

**April 16, 2006**

GOING TO

## Casablanca

By **SETH SHERWOOD**

**WHY GO NOW** Thanks to a certain Hollywood film, this Moroccan port city forever recalls the black-and-white era of foggy steamships and fedora hats. It's the author and aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, strolling [Paris](#)-style streets on a stopover to Dakar. It's Edith Piaf, holed up in a hotel with her lover, the prizefighter Marcel Cerdan. It's Josephine Baker, crooning "J'ai Deux Amours" at the Art Deco Rialto theater. And, ultimately, it's Humphrey Bogart, telling Ingrid Bergman that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.

But truth be told, the glamour wore off a long time ago. With its majestically faded architecture and dusty colonial boulevards, this rough-edged metropolis of four million feels like a fossil of bygone days, which is exactly what makes Casablanca so enticing. Its raffish air and melancholy grandeur — more evocative of Havana than [Hong Kong](#) — are the rare exception to a shrinking, touristy world of design-minded boutique hotels and Wallpaper-style homogeneity.

These days, the grandiose architecture concocted by the French colonialists — sinewy Art Nouveau edifices, cool Art Deco town houses, collagelike Neo-Moorish palaces — has made the city a giant museum. Under the eye of the world's tallest minaret, men and women still walk along the palm-lined medinas in hooded djellaba robes and head-covering hijab. And with the exception of Casablanca's thoroughly contemporary night life, the newest hot spots exploit the city's aging bones, resurrecting venerable structures into period boutiques and cafes.

**WHERE TO STAY** A new bright spot in Casablanca's staid hotel scene, Dar Itrit (9, rue Restinga; 212-22-36-02-58; [www.daritrit.ma](http://www.daritrit.ma)), is a rare specimen indeed: an intimate bed-and-breakfast at a quiet remove from downtown. It is housed in a whitewashed 1940's villa, which was converted into a hotel by a French couple in 2004, and is outfitted with Moorish mirrors, inlaid tables, Oriental carpets and other Old World Moroccan touches. The hotel has one single (65 euros, about \$81, at \$1.24 to the euro) and two doubles (75 euros), all with shared bathrooms. Breakfast is included.

Self-made sultans of business and style stride up the red-carpeted steps, under the soaring oriental archway and into the opulent Le Royal Mansour Méridien (27, avenue des Forces Armées Royales; 212-22-31-21-12; [www.mansour.lemeridien.com](http://www.mansour.lemeridien.com)). Though built in the 1950's, it is a modern Moorish affair, complete with high-speed Internet access, a spa, a gym and upscale restaurants. Low-season doubles start at 2,900 dirhams, about \$319, at 9.10 dirhams to the dollar.

To live la vie en rose (with a daily linen change), follow the footsteps of Piaf and Cerdan to the Hotel Transatlantique (79, rue Chaouia; 212-22-29-45-51; [www.transatcasa.com](http://www.transatcasa.com)). Built in 1922, the Art Deco structure holds a riot of Oriental carpets, urns, mounted rifles, statues of Nubian princesses and other riches. Doubles from 840 dirhams.

**WHERE TO EAT** When the French pulled out of [Morocco](#) in 1956, they left behind an appreciation for fine food and drink that persists to this day. Paris-style bistros are entrenched in Casablanca's culinary landscape, and French ingredients infuse top restaurants that are not ostensibly Gallic. Prices below are based on a three-course meal for two, without wine.

Despite its gimmicky name, Rick's Café (248, boulevard Sour Jdid, Old Medina; 212-22-27-42-07) has become one of the city's chicest restaurants and bars since its 2004 debut. Inspired by "Casablanca," the exquisite mini-palace evokes the glamour and exoticism of the city's cinematic glory. By night, bartenders in white jackets and red fezes pour cocktails for an international crowd dining on parfait de foie gras, roast duck in mango sauce and other French-tinged specialties. About 500 dirhams.

Fancy a fillet of ostrich? Join local foodies at A Ma Bretagne (Boulevard de l'Océan Atlantique, Sidi Abderrahmane; 212-22-39-79-79). Operated by one of the nation's most decorated chefs, André Halbert, a Frenchman, this modern, oceanfront restaurant was designed by Brigitte Martinez, a Philippe Starck student with more restraint than her teacher. Within the airy glass and wood space, bourgeois Moroccan and French couples sip selections from the extensive international wine list and dine on a seasonal menu based on market availability. Recent specials included sea bass tartare, duck à l'orange, king prawns in flaky pastry, John Dory fish in lobster sauce and ostrich. A selection of classic desserts (like chocolate soufflé and poached pears) and petit fours winds up the evening. About 800 dirhams.

The humble pigeon becomes culinary art at Al Mounia (95, rue du Prince Moulay Abdellah; 212-22-22-26-69). Diced, stuffed into puff pastry and topped with powdered sugar and cinnamon, the bird forms the core of the excellent pastilla at this ornate shrine to traditional Moroccan fare. Also on the menu are very good sweet-savory tajine stews, grilled kebabs and spiced couscous piled with judiciously tender meats and vegetables. Dazzling Moorish décor creates a dramatic dining atmosphere. Around 600 dirhams.

For dessert, tote your vintage Hermès bag to the intersection of Boulevard Moulay Rachid and Boulevard d'Anfa, where you'll find the Villa Zevaco (212-22-36-60-00). A sleek, modernist 1949 house, seemingly airlifted from Palm Springs, it has recently become an outpost of Paul, the upscale French patisserie chain. The hangout serves sorbets, chocolate croissants, hot chocolate and an extensive brunch (for 99 dirhams) to Casablanca's air-kissing socialites.

**WHAT TO DO DURING THE DAY** Imbibe Casablanca's distinctive architectural cocktail. Though run-down, the Art Nouveau buildings along the Boulevard de Paris, Boulevard Mohammed V and

Avenue Lalla Yacout are teeming with wrought-iron balconies, sinewy curves, tendril-like ornamentation and other details that suggest the 16th arrondissement in Paris. Morocco's version of prehip [Miami](#) is the Gauthier district, which radiates with Art Deco buildings. And in the city's downtown, the Rialto theater remains a singular landmark. Seemingly carved from lemon and strawberry sherbet, the Rialto (35, rue Mohammed Qorri) in 1943 was host to Josephine Baker, who was living in Casablanca at the time.

Gothic and Art Deco merge at the abandoned Sacré Coeur cathedral, a huge sepulchral presence on Boulevard Rachidi. In Place Mohammed V, the large central post office and other administrative buildings embody the Neo-Moorish style, a fusion of centuries-old Arabo-Andalusian details and modern Le Corbusier-esque functionalism.

The icon of the Casablanca skyline is the towering 656-foot minaret of the Hassan II Mosque (Boulevard Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah; 212-22-48-28-86). The third-largest mosque in the world (after those in Mecca and Medina), Hassan II was finished in 1993 after six years of round-the-clock labor by some 10,000 artisans. Tours (120 dirhams) daily except Friday.

**WHAT TO DO AT NIGHT** Come weekends, Casablanca goes cosmopolitan. French expatriate businessmen loosen their ties, staff members of international embassies from the nearby capital, Rabat, arrive in party mode, and Moroccan professionals and socialites don their best European fashions. Conveniently, the city's nocturnal scene is concentrated along the seaside corniche in the Aïn Diab district, another haven of Art Deco edifices. Like an all-night buffet, this coastal strip is lined with D.J. lounges, live music sites and Arab-themed discos full of smoldering chicha pipes.

One of the most stylish spots is the very sleek and very pink Candy Bar lounge in the Hotel Riad Salam (Boulevard de la Corniche Aïn Diab; 212-22-79-84-40). At Armstrong (41, boulevard de la Corniche Aïn Diab; 212-22-79-76-56), the band is so loud that you can barely think. Still, the place attracts dense throngs of 20- and 30-somethings, and the festive vibe is contagious. For a mellower scene, head to the minimalist-chic Mystic Garden (33, boulevard de la Corniche Aïn Diab; 212-22-79-88-77), a restaurant-bar that offers a counterdose of Scandinavian design and mellow music.

**WHERE TO SHOP** For one-stop shopping, the nearby Twin Center (191, boulevard Zerktouni) houses a high-end mall below its dual towers. Walk into the cool white marble atrium and walk out with Fendi sunglasses, an armful of Swatches, sacks of Agatha jewelry and a closet full of Italian footwear.

For chic Moorish-modern home décor, hit Thema Maison (27, rue Houssine Ben Ali; 212-22-22-03-60). The Art Deco town house is stocked with tufted cushions, psychedelic blankets, eggplant-colored drapes, tangerine-hued table runners and other ethno-chic concoctions. Moorish antiques can be found, at a price, at Amazonite (15, rue du Prince Moulay Abdellah; 212-22-29-50-19). Buyers scour Morocco for Fez pottery, Berber jewelry, inlaid woodwork and

more.

**HOW TO STAY WIRED** Just off the Prince Moulay Abdellah pedestrian shopping street is G@.Net (29, rue Abdelkader Al Moftaker; 212-22-22-95-23). High-speed Internet access costs 10 dirhams (about \$1) an hour.

**YOUR FIRST TIME OR YOUR 10TH** The mazelike passages of the Old Medina — Casablanca's 18th-century town — are a welcome antidote to the busy modern city. Amid the echoing calls to prayer and the shouts of hawkers working the souk, an ancient world unfolds: men in djelleba robes praying in small mosques; fully veiled women toting groceries; pushcarts laden with fish rumbling over the stones. The New Medina, a post-World War I creation, is another Neo-Moorish masterwork by French colonial architects. Visit the colorful olive market and handicraft stalls.

**HOW TO GET THERE** Morocco's national airline, Royal Air Maroc (800-344-6726; [www.royalairmaroc.com](http://www.royalairmaroc.com)), offers several nonstop flights a week from Kennedy Airport. Round-trip fares for April begin at \$768, taxes included. From May 17 to June 12, the airline's Web site is offering a special promotional fare starting at \$499, taxes not included.

**HOW TO GET AROUND** Casablanca's red "petit taxis" are cheap and abundant. On the meter, most trips around the central neighborhoods will cost 10 to 20 dirhams. A trip to the Aïn Diab night-life district runs closer to 30 or 35. The minimum charge is 7 dirhams. After 8 p.m., the meters increase by 50 percent.

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