

The Art of Decadence *Dar Doukkala*



The arched wooden doorway that leads you into Dar Doukkala from the busy street of the same name is pleasing, but no more so than many of the houses in Marrakech Medina, although the stately sweep of the stairway just inside is pretty spiffy, with its white and red tiled treads and vaguely sensual hooping rise of the chrome banister. The internal garden is delightful, with pathways separating the quadrants of palm trees and lush floribunda, but other than the size and the pretty alcoves set in the walls to sit and mull the day away in, it's akin to what you would expect to find as the centerpiece of many of the best riads. But it's when you get to the bedrooms that the 'Oh my giddy aunt!' effect kicks in, backed up later when you take yourself down to dinner in the long, chi-chi dining room that's just made for romantic evenings and whispered conversations.

It doesn't take long to realise that this is no ordinary riad, and certainly no ordinary restoration. Many of even the best riads in the ancient quarter have the reputation for bedrooms being a bit



pokey, but Dar Doukkala was obviously designed as a grand residence of someone of substance in the early 19th century because the six bedrooms and two suites are expansive by anyone's standard. And the quality of workmanship... exquisite examples of carved *geps* plasterwork, carved in four and five layers and filled with flowing calligraphy and arabesque patterns, some carvings hand-painted using egg tempera paint tinted with natural ground pigments such as saffron and poppy seeds; intricate wall coverings of geometric *zellij* tiles, each separate piece carefully cut from a glazed clay tile to create intricate patterns; bathrooms of coloured *tadelakt*, a waterproof plaster surface used in Moroccan architecture to make baths, sinks, walls, ceilings, roofs, and floors, labour-intensive to install, but with a soft, warm, undulating character when finished; exquisite *zouak* painted cedar wood ceilings, and it's probably one of the few houses in existence that can boast of a room with wall paneling in leather and another with leather covering the bathroom floor.

Possibly one of the best quotes about Dar Doukkala comes from Hg2, *A Hedonist's Guide*:

It's a huge place with six rooms that unfurl organically around two floors connected by a huge, florid courtyard and a red-and-white tiled stairwell that's like something out of Alice in Wonderland; it's just one of the signature flourishes of designer Jean-Luc Lemée, who has transformed the place into a feast of art-deco curves and madcap orientalism.

It's the delightful use of harlequin-coloured glass panels in some of the bedrooms and bathrooms that creates an ambience of exotic eastern decadence as the afternoon sunlight follows its arc to evening. I'm staying in room number five, where I feel Mr Lemée has given full reign to his outrageous expression of colour – a rich red sofa big enough for a bed (the bed itself is the size of a small island), a pair of bright yellow leather armchairs begging for you to sit in and fall asleep, and as I'm fortunate to have pair of French windows with beautiful coloured panels, I sink into one of the chairs and watch swathes of red, yellow, blue, green, splurge across the multi-coloured hues of Moroccan rugs covering the floor.

A step outside my room is the swimming pool, its sparkling water casting a pattern on the underside of the balcony of the room above. I splash, then recline on a green lounge, letting the somnambulist ambience wrap itself around me, the high walls of

the riad keeping the hubbub of the Medina streets at bay.

It's been my habit over many years of travelling to dress for dinner. I don't go the full hog of bow tie and cufflinks, but long trousers and a clean shirt are a must. As I settled into my armchair in the dining room, awed by the sumptuousness of my surroundings, I felt that the eloquence and elegance of my surroundings made the effort with my wardrobe all the more worthwhile. I felt as if I was in the Moroccan version of a gentleman's club, one where a gentleman could metaphorically bathe in the calm of the subdued lighting reflecting through the ornate wall mirrors that seemed to send their glow on into infinity, as Alice might as she ventured through the looking-glass.

Dar Doukkala has that sort of effect on you; romantic, decadent and dressing-for-dinner.

Dar Doukkala is one of the family of *Kasbah du Toubkal* hotels and can be booked independently or as part of ***Trekking in Style*** holidays. Visit **THIS PAGE** for more information.

