



Marrakesh's Djemaa el Fna Square and Koutoubia Mosque at dusk.

# DESERT ROSE

Stylish and richly historical, **Marrakesh** is a world traveler's dream destination

BY CHRIS CASWELL

**T**he very name evokes images of hippies and fashionistas, winding alleys and dusty street markets, cool courtyards with bubbling fountains and the loom of the snow-capped Atlas Mountains crisp in the distance.

It was Yves Saint Laurent's favorite place in the entire world and where he drew inspiration for his haute couture designs so, when he passed away early in June, it was only fitting that his ashes be scattered at his beloved Jardin Majorelle, the home he had owned for decades.

He called Marrakesh "a place out of time," and it was here that he reveled in the beauty, the history and the unrestrained hedonism of this exotic and ancient Red City.

Everyone—bohemians and beats, jet-setters and hippies—seemed to discover Marrakesh in the '60s, but the mud walls and palm-lined gardens of this former Berber

trading post have been a crossroads for centuries as the first major city north of the Sahara.

But oh, the '60s! It was a time of Paul McCartney and John Lennon lying, helplessly zonked and giggling, on billionaire John Paul Getty's roof terrace. It was Jimi Hendrix hanging out before returning to play at a music festival called Woodstock. It was beat poet Allen Ginsberg forsaking Greenwich Village for Morocco, and it was Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, not rolling but certainly stoned.

And, of course, it was Crosby, Stills and Nash with "Marrakesh Express":

*Sweeping cobwebs from the edges of my mind,  
Had to get away to see what we could find...*

What they found was a cosmopolitan city that was gay by any definition, crazed



Yves Saint Laurent at a street market in his beloved Marrakesh, March 1972.

OPPOSITE: JOHN MILLER/ROBERT HARDING WORLD IMAGERY/CORBISIMAGES.COM.  
RIGHT: WWD/CONDE NAST/CORBISIMAGES.COM.





The interior of the Villa Benjelloun at Jardin Majorelle.

and stylish and often drugged. Certainly one of the attractions was that you could find a supply of *kif kif*, or cannabis, simply by watching to see who was smoking it openly on the streets.

What Saint Laurent saw through kaleidoscope eyes, however, were the brilliantly colored shawls and skirts of the women, and it was his use of those oranges and purples, pinks and reds that set him apart from other designers. After leaving Dior, he was influenced not just by the colors of Morocco, but by the characters who populated his universe in Marrakesh.

*Colored cottons hang in the air,  
Charming cobras in the square,  
Striped djellabas we can wear at home...*

One of his muses was jet setter Loulou de la Falaise, but he drew what has been called “hippie chic” and “boho chic” from Talitha Getty, the wife of Getty oil heir, J. Paul Jr. She dazzled Saint Laurent with her combination of beauty and charm, élan and notoriety. She appeared with Jane Fonda in *Barbarella*, had an affair with Rudolf Nureyev and was introduced to Getty by accused wife-murderer Claus von Bülow.

Saint Laurent was intrigued by her seemingly careless mixture of turbans, gaucho pants, caftans and long scarves, but her candle burned out quickly at the age of 30, when she died in 1971 of a heroin overdose. She left behind a style that has been called “Talitha Getty chic,” along with some images taken by famed photographer Patrick Lichfield, which Saint Laurent labeled as “beautiful and damned.”

But the decadent fantasies of the '60s are still a part of Marrakesh, just as the bold hand-dyed and -embroidered ethnic textiles continue to turn up in Yves Saint



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT, KIM WEST/TERMINUSCORBIS; FROM THE BEAUTIFUL FALL: BY ALICIA DRAKE, LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY



Saint Laurent in Marrakesh, 1977.

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Laurent designs.

The hippies are, for the most part, gone, only to be replaced by celebs like soccer star David Beckham and his wife, Victoria (née Posh Spice), who shop Marrakesh for furniture for their Spanish villa. You also might bump into Julia Roberts or Brad Pitt, Sting or David Bowie as they wander the maze of streets in the medina, or old town.

What has changed, however, is that Marrakesh has become the Tuscany of North Africa, with wealthy foreigners snapping up property to build luxurious villas. In the medina are the *riads*, the traditional Moroccan homes built around a central courtyard. From the street, they show only a nondescript façade, but once inside, feature brilliant tiles, ornate fountains and lush gardens. The French and British led the charge to acquire and transform the *riads* into luxurious havens, but Americans are not far behind. This is where Yves Saint Laurent found peace in Jardin Majorelle.

Around Marrakesh, olive groves and farmlands dotted with palms are being transformed into fabulous villas for seasonal and full-time residents. And there has been a renaissance of hotels and resorts as well.

*Looking at the world through the sunset in your eyes,  
Traveling the train through clear Moroccan skies...*

For decades, the place to stay in Marrakesh was La Mamounia ([mamounia.com](http://mamounia.com)), which Winston Churchill told Franklin D. Roosevelt was “the most beautiful place in the world.” The Mamounia has been undergoing a two-year renovation and is set to reopen later this year. When it does, it should blend art deco



The hotel La Mamounia, the Marrakesh resort Winston Churchill deemed “the most beautiful place in the world.”

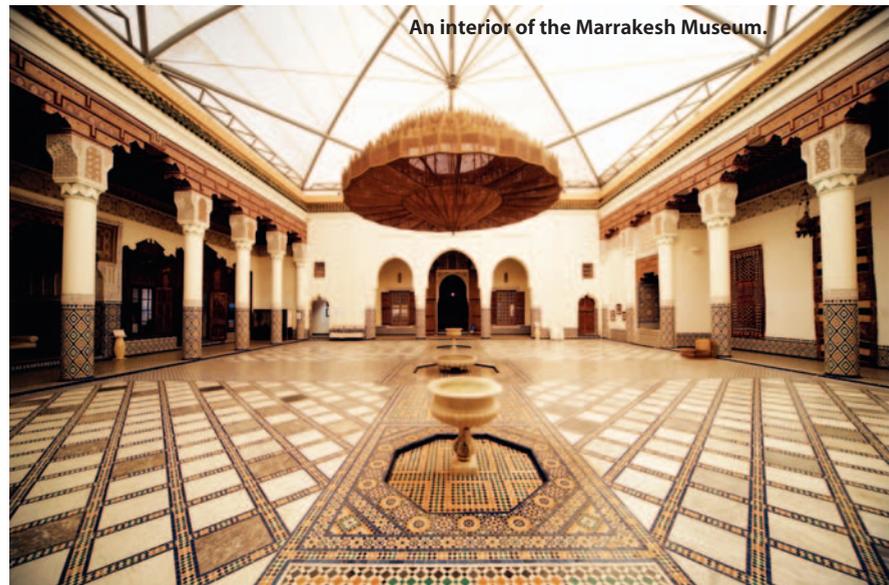
## Around Marrakesh, olive groves and farmlands are being transformed into villas for seasonal and full-time residents.

and Moorish styling in a truly grand hotel.

In the meantime, however, there is no shortage of ultra-luxe properties. Sir Richard Branson built a spectacular resort, Kasbah Tamadot ([kasbahamadot.virgin.com](http://kasbahamadot.virgin.com)), in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains that is a vision of a five-star oasis, with glorious gardens, an infinity pool that defines “infinity” and magical lighting.

Aman Resorts has created Amanjena ([amanjena.com](http://amanjena.com)), close to the medina but with the feel of a Berber village. With 32 ochre-colored pavillions, private pools, domed ceilings and pillared gazebos with pillowy seating, it is faithful to Morocco and opulent at the same time.

A converted *riad*, Riad Meriem ([riadmeriem.com](http://riadmeriem.com)) is a labor of love for owner



An interior of the Marrakesh Museum.

LA MAMOUNIA: GUY VANDERELST. MUSEUM: MARKO MACPHERSON/GETTY IMAGES.COM

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Morocco's "Moorish rose," the Amanjena luxury resort and hotel, is secluded but near to Marrakesh's bustling medina.



Marrakesh belongs to everyone. It is changed and yet unchanging,  
just as it has been for centuries.

and New York designer Thomas Hays, who filled the five lavish suites with fabulous textiles and artwork, including his own fine art photography.

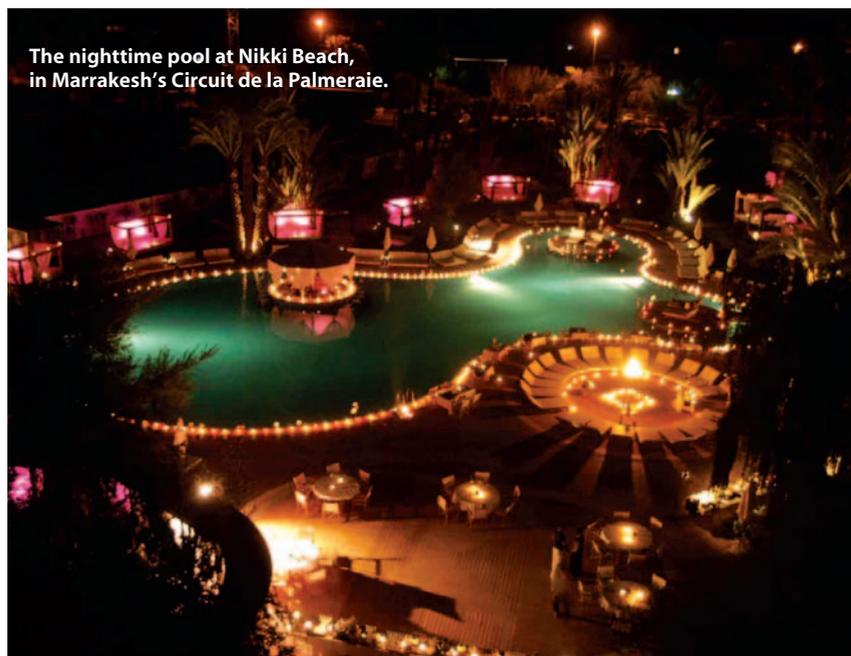
*I've been saving all my money just to take you there,  
I smell the garden in your hair...*

Yves Saint Laurent loved Marrakesh so much that he wished to spend eternity in his quiet garden in the *riad*. As he told *Paris Match* in 1983, "I am indebted to that country, to the violence of its harmonies, the intensity of its inventions. The culture has become my own."

But Marrakesh actually belongs to everyone. It is changed and yet unchanging, just as it has been for centuries.

It is, and always will be, Marrakesh.

*Wouldn't you know we're riding on the Marrakesh Express,  
They're taking me to Marrakesh,  
All on board the train... ■*



The nighttime pool at Nikki Beach,  
in Marrakesh's Circuit de la Palmeraie.