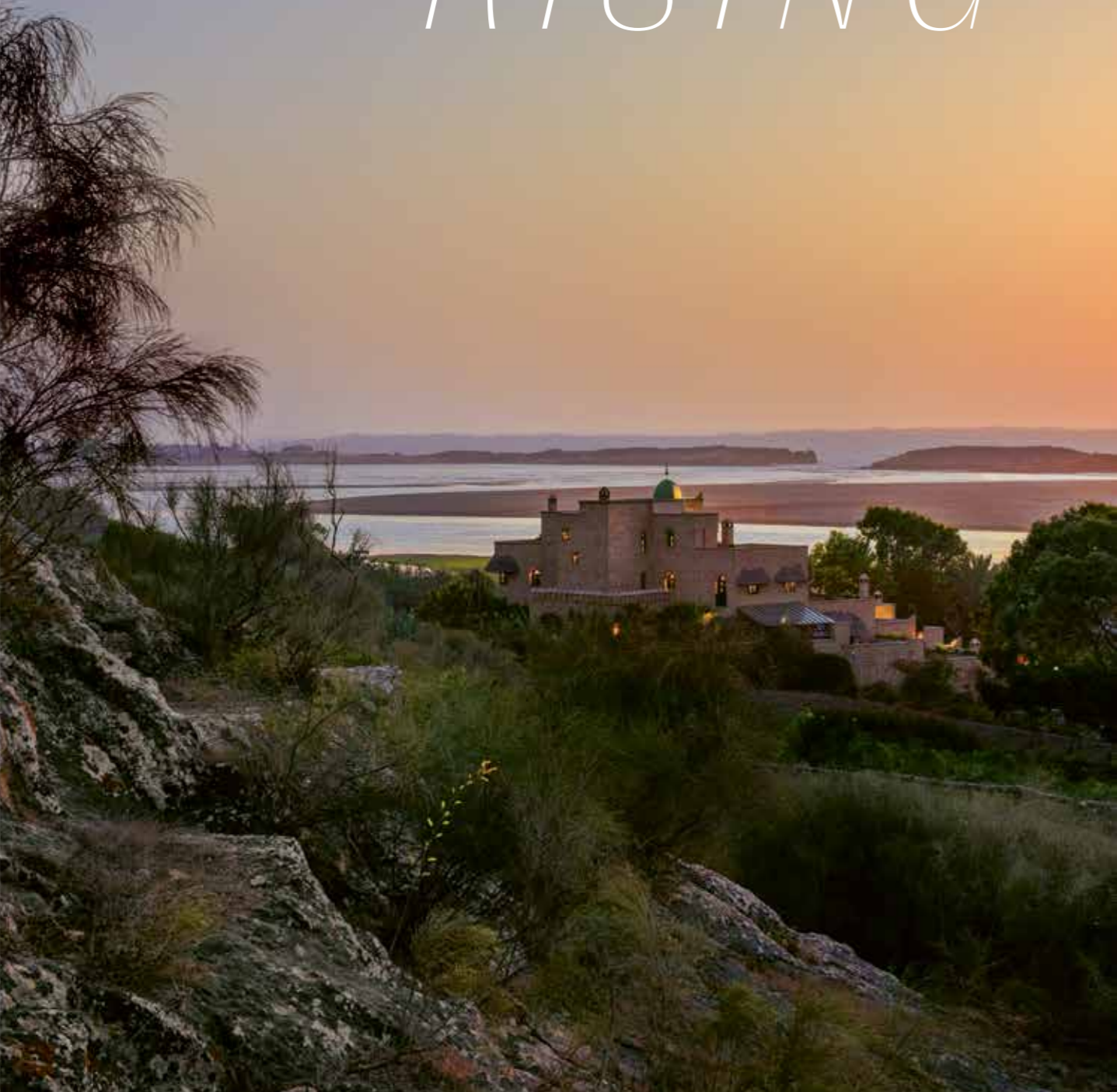


With its dazzling variety of boutique and luxury hostelries, the North African country's star appeal remains very much in the ascendancy. // By Nicola Chilton

MOROCCO RISING



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YANN DERET

ROOMS WITH A VIEW

Clockwise from top left: Laurence Leenaert and Ayoub Boualam of Riad Rosemary; view from the Fairmont Taghazout Bay; Maison Brummell Majorelle; a La Sultana Oualidia suite.

Pages 40-41, from left: La Sultana Oualidia; Riad Fès.

WITH ITS LONG, windswept Atlantic coastline, vast swathes of desert, snowcapped mountains, and ancient medinas, Morocco's allure is evergreen. The country is also home to North Africa's most exciting accommodations, meaning that you're never far from a smart—and often breathtakingly beautiful—base.

While the earthquake that struck the High Atlas last September caused extensive damage and casualties in some of the region's mountain villages, much of the broader surrounding area was largely unaffected. In Marrakech, some 45 miles from the epicenter, damage was mostly confined to older parts of the Medina. Over the ensuing weeks, the message was clear—Morocco was dusting itself off, and would need visitors more than ever.

With that in mind, we're charting some of our favorite accommodations across the country, as well as highlighting our greatest hits of places to go and things to do. From bijou riads in bike tours, here's how to maximize a stay in this beguiling land.

TANGIER AND THE NORTH COAST

At the northern tip of Morocco, Tangier's mix of magical light, whitewashed lanes and rich culture has drawn generations of travelers. Not least among them were Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé, whose former pied-à-terre has recently been reimaged by Jasper Conran as the 12-room **Villa Mabrouka** (villamabrouka.com). Here, multilayered gardens and views across the deep blue Strait of Gibraltar encourage languid days spent outdoors, and the bustle of the neighboring kasbah feels a world away. But, as you'd expect with Conran at the helm, it's the interiors that truly take the property to

the next level. Inside, the 1940s modernist building blends the British designer's contemporary aesthetic with subtle Moroccan craft details, creating dreamy, light-filled spaces that are calming, comforting, and channel prewar glamor through gleaming chandeliers, an abundance of marble, and plush green velvet upholstery. Little wonder it's the current darling of the north coast.

There's more 20th-century design inspiration at another recent Tangier arrival, the **Fairmont Tazi Palace** (fairmont.com), which sits within almost nine acres of rolling gardens filled with eucalyptus trees and groves of olive, citrus, and pomegranate. Reflecting its heritage, the hotel's interior is full of Art Deco-inspired touches, while outside, the central swimming pool beckons with cocktails and Asian tapas at S-Lounge by Buddha-Bar.

An hour's drive away to the east, on the Alborán Sea, another big hitter makes its Morocco debut in the form of **The St. Regis La Bahia Blanca Resort** (marriott.com). Surrounded by palm-filled gardens, smack-bang on Tamuda Bay, the resort's Mediterranean setting exudes a relaxed holiday vibe.

➔ Tangier Ibn Battouta Airport

WEST COAST

In Rabat, the soon-to-open **Four Seasons Hotel Rabat at Kasr Al Bahr** (fourseasons.com) is housed in six historic buildings, which were formerly part of a sprawling, 18th-century royal summer palace, and five new ones. With seven restaurants and bars, an extensive spa and hammam, and huge gardens, it promises to be the perfect place to live like a king or queen while exploring Morocco's laidback capital.



© RIAD ROSEMARY



© FAIRMONT TAGHAZOUT BAY



© LA SULTANA OUALIDIA



EMILY ANDREWS

“ Morocco is also home to North Africa's most exciting accommodations, meaning that you're never far from a smart—and often breathtakingly beautiful—base.



GREEN PARADISE
The gardens of
Villa Mabrouka.

South of Casablanca, on a quiet stretch of coast between the cities of Safi and El Jadida is **La Sultana Oualidia** (lasultanahotels.com), the sister property of Marrakech's opulent La Sultana hotel. Perched at the edge of a sheltered lagoon, this 12-key boutique beauty is surrounded by market gardens and prickly pear-studded salt marshes. Rooms—including a quirky “treehouse” suite hidden among palms—feature earthy natural materials such as stone, repurposed marble, and oleander wood. Daytimes revolve around surf lessons, horseback riding on the beach, and argan oil massages, while evenings are dedicated to slurping locally caught oysters on the overwater deck, and lounging in the private seawater Jacuzzis that come with each room.

Just inland from the ancient harbor city of Essaouira, **Les Jardins de Villa Maroc** (lesjardinsdevillamaroc.com) offers a bucolic setting filled with olive trees, blooming bougainvillea, and the occasional free-range tortoise. What began as a three-room guesthouse has now expanded to include 11 “Ecodomes”, built from local materials, that look like a cross between Puglian trulli and ready-to-drink coconuts.

A nudge north of Agadir, the 146-key **Fairmont Taghazout Bay** (fairmont.com) softens the geometric design of its sand-colored block-like architecture with water features inspired by desert wadis, and decorative touches that reference Moroccan craft traditions.

✈ Rabat–Salé Airport; Casablanca Mohammed V Airport; MarrakeCh Menara Airport

FEZ

The ancient city of Fez is home to Morocco's oldest medina—a labyrinth that reverberates with the tap and clink of hammers from artisanal workshops. At times it's bewitching, at others confusing; either way, it's impossible not to get lost in, so it pays to choose accommodation that will give you a calm base for the night.

On the edge of the medina, offering eye-popping views from its multiple rooftop terraces, **Palais de Fès** (palais-de-fes.com) boasts centuries-old zellij mosaics and carved plaster, and a restaurant where the recipes haven't changed in 50 years. Dining here feels like being welcomed to a family dinner.

MORE TO MOROCCO

From craft shopping to some of the world's best culinary experiences, Morocco is a paradise for extracurricular activities. Here are a few of the top places and pastimes to seek out while you stay.

RED CITY RETAIL THERAPY

Morocco's medinas are filled with ceramics, leatherwork, hand-hammered lamps, babouche slippers, and many more items that beg to be taken home. But if you're also looking for high-quality, high-design items, Marrakech is the place to stop and shop. A symphony of blues on Riad Laarouss, **STELLA CADENTE** (stellacadente.shop) is a sprawling emporium of color-themed homewares, accessories, and perfumes. Don't miss the blue rooftop cafe with its geometric floor tiles and outstanding orange cake. For a kaleidoscopic selection of contemporary abaya-style dresses that look as cool in Manhattan as they do in Marrakech, head to **NORYA AYRON**'s flagship store and atelier in the buzzy, upmarket district of Guéliz (norya-ayron.shop). In the market for handcrafted rugs, furniture, lamps, ceramics, and many more treasures sourced from Morocco and beyond? Head to **MUSTAPHA BLAOUI**'s store, just off Dar El Bacha on Arset Aouzal Road, where you'll discover rooms packed with interior treasures. There's no major signage, so finding it feels like a genuine achievement, but your efforts will be well rewarded.

ACTION STATIONS

Marrakech's traffic—a cacophony of cars, buses, motorbikes, and donkey carts, all honking at the same time—may look chaotic, but somehow it seems to work. **INSIDERS EXPERIENCE**'s (marrakechinsiders.com) vintage sidecar tours dive straight into it all, offering half- and full-day trips around the city and medina, or out into the desert. Morocco's windswept Atlantic coast provides fantastic conditions for kitesurfing, and Essaouira is becoming something of a cult destination for the sport. Check out **BLEU KITE** (bleukite.com), which has been showing visitors the ropes for more than 20 years. Fez's cuisine elevates the ubiquitous Moroccan salads and tagines to a completely different level. **FEZ COOKING SCHOOL** (fezcookingschool.com) offers classes in everything from baking and how to make local favorites to Moroccan Jewish heritage culinary workshops.

ANDREW MONTGOMERY

Further inside the medina, **Riad Fès** (riadfes.com) is a dazzling spot, due to its soaring central courtyard, stained-glass details, and mustard-yellow drapes that frame the extraordinary craftsmanship. When you tire of trying to navigate the medina, the rooftop bar is the perfect place to unwind from the *melée*, sip a glass of Moroccan *vin gris* and gaze out over the surrounding hills.

✈ Fès–Saïss Airport

MARRAKECH

With one of the richest mixes of accommodation anywhere, there will always be old favorites to return to—and new additions to discover—in the vibrant melting pot that is Marrakech.

Having just celebrated its centenary, the perennially popular **La Mamounia** (mamounia.com), is an oasis of lush

gardens, towering palms, and a scene-y central pool, vying for the love of travelers in the glamor stakes with **Royal Mansour** (royalmansour.com), itself a showcase of exquisite craftsmanship set behind imposing gates.

Several recently opened smaller properties are making Marrakech's hotel scene more exciting than ever. The effortlessly stylish eight-room **Maison Brummell Majorelle** (brummellprojects.com), on the edge of the Majorelle Garden, presents a contemporary take on Moroccan design, using traditional techniques and materials in a serene setting. (It will soon be joined by a sister riad in the medina.)

A little more edgy is 14-room **IZZA** (izza.com), a smart amalgamation of seven former riads now housing some 300 artworks that sit alongside fine examples of Moroccan artisanship, as seen in the wooden ceilings and tiled floors.

MARRAKECH BY THE FORKFUL

A new crop of restaurants is making the Red City's dining scene more vibrant than ever.



BERNARDO MARROQUINT



PASCAL MONTARY

In Guéliz, **PÉTANQUE SOCIAL CLUB** (pscmarrakech.com), or PSC as it's known locally, is the latest opening from Kamal Laftimi, the brains behind Marrakech favorites Nomad, Le Jardin, and Café des Épices. Interiors feature original 1970s club chairs from La Mamounia hotel, black-and-white photographs of former club members found in an old safe, and a hypnotic fresco by contemporary Moroccan artist Yassine Balzoui. Outdoors, sofas and tables are spread throughout the courtyard, where an eclectic crowd sip saffron-infused Sahara spritzes and gather around the *boulodrome* for a round of *pétanque*.

FEED THE SENSES
Above from top:
Pétanque Social Club; Sahbi Sahbi;
right: R'Matt.

Also in Guéliz, **SAHBI SAHBI** (sahbisahbi.com), meaning “soulmates” in Darija Moroccan Arabic, is run entirely by women. Prepare for Moroccan cuisine in a setting that feels part-Tokyo, part-Marrakech. Interiors are sleek and stylish, with terracotta mosaic walls and dangling paper lanterns, and dishes range from the adventurous brains-the-Moroccan-way, to fragrant salads with pumpkin, honey, and almonds. There are tagines cooked over hot coals, and on Fridays, as is the tradition across Morocco, lunchtime couscous.

A 40-minute drive from the city, **R'MATT** (rmattmarrakech.com) is a place reserved for “those in the know” (fortunately, that stretches to hotel concierges and riad owners who can gain you access.) A surprisingly bucolic green oasis in the most unlikely of locations, R'matt is a place where thick lawns, towering palms, and mountain views set the stage for a deeply relaxing day spent lounging around the pool or sampling dishes made with ingredients sourced from the kitchen gardens and cooked over flames.



PASCAL MONTARY

Among the huge collection of digital art are works by contemporary Moroccan artists and 24 prints from Sebastião Salgado's "Amazônia" NFT release, each featuring a QR code linking to details about it. Don't miss the staircase filled with video art by Ethiopian collective Yatreda. It's like a modern museum in the medina.

Entered through a hand-carved cedar door, **Riad Rosemary** (rosemarymarrakech.com) has just opened its five rooms in a quiet corner of the medina, near the Bahia Palace. A labor of love for artist Laurence Leenaert and Ayoub Boualam, co-founders of local lifestyle brand LRNCE, Rosemary is a showcase for Leenaert's signature aesthetic, inspired by the Moroccan landscape. Practically everything here is made by hand, and all has been selected with the utmost care, from the wall art to bathroom tiles to the vintage furniture sourced from flea markets.

Finally, for those in search of a retreat outside of the city, there's **The Oberoi, Marrakech** (oberoihotels.com), a grande dame surrounded by mature olive trees and fragrant, lavender-filled gardens, with a long central canal reflecting the surroundings. The hotel's extraordinary architecture takes its inspiration from the city's historical monuments, and the detailed plaster carvings and tilework are especially beautiful. Imposing arches frame the canal and gardens, best appreciated at sunset from one of the wide terraces.

➔ Marrakech Menara Airport

JUST DESERTS

The Agafay Desert outside Marrakech may not have the soaring dunes of the Sahara, but its gravelly plains have their own beauty. There are plenty of new arrivals in the area, but **La Pause** (lapause-marrakech.com) has been welcoming travelers to its oasis-like setting for 20 years, and recently added a swimming pool. The camp's bivouac tents offer a back-to-nature experience, while the more substantial mud-walled lodges come with their own bathrooms and stoves to keep things cozy on chilly nights.

In Ouarzazate, the gateway to the vast southern desert, the 14-room **Dar Ahlam** (darahlam.com) is a 200-year-old kasbah surrounded by olive trees, palms, and almond groves, offering an oasis in the true sense of the word. Highlights include dinner in gardens created by the designer of Paris's Jardin des Tuileries, massages by candlelight and treks into the Valley of the Roses in the Atlas foothills.

For a trip that takes you way off the beaten track, head deep into the sands of Erg Chebbi. Here, hidden among the dunes and surrounded by silence, you'll find **Merzouga Luxury Desert Camps** (merzougalexurydesertcamps.com) and its new sister camp, **White Camel Acacia**. Fly into the nearby Errachidia airport, and the camp will arrange transfers right into the heart of the dunes.

➔ Errachidia Moulay Ali Cherif Airport



PEACE OUT
Merzouga Luxury
Desert Camps

MARWAN SOBAI