

Travel

The Call of Tangier

With new hotels, museums, and travel routes, Tangier is welcoming visitors to *a city whose cultural scene is shaped by locals*. By Rima Suqi

ANDREW MONTGOMERY

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Above: Tangier's Villa Mabrouka, a 12-suite hotel owned by British designer Jasper Conran, was once the home of Yves Saint Laurent.

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"If you had said to me 10 years ago that Tangier was going to be the hottest place and everybody was going to be talking about it, I would have said you were crazy," admits Kenza Bennani, founder of ready-to-wear and accessories brand New Tangier. Her hometown is one of the largest cities in Morocco, perched on the northwestern tip of not just the country but the entire African continent. It's an extraordinary location, poised between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, and bordered by the Strait of Gibraltar. The hillside topography here is often compared with San Francisco's, and on a clear day residents say they can see cars zipping along the southern Spanish coast, just across the way.

Unlike Marrakech or Casablanca, Tangier hasn't seen a boom in huge new resorts and luxury boutiques or become overly popular. It's managed to retain its charm and an air of mystery, possibly because until recently, it's been relatively difficult to travel to. That's undoubtedly one reason that it has drawn so many creative types over the years, from Henri Matisse (who called it "a painter's paradise") to authors Paul Bowles and Jean Genet, and designer Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre

Bergé. The 2018 launch of Africa's first high-speed train linking the city with Casablanca and the debut this year of nonstop flights between Tangier and Marrakech have made the city a more viable travel destination. (There are also daily ferries that whisk visitors between Tangier and Spain in just about an hour.) Two of the newest hotels—St. Regis La Bahia Blanca Resort in Tamuda Bay, located about a 90-minute drive away, and Fairmont Tazi Palace Tangier, which sits in a 1920s building once owned by an adviser to the king—come from international brands, but the city is also full of charming, privately owned riads, like Villa Mabrouka, the onetime home of Saint Laurent and Bergé. It was purchased by the renowned British designer Jasper Conran, who transformed it into a 12-suite hotel that opened its doors last year. Conran updated the interiors (originally by designer Jacques Grange) but preserved the lush gardens, adding 6,500 new plants to the space created by legendary landscape designer and long-term Tangier resident Madison Cox, who was married to Bergé when he died.



Top: A courtyard at the art museum Dar Niaba. Above: A showroom for the fashion brand New Tangier.

VILLA MABROUKA (3): ANDREW MONTGOMERY; REMAINING IMAGES: COURTESY OF THE VENUES.



Left: Villa Mabrouka's gardens, which were designed by famed landscape architect Madison Cox. Below: A Villa Mabrouka suite.

"You can have your feet in Africa and your head in Europe."

—ANAËLLE MYRIAM CHAAIB

A new surge in cultural activity has seen the opening of several museums in the last decade. The Villa Harris Museum is in the former home of British journalist Walter Burton Harris and focuses on Moroccan art. The new Tangier Museum of Contemporary Art is housed in a former prison in the Casbah, while the Dar Niaba Museum, located in the city's medina, the historic non-European part of the city, showcases the work of painters who spent time in the area. The Beit Yehouda Jewish Museum (built in the restored Assayag Synagogue) traces the history and culture of Moroccan Jews, and the Fondation pour la photographie is dedicated to photography in Morocco. "It's created a new vibrancy that is quite interesting because it's not just reliant on foreign tourism," Cox says.

"We finally have a lot of Moroccans and creatives who are doing great things here," notes Hicham Bouzid, an art director, curator, and Tangier native. He's the cofounder of Think Tanger, a nonprofit cultural agency, as well as founder and creative director of Kiosk, a must-visit bookshop and gallery that is a social hub for the neighborhood. Bouzid credits Yto Barrada, an acclaimed artist whose work has been exhibited at the Tate Modern in London and the Centre Pompidou in Paris (and is currently on view in the MoMA PS1 courtyard in New York), as "putting Tangier back on the map when she opened the Cinémathèque about 20 years ago." Barrada helped lead the restoration of the classic 1938 cinema, simultaneously creating what was billed as North Africa's first cinema cultural center and a vibrant creative hub.

More recently, a younger crowd has set its sights on Tangier, many drawn here during the pandemic and staying on when they found cultural and career opportunities. Anaëlle Myriam Chaaib, an illustrator and artist, grew up



in France and traveled throughout Morocco as a child. It was only as an adult that she realized all the things Tangier had to offer. She and her sister are planning to open Maison Citron, a pastry shop in the Marshan neighborhood, later this year. Chaaib says they were seduced by the city's rich history, cultural and religious diversity, epic beauty, and the fact that "you can have your feet in Africa and your head in Europe."

Lamiae Skalli, founder of the jewelry brand Elhora, was in Fès and her husband, photographer Seif Kousmate, was working in Casablanca when they ventured to Tangier during the pandemic. Within two years, they opened Alma Kitchen & Coffee on a square in the city center. It hosts yoga classes, art workshops, pop-up events, and a small shop, its lovely interiors and strategic location making it a popular hangout for locals and visitors alike. "I have a real impact here, versus going somewhere else," Skalli says. "There's a creative rebirth happening," confirms Bennani, who has lived in Spain, Italy, and London and worked for Jimmy Choo and Louis Vuitton. She had intended to launch her brand in Tangier and then return to Europe, but ended up staying: "There's too much happening here not to be a part of it."