

Local essence

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Photography:
Courtesy La Farnatchi

In Marrakech, Riad
La Farnatchi is the
embodiment of
place-led design.

Image on
previous page:
Interconnected
sleeping and
living area

Below:
A shaded private
balcony

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Marrakech was once firmly off the beaten track; the type of destination that drew in the worldly and adventurous. Today, the dusty lanes of its Medina are more well-trodden and the tourists, well, more typical – the major sites now aesthetically sumptuous fodder for Instagram. Yet, even as the city feels more accessible than ever, it hasn't lost its exotic essence; at once colourful and brash, subtle and romantic.

One of the great pleasures of Marrakech has always been the way in which a new world can unfold from behind the doorways that line those Medina pathways. In the city's riads, in particular, the vague chaos of the souks is often supplanted by quiet courtyards, trickling fountains and gentle birdsong. Originally developed as houses or palaces, these inward-facing buildings force out the heat and noise, the living and social spaces oriented around central patios; the name derived from the Arabic word for garden, ryad.





“Traditional Moroccan craft with the spatial comfort expected by international guests.”

Left:
Leather banquette seating in a bar and lounge area

Below:
Lap pool and outdoor seating at twilight

Right:
Traditional detailing on arched entryways



Once the preserve of wealthy merchants, and still predominantly private residences, many of these homes have nonetheless been reimagined as chic hotels, sometimes with just a handful of guestrooms. Among the most highly regarded is La Farnatchi – set across nine interlinked buildings, the boutique riad comprising 10 suites arranged around a series of courtyards, terraces and connecting passageways. Opened in 2004 by the Wix family, today it’s under the stewardship of James Wix specifically, whose father pioneered the business and subsequently handed over the reins. He has bold plans for the property, including the impending addition of five new bedrooms – more bijoux than the existing suites but drawing on the same design language. Other developments are afoot but, subject to planning permits, not yet ready for public consumption.

La Farnatchi has always been a work in progress, however – starting out with five bedrooms, then adding another four and, ultimately, a tenth (along with the spa), bringing things to the still-evolving iteration we see today. It’s a fundamental part of its charm, reading less as a single, unified structure and more as an aggregation of spaces, each with its own proportions and character. The courtyards are varied in scale and atmosphere, while the circulation between the buildings creates a sequence of compressed and open moments typical of the Medina itself.

The interior design approach is equally layered. From the outset, Wix wanted to avoid the binary previously found in Marrakech hospitality. “When we approached this place, we wanted to do something that was a bit different in the Medina,” he explains. “In those days, a little over 20 years ago, we noticed that



a lot of the other properties were either extremely Moroccan in their style or all very European; there wasn't anything that really blended the two.”

Noting that classic Moroccan interiors aren’t traditionally terribly comfortable – “I don't know if you've sat in many Moroccan chairs!” Wix jokes – the aim, in practice, was to mix the look and feel of the region with the ease of Europe; to combine traditional Moroccan craft with the spatial comfort expected by international guests.

This is most evident, perhaps, in the vivid material palette: tadelakt walls, hand-cut zellige tiles and carved plasterwork appear, alongside cedarwood ceilings and moucharabieh screens. These are paired with capacious beds, softer seating and more generous layouts than would typically be found in a domestic riad.

There’s also little of the cookie-cutter on show. Each of the 10 suites is distinct; no two alike and every one shaped individually by scale, light and materiality. From double-height volumes framed by grand arches to cocooning spaces layered in rich textiles, La Farnatchi still evokes something of a ‘home’ in the way eclectic pieces are assembled or, maybe more accurately, collected. There’s a looseness to the design, nothing too precious or fussy. “If I walk through the souks one day and see a lovely lamp or something, or a great pot, I instantly imagine where it might work in one of the suites or the reception,” Wix laughs. “Next thing you know, there's a cart winding its way through the streets with my lamp on it and all the staff looking at me going, ‘he’s done it again!’”

Below left:
Farnatchi Spa
lounge area

Below right:
Moroccan tiling
in the spa spaces

Though this might all seem a touch ad hoc, there's a foundationally crucial ethos at play. La Farnatchi isn't just in a place, but of the place. At a time when hotel designers chase the narrative of locality, of supporting local craft and production, La Farnatchi is its embodiment. Almost all of the furniture and fittings have been made in Marrakech. Tables, lighting, joinery and decorative elements are, bar a few rarities, bought or commissioned locally. "Even down to picture frames," continues Wix. "And we'll always continue to do that, partly because it supports the local artisans and helps those skills continue, and partly because there's just such amazing quality here; you don't need to go shopping in Bali or London or Paris for all of these items, when you can get some really wonderful things here, or get them custom made."

This reliance on local production is, as Wix notes, intentional in terms of storytelling, yet also practical. It allows the interiors to be adjusted over time without relying on external suppliers and it keeps the design process closely tied to the city's artisanal economy – a feedback loop of sorts. The new rooms will be more 'modern' in design, but sit comfortably within the whole; more than 20 years after opening, Le Farnatchi continuing to be refined in small and large ways, shaped by its setting, its makers and its day-to-day use.

