

Accommodation

The people who make your holiday
Read Esther Addley's blog and send more tips
guardian.co.uk/travel



'This is your Moroccan home ...'

More than location, weather or food, a great host can make a holiday truly memorable, as Esther Addley finds when she meets the amazing Jacqueline

We had been terribly unlucky with the weather, said Charlie, our charming and relaxed tour operator on receiving our emergency call. But everything was going to be fine now. "I'll send you to Jacqueline," he said. "She'll look after you."

Talk about an understatement. Weary, sore, and trying to shake off a miserable fug, we were greeted at the door of the Riad Samsara by a chic tornado of a Frenchwoman, all embraces and apologies on behalf of her adopted country. "Beautiful young lady! It is a disaster! You are safe now. I am your Moroccan maman and this is your Moroccan home!"

Disaster is not too strong a word. Late October is a sensational time to see the High Atlas - everyone agrees. With the mountains getting their first dusting of snow, and the deciduous orchards below the snow line bursting into dazzling oranges and browns, it is the perfect season for sightseeing, whether by car, on foot or by mountain bike.

But as we set off from Marrakech on a looping road trip across the Atlas and towards the Sahara, we found that reality was a little different from what we'd read on the message boards. Winter had arrived early - earlier than anyone could remember - and was making its presence felt with spirited enthusiasm as our feeble Peugeot set off for the winding Tichka pass. When it started to rain thunderously as we left Marrakech, we laughed. Rain! In the desert! By the time we reached the foothills it was snowing, with visibility down to about 15m, as lorries careered past us on the narrow, winding roads.

After a few hours, we turned off towards the Glaoui family kasbah at Telouet, described as one of the most extraordinary sights of the Atlas. Within a few 100 metres, we were met by a group of 4x4s gesturing furiously at us to turn round, as the muddy riviulettes running across the road swelled to torrents.

Back on the main road, a rockfall from a cliff almost did for our axle. When we at last limped, under darkening skies, into our hotel close to the spectacular hill town of Ait



Come on in . . . Jacqueline Brandt on the balcony of Riad Samsara

Benhaddou, star of Lawrence of Arabia and Gladiator, we were cheerfully informed that the river we would have to cross to visit the fortress - in summer, an empty wadi - was impassible.

The following day was not much better, offering another miserable drive and culminating in a freezing mountain hostel in the Dades Gorge, where we discovered our room had only one small electric heater. It was when the German couple eating dinner next to us complained about the truly dreadful food and were greeted with abuse that we resolved to leave the rest of south-eastern Morocco for another trip. We slept in our clothes, rose at 6am and drove like fury back to Marrakech, where we hoped, at the very least, we might encounter a warm bath.

But as we were ushered into the courtyard of a beautiful old Marrakech riad, and to a jewel-like salon, all scarlet rugs and rich leather pouffes and low, silk cushions, we realised our luck had changed. In the corner was a roaring log fire, and a tray was set with hot mint tea and cake. "I thought you might like to eat here this evening and not have to find a restaurant," said Jacqueline. Then she showed us to our room, one of just three in the riad, where there was an enormous bed, more plump cushions, another open fire and, in the bathroom, a huge marble bath. It was all we could do not to weep.

It would be tough to find someone who would not enjoy an exquisitely restored, homely riad in the heart of Marrakech's medina, garlanded with trailing roses and bougainvillea. And given what had preceded it, we were certainly warmly disposed to Riad Samsara. But there is no question that what turned our calamitous trip into one of the most delightful holiday experiences I have had was the warmth of the welcome from the proprietor.

Jacqueline Brandt moved from France to Marrakech in 1999 with her husband, hoping to paint. Some years later he returned to France, but she had fallen in love with the old house in the northern part of the Medina that would become Riad Samsara (named after her favourite Guerlain perfume). Her housekeeper and cook have become her family here, and her guests are encouraged to feel the same way. We were advised where to

eat and what to see, which hammam to visit for a spa treatment, the best way to haggle in the souk (a smile, a gesture, a polite "non" - "Say you are with Madame Jacqueline!"). Best of all, though, was sitting on low pouffes in one of the riad's two salons to eat exquisite tagines, salads and local desserts, before leaning back on a cushion in front of the fire, kicking off our shoes and dozing.

After a couple of days, Jacqueline offered to show us her place in the mountains, where she truly fell in love with Morocco. Situated just beneath the 4,100m Mount Toubkal, the Douar Samra is a traditional berber house made of wood and earth, which she has restored and expanded into an extraordinary mountaintop refuge with spectacular views to the valley.

The mountaintops were snowy and there was a chill in the air, but though the guesthouse is mostly without electricity and lit by candles, it was bursting with colour and cosiness.

The loving restoration of the douar has provided employment for many of the villagers in nearby Tamaterf. It is furnished with their rugs and textiles, and a local woman, Rashida, caters for everyone on low tables in the large communal lounge. While we were there, locals of all ages wandered into the house to be offered cake or sweets and be introduced to the guests. We shared mint tea with a village elder, one of the few who speaks French. The villagers call her "Monsieur Jacqueline", the old man told us affectionately, because "she has the head of a man". As he left, Jacqueline filled the hood of his long woollen *djellaba* with oranges for his children.

The douar won't be for everyone - it's a little rustic, and there's a moderately challenging uphill walk from the village to reach it - but for a lesson on how to create a tourist development in the heart of a very

We were advised the best way to haggle. 'Say you are with Madame Jacqueline!'

poor community, it is difficult to better.

We returned to Marrakech for one last night before flying home. Jacqueline had stayed in the mountains to welcome another party, and we were the only guests in the riad. After supper the cook left and we were asked to bank down the fires and put out the lights ourselves, as Marrakech fell dark and silent outside the courtyard walls. We opened Jacqueline's guest book by candlelight. "You promised us a holiday," a previous guest had written, "and have given us a home." We knew how she felt.

● *Epic Morocco offers tailor-made holidays (020-8150 6131, epicmorocco.co.uk) including stays at Riad Samsara (doubles from £80 per night half-board) and Douar-Samra (doubles from £65 per night B&B). RyanAir (ryanair.com) flies to Marrakech from Luton and Bristol.*

La Casa Noble Andalucia

I had an amazing weekend at this luxury B&B in Aracena. The woman who owns it is a designer and has spent four years renovating - it is absolutely beautiful. Everything about the trip was wonderful - the food, the owner, who went out of her way to make our stay memorable, the setting (Aracena

Five more exceptional hosts



Viren and Sinnika, Sri Lanka

Viren de Mel, Bonnieland Sri Lanka
Arriving at Bonnieland, a colonial hilltop cottage with a wild garden of pepper, coffee, sugar, jakfruit and a family of mango-stealing rock squirrels, I was greeted like family by my hosts, the Sri Lankan former tea estate boss Viren de Mel, and his glamorous Finnish wife Sinnika (pictured above).

Bonnieland mornings began with tea in bed from delicate rosebud cups, then a breakfast of papaya and avocado decorated with tropical flowers. Viren took me up to meet his old associates at the tea factory, and arranged a walk through the terraces to a Buddhist shrine with two machete-wielding guides. He told me about the glamour of the tea business and the parties at "the club", his stories peppered with references to "chaps" and "jolly good shows".

At night, after the chef's amazing mulligatawny, there was no escaping a long chat and a round of the Bonnieland card game. And the best thing was, I had them all to myself. They only ever host one party at a time in order to give a devoted service, so I was their one guest. The only place I've felt better looked after is at my granny's. *Experience Sri Lanka (0845 638 1415, experiencesri Lanka.com) arranges packages including Bonnieland in Badulla, which has three double rooms, from £60pp per night full board. Gemma Bowes*

Hans Keller, Kellerwirt Austria

Hans Keller is a man of many passions. He bounds around the Kellerwirt - a traditional Tyrolean inn that has been in his family for six generations - like a greying Tigger, loquacious, energetic, fizzing with enthusiasm about his chosen topic of the day - be it his beloved Manchester United, the latest vintages he has brought back from a foray to Italian or French vineyards, the state of Austrian politics or the latest shenanigans in Oberau.

The tiny village would be lost without him; the hotel terrace buzzes with the jazz brunches and concerts he puts on in the summer, and the weekly night skiing in winter would be no fun without Hans freewheeling down the piste on an ancient bicycle. His wine-tastings are legendary; tucked away within 12th century walls, the air thick with jokes and anecdotes. He is a natural host, and long may he reign. *From €36pp B&B, +43 5339 8116, kellerwirt.com. Annabelle Thorpe*

Carol Wandrey, Woodstock Country Inn New York

The bus from Manhattan drops you off opposite the village green in Woodstock, but the Inn is two miles away, so Carol collected me. It was a Sunday in October, and I was her only guest.

She respected my privacy but, on top of her infectious joy at living in what is arguably one of the prettiest houses on the planet, with views of



Carol, New York

And five readers' favourites

The Big House Vinales, Cuba

Staying at The Big House was one of the highlights of our holiday in Cuba. Why? Because the host, Arturo, is one of the coolest people you could wish to meet. He is fun, warm and friendly - you are bound to end up chatting and laughing over a late-night beer with him and his friends. We met many lovely people on our travels, and struggled to communicate using our paltry Spanish, but Arturo speaks excellent English. He has two rooms in his *casa particular*, both with private bathrooms and a lovely outside area - perfect for pre-dinner drinks and his delicious home-made potato chips. Dinner was a tasty spread of fish, chicken, great rice and beans and plenty of fruit and veg and salad. He also makes sure the fridge is always full of beer and water. Vinales is a sweet little town with plenty to do nearby such as walking, horseriding. Arturo can help organise and pre-book these for you. *From 20 CUC per night (about £15); breakfast 4 CUC, dinner 8 CUC. The Big House Rafael Trejo #33, Vinales Pinar Del Rio (048 793342, lusien@corredecuba.cu). Walkaboutnico*

La Casa Noble Andalucia
I had an amazing weekend at this luxury B&B in Aracena. The woman who owns it is a designer and has spent four years renovating - it is absolutely beautiful. Everything about the trip was wonderful - the food, the owner, who went out of her way to make our stay memorable, the setting (Aracena

is a beautiful little Spanish town); and of course the weather. Make sure you use the Jacuzzi at the B&B and go for a walk up to the old church at sunset. *Doubles from €165, room only, €195 with breakfast and tapas; (0034 959 127778, lacasanoble.net). Fly to Seville and then take a bus (1 hour). LondonLucy*

The Secret Garden B&B Iguazu Falls, Argentina

The Secret Garden inn is a five-minute walk from the main centre of Puerto Iguazu and it is a two-minute walk to the end of the road to get the public bus to the Argentinian side of the falls, Foz do Iguacu (Brazil) and Ciudad del Este (Paraguay). The proprietor is John Fernandes, an incredible chap who is extremely interesting to talk to. Every night John hosts a sundowner with caipirinhas and scrumptious bruschetta. John will also sort out any transport you need and has some very good recommendations for local places to eat and drink. He arranged for us to visit the Brazilian side of the falls, a brilliant wildlife park and Ciudad del Este. *Doubles from \$100 B&B, +54 3757 423099, secretgardeniguazu.com. suzyhobby*

Rose Lodge Cape Town

This gem of a guest house is run with immaculate care by its owner, Bruce (pictured above). He is always available for any request, yet I never found him intrusive - he instinctively knows when to step forward but remains unobtrusive when one is looking for pri-



La Rosa, Yorkshire

Amanda Boorman, La Rosa Yorkshire

It's always a good sign when your host's hotel is an extension of their personality. Then the hospitality radiates from the place. Amanda Boorman at La Rosa Hotel in Whitby has that synergy with her accommodation. The rooms have an unconventional but easy charm, like Amanda. Children and adults alike relax and fit in. La Rosa is not quite like any other hotel: for a start, many of the furnishings and fittings came from car boot sales. In most other hands, all that secondhand stuff would remain junk. With Amanda and her partner, Claudia, it becomes a gateway to conversation and intrigue. And her guests feel the same: they wake up feeling a bit different and special. Life seems more interesting. There is no exaggerated pampering, just that feeling of becoming part of a bigger, more colourful world. *From £80 per room B&B, 01947 606981, larosa.co.uk/hotel. Kevin Rushby*

Alfredo Colombatti, Cobo Polonio Hostel Uruguay

Alfredo is the proud owner of a two-shack hotel smack on the beach at Cabo Polonio, a beautiful, ramshackle community of fishermen and hippies on the Uruguayan Riviera. There's no electricity on the peninsula, but with his ancient wood-fired stove Alfredo cooked up easily the best meal we had in the country. Alfredo, you see, isn't your average shack-owner: in a previous life he was a head chef at a distinguished restaurant in his home town of Buenos Aires. Meals usually consisted of fish caught (by Alfredo) an hour before dinner, and came with home-made wine (not as rough as it sounds) and plenty of anecdotes - we talked at length about the fortunes of the Cabo football team, managed by the community's only policeman. Post-meal drinks took place in the only bar on the peninsula, where the blind owner dished out honey liqueur and paraded his pet penguin to the patrons. Cabo Polonio is a very different place indeed. *Doubles from \$55 B&B, 00 598 99 000 305, cabopoloniohostel.com. Benji Lanyado*

nothing but birch, hickory and maple trees, sky and the occasional deer, she clearly loves meeting people. She's passionate about art (the house was originally the home of a local artist), Carol collected me. It was a Sunday in October, and I was her only guest.

She respected my privacy but, on top of her infectious joy at living in what is arguably one of the prettiest houses on the planet, with views of

Over a breakfast of home-made organic blueberry pancakes and local maple syrup, she told me about some Londoners who had recently sent her Marmite and other English delights as a thank you. "Turned out I knew them. They told me that they had all gone out to dinner and had a ball. I wish I'd gone out to dinner with Carol. *From €175 B&B per room, 001 845 679 9380, woodstockcountryinn.com. Amy Fleming*



Bruce, Cape Town

vacancy. He is truly professional and very pleasant in a subdued manner. My stay in Cape Town was made more memorable thanks to Bruce and Rose Lodge. *From £24.55pp pn B&B, 0027 21 4243813, rosestreet28.com. megatraveler*

La Lucertola Tuscany

Set in an area of outstanding natural beauty, high up on a mountainside amid an ancient olive grove and with stunning views of the surrounding countryside as far as Pisa and the coast beyond, the two self-contained farmhouses at La Lucertola are perfect - large, comfortable and extremely well-equipped. There is an organic gar-

den and the produce is available for the guests to pick and use, free of charge. "This proved a particular favourite with our three children.

Living in their own separate farmhouse on site, Luisa and Coz are the perfect hosts, and I would like to thank them for allowing us to spend time sharing their little piece of Tuscan heaven, where even the rain storms hold a certain charm. It's very easy to understand why they chose to swap their hectic London life for this. *£500 per week per house (each sleeps up to 7), 0039 050 851405, lucertola.info. KeremB*
● *Find more great hosts on our interactive site. Been there: ivebeenthere.co.uk/articles/good-hosts.jsp.*



Moroccan magic (from left) . . . Inside the Douar Samra, Jacqueline's other property; the High Atlas near the Tichka pass; a log fire warms the salon in Riad Samsara; plants festoon the riad's courtyard

