

# Magical Marrakech



Everyone in Marrakech tells the same two jokes. The first joke is when they ask you if you've tried Moroccan whiskey, which in this Muslim part of North Africa refers to the sweet mint tea that is served in every home, restaurant, and cafe. The second is when they offer to let you pay with Berber credit—half now, and half when you leave, a gentle dig at their neighbors in the Atlas Mountains, the only thing that breaks the endless sightline into

the desert. They tell these jokes in any of three, four, five languages, to visitors from all over the world, in taxis and in shops, in the souk and in the hotels. They tell them and you know that you've arrived in one of the world's great resort towns, where the jet set has relaxed for decades, and if you're very lucky, you've arrived here on your way to La Mamounia, the great goddess of the North African desert, back to life after several years of renovations.



As you watch the red city rises up slowly out of the desert on the road from Casablanca, the bright sun blurs the line between sand and structure. It surrounds you quietly, welcoming you into the embrace of the medina, the walled old city that stands for the cultural heart of Marrakech, and just steps inside, prepared to welcome her guests, stands La Mamounia, behind a wrought-iron gate, wrapped with a cobblestone drive. The staff greets you in traditional garb and ushers you into a cocoon of dark, and silence. Before your eyes adjust, your nose is filled with the scent of dates and cedar, a memory instantly formed, and when the surroundings snap into focus, the velvety couches, flowing drapery, smooth marble and stained glass, it's almost too much to take in. The light beckons again, drawing you forward into the lushly landscaped gardens, and you

begin to explore the magic of La Mamounia.

Built in 1922, the hotel has long been considered the ultimate expression of Moroccan style and luxury. It takes its name from Prince Moulay Mamoun, who received the land on which the hotel now sits as a wedding gift from his father during the 18th century, and who began growing the beautiful gardens that are still one of the best-loved features of the property. The 20 acres are thick with 700-year old olive trees, stands of orange trees heavy with fruit, and now a kitchen garden, providing herbs and vegetables to the hotel's restaurants, and two clay tennis courts, pristine and ready for play. Throughout its various owners and renovations, it's continually attracted a who's who of famous names, from the political (the suite Winston Churchill used as his winter quarters still bears his name), to the musical

(the Rolling Stones made Morocco a dream destination for traveling youths in the 1960s), to the theatrical: the hotel itself has been the site of many films, and played a particular role in the oeuvre of Hitchcock, who was startled by pigeons on his balcony while filming "The Man Who Knew Too Much" there, an experience that later became "The Birds." More recently, stars like Sharon Stone, Sylvester Stallone, Charlton Heston, Tom Cruise, Orlando Bloom, Hillary Clinton, and the cast of Sex and the City, who stayed for several months while filming their second movie.

The property, redesigned under the care of French designer Jacques Garcia, is in a word, spectacular. Every square inch of the property has been treated with exquisite care, from the most intricate mosaic to the plain white walls, which, it was explained, are not actually plain







white at all, but a painstakingly applied mixed plaster smoothed on by master artisans, water-proof and buffed to a luxurious sheen. The attention to detail borders on comical: the nailheads studding the side of each upholstered chair don't simply terminate, they blossom into a flower; the art isn't just beautiful, it was commissioned from a series of North African artists capturing the hotel and the city in totally new ways; the bread isn't just baked fresh, your waiter will pause, note out loud that one piece is shaped like a heart, and present it to the lady at the head of your table with a flourish. As with any luxury, the staff is what makes the experience, and the ratio of staff to guests is extremely generous, 777 employees for 210 rooms – and an aesthetic delight in itself, as they are all closed in exquisite custom uniforms from Terre & Ciel Conseil, tailored and embroidered differently for every hotel role, and for some, different costume for day and night. Clocking in at over three years and 120 million euros, the renovation involved up to 1,400 workers at any given time, incorporating artisans from all over the country to re-design everything from scratch. The result is an unusual aesthetic harmony, that manages to be richly layered and luxe while also being well-ordered and logical – it has all the charm of an old hotel without the idiosyncrasies and technical difficulties that come with an aged building. The experience of staying here is intended to engage all five of your senses, from the low lighting, running water, and soothing music, to the signature cedar and rose scent designed by Olivia Giacobetti, which is diffused via flickering scented candles around the hotel.

The various rooms are divided between single rooms, suites, and three magnificent 3-bedroom riads, which have private and direct access to the kitchens for the house staff. They all express the same aesthetic, from the intricately tiled shower walls and studded head-





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boards to the carved wooden shutters that open onto private balconies, but even beyond the spectacular specialty suites, there are special rooms, with garden views and some with a prime view of the Koutoubia mosque, whose call to prayer echoes across the city five times a day. The outbuildings on the property echo the look as well: the pavilion at the pool is modeled after the Manara Reservoir, while the Menzeh, a garden pavilion, serves mint tea and delicate French pastries on Morocco's famous engraved silver. The incredible light of the city is so bright and clear, there's nowhere for anything less than perfection to hide.

In addition to the historic nature of the hotel itself, the city Marrakech has long been one of the world's most welcoming playgrounds. Visitors today enjoy the same caliber of incredible cuisine, fashionable restaurants and nightclubs, pristine accommodations and exciting shopping opportunities as guests have for decades. These days, the action is at a few key hotspots (Pacha has an outpost here, and T  atr   and Diamant Noir still draw crowds) and shopping has expanded beyond the souks into the new areas of the city, but the old appeal still holds. The Majorelle Gardens are a peaceful oasis, particularly early in the morning before the crowds come (guests of La Mamounia can examine at their leisure a mural by Majorelle that decorates the cathedral-like ceiling of the hall that leads to the garden), and the hotel provides some of the best-connected and helpful guides in Marrakech to lead you through the souks – or to any of the newer boutiques popular with guests. Some of the most upscale drinking and dining in the city, however, is right in La Mamounia itself. The Churchill Bar has long been one of the most famous bars in Marrakech, its underground speakeasy atmosphere enhanced by a live jazz singer every night, and each of the restaurants have their own unique, adjoining bars as well, serving signature cocktails that are only a precur-

sor of what's to come. The restaurants L'Italien, Le Francais, and Le Marocain represent the absolute best of the country's culinary heritage, and serves the needs of its guests' most experienced palates, from the first custom Bernardaud plate that touches your table to the final sip of mint tea. L'Italien by Alfonso Iaccarino and Le Francais by Jean-Pierre Vigato both bear the marks the Michelin 2-star chefs who direct them, serving the best of their native cuisines, right down to the homemade limoncello and macarons, to close out your meal respectively. The cuisine changes with the crop from the garden and the bounty of the nearby sea, but always maintains a level of quality that can compete with any European equivalent. Le Marocain, however, is a truly unique dining experience and an absolute must for the foreign visitor – as any Moroccan will tell you, the best Moroccan food is in the home, but Chef Rachid Agouray serves a modern take on traditional Moroccan dishes, in such plenty and of such quality that you feel as cared for as if you were personally his guest. The restaurant's tables are set back into romantic, private alcoves, while musicians play under a fabric-festooned ceiling just out of sight, and tagine after tagine arrive to delight your imagination.

The great resorts of the world ask nothing of their guests but to enjoy. They ask you to wrap yourself in a plush white robe and make your way to the blue-tiled spa, where you descend into bliss in a massage or enjoy an ancient hammam ritual. They invited you to fill your plate at the poolside pavilion with custom-mixed tartars and fresh fish and salads, and then sleep off your meal on a padded lounge chair. They feed you, welcome you, delight you and surprise you – and this, truly is the secret of La Mamounia. In every room, around every corner, in every bite, there is a new world of luxury just waiting to be discovered, by those who dare to truly indulge. ■