

Framed in Marrakesh

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A blaze of colour and tastes at Djemaa el Fna.

Photo: Huw Jones/Lonely Planet

Deep in the medina, Barry Divola observes the colour and movement of the city with a painter's eye.

To say I'm out of my depth is an understatement. I'm in Marrakesh, on the first day of an art retreat led by renowned Australian artist Tim Maguire. When Maguire asks the group of a dozen Australians to share their art experience, one modestly admits, "I'm a beginner. I've only been painting for about 10 years."

Then it's my turn.

"I've just finished a handful of three-hour sessions at an introductory art course," I say. "So I've got about 15 hours of experience. And I'm colour blind."

Maguire will have his work cut out for him.

Our guide for the trip is English travel writer Anthony Sattin, who specialises in north Africa. His first visit to the city was in 1990. "It was a very different place back then," he tells us. "There was little employment and in the cafes you'd see these sad-looking men lingering over a single cup of tea for hours and hours."

In 1999, King Mohammed VI announced a program called Vision 2010, which aimed to bring 10 million tourists to the country by the end of the decade; tourism is now Morocco's second-largest industry.

We're staying at Riad Sara, one of the many traditional Moroccan homes converted into guest houses in the medina, the old walled city. These grand old riads are hidden behind heavy, brass-studded wooden doors that line the narrow alleys of the medina. Our clean, simple rooms look out to a courtyard planted with bougainvillea and citrus trees, with a fountain at the centre.

The thick mudbrick walls and the tiled plunge pool off the dining room provide relief from the afternoon heat.

For two days, Sattin leads us through the winding streets of "the red city", named for the pinkish hue of its walls. Our ears quickly become attuned to the cry of "Balek!", which translates roughly as "You are about to be run over by a motorbike or donkey if you don't move now!"

Like every other visitor, once we enter the souks - the tightly packed market stalls that are connected by meandering alleyways - we get hopelessly lost. Even a map isn't much help - the maze is too intricate to correspond to any cartographer's lines.

Two landmarks that help orient us are Place des Epices (the spice market) and Djemaa el Fna, which is part open-air market and part circus. Sattin takes us to cafes overlooking each of these spaces on consecutive days to recount their history and then lets us loose with instructions for writing exercises.

In the spice market, a small bustling square known for its shops displaying technicoloured pyramids of turmeric, paprika, cumin, cinnamon and more, I see a cat get clipped by a speeding motorbike. The rider doesn't look back. I follow to check it's all right, finally finding it under a stationary handcart, licking its paws but seemingly unhurt. That's how I get talking to Abdessamad, who works in the spice shop where the cat has ended up. He invites me in to sit and drink tea. Although some travellers are wary of shop owners' intentions, in Marrakesh such an invitation is usually motivated by genuine friendliness without strings attached.

The spice shop has been in 40-year-old Abdessamad's family for half a century and is owned by his uncle. He describes the changes he's seen in the city in the past decade. "Many European people come here, buy riads, start businesses. It has advantages and disadvantages. We lose some of our traditions but the economics are better. We are lucky that people will always need spices. It's part of our culture. It's in all our kitchens. Our store has no name but people know to come here.

"It is good to tell each other our stories," he says as I go to leave. "I know you are from Australia but it is very good for American people especially to come in and talk, because it changes their minds about us. They thought we were all monsters after what happened in 2001.



"We invite them in to drink tea, we talk and they discover the truth. There are good people and bad people in America, in Australia and in Morocco. We cannot generalise."

The next day, we walk to Djemaa el Fna, which is also the main square and meeting place of the city. Gazing at the chaotic scene from the balcony of Cafe de France, Sattin quotes from a description of the scene written in 1966 by Gavin Maxwell, best known for his 1960 book, *Ring of Bright Water*. Little appears to have changed in 45 years.

Snake charmers make a ruckus on their horns to coax cobras out of baskets. Dancing Berbers clash cymbals while twisting their heads round and round to twirl the long tassels on their fezzes. Placid-faced monkeys chained to their masters are positioned around the square, waiting for their next photo opportunity. And everywhere, something is for sale: carpets, jewellery, handicrafts, men's shaves, henna tattoos, fortunes, stories, dental services, fresh juice from dozens of carts piled high with oranges.

Before sunset, the square is transformed by the arrival of more than 100 makeshift food stalls, their gas cookers hissing, and spruikers amuse the crowd with lines such as "Five-star Michelin!" and "You too skinny! Eat here!"

Sattin challenges us to venture into the throng, single out a person or group and observe how they fit into Djemaa el Fna. This is how I befriend Rahid and Mehdi, young acrobats who make their living by staging impromptu shows in front of the outdoor cafes, constantly on the lookout for the police, who don't always approve of their activity. They tell me they make about 100 dirham (\$12) a day.

Maguire arrives on the third day and for the next week we shift our focus from observing and writing to observing, sketching and painting.

I've written a couple of stories I'm happy with but that's how I make my living. I'm a novice with a sketchbook.

My first challenge is to draw some gimbris, Moroccan instruments that are a cross between a lute and a banjo, at one of the market stalls in Place des Epices. It takes two hours, many pages and a lot of cursing. Maguire watches me clutching my pencil and advises me to loosen my grip and relax my arm. My work improves instantly. He teaches us how to frame what we see, focusing on the most interesting elements and structuring a picture so it has balance. Each afternoon we return to the riad with our sketches and photographs and sit at our workspaces in the courtyard, trying to translate our research into paintings. We labour until sunset, when the sparrows return to the orange trees like clockwork, signalling it's time for dinner.

We visit Jardin Majorelle, a lush oasis in the centre of the ville nouvelle (the new city, outside the walls), opened to the public by French artist Jacques Majorelle in 1947. It fell into ruin after his death in 1962 and was restored in the 1980s by Yves Saint Laurent, who lived next door and then moved in. The cobalt-blue buildings, yellow plant pots, Zen gardens dotted with succulents and lily ponds populated with fish, frogs and turtles provide plenty of material for sketching.

One day we venture out of the city, on a winding 65-kilometre bus trip to the foot of the Atlas Mountains and then hike through Berber villages. We end up at Kasbah du Toubkal in Imlil, which sits at the foot of Jbel Toubkal, the highest mountain in north Africa. This former home of a feudal chief has been converted into a guest house and restaurant run by an English company in partnership with the community. Martin Scorsese transformed it into a Buddhist monastery for his 1997 film *Kundun*.

On the terrace, 1800 metres above sea level, we eat a lunch of chicken and vegetable tajines, salads and pastilla (a sweet pastry with savoury filling), then sketch the surrounding mountains for a couple of hours, as the sky turns from blindingly bright to grey, then black rain clouds, then sun again.

On our final night there's a group exhibition of our work in the riad's courtyard; dozens of paintings in wildly diverse styles, from impressionism to collage to photorealism. Although my three paintings - of the gimbris, a fortune teller and a beggar - are obviously the work of a colour-blind writer, everyone is complimentary and agrees I've climbed the steepest learning curve.

"This is just the beginning," Maguire says. "I'd like to think that when you get back home to your studios, you'll unpack a lot more from this experience that hasn't come out yet."

It's clear, though, we've observed Marrakesh's faces and street life more keenly and engaged with its people more openly than we would have as solo travellers. They call these trips retreats but, in the end, we felt more like adventurers.

Barry Divola travelled courtesy of Art Retreats International.