

Haven in the Harem

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Relax, unwind ... Harem spa retreat.

In a sanctuary where men are forbidden, Susan Gough Henly discovers peace, seclusion ... and an upside-down house.

Set in a luxurious private compound, overflowing with whimsical sculptures, on the outskirts of Marrakesh, Harem is not your usual spa retreat. Sure, it evokes Moroccan exotica and, of course, it offers healthy food, foot baths and facials, but it is primarily a place of discovery, of surprise.

The woman behind it all is from the Netherlands but has lived in Morocco for 14 years. Sandra Zwollo corralled the name "Harem" because "for Europeans like me, it has the aura of an oriental paradise filled with mystery, opulence and well-being. I have taken only the positive elements ... there is no Sultan waiting for service!"



The dining room at Hotel Harem.

The word comes from Arabic and means "prohibited place". By extension it is a sanctuary forbidden to men.

Arriving at dusk after a sensory-overloaded 10 days exploring the labyrinthine medinas of Fez and Marrakesh and the swirling sands of the

Sahara, I am in need of calm.

Sandra welcomes me to an oasis of green lawns and palm trees. My suite, located off a plant-filled courtyard, has ochre stucco walls, hung with paintings in horizontal bands of saturated colour, and a pretty hand-carved blue bed draped in netting. There is a couch, an intimate fireplace and a large mirror in a small living area, while the dressing room has space for all my paraphernalia.



A guest room at Hotel Harem.

After a luxurious bath I change into a long brown kaftan embroidered in the same lime green as the butter-soft babouche slippers Sandra has left for me. You don't have to pack any resort clothes, beyond a swimsuit, as everyone relaxes in this gear for their entire stay. No make-up, no showing off ... just time out.

A secret passageway leads from my room to the library and I push open an immensely heavy door, which turns out to be part-bookcase, to meet the other five guests ... a couple of fiftysomething women from the east coast of the US and three young professionals from London. (Sandra needs a minimum of six bookings for a Harem retreat to go ahead on this 10.1-hectare private estate. While many people come as a group, she is also happy to join together individual bookings.)

When the gong sounds for dinner, we head through the art-filled scarlet parlour to a white-on-white dining room. A life-size giraffe sculpture peers over a table set with bowls of crimson beetroot gazpacho with Moroccan flat bread. Lamb braised with apricots and saffron and a salad of zucchinis tossed with almonds and mint wash down superbly with a flinty Moroccan wine. To finish, we savour a cleansing grapefruit-and-basil granita. The food is exquisite, much of it from organic gardens right outside the door.

Next morning, Sandra arrives at my door with a tea infusion and a ginger shot designed to kick-start my digestion. Breakfast is homemade yoghurt with watermelon, pawpaw and kiwi fruit plus wholemeal bread with delectable gomassio (ground sesame seeds and Japanese salt), fresh tomatoes and olive oil from the estate. After a terrific cup of Moroccan coffee, I'm raring to go.

First up is a massage by New Zealand expat Aisha, who is married to a local. Next is my hammam bath baptism in a womb-like domed room with cisterns of gushing hot water. Spa expert Hind, a hearty Moroccan woman dressed in a black swimsuit, has me sit on a bench where she suds up my body with black olive-oil soap to soften the skin. She washes it off before scrubbing off multiple layers of dead skin with a rough glove until I am glowing pinker than a Pom in summer. Then she applies rhassoul, a fine, mineral-rich clay mask with Morocco's famous restorative argan oil. After a final wash my skin is smooth and satiny and I feel like 10 years' worth of age lines have disappeared down the drain.

Meandering to the yoga studio set amid an olive grove, I savour an hour of Hatha yoga stretches and sun salutations before a lazy lunch on the terrace. After a glass of crisp Moroccan rose, the lounge chairs by the pool look mighty inviting, emphasising the atmosphere Sandra creates: understated, classy, different. "This is no boot camp, there are no guilt trips."

And so the days blur in a sumptuous tour of the senses ... facials, head massages and rose-petal foot baths, manicures and pedicures, yoga and meditation, pool time, high tea, tennis, and a grand-finale couscous feast with belly dancing in a Moroccan tent. Yet perhaps most intriguing is my Alice-down-the-rabbit-hole explorations of the magical world of artist Jean-Francois Fourtou, whose creative spirit permeates his family's estate.

There is his Giant's Installation House, where the bed, cupboard, tables and chairs, are super-sized and you have to climb up like the child he remembers being when visiting his grandmother.

Even more surreal is the upside-down house fallen from the sky into a grassy field.

It is an exact recreation of his grandparents' summer home only you enter via an upstairs bathroom window and climb up the staircase to the ground floor where a table, set with soup, bread and wine, hangs from the ceiling in the kitchen.

As with his enormous animals ... like the giant friendly goat by the swimming pool or the elephant's trunk peeking around a courtyard corner ... all the art transforms the Harem into a place of whimsy. As Zwollo says, "it's playful and fun and makes you giggle ... like going back into childhood".

An ideal place of rebirth, in fact ... of body, mind and spirit.

Trip notes

Where Harem is located in a private estate in the Palmeraie, 15 minutes' drive from Marrakesh. +212 672 091 886, harem-escape.com.

Getting there Emirates flies from Sydney to Marrakesh, via Casablanca and Dubai. emirates.com.au.

How much Harem offers three- to seven-day retreats, prices start from \$485 a person, a night, including food, wine, spa treatments, yoga and meditation.

Top marks The food is so fabulous you'll be asking for all the recipes.

Black mark You can't always arrange for the treatments you want when you want them, as this is a small operation.

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