

The luxury hotels putting Morocco's unsung cities on the map

A slew of new high-end openings are set to draw visitors out of Marrakech



A host of new luxury hotels, such as Four Seasons Rabat, are enticing visitors to see more of Morocco

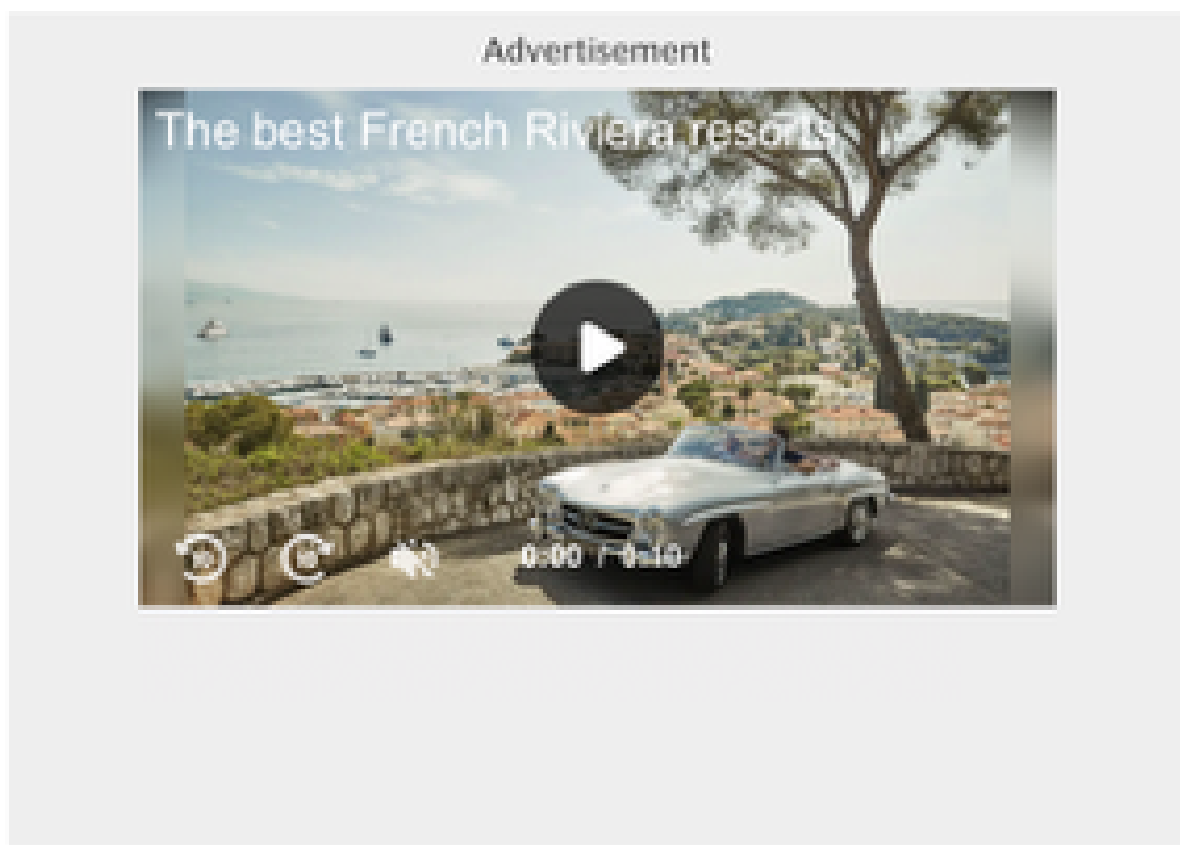
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“Before [Marrakech](#), everything was black,” [Yves Saint Laurent](#) said. “This city taught me colour, and I embraced its light, its insolent mixes, and ardent inventions.” But

insolent mixes, and ardent inventions.” But Saint Laurent also fell in love with [Tangier](#). Known as the White City after its beautiful Medina, a cluster of white buildings that tumble down the hillside to the sea. He bought a house there, Villa Mabrouka (the House of Luck), which opened last year, courtesy of [Jasper Conran](#), as what must surely be one of the country’s most beautiful hotels.



It is just one of a raft of [new hotels](#) putting the north of the country on the map, enticing visitors away from Marrakech to previously undiscovered cities and

enticing visitors away from Marrakech to previously undiscovered cities and coastlines. Alex Wix, who runs high-end tour operator Wix Squared and has endless insider knowledge, told me: “90 per cent of my clients go to Marrakech, but what has changed is that 50 per cent of them are now returning to explore the north. Previously, there was only one luxury hotel I could recommend on the coast, down in the south. But now thanks to the north opening up, both on the [Mediterranean](#) and the Atlantic, there is a choice.”



Villa Mabrouka, formerly owned by designer Yves Saint Laurent, opened as a hotel last year

Much of this is thanks to Vision 2020, a strategic national plan that has successfully

strategic national plan that has successfully encouraged social and economic development, and is protecting Morocco's cultural heritage and the environment. Infrastructure such as the arrival of the TGV supports new hotels. It currently links Tangier to Rabat, with plans to go south in the future.

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Meanwhile, [Rabat](#) is now home to the tallest building in Africa, the Mohammed VI

Offering visitors a luxurious base from which to see all this, the Four Seasons Hotel Rabat at Kasr Al Bahr (Palace by the Sea) opened in November. Once a Sultan's summer residence and later a military hospital, six heritage buildings have been restored, which together with five new ones house 200 rooms and a raft of dining options.



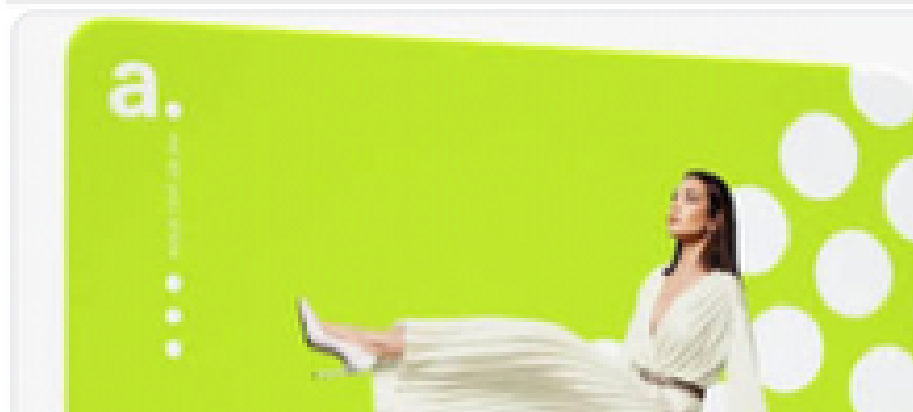
The Four Seasons Hotel Rabat at Kasr Al Bahr opened last month

Facing the Atlantic Ocean, my room had a turquoise-tiled, stone-arched, wraparound terrace from where I drank my early morning coffee to the sound of the muezzin's dawn call. But the Sultan's Riad, spread over two floors of a restored 18th-

tallest building in Africa, the Mohammed VI tower, which rises 250 metres and will, rumour has it, house a Raffles Hotel when it opens. The Grand Theatre of Rabat, a performing arts centre designed by [Zaha Hadid](#) is set to open next year, part of an initiative from the King to promote arts and culture in the capital. This followed Rabat being listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2012.

The Chellah, the medieval, fortified Muslim necropolis and ancient Roman archaeological site, has now been cleaned up and opened to visitors. And last year within the Kasbah, the impressive National Museum of Jewellery, which documents the history of Moroccan jewellery and attire, opened in ancient pavilions neighbouring the Andalusian Gardens.

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hotels under no less a personage than the King himself expanded beyond [Marrakech](#) this year to [Casablanca](#) and the edge of the Mediterranean in Tamuda Bay.

In Casablanca, an easy 80 minutes down the coast from Rabat, the hotel is housed in an emblematic art deco building from the 1950s, with views stretching out over the city's multitude of white-washed roofs to the magnificent Hassan II Mosque. Its interiors are both ornate and opulent, as befits a hotel in the country's economic capital, and service and food sublime.



Royal Mansour Casablanca opened earlier this year Credit: CYRILLE ROBIN

But I am tempted to say that the food is

spread over two floors of a restored 18th-century building, will be the most special accommodation when it opens shortly, well in advance of the 2030 FIFA World Cup taking place there (along with Spain and Portugal).

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Before that too, there are unconfirmed reports that a Royal Mansour is due to open in Rabat. This rapidly expanding group of hotels under no less a personage than the

But I am tempted to say that the food is even better at Tamuda Bay. Perhaps it was the soundtrack of the waves that made the difference but the lunch I had at La Méditerranée was one of the best of my life. A lightly grilled scarlet prawn, gratinated with a sabayon, followed by a paella with aioli, were quite simply perfect. Italian and French restaurants provide alternatives; both with acclaimed chefs at their helm.

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La Table is hung with Berber jewellery but throughout this 55-room hotel, which stretches along the beach in sand-coloured villas, interiors impress. There are art pieces by Ghizlane Sahli, who upcycles waste with

by Ghizlane Sahli, who upcycles waste with silk thread, 95,000 sea shells inlaid in walls and kilim patterns from nearby Tétouan, where one of the country's best-preserved medinas can be found.

From there it is less than two hours cross-country to Fiermontina Océan, a family-owned spot that has put the Atlantic coastline on the map for the luxury traveller. Thirteen villas dot the rock-covered gardens, colourful woven rugs on their Taza stone floors. Each comes with a huge pool and views over it to the ocean.

Thanks to the owners, three neighbouring villages now have electricity and one offers four traditional cottages clustered around a hammam and Café Maure, which serves breakfast and snacks to guests staying there. In another you can enjoy a delectable soup of *bisarra* (fava beans) for breakfast on the terrace of Rahma's house, while cockerels crow and her grandchildren play at her feet.



Family-owned Fiermontina Océan has 13 villas, each with their own pool and ocean view

It's a far cry from city life and the imposing Fairmont Tazi Palace, which opened in Tangier last year. Originally built in the 1920s, its sensitive conversion from palace to hotel has drawn on the tadelakt plaster, zellige tiles and mashrabiya screens that make Moroccan craftsmanship so renowned. It lies in a woody enclave on the outskirts of the city, unlike Villa Mabrouka, whose horseshoe-arched doorway beckons to you from the edge of the kasbah. Like all of these hotels though, it is worth heading north for.