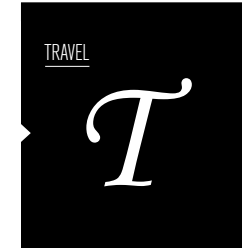




# ROCK THE CASBAH

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IN MOROCCO, AFRICAN AND ARABIAN CULTURES MESH IN THROBING MUSIC FESTIVALS, SUMPTUOUS PALACE HOTELS AND TRIBAL LIFE, WRITES JANE CORNWELL.



## MUSIC IS THE FABRIC OF MOROCCAN SOCIAL EVENTS INCLUDING WEDDINGS, FUNERALS AND HEALING RITUALS, WITH DRUMMING, DANCING AND TRANCING.

**A**h, Morocco. To sit in the courtyard of a boutique riad, sipping mint tea from tiny ornate glasses as a sparrow dips its beak into a fountain strewn with rose petals and clad in intricate mosaics, the scent of jasmine and a muezzin's call to prayer in the air, is to be transported, invigorated, soothed.

As is enjoying a steam in a hammam, the Moroccan equivalent of a Roman bath – de rigueur whether you're in the country for business, pleasure or, well, wellness. Morocco is the fastest-growing spa and wellness tourism market in the world. Little wonder: here are secluded resorts with infinity pools offering views of lakes, dunes, snow-capped mountains. Luxury Marrakesh hotels such as the renowned La Mamounia and La Sultana (a collection of five riads, or palaces, in the heart of the medina) boast their own five-star spas.

Morocco's biggest drawcard is its rich and varied culture. Traditions in this North African country have endured and thrived for centuries, combining Berber, Jewish and Arabic heritage with external influences from France and Spain. It's Africa and the Arab world, throbbing all at once.

Now, encouraged by a calendar teeming with cultural festivals, a king (Mohammed VI) with an active interest in the arts and Morocco's close proximity to Europe (Marrakesh is less than four hours from London), luxury travel operators are stepping up. Itinerary-wise, they're spoilt for choice. There are museums, galleries and architecture from lavish mosques and fairytale adobe forts to the sleek designs of business capitals Casablanca and Rabat.

Literature abounds: oral and ancient, contemporary and 20th-century (American writers William Burroughs, Paul Bowles and Tennessee Williams were famously inspired here), as championed by festivals including the internationally respected Marrakesh Biennale. Moroccan cinema history also stretches back to 1897 with the filming of *Le Chevrier Marocain* (*The Little Goatherd*) by French director Louis Lumière, and has gone from strength to strength. December's annual Marrakesh Film Festival gets the Red City buzzing with movie premieres attracting Hollywood names (last year, Jeremy Irons and Viggo Mortensen) and Maghreb stars alike.

Then, of course, there's music – the fabric of Moroccan social events, including weddings, funerals and healing rituals, with their drumming, dancing and trancing. Rock, jazz, hip-hop and heavy metal, which many younger Moroccans are particularly fond of. Religious or secular, music is

ubiquitous in Morocco. It's also the subject of more festivals than you can shake a babouche slipper at.

Indeed, what was once the preserve of Kombi-driving peaceniks has become a high-end travel destination, with bespoke tours offered by the likes of SheherazadVentures – a boutique travel company run by former music radio broadcaster Rachel Blech, in association with a family of Sahraoui nomads.

"Our clients want to feel the beating pulse of the country but with plenty of creature comforts," says Blech, a vivacious, Marrakesh-based Englishwoman. "So they might sleep in a five-star luxury riad one night, with upmarket Moroccan wines and haute cuisine served on fine linen, then go on to enjoy a romantic lantern-lit desert camp in the Sahara dunes."

Luxury travel shouldn't mean staying inside a resort, or peering through the tinted window of a private car, adds Blech, who arranges guides, drivers, transport, itineraries and accommodation. "It just needs to be handled sensitively. Our favourite client is one who is willing to experience the true rural, simple life of Morocco – eating lunch at our Berber guide's village, say – as well as enjoying its regal hospitality and sumptuous food.

"We've organised for a French family to learn quality carpet-weaving with a Berber women's co-operative, and a get-together in Marrakesh for some very wealthy Americans. I would discuss arrangements with the client as she ran on her treadmill at 6am in New York."

Music-themed travel is proving increasingly popular, with clients requesting musical adventures with small-scale soirees tailored just for them, as well as itineraries that combine top-notch accommodation (early booking advised) with one of Morocco's many varied music festivals. "We recently did a luxury tour for a big Canadian rock star and some of his fans, arranging meetings with traditional musicians and nightly private concerts," says Blech.

Where to go and what to see is a matter of taste and timing. Most music festivals take place from April onwards, so start planning now for next year's adventures. Highlights of the 2016 festival calendar included Jazzablanca in Casablanca (April), which featured concerts by Jamie Cullum and Macy Gray; the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music (May), with a program of classical music from India, Mali, Persia and beyond.

This festival offered a refined experience in a city that was a centre of learning in the ninth century, a meeting place for scholars of different faiths, and still has the oldest working medina on the planet. Left-field artists such as Björk have also performed here.





FROM TOP: The Gnawa World Music Festival in May draws musicians such as the late Doudou N'diaye Rose; Bab Bou Jeloud, also called the Blue Gate, leads to the old medina in Fez; boutique riad Villa Maroc hosts celebrity guests such as Sting and Peter Gabriel.

The country's three biggest music shindigs – each attracting crowds of up to 500,000 people – include the Mawazine Rhythms of the World Festival in Rabat in May, a citywide affair that has featured everyone from Stevie Wonder to Rihanna and Iggy Azalea, and even marked the 2008 comeback gig of Whitney Houston.

There's Timtar in the coastal town of Agadir (July), with its line-up of jazz and hip-hop artists and focus on Amazigh (Berber) culture, which went officially unrecognised until the mid-1990s, when the king acceded to public requests to honour Amazigh traditions.

Then there's the Gnawa World Music Festival (June) in Essaouira on the Atlantic coast, a free four-day event celebrating the Maghreb's funkier and most mystical of Sufi brotherhoods, whose musicians gather for what has been called the largest jam session on the planet, a sort of Moroccan Woodstock. Guest musicians from the West – including the Grammy-winning likes of Marcus Miller, Robert Plant and, this year, iconic American pianist Randy Weston – play with the Gnawa, mucking in alongside the bluesy rhythms and loud, football-style chants that every Moroccan seems to know.

The descendants of sub-Saharan slaves and free men who travelled to North Africa, the Gnawa were once subject to discrimination. Not any more. It's largely thanks to the Gnawa Festival, now in its 19th year, and its founder/director Neila Tazi, that this racial minority is now celebrated as healers and artists. The festival association is lobbying for the classification of Gnawa traditions with UNESCO as Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, by way of safeguarding this important African cultural tradition.

"My passion has always been to promote events that reflect the beautiful, authentic soul of Morocco," says the Paris-educated Tazi, a gracious mother of two who founded



her own all-female communications and PR agency in Casablanca, her hometown, more than two decades ago. "The success has been overwhelming."

There was resistance at first. Morocco might have a stable democratic government and a popular, hands-on King, but it is also a Muslim country that sometimes has to wrestle with equal rights. A free festival of Gnawa music run by women was considered both brave and insolent. But Tazi, whose first large-scale event was a women-only car rally in the Sahara desert, was undaunted.

"I wanted to put on a festival that promoted dialogue, tolerance and openness," she says in her accented English. "And right from the start people flocked from everywhere, from cities across Morocco and abroad, to discover this enchanting music and this magical city. Nineteen years on, it has become a great rendezvous, a model of the peaceful co-existence we put into practice here in Morocco."

Morocco's music festivals, then, aren't just about music. Most have social and political agendas, with forums and talks strands encouraging cross-cultural dialogue. The Fes Festival of Sacred Music was established as a beacon of tolerance in the wake of the Gulf War.

Rabat's Mawazine Festival "calls for sharing and conviviality between cultures, communicating tolerance and respect through music and art, bringing together audiences from all backgrounds". Timtar's rappers get to let off steam, railing against corruption, advocating debate. Audiences are encouraged to think as well as dance, sway or dream.

Morocco is keenly aware of the importance of tourism to the country. Security is tight, with frequent road checks and a uniformed presence that feels more reassuring than intrusive.

Rather not watch a concert from the middle of a cramped yet overwhelmingly good-natured crowd? Not a problem – all the aforementioned festivals have carpeted VIP areas in front of their main concert stages, easily accessible with a scan of a designated lanyard.

If you're in Essaouira for the Gnawa Festival, try watching the action from one of the bars overlooking the main Moulay Hassan stage. Or press the buzzer on the heavy cedar doors of Villa Maroc, the town's first boutique riad (host to such celebrity Maroc-o-philes as Sting and Peter Gabriel), with its high ceilings, ornate stucco and antique furniture, and venture up the stairs for a glass of chilled local white and an uninterrupted view of the music, the crowd and the Atlantic Ocean. "It's such a beautiful spot, especially when the stars are out," says Blech. "I took some clients up there during last year's festival. Both of the couples either side of us were on their honeymoon." ❌

#### NEED TO KNOW

Moroccan Tourist Board: [visitmorocco.com](http://visitmorocco.com)

SheherazadVentures: [morocco-adventure-holidays.com](http://morocco-adventure-holidays.com)

Gnawa World Music Festival: [festival-gnaoua.net/en/](http://festival-gnaoua.net/en/)