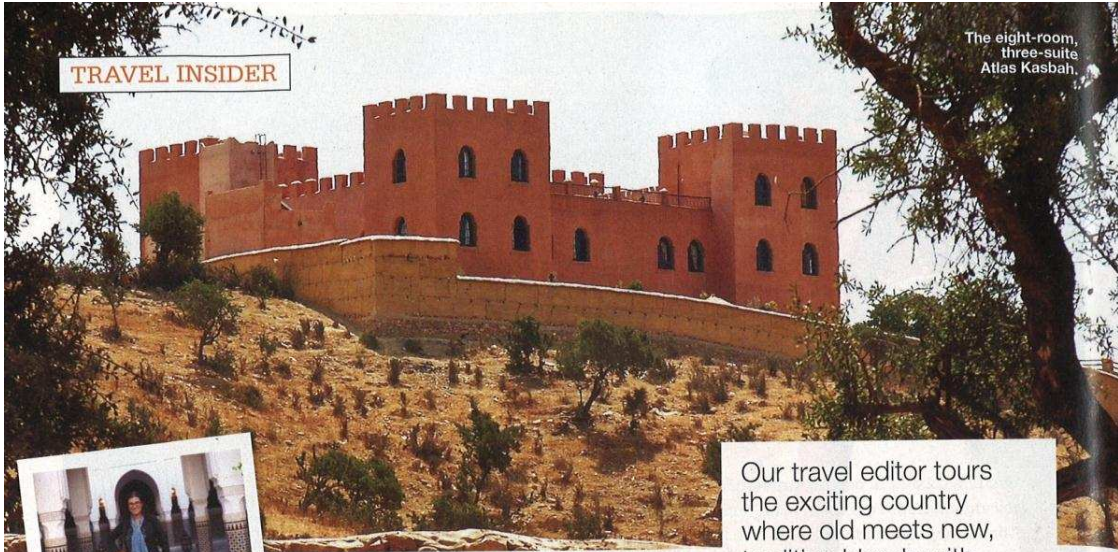


TRAVEL INSIDER

The eight-room, three-suite Atlas Kasbah.



Our travel editor tours the exciting country where old meets new, tradition blends with modernity and the hotels are over-the-top luxe. by Jenna Mahoney

Morocco

Of all the places I've seen in my decade as a travel writer, none is as diverse as the North African country of Morocco. It is, after all, the place where the spice-trade caravan from Timbuktu met the West. Today, that blend of east and west and old and new is alluring to visitors. There are ancient palaces, historic gardens and brand-new attractions and hotels. The topography is just as varied, with the desert extending from the ocean to the snowy Atlas Mountains.

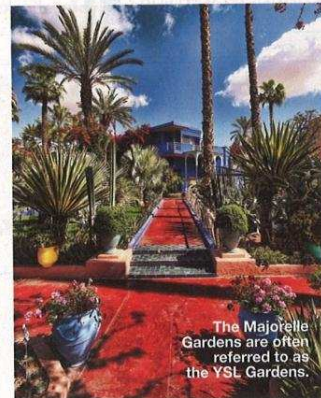
A Big Welcome

Although it may feel far-flung, Morocco is only about five hours from the East Coast. Direct flights from New York land

in Casablanca. While it's the kingdom's largest city, there aren't many cultural attractions. The biggest exception is the massive Hassan II Mosque. The awesome structure is made of local marble and granite. It boasts the largest minaret in the world, a sliding roof, and took nearly 10,000 artisans to construct. Tours are offered in various languages.

Magical Marrakech

Also known as the "Red City" thanks to the color of the walls of the *medina* (old city), Marrakech, about 140 miles from Casablanca, has long been popular with the jet set. Celebrated sites include the ornately tiled Sadiyan Tombs, the enormous town square at night—yes, there are snake charmers!—and gorgeous gardens (the Majorelle, cared for by the estate of Yves Saint Laurent, are especially impressive). The luxury hotels are another draw—the Royal Mansour is the most decadent I've ever seen (note: You need an appointment just to visit the common areas). And the famous La Mamounia has fantastic gardens and the exquisite Le Marocain restaurant. I prefer the brand-new **Four Seasons Marrakech**. Located within

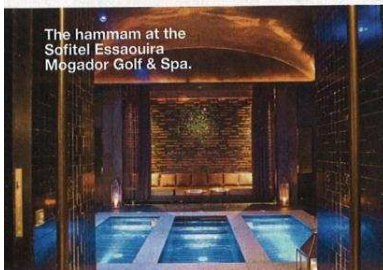


The Majorelle Gardens are often referred to as the YSL Gardens.

walking distance to Menara Gardens, the hotel is actually a resort complex complete with spacious accommodations, multiple eateries, a glorious spa and beautiful pool area (room rates start at about \$435; fourseasons.com).

Ritual Bath

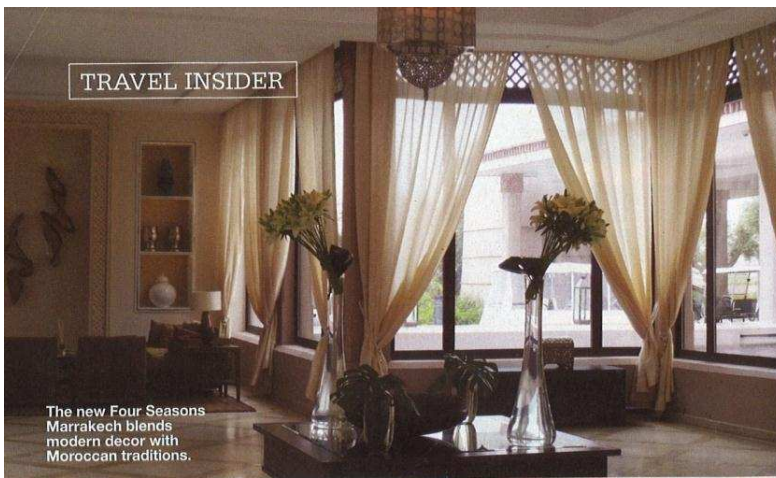
Traditionally, every Moroccan village or neighborhood had five central structures: a spigot for water, a communal oven, a *madrassa* (school), a mosque and a *hammam* (bath). As you tour →



The hammam at the Sofitel Essaouira Mogador Golf & Spa.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) ATLAS KASBAH; DAVID LEWIS; SOFITEL; MOGADOR.

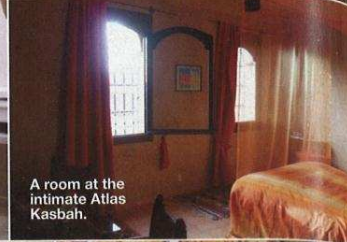
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The new Four Seasons Marrakech blends modern decor with Moroccan traditions.



Spices on display in the souk.



A room at the intimate Atlas Kasbah.

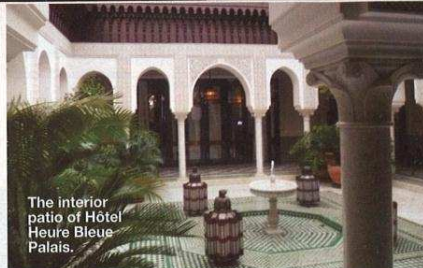
the various medinas, you still see these elements. Yet, the hammam has taken on a new identity as a spa treatment. Most hotels offer hammam services, which, depending on the location, can include steam-room therapies solo or in addition to a scrub treatment. The hammam at the new Sofitel Essaouira Mogador Golf & Spa features a series of tiled steam rooms at varying temperatures and a variety of pools that twinkle with the light from bronze candles.

Shopping in the Souk

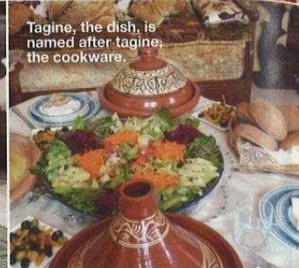
Every city has a *souk* (marketplace). Since bargaining is expected, transactions can take longer, so reserve a full day to shop. Moroccan-made lamps, ceramics, indigenous spices and beauty products, candles, leather goods, and of course, rugs are all on offer. The souk in Marrakech is the most famous, but you can get better prices in the smaller cities. If you want a rug, ask your hotel concierge to recommend a women's cooperative store. These tend to have better quality items, take credit cards and provide work to single mothers. Note: You'll still need to bargain.

In the Mountains

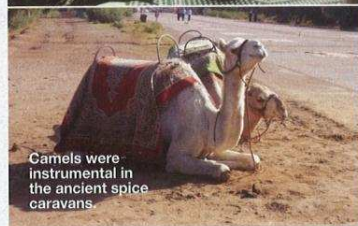
Set in the Atlas Mountains is the eco-friendly **Atlas Kasbah**, a castle-like hotel owned by the sweetest couple in Morocco. It's a homey hideaway with sweeping mountain views and loads of quiet places. Here power is solar, beauty products are traditional (black olive



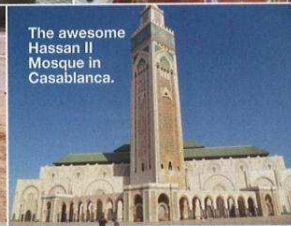
The interior patio of Hôtel Heure Bleue Palais.



Tagine, the dish, is named after tagine, the cookware.



Camels were instrumental in the ancient spice caravans.



The awesome Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca.

oil soap) and much of the food is grown on property—even at the farmers' market, I've yet to find eggs as fresh. Hiking around the area is popular, as are the evening tea ceremonies and pottery classes (room rates start at \$92 and include breakfast; atlas-kasbah.com).

By the Sea

Of all of my stops in Morocco, the seaside Essaouira (about 150 miles from Marrakech) was my favorite. Fishing remains the main industry in this city of maze-like whitewashed walls. Tucked among the metal shops, spice stalls and other hawkers of the medina, are a series of boutique *riad* (formal homes) hotels. Riads have multiple stories and

interior gardens or patios that are open to the sky. Guest rooms are in traditional decor. A favorite jewel box is the **Hôtel Heure Bleue Palais**, a 35-room hideaway with impeccable service and delectable food—go for lamb tagine. The location allows you to hear the hypnotic call to prayer (room rates start at about \$395 a night and include breakfast; heure-bleue.com).

What to Wear

In Morocco, modesty is expected. In fact, many men and women dress in full-body covering *djellabas* (hooded caftans). Keep your knees and shoulders covered when out touring. Reserve tanks and shorts for the hotel pool. ■