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SUMMER ROMANCE

DANCING IN COUTURE
from THE BEACH TO THE BALLROOM





PLEASURE PALACE

Rachel Johnson throws a party to remember in a magnificent Moroccan mansion

We have a farm in Somerset but can never seem to persuade friends to come. 'It's five hours to Exmoor... on a good day,' they point out, leaving unsaid the fact that it's also cold, dark and wet in winter. Radical action was needed if I was going to be the relaxed, effortless, stylish convenor and hostess I'd always yearned to be before the year was out. And lo! Here was the answer. The offer to host a Marrakesh house party in a sprawling walled estate, bathed in sunshine, just three and a half hours from London.

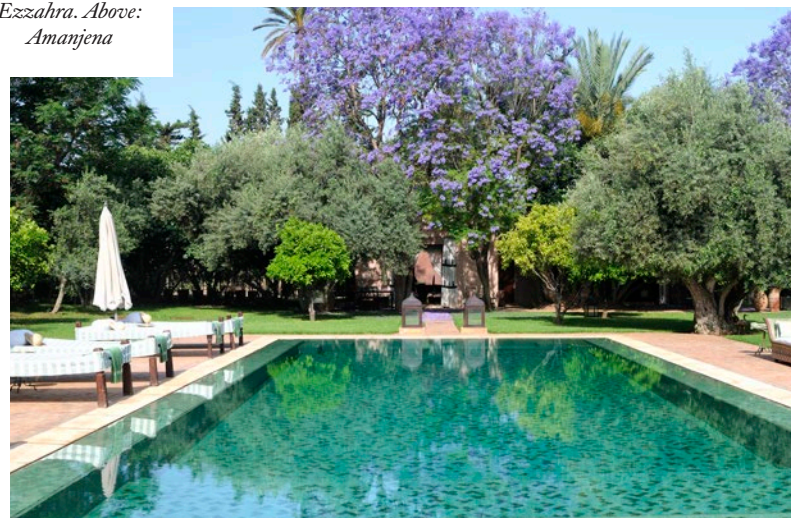
The sumptuous Villa Ezzahra, in the oasis of Palmeraie, is a property with all the advantages of the best sort of hotel and private home combined, and none of the disadvantages (strangers, cooking, shopping, clearing up, and so on). The house is decked luxuriously throughout in a warm palette the colour of the spices in the souk – cinnamon, paprika, chilli – and filled with art. All was aromatic and exotic at a time of year when Europe is grey and bleak. We were woken by the call of the muezzin and babbling birdsong, to a pink sunrise and ice-cold dew on manicured green lawns.

By day, it was 28 degrees, sunhat-and-bikini weather; by night, it was chilly, so you hit the hay with a log fire crackling companionably.

We had three days to relax in paradise, and it was hard to fit everything in. As well as a gym, ping-pong table and badminton court, there was a hammam, where some guests went down to be scrubbed side by side on marble slabs; others played paddle tennis or lounged by the pool as the staff, including our wonderful housekeeper Maria, padded around us in crisp white uniforms. Oranges and grapefruits clustered ripely on trees, the pool sparkled in the sun during the day and glimmered under the crescent moon at night, when the gardens were hung with lanterns and lights, and fire-eaters, Berber singers and belly dancers made our evening go with the sort of swing we didn't think possible any more.



Below: the pool at Villa Ezzahra. Above: Amanjena



On the Saturday, we headed to the medina to shop and competed as to who could buy most. I wanted everything – Berber silver cuffs, deep red ceramics, great fat kilim poufs – but managed to keep my lust in check. We drank coffee and mint tea to recover in a café looking onto the snake-charmers and the crowd on the Djemaa El Fna, then whizzed around the ineffably chic Musée Yves Saint Laurent. This alone is worth the journey to Marrakesh and already a hotspot for followers of fashion, displaying original Saint Laurent pieces, from the iconic Mondrian dress to Le Smoking. Afterwards, we ambled to the Jardin Majorelle, a brilliant jumble of green palms and exotic fronds, and the Berber Museum, the passion project of Saint Laurent's partner Pierre Bergé. We ended the day with a jaunt to the Amanjena hotel, where I sampled the best champagne and canapés I've ever had, in the swanky suite Victoria Beckham booked for David's 40th-birthday celebrations.

Sunday was not a day of rest, but a trip to the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. The Kasbah Bab Ourika is owned by Steve Skinner, an old friend, who treated us to lunch on the terrace overlooking the valley and across the jagged ranges beyond. After our feast, we rolled down the hill wondering how we would ever manage chicken tagine in the hotel's Berber tent, followed by cheese and hot-chocolate soufflés, but, as you've guessed, we did...

On our last night, I forced the men in the party into traditional long white djellabas and soft leather babouche slippers (and I'm keeping the photos as Kompromat). It was all such a success that I'm going to forget about entertaining on Exmoor. Having a house party abroad is a lot more fun.

Three nights at Villa Ezzahra (www.ezzahra-morocco.com) costs £17,400 for 14 guests, including sole use of all facilities at the house, all meals, non-alcoholic drinks, laundry, massage and beauty treatments, a seven-seater vehicle with a chauffeur and return airport transfers for the group.



Below and below left: Villa Ezzahra