

the smart shopper

From its colourful, chaotic souq to the discreet stores of the medina and the up-and-coming designers of Majorelle, Marrakesh offers a multifaceted shopping experience, writes **Adrienne Pielou**

COLOUR AND CRAFT

Shopping in Marrakesh used to be all about the souq. It still is, up to a point. Dodging the acrobats, monkey-trainers, juice-sellers and somewhat menacing snake-charmers in the famous Djemaa El Fna main square, to plunge into the chaos of the world's most photogenic, goods-crammed alleys, is something you have to experience at least once, surely, during any trip.

Morocco is one of very few countries that still maintains a tradition of dazzling craftsmanship. Tourism is its lifeblood, and with a guild system to preserve standards, artisans by the thousand still turn out the beautifully made items their great-great-grandfathers were making a century or more ago. A tiny proportion of the goods on sale in the souq are sourced from elsewhere, often Turkey or China. But with every little store stacked with something enticing – brightly coloured kaftans, leather babouche slippers, straw handbags, leather bags, wool rugs, beaten copper trays, thin cotton hamman towels, painted glasses, decorated ceramic bowls, embroidered velvet jackets, perforated brass lanterns and the like – those alleys still exert a hypnotic allure.

Bargaining your way around, though, is exhausting. There are no fixed prices. "And no one actually buys a chameleon. That's just here so you stop to look. Then the owner can quickly start chatting and show you other items," grins my wonderfully named guide Hatim H Hatiman (who has led Paul McCartney and Mariah Carey through the souq), as I suddenly stop, confronted by the sight of a slightly befuddled-looking chameleon standing on a stack of battered little cages containing other chameleons. Sure enough, the stall-owner is over in a flash.

Waving a chunk of creamy white menthol under my nose, he says it's a very good remedy; very, very good, the best. He's right, too, I realise, after cautiously inhaling. Sinuses cleared in an instant. After a glance from Hatim, 30 Moroccan dirhams (Dh12) seems reasonable, too, for something I'd never have thought of buying, but looks set to last my family for years.

But to hunt out the best-quality items in Marrakesh, you're generally better off shopping away from the chaos, crowds and cacophony of the souq. There are three other key shopping spots. Some of the most renowned boutiques lie in the ancient medina – the streets and squares lying between ▶

A shop owner in Marrakesh's souq uses a chameleon to attract customers



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► the covered souq and the ochre city wall. North-east of the medina, a 10-minute, Dh8-taxi ride away (agree on the fare first as drivers don't use their meters) are the broad, busy boulevards of Gueliz or Nouvelle Ville – new when the French colonists built it in the early 1900s, anyway. Stop for a cooling mid-expedition drink in the 1930s Grand Café de la Poste, surely the inspiration for Rick's Café Americain in the classic film *Casablanca*, given its slowly whirling overhead fans, potted palms and scarlet lampshades. Then take a five-minute, Dh4-taxi ride north-west of Gueliz to the up-and-coming shopping area of Majorelle.

Some guide books and fashion sites also recommend shopping in the industrial zone, Sidi Ghanem, a 20-minute taxi ride outside the city. I wouldn't bother. It's a big, dusty, windblown area of mostly anonymous-looking buildings and warehouses. It's certainly no pleasure to wander around. Moroccan decorative elements – the bright rugs and pillows, low tables and brass lanterns of palaces and riads – have influenced interior design around the world for decades. But there's nothing like going to the source for such items, and the best shops for traditional Moroccan furniture, jewellery and those marvellous wool rugs woven by women in the Atlas Mountains are still Moroccan-run. However, for kaftans,

shoes and homeware, it's often the shops run by the small army of foreign designers – mostly French, Italian or American – now working in Marrakesh, whose goods fit best into lives conducted in Dubai, London or New York. Babouche slippers cut narrowly, for instance, and sized properly, are more flattering than the traditional one-size-fits-almost-all version.

SHOPPING IN THE SOUQ

In the souq's lighting section, it's hard not to be overwhelmed by the hundreds of pierced-brass lanterns glittering all about in Miloud el Jouli at 48 Souq Charatine Talaa. They ship, of course.

Nearby, the fragrant little L'Art du Bain sells tubs of oily black hamman soap, and soaps and body creams scented with orange blossom, rose and sandalwood (from about Dh28). Order a customised, beautiful hand-embroidered silk, cotton or linen kaftan from L'Ourika (lourikakaftan.com), where Giorgio Armani has been spotted, and it'll be delivered in about six weeks (from about Dh2,750).

Below the rooftop restaurant Nomad, Berber-homeware shop Chabi Chic (chabi-chic.com) does irresistibly chunky black-and-white striped beakers for Dh25. At Souq Cherifia, La Maison Bahira sells thick, austere hand-embroidered hamman towels (Dh160) and bed linen, and at Hanout

(hanoutboutique.com), the Central St Martins-trained designer Meriem Nour Rawlings displays her racks of long, lean, slinky silk tunics and beaded kaftans. At Le Jardin, Norya Ayron (norya-ayron.com) counts Kate Moss and Sharon Stone among those who've worn this Algerian-born, Paris-trained designer's bright abayas (Dh775), flamboyantly printed kaftans and lounging pyjamas.

SHOPPING IN THE MEDINA

Like so many medina stores, Khalid at 14 Rue dar el Bacha looks innocuously small from outside. Inside, it reveals itself as an Aladdin's cave packed with such exceptional armoires, dining tables and giant lanterns, it's no surprise to learn Morocco's king acquires items for his palaces here.

In complete contrast, the Max & Jan concept store (maxandjan.com) is an airy delight with its ethnic chic resort wear, jewellery, bags and toys. Unexpectedly, the little shop at La Maison d'Arabe cooking school – close to the devastatingly alluring old riad and restaurant of the same name, a favourite of Winston Churchill in the 1940s – sells pretty, narrow-cut babouche in jewel-coloured suede for Dh390.

SHOPPING IN THE NEW TOWN

In the immaculate new Passage Ghandour, behind 61 Rue Yougoslavie, the gallery-like Yahya (yahya-group.com) employs a workforce of 250 master craftsmen and is a lighting store like no other. Jewellers working with the greatest delicacy and precision turn artisan-made three-foot-in-diameter brass wall-lights, immense lanterns and floor lamps into sculptural works of art. Next door, the airy Kaftan Queen (facebook.com/Kaftanqueen), run by a British ex-model, sells some of the best embroidered, narrow-cut, three-quarter-length kimonos, and flowing silk or linen kaftans in the city (about Dh390).

At the big, shadowy La Porte d'Orient (laportedorientmarrakech.com), the enthralling stock includes ancient fortress doors, and the remaining 1920s Art Deco chairs, consoles and tables sold off by the 1925-built Mamounia hotel when it was refurbished in 2007.

Discreet, hushed, and presenting top-quality antiques and contemporary pieces, Galerie Le Pacha, at 79



Boulevard Moulay Rachid, is popular among Middle Eastern royalty shopping for extravagantly inlaid dining tables, mother-of-pearl game tables, jewellery, carpets and oversized vases. Maison Lab (maisonlab.com), an American-owned design studio, sells ultra-cool locally made contemporary furniture.

Amazonite Antiquities at 94, Avenue El Mansour Eddahbi, is owned by a Sorbonne-trained gemologist and his sister, and with fixed prices, offers antique and modern Berber jewellery, silver items and assorted treasures so superb, they supplied the exhibits for the Jardin Majorelle's Berber Museum. On Rue de la Liberté, one of the best places in the city to buy traditional Atlas Mountain wool rugs (many around Dh2,750), is the dusty, fragrant and cavernous Ben Rahal (benrahalart.com). The rugs are a great holiday buy as they fold up surprisingly compactly.

Nearby, French designer Laetitia Trouillet's shop Lalla (lalla.fr), stocks towelled beach hold-alls (Dh395) and tasselled straw or leopard-spot clutches (Dh145), while Some (facebook.com/someslowconcept), dedicated to empowering local artisans, sells an appealing mix, including customisable bags, raffia lightshades (Dh720), and little beaten copper bowls (Dh90).

SHOPPING IN JARDIN MAJORELLE

Enchanted by the colours and craftsmanship of Marrakesh, the late French couturier Yves Saint Laurent bought Villa Oasis in the 1960s, later also acquiring the Jardin Majorelle. This otherworldly garden of cacti, palms and bamboo, laid out in the 1930s by French painter Jacques Majorelle, has since become a huge tourist attraction. There's now also a Berber Museum in the garden, an excellent arts bookshop and the Boutique Majorelle. It sells a small, expensive, intensely stylish collection, including fringed unisex silk scarves (about Dh1,000), clutch bags and ankle-length embroidered silk dressing gowns.

Multiple construction sites in the streets around the nearby Yves Saint Laurent museum, which opened in 2017, forecast a slew of new shops and cafes. Meanwhile, the newly opened Maroc 'n Roll (maroc-nroll.com) is in the vanguard with delicious faux gem-studded bags (from Dh450) and

Clockwise from far left, Norya Ayron's creations are popular with A-listers such as Kate Moss and Sharon Stone; Boutique Majorelle offers a stylish selection of scarves, kaftans and accessories; visit the Yves Saint Laurent Museum to view preserved prototypes and accessories designed by the French couturier; and the Grand Café de la Poste, built in the 1920s

denim jackets, quirky lampshades and platform babouches (Dh590).

Next door, Soufiane Zarib (soufiane-zarib.com) is an ultra-stylish contemporary design store. Opposite the garden entrance, 33 Rue Majorelle displays the bags, kaftans, lighting, jewellery and homeware created by 100 up-and-coming local designers. Barbara T's silky printed tunics tempt (Dh300), as do the Orenzo lime green leather pochettes (Dh200), but some prices are unwarrantedly high.

Marrakesh isn't quite the bargain it was when shopping really was all about the souq. But, who cares?

WHERE TO STAY

Beyond opulent, set in 32,375 square metres of beautifully planted gardens full of birdsong inside the medina walls, the Royal Mansour, commissioned by the king and opened in 2011, is easily the grandest hotel in the city. This is where royalty and politicians stay, in 53 one to four-bedroomed, three-storey, tiled, mosaiced and tadelakt'd riads. Designed to display Moroccan craftsmanship, the entire place looks exquisite. Admittedly, for all the panache with which it's served, the food is good rather than great. But you will forgive anything when stretched out by the huge pool, the most serenely beautiful in Marrakesh. Double rooms cost from Dh4,091, including breakfast and taxes; royalmansour.com.

After the hubbub and heat of the souq, it's a pleasure to arrive at the profoundly peaceful Amanjena, a 10 to 15-minute taxi ride out into the countryside. Here the centrepiece is a large square lake, a calming expanse of water rippled by the occasional carp. The 32 single-storey villas here are high-ceilinged, spacious and airy, with broad daybeds in a courtyard shaded by sweeping curtains and a fountain or private pool. What is absolutely outstanding here is the food – at breakfast as much as at dinner, and the service is quick and sweet-natured. Surprisingly, the spa area and hamman are a bit underwhelming, and showing their true age (the hotel opened in 2000). But the library is a delight for anyone who wants to take an armful of books about Morocco and settle in the shade to read. Rooms cost from Dh3,680 including breakfast, taxes and transfers; aman.com. ■