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Auberon Waugh, newshound

My father's dogfight with Jeremy Thorpe – Alexander Waugh

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The souk still socks it to you

Marrakech has been cleaned up and commodified since the Sixties, but it retains its exotic allure, says hippie-trail veteran *Ivo Dawson*

Many of us can remember the old days in Marrakech. Well, at least, vaguely. Rather as with the 1960s themselves, to coin the tired old cliché, too crisp a recollection suggests you weren't really there.

In those good old, bad old days, you got to the Shangri-la in the shadow of the High Atlas by means of a clattering, sweltering railway, either from Tangier or the hellhole of Casablanca. Apologies to Crosby, Stills and Nash, but Marrakech Express it wasn't. It huffed and puffed past the scrapyards and rubbish heaps of the city suburbs and then on to the great plain, scattering goats and the occasional camel on the way.

The speed, I seem to remember, was such that, if you needed a breather from the sweltering carriages, you could step off the open platform at the carriage door, have a stretch and a scratch, answer a call of nature, and still have time to step up on to the footplate at the botulism-rich catering coach at the back. It took forever.

And when you finally reached the exotic city, you battled through phalanxes of djellaba-ed 'guides' plying you with promises of 'first quality' hashish or hotels or even their sisters – both of the last two items offered as 'very clean, very cheap – student price'.

Those were the days and, frankly, if,

like me, you are now in your sixties, thank God they are over. Modern Marrakech may have lost a bit of its old-world glamour, but it is now an oasis of five-star pampering or, for tighter budgets, genuinely comfortable three-star hotels.

You can still bargain, of course.

The combination of the financial crash of 2008 and Mr bin Laden and his friends has ensured that most hoteliers are still enthusiastic for your custom and yet still ready to haggle. Moreover, the city – now vastly larger – still retains many of its old charms. The souk is still

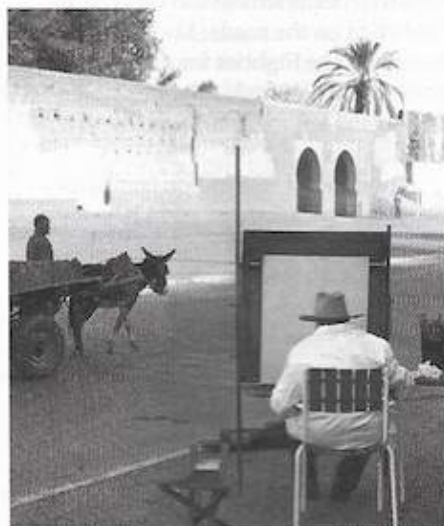
souky as hell, though cleaner; the sunlight still filters through the split-bamboo roof, letting shafts of gold mingle with the argan oil, leather-goods hucksters and Ali Baba carpet caves.

'There is no charge for looking,' the salesmen plead, luring customers in with pastries and mint tea.

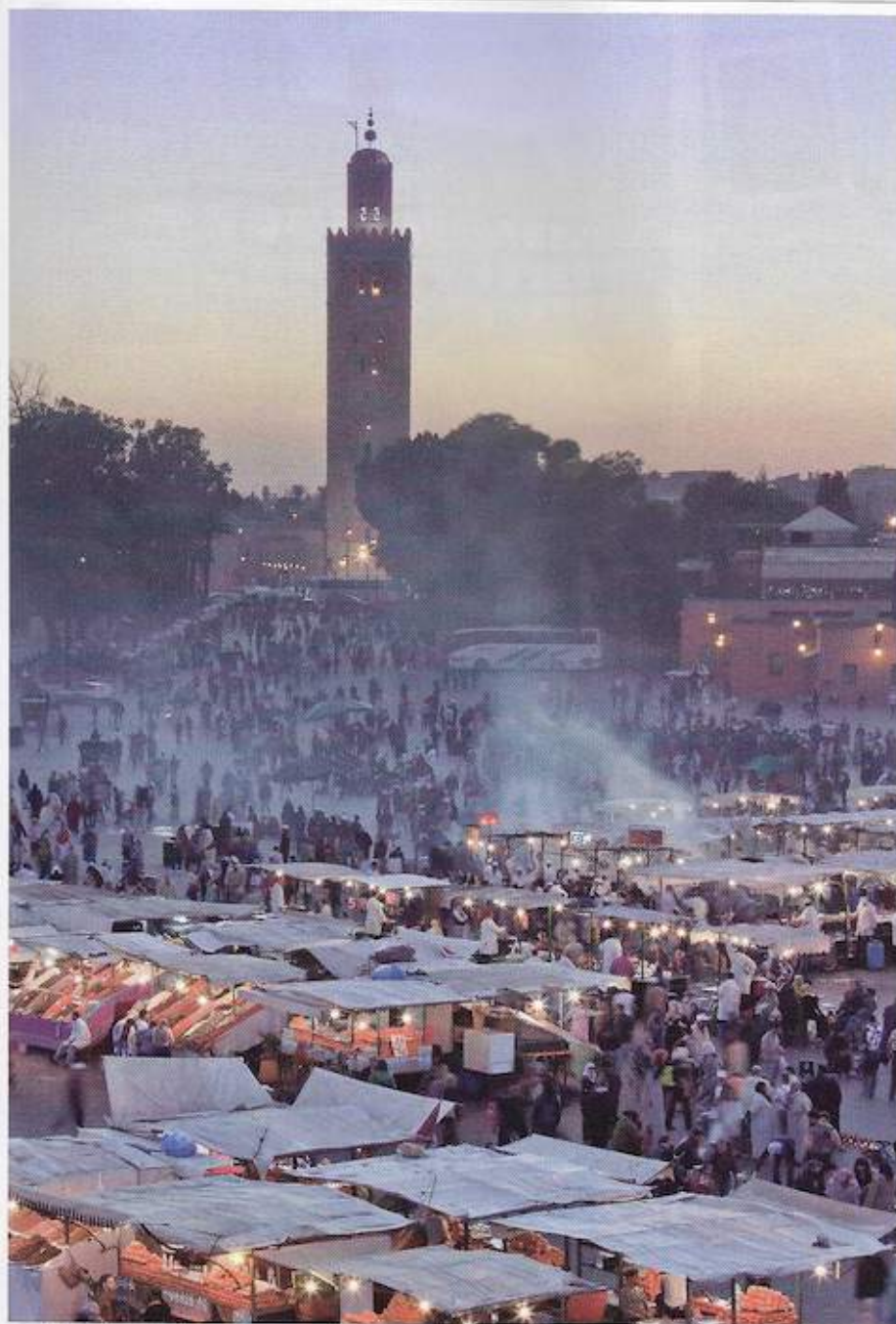
I don't remember the Louis Vuitton rugby balls in days gone by (I suspect Mr Vuitton himself would be a trifle surprised by this new product line) and the hustling has been greatly reduced by the tourist police. But the souk is pretty much as I remember it.

If one were to go back to the old Marrakech, the one to see would have been that of Winston Churchill's winter-sun painting holidays in the 1930s. His great friend was Thami El Glaoui, a larger-than-life tribal chief, described by the non-exaggeration-prone Gavin Maxwell as 'a gracious host and delicate diplomat, a scratch golfer and a fantastic warrior, an athlete of sexual orgy and refined sadism, an ogre and a sage like Solomon'.

No one interested in history should consider visiting the great city without first reading Maxwell's masterpiece, *Lords of the Atlas* (1966) which tells the story of the Glaoui's extraordinary life as pasha (under the French protectorate) of pretty much the whole south of the country.



Donkey work: Winston Churchill painting on holiday in Marrakech (1959)



Medina magic: Djemaa el-Fna, famed for its food stalls and snake-charmers

been funded by the state rather than dependent on the free-flowing francs of Paris's couture-lovers.

But one does not really come to Marrakech for the culture – or at least the formal kind. Sure, there are attractive minarets, square-shaped like St Mark's Campanile, but there isn't a huge amount to tick on a cultural checklist.

More, a trip should be motivated by the crisp desert light and dramatic chiaroscuro contrasts of the near-biblical sights outside – blind beggars, snake-charmers and piles of saffron – and the oriental five-star fantasies that lurk behind the high adobe walls guarding the privileged.

Our stay was at the stunning Villa Ezzahra, a tasteful confection of rooms and houses, constructed in a vast garden, hard by the equally opulent (and invisible) Moroccan home of Saudi prince Bandar bin Sultan.

Hidden behind vast gates, our tasteful confection of Glaoui-esque luxury was disturbed only by the call of the muezzin. Otherwise, the series of double suites and cottages, created by former British army officer and gentleman Brian Callaghan, offered all the delights one might expect: delicious food, hammam treatments and hot-and-cold-running servants round every corner.

Brian's generosity stretched so far that he even introduced us to a friendly British rival, Stephen Skinner, whose small but perfect boutique hotel, Kasbah Bab Ourika, up in the High Atlas mountains, would perfectly complement the Ezzahra if you were planning a week's holiday.

Our Ezzahra stay comprised a house party of good friends which occupied the whole estate – the perfect way to make the place one's own. Our main occupation was general, idle lotus-eating, though there were day trips on tap, a vast swimming pool, swaddled by Berber tents, and 'padel' tennis for the active, and good books and pictures for the rest. And this seemed the best way to lap up Marrakech for those who last saw it through dust and sweat, tending backpack blisters in a mosquito-filled student hostel.

Paul Bowles's Morocco it wasn't – and thank goodness for that. But the Glaoui would have felt at home. ☉

Ivo Dawnay stayed at Villa Ezzahra; www.ezzahra-morocco.com British Airways flies from Gatwick to Marrakech (from £169 return)

The Glaoui, as absolute autocratic ruler, liked to demonstrate his power to French visitors, not least a newly appointed French 'resident general' who might mistakenly think they were in charge. On one such occasion, he ordered all his tribesmen, fully armed, to line the thirty-odd-mile route from the city to the Atlas as the colonial chief's car passed to see the sights.

When the official party arrived at the Tizi n'Tichka pass, he was greeted by 10,000 mounted Berber tribesmen who each fired their rifles twenty times in salute before a lunch attended by several thousand dancing women.

Churchill, who sometimes played golf with the chieftain when tired of his paints, would have approved of the Glaoui's view that he would have preferred British colonial masters to French ones; but no doubt the Glaoui

would have largely ignored both. The post-colonial 20th century saw an end to such exoticism, however, and, when the French left, the Glaoui's inevitable fall from grace ended a major component in Marrakech's exotic magic.

Today, arguably the most prominent trace of imperial France is the newly opened Yves Saint Laurent Museum in the pink-walled, bougainvillea-filled suburbs. A tribute from his former lover and business partner, Pierre Bergé, the £12m brick-and-terracotta shrine includes a thousand pieces from the YSL collection, many influenced by the colours and textiles of Morocco and neighbouring Algeria where the master was born.

Nearby lurks the garden and studio of the artist Jacques Majorelle, the latter now a museum to Berber culture which – one can't help feeling – should have