

Marrakech

When James Wix travelled to Marrakech to help his hotelier father open and run a riad, he never dreamt he would end up moving there...



James Wix's hotelier father went to Marrakech in 2002 with the dream of buying a holiday home as a retreat from his busy hotel businesses – The Scotsman in Edinburgh, The Calls in Leeds and Hôtel de la Trémoille in Paris.

"My father came here and fell in love with it. He bought a small property to build into a holiday home and gradually other properties around us became available," he says. It was then that Wix came up with the idea of creating a new concept – a high-end luxury riad.

Opening a riad was also a first for Wix junior who, at the time, was a party designer for top-end event companies and worked for the Four Seasons. His plan was to help his father out for just a few months but he ended up staying and taking over the family business.

"I came out to develop the business and clear up after a manager left, and I fell in love with it. I knew there were some really great opportunities in Marrakech so I decided that I would stay," says Wix.

Taking on the riad was a role



The ochre city: James Wix, above, launched his successful Marrakech riad with his father in 2004

he relished. "A riad allows us to offer a far more personable service than in a hotel. I am able to say good morning to my clients every day and I can tailor their holiday so it's exactly what they want it to be. That's a very exciting role."

GETTING STARTED

But being the director of Riad Farnatchi presented a huge number of cultural and red-tape challenges for Wix.

"Out here everything is still done on paper. Huge piles of documents arrived to be signed when we first started. Even with a reasonable understanding of

French I found myself looking at the papers and wondering what on earth they were. There were definitely language barriers in the beginning."

But it was government office bureaucracy that was the most difficult thing to overcome: "It was a huge amount of work. You're very lucky if you manage to find a government office that's doing the right thing at the right time. And when you discover the offices are only open for two or three days a week it gets slightly frustrating, especially when you're trying to get planning permission."

Wix also had to get to grips with the requirements of employment law – much stricter in Marrakech than many other Moroccan states and geared heavily towards the employee rather than the employer.

"It's taken a while to fully understand all the implications of the law and to learn all the new rules and regulations, and to be honest I'm not there yet. Employment law is constantly changing and there will continue to be a lot of alterations in the next few years."

CHARMING CULTURE

"The Moroccans are a charming race who welcome you with open arms," says Wix. "You will always be greeted warmly and all sorts of people will offer help, which is brilliant but you have to keep a very close eye on what's going on around you. If you take your eye off the ball for one second you're back to square one."

Working culture is similar to the UK with shops opening at nine o'clock in the morning and closing around five or six o'clock in the evening. "People take a long lunch, which can often last up to two hours, but they will then work until six or seven o'clock," he adds.

The majority of the population in Marrakech is Muslim and Friday is the day of prayer, which results in a lot less business.

"Some people will work a shorter day on Friday depending on how religious they are. Those who are very religious won't work on Friday at all and will work on Saturday instead."

Ramadan – when Muslims observe a month of fasting – also plays its part. "Things slow down but people are used to it. The

time of Ramadan varies every year but we often close in August just because it's so hot here. It also gives us a chance to catch up with our maintenance and make the place look fresh for the coming season," says Wix.

The business is doing well since its 2004 launch but it has not been without its challenges. "With the Arab uprisings, various incidents that have taken place in Marrakech and the Arab world, and the financial crisis it has been tough," he says. "I won't claim to have had a record-breaking year this year but we're holding our place in the market."

THE REWARDS

Setting up Riad Farnatchi presented several challenges but it also came with plenty of rewards. "The most rewarding thing is seeing the business come to life. It's great to see my guests enjoying their time here and to be able to shake hands with each person as they leave.

And of course hearing and reading the great comments from the guests who have stayed – that's always lovely."

His advice to people who are looking to establish a business in Marrakech is to keep an open mind, not to have too many preconceptions about the place and to be flexible.

"In Marrakech the sky is the limit and you can do whatever you want. But it may take longer than you anticipate and it may be more expensive," he advises.

"The cost of living isn't as cheap as you first think and you need to be prepared for initial costs to be exaggerated and for things to take longer than quoted. You've got to be sure it's really where you want to be," he adds. "I think it is important for people to consider that carefully before they come to Marrakech."

Even with the challenges Wix is happy to be where he is today. "I absolutely love Morocco – it's an amazing country and the culture is fascinating. It's an exciting place to be in an exciting time."

Behiye Hassan

MARRAKECH FACT FILE



Population

Estimated to be one million

Currency

Moroccan dirhams

Language

French and Arabic. "I have a basic schoolboy grounding in French, which served me well as a starting point and has improved massively since I've been out here."



Sightseeing

"Go and spend some time at Djemaa el-Fna square – there is so much to see. And visit the souk – part of the fun is getting lost and finding your way out again."

Food

"I would recommend Le Comptoir Darna for a fun evening. For a more serious Moroccan dinner try the Al Fassia or Yacout." www.comptoirmarrakech.com www.alfassia.com www.riadyacout.com

Where to stay

Riad Farnatchi, of course. But if the riad is full I would recommend staying out of town in Kasbah du Toukhal, in the Atlas Mountains." www.riadfarnatchi.com www.kasbahdutoukhal.com

Getting there

BMI, BA, easyJet, Ryanair, Thompson and Royal Air Maroc. Flights go from Heathrow, Gatwick, Luton, Stansted, Birmingham, Manchester and Nottingham. Book through WEXAS at www.iad.com/travel (020 7838 5989).

Useful contacts

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