



FIRST REVIEW *The Oberoi,*
MARRAKECH

LAUREL MUNSHOWER slows down to appreciate the artistry of a new Moroccan retreat

“Stop and smell the roses” – it’s advice we would all do well to heed a little better. Marrakech, with its frenetic medina, isn’t at first glance the most conducive place to try out this philosophy, but then along comes a hotel like The Oberoi, Marrakech. Set a 20- to 30-minute drive outside the city centre on former farmland, you don’t actually have to stop to smell the flowers at this new resort – they’re fragrantly in bloom everywhere across the 28-acre grounds – but your appreciation will be that much greater once you slow down to discover the plots of lavender and rose and bursts of confetti-like jasmine. Once inside, slowing down also allows you to marvel at the impressive design details – all handcrafted, taking some 200 artisans two years or more to complete.

So stop to take it all in I did, over and over. Beneath the reception’s large cedar-wood dome replete in geometric Moroccan patterns. Next to contemporary paintings of the country’s people and landscapes. In front of delicate sculpted plasterwork on the



walls with auspicious Arabic phrases wishing good health. Then there were the colourful *zellige* tiles, ample Carrara marble, grand archways and wooden *mashrabiya* latticework, many framing views over beautifully landscaped grounds toward the not-so-distant High Atlas mountain range. The peaceful internal patio – off which you can thumb through a library of gorgeously produced books on both Morocco and, in a nod to Oberoi’s heritage, India – features ornate tiling and carvings, heavily inspired by Marrakech’s famed Ben Youssef Medersa, a 14th-century Islamic college in the medina.

Inspiration also comes from Moroccan and Andalusian palaces, such as Alhambra – the grand main building is revealed to me only after I exit my car and walk through fortified walls into a courtyard. Here a large black pool of water, which in bygone days would have refreshed visitors after a long journey, holds a central flame that sets the area warmly aglow after the sun sets. Key in spirituality, water features are found throughout, from a burbling basin in the reception to the dramatic 240m-long canal, which starts at the entryway of the



Clockwise from top left: The lobby; the Royal Suite’s bathroom; a Deluxe Villa’s terrace and pool; a turbot dish at Siniman. Opposite, from top: The grand canal; a Deluxe Room

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Presidential Villas at the far end of the grounds and flows gently past clusters of accommodation finally tumbling down into a small pool at the foot of the main building. Beyond the canal, the clever landscaping – geometrically designed to adhere to the metaphorical belief of spiritual order – begs to be further explored.

The best way to do that is after a hearty breakfast of *shakshuka* (topped off with a perfectly flaky *pain au chocolat*) at Tamimt restaurant. Hopping on a bicycle – guests are offered an hour of complimentary use per day – I made my way through the pathways, often lined with aromatic citrus and olive trees. They number in the thousands; many are remnants of the old farm, and the olives are harvested each October to produce olive oil used exclusively at the hotel – a light and subtle variety that’s all too easy to enjoy with freshly baked tomato bread. Biking around I discovered villa clusters, each uniquely landscaped; one abloom with an explosion of white roses is particularly striking. Around these clusters are 72 one-bedroom Deluxe Villas, each with their own garden and pool, making up the bulk of the property’s 84 accommodations. With a combined indoor/outdoor space of 196sqm, the plush and private villas are well suited to either travelling couples or larger families (a kids’ club is soon to open).

An additional seven rooms are found on the first floor of the main building: six Deluxe Rooms, and a singular Royal Suite that I had the pleasure of calling my own during my stay. Until the two-bedroom Royal Villa is completed for the hotel’s grand opening later this spring, this suite is the most indulgent guest room, a 320sqm space with a living and dining area, a small pantry, a large bedroom with a sitting area, a walk-in wardrobe, a bathroom with a tub overlooking the hotel gardens and a shower with a door that leads to the terrace – which itself has ample seating and sun-lounging opportunities alongside a 10m-long pool. With panoramic views across the bucolic grounds all the way to the Atlases, I woke up each morning to a surreal blaze of fluorescent pinks and oranges

emanating from behind the peaks, which is worth the price of entry alone. Though there’s plenty for your eyes to feast on inside, too – an ornate wood-burning fireplace, a variety of artwork, a four-poster bed backed by a decorative wall, and sinks with delicate golden brushwork, all meticulously hand-crafted.

One afternoon I entered my suite to find specially made biscuits modelled after my beloved black and white pet cats that were as tasty as they were cute – proving that Oberoi’s inimitable personalised service standards have landed safely in Marrakech. Some of the staff here have been working with the hotel group for years and the friendly, familiar service makes this new property feel like a visit with an old friend. The brand is also introducing Indian heritage to this

corner of North Africa – Tamimt is the city’s first hotel restaurant serving Indian cuisine (and I’m pleased to say the savoury *murgh makhani* hits the spot after a long afternoon trawling the souks), and The Oberoi Spa, set on a small island on a serene lake, plans to bring in an Ayurvedic doctor who will oversee programmes. That doesn’t mean you should forgo the traditional Moroccan hammam – my 90-minute bath with black soap, a *kessa*-glove scrub and *ghassoul* wrap was perhaps the most thorough experience of this kind I’ve

ever had, and I emerged quite literally feeling like a new person.

More Moroccan experiences are found throughout the property – Siniman offers opulent dining on traditional dishes, like a lamb-shank tagine that falls right off the bone, and live music from *oud* and *darbouka* players. Head into the kitchen for a cooking class to whip up your own Moroccan feast, learning how to shape *kaab el ghazal* (gazelle horn) pastries just so and plate a fish tagine. A weekly schedule features activities like falconry with the Kwassem tribe and local grape tastings, or you can get an eyeful of Marrakech’s most famous hue at the Majorelle-blue swimming pool, where adjacent Azure serves a menu of light bites. There are many reasons to stop and smell the roses. In a place like this, it would be almost rude not to. © Doubles from AED 2,075; 00212-525-08 1515, oberoihotels.com

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