His Majesty, Hotelier

Morocco's king builds a palace—with rooms starting at $1,928 a night

By Toni Bentley

The lobby, above, of the Royal Mansour; below, an interior of a guest suite (riad); at bottom, the entrance to the high-priced Riad d'Honneur.

Marrakech, Morocco

Once upon a time there was a young King of Morocco, who was said to be the seventh richest monarch in the world. King Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in 1999, descendant of more than a 1,000 years of sultans but, being a modern man, he drove his own car, championed women's rights and took only one wife.

Despite his many inherited palaces, he decided, a few years into his rule, to build yet another. For this magnificent place there was no budget, only the royal edict to make it the most beautiful example of Moroccan architecture in the world. It was handmade by 1,200 artisans using the best stones, marbles, tiles, silks, satins, beads, feathers and cedar. No one, to this day, knows how much it cost.

The Royal Mansour is finally finished, and this palace is for visitors, the foreign dignitaries who are you. Scheherazade would have found enough cozy corners in which to tell a different tale on a different divan every night.

The hotel doesn't plan to advertise and a Web site has yet to appear. It's a word-of-mouth hotel, and it is not cheap: Prices run from $1,928 a night for a one-bedroom riad (a traditional, three-story, Moroccan-style house), to $5,397 for a two-bedroom, or $38,552 for the almost 20,000-square-foot Riad d'Honneur.

The experience begins on the tarmac at the Marrakech airport when an arriving guest is whisked out of the line of weary travelers, led to a quiet room and offered sustenance while passports and baggage tags are collected. Within minutes one is escorted out of the airport into a discreet shiny black Mercedes. Well, fairly discreet. The bags are in the trunk and passports are returned inside the car. All this is done in reverse upon departure, bringing home the notion of what it really means to be staying, as it were, with a king.

A 15-minute ride brings into view the mammoth punctured walls of the old section of Marrakech in dark-orange ochre, the glorious color that is Morocco under an unsheltered sky. The Royal Mansour is just inside one of the gates, nestled up against the 13th-century city walls. The massive entry gate—a four-ton marvel of wood sculpted, then covered in bronze—opens like, well, Sesame.

During construction the king showed up one day at this gate, said "It's not big enough," and departed without entering. The gate is now about one-third bigger, and the hotel staff are still awaiting a first visit from the king. His extended family, however, have been frequent guests and are said to report to him daily by phone.

The hotel is designed like an old Moroccan city with winding paths lined with lily ponds and fountains that open suddenly into sunny squares of palm trees, brilliant bougainvillea and aromatic olive and lemon trees. The public spaces—lounges, bars, library, and restaurants—are built, as are the 53 accommodations, as riads with all rooms on all levels opening inwardly onto a courtyard and upwardly to an array of carved arches.

The reception is a place of both grand opulence and yet quiet understatement perfectly echoing the poetry of the entire place. The check-in desk looks like embroidered silver and behind it a towering wall of geometric arabesques in thick, double-layered white marble.

The rugs are woven suede and leather, the couches and chairs silk and velvet brocades, the crystal Lalique, Baccarat and Venetian, the swathed silk curtains harnessed by mother-of-pearl inlaid tiebacks. (My favorites are on the curtains framing the central entryway: huge, deep-red ostrich feathers flecked with gold silk tassels and red velvet—the history of the Folies Bergère in a single tassle.) The reception riad appears to float in the silence of the still water in the central fountains with the occasional chirp from a cage of pastel parakeets.

Each riad's ceramic tiling follows one of four color themes, including "vert-anis," a bright lime, the King's favorite color. The central courtyard's circular fountain is filled one morning with floating white roses and red carnations. The dining room, living room, small kitchen and another pillowy gathering area surround the courtyard. The second floor has the sumptuous bedrooms, live-in bathrooms (here marble really is king) and an enclosed glass Juliet balcony overlooking the courtyard.

The roof is a multileveled outdoor patio with dipping pool, shower with a whimsical stained-glass cupola, dining area (a lovely place for breakfast or dinner by candlelight), a fireplace, chaise longues and a brightly-colored couch corner with a Bedouin tent. Beyond the tops of the intricately carved cedar-paneled walls of the deck rise swaying palm trees, the glowing tower of the haunting nearby Koutoubia Mosque and, in the distance, the snow-caps on the Atlas mountains. The roof of the riad can be opened to the sky so that the sun's rays ricochet off the luscious, lime-plaster tadelakt walls, and the occasional bird descends to drink at the fountain below.

The riads are serviced by a vast staff—the hotel employs 500, a ratio of 10 per riad—who arrive, unseen, from beneath. The hotel has a parallel underground city where the staff drive golf carts and can enter each riad through hidden elevators. Each riad has two butlers, on alternating shifts, and they will simply do or arrange anything for you. Everyone is helpful and welcoming, and, perhaps most notable for such an elite hotel, entirely without disdain for their guests—no matter who, or what, you are wearing.

All this luxury is overseen by the debonair General Manager Jean Pierre Chaumard, a hotel business veteran who's been decorated with the Légion d'Honneur for "representing the French savoir faire worldwide." (You've got to love the French for awarding a medal for being super-French!) A spunky septuagenarian with a twinkle in his eye, Mr. Chaumard likes riding his Harley-Davidson Road King Classic to explore Morocco.

The hotel has three restaurants all overseen by Yannick Alléno, the chef of Paris's Le Meurice hotel, where he earned—and has retained—three Michelin stars in 2007. The stars are much in evidence in the setting, service and food at two dinner restaurants, one French and one Moroccan. The "Pigeon in Crispy Pastille" in the Moroccan restaurant is a delicate patty of tender shredded pigeon in crispy layers of millefeuille, an edible work of art, while the "Orange Salad" dessert offers magical orbs of orange ambrosia that burst in your mouth like citrus caviar.

And yes, there is a spa, a 27,000-square-foot airy white lacework frame that is a kind of pale marble temple to the human body. Don't, under any circumstances, leave Marrakech without having a hamam—a classic Turkish bath—here with Abdelkader al Ibtikar. After he has washed, scrubbed, shined, dipped and stretched you (this last is a Moorish "dance" to remember—just breathe and go with it!) you will feel reborn not as you are but as the child you once were, like the child of a sultan perhaps. Now where is the beautiful Scheherazade? I am ready for my bedtime tale. I feel sure Mr. Chaumard will find her for me.

Toni Bentley danced with New York City Ballet for 10 years and is the author of five books. She is writing a book on George Balanchine's ballet "Serenade."

The pickup by Mercedes—no passport line—brings home what it is to stay, as it were, with a king.

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