

LA MAISON ARABE



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“He has cause to lament who has never once
encountered that which is worth losing everything for.”

Andalusian poet, 12th century
Guestbook, La Maison Arabe


Text

Aude de Tocqueville

Photographs

Pierre David
Marie Rodier

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The twentieth anniversary of La Maison Arabe is a very emotional moment for me.

The adventure told in these pages would not have been possible without the unfailing support of Nabila Dakir and Taoufik Ghaffouli, who have accompanied me since we opened our doors. It is thanks to them that so many of our clients consider La Maison Arabe their home in Marrakech.

I also extend my heartfelt gratitude to Jeannine Coureau, the finest and most loyal ambassador of La Maison Arabe since its earliest days. We will never forget her thoughtful advice and unrivalled professionalism in helping our establishment achieve its international renown and reputation.

This book is an homage to the entire team at La Maison Arabe, who work daily to ensure our guests remember with fondness their stay with us, as well as to the local artists and craftsmen who helped me resurrect this Moroccan legend.

Fabrizio Ruspoli



WHERE HISTORY
AND LEGEND MEET

Fabrizio Ruspoli strolls down the middle of the alley that runs through the El Khemis souk, greeting a stallholder or two as he goes by. A familiar face, no one thinks to bother him. This aficionado of art and architecture has, on occasion, bought the odd item from its medley of stalls to decorate La Maison Arabe, one of Marrakech's first restaurants, which he acquired in 1994. Although this descendant of a noble Roman family, the Princes Ruspoli di Poggio Suasa, was then struck by the melancholy air that hung about its crumbling walls after years of disuse, he also had a sense that he was starting a new chapter in his own personal story, one in which Morocco, the scene of his childhood holidays, would once again play a part. To his sudden impulse – which in actual fact owed nothing to chance – he added the ground-breaking idea of turning the restaurant into Marrakech's premier riad-hotel. Perhaps this is why the transformation went on to be such a success. In 2017, La Maison Arabe was presented with the Travellers' Choice Award by the Tripadvisor website as one of the world's twenty best luxury hotels. The reasons are plain to see: a fascinating history, the exceptionally considerate service provided by its team of some one hundred and thirty staff for twenty-six rooms and suites, its atmosphere, which combines the privacy of a family home with the amenities of a luxury hotel, and the beauty of its Secret Garden, a peaceful oasis a quarter of an hour from the medina by car. Although Marrakech is home today to five hundred riads that welcome paying guests, few can rival La Maison Arabe.



1938

The offspring of a first marriage between Hélène Sébilon and a certain Monsieur Larochette, Suzy was a delicate teenager. A doctor advised her mother that a spell in warmer climes would be kinder on her daughter's lungs. As fate would have it, in the 1930s, the Pasha of Marrakech, Thami El Glaoui was a regular customer of Hélène, then married to the owner of a chain of Parisian restaurants that had specialized in leg of lamb since the 19th century. A man of refined tastes and rather partial to the company of women, he regularly regaled Hélène with tales of the particularly dry climate on the Haouz plains at the foot of the Atlas Mountains. The idea of a visit to the region gained ground and, in 1938, mother and daughter set out for Morocco. Although Suzy's health weighed heavily in the decision, some say that the vagaries of a fickle husband in difficult financial straits speeded their departure, although neither woman could ever have imagined that they would never move back.

On the eve of war, Morocco was home to a large European colony. Of Marrakech's 190,000 residents, 7,000 were from the *vieux continent*. Life inside the city's ring of earthwork ramparts was, by all accounts, highly agreeable. By advocating a form of colonization respectful of local customs and Islamic values, the Protectorate's first resident-general (1912-1925), Hubert Lyautey, a future Marshal of France, had gained the esteem of the Moroccan people. Although his successors lacked his visionary qualities and respect for what was then called the "indigenous population," in 1938 his legacy could still be felt in the peace that reigned between the French and Moroccans.

Hélène and Suzy had few problems making friends in this

community bound by exile. But at the outbreak of war, the two women, finding themselves in an unfortunate financial situation, were stranded in Marrakech, uncertain as to what their next move should be. Moved by their plight, the Pasha, who owned vast swaths of land in the Bab Doukkala neighborhood, where his palace stood, suggested they buy a house in the medina and open a restaurant: "What Marrakech needs is a real restaurant serving Moroccan cuisine, one worthy of the city's reputation. And I'll help you do it. I will make you a present of one of my best cooks and, with her, I promise that palace cuisine will never be a mystery to you again," the Pasha is said to have told Hélène and her daughter. In an interview with Chandler Forman for the *Chicago Sun Times* in 1984, Suzy confirmed the story, adding that, by smoothing their path, the Pasha was also making life easier for himself: since the palace was then the only place where it was possible to enjoy a good tajine, the restaurant would help stem the endless flow of hungry guests to his own table.

1946

And so, in 1946, the two women bought a small house in Bab Doukkala, not far from the gate through which caravans of camels once wound, loaded with cereals, fruit and skins from the surrounding plains. At the time, Marrakech was ringed by nothing but dirt tracks, which became uncrossable when it rained heavily, while inside the city, plants bristled between the house walls of the medina, through which darkness crept as night fell, and where women gathered at the public fountains before the houses were supplied with running water. In the shadow of the Bab Doukkala mosque, as everywhere in this city built

around a legendary square that has set the scene for storytellers since time immemorial, history and legend inextricably intermingled. According to tradition, this mosque and its adjoining school were founded in the 16th century by a Berber princess, Lalla Massouda, to atone for eating a date during Ramadan. More likely, the princess, mother of the Saadi dynasty's most powerful sultan, Ahmed el Mansour, and thus wealthy beyond imagination, was applying a keystone of the Koran: "Whoever builds a mosque helps convey the message of Islam and a house will be built for him in Paradise". Did the devout princess spin an invisible thread through time? Other women with strong personalities have also found refuge in Bab Doukkala. A stone's throw from the mosque, in a riad now used by artists-in-residence, the French humanist Denise Masson toiled at a translation of the Koran later approved by the highest religious authorities in Cairo and published by Gallimard in 1967, in the prestigious La Pléiade collection. Residents of a modest alley close to the same mosque, Hélène and Suzy and their legendary cook added to the neighborhood's reputation for extraordinary women when they opened their restaurant, La Maison Arabe, a Marrakech legend for decades to come.

For Europeans, especially women, it took a special kind of courage to dwell in the medina. Most French residents of Guéliz, the new district built in the early years of the Protectorate, rarely ventured down its alleyways. Inhabited by less well-heeled foreigners and Moroccans from the countryside, it was considered too working class. But Hélène and Suzy were made of stronger stuff. They quickly adjusted to this enticing neighborhood with its houses gathered around patios, of which the entrance doors were all alike,

