

# Magic In Marrakesh

INSPIRED BY THE PROSE OF WRITER EDITH WHARTON, ELAINE KIM SETS OFF ON AN ADVENTURE TO SAMPLE THE MOST AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES OF MOROCCO'S RED CITY

**F**OR SOME REASON, STORIES ABOUT Morocco often came my way in books I picked up, especially Edith Wharton's *In Morocco*. Vivid descriptions of the country piqued my desire to visit, and in recent years, a flurry of travel stories on Marrakesh I came across hinted that something was stirring in this mystical city. That solidified my plans to discover the fabled red city with my husband John and son Kyan, and off we went last year.

**MOROCCAN CHARMS**  
**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT**  
Elaine Kim at the lobby lounge of Le Royal Mansour; the pastilla at Riad Kniza; John and Kyan Kim joining the traditional musicians in front of Amanjena

Morocco's popularity with European tourists is understandable. It can be partly attributed to its enviable location – being in North Africa, it makes a naturally exotic destination, and is yet a mere 30min ferry ride from Spain. Marrakesh in particular, being a perfect combination of old and new Morocco, has become a holiday hotspot.

A repository of extreme wealth brought in by European billionaires and celebrities, who are gradually transforming the city into a playground of the rich, Marrakesh is akin to a North African Saint-Tropez or Monaco. This influx of capital is, in part, engineered by King Mohammed VI,



who dreamt of turning Marrakesh into a luxury destination, and so set about building a new airport and highway from Casablanca, and offering tax incentives for foreign developers. It worked and the Europeans came, and in recent years, the rest of the world seems to have caught on.

Marrakesh's growing popularity as a tourist destination has led to a rapid burgeoning of fabulous new hotels and resorts. In just 2012 alone, the city has seen the opening of the palatial Palais Namaskar, grand designer boutique hotel Selman, a luxurious Four Seasons, and a sprawling Taj resort (made famous in *Sex & The City 2*), among more than 30 new arrivals. Spoilt for choice in terms of accommodation, we ended up spending our time in two different hotels, La Mamounia and Amanjena, each decidedly impossible to forgo a stay in.



IMAGES: ELAINE KIM



*La Mamounia emerged a resplendent palace of Moroccan glamour, with hand-carved tiled walls, trickling fountains and gleaming Murano-tiled pools*

With its acres of lush gardens, two swimming pools, four acclaimed restaurants, inviting piano bar and lavish subterranean spa, La Mamounia is a destination in itself. But we were in Marrakesh! And beyond the gates of this oasis lay a city of excitement waiting to be explored.

OLD AND NEW MARRAKESH

At the heart of Medina is Djemaa El Fna Square, Old Marrakesh's pulsating centre of activity. We had been picked up in a horse-drawn carriage at La Mamounia and alighted at the edge of the square, where the souks of Medina stretch out. The souks are a treasure trove and, at the same time, a labyrinthine maze. We would surely have been hopelessly lost were it not for our guide, Haj Mohamed Bouskri. An antique dealer, he is a professional tour guide in his free time, and has led tourists including Ronald Reagan, Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt through the streets of Marrakesh.

Mohamed is also the owner of a *riad* (a traditional Moroccan house with an internal courtyard), which he had lovingly restored into a charming 11-suite hotel. He invited us for a delicious meal at Riad Kniza, which is a few steps

from Djemaa El Fna, and it was delightful to see how a pair of doors in the alley opened up into an airy space with fountain courtyards, luxurious suites, a rooftop terrace lounge and even a little swimming pool.

Cloistered in the middle of nouvelle town, or new Marrakesh, is the other spot that topped our Marrakesh to-do-list. Le Jardin Majorelle is an enchanting garden that French painter Jacques Majorelle tenderly cultivated during the Art Deco era, a project that lasted 40 years. After his death, the garden was abandoned until Yves Saint Laurent discovered it, making it his home and bringing it back to life. Today the garden is open for all to meander through. It also houses a Berber Museum that celebrates the history and culture of the Berber people, the original inhabitants of North Africa.



SPA AND HAMMAM

Summer in Marrakesh can be scorchingly hot, and it was a pleasure to end the day of exploring with a visit to La Mamounia's subterranean spa.

I crossed a lush fountain courtyard to reach the spa, a 27,000sqft complex that houses private marble-clad *hammams* (traditional steam baths), candle-lit treatment chambers and a stunning indoor swimming pool and Jacuzzi.

I treated myself to the three-hour Royal Hammam Ritual – the thick steam opens your pores, and then you are bathed with a traditional black soap, scrubbed and exfoliated until your skin is baby smooth, and wrapped in a body mask of Rhassoul clay. Freshly bathed and moisturised, you are then led off for a heavenly Tadelakt massage using marocMaroc products.



EXOTIC  
REVELRY

CLOCKWISE  
FROM LEFT  
Elaine at a furniture store in the souk; Elaine and Kyan enjoying the indoor pool at La Mamounia's spa; the living area of the suite they stayed in; the fountain courtyard of La Mamounia

LA MAMOUNIA

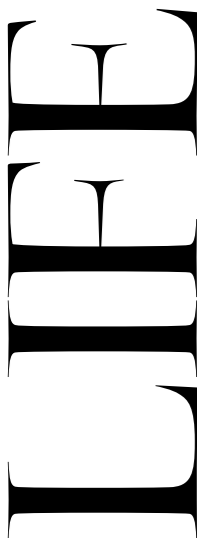
Generally recognised as Morocco's most legendary hotel since the days when stars of Hollywood's golden age descended upon its grounds, La Mamounia reopened its doors in 2010 following a three-year, €120m overhaul. In the hands of feted French interior designer Jacques Garcia, La Mamounia emerged a resplendent palace of Moroccan glamour, with hand-carved tiled walls, trickling fountains and gleaming Murano-tiled pools. The light from hundreds of lanterns, the scent of cedar wood perfume and the tunes from a Moroccan stringed instrument create an atmosphere that is *Arabian Nights*-magical.

As we entered the living area of our suite, we were greeted by a silver tier of traditional sweet pastries and a bucket of champagne. One pair of doors opened onto a large balcony overlooking La Mamounia's famed gardens, another led to the bedroom. Everywhere, carved panels adorned the walls and ceilings, and the floor was marble inlaid with patterned mosaics. In the bathroom, iridescent tiles covered the domed ceiling of the shower, and a clawfoot tub called out for a bath to be run.



**TRAVEL**

Great Escapes



**MOROCCAN FEASTS**

We had the chance to dine at three of the best traditional restaurants in Marrakesh. Arguably the most famous restaurant in Marrakesh is the gorgeous Dar Yacout, where the food is matched by incredible ambience. The venue is an enchanting mansion whose courtyard looks right out of an Arab-Andalusian palace. Upon entering, we were ushered to the second floor for an aperitif, after which we dined in the courtyard, waited on by courteous waiters in white djellabas. The food was delicious and their famed lemon almond chicken tagine did not disappoint.

In contrast to the opulent setting of Dar Yacout, Le Tobsil is an intimate restaurant found in a beautiful small riad hidden within the alleys of Medina. The tables are laid out in a romantic courtyard and in the gallery above. The food prepared by acclaimed local chef Fatima Mountassamim is traditional yet refined, and the delightful courses kept on coming, washed down with aperitifs and wines.

And right on our doorstep, within a riad tucked away in the gardens of La Mamounia, was the Le Marocain restaurant. Guests dine on a leafy terrace, enjoying cuisine that is a contemporary take on traditional Moroccan dishes. One night, we decided to go for something modern – Bo & Zin was a perfect antidote. This glamorous restaurant-bar is a new favourite watering hole of Marrakesh's A-list. The cuisine here is contemporary fusion, with French, Moroccan, Thai and Japanese influences. The DJ plays lounge music while dinner is being served, but as the night gets deeper, the restaurant turns into a dance floor.

**AMANJENA**

For the latter part of our trip, we retreated to Amanjena, a resort near the foothills of the Atlas mountains, a 15min drive outside Marrakesh's city walls. A large gate off the highway opens to a long driveway lined by palm trees, and driving into the compound, it felt like we were entering a tranquil oasis. The architects have created a minimalist yet



**LAVISH HAVEN**  
**CLOCKWISE**  
**FROM LEFT**  
Dar Yacout; a maison living room at Amanjena; the pool at Amanjena; the staff at Amanjena set up a surprise, romantic dinner for the couple; private dining in the Caidel tent can be arranged for guests of Amanjena

palatial complex set around a rectangular bassin or lake. Some 32 pavilions surround the bassin, hidden behind terracotta-pink walls.

We were led to the pavilion that would be our accommodation for the next three days. It is a spacious room under a high, domed ceiling, aesthetically simple in design yet utterly luxurious. The furnishings are tasteful and understated; the marble bathrooms feature a columned bathtub and huge his-and-hers vanities and dressing rooms; the glass doors of the suite open up to a courtyard with a sunken fountain and an outdoor pavilion where we would take our breakfasts in the morning.

Our days at Amanjena were spent in idle relaxation – reading, splashing with Kyan in the vast swimming pool, and enjoying leisurely lunches in one of Amanjena's beautiful restaurants. I visited the spa, enjoying the dim, silent solitude of sitting in the cave-like hammam.

If we were feeling more active, there was no shortage of activities in Amanjena. My husband loved that there were two tennis courts and an adjacent golf course. The concierge at Amanjena was always ready with tailor-made excursions and experiences to recommend –guided tours through the souks, visits to Berber villages up in the Atlas Mountains, even a home-cooked Berber meal with a local family.

There was so much to love about a stay in Amanjena, but perhaps what we appreciated most



was enjoying the same Aman hospitality that we had previously been spoiled by in other Aman resorts across the globe. Dusty sandals re-appear magically cleaned; his-and-hers sunhats wait on the lounge beds when you step out.

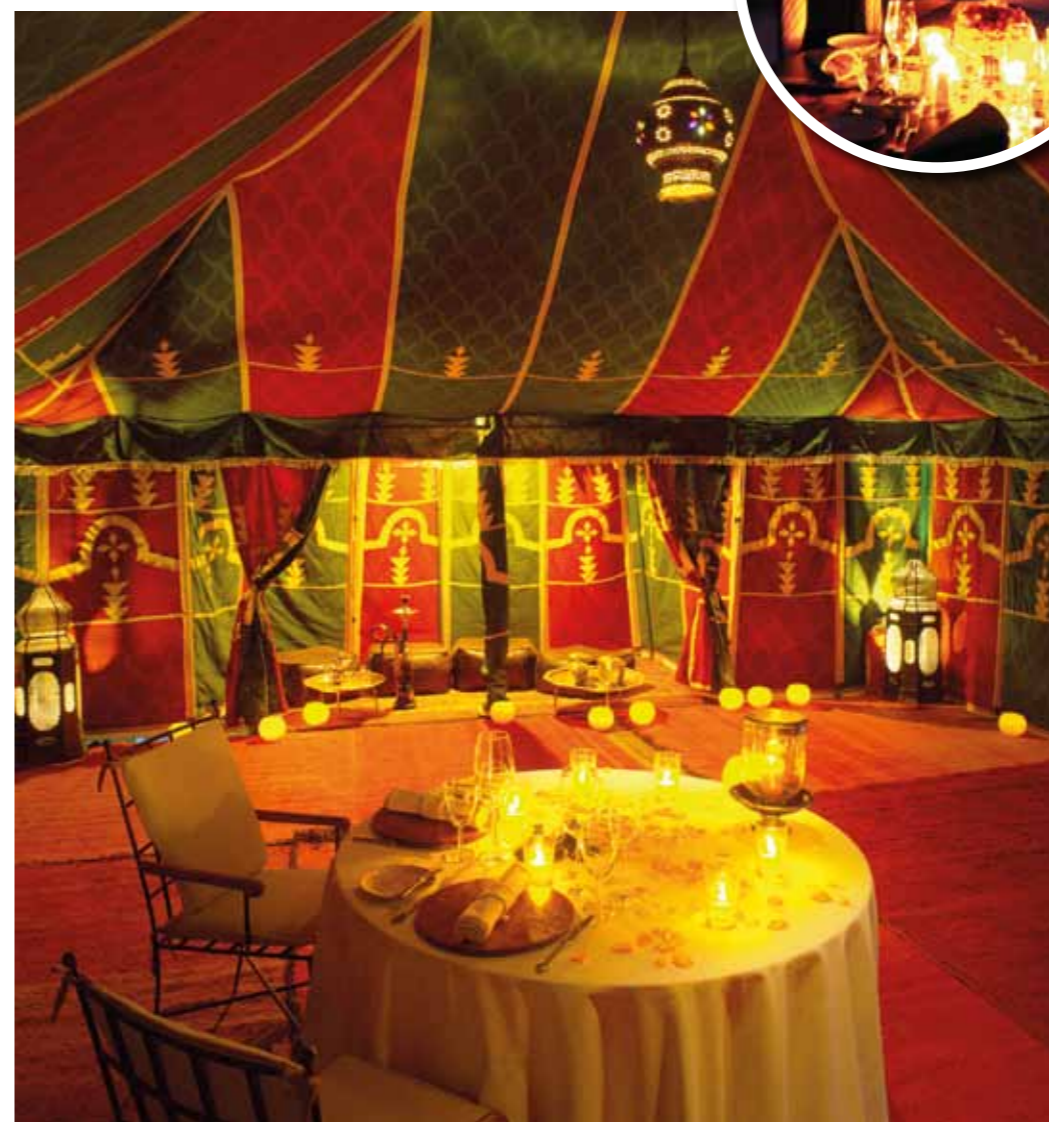
Indeed, the staff seems to make it a point to always give you more than you ask for. When we arrived, we mentioned we hadn't made dinner plans, and the butler told us he would arrange it for us. At sunset, he met us at our pavilion and led us out into the grounds. A marble fountain stood in the gardens, and next to it a red carpet, lined on each side by silver lanterns, had been laid out, leading to an open pavilion. In the middle was a candlelit table set for two, a bucket of champagne chilling on a stand next to it.



A musician sat under a pillar strumming a Moroccan stringed instrument. On the lawn just outside the pavilion, a private chef stood roasting delicious-smelling grilled skewers on a barbecue. By now, we had learnt how much food a Moroccan formal meal usually involves, but we still continued to marvel at the endless mezze, tagines, pastilla and kebabs that continued to arrive.

On our last night, the general manager had prepared a feast for us in the Caidal tent, a Berber tent set in an olive grove. There was to be a splendid dinner accompanied by Moroccan musicians and dancers, and dessert taken on Berber rugs in the garden. However, the plans were thwarted by a sandstorm, so we snuggled together in our pavilion by a log fire as the wind roared outside. The Amanjena staff insisted upon braving the sandstorm to bring the banquet to our room, laying the spread across a meticulously set table and placing candles and lanterns all around.

It turned out to be an utterly enjoyable meal, befitting of our last night in this enchanted place. And although we had missed the dining experience in the Caidal tent, there was no regret... We knew that we would be back. **T**



**RESOURCES**  
La Mamounia: [lhw.com/LaMamounia](http://lhw.com/LaMamounia)  
Amanjena: [amanresorts.com](http://amanresorts.com)