

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

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There are retail destinations, and then there is Marrakesh: a riotous mash-up of exquisite craft traditions, global influences, high fashion, and homegrown hipster chic. EVE MACSWEENEY blows the budget on a week in the medina.

**PHOTOGRAPHS
BY SORAYA MATOS**

◀ *Ultrasoft fabrics at Marrakshi Life, all of which are woven on site.*

▶ *The entrance to one of the 53 riads at the Royal Mansour hotel in Marrakesh.*

CASBAH



I



AM STANDING ON a rooftop slap-bang in the middle of the Marrakesh medina, the winding maze of streets that makes up the Moroccan city’s original, medieval heart. The 360-degree view is a patchwork of pink walls, stone-lattice windows, and flat roofs, some with colorful rugs hung out to air in the sun. The occasional minaret or extra-tall palm tree rises above the skyline. Beyond them, the burning blue horizon stretches all the way to the Atlas Mountains. If it weren’t for the ubiquitous satellite dishes, this could be a scene from 500 years ago.

But there is nothing old-fashioned about the building whose terrace café I have climbed many stairs to reach: Shtatto is a concept store as hip as anything you’ll see in Brooklyn or Canal St.-Martin in Paris. Here you’ll find curated pieces by cutting-edge Moroccan designers, including fashion by Amine Bendriouich, photography by Hassan Hajjaj (one of the store’s owners), and a 1950s-style hair salon.

Everything is witty and fresh, with subtle cues to remind you where you are—such as the soft leather bags by the local label Nasire. They’re made in a restrained palette of black, white, red ocher (the color of Marrakesh’s soil, and its houses), and the vivid blue that the artist Jacques Majorelle used in his iconic gardens nearby.

I was introduced to Shtatto by Cristel Deren, a young Frenchwoman who moved to Marrakesh three years ago and runs Kitula, an exquisite hotel in a *riad*, or traditional Moroccan home, in the medina. She is a former right hand to Colette Roussaux, owner of the beloved Parisian concept store Colette, which closed in 2018, sending shock waves through the fashion community. Deren is the perfect guide for sleuthing out the most creative retail in the city. “I like a real story,” she told me as we walked back down to the street. “Not one just for selling.”

► *Clockwise from top left: Shtatto, a concept store that carries Marrakesh-inspired leather accessories by Nasire; a guest room at El Fenn; a model shows off the menswear at Marrakshi Life; Palais Saadien, in the medina.*

Our next stop in the souk, Funky Cool Medina, was another real story. This hole-in-the-wall is filled with hats, shirts, T-shirts, and vintage pieces in British “Buffalo Boy” street style. As we approached, the young Marrakshi owner, Jimmy Boukhris, rushed out to greet us, modeling the kind of Stetson/porkpie-hat hybrid that Pharrell wore to the Grammys a few years back, along with rolled-up striped pants and a shirt emblazoned with giant stars.



From the research I had done before my trip, I was expecting to find the glorious traditions of carpet-weaving, silversmithing, and leatherwork that form the foundations of the Marrakesh shopping scene. And it was no surprise to see a swath of stores, both in and outside of the medina, where European designers work with Moroccan materials and resources to make products that sit at a comfortable midpoint between authenticity and bourgeois familiarity. But it was thrilling to also see evidence of a new wave of

Moroccan designers and artists, like those I admired at Shtatto, reclaiming and updating their traditions in innovative ways. Too bad I had just missed late February’s 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, which, since its launch in 2013, has built a reputation as one of the most dynamic events on the region’s cultural calendar. In April, Marrakesh also served as the setting for Dior’s Resort 2020 show, a collection that included collaborations with African artists. More evidence that it’s not only Instagram—which the town’s colors, light, and textures feel overtly suited to—that can claim credit for the city’s current resurgence.

YOU CAN EXPERIENCE Marrakesh in myriad ways. You can also tailor your degree of immersion to suit your tastes, excavating or cocooning to your precise comfort level. I had arrived two days earlier with my mother, who lives in London but, at the first sight of scruffy camels and strings of roadside palm trees on our way in from the airport, was instantly transported back to her childhood in Alexandria, Egypt.

Our first home base was the ultimate urban sanctuary, the Royal Mansour hotel, right in the middle of town. Built by King Mohammed VI just a decade ago (he is said to have simply requisitioned a street and covered it with this lavish compound), the property was designed as a showcase for the very best of Moroccan craftsmanship. Everything here is exquisite, from the onyx floors to the walls of inlaid wood, food courtesy of a chef from a Michelin three-starred Parisian restaurant, and Andalusian gardens landscaped by the team who recently refurbished the Alhambra in Granada, Spain.

Instead of conventional guest rooms there are 53 individual *riad*s, spread over three small floors with a plunge pool and roof terrace where you can request that your meals be served. It took a day or two for me to realize what was especially unusual about the place: wandering its grounds, among the trickling fountains and twittering lovebirds in ornamental cages, I realized that they were almost entirely empty of other people. Turns out, the incredibly attentive service is administered via a series of underground tunnels, so you rarely encounter a member of the hotel’s 550-strong staff.

A true cocooner could simply stay, soak in the hammam, and shop at the Royal Mansour: its boutique features regular designer collaborations,

The Ultimate Marrakesh Shopping Trip

Getting There

Royal Air Maroc (royalairmaroc.com) offers the only direct flight from the U.S. to Morocco, from JFK to Casablanca. While internal flights are an option, the smart move is to have your hotel book a driver to whisk you off to Marrakesh by road. The journey takes 2½ hours, and the highway is a dream.

Where to Stay

Design lovers will adore the **Royal Mansour** (royalmansour.com; riads from \$1,230), an opulent property near the medina, where guests stay in 53 picture-perfect traditional Moroccan homes. The hotel puts local craftsmanship front and center; its boutique is also world-class. For a more informal take on the *riad* experience, stay at **El Fenn** (el-fenn.com; doubles from \$255), a 28-room hotel inside the medina with colorful, Instagrammable interiors and a must-visit design store on the ground floor.

Where to Shop

Contemporary art and fashion converge at **Shtatto** (81 Derb Nkhal Rahba Lakdima; 212-5243-75538), a concept store with a 1950s-style hair salon attached. Duck into **Funky Cool Medina** (fb.com/funkycmedina), a tiny boutique chock-full of shirts, hats, and vintage pieces, before continuing to **Palais Saadien** (palais-saadien.com) for a lesson in the art of rug buying. Clothing and embroidery atelier **Al Nour** (alnour-textiles.com) provides work for local women with special needs and sells pajamas, linens, children’s clothes, and

more. **Soufiane Zarib** (soufiane-zarib.com) stocks eye-popping carpets, while the nearby **Galerie Tindouf** (galerietindouf.com) displays treasures including antique Berber jewelry and vintage textiles. In the city’s industrial district, you can watch weavers creating the fabric used to make on-trend clothing at **Marrakshi Life** (marrakshilife.com). Over near the king’s palace, spice shop **Herboristerie Bab Agnaou** (1 Rue Bab Agnaou; 212-5243-91632) lines its shelves with jars of saffron, rose petals, and orange-flower water. Tucked away on a road leading to the Atlas Mountains, **Popham Design** (pophamdesign.com) makes tiles that combine Moroccan technique with a modern, graphic sensibility. And at **Nectarome** (nectarome.com), an apothecary and nursery in the Ourika Valley, locally grown plants are made into aromatic soaps, oils, and creams.

Travel Planner

T+L A-List member **Michael Diamond** is a Morocco specialist who can enlist a Marrakesh-based designer to lead you on a day of shopping and design in the city. hello@cobblestonetravel; trips from \$475 per person per day.

— MADELINE BILIS



Clockwise from left: Rugs from floor to ceiling at Palais Saadien; preparing mint to make into beauty products at Nectarome; a view of the medina from Shtatto; making tiles at Popham Design.





▲
Clockwise from above:
Teatime at Shtatto's
rooftop café; the Jardin
Majorelle gift shop;
Jimmy Boukhris, right,
owner of vintage store
Funky Cool Medina,
and a friend; glassware
at Verre Beldi; a lavish
guest room at the Royal
Mansour hotel.

You could visit the souk every day of the year and have a different adventure. The market is Dickensian in feel, with specific areas, a bit like medieval guilds, for different objects. There's the shoe area (knockoffs of Hermès sandals were the big sellers when we were in town); the belt area; the door-knocker area; the area where artisans carve bowls from juniper and olive wood.

We visited antiques shops selling vintage Berber carved doors painted red and blue and furniture stores where extraordinary Moroccan craftsmanship is scaled up for statement interiors: oversize filigree lamps, giant candlesticks, and gargantuan strings of beads. And then, of course, there are the carpets. At Palais Saadien, in the outer ring of the medina, we were treated to the full, time-honored rug-buying ritual. After being ushered upstairs to a loft and plied with ice-cold water, we settled into a beautiful presentation by the owner, Abdelali Mossaddaq.

"I'm going to show you art," Mossaddaq said, as his team unfurled carpets from different tribal regions in the Sahara and the Middle and High Atlas. Some were dyed with saffron and henna, others were in the natural black and white wool of the sheep they came from; some intricate and made on vertical looms, others double-knotted and triple-woven. Each one handmade and bearing the individuality of its maker. How to choose? The experience of hearing about the intricacies of each region, tribe, technique, and creative decision was so lyrical, I defy anyone to leave empty-handed; I certainly didn't.

VISUALLY, MARRAKESH IS a place of controlled explosions. Colors, scents, flavors, and textures burst like miracles from the austere landscape, emphasized by a culture of modesty and interiority. In the medina, the front doors of houses open onto a facing wall with passageways left and right, so as not to disclose a beautiful courtyard garden, for example, with any display of ostentation. Loose clothes cloak bodies. Succulents are coaxed from dry earth. "The more you explore, the more you discover," explained Madeline Weinrib, who has been visiting for 20 years, first as the owner of a New York-based design business selling vintage and contemporary rugs and textiles, and now as a business partner at the hotel El Fenn. "It's true of all of Morocco, for Marrakesh, and for the medina," she said. "I love to hunt, and it's extraordinary how it unfolds."

Since joining El Fenn, which was launched in 2004 by Vanessa Branson (sister of Richard) and a partner, Weinrib has also become involved with the hotel's in-house boutique, which she stocks with her own caftan designs, as well as collaborations with other manufacturers and stylish accessories and home wares found on her explorations in and around town.

My mother and I decamped to El Fenn for the second part of our stay, stepping through (Continued on page 100)

such as shimmering Christian Louboutin slippers for Saharan Cinderellas. (A Galliano cape, I'm told, is coming soon.) But the medina was calling, and we started in the conventional way, escorted by a wonderfully erudite guide provided by the hotel, who, like others we met, defines himself by his most famous past clients. Mustapha Chouquir's are Hillary and Chelsea Clinton, whom he accompanied when they came on a state visit 20 years ago, and this brush with political royalty has given him quite an edge.

As he helped us dodge mopeds and trotting donkeys pulling wooden carts, Chouquir expounded the region's history and the clear distinction between the Berber culture of Morocco and the Arab traditions that dominate farther east. Many of the Berbers, an indigenous group dating back 4,000 years, were originally Jewish, which explains why hammered silver menorahs popped up in so many of the shops Chouquir took us to.



(Marrakesh, continued from page 99)

an anonymous entrance just inside the 11th-century medina walls—and suddenly finding ourselves in Notting Hill-in-the-Atlas. The property is made up of several adjoining *riads*, and its historic rooms are decorated in jewel tones, with freestanding bathtubs and a mix of antique and modern furniture. The effect is pure bohemian charm. A rooftop restaurant and bar strewn with rugs and pillows is made for selfie-taking—a fact not lost on the London influencers who frequent it.

So who better to give me another slant on what Marrakesh has to offer than Weinrib, who took me on a tour of her greatest retail hits. Traditional craftsmanship is what really motivates her, and she’s an expert at tracking down the very best. Our first stop was just down the street from El Fenn, where we entered a beautiful, modern, light-filled interior inside the medina. Al Nour is a small clothing and embroidery factory founded by a Patricia Kahane, a Viennese woman who bought a *riad* nearby as a vacation home 20 years ago, because its narrow streets and high terra-cotta walls eased the glare of daylight for her daughter, who is legally blind.

Al Nour provides work for local women with special needs, who are often barely tolerated in their own communities. It includes an educational component, training the women in crafts and basic reading, writing, and arithmetic; French; English; and computer skills. There’s even a day-care facility across the street

for their children. “The women evolved from being ‘tolerated’ to earning regular wages and being independent and proud of their expertise,” said Kahane, who is about to add a weaving department to the facility. The store sells heavenly linens, shirts, pajamas, and children’s clothes. When I got home I kicked myself for not having bought more of the hand-smocked baby dresses to give to every little girl who will enter my life in the future.

We also visited Weinrib’s favorite carpet emporium, Soufiane Zarib, where the wares are grouped by color, which helps shoppers avoid falling into a sea of indecision. Then we headed to an insider’s secret, Galerie Tindouf. I knew we were in the right place when we spotted the French minister of culture leaving, just as we arrived. Tindouf has art galleries front and back—on show was an exhibition of photographer Lalla Essaydi’s glittering portraits of women. The shop itself is a trove of outstanding treasures, including antique Berber jewelry, a passion of Weinrib’s, and an impeccable selection of vintage textiles, furniture, and ceramics.

To witness the edgier side of the design and retail scene in Marrakesh, Weinrib and I headed to the Industrial Zone, a district on the outskirts of town. Here, the streets have a SoHo feel—let’s say SoHo in the 1990s—with contemporary art galleries, furniture stores, perfumeries, and small factories. From one of these, American expat and former fashion photographer Randall Bachner runs Marrakshi Life, where workers weave cotton on looms in the back of the airy, high-ceilinged space. Bachner then brings

his international sensibilities into the mix, turning the cloth into pants, jackets, shirts, and jumpsuits that feel gloriously soft to the touch.

THERE ARE OTHER must-sees in Marrakesh, of course, like the crowded but botanically marvelous Jardin Majorelle, which adjoins the house renovated by Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergé, site of so many decadent fashion dreams. Inside the park is an ultra-colorful boutique and, next to that, the museum dedicated to the late designer that Bergé completed before his own death in 2017. When I visited, it was hung with an immaculate show of drawings by Brice Marden, rendered in the colors of Marrakesh, where the artist also has a house.

We were running out of time, but managed to squeeze in a few more treats—including a trip to Herboristerie Bab Agnaou, an unassuming spice shop near the king’s palace where I bought containers filled with saffron, rose petals, star anise, and orange-flower water. (We’d been advised against buying from the open-air stalls in the souk, since they’re exposed to so much dust and pollution.)

Afterward, we dropped in at a popular lunch spot and hotel 20 minutes out of town, the Beldi Country Club, for some R&R. Built in 2005 by Frenchman Jean-Dominique Leymarie, it includes a greenhouse-like restaurant set in a garden filled with birdsong, as well as a cluster of boutiques that offer a reprieve from the hassle and haggle of the souk. Some are the usual suspects, like Chabi Chic and Corinne Bensimon—the sorts of clever, European-owned brands that tend to pop up in tourist-

friendly locations. There is also a carpet store and a wonderful shop, Verre Beldi, that sells glasses, vases, and lamps in clear and jewel tones. Leymarie bought up the last Moroccan handblown-glass factory, in Casablanca, when it was going out of business, and gave it a home to continue production here. I took away a set of stacking glasses, each with the characteristic small irregularities of the artisan’s hand.

For our final foray before flying home, my mother and I booked a car to take us into the Atlas Mountains. On the road out of town, we stopped at Popham Design, a factory run by a pair of Americans, Caitlin and Samuel Dowe-Sandes, who use Moroccan techniques to create their own wonderful geometric cement tiles. Moving on, we passed saffron plantations and spice gardens as we looked for Nectarome, an apothecary and nursery in the Ourika Valley, a couple hours’ drive outside Marrakesh. It was founded by a pair of Moroccan brothers and their friend—one a professor, one a pharmacist, and the other a cosmetic formulator—with the aim of reviving traditional beauty recipes.

As we headed higher and higher into the mountains, with their hillside villages and breathtaking views, it became very hard to think about turning back. Never mind that we had a plane to catch; we wanted to continue, discover more, see what was around the coming bend and beyond the next rise. It felt like a beginning, not an ending.

It was consolation, however, when we found Nectarome, to walk among its fragrant beds of aromatic plants and browse the selection of soaps, oils, and scents in its small shop, where I stocked up on argan oil. Like learning about the origins of the carpets we step on, the experience connected us to nature and production in ways we had long forgotten, and offered a little treasure to take home. ✦

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