

Magical Morocco

From playing on a course dotted with artwork and statues to a venue set within the walls of a palace, there is nothing quite like golf in Morocco, as Sarah Forrest details



Al Maaden GC

A

short three and half hour flight from London safely delivers me into Marrakech, Morocco situated in the north west corner of Africa and about the same size as California.

Arrival day gave me a few hours to kill, so I took advantage of this and went to the Al Maaden golf course and managed to sneak in a quick nine holes before sunset where the golfer in me was quickly replaced by the inner photographer (in

training). Al Maaden is unique; it has artwork and statues dotted around the course.

I played the same course again the next day in a competition, and starting on the tenth hole gave me a whole new perspective and appreciating for what the golf course offered. In my opinion the back nine is the stronger of the two - there were more interesting holes and of course the quirky statues and art continued weaving themselves into the relatively flat landscape. The art took on a whole new form when it was in play, as it was on a few of the holes as water hazards. The irrigating system was fed by a series of aggressive straight lined abstract ponds, as if drawn by a computer



Al Maaden GC



Dar Essalam GC

aided Picasso, challenging my obsession with symmetry with the lines of the ponds not parallel or seemingly giving any consequence to the course, but I'm glad to say I was wrong. After a while I understood Al Maaden, a traditionally designed course playing with the eye and playing with one's sense of what a golf course could be by adding unique touches.

Sadly I only got to play that one course in Marrakech, as the next day I was on a bus to the capital of Morocco, Rabat. Rabat has a totally different feel to that of Marrakech. Staying in the View Hotel in the centre of Rabat, it was a shame we didn't have more time to explore this inviting city as you stood on the hotel balcony surveying everything that you would expect from Morocco with overwhelming curiosity.

Dar Essalam was a treat as an established parkland course with a typical Robert Trent Jones design; narrow entrances to the greens and strategic water placements sitting in harmony amongst the cork trees. There was obviously some kind of nut tree too as the caddies took great delight in filling their pockets and spitting the shells during the round in a Hansel and Gretel style back to the clubhouse. Playing just nine holes on the Red Course was enough to see what delights this course could offer; shade from the trees on some, tight in places, fairways to inviting sloping greens added to the beautiful mosaic pattern clubhouse serving traditional food pretty much

had me begging to go back for more.

Next stop, Meknes. One of the four 'imperial cities', Meknes lies in the north of the country with narrow winding streets and imposing ornate gates as you enter the walled city. It was a bit of a rabbit warren, but eventually we popped out in to a relatively open area and parked up outside Royal Meknes Golf Club whose impressive entrance melted into the sand coloured walled back drop.

Playing this flat course with limited interest at first glance. The golf course did not deter from its old world charm as you meander around embracing the walled city casting a quizzical eye over those high dominating walls wondering what they might say if they could talk. Bearing in mind the nine holes were set within the walls of the Royal Palace, it was impressive that the course itself didn't feel closed in at all.

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A drive to Michlifen, Ifrane for a 'quick' lunch. Quick in Morocco is still slow, but maybe that was because the course looked so inviting as we enjoyed lunch on the outside patio with views over the golf course to the Atlas Mountains in the back ground! Playing off the tenth at this recently completed Nicklaus signature designed course in the late afternoon sunshine was a real treat. Nice wide fairways and bunkers aplenty with incredibly slick greens. But get up to the ninth or 18th holes and not even Mr Nicklaus himself could tear your



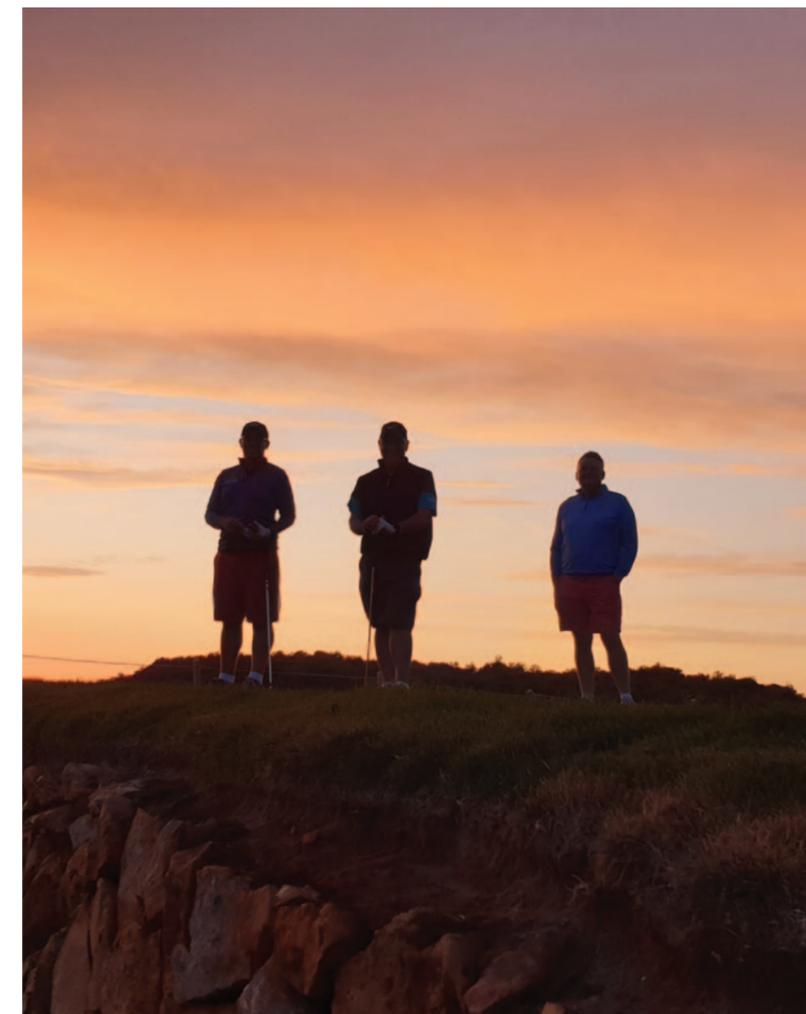
Souk, Medina



Souk, Medina



Royal Meknes GC



Michlifen GC

eyes away from the most amazing view, made extra special as the day closed to produce extraordinary colours that lit up the sky.

Staying in the on-site five star hotel that night was a pleasure as I rattled around a suite made for a family trying to make sure I got to see, let alone enjoy, every square inch. But what a room with those same cascading patio views over the golf course and into the far reaching vistas of the sun reflecting mountains. This place has it all, great golf, a beautiful hotel and amazing food, despite its remote location, it is worth considering a couple of nights whilst travelling in Morocco.

The final day of touring brought me to Medina, firstly a trip into the old city to learn a bit about the history, then into the souk.

This place has it all - great golf, a beautiful hotel and amazing food

The souk was amazing, with the emphasis being on 'maze'! A bird's eye view would be of an isolated sand stone island within a busy metropolis, with labyrinth narrow paths snaking through high sided imposing buildings. Replaced occasionally by white, perfectly formed temples taunting the interested visitor to peer through ornately decorated geometric patterned arches to contrasting colourfully dressed people to make the scene perfectly Moroccan.

Turn down another street and

another scene unfolded with olives, dates and nuts filled to the brim displayed inside brightly coloured ceramics. Another turn revealed the tanners quarter, as an offensive smell overpowers your nose, yet your eyes feast on the brightly coloured leather handbags, purses, slippers and belts displayed all the way up the steep walls like a psychedelic waterfall.

Tap tap tap, and another street showcases working metal shapers, a large selection of metal pieces carefully punch patterned to elevate this basic material. Lace and material decorated to the nth degree with gold thick braids, clothes and of course souvenirs were all present in other streets. It is fair to say, you can get lost in this souk, so unless you plan to take a rather long length of rope, get a knowledgeable guide!

Visiting Morocco was an eye opener for me. I was excited to see the explosion of colour to play the golf but as a single lady

travelling, I wasn't comfortable all of the time. Having negotiated taxi or caddy fees and having to argue your point afterwards didn't sit well with me, on occasions there appeared to be a lack of respect for females but taking the rough with the smooth, all of your other senses were satisfied by the bucket load, especially on the golf course. **TGB**

Sarah Forrest is a freelance journalist and consultant for global golf travel and for female golf

If you want a course or location review across all platforms, contact Sarah.

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