



# Marrakech

Intoxicating and intriguing in equal parts, this vibrant city on the tip of Africa has bewitched everyone from prime ministers to Parisian fashion royalty.

Words HOLLY RUBENSTEIN Photography LIZ & MAX HAARALA HAMILTON



**W**ANDERING THROUGH THE lush seven hectares of private garden at Marrakech's iconic La Mamounia hotel during a sultry autumn afternoon, you can see why Winston Churchill once described this city as being "the loveliest place on Earth". Between pockets of palms, olives are being harvested into shiny black heaps on the grass, and the scent of jasmine and fresh clementines, ripe for picking, hangs in the air as the sun sets.

It was here at La Mamounia that world-renowned fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent, and his partner in life and business Pierre Bergé, stayed when they first visited Marrakech in 1966. "For a full week, it rained cats and dogs. They couldn't see anything," says Björn Dahlström, director of the city's Yves Saint Laurent Museum. "Eventually, one morning, the sun rose. The birds were singing. The couple were entranced by the famous light, which you cannot see anywhere else, allowing the colour, the nature, the smells of the city to be totally enjoyable."

"We would never forget that morning when it stopped raining," Bergé once recalled. And before their trip was at an end, the couple had purchased a house in the medina. "It was an exceptional case of love at first sight," he said.

Here, you can follow in the footsteps of the great couturier, to experience the sights and sounds that inspired him, and

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discover the new additions which could have captured his imagination were he still alive today. "Marrakech introduced me to colour," Saint Laurent famously said — words that now welcome visitors to the museum that celebrates his legacy. "For whatever daring things I have done since then, I am indebted to the country. To its forceful harmonies, its audacious combinations, the fervour of its creativity."

Built from terracotta bricks and polished pink granite, the Yves Saint Laurent Museum is a soothing composition of curves and lines that its architects describe as having been inspired by the art of dressmaking, designed like one would cut fabric for a dress — befitting the man that it honours. "I feel very satisfied that a museum dedicated to Yves' work and life is to open in a city that so naturally became our home," said Bergé, who sadly died not long before its opening in late 2017 (Saint Laurent passed away in 2008). The complex stands next door to the Jardin Majorelle, a colourful botanical garden that was purchased by the couple in the 1980s and is now one of the most visited sites in Morocco. It's a cooling haven of greenery, lofty bamboos, burbling streams and pools, and cacti great and small, interspersed with photogenic pots and urns painted in bold cobalt blue and buttercup yellow.

In contrast, the museum's permanent exhibition is arresting in its darkness. Black mannequins, donned in a rotating cast of Saint Laurent's most memorable designs, stand in low light, enveloped in visual installations, floating quotes along the walls, transportive music and videos that bring his sketches to life. Of course, the revolutionary Le Smoking Suit is a crowd pleaser. The first tuxedo for women, it was a seismic feminist statement and an iconic design in 20th-century fashion.

However, it is the Moroccan-inspired pieces that are the most evocative, draped in silks of purple, orange, brown and pink, with heads swathed in turbans, and necks and arms laden with ornate beaded jewellery. They transport you to the labyrinthine souks in the medina, a maze of glowing glass lanterns, heady spices, flowing dresses and woven rugs, where Saint Laurent was known to go wandering for inspiration. The souks lead to the medina's famed Jemaa el-Fnaa square, offering a spellbinding snapshot of Marrakechi life. It's a tourist hotspot, with snake charmers and street performers, henna artists and drink stands, but it's also teeming with locals, enjoying animated conversations while charring meats and corn on the cob over open flames. "Yves loved the square," Dahlström explains. "But remember, he too was moved by

**These snowy peaks — the Atlas Mountains — frame the city. "They make our horizon warmer and greater."**

the architecture, the tiles, the painted wood, the red soil, the contrast of the blue sky and the snowy mountains."

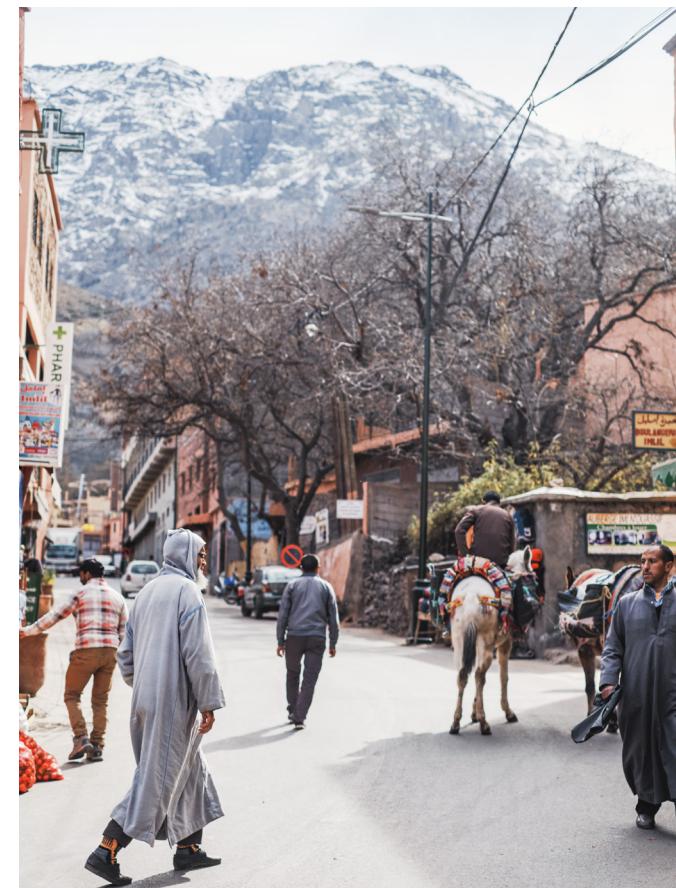
These distant snowy peaks — the Atlas Mountains — majestically frame the city. "They make our horizon warmer and greater," Bergé said. The Atlas are home to the Berber people, an ethnic group dating back more than 4000 years. "We particularly admired the tribal and identity-based nature of the Moroccan Berber aesthetic," Bergé said, "and Yves was deeply inspired by the clothing worn by the women." The museum's library houses thousands of books on Berber culture, and there's a Berber museum in the grounds of the Jardin Majorelle.

To catch a glimpse of Berber life firsthand, drive an hour into the mountains towards the village of Asni. Winding through the cliffs and snaking through the valleys, you'll pass camels and goats wandering along the side of the road; ramshackle stalls heaving with clay tagines of every shape and size; groups of men in long hooded *djellabas* (traditional robes); women in brightly coloured gandoura gowns on chugging mopeds; and children playing on bicycles with their dogs sitting in baskets over the front wheel.

From Asni, head for Kasbah Tamadot, a private mansion turned luxury resort that is now part of Sir Richard Branson's elite collection of hotels. The property's Berber-style tents — really more like decadent pavilions — overlook the neighbouring local village on the other side of a rocky valley, divided by a rushing river. It evokes an overwhelming sense ➤

**THIS PAGE**  
The majestic  
Atlas Mountains.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
La Mamounia hotel,  
where Yves Saint  
Laurent fell in love  
with Marrakech.  
**OPENER, FROM  
LEFT** The gardens  
at La Mamounia;  
the busy medina.



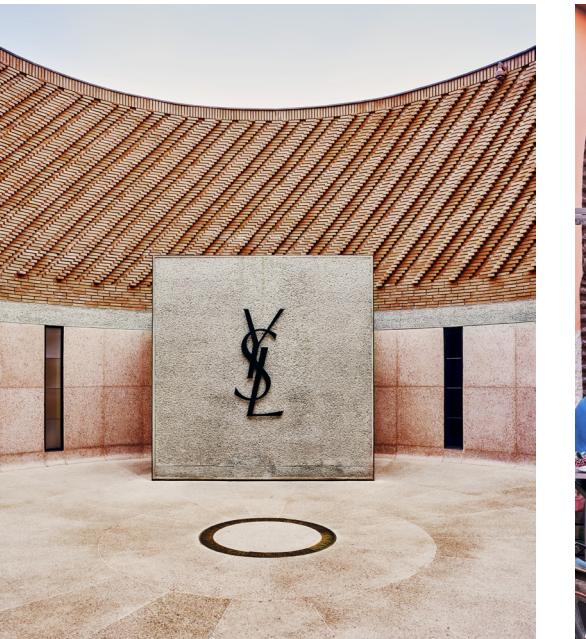
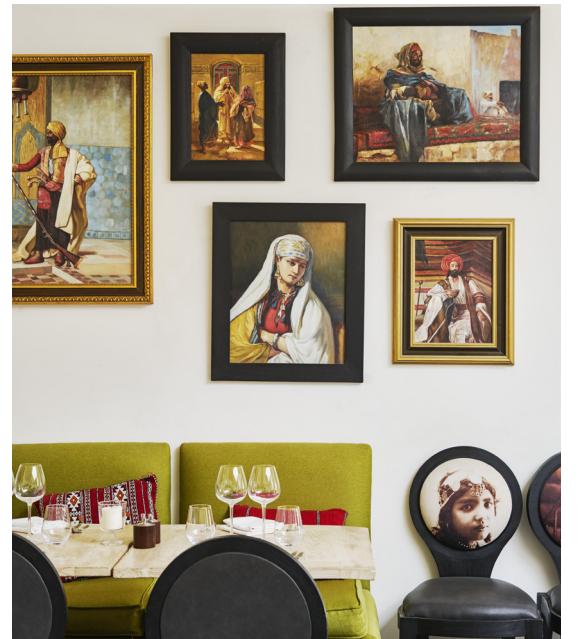


**CLOCKWISE FROM  
OPPOSITE PAGE, FAR LEFT**  
Kasbah Tamadot, tucked away in the Atlas Mountains; visual installation at the Yves Saint Laurent Museum; the Jardin Majorelle; cocktails at El Fenn; friendly El Fenn bartender; the bustling medina; outdoor area of the Yves Saint Laurent Museum; interior of Le Trou Au Mur; Asni; Le Trou Au Mur dish; fruit carts in the medina.



## DETAILS

**El Fenn** Derb Moullay Abdullah Ben Hezzian; [www.el-fenn.com](http://www.el-fenn.com). **Jardin Majorelle** Rue Yves Saint Laurent; [www.jardinmajorelle.com](http://www.jardinmajorelle.com). **Kasbah Tamadot** BP 67, 42152 Asni; [www.virginlimitededition.com/en/kasbah-tamadot](http://www.virginlimitededition.com/en/kasbah-tamadot). **La Mamounia** Avenue Bab Jdid; [www.mamounia.com/en](http://www.mamounia.com/en). **Le Trou Au Mur** 39 Derb el Farnatchi; [www.letrouaumur.com](http://www.letrouaumur.com). **Royal Mansour** Rue Abou El Abbas Sebti; [www.royalmansour.com](http://www.royalmansour.com). **Yves Saint Laurent Museum** Rue Yves St Laurent; [www.museeyslmarrakech.com](http://www.museeyslmarrakech.com).



of calm and tranquillity. That Moroccan light Saint Laurent loved makes the landscape appear as though the saturation has been amped up on the clear blue sky, the thick green grass, the cascading bougainvillea and the vivid white mountain tops.

The luxury retreat's core values involve supporting the community and the employment of local staff, who are irresistibly charming. Throughout the property, Berber design and style is artfully celebrated — from the soft, pointed leather slippers given to guests on their arrival, to the patterned rugs and tasseled wall hangings featured throughout.

Back in Marrakech, El Fenn is the Instagram-famous riad where today's fash pack hangs out. Its emerald-green tiles and stunning red walls, roof terrace restaurant overlooking the Koutoubia Mosque, and cocktail bar, attract the boho-chic set. Elsewhere in the city, Le Trou Au Mur is a culinary destination for those in the know, offering refined spins on traditional Moroccan dishes — think rich tagines, fresh fish, blistered aubergines and towers of colourful salads. You'll be surrounded by a cosmopolitan crowd, chatting fashion, photography and art. Saint Laurent would have felt right at home here.

Spend your last night in this magical city in perhaps the most fashionable situation so far. The Royal Mansour hotel hadn't even opened when Saint Laurent was alive, but it's quickly become a local institution, as well as a global star. Commissioned by King Mohammed VI, with a reportedly unlimited budget, his idea was to create a 'medina within the medina'. Much like Saint Laurent, he wanted to showcase the colours, skills and beauty of Moroccan craftsmanship.

The hotel is made up of a series of exquisite individual riads, packed with ornate plasterwork and tiling, carved cedar wood, sumptuous fabrics and decadent designs — a lavish treasure-trove celebrating the talents of the more than 1500 locals who worked every day on the hotel's creation for over three years. Lounging by a palatial riad's stunning rooftop pool, being served fresh mint tea by an exclusive butler, you'll feel like fashion royalty — making it the perfect, if decadent, way to end a homage to Saint Laurent. While it's been just over 10 years since his death, the designer's legacy is felt more strongly than ever in the African city that shaped his life.

**GETTING THERE** VIRGIN AUSTRALIA OFFERS FLIGHTS TO MOROCCO WITH ITS CODESHARE PARTNER ETIHAD AIRWAYS. TO BOOK, VISIT [WWW.VIRGINAUSTRALIA.COM](http://WWW.VIRGINAUSTRALIA.COM) OR CALL 13 67 89 (IN AUSTRALIA).