

Morocco

A Filmmakers Playground

While Wi-Fi and cell phones have come to Morocco's kasbahs, the ageless traditions of the desert endure.

BY JANET FORMAN
PHOTOS BY TOM HOUGHTON



Marrakech Atelier De Cuisine dining, Beef Tajine

Atlas Mountains Roads

“When I was a boy in our desert village, matches were scarce,” recalls 44 year old Lahcen Zaaim, “and starting the breakfast cooking fire was difficult.” The problem was solved, he realizes today, by the power of community: “Our houses were connected by holes in the walls, so women could pass a flaming stick from one family to the next.” Lahcen flips his iPad to an image of his childhood Berber settlement, a nine-hour drive over the High Atlas Mountains, where he still retreats each summer. He is a man of the 21st century: computer savvy and Internet wise, the guide, fixer, historian and cultural translator provided by Kensington Tours, the company that arranged this richly textured journey to Morocco. Yet the country has moved into the modern world so quickly that even this relatively young man remembers when his Berber kin were nomads.

Lahcen's attire speaks volumes: He first appears in flowing Berber robes, expert at transforming the hood from hat to backpack to wallet. The next day he's wearing a T-shirt and jeans. The transformation appears seamless, but when I probe a bit deeper, asking if he'd lived with his parents until he married, Lahcen laughs: “I lived with my mother until two years ago! The only reason she let me move to Marrakech was to get a better education for my son.” His marriage was arranged, I learn, quite an acceptable practice even now, for like Morocco itself, this contemporary man's everyday life is guided by an ancient desert culture.

A Land Handcrafted

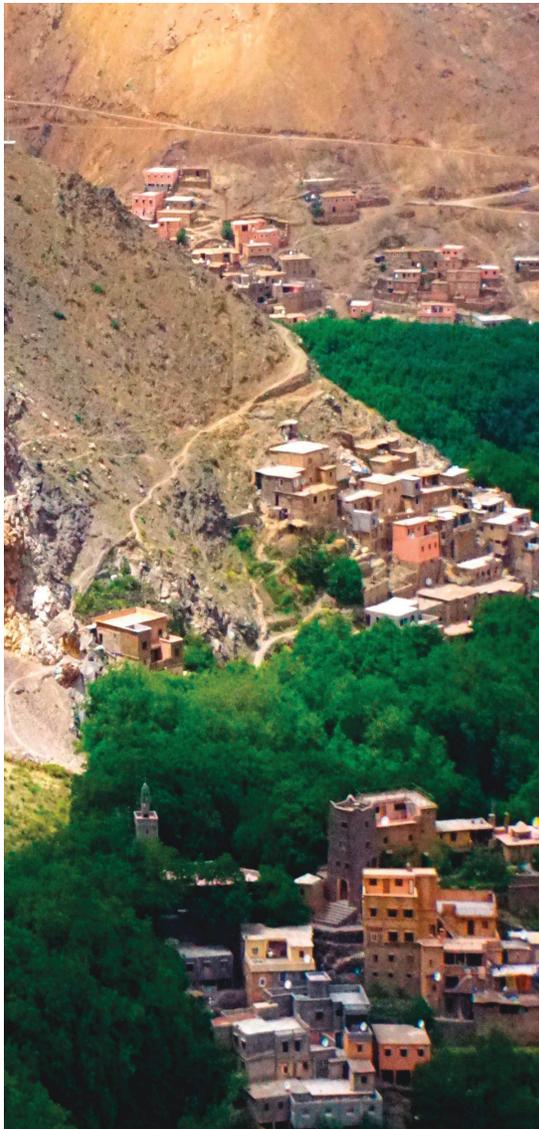
As if by royal decree, just about every inch of Morocco's interior space, from city medinas to rural kasbahs, seems crafted by hand. Archways and floors of Moroccan hotels, restaurants and places of worship are laced with a giddy mosaic of *zellige* tiles: shimmering enamel chips meticulously arranged in intricate patterns like the inside of a jewel box. Lime plaster *tadelakt* walls are so finely honed they take on a velvet sheen, and lustrous mother of pearl is often embedded in intricately carved cedar, creating an

ambience so sumptuous it has drawn generations of sensualists. Winston Churchill found repose in painting the three-century-old gardens of La Mamounia hotel, planted by a sultan as a wedding gift for his son. Alfred Hitchcock set *The Man Who Knew Too Much* in 12th century Djema el-Fna square with its snake charmers, trained monkeys and dancing boys, a chaotic ecstasy immortalized by 1960s rock stars Crosby, Stills and Nash in the song *Marrakech Express*.

Painter Jacques Majorelle was so deeply enamored of these visual riches he created



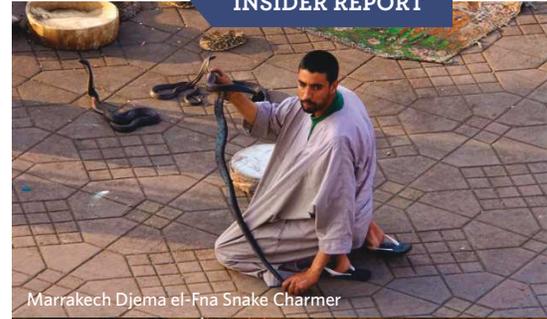
Djema el-Fna Night Pastry Seller



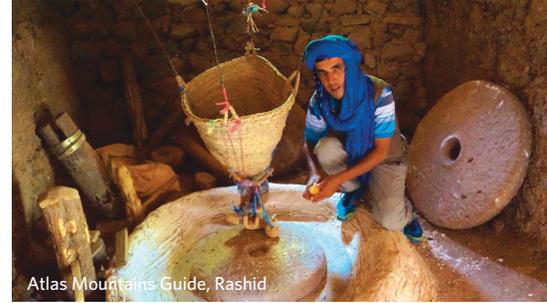
Quarzazate Lahcen, Janet Peeking Over Wall

a luminous shade of blue, a color he found in Morocco's tiles, textiles and sky, now immortalized as Majorelle Blue. A master botanist as well as an artist, Majorelle spent 40 years establishing an otherworldly garden in Marrakech: two and a half acres densely planted with specimens from across the globe as a "cathedral of shapes and colors." After Majorelle's death in 1966 the elaborate gardens lay in ruins for years, until fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergé were inspired to restore them.

The most recent addition to the Majorelle complex is the provocative Berber Museum, a dramatic retelling of these desert people's 9,000-year story, beginning in the pre-Arab era when they cohabited this region with the Jews. Even today Berber jewelry like the Fatima's Hand may include a Star of David, burial sites of eminent rabbis are preserved in lost corners of the desert, and Berber children are given Old Testament names like Sarah, Jacob or Daniel. Indeed, descendants of the museum's musical instruments are now played by hipster twenty somethings in a modern, reggae-inflected version of *gnawa*, the ancient spiritual music and dance.



Marrakech Djema el-Fna Snake Charmer

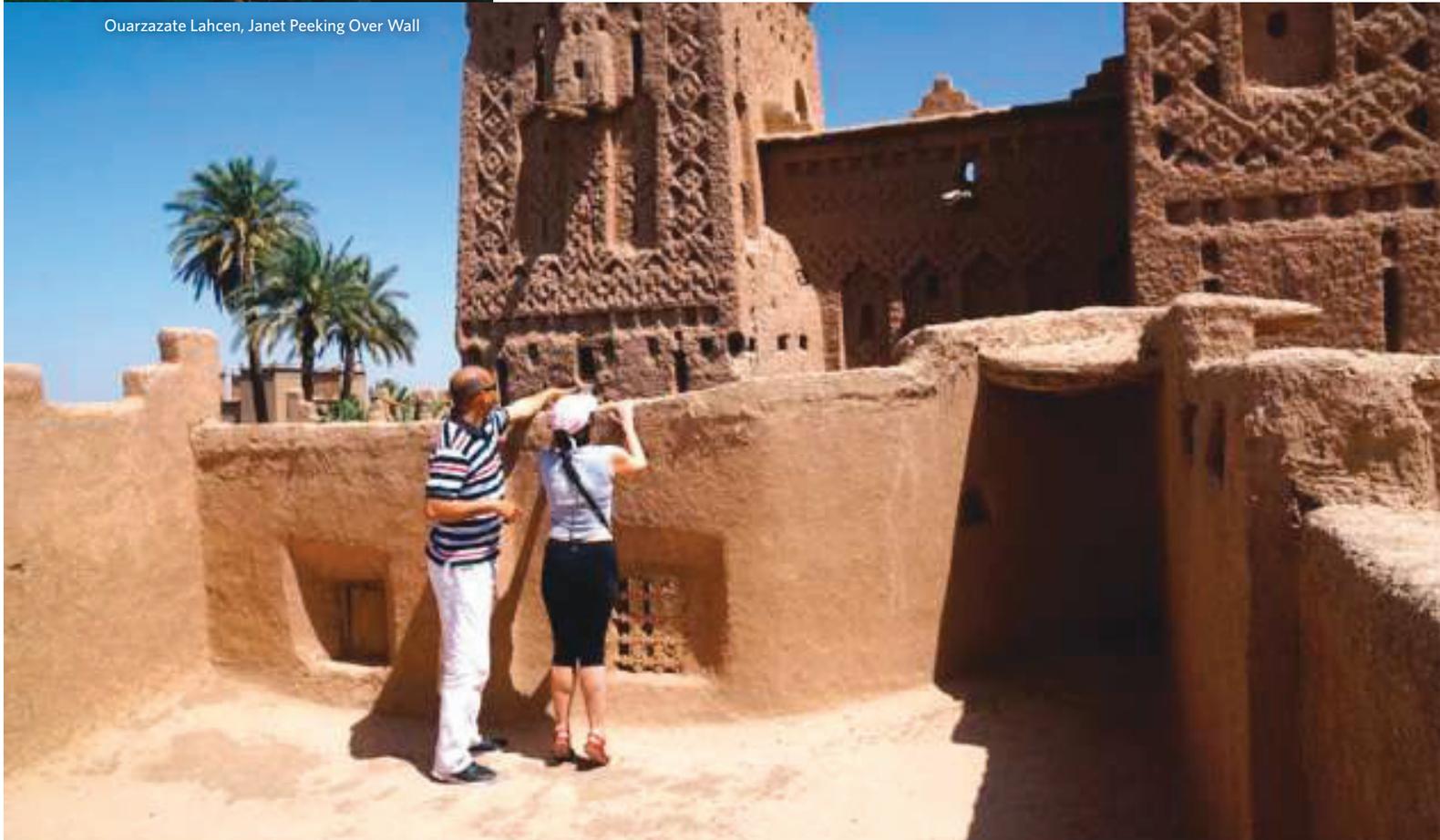


Atlas Mountains Guide, Rashid

In the High Atlas Mountains

Those biblical times seem to materialize before my eyes as we inch along the single-track roads of the High Atlas Mountains; peaks so high they are capped with snow as the temperature in Marrakech hits 108. The vast emptiness of these

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BRING MOROCCO HOME

Labyrinthe du Sud

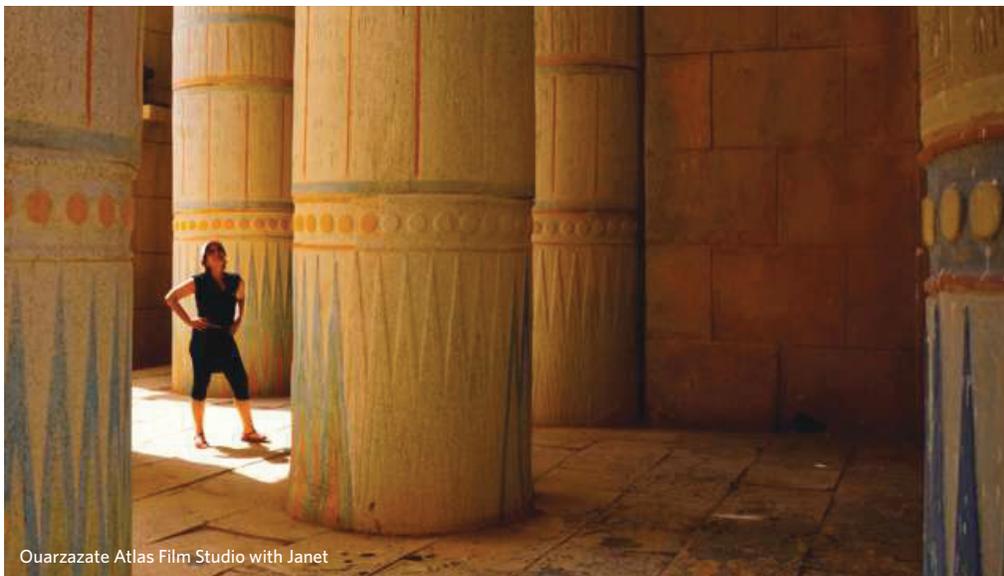
This back street storehouse resembles Ali Baba's cave; a treasure chest lined with handcrafted silver jewelry, massive temple doors and centuries old torahs. While the proprietor, Achmed, dressed in royal blue robes, usually sells to shops, decorators and collectors, he's happy to work with individuals who find him. labyrinthedusud.com

Afous Argan Factory

Argan oil, renowned throughout the Middle East and North Africa for its cosmetic and culinary benefits, is quite expensive due to the hours of handwork needed for processing. This cooperative factory channels that money to single women, mostly widowed and divorced, who have a difficult time in Moroccan society. On the drive to its location in an Argan forest about 2.5 hours from Marrakech, watch the roadside for an entire herd of goats standing on branches of an Argan tree, looking like giant four legged Christmas ornaments. afousargan.ma

serrated hills leaves me breathless; as does the slender strip of road we're driving, clearly built for animals and humans, not cars. I notice only a few pullouts to accommodate oncoming vehicles, and when I summon the courage to ask our driver about car passing protocol, he smiles at my naivety: "Somebody has to back up. Sometimes 10 or 12 kilometers."

This is way too much information for right now, yet I soon understand there's a measure of safety in the fact that life is lived in the slow lane here, as locals travel largely by donkey along village streets too narrow for automobiles. We leave the car to climb through a hillside village where streets are suffused with aromas of juniper, pine and oak, to the home of a local patriarch. We're greeted by his second wife; an energetic woman with a noble chin tattoo, who appears to be in her late 50s. (Locals rarely know their exact age as in these remote parts births have only been officially recorded since the 1980s.) She invites us in for freshly baked bread, and with a practiced hand slaps a round of dough against the side of the stone oven where it's quickly transformed into a puffed round so fragile it must be consumed within minutes. As a column of smoke rises through the crisp mountain air, I feel there are few pleasures so primal as literally breaking bread: "BeSaha! To your health," calls our mountain guide Rashid, a wiry young man from a nearby village, as he stands to pour mint tea in a stream



Ouarzazate Atlas Film Studio with Janet

so high it raises froth in the flute shaped glass: Champagne of the High Atlas Mountains.

Hollywood in the Desert

On the other side of the mountains, five hours drive from Marrakech, the town of Ouarzazate may be forging a crucial path to Morocco's economic future as the cinema center of North Africa. When director David Lean filmed some of the most ravishing scenes of *Lawrence of Arabia* here in the early 1960s, other producers took note. While the region had no production support and living conditions were basic,

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filmmakers found the massive sand dunes, emerald oases and archaic kasbahs could represent bygone epochs like Biblical Egypt and 1930s Tibet. In the early 1980s Atlas Corporation Studios was built, an endeavor that has grown to 50 square acres of sound stages and back lots, one of the world's largest film complexes. Now that the infrastructure has evolved, major productions use Ouarzazate as a base: Michael Douglas came to shoot *Jewel of the Nile*, Martin Scorsese filmed *The Last Temptation of Christ* here, then returned with *Kundun*, and Ridley Scott brought Russell Crowe for *Gladiator*. The pace of production seems to be rising with last season's *Game of Thrones* and *American Sniper*, and a number of European film technicians are moving to Morocco. "The work is here," declares Italian gaffer Patrick Bramucci, "and the lifestyle is very, very nice."

If it's startling at first to see a Berber truck laden with livestock rounding the statue of an unfurled reel of film, Ouarzazate's *Arc de Triomphe*, like much of Morocco, this desert

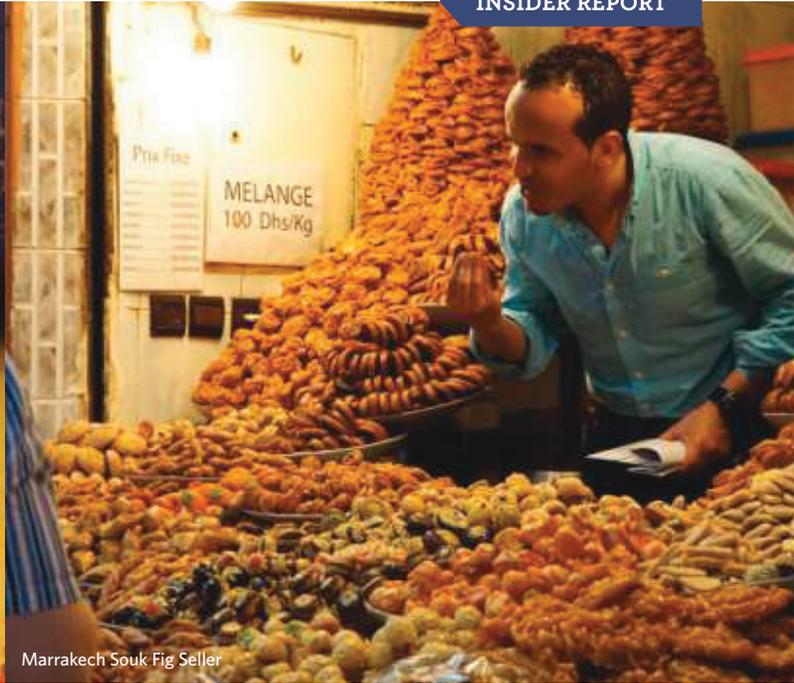


Action Sign and Berber Truck

Sir Richard Branson's Kasbah Tamadot



Ouarzazate Labyrinthe du Sud Shop Carpet Clerk



Marrakech Souk Fig Seller

city embraces the 21st century as a means of preserving its past. Atlas Studios offers a “back lot tour” where visitors can walk among Styrofoam pillars laced with hieroglyphics built for scenes of ancient Egypt, and stand beneath faux Roman columns while watching sequences of stuntmen leaping from their tops on an iPhone. The neighboring CLS studio, created by international producer Dino De Laurentiis, also allows visitors to tour its prop rooms, costume collection and sound stages. And just a few years ago, producers donated elaborate sets such as a medieval torture chamber, a desert encampment, and the Pharaoh’s throne room from Solomon and Sheba to the new Cinema Museum.

An hour drive into the desert from Ouarzazate at the Skoura oasis, Ksar El Kabbaba is designed to let travelers experience traditional desert life in comfort. At this adobe family compound recently opened as a hotel we’re greeted by Joseph, a Berber from Morocco’s northern Rif region, who follows his handshake with a thump of his chest: a gesture that means “you are welcome from my heart,” he tells us. From a roof deck where the brisk desert breeze tempers near 100-degree heat, he points out a small settlement just past the line of trees: “There’s a synagogue 50 meters from a mosque in that village,” he reveals. When I register surprise, he explains: “We all live together here in the desert; we don’t distinguish by what people believe.” It has always been that

way locals tell us, even now that the Internet has replaced grandmother’s stories and Marrakech airport waves in private jets and easyJet with confident aplomb. Yet as Morocco leaps into the modern world, the country seems determined to uphold the millenniums-old values of the desert, to preserve a genteel culture where Berbers, Muslims and Jews live as siblings instead of rivals.

“BeSaha! To your health,” calls our mountain guide Rashid, a wiry young man from a nearby village, as he stands to pour mint tea in a stream so high it raises froth in the flute shaped glass: Champagne of the High Atlas Mountains.

Sir Richard Branson’s Kasbah Tamadot



DETAILS

GETTING THERE:

Kensington Tours

kensingtontours.com

EATING THERE:

Marrakech

Café Clock

marrakech.cafeclock.com

High Atlas Mountains

Roches Armed

Can only be reached by 4x4, arranged by Kensington Tours. Tel.: +212 667-644915. Address: Douar Armed, Imilil, Imilil 42150, Morocco.

Inn on the Oasis

Ksar El Kabbaba

ksar-elkabbaba.com/en

DON'T MISS:

Marrakech

Jardin Majorelle and Berber Museum

jardinmajorelle.com

Cooking Class - Atelier de Cuisine

atelier-chef-tarik.com

Ouarzazate

Cinema Museum (8am to 6pm daily)

Atlas Studio Tour

studiosatlas.com/crbst_29.html

Morocco's opulent artisan tradition coupled with the people's natural gift for hospitality has created some of the world's most inviting hotels.

La Mamounia. *The Grande Dame*

The recent restoration by celebrity designer Jacques Garcia has conferred a ravishing theatricality upon this classic Art Deco lodging: Towering figures open the massive front doors, their robes billowing in the breeze. The lobby is a sensual bath of florals, fountains and crystal chandeliers, and the alluring 20-acre garden again recalls its 18th century heyday when Prince Moulay Mamoun feted dignitaries in their midst. Chefs at Le Marocain enhance Morocco's multi-layered cuisine with remarkable ingredients such as saffron from Ourika Valley and 15 varieties of tomatoes. mamounia.com/en/marrakech.htm

Angsana Riad. (Banyan Tree) *A home in the kasbah*

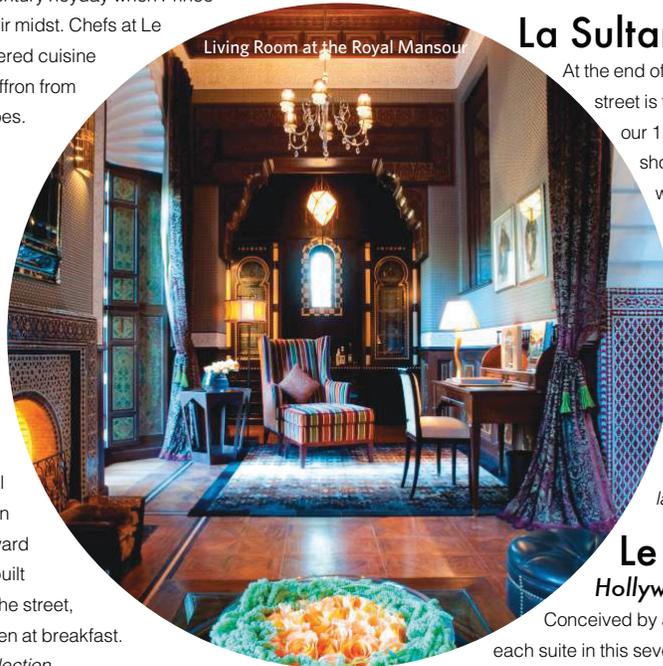
This clutch of traditional Moroccan riads tucked away in a quiet corner of the medina have been restored with shimmering zellige mosaic tile, deeply burnished wood carvings, reflecting pools and fountains. Our suite recalls the building's 1912 colonial era with a wood-burning fireplace, silken pillows and a garden outside our courtyard door. In the atmospheric dining room, built into a riad with a swimming pool down the street, candles flicker inside brass braziers even at breakfast. angsana.com/en/em-morocco-riad-collection

Royal Mansour. *Residence in the imperial city*

Built by Morocco's King Mohammed VI in 2010, this property is akin to a royal compound, where each accommodation is an opulent private riad: Our one bedroom spanned more than 1,800 square feet over three floors, with a private plunge pool on the roof. No one will reveal the cost, but 1,500 artisans worked for more than three years to create interiors awash in illuminated marble, pink gold and thick damasks. Equally impressive is the seamless technology: Cell phone chargers are imbedded in cushy leather armchairs, the library ceiling parts like a book opening to the sky, and the ingenious underground service tunnels lead to the riads' back doors, which means carts never appear on the elegantly landscaped walkways. royalmansour.com/#/en/home



Kasbah Tamadot - Dinner on Roof Terrace



Living Room at the Royal Mansour

La Sultana. *A secret street in the medina*

At the end of a hushed brick-lined alley off a busy medina street is this surprising cache of restored riads. Entering our 1,000-square-foot Lion's Suite, we find rose petals showering the bed, the dining room table laden with honey filled pastries, and a waiter ready to pour aromatic mint tea from a silver flask. Two rooms are devoted entirely to bathing, one with a walk-in Moroccan shower, the other with a circular Roman-style Jacuzzi. At breakfast on the breezy rooftop, served between the civilized hours of 8 a.m. and 11 a.m., a waiter carries buffet choices to the table and offers a one page condensed version of the news: Just enough when you're on vacation.

lasultanahotels.com/eng/Marrakech

Le Temple des Arts. *Hollywood North Africa*

Conceived by a film producer and located near Atlas Studios, each suite in this seven-room boutique hotel pays homage to a film made nearby. Beyond our Cleopatra Suite with its four-poster bed, frescoed walls and stepped tub, accommodations recall Lawrence of Arabia, Kundun and Scheherazade. In touches of fantasy, winged gods flank the lobby staircase, a Tutankhamun frieze encircles the dining room, and music of a 1940s chanteuse accompanies dinner. Run by a worldly French speaking Moroccan who has spent the last few decades working for luxury spirits giant Pernod Ricard, the exceptionally refined cuisine runs to delicately marinated lamb and caramelized crème brûlée. mamounia.com/en/marrakech.htm

Kasbah Tamadot. (Virgin Limited Edition)

At the gateway to the High Atlas Mountains

When a gust of wind tossed Sir Richard Branson's hot air balloon over the High Atlas Mountains he glimpsed a hidden valley: Inhabited by Berbers and little known outside the folds of these snowcapped peaks, it was carpeted with green, cooled by gentle breezes, with soil so fertile that peaches, apples and walnuts flourished with abandon. To share this garden spot with guests, Branson and his parents restored a palace with a riot of sumptuous materials such as vintage carved wood and zellige tiles winding through floors of Italian marble. As in every Branson project, hospitality here is boundless with a gratis minibar, a fully equipped Nespresso station and fancifully pointed leather Berber slippers as a take home gift. virginlimitededition.com/en/kasbah-tamadot?gclid=ClaiJva_cUCFVSRHwodsoQAMQ



La Mamounia Gardens