



Illuminated for evening, Kasbah Tamadot takes on an enchanting fairytale appearance.

Up a Hill In Morocco

by Margie Goldsmith

It's dawn in the old city of Marrakech as I jog down the cobblestone streets past vendors setting up their wares.

Cumin and mint waft through the air. Merchants arrange pointed-toe slippers called *babouches*, cone-shaped piles of fresh figs, dates and olives, and *tagines*, the clay cooking pots. A few men look up as I run by, obviously finding the sight of a blond female in sneakers and workout clothes very strange. I had been worried it might be bad manners for me, a woman, to run in a Muslim country, but someone assured me it was fine, so I

smile and keep going. I love running in strange new places early in the morning when most of the city is sleeping, and I see things I wouldn't otherwise.

I pass the *souk*, the famous market, where I went yesterday with my guide, Mohammed, who also owns Riad Kniza, a luxurious boutique hotel where I am staying. Yesterday, he led me through the maze of stalls offering silk tassels and camel saddles, furniture and rugs. We saw leather-workers cutting hides and went to the blacksmith area, which Mohammed said has not changed

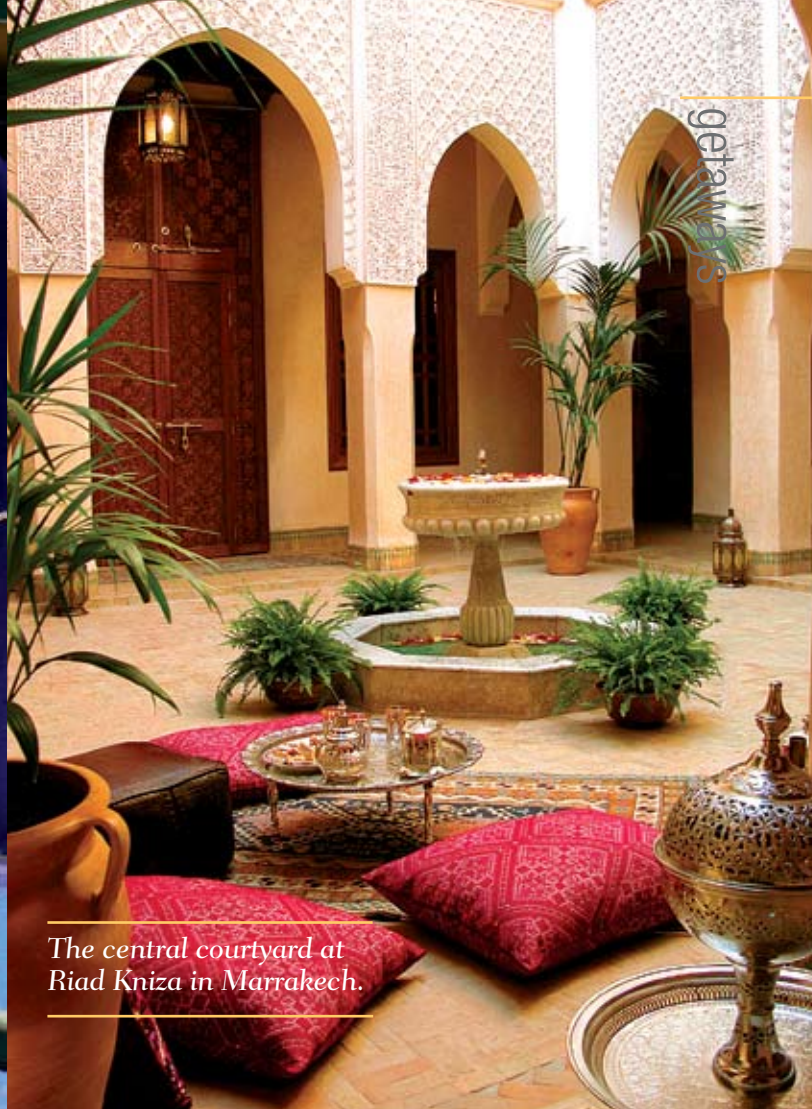
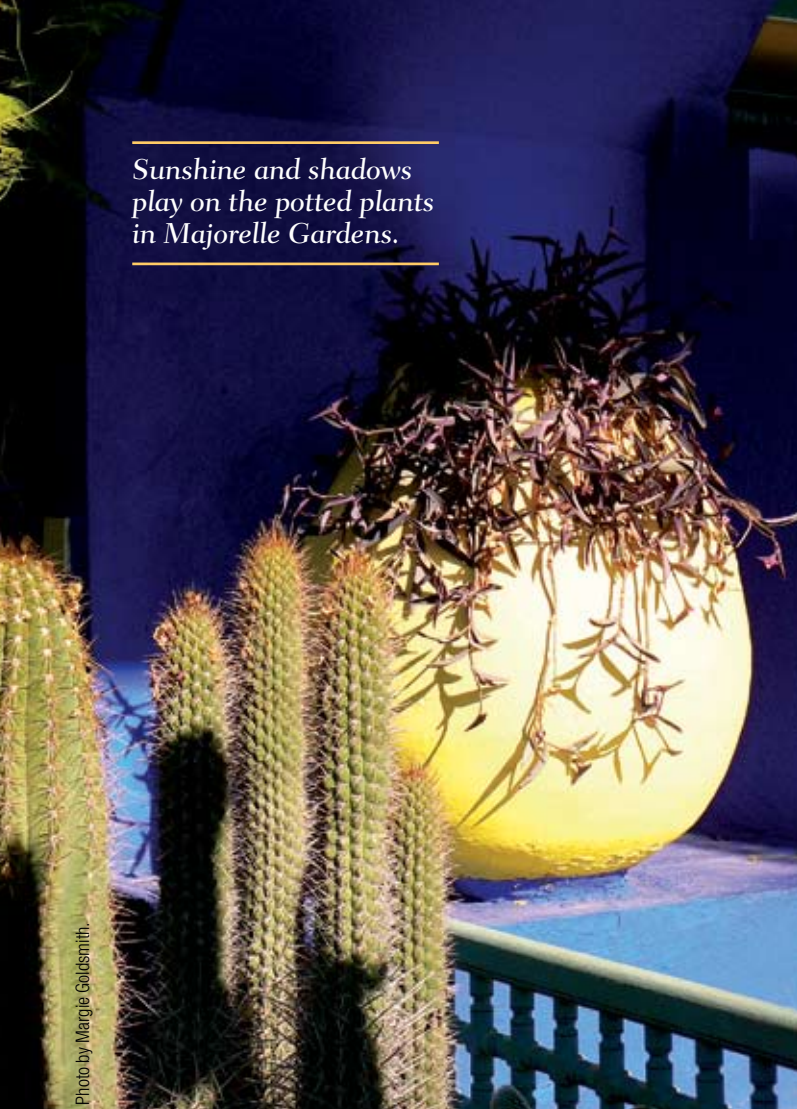
since it was first built centuries ago.

The souk is now empty, unlike yesterday when we squeezed past throngs of people, bicycles, motor scooters and donkeys pulling carts laden with goods. I had to watch where I was going every second because no one stops for tourists. When a motorbike almost smashed into me, I asked who had the right of way. "The first one to make it," Mohammed grinned.

We entered *Ja-a malfama*, the famous square that looks like a scene out of *The Arabian Nights* with its snake

Sunshine and shadows
play on the potted plants
in Majorelle Gardens.

Photo by Mergie Goldsmith.



The central courtyard at
Riad Kniza in Marrakech.

charm, acrobats, drummers and fortune-tellers. Winston Churchill said, “If you only have one day to see Morocco, come to Marrakech, and if you only have one hour, God forbid, come to the famous square of Ja-a malfama.”

But I found even more interesting sites, such as the lush Majorelle Gardens where lovers embraced behind huge potted plants, and the former sultans’ palaces with mosaic courtyards, trickling fountains and green trees. Mohammed explained that the promised land of the Koran is green and contains water, so every wealthy home includes both. The mosques and palaces have green-tiled roofs as does 13th-century Ben Josef University.

As I run along the adobe-colored wall, a woman in a headscarf and jelaba,

a long hooded robe, comes towards me. The jelaba was adapted from Christian monks during the Crusades and became very fashionable for both men and women. Mohammed also explained that women originally covered their hair because tresses were considered inappropriately sexy. In the mosques, women have to pray behind the men because otherwise it would be too provocative.

The woman is now only a few feet away, and we make eye contact. “Salam Alikhoum,” I say in Arabic. I always learn “hello” and “thank you” when I’m in a foreign place. The woman starts to smile, but quickly covers her mouth with her hand. The same thing happened last night in the hotel when I was having dinner and said something

funny to the waitress. She covered her mouth before she laughed. I wonder if teeth are also considered provocative.

I finally arrive at a park so small I can sprint it in five minutes. A camel suns itself in the dirt, and as I do some stretches, the camel owner approaches and tries to sell me a camel ride. I shake my head and race away. Each time I come back to that end, the camel owner rushes towards me and begs me to mount his camel. I keep going, thinking about yesterday in the souk where I bargained for a leather purse. I’d offered the vendor half the price he demanded, and he said, outraged, “You want to buy a camel for the price of a donkey!” But in the end, he sold it to me for my price.

The next day I check into Kasbah Tamadot, which is about an hour outside



Photos by Margie Goldsmith

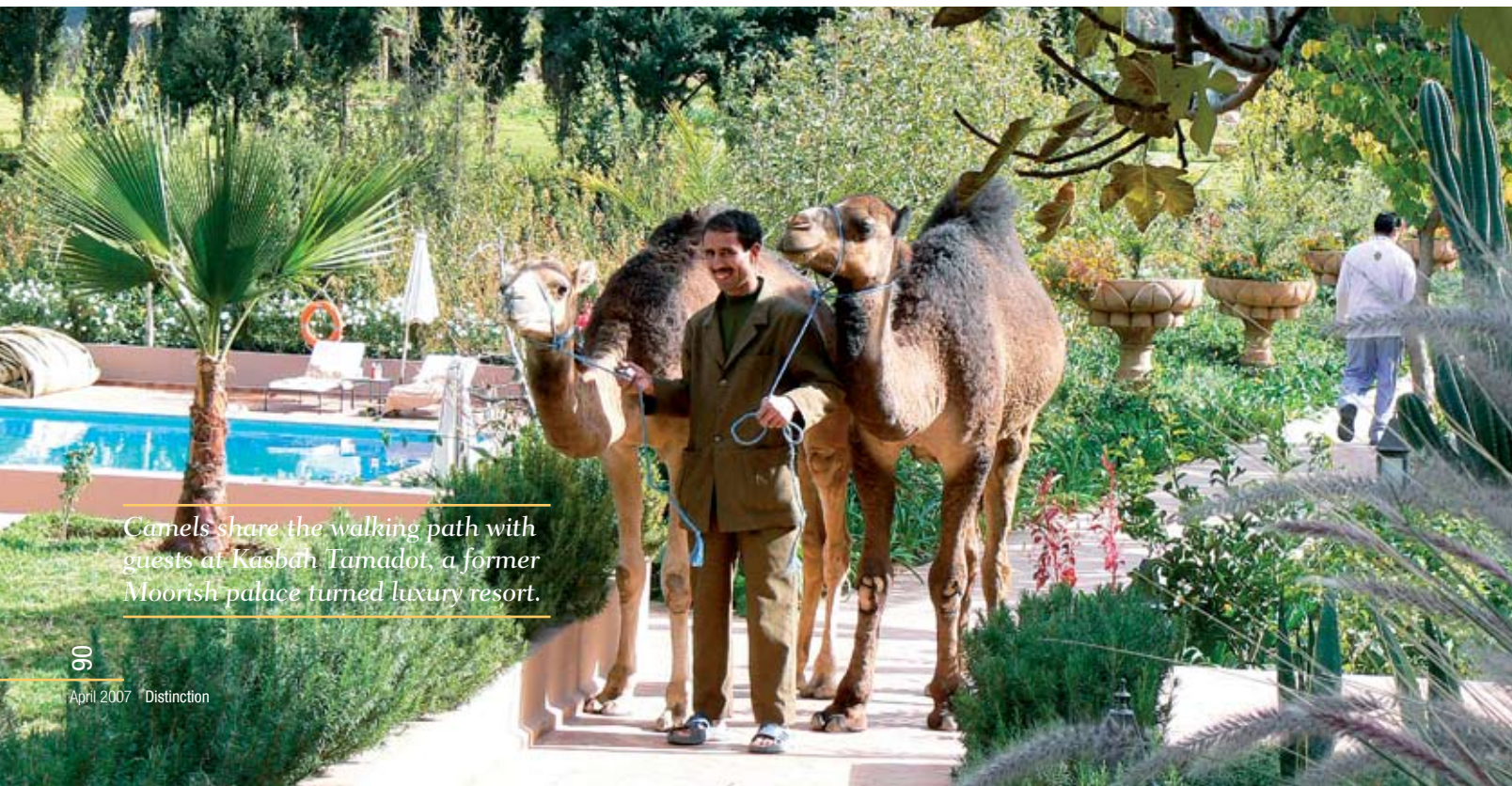
The Berber village of Imlil appears grafted onto the mountainside.

Marrakech. This former Moorish palace is perched 4,000 feet up on a hill in the Berber countryside with unobstructed views of the Atlas Mountains. Sir Richard Branson bought the Kasbah a few years ago and turned it into a luxury resort with flowering gardens and fruit trees, tennis courts, a marble *hammam* (Turkish bath), spa, huge pool and gourmet restaurant. My opulent suite has a huge dome in


the living room, glittering mirrors, an enormous chandelier and silky Berber pillows. The balcony overlooks a river where women in head coverings and long skirts wash their clothes, scrubbing them on the rocks. A man with both legs slung over one side of a donkey clip-clops down the road.

I am mesmerized by the bucolic scene, but also want to experience the

Berber countryside. Kasbah Tamadot has arranged a private guided excursion in a four-wheel drive vehicle with Abdou, a Berber guide who speaks excellent English. We drive towards the Ourika Valley, passing farmers tilling the soil with donkeys, and women laden with huge bundles of twigs on their backs walking along the road. Men clothed in *jelabas* whiz by on motorbikes.



Camels share the walking path with guests at Kasbah Tamadot, a former Moorish palace turned luxury resort.



A minaret is silhouetted against the lowering sunset of an evening in Marrakech.

Photo by Margie Goldsmith.

Occasionally, we stop for a herder to lead his goats across the road. The snow-capped Atlas Mountains loom in the background.

After a picnic lunch of cooked meat, *kanoun* (a flat bread baked at Kasbah Tamadot that morning), exotic salads and homemade sweets, we head to the little village of Imlil where I mount a mule. My mule guide laughs when I explain I am terrified of falling. We bump along up a steep hill towards a village that, from here, looks like a collection of ant-hill-sized adobe huts built into the rock. On the way, we pass vendors selling knives, camel-bone boxes, Berber jewelry and ceramics. A dark-haired young man runs in front of me and pleads, “Just look, just look.” Needing a break, I dismount and choose five delicate silver necklaces from his stall.

“How much?” I ask. “Two hundred dollars,” he says. I offer him \$100. He looks at me and says, “Lady, you put your knife in my heart.” We settle on \$130.

The next morning Abdou takes me a couple of miles down the hill to the weekly market in the small Berber village of Asni. There, they sell everything from spices, used clothing and enormous mounds of sugar to bales of hay, donkeys and live chickens. Abdou tells me that his wife will come here today and buy vegetables.

“How did you meet your wife?” I ask.

“Arabic phone,” he replies. “I tell you, to tell him, to tell her.” I guess it’s a fix-up with help. When I ask him what a man looks for in a wife, his answer is simple: “A girl who can make a good tagine [a type of stew with rice] and cook

one very good couscous and one very good soup.”

It’s 5 pm on my last afternoon, and I decide to go for one final run. Sprinting down the long hill towards the village of Asni, I’m surprised to see so many people because most of the time the road has been empty and this is a tiny village. School has let out and the shops must have just closed because everywhere are schoolkids in clusters, mothers with babies, older women and groups of men squeezing into the backs of trucks. I run by a hoard of adolescent boys who scream with laughter. “Ta bes,” I call out, the Berber word for hello. “Ta bes,” they holler back. One boy gives me the thumbs-up sign. Another encourages me in French, “*Vas y, Madame!*”

Two women in their mid-sixties stand by the side of the road. “Ta Bes,” I

say as I run towards them. But before I can pass, they each extend a hand covered in dark brown henna designs. Are they stopping me? Do they disapprove of my running? No. They want to run with me! Thrilled, I move to the middle, grip each of their hands, and the three of us charge up the hill, shrieking at the top of our lungs. Eventually, they stop, breathless, almost doubled over in laughter. They slip their hands out of mine and we hug goodbye. I give their hands one last squeeze, then continue up the road, completely joyful. ✈

Margie Goldsmith, a New York City-based novelist and writer, has traveled to 90 countries on six continents and written about them all.

— WHERE TO STAY —

Riad Kniza is in the heart of the old Medina of Marrakech. Seven rooms (including four suites) built around an open courtyard, from \$240 to \$405 per night for two. Includes airport transfers, breakfast, non-alcoholic drinks, half-day guided tour and free laptops with high-speed internet service. www.riadkniza.com. 212 24 37 69 42; riadkniza@riadkniza.com

Kasbah Tamadot is one hour from Marrakech in the countryside, atop a hill overlooking the Atlas Mountains. Eighteen rooms (including 11 suites and one three-bedroom cottage); Room rates from \$290 to \$1,549 (low season); \$438 to \$1,678 (high season). Includes taxes and breakfast. Children only permitted from July 1 to August 31 and during UK October school holiday. kasbahtamadot@sanctuary.com; www.virgin.com/kasbah. 800-225-4255.

— WHEN TO GO —

Anytime is a good time for Morocco, though spring and fall are ideal. Excellent for winter sun (although not for sunbathing), and hot in summer.

— GETTING THERE —

Royal Air Maroc to Casablanca, then a one-hour hop to Marrakech. 1-800-344-6726, www.royalairmaroc.com