

MOROCCO

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LIGHTS, CAMERAS AND ACTION -- HOLLYWOOD'S SECRET HIDEAWAY

By JesseNash

photos courtesy of Geoffrey Weill & Assoc.

A bustling new film Mecca has Hollywood buzzing. No, it's not New York City, even though more films have been shot there during the last few years than were filmed in Tinseltown during the same period. Neither is it Sydney, Australia, or Wellington, New Zealand, where films like "The Matrix" and the "Lord of The Rings" trilogy were recently produced.

Surprisingly, this motion picture oasis has sprung up amid sands as old as time, and it has attracted more than a dozen new Hollywood film productions in the last year alone. It has happened in magical Marrakech, capital of Morocco in Northern Africa, where the greenery is lush, the scenery is spectacular and Hollywood is raking in newfound riches.



Marrakech is an intriguing admixture of old and new. The pungent odors of smoke and camels mix with the pleasant aromas of spices and olives, and the sights and sounds confound. Men dressed in traditional garments talk on cell phones as they drive their motorbikes. A bike rider races by carrying live chickens in a crate. Suits and robes mingle amid modern office buildings and ancient mosques, as a thousand years of history entwine in an alluring embrace.

Morocco is an Arab country, make no mistake about that, but it defies the stringent stereotypical images of Middle-Eastern Islamic peoples. It is an open,



the city's Islamic underpinnings are somewhat under wraps. Although mosques in downtown Marrakech sound their call to prayer five times a day, the custom of bowing to Mecca each time is not obvious to the casual

observer. The usual dictates against drinking, dancing and frivolity are also not as evident as one might expect. Marrakech is surprisingly comfortable to Western sensibilities.

HOLLYWOOD'S FAVORITE ON-LOCATION FILM SET

Upon first inspection, you might suspect that the intricate assortment of alleyways and maze-like passages that traverse Marrakech were built just so films like "Indiana Jones" or "Star Wars" could be made there. But not so. The city has simply evolved in mysterious and wondrous ways. (And by the way, these are just two productions that are destined to return to the big screen ... and to Marrakech. According to director Steven Spielberg, plans are already in motion to film much of the long-awaited fourth installment in the "Indiana Jones" series. And director George Lucas has revealed that a good segment of the latest installment of the "Star Wars" franchise recently completed production in Morocco.)



Jeremy Irons, Liam Neeson, Brendan Gleeson and David Thewlis, which shot in April and May of 2003.

So it appears that Morocco has fast become Hollywood's back lot hideaway, with more than ten films recently completed or soon to be shot there. Additional films of note: Director Martin Scorsese is about to do some location shooting for his new Leonardo DiCaprio epic, "The Aviator", on the life of Howard Hughes. And director David Lynch was in Marrakech recently scouting locations for a still unutilized film project that he is working on.

"It is the most beautiful place in the world." -- British Prime Minister Winston Churchill writing to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, urging him to come to Marrakech at the close of World War II's Casablanca Conference in 1943.

Just two hours away by car, another eye-candy destination has caught the attention of Hollywood bigwigs. The enchanting seaside village of Essaouira was recently used as a backdrop for principle shooting of director Oliver Stone's new film "Alexander", starring Angelina Jolie, Colin Farrell and Anthony Hopkins, and based on the life of Alexander the Great. According to the director, further filming was done in Marrakech at the city's most historic and famous hotel, La Mamounia. [More on the great La Mamounia in a moment.]

Director Ridley Scott is in the middle of production in both Essaouira and Marrakech on his film, "Kingdom of Heaven", starring some of Hollywood's hottest stars, Orlando Bloom,

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Not long ago, director Francis Ford Coppola received a Lifetime Achievement Award at Marrakech's international film festival, and the director ended up staying on to scout locations for a film that his Academy Award-winning daughter, Sofia Coppola, is planning as her follow-up to the hugely successful "Lost in Translation".

Morocco is no secret to dignitaries and royalty; they've been finding solace in this exquisite place for generations. American Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, former British Prime Ministers Sir Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, England's Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles, French President Jacques Chirac, Princess Caroline of Monaco, and South Africa's President Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu

are just some of those who've escaped the rigors of busy lives for the joys and riches of Moroccan culture.

A TOURIST'S DELIGHT

An evening visit to Djemaa el Fna Square in the heart of Marrakech overloads the senses. Part circus/part market/part nothing you've ever seen before, the square reflects both

Moroccan entertainment and lifestyle. Snake charmers, fire-eaters, acrobats and fortune-tellers compete for your attention and patronage, along with whistling water-sellers, dressed in distinctive elaborate garb, musicians playing centuries-old one-stringed instruments, and barbers cutting hair at make-shift stands.

People gather three-deep to hear storytellers weave lyrical tales about Berber life and philosophy. The Berbers, indigenous to Morocco, have been around for 2500 years, and still make up 85% of Marrakech's population. Good marketers, they stop midway through their narratives, prompting their enthralled audience to pay to hear the rest.



Barrages of sights, smells and sounds mesh with each other as you cross the huge grounds. It can be a costly stroll, however; if you offer so much as a glance, the performer expects a couple of dirhams (about a quarter) for the privilege. Considering the size of the square and number of performers ... well, you do the math. Latif, our guide, provided by the VERY competent Heritage Tours, explained that this is the way many people in Marrakech make their living. It's seen as a respectable alternative to begging, and if you consider it an evening's entertainment, it's relatively inexpensive.

Latif was our entrée to the city -- important since you have to know where everything is in order to find it! His knowledge of Marrakech, its history and its quirks made for a daily feast of fascinating and entertaining tidbits.

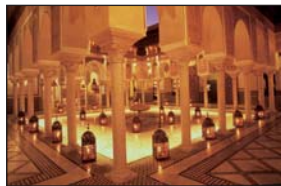
A visit to the Mellah, the old Jewish section, also combines a sense of then and now. Although principally inhabited by Arabs today, the Jewish flavor of the area is still very much apparent. A 500-year-old synagogue, built by the first European Jews to seek refuge in Morocco after fleeing the Spanish Inquisition, is still in use today, and many "shaloms" are exchanged throughout the Mellah between vendors and visitors alike.



Jews were allowed to live in the by then Muslim nation without being subject to Muslim laws -- not a common practice in Arab countries. Although the Berbers (who are not Muslim) and Jews followed separate religions, they shared customs, crafts, land and loyalty, and the strong connection between Arabs, Berbers and Jews persists today.

Most Berbers, the real craftsmen of Morocco (woodcarvers, rug weavers, potters), live high in the Atlas Mountains, the highest peaks in North Africa, and take little part in the "cosmopolitan" Moroccan lifestyle. Still, they have always been considered an important part of the government, and their representatives have long lived within the compound.

Buying a Berber carpet is also part of the Marrakech experience. These world-famous woven wonders are known for the individual artistry and painstaking work that go into their creation. Prices range from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars, depending on size, workmanship and age.



A nondescript walled building, common throughout Marrakech, houses the Daarsaissa Co-op, the largest and most recommended carpet store for price and value. Inside are three floors of uncountable carpets, and huge looms where weavers' hands play the strings like the flying fingers of a concert harpist. The showroom is an experience in itself. Dozens and dozens of rugs mysteriously appear. Their bearers, in constant motion, pile one atop the other before you until the area resembles a large multi-colored mountain range.

The owner, touted by Latif as a most honorable gentleman, lost his credibility when,

after announcing that prices are set by the government and therefore non-negotiable, he adopted the more familiar "Have I got a deal for you!" stance. Although prices of the newly-made -- meaning commercial -- rugs are pre-determined, there is a holier-than-thou approach to what is really just another place to bargain. The price of my rug in the showroom included shipping, which somehow morphed into an extra charge by the time I got to the cashier. Don't be deterred, just aware. The process itself is worth the cost, and you'll come away with a singular treasure that's available only in Morocco. **THE GREAT HISTORIC LA MAMOUNIA HOTEL.**



Opened in 1923 and located in the very heart of Marrakech, La Mamounia is set amid idyllic gardens that are almost three hundred years old, and surrounded by the city's 12th century ochre-colored ramparts.

For 80 years, La Mamounia has emphasized the great traditions of Moroccan hospitality. It is considered a classic example of the great age of grand hotels of the 1930's, and a unique blend of Art Deco and Moorish styles.

Conceived in 1922 with one hundred rooms, La Mamounia was enlarged in 1946, 1950 and 1953. In 1986, the hotel undertook a massive nine-month recreation, bringing it to today's level of magnificence. In 2000 and 2001, every guest room was updated and redesigned -- combining a true Moroccan ambience with every conceivable 21st-century convenience.

Here in the heart of this Imperial city, royalty, connoisseurs and celebrities gather at the legend called "La Mamounia" to relax in an atmosphere that combines history with enchantment and luxury.

Winston Churchill used to spend weeks at a time at La Mamounia with paintbrush in hand painting landscapes from the terrace of his suite, which is still available to those who wish to capture the spirit of those historic times. You can even find old Winston's portrait in the suite, an original painting that is dated 1945 and was painted by his nephew.

Films such as "Gladiator", which gave Russell Crowe his first Academy Award, "Black Hawk Down", and even the historic Alfred Hitchcock film "The Man Who Knew Too Much", starring the legendary James Stewart and Doris Day, were all filmed at La Mamounia, using its grounds as a backdrop.

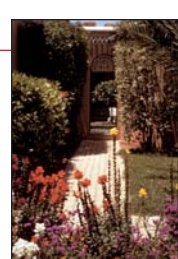
At La Mamounia, everything has been created to take advantage of the hotel's glorious location. The magic begins with breakfast on your private terrace. As sunlight streams onto the crisp linen tablecloth, your gaze is drawn to the horizon where the snow-capped peaks of the Atlas Mountains seem to float upon the desert valley.

Equally magical is the tranquil perfection of the hotel's gardens. Every day, forty gardeners prune, plant and lavish care on La Mamounia's thousands of flowers, bushes and trees, as well as its vegetable gardens. And the birds -- finches, nightingales, warblers and more - are at home in this North African paradise.

As the sun sets, the murmur of frogs croaking in lily ponds creates a natural symphony -- the perfect accompaniment for a cocktail on the Bar du Soleil terrace.

Since the 1920's, the name "La Mamounia" has been synonymous with legend, and every visitor to La Mamounia becomes part of that legend, a component of their reputation as one of the world's grandest and most exquisite hotels.

For more information, contact the Moroccan National Tourist Office; 20 E. 46th St., New York, N.Y. 10017; 212/557-2520; www.Morocco.com.



ACCOMMODATIONS IN ESSAOUIRA: RIAD GYVO

Riad Gyvo is a large riad, well positioned, beautifully constructed and filled with interesting pieces by its museum curator owners, Guy and Ivor. The walls are thick and the ceilings high, the rooms are light and airy and lacking in the over-present dampness that seems to infiltrate the whole Medina of Essaouira. There are two spacious first floor apartments, one first floor studio and two more studios on the ground floor. Each has an ensuite shower room and a well-equipped kitchen area for those who wish to self-serve. Adjacent to Riad Gyvo's roof terrace (where you'll find some of Essaouira's best views of the beach and port), is a charming garconiere with direct access onto the terrace and a more secluded atmosphere than the other rooms, although the private bathroom is not ensuite. Breakfast is not compulsory but it would be a crime to miss the spread, accompanied by the conversation of fellow guests and your host who manages to be welcoming, friendly and enthusiastic while still allowing you to relax in peace. Staying at Riad Gyvo feels like staying with old friends.

Guy and Ivor also have been approached to be a part of the Hollywood pilgrimage. Director Ridley Scott has hired them to consult on the wardrobe for his "Kingdom of Heaven" film. Ivor and Guy are experts in the wardrobe of the region and are historical experts on the subject, and other filmmakers, like Steven Spielberg, are having similar discussions with them.

The climate is sunny and delightful most of the year. The winter nights get chilly, and summer days, uncomfortably hot.

HERITAGE TOURS

Run by Joel A. Zack, Heritage Tours is a boutique specialist that serves the upper end of the market in tailoring each and every client's travels to their interests and their passion. And they live up to their word. They understand the needs of each person, take the time to understand what will make the trip the most enjoyable experience, and have guides, like Latif (mentioned earlier), who really make you feel welcomed into a culture you may not be familiar when you first arrive, but one that will leave you feeling exhilarated as though you had just spent time in your best friend's home.

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HOW TO GET THERE
ROYAL AIR MAROC 1-800-344-6276 or go online at www.royalairmaroc.com. Currency: \$1 equals approximately 87 dirhams.
Entry Requirements: Passport and visa.
Electricity: Both 220 and 110 volts; best to check.