

# travel

In an oasis on the outskirts of Marrakech, **Bob Granleese** gets to grips with one of the world's great unsung cuisines

## Spicing things up



**T**here is one thing about Dar Liqama that I still can't get out of my head. But then, perhaps that's understandable — after all, there can't be many cooking schools built on the site of a former camels' toilet.

The Palmery is the last-gasp oasis on the road out of Marrakech before nature puts its foot down and insists that civilisation encroaches no further on the parched landscape. Beyond this point there is nothing but sand, scrub and the odd scorpion,

but here there are date palms (hence the name) spread over an area of some 130 hectares.

What are they doing here, thousands upon thousands of them, slap-bang in the middle of one of the driest spots on earth? Legend has it that back in the mists of time Berber tribesmen camped in this neck of the woods when they came to Marrakech to trade, bringing with them their camels. And those camels were fed mainly on dates, and those date stones had to come out somewhere, and — hey presto — palm trees everywhere.

These days the Palmery is home to Marrakech high society and to tourists; the former in spectacularly grand mansions — all turrets and imposing entrance gates, a sort of north African Beverly Hills — the latter in one of the hotels and maisons d'hôte that have opened here in recent years.

Dar Liqama is one such, a villa built along the lines of a

traditional riad, or town-house, where the main purpose in life seems to be to pamper guests as much as is humanly possible. It has two swimming pools, a hammam (steam bath), sumptuous rooms, a stunning, open-air, courtyard complete with antique fountain, as well as just about every other comfort you could wish for. And all set in the lush of gardens — on the edge of a desert.

But beyond these five-star luxuries, its main business is food — more specifically, teaching foreigners the delights of the Moroccan kitchen.

According to culinary guru Robert Carrier, Morocco is home to one of the world's three great cuisines (the others being French and Chinese, in case you're wondering), so how come it's so unheralded?

This is a culinary culture that is principally about good, honest home cooking and it doesn't demand any of the highfalutin culinary pyrotechnics of haute cuisine. Or

at least that's what Dar Liqama's young chef, Nezha Telmoudi, told us while we were making a complete hash of folding our *briouat bel beyd* (egg and herb triangles), spilling egg all over the place and ending up with parcels that looked like a two-year-old had been messing around with the Play-Doh.

Fortunately, Nezha was there to show us how to cover up our deficiencies. At each class, she'd take us through the day's menu, watch us mess it up spectacularly, then demonstrate how to do it properly. Unfortunately, we got to eat the ones we'd made. That said, though they might not have come out looking exactly as they were meant to, the flavours were something else altogether: spicy, savoury or sweet — sometimes all three at once; this was food to perk up even the most jaded of palates.

Unlike most cooking schools, the people at Dar Liqama don't just want you to

learn how to cook their food. They also want to teach you Moroccan culture, history, religion. But without forcing it on you — they treat you with such genuine charm and enthusiasm that you'd feel an ingratitude not to take up the offer.

To this end, the course includes trips into town (plus guide, if you want) to visit the souks and soak up the atmosphere; a day in the Atlas Mountains; outward-bound desert expeditions for the more intrepid; not to mention the odd meal out, just to show you what the food you've been trying to make is really meant to taste like.

Apart from the food and the hospitality, the most striking aspect of Dar Liqama is the Palmery itself, a blessed sanctuary that seems a million miles from the mad, vibrant melee of Marrakech, rather than just 15 minutes down the road. In the city centre, your very being is bombarded by the ceaseless ebb and flow of

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### Hamam m'ammam bel kseksu (squab stuffed with couscous)

Squab, or young pigeon, is a Moroccan staple; use poussin instead if you prefer. Serves four as a main course.

- 400g regular couscous
- 5 tbsp melted butter
- 150g blanched almonds, coarsely chopped
- 175g sultanas or finely diced dates
- 1 tsp icing sugar
- 1-2 tbsp orangeflower water
- 1 tsp ground black pepper
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 3 tbsp sunflower oil
- 2 medium red onions, sliced thinly
- 1 tsp turmeric
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ¼ tsp ground ginger
- 1 pinch saffron
- 1 tsp ras el hanout (Moroccan spice)
- 4 squabs
- ½ litre water

Prepare the couscous according to the instructions on the packet. Put it in a bowl, then mix in half the butter, the nuts, dried fruit, icing sugar, orangeflower water and a little pepper. Adjust the seasoning,

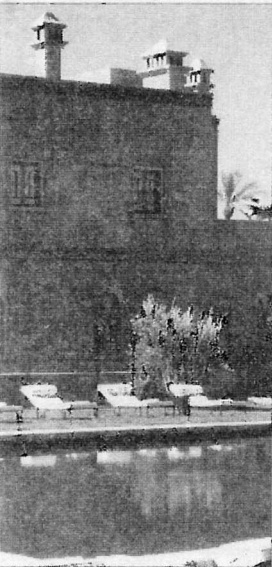


and add more butter if it seems a little dry. Stuff each bird with about three tbsp of this mixture — do not over pack — then secure the cavity at both ends with a toothpick.

In a large pot, heat the oils, and gently fry the onion with the spices until soft, season, then add the birds to the pot. Pour in the water, cover the pot, bring to the boil and simmer for around half an hour, adding

water if necessary. Reduce the heat, and cook until the meat is tender (15-20 minutes). Remove the birds, strain the liquid into another pan, and reduce over high heat until it is a sauce-like consistency.

Place the excess couscous on a platter, put the birds on top, spoon over the sauce, and serve hot.



citizens going about their business; by the incessant din that permeates even the darkest corners of the old city; and by the locals' death-defying driving (be that with car, moped or donkey).

Most exhilarating of all is the nightly gathering on the main square, the vast Djemaa El Fna. You don't know where



to look next as snake charmers, storytellers, musicians and dancers vie with hundreds of food stalls for the attention of what seems to be the city's whole population. You'd have to be dead not to come across something that captivates you. Come to think of it, the same could be said of Morocco's cooking.

**Moroccan roll (clockwise from above) ... a traditional bread oven at Dar Liqama. The villa built along the lines of a riad, whose main business is pampering and teaching the delights of Moroccan cooking**

## Way to go

►►► **What's cooking:** A week's cooking course at The Rhode School of Cuisine (01252 790222, [modschoolofcuisine.com](http://modschoolofcuisine.com)) at Dar Liqama starts at £1,050pp including accommodation, food and wine but not flights. The next courses are Oct 30-Nov 6, Nov 6-13. Rhode also offers the Angela Hartnett Cookery School at Villa Lucia, Vorno, nr Tuscany, which opens next month.

►►► **Getting there:** British Airways (0870 8509850, [ba.com](http://ba.com)) flies to Marrakech from £290 (rt) excl taxes. Royal Air Maroc (020 7439 4361, [royalairmaroc.com](http://royalairmaroc.com)) for £351 inc taxes (except July and August).

►►► **Further information:** [visitmorocco.com](http://visitmorocco.com). Time difference: -1hr. Flight time: 4hrs, 45. £1 = 16.23 Moroccan dirhams.

