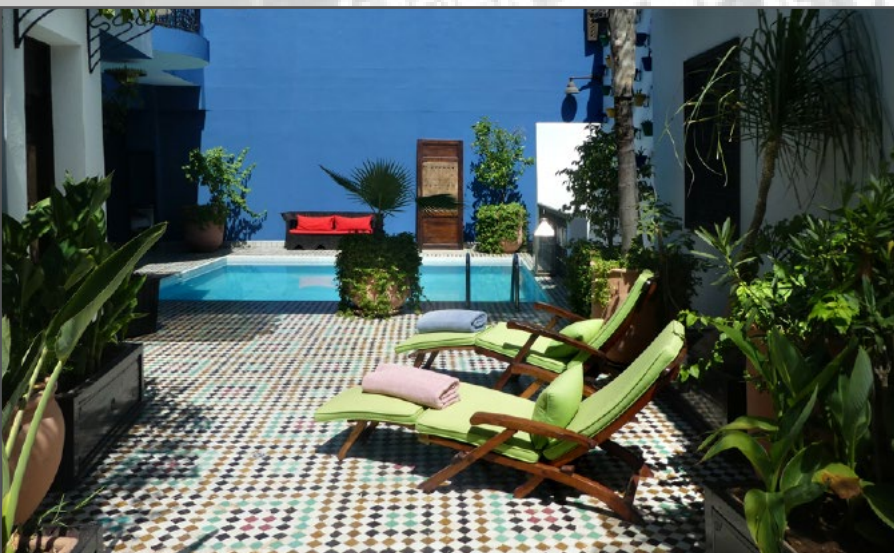


The Art of Decadence *Dar Doukkala*



The arched wooden doorway that leads you into Dar Doukkala from the busy street of the same name is pleasing, but no more so than many of the houses in Marrakech Medina, although the stately sweep of the stairway just inside is pretty spiffy, with its white and red tiled treads and vaguely sensual hooping rise of the chrome banister. The internal garden is delightful, with pathways separating the quadrants of palm trees and lush floribunda, but other than the size and the pretty alcoves set in the walls to sit and mull the day away in, it's akin to what you would expect to find as the centerpiece of many of the best riads. But it's when you get to the bedrooms that the 'Oh my giddy aunt!' effect kicks in, backed up later when you take yourself down to dinner in the long, chi-chi dining room that's just made for romantic evenings and whispered conversations.

It doesn't take long to realise that this is no ordinary riad, and certainly no ordinary restoration. Many of even the best riads in the ancient quarter have the reputation for bedrooms being a bit



pokey, but Dar Doukkala was obviously designed as a grand residence of someone of substance in the early 19th century because the six bedrooms and two suites are expansive by anyone's standard. And the quality of workmanship... exquisite examples of carved geps plasterwork, carved in four and five layers and filled with flowing calligraphy and arabesque patterns, some carvings hand-painted using egg tempera paint tinted with natural ground pigments such as saffron and poppy seeds; intricate wall coverings of geometric zellij tiles, each separate piece carefully cut from a glazed clay tile to create intricate patterns; bathrooms of coloured tadelakt, a waterproof plaster surface used in Moroccan architecture to make baths, sinks, walls, ceilings, roofs, and floors, labour-intensive to install, but with a soft, warm, undulating character when finished; exquisite zouak painted cedar wood ceilings, and it's probably one of the few houses in existence that can boast of a room with wall paneling in leather and another with leather covering the bathroom floor.

Possibly one of the best quotes about Dar Doukkala comes from Hg2, A Hedonist's Guide:

It's a huge place with six rooms that unfurl organically around two floors connected by a huge, florid courtyard and a red-and-white tiled stairwell that's like something out of Alice in Wonderland; it's just one of the signature flourishes of designer Jean-Luc Lemée, who has transformed the place into a feast of art-deco curves and madcap orientalism.

It's the delightful use of harlequin-coloured glass panels in some of the bedrooms and bathrooms that creates an ambience of exotic eastern decadence as the afternoon sunlight follows its arc to evening. I'm staying in room number five, where I feel Mr Lemée has given full reign to his outrageous expression of colour – a rich red sofa big enough for a bed (the bed itself is the size of a small island), a pair of bright yellow leather armchairs begging for you to sit in and fall asleep, and as I'm fortunate to have pair of French windows with beautiful coloured panels, I sink into one of the chairs and watch swathes of red, yellow, blue, green, splurge across the multi-coloured hues of Moroccan rugs covering the floor.

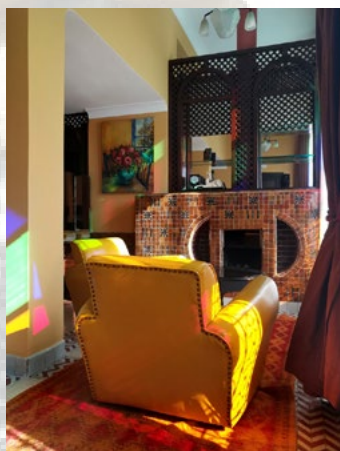
A step outside my room is the swimming pool, its sparkling water casting a pattern on the underside of the balcony of the room above. I splash, then recline on a green lounge, letting the somnambulistic ambience wrap itself around me, the high walls of

the riad keeping the hubbub of the Medina streets at bay.

It's been my habit over many years of travelling to dress for dinner. I don't go the full hog of bow tie and cufflinks, but long trousers and a clean shirt are a must. As I settled into my armchair in the dining room, awed by the sumptuousness of my surroundings, I felt that the eloquence and elegance of my surroundings made the effort with my wardrobe all the more worthwhile. I felt as if I was in the Moroccan version of a gentleman's club, one where a gentleman could metaphorically bathe in the calm of the subdued lighting reflecting through the ornate wall mirrors that seemed to send their glow on into infinity, as Alice might as she ventured through the looking-glass.

Dar Doukkala has that sort of effect on you; romantic, decadent and dressing-for-dinner.

Dar Doukkala is one of the family of Kasbah du Toubkal hotels and can be booked independently or as part of Trekking in Style holidays. Visit



Beautiful Blue Eyes

After six days in the cold and fog of the High Atlas Mountains, experiencing some of the strangest weather most Moroccans have ever seen at this time of year, I finally feel relaxed.

I take mint tea, sit in a Colonial easy chair at the side of the pool, nothing to disturb the silence other than the chirruping of birds and the low murmur of staff going about their business. The scent of citrus floats on the air, the sun filters through orange trees and a stand of bamboo.

I'm entertained by a young lady decked out in white who sits on the steps of the pool and leans

back, looking up, her left foot dangling languidly in the water. I follow her sight-line and

The peacefulness and comfy beds have that 'napping' effect

see a young man, presumably her partner, taking a photo. It's that sort of pool, and Les Yeux Bleus is that sort of riad. I begin to doze. Registration done, I'm shown to my room, a sumptuous ensemble of deep blue walls, armchair in lush pink velvet and a bed the size of a small island, on which I flop and continue my doze for another half-hour.

Recently renovated under the direction of Dutch interior designer Willem Smit, one of the most innovative designers working in



Marrakech at the moment, Riad Les Yeux Bleus is a delightful blend of traditional and modern, made vibrant and cosy at the same time with the use of rich colours – yellow, blue, green, deep maroon for the interiors that set off the opulence of the colourful decoration perfectly. I'm particularly taken by the beautiful blue and white hand-painted hexagonal floor tiles used throughout the riad, a complete change from the zellige mosaic tile usually found in ancient riads, and wonder how many

it took to refurbish the building. Each of the eight rooms distributed around two patios has its own character, some with an open fire, but all of them make you feel as if you want to curl up with a good book and let the day drift on by – although you would miss the escapism of the roof-top pool and terraces if you did.

Cooling in the pool

I drag myself from the lethargy of my island bed to the lethargy of the roof terrace, where I sit under an awning of woven camel's hair, the traditional material for a *jaima*, a Berber tent. I defocus my eyes and while I might not be able to imagine myself in the desert, I'm certainly in a more peaceful place than I usually find myself. The second, roof-top pool, is more



for splashing and cooling than taking photos, as the downstairs version is, and varying levels of terrace create lounging areas of long daybeds and shady canopied sofas, ideal for stretching out on if you think you can get away with it. The warmth of the early afternoon sun as I lean against the large cushions laid on the banquette of rich velvet makes me think that there is nowhere I would rather be at that particular moment. Warm colours everywhere, the



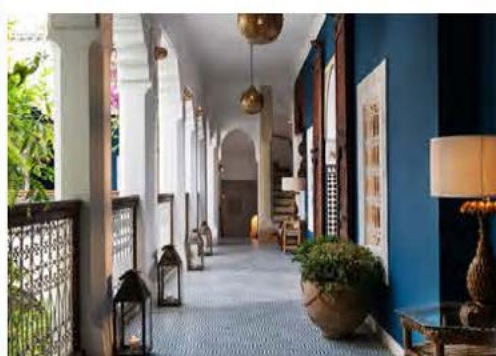
deep reds, maroon and light beige ubiquitous in Morocco. Bougainvillea of purple, orange and pink climb the walls of the three-storey building. Through a tiny horse-shoe-arch wooden door I glimpse a hammam, one of my favourite elements of Moroccan culture. I picture myself taking an aperitif later at the terrace bar.

Ten minutes to the Medina

Stirring myself, I take a walk into the narrow alleyways of the Medina. The famous Jmaa el Fna with its nightly open-air food stalls, the largest of its kind in the world, is only a ten-minute walk away, and after a pleasant hour gawping at the brilliance and colour of the tiny shops I wander back to LYB in time for a nap and to change for dinner (the peacefulness and

comfy beds have that 'napping' effect on me).

Dinner is served in the beautiful Beldi patio, smaller than the Pool patio and roofed-over to create an intimate sitting room with a wall-mounted fireplace as the centrepiece, that also serves as a dining room, but as I'm alone I accept the offer of a table set at the end of the pool. The twinkling of candle flame from the lanterns placed along the poolside reflect in the gently moving water, lulling me into a soporific state of mind, and pretty soon I'm back in my island bed, all thoughts of the previous six days in the cold and fog in the High Atlas banished from my mind.



Les Yeux Bleus works in association with *Kashbah du Toukbal* on a number of tours that offer the best of exotic Marrakech and the beauty of the High Atlas Mountains, plus a visit to the fishing port of Essaouira.

Accommodation at Riads Les Yeux Bleus and Dar Doukkala

can be booked independently or as part of a multi-centre holiday.

For more information, please contact

bookings@discover.ltd.co.uk