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SOUK OF THE DAY

In the historic city of Marrakech, **Sonia Soltani** discovers an Aladdin's Cave of five-star options, from the atmospheric alleyways of the Medina to sweeping palm-lined resorts on the edge of the Sahara



“Here in these

spacious palm groves rising from the desert, the traveller can be sure of perennial sunshine, of every comfort and diversion,” wrote Winston Churchill, a guest at the legendary La Mamounia.

Three hours from the UK, Marrakech is perhaps the closest you can get to exotic escapism without jet-lag. What's changed dramatically in the past five years is the level of interest from the luxury sector in this former imperial capital. Back then, your five-star seeking clients would have had the choice between a few top-end resorts, mainly in the Hivernage district, the most European (and some would say bland) option, and inventively restored riads – traditional houses in the old town, which had fallen into dereliction.

The French, once the colonial occupiers of Morocco, reigned almost without rival on the luxury scene, the notable exception being Asian-owned Amanjena, one of the country's most acclaimed resorts.

Fast forward to 2008 and the hot topic in the local travel industry – besides guessing what La Mamounia will look like after its revamp by Jacques Garcia (Paris's superstar hotel interior designer) – is which group will open a hotel next. Four Seasons, W Hotels, Raffles, Banyan Tree, Mandarin Oriental and Rocco Forte are all lining up to get a slice of the booming market. All the new resorts are in La Palmeraie, the palm tree grove north of Marrakech on the doorstep of the desert.

But this doesn't mean building projects have ceased in the historical Medina: newly renovated boutique riads keep opening, bringing the city's number of five-star beds to around 2,000. This boom in luxury accommodation is fuelled by the King of Morocco's ambition of attracting 10 million tourists by 2010 – almost three times more than the current figure.

Do fans of Marrakech need to worry that the city, and its Medina in particular, is about to lose its authenticity and appeal as the result of this expansion? Lucy Clark, marketing manager at Exsus, doesn't

think so. “I don't see it as a threat to the city's charm,” she says. “The labyrinth of streets in the Medina doesn't lend itself to large five-star resorts, so when luxury hotels do open up here, they tend to be boutique and full of local character.”

With this wealth of five-star choices, Marrakech lends well to a two-centre holiday. Operators such as Exsus and Prestige Holidays usually recommend combining a few nights in the Medina with stays in La Palmeraie, with its gardens, swimming pools and open spaces.

Shopping options are so numerous your clients might have to hire a personal shopper (see Mode, p48) to make their way through the riches of the souk and the trendy boutiques. And when they need to chill out after a strenuous credit card workout, they'll be happy to know the city is home to some superb spas. The resorts know luxury clients like nothing better than pampering, and being able to boast the most decadently indulgent spa is key in the battle for customers.

La Sultana in the Medina has one of the most spectacular spas in town and a swimming pool on its roof. Es Saadi in the Hivernage district is opening a 3,500sq m spa early next year. And Meryanne Loum-Martin – of Jnane Tamsna fame – is currently working on a Relais & Chateaux health retreat in La Palmeraie.

As fascinating as Marrakech is, there's plenty of breathtaking natural beauty to explore outside the city. For a chic seaside resort, recommend a trip to Oualidia, 3.5 hours away. Here La Sultana has opened a resort to rival its Marrakech-sister property. At Unesco World Heritage listed Essaouira, clients can surf in the Atlantic. For mountain treks, nothing beats the High Atlas range. Around Mount Toubkal are some of the region's most beautiful kasbahs (fortresses), now transformed into hotels, such as Agafay, Tamedot and Toubkal.



High stakes: opened in 1952, Es Saadi's casino is an institution – and the only one in town until La Mamounia reopens next spring.

Posh 'n' decks: DJs at the Murano tend to attract the most fashionable crowd in town (muranoresort.com).

Hangout: Marrakech's beautiful set loves Le Comptoir for its stylish setting, fusion food and belly dancers at the weekend (tel: 00 212 2443 7702).

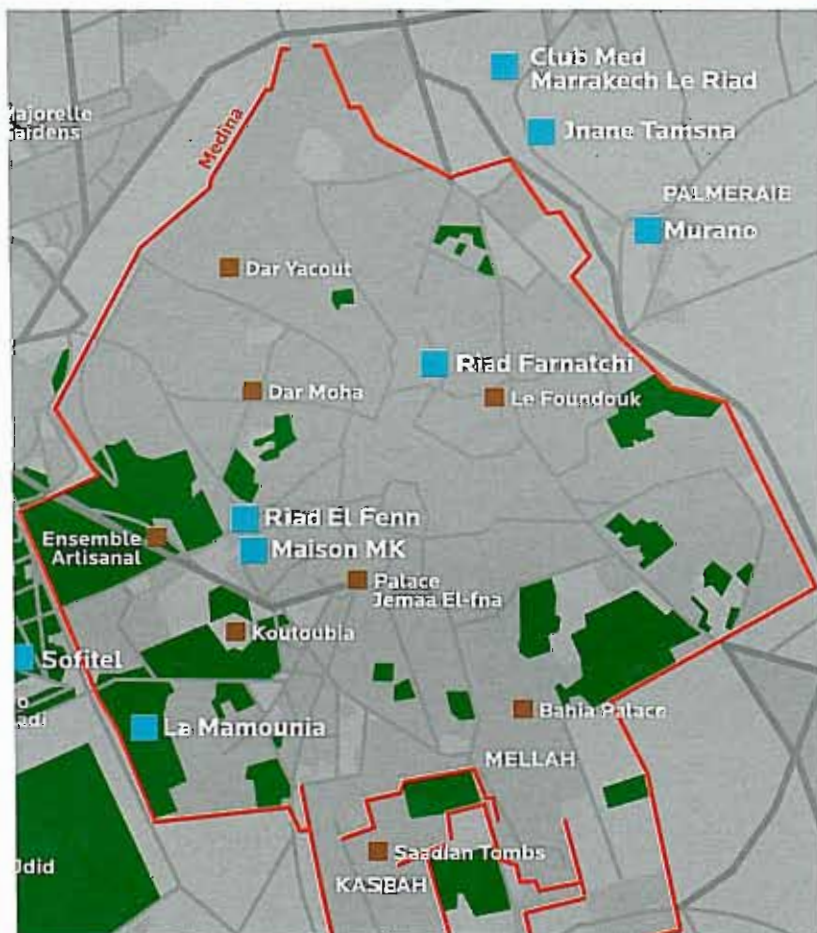
Clubland: open every night, Le Pacha on boulevard Mohammed VI hosts a chill-out bar and a nightclub with electro and house DJs (pachamarrakech.com).



Meet

Casablanca is where the real business is done: Marrakech is for leisure and better suited to incentive trips. Business venues are few but of good standard.

The main business centre is the 5,500-capacity Palais des Congres. There are facilities at La Mamounia and Es Saadi, and Le Club Med in La Palmeraie. The largest of the five meeting rooms at the Sofitel Marrakech Imperial Hotel and Spa can host up to 450 people (sofitel.com). Le Meridien N'Fis can host up to 277 delegates across four meeting rooms (starwoodhotels.com).



Must-do

Recommend clients hire the services of a licensed guide to explore the Medina.

Saadian Tombs: beautiful remnants of the 16th century – particularly impressive are the Zellij mosaic tiles.

Bahia Palace: originally the apartments of a vizier's four wives and 24 concubines in the 19th century, the palace is an architectural gem and showcase for local crafts.

Majorelle Gardens: originally created by a French artist in the 1930s, the gardens mix lush greenery and vibrant blue potteries (jardinmajorelle.com).

Rooms

We stayed at...

Riad El Fenn

Vanessa Branson's superbly restored riad is an arty, atmospheric house of 19 guest rooms. It features two pools, excellent restaurant, panoramic terrace, spa, movie room and rooftop mini golf.

Bab El Ksour, Medina.

Tel: 00 212 2444 1220, riadelfenn.com

Riad Farnatchi

This extremely smart, intimate riad features eight exquisite suites, a pool, traditional cuisine and impeccable service.

Derb el Farnatchi, Rue Souk el Fassis, Qua'at Ben Ahid, Medina.

Tel: 00 212 2438 4910, riadfarnatchi.com

Es Saadi Gardens & Resort

The Palace's 92 executive suites combine great comfort with an authentic Moroccan feel. For ultimate luxury, recommend one of the 10 villas, which offer 24/7 butler service, private pool and garden.

Avenue El Quadissia, Hivernage.

Tel: 00 212 2444 8811, essaadi.com

Club Med Marrakech Le Riad

All-inclusive luxury in the resort's 60 suites – chic duplexes with either a private terrace or a private garden.

Sidi Yahya, La Palmeraie.

Tel: 00 212 2442 5808, clubmed.co.uk

We also like...

Maison MK

This quirky riad of six suites is ideal for travellers who want modern facilities and style in the heart of the Medina.

14 Derb Sebaai, Quartier Ksour, Medina

Tel: 00 212 2437 6173, maisonmk.com

Jnane Tamisna

An enchanting complex of 24 ensuite bedrooms spread over three properties around a lovingly kept garden.

Douar Abiad, La Palmeraie.

Tel: 00 212 2432 8484, jnanetamsna.com

Angsana Riads Marrakech Collection

A collection of seven opulent, traditional houses around charming courtyards, some with beautifully tiled swimming pools.

Tel: 00 65 6849 5799, angsana.com

How to book

Exsus offers four nights staying at Riad El Fenn with breakfast, airport transfers and return flights from Gatwick with Royal Air Maroc, from £729pp based on two sharing. Tel: 020 7292 5050, exsus.com

CONCIERGE

Marrakech

When to go

Marrakech is a year-round sunshine destination but July/August temperatures reach a stifling 46°C.

Getting there

Direct flights with national carrier Royal Air Maroc and from low-cost airlines Atlas Blue and easyJet from Gatwick and Manchester; Thomson from Luton and Manchester.

Getting around

Taxis are cheap but drivers are often reluctant to use their metres. Nothing beats the luxury resorts' chauffeured private cars. Alternatively, Jetlag offers private transportation throughout the country (jetlag-corp.com).

Who goes

Last year A-listers including Leonardo di Caprio, Martin Scorsese and Catherine Deneuve attended the annual Marrakech International Film Festival, held every November.

Wow factor

Hotels can organise activities such as hot air balloon and helicopter rides. Desert experiences (bivouacs, picnics in the desert) can be booked through La Pause (lapausemarrakech.com).

Useful contacts

Moroccan Tourist Board in London, tel: 020 7437 0073, visitmorocco.com Marrakech tourist office, tel: 00 212 44 43 61 31.

Time

GMT all year round.

Cashflow

€1 = 15 Moroccan dirham (MAD). Currency can't be bought in the UK but is available at cash points, banks and hotels in Marrakech.

In touch

Intl dial code: 00 212. Good national mobile network but limited access in the mountains.

Culture & etiquette

Haggling in the souks is the done thing – as is tipping staff (10-15%). Morocco is a Muslim country so advise clients to dress modestly – women should avoid showing too much skin when out and about.

Coming soon...

Beachcomber Hotels' Royal Palm Hotel Golf & Spa Marrakech opens in 2009 with 150 suites and villas, Clarins spa and 18-hole golf course. W Marrakech, with 150 rooms, 68 villas, meeting space, pools, fitness centre and spa is due to open mid 2010.





Menu

"Here you eat with your eyes," the locals say. Indeed, Moroccan cuisine is a visual feast but a treat for the palate too. Most Moroccan-born chefs at high-end restaurants have trained in Europe. Their menus cleverly mix traditional dishes such as pastillas, a refined pie filled with pigeon, chicken or shellfish, harira (a chickpea soup) and tagines (traditional meat stews with fruit, nuts and vegetables) with French and Mediterranean options. Haute cuisine – Moroccan: excellent dining and decor can be found at Cour des Lions at Es Saadi (essaadi.com), Dar Moha (darmoha.ma) and Tobsil (tel: 00 212 4444 4052). Haute cuisine – French: Le Crystal, a spacious restaurant with an open-plan kitchen which is part of the Pacha complex (see Mix), features a refined and aromatic menu devised by the Michelin-starred Pourcel brothers (tel: 00 212 2438 8480). Brunch: healthy, delicious Mediterranean food is served by the pool every Sunday at the Murano. A DJ and fashion shoot vibe add to the party atmosphere (muranoresort.com). Business: elegant European cuisine amid beautiful greenery makes Epicurien at Es Saadi a good place to do business. Fusion: at Le Foundouk, guests can choose from a Morocco-to-Asia-via-the-Med menu and sit either on the roof terrace to enjoy superb views over the Medina, or in the smart interior (foundouk.com).

Mode

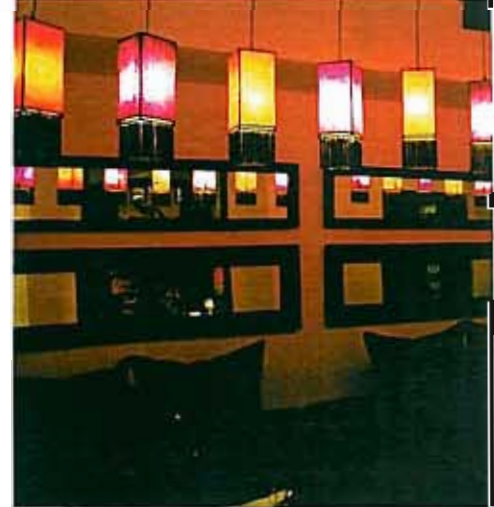
The question that inevitably arises when shopping in Marrakech is not what to buy but how to bring it back, so vast is the choice of leather, jewellery, carpets, slippers, pottery, lamps and antiques. Exploring the city with a personal shopper is the best way of avoiding the hassles often associated with shopping in

Morocco. Maison MK provides its guests with such a service for free, and in the comfort of a private air-conditioned car (maisonmk.com). At a cursory glance the souks in the Medina appear to be a maze-like mismatch, but far from being a chaotic collection of tiny shops, the alleys are in fact organised by trades and crafts. Clients who want to get an idea of what they should be paying for goods can visit the Ensemble Artisanal on Mohammed V avenue, where prices are state-controlled (tel: 00 212 4438 6758). Furniture and carpets: Ethnio Art Gallery in the souk offers an unheard of hassle-free shopping experience and thorough advice (tel: 00 212 2444 4387). Fashion: Intensite Nomade, designer Frederique Birkemeyer's elegant boutique in the Gueliz, offers beautifully tailored clothes for men and women inspired by local traditions (tel: 00 212 4443 1333). Also in the Gueliz on Rue de Vieux Marrakchi, Michele Baconnier's deliciously girly shop is a treasure trove of original kaftans, djellabahs and jewellery (tel: 00 212 2444 9178). Beauty: for clients who want to recreate a hammam back home, Les Sens de Marrakech, in the Zone Industrielle Ghanan, sells elegantly packaged organic products (lessensdemarrakech.com).

Mix

Marrakech's most famous nightlife spot is Jemaa el Fna, where gnawa (a traditional Moroccan music) is played, and jugglers and snake charmers entertain the passers-by. The Red City is no Ibiza, nor does it have the wide choice of trendy bars and clubs favoured by the well-heeled in Casablanca. In spite of Morocco being a Muslim country, alcohol is easily found, more readily so in the new town than in the Medina.

THE INSIDER
Lynn Perez, manager at Riad Farnatchi, has lived in Marrakech for eight years.
"There are very few cross-overs in the riad scene, so your clients can have very different experiences. I recommend clients not stay too long in the Medina as it can get oppressive. It's better to stay a couple of nights in the Medina and then take refuge in the Palmerale to avoid being burnt-out. For clients who wish to leave Marrakech, the Dar Ahlam is a must. It's a "hotel theatre" close to Ouarzazate. It's all-inclusive and a member of Relais & Chateaux. Advise clients to stay at least two nights to make the most of it."



Clockwise from top left: poolside at the Murano; the Majorelle Gardens; a Medina alleyway; Maison MK; dining room at Le Foundouk

