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In Search of Serenity

There's more to Morocco than its crown jewel, says Ann Abel, who visited a trio of tranquil resorts that feel light years away from the hustle and bustle of Marrakech



The bucolic private terrace of an Olinto pavilion

In the world of travel, Morocco used to mean Marrakech. No longer. Yes, the Red City is as gloriously chaotic as ever. And sure, you could retreat into a riad, but perhaps it's time for us to venture out towards destinations that aren't physically far from the tourism capital but are, psychologically, worlds away – both from the city and from one another.

The Mountain Retreat

Opened in September, the stunning Olinto (*olintomorocco.com*) is giving Richard Branson's opulent Kasbah Tamadot some new competition in the Atlas Mountains. Like the

more famous spot, it's in a (more) remote area and targets an adult-only clientele. The hotel is luxurious but quietly so, exuding the good taste of its owner, the Italian prince Fabrizio Ruspoli di Poggio Suasa. He was the creator – way back in 1997 – of the legendary La Maison Arabe in Marrakech, a gorgeous property that neatly split the difference between riad and hotel.

Olinto has a similarly understated aesthetic, with nine freestanding pavilions, each decorated with a rich colour palette and classic furnishings, and some truly impressive carved and painted doors. A few of the pavilions have their own private pools, but the shared one is lovely as well, with the peaks of the High Atlas always in view. The bar, with its stained-glass windows, brick niches, and hints of Art Deco, shares a bit of DNA with the bar at La Maison Arabe, namely a suspended-in-time design that leaves guests unsure whether the space has been around for 10, 20, 50 or 100 years.

It's a fine base for mountain sports on Mount Toubkal, the highest peak in northern Africa, and for home-cooked lunches in family homes in nearby Berber villages. It's also an excellent base for doing not much of anything.

The name Olinto is meant to be easy to say and to remember, and to evoke olives – the estate is an olive grove – though it's not linguistically connected. It was also the artistic nickname of the owner's 17th-century ancestor, Marquis Francesco Maria Ruspoli, the most important Roman patron of the Baroque composer Handel. Passion for music runs in

La Pause lives up to its name. You must pause: not only is there no wifi but there is not even electricity

the family: the current Ruspoli is using his private home on the property as a sometime recital hall, and has created extra accommodations and a programme for world-class pianists, singers and other musicians in residence.

The Coastal Hideaway

Villa Maroc has been a standard bearer in the coastal city of Essaouira for a while now, and in this case, the owners didn't close the original before they launched a sibling in the countryside. Les Jardins de Villa Maroc (lesjardinsdevillamaroc.com) opened in 2009 as a single villa about 10 kilometres from the medina. It got a big expansion and became a proper hotel about six months before Covid closed the world. Its setting is quiet and peaceful, the kind of place that makes you forget that a popular destination is quite close by.

What's interesting about the hotel is its architecture – 11 striking structures, described by hotel employees as the Star Wars village and a Smurf village but officially known as Ecodomes. They're rounded, mud-walled structures with lovely furnishings like geometric-patterned textiles and

woven-leather benches inside (mostly procured from artisans in Essaouira, a burgeoning artistic hub).

Dinner is offered only on request, and it's worth making that request. It starts out with a lovely spread of olives, smoked aubergine and bread, moves on to some savoury pastries, and then seemingly takes you into a Moroccan grandma's home. In my case, a woman of grandmother age proudly emerged from the kitchen with a baking dish of oven-cooked fish – fresh from the fishing city's market – with tomatoes, potatoes and that subtle but complex blend of spices that's so central to the deliciousness of Moroccan cuisine.

The Desert Escape

La Pause (lapause-marrakech.com) lives up to its name. You must pause: not only is there no wifi (an increasingly rare luxury) but there is not even electricity in most of the accommodations at this Agafay Desert property. The best rooms are in the roughly half-dozen mud houses, with thick walls in the traditional climate-controlling construction. The best ones have European-city-style bathrooms but still no artificial light. Once you light all the lanterns and candles, it's as romantic as can be.

There are three main things to do: pool time, camel rides during the golden hour (as anyone who has ridden a camel knows, this is primarily for the photo op, but in this landscape, the light and shadows of the late afternoon are, in fact, magnificent) and food. Lunch is pleasant, but dinner is what really impresses. Tables are set beneath tents and among the scrubby trees of the desert oasis. The only light is from candles, lanterns and bonfires. Busloads of dinner-only guests arrive from Marrakech. And then the servers begin their intricate choreography of carrying tagines through the darkness to the low-lit tables. The confidence of it all adds another layer to the romance of Morocco beyond the famous city.



From left: poolside at Les Jardins de Villa Maroc; La Pause's spectacular desert locale