

# A winter break in Marrakech

As summer comes to an end and the nights start closing in, there's only one way to escape that impending seasonal affective disorder: fly somewhere sunny and exotic of course. Topping the list of Luxe Magazine's favourite places to go at this time of year is Marrakech, a sensory mélange of sumptuous travel and enticing north African vibes.





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Encircled by blushing rose-tinted walls with a spectacular backdrop of the Atlas Mountains, the Red City, as it is widely known, has attracted an A-list set for decades who come to bask in its wonderful climate, glorious mountainscapes, vibrant souks and towering mosques. So you're in good company.

Yves Saint Laurent first visited in 1966 and soon after, a myriad of stars and creative types from The Stones to Charlie Chaplin were

inspired and seduced by the Red City. The local people are vivacious and charming and in recent times Marrakech has evolved with its popularity to become a compelling travel destination offering culture, up-to-date luxury, palatial hotels, reinvented riads and a sultry, centuries old medina that is nothing short of beautiful.

The medina is the city's main attraction, an intoxicating tapestry of winding alleyways, traditional

houses, souks and workshops. To the west of the Medina you'll find the leafy laid-back Ville Nouvelle (or Guéliz) neighbourhood created in the early 20th century, while to the northeast of the city, the Palmeraie is Marrakech's wealthiest district home to lavish resorts, golf courses, private villas and hip nightclubs. One such estate is the Ezzahra villa complex, where guests can choose from three sumptuous fully-staffed villas set amid 20,000 square metres of landscaped gardens with

Souks, image courtesy of [www.visitmorocco.com](http://www.visitmorocco.com)/Moroccan National Tourist Office



Djemaa el-Fna, image courtesy of [www.visitmorocco.com](http://www.visitmorocco.com)/Moroccan National Tourist Office

*There can be no more evocative activity while visiting Marrakech than sipping mint tea at dusk while being entertained by musicians, snake charmers, street performers and storytellers*

ancient olive trees, date palms and orange and pomegranate trees. All come with private pools and gardens.

Most people, if they can pull themselves away from their luxury accommodation, start their visit by hitting the souks, a colossal labyrinth of streets that are both fascinating and bewildering in equal measures. A steely determination is needed to navigate the trading hawkers, amongst clouds of heat, spice scent and bright colours. Luckily most high-end hotels and riads will provide the services of a guide and personal shopper so you can make the most of your visit with none of the stress.

Once you have shopped 'til you drop in the souks you'll most likely find yourself (arms laden with purchased carpets, lanterns and leather goods) at the medina's nucleus, the vast UNESCO World Heritage Site, Djemaa el-Fna, which bursts with life around sunset. This enormous square was traditionally the place where Berbers traded slaves, gold, ivory and leather. There can be no more evocative activity while visiting Marrakech than sipping mint tea at dusk while being entertained by musicians, snake charmers, street performers and storytellers amid the thick swirling smoke from seemingly limitless food stalls turning out sizzling Moroccan delicacies at an astonishing rate.

When you have souk-fatigue you can high-tail it to the legendary La Mamounia Hotel, a cool haven close to the 12th century ramparts of the medina surrounded by 200-year-old gardens. Within the intimate surroundings of Le Bar Churchill, sink into plush velvet-clad seats and choose from a fine array of cocktails to the sound of mellow jazz tunes. The hotel first opened in 1923 and hosted many well-known personalities. Churchill, as the name suggests, was a regular, describing it as "the most lovely spot in the whole world". La Mamounia also has several excellent restaurants serving local and international food, while accommodation ranges from handsome rooms to private riads complete with zellij tile work,





Kasbah Tamadot Hotel





Royal Mansour - La Grande Table Marocaine

private pools and 24-hour butler service.

No visit to Morocco would be complete without a stay in a riad. A riad is a traditional Moroccan house or palace that encircles an interior patio or courtyard. They are historic, atmospheric and the last word in relaxation. There are literally hundreds of riads in Marrakech. At the very top end, the Royal Mansour is an oasis of riads set within the grounds of an elegant hotel.

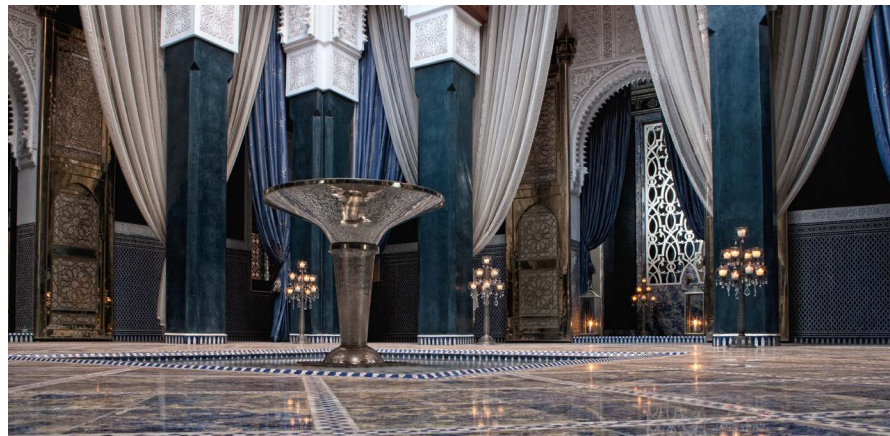
Commissioned by the King, whose aim was to rebrand Marrakech from hippie destination to luxury haven, there is nothing modest about Marrakech's most extravagant hotel. Over 1000 Moroccan artisans handcrafted polished marble, zellij mosaics, leather, silk, gold and mother of pearl details as far as the eye can see.

The hotel is made up of several individual riads set like jewels between gurgling fountains,

orange blossom, the scent of jasmine and date palms. Each fabulously opulent riad comes with a rooftop pool and sun deck, while some also come with galleries and private dining rooms. The staff navigate the grounds through an underground network of passageways on golf carts, accessing



Royal Mansour - Spa Pool



Kasbah Tamadot Hotel - Berber tent deck

the riads via hidden portals. For guests seeking the ultimate x factor, the showstopping 1800 square metre Riad d'Honneur boasts a home cinema, pool, gym and hammam. The hotel also has three outstanding fine dining restaurants serving exquisite cuisine, most notably the La Grande Table Marocaine, reputed to be the best Moroccan restaurant in the country, under the watchful supervision of three-star Michelin chef Yannick Alléno.

There is plenty of history in Marrakech to get to grips with. Beyond the protected ramparts of The Royal Mansour sits the distinctive silhouette of the 12th century Koutoubia Mosque, whose 70m tall minaret dominates the city skyline and five times a day the muezzin calls the faithful to prayer. To gain more insight into Morocco's past visit the 14th century Medersa Ben Youssef Islamic school, one of Marrakesh's biggest treasures, home to some of the most beautiful art

andarchitecture in the country with wood carvings, intricate stuccowork and colourful zellij tiles.

For all that the city centre of Marrakech has to give, its hectic pace may mean that after a few days you will be pining for a therapeutic retreat close to the rolling hills and stunning mountain landscape of the surrounding area. A mere 45-minute drive from Marrakech, set in the foothills of the majestic snow-capped Atlas Mountain range overlooking



Kasbah Tamadot Hotel - Berber tent deck with hot tub



spellbinding views of the Mizane Valley, Richard Branson's Kasbah Tamadot retreat grants the antithesis to the bustling souks and crowded Medina. Formerly an Italian antique dealer's private residence, it was subsequently purchased by Branson and transformed into a luxury hotel. Guests can use it as a base to go trekking, visit authentic Berber villages or simply lounge by the pool.

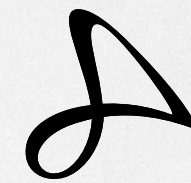
With mesmerising UNESCO World Heritage sites, a sprawling tangle of souks and tantalising cuisine, Marrakesh is an enchanting place to explore and the captivating beauty of its surrounding landscape combine to make it a perfect winter destination.



Kasbah Tamadot Hotel -Interior courtyard interior



Kasbah Tamadot Hotel -Deluxe suite



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