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*ALNOUR TEXTILES:
MOROCCO'S FIRST
SOCIAL ENTERPRISE*

HOW TO PLAN A SOLO
BIRTHDAY TRIP

MARRAKECH



MARRAKECH FALL 2024

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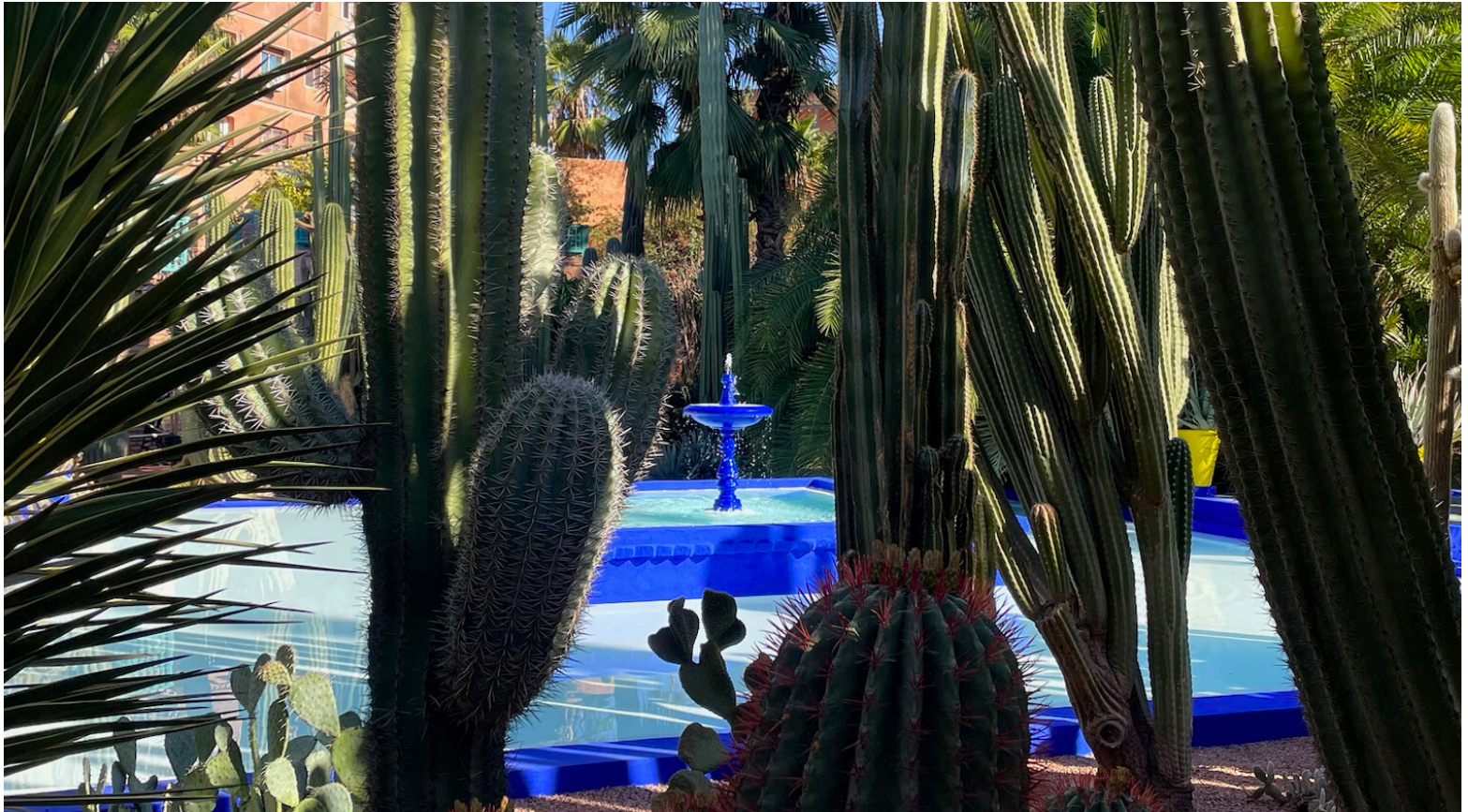
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COBALT STUDIO IN JARDIN
MARJORELLE,
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EDITOR'S LETTER

Welcome to the Marrakech Issue

Dear Reader,

We often talk about travel as an escape or a chance to find ourselves, but Marrakech taught me about the importance of focusing on just being and existing in the moment. Many of my favorite memories from this trip aren't flashy or dramatic; they took place over quiet dinners or steaming cups of tea that offered a chance to reflect and think.

From the shopkeepers who made sure I got home safe to the hotel manager who sent me back to bed when it was clear I wasn't feeling well, Marrakech made sure that I felt loved, cared for, and rested. Marrakech taught me about finding peace even when things around you feel like they may be going too fast. So while these articles feature stories full of jaw-dropping moments, I hope that you're able to feel the way this city wrapped me in its tapestry and made me feel at home.

Until Next Time,

Joy Grant



JOY SMILES IN A SOUK,
PHOTO CREDIT: [RANIA](#)



JOY POSES ON STAIRS, PHOTO CREDIT: [RANIA](#)



MARRAKECH

THE RED CITY

Marrakech, often called the red city, is just like everything you expect, and yet, so different from anything you can imagine. Positioned in Maghreb, also known as Northwestern Africa, Morocco sits just opposite Spain, separated by the Strait of Gibraltar. Founded in the mid-11th century by the Almoravids, Marrakech quickly rose to power and became one of Morocco's four historical capitals. And in the country's center, the red city stands as one of its most renowned destinations.

The terracotta walls of Marrakech's Medina (a UNESCO World Heritage site) shape a labyrinth of homes, places of worship, gardens, and souks (markets), all immersed in an ecosystem of its own. Donkeys haul goods through narrow streets as motorbikes whiz by; these contrasting scenes create a beautifully chaotic picture.

Surrounding this ancient center, modern neighborhoods like Gueliz and Hivernage reveal Morocco's growing contemporary lifestyle. This side of Marrakech displays wide boulevards, shopping centers, French cafes, and luxury boutiques. While the city is growing and changing, its soul remains visible in the colors, the hospitality, and the history that's embedded throughout its streets.



INTRODUCTION TO

The Medina



Words by Joy Grant | Photos by Rania

Step into the heartbeat of Marrakech, where the souks are more than markets; they're Morocco's living museum, alive with the scent of spices, the glimmer of brass lamps, and the calls of merchants echoing through winding alleys.

The first time I entered the Medina, I was overwhelmed by the sounds of haggling, the smell of spices, the glint of brass lamps, and the people crowded into tight alleyways as shop owners called out in hopes of getting my attention. Although I felt bombarded at first, I never felt unsafe. The souks served as an opportunity to rebuild trust in myself as a traveler, find some great deals, and discover Moroccan culture for myself.

The more time I spent in the Medina, the the less intimidating the souks became. The chaos melted away and revealed a well-oiled machine. The deeper I went, the more I understood that the souks weren't just a maze of markets; they're Morocco's living, breathing museum exhibiting its longstanding culture.

Founded in the 11th century by the Almoravids, the souks served as a major political and trading hub. Located in the center of ancient caravan routes, Marrakech became a meeting point for traders from all over the world.

As the amount of goods sold increased, specialized markets were formed and eventually separated based on trade. Today, the souks are divided into sections such as the spice souk, the leather souk, the dye souk, etc. To this day, many of the families who were there at the start still work within the same craft. And while I knew most of that ahead of time, that didn't make it any easier to navigate.

When doing research for this trip, many suggested that I enter the souks for the first time with a guide. Luckily enough, my hotel's manager took me and a couple of other travelers on a short tour showing us the way from our riad to the Souks main square, Jemma el-Fnaa. Along the way, she pointed out other landmarks like the Madrasa Ben Yusef and Le Jardin Secret. And while a GPS is great, I suggest using landmarks as much as possible to orient yourself. Cell service can be spotty, and even on offline maps,



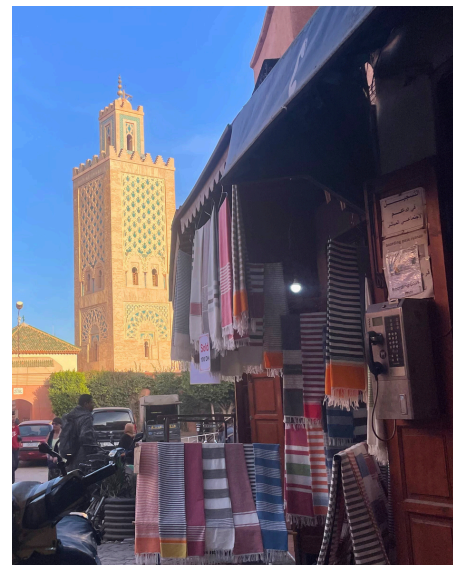
JOY SMILES NEAR SPICE DISPLAY IN A SOUK

MEDINA



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:
JOY POSES IN A YARN SHOP
JOY SMELLS SPICES IN A SOUK
BACKGROUND IMAGE: JOY POSES IN A SPICE SHOP
JOY POSES WITH MULTI-COLORED YARN IN THE FOREGROUND

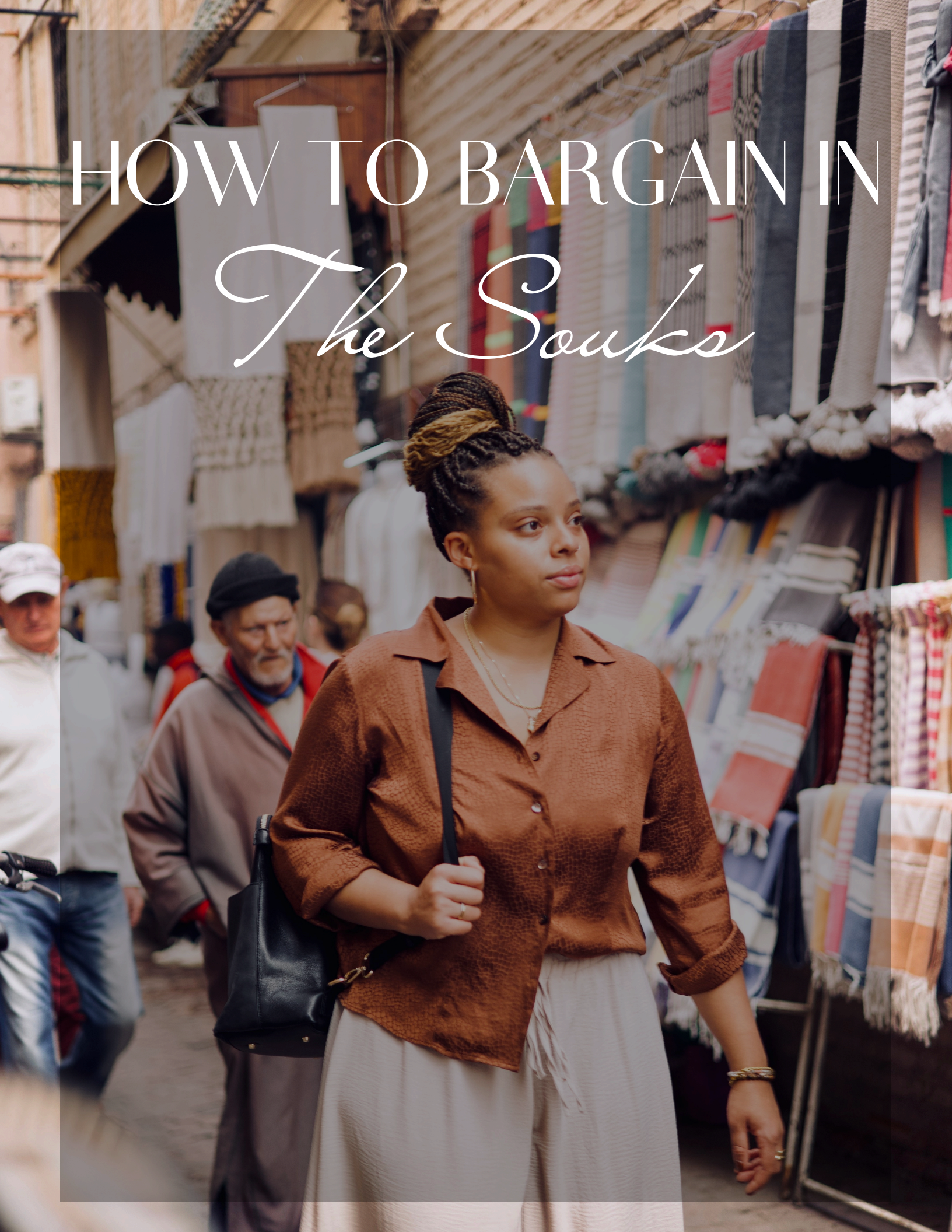
On my second day in town, I remember frantically walking up and down the same few streets because I couldn't figure out which of the small streets led to my riad. It wasn't until one of the shopkeepers noticed and helped me that I finally got turned in the right direction. My beloved GPS had failed me, yet reminded me that there was a world before technology, and paying attention to your surroundings would always be the safest bet. After this incident, I remembered streets by the faces of shopowners, a motorbike that had been parked in the same place for three days, or even the sound of handmade wind chimes. Now with the difficulty of navigating out of the way, I could focus on what really mattered: shopping.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
SHELVES OF DECORATIVE PILLOWS AND TAPESTRIES; PEOPLE SHOPPING IN THE SOUKS; GOLD LIGHTING FIXTURES AND HOME DECOR IN THE SOUKS; ARTISANS MAKING LEATHER GOODS; SCARVES HANGING ON DISPLAY IN THE SOUKS
PHOTO CREDIT: JOY GRANT

MEDINA

HOW TO BARGAIN IN *The Souks*



MY FIRST BARGAINING EXPERIENCE. . .

Words by Joy Grant | Photos by [Rania](#)

In Marrakech's souks, bargaining is more than a way to shop; it's how you find fair prices, share a laugh, and build authentic connections.

My first bargaining experience was an experiment. I needed to know what to expect in a low-stakes environment. My main goal was to buy a rug on this trip, but I couldn't practice bargaining on the rug, so when the first rug shop invited me in, I accepted. I wasn't particularly blown away by their options, but I didn't need to be. I let them know that I was just looking and getting a sense of prices. He pulled out the first rug, and immediately, I asked how much, underestimating how intricate this exchange was about to become. From there, a show began, and I was in for a masterclass of showmanship.

Before I knew it, two additional workers surrounded me, each pulling out a few rugs to be exhibited.

I stood in the middle of the room as red, yellow, and blue rugs began unfurling on the ground. "This one's wool, touch it." "This is crafted with aloe leaves." Finally, the boss and original showman stepped in. "Name your price," he said, handing me a pad of paper and a pen.

And this is where I'll give my first and most important bargaining tip.

01.

Know exactly how much you are willing to AND want to pay.

- ▶ Visit stores with set prices. [Ensemble Artisanal](#) is a great option.
- ▶ Watch YouTube and TikTok videos to see what other people have paid.
- ▶ If you don't enjoy bargaining, only shop at places where prices are clearly displayed.

SOUKS

JOY POSES WHILE IN A CERAMIC SHOP



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:
JOY POSES IN AN ALLEY IN THE MEDINA
JOY SMILES IN A CERAMIC SHOP WHILE HOLDING A CERAMIC IN A SOUK
JOY SMILES IN A CERAMIC SHOP IN A SOUK
BACKGROUND IMAGE: JOY SMILES WHILE LEANING AGAINST A WALL IN THE MEDINA
JOY POSES ALONG A WALL IN THE MEDINA
PHOTO CREDIT: [RANIA](#)

This way, you're not caught off guard when someone hands you a pen and tells you to make the first move.

This is exactly where I found myself, pen in hand, eyes wide, trying to remember everything I'd read. Semi-confident, I jotted down my number and handed the pad back face down. He wasn't the only one who could be dramatic. Turning over the paper, his eyes got almost as big as mine before he chuckled and handed my pad back with a number almost triple what mine was. We were both in the business of shocking each other, it would seem.

02.

Stay calm when you see the counteroffer; highballing is part of the game.

- ▶ Keep your cool, counter with your own number, or be ready to walk away.
- ▶ As a rule of thumb, counter about $\frac{2}{3}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ of their price, depending on how firm you want to be. Offering half will likely end the back and forth, and you'll either get the price or walk away.

We went back and forth on pricing a couple of times before I realized that we wouldn't be able to come to an agreement. So I said my goodbyes and turned to leave.

As I was walking out, he followed and made his actual final offer, stating that since I was his first customer of the day, he would make it easy for both of us. And while I didn't accept it, this interaction prepped me for many bargain wars to come.

03.

Be okay with walking away.

- ▶ If the price doesn't match your expectations or you're not a fan of the vibe, leave.
- ▶ Knowing your limit and your budget makes this decision easier,
- ▶ Sometimes walking away can get you the best offer or just peace of mind.

The rest of my time in the Medina was filled with ease. The sounds and smells of the market became charming and quaint. The shopkeeper who helped me find my bearings when lost became a friend and hosted me for tea with his daughter. And when packing to leave, I had to reorganize my bags four times to get everything to fit (mainly my two rugs!). The Medina had stayed the same, but the chaos had shaped me into someone who could embrace peace despite the noise.

A Few Final Souk Survival Tips

- ▶ **Don't fall for the "one-day-only" show:** If someone invites you to a special Berber presentation that's only happening today, odds are it'll happen tomorrow too. It's part performance, part persuasion. But also a good opportunity to find out about other souks you may not have visited yet.
- ▶ Shopping during the morning is usually calmer, and when you can get better deals, people often want to start with a sale early in the day to get the ball rolling.

ALNOUR: MOROCCO'S *First* SOCIAL ENTERPRISE



AINOUR EMPLOYEES SEWING EMBROIDERY

How AlNour redefines what work can look like for women with disabilities in Morocco.

Words and Photography by Joy Grant

In the heart of Marrakech, AlNour Textiles is stitching a new future. Morocco's first and only social enterprise employs 40 women with disabilities and has already supported two into retirement, an uncommon security in a country where opportunities for women with disabilities are scarce. Inside its light-filled workshop, embroidery serves as a vehicle for independence, dignity, and cultural preservation.

In 2023, the United Nations Development Program released statistics highlighting that 5.5% of Moroccans have a disability, and a 2014 national survey revealed that only 13.6% of adults with disabilities were em-

ployed. While Morocco's government has begun making this population's needs a priority, there are still challenges being faced. Many of these difficulties are rooted in stigma, discrimination, and a lack of awareness. These difficulties are further exacerbated by poverty. People with both visible and invisible disabilities are more likely to experience multidimensional poverty than people without disabilities. This economic strain often limits their access to essential services and devices that would vastly improve their quality of life.

These constraints weigh even more heavily on women with disabilities. According to Morocco's Second Survey on Disability Prevalence, only 8.9% of the country's working population accounts for women with disabilities.



AINOUR TEXTILES STOREFRONT

The discrimination they experience for having a disability is then compounded by the discrimination they face for being a woman. Framed by this reality, AINour's structure and employment record are groundbreaking for a community with limited opportunities for independence.

While the statistics paint a picture of exclusion, AINour offers a different scene entirely. Its storefront and workshop sit in Marrakech's Medina, less than a ten-minute walk from Jemaa el-Fnaa Square. Behind its front doors, the hum of stitching and the rhythm of women working side by side reveal how inclusion can look. When the business first began, one of its largest undertakings was making the building fully accessible. Today, opening the doors from the store into the workshop reveals wide hallways and doorways, open spaces, and bright sunrays spilling across embroidery tables.

During my tour, what stood out most was the atmosphere itself and how infectious the energy was. It was one of those rare occasions when you could tell that it was a joy for them to be at work. The employees

are coworkers, but also peers and classmates in a way that rarely happens in a typical workspace. While walking around with Fatima Belayachi, one of AINours' coordinators, she explained that their days begin together, and they are picked up and transported to the workshop as a group. "Everything she needs, she finds here," she continued. They share breakfast and lunch provided by AINours' in-house chefs, and their children attend daycare together in the same building. In the future, AINour hopes to also offer on-site physical therapy, but in the meantime, they pay for the women's outpatient care. Many companies claim to be "a family," but AINour models what that looks like in practice.

From the start, language is prioritized to help with communication and connection. Each woman can learn Arabic, French, or sign language as needed, including those from the High Atlas regions who often arrive with embroidery skills but no formal education in Arabic or French. Those who will be customer-facing

are also taught English. Alongside language, they are all trained for six months to a year (depending on skill level) to be able to perfectly replicate traditional Moroccan designs, ensuring that their culture will always be embedded in their work.

EACH PIECE NEEDS TO BE AS CLOSE
TO PERFECT AS POSSIBLE TO PROVE
A POINT: PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
ARE CAPABLE OF PRODUCING WORK
OF THE HIGHEST QUALITY.

As I was taking pictures and observing, each woman was eager to show me their projects, visibly proud of themselves, their work, and the group as a whole. What they create is more than skill; it is a continuation of Morocco's rich embroidery heritage. Moroccan embroidery consists of seven styles, each named after the city they derive from. At AlNour, these designs are taken seriously. Some women's sole responsibility is quality control, checking each item to ensure that there isn't a stitch out of place. Fatima explained to me that this attention to detail isn't just about keeping customers happy. Each piece needs to be as close to perfect as possible to prove a point: people with

disabilities are capable of producing work of the highest quality.

One of the most recognized of these designs is Fes embroidery, which originated in Fes, and is recognized by its symmetrical and meticulous reversible stitching (it looks the same on each side of the fabric). Its motifs include geometric borders and arabesques that represent protection and continuation. Rabat embroidery, on the other hand, is more expressive and known for its bold colors and floral designs.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
ALNOUR EMPLOYEES HARD AT WORK, AN ALNOUR EMPLOYEE
MEASURING A PATTERN, CLOSE UP OF FES STYLE EMBROIDERY
STITCHES

At AlNour, these centuries-old patterns are highlighted and preserved by applying them to modern clothing and textile designs that carry traditions into the present. As Fatima explained, “Our embroidery is always traditional, but the styles are contemporary; no kaftans, or heavy items, only simple, minimal pieces that people can wear or use every day.” From tablecloths to dresses, each AlNour piece seamlessly blends traditional elements with contemporary design, capturing the essence of Morocco today.

While these designs are intended to showcase Moroccan embroidery, they are not exclusive to Moroccans. The balance between culture and modernity has opened doors beyond Morocco. Through its storefront, social media presence, and partnerships with local and international organizations, AlNour’s embroidery has garnered supporters worldwide. One example is its collaboration with The Met Museum in New York, which co-developed a line of products with AlNour as part of its Heirloom Project.



RETAIL ITEMS DISPLAYED INSIDE ALNOUR'S SHOP

The collection of embroidered home décor items was inspired by the Museum’s Islamic Wing as well as the Met Cloister’s garden. Partnerships like this show how AlNour’s designs connect local tradition to a global stage, extending the women’s work and their stories far beyond Marrakech. Full of pride, Fatima spoke of these partnerships as learning opportunities, stating, “There’s always a new thing to learn and a new challenge to resolve. This allows everyone to keep growing together.” And for visitors who shop at AlNour in person, enterprises like AlNour show how tourism can be reimagined: not as extraction, but as exchange. Every purchase becomes part of a cycle that uplifts women, sustains tradition, and connects visitors to Morocco in meaningful ways. While the weight of that task may seem heavy, AlNour takes it in stride.

“THERE’S ALWAYS A NEW THING TO
LEARN AND A NEW CHALLENGE TO
RESOLVE. THIS ALLOWS EVERYONE TO
KEEP GROWING TOGETHER.”

Beyond special collaborations, AlNour produces two collections each year, summer and winter, creating a rhythm that aligns the enterprise with global fashion and textile houses. This consistency allows consumers and partners alike to see AlNour not only as a social initiative but as a professional brand of enduring quality.

Fittingly, “AlNour” means light, and that’s what it offers: a way forward for women, for cultural preservation, and for how we imagine business with purpose. In a city shaped by crafts, AlNour is proving what is possible when the artists are supported. The demand is already there; they consistently have more CVs than open positions, and their goal is to open more stores and workshops across Morocco. Each new location would provide more women with the opportunity to learn, support themselves, and carry their traditions into the future.

CRAFTS DESCENDING

down the MOUNTAIN



OURIKA VALLEY RIVERSIDE RESTAURANTS

Just beyond Marrakech, the Ourika Valley is the craft collectors' paradise. This article highlights the crafts and their connection to the land, showing how Amazigh traditions have endured through resilience and artistry.

Photos and Words by Joy Grant



MARRAKECH FALL 2024

Marrakech fades into the High Atlas mountains like an ombre, slowly but surely. Just 20 miles from the Medina, the range stretches from Morocco, across Algeria, and into Tunisia. The mountainside develops into a lush greenery that attaches itself to the sky as the peaks climb closer to the clouds. The driver I used on my first day in town was from the Ourika Valley and mentioned that the mountain views couldn't be missed, and even that was an understatement.

AS BEAUTIFUL AS THE OURIKA VALLEY IS, THE LANDSCAPE IS JUST THE BEGINNING OF ITS DEPTH.

As the road unwinds into the Ourika Valley, it unfolds into the crevices of the mountain's ridges. The higher you go, the greener it becomes, fed by the Ourika River. Its waters have shaped both the land and the Amazigh villages that line its banks for centuries, nourishing the orchards and the communities surrounding them. In the Ourika Valley, the mountains may form the backdrop, but it is the Amazigh people who bring color and meaning to the scene along the roadside. Souvenirs found here aren't just trinkets; they are a way of sustaining life, preserving identity, and showcasing a culture as fertile and enduring as the valley itself.

As beautiful as the Ourika Valley is, the landscape is just the beginning of its depth. Its villages are full of artisans who hold generations of knowledge and traditions. Trees and shops line the winding road, displaying the valley's treasures. Bright woven rugs blow in the wind, and handmade goods glisten in the sun, inviting you to pause as you take in the breathtaking views around you. The artistry laid out

beside the roadside is calling us to shop and offering an introduction to the local culture, carrying threads of traditions that have been passed down for generations. These traditions belong to the Amazigh, commonly known as Berber. To understand these traditions fully, it's important to recognize the people behind them and the weight carried in even the name they are known by.

The effects of racism appear not only in daily life but also in language. Indigenous North Africans are historically known as Amazigh (plural: Imazighen), meaning "free person". After the Arab invasion of North Africa in the 7th century, the Amazigh community was stripped of their name and labeled with the Latin term "barbarus" (originally used to describe anyone who didn't speak Greek or Latin, and sounded like "unintelligible speech"). Arabs adopted a shortened version of it, "al-Barbar."

When European colonial powers entered the region centuries later, they reinforced the term in official documents and maps. Over time, "Berber" began to have an air of negativity, associating the group with "tribal" or "primitive" stereotypes. Today, the respectful and accurate name is Amazigh/Imazighen, rather than the label imposed on them by outsiders.

Among the valley's earliest crafts, pottery stands out. Terracotta vases arranged on shop shelves glow with the same red earth that formed them. Their uses range from jars for storage, tagines for cooking, to decoration. Regardless of their use, the care in creating them remains the same. Different motifs are selected for each piece's decoration. These designs are symbols with meaning attached, each linked to cosmology, fertility, or tribal identity. During colonization, pottery moved beyond utilitarian needs and became a form of cultural



resistance, reinforcing Amazigh identity and heritage when even their name had been stripped away. These designs are symbols with meaning attached, each linked to cosmology, fertility, or tribal identity. During colonization, pottery moved beyond utilitarian needs and became a form of cultural resistance, reinforcing Amazigh identity and heritage when even their name had been stripped away.

THESE DESIGNS ARE SYMBOLS WITH MEANING



Rugs are another example of the Amazigh community using crafts to carry their legacy. Each rug is woven with intentionality and attention to detail. Different colors, designs, and materials are chosen to tell a story. The rug shop that I visited in the valley was filled to the brim, each wall like a library holding memories waiting to be shared. The manager explained that patterns and symbols forge a visual language tied to spirituality, protection, and family lineage. Diamonds represent an eye for protection, zigzags represent rivers, and v-shapes depict arrows or mountains, often correlated with strength and resilience. And more broadly, many of the symbols are tied to womanhood, with triangles representing motherhood, and diamonds representing the female form.



Amazigh rug weaving is a centuries-old technique traditionally passed down from mothers to daughters, taught in the intimacy of homes. Because of this, different regions developed their own styles. The High Atlas Mountains have become known for their bold patterns and deep reds. Traditionally, natural dyes were used to produce the colors: saffron or pomegranate for yellow, indigo for blue, and madder root for red. Each rug is as much a part of the land as it is a work of art. The fibers, colors, and patterns are spun directly from the earth that sustains this community and transformed into a source of support.

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:
ROADSIDE POTTERY STAND
RUGS DISPLAYED ON ROOFTOP
WOMEN PERFORMING TRADITIONAL AMAZIGH RUG WEAVING



MARRAKECH FALL 2024

Another way women can use the valley's resources to support and preserve cultural practices themselves is through almond oil pressing. Argan oil is so intrinsic to Moroccan culture that UNESCO recognized the practices and know-how concerning the argan tree as an Intangible Cultural Heritage Element in 2014. Earlier, in 1999, the argan forests of southwestern Morocco were declared a Biosphere Reserve.

When I stepped inside the almond oil Co-op, a group of women welcomed me inside, away from the cold. Introductions were made as I warmed up by the fire with their homemade bread, whipped butter, and honey for breakfast. After, we followed the sound of stones grinding and the smell of almonds roasting to where the process was taking place. A thick paste flowed out of the sides of the hand stone mills as their handles were turned to grind the nuts. After kneading, the paste slowly but surely released oil. This oil is treasured for its versatility, celebrated both as skin care and a cooking essential. But more than anything else, it's a highly in-demand Moroccan resource and craft that Amazigh women produce.

My journey into the Ourika Valley continued on a hike that began in the Settti Fadma village and extended further up the mountain. Escorted by a local guide, who, like the craftswomen, makes a living sharing his culture, I was led over slippery rocks, past a beautiful waterfall, to peaks with views I had only dreamed of before. The valleys below were spotted with villages full of earth-toned buildings and streets that followed the mountains' winding bends. The same clay used for pottery can be spotted on the red mountain in the distance, the same saffron used to dye wool for rugs is being sold in small shops along the winding trails of the hike, and almond tree branches can be seen swaying in the cool winter breeze as it makes its way through orchards.

From there, the Atlas mountains extended out of sight, providing thousands of miles of land where Amazigh communities continue to draw from the earth's resources to provide for their people and share their gifts with the world. The scenic mountains may frame the Ourika Valley, but it's the people who bring this land to life. Through crafts and traditions like pottery, rug weaving, and almond oil pressing, the Imazighen have brought color, soul, and life to the land. Through their perseverance, they have ensured that their traditions will live on.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: JOY ENJOYING BREAKFAST ALONG THE OURIKA RIVER, JOY POSING IN FRONT OF THE FIRST SETTI FADMA WATERFALL, JOY POSING IN THE HIGH ATLAS MOUNTAINS



JOY SMILES AND MAKES PEACE SIGNS ON HOT AIR BALLOON, PHOTO CREDIT: JOY GRANT

HOW TO *plan a* SOLO BIRTHDAY TRIP

BY JOY GRANT | PHOTOS BY JOY GRANT AND LANIA

Dive into the art of planning a solo birthday trip so you can never say you don't know where to start again.

Twenty-nine felt like a chance to cap off an important decade, and I wanted to honor that. I wanted to create an experience that would remind me of what's important and that I'm capable of making my dreams come true. Morocco had been on my travel list for the past decade. Twenty-nine was my chance to make it a reality.

Step 1. Choose Your 3 Words

Pick three words to describe the type of trip you want. Do you want your trip to feel relaxing, lavish, and artsy, or adventurous, outdoorsy, and insightful? There's no wrong answer, but be honest with yourself. When you travel alone, your joy is completely up to you. Take this as an opportunity to focus on what would make you feel the best.

My three words that led me to Morocco were adventurous, historical, and breathtaking.



Step 2. Set Your Budget



Now that you know how you want to feel, decide how much you're comfortable spending to bring that vision to life. Pick an overall amount and split that into the different categories (flights, hotels, food, excursions, etc.).

Step 3. Pick Your Destination

Think of places you've always wanted to visit, then narrow it down based on your budget and what aligns best with your three words and research. Browse Facebook groups, flip through travel magazines, and scroll through TikTok and YouTube for firsthand stories and inspiration videos. When researching, make sure to consider visa requirements, safety, and weather.

Step 4. Book Flights & Accommodations

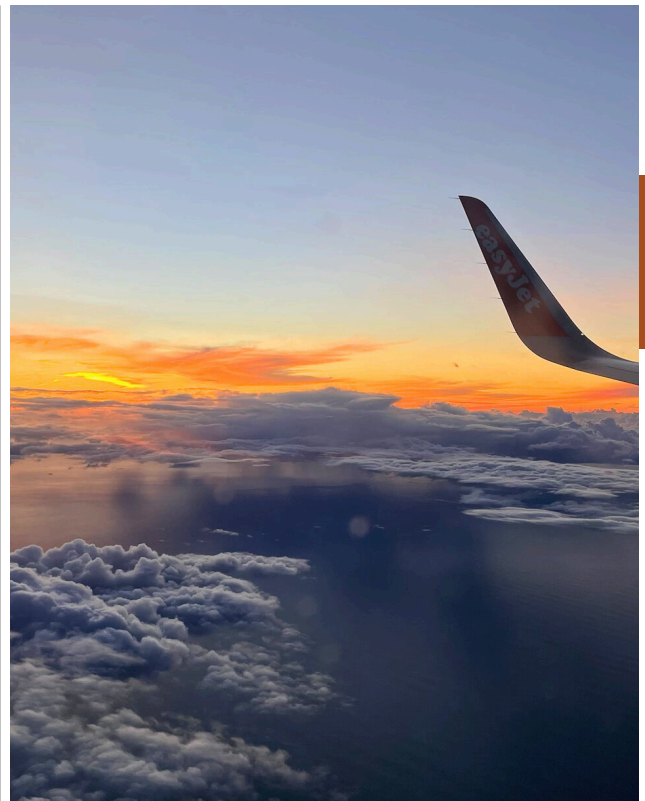
Start by locking in your flight and hotel. Set Google Flights alerts to track the best dates, prices, and routes.

***Land during the daytime for ease and safety**

Search hotel reviews for keywords like "solo traveler" on Google or TripAdvisor.

Check how close hotels are to the things you want to do and research the vibe of the neighborhood to make sure it matches what you're looking for.

To stay organized, I use a spreadsheet with tabs for flights, hotels, and train tickets. It makes comparing prices and saving links in one place way easier. Here's a [template](#) that you can use.



PHOTOS TOP TO BOTTOM: JOY SMILES WALKING THROUGH THE MEDINA, PHOTO CREDIT: RANIA, THE WING OF A PLANE IN THE SKY AT SUNSET

STEP 5. PLAN YOUR EXPERIENCES

This is where your three-trip words come to life.

Relaxing



PHOTOS LEFT TO RIGHT: JOY POSES IN MOROCCAN TENT, HIGH ATLAS MOUNTAIN RANGE, JOY POSES IN JARDIN MARJORELLE

Adventurous



PHOTOS LEFT TO RIGHT: GONDARÉM BEACH, JOY LOOKS OUT AT SKY FROM HOT AIR BALLOON BASKET, ART DISPLAYED IN MARRAKECH SOUK

*Slow mornings,
a trip to the spa,
and beach days.*

*hikes,
ziplining,
fast-paced excursions*

*Birthday photoshoot,
museum visits,
nights filled with live music*

My biggest tip: plan *something*, not *everything*. Do some research and book at least one activity in advance, especially if you're traveling on your actual birthday, to ensure you feel celebrated. But leave some time in your itinerary for spontaneous plans. Many of my favorite experiences have been the result of local suggestions and spur-of-the-moment adventures.

I've always wanted to go in a hot air balloon, so that was a no-brainer for my birthday activity, and while on my trip, I learned about the Ourika Valley and ended up booking a tour there as well.



Step 6. Prepare for Solo Travel

I feel most at ease solo travelling when I'm prepared; how you show up greatly impacts the quality of your trip.

Do Your Research - local customs, key phrases, and offline maps with important locations saved.

Pack Smart - Versatile clothing, safety essentials (travel insurance, copies of IDs, bag locks), and a small day bag.

Stay Safe - Share your plans and location with loved ones and stay alert.

Stay Open - Trust yourself, be vigilant without fear, and remain open to unexpected magic.

Step 7. Create a Birthday Ritual

Being alone on your birthday for the first time can be a jarring experience. It helps to add intentional moments to remind yourself why you chose to spend your birthday this way.

This can be as simple or meaningful as you want it to be: a sunrise walk, journaling your hopes for the year ahead, treating yourself to a solo dinner, lighting a candle and saying a prayer, or writing a letter to your future self. The point is to mark the moment. Claim it. Let it be yours.



A CHOCOLATE CAKE READING HAPPY BIRTHDAY JOY IN FRENCH

Step 8. Be Present and Stay Open to Magic

A solo birthday trip is a reminder that your joy isn't waiting on anyone else's schedule. It's yours to create, explore, and celebrate; whether you're dancing on a rooftop in Barcelona, reading by the ocean in Belize, or hiking through the Atlas Mountains.

Wherever you go, I hope your birthday feels like the best gift of all: freedom, peace, and a little bit of **magic**.





JARDIN MAJORELLE

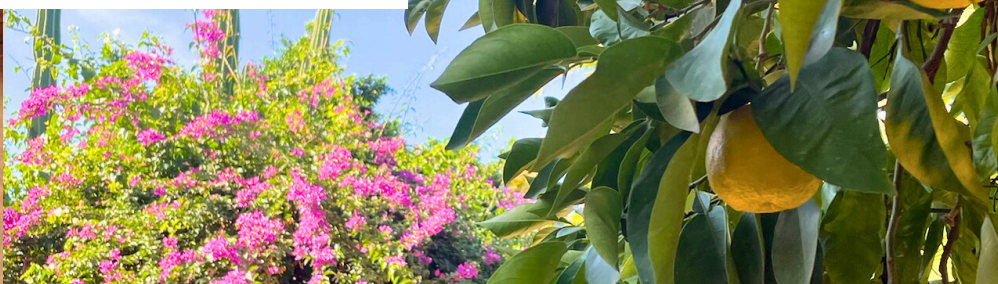
This botanical garden offers a mix of moorish and Art Deco influences in its landscaping and architecture which provide visitors with the perfect backdrop for a romantic stroll or a vibrant photoshoot.

100th
1924-2024
Anniversary
jardin majorelle



JNANE EL HARTI GARDEN

A charming public garden with shaded seating areas, fountains, and walkways provides a haven in the middle of Marrakech's busy Gueliz neighborhood.





The QUIET ABOVE

HOT AIR BALLOONS ASCENDING INTO THE SKY

Photos and Words By Joy Grant

As the sun rises in Marrakech, hot air balloons follow suit, gliding into the sky, leaving the buzz of Marrakech's Medina behind. Floating between the earth and sky, the morning unfolds in beauty and an unexpected calm.

Suspended high above the ground, the chill of the desert air melted away as the hot air balloon's flame engulfed us in its warmth. There were sixteen people in each basket, all divided into four different sections with a pilot in the middle. But up here, I was all alone. The higher we went up, the lighter everything felt and the easier it became to breathe. When the snow-capped peaks of the Atlas mountains came into view, the chatter around me faded to a murmur, and even the sharp hiss of the burner system seemed to soften into the background. As the rising sun lit

"BUT UP HERE, I WAS ALL ALONE"

the mountains in gold, I reminisced on how my morning had begun in the still-dark Medina, tracing my way through almost empty streets.

Knowing that I needed to meet my shuttle driver at 6 am, I was worried about navigating the dark streets on my own. However, I was assured that there wouldn't be issues, as the only people out would be headed to the mosque

or work. They were right, I saw maybe five people in total in an area I'd previously had to duck and dodge people to weave through. Even the sounds were different. The call to prayer rang out, echoing through the air, and cats slipped their way through alleys. Other than that, the only thing I could hear was the crunch of my boots along the street. Cool air brushed against me as I intently found my way to the Ben Youssef Mosque. The near-empty streets made the Medina walls feel larger than life, keeping watch over the Medina's residents.



HOT AIR BALLOONS FLOATING WITH THE HIGH ATLAS MOUNTAINS IN THE DISTANCE



(TOP) HOT AIR BALLOONS
PREPARING FOR LAUNCH
(BOTTOM) JOY LOOKING
UP AT THE SKY IN HOT
AIR BALLOON BASKET

“THE ONCE BLACK BLANKET ABOVE US WAS
NOW STREAKED WITH DEEP PURPLES AND
FUCHSIAS.”



I chose to do an early morning hot air balloon ride because I wanted to see the sunrise and start my day with a beautiful perspective. On the way, we picked up two passengers, both named Carmen, from Spain. As we drove out of the city, light conversation began as everyone introduced themselves, but as we traveled into the desert, the car quieted with the sight of the colors in the sky changing. The once black

blanket above us was now streaked with deep purples and fuchsias.

Just as we all became adjusted to the beauty before us, we began approaching the hot air balloon launch sites. Large flames shot into the air on either side of the road as we passed each company's site, all silently competing with each other to provide the best experience and get their customers in the sky at the



JOY SMILING IN HOT AIR BALLOON;
(RIGHT) HOT AIR BALLOONS FLOATING
IN THE SKY



best times. You wanted to be launched around the same time as everyone else so you could get good pictures, but you also needed to time it so you'd lift off in time for sunlight. There was a beautiful tension and anticipation in the air, a quiet nervousness and a loud sense of awe at the opportunity.

Once unloaded from the car, we all stood back, croissants and juice in hand, watching as the crew moved large baskets and deflated balloons around against the background of the balloons slowly rising and sagging in the half-light, their fabric glowing faintly with each burst of flame. It was almost time.

Situated in our baskets, we anxiously pulled our phones out, ready to capture the magic taking place around us. The flames' heat wrapped around us as the burner system roared the basket jolted, kidding across the ground for a few seconds, catching a few people off

guard, causing them to gasp, clutch the railing, or yelp. "It'll be alright," the pilot chuckled, reassuring us all. Then, it rose, climbing into the sky, leaving the ground behind. Our baskets crew had timed it just right. Looking around our balloon from any angle, you were met with a dozen other balloons ascending into the air, glowing like lanterns off on an adventure of their own, but all adding to the grandeur of the same moment.

The roads below seemed to stretch for miles, leading back to the Medina. Small towns were scattered about, surrounded by fields in a medley of colors with patches of green, browns, yellows, and reds adding to the landscape's tapestry. The balloons around us danced silently in the breeze, passing each other like ships in the night. Their bright fabric reflects

the sunlight. At this height, there was no rush, no noise, just the space to be.

As we began to descend, the ground lifted towards us, leaving the stillness of the sky behind. All around us, the balloons began to land. One by one, each deflated with a sigh. The pilot signaled for our attention, explaining landing instructions, and let us know that we'd be active participants in making it back safely, much to our surprise. The burner released its final hiss as we all clamored to position ourselves so that we faced the same way, ready to hold on and lean back as the shouting of the ground crew emerged. With a gentle thud, it was all over. But the sight of lingering balloons floating in the sky served as a reminder that the quiet above had been real.



LE BAIN BLEU HAMMAM RESTING AREA

The MOROCCAN HAMMAM

Centuries of tradition meet a personal pause: the Moroccan hammam is a ritual, a respite, and an experience that lingers long after the steam fades.

Photos and Words By Joy Grant

Women's wellness has historically been a communal activity. In Japan, onsens provided women a place to soak in mineral-rich hot springs. In Russian banyas, women would gather for heat, steam, and herbal treatments. Women in South Africa have traditionally used herbal steam baths prepared and shared in the community. And Morocco has hammams.

On the search for a restful final day in the city, I navigated my way through the Medina's maze, look-

ing for the hammam that my riad's manager had suggested. When she let me know there were a few good nearby options, I told her that I wanted something with a touch of luxury but rooted in traditional treatments. After walking past the same side streets for a second time, I stopped and asked a group of men if they knew where Le Bain Bleu was. This must have happened often, because before I finished my sentence, they pointed someone out who immediately began leading me in the right direction.

Traditionally, WOMEN USED HAMMAMS AS A PLACE TO



CLEANSE, CONNECT, GET A BREAK FROM DUTIES AT HOME, AND
CREATE A WORLD OF THEIR OWN, ONE WHERE THEY COULD
RELAX, SHARE, AND OPEN UP.

Hammams were born out of Roman and Byzantine bathhouses. In Islamic culture, Hammams became essential for ritual purification before prayer as well as for community life. While hammams have always served both men and women, they became especially important places for women to care for themselves outside the home. Traditionally, women used hammams as a place to cleanse, connect, get a break from duties at home, and create a world of their own, one where they could relax, share, and open up. In modern upscale hammams, the communal aspect is mainly reserved for groups. Solo visitors receive their treatments alone and are given time to clear their minds and connect with themselves.

Entering the reception area, I could immediately tell that the atmosphere I wanted was understood. The decor was a blend of Moroccan touches with a luxury finish. From just this room, you would think that the building was small. But as the staff led me around, it opened up into a full haven beneath the Medina. After changing into a robe and slippers, I was led down a candlelit stone staircase toward the treatment rooms.



LE BAIN BLEU SOAKING ROOM DECORATED WITH ROSES AND CANDLES

When it was time for my treatment, I was brought into a small stone room, hazy with steam and lit with a soft glow. Two stone benches sat across from each other, attached to the walls with a deep stone sink between them. This is where the hammam began. After lying in the heated chamber, relaxing and allowing my pores to open up, it was time to rinse. Warm water was poured over my body, followed by black soap. After each step, I was told to lie down for ten minutes. Whether it was to give me time to relax or to allow my body to prepare for the next step, I was grateful for the break. Being in such an intimate space with a stranger took a moment to get comfortable with and required a level of trust that grew deeper as the process went on.

Next, an exfoliating glove was trailed across my skin for the first part of the exfoliation process. After, a ghassould stone (clay pumice-like tool) was used to polish the tougher skin along my heels. Once smooth head-to-toe, a clay mask was applied, and I was left alone for my final and longest break. Steam twisted upward toward the ceiling, and I closed my eyes, allowing any stress I carried to float away with it.

As I prepared to leave the city, I understood why rituals of the hammam had stood the test of time. This experience allowed me to take a long pause to soak in Morocco's traditions and left me with a sense of renewal, connection, and calm.



LE BAIN BLEU HAMMAM TREATMENT ROOM



MARRAKECH FALL 2024

