

• The Destination

Spice of life

The Moroccan city of Marrakech is a melting pot of vibrant cultures and vivid colours, where the traveller is often spoilt for choice

Words: Eugene Costello
Photos: Tim White



Today, Marrakech means five-star hotels, fashionable boutiques and sumptuous *riads* and, if you are heading over for a short city-break, you'd be well advised to stay central, ideally within the rose-coloured walls and ramparts of Medina, the Old City. Linger a little longer and the wide boulevards of the upmarket La Palmeraie district is hard to beat; take this option and you may also have chance to explore the desert and the nearby Atlas Mountains.

As a first port of call, you might want to check out the impossibly cool Bo & Zin – think Ibiza-chic, with decked terraces, pools and gardens that are lit up at night, a DJ playing chilled ambient sounds and impressive French/Modern European cuisine. People come for cocktails just as much as for dinner – rather endearingly, the website promises 'drinking + fooding'. It's popular with celebrities, too, being a favourite choice for stars during the Marrakech Film Festival, which takes place this year from 30 November to 8 December.

For something a little more traditional and sumptuous, though, Dar Yacout is a local institution. Patrons include King Mohamed VI of Morocco when he's in the city, and it's probably Marrakech's most famous Moroccan restaurant.

Owned by the ex-Honorary British Consul, Mohammed Zkhiri, it has built up an enviable guestbook of celebrity names over the years. To ensure an evening to remember, head to the rooftop for drinks before settling down to enjoy the assorted salads, *couscous* and lamb *tajines*.

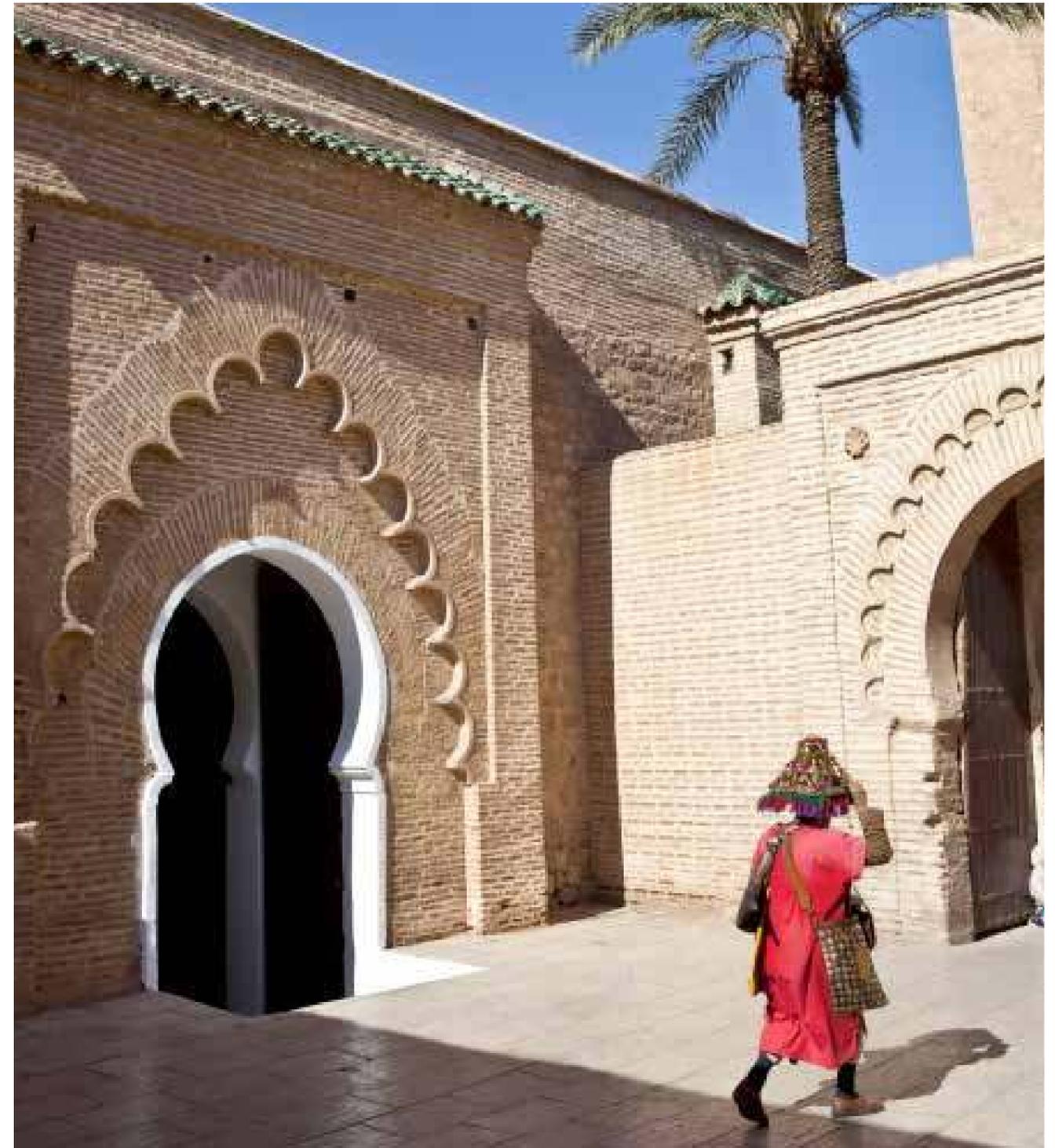
People cannot live on food alone, though. For an authentic Marrakechi experience, have a drink in 'le bar Churchill' – named after Winston, of course – at La Mamounia, probably Morocco's most famous hotel. Just off the Galeria Mamounia, the bar is beautifully decorated in glorious, 1930s style. It's a fascinating mixture of Moorish and Art-Deco design. Today, La Mamounia still attracts the rich and famous, including Salma Hayek, Paloma Picasso and Sarah Jessica Parker; it was voted Best Urban Hotel in the World this year by the US edition of *Condé Nast Traveler*.

Marrakech has a cosmopolitan and tolerant approach towards visitors and perhaps unsurprisingly the city has a large European expat community. Among its members are twin sisters Beryl Bakewell, who is British, and Barbara Abu-Zahra (joint British and Canadian), who made Marrakech their home after falling in love with the city and developing two luxury *riads* here.

Bader, Barbara's husband, is originally Palestinian but has Canadian nationality. Because of their background and experience of living in Morocco and other countries in the Middle East they have a deep understanding of the history and culture.

Barbara and Bader own Riad Ariha and they all jointly own Riad Chi-Chi in the heart of Marrakech.

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From top left: a market trader at work; one of many minarets; mint tea is a local speciality; mule carts are still a feature of the streets



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The Majorelle gardens are filled with colour; plants of all shapes and sizes, flowers, fish ponds and, perhaps the most pleasing aspect of all, tranquility

Asked where she would recommend for a coffee and a chance to read a newspaper or simply watch the world go by, Barbara Bakewell doesn't hesitate: 'Le Grand Café de la Poste. It's a great place to people watch. You could spend all afternoon here just enjoying the atmosphere.'

'It's a famous haunt of celebrities and has long been the place to go for fashionable expats and locals alike. Set aside plenty of time when you come here, though, because it's great for long, lazy lunches and indulgent dinners.'

But Morocco is not just about fine dining and well-appointed socialising. It is also a cultural treasure trove. No trip here is complete without being bowled over by the spectacular oasis that is Le Jardin Majorelle.

Latterly owned by the late Yves St Laurent, this private garden deserves its reputation for verdant charm. In the 1920s, French artists Jacques and Louis Majorelle created a delightful hideaway in the middle of Marrakech's then 'new town'. The Majorelle gardens are filled with colour; plants of all shapes and sizes, flowers, fish ponds and, perhaps the most pleasing aspect of all, tranquility. The building that gets most of the attention is the bright blue and yellow one, used by the Majorelles as their studio and which now houses the Museum of Islamic Art.

Asked for insider tips for culture-lovers, the Bakewell sisters have a few suggestions. Photography-loving Barbara's favourite spot is the French-run Maison de la Photographie: 'It's not only a treasure-trove of classic Moroccan photography, it also offers one of the best views of the Medina, making it an essential stop.'

For fine arts and antiques Beryl recommends the Lawrence Arnott Gallery in Gueliz. 'It has had some wonderful exhibitions attracting royalty, such as Princess Lalla Fatima Zohra and the late Princess Diana, as well as celebrities,' she says. For something more contemporary, Gallery Re highlights up-and-coming Moroccan artists.

An icon of literary Marrakech, Le Café du Livres is home to 2,000 books, all available to enthusiasts, residents and travellers. A literary meeting place, with a suitably restrained ambiance and décor, it often holds evenings of live music and exhibitions. Beryl describes it as one of her personal favourites, saying it is a popular choice among the literary and expat crowds for its very good, brunch-style breakfasts.

No visit to Marrakech, though, would be complete without a visit to the souk for a little recreational haggling. And this is where a little local knowledge can be very useful.

Barbara singles out a couple of particular shops for the

From left: an entrance to one of the city's souks; lanterns for sale; traditional Moorish architecture

The Information

Bo & Zin
Route de l'Ourika, Marrakech
Tel: (+212) 5 2438 8012
www.bo-zin.com

Dar Yacout
79 rue Sidi Ahmed Soussi, Arset Ihiri,
Medina, Marrakech. Tel: (+212) 5 2438 2627

Hotel Mamounia
Avenue Bab Jdid, Marrakech,
www.mamounia.com

Le Grand Café de la Poste
Corner of Boulevard El Mansour Eddahbi and
Avenue Imam Malik, Guéliz, Marrakech
Tel: (+212) 5 2443 3038

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essential artisanal souvenirs to bring home. 'Marrakech is full of incredible shops,' she says, 'but there are two places that we recommend in particular to many of our guests. Aya's (www.ayasmarrakech.com), whose owner has a real eye for quality and design, is the place to come for custom-made kaftans and dresses. And Mustapha Blaoui's Trésors des Nomades – an iconic store in Marrakech – is so well-known he doesn't see the need for a sign outside. Behind the impressive wooden doors, guarded by several sentries, you'll enter an emporium of all things Marrakechi – both antique and modern. It's a favourite place for cognoscenti from around the world.'

If you're looking to go beyond the city centre, the Pullman Marrakech La Palmeraie Resort & Spa is a great spot to unwind. Not just because it is a fabulous hotel – it is, with apartment buildings spaced out generously, a splendid swimming pool, wellness centre and world-class restaurants – but also because, from here, you can undertake a four-wheel-drive trek that you will never forget, courtesy of local exploration company Desert & Dunes.

The company runs tours to the Atlas Mountains – surprisingly lush and verdant after the sand dunes you cross beforehand.

Time it right, as we did, and you'll come to the buzzing little Berber village of Imlil before lunchtime. High above the village is the impressive Kasbah do Toukbal – if it looks familiar, it may be that you recognise it from the film *Seven Years in Tibet*, where it doubled as the Buddhist monastery. There's no road up – instead, you climb the shaded, wooded slopes on horseback.

Once you arrive, you can enjoy traditional Moroccan lamb *tagines* on the shaded verandah atop the battlements. You can even stay the night, if you like – there are simple, but tasteful bedrooms here.

As you look out over the valley, across to the desert and Marrakech 50km to the north, you will inwardly pat yourself on the back for making the effort. This is a view whose memory will stay with you for many years to come.

High above the village is the impressive Kasbah do Toukbal; if it looks familiar, it may be that you recognise it from the film *Seven Years in Tibet*, where it doubled as the Buddhist monastery



Local people take a morning stroll (above); inside the Riad Ariha (left); a garden adapted for Moroccan weather conditions (far left)

Where to stay

In the centre, Sofitel Marrakech Palais Imperial; Sofitel Marrakech Lounge and Spa.

In the La Palmeraie district, Pullman Marrakech Palmeraie Resort and Spa. www.accorhotels.com

Riad Ariha

With beautifully decorated rooms, crisp bedlinen and lots of shade from the sun, Riad Ariha wins consistently glowing accolades. www.riadariha.com

Riad Chi-Chi

In the Medina, this has a lovely roof terrace and has won rave reviews from the likes of *The Guardian* to *Lonely Planet*.

Bloggers

Beryl and Barbara Bakewell blog regularly about Marrakech and share many useful tips and insights. <http://chic-riads-marrakech.com/cool-marrakech-guide-blog/>

Dunes & Desert

Specialist in trips to the desert and Atlas Mountains. www.dunesdesert.com