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Savouring Marrakech

Stanley Moss talks of the luxury living and the celebrated cuisine of the unique city of Marrakech, Morocco

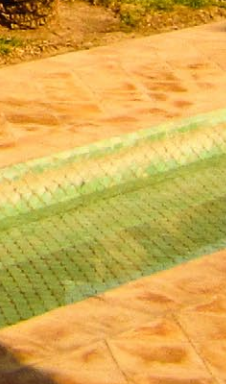
PHOTOGRAPHED BY PAULA SWEET

UNLIKE MANY OTHER DESTINATIONS in the world, central Marrakech hasn't changed much in the last five years. While there's major development on the outskirts of town, inbound traffic still proceeds somewhat anarchically to the old medina. At least it moves. Humans meander in front of cars, horns blat, donkeys and horses plod along ambivalently, and ultimately you reach your destination. The Jmaa Al Fnai

continues to attract droves of tourists, while the same vendors and storytellers, musicians, souvenir-sellers and henna ladies maintain their unique locations night after night, year after year. The food stall greeters hawk their bills of fare in whatever language you'll answer to: they have expert radar in determining your nationality, largely error-free, though their vocabulary extends only as far as their particular category of



**THIS PAGE AND
OVERLEAF:**
Scenes and
dishes from
Amanjena.



food offering and elementary flirtation. Try and discuss the Higgs boson with them and you probably will get a blank stare. The fact that Marrakech can now be called a culinary destination is the tantalizing surprise.

Moroccan cuisine is hot, and we're not only talking about the spiciness. The celebrated chef Joël Robuchon has placed Morocco among the 'best cuisines in the world'. With their origins among the upper class, the classic tastes of the Levant begin with expensive ingredients, namely rare spices and savoury accoutrements. The very best recipes need time, some specialties requiring 12 hours in preparation. Taken in tandem with Morocco's legendary hospitality, the dining experience is irresistible. If you've crossed Morocco off your bucket list, time for a rethink. In the words of Amanjena's GM, Gabriel Lousada, speaking about his near-case of traveller's remorse before his first visit, 'I was about to commit the biggest mistake of my life by not coming.'

Ten kilometres east of the city, Amanjena remains a dream destination: spacious, tranquil, opulent, elegant, and 40 suites set among fantasy palatial passageways, straight out of the Arabian Nights. Amongst vast grounds like these you'll never have the sense of the other guests. Frankly, why bother to venture far from your villa, especially the ones with private plunge pools? You could, of course, browse art books in the library, sunbathe by the poolside, or sip mojitos in the extremely comfortable bar, æons away from the grime and frenzy of the souk.

Eventually the need for sustenance will surface. In that realm, Amanjena never disappoints, thanks to the ascent of two Moroccans, Chef Khalid and Chef Nourddine, whose joint stewardship has gracefully nudged the restaurant into one of Marrakech's preferred culinary oases. (Guests have first call on reservations, but the public can also avail themselves).

On a recent visit to the property, a splendour of delicacies were sampled in the fine dining restaurant for dinner and by the poolside for luncheon. Both venues delivered world-class service, a brilliant panorama of traditional flavors, informed by French sensibilities and artful presentations. At dinner, a delicate amuse-bouche of tomato gel and pesto







**ABOVE AND
RIGHT:**
Amanjena.
BELOW:
**Courtyard at
Riyad El Cadi.**

garlanding fresh feta cheese gracefully preceded beef tangia, unique to Marrakech, accompanied by ethereal couscous and seasonal vegetables, served at an ideal consistency and temperature. As the evening wound down, a dessert bestia with home-made cinnamon ice-cream finished off the course in the romantic setting, to the echoes of haunting strains of a Gnawa vocalist.

Lunch the following day proved another temptation. Sipping ice-cold vin gris from the ancient Roman city of Volubilia, we sampled dlaa—a traditional slow-cooked lamb with saffron dish—which requires one-day advance ordering. It was served on a background of tanta-

lizing side dishes. Mint tea and cookies capped a truly memorable al fresco meal. (The ghoriba, a sesame cookie concocted from almond flour, sesame, honey and butter is a must-try. Those with a sweet tooth may need to ask the chef to send out a few more). It's impossible to exhaust Amanjena's menu in two meals, so a revisit is a must. For variety, Amanjena also boasts a highly recommended Thai restaurant, which is to be reviewed in a future article.

Those curious to unravel the secrets of Moroccan cuisine will certainly benefit from a stay at Riyadh El Cadi, located in the medina. This wonderful small and authentic riad of 15 rooms

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THIS PAGE: Cuisine at El Cadi.





ABOVE LEFT:
Discovering El Cadi.

ABOVE:
Food at Riad Ilayka.

BELOW:
Market-place at
Marrakech.



Savouring Marrakech

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not only feeds you well in local and European style, but also offers highly personalized cooking instruction as an add-on. More like socializing, a typical class might begin with early shopping in the souk, followed by a two-hour on-site adventure, moving back and forth from courtyard tables to the kitchen as Chef Hassan demonstrates, while majordomo Ali translates. The vivid palette of foods and spices, the buzz of energetic chopping and tasting, the aromas drifting up from tiny earthen cooking pots mysteriously turns into the thrill of seeing one's handiwork transform into delectable meals.

This riad takes dining seriously. Its small size permits customizing cuisine to individual preferences; arriving guests may find themselves happily immersed in detailed discussion about their upcoming meals. A typical dinner of four courses might consist of soup, salad, tajine (the choice during our visit: fish, chicken, veal, lamb, or artichoke and peas) and dessert, washed down with local Casablanca beer, or a hearty Moroccan wine selection. The riad understands a visitor's palate must be satisfied, thus management will try and fulfil any wish. On rare occasions guests

arrive with exceptional preferences: two folks from England who won a trip to Marrakech, their first outside the UK, specifically wanted

McDonald's, an unusual request which innkeeper Julia Bartels hospitably honoured. Happiness is always the goal.

There's a charming history to Riyad El Cadi, seven interconnected houses collected by Bartels' father, former German ambassador to Morocco. He began the mass renovation in the year 1996, opening the riad in 2000. A maze of courtyards decorated with

a remarkable collection of textiles, the riad is a refuge of quiet space, seemingly far from the chaos only minutes away. You get some idea of the intricacy of the property looking across the interconnected roof terraces with panoramic views of the surrounding medina. Great pains were taken to preserve the original architectural details of each house, despite the complexities of connecting the diverse structures, a layout so organic that no architect has ever been able to draft a workable floor plan. A bemused guest from the UK told us, 'been here four days, still can't find my room.'

The riad footprint straddles two different Marrakech municipalities and is served by two different water and electricity systems. On one notable day during renovation, workmen unwittingly broke through a wall into a neighbor's living room, fortunately without serious diplomatic repercussions. It's a peculiar joy to wander through the smooth hallways, climb narrow skylit staircases as you encounter authentic décor rich in local tradition and culture. There are hidden patios ideal for quiet reading (or napping), even a plunge pool, accessed through ornate doorways and sculpted porticos. And your stay inside the medina means the opportunity to discover first-hand the high quality of Moroccan arts, since a wealth of museums, palaces and tombs are at walking distance.

Riyad El Cadi occupies a special position in the mid-price range at €180–€220 per night, so the value proposition is high. This may present a conundrum for groups, due to spontaneous cases of room envy: every room is unique, and there are multiple grades and suite configurations from which to choose. This is a property to consider taking over in its entirety, for birthdays, weddings, and reunions. With some doubling up the riad can comfortably sleep 35. Location, comfort, cuisine and amenities mean a great Marrakech experience. Be sure to try out the Argan oil products in your modern bath. They are artisanal, bio, and locally sourced.

Veteran travellers call the first meal of the day the most important one. Tucked away among the labyrinthine lanes of the medina, Riad Ilayka brings a decidedly enlightened sensibility to *petit déjeuner*. Open just 16 months ago, this property of only seven rooms has been lovingly renovated by ex-Parisians who put forth a bountiful morning table. Included in the room rate, breakfast on

the roof terrace combines splendid flavours and inspired presentation in a classic setting. The menu: fresh orange juice, four breads (brown bread, white bread, flat bread, pain au chocolat), the traditional Moroccan crêpe, olive oil, two kinds of confiture, local butter and honey, rosewater–agar-flavoured yogurt, fresh fruit compote, omelette and *pousse-café*. Ilayka's restaurant, which is reserved only for guests, proved another bonus. Dinner at €25/person and wine priced at €15–€30 delivered excellent value.

Following a one-year renovation, the riad's young proprietors brought the property back to perfect repair. It looks vintage, but everything is new. Even the room called 'La Cave', with its intricate ceiling painting. The roof area now feature views of a traditional menzeh, Jacuzzi, hammam, and an airy elevated platform appropriate for afternoon drinks or romantic trysts. Our room with its private terrace, featured a fantasy bathroom with overhead shower, plunge tub, artisan mosaic work, illuminated cubbies and hammered metal sink and mirror. All rooms are non-smoking, and have air conditioning and a safe, all at the attractive rate of €95–€200. This mostly tourist hotel has an average stay of three nights. Local artisan soaps, abundant towels and plush robes fill out the amenities offering. •

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