

Move over Marrakesh, this is the fashion set's new holiday hotspot

Chic indie shops, drop-dead interiors and a very louche vibe — no wonder we've fallen in love (again) with Tangier



New Tangier's caramel kaftan
DAIZEK VISUALS

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Rue de la Kasbah links the new Tangier with the 15th-century walls of its old medina and has lately become a destination for easy luxury, with wearable pieces that are designed and made here using Moroccan materials. There's Rock da Kasbah selling high-quality sweats, totes and tees, then, a few doors up, Las Chicas specialises in off-the-peg luxury plus the kind of carefully tailored harem pants that have become a wardrobe staple for global nomads. For something even smarter, Kenza Bennani's label, New Tangier, has dresses, kaftans and dramatic cloaks that pop up on red carpets around the world.

Something is happening here in Tangier — a new, confident and understated style that shuns fast fashion while mining Morocco's copious artisanal talent. Bennani, formerly of Marc Jacobs-era Louis Vuitton and Jimmy Choo, sums it up: "Here, tradition is a resource, not a burden. Fashion in the West is based on an imbalanced idea of a creative genius at the top when there's no genius about it. It's a combination of good ideas and the artisans who can execute them."

Style has long been what the scene here is about. "In Tangier, as long as you've got style — be it taste, conversation or wit — you're in," says Gordon Watson, a well-known mid-century collector and dealer; everything is for sale in his home in the Marshan district of the city. He, like many of Tangier's expats, is a raging snob, albeit not about money or class but about style.



A sea view from the pool at Villa Mabrouka; and its owner, Jasper Conran

At the top of Rue de la Kasbah is Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé's summer house, which Jasper Conran bought in 2019 and is now a 12-room hotel called Villa Mabrouka that has been near-permanently booked since it opened a year ago. Conran, who already has a hotel in Marrakesh, describes Tangier as "a joy ... There's a broad brushstroke of people here with good, interesting taste, but they are not all doing the same thing. They express themselves in different ways, so it's exciting. You've got a lot of intelligent expression in gardens, in houses. It's an extraordinary place."

Through the 20th century the famously tolerant yet conservative city welcomed western bohemians, outlaws and aesthetes. And for Swinging London-era boomers, this was the coolest place in the world for intellectuals, writers, rock stars, artists and an elegant demimonde driven abroad by antigay laws. A taste of Tangier's allure can be seen in the list of people who have lent a hand with the production of the American School of Tangier's summer play. One year Yves Saint Laurent made the costumes and Paul Bowles composed the music. Tennessee Williams? Oh, he contributed plays and is said to have sat in the front row to watch them.

It was also, Watson says, "fabulously sleazy and dodgy" back then. No more. Lately the incomers have been "an absurdly disproportionate number of the [Architectural Digest] AD100 ... a colony of decorators" who have come to buy crumbling palaces, townhouses and villas and further send the tremors of gentrification through the city. "You came here to create your great fantasy of beauty," Watson says. "Tangier is different to any of the other Moroccan cities. The look here is totally unique."



The drawing room at Dar Sinclair, right
ALAMY; MARK BOURDILLON

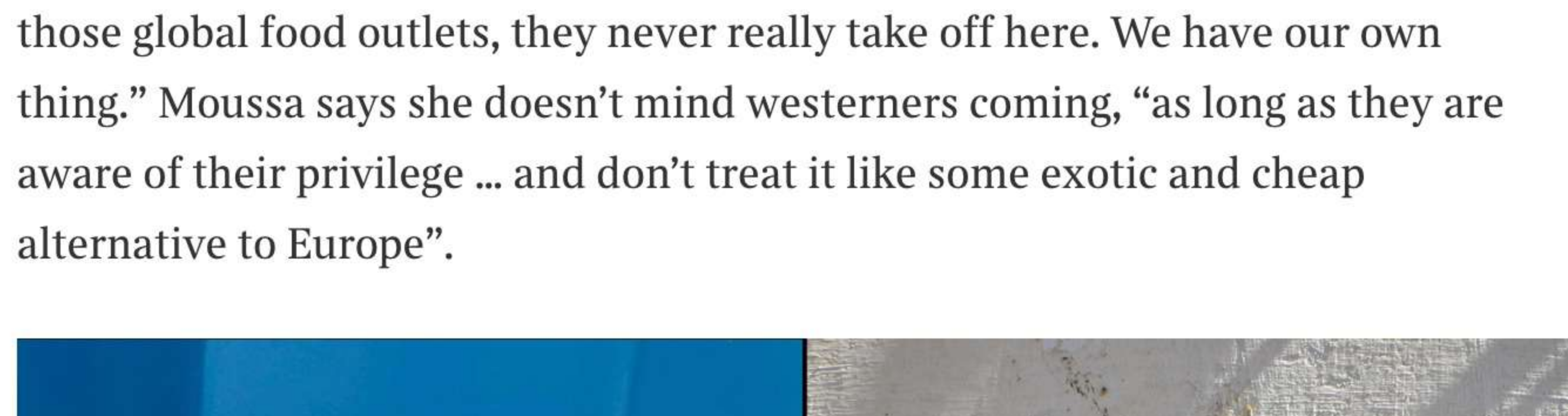
Bennani's great friends, meanwhile, are the three Wheeler sisters, Sarah, Jacquetta and Charlotte, whose maternal great-grandfather moved to Tangier in the 1900s. The three live between the UK and their two family homes here, Dar Sinclair and Lalla Yenou (which they rent out when they're not using them). "Tangier attracts people who are interested in beauty," Jacquetta explains. "If you want to get things made for your home you don't go to a shop — you go to the rattan furniture maker or the weavers' market, take the kids and watch it being made." Take Najim Imran Bando's furniture studio, Now on the Ocean, which uses gnarled strawberry tree branches to make simple rustic furniture with a cult following among interior designers. Its quirky one-off pieces crop up everywhere from Marfa to Milan.

Even those crumbling houses now go for millions: gentrification is happening at a rapid pace, but at what cost? There are no hedge funders or tech bros here yet, but everyone is a little edgy about newcomers, about whether they will "get" it. "The beaches are staggeringly beautiful but it's really not a touristy place," Charlotte says. "There's no big hierarchy here," Jacquetta adds. "We mix."

Another Tangier resident describes being a guest at a famously grand holiday destination and being horrified by "this huge gap between the locals and the visiting rich people. If you behaved like that here you'd be an outcast."

• [Tangier city guide: your weekend break sorted](#)

Preserving and elevating art and culture is seen as one way to buffer the inevitable impact gentrification has on locals. The artist Yto Barrada, who is represented by the super-gallery Pace in New York, has restored the art deco Cinéma Rif into a dynamic cultural hub. Then there's Think Tanger, a non-profit organisation with a bookshop, co-working space, vintage store, print shop and a community to raise up young Moroccans who are pushed further away from the city centre. Hiba Moussa is working here while studying PPE with the Open University. "I wanted to get an English education without having to leave the country because that's expensive. And anyway I love Tangier — I don't want to leave," she says. "It has always been different. We don't have all the malls and all those global food outlets, they never really take off here. We have our own thing." Moussa says she doesn't mind westerners coming, "as long as they are aware of their privilege ... and don't treat it like some exotic and cheap alternative to Europe".



Painted bags from Las Chicas, left
ALAMY

As Bennani says: "Tangier is not for everyone. Anyone — and I include Moroccans in this — used to a stratified society will leave. Marrakesh is a community of jet-setters, which feels 'cool' but really it's a gorgeous bubble, all conceived for this customer base who want to feel like they're in some exotic Shoreditch."

Nor will it serve the yoga-mat mob, all set on self-enhancement and psychedelic-fuelled fun. "Tangier's not a wellness destination," Jacquetta says, shuddering at the thought. "Thank God. I hope we can avoid that."

Instead, if you want to smoke a fat cigar in the middle of a fish restaurant with Provençal rosé on ice, you can do that at L'Océan on the Atlantic shore. There are some serious shops with museum-worthy items alongside the cool little boutiques on Rue de la Kasbah, but there's no Prada and no Chanel — just cafés, popular but pretty humble restaurants and the hugely loved donkey museum.

"The world is shifting," Bennani says. "I feel we are finally coming to our own understanding of what luxury is. And what we've got here in Tangier, that's the real luxury."

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