

# MOROCCO 'N' ROLL

Marrakech has long attracted the great and the glamorous for sunny sojourns, but some are now choosing to put down more permanent roots, as hotel-and-residences models blossom around the city, creating the best of both worlds. Gordon Miller reports

The lure of Marrakech as a decadent escape away from prying European and American eyes feels as strong now as it was in the 1960s, when it attracted The Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Yves Saint Laurent, John Paul Getty Jr and their acolytes. This year, David Beckham chose Amanjena, the elegant five-star resort on the city's outskirts, to celebrate his 40th birthday, while last year, across town, model Poppy Delevingne married at the boho-chic Beldi Country Club.

It's not hard to see why the city draws such a crowd. A kaleidoscope of colour – set off by the walls of the red-brick medina – and the 24/7 cacophony of both traffic and souk traders lend Marrakech the vibrancy

of New York City, but with a bustling, characterful old-world undertone. The city's grandest hotels are a case in point – 21st-century retreats that showcase the nation's finest ancient crafts.

At the Royal Mansour (the King of Morocco's personal project), the elaborate tilework (*zellige*), engraved-leather and wood-panelled walls and burnished metal features are stunning, while the white spa, with its birdcage frame, has wow factor writ large. Next door, La Mamounia hotel had a 2010 refresh, and its sumptuous gardens and timeless elegance are even more impressive than when Churchill counted it his favourite hotel in the city. The Mandarin Oriental and W Hotels are also opening outposts in the next few years – adding to the buzz.

However, the five-star horizon is, quite literally, changing. The snow-capped Atlas Mountains might still be the backdrop, but many resorts are developing a hotel and residences model. One of the first hotels to weave private real estate into its portfolio was Domaine



A £1.6 million villa with a private pool at Assoufid, from £1.6m through Aylesford International



From top: the four-bedroom Villa Doria at Al Maaden Golf Resort, £1.45m through Aylesford International. Four-bedroom Jnan Karmouss villa at Domaine Royal Palm, price on request



Royal Palm, commencing its first phase of 98 villas in 2008. The huge 231-hectare estate, located on the city's fringes, also has a five-star luxury hotel, golf course and several tennis courts. Each single-storey villa (prices on request, directly through Domaine Royal Palm, example pictured above) has its own pool and walled garden, and is "inspired by Berber culture with sleek lines". The estate is being developed and managed by Beachcomber, which also has luxury resorts and villas in Mauritius and the Seychelles. Such developments are one way to fall in line with planning legislation that favours historic renovation over new builds in the city, and single-villa plots over cluster developments on the outskirts – rules that had, for many years, limited Marrakech's new-home market.

Max Lawrence, owner and managing director of specialist tour operator Lawrence of Morocco, a British company that has two generations of experience in the country, says: "Property zoning laws, as in the UK, restrict the building of new homes in certain areas, such as the ancient medinas. Elsewhere, new-build

developments are increasingly being permitted on the city's outskirts on non-agricultural land." But "overall, the property market has slowed since the boom years in the decade up to 2008. Although the growing Moroccan middle class is helping to buoy the market by investing in new housing, there isn't the level of foreign investment there was. Not surprisingly, well-developed and strong brands are the ones that are doing well."

A case in point is the aforementioned Amanjena (part of the international luxury hotel group Amanresorts), where 17 bespoke luxury villas, adjacent to the hotel's walled estate, are in the pipeline. Details at this stage are limited – the plans have not officially been announced – but it's likely construction will begin in 2016, with sumptuous villas delivered during 2017.

Ritz-Carlton branded residences, situated 20 minutes outside Marrakech on the 50-hectare Jnan Amar Polo Estate, is another new kid on Marrakech's property block. The development, which is due to open in 2017, is set against a dramatic Atlas Mountains backdrop and includes a Ritz-Carlton hotel, a luxurious spa and

*Buyers are attracted by "the plethora of properties, the fact that they can expect to pay 5-10 per cent less than the advertised price, and the current strength of the pound"*

world-class restaurants. The 85 three- to five-bedroom residences (from €837,000) have their own private terraces, and expansive living areas and dining rooms overlooking exquisitely landscaped gardens.

Nick Young, negotiator on Knight Frank's International Residential Development team, who is marketing the villas, believes "the market has realigned after a turbulent couple of years and is now offering solid investment opportunities. The villas offer buyers luxurious living within secure grounds that are secluded yet within easy reach of a wonderfully cosmopolitan city."

For those keen to buy now, Assoufid, a luxury boutique hotel and spa with an 18-hole golf course, located 10km south-west of Marrakech, has three- to eight-bedroom villas for sale (from £1.6m, through Aylesford International, example pictured on previous pages), offered in four architectural styles (contemporary, art deco, Atlas and Hivernage). Each has a 15m x 7m pool, state-of-the-art fixtures and fittings, heating and air-conditioning throughout and a high-spec kitchen.

The company's international negotiator and manager Amy Redfern says buyers are attracted to Marrakech by "the plethora of properties available, the fact that they can expect to pay between 5 and 10 per cent less than the advertised price, and the current strength of the pound". The climate, with the sun pretty much shining for 10 hours a day, and the relatively short



From top: villas at L'Amandier, including the two-bedroom Villa Lavande, £329,000. A rooftop terrace on the estate, overlooking the Atlas Mountains

*Each villa exemplifies L'Amandier's philosophy of marrying a contemporary European aesthetic with traditional craftsmanship and materials*

three-and-a-half-hour flight from northern Europe only add to the appeal.

Also on Aylesford's books are properties (£335,000-£1.45m) at the Al Maaden Golf Resort, 15 minutes from the medina. At the top end, Villa Doria's 2,582sq m plot is ample space for a 456sq m four-bedroom and four-bathroom property (pictured on previous page) that faces onto the golf course, with three reception rooms (one furnished in Moroccan style), dining room and hammam. Flipping the development trend of the other resorts, a five-star Park Hyatt hotel is due to open on the estate in 2016, to which villa residents will have access. It promises to become a hub, with a tennis academy, clubhouse, restaurants, kids' club and spa.

A similar residences-and-hotel evolution is also being realised at L'Amandier, in the Ouirgane Valley in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains, one hour south of Marrakech and 15 minutes from Richard Branson's 27-bedroom Kasbah Tamadot hotel. This is spectacular countryside, with valleys of pine trees and olive groves scarred by slashes of terracotta earth, leading towards the peaks.

Of the 14 villas, three are still available to buy: a premium three-bedroom, south-facing villa, priced at £495,000; Villa Lavande (rendering pictured above) – currently modelled as a two bedroom but at an early stage of construction, so it has the potential to be upgraded to a three-bedroom home – priced at £329,000; and a completed two-ensuite-bedroom villa with beautifully mature private gardens, priced at £349,000. Each exemplifies L'Amandier's philosophy of marrying a contemporary European design aesthetic



and specification (such as floor-to-ceiling windows) with traditional craftsmanship and materials (such as smooth *tadelakt* plastered walls and earthen *bejmat* tiles). The architecture is cubist in form, but plays on the style of a Moroccan riad – each is an inside-out house (to western eyes), whereby the rooms are built around a central courtyard. “The attention to detail and quality of fittings are what you'd expect in central London,” says City financier Chris Corrin, who owns a villa at L'Amandier.

L'Amandier's cachet is likely to increase in January, when this residential enclave opens a five-star boutique hotel with six rooms, a 50-cover restaurant and a 25m infinity pool with sublime views across the valley and lake and on to the Atlas Mountains – followed later in the year by two penthouses and a branded spa. “L'Amandier is a really differentiated property prospect compared to other parts of the world,” says another

British buyer there, Zach Dovey, who practices as a surgeon in Belgium. “I trust it'll grow in value.”

Recently published statistics certainly seem to support this view. In a report co-authored by Morocco's land registry and Bank Al-Maghrib, the overall volume of real estate transactions in 2014 is shown to have increased 15.7 per cent year-on-year, with property prices, including riads in Marrakech's medina but excluding building plots, gaining 3.5 per cent over the same period. ♦

#### VILLA PEOPLE

**Amanjena**, [www.amanresorts.com](http://www.amanresorts.com). **Aylesford International**, 020-7351 2383; [www.aylesford.com](http://www.aylesford.com). **Domaine Royal Palm**, +212-5244 58746, [www.domaineroyalpalm.com](http://www.domaineroyalpalm.com). **Knight Frank**, 020-7861 1057; [www.knightfrank.com](http://www.knightfrank.com). **L'Amandier**, 020-7754 5563; [www.lamandierhotel.com](http://www.lamandierhotel.com). **Lawrence of Morocco**, 01672-500 555; [www.lawrenceofmorocco.com](http://www.lawrenceofmorocco.com). **Ritz-Carlton Marrakech**, +212-6613 56825; [www.rcr-marrakech.com](http://www.rcr-marrakech.com).