

Chelsea meets Morocco

Jade Jagger loved it, Bob Geldof wanted to buy it ... and once it was a brothel.

MARCUS SCRIVEN discovers a North African hotel with the stamp of style



Richard Waite/Arcaid

ITS BEDROOMS have no air conditioning, telephones or televisions; you will search in vain for the mini-bar or the monogrammed dressing gown or any of the fripperies considered essential by the soi-disant great hotels of the world.

If you take a shower (and it is most unlikely that your room will have a bath), the hot water system may prove capricious, a thin jet rather than a steady torrent issuing from the shower-head. Yet for all its lack of luxuries, the Hotel Villa Maroc in Essaouira — on the Atlantic coast, two hours west of Marrakesh — has developed an unshakeable hold on a former ambassador to Morocco, as well as Jade Jagger, various *recherché* London honeymooners and even the odd grown-up American.

“The beautiful hotel,” wrote Jade at the end of her stay (her use of the definite article indicating that she

A feeling for the blues: one of the two courtyards at the Villa Maroc. The roof terrace is just above

had perhaps dwelt too long amid the resinous scent of the thuya wood which drifts from workshops beneath the town's crenellated battlements).

Bob Geldof evidently shared Jade's sentiments, expressing interest in buying the Villa when it was put up for sale last year by James Whaley, the Englishman who founded and furnished it.

To an extent, the Villa Maroc is Morocco meets Chelsea. That might suggest a dispiriting melange of sexagonal lanterns and Colefax and Fowler; the reality is stunningly better.

For a start, the hotel does not stamp itself on Essaouira; to find it, you have to leave your car or taxi just inside the town's ochre-pink walls, walk through an arch by a clock tower, then turn left along a high-walled, mud-floored alley, typical of the arteries which thread through the Medina (or old town). Even then, if it were not for a small white sign (easily missed) you might never know that the Villa was there — quite unlike the Hotel des Iles (apparently favoured by Yusuf Islam, who used to be Cat Stevens), a good, comfortable establishment with a pool, but one whose Thirties-barracks architecture sits grumpily aloof on the seafront.

Whaley was infinitely more deferential to his surroundings, combining two adjacent high-walled old medina houses — each built around a courtyard — whose rooms had been servicing appetites for generations (the villa had a long and honourable history as a

brothel) to form the hotel. When decorating it, he largely adopted Arabic idiom, resisting the temptation to cover walls with gentle watercolours (Moroccan creativity is not expressed in painting but filigree carving or mosaic art). So, instead, he unearthed old maps and photographs, tracing Essaouira's development as a trading port, then known as Mogador, with which the Portuguese made contact four centuries ago. The British — mainly Mancunian merchants — arrived three centuries later, by which time the town had been redesigned by a (captive) French engineer.

LONG inured to foreigners and their ways, the people of Essaouira are among the most relaxed in Morocco. Sauntering through the medina, glancing up at the blue shutters or through open doors, you can persuade yourself that they live in houses not that dissimilar to the Villa. That is not quite true, of course. In the Villa's white-washed bedrooms — each one a different size and shape — there are bedside lamps which you can actually read by, instead of the pitifully fancy

things (so often favoured by smart hotels) doing little more than throwing out a dim pool of light which vaguely shows the outline of a bed. There are handsome writing tables and comfortable chairs which you yearn to take home with you, all made from thuya (a remarkably varied wood, with a light, speckled root; the remainder of a darker, smoother grain) in the workshops beneath the battlements. A curtain separates the adjoining bath (or shower) room, invariably decorated with mosaic tiles. These are rooms you could happily live in for months, not just a day or two.

There is no dining room, breakfast and dinner being served wherever you choose, breakfast, perhaps, on the blue balustraded roof terrace which looks out to the harbour, the gulls, the grills and ramparts (on which Orson Welles filmed his *Othello*), and from where the beach ebbs away into the distance in an almost endless curve. For dinner, you stay inside: though the skies above Essaouira are often clear, the town is not blistered by the sun in the way that much of Morocco is, being cooled by the winds, frequently strong,

which blow in off the Atlantic. But you will probably wander up to the terrace beforehand. The town seems timeless in the half-light: there are no cars near the hotel, the only traffic being Essaouirans on foot, returning from the spice souk, or market, the women, invariably veiled, seemingly silent in their all-enveloping *haiks*, the men more voluble, deal-making on the move. Occasionally, a bulbous-fronted lorry chunters down to the harbour.

Inside the Villa, the atmosphere is relaxed, sometimes almost skittish, as if the grown-ups of the house had gone out for the evening leaving their teenage children in charge. The kitchen emits laughter and the occasional shriek, as well as impeccably cooked fish and the inevitable tagine.

Whaley sold the hotel last year.

By then, though, he had shown that restraint and imagination, rather than acres of marble and piped music, are what are needed to create a minor masterpiece in an

ancient place. Or, as Jade would have it, *the* beautiful hotel.

WAY TO GO

Average temperature in Essaouira is a pleasant 70 degrees during the day, although you will need an extra layer in the evening. There is only a handful of specialist operators to Morocco. Two which can arrange stays at Villa Maroc are Best of Morocco (0171 487 4224), four nights in November/December cost £368, including scheduled flights from Heathrow to Marrakesh; and Morocco Made to Measure (0171 235 0123) which offers breaks from £432, and can arrange car hire or chauffeur-driven limousines from the airport.