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Eating Fish with My Fingers in Essaouira, Morocco

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By David Hammond

Walking through old seaport cities like Venice, New Orleans and Essaouira on Morocco's Atlantic coast, there's a heavy sense of ancientness that hangs on the buildings, few of which ever seem to have many right angles, many of which – even those of stone – appear to have been warped by time, sagging under the weight of history, weary but withstanding the ages.

Being by the water, these cities naturally have a strong seafood culture. Superb fish seems abundant and relatively cheap (in Essaouira, just about all the fish you could imagine eating for maybe \$5US).

In Essaouira, I was fortunate to have fresh seafood, pulled from the sea and grilled on the shore that I was able to consume cheek-by-jowl with locals who've probably been eating here, in this way, since the Phoenicians initiated waves of invasions that continued to be carried on through the millennia by Romans, Portuguese, Spanish, French, and finally, American travelers like me.

Here's how to eat economically in Essaouira, which is admittedly already a very inexpensive place to eat.

First, buy fish from a vendor – and haggle over the price. Haggling in Morocco, my strategy is usually to offer half or one-third the stated price and take it from there. Though I didn't do the negotiating this time around (I left that to Youseff, our guide, from [Access Trips](#)), I got pretty good at it and later was able to buy a Rolex for about \$12US. A Moroccan miracle!!

Second, bring fish to a nearby place whose main business is to grill fish (these places will also sell you fish, but for a significant premium). They also usually provide tables, bread and salads. Nice.

Third, eat with your hands. I'm getting the hang of this way of eating, although at first I was horrifically clumsy. Here's how to eat with your hands:

1. Make a claw with your right hand – think crane, not shovel.
2. Grab a little pinch of food and lift it to the mouth.
3. Cock your thumb and position it behind the food
4. As you lift food to mouth, move your thumb forward slightly to push food into mouth.

The thumb action is critical.

Moroccans seems less phobic about using the left hand than, say, Indians, but I stuck with the right throughout, sometimes sitting on my left, which kept wanting to get into the action.

It was so elementally satisfying to eat fish, close to where it was caught, dressed with nothing more than salt, with salad and bread, as I'm sure people had been doing for a long time, right where I was sitting, my fingers covered with oil and a big smile on my face.

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