

Morocco Deco

Diane Dorrans Saeks | Photo: Courtesy Images | December 5, 2013

Secluded behind ancient Marrakech walls, the palatial Royal Mansour offers guests endless discoveries of enveloping decor and refinement.



The spa's filigreed arches are part of the Royal Mansour's instantly transporting design.

Marrakech is like a lavish watercolor painting by Delacroix: bright, sun-struck gardens blooming with magenta bougainvillea, punctuated by flickering palm trees and encircled by 16th century terra-cotta ramparts. It's like a hallucinatory dream where the polished Paris-meets-Morocco style of Yves Saint Laurent and his coterie linger on at their most glamorous. Since June 2010, the Royal Mansour (royalmansour.com (<http://royalmansour.com>)) offers guests a most luxurious enchantment.

The historic silver Daimler sedan glides with exquisite grace past the hotel's security gate and turns toward a long private drive lined with robust palm trees. In the distance awaits the arched grand portal and stunning architecture of the Royal Mansour.

A passenger could be forgiven for asking the white-gloved, liveried chauffeur to seize the moment and let it rip. But this handsome driver proceeds at a stately pace, just as he does when he's driving the king of Morocco, who owns the property.

Anticipation is such sweet pleasure. The car pulls up; luggage is whisked out of sight; and, suddenly, I am in another world, far from the jangle and clamor of the nearby ancient medina of Marrakech.

Exploring the centuries-old souks (markets) of the city is for another day. For now, I am transported to the truly palatial style of Morocco. The grandiose entryway leads to an open-air courtyard centered on fountains and a pool. I'll soon learn that the lovely space is ethereally lit at night by hanging lanterns of handblown glass.

The king of Morocco built this pleasure palace, which opened last year, to show off ancient crafts, and arts and design influences of his country. He gathered the kingdom's best stonecutters, silk-weavers, glassmakers, carvers, gliders, tile-makers and others skilled at traditional crafts and decorative arts.

The resort's suites are ornamented with exquisite handiwork, painted silk fabrics, handwoven Moroccan carpets and intricately tiled walls. There are also tracteries of stucco, carved and painted cedar beams, recessed windows with carved shutters and gold arabesques of decoration. I lie on a silk-embroidered divan, noting that every vignette offers delight and surprise.

Built into the medina wall, the expansive property covers 8-plus acres. The Royal Mansour, discreet and private, contains 53 Moroccan *riads*, each one true to the centuries-old Moroccan style and configured around a central, open-air courtyard. *Riads* are the traditional, incredibly ornamented residences of the country (with high walls to keep out desert sands, marauders and prying eyes), with a living area and, in some cases, a dining room. Each of the Royal Mansour's *riads* (ranging from 1,400 square feet to 19,375 square feet) showcases the country's classical design, in addition to artwork from more than 80 contemporary native artists, also on display throughout the property. The second floor houses bedrooms that overlook the private courtyard below, while roof terraces with sun beds and private pools provide stunning views of Marrakech and the Atlas Mountains.

"We wanted the experience here to be like staying in a place with a history rather than staying in a hotel," says Nicolas Papamiltiades of 3BIS, architect for Royal Mansour. He's right: It's nothing like a conventional hotel. There are none of the usual hotel codes, including no check-in desk. And visitors experience service suited for royalty—a stealth staff of 500 stands vigilant, ready to meet your every need.

"We stayed true to spaces that obey the rules of Moroccan architecture, solidly anchoring the project in its setting and forging its credibility," Papamiltiades adds. Guests are welcomed and then taken directly to their private accommodations in the individual *riads*.

When hunger rouses, two lavish fine-dining options, La Grande Table Marocaine and La Grande Table Française, await with menus supervised by three-Michelin-starred chef Yannick Alléno. For a more leisurely reprieve, toast terrace-side at the Mediterranean concept, La Table. Likewise, post-dinner lounging proves positively posh. Interior gathering spaces like Le Bar are furnished with antique mirrors, while the cozy, jewel-box-like Cigar Lounge provides an inviting space in which to relax. The Library is stocked with walls of books on Moroccan culture, science and art. It also features a unique retractable ceiling and telescope, giving guests the chance to scan an extraordinary view of the Marrakech night sky.

The Spa is equally indulgent, encompassing an airy 27,000 square feet. Flaunting an indoor swimming pool (in its own glazed pavilion), 13 treatment rooms, a Watsu bath area, three spa suites and a fitness center, it's easy to feel worlds away mid-massage. It's dramatically modern with glossy white geometric screens inspired by traditional Moorish styles, but reinvented in an abstract fashion that lends a modern aesthetic to the classic hammam (Turkish bath). It's a dream of all-white decor: serene, airy, pristine.

Afterward, there's a cool sip of Moroccan mint tea, and then it's time to rest, meditate and consider the great good fortune of spending a few blissful days among the formidably elegant walls at the very royal Royal Mansour. For the duration of my stay, one thought repeats itself: It's good to be the queen.