

# SAHARA CITY AT LA TRELADE

## Eastern promise

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Mixed grill. (24528756)

IT HAS been a long time since I had a truly new dining experience, so a visit to Sahara City at La Trelade Hotel was a treat in more ways than one. ‘Full of Eastern promise’ was a slogan used for a well-known confectionery many years ago, but it applies equally well to this restaurant, with its varied menu of dishes from Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon and around the Mediterranean. But people with delicate palates or who are not feeling particularly adventurous need not fear – there is plenty of British fare on the menu too, including bangers and mash and fish and chips, right down to a selection of dishes for youngsters, making this the perfect venue for families who fancy something a bit different while not risking the children turning their noses up at everything. It would have been odd, if not downright stupid, to turn up at such a venue and not sample something exotic, so I made it a condition of attending that myself and my three family members each try at least one eastern dish. On arrival we were greeted by the friendly face of Said, who would not only be our host for the evening but also served as our guide and interpreter as we set out on our adventure into the restaurant’s menu. He patiently explained what some of the dishes involved, and how they were prepared, and that enabled us to select our courses with a bit more idea of what we would be getting. Of course, the final experience was down to the chefs, and I am delighted to say that by the end of the evening all of us were delighted with our experience. The first course arrived with a plate of pita bread which was the best I have ever had. It can be quite a chewy bread, I have found, but this was beautifully easy on the teeth. What made this even better was Joe’s idea of ordering a garlic dip, which augmented the pita perfectly and ended with us ordering another round of the bread later on. The rather safe and routine entree selected by Joe was spicy lamb sausage, and, like many of the dishes, there was sufficient for all of us to have a taster. Flavourful but not too spicy, he said – and I agreed – and the portion was of a sufficient size without being too large. I opted for the mezze platter. This selection of different starters from the menu can be ordered for one or two people, and comprised among other things a vine leaf stuffed with rice, onion, parsley and olive oil, falafel, sambousek – a deep-fried crispy pastry filled with vegetables – served on a bed of houmous. It was a really great way to sample some of the starters, all of which I thoroughly enjoyed. But next time I go I will be looking forward to having a larger portion of sambousek to start with, with its crisp and light pastry and delicious filling. Harry’s choice was the aptly named batata harra, a nicely-sized portion of potato cubes spiced with garlic, coriander, chilli and sweet pepper. ‘The potatoes are really good and crispy mixed with a nice amount of vegetables,’ he said, adding that he loved the spicy edge: ‘It’s not too hot.’

Haloumi. (24528767)

Batta harra. (24528764)

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Chicken shawarma. (24528754)

Karen’s option was haloumi, which again arrived in a generous amount – several slices, fried, and served with a salad garnish and a tangy sauce which balanced the taste of the cheese. Those were generous starters and it was at this point that the prospect of making it through a dessert course began to seem optimistic. While waiting for the main event of the evening, though, I took the chance to enjoy the atmosphere of the place, with its tapestries featuring camels, stylish lighting and music that could make you think you were eating in a restaurant in the heart of Egypt. Said offered to turn it off, since he said some guests found it a bit too un-Western for their tastes, but if you’re going to an eastern-style restaurant to eat surely you’d want to feel you were really in the east? The arrival of our main courses gave us another insight into the unusual dishes on offer. Both Karen and I had gone for a tagine – a Moroccan dish similar to a stew, but slow-cooked in a herb and tomato sauce. The presentation was different, too, with what looked like an inverted pottery funnel covering the plate as it was served. You could have either couscous or rice with the dish, but since the former was the traditional accompaniment this was what we went for. This arrived in a neat mound on a separate plate, but it wasn’t long before I put it on to the main plate, where it helped absorb some of the tasty gravy. My tagine of choice was cubes of lamb and these were lovely and melt-in-the-mouth tender without a hint of fat or gristle and augmented beautifully by spinach and the tasty gravy. Karen had gone for the chicken variety and loved it: ‘The flavour is amazing,’ she said, adding that the chicken was nice and tender and there was plenty of it. Both Harry and Joe had chips with their mains and both raved about them as much as anything else we had the whole evening – light and crispy on the outside but fluffy on the inside: ‘The perfect chip,’

Baklawa. (24528752)

was their verdict. Harry’s choice was what sounded like a rather pedestrian mixed grill, but of course this was a mixture of meats with an eastern edge – skewers of grilled chicken, with cubes of lamb served with tahini (a paste made from sesame seed husks) and garlic and chilli dips. The meat was tasty and tender, he said, with the garlic and chilli adding extra spice to the dish. Chicken shawarma was Joe’s choice, and as with most of the dishes we ordered it was interesting to see what it was. In this case it turned out to be another course served with those rave-reviewed chips, Lebanese pita and garlic and chilli dips. The chicken was in thin strips which had been marinated in a medium heat spicy sauce and then grilled: ‘Sweet and spicy,’ declared Joe. ‘Very flavourful.’ And so to dessert, and for half of our party the two courses they had enjoyed proved more than sufficient and so it was left to me and Joe to travel the last leg of this journey together, although in Joe’s case the destination was an old familiar. What can one say about a classic creme brulee that is served exactly as it should be? ‘Crispy on top and smooth below,’ said Joe, polishing it off with obvious relish. I was determined to try something different, so my dessert of choice was baklawa, a plate of small chunks of filo pastry filled with chopped nuts and baked with honey and butter and served with a cream dip. The dessert deserters couldn’t even be tempted to try one of these small pastries, which was just as well since I was reluctant to let anyone else pinch from my plate such was the toothsome nature of these delicious bites with their nutty flavour and chewy yet light texture. And so our time in this unique restaurant came to an end, but it’s safe to say it’s highly likely we’ll be back. With good parking, this out-of-Town restaurant was well worth a drive south for us to enjoy a taste of the East.

Spicy lamb sausage. (24528762)

Creme brulee. (24528750)

Lamb and spinach tagine. (24528760)

Mezze platter. (24528769)

Chicken and spinach tagine. (24528758)

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