

## MOROCCO'S SEXIEST HOTELS

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### 10 properties that rock the casbah

The flicker of obsidian-colored eyes, peering from beneath a veil... The sudden blur of movement behind the latticed architectural feature called a musharabia... The mystical calls to prayer that echo off the kasbah's ancient stone walls...

These are just a few of the sensual sensations that have made Morocco one of the planet's most intriguing destinations for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. From the traders who made Morocco a required stop in 12th century, to a generation of Beat poets who "discovered" the city in the 1950s, Morocco has long held a fascination that's hard to describe.

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While this North African country's exotic pull often lures travelers who tend to live out of backpacks, the last decade has been a boom time for Morocco's boutique hotels. From immaculately restored riads (traditional Moroccan homes built around a central courtyard) in the medina, to sprawling five-star luxury resorts in the oasis-like outlying Palmeraie district of Marrakech, the boom in luxury accommodation appears to have no end in sight. The kingdom's sex appeal is soaring.

Particularly in the southern city of Marrakech, upmarket properties are coming on the scene with the increased frequency of charter flights from Europe. An outpost of the Mandarin Oriental is slated to open here in 2009, and the Four Seasons is due to open later this year. But even the conservative city of Fes and remote villages in the Atlas Mountains and desert regions are seeing their share of mostly foreign-operated hotels upping the local lodging ante.

Still, Morocco's draw has as much to do with the flourishing presence of Egyptian cotton bedding and iPod docking stations in hotels there today as with the more trail-blazing side of the travel coin. "It's like the world's most authentic Disneyland," says Lynn Perez, manager of **Riad Farnatchi** in Marrakech, referring to the intrigue of the red-walled city, "The Muslim calendar year is 1428, and it feels like 1428 when you come back to the medina."

And yet, modernization is taking place. "In Marrakech," says Perez, "you've got both worlds—Western cafes in the new town where you can relax with a book, then the medina where you can dive back in time."

Ali Najy owns a shop called Living Morocco in Orlando, Fla., and returns regularly to his native country on buying trips. He's taken notice of the new hotel developments. "Many of the riads in Marrakech that have been

restored as hotels feature not only traditional Moroccan design, but what's called Moroccan art deco, too," he explains. "You can see fixtures such as benches, chairs and lights that are very modern, but yet they fit the old design perfectly." It's exactly this old style, updated to meet modern standards for comfort, that make the riads popular foreign travel destinations.

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**Riad Farnatchi** is a prime example of traditional Moroccan craftsmanship meeting international standards for luxury. Located in the Marrakech medina, the property is actually five smaller riads that have been converted and modernized. The property's nine spacious suites feature traditional wooden furnishings and carpets; private sun terraces and courtyards; and indulgent Phillippe Starck bathrooms with sunken tubs inlaid with native Moroccan fossils. The romantic dining room features highly detailed tadelakt plasterwork and ornate metal lanterns that are kept dim. There's also a private marble hammam, or Turkish-style bath, offering both individual and couple's treatments.

Then there's the **Riad Meriem**, New York interior designer Thomas Hays' foray into Moroccan chic and an all-out symphony to seduction, and the new **AnaYela Riad**, with just three sumptuous rooms and two suites. All the furniture, from the lamps to the tableware, was created by owner Bernd Kolb, designer Yannick Hervy and Moroccan artisans. And talk about atmosphere: A renowned local calligrapher hammered the story of the girl Yela who once lived here in silver on doors throughout the house. Both properties are in the Marrakech medina.

When the tiny winding streets of the medina start to feel too maze-like, strike out for the wide-open Palmeraie district of Marrakech, where five-star resorts and golf courses are cropping up between the date palms. The **Octogone TERRE** is an upscale resort that opened here in 2007. With an otherworldly landscape of eight-sided buildings set amongst lush cactus and palm gardens, it's nothing less than transporting. The pool fringed with daybeds and private torch-lit tents are available for intimate dinners; and the Sanctuary Spa is a study in marble, brass and rose petals, where traditional Moroccan ingredients such as argan oil are incorporated into scrubs.

Less than an hour's drive from Marrakech, Richard Branson's walled **Kasbah Tamado** in Asni, in the High Atlas region, is a hideaway dream of terraced courtyards and fruit-tree filled gardens, centered on one of Morocco's most spectacular infinity pools. And over in atmospheric Fes, far and away the sexiest address is the **Riad Fes**, which appeals to both traditionalists and style sybarites looking for an authentic experience in Morocco's religious, cultural and intellectual capital.

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