

**Deals** Luxury European cruises **Page 7** ➤  
**Flying** Solar-powered flights are no longer science fiction **Page 3** ➤



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MOROCCO » A FLAIR FOR THE DRAMATIC



HEMIS/ALAMY

## MARRAKESH FOR OLD TIMES' SAKE



Grand medieval buildings, the sounds of the souk and pyramids of spices...

Visiting her mother's hometown, **Olivia Stren** finds rich sights and luxe hospitality **Page 4-5** ➤



MOROCCO » A JOURNEY INTO THE PAST

# Marrakesh: a city of myths, mint and memories

Four decades after her mother left the city, **Olivia Stren** heads into Morocco's sharp sunlight to sample the city's bold flavours, strong colours

MARRAKESH, MOROCCO

My mother was born in a taxicab in Casablanca. She has always had a flair for making an entrance, and that was her first. It was 1941, the year before the classic film *Casablanca* was filmed, and to me, my mom's life always seemed like a movie: glamorous in its tumult.

My mother's Morocco – the one I grew up hearing about, the only one I knew – was a tumble of clamour and colour. I heard about places she lived, like Rabat's Jewish ghetto, inside the city's ochre-coloured ramparts. There, in twisty streets cramped with fruit and spice stalls, men sat cross-legged next to baskets heaped with dates, white-fleshed bergamot, glossy quinces and big-bellied lemons. There were rainbow pyramids of cumin, cayenne and coriander, and doughnut vendors where spheres of dough were tossed in bubbling oil to balloon, emerging plump and chewy and huffing clouds of sweet heat. Men in *djellabas* pushed heavy carts piled high with cactus fruit and figs, their *babouche* slippers whispering across cobbled *ruelles*.

But mingled with the perfume of fruit were the smells and sights of poverty. Streets were well-populated with small flying cockroaches and barefoot children while donkeys carried fetid hides fresh from the abattoir.

Tales of my mom's childhood – in a country she left 40 years ago and, in many ways, has longed for ever since – lent mine vibrancy, but also made it seem unbearably bland in contrast. If my mom had a legitimate nostalgia for a culture she was forced to leave (for religious and political reasons), I felt a second-hand nostalgia for a place I had not even seen.

Morocco, a liberal and liberalizing Islamic state, has long seduced Westerners – not



**La Mamounia, a hotel with eight decades of history – Winston Churchill stayed here – has just completed a massive renovation, one of many developments to welcome tourists to the city and the country.** ABOVE RIGHT: ALAMY

only with its hashish-addled mythology, fire-licked food and colours and medieval architecture, but also with its relative stability. In efforts to boost tourism even more, King Mohamed VI announced an ambitious program to boost tourism. The plan is working: Hotel and resort openings have been swiftly on the rise, with many more slated for opening in the next couple of years.

But the King's strategy didn't help in luring my mother and me to visit. Conversations with my mom about the homeland were usually paired with plans to one day visit Morocco together so that she might intro-

duce me to her haunts, her sunshine, her colours. I probably didn't press her to take the trip because I was comfortable with leaving Morocco where it couldn't disappoint – in the haze of fantasy.

But when I was recently invited on a trip to Marrakesh, it turned out to be just like going anywhere else: You get on a plane and it lands there. And when I did land in Casablanca, what first struck me (literally) was the sharpness and clarity of the light: sunshine bright to the point of pain. I put on my sunglasses and some lipstick, as if trying to look vaguely presentable for our first meeting.

My time in Morocco was

ers, and luxurious hospitality



spent at La Mamounia, a palatial hotel at the foot of the Atlas Mountains, where my mom once came for mint tea in 1950 when she was 9. (When I asked had she ever heard of it, she responded like a Parisian would if asked if they had heard of the Eiffel Tower.)

Originally opened in 1923, La Mamounia epitomizes the fantasy of a magic, snake-charming Morocco. Winston Churchill, who used the property as his winter quarters, declared it “the most lovely spot in the whole world.” He would spend his time balcony-hopping with his paints and canvas in efforts to render the mountains in shifting

light. This past September, the 86-year-old property emerged from a three-year reno by superstar French interior designer Jacques Garcia: It’s now a dreamscape of zillij mosaics, tiled pillars, traditional Moroccan marquetry, orange-blossom scented pathways, and spouting fountains. There’s also a lake-sized ozone swimming pool where deeply tanned Europeans leaf through yachting magazines and nibble on dates, and 200-year-old orange and lemon groves. (In fact, La Mamounia is named after its gardens; King Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah offered them as a wedding gift to his son, Prince Moulay Mamoun.)

*What first struck me... was the sharpness and clarity of the light: sunshine bright to the point of pain. I put on my sunglasses and some lipstick, as if trying to look vaguely presentable for our first meeting*

Wander around the grounds, where walkways trimmed with silvery-green 700-year-old olive trees as tall as royal palms lead to a pink-walled patisserie, and all you hear is the fluttering of leaves and birds, the occasional muffled thump of an orange dropping to the grasses, and the disarmingly loud sound of chirping birds. Birds here sing like they are rehearsing for Broadway.

The afternoon of my arrival, nearly 60 years after my mom’s visit here, I also enjoyed a mint tea at La Mamounia. I’m three times as old as my mother was when she was last here – long before she spoke any English, before she knew there was even a place called Toronto or such a thing as snow – and I thought of how this place has seen what I hadn’t, my mom’s youth. With the mint tea and musings came a silver tray of anise-spiked cookies that tasted eerily like the ones my maternal great-grandmother, Meme, used to make.

Beyond feeling a fast affinity with the decadence on offer at La Mamounia (the learning curve for luxury is amazingly brief), I felt an intuitive familiarity and intimacy with the city. I was home with its assertive, life-validating colours (the whole city is washed a rosy, sunset hue), fresh flavours (everything spiked with mint, orange water, cumin and coriander) and its tirelessly cobalt-blue skies. The sheer abundance of taste and light and colour also offered me an insight into my mom’s character – dramatic and vivid as the surroundings.

And there is nothing in the Saharan capital as vivid as Marrakesh’s amphetamine Medina: a swirl of narrow passages in the city’s old quarter are lined with shops hawking aromatic leather bags, poufs, tea cups, jewels and rugs. Velvet-eared donkeys pull carts heaped with textiles, artisans sit hunched

over their various wares, hammering, carving or dyeing, while shopkeepers (speaking every imaginable language) ply you with sweet tea, inciting you to haggle endlessly over the cost of a tagine. Surrounding the souks are the rosy ramparts, flushing into a brilliant golden pink with sinking sun.

Chase the chaos of the Medina with a quiet wander through Majorelle Gardens (created by French designer Jacques Majorelle). The gardens are washed not only a rich blue but also acidic yellows, brave oranges, and fresh pistachio greens. It’s an Edenic maze of giant flowerpots, towering cacti and palms, blue buildings with carved yellow windows, fountains, and turquoise ponds where stray cats strolled by for a drink.

The gardens, like both Marrakesh’s new town and the ancient souk, manage to feel both lively and languid. Even Morocco’s national footwear, the *babouche*, with its stamped-down heel, is engineered for the doodle and the daydream. Entirely hostile to rushing, the *babouche* is toe regalia and a cultural mascot.

I felt as comfortable with the country’s colours as I did with its pace. A friend of mine, knowing my affection (and talent) for things leisurely, suggested I might enjoy a book called *How to Be Idle*. But fancying myself already a bit of an authority on the subject, I responded that I would probably benefit more from something more like *How to Not be Idle*. At least I’ve now discovered that my vice is my cultural legacy.

After five days in Marrakesh, it’s time for me to leave. But unlike my mom who left her country never knowing if and when she would return, I know I’ll be back. Bogart said it best: I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

» Special to *The Globe and Mail*

## Pack your bags

### GETTING THERE

Royal Air Maroc offers direct flights from Montreal to Casablanca ([www.royalairmaroc.com](http://www.royalairmaroc.com)). Charter flights, buses and trains run from Casablanca to Marrakesh. And many hotels, such as La Mamounia, will arrange for land transfer from Casablanca’s Mohammed V Airport.

### WHERE TO EAT

**LA TABLE DU MARCHÉ** 4 Rue du Temple; 212 (024) 42 41 00; [www.christophe-leroy.com](http://www.christophe-leroy.com). Chef Christophe Leroy helms this French-Moroccan market-menu restaurant in the Hivernage Hotel. Book a table outdoors.

**LE MAROCAIN AT LA MAMOUNIA** Serving couscous and tagine, the resto is housed in its own three-storey *riad* full of pillow-heaped banquettes, Moroccan lanterns and spicy colours.

### WHERE TO STAY

**LA MAMOUNIA** Avenue Bab Jdid; 212 (024) 524 388 600; [www.mamounia.com](http://www.mamounia.com). From \$785.

**RIAD EL FENN** 212 524 44 1210; [www.riadelfenn.com](http://www.riadelfenn.com). Doubles from \$400.

### WHAT TO DO

**KOUTOUBIA MOSQUE** Mohammed V Avenue. The city’s towering landmark; all roads in Marrakesh seem to lead to this 12th-century edifice.

**MAJORELLE GARDENS** 212 (024) 30 18 52; [www.jardinmajorelle.com](http://www.jardinmajorelle.com). Originally designed and opened by Jacques Majorelle in 1947, the lush grounds (bought and restored by Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Berge in 1980) are a dreamscape of tropical flora, riotous colour and traditional Moroccan architecture.