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In an Ancient Desert, a Modern Oasis Beckons

By SETH SHERWOOD

TO find Fabrizio Bizzarri's atelier, navigate the human tide along the Rue Mouassine, zig-zag down the claustrophobic passageway called Derb Azouz and pause before the pit of dirt. Ring the bell of the house just across, No. 22. It's the postmodern-pastiche place with the fuzzy walls, Gaudí-inspired windows, Mexican-style adobe roof and high turrets adapted from the sand houses of Mali. You can't miss it.

When he greets you, Fab - and what better name for the master of this crazy-cool shop and gallery, the *Ministero del Gusto?* - will usher you into a strange world where no one drinks mint tea or wears a djelleba. Outside, the Muslim call to prayer echoes over the mud-brick houses of the medina, the labyrinth that is Marrakesh's oldest quarter. Inside, Elvis Presley croons into rooms of Eames chairs, snakeskin cabinetry and other curios of décor amassed or designed by Fab and his partner, Alessandra Lippini, a former Italian *Vogue* editor.

"Ten years ago, there were maybe 30 foreigners living in the medina," he reminisced on a cool December night when the discussion turned to the changes he has witnessed while living in the heart of Morocco's second-largest city. "We came here for the sights, the sounds, the smells. Now, there's something like 3,000 of us."

While the exact figures are hard to pin down, the fact is unassailable: Marrakesh, the millennium-old, palm-planted oasis at the edge of the Sahara, is going international. It's not just the expatriate population that's heating up - it's the city's pulse, its rhythm, its reputation. Lured by cheap properties, a rich local culture and a tourism-minded king known for his moderate and modern views, waves of Europeans are snapping up land in the Jewel of the South and creating a modern oasis alongside the old.

Time-honored Moroccan attractions like carpets, couscous, casbahs and souks are being supplemented by spas, cocktail lounges, fashionable boutiques and the occasional Italian-owned showroom of gorgeous kitsch. Western-style nightclubs rise like reeds from the dust. Once-dilapidated riads - grand traditional houses built around patios - are being reborn as luxurious B & B's with fit-for-a-sultan furnishings.

And the high-rolling Continental cognoscenti have come knocking. As the French weekly magazine *Le Point* declared this summer, Marrakesh has become another St.-Tropez. No longer simply a destination for a scattering of adventuresome elites, bohemians or backpackers afire with Arabian Nights fantasies, the North African market town finds itself a sizzling stopover for the European jet set. Just as New Yorkers shoot down to Miami for a few days, weekenders from European capitals are hopping off direct flights and shelling out piles of dirhams to shop, dine and party.

"The weather is amazing, the sky is perfect and the flight is short," the Moroccan painter Miloudi Nouiga explained to me at the opening of his exhibition at the four-year-old Dar Cherifa gallery, itself a symbol of the direction Marrakesh is heading. "Parisians need to get out of those traffic jams."

Many of the new visitors are stepping onto the tarmac straight off tabloid covers. While Marrakesh has always had a few celebrity fans - Edith Wharton shopped in the souks, Winston Churchill was once a frequent presence and the

Rolling Stones dropped in during the woozy "Marrakesh Express" period of the late 60's - the city now seems as regular a presence in celebrity weeklies as Cap d'Antibes or St. Bart's.

As magazine readers may have noted, the Beckhams rolled in for a stint - reportedly to renew their vows - and rolled out with tens of thousands of dollars in home furnishings. Colin Farrell was spotted on the town during the filming of "Alexander" nearby. Sting planned a 50th-birthday celebration in Marrakesh for 100-plus friends (derailed in the wake of Sept. 11). Pre-breakup, Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston stopped by to celebrate an anniversary. Gérard Depardieu, Naomi Campbell, David Bowie and Iman are regular visitors. The fashion moguls Yves Saint Laurent and Jean-Paul Gaultier own homes there.

A week before my visit last month, the city welcomed the fourth annual Marrakesh International Film Festival, with the director Alan Parker heading the jury. (Francis Ford Coppola, Catherine Deneuve and David Lynch are among past festival participants.) A week after I left, President Jacques Chirac of France and his wife, Bernadette, flew in for a break.

During my stay, I noticed several photos of local shop owners posing with celebrities (including Paul McCartney and Jeremy Irons), chanced across a British film crew in the souks, and had a random breakfast encounter at my riad with Paola Antonelli, the international design expert and curator for MoMA.

The city's high profile notwithstanding, daily life seems to carry on as it has for decades, if not centuries. A morning stroll through the busy, ever-forking paths of the medina turns up blissfully little resemblance to a Riviera resort or Hamptons village. Veiled women quietly pass. Horse-drawn carts clip-clop along. Keyhole doorways open onto narrow alleys filled with playing children. Halal butcher stalls hang with fresh meat. Flies buzz. Fez-wearing shop owners listen to soccer matches on tinny radios between calls to prayer.

"Soyez le bienvenue," many Marrakeshis will greet you in French - still spoken widely a half-century after Morocco's independence - as you poke around piles of candlesticks in the souks or admire the skills of the henna artists in the famous central square, Djemaa el Fna.

In short, the sights, smells and sounds that drew Mr. Bizzarri here a decade ago seem largely untouched by the fashionable addresses in their midst. The old and new live side by side, but it's the new that's out of sight. Like the Ministero del Gusto, most of the stars of the new Marrakesh are hidden around the medina, secretly burning behind anonymous doors like chic speakeasies that await the knock of the knowing traveler.

Knock on one of the heavy old doors in the souks and you, too, can find Dar Cherifa, the majestic art gallery, tea salon and bookshop where I encountered Mr. Nouiga. (If you have trouble, a neighborhood kid will eagerly lead you there for a dirham or two.)

Knock for lunch or a drink at Le Foundouk, tucked anonymously in the north-central medina, and enter a sublime palace of décor. Illuminated by seas of thick candles, the sultry Moroccan-gothic dining room is part Moorish harem and part modern bar-lounge, a visually sumptuous environment of eggplant, red wine and cream colors.

More impressively than anywhere else in town, Le Foundouk embodies the Oriental-Occidental, past-meets-present, casbah-cool aesthetic that has come to define the new Marrakesh. With varying degrees of creativity and imagination, new riads and restaurants are melding traditional Moroccan style - carved wood paneling, sculpted doorways and polychromatic tilework - with the angular minimalism of contemporary design.

Until fairly recently, the standard-bearers of Moroccan design were still historical mosaic-laden masterpieces like the 16th-century Ben Youssef Medersa (once the most important Islamic learning institution in the region) or the sprawling 19th-century Bahia Palace. Only a handful of restaurants and hotels, notably the 1923 Mamounia hotel (a favorite of

Churchill), with its Art Deco and Moorish elements, achieved any truly interesting east-west combinations.

Today, the colorful hybrid style is ubiquitous. The new restaurants and riads are the most talked-about examples - La Sultana, a hotel comprising several restored riads, was recently the backdrop for a lush Bergdorf Goodman catalog, for example - but the so-called Morocco Modern movement is certainly not limited to interior design. Exploring the new Marrakesh, you find that it returns again and again, like a symphonic theme, in ever-new contexts.

The boutique at Ryad Tamsna, a chic medina restaurant, shop and art gallery off the Rue Riad Zitoun, sparkles with contemporary necklaces, lamps, handbags and other objects that employ Berber, Arab and even sub-Saharan styles. The nearby Jamade, a tiny outlet for local designers, updates traditional Moroccan tagines (conical clay pots for stews) and teapots into sleek decorative cookware fit for a 21st-century loft.

At Beldi, nearly invisible behind a simple door on a teeming medina street, lurks an exquisite collection of runway-worthy caftans, jackets, shoes and accessories made from expertly woven silk, linen and cotton. "The idea is to make a Western style using Moroccan materials," Beldi's owner and designer, Taoufiq Baroudi, said one afternoon as he helped a woman from Barcelona try on a luxuriously striped long jacket.

Mr. Baroudi, who also works out of Aix-en-Provence, has established a much-sought line of garments that have won him a devoted international clientele. Call it fusion fashion.

With nightfall, Marrakesh old and new awaken with redoubled energy. Under the all-seeing eye of the Koutoubia Mosque's illuminated minaret - a 12th-century masterpiece of proportion and symmetry - Marrakesh's central square, Djemaa el Fna, starts to hum. White-clad cooks fire up grills for the thousand and one mouths who nightly dine on sausages, kebabs and stews under the stars. Musicians, snake charmers, monkey handlers, quacks, merchants, preachers and purveyors of all manner of service start to appear, ready to ply their trades for the night. From every direction come streams of Marrakeshis and travelers, blending in an ocean of humanity.

From the new Marrakesh emerges the nocturnal sounds of deep house music and the smells of haute cuisine. The twain meet at Bo-Zin, a stylish French-Moroccan-Thai restaurant that smacks of the Manhattan meatpacking district, and even more alchemically at Le Comptoir Darna, a sexy restaurant-bar-boutique with a sister spot in Paris.

Downstairs, the Moroccan-French menu features traditional couscous and pastilla alongside Gallic offerings like *côte du boeuf au jus* (\$21). Upstairs, in the lounge, Occident and Orient meet nightly in a beautifully choreographed chaos of dancing.

One evening, I watched as a bit before 11, the D.J. lifted the needle, the lights dimmed and a fire-spouting dervish suddenly rose from the staircase. Under a seductive electronic beat, the flaming entity - which upon closer inspection revealed to be a woman with a tray of candles on her head - oozed between the tables and began to shimmy.

Soon she was joined by a troupe of "I Dream of Jeanie"-attired belly dancers, and shouts of "Allez!" erupted from the entranced, mostly French, patrons. Something resembling a private dance unfurled before a wide-eyed husband, as sequins threatened to exfoliate his nose. As midnight approaches, the international night owls head out to dance-till-dawn clubs whose glossy ads pile up at new cafes and shine from pages of local life style magazines with names like Fashion Addict.

At the White Room, a 2004 creation whose décor hews closer to "2001: A Space Odyssey," the rose-petal-sprinkled tables and bar get crowded with dolled-up young Moroccan women drinking champagne with one hand and smoking hookahs with the other. There's a whiff of decadence. Bodies collide on the small dance floor as lights flash and smoke machines billow like Aladdin's lamps.

Le Théâtre, in the Saadi Hotel, is another Sahara-hot boîte of the moment for the 25-ish crowd (with sprinkling of 40-somethings). Hung with clusters of disco balls resembling bunches of grapes, the converted auditorium has no dance floor per se to accommodate the revelers, only balconies, alcoves and minilounges with massive floor cushions. No matter. As the bass thumps, people just dance in place, wherever they are, Red Bull-and-vodka in hand.

"Frankly, five years ago, there wasn't much choice," a young Moroccan woman tending bar testified of the local night life on the last evening of my stay. "We had some other hotel bars then, but now. ..."

She nodded happily at the throngs in the softly glowing darkness. Her silence said plenty. The city is changing, ascending.

Not everyone I talked to was as overjoyed about it, of course, and I recalled some of the misgivings I'd heard. A cafe owner had voiced concerns about tensions that might arise when monied Westerners live side by side with comparatively poor local residents. Ms. Lippini from the Ministero del Gusto criticized some new entrepreneurs' mindset as "more business, less creativity."

But to judge from the diverse clientele at Théâtre, the energy of the new Marrakesh was winning plenty of new partisans.

As I left, a hypnotic North Africa-via-Ibiza mix filled the space and people danced in the club's many nooks, swirling like hipster cobras. The music and murmurs of the global crowd intertwined and spilled into the cool Marrakesh night. It sounded, curiously, like a charm. It smelled, for the moment, like success.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Getting There

No airline offers direct flights from the United States to Marrakesh. Royal Air Maroc, (800) 344-6726, www.royalairmaroc.com, (in a partnership with Delta) flies from New York City (J.F.K.) and Montreal to Marrakesh via Casablanca most days of the week. According to its Web site, coach round-trip fares are generally around \$750 (including taxes).

British Airways, (800) 247-9297, www.britishairways.com, flies to Marrakesh via London, from both Newark Liberty and J.F.K. Web fares for mid-February start at \$793.

Others flying from New York to Marrakesh with a single connection are Iberia (through Madrid), (800) 772-4642, www.iberia.com, and Air France (which generally is the cheapest, but often requires changing airports in Paris), (800) 237-2747, www.airfrance.com.

Getting Around

The medina, where visitors tend to spend most of their time, is best explored on foot. Because the old streets are narrow and twisty, automobiles are mostly forbidden (but the ubiquitous speeding mopeds must be dodged). A good map, however, is essential. You may find neighborhood residents, especially children, eager to help you find obscure addresses. Their aid can be a relief, but know in advance they will expect some small change in return.

Taxis are the best way to reach the modern hotel district (Hivernage) or the nearby Nouvelle Ville (Guéliz) from the airport. Drivers seem loath to use the meter (le compteur, in French), though they can occasionally be persuaded. If not, set a price in advance. Going to either of the above areas shouldn't cost more than 30 dirhams, about \$3.45 at 8.7 dirhams to the United States dollar, each way. To go to the Palmeraie, expect to pay 80 to 100 dirhams (\$10 to \$12).

Security

Though considered a moderate - even progressive - Islamic state, Morocco is not a stranger to terrorism. Coordinated hotel bombings in Casablanca in May 2003 killed dozens, and many of the people arrested in the Madrid railroad attacks last year were Moroccan. That said, many Marrakeshis, in the medina at least, will go out of their way to be friendly to foreigners, and I neither experienced nor heard of crime or harassment.

Where to Stay

There are now about 300 restored riads in the medina that serve as hotels or B & B's. Many are quite luxurious, featuring fruit-tree-planted courtyards, beautifully tiled pools and rooms with colorful Moroccan elegance. Some agencies, like Hotels & Riads (www.riadsmorocco.com), represent multiple properties. Here are some top options:

Riad Farnatchi, 2 Derb el Farnatchi, Qua'at Ben Ahid, (212-44) 38.49.10, www.riadfarnatchi.com. In the north-central part of the medina, close to the Museum of Marrakesh and the Ben Youssef Medersa monument, this lavish, five-suite riad opened in 2004. It blends classical Moroccan décor and a traditional hammam with modern conveniences like satellite television, telephones and a lovely (if small) pool. Rates start at \$385 a room, including breakfast and airport transfers.

Riyad el Cadi, 87 Derb Moulay Abdelkander, (212-44) 37.86.55, www.riyadelcadi.com. Just off the bustling Derb Debachi, this tranquil hideaway has 12 rooms and suites. Doubles from \$225, including breakfast.

Somewhat more traditional is La Sultana, Rue de la Kasbah, (212-44) 38.80.08, www.lasultanamarrakech.com. Opened in 2004, this boutique hotel is an extravagantly renovated complex of riads with 21 rooms and suites, and it's setting the new standard for elegance in the Medina. It has lots of carved wood, columns and keyhole doorways, as well as a pool, restaurant and spa. Doubles start around \$300 in low season, and they include breakfast, minibar and access to the spa.

Ksar Char-Bagh, Djnan Abiad, (212-44) 32.92.44, www.ksarcharbagh.com, is one of the hottest spots in the Palmeraie district. A Relais & Chateaux property, the hotel has 12 suites, a restaurant and a beautifully marbled Turkish bath. Suites from \$750, including 10 percent tax and service charge.

Where to Eat

Many of the newer restaurants serve both upscale French food and traditional Moroccan cuisine. Staples of the latter include tagine, the Moroccan stew, and pastilla, a pastry of diced squab topped with powdered sugar and cinnamon.

Dar Moha, 81, rue Dar el Bacha in the medina, (212-44) 38.64.00, is the most prestigious Moroccan restaurant in the city. The fixed-price, five-course meal (\$50) encompasses traditional Moroccan salads (a bit like tapas), pastilla, tagine, couscous and dessert.

Le Foundouk, 55, Souk Hal Fassi, (212-44) 37.81.90, stands alone for its hyperplush North Africa-meets-Elle décor. The lunch menu is divided between Moroccan specialties like harira soup (\$7) and chicken tagine (\$13), and French dishes like goat-cheese salad (\$11) and croque monsieur (\$7.70).

Bo-Zin, Route de l'Ourika, Kilometer 3.5, (212-44) 38.80.12, is a new spot that's well worth the trip to the outskirts of town. Its menu mixes French, Moroccan and Thai cuisines. Dishes include satay (\$9), seafood tagine (\$17) and filet of beef (\$19).

The stylish Le Comptoir Darna, Avenue Echouhada, (212-44) 43.77.02, in the Hivernage district, south of Guéliz, offers

a mix of local and international dishes downstairs and bellydancing in the dimly lighted upstairs lounge.

Where to Dance

Most clubs in Marrakesh are in major hotels and typically open between 11 p.m. and midnight. Cover can be up to \$20. Some of the hot spots are The White Room, Hotel Royal Mirage, Rue de Paris, Hivernage, (212-44) 42.21.05; Le Théâtre, Hotel Es Saadi, Hivernage, (212-44) 44.88.11; and the Sunset Club, Circuit de la Palmeraie, (212-44) 44.90.41, with its swimming-pool lounge and a restaurant that opens daily from 10 a.m. to 1 a.m.

What to See

Ben Youssef Medersa, Place Ben Youssef in the medina, (212-44) 44.18.93, is a 16th-century Koranic school with exemplary mosaics, wooden carvings and other hallmarks of classical Moroccan artistry. Admission, about \$3.45.

Museum of Marrakesh, Place Ben Youssef, (212-44) 44.18.93, is a renovated 19th-century palace with exhibits by contemporary Moroccan artists as well as displays devoted to historical ceramics, metalwork and other crafts. Admission, \$3.45.

El Bahia Palace, Riad Zitoun al Jedid, (212-44) 38.91.79, is an especially large 19th-century palace: it had to be to hold an aide to the Sultan, his 4 wives and 24 mistresses. Admission, about \$1.20.