

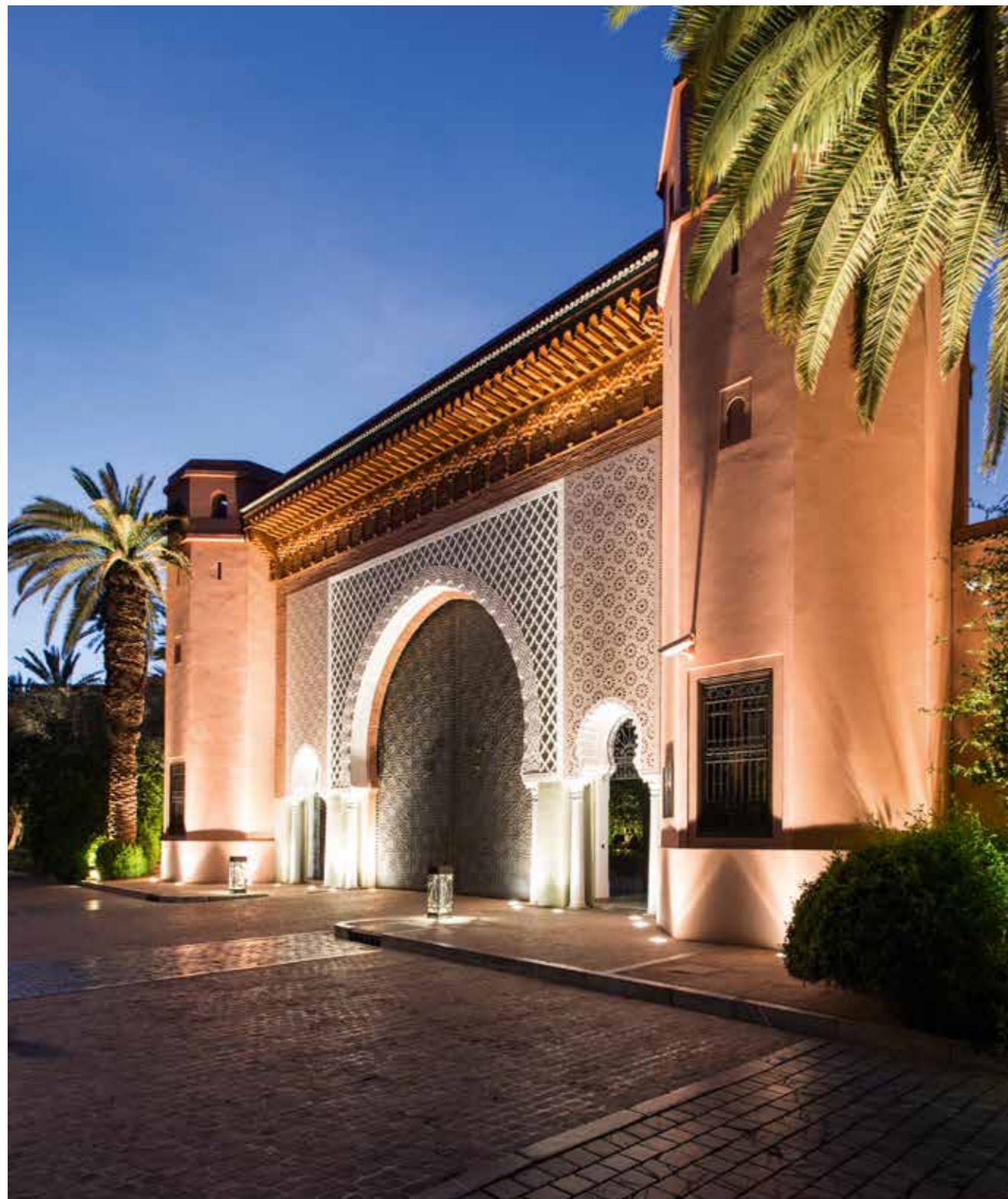
The lustrous blue marble courtyard, this page, and an elegant atrium, facing page, both with central fountains, a flourishing symbol of the Royal Mansour's intricately conceived design



THE MAJESTY OF MARRAKECH

HAVING LAVISHED UNTOLD SUMS ON CRAFTSMEN, DESIGNERS AND ARCHITECTS, THE ROYAL MANSOUR HAS SINGULARLY REDEFINED THE IDEA OF HOSTELRY AS A WORK OF ART. AND, AS **THOMAS MIDULLA** REPORTS, ITS OPULENT ACCOMMODATIONS, GRAND GOURMET EXPERIENCES AND FIRST-CLASS SERVICE SET A STANDARD UNMATCHED ACROSS THE CITY

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARTIN KREUZER



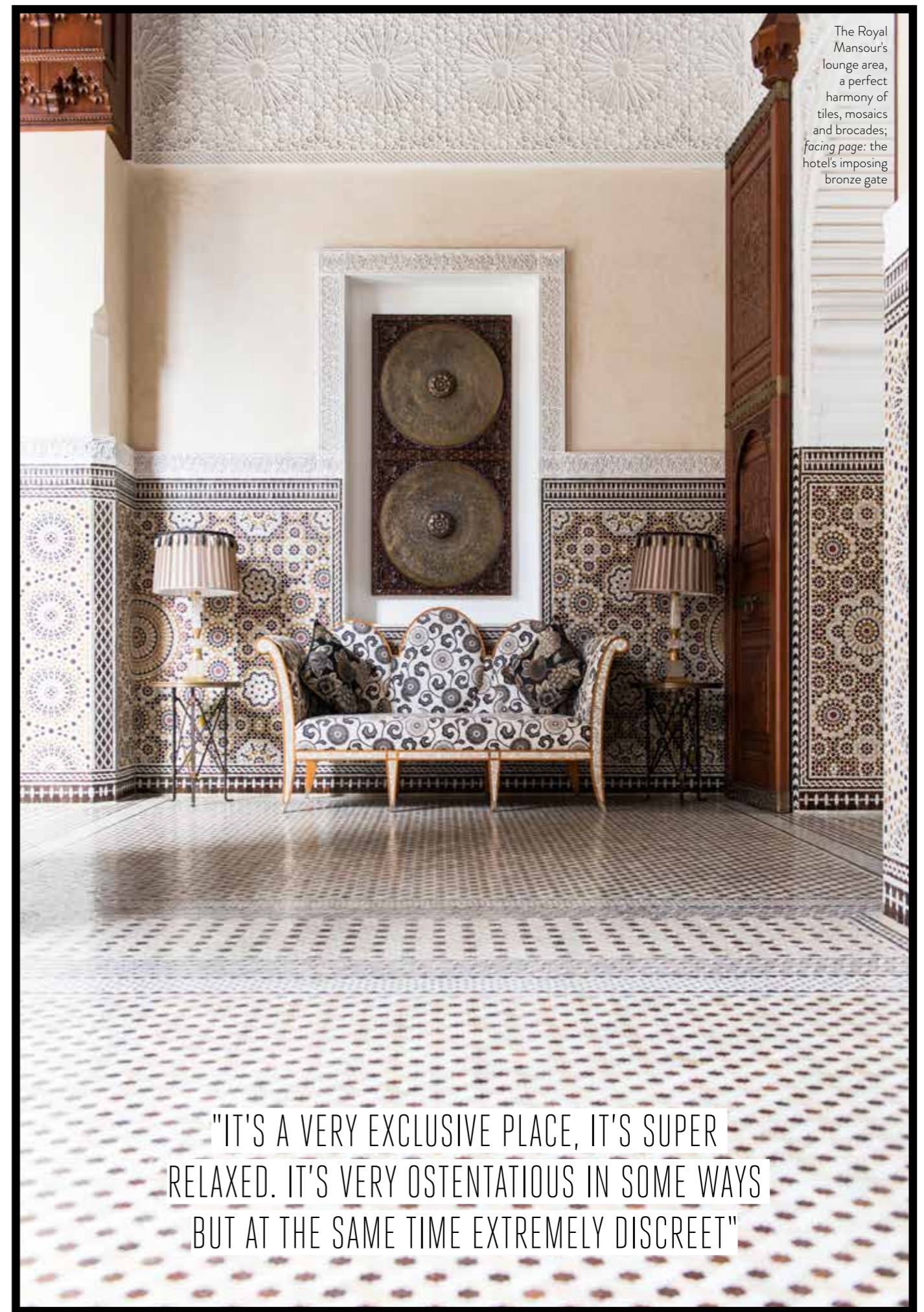
It's been four years since the four-tonne bronze gates of the Royal Mansour first swung open, revealing not the private residence of His Majesty, King Mohammed VI, but a regal palace by any measure, spread out across 3.5 hectares within the boundaries of Marrakech's ochre city wall. Legions of planners, architects, gardeners, designers, artists and craftsmen – no fewer than 1,200 of the latter – worked for almost four years to create this masterpiece, set within a

calm palm-studded oasis just minutes from the ever-bustling medina. It is a place that not only touches all the senses, but intoxicates them.

Inspired by stately residences like the Katsura Villa in Kyoto and the Alhambra, the Royal Mansour was modelled on the traditional Moroccan market. Narrow, winding alleyways meander around the elevated guest riads – which boast impressive, alabaster-green wooden doors – passing by

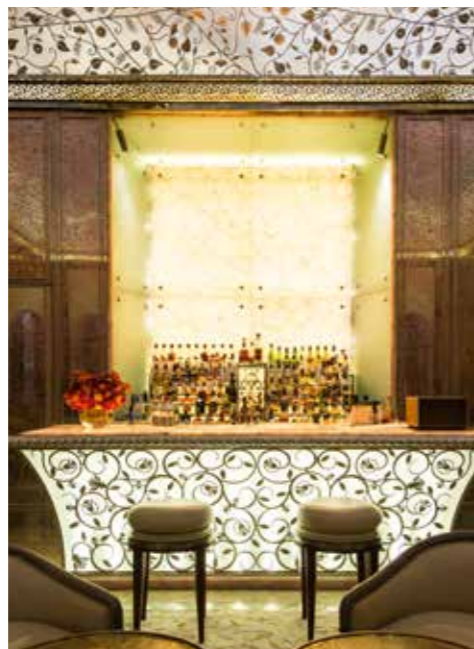
brilliant cascades of violet bougainvillea, along babbling fountains and brooks, up to a sunny clearing with old olive trees and date palms that were transplanted here from the nearby Agdal Gardens or the Agadir region. Everything is so meticulously planned that it seems as if it had grown and evolved here naturally.

Like the accommodations, the public spaces – the lounge, bars, restaurants and spa – were also built as riads of various sizes. The central point is the



The Royal Mansour's lounge area, a perfect harmony of tiles, mosaics and brocades; facing page: the hotel's imposing bronze gate

"IT'S A VERY EXCLUSIVE PLACE, IT'S SUPER RELAXED. IT'S VERY OSTENTATIOUS IN SOME WAYS BUT AT THE SAME TIME EXTREMELY DISCREET"



Right: butler Kamal lights the candles in the red-tiled courtyard of a two-bedroom riad (No 27 is the one to book). A wooden Juliet balcony juts out from the first floor, where the bedrooms are located. For larger parties, Royal Mansour offers the fully secluded four-bedroom "Riad d'Honneur", complete with its own private entrance

Facing page, clockwise from top left: the artist Yahya leans on a silver door he created for the hotel; elaborate decorations of the bar; a cosy corner in the blue courtyard; hammam master Abdelkader al Ibtikar; ornate lighting in a two-bedroom riad; Marc Lahoreau, head chef at La Grande Table Française; the oasis within the oasis; spider crab meat in calamari tubes at La Grande Table Française; sumptuous sleeping quarters of a two-bedroom riad



inner courtyard with a marble fountain, surrounded by ornately wrought arches decorated with plasterwork and mosaics. Upholstery, sofas, chairs and curtains are almost entirely fashioned from silk, velvet and brocade, while the tables are inlaid with mother-of-pearl. All the crystal comes from France and the chandeliers from Murano. Perfection down to the smallest detail is celebrated here for its own sake. Even the budgerigars in the lobby chirp from the beauty of a decorative birdcage designed by Yahya, a British-Moroccan artist whose pieces can be found throughout the palace, including a massive copper chandelier over the entrance to the bar, an entire ensemble of lamps, and metre-high doors of worked German silver in the blue courtyard of the restaurant. Seventeen of his works, which were shown last year at the Arab World Institute in Paris, will be on display (and for sale) until 5 September at the Royal Mansour.

"It's a very exclusive place, it's super relaxed. it's very ostentatious

in some ways but at the same time extremely discreet," says the 42-year-old, who plies his trade from a decorous showroom in the Ville Nouvelle. And how right he is: though there are 500 employees serving 53 riads, guests rarely come face-to-face with any of them. It takes discretion to a whole new level – literally. A system of tunnels runs through the park, giving each riad its own lift access, along with butler and room service, which can depart unseen. Breakfasts are served on the roof terraces of three-storey riads, where a plunge pool, deck chairs, a fireplace, dining table, a Bedouin tent for a nap in the shade and picturesque views of the Koutoubia and the snow-capped peaks of the High Atlas all beckon.

The culinary experience matches the exquisite tone set by the rest of Mansour – though the prices also match those of Paris's top restaurants. Under the direction of Yannick Alléno, Marc Lahoreau and Karim Ben Baba lead La Grande Table Française and La Grande Table Marocaine. Lahoreau succeeds

extraordinarily with his pigeon and lamb main dishes, especially toothsome when paired with black truffles sourced from the nearby mountains, and Ben Baba offers a sensational selection of *briouates* and Moroccan salad variations, all of which are paired to surprisingly refined local vintages such as Château Roslane Les Coteaux de l'Atlas.

The only possible letdown comes with the pool, which is petite and unfortunately wedged between the main public areas of the hotel and restaurant terrace wall (there are other hotels in Marrakech to show-off one's latest swimwear).

Yes, the guests at the Royal Mansour come for the peace and the privacy and the utterly unique atmosphere. The artist Yahya sums it up perfectly: "High-end hotels want to impose very strict dress codes on their guests – and here they can have billionaires who come and just want to chill out in their shorts and trainers – and it doesn't seem out of place." ◀

One bedroom riad from £1,350 per night, royalmansour.com

