

HAYDON BRIDGE gets accustomed to the discreet decadence of Marrakech

DON'T go to Morocco! There's no alcohol and you'll be locked up for being gay. That's what we were told. But common sense told us this couldn't be true. After all, Morocco is the country where April Ashley had her sex change operation, and Joe Orton filled his diaries with blow-by-blow accounts of his nights with Mohammed and Larbi and the rest. Sure enough, Morocco is the most liberal of the Muslim countries in North Africa. Moroccans will tell you that you can get anything here that you can get in Europe. But you have to be discreet.

Only 3 hours from London, Morocco is the nearest holiday hot spot for a tantalising mix of ancient and modern, familiar and exotic. The best known destinations are the coastal resorts of Casablanca, Tangier and Agadir. But they're either dreary or touristy or both. The in place is inland Marrakech. The Beckhams were there earlier this year. The 1,000-year-old pink city has all the excitement and mystery of an ancient civilisation, all the modern conveniences the European traveller expects, and an "undiscovered" feel to go with them. Like other Moroccan cities, Marrakech has its **medina**, the original walled town, surrounded by a **villle nouvelle**, begun during the French occupation of the 20th century. The medina of Marrakech is famous for its plaza, the **Jemaa el-Fna**, with its snake-charmers, acrobats, musicians and fortune-tellers. This is the best thing to do a time machine for experiencing medieval North Africa. But outside the medina, as you walk along wide boulevards lined with boutiques and patisseries, you could be in 21st century France. At night in the Jemaa el-Fna you will be pestered every other minute by boys who want to be your friend. Needless to say, friendship costs money, but not much. Negotiations normally begin at 150 dirhams (£10). But if this kind of deal appeals, you should go elsewhere for the real action.

Marrakech's main cruising strip is the **Avenue Mohammed V** (in the ville nouvelle). The section between the Boulevard Mohammed Zerktouni and the post office at the Place du 16 Novembre makes Old Compton Street look like a side turning off Penge High Street. On a summer's evening, literally hundreds of hunks

MEN À LA MENTHE

swarm around the post office, licking their lips and grabbing their crutches. The area feels like the centre of the gay universe. After only a week, you'll return to London and, for a moment, wonder why every man in Oxford Street isn't winking at you. If you prefer more comfort for your transaction, take a table at a café, where you can make a thé à la menthe (mint tea sweeter than a tin of Tate & Lyle's syrup) last an hour and you still won't be presented with the bill. The main pick-up places are the **Café les Négociants** (on the junction of Mohammed V and Mohammed Zerktouni) and the **Café de l'Atlas** opposite. Just sit down at a table and you'll make eye contact before your bum hits the wickerwork. Rules of engagement: 1. If he looks 14, he might well be, so forget it. (If you're in doubt, ask to see his identity card). 2. Then agree the price. 3. Don't hand over cash in public. 4. You can't take your new friend back to your hotel. 5. Don't agree to go anywhere isolated, especially at night. Does this all sound too complex and stressful? It needn't be. But there is an alternative. There are also gay bars, where we've had regular dates (no cash involved).

Le Diamant Noir (behind the Hotel Marrakech, on Mohammed V) is a big club on three levels with a dance floor, where locals of all ages bop to Arabic and

Western pop, and cosy corners for schmoozing (no tongues down the throat, please). It's open from 10pm, but doesn't get going until midnight. Then it's pumping until dawn. 100 dirhams door charge includes your first drink. Opposite the Hotel Marrakech is the **VIP**, a big basement with the same music policy, open the same hours, but more expensive (150 dirhams). It's also been attracting more straight couples recently. The latest place is the **Bodega** (23 rue de la Liberté). This café-bar with a Mexican theme opens at 7pm, a good time for a quiet drink (cocktails are 60 dirhams). Between 11pm and 1am the small dance floor is usually crammed. And for those odd hours in between hot dates, how about the **Jardin Majorelle**, an oasis of palm trees, bamboo and cactus, administered by Yves St Laurent, who lives there, and the Palais el-Badi, the shell of a 1602 palace, once "the most splendid building in Africa"? It's worth mentioning that most of the delights of Marrakech don't require any discretion at all.

> **British Airways** (www.british-airways.com) and **Royal Air Maroc** (www.royalairmaroc.com) both fly direct to Marrakech.



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