

CONTRASTS OF MARRAKECH

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I was off to Marrakech on a one week escape from a frosty North European winter. A hectic schedule up to the moment of our departure prevented me from the usual Lonely Planet read.

Instead I brought with me a handful of newspaper articles highlighting the top of the pops of the must see collection for when you're in town for a long weekend.

Also, I presumed I was going to experience some of the contrasts between the Islamic world of North Africa and general Western cultural influence.

In the following days we took in as much of the charm and beauty of Marrakech as we possibly could. Soon, I was thinking of everything but contrasts - just enjoying the sun and the city.

One thing I particularly enjoyed was the visit to the Majorelle Gardens. Essentially, it is a large blue house with a magnificent botanical garden.

Majorelle's claim to fame lies with its former owner, the French designer extraordinaire, Yves Saint Laurent, who bought the place in the 1970s.

What really gives the Majorelle Gardens its magic touch is the very special bold cobalt blue colour which is used on the walls surrounding the place and on most parts of the house.

What also struck me was the tranquillity of the place. You simply ventured into another world when you went through the gates of the Gardens.

Another remarkable place in Marrakech was the Jeema El Fna Square which forms the centre of Marrakech.

We had our first meal in Morocco on the first floor of a restaurant overlooking the square, and we visited the square many times during that week.

At first the square appeared as a bit of a tourist trap with eager merchants doing their best to rip off naïve tourists trawling the place in their quest for souvenirs. But I soon realised that there was much more to the Square.

In between the snake charmers, the musicians, the street vendors with their 'special price' call and the postcards stalls, locals were quite simply living their regular lives – meeting, chatting, laughing, having coffee, eating - and the Square was a part of that life.

On our return flight I realised I had forgotten all about my initial thoughts on cultural contrasts. I had quite simply enjoyed myself and Marrakech.

Two months later, Marrakech was hit by a terrorist bomb. It exploded on the first floor of Restaurant Argana, a popular spot for locals and tourists alike. More than a dozen people were killed.

I soon realised that we had had our first meal in Morocco on that very same first floor, overlooking the Square. Sadly, there was contrast for you!

The images of destruction that we all saw on TV, orchestrated by violent religious nutters, were a far cry from my images of the peaceful city I had just visited. This was not what Marrakech was about.

Still, I would not hesitate to go back.

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