



Against time

Prompted by rumours that the Moroccan port resort of Essaouira was about to succumb to overdevelopment, BARNABY ROGERSON went to look for himself – and was delighted by what he found

Do you know the dirge of the ancient traveller? Like Coleridge's 'ancient Mariner' the ancient traveller grabs hold of you and hisses, 'Ruined, totally ruined, you should have seen it in my youth' at any romantic destination in which you express an interest. Even so, I was alarmed to hear that Essaouira is now burdened with an airport, and plans for a marina and 40 beach hotels on a site which includes the ruins of the eighteenth-century Sultan's palace. So I went back to check for myself, lest I join the number of grey-beard loons that depress prospective travellers.

My route, via a friend who has just moved into a courtyard palace surrounded by *bidonville* slums in Casablanca, and the festival of sacred music at Fez, was idiosyncratic but worked out beautifully. For I approached Essaouira – a crescent of white houses enfolded by dunes, forest and the sea – across the Arcadian simplicity of the Moroccan countryside, having travelled all day through the intense activity of harvest time. Arriving this way, you appreciate the bright lights of this port-resort-town for what they are – an oasis of urban civilization on the edge of a vast agricultural continent.

The town is quite simply an eighteenth-century masterpiece, the result of a brilliant double act of committed patron and dedicated architect. It is as if Charles II and Wren had decided to build Brighton, though in the case of Essaouira, once Mogador, it was Sultan Sidi Mohammed ben Abdellah and el-Aleuj (the Frenchman Théodore Cournut). But what gives it a double enchantment is that the elegance of public squares, arcades and bastions coexists with the traditional pattern of subterranean passages, vaulted alleys and courtyard houses.

The latter were built when Essaouira was a boom town, the gateway into the Sahara, packed full of European consuls, Jewish traders, West African soldier-slaves and Berbers. This multicultural sophistication has seemingly never left the town, which has a new eminence as a centre for Morocco's sub-Saharan-inspired Gnawa music and its

ABOVE Wooden fishing boats still jostle in the fortified harbour at Essaouira, on the Atlantic coast



derivative – a whole new artistic school of trance-inspired art. This has been married to an old expertise in carpentry, so that the streets are filled with the bold colours of carpets and naive art and scented with thuja wood. The other abiding aroma is fish. The harbour remains packed full of fishing boats and boat builders, while outside the handsome custom-house gates you are assailed with wafts of grilled fish and glittering displays of shellfish.

The whole concept of a Moroccan house hotel – the so-called riad phenomenon – was first invented in Essaouira. It has provided the resources to restore new life to dozens of eighteenth-century courtyard houses, while the inflow of well-heeled guests has given a breath of life to the small traders as opposed to the habitual Moroccan conspiracy of guides employed by commission-paying bazaars. The two riads I tried out on this recent visit offered a perfect contrast: Dar Loulema was white-washed and intimate (and does a good trade in family bookings), while Heure Bleue Palais is a chic hotel, with pool and bar on its roof, elegant doormen, clove-scented bedrooms filled with baskets of fruit and a candle-lit dining room, all fitted into a lovely old courtyard house.

The Atlantic coast of Morocco may one day be covered in hotels and apartments, so that the route from Agadir to Casablanca becomes another Costa Brava. For the moment, it remains a vision of untouched sandy bays and empty headlands with a scattering of tiny fishing villages ornamented with the odd surfers'-shack café. Go now so that in future years you also can boast of the time when the rare Eleanora's falcon nested on the isles of Mogador and the old Sultan's seaside palace was still covered in sand □

ways & means

Barnaby Rogerson travelled as a guest of **Abercrombie & Kent** (tel: 0845-070 0612, website: www.abercrombiekent.co.uk). Five nights at **Dar Loulema** cost from £595 per person; a similar stay at **Heure Bleue Palais** costs from £915 per person – both on a B&B basis and including flights and transfers.