

Portals to instant calm

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Archways to adventure ... *Maison Mnabha*.

Alison Bing discovers boutique riads among the alleys and old estates of Marrakesh.

Marrakesh leaves you with holiday photographs that demand further explanation. How did you wind up sipping tea with blacksmiths, shedding your skin - quite literally - in a hammam and trying Berber dance moves in the main square, the Djemaa el-Fna?

Sipping a sunset cocktail on the roof of an 18th-century riad, you think back over the day's experiences and, in your mind, try to retrace your steps. Possibly there was a donkey cart dodged or a magical shop stumbled upon among the city's 3000 winding derbs but that doesn't entirely explain your iron lantern, henna tattoo and new-found capacity to shimmy.

Marrakesh is a "year round" destination but it's at its best in spring and autumn, with almost guaranteed sunshine and bearable temperatures. The days are warm and the nights are not too chilly.

At the height of summer, daytime temperatures can reach 38 degrees and shops and restaurants often close during Ramadan. Winter (November to February) can be warm and blissfully free of crowds but, remember, temperatures fall sharply at night.

While new tour-group hotels sprawl around the Nouvelle Ville, more than 200 riads - courtyard mansions converted into guesthouses - offer glimpses of Marrakesh from the inside out. Step through ancient portals from clamorous souks into cloistered courtyards and calm is instantly restored. Some of the finest villas and exclusive boutique hotels now dot the Palmeraie, the palm-oasis suburb that begins three miles north-east of the Medina.

If rates at your preferred riad are just beyond reach, contact the property and make an offer.

Jnane Tamsna

Moorish arches frame views of the US botanist Gary Martin's organic gardens and shed light on the extensive contemporary African art collection of the Jnane Tamsna's co-owner, Meryanne Loum-Martin. Booker Prize winners, star chefs and other illuminati offer courses at this secluded estate in the Palmeraie, the historic palm grove outside Marrakesh. Inside the hotel it is all chiselled good looks in cream stucco and dark wood, with light and airy rooms. The service is pleasant and well-informed - though not especially efficient - but you will be too busy sampling the outdoor pools, cooking classes, massages, tennis, yoga and gallery to worry.

Ksar Char-BaghA thoroughly modern castle on the periphery of the Palmeraie, Ksar Char-Bagh has architect-designed ramparts, organic gardens, moats meandering through marble floors and all the modern amenities hidden behind carved cedar panels. Leaving your spacious suites may seem counter-intuitive but massages in the subterranean hammam, cigars in the smoking salon and chauffeured shopping trips in vintage London cabs are powerful draws, as are the grounds, with their heated pool, tennis court, golf access and horseback rides through olive groves.

Riad al Massarah

Michael Matthews and Michel Contreras (one British, one French) offer a warm welcome that never seems forced at this riad near the Bab Doukkala gate. The stay has been cleverly designed, with skylights and tadelakt (polished plaster) fireplaces at every turn. Each guest room is distinct, with original art, handmade textiles and lanterns setting a relaxed mood. Besides offering spot-on shopping tips and exceptional meals (the in-house chef, Abdelwahed, trained at the city's best restaurants), they set an environmental standard with what is Marrakesh's first Green Key-certified guesthouse.

Riyad el Cadi

Peace is easy to find in this former ambassador's retreat around the corner from the Djemaa el-Fna. Not one but five linked riads offer gallery-size guestrooms showcasing Middle-Eastern artistry, from hand-painted tiles in the Ottoman suite to antique Berber wedding veils in the douriya. The bedrooms could easily be taken for galleries, given the lofty architecture and framed textiles. Some are a bit dark and sound reverberates in the larger courtyards and not all have airconditioning or wi-fi. Bonuses are the large in-house hammam, breakfasts, a small pool, sunset cocktails on the terrace and cooking classes that lead you from local markets to a four-course lunch. Given notice, the in-house chef, Hassan, will make Moroccan and continental dinners to your tastes.

Tchaikana

The first time you're accompanied down the winding derb and through a tunnel to the front door is an adventure. Room decor nods to ancient trade routes, with upturned boats as light fixtures and four-poster beds with Tuareg tent posts. Reliably gracious staff are quick with smiles, refreshments and dinner reservations at top restaurants. Count on the affable English-speaking owner, Jean-Francois, to map out custom souk itineraries and desert excursions. The rooms would qualify as suites elsewhere, with seating areas, walk-in wardrobes, antique Saharan water jugs and family-heirloom desks. All rooms have wi-fi, though not necessarily airconditioning.

Maison Mnabha

Getting to this 17th-century house is a cultural immersion experience in itself. Like a talisman tucked deep in the pocket of the royal Kasbah, this property lures repeat guests with dinner parties held beneath crystal chandeliers, restorative massages and trustworthy antiques advice. The style is exuberant - rose petals and candles are strewn along the stairs - yet somehow meditative, thanks to the hidden location and ubiquitous antique bronze Buddhas. Rooms are on the snug side, with silken cushions, intricate plasterwork and fresh flowers. All six rooms offer airconditioning, free coffee and tea and character aplenty. There's wi-fi in upper rooms and a private rooftop salon with views over the Atlas Mountains.

FAST FACTS - Travellers' tips

Marrakesh isn't easily shocked but it is still considered a sign of respect to keep knees and shoulders covered.

In narrow alleyways, remember the following unofficial order when it comes to the right of way: 1. anything with hooves; 2. anything on wheels; 3. anyone with a stick; 4. babies; 5. women shopping.

Mosques and zawiyyas are not open to non-Muslims. Moroccan law still technically prohibits extramarital sex, drinking in public and smoking hashish.

Don't be embarrassed to consult maps or decline unsolicited company. Although Marrakesh has cracked down on professional faux guides, mischievous children may still try to mislead you. When in doubt, ask directions from a hanout (grocer).

Official guides hired through riads or the tourist office will squire you through the Medina for a price (from about €18 [\$24] for a half-day) but doesn't that defeat the purpose of the adventure? Also, souk merchants give better prices when they don't have to pay a guide's commission.

