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MIDDLE EAST EDITION SPRING 2011

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THE ULTRATRAVEL TOP 10

ROCK & RIAD

A private riad in Marrakech, blending traditional architecture and design with modern creature comforts, offers the most opulent introduction to Morocco.
Robert Carroll reports



2



ALAN KECHANE

More than most other architectural forms, traditional Moroccan riads utilise an element of surprise. Walking through the streets of Marrakech's medina for the first time, the mud-grey walls hoodwink you into believing the city's architecture is not particularly stunning or beautiful until through a chink in a huge wooden door you glimpse – gasp! – a splendid courtyard within. From the Arabic word for garden, riads attempt to mimic nature's symmetry and balance, incorporating clean lines and crisp palettes, making things – to borrow a phrase from Einstein – as simple as possible, but not simpler. These inward-facing and insulated sanctuaries lure you in, welcoming you into their gorgeous, sheltered realms. What could be more private than having one of these exotic places entirely to yourself and your guests? Many of these riads, among the finest in the world, offer this possibility, along with the more conventional room basis. They also riff on the riad tradition in new and exciting ways.

1. RIAD EZZAHRA, PALMERAIE (previous page)

This magnificent villa is located in the Palmeraie, a shady, expansive and expensive district on the fringes of the city, yet only about 15 minutes drive from the hustle and bustle of the souqs. Built in 2003 as a family residence, it houses seven bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms and private terraces, as well as a games room, gym and two screening rooms. Its large gardens contain a 16m swimming pool, a large chess board and facilities for paddle tennis, badminton and table

tennis. There's even a Berber tent for languidly willing away the days in. What truly sets this place apart are the spa and beauty treatments, which are included in the price. Relax in the hammam or choose from a range of treatments by one of three full-time beauty therapist. **Riad Ezzahra (00 212 524 328 688; www.ezzahra-morocco.com) sleeps up to 14 guests and costs £19,500 (Dh111,355) for one week, full board. For smaller groups, Villa Alkhazama sleeps up to four guests and costs from £3,900 (Dh22,316) for three nights full board.**

2. BAB OURIKA, OURIKA VALLEY

Standing on a hilltop at the start of the Atlas Mountain range, this secluded spot boasts rarefied air and views of dramatic peaks (capped with snow in winter), yet is only 45 minutes drive from Marrakech international airport. Built using traditional Berber methods, this property tries hard to be in harmony with its magnificent surroundings. The walls are made of rammed earth and provide excellent insulation, while solar panels heat water for the hotel and the underfloor heating system. A biodegestor, which converts organic waste into electricity and compost, will soon be up and running. Yet these ecologically friendly innovations do not mean the quality of the facilities have been compromised. There are 15 large rooms with en-suite bathrooms and terraces, as well as a various terraces and a swimming pool. Add to this excellent food and opportunities to go trekking, horse riding and kayaking in

the surrounding area and a stay here promises to be invigorating as well as relaxing. **Bab Ourika (00 212 661 25 23 28; www.babourika.com) has rooms from £127 (Dh728) per night.**

3. RIAD 72, BAB DOUKKALA

Tucked away in the labyrinthine streets of the medina, this small riad is stylish and sophisticated, blending Italian decor with authentic Moroccan design. Despite being only five minutes' walk from the souqs, the residence is tranquil and peaceful. Its courtyard has palm trees, banana plants and a fountain and is tastefully decorated in whites and beiges. With just four rooms, the staff have time to be attentive. From providing cups of mint tea on the terrace to meals cooked to order by Fatouma, the chef, this boutique approach pays off. There are impressive views over the old city from an extensive roof terrace furnished with sunloungers, while the hammam offers a wide range of treatments as well as a steam bath. **Riad 72 (00 212 24 38 76 29; www.riad72.com) sleeps up to 12 guests and costs from £509 (Dh2,896) per night, including breakfast and afternoon tea. Individual rooms are also available from £106 (Dh604) per night.**

4. RIAD EL FENN, BAB EL KSOUR

This lavish and perhaps even a tad whimsical riad is owned by Vanessa Branson, founder of the Arts in Marrakech (AIM) International Biennale and sister of Sir Richard Branson. It is home to a contemporary art collection that in-

cludes works by Bridget Riley and Antony Gormley. From the brightly coloured rugs and snug spaces to bar with stage, this artistic bent permeates the entire residence. There are 21 suites and bedrooms ranging in size, all en suite. The place is packed with facilities, including two swimming pools, a screening room, a library and a traditional hammam spa meaning there's no opportunity to get bored. **Riad el Fenn (00 212 524 44 1210; www.riadelfenn.com) has rooms from £229 (Dh1,310) per night, including breakfast and afternoon tea. Alternatively, Riad Vanessa – a separate building five minutes' walk from the main residence – sleeps up to eight guests and costs from £511 (Dh2,924) per night.**

5. RIAD MADANI

This magnificent place was once home to Madani el-Glaoui, grand vizier of Marrakech during the first half of the 20th century. It is a splendid palace, replete with brickwork colonades and salons with ornate woodwork and tiling. It is furnished and decorated in an eclectic style: 19th century Chinese portraits and antique collections of African tribal shields jostle with prints by Andy Warhol. Just a short walk from Djemaa el Fna, the lush gardens and verdant courtyards mean it has a relaxed and tranquil atmosphere. There is a large swimming pool and sunny terraces for lazing around on. **Riad Madani (00 212 524 44 18 84; www.riad-madani.com) has rooms starting from £85 (Dh486) per night, including breakfast and taxes.**

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CX683	Hong Kong – Abu Dhabi	0030	0450

*Flights will operate every Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.



3



4



5



THE ULTRATRAVEL TOP 10

6. DAR ZEMORA, PALMERAIE

If you want to be close to the medina but slightly distanced from its mayhem, this stylish riad is an excellent option. Located in the Palmeraie on the fringes of the city, it is about a 15-minute taxi ride from the souqs. With more than a hectare of gardens brimming with palm trees, roses and bougainvillea, as well as a large solar-heated swimming pool, this peaceful setting is a great place to relax. There's a traditional Moroccan bathhouse and a beauty treatment room offering massages, facials, manicures and pedicures. The decor of the six bedrooms – three room and three suites – reveals Moroccan, English and Balinese influences with big four-poster beds, marble bath tubs and diaphanous fabrics used to fine effect.

Dar Zemora (00 212 524 32 82 00; www.darzemora.com) has rooms from £185 (Dh1,059) per night, including breakfast and taxes.

7. RIAD DIXNEUF LA KSOUR, BAB KSOUR

With interiors by Karl Fournier and Olivier Marty of Studio KQ, this riad's design is minimalist and tasteful. The dominant colour is white, giving it a light and airy feel. It's the perfect relief from the glut of colour in the bustling market square of Djemaa el Fna nearby. Beautiful furniture, handmade from dark mahogany, adorns the six bedrooms and juxtaposes starkly with the plain backdrop. There is a rooftop terrace with great views over the city and an outdoor plunge pool tiled in white, black and brown mosaics. The service is outstanding and the food, a selection of classic Moroccan dishes, is excellent. The residence's chef, Atika, also offers cooking lessons.

Riad Dixneuf la Ksour (00 212 5 2438 4132; www.dixneuf-la-ksour.com) has rooms from £84 (Dh481) per night, including breakfast and taxes. It is also possible to rent the entire property of nine suites.

8. RIAD TARABEL, DAR EL BACHA

With its tasteful grey wooden shutters, wrought-iron railings and trompe l'oeil paintings on white walls, this place oozes the understated French chic of its owners, Leonard Degoy and Rose Marie Fournier. There are only three rooms – two rooms and a large suite – all with en-suite bathrooms. Each one has been furnished with style, taste and discernment. Among choice objects from Europe and the Far East are a four-poster bed in the Argana room to a free-standing bath in the Jasmin room. The roof terrace is a great place for breakfast, while the courtyard shaded by orange trees is a good place to relax. There are plenty of cushion-filled nooks to loll around in, as well as a hammam and massage room.

Riad Tarabel (00 212 524 39 17 06; www.ridatarabel.com) costs from £636 (Dh3,621) per night, for up to eight people. Individual rooms are also available from £144 (Dh825) per night.

9. RIAD FARNATCHI, MARRAKECH

Nestled in one of the oldest parts of the city, this place comes close to providing perhaps the quintessential riad experience. Created from five small riads, some with walls more than four hundred years old, the owner Jonathan Wix, a retired British hotelier, has done a great job in forging an elegant, modern look without marring the original



6



7

features. The handmade furniture looks great but is also comfortable. Of the nine suites, which vary in style and size, most have private terraces or courtyards. There are three courtyards – one with a seven-metre pool – and a roof terrace with excellent views over the city. The hammam, made from white marble, is heated between 4pm and 7pm every day and other times by appointment.

Riad Farnatchi (00 212 524 38 49 10; www.riadfarnatchi.com) has suites from £236 (Dh1,350) per night including breakfast and taxes. It is also possible to rent the entire property of nine suites.

10. ROYAL MANSOUR

This sumptuous complex of 53 riads is worthy of its regal monicker. Covering 3.5 hectares within the walls of the city's medina, the riads are mostly

one bedroom, but there are some two- and three-bedroom residences available. Riad d'Honneur, which costs a princely £26,606 (Dh151,344) per night, has four bedrooms and covers 2,000 square metres. There's a huge outdoor swimming pool as well as a vast 2,500-square-metre spa featuring two hammams, a swimming pool, a gym and beauty treatment rooms. Its most striking feature is also the most inconspicuous: an elaborate network of underground tunnels mean the 350 staff can go about their business unseen beneath your feet, popping up only when required. This element gives the place a hint of magic.

Royal Mansour (00 212 529 80 80 80; www.lhw.com/Hotel/Royal-Mansour-Marrakech-Marrakech-Morocco) has 53 riads starting from £1,370 (Dh7,808) per night including breakfast and taxes.



8



9



10