

Swept

A few hours' drive southwest from the urban bustle of Marrakech lies the idyllic coastal village of Mirleft, the perfect place to catch some Moroccan winter sun

A T FIRST GLANCE, THE BERBER FISHING VILLAGE OF MIRLEFT NESTLED ON THE ATLANTIC COAST SOUTHWEST OF MARRAKECH, RESEMBLES THE SET OF A SPAGHETTI WESTERN FILM. Clusters of white-washed dwellings slump round the edges of a rocky expanse of wasteland, scruffily-clad children play marbles in sandy alleyways while gangs of swarthy men gossip idly in the shade of shop-front awnings. And as you wend your way up the dusty Rue du Souk, the hub of the entire village, you can't help but be reminded of a scene from *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*. It doesn't take long though for the tranquil beauty and laid-back atmosphere of Mirleft to envelop you.

In the latter stages of the last millennium when most people couldn't be bothered to travel through twisty trails Mirleft, then without running water and electricity, was a haven for hoards of hippies—even Jimi Hendrix is rumoured to have fallen under its spell.

Only recently, with the advent of modern amenities and a shift in tourist attitude, has Mirleft managed to shrug off its hippie mantle and establish a burgeoning tourist industry.

Morocco's Berber people have a carefree attitude and unconditional bonhomie that strikes you very soon after you adjust to the pace of life here. Mirleft may be equipped with several high-end internet cafés but it's still light-years away from the cosmopolitan lifestyle that most Europeans enjoy. What you will notice, though is a genuine curiosity in you as a visitor to this corner of paradise.

Strolling around Mirleft, you get a sense of what it must be like to be famous. Every person you meet greets you with the ubiquitous "bonjour, ça va" or "wilcome Mirleft" and unless you're rabidly anti-social you can't help but feel uplifted by their cheeriness.

Genial exchanges are invariably followed by an invitation to drink "Berber whiskey" (a teeth-itchingly sweet mint tea) and to eat at their modest but usually delightfully



away



decorated houses. Accepting at least some of these invitations is a brilliant way to immerse yourself in the Berber culture.

A popular local snack, which you may be offered if you take up such invitations, is the Berber omelette—fried onions and tomatoes with eggs cracked on top. But the favourite dish is the traditional Moroccan tajine, cooked over direct heat in a special earthenware pot. Naturally, the ingredients vary from chef to chef but it's basically a delicious concoction of root vegetables generously spiced with cumin, paprika and saffron cooked with fish, mussels, octopus or poultry. And don't expect a knife and fork—you'll be eating Berber style: crossed legged round a low table scooping straight from the pot with fingers and bread.

A **NOTHER ASPECT AND DRAW OF MIRLEFT'S AMENABLE ATMOSPHERE IS THE SUPERB WEATHER.**

In January and February, when most people in Northern Europe are shivering and snivelling in the damp and cold, the villagers of Mirleft wake up to crisp blue skies and warm sunshine; aside from the very occasional few drops of rain it's rare that you can't sunbathe, swim or surf on one of its five beautiful beaches.

At only a ten minute-drive away from the centre, or a 50-minute snaking stroll along the craggy cliff-tops, is Plage Sauvage — so called for its combination of spectacular surf as well as total tranquillity, it's one of the best beaches on Morocco's Atlantic coast. Despite the hectares of golden sand and the stunning rock formations this little piece of heaven is amazingly, very deserted —except for a few Ronaldinho wannabes playing football or the occasional fisherman peeping out from his cliff-side cave.

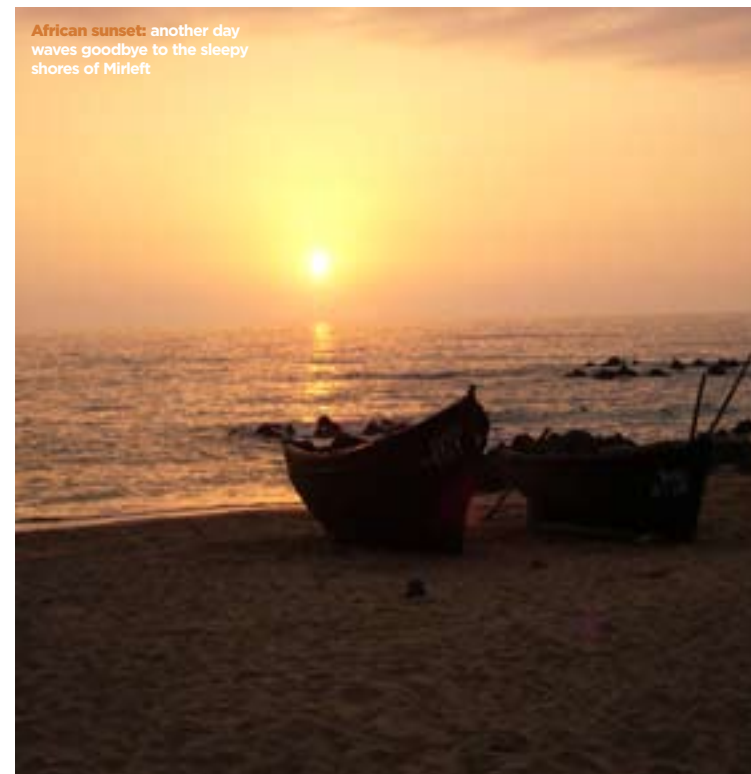
If you're feeling vaguely adventurous it's definitely worth a jaunt to L'Gzira, 17kms south along the coast road. Its beachfront hotels may be a bit forlorn but its ancient rock formations are truly awe-inspiring. As you stand under the cathedral-high, rose-coloured weather-hewn arches you can't help but feel humbled. The temptation to perch somewhere and just stare is overwhelming.

Those who have found the laid-back vibe particularly infectious should saunter over to Aftas Plage, a petite pit-stop



Serene scenes: clockwise from top left, Mirleft

African sunset: another day waves goodbye to the sleepy shores of Mirleft



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for fishing boats. It's also very popular with local kids when school's out—so is best visited in the morning. Adjacent to Aftas is La Grand Plage. A favourite haunt for surfer-dudes, this beach is accessed either by scarily steep steps leading down from a cluster of pricey cliff-top villas on one side or via Mirleft's lush green oasis valley on the other. To avoid serious thigh-crunching, descend the steps and stroll back through the postcard-worthy oasis. At sunset, the wide-angle view of the village lying above the prickly pear-laden cacti is genuinely breathtaking.

UNSURPRISINGLY, MIRLEFT'S NIGHTLIFE IS A TAD ON THE LOW-KEY SIDE SO ENTERTAINMENT TENDS TO BE SELF-GENERATED AND USUALLY REVOLVES AROUND FOOD. There are several hotels and restaurants in the

village, all of which offer a variety of mouth-watering tajines, and chicken and fish dishes (and also serve wine and beer). Particularly notable eateries are the Hotel Restaurant Abertih and Hotel Atlas both of which offer fantastic fare that, flavour-wise, more than matches the chic décor of their surroundings (the spider-crab starter at Abertih is worth seeking out).

What action there is inevitably takes place in the Rue du Souk where lively tea-tippers vie with the blare of the snooker bar TV and pumping pop music. Often you'll be treated to impromptu live entertainment in the form of amazing Berber drumming. Led by an ancient jelabba-clad whistle player, a motley crew of teens fashion the percussion from saucepan lids, tabletops and empty plastic bottles and drum up a mesmerising rhythm. Invariably, the hypnotic beat will quickly draw a huge crowd clapping and stomping themselves into a trance-like state.

Marrakech may be the “pearl of the south” but Mirleft is definitely the diamond; you just have to dig a tiny bit deeper to find it.

easyJet

GETTING THERE: easyJet flies to Marrakech from London Gatwick and Madrid. Book online at www.easyJet.com. See page 150 for our insider guide to Marrakech.

INSIDER TIPS

THE WAY TO MIRLEFT:

Getting to Mirleft is easy. The surprisingly smooth route N8 out of Marrakech goes all the way to Agadir. From here take the route N1 to Tiznit. From Tiznit you can either take the cross-country road through hills laden with Argan trees or drive alongside the beautiful coast—both options lead straight into Mirleft.

There are several regular coach operators that go from Marrakech bus station to Tiznit for under €14.

MONEY:

There's no bank in Mirleft. You can change notes at the Poste Maroc, but the nearest ATMs are a 30-minute drive away, in Tiznit. If you don't have a car you can take a local bus (fare 7 dirhams (approx 57 cents) or bag 'un place' in a grand taxi for 13 dirhams (approx €1). Tiznit is also renowned for its jewellery and its souks in which you can find a somewhat wider range of wares than are available in Mirleft.

ACCOMMODATION:

For those on a seriously tight budget Mirleft offers cool camping facilities in the style of Saharan nomads where, along with several other travellers, you cook and sleep under enormous camel-skin awnings. Aside from being a unique experience, it's also a great way to meet people.

www.atlas-mirleft.com
www.abertih.com
www.nomadetrip.com

ACTIVITIES:

Aside from surfing and swimming, Mirleft is also the ideal place to dive, kayak, wakeboard and fish. There's no shortage of sporty set-ups offering equipment hire and lessons, as well as a host of alternative activities such as trekking, quad-biking, paragliding and dirt-biking. A few also offer two- or three-day excursions into the Sahara; these are very popular so it's worth reserving a place online first.

www.mirlefttride.net
www.anzidquadevasion.com
www.aftastrip.com