

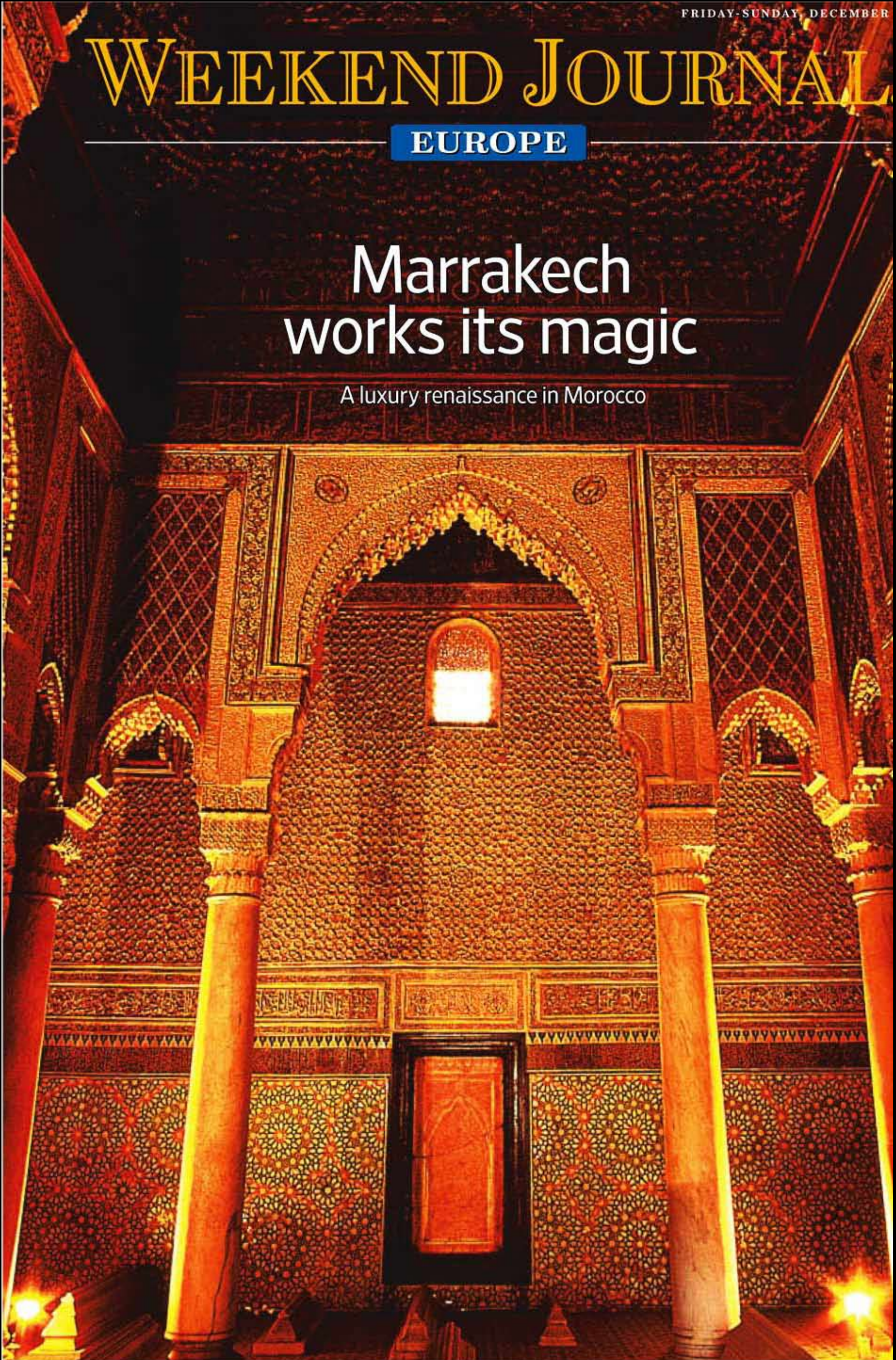
FRIDAY-SUNDAY, DECEMBER

# WEEKEND JOURNAL

EUROPE

## Marrakech works its magic

A luxury renaissance in Morocco



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Clockwise, Julian Schnabel and Rula Jebreal, the writer of his new film based on her book 'Miral'; Vanessa Branson, the co-proprietor of Riad El Fenn; Meryanne Loum-Martin at her villa in the Palmeraie; Riad El Fenn.



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vast influx of foreigners and wealthy Moroccans into the Palmeraie has brought much needed employment, it has been at the expense of natural resources, which are rapidly running down," she says. As a consequence, Ms. Loum-Martin is developing a 150-acre eco complex half an hour further out from Marrakech toward the Atlas Mountains called Jnane Ylane, which is set to open at the end of 2010.

Straddling both the resort nature of the Palmeraie and the intensity of the Medina, there is the zone called Guéliz, or the New Town, which French colonials developed in the Thirties. Despite the recent erection of rows of apartment buildings, it still has elements of French provincial charm, with its wide tree-lined avenues and a sprinkling of attractive bistros and quality retail outlets. A meeting place for Moroccans and the foreign community is Café du Livre, a pleasantly relaxed Internet café cum second-hand bookshop next to a three-star hotel that is run by Dutch born Sandra Zwollo, whose husband was headmaster of the American School in Marrakech.

Close to the Guéliz central market, Italian Lucien Viola has opened Gallerie Rê, one of the most sophisticated art galleries in Marrakech. He exhibits local artists and normally has six or seven major exhibitions a year; he also runs a Berber textiles museum on the outskirts of Marrakech. He says that on his arrival 20 years ago, Marrakech was an entirely different expatriate scene, dominated by the Rothschilds, the Hermès and the Agnellis. Foreigners tended to drive around in Rolls-Royces and had scant interest in the local culture. "Now people are interested in good art and good living—and the gallery also has concerts, book signings, music evenings," he says. "Next year we are having a yoga performance with accompanying musicians."

Many Western artists or members of the so-called cultural crowd tend to live in the Medina, where they have purchased run-down riads for relatively cheap prices and made them into their own fantasy residences. One of the most spectacular modernist ones is owned by Dietrich Becker, the prominent London-based German banker, while nearby artist and writer Danny Moynihan and his wife, actress Katrina Boorman, have created their own local residence. "The Moroccans all want to move out of here to the leafy suburbs because they consider the Medina to be cold and damp," Mr. Moynihan says.

Next door to the Moynihans, Wasfi Kani, the British Opera impresario, has carved her house out of a section of the old pasha's palace. "I love the fact that there are still amazing craftsmen working in the *souk* and a feeling that the local culture is incredibly strong and vibrant," she says. "There is also the rather appealing way that store owners will only beseech you to buy their wares when you are directly in front of their shops and not otherwise."

The recent five-day Marrakech Arts Festival held a series of exhibitions, discussions and film screenings throughout the city. Apart from the screenings of participating film directors such as Mr. Schnabel and James Marsh, the literary gatherings and poetry readings had an intimate house-party feel to them. James Fenton, the former Oxford professor of poetry, read his work in the small courtyard of an ancient riad along with Moroccan and French poets. Novelists Raffaella Barker, Ahdaf Soueif and Andrew O'Hagan held literary gatherings while restaurateur Mourad Mazouz from London's Momo and Sketch cooked lunch on the roof of Riad El Fenn.

As for the future of Marrakech, some residents have voiced concern, saying that they have observed more drunkenness and bad behaviour since the advent of the ultra-budget airlines, such as Ryanair and easyJet in the past two years. On the outskirts of Marrakech, a huge nightclub disco called Pacha has been created where up to 3,000 people fly in from France and elsewhere for weekends of nonstop dancing to music played by leading European disc jockeys. There have been few specific complaints because the revelers are relatively isolated from Marrakech itself, but residents fear it could lead to the growth of more all-night events.

Ironically, the success of the budget airlines appears to have driven other carriers off the route. Currently there are no direct flights from British Airways or Air France while Royal Air Maroc only flies via Casablanca. With the coming explosion in luxury accommodation, partially inspired by the modernist King Mohammed VI, there threatens to be a shortage of flight capacity to Marrakech. One luxury-travel specialist in London says many of its clients refuse to travel on budget airlines to hotels that cost upward of €1,000 a night. "People have to make up their mind because it really comes down to either easyJet or private jet," travel consultant Alice Daunt of Earth London said.

Marrakech however, has shown impressive resilience, regardless of all the development in the past decade. Despite the thousands of expatriates who have arrived, traditional cohesive values are strong and the markets still retain their original allure. Vanessa Branson says she began the Marrakech Arts Festival as a bridge between Islamic and Western cultures—and also as a way of paying back the city for being so generous to her. "You have to be careful not to get too nostalgic about the disappearance of the wizened old men on their donkeys or complain because a KFC opens for the Moroccan market. Infant mortality is falling and literacy is rising with a lot more women graduating as doctors and lawyers. People love to moan, but you can't stand still—I really respect Marrakech for that."

—Bruce Palling is a writer based in London.

## WHERE TO STAY

### Riad Farnatchi

A small and stylish riad created by a prominent British hotelier hidden away in the Medina.  
[www.riadfarnatchi.com](http://www.riadfarnatchi.com)

### La Mamounia

One of the international grand dames, it just emerged from a €100 million facelift and now includes a French restaurant from the Michelin-starred Jean-Pierre Vigato.  
[www.mamounia.com](http://www.mamounia.com)

### Riad el Fenn

Vanessa Branson's hip hotel with two pools and a rooftop restaurant.  
[www.riadelfenn.com](http://www.riadelfenn.com)

### Amanjena

A retreat on the edge of Marrakech for guests who want to unwind and relax in a perfectly run resort.  
[www.amanresorts.com](http://www.amanresorts.com)

### Jnane Tamsna

A series of five beautiful villas in the Palmeraie that can be rented in their entirety or on a room-by-room basis.  
[www.jnaneTamsna.com](http://www.jnaneTamsna.com)

## WHERE TO EAT

### Dar Yacout

The most stylish traditional Moroccan restaurant; be sure you have an appetite as portions are large and endless. +212 52438 2929

### Le Comptoir

The most fashionable French/Moroccan restaurant in the Medina.  
[www.comptoirdarna.com](http://www.comptoirdarna.com)

### Le Grand Café de la Poste

A left bank bistro experience in Gueliz with shades of 'Casablanca' (the film, not the city).  
+212 52443 3038