

36 Hours in Marrakesh

By SETH SHERWOOD FEB. 2, 2017

In Morocco’s “Jewel of the South,” the streets and bazaars spill over with artistry, whether it be in architecture, cuisine, crafts or fine art.



Jemaa el Fna square and the Koutoubia Mosque. Credit Daniel Rodrigues for The New York Times

Arabic lesson No. 1: fenn. It means art, and it’s being uttered, printed and practiced like never before in Morocco’s “Jewel of the South.” From the narrow mazelike passages and bazaars of the old medina to the modern boulevards of the Gueliz district, a crop of new museums, galleries, gardens and indie creative spaces is showcasing the talents of Moroccan and international artists. The artistry is also spilling over into the city’s long-admired culinary and artisanal traditions, melding 21st-century materials and styles with classic Moroccan recipes and handwork. And with a continuing hotel surge, from new luxury palaces to renovated centuries-old private homes, the city is easier than ever to visit. Arabic lesson No. 2: Yalla! Let’s go!

1. 36 Hours in Marrakesh, Morocco

Friday

1) 4 P.M. Arty acronyms

A creative corridor is flourishing along Rue de Yougoslavie, in the Gueliz neighborhood. Run by a Casablanca auction house, [Cmooa](#) (Compagnie Marocaine des Oeuvres et Objets d'Art) is an ambitious new art space that occupies a former office building and an adjacent hangarlike annex. Already home to the esteemed Galerie Matisse, the alley at No. 61 last year welcomed [Macma](#) (Musée d'Art et de Culture de Marrakech). Moroccan artifacts and European Orientalism comprise the permanent collection, including Delacroix prints, a Dufy watercolor and Fez ceramics that once belonged to Yves St. Laurent (who had a home in [Marrakesh](#)).

2) 8 P.M. Moorish morsels

The best-kept secret in Gueliz dining is [L'ibzar](#). Crowds are sparse — for now — but flavors are abundant and innovatively combined. Amid a cool gray dining room decorated with red Berber rugs and touches of chiseled plaster, you can start with a selection of small tapaslike salads, each colorful and jewel-like: a bright mound of julienned carrots scented with vanilla; roasted, marinated eggplant slices around a core of sweet almond paste; pumpkin purée with diced nuts and a crisp phyllo shard. The beguiling interplays continue in the form of beef shank with candied lemons and a standout chicken tajine stewed in a broth of diced onions and topped by sweet tomato jelly sprinkled with sesame seeds and almonds. Saffron and cardamom infuse the dual crème brûlée dessert. Three courses are 280 dirhams, or about \$28, per person.

3) 10 P.M. An Arabian night

A night out in Gueliz can take you down the bourgeois or bohemian path. For the former, join the stylish young professional Moroccans who fill the couches at [Pointbar](#), a dimly lighted and laid-back lounge with D.J.-spun mainstream house, soul and R&B tunes. Booze, beer and wines are on offer, including Morocco's own Casablanca beer (60 dirhams) and vin gris — a very light rosé — from the Moroccan winery Terres Rouges (45 dirhams). For a bohemian vibe, pack into [Le 68](#), a cozy and convivial cubbyhole bar where Moroccans and European expats from the arty-intellectual set soak up wines from an extensive menu of French and local vintages by the glass.



In the souk of the medina, one of the oldest and largest such markets in the world. Credit Daniel Rodrigues for The New York Times Saturday

4) 10 A.M. Paradise found

Echoing with buzzing scooters, portable radios and the constant come-ons of hawkers and storekeepers, the crowded lanes of Marrakesh's medina, its old city, are hardly havens of tranquillity. Until you slip into [Le Jardin Secret](#), which opened last year. Built from the ruins of a magnificent 19th-century palace, the elegantly manicured grounds of exotic flora, fruit trees, pavilions, pools and fountains were inspired by a Koranic verse about paradise: "He will reward them for what they endured with a garden..." Scale the tower for views of the medina's splintered geometry and the soaring minaret of the medieval Koutoubia Mosque. Admission is 80 dirhams for gardens and tower.

5) Noon, Treasure trail

Arabic lesson No. 3: souk (market). The medina must also rank among the planet's oldest, largest, most diverse and most atmospheric open-air markets, thanks to stalls selling a wide range of items, including water pipes and wedding dresses. A targeted treasure hunt offers a chance to explore its myriad passages and discover some innovative takes on traditional artisanal goods. A design district is emerging at [Souk Chérifia](#), courtesy of boutiques like Khmissa, which channels the spirit of the jet-setter Talitha Getty through psychedelic caftans, slippers and accessories with a 1960s feel. For stylish updates of tea glasses, ceramics, towels, cushions and other décor, step into [Chabi Chic](#), just south of the fragrant spice market known as Place des Épices. And be sure to wear sunglasses at [Riad Yima](#), a funky and flamboyant cafe-boutique-gallery where every surface pops with radiant hues and crazy geometric patterns. The space was founded by the photographer Hassan Hajjaj, whose color-soaked street portraits of Moroccan dandies and fashionistas line the walls, alongside vintage Egyptian film posters, Arabic-language street signs and many Warhol-esque objects and garments (all for sale) made from upcycled Arabic-language advertisements and food packaging. Seeking a handbag created from a recycled couscous sack? It's here.



Paintings at the Museum of African Contemporary Art at the Al Maaden golf resort. Credit Daniel Rodrigues for The New York Times

6) 2:30 P.M. Clock the Kasbah

Time passes languidly at [Café Clock](#), an arty hangout in the medina’s southern Kasbah district. Books, bric-a-brac furniture and graffiti murals decorate the space, while the eclectic comfort-food menu roams from all-day Moroccan breakfast to camel burgers to eggplant-goat cheese quiche. Sweet-savory hybrids are especially rewarding, including harira (a thick tomato-based soup with chickpeas and vermicelli) with dates and sticky pastry on the side and the stewed chicken (immersed in a heavy broth flavored with cinnamon, ginger and caramelized onions). The cafe also features regular cooking classes, exhibitions, concerts and traditional Arabic storytelling nights. Lunch for two: about 250 dirhams.

7) 4 P.M. Art course

Don’t forget your putter when you set out for Marrakesh’s splashy new Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden ([Macaal](#)). The center is the latest cultural offering at Al Maaden golf resort, whose course already showcases large-scale outdoor sculptures by international artists. Showing until early March, the museum’s excellent inaugural exhibition, “Essentiel Paysage,” features dozens of African artists who take nature as their theme. Notable works include dreamlike surrealist canvases by the Congolese painter Pierre Bodo; a wall sprouting tree branches that blossom with colorful plastic bags instead of fruit, by the Cameroonian artist Pascale Marthine Tayou; and a ghostly video montage of African migrants relating tales of striving to reach Europe, by the Moroccan photographer Leila Alaoui. Ms. Alaoui was fatally shot in 2016 during a Qaeda attack on a hotel in Burkina Faso, making the work doubly haunting. Admission: 40 dirhams.



A street scene in the medina. Credit Daniel Rodrigues for The New York Times

8) 8 P.M. Meat and Sweet

Like greenhouses, the disconnected dining rooms on the lush grounds of the [Dar Rhizlane](#) hotel are angular, airy and lined with glass walls. And, like greenhouses, they bloom with exotic and fragrant specimens — in this case from the genus of neo-North African haute cuisine. The classic meat-and-sweet medley is elevated to new heights. An interplay of vanilla paste, nuts and caramelized onions lends multiple textures and tastes to dark and smoky lamb, while a spice biscuit of pistachios and dried fruits adds crunch to shredded chicken in a sweet sea of puréed carrot. Desserts are exceptional as well, including a dense dome of orange mousse enlivened by a zippy ginger sauce and crumbly biscuit base. A three-course meal for two, without drinks, costs around 800 dirhams.

9) 11 P.M. Red rooms

Pleasures and temptations beckon from all directions at the [Epicurien](#) nightclub. Just outside, a buzzing casino awaits with gambling tables and slots. Inside, red velvety banquettes, mirrors and flickering candles lend a boudoir vibe to the sultry space, where singers and bands channel soul, pop and funk grooves during the wee hours. A bottle of Moroccan Terres Sauvages red wine (380 dirhams) ups your I.Q. (indulgence quotient) yet further. Nearby, things get even redder — walls, carpets, chandeliers, banquettes — at [Raspoutine](#), a brand new branch of the celebrated Parisian club. A few Raspoutine cocktails (vodka, tequila and lemon juice; 150 dirhams) and you will fit right in.



A breakfast of berber eggs. Credit Daniel Rodrigues for The New York Times Sunday

10) 11 A.M. Get out of town

Nature and culture envelop the paths that fork through [Anima](#), a wonderland of exotic gardens, gazebos, ponds and mystical artworks 45 minutes south of Marrakesh. (Use the website to reserve the free shuttle bus, with Sunday departures at 9:30 a.m., 11:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. Admission: 120 dirhams.) Like a stroll through the collective unconscious, the journey turns up something primordial, archetypal or strange at every turn. One trail passes a reproduction of Rodin's "The Thinker," who appears to contemplate a tall cone ringed with bands of color. Another lands you at a huge metal ark carrying a pyramid, a multicolored camel, a hollow giraffe and far weirder creatures. Turn again and you find a soaring African mask blowing smoke from its mouth. After, mull the meaning of it all over café au lait (25 dirhams) at the site's Café Paul Bowles and prepare for Arabic lesson No. 4: Ma'assalama! Goodbye!

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/02/02/travel/what-to-do-36-hours-in-marrakesh-morocco.html? r=0>