
Director

Fit for a king

By Richard Dunnett



Rejuvenate at the Royal Mansour Marrakech in a five-star riad commissioned by Morocco's monarch

As you lounge on a private roof terrace at the **Royal Mansour** the buzz of Marrakech's frenetic streets seems a million miles away. And when you put down that good book to cool in the mosaic-tiled plunge pool, the only sounds filling the blue skies are the birdsong, occasional youthful hum of a scooter or call to prayer from the towering 12th-century Koutoubia mosque nearby.

Locals will tell you that the Marrakech of today is indistinguishable from the city of 15 years ago. Shortly after his accession to the throne in 1999 King Mohammed VI introduced civil and economic reforms that have cemented Morocco as a year-round tourist destination with a boom in high-end western chains and boutique hotels.

Completed two years ago, the five-star Royal Mansour was commissioned by the king himself to showcase Moroccan craftsmanship and service. Architect Nicolas Papamiltiades and interior designer Fabrice Bourg of Paris-based 3BIS have mixed traditional and contemporary styles using Moroccan craftsmen and artists.

Like a medina inside a medina the lavish hotel replicates the layout and architecture of the country's imperial cities. Guests are accommodated in opulent private riads off a central hub – yet for such a palatial retreat it remains deliciously intimate.

The experience starts the moment you step from the plane, with guests met from their flight by a Royal Mansour representative and guided into a lounge while a passport officer attends to immigration checks. Luggage is collected and customs cleared, and a chauffeured Range Rover or Mercedes provides the 10-minute air-conditioned journey to the hotel.

ULTIMATE LUXURY

From the main road the car enters a private drive lined with centenarian olive trees before reaching an imposing entrance. The

gate is made from cisele metal, sculptured plasterwork and traditional cedar wood and swings open to reveal a courtyard of trees and plants geometrically positioned around a central fountain.

Admire the decoration of the main building: a sunken fountain laid out in perfect symmetry, shiny, smooth tadelakt plaster, zellige ceramic tiles, and delicate chandeliers and drapes. From here marble paths lined with trickling water channels and olive trees lead guests to their personal riads.



One- to four-bedroom riads are available, each designed and furnished by Moroccan craftsmen. We stayed in a one-bed. The ground level is built around a central atrium and includes a lounge and dining area; the second floor encompasses a bedroom and sumptuous bathroom with a marble bath and triple shower and above that is the private roof terrace. Sun-kissed terracotta walls here contrast with the dark panelled wood and rich furniture of the shaded lower levels.

The riad's ambient lighting, air conditioning and surround sound system are controlled by touchscreens in each room. One touch also hangs a metaphorical do not disturb sign outside the Narnia-like butler doors, which lead from each level to a network of underground service tunnels. In theory you needn't encounter any staff but this would mean missing an opportunity to chat to the knowledgeable workforce. Each riad is assigned a butler should you wish to take breakfast, lunch or dinner on the terrace or in your dining room.

Soothing hammam

With every need taken care of it's tempting not to leave your riad at all but this would be wrong. The three-floored spa sits in a birdcage-like central atrium. Crafted in stark white wrought-iron latticework and bathed in natural light it showers the tiled walls with intricately patterned shadows.

The treatment menu includes house brand Maroc Maroc, Dr Hauschka and Sisley. But don't leave without experiencing a traditional hammam – a 90-minute treatment atop a hot marble slab in a cavernous steam room that leaves you washed, scrubbed, exfoliated, stretched, massaged, oiled and ready to face the day – or at least a traditional Moroccan mint tea.



The Royal Mansour boasts several restaurants including two offering gastronomic dining under the supervision of Yannick Alléno, the Michelin three-star chef. The honeyed tones of La Grande Table Marocaine provides a contemporary twist on traditional Moroccan cuisine, while the pure white La Grande Table Française serves fine French cuisine.

And at night if you don't fancy the 10-minute stroll to the famous Djemaa el-Fna square with its market and street entertainers, retire to the main building for the pleasant piano bar and cocktail lounge, or peek at the night sky through the telescope in the library with its rain-sensitive retractable roof. Or simply turn in for the evening – after all, the plumped beds will certainly meet with a seal of approval, royal or otherwise.

FACT FILE

A one-bedroom riad, which includes breakfast, city taxes, service charges and VAT, starts at 15,000 Moroccan dirham