



# On a Moroccan roll

A trip to Morocco turns even the sensible tourist into a shopaholic. Vanessa Branson couldn't resist snapping up a string of properties and turned one into a very exclusive hotel, says Caroline Phillips



Photographs by Viviana Gonzalez



### INSIDER KNOWLEDGE

#### SHOPPING

Rugs: Belhadji el Bachir Abdeljalil, 93 Souk des Tapis Rahba Lakdima, Marrakesh, Morocco (21262 153711).

Lighting: Fan Wa Nour, 16 Ibis Quartier Industriel de Sidi Ghanem, Marrakesh (21244 336960).

Art: Les Atlassides, 22 Rue Yacoub Al Marini, Marrakesh, Gueliz (21244 437993; almanar.france.com).

Ceramics: Akal, 322 Zi Sidi-Ghanem, Route de Safi, Marrakesh (21244 335938).

Furniture: Peau d'Âne, 297 Qj Sidi-Ghanem, Marrakesh (21244 336550).



From top: marble floors give Riad El Fenn an authentic look; the nearby souk is a treasure trove for shoppers; furnishings were sourced locally

Textiles: Kikif, 8 Rue Des Ksour, Bab Laksour, Marrakesh (21261 082041).

Candles: Amira, 344 Zi Sidi-Ghanem, Sidi Abbad, Marrakesh (21244 336247).

#### STAYING

Riad El Fenn: 2 Derb Moulay Abdallah Ben Hezian, Bab El Ksour, Marrakesh, (21244 441210; www.riadelfenn.com).

France Atlas: estate agent selling riads in the medina (21244 437035; www.franceatlas.com).

Marrakesh Properties: estate agent based in Morocco (21244 437290; www.immobiliemarrakech.com).

Riad 2000: local estate agent (21244 386275; www.riad2000.com).



**W**HEN Vanessa Branson purchased her riad in Marrakesh, she was the only woman who didn't sign the deal with a thumb print. There were other details that also made the transaction novel. "Myself and my business partner, Howell James, had to wait a further four days before completion because the vendors didn't trust our notaire to hand over the keys and money." Vanessa and Howell followed the 26 Moroccan family members involved in the sale back to the riad, and the problem was resolved over mint tea. Vanessa, who also owns a Scottish island and London home, thought she was buying three adjoining houses. "It wasn't until we signed that we discovered we'd also bought another neighbouring house."

Vanessa, now 45, first fell in love with Morocco when her brother, Richard, was attempting his trans-global balloon flights. But it was on a trekking holiday in 2001, with Labour spin doctor Howell, that she decided to buy a house to turn into a hotel. ("We had a budget of about £52,000 — but ended up paying nearer £240,000.")

The result, Riad El Fenn, is in the bustling old town, or medina, near Jemma El Fna, with its fire-eaters and snake-charmers. On first sight, it was a crumbling ruin with walls a metre thick. "It wasn't even safe to go upstairs," explains Vanessa, a former gallery owner. However, she was immediately enchanted by the peaceful interior, courtyard and terrace views of the Atlas mountains.

The work took a team of up to 40 labourers a year. ("It cost shed-loads," she admits, reluctantly. "More than £800,000.") Everything was done by hand and the rubble removed on donkeys. The builders downed tools to pray five times a day and only spoke Berber, while the neighbours dropped by with couscous and pastries. "We didn't change the layout. Our manager oversaw works and emailed me progress photos," explains Vanessa. "I visited every six weeks." "We're sitting in the riad's tiled courtyard, which has an orange

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tree and fountain with rose petals strewn in its bowl. Local marble is laid on the floor in a haphazard, asymmetrical way. "We wanted it to look as if it was done years ago," says Vanessa. Her nine-year-old son walks past with a chameleon in his hand. The riad is a funky fusion, sort of Marrakesh-meets-Notting Hill all in achingly good taste. "We pored over hundreds of books. We didn't want it to look cream-on-cream interior designed."

They settled on modern open-plan bathrooms in the six suites, *tadlakt* (lime plaster) walls in intense natural pigments — from cherry reds to saffron — contemporary low beds, a fibre-optically projected bannister and an al-fresco screening room juxtaposed with Moorish architecture, *zellig* tiles, old Moroccan lamps, ornate metal jalousies and carved ceilings.

Everything was sourced from the medina — from handmade fabrics and rugs to the work of local leather, metal and wood craftsmen — but mostly modified by Viviana Gonzalez, a local



interior designer. She had leather, feathers and raffia woven into the fabrics.

One suite has a 10ft-high leather headboard, cream walls, a Mark Francis Spore picture, a sunken black marble bath, leather-lined shelves, bed throw with sequins and wool tufts and feather-and-sequin-trimmed curtains. "The sheets are 600-thread count cotton from Casablanca," reveals Vanessa. "I wanted them because my partner [her former husband, Robert Devereux, whom she is dating again] is chairman of Soho House and his sheets are only 200-thread."

Another bedroom has tobacco-pigmented walls that are polished with stones to give the colour depth, a chiselled frieze, a 25-foot high ceiling of carved cedar and a striped Fred Pollock canvas. Nearby, a room has an innovative camel-bone frieze on cream walls. Another has a Venetian mirror and vibrant emerald walls offsetting ruby Moroccan rugs, claret cushions and a banquette.

**T**HE library boasts camel-hide floor tiles that have been sewn together with oversized stitches. "We copied them from Joseph Beuys's studio." And three colourful, 4-ft long Fifties torpedo glass shades. "Bringing them out in hand luggage was fun." The raspberry-and-cream dining room has a duss floor (highly compacted *tadlak*), a Fifties chandelier of Murano glass and a burpundy chenille banquette with striped bolster cushions. "We wanted lots of places in which to slomp," Vanessa explains.

Rooms cost from €270 (£187) to €450 (£312). Soon it'll have 10 bedrooms. "We've agreed on a price to buy next door," divulges Vanessa, standing in the hall beside 50 pairs of colourful *babouche* slippers. "But it has sitting tenants." As she's leaving for the airport, Vanessa suddenly disappears. Yes, she's just heard that there's yet another riad for sale...

Clockwise from above: Riad El Fenn blends Moorish architecture with the best of modern interior design; one of the hotel's bedrooms; the courtyard boasts a petal-filled fountain; the next-door souk is a haven for shopaholics; Vanessa Branson fell in love with Morocco while visiting her famous brother, Richard, on one of his ballooning expeditions; Riad El Fenn's courtyard is one of its most stunning features; a vibrant colour palette gives the hotel's balcony a very distinctive look

