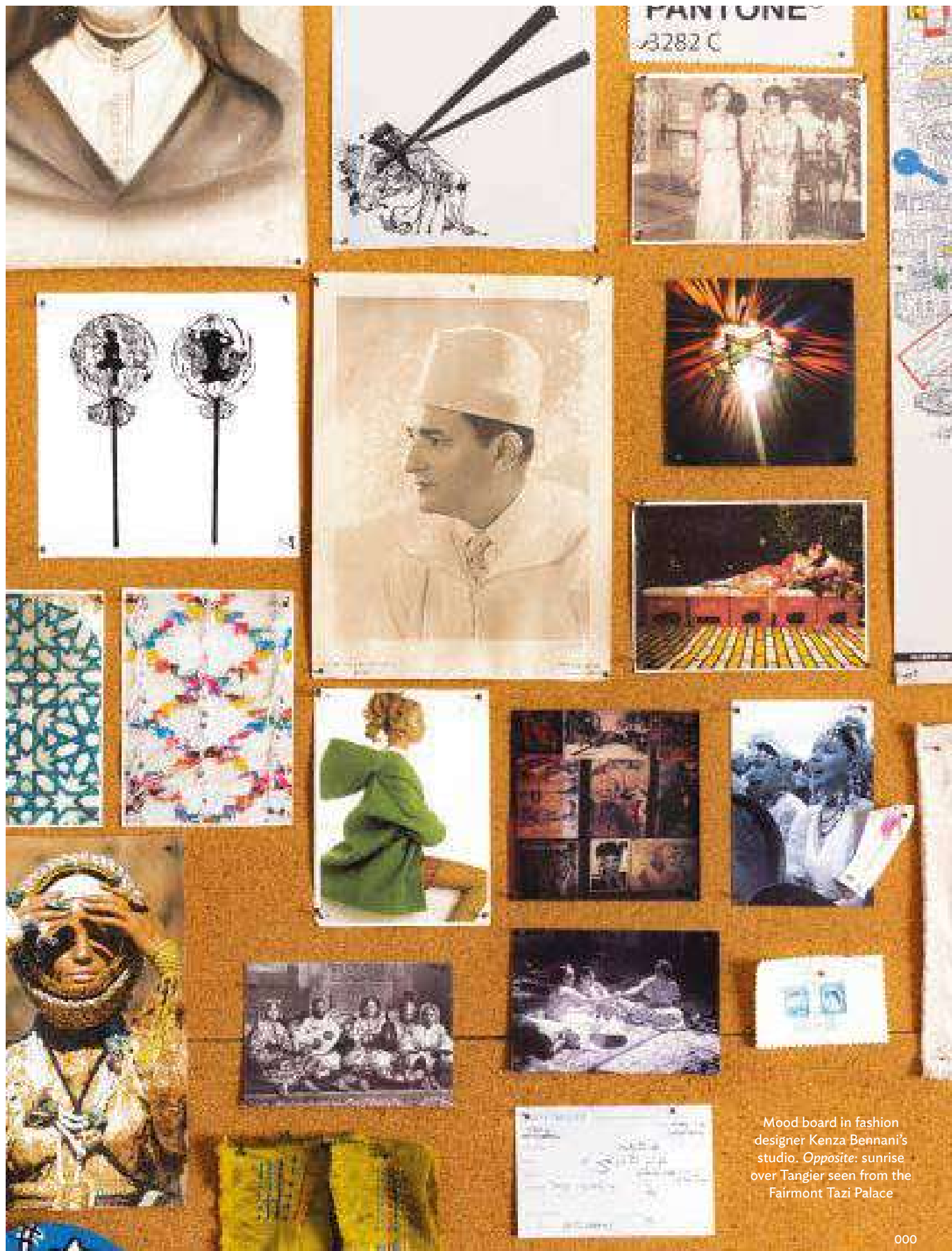


TANGIER RISING

THE CREATIVE VISIONARIES OF MOROCCO'S OFT-ROMANTICISED PORT CITY ARE TELLING A NEW STORY

BY STEPHANIE RAFANELLI. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW URWIN





Mood board in fashion designer Kenza Bennani's studio. Opposite: sunrise over Tangier seen from the Fairmont Tazi Palace

Clockwise from right: Hicham Bouzid, cofounder of Think Tanger; Les Insolites bookshop; box of threads in the New Tangier workshop; Alma Kitchen & Coffee; mimosa and foliage used for dyeing fabrics in Yto Barrada's studio. Opposite, from left: Think Tanger's printing space; Kenza Bennani





“PEOPLE WILL TELL THE SAME OLD STORY until they hear a better tale,” says Ahmed, an elder who I meet by chance in Tangier’s Kasbah, a cubist jumble of white buildings beneath circling gulls that cry out over the morning call to prayer. We perch chatting on the high ramparts of the old Portuguese citadel, our heels in Africa, Europe on the horizon like a giant seabird gliding towards us. Our toes float someplace in between. “Birds go back and forth without borders,” muses Ahmed, his words flying just as freely between Darija (Moroccan Arabic), French and Spanish. Tanjawi – or Tangerines – are sociable polyglots who speak in a meze of languages. His hair is as silvered as Moroccan sardines, his green eyes drizzled with amber like the olive oil in bissara pea soup.

In this city of white and pearly light, colours pop: the emerald of mint sold next to nets of escargot and jade roofs of mosques; the yellow stripes of hooded djellaba robes; the cumin-like sprinkles of gold bougainvillea; and everywhere, between the network of roof terraces, the oily indigo brushstrokes of the sea. The politics of this 8.1-mile stretch of water below Tarifa has decided the fate of Morocco’s northernmost port city and the identity of its people since this Fez hat of land was conquered by the Phoenicians, Portuguese, Middle Eastern caliphates, Spanish, British and French, and became the Moroccan sultanate’s diplomatic centre in the late 19th century. “We have been a nexus of culture in the Mediterranean for thousands of years, and Jews and Muslims coexisted in peace,” says Ahmed. “Yet in the West, they only talk about the moment 20th-century colonists created ‘the Tangerine dream.’”

I meet Ahmed through a sphinx-like black cat with knowing eyes – one of hundreds collectively raised by the city that curl up on doorsteps and carpets in Medina shops like the fluffy guardians of its master artisans. This one lolls beneath the seductively perfumed goblets of an angel’s trumpet tree outside the Kasbah home of American socialite

Barbara Hutton, who entertained US ambassadors, Second World War spies and libertines here after the city was carved up by colonial powers in 1923 as a tax haven. And so begins that same old story. Tangier has hitherto been defined by its brushes with countercultural Western “genius”: a playground for babouche-wearing lotus eaters who experimented with kif and sexuality on the Afro-European fringes. What happened in Tangier stayed here. To them, palms along the Bay of Tangier were as exotic as the belly dancers and the zellige psychedelics. The standard Tangier pilgrimage takes in the stomping grounds and brief encounters of Delacroix and Matisse, who respectively discovered light and blue here; the literary thief Jean Genet, the heroin-addicted beatnik William Burroughs, the resident bisexual American composer Paul Bowles, The Rolling Stones and the rest.

By the time the Stones rolled in, the white Door of Africa had turned the colour of stale garlic and Petit Socco, a former square of banks, was the place to score drugs and rent boys. Abandoned by King Hassan II for its association with the Rif mountain revolts after Moroccan independence in 1956, Tangier became a dilapidated drive-thru; a no-man’s land for another 50 years. “The glorification of the Tangier International Zone and Orientalism – the Western mystical version of Moroccan culture – has been really damaging for us,” says Hicham Bouzid, a lanky polyglot in intellectual specs and clam-diggers who runs creative and cultural agency Think Tanger, part of a new generation of Tanjawi creatives who are taking back and redefining both their city and Arab-Mediterranean identity. His multidisciplinary team helps channel Tanjawi voices, thinkers, art and community projects from a blue-washed old fishmonger’s just behind Tangier’s Grand Socco. “That period was a hedonistic utopia for rich Westerners but a disaster for poor Moroccans,” he says. Driss Ben Hamed



Charhadi's *A Life Full of Holes* (1964) and Mohamed Choukri's *For Bread Alone* (1973) are testimonies of desperation. "We need to reclaim the past then start telling the story of contemporary Tangier."

As with any port, that story is complex. Bouzid cofounded Think Tanger seven years ago to focus on urban and architectural matters when the city was "under construction" and in a "cultural vacuum, where the only institutions and best projects were run by a circle of Europeans who'd stayed." Tangier was changing dramatically due to the major infrastructural investments of Hassan's successor, King Mohammed VI. He masterminded Tanger-Med port in 2007, now the busiest in Africa, diverting cargo traffic away from the city's new leisure marina; and in 2018 oversaw Al Boraq, the continent's first high-speed train between

manifested by a peripatetic, rootless city. Despite the mushrooming of Tangier's peripheries, downtown has the laid-back feel of a fishing island: its palm-flagged parks, mosques, briny fish markets and boulevards of yellow-piped art deco townhouses – now as cheery as lemon meringue pie – are compact enough to stroll between. Tanjawi rise and eat late, the light and sense of space lending them sunny, open-minded, independent artistic dispositions. Everything runs to a slow Mediterranean pulse: a rhythm to which metal is hammered, looms drawn and carpets unrolled in the quiet, hassle-free Medina, where only the sparrows flitting between arbours of vines seem rushed.

Tangier's potential is as wide open as its amphitheatre of beach, but its young creatives are cautious, having learned from their colonial past

EVERYTHING RUNS TO A SLOW MEDITERRANEAN PULSE: A RHYTHM TO WHICH METAL IS HAMMERED, LOOMS DRAWN AND CARPETS UNROLLED IN THE QUIET, HASSLE-FREE MEDINA, WHERE ONLY THE FLITTING SPARROWS SEEM RUSHED

Tangier and Casablanca, with a planned extension through to Agadir and a tunnel under the Straits to Tarifa. With Petit Socco already cleaned up, the Kasbah and Medina were recently renovated, their walls now the colour of the white curd cheeses brought to market by Jebala women from the Rif. Meanwhile, embassies, sultanate palaces and art deco colonial villas have been steadily regenerated, including Perdicaris Park, a 173-acre urban forest in Rmilat, and a new contemporary art space at the Kasbah Museum, in the former Kasbah prison, dedicated to the north Moroccan post-war canon of abstract painters.

Today, the mood in Tangier's historical centre at least could not be further away from Mohammed Mrabet's claustrophobic inkings or modernist Jilali Gharbaoui's agitated brushstrokes, which seem

and Marrakech's over-reliance on foreign tourism. "It's become a Disneyland. We wouldn't want our authenticity bleached," says Bouzid, as we walk to Rue de Velázquez, an organically evolving hub of independent vintage stores and galleries in the old Spanish quarter, past avenues of low clipped trees like giant bird tables near the 1913 art nouveau Gran Teatro Cervantes. This summer, Think Tanger opened Kiosk here in an old art deco chess café. A gallery, bookshop and artists' residency, it runs socially aware tours and prints alternative city guides and limited-edition posters with contemporary Tanjawi artists such as Omar Mahfoudi, also the cofounder of Tangier Records, a bubble gum-pink surprise in the Medina. "It's Tangier's second vinyl store," says partner sound engineer Hamza Sbai, drolly. "The other opened in 1973."



Hallway at Casa Tosca.
Opposite, clockwise from
far left: Yto Barrada;
Kasbah Museum;
lobby of the Fairmont
Tazi Palace; suite
at that hotel



From left: sunrise over Tangier; bedroom at Casa Tosca; plants at sunset. Opposite, left-hand column, from top: garden at Casa Tosca; its rooftop; bedroom there. Opposite, right-hand column, from top: Abdelghani Bouzian outside his studio; the artist working on one of his mask sculptures

“There’s been a big change to the people of Tangier’s self worth that was bruised during the colonial and post-colonial periods,” says quietly spoken Yto Barrada, an internationally renowned Tanjawi artist. “That’s why we want slow, culturally mindful tourism.” I meet Barrada at Cinema Rif, with its foyer covered in vintage posters of Tangier-set films and a photo of Egyptian singer and 1920s film actress Umm Kulthum, North Africa’s arch matriarch, in her trademark cat-eye shades. Barrada, who is showing at New York’s Moma in spring 2024, ignited the new creative scene here in 2006 when she rescued the art deco cinema in Grand Socco and turned it into non-profit La Cinémathèque de Tanger, North Africa’s first arthouse film theatre. Her body of multimedia work has also set the tone for today’s socially

artists’ residency and holistic retreat where Barrada experiments with forgotten pre-colonial natural dyes, botanical pigments and inks, reclaiming both ancient know-how and these slopes that once belonged to American-Scottish artists Marguerite and James McBey.

In Marshan, a former Jewish art deco district scented by orange peel and accented by birds of paradise blooms, is another creative experiment in colour. Tanjawi designer Kenza Bennani, having worked for Jimmy Choo in London, returned home in 2015, setting up the slow fashion label New Tangier in her late grandfather’s townhouse. Inside is a prismatic universe devoted to Moroccan craftsmanship, from a rainbow-like row of silk-thread spools (her great-grandfather brought some here from Fez more than a century ago) to rails of

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engaged creatives, beginning with *A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project*, which explored the movement of people across Europe’s borders seemingly sanctioned only as a one-way street.

“The creatives here are a community,” she says that evening. “They aren’t driven by ego, they have a bigger responsibility to their city as cultural activists.” Barrada takes me to the vast, ramshackle gardens of her maternal home overlooking the Straits, where hillsides of indigo and waist-height black hollyhocks with petals the colour of red cabbage, backlit by the sunset, emit a peachy aura. Here, as an extension of her textile work, she recently founded The Mothership – a reference to the 1970s Afrofuturist Parliament-Funkadelic collective – which puts an eco-feminist lens on Tangier’s famous gardens. It’s a textile workshop,

kaftans and unisex djellaba cloaks and sarouel pants in locally sourced silks, and upholstery brocades, all hand-stitched and hand-finished by local maalem artisans.

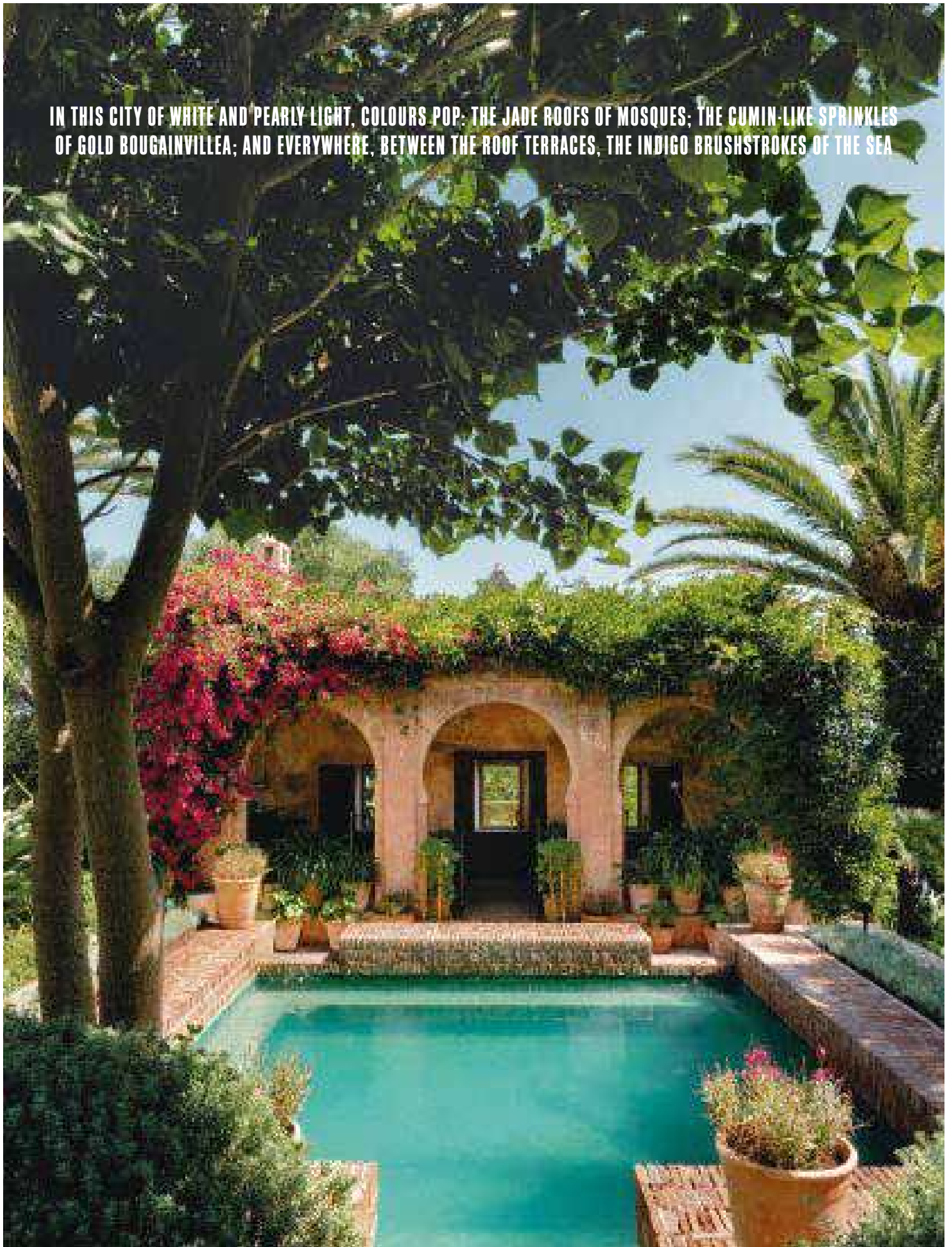
“In Western culture, there’s this idea of the omnipotent vision of the designer to which everything is subservient, even our bodies,” says Bennani, all velvet voice, brains and brunette curls. “Here it’s not about me or my ‘genius’. The craftsmanship always comes first, the community.” Bennani considers her stripping back of Moroccan garments to their most minimal shapes – body-friendly unisex square cuts – to be a kind of cultural activism. “In Europe, I felt that I had to respond to some Orientalist idea of what being Moroccan means, that is, highly decorative. But we cannot reduce our entire cultural heritage to pom-poms.”





Yves Saint Laurent's former bedroom at Villa Mabrouka. *Opposite:* the house's pavilion-front pool

IN THIS CITY OF WHITE AND PEARLY LIGHT, COLOURS POP: THE JADE ROOFS OF MOSQUES; THE CUMIN-LIKE SPRINKLES OF GOLD BOUGAINVILLEA; AND EVERYWHERE, BETWEEN THE ROOF TERRACES, THE INDIGO BRUSHSTROKES OF THE SEA



Clockwise from below: Anaëlle Myriam Chaab's paint trays; the artist at work; raspberry millefeuille from El Morocco Club; the Kasbah; inside Cinema Rif.
Opposite: that cinema's exterior





THE NEW TANGIER CREW

Alma Kitchen & Coffee, recently opened by jewellery designer Lamiae Skalli and art photographer Seif Kousmate, reinvents Tangier's café culture for young Moroccans with a minimalist design. "We have to overcome the idea that if it's not exotic or traditional, it's not Moroccan," they say. @alma.tanger

Interior decorator **Guiomar Doval**, a Tanjawi of Spanish descent who studied design in Madrid, hones Afro-Mediterranean style using north Moroccan materials and crafts in contemporary restaurants, including Chiringuito in Tanja Marina Bay. @guiomardoval

At the shoebox **Mahal Art Space**, Nouha Ben Yebdri fosters emerging African artists, such as the Morocco-based Ghanaian Reuben Yemoh Odoi, whose installations of scrawled train tickets and suitcases represent the journey of migrants. @mahalartspace **Abdelghani Bouzian** creates giant mask sculptures that nod to oral cultures of the Rif people, and towering puppets made from refuse – a result of his theatre, craft and sustainability workshops for kids as director of non-profit group Association Darna. @abdghanibouzian At **El Morocco Club**, Tangier's decade-old dining institution, chef Nouredine Zaoujal follows in the footsteps of Casablanca's Meryem Cherkaoui, turning out lighter "New Moroccan" twists on city classics, such as chicken pastilla pies and souk vegetables in argan oil. elmoroccoclub.ma

THE STAYS

VILLA MABROUKA

Designer Jasper Conran's second Moroccan hotel, a magical renovation of Villa Mabrouka – the late Yves Saint Laurent's Tangier bolthole, with a Slim Aarons-worthy kidney bean pool, just outside the Kasbah – is as immaculately dressed down as an insouciant white linen shirt. The building has previously passed through the maximalist visions of Orientalist designer Stuart Church and Parisian bohemian Jacques Grange. But the only jewelled accessories here are palm fruits. Dazzling whites and mint shades in 12 suites only serve to offset the inky indigo expanse before it. villamabrouka.com

FAIRMONT TAZI PALACE

This 1920s palace, high above the Rmilat forest, was once the second residence of "Mendoub" Ahmed Tazi, the sultan's representative during the Tangier International Zone. Now, it's reborn, after a Fairmont renovation, as a showstopping Middle Eastern celebration of Moroccan art deco glamour, in black and white marble, keyhole arches and singularly dramatic mosque-height corridors, with 133 rooms, suites and penthouses. It's adorned with Moroccan crafts and contemporary art, and has a 26,000-square-foot spa, plus seven bars and restaurants. Highlights include the low-lit Origin Bar in swirling green marble; Persian restaurant Parisa, which features murals by graffiti artist Mattia Sitou; and an irresistibly slick black marble pool. fairmont.com

CASA TOSCA

Tangier's villa community is legendary: a menagerie of close-knit, colour-loving international creatives, their homes catalogued in the coffee-table tome *Inside Tangier: House & Gardens*. The book's author, Milanese interiors guru Nicolò Castellini Baldissera, is the great-grandson of pioneering Italian modernist architect Piero Portaluppi. His new rattan furniture brand, Casa Tosca, is named after his four-to-five bedroom townhouse in sedate Marshan. With a rooftop pool and hammam, it's a maximalist wonderland of Tanjawi crafts, Anglo-Italian kitsch, art mementos, antiques and heirlooms, with terrace gardens by the legendary Umberto Pasti. By word of mouth. casatosca.eu

Northern Moroccan artisanship has remained uncorrupted by the "cheap vision" of the souk – a fact that has drawn back both Europe-trained Tanjawi creatives and pulled in international designers. In a warehouse in Malabata, honeyed by bundles of wicker and afternoon light, where 90 hands work, I meet Meriem Bikkour, the quick-witted matriarch of the esteemed rattan business founded by her father Mustapha in the 1970s. "The artisan scene here is less driven by money than in Marrakech, it's much more personal for us," she says, to the gentle rhythm of stapling. One of the unsung heroines of Tangier, she is the maker responsible for the rattan chairs and tables at the city's newest hotel openings, including the Fairmont Tazi Palace and Villa Mabrouka, designer Jasper Conran's second Moroccan hotel, in a Kasbah oasis that was once the home of Yves Saint Laurent.

"Tangier is a place where female creatives can thrive," says French-Moroccan artist Anaëlle Myriam Chaaib. "The mentality towards women is very different from other Moroccan cities." Chaaib is opening Maison Citron, a patisserie in a Portuguese townhouse in Marshan, decked out in the same yellow stripes as shop awnings on nearby Rue d'Italie. She moved with her older sister from Lille to her father's hometown, Chefchaouen, a few years ago, opening an all-female-staffed restaurant, where she began to paint, inspired by the colours of the nearby coastal road. "At first I painted to counter the stereotypes that my friends in France had that Morocco is all dry and dusty," she says. "I used to be ashamed of being Moroccan. Now I'm proud." Her naive illustration style is a love letter to Tangier: today a nexus of Africa's past and future, a living, breathing honest muse refusing to be whitewashed or painted over. As she puts it, "I walk the streets constantly stimulated by beauty and colours, such as the red of a tuna carcass against a pink wall." 📍