



Need to know

Tony Turnbull was a guest of MasterChef Travel (020-7873 5005, mastercheftravel.com), which has a four-night trip to Marrakech, joined by *MasterChef: The Professionals* 2012 joint winner Keri Moss, priced from £1,395pp, including flights, transfers, excursions and accommodation with breakfast daily and some lunches and dinners

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Gourmet breaks

MasterChef takes on Morocco

The hit cookery show now runs foodie holidays. Times food editor Tony Turnbull heads to Marrakech on the first trip

It is normal when you ask what you want to eat, to be told "chicken". For the record, I cannot eat chicken at all. The consensus around our table was that it was more like veal, albeit a veal called on desert wind rather than its mother's milk. Mild, matty, with perhaps the slightest hint of sweet, but really very good. The fermented butter was much better than we expected, too. That is, delicate, that traditionally layered on the ground at your daughter's birth and only dug up again on the day she marries comes with low expectations, but this, a considerably less aged version, added its savoury moreishness to both a lamb stew and an unusual dish of quail and shredded pancakes.

The sheep's head, on the other hand, took no one by surprise. It was quite as disgusting as we all feared. This particular plate came courtesy of a lambchop shop, the site of Marrakech's main square, Jemaa el Fna. We had started with bread, olive oil and a fiery hot sauce paste, then mchouli

lamb roasted in an underground furnace and served with the same salt that serves as ubiquitous seasoning here in Morocco. So far so good, the lamb as delicious as can be, meaty, you could slice with a spoon, the skin crisp and charred. The sheep's head, though, defeated us all, a range of grates, gristle and bones that tasted of pure fear, and not a very clean one at that. Still, you don't go to Morocco on a food-fetters holiday, without sticking your neck out sometimes. Mostly your courage will be rewarded, but it is well to remember that Moroccan cooking isn't Orthodox-style rose water and hazelnut chicken or salads scattered with feta-granule seeds. Sometimes it needs a few tweaks to suit Western palates.

Luckily, we had our own celebrity chef on hand to iron out any knots. A new venture called MasterChef Travel means that we can now travel the world with past winners and finalists from the TV show as our guide. So there might be David Baker, the 2000 winner, escorting guests around Mexico and India (where he was respectively born and brought up), or Ash Ward, the 2011 Professionals champion, showing you around Spain.

For our five days in Marrakech, we had Keri Moss, winner of *MasterChef: The Professionals* in 2012. If she has won over the hearts of *Michel Roux Jr*, she was sure to be able to do the same with us. MasterChef Travel is very keen to stress that this is not a competitive holiday. No one's going to be best, home early bought for messing up their tagine and, to misquote Gregg Wallace, cooking certainly does get tougher than this. In fact, there's not really a great deal of cooking to be done at all, with the only hands-on activity

limited to one morning. This is more of a gentle exploration of a destination through the medium of food. After our three-hour flight from London we started with a wine tasting at the hotel, Dar Les Caprices is traditional riad in the Jewish quarter, outside the walls of the old Medina. Up on the roof terrace, with meeting tables standing like sentinels on the crumbling walls of the Badli Palace across the road and the minaret of Marrakech's famous Koutoubia mosque glowing in the rosy light of the setting sun, we tackled the big question, such as who could spot the difference between French and Moroccan claret (no competitive element, paté) and whether we preferred the very drinkable local rose or white (correct answer, both).

Then we sat down to a meal prepared by the main cooks. Cauliflower soup, pastilla that cascades pie of papaya and almonds dotted with icing sugar and cinnamon — then two dishes. I'd never come across before, chicken seffa, a noodle dish from Fez, and tidd, a dish of quail, broad beans and lentils, shredded pancakes and that fermented butter. All quite exquisite.

Every quarter in Marrakech has a public bread oven, a hammam public bath and a mosque, and the next day we were led on a tour of the hidden city that most tourists walk straight past. Unfamiliar arches in the mud walls revealed teams of bakers pushing the dough brought to them by local families deep into ovens with lift long wooden peels. We visited men who stoke the fires for the hammams and as a sideline cook the tagines, smprom-topped capers of meat that they arrange in the glowing embers. We watched men in the



Tony Turnbull with chef Keri Moss in Marrakech. Below is a spice stall and communal bakery.

sooks prepare msemen, the poussem, thin pastry used to make briouates, the cross between samosa and spring rolls that they fill with meat, vegetables or sweetened rice. Moss introduced us to strange ingredients and told us how she would use them to add a twist to classic Moroccan dishes.

Best of all we visited the spice merchants and met with the variety and quality great sacks of mace, cardamom, star anise, all spices, cinnamon, cassia bark, three grades of paprika ranging from sweet to hot to a dusty ochre, three types of cumin, from Syria, Saffron, Morocco (the late a lemony, pasty, coloured revelation), kila bay, saffron at 25 dirham (12) a gram, and a kilo of feta cost in Britain, of course, as at home, or head of the shop, the house mix of up to 40 spices, which marks one shop against another. I will never look at my dusty spice rack the same way again.

That evening we ate at one of Marrakech's most famous restaurants, Dar Yacout. It was a grand setting for us, a former governor's house, but the food, set dinner of chicken, with olives and preserved lemons, couscous and more mchouli lamb, was not a patch on what Moss ate the cooks at Dar Les Caprices made with us the next day.

Cooking in Morocco is a woman's work. The only thing men ever make is tagines, involving, as it does, a trip to the hammam followed by four hours sitting around waiting for the meat to cook. Happily, Moss put us in the kitchen to better see. While the husband herself Otlohenq-ang (is that a verb yet? It surely should be three salads — orange, fennel and anise) and caribou, artichoke, broad beans and wild asparagus, and her

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Moroccan take on a hot-and-sour Thai beef salad with jerked beef, green herbs and lemon — we learnt the essential of making couscous. Basically, it's quite laborious, and requires a ton of asbestos as you huff up the steamy grains three turns dinner — warning, hot! Keri's steaming pot is the highest couscous you will eat. As with the spices, it has turned for ever the instant stuff I am used to back home.

It wasn't all about the food though. After all, what's the point in travelling to such an enthralling city and then being stuck in the kitchen all day, in between the spice shops, and bread ovens we took in two of Marrakech's palaces. Badli Palace, built in the 16th century for Sultan Ahmed al-Mansour, survived barely a century before being stripped of its adornments, its treasures carted off to a new palace in Meknes. All that remains now are its crumbling walls. After exploring the huge central courtyard with its four fountains orange groves and visiting the water-cooled grain stores, we climbed the terrace

for views of the city and the snow-capped Atlas Mountains beyond. As we stood taking it in, a sweet-smelling breeze came (with it both) the orange blossom from below and the warm scent of spices from the sook.

Next stop was the Bahia Palace, just inside the medina. This was built in the 16th as the Grand Viceroy's residence and is embellished with all the ornately carved, cedarwood ceilings and latticework, colourful tiled mosaics, floors and swaths of Casablanca marble that befit such a powerful man.

On another day we took a trip out of town to visit a saffron farm and argan oil producer. But mainly we did what every visitor does and got lost among the souks, filling our bags with bargain spices, jewellery and leatherwork, before winding our way to Jemaa el-Fna and being mesmerised by the snake charmers and musicians who take it slow at night. Not even a plate of sheep's head could spoil the magic of that