

Escape

ROCK THE KASBAH!

Tangier's walled fortress is a heady blast of Moroccan charm

JUST across the Strait of Gibraltar, Tangier can feel more European than African.

The city is also acquiring a reputation as an artistic and cultural hub for those seeking winter sun (temperatures are around the 18-degree mark this month) only a short hop from home. Indeed, Air Arabia has just launched a low-cost direct flight from London. Tangier can be divided into three areas: the Kasbah (a beautifully preserved walled fortress overlooking the city), the Medina (a narrow labyrinth of alleyways that contains the souk), and the marina, with an esplanade running the length of the city's Atlantic coastline.

The last is where you'll find the Atlas Marina Bay, a modern hotel over six floors. Opt for the Double Legend rooms on the fifth and six — from a remarkable £83 per night — and you get spectacular

views over the marina that twinkles alluringly by night.

Along the corniche below is a ribbon of what appears to be public art installations; these are, in fact, glass elevators to the subterranean car parks built in response to the regular gridlock in the city.

And to the left is the old belle époque train station — now a museum since they built the high-speed line to Casablanca.

It makes sense to invest in a

licensed tour guide, and ours, Abdelhaq, tells us: 'Tangier's history is of patronage by the French, Spanish and English, as well as a sizeable Jewish population, which accounts for the laid-back and cosmopolitan vibe.'

I ask him if he drinks. 'Yes, of course, and when I go to a restaurant, my wife joins me without any sense of disapproval from waiters.'

Shopping in the Medina is a perennial pull, albeit selling the usual fare of tagines, kaftans and

carpets. But the Kasbah is the real draw — a walled fortress with wide boulevards and riads where the wealthy live.

Dar Sultan is a superb example of a riad hotel, a converted 300-year-old merchant's townhouse. Sump-tuously furnished, it has the most opulent roof terrace in Tangier, its three levels lavishly restored in a Franco-Moorish style.

A few doors along is the El Morocco Club, a fine-dining room with a somewhat rakish piano bar

downstairs where you'll often find the founder and owner, Vincent Coppée, a Belgian art collector.

The food here is superb, part-Andalusian, part-French and with a Moroccan twist. Try the plump oysters from Dakhla on Western Sahara's Atlantic coast, some 1,200 miles south, that arrive daily.

Above the Kasbah is a local institution, Cafe Hafa, which opened just shy of a century ago and the aesthetic has changed little.

Beloved of the Beat Writers Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who are said to have snacked and scribbled here, a hip crowd of locals still drink coffee and smoke on the sea-view terraces.

And be sure to take in the glorious Art-Deco monument Cinema Rif, opened in 1948. Inside, trendy locals come for café au lait and croissants.

Take a table outside and watch the bustle of Grand Socco, the main square, as men in *djellabas* trundle handbags of goods through Moorish gateways into the Medina. It's a sight that has changed little in centuries.

EUGENE COSTELLO

TRAVEL FACTS

AIR Arabia (airarabia.com) London to Tangier from £139 return. Atlas Marina Bay Hotel (hotelsatlas.com) has sea-view suites from £83 B&B. Guide Abdelhaq Arfaoui can be reached on +212 661 758 447.



Perennial pull: Old Tangier and, inset, a street flower seller

Picture: ALAMY

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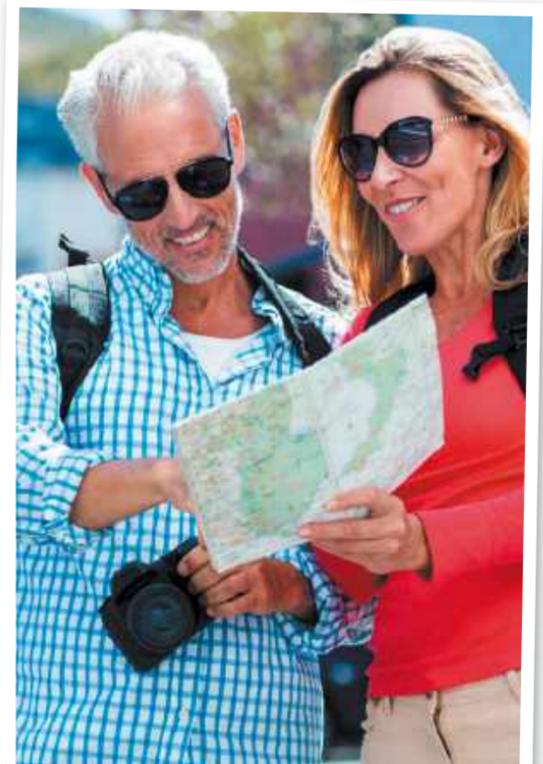
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