maroc, (800) 344-6726, www.royalairmaroc.com/eng/, flies from Kennedy International to Marrakesh five days a week and to Essaouira twice a week via Casablanca; fares start about \$900 round trip. The two-hour trip from Marrakesh is about \$70, at 8.8 dirham to the dollar, by taxi and \$6 by Supratours bus, (212-44) 43 55 25.

Where to Stay

Emma Wilson rents Dar Emma, 24, rue Laalouj Essaouira; (44-77) 68 35 21 90 or (212-67) 96 53 86, www.castlesinthesand.com, her cozy four-story house with two double bedrooms in the medina for \$960 to \$1,150 a week, at \$1.92 to the British pound.

Villa Maroc, 10, rue Abdellah Ben Yassine; (212-44) 47 61 47; www.villamaroc.com, has 20 rooms and a central open courtyard. Doubles start at \$100.

The new six-room Madada Mogador, 5, rue Youssef el Fassi; (212-44) 47 55 12; www.madada.com, has a terrace with Atlantic views. Rooms from \$130.

Where to Eat

Taros, Place Mouley Hassan; (212-44) 47 64 07, is Essaouira's most stylish hangout and its large terrace is crowded all day during sunny weather. Dinner for two without wine is about \$45.

You'll find cheap and tasty Moroccan food (about \$10 a person without wine) at Restaurant Ferdaouss, 27, rue Abd Essalam Lebadi; (212-44) 47 36

55.

For grilled fish straight from the sea, go to Ali's Les Bretons du Sud fish stall, (212-67) 19 42 34, in the port. A hearty meal usually costs under \$10.

What to Do

Some visitors get a rush from racing through the sand dunes on quad bikes, motorized off-road vehicles that can be rented at Cap Quad, in Diabet, (212-66) 25 21 45, www.capessaouira.com (click on Trekking); \$65 for three hours.

Others prefer to explore the endless coastline by foot or camel. Camels are available through Cap Sim Trekking, (212-62) 20 18 98 and www.capessaouira.com (under Trekking) for about \$40 for four hours and lunch.

Ocean Vagabond, (212-61) 13 56 44, www.oceanvagabond.com, a surfer hangout and cafe on the beach, rents windsurfing equipment (\$65 a day) and surfboards. GISELA WILLIAMS

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