

The Marrakesh express

Deborah Francis
rediscovers the magic
of yoga on a wellbeing
weekend in Morocco with
Satvada Retreats



It's a warm North African evening on a rooftop deep in the Marrakesh medina. I'm lying supine on the smooth tadelakt floor, surrounded by my fellow retreaters. We're about to start our evening yoga practice, and I feel like I'm coming home. But it's been over four years since I was on the mat... over four years since I last did a yoga class, or indeed any yoga at all.

Why? Well, life had mostly got very busy and stressful, due to a succession of largely thankless jobs, growing professional seniority,

and many hours spent at a desk. I was too busy to notice, but I was sinking and becoming consumed by the spiralling pressure. Exercise, including yoga, became just another thing on an ever-lengthening to-do list.

Then one day in 2013, without warning, or so it seemed, I was at breaking point. I was experiencing chest pains, my fingertips were numb, and worst of all I couldn't stop crying, huge gulping sobs, tears tracking my cheeks. It was horrendous and very scary.

What I was experiencing was a complete mental and physical

breakdown due to stress and overwork. Of course, my job was at an end, and for a long time after I couldn't do anything at all, but gradually, and piece-by-painful-piece I've put myself back together.

It's been a long road but I'm truly thankful that today not only do I know myself better, I'm the happiest I've been in years. My recovery has taken me in many directions, but taking time out has meant less money, and I've managed on very little. Money can't buy happiness, it's true, but suddenly I couldn't afford anything. The first thing to go was travel.

Three years later I'm self-employed and it was with great joy that I realised I could finally afford to take a little trip. Remembering how much I'd enjoyed the yoga retreats I'd been on in the past, I resolved to book a therapeutic treat for myself - and what a treat it turned out to be.

Tranquility in the city

After researching online I chose Satvada Retreats 'Wellbeing and Yoga Retreat' in Marrakesh; a long weekend in the most exotic place within closest reach. I was worried that I wouldn't be fit enough but I needn't have worried, the retreat turned out to be the final piece in the puzzle of putting me back together, and I returned to the UK feeling whole again, and for the first time in years, really in tune with my body.

The retreat was based in the exquisite Riad Majala in the heart of ancient Marrakesh. It was like staying in your own private palace. And we had the whole place to ourselves. It was hard to believe we were in the centre of such a hugely busy, bustling capital city. The riad was tranquility itself.

The retreat offered six mindful yoga and meditation classes, which began shortly after we arrived with an evening practice on the rooftop of the riad. As I lay in Savasana, trying to let go of everything, the sounds of evening in the city drifted past. The call to prayer began and as voice answered voice, from minaret to minaret, I felt very much at peace.

The winter months in Morocco are perfect for yoga. If you're lucky it's still warm enough to be outside, perhaps on the rooftop of your riad, as I was. Feeling refreshed and very relaxed, I looked forward to the evening ahead and meeting my fellow retreat guests (we were a small group of 10, a complete range of ages and fitness).

Thankfully, I also felt reassured that I wouldn't be out of my depth when it came to the more strenuous yoga we would be doing in the morning. As the table was laid for dinner I had a chance to talk to people, including Lucia Cockroft, our teacher and co-founder of Satvada Retreats. She was very welcoming and friendly and instantly put me at my ease.

I love meeting new people, and in my experience those I've met on a retreat often turn out to be exceptionally interesting. And as we gathered for our meal, it was fascinating to hear the individual accounts of what had attracted the group to this particular retreat, and their experience and interest in yoga. Most of the group had practiced yoga in the past, but there were a couple of beginners.

Finding me again

By now I was really looking forward to the morning class, and I wondered how I would fare. After refreshments, we gathered in the courtyard of the riad, where a small, rose petal-filled fountain was playing. We fanned our mats out around the fountain and began. Our teacher's calm, soothing voice eased us into the practice. Over the course of the next couple of days we focused on our core, as well as exploring our flexibility with back bends and hip openers. We balanced in Tree Pose, hands reaching up to the blue sky, and

gradually built up to a more intense sequence of Warrior Poses and Sun Salutations.

I was amazed by how my body appeared to have retained the muscle memory of the years I had spent practicing yoga. I found myself comfortably in Downward Facing Dog, despite being quite unfit and weighing considerably more than I had. By the second day I was even able to drop down in to Plank Pose and even complete several flows with little difficulty. It felt wonderful. I was also reminded of how much I love being in Child's Pose, and how comforting it can be.

The other great joy of the retreat was the abundant delicious, healthful vegetarian food. The most astonishing feasts were laid before us. From fruit and coffee or fragrant tea before morning practice, to the veritable banquet of a brunch after. Personal favourites were the delicious Moroccan set cheese, the rich olive oil, and thick local honey, served with a choice of flatbreads and little pancakes, with everything freshly prepared.

At around 4pm each day we were served with soothing Moroccan mint tea, brewed in a beautiful silver pot, capped with a little fez, and poured out into exquisite little glasses in a range of jewel-bright colours. Of course there was delicious cake too. The evening meals were a kaleidoscope of flavours. The table setting was fabulous too, with rose petals carefully arranged across a snowy white cloth. Tagines were placed in the centre, and when the coned-lids were whisked off, the most amazing aromas drifted across the table.

After four nights at Riad Majala I returned to the UK feeling fantastic, and completely refreshed. My retreat experience was utterly restorative, particularly in view of my recovery over the past few years. Marrakesh was dazzling, beautiful, different, and fed my travel-starved soul. The yoga and meditation unlocked a part of me that I thought had been lost, and now I'm hungry for more. The experience has convinced me that I need to make yoga an important part of my life again.

Satvada Retreats runs regular three-night Wellbeing Weekends in Marrakech. From £599 per person, inclusive of all yoga and meditation classes, wonderful vegetarian food, a massage and boutique style accommodation. Visit: satvada-retreats.co.uk

