

MARRAKECH A LA MODE

A succession of high-end openings and restorations has transformed the 11th-century Moroccan city into an obligatory stop for jetsetters.

Text Leo Bear Photos Alvaro Leiva

Entrance court at the super lux Amanjena resort, Marrakech

With its pulsating souks, sizzling nightlife and new-wave riads, a city break in Marrakech has always been a thrill-a-minute experience. The Red City has long been a go-to destination for sightseers, shoppers and Bohemians seeking an exotic escape, but recently the ancient metropolis has undergone a dramatic transformation that is attracting a new, well-heeled crowd.

Designer boutiques have sprung up along orange-tree-lined boulevards and the luxury hotel industry is booming. Recent additions to the accommodation roster include the Selman, Delano, Mosaic Palais Aziza, Palais Namaskar and Taj, to name a few, but with endless new über-resorts vying to out-design each other, insiders fear Marrakech is in danger of losing its identity. Others argue the city is on a trajectory to glory. Whatever the case, Marrakech is definitely having a moment.

Most of the hotel development is confined to the Palmeraie region, a largely empty expanse to the northeast of the city, once home to date palms as far as the eye could see, but a few hotels are also springing up on the borders of Marrakech's old town.

Within the walls of the medina itself, rest assured, little has changed. Wandering through the quiet winding passages of the As Wal quarter, for example, you'll find a 16th-century fountain still gushing drinking water, and men weaving Agave silk, traces of it glinting in the air. Herbalists selling all manner of lotions, potions and powders in every colour of a Pantone book, still promise a cure for every malaise, and if you poke your nose through enough ornate doorways, you'll eventually spy the kind of guesthouse Esther Freud described in her autobiographical 1960s novel *Hideous Kinky*.

Come up for air in the main square, Place Jemaa El Fna (a UNESCO World Heritage site) however, and you'll be knocked sideways by the intoxicating atmosphere. Rows of smoking barbeques, live musicians and tenacious street sellers attract hordes of visitors from across the globe, all bartering for babouches (Moroccan slippers) and sidestepping snake charmers.

Fortunately, a stone's throw from Place Jemaa El Fna, lies La Mamounia, a gentrified bolthole and one of Morocco's most magnificent hotels. Despite being nearly a century old, it is still the city's best address and a must-visit if only for a pot of mint tea. Originally built in 1922 and recently spruced-up by the flamboyant interior designer Jacques Garcia, the hotel has a talent for constantly reinventing itself. One can spend a long stretch of time strolling up and down its vast marble lobbies marvelling at the elaborately tiled ceilings, or prowling around seven hectares of gardens that once provided the medina with all its fruit and vegetables. Suites are sumptuous and service is unfaltering, but above all, it's the history that keeps people coming. Sir Winston Churchill's old room remains the most coveted suite in the city.

Just around the corner sits the Royal Mansour, La Mamounia's closest rival. Modelled on a mini-medina, >>

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(From top)
The Riad
Kaiss:
Traditional
elegant steps
from a World
Heritage site

Entrance to
Hotel Royal
Mansour

Afternoon
tea at the
Amanjena

accommodation comes in the form of clusters of two and three-storey riads – with roofs that slide open by remote control. My riad even had a lift. Masterminded by the King of Morocco, Mohammed VI, every detail from the pink gold-leaf in the bar to the extensive zellige in the spa was overseen by his majesty. Thousands of local craftsmen were drafted in and – reportedly – billions of Dirham spent; every inch of the property showcasing Moroccan arts and crafts.

The Royal Mansour raised the bar so high, any sensible hotelier would have turned on his heel and headed elsewhere. But not so. More luxury hotels have followed suit.

The Delano hotel in the central Hivernage district is one of the latest arrivals. Breaking new ground with its trendy swagger, it is every bit as cool as its sister property in Miami. Its 73 rooms line an airy Guggenheim-esque rotunda and behind closed doors the mood is dark and daring with swathes of purple velvet. The Italian restaurant, Pomiroeu, is world-class and there's also an upscale sushi bar. But ultimately, people check in for the Sky Lounge on the roof – since it opened there's been no hipper place to watch the sun go down.

In contrast, a couple of kilometres south of the medina, the Selman hotel (prides itself on discretion. This family-run hideaway might have an 80m swimming pool (the longest in the city) and Arabian thoroughbreds cantering around paddocks for guests' viewing pleasure but its traditional briquette-rouge exterior and friendly Moroccan owners make it a shining example of past meets present in Marrakech.

The long-awaited Taj Palace, on the other hand, is a 161-room brassy behemoth in the Palmeraie region. Famous for serving as the backdrop for Carrie and co in *Sex and the City 2*, it has Las Vegas-style proportions. Take for example the Royal Suite atop the main building: it covers 450sqm and has three bedrooms and a wraparound terrace with spectacular views of the Atlas Mountains. Modelled on Ottoman architecture blended with rich Indian pageantry, all the rooms have vivid colour palettes and are dripping with opulence.

Palais Namascar, opposite the Taj, is equally splendid although skewed towards the contemporary. Seven years and EUR50 million in the making, the five-hectare playground is dotted with villas interspersed with symmetrical reflecting pools. Time-poor big spenders can make use of the hotel's 14-seat Dassault Falcon 900LX – which operates from a nearby airfield – and anyone seeking to shed a few layers of skin can do so in its state-of-the-art spa.

While design junkies might appreciate Palais Namaskar's inventive aesthetic – did I mention the giant salt-crystal installation in the bar? – travellers seeking something more conventional ought to look elsewhere.

Striking the perfect balance between modern luxury and traditional charm is Aman Resort's Amanjena. Located to the east of the city, guests are housed in palatial private villas brimming with vases of fresh-cut roses along with roaring log fires and decadently deep >>

marble bathtubs. The centrepiece of the hotel is a vast ancient pond inspired by the city's 12th-century Menara Gardens teeming with enormous carp. At turndown, guests are spoilt with locally crafted gifts such as straw hats, babouches and pouches of potpourri, and the Moroccan restaurant serves some of the finest tagines and pastilla in the city.

Likewise, at the new boutique hotel Mosaic Palais Aziza, a sense of place is constantly tangible. Rooms boast chapel-like ceilings, ornamental brass lanterns and colossal beds stretched tight with Egyptian cotton, and beyond the sleeping quarters, there are two pools, a small spa and gym. The hotel's star attraction though has to be Chef Daniele Turco (formerly of Venice's Gritti Palace) who toils away in the kitchen reconstructing traditional Italian fare with delicate flair. Marinated sardines, spaghetti with chunky pistachio and basil pesto, and scorpion fish in a broth of anis, are just a few of his stand-out dishes. Ask him what brought him to Marrakech, and he'll tell you the city is a gourmet hotspot. Food markets overflowing with spices and local produce are a big draw, as is the emerging modern bistro scene. For further proof, the Royal Mansour has secured three-Michelin-star chef Yannick Alléno to oversee its menus. Should you be inclined to learn some Moroccan recipes during your visit, Les Jardins de la Medina has a brilliant programme of cookery classes, but book early, they tend to fill up quickly.

Remarkably, in spite of the recent luxury explosion, riad culture continues to flourish in the medina. Rundown guesthouses are constantly being updated and old favourites such as Riad Kaiss and Riad Abracadabra continue to welcome loyal guests. But for true authenticity and charm, there's nowhere quite like Beldi. Tucked down a dirt track, five km south of the medina, this beguiling country club used to be somewhere those in-the-know came for the day to escape the city. But now, with 28 rooms recently added, it's become one of Marrakech's chicest retreats. With its striking beauty, warm hospitality and deep-rooted respect for Moroccan culture, here's hoping Beldi can offer some kind of counterbalance to Marrakech's newly acquired glamour. Just don't tell anyone about it... ■



Malaysia Airlines flies direct from Kuala Lumpur (KUL) to Amsterdam (AMS); from Amsterdam, **one**world partner British Airways flies to Marrakech (RAK) via London (LGW)

HIPPIE HAVEN

HEY DUDE, DID HENDRIX SLEEP HERE?

There is a certain type of visitor who comes to Morocco seeking the '1960s Hippie Experience'. If you are one, then you're in for a surprise. Eager-to-please hotel and restaurant owners are only too happy to cater to those who crave to relive or experience anew the woozy 1960s and early 1970s when Morocco was a hippie magnet for rock and movie stars. Jimi Hendrix, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Cat Stevens - born Steven Demetre Georgiou, now going under the moniker of Yusuf Islam - all spent time in the country and made it the ultra cool place to be or to have been.

These days every other riad claims that Jimi Hendrix stayed there and nearly every restaurant claims ate there. However it's generally accepted Hendrix spent just one week in Morocco, in July 1969, when he based himself in Essaouira, on the coast 180 km west of Marrakech.

The Chez Sam restaurant sports a photo purportedly signed by Jimi and dedicated to the owner Sam. It reads, "A MON AMI SAM, 63". Well, does that mean 1963? If so, Jimi must have been very dazed and

confused to be six years behind the times. Or does it mean Sam was 63? If so, he would be 110 years old today, and he is still very much alive. A guest asked the waiter when Chez Sam opened and was told 1983. He said he thought that Jimi was a friend of Sam's in 1973. Sadly Jimi died in 1970.

You will find similar confused tales at other hotels and restaurants in the town. The Riad Al Madina, billed as 'The Jimi Hendrix Hotel', displays some black-and-white framed pictures of Jimi and his contemporaries on the walls. The truth be told, he never set foot in the place. He stayed at the Hôtel Des Îles and he ate at the Café de France. Or so they say.

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