



MANDARIN ORIENTAL *Marrakech, Morocco*

The new Mandarin Oriental has confidently shouldered its way in to a busy hotel landscape, exuding a brand of tranquil luxe not found elsewhere. No boisterous guests demanding Cohiba cigars and a refreshing absence of designer boutiques lining its charming lobby. Instead, you'll find neatly trimmed hedges, ornamental pools and vast open spaces dotted with ochre-tinted sun-umbrellas. Just 10 minutes from the medina, it's the perfect spot to top up the vitamin D levels and surrender to luxury.

The initial foundations were laid seven years ago, so it's been a long time coming, and although the architecture is quite bland, the interiors are exquisite. It took Parisian duo Gilles & Boissier three years to complete the look; think Moroccan pleasure palace meets Andalusian Moorish temple. The gardens are impressive too. Thirty varieties of rose are dotted amid ancient olive trees, towering palms and man-sized cacti – most of which were transplanted from the Atlas mountains. The whole place has a cool, unselfconscious feel, and a wonderful sense of orderliness. Symmetry and good service go hand in hand here.

The pool lies at the heart of the property and is flanked by apricot trees and terracotta urns planted with frilly cabbage flowers. This is the spot for lunch – be it in the shade of the restaurant's bougainvillea-clad pergola or stretched out on a daybed. Handsome waiters in cricket jumpers buzz about with trays of Caesar salad and, before long, sushi lovers will be able to indulge, courtesy of Ling Ling opening this autumn. There's a heated pool for winter swimmers and a decadent spa with hammam, although better spas



can be found elsewhere in Marrakech.

Chef Meryem Cherkaoui visits the hotel's neatly combed rows of sprouting fare every day to collect basketfuls of miniature carrots, artichokes and herbs for Mes'Lalla, the hotel's Moroccan restaurant. Open to non-guests in the evenings, Mes'Lalla stand-out dishes include the traditional chicken and olive tagine and the magdour-style lamb kebab. Breakfast is equally good. Five varieties of msamen (Moroccan crepes) are flipped and spun in front of you, served with crushed almonds, argan oil and honey.

What of the rooms, we hear you cry? They are fantastic with a capital 'F'. Ultra-swish with a chic Chanel-like colour palette and acres of space. A handful of penthouse-style suites in the main

building are popular with big spenders for their wide-screen views of the Atlas mountains, but the 54 riad-like villas offer a more intimate experience. Each has a private courtyard, hot tub, outdoor kitchen and open fireplace – the pool villas are some of the most spacious we've seen in Morocco. Inside, smooth cream stone is offset by handwoven wool rugs, dark-wood trimmings and Berber motifs etched in clay. Suitably high-tech, a flatscreen TV pops up at the end of your bed if you push the right button. Either that, or it opens the linen curtains that have been hiding you away from the world, damn it.

HOW MUCH: Rooms from £515 B&B
MANDARINORIENTAL.COM/MARRAKECH

Leo Bear