

AND THERE'S MOOR...

With a charm little changed since the Middle Ages, Morocco is reaching out with a slew of very different new retreats that explore its heritage, while delivering plenty of exotic luxury, says Julian Allason.

For centuries the pink-walled city of Marrakesh, capital of Morocco's south, has drawn European visitors with its medieval exuberance and unfailing exoticism. Until now, change has come like a thief in the Arabian night, derelict palaces quietly transmuted into riads – introverted guesthouses, austere or opulent but seldom large enough to warrant the designation “inn”. Now the city's mighty gates have been thrown open to grander, more ambiguous enterprises.

Next month will witness a cascade of luxury hotel openings unlike anything yet seen here. The first, Jnan Rahma by the Hong Kong-based Mandarin Oriental group, is a dramatic 161-room palace and riad complex of Moorish courtyards beyond the city walls. Against a backdrop of the snowcapped Atlas mountains, it will institute a controversial new approach to North African hotel-keeping with the company's concept of Asian service. The travel industry is agog to see how its introduction into an assimilation of Berber, Arab and West African cultures will play out.

An almost unprecedented sequence of launches will then unfurl throughout 2010 and 2011, including an ambitious Four Seasons resort near the Menara Gardens, with an 18-hole golf course on site. The

company, it is quietly being emphasised locally, is Canadian – not American. Among other luxury operators with projects well advanced are Rocco Forte Hotels, Banyan Tree, Gordon Campbell Gray and Hyatt. Meanwhile, the grand dame of Marrakesh, the magnificent La Mamounia, beloved of Churchill and Chaplin, has just reopened after a £100m, three-year restoration by that pasha of hotel design, Jacques Garcia. With such established competition – Aman is already here – the newcomers cannot afford any failure of imagination.

So why here? And why now? Facing an almost doubling of the population over the past 30 years, the Kingdom of Morocco, sometimes described as a benign autocracy, plans to fund development through tourism, expanding its predominantly Francophone appeal into English, German and Italian markets. There are also the Levant and Gulf states to whom the attractions of an Arabic-speaking “cold country with a hot sun” (in Marshal Lyautey's unexpected characterisation) are self-evident. The presence of Saudi princely estates in the Palmeraie testifies to this. The interest of Western hoteliers is rather different, and includes an unspoken desire to hedge bets placed on Dubai. So while Moroccan royal advisers fret about the impact of

Main picture: the Kasbah Bab Ourika looks out onto the Atlas Mountains. Right: Bab Ourika has a calm, simple aesthetic.







The restoration of the kasbah is as authentic as may be found. Our bedroom is of serene simplicity, guarded by a massive ancient door, magnificently carved.

affluent Western visitors upon the indigenous population, luxury hoteliers harbour an opposing anxiety: just how much local authenticity will top-end guests be able to handle? It is a question over which hotel developers agonise. Another is how best to differentiate their offerings in what “Marrakshis” liken to a stampede of racing camels. Given that proximity of the exotic – around three hours’ flight from most European capitals – is the key attraction, the consultants’ advice has been the same: emulate Moroccan architectural forms and service styles as authentically as possible. But which? For there are four: the riad palace, kasbah fort, Berber tent and the most recent, the Palmeraie villa. In the race to offer distinctiveness, hoteliers have variously headed in all four directions, leaving tour operators delighted at the choice.

Characteristically, the King has voted with his treasury for the palace/riad approach. Next spring, his pathfinder project, the Royal Mansour, is due to open on Marrakesh’s ramparts. An astonishing eight-and-a-half acre labyrinth of courtyards and private riads has been constructed as an alcazar, recreating in exquisite detail the traditional forms of the Medina. Guests can occupy their own riad or courtyard house, with access to roof terraces and hammams, not to mention French and Moroccan restaurants under the direction of the Michelin three-starred Parisian chef Yannick Alléno. Somewhat grander, perhaps, than His Majesty’s own lifestyle.

The second, and even more ancient, traditional building is the kasbah or fort, in search of which I found myself careening through the amber and vermillion of the south Moroccan desert 220km from Marrakesh. Suddenly, shimmering in the glare ahead, a sapphire pool appears, washing out towards the horizon. A mirage, surely? Yet on approach the illusion fails to dissolve into



eddies of heat. The wadis (valleys) east of Ouarzazate have been dammed to form a great lake over the thirsty wilderness. In springtime, the dried-up watercourses flood with snowmelt from the High Atlas that hitherto dissolved in the pre-Sahara.

In the badlands of the Maghreb, the spare, barely governable lands where Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania collide with the Western Sahara, raids by Touareg nomads are still recalled with dread. Thus the kasbah is the stronghold within which the chief safeguards the wealth of the village. In the passes of the High Atlas, traditionally controlled by one of the three great tribes, the kasbah has a less benign aspect, being the fortress of a warlord, its dungeons populated by enemies. When in the 1950s Gavin Maxwell, author of *Lords of the Atlas*,

visited Telouet, castle of the powerful Glaoui clan who deposed two sultans, he was shown round a labyrinth of cells by slaves. Today, the kasbah is a picturesque ruin

20km off the mountain road to Marrakesh, yet so terrifying is its memory that the provincial government has not been moved to authorise restoration.

Until the mountain snows melt – still just visible in late September – the Dadès river is no more than a meandering of dry wadis a kilometre wide, the banks delineated by fringes of date palm. Searching through *pisé* (rammed earth) villages we found Dar Ahlam, the “House of Dreams”. The restoration of the kasbah is the fantasy of a Parisian, Thierry Teyssier, yet it is as authentic as may be found. Our bedroom is of serene simplicity, guarded by a massive ancient door, magnificently carved. Surrounded by orchards and formal gardens, the kasbah offers a tranquil synthesis of simplicity and sophistication, befitting a member of Relais & Châteaux. Meals are served whenever guests desire them: for lunch we are led to a bower in an olive grove where cushions and a low table are decorated with flower petals and coffee beans. Smiling local staff, female as well as male,

bring a succession of tiny courses, such as barbecued chicken kebabs on mint leaves with pomegranate yoghurt. Moroccan wine is served with spring water.

Framed in such a manner, it is not difficult to appreciate the appeal of the kasbah model to the incoming hoteliers, nor its reach out into the dramatic landscape of Berber villages clinging to the sides of gorges, where the rhythm of life has altered little despite the recent introduction of electricity. One property attracting professional interest is Bab Ourika, a simpler, British-owned kasbah conversion opened in the spring at the apex of the Ourika valley, which has been enthusiastically adopted as a venue for spa retreats.

Further out, on the shifting margins of the Sahara, Dar Ahlam staff are erecting a Bedouin-tented encampment for two, the ground lined with carpets, lit by oil lamps and a woodfire. Some guests choose to sleep out under stars of unaccustomed brightness, the better to enjoy dawn over the desert. The nomadic *bayt* (literally “house of the family”) constitutes the third Moroccan structural form and a design solution to the desire of guests for the authenticity, experience and sense of place absent from most resort developments. But the tents are no more confined to the desert rim than the Berbers themselves. On the six-hour journey north to Marrakesh, we pass film sets in the wilderness, the 11th-century ksar or fortified village of Ait Ben-Haddou, and women washing carpets in the river watched by men from the shade of canvas pavilions. After a switchback climb up the High Atlas to Tizi n’Tichka pass at 2,255m, and the descent past rushing waterfalls, a rather different interpretation awaits.

What are modestly described as Berber tents have recently been pitched on the edge of a precipice over the Asni valley at Kasbah Tamadot. After acquisition from an Italian-born antiquarian by Sir Richard Branson, the fort – formerly seat of the “Caid” or district governor – has been restored in a piece of pure theatre that should propel followers of the Paul

Top: the view from Richard Branson's Kasbah Tamadot in the High Atlas foothills. Above: a Berber-inspired tent room at Kasbah Tamadot.

Bowles school of Moroccan realism screaming to the exits. The tents are the stuff of 19th-century Orientalist fantasy with the addition of air conditioning, colonial bathrooms and heated plunge pools on their decks that would have delighted the Caid's camels. Staying in one is a more romantic experience than in the Kasbah's plush bedrooms.

The *khaima* (tents) at Kasbah Tamadot offer the notably funky clientele an opportunity to chill before tackling the hurly-burly of Marrakesh, one hour below. There is scope aplenty, from a spa offering four-handed massage and 180° mountain views to expeditions by hot-air balloon. Any search for the hippie legacy of the *Marrakesh Express* passengers of the 1960s, such as Talitha Getty and Yves Saint Laurent, would be more likely to find their heirs camped here, rather than in the city. The charming staff, recruited from local villages, provide a flavour of Morocco's dramatic history and exotic culture. Indeed, guests are welcomed into local homes and encouraged to support a co-operative making textiles and handicrafts.

Yet within the ambit of Marrakesh, this may represent the extent to which guests on a short visit to a luxury hotel can realistically penetrate a way of life that still owes as much to the Middle Ages as to the era of the French Protectorate. There is, however, an intriguing parallel strand of development that has also been the subject of careful study by the immigrant grand hoteliers. La Palmeraie is a fertile palm grove north of the Medina or old Arab quarter. The land here is gradually being converted into private estates of at least a hectare, often larger. Upon it are already planted a few small – and decidedly exotic – boutique hotels. Such, for instance, is the high-camp glamour of Le Palais Rhoul that it would be hard to conceive its existence elsewhere. Its neighbours include some of the most enchanting villas in North Africa. It is these that have provided inspiration to the architects of some of the new hotels.

Hidden away behind high walls in a secret domain shaded by palm and olive groves is Ezzahra, a magnificent family house of contemporary Moroccan design. In the Moorish courtyard, a fountain tinkles in the sunshine. Opening off are seven airy bedrooms overlooking a swimming pool and gardens. Its British/Gibraltarian ownership is hinted at in the alfresco dining and lounging arrangements with squashy sofas on a loggia, or in a marquee-sized *haima* full of rugs and cushions. Guests here are cosseted by a dozen staff, including three spa therapists and Mohammed, a Moroccan Jeeves attired in silk djellaba and fez. The

Below: a fountain trickles in the Moorish courtyard at Ezzahra, hidden behind Marrakesh's walls.

tranquillity and security of its position make Ezzahra an inspiring and child-friendly venue for family reunions, as

well as a great starting-out point for expeditions into the turmoil of the souks or up into the Atlas on horseback or by private plane. One birthday-partying group never left the estate, content with the choice of paddle tennis, screening rooms, billiard table and tranquil places of escape. For larger house parties, there is also a pavilion in the garden, and in the adjacent compound Khozama, a new private villa of esoteric design with a swimming pool open to the stars.

These, then, are the models from which the incoming hoteliers are drawing their inspiration: the historic authenticity of the kasbah, the interior perfection of the riad, the experience of the *khaima*,

and the tranquillity and space of La Palmeraie. The harder balance to be struck will be in bending the Moroccan manner of doing things to the Western expectations of a luxury hotel. A few degrees too far in the first direction and things may descend into cheerful North African chaos; a swing in the other and sense of place will evaporate as swiftly as the snowmelt in the Sahara. ♦



CULTURE CLUB

The best time to go is Sept-Nov and Mar-May when temperatures are pleasant but not soaring. Julian Allason was a guest of **Original Travel** (020-7978 7333; www.originaltravel.co.uk), which offers a week's mid-season package – three nights at Dar Ahlam full-board, three nights at Kasbah Tamadot B&B from £2,540 based on two sharing with flights from London and transfers. He was also a guest of **Royal Air Maroc** (www.royalairmaroc.com), which flies from Heathrow to Marrakesh from £145. Prices are for a double B&B unless stated: **Dar Ahlam**, Skoura, Ouarzazate (+800-2000 0002; www.maisondesreves.com), from €890 full-board. **Kasbah Bab Ourika**, Ourika Valley (+212-661 634 234; www.babourika.com), from €150. **Kasbah Tamadot**, Asni, Marrakesh (0800-716 919; www.virginlimitededition.com), from €430. **La Mamounia**, Marrakesh (+212-524 388 600; 020-7235 3245; www.mamounia.com), from £547. **Mandarin Oriental Jnan Rahma**, Marrakesh (+212-5243 27777; +800-2828 3838; www.mandarinoriental.com), from £583. **Le Palais Rhoul**, La Palmeraie, Marrakesh (+212-5243 29494; www.palais-rhoul.com), from €290. **Royal Mansour**, Marrakesh (+212-52437 8339; 020-7235 3245; www.royalmansour.ma), from £122. **Ezzahra**, La Palmeraie, Marrakesh (020-7978 7333; www.ezzahra-morocco.com), from £193pp per night, based on 14 sharing for seven nights, full-board with spa treatments. **Khazama**, La Palmeraie, Marrakesh (020-7978 7333; www.ezzahra-morocco.com), from £250 based on four sharing for six nights' full-board. **Easyjet** flies from Gatwick to Marrakesh from £97 (www.easyjet.com; 0905-821 0905). **Morocco Tourism**, 020-7437 0073; www.visitmorocco.com.