

By Neena Dhilon

# marrakech on the move

**Rich in culture, history, and creativity,** Marrakech, the rose-hued city nestled at the base of the Atlas Mountains, remains an undisputed jewel in the crown of Morocco's tourist industry. While other North African countries suffered dispiriting downturns in visitor numbers last year (a result of the Arab Spring), Morocco emerged relatively unscathed, registering a three percent rise in overseas tourists in the first nine months of 2011 compared to the previous year. A modest increase, perhaps, but not when the figure is compared to the 30-40 percent falls endured by its North African counterparts. This also builds on an upward curve that has seen visitor numbers grow almost year-by-year since 2000, reaching 6.3 million in 2010, a landmark that stopped just short of the Moroccan Government's aim of 10 million as set out in its Vision 2020 strategy. The country's ruler, King Mohammed VI, has since unveiled Vision 2020, a successor initiative that calls for sustainable investment in Morocco's tourism infrastructure, enabling it to become a top 20 destination worldwide (it currently ranks 25), with the power to attract 25 million visitors by 2020.

Ferret predicts the luxury chains will end up competing for the same client base—as there is a limit to the number of travelers who will pay significantly higher room charges—but she recognizes the importance of carving a position in a market that promises much in the medium to long term: "It's a race to plant a flag in the ground."

## Luxe Accommodations

Following a six-year construction period, summer 2011 saw the opening of Four Seasons' 40-acre walled resort besides Menara Gardens. Developed predominantly by Kingdon Hotel Investments, the extensive low-rise



From left: The lobby and spa of the Four Seasons Resort Marrakech, which was designed as a "modern interpretation of a south Moroccan village."



Such conditions have made Marrakech a target for hotel investment, with luxury brands seemingly unable to ignore the pull of the popular Moroccan city. Bolstering the current supply of 14,440 hotel rooms, STR Global estimates there are a further 2,400 in development. Sophie Ferret, associate director at HVS, acknowledges that Marrakech's pipeline has been booming for the past two years although she sounds a note of caution: "For every hotel opening, there are more that are on hold, delayed, or not one hundred percent confirmed. I think Marrakech will face challenges in the short term—partly due to the indirect fallout from political turmoil in the region and because the Euro disaster is having an impact on what Europeans [the city's major source of tourists] are spending."

Marrakech has steadily been evolving its 5-Star product, with most new entrants combining resort facilities with blue-chip residences.

complex is described by Didier Lefort, principal architect of DLR, as "a modern interpretation of a south Moroccan village" comprising warmly toned pavilions, lush Moorish landscaping, water pools, arcades, and pathways. Designed by Lefort to integrate into the environment, Four Seasons Hotel Marrakech achieves elegance without monotony by incorporating local touches into architectural detailing. Flooring consists of Moroccan stone or firebricks, adorned with simplified versions of traditional patterns; water pools are constructed with handmade ceramic tiles; cedar *moucharabiah* latticework doubles as balustrades for terraces and balconies; and external plasterwork is rendered in an uneven finish.

This contemporary take on traditional Moroccan architecture is followed through into the interiors where GA Design International studied *winds* (a traditional Moroccan house with a courtyard) as well as the local arts and crafts scene for inspiration. Associate Caroline Cundall



Color and detail will dominate in the guestrooms and hallways of the Taj Palace Marrakech.

#### Boutique Offerings

Spring is set to be a busy time, with GLA Hotels bringing an ultra-exclusive 56-room 'palace' hotel to a 25-acre park just five minutes from the Medina. Designed by Jacques Garcia to evoke a Moorish atmosphere, the Selman's amenities include a spa managed by Dominique Chénot, two restaurants, two bars, and a stable housing a private collection of Arabian horses.

This year Italian brand Baglioni Hotels is also scheduled to unveil its first African property, a 5-Star, 34-acre parkland resort created in partnership with Ajerna. Lead architect Patrick Genard says he has taken the *ksar* (or castle) as a starting point, blending local stone, glass, and wood with the

explains how the firm hints at the location in subtle ways: "Against a beige-toned color palette, plaster carvings, fretwork, and border designs in the corridors that nod to zellige tiles set as a backdrop to clusters of contemporary furniture, natural linens, and accessories sourced from the Medina." GA Design commissioned bespoke pieces from local craftsmen, including oversized ceramic jars, intricately cut iron lanterns, and bone inlaid *lsoqar* boxes, while artwork comes from Moroccan artists, both established and emerging. Oundall adds the garden setting called for interiors that maximize the use of indoor/outdoor spaces—each of the 341 rooms has a furnished balcony or terrace—another feature that promotes the feeling of a residential resort.

A highly anticipated debut this spring/summer, Taj Palace Marrakech sees the Asian hospitality group making its first foray into North Africa under a management agreement with JK Hotels. American artist and architect Stuart Church, a longtime resident of Tangier, is responsible for the design of the 265-room hotel (initially the slated location of a Mandarin Oriental), which is positioned alluringly before the Atlas Mountains within the green Palmerie district. Church explains how "the sensuality of an oriental painting, the beauty of an Indian palace, and the majestic traditions of Morocco" are all reflected in lavish and colorful interiors that open into exotic, harmonious gardens. Although traditions from around the world have been respected here, the designer notes that materials and techniques are rooted in Morocco: "You will see *zadelak*, a type of plaster commonly used in hammams, alcoves decorated with splendid zellige work, sculptured plaster frescoes, and *moucharabieh* fretwork." Considering every aspect of Taj Palace Marrakech, from the wall hangings to ceilings, is rich in detail, it's not surprising to learn that furniture and fittings are bespoke, falling in line with Church's orientalist vision. Another highlight will be the on-site 30,000-square-foot Jva Grande Spa.



A rendering of the lobby bar at the Baglioni Marrakech, where modern touches of the Arabic screen act as a backdrop.

latest technologies, including solar panels, in his contemporary reading of Moroccan architecture. Imbuing the interiors of the 80-room boutique hotel with Italian flair, Milan-based Reboto+Spagnolo Design has layered a base palette of beige, sand, and brown with accent tones of black, gold, and red to striking effect. "Marrakech is a location in which it would be impossible to create a project without some relationship to the regional culture," observes senior partner Federico Spagnolo, who explains that Baglioni seeks to insert local design elements into their established template for luxury.

A double-height lobby, in which a suggestion of the outdoors is planted through the play of light, spills through into neighboring single-height spaces arranged to promote intimacy. These include the lobby



A rendering of a villa at the Park Hyatt Marrakech, set to open in 2013.

bar where a modern version of the Arabic screen—wenge-finished latticework—is the backdrop to richly colored rugs and 21st century depictions of Moroccan lanterns. The dark oak, 3D-effect bar backlit by LED and crowned with Absolute black granite is finished with strips of white glazing to give the impression that the countertop is floating. Per Spagnolo, though, one of the most impressive places is the presidential suite that boasts a double-height living room distinguished by a sculptural black stone fireplace offset with gold inserts. One of the two bathrooms, meanwhile, benefits from a deep Jacuzzi bath enclosed by a handcrafted, bespoke patterned stone surround.

#### Palatial Properties

Other developments guaranteed to offer their fair share of palatial spaces include Sir Rocco Forte's Assoufid, an all-suite golf and spa resort situated in a 30-acre olive grove. Clive Polizzi, director of design for Rocco Forte Hotels, is working with architect Paul Udris on this elegant 66-suite property slated for a 2013 opening.

The same year should also see the launch of Domaine Royal Palm, a vast 570-acre estate south of Marrakech's historical center that represents the home of Mauritian hospitality group Beschoomber's first resort outside the Indian Ocean. The Royal Palm Hotel, made up of villas and suites, takes its aesthetic influence from Berber culture, drawing on the talents of Mauritian architect Jean-François Adam, among others. Another work-in-progress is Monte-Carlo SBM's first international property outside Monaco. Positioned in the Menara district, the exclusive 34-acre resort called Jawhar features architecture by HKS Hill Glazier Studio and a 98-suite hotel with interiors by Sybille de Margerie.

De Margerie's Paris-based firm, SM Design, is also responsible for the interiors of the Park Hyatt Marrakech, due to open in 2013 as part of the high-end Al Maaden Golf Resort, developed by Alliances. The 131-room property's subdued color palette borrows from the ice blue of



Tlespat Selma, a GIA hotel.

the Atlas Mountains to the earthy hues of the local landscape. Cedar, leather, raw cotton, and embroidered fabrics are worked into bespoke furniture and lighting employing local craftsmanship as often as possible. SM Design's scheme expresses richness through detailing, layers, and surprise: a tea lounge features sculpted columns made from gypsum, the reception is laid out as a seating area under a sizeable pavilion, and each room has its own landing complete with a bespoke lighting fixture on which signage is installed.

New-York based Perkins Eastman is the design architect for the project. Principal-in-charge Shawn Basler says the largest challenge, a limited site area, has forced the team to think creatively about the relationship between internal and external spaces, as well as public versus private concerns. "We identified a similarity to the pattern of language found in Marrakech's Medina," he notes. "So sightlines and axes, secret areas, and an underlying sense of discovery within the resort's geometry have resulted in a multilayered destination that unfolds at every turn. Park Hyatt Marrakech takes its cue from the city with narrow corridors that lead into a series of medinas and courtyards, plus interiors that open up to exteriors, thereby blurring the boundaries between indoors and outdoors, and allowing guests to experience the architecture as a sequence of events."

For Basler, as with so many designers who have spent time working on the destination's newest crop of luxury resorts, it seems the ultimate goal is to embody the character of Marrakech itself.