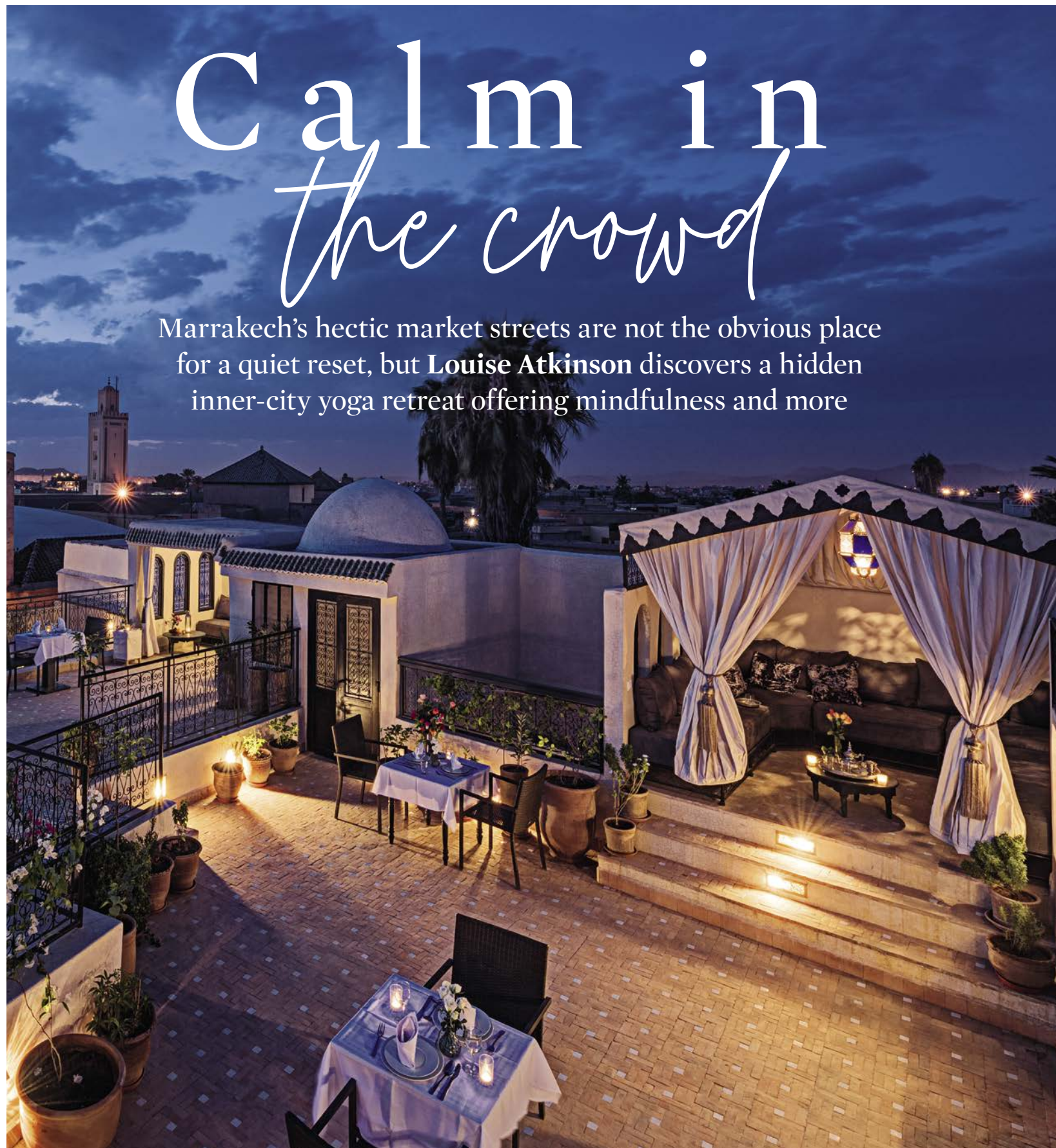


Calm in the crowd

Marrakech's hectic market streets are not the obvious place for a quiet reset, but Louise Atkinson discovers a hidden inner-city yoga retreat offering mindfulness and more



The narrow, winding alleys of the souk at the heart of Marrakech's walled inner city are an assault on the senses. Even for a seasoned traveller, it is unbelievably intense, all-consuming and (if I'm honest) a little scary. It's also the perfect place to practice mindfulness, it turns out.

I am spending five days as a guest of the White Owl Retreat, staying in a riad (guest house) right in the middle of the medieval walled city (the medina), and we'd been set a challenge: to go out alone and spend 10 minutes wandering the narrow, crowded streets, being properly mindful of everything we saw, smelt, touched, tasted and heard.

We'd been warned it's very easy to get lost, but we were advised to go *without* a map because that would identify us as tourists and only make us prey to the young men who run a lucrative scam offering to guide gullible tourists to the main square in convoluted loops via their cousin's carpet shop.

Incredibly, it turns out mindfulness is a kind of medina super-power that allows you to absorb maximum Morocco in one intense sensory burst.

REFOCUS AND REDISCOVER

With everything on full alert, I walk through the city, soaking up the jewel-bright colours of the stalls selling pointed leather slippers, patterned bowls and metal lanterns. My ears tune in to the sounds of Berber chatting and the discordant twang of snake charmers' flutes. Suddenly brave, I stop to stroke the buttery soft suede handbags and touch the rough wool of felt hats while inhaling the sweet fug of slow-broiled sheep's heads, which is deeply infused with a whiff of wood smoke and a hint of bad drainage. Then, to complete my mission, I hand a few coins (roughly 25p) to a street vendor and crunch on a salty *maakouda* (deep-fried potato ball dipped in spicy sauce). At that moment, it is the most delicious thing I've ever tasted.

This is proper Morocco and it is right outside the riad's intricately carved front door. There, the alleys are buzzing with locals going about their business, and you have to flatten yourself against a scumbled terracotta wall to avoid being run down by a rickety cart pulled by a fast-trotting donkey.

But on the other side of that door, the riad is an oasis of cool, white-marbled calm.

Lucie Andersen-Wood and her husband Mike own four boutique hotels in the medina (I'm staying at the Riad Star, while some activities take place at the Riad Spice). She is a psychotherapist and a trained teacher of 'yoga dance', and the pair host retreats in Morocco throughout the year. Lucie's declared mission is to offer guests the opportunity to renew, refocus and rediscover themselves through yoga classes, workshops, visualisation exercises, healthy cookery sessions and guided meditation in this exotic location.

I was keen to brush up on my yoga, try a little dance, see a bit of Morocco and soak up some



winter sun, but the retreat turned out to be more powerful than I was expecting.

It all kicked off after dinner on the evening we arrived. We were 15 women aged between 20 to 70 (including four mother-and-daughter combinations). The lights were dimmed as we arranged ourselves on yoga mats on the floor, bolstered by cushions and tucked up with soft blankets. As music played quietly in the background, Lucie led us on an hour of guided visualisation in search of our 'inner child' and on a tangential mission to create a 'safe place' somewhere in our mind that we could use to retreat to when, or if, things ever got too much.

It was very intense but deeply relaxing, and so wonderfully soothing I discovered I wasn't the only one struggling to stay awake. Lucie later explained the idea is to find that place between wake and sleep where our unconscious mind is most susceptible to learning and change. It's a kind of hypnosis, and the process became more familiar with each successive evening session.

A TASTE OF MOROCCO

There's little chance of a lie-in once the mosques start their early morning call to prayer, so there was always impressive attendance at the pre-breakfast yoga sessions on the riad's beautiful roof terrace and, not surprisingly, *full* attendance at breakfast.

We sat down each morning to a properly authentic Moroccan feast with rough local bread (*harcha*) made from semolina flour served with creamy butter and lashings of honey or *amlou* (a kind of peanut butter made from argan oil, almonds and honey). There were also fresh pancakes (*baghrir*), hard-boiled eggs, fruit, salads and strong coffee.

The rest of the retreat morning is allocated to a series of workshops. At the cookery sessions, we learn about healthy eating, making our own gluten-free bread from ground almonds and seeds, ►

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Opposite: The rooftop of Riad Star; Above: Riad Star's elegant pool

From left: Yoga at the Riad Star; Marrakech's Djemaa El Fna market; a luxury riad suite



tangy coconut yogurt, bubbling sauerkraut, chia pudding, smoothies and homemade cashew nut milk. Other sessions give us the option to turn apothecary by making our own sweet-smelling lip balm from shea butter and coconut oil.

However, it is Lucie's mindfulness workshops that form the heart of this retreat, and they are really quite challenging - in a good way. It swiftly became clear that this retreat was going to be more intense than any I'd attended before.

Lucie creates an inclusive, safe environment where you can explore the sort of feelings you might normally choose to package up. She guided us through role-playing exercises designed to help peel back the protective layers. In one session we are encouraged to explore if we might be stuck in the role of victim ('woe is me'), persecutor ('what on earth is wrong with you?') or rescuer ('what can I do to help?') and to write down key phrases we could chant in future to help change any negative patterns we might have inadvertently formed. I tentatively write 'I am strong, I am beautiful, I am kind, I am brave', but when Lucie asks us to read our statements to the group I can't say 'beautiful' without squirming. Introspection like this is not always comfortable, which is probably why we so rarely make time for it, but it is wonderfully thought-provoking to have the space and the support be able to ponder and reflect.

A CHANCE TO LOOSEN UP

Stories gradually emerge of grief, long-held resentments, difficulties and, inevitably, tears are shed. As the week progresses, these workshops become more like guided group therapy sessions in which Lucie listens, encourages, and hands out an

THE DETAILS

A three-night break with White Owl Retreats costs from £499 multiple occupancy or £699 twin share (private rooms are available at a supplement), including airport transfers; daily breakfast, lunch and dinner; all learning sessions; cookery demos; excursions to the Majorelle Garden, Yves St Laurent Museum, souks and evening trip to the Jemaa el-Fnaa Square; and traditional Moroccan hammam or luxurious massage. (Price excludes flights.) For further information and to book, visit marrakech-riad.co.uk

assortment of different confidence-building tools for us to try. We are encouraged to mingle at mealtimes sitting with people we don't necessarily know, and Lucie gives us mini conversational challenges to ensure the introspection never drops.

Lunch is pure Moroccan vegetarian fare of soups, dips (including *b'ssara*, which is a kind of houmous made from broad beans, and a smoked aubergine dip called *zaalouk*), falafels and platters of hot and cold salads. Dinner each night is a self-service feast of Moroccan delights

featuring tagines, salad, couscous, plus my favourite: a delicious sweet and savoury filo pastry pie dusted with icing sugar and cinnamon called *bisteeya*.

The afternoons are free for exploring (a few brave souls strike out into the souk in small groups, or head off to visit a museum or gallery), journaling (we are each given a notebook and encouraged to write down our thoughts, dreams and encouraging messages to ourselves) or just basking in the sunshine on the riad's roof terrace, which boasts spectacular views over the city and out towards the Atlas Mountains in the distance. We take it in turns to experience the riad's own mini roof-top hammam, being scrubbed vigorously with traditional Moroccan soaps, then massaged deliciously with sweet scented oils.

But one element that really sets White Owl retreats apart is the yoga dance. I imagined it would be a sequence of flowing yoga moves, but after all the intense psychotherapy this turns out to be our big opportunity to loosen things up. Lucie gets the funky pop music going and hands out scarves, and there we all are, a group of grown women jiggling and gyrating seemingly without a care in the world. Lucie teaches us a few moves, some of which are based loosely on standing yoga positions, all the time spinning, clapping and hopping about.

The Riad Star is the former home of vaudeville star Josephine Baker, hero of the French resistance and civil rights pioneer, and I am lucky to have the 'Josephine' room, which is packed with memorabilia. On our last night, we all get to plunder an amazing 'dressing up box' of gowns, shawls and hats for a celebratory dinner. That evening ends with a ceremonial 'tunnel of love', where each person is nudged forwards to walk slowly through a crowd of retreat mates to be showered with praise and positive affirmations. The process is excruciating and glorious in equal measure, and when it comes to my turn, although my eyes are blinded by tears, I'm pretty sure the word 'beautiful' pops up more than once.

There's no doubt this retreat has a powerful, life-changing impact on many of its attendees, and it is certainly one hell of a way to enjoy Morocco. ■