

MOUJEH

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

ISSUE 120 / OCTOBER 2024

The lobby lounge of the Ritz-Carlton Rabat, Dar es Salam features an ornate green and gold *muqarnas* dome characteristic of Islamic architecture.

RABAT, REBIRTHED

Is Rabat poised to be the next Marrakesh? MOJEH journeys through Morocco's capital, home to spectacular Roman ruins, a stunning golf course visited by royals and a pristine new Ritz-Carlton property that encapsulates the Arab-Andalusian soul of the city

WORDS BY HAFSA LODI



The outdoor pool at The Ritz-Carlton Rabat, Dar es Salam is a serene sanctuary at the centre of the hotel's lush, green grounds.



Touches of greenery feature across the hotel's interiors and suites with balconies overlooking the garden giving guests an opportunity to enjoy the Moroccan weather, which is pleasant throughout the year but best enjoyed in Rabat between September and November.

Six women wearing ethereal white dresses completed with bold, gold corsets play violins, welcoming guests to the new Ritz-Carlton Rabat, Dar es Salam. A few steps further in to the lobby lounge, right underneath the majestic green and gold *muqarnas* dome with its elegant Arab-Andalusian architectural aesthetic, a woman plays enchanting tunes on a golden harp. Later, the musical troupe moves outside, creating orchestral renditions of popular songs in the upbeat, instrumental style popularised by Bridgerton. Actresses, fashion designers, diplomats and the who's who of Rabat congregate around the poolside courtyard to celebrate the hotel's inauguration. The Ritz-Carlton Rabat, Dar es Salam officially opened its doors in September, just a short drive away from the capital's embassies, consulates and diplomatic missions. Rabat has a captivating history that's often eclipsed by the country's tourism hotspots like Marrakesh, Fes and Casablanca, but with Morocco set to host the FIFA World Cup alongside Portugal and Spain in 2030, it's an optimal time to journey through the gems offered by this lesser-known city.

Rabat has been the capital of Morocco ever since it achieved independence from France in 1955. But its rich history dates far deeper — prior to French colonial rule, the city was central to the Roman Empire's North African expansion, and was then a cultural capital during the medieval Marinid and 'Alawi dynasties. Its Spanish influences stem from the influx of Moorish refugees from Spain in the 1600s, and it was once a popular base for pirates. While ruins and monuments from Rabat's colourful past are what give this city its character, it's also home to the more contemporary Zaha Hadid-designed Grand Theatre of Rabat, as well as the Mohammed VI Tower, which is one of the tallest in Africa. The latest development on its map is the new Ritz-Carlton, offering an idyllic escape amid a haven of history and culture.

The drive from the gate to the hotel is lined with romantic clusters of fluffy pampas plants and birds of paradise flowers, and, once inside, Arabian hospitality and Andalusian history combine in a stunning marriage of Moroccan heritage and baroque opulence. The stately interiors present a labyrinth of corridors with marble floors, pistachio-embossed carpets and dreamy drapes, grounded by deep, wooden doors. Framed paintings inspired by Ibn Battuta's 14th-century travels

on the silk road invite guests to pause and ponder the scenes, many of which depict harems and hammams to both regal and eclectic effect. The spa contains 10 massage rooms, two couples' suites, saunas, hammams and an indoor pool, inspired by Roman baths and flooded with natural lighting. Equally serene is the outdoor pool, where guests can take part in invigorating morning yoga sessions by the water. Greenery is resplendent across the hotel grounds, where graceful white birds — the charismatic cattle egret — wander along the 440 hectares of forestry and gardens.

Dining options are ample: at the day-to-night Mediterranean Brasserie, the *pain perdu* — fluffy French country bread drenched in maple syrup and topped with berries — is truly a treat, as are the tacos and ceviche at Palapa, the property's poolside Mexican fusion eatery with rustic, lodge-style exteriors. The hotel plans on opening Morocco's first Sumosan in 2025, along with Rihla — which in Arabic, translates to 'the journey', and is coincidentally the title of Ibn Battuta's own travelogue. Its interiors feature a striking domed ceiling decorated with stained glass along with exquisite private dining rooms, and its

menu will marry Moroccan gastronomy with Asian influences. The layering of diverse cultural elements from different periods of history is characteristic of Rabat, and embodied best in the fortified remains of the Chellah, an ancient hilltop settlement first inhabited by the Phoenicians, dating back to the first millenium BC. The Romans later expanded the site into a larger city, and then in the 14th century the Muslim Marinid dynasty constructed a necropolis here, complete with a mosque, madrasa, mausoleum of Sultan Abu Al-Hassan and tombs of Sufi mystics. The Chellah was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2012, and still stands despite the impact of earthquakes. Visitors can enter through the stately Bab al Kabir — which translates to 'the great gate' — where intricate carvings around the red sandstone archway feature Our'anic verses in old Kufic Arabic calligraphy. Green and turquoise mosaic work remains intact on a minaret of the mosque, topped with a nesting stork — the resident bird of the Chellah. While placards briefly mention the significance of the sites, a local tour guide is a must; preferably one who has both a passion for history and an upbeat personality. 📍



The ancient ruins of the Chellah, which was later developed to include a mosque and necropolis during the 14th century Marinid dynasty, still stand today.



A trip to the Chellah can be completed with a Mediterranean meal at Ciconia, granting a prime view of storks nesting near the ruins.

While the grounds are inhabited by resident cats and kittens, the real stars of the show here are the storks, perched on towering, tiered nests. To get a prime view of this spectacle, you can order an ice cream cone — or a Mediterranean meal — at Ciconia, the terraced restaurant at Chellah, where pistachio-coloured chairs, tables and green umbrellas offer a picturesque setting for a view of the storks' incredibly complex nests, and the ruins that lay beyond them. Staff are dressed in white suits and boat hats, and slow, saxophone tunes give a Parisian flair to the quaint space that tempts visitors to sit back, slow their pace and contemplate the rich history of Rabat.

Although these sandstone ruins are key to the capital's sightseeing itinerary, acres of lush greenery, visited by royals of a more contemporary time period, are also worth experiencing. Located just next door to the new Ritz-Carlton is the sprawling Royal Golf Dar es Salam, which opened in 1971 after Morocco's King Hassan II commissioned world-famous golf course architect Robert Trent Jones to design it in the late 1960s. Three courses offering 45 holes are spread across a 440-acre oak forest, and a 15-kilometre trail for walking and jogging surrounds the sports complex. If you're lucky, you might cross paths with Ahmad, a passionate golf instructor who has taught members of the UAE royal family, as well as the King of Bahrain. The signature par-three hole, situated on a small island surrounded by water, beckons those who seek a challenge, and for those looking for leisure, the property is home to a members-only clubhouse and spa. Cross-cultural design influences underline the interiors of the clubhouse, such as in the cigar lounge,

where Scottish tartan drapes and brown leather sofas are juxtaposed with a traditional Berber Moroccan rug.

Leaving Rabat without one of these striking Moroccan rugs would be a great shame — they can be sourced at the city's Medina, where antique wooden doors open to display vendors' handicrafts and souvenirs. Available in silk, cotton and wool, these vibrant floor pieces are distinguished by the tribal, geometric motifs that adorn them, and there are hundreds of different styles unique to the Berber tribes that crafted them. From neutral tones to electric hues, Moroccan rugs are piled high and available in many sizes at stores like Bazar El Kasbah, which is located close to the Medina's main entrance. True textile connoisseurs will require a few hours at Rabat's Medina to select their favourites — and should also plan how they'll transport them back home. Colourful leather-seated stools, ornately painted side tables, kaftans with gold embroidered necklines, silver tribal jewellery and hand-painted ceramics imbued with heritage are also tempting splurges, and you may even come across artisans crafting their goods on the spot. In one alley, a shoemaker hangs strands of natural and hand-dyed raffia, sourced from the sea, and uses them to make hand-woven loafers and sandals. In another, leather skins are hammered and treated to produce satchels and cross-body bags. These artisans work just a short walk away from fort-like ruins that offer a view of surfers riding the waves at the mouth of the Bouregreg River. While the city may be steeped in history, it never stops surging forward, remaking itself time and again. ⁽⁹⁾