



Explorations / THE ADVENTURE ISSUE

MAGICAL

TOUR

Imagine a journey where you are blissfully unaware of your destination until you arrive. The most curious adventurers are now discovering new thrills by booking trips to destinations unknown. **Ianthe Butt** packs her bag. Photography by **Adrian Morris**



THE ADVENTURE ISSUE

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Clockwise from top left: A villa once owned by pioneering designer Jacqueline Foissac; negotiating the Agafay desert in a dune buggy; aerial views of Marrakech's Palmeraie area from a hot air balloon; the interiors at Douar Samra were designed by Swiss owner, Jacqueline Brandt



The night before departure, anticipation reaches fever pitch. Reactions to my imminent escapade range from “thrilling” (my friends) to “nightmarish” (my mother). I am ready to try an exciting new way of travelling – a holiday where you have no idea where you’ll go, or what you’ll do. In a world that feels ever more ‘discovered’, it’s no wonder that relinquishing control over time away is an exhilarating prospect. I have already been grilled on my expedition preferences, from the practical (budget, trip length, travel stresses) to quick-fire questions (Cycling or walking? Beach or mountains?). A packing list is delivered via an app on my phone: sun cream, a rash vest, hiking boots and a ‘glamorous’ evening dress. I might be off anywhere from Cambodia to India.

‘Boarding pass’ reads the envelope the driver thrusts into my hand at London Gatwick a few sleepless hours later. I’m thrilled when I open it: Marrakech. My experience is limited to snatched moments in the city’s maze-like Medina on a trip years ago. Instead of Googling like crazy, I let my imagination run wild. Scenes when I arrive less than four hours later don’t disappoint: pink clay houses, bright carpets tossed over scuffed walls, goat kids traipsing knock-kneed underneath soaring arches. Each village resembles a woozy Jenga tower, which blurs into a flamingo streak as Ali Aït Si Hamma – a local driver who doesn’t reveal where we are heading – takes us out of the city.

Pulling up next to a line of six squat dune buggies, Hamma wraps my hair in a headscarf, hands me goggles and we’re off.

Clad in a get-up somewhere between an Egyptian mummy and Amelia Earhart, it feels surreal to teeter on the edge of a sheer drop in a sandy wilderness, 1,400 miles from home. I strap in, floor the accelerator and whizz my way after Hamma who, it turns out, runs adventure outfit Quad and Co Maroc.

Roads melt into the lunar-like landscape of the Agafay Desert, north of Marrakech. My heart races. Some ridges are near vertical. Hitting the gas hard, drift happens, and fast. I’ve no sense of what lies only feet ahead, as dust clouds swirl over green-gold mounds. Two hours of seesawing up and over, and the rush doesn’t lessen. Knowing I’d never have considered this activity given prior warning only intensifies the high.

As I catch my breath, I remember why I’m here in the first place. I wanted an alternative to a traditional trip. When planning a holiday, I can’t remember the last time I didn’t delve into the minutiae of a destination, reading travel guides, requesting Twitter tips, binging on Instagram photos. Eighteen-year-old me, backpacking with no phone and no plan, would shudder at my lack of spontaneity. Overplanning has sent my adventurous spirit AWOL.

Mystery trips are springing up for people who want to recapture that same thrill of excitement in travel. Travel specialist Srprs.me lets individuals choose between ‘city’

and ‘adventure’, then arranges accommodation and reveals your destination via scratchcard. Docastaway offers desert island experiences, while Brown and Hudson’s Journey With No Destination focuses on eliciting a different emotional state by revealing locations and activities individually. Latest to arrive on the scene is ‘mystery travel’ from Wix Squared, curated by Alex and James Wix, who are responsible for my trip. “Ever more adventurous people want new ways to satisfy that craving,” Alex explains. “Letting someone else take charge equals more risk, but more adrenaline.”

Adrenaline still skyrocketing after my quad bike ride, I’m dropped off after a short drive at a carved black door, draped in bougainvillea. Home for the night is the Capaldi, a Boho haven with Moroccan soul in spades. After a supper of chilled watermelon soup and gooey cheese-stuffed ravioli, my app vibrates: “Be ready to leave in swimwear, T-shirt and shorts at 9am.” I drift off convinced I’ll be riding the waves in Essaouira, a coastal town a surfer once told me about.

I’m way off mark. Come morning, after a quick drive, a man frantically jiggling an oar jumps in front of the car. “Welcome to Lalla Takerkoust,” says a twinkly-eyed ball of energy called Marc Romain, who I learn is a Parisian stand-up-paddleboarding guide at Dunes & Desert. →

Clockwise from top left: Watermelons and traditional dress; surprise sidecar pick-up; carpets are laid out to dry after being washed in a river in the Atlas Mountains; our writer at the Royal Mansour hotel





Normally the Atlas Mountains – North Africa’s highest range – are reflected in the royal blue of the reservoir, but today its peaks are wrapped in a thick scarf of cloud, the sky slate grey.

Standing balanced on a board while pulling the oar through the water without falling in head-first is a real challenge. Romain ascertains that I’m a nature geek, and a unique waterborne twitching session ensues. Eagles hover overhead and beady-eyed herons strut past. It feels meditative to a degree, but my brain can’t quite register that I’m wobbling in the middle of an African lake where I can hear perch slapping the water around me.

When we land, Romain hands me over to a man who only gives his name as “Nouri”, a Moroccan guide with thick glasses, well-worn outdoor gear and a traditional red *shesh* scarf. Asked about the next stage of our adventure, he says: “You have no idea. I have no idea. Our driver Hassan, he definitely has no idea.” Bachar tells me he has been an Atlas Mountains guide for 15 years, but I’m the first trekker he’s kept the route from.

Our car weaves up and down through the Kik Plateau, where crop fields masquerade as pointillist artworks. Each village – a clutch of burnt sienna box-shaped houses on steep crags – has a story. “A healer, Moulay Brahim, is buried here, people come on pilgrimages to pray for fixes to problems the doctors can’t solve,” Nouri explains. I briefly consider whether divine intervention from Moulay might help my balance on a paddleboard.

Three hours later, we screech to a halt in the Imlil Valley. Nicknamed the ‘Chamonix of Morocco’, it attracts hikers and bikers, and reminds me of trekking mecca Kathmandu. We

start with lunch: feasting on *zaalouk* (spiced aubergine), tagine and mint tea at Douar Samra, a Berber home transformed by Swiss-born Jacqueline Brandt. Sporting Louis Vuitton cats’-eye glasses, she looks like the Iris Apfel of the Atlas Mountains. Cashew, Chanel and Fendi, a trio of shih tzus, trot at her feet through the vegetable garden and hammock-filled courtyard.

“Time to put hiking boots on,” announces Nouri. He’s going to lead me through Toubkal National Park, named after its highest peak, which looms in the distance. The rusty-toned pinnacles surrounding it are streaked leafy green. We encounter farmers with sun-weathered skin tending steppes heavy with apple and peach trees. Rocky trails zig-zag as we walk towards the summit through the High Atlas.

In the shadow of Toubkal sits an impressive kasbah. After two miles walking and little sleep, it only dawns on me that this will be the second night’s accommodation when I’m handed a check-in form. While I’m relishing running on adrenaline, it means my brain isn’t as switched on as normal. I’m happy but exhausted. Nouri advises rest: “Tomorrow will be a long day.”

At 8am the following morning, we’re off. Although we’re not headed up Toubkal, walking is hard going, as we ascend steep passes and navigate pebbly pathways. After a few hours, sweaty and muscles aching, I’m tired, so focus on the vistas for motivation. The colour palette is psychedelic, with

turquoise and violet striping the cliffs. After seven hours of marching, I’m thrilled to arrive at a simple lodge in the Azzedine Valley. I fall asleep immediately, boots-and-all. This trip is truly a challenge. For easy-going adventurers who enjoy →

Board and lodging

Above: Jacqueline Brandt in the garden of her charming guesthouse Douar Samra; lanthe attempts to stay atop a paddleboard on Lake Takerkoust

testing themselves, it's perfect. The hyper-organisers who thrive on structure might find this much mystery a step too far. Part of me misses being able to switch off, and hopes that the surprise tomorrow is a day spent navigating a paperback under a parasol.

Day three brings ravishing views, weathered juniper trees and shepherds herding flocks along precipitous tracks. Eventually, small paths widen into a dirt road. A 4x4 slows down, and we're ushered in. Nouri hands me a wooden box. "Fifteen minutes. Go." I feel as if I've entered *The Crystal Maze*. Prodding away, I locate a hidden key, then, under a sliding panel, the lock. "Your next stop is fit for royalty," reads the note inside. Delirious, I hope we're popping to a palace.

Back in Marrakech, we arrive at a towering door topped by elaborate metalwork. I recognise it. Every hotel aficionado knows the Royal Mansour. Owned by the King, it's one of the world's finest hotels: vast riads with mosaic walls, golden decorations and a glorious glasshouse swimming pool. A Moroccan supper of delicate dishes follows (cucumber salad with orange blossom foam, spinach *briouat* pastries and chocolate mousse with nutty *amlou* ice cream). As I head back to my room, I reflect – did I feel that I'd missed out on anything as I'd made no decisions about where I wanted to dine or visit? Absolutely not. It's been liberating taking the pressure off. While the adrenaline surges have sometimes left me exhausted at the end of the day, this trip has made me re-embrace the unfamiliar. My coordinates the next day come in: a wake-up call is at 05.30am, yet my boarding pass shows an afternoon flight.

Morning blushes from obsidian into dawn. I'm equally delighted to see billowing folds of bright material transform into a giant hot air balloon, after being dropped in

Marrakech's northern Palmeraie in the dark. I'd had an inkling that sunrise was on the agenda, but nothing quite as remarkable as floating skywards. The fantastical nature of it all feels as if I've walked into a theatre performance. It's almost silent, meaning no distractions from mountain silhouettes and minuscule sheep grazing across an earthy chequerboard.

Back on the ground, a suited young man, Felix Mathivet, strikes up conversation. His small talk isn't off-putting exactly... but it's just odd as we're standing in the middle of nowhere. It would appear that even an airport transfer can be adventurous. Mathivet turns out to be from another tour company, Insiders, and reveals a motorbike and sidecar. We speed past palms in the manner of a Moroccan Wallace and Gromit. With moments to spare, I arrive at the airport. For the first time in three days, I know what's going to happen next. ■

✉ @ianthita

Wix Squared offers three-night mystery tours from £1,000pp (including accommodation, airport transfer, private guide and expeditions) to countries including Morocco, India, Cambodia, Oman and Sri Lanka. wixsquared.com



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FIND IT AT BA.COM British Airways flies direct on a daily basis from London Gatwick to Morocco's capital Marrakech. Total journey time: three hours 40 minutes. Flights depart at 7am, 9.15am and 9.25am in the morning and 1.40pm, 1.45pm and 1.50pm in the afternoon over the course of the week.



High time

An ornate fountain at the Royal Mansour; a local guide in traditional Moroccan dress and ruby red fez enjoys the view from the hot air balloon