



Sunworship

GORDON MILLER checks into three of Morocco's most stylish and luxurious hotels

Matthew Williamson claims to have visited more than a dozen times. Jean-Paul Gaultier has a riad there. And Poppy Delevingne chose it as the place for her wedding.

Indeed, Marrakech, Morocco's exotic city, has become the holiday destination of choice for the fashionable rich and famous. It all started in the 1960s, when the likes of The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix and Yves Saint Laurent (who designed Jardin Majorelle, the stunning 12-acre botanical garden and one of Marrakech's most visited sites) would seek refuge in this ancient fortified city, away from prying European eyes, and indulge in hedonistic activities.

Today, visitors continue to be drawn to the red city year after year, seduced by its mesmerising colours, aromatic spices and rich culture. The 18 souks that inhabit Marrakech are packed full of stall holders experiencing a roaring trade thanks to the many generous tourists and both real estate and luxury hotel development have grown significantly in the past century, despite the global economic recession.

Two of the most famous five-star resorts include the Royal Mansour hotel and La Mamounia palace-hotel, which lie adjacent to one another. The former was commissioned by King Mohammed VI for an astronomical sum of money and this extravagant oasis shows off the skill of local craftsmen, for whom it took three and a half years to build. The latter, renowned for its 16-acre lush gardens, was regularly frequented by Sir Winston Churchill (the bar has been named after him) and recently underwent an extensive refurbishment, restoring it to its former glory.

However, if you fancy venturing away from the hustle and bustle of Marrakech's main medina and finding a more tranquil escape, then there are some great alternative options, as I discovered on my recent visit.

Palais Namaskar

Palais Namaskar, a 20-minute drive from central Marrakech and one hour away from the Atlas Mountains, is reminiscent of a sultan's palace. This Moroccan retreat from The Oetker Collection features traditional Moorish architecture, beautiful landscaped gardens and all of the amenities you could possibly wish for, including a luxury Clarins spa, fine dining and a fitness centre.

The accommodation has been divided into four tiers: standard rooms, suites, villas and palaces. The path to the pool villas is an enchanting walkway lined with bougainvillea. The double-fronted property is enclosed within ornate, arched gates and the walls surrounding it have been lined with jasmine and orange trees, promising total privacy as you bathe in the outdoor pool.

Inside, the tranquil setting continues with the feng shui design, but for those of you who can't do without 21st-century technology, rooms come complete with televisions and iPod docks. Finally, guests can choose from the free-standing bath tub or the outdoor plunge pool in which to soak up this Moroccan experience in glorious solitude. *From €490 for a deluxe room, palaisnamaskar.com*

L'Amandier Hotel

One hour south of Marrakech, in the little-known Ouirgane Valley in the High Atlas Mountains, is where you'll find L'Amandier Hotel, which officially opens this April. Set on a plateau amid citrus and olive groves, this



Clockwise from left: Main pool, Palais Namaskar; Spa suite, La Roseraie; L'Amandier Hotel terrace. *photography: Tara Panchaud; Villa Lavande, L'Amandier Hotel; Swimming pool, La Roseraie; Water feature, Palais Namaskar*

intimate hideaway comprises six en-suite bedrooms and 14 villas. The land was bought by two brothers, whose shared vision was one of barefoot luxury, allowing guests to experience the raw, natural beauty of the surrounding Toubkal National Park without compromising on luxury.

Skilled craftsmen were employed to undertake the task, all of whom were highly accomplished in time-honoured artisanal building techniques, and used local materials. This has been cleverly fused with contemporary European design, courtesy of British architect Nick Gowing and interior designer Michael Kopinski.

The hotel's amenities include an infinity pool, a 50-cover restaurant, and an all-weather tennis court. Each of the estate's villas has its own roof terrace, courtyard, plunge pool, and panoramic views across the valley of olive groves, or to the lake and mountains that lie beyond L'Amandier's neighbour: La Roseraie Spa Retreat. *Suites in shoulder season start from €240 per suite per night and €420 for a two-bedroom villa per night, lamandierhotel.com*

Domaine de la Roseraie

La Roseraie is an institution in the Ouirgane Valley, known and loved from Casablanca to the Côte d'Azur. Founded 46 years ago by Abdelkader Fenjro – who is the father of the current custodians, Kenza and Nabil – the 40-room retreat is centred on the main hotel with a lounge, a handful of bedrooms and a swimming pool; the majority of the en-suite guest rooms are dotted around the grounds.

Having been planted over several decades, and lovingly tended by four gardeners, the verdant estate is now home to hundreds of olive trees and pomegranate bushes, some 5,000 rose bushes, a rare and magnificent flowering pecan tree, and a magnolia tree that annually produces its beautiful white blossoms.

Kenza Fenjro, a published writer on aromatherapy, has added a new dimension: cultivating a herb garden whose produce is used in the luxurious spa treatments. Guests are invited to learn about, and create, their own tinctures in the welcoming and attractive laboratory adjacent to the spa.

Complete with hammam (traditional Moroccan steam room), four massage rooms, Jacuzzi and indoor swimming pool, the spa was completely remodeled last year. Located in the heart of Berber country, the design pays tribute to the indigenous North African people's culture and history, with rare artefacts, including jewellery and daggers, adorning the walls and bedecking the floors, which have also been covered in geometric-patterned hand-woven rugs.

The overall effect is eclectically charming. It has an authenticity borne out of passion and personal investment. It was Benoît Laberrigue, Kenza's husband, who designed the space and was responsible for several installations, including the impressive wall-hanging mirror with jagged clear crystals. This unique piece might be considered a totem of the evolved La Roseraie Spa Retreat. As Kenza said, "Nature provides everything. Look around you – it's all here to be discovered." ■

From £120 for a standard room for two that includes half board, laroseraiesparetreat.com