

# *jet set* MARRAKECH

By Cassidy Hazelbaker

For decades Marrakech has been a symbol of oriental luxury. Its red buildings and palm trees surrounding opulent palaces have attracted some of the world's most refined characters. Cassidy Hazelbaker reports on Marrakech's glamorous lifestyle throughout the ages.



Blurred view of birds over courtyard. Photography by Henglein and Streets. Image courtesy Getty Images.





Every street scene is a window onto a traditional past mixed with a vibrant present.



For many, the mention of ‘Marrakech’ conjures up images of camels crossing caramel sand dunes towards an adobe-style city. The tradition and authenticity captured within such an image, peppered with some colorful glamour, is in many regards an accurate portrayal of the city. Along with Fes, Meknes, and Rabat, Marrakech was one of the four former imperial cities of Morocco. Its grandeur has been maintained throughout the centuries and heightened over the last several decades with the appearance of foreigners lured and inspired by the exotic charm of the city.

MARRAKECH IN HISTORY

Founded in 1062 by the Berber chieftan Abu Bakr ibn Umar, Marrakech quickly became a hub for trade, culture and religion, as travelers from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb and Andalusia crossed paths in the ochre city. Many mosques and Quranic schools, known as *madrasas* in Arabic, were established, promoting study and dialogue between religious scholars. The techniques employed by architects and craftsmen from Andalusia blended with Sub-Saharan forms resulted in the creation of a distinctive architectural style filled with domes and arches prevalent throughout the city. An irrigation system installed in the 12th century enabled the construction of many gardens and orchards, which attracted writers from Andalusian Spain and further promoted cultural exchange and

contributed to Marrakech’s reputation as a beautiful place of culture and learning. From the 13th to the 16th centuries, Marrakech went through an unstable period as rivalries and disputes between various clans and families resulted in the destruction of many parts of the city. Glory was restored to the city in the 16th century with the arrival of the Saadian dynasty, whose wealthy sultans constructed opulent palaces and restored heritage buildings and landmarks that had previously been damaged. Marrakech once again became a thriving hub for travelers from the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean.

GOLDEN ERA

The 1960s and 70s saw contemporary Marrakech soar to fame in the glamorous jet-set circle of the era. From fashion to music and culture, the who’s who of the day could be found in lavish villas, spending the days and nights enjoying extravagant parties and frolicking around the Medina. The ‘anything goes’ atmosphere of Marrakech at the time was alluring and contrasted with more regimented social codes that, though slowly breaking, were still present in Europe and the United States.

The Beatles and The Rolling Stones both found inspiration and refuge in the exotic city. In Marrakech they could roam the streets wearing hooded *djellabas*, blending in with the crowds

perusing the shops in the souk - an anonymity unavailable to them in Europe. The opening line of John Lennon’s song ‘Child of Nature,’ which was intended to go on The Beatles’ 1968 self-titled album, begins with “On the road to Marrakech...”

John-Paul Getty Jr., son of the Founder of Getty oil company, was another big personality of the time who found Marrakech to be a place of wonders and delights. An enormously wealthy philanthropist, he and his second wife Talitha spent a significant amount of time in the city. An iconic photo of the couple posing on the roof of their villa, John-Paul clad in a hooded *djellaba* while Talitha wore billowing white harem pants and was draped elegantly with a richly colored silk kaftan, was later published in *Vogue* and further perpetuated the idea of Marrakech as a blend of hippie-chic. The Gettys were known for their sumptuous and decadent parties, hosted at Le Palais du Zahir, the palatial villa they had purchased while on their honeymoon in 1966. It was in Marrakech that Yves Saint Laurent crossed paths with the enchanting Talitha. Saint Laurent was once quoted as recalling, “I knew the youthfulness of the Sixties. Talitha and Paul Getty lying on a starlit terrace in Marrakech, beautiful and damned, and a whole generation assembled as if for eternity where the curtain of the past seemed to lift before an extraordinary future.”

Saint Laurent spent considerable time in Marrakech, restoring the Majorelle Gardens that had been planted and designed by artist Jacques Majorelle in the 1920s and 30s, when Morocco was under the French protectorate. Bleu majorelle, a special shade of cobalt blue that was used extensively throughout the gardens, fascinated Saint Laurent and always remained a special shade to him. Saint Laurent often travelled to Marrakech to find inspiration and refuge. In 1980, he and his partner Pierre Bergé purchased the gardens. After Saint Laurent’s passing in 2008, his ashes were scattered in the Majorelle Gardens, with Bergé stating “...one day I will join you under the Moroccan palms.”

Patrick Guerrand-Hermès, great-great-grandson of the founder of Hermès, Thierry, is another notable aristocrat who has left his mark on Marrakech. Stationed in Morocco as a calvaryman in the 1950s, he developed an intense interest in oriental art and horses. Guerrand-Hermès later became a president of the Federation of International Polo and a notable art collector, and in 1984 he purchased and redeveloped Ain el Kassimou, a villa built for Leo Tolstoy’s daughter, Olga. The villa is now part of the Polo Club de la Palmarie and houses Guerrand-Hermès’ art collections.

MARRAKECH TODAY

Visitors from all over the world continue to

flock to Marrakech, drawn to its oriental allure, unique architecture, and historical significance. Once a prime stop on the hippie trail, Marrakech now regularly appears in the repertoire of the world’s most glamorous globetrotters. A plethora of luxury hotels and *riads* offer travelers a deluxe experience in one of the world’s most vibrant cities. The Royal Mansour, La Mamounia, Taj Palace, Four Seasons and Delano, among others, offer visitors the warm oriental hospitality and comfort for which the region is known. Traditional dishes such as lamb tagine and couscous can be found on the menus of top-quality restaurants throughout the city, while a cup of Moroccan mint tea with a honey-flavored sweet in the courtyard of a traditional *riad* is a memorable moment.

The city of Marrakech is composed of narrow alleys and wide streets, with pedestrians and donkeys sharing the roads with cars and motorcycles. Every street scene is a window onto a traditional past mixed with a vibrant present. There are quite a few sights to see. First stop on the must-see traveler’s list is the Jemaa el Fnaa Square- the main square and market place in the old city. By day, snake charmers, souvenir stalls and juice vendors crowd the square, in which tourists and locals alike gather. By night, food vendors sell local dishes to the lingering crowd. Marrakech also contains a traditional souk, where everything from carpets to spices to leather goods

can be found. The Bahia palace is set on two acres of gardens and boasts magnificent courtyards. The Majorelle Gardens house the Museum of Islamic Art, and many visitors enjoy this dose of culture and tranquility within the high-paced city. The Museum of Marrakech and the Museum of Moroccan Art provide more insight onto the craftsmanship and traditions which make up the city’s heritage. Perhaps Marrakech’s most prominent mosque, the Koutoubia mosque, with its striking minaret punctuates the city’s skyline. The Kasbah mosque is another centrally-located place of worship, from which the call of prayer streams forth five times a day, beckoning worshippers.

This incredible city for cultural exchange continues to mystify the traveler. For centuries Marrakech has been a crossroads of people and places, as Mediterranean, Asian and African cultures intersect to shape this ever-evolving city. Marrakech has appealed to traders, scholars, artists, writers, designers, entrepreneurs and travelers, all drawn to the magnetism of this great North African city. It comes as no surprise that some of the greatest musicians and designers of our time have left their hearts in Marrakech; such a city will surely continue to charm all who pass through its majestic gates for decades to come. ♦

Images Left to Right: Medina of Marrakech, Morocco. Image courtesy Magnus Manske. Marrakech majorelle gardens. Image courtesy Luc Viatour. Medina of Marrakech. Image courtesy Russavia.