

TRAVEL

ESCAPE ROUTES

THE JEWEL IN
MOROCCO'S CROWN

THE TERRACE AT THE
ROYAL MANSOUR HOTEL



LEAVE NO SENSE UNSTIMULATED



**Stylist contributor
Natalie Partridge
indulges in a
series of sensory
feasts at some of
Morocco's most
luxurious retreats**

I'd been warned by friends about the near-inevitability of falling hook, line and sinker for the exotic charms of Marrakech. And I can place the exact moment it happened: walking along the shady, narrow, winding streets of the old medina, in the midst of the hustle and bustle where street sellers holler about their fresh coconut, ripe melons and roasted nuts. The pavements are lined with souks selling an array of treasures – argan oil, black soap, brass interiors, rugs and traditional Moroccan slippers in a rainbow of colours. The air is heavily-scented with spices, hot tagines and leather. The vibrancy is almost overwhelming. It is both chaotic

and charming at once, and in this particular moment as I take in the vivid surrounds, I feel very much alive.

I am staying at the Royal Mansour hotel, a beautiful and opulent retreat owned by the King of Morocco. It is a short walk to the west of the medina, in close reach of the famous Koutoubia Mosque, and tucked away behind remains of the old city wall. The entrance, fringed with tall palms, is spectacularly grand, a theme – which I later find out – runs throughout the grounds and private riads which took over a thousand craftsmen on site every day for three years to complete. Each and every detail is handmade: and either painted or carved using traditional Moroccan craftsmanship techniques. Rich in colour, mosaics and tapestry, it is hard not to be wowed by almost every element within its walls. The ethos behind the Royal Mansour

was apparently to build a medina within a medina, a glow of pink private riads set in peaceful narrow walkways, surrounded by ornate water features and tropical gardens, emulating the surrounds of the city.

My own spectacular one-bedroom riad is spread over three floors, all of which are drenched in opulence, and boast two private courtyards and a private roof terrace with sun-lounging area, plunge pool and pergola. Here I enjoy a lavish breakfast each morning, while taking in the spectacular views across the city roof-tops to the snow capped Atlas mountains. It's also a great space to savour the balmy evenings, watching the sinking sun whilst sipping a cool mixed drink, laced with freshly-grown Moroccan mint.

A wonderfully peaceful setting, Royal Mansour is designed cleverly in that the staff remain largely unseen,

carrying out their duties via underground tunnels and appearing to the service doors when needed at your riad.

The retreat is home to a spacious, light-filled spa with a range of traditional treatments to leave you feeling every inch as serene as your environment. I am recommended the traditional Moroccan hammam, an ultra-purifying exfoliation using the kessa massage glove and black Beldi soap known for its skin softening properties. In a beautiful ornate marble room, I'm scrubbed, sloshed and rinsed within an inch of my life, though it is an experience to be savoured as I have never before felt so cleansed or invigorated.

The taste buds are also not forgotten at the Royal Mansour. I eat at two of the restaurants within the hotel, La Table and La Grande Table Marocaine, which each offer very different dining



EL FENN COURTYARD ROOM:
NOT BAD IF YOU LIKE OPULENCE

experiences. At La Table I enjoy the simplicity of Mediterranean cuisine while relaxing under aged olive trees on the terrace. At La Grande Table Marocaine it is more of a fine dining affair – though in a very traditional style. The décor is opulent and the lighting low. It is definitely the place to soak up a true flavour of Morocco with an ancient hand washing ritual, before enjoying delicacies such as the famous zesty harira soup, made from tomatoes, lentils and chickpeas.

If you can bear to leave the paradise of Royal Mansour, I would advise that you explore the Majorelle Gardens, a leisurely 20-minute walk north of the hotel. Yves Saint Laurent brought these beautiful oriental gardens back to life as a gift to the city he loved. Originally purchased by Jacques Majorelle, the French orientalist painter, the gardens are a calm oasis amid the hustle and bustle of Marrakech. I lose myself while browsing Saint Laurent's exhibition of boldly graphic Love postcards; which feature objects near and dear to his heart, and a collection that the designer created and sent over 30 years. from 1970-2000. However, if it's Moroccan – as opposed to fashion – history you seek, the Berber museum is also located here and well worth a visit.

My stay in Marrakech ends at the El Fenn retreat, owned by Vanessa Branson and Howell James. This beautifully-restored

property was previously one of Marrakech's great private houses, and the pair spent two years on the renovation, hiring local craftsmen who used traditional techniques to breathe new life into the building. The ethos was simple; El Fenn would be a home from home retreat that combines

“AT DUSK JEMAA EL FNA SQUARE FILLS UNTIL IT BECOMES A CARNIVAL OF STORYTELLERS, ACROBATS AND MUSICIANS”

great food and service with the spirit of the buildings past and a contemporary decorative twist. Tadelakt lime plastering has been used in a rainbow of colours to create walls, baths and bed frames, original tiling was renovated and carved cedar ceilings restored. Retro furniture sourced from local flea markets was combined with bespoke pieces to complete the

aesthetic. The result is an impressive mix of old and new. The rooms are bright and spacious, adorned with exquisite art and huge mirrors.

I while away my time at El Fenn enjoying an abundance of hidden spaces. From lounging on the roof terrace overlooking the Atlas mountains, surrounded by the scent of the local growing herbs, to swimming in the incredible pool ensconced by tropical palms and sipping mint tea in the beautiful courtyard while watching the many roaming tortoises. It is most certainly a place to kick back and enjoy the tranquility before stepping outside to soak up the atmosphere of one of the most exotic cities in North Africa.

A trip to Marrakech isn't complete without visiting Jemaa El Fna marketplace. At dusk people come out for an early evening promenade and the square gradually fills until it becomes a whole carnival of storytellers, acrobats, snake charmers,

musicians and entertainers. It is certainly an assault on the senses with the muezzin's call to prayer echoing across the crowds and the sweet scent of incense hanging in the air. Sampling the authentic street food from one of the many stalls is a must. From here you can wander the souks which thread north and continue a winding labyrinth until you hit the Musée de Marrakech.

I feel as though I only manage to scratch the surface of this exotic city that has so much to offer. It will take at least another visit before I can claim I know it well – but despite that, it already has my heart.



Stay in a one-bedroom riad at Royal Mansour starting from Dhs3,379. A night at El Fenn starts from Dhs813 for a courtyard room and Dhs1,220 for a colonade room. Qatar Airways have return flights from Dubai to Marrakech from Dhs3,687 per person.

SHOPPING AND EATING IN THE MEDINA

The medina offers a sea of treasures to discover...



THE MEDINA IS EASY
TO LOSE YOURSELF IN

TOPOLINA, 134 DAR EL BACHA
French designer Isabelle Lallemand reworks rich fabrics into one-off pieces, creating original wraps, shoes and bags. Boho-chic designs that channel a '50s vibe.

LE JARDIN
An oasis located within a beautifully-renovated 16th century building. Le Jardin has a delightful menu that offers a choice of both traditional Moroccan and European cuisine. It's a great spot for either lunch or dinner, or simply to enjoy a refreshing drink or cocktail amongst the stylish tropical surrounds. lejardin.ma/en/

NORYA AYRON BOUTIQUE
Designer Norya Ayrón's Moroccan-inspired women's wear is fast becoming a hit. Each item is limited edition offering something unique with a traditional touch. Colourful printed kaftans, kimonos and leather tasseled clutches are what this boutique is known for. norya-ayron.com



NATALIE TAKES A BREAK
FROM THE POOL TO PLUNGE
INTO ANOTHER KIND OF BLUE