

AREA

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AN INTIMATE ESCAPE TO MARRAKECH

Anna Snell explores the wonders of Morocco from two luxury hideaways in the heart of the city...

Marrakech is a mere three hours away by plane, but this short journey opens up a whole new world and culture to explore. It is a place filled with magic and romance and we thought it only fitting to find out in true AREA style just what Morocco's dusty pink city has to offer...

As far as timing is concerned, we couldn't have planned our trip at a more contentious moment: Morocco currently needs the help of tourism more than ever. This year many North African countries have been under the political spotlight and we arrived in Marrakech a few days after a bomb attack in the Medina's central square. But Morocco is a safe place with patriotic citizens and a lower terrorism rate than London, so if you're looking for an exotic city to explore then this is the place for you.

Marrakech's reputation for luxury boutique hotels did not disappoint: our first two nights were spent at the Dar Les Cigognes, part of the much-acclaimed Sanssouci Collection. It was recently nominated as one of the best boutique hotels in Africa by the World Travel Association, and it wasn't hard to see why. Located opposite the gates of the Royal Palace in the historic Medina, Dar Les Cigognes was once a wealthy merchant's home and has been transformed into a lavish and exclusive hotel. There are



Koutoubia Mosque

II guestrooms and suites, - each one is fashionable and unique - encouraging you to escape everyday life in luxurious comfort.

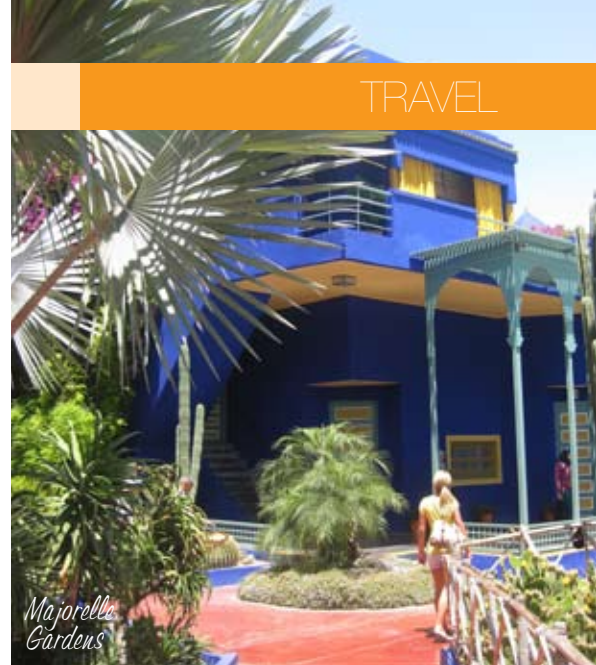
Checking in late in the evening, we arrived to see Dar Les Cigognes at its best, with the courtyard lit up by softly flickering candles among the fruit trees. With the gentle sound of the fountain and scattered rose petals, the effect was one of total calmness and wellbeing. In fact it was difficult to tear ourselves away, but the excitement of stepping out into the alleyways of Marrakech and experiencing our first taste of this magical city was too much to resist.

Just ten minutes after leaving the hotel, we hit the hustle and bustle of the night market at Jemaa El Fna. When the sun goes down in Marrakech, dozens of open-air kitchens and seating areas are



set up to create a huge al-fresco eatery, accompanied by lively entertainment. It was slightly daunting at first but we quickly settled beneath the huge cloud of smoke from the charcoal grills and tucked into delicious fiery cuisine from several specialist stalls - bypassing the boiled sheep's head!

We spent our first morning on the sun drenched roof garden of our hotel enjoying a traditional Moroccan breakfast; freshly made orange juice, breads, cakes and pancakes with jams and honey. Making our way into the heart of the Medina we learned that the central square is just as entertaining by day as it is after sundown. Surrounded by street performers and snake charmers, it is easy to stay in the square all day, but after narrowly avoiding having a snake draped around our necks, we hastily made our way into the souks.

*Dar Les Cigognes**Riad Kaiss**Majorelle Gardens**Our rooftop garden*

It feels like the heart and pulse of Marrakech lies within the souks; the endless maze of lanes runs through the city like arteries. Tiny shops lure you in with beautiful brass lanterns, pyramids of brightly coloured spices and pointed shoes known as babouches. Be prepared to get lost, it is impossible to navigate your way around these lanes that are constantly branching out - or so it seems - but thankfully you're never more than a few minutes' walk back to Jemaa El Fna.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in the most famous of Marrakech's many gardens. The legacy of the Majorelle Gardens is entwined with Yves Saint-Laurent who rescued and restored them in 1980. The place feels like a true oasis, shielded from the sun and chaos of the streets and are definitely worth a visit.

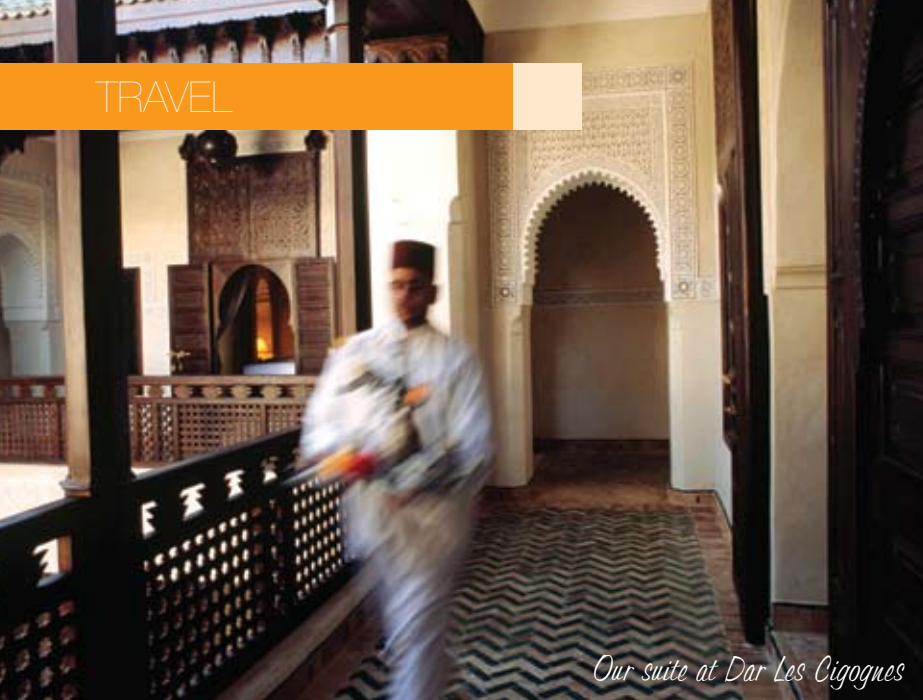
Having returned to Dar Le Cigognes, we took ourselves to the hotel's beautiful spa and hamman, which has many beauty treatments on offer. After a vigorous gommage (rubdown), we were taken through for a massage using locally produced oils during which our stresses simply melted away.

We then took a cookery class with the head chef and learnt how to prepare a delicious fish tagine. The superb and extensive menu changes daily at the hotel, with only the freshest of ingredients used, so this is definitely the place to sample some traditional Moroccan cuisine. Finally, we ended the day the way we had started - on top of the roof garden - sipping a chilled white wine and watching the sun set over the city. ▶

*Medersa Ben Youssef*

DOS AND DON'TS

- Do arrange with your hotel for a taxi to pick you up from the airport beforehand otherwise it can be very daunting when you first arrive
- Do make sure when you get a taxi that you agree a price or ask them to turn the meter on, most trips cost around 10Dh
- Don't be bullied into taking a guide around the souks, they aren't necessary
- Never accept the first price for anything, bargaining is an accepted practice
- Always make sure you have some loose change with you, many stall-holders won't be able to give you change for a large note, and it's a bad idea to draw attention by flashing money around



Our suite at Dar Les Cigognes



The balloon ride



Our suite at Riad Kaiss

The next morning involved a very early start as we were picked up in a Land Cruiser and driven across the desert to experience Marrakech from a different perspective – a hot air balloon. With the Atlas Mountains as a backdrop to the pink washed city being lit up by the sunrise, it was a privilege to witness. For those looking to make it even more special, breakfast for two with Champagne during your balloon ride can be arranged. Having quietly drifted by the Atlas Mountains, our hotel arranged for a car to take us to see them close up. If a personal 4x4 as a mode of transport isn't authentic enough for you, camel treks through the area are easily arranged by tourist companies.



Patio Chemney at Riad Kaiss

We spent our final night dining at Le Tobsil, an exquisite and opulent Medina restaurant. Occupying two levels of an old house, with a central courtyard and lit up by candlelight, this is a favourite for tourists. There is no menu, the waiters simply bring you endless dishes including a fantastic vegetarian mezze throughout the evening, all accompanied by a musician playing soothing and rhythmic music.

We moved into the second Sanssouci Collection hotel; Riad Kaiss, with just nine elegantly decorated rooms and suites, this hotel has been featured in books and magazines across the world. With rose and cobalt blue walls, cushion filled alcoves tucked away and beautiful

tiling; this hotel is everything you could imagine a Moroccan riad to be. After enjoying breakfast on our private terrace and a quick dip in the rooftop pool, we headed out once more to try and squeeze in more of what the city has to offer, including the Medersa Ben Youssef and the Badii Palace, and reluctantly left feeling like we had barely scratched the surface.

The quality of these fantastic riads made our stay at Marrakech very special, with attentive staff and an intimate atmosphere. In fact we loved it so much that AREA Magazine has teamed up with The Sanssouci Collection. To **WIN** a four night stay in the stunning comforts of one of the hotels, so turn to page 65 to enter.



BOOKING INFORMATION

The Sanssouci Collection for both Dar Les Cigognes and Riad Kaiss. Visit www.sanssoucicollecion.com for more information and booking details. Prices range from £160-£235 per night.

Ciel d'Afrique (balloon ride) visit www.cieldafrique.info for more information and booking details or ask your hotel to help out.

Ryanair flies regularly between Bristol and Marrakech, prices start at approximately £50 for a return including basic fares.

Dunes & Desert day trips, visit www.dunesdesert.com for more information and booking details (€150 per person).