

Mission to Marrakech

IN THE 1960S, BOHEMIANS JOURNEYED TO MARRAKECH TO EXPERIENCE NORTH AFRICA AT ITS MOST MYSTERIOUS. NOWADAYS, IT'S A MAGNET FOR ADVENTUROUS PROPERTY INVESTORS. WE TOOK RUTH PEPPER TO THE 'RED CITY' TO DRINK MINT TEA AND CHECK OUT THE LIE OF THE LAND

WORDS DAN SAVERY PICTURES LEWIS HOUGHTON

Morocco

PROPERTY VIEWING TRIP

Ask any experts in overseas property for their top five investment hotspots and Morocco is likely to crop up again and again. This North African country is experiencing a major image change – and nowhere is this more apparent than in the city of Marrakech.

Little wonder, then, that our house-hunter, Ruth Pepper, heard about Marrakech through the grapevine. “I’ve heard the market here is really opening up. Friends have told me it’s a city that’s primed for investment.”

Morocco is ranked as the fifth largest economic power in Africa – after South Africa, Algeria, Egypt and Nigeria. The current monarch, King Mohammed VI,

makes no bones about his number one priority – increased tourism.

However, at the moment, Marrakech is a city where great luxury co-exists with considerable poverty, and where the future collides with the past. The heart of Marrakech is the medina – an almost Biblical walled city composed of a labyrinth of narrow streets shared by taxis, bicycles, motorbikes, horses, mules, plus thousands of pedestrians wandering through the *souks* (markets). The focus of the city is the Place Djemaa el-Fna – said to be the busiest square in Africa – where each day drummers, snake-charmers and market traders whip up a frenzy of Arabic activity.

“Marrakech is an assault on the

senses,” says Ruth. “It’s just so full of life and colour. Probably the best thing about it is the people – they’re so hard-working, determined and positive.”

Life for the locals is based around religion. There are a number of beautiful mosques scattered across the medina, none more impressive than the towering Koutoubia. Followers of Islam must pray five times a day towards Mecca and this call to prayer can be heard each morning at 5.30am with the chant of “Allah Akhbar” (“God is great”).

“This is the first time I have spent any time in a Muslim country and I’m very impressed with how it functions,” says Ruth. “It is totally different to what we know, but there’s a strong

THE BRIEF: Ruth Pepper is looking to invest in Morocco and is interested

in a three or four-bed property in the bustling city of Marrakech...



“Marrakech is an assault on the senses. The place is just so full of life and colour”



← Above: Ruth enjoys a small glass of red wine against the backdrop of Place Jemaa el Fna

Above right: snake-charmers go about their business in the square

moral standard running through it.”

The locals are very helpful and, despite what you may have heard, the medina is a safe place for women. As one local market trader told us: “This is not Iraq”. But there are problems. Morocco’s infrastructure still needs time to develop and some tourists will get a culture shock. “People work very hard to make a little bit of money. It’s sad when you see those that aren’t able to work barely getting by,” says Ruth.

Back in the UK, she is a marketing and promotions manager who also dabbles in property. She is particularly interested in interior design and loves the Moroccan style of furniture.

In the past ten years, she’s teamed up with friends and renovated a few properties in Scotland, then sold them on. She now lives in a Victorian terrace in Portobello, on Scotland’s east coast, but is itching to invest overseas.

Ruth spent six years living in Athens, and feels this broadened her horizons and made her “aware of what it’s like to live in another culture, away from the comfort-zone of the UK.” She says she wouldn’t buy in the Greek capital because it’s too polluted – instead, she is turning her attention to Eastern Europe and North Africa.

This is Ruth’s first trip to Morocco and she is looking for a three or four-

bed property to use for holiday lets. She might also want to spend a few weeks a year at the property with friends and family. She is flexible on location, but is looking for an easy investment that could house large groups of people.

Marrakech is becoming expensive, but Ruth’s budget of around £200,000 should be enough to show her a good selection of properties.

“It’s easy to get bamboozled by the constant movement in this city, the hustle and bustle,” says Ruth. “So I’m going to keep an open mind and give it time.” Read on to find out what hidden gems we found for her in Marrakech...

PROPERTY 1



Stylish designer house
From €280,000 (£188,800)

PROPERTY 2



Riad Anochka
€260,000 (£175,345)

PROPERTY 3



Palatial villa
€260,000 (£175,345)

PROPERTY 4



Riad Ruth?
€320,000 (£215,640)

PROPERTY 5



Riad Isabelle
€320,000 (£215,640)

... We found five different properties for Ruth to look at...

... turn the page to see how she got on

A Place in the Sun’s

ESSENTIAL GUIDE: the basic facts, figures and highlights of Marrakech

Morocco Guide

THE PLACE

Rabat may be Morocco’s capital, but Marrakech is its heartbeat. The city makes a great base for further exploration, as it’s located near the Atlas Mountains, the Sahara Desert and the Atlantic Ocean.

The medina (old city) merges Arabic, West African and French influences and there are so many food stalls and restaurants that the city feels like one giant barbecue. The smell of burning food permeates the streets and you’re never far from a cafe that serves mint tea, tajine and cous cous.

HISTORY

Centuries before Marrakech existed, this part of North Africa was home to a number of tribes known as ‘Berbers’ (meaning ‘those who were not Arabs’). Founded in 1062, ‘Marrakech’ – derived from Berber words meaning ‘land of God’ – was the capital of an enormous empire that spread from Spain to Sudan in the 11th and 12th centuries.

In the 19th century, the

French and Spanish controlled large parts of Morocco, but in March 1956 they signed an agreement granting the country full independence.

WHERE TO GO

The Koutoubia Mosque dominates the Red City’s skyline and the mayhem of Place Djemaa el-Fna is at its core. Other places of interest include the Bahia Palace, the Majorelle Garden and Marrakech Museum. Most hotels offer excursions to the Atlas Mountains and the seaside town of Essaouira (where rock star Jimi Hendrix used to hang out).

CLIMATE

Marrakech has long hot summers with temperatures in July and August reaching over 40°C (104°F). The best time to visit is in spring or autumn, but evenings can be cold, so you’ll need to pack warm clothes. The wettest part of the year is November to January, when strong rains cause bad driving conditions in the Atlas Mountains.

GETTING THERE

Marrakech is served by Ménara International Airport and is part of the EU ‘Open Skies’ regime thus opening the floodgates for no-frills carriers. Passengers can choose between RyanAir, Thomson Fly, easyJet and Atlas Blue. Morocco can also be accessed by ferry from Spain. Work on a 39-km tunnel between Spain and Tangier is due to start shortly.



“MARRAKECH IS A FAVOURITE SPOT FOR CELEBS. RICHARD BRANSON AND YVES SAINT LAURENT OWN PROPERTIES IN THE CITY, AND THE BECKHAMS HAVE SPENT WEEKENDS THERE”



Morocco



PROPERTY 1

Stylish designer house

From €280,000 (£188,800)

Where: Near La Palmeraie

Property details:

- three bedrooms
- three bathrooms
- fully-fitted kitchen
- Moroccan lounge
- dining area
- galleries
- central courtyard with plunge pool
- balcony with views of the Atlas Mountains
- communal swimming pool surrounded by 250 palm trees
- air-conditioning with heating

For more details:

Contact South Invest: 020 7691 2195; www.south-invest.co.uk.

Teatime in the pleasure dome

Our first property is set in the elegant surroundings of La Palmeraie (palm grove), on the outskirts of Marrakech. We wanted to start our viewing trip with something special and show Ruth a new property in one of Marrakech's finest developments – Dar Lamia.

However, the site is still under construction – completion is expected in July 2008 – so this house is a show-home set in an older resort built by the same developer. It's owned by the resort's French architect, Patrick Abes, and its style will be replicated at Dar Lamia. This part of Marrakech is incredibly peaceful compared to the madness of the medina.

Celine Serna from South Invest tells us that 46 houses are being built at Dar Lamia; prices range from €280,000 to €520,000 (£192,000-£356,365) for four-bedroom properties. The resort's theme is 'fire and water', with each home having a grand fireplace and

a pool in the central courtyard.

The exterior walls are in keeping with the vivid colour of Marrakech itself – it's often called 'The Red City'. The walls are covered in shining *tadelakt*, a smooth plaster that is polished by a river stone, while the tiling on the walls and floors is called *zellige*. These tiles are made in Fez and cut by hand.

However, these properties are all about the interior design. All around the house, there are fantastic spaces to unwind. These include the galleries – a three-metre-wide corridor next to the pool, a salon (Moroccan lounge) and even a little corner especially designed for a siesta! Moroccan families tend to eat their dinner on small separate tables, which we use here to enjoy cups of refreshing mint tea.

Special mention has to be given to the master bedroom, which has a domed roof and a beautiful en-suite bathroom.



I LOVE...

"This property is decked out with beautiful furniture and the decor is out of this world. I really like the setting in the Palmaie – it makes a big contrast to being in the chaos of the medina. The Palmery is very quiet and relaxing, but it's also close enough to the city centre. The entire design and layout of the property is well-thought-out. I love the central courtyard and the siesta room. It is a very good price for what you get and it would fit in with my plans nicely, as I think it could be easily rented out."

I HATE...

"My only concern would be that, although it has the feel of a traditional riad, it is set on a new-build resort. But I think all the resort facilities would appeal to the British market."



"DEVELOPERS CAN OFTEN OFFER FURNITURE PACKAGES, HELP WITH OPENING A BANK ACCOUNT AND FIND AN INDEPENDENT TRANSLATOR FOR THE SIGNATURE OF THE DEED"



This show-house provides a foretaste of Dar Lamia's elegance and comfort. Tiddles certainly likes it...



Morocco



PROPERTY 2

Riad Anochka

€260,000 (£175,345)

Where: In the heart of the medina

Property details:

- four bedrooms
- three bathrooms
- Moroccan lounge
- dining room
- courtyard with pool
- shaded patio
- kitchen
- sun terrace with outdoor furniture

For more details:

Contact Residence Maroc: 01491 835222; www.residence-maroc.co.uk.



A touch of French class

Hidden in the labyrinth of narrow backstreets that wind their way through the medina, this property gives us a taste of the old Morocco.

A riad is a traditional Moroccan property set around an interior garden or courtyard. Many are now used as hotels and provide a peaceful interlude from the hustle and bustle on the street. From outside, most look like an ordinary door in an alleyway, but when you step inside you enter an oasis of peace and tranquillity.

The riad's inward-looking aspect means that much of the property is covered in shade and remains cool. It also means that your home is private, but as soon as you step outside your door you are open to your neighbour.

Most riads are given female names. This one is called 'Riad Anochka' and was renovated two years ago. It is difficult to obtain detailed records of old riads in Marrakech, but it is

thought Anochka originally dates from the early 19th century.

Today, the riad has a French owner, who lets it out to guests. The decor has a colonial feel – not surprising when you think that, 100 years ago, the French controlled large parts of the country, and their influence is still very much a part of this city.

This property comprises four bedrooms and three bathrooms, so Ruth could use it as a small guesthouse. Our agent, Christine Hilton, tells us that the high tourist season is March to July, as August is too hot.

The interior decor is simple but sophisticated. Much of the furniture is made from carved cedarwood. Here in Marrakech, the talented craftsmen and women who make these furnishings and rugs are nicknamed 'Berber Picassos', with no two styles being the same.

The crowning glory is the rooftop terrace, with covered and open areas.

I LOVE...

"I like the fact that you could put your own mark on this riad. It could be lovely with a bit of TLC. At the moment, it works well as a guesthouse, and there are people here who could manage the rentals. I think it could be fantastic: it's very near the souk and right in the middle of the old city."

I HATE...

"My concern would be getting people to and from the riad. You would always need to have somebody here that could collect visitors from the airport and babysit anyone coming on holiday. It's another cost that would have to be factored in."



The kitchen is simple but sophisticated, like the rest of the rooms in this riad



"IF RUTH LIKES THIS PROPERTY SHE WILL NEED TO MAKE A VERBAL OFFER. BUT, UNLIKE IN THE SOUKS, BUYERS WILL BE LUCKY TO GET ANY SORT OF REDUCTION ON THE OFFICIAL ASKING PRICE"



PROPERTY 3

Palatial villa
€260,000 (£175,345)
Where: Luxor in the city suburbs
Property details:
→ huge semi-detached villa
→ six-seven bedrooms
→ four bathrooms
→ basement kitchen
→ bibliotheque (library)
→ large ground-floor living space
→ small rear patio garden
→ roof terrace with pool and fountain
→ hammam (Moroccan sauna)
→ views of the Atlas Mountains
→ air-conditioning with heating

For more details:
Contact Residence Maroc: 01491 835222; www.residence-maroc.co.uk



A villa fit for a king

This is one of the most extraordinary properties *A Place in the Sun* has ever visited. Set on three floors, it's a seven-bedroom house that is so spectacular it could be a mini-palace. And what's even more amazing is that it costs under £180,000.

We picked this villa to show Ruth something completely different to a riad. This property is 15 minutes from the medina, in an opulent suburban area called Luxor, (after Egypt's Valley of the Kings). Luxor is home to lots of wealthy academics from Morocco and Europe. This neighbourhood is dotted with grand villas and tall palm trees.

The colourful ornate work that decorates this impressive property can be seen from outside. The first-floor balcony is supported by two tall pillars and features the intricate ceramic work called 'platre traditionnel'.

Inside, the distinctly Arabic flavour is enhanced by the use of *tadelakt* and

hand-cut tiles from Fez. Interestingly, our agent says that green tiles signify wealth in Morocco. You would have thought that such intricate craftwork dates back centuries, but in fact this villa was completed in 2007.

It is unfurnished, but it does have kitchen cupboards and some of the bedrooms have built-in wardrobes. Unusually, the air-conditioning comes through disguised gaps between the ceiling tiles. There is also a fireplace, as it can get cold in this city. We're told that it's always 5°C (41°F) cooler here than in the medina. The entire house is heated by a solar panel on the roof.

The terrace has unobstructed views of the magnificent snow-capped Atlas Mountains, just an hour away by car. It also has a *hammam* – a sauna, heated underneath by firewood, which is said to be extremely good for the skin.

This villa has a huge amount of living space. But what does Ruth think of it?

“THE COST OF LIVING AND THE COST OF LABOUR IN MOROCCO IS MUCH CHEAPER THAN IN EUROPE. IT'S AROUND 30 PER CENT CHEAPER FOR FOOD AND ALCOHOL THAN IN THE UK”





Hand-crafted tiles from Fez adorn the water fountain in the back yard



I LOVE...

“I like the access to this villa. It's near the medina, but in a nice quiet area. It's a huge house and they say you can get €2,000 for monthly rentals here, which is great. I like the Moroccan style and every single room has wonderful craftsmanship of some kind.”

I HATE...

“It's probably too large to be used as a holiday let, as it wouldn't be suitable for small families. The sensible option would be to rent it out to a big Moroccan family, but I don't know enough about renting to the local market – I'd need more information on that. Unfortunately, this doesn't really fit in with my plans.”





PROPERTY 4

Riad Ruth?

€320,000 (£215,640)

Where: Dar Bacha, in the medina

- Property details:
- unfurnished riad
 - renovated in 2006/2007
 - three bedrooms
 - five bathrooms
 - kitchen
 - central courtyard with pool
 - Moroccan lounge
 - dining room
 - roof terrace

For more details:
Contact Francophiles: 01622 688165; www.francophiles.co.uk.



The riad with no name

Property four is located in a part of the city called Dar Bacha. This is a quieter section of the medina, away from the chaos of the souks and very near the Royal Palace. A number of riads in this area are being used as guesthouses, so it's a popular place for tourists.

The property is a one-minute walk from a tourist drop-off point and taxi rank, so it is easily accessible. The agent tells us that this riad was sold to a French buyer 18 months ago, who renovated the property and now wants to sell it on. This is clearly a good way of making a profit here.

Unusually, this riad has no name, so if she wanted to buy it, it could be called 'Riad Ruth'! As soon as we step through the door, we can see that it's been beautifully restored throughout. Cedarwood, *tadelakt* and mosaic tiles from Fez add touches of colour to the

otherwise plain white and pink walls. The property dates from the 19th century and feels like a piece of Moroccan history. If it was in the UK it would probably be used as a museum or gallery, but here it's just another riad.

The central courtyard is based around a small but deep plunge pool. The wall behind is decorated with an olive tree motif and a regal fountain. There is a tiny box room underneath where you can turn the pool into a Jacuzzi and switch the fountain on.

There are three narrow rooms that can be used as a lounge, three en-suite bedrooms and two extra shower rooms. One of these is on the roof terrace, so you can cool down after an afternoon's sunbathing. From the terrace, you can look down through the whole riad or gaze across the rooftops of the 'Red City' at the hustle and bustle below.

“ OPENING A CONVERTIBLE BANK ACCOUNT WILL ALLOW YOU TO FREELY DEPOSIT AND REPATRIATE ANY FOREIGN CURRENCY, PLUS PROFITS FROM THE PROPERTY ”



The characteristically Moroccan *tadelakt* finish lends the walls a terracotta-like hue

I LOVE...

"This is in a good area and is more accessible than the other riads we've seen. You could almost get a car up to the front door. I think it's perfect for holiday lets – it's close to the palace and there certainly seems to be lots of tourists staying round here. I think it would be fun to kit it out with furniture, plants and so on."

I HATE...

"The rooms are quite small and narrow, and I think it's a bit expensive for just the three bedrooms. Although I suppose the price is higher because it's been renovated so beautifully."





PROPERTY 5

Riad Isabelle

€320,000 (£215,640)

Where: Dar Bacha, the medina

Property details:

- three bedrooms (all en-suite)
- fountain
- open sitting room (bhou)
- living room
- dining room with fireplace
- fitted kitchen
- cloakroom
- large roof terrace with views of the mosque and Atlas Mountains

For more details:

Francophiles: 01622 688165;
www.francophiles.co.uk.

Under the orange tree

This is our last property in Marrakech, but we wanted to end on a high note – and ‘Riad Isabelle’ doesn’t disappoint. It’s a fantastic fully-furnished riad that was renovated three years ago.

This property is once again located in Dar Bacha. We pass from a humble alleyway through a low medieval front door... and enter into another world of sublime peace and quiet.

Each riad is different, and Isabelle’s courtyard has a cool, blue feel. Four orange trees provide the shade in the *jardin* (interior garden). Some of the carvings on the walls are Arabic verses from the Koran. Ruth feels at home here, as her favourite colour is turquoise.

The ground floor consists of a *bhou* (open living area), another living room with Moroccan cushions scattered around and a large TV, dining room and a kitchen with an oven, fridge-freezer and washing machine.

The first floor comprises three spacious en-suite bedrooms, one with

a glorious four-poster double bed. The roof terrace offers views across the Palace and the nearby mosque, where you can hear the haunting call to prayer five times a day.

The great thing about riads is that even if it rains you can still enjoy your courtyard or *jardin* – all you have to do is pull across the tarpaulin cover.

Another selling point of this property is the *menzeh*, which is a covered corner of the roof terrace, that could be used as another lounge/dining area. The detailed carvings and woodwork add to the authentic Moroccan atmosphere of the place and would definitely appeal to guests.

Our agent tells us that the rental income would be around €1,200 (£820) per week here. The cost of a full-time maid would be just €200 (£140) a month. This sounds like a very low wage by British standards, but in this part of the world it is regarded as a reasonable income.



“RENOVATION PROJECTS MAY COME WITHOUT TITLE DEEDS, SO A NOTAIRE HAS TO TRACK DOWN EACH FAMILY MEMBER TO GET THEIR CONSENT TO THE SALE”



I LOVE...

“This is lovely. I really like the *jardin* (garden) and the central patio with the water feature. This one comes with all the fixtures and furnishings, which makes life easier. I love the split-level terrace with the *menzeh* (covered area) – it would be a great place to entertain guests. Another plus-point is that the riad could be managed by a Moroccan agent working on my behalf.”

I HATE...

“Nothing. It’s slightly above my budget, but then it doesn’t need any work or furnishings.”



Ruth weighs up the pros and cons in the *bhou*, an open living area off the courtyard

Morocco



What's the next step?

"The final property fitted in best with my plans – I loved the romantic style of that riad, it was much more accessible than the others I had seen and had been very well renovated. But I need to think harder about the financial situation, as it was over my budget.

"I now realise that you need to

employ a manager here. Logistically, you would need to have someone on site to look after the guests.

"However, it has been a helpful trip in showing me what is available and what can be done. For instance, you could buy a riad, do it up and then resell it at a profit or you could buy one that's been already renovated and use it as a rental property. This trip has given me a lot of food for thought."

WE NEED YOU!

Are you looking for some expert assistance in finding your place in the sun? If you are interested, e-mail us at ptsmag@brooklandsgroup.com with details of where you are looking, your budget and the type of property you are looking for, as well as your phone number and a recent photo. Successful applicants will be contacted as soon as possible.

BUYING TIPS

Investing in Morocco

THE MARKET

Morocco was one of the hottest property markets of 2006 and this looks set to continue in 2007. Foreign Direct Investment in Morocco has been increasing year on year and rose from \$1.07bn (£51,622,000) in 2004 to \$2.9bn (£1.49bn) in 2005. In terms of letting your property, demand outstrips supply and Christine Hilton from Residence Maroc reckons you can expect 85 per cent occupancy. Last year many properties rose in value by 30 per cent.

BUYING PROCESS

Property law in Morocco follows the French example. When both purchaser and vendor have signed the *compromis de vente* (preliminary contract), the

purchaser pays a ten per cent deposit. On occasions, the notaire will under-declare the sale price to try and save on fees and taxes payable to the government. The real sales figure is written on the deeds, which is the only document that stays on record.

Once the notaire is satisfied about the title and status of the property, they will prepare the final sales contract (*acte de vente*) and notify you of a completion date. From start to finish, this process usually takes two to three months.

EXTRA COSTS

When you buy a property in Morocco you will need to add 5.5 per cent to the purchase price for legal fees and registration taxes. Once you own the property, you will have

to pay annual local taxes and you are obliged to insure your house. The maximum rate of Capital Gains Tax is 20 per cent. This reduces to ten per cent after five years and zero after ten years. The good news is that there is no income tax on the first five years of rental and no Inheritance Tax.

MOROCCAN OPTIONS

If Marrakech becomes too pricey, there are other hotspots that are offering affordable properties. New golf and leisure developments are springing up along the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts in Agadir, Tangier, Taghazout Bay and Mogadar, near Essaouira. Prices vary hugely at these resorts, but it is still possible to track down a small off-plan apartment for under £100,000.

Average property prices

HOUSE: £130,000

APARTMENT: £70,000

RIAD TO RENOVATE:

£140,000

FINISHED RIAD:

£220,000

MOROCCO IS
AIMING TO HAVE
10m
TOURISTS PER YEAR
BY 2010