

(insider's guide)

PLAY IT AGAIN, CASABLANCA



Discover Morocco, minus the tourists, in a city brimming with ancient architecture history, cuisine and culture.

WORDS DAVE STAMBOULIS

Visitors to Morocco often bypass Casablanca, claiming it is not as exotic as Marrakech or Fez. While those ancient cities may get the lion's share of the press, Casablanca actually offers its own nostalgic past — and the country's best seafood — with far fewer tourist hassles.

Bogart mythology aside, Casablanca combines Morocco's modern cafes and clubs with Art Deco architecture from the 1920s, timeless medinas and souks where you will be hard-pressed to find tourists.

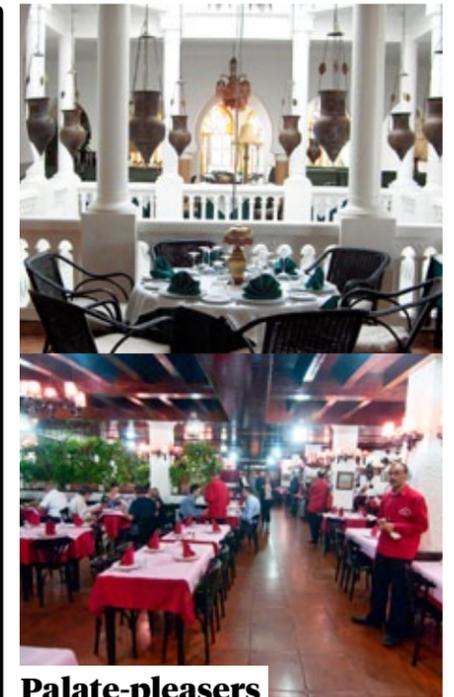
While the city was modelled after the French port of Marseille and may look European at first glance, it is uniquely Moroccan at heart, and a place to savour the mint tea and scents of spice markets. With several thousand street cafes to relax in, you may find yourself staying a little longer than planned.

GETTING THERE To book your flight to Casablanca with our codeshare partner, Etihad Airways, visit www.virginaustralia.com or simply call 13 67 89 (in Australia).



As time goes by During the 1920s, the French built Casablanca's downtown area based on France's emerging Art Deco style, combining it with traditional Moroccan design to create a beautiful port capital. While colonialism is gone, the city centre can still be marvelled at for its grand past. Places such as the **Rialto cinema** (rue Mohammed Qorri), **post office** and other edifices featuring ornately carved façades, wrought-iron balconies and white shutters gleaming in the afternoon sun are perfect examples of Mauresque architecture and still significant to the city's image today. If there is one reason to come to Casablanca, it's to marvel at the **Hassan II Mosque** (pictured above). Outside of Mecca and Medina, Hassan

is the world's tallest mosque, and supposedly the only one non-Muslims are allowed to visit in Morocco. The colossal minaret soars above the city, and the mammoth prayer hall, crafted by 10,000 artisans, accommodates 25,000 worshippers. Tours of the mosque, including its basement *hammams* and fountains, are given in several languages from Saturday to Thursday. The **Marché Central** (Central Market) is a hive of wildly colourful produce stalls, artisan shops selling local crafts and, at its heart, a fish market that has to be seen to be believed. The women selling the fresh catch also cook sumptuous seafood lunches for the array of tiny restaurants set up outside the market's northern side.



Palate-pleasers

Whether you're in the mood to try a tagine (stew cooked in a conical ceramic pot) or sample the local specialty *seksu bidawi* (a slow-cooked couscous feast made with seven vegetables), you'll find Casablanca's food scene a real delight.

ONE Kathy Kriger, an ex-American diplomat, asked friends around the world to support her dream to bring to life the mythical saloon from the film that made this city famous. The result is **Rick's Café**, (pictured top; 248 Boulevard Sour Jdid; +212 522 274 207; www.rickscafe.ma) a restaurant and bar specialising in Moroccan and Californian fusion cuisine. The upstairs lounge features all sorts of *Casablanca* movie memorabilia, while Moroccan Sam (Issam Chabaa) plays *As Time Goes By* on the grand piano.

TWO Locals in the know head down to the fishing port each evening, where the catch at **Restaurant du Port de Pêche** (pictured above; Le Port de Pêche; +212 522 318 561) is as fresh as it comes. Sample the shellfish paella and fish tagines in a lively and unpretentious atmosphere, with gingham tablecloths and laid-back waiters serving Morocco's freshest fish.

THREE **La Taverne du Dauphin** (115 Boulevard Houphouët Boigny; +212 522 221 200; www.taverne-du-dauphin.com) is a long-running French bistro wildly popular for its excellent wine cellar and seafood offerings such as the famed Oualidia oysters. ▶



Moroccan nights

Whether you are looking for authentic lodgings or modern charm with a decidedly artistic twist, Casablanca will surely provide.

CHARM **Le Doge Hôtel & Spa** (pictured top; 9 rue du Docteur Veyre; www.hotelledoge.com) is housed in a 1930s mansion with a private rooftop terrace overlooking the heart of the city. Each of the rooms is dedicated to a major artist or author of the Art Deco period.

BOUTIQUE For Atlantic breezes, **Villa Blanca** (Boulevard de la Corniche; www.villablanca.ma) is an escapist haven. Situated just across from the beach, this boutique hotel features an open air Skybar and a brasserie (pictured above) offering fine French cuisine.

ELEGANCE **Le Royal Mansour Méridien** (27 Avenue De L' Armée Royale; www.leroyalmansourmeridien.com) is a contemporary five-star hotel located near the towering Hassan II Mosque, with top-notch spa treatments and many fine-dining options.

HISTORY For a bit of nostalgia, stay at the **Hôtel Transatlantique** (79 rue Chaouia; www.transatcasa.com), where legendary French songstress Edith Piaf resided. This 1922 colonial gem has superb decor, along with a piano bar, cabaret and plenty of Piaf relics to relive the past.

PRIVACY The **Gray Boutique Hotel & Spa** (14 Angle rue Ain El Aouda et 8 rue Abou Al Kacem El Kotbari; www.grayhotellandspa.com) is tucked into a quiet side street in the middle of — yet seemingly away from — the bustle of the city centre. Its modern rooms with sophisticated decor make it an excellent spot to relax in.



NIGHT AND DAY

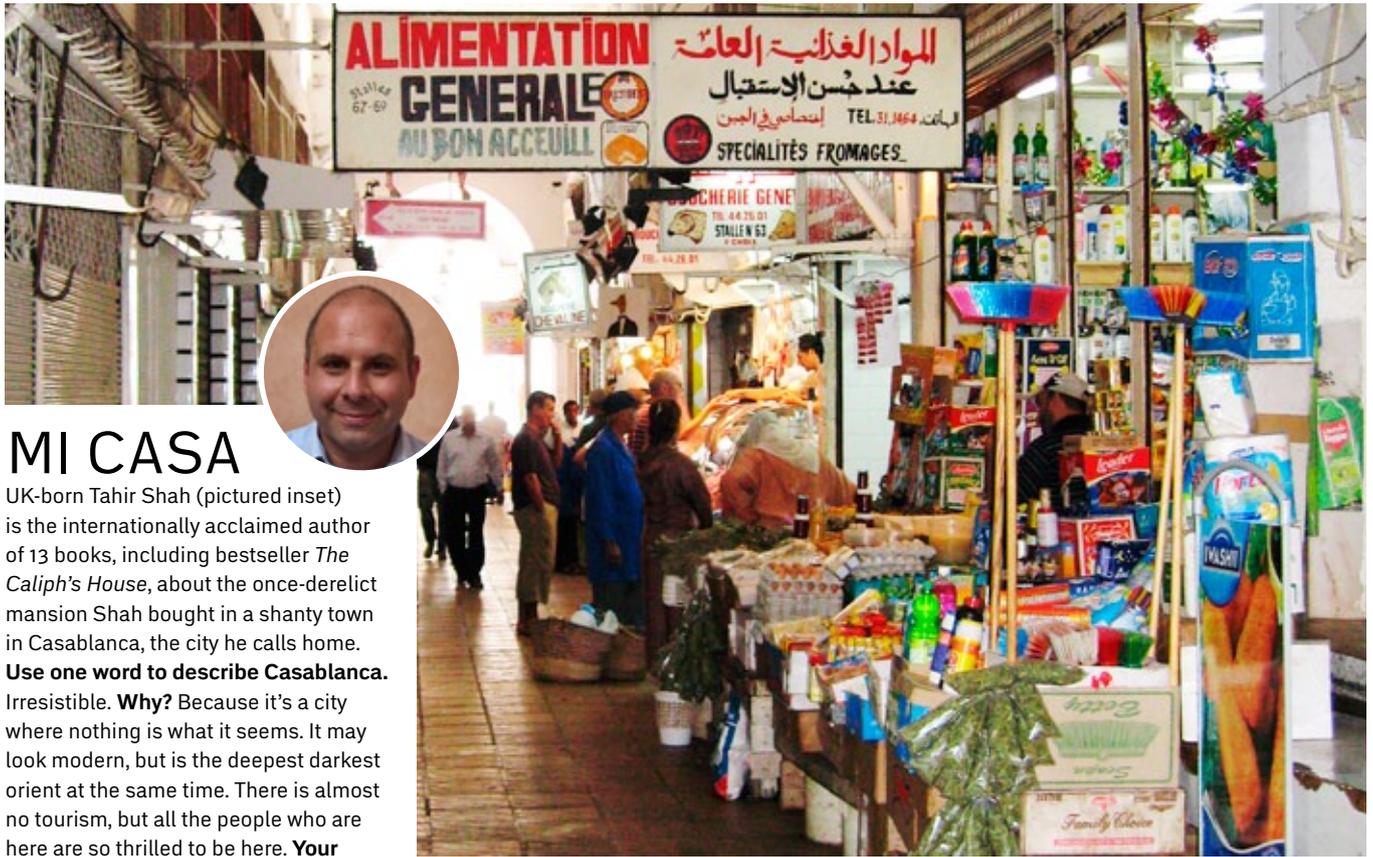
For a swanky day and night out, locals head to the beach-side promenade of **Le Corniche** (pictured left), where BMWs outnumber donkey carts and private beach clubs are the norm. Most of these member clubs allow foreign guests to use their pools, so you can relax all day in anticipation of a long night out, as Casa's top nightclubs are also located here, ensuring the party goes on until the wee hours. Those with dirhams burning a hole in their pocket should head to the spaceship-look-alike **Morocco Mall** (www.moroccomall.net), where, if it weren't for the blinding sunshine and waves rolling in from the Atlantic, you might swear you were at a NASA space centre. The mall is hailed as Africa's largest and does seem a bit alien in this environment. It attracts plenty of shoppers and even adrenaline-seekers, with its plethora of shops and Adventureland theme park. ▶



HISTORY LESSON

For Art Deco lovers, the restored 1930s **Villa des Arts** (30 Boulevard Brahim Roudani; +212 522 295 087; www.fondationona.ma), in the fashionable Gauthier quarter, hosts exhibitions of local and international contemporary artists. Trek out to the suburb of Oasis to visit the **Museum of Moroccan Judaism** (81 rue Chasseur Jules Gros; +212 522 994 940), the only Jewish museum in any Muslim country in the world. Casablanca's **Medina** might not be as labyrinthine as Fez's, but you'll still enjoy getting lost in its maze of restored ramparts, stopping for mint tea and a bit of haggling with carpet salesmen. **La Sqala Café Maure** (pictured above; Boulevard des Almohades), set in an 18th-century bastion, is the perfect place to observe it all. The French-built 1930s version of an ancient souk, the **Quartier Habous** (pictured below), is home to many antique shops and brass makers. While you're there, try some of the best pastries in town at **Bennis Habous** (2 Rue Fkih el Gabbas, +212 522 303 025). ►





MI CASA

UK-born Tahir Shah (pictured inset) is the internationally acclaimed author of 13 books, including bestseller *The Caliph's House*, about the once-derelict mansion Shah bought in a shanty town in Casablanca, the city he calls home.

Use one word to describe Casablanca.

Irresistible. **Why?** Because it's a city where nothing is what it seems. It may look modern, but is the deepest darkest orient at the same time. There is almost no tourism, but all the people who are here are so thrilled to be here. **Your**

favourite place to eat out? The Marché Central (pictured right), as I can eat fish I have bought myself and it is where people of all walks of life meet over lunch. **How does Casablanca inspire**

your creativity as a writer? Its chaos and cultural colours create endless layers, and it is a city that is always interesting. **Your favourite hidden**

gem? The Soco De Moïna flea market in Hay Hassani, where you can buy 1930s French washbasins and other antiques, and you will never see a tourist. It's raw Morocco at its best. **What is the biggest misconception the world has about Morocco?** That it is just 'another' Arab country. Morocco is so much more than this; it is a crossroad of Africa, the Arab world and Europe. 🇲🇦



Photography: 4Corners Images, Alamy, Getty Images, The Usual Suspects SA/Rick's Café