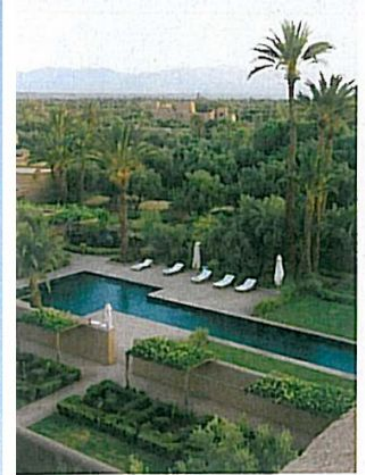




DESERT SANCTUARY

The luxuriant garden at Dar Ahlam, a restored kasbah on the edge of the Sahara, is an oasis of relaxation and romance, writes Clare Foster

PHOTOGRAPHS CLAY PERRY



AS DUSK DESCENDS ON THE

gardens of Dar Ahlam, the birds cease their chattering, the scent of jasmine fills the air, and hundreds of candles and lanterns are lit to mirror the stars above. This magical scene is typical of this romantic kasbah hotel hidden in a Moroccan oasis between the rugged Atlas Mountains and the Sahara Desert. Getting there is itself an experience, whether you brave the spectacular five-hour drive over the mountains from Marrakesh or fly to nearby Ouarzazate. The final leg of the journey along potholed, dusty roads gives no indication of the paradise to be found within the thick mud walls of this traditional fortress, and once through the door you enter another world.

Dar Ahlam, which means 'house of dreams' in Arabic, was opened six years ago by French events organiser Thierry Teyssier, who oversaw the renovation of the nineteenth-century kasbah and its transformation into a luxurious hotel. Once inside the cool, dark interior, you find yourself in a labyrinth of narrow corridors, winding stone staircases and intimate tiled courtyards, with beautiful artefacts and architectural motifs at every turn. Decorated in a style that successfully combines traditional Moroccan with modern French chic, each of the nine suites and three villas has its own character, furnished with sumptuous textiles and eclectic works of art.

From the gloaming of the interior, the garden beckons irresistibly, and here, sitting under the shade of an olive grove, you can unwind with a delicious clove-infused aperitif in your hand. Designed by French landscape designer Louis Benech, renowned for his redesign of the Tuileries gardens in Paris, the garden perfectly complements the turrets and terraces of the kasbah, bringing in a feeling of the lush oasis beyond the walls. Benech has created a landscape that flows in sensuous sweeps and curves, from the soft banks of ornamental grasses near the building to the snaking irrigation channels that wind round the upper part of the garden. Beneath the

OPPOSITE Evening light reflects off the terracotta-coloured mud walls of the nineteenth-century kasbah, which has been immaculately restored as a luxury hotel. THIS PAGE FROM TOP The deep-green pool is designed in an angular shape, with Islamic influences. A spiky yucca forms a focal point in a border near the olive grove. A lawn, greened by the oasis, is flanked by borders. In the secluded sunken garden, a tiled path leads through beds of acanthus

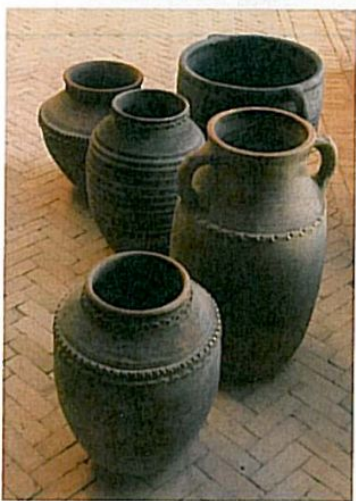


towering date palms and tangle-branched olive trees is a working potager, laid out in the traditional Moroccan way in a grid of raised banks to conserve water. Vegetables are grown here for the hotel kitchen, and guests can wander at leisure, inhaling the heady scents of the herbs and flowers.

The garden is integral to the experience of Dar Ahlam and it is used for all but a few weeks of the year. Eating outside is one of the most pleasurable aspects of a stay here, heightened by the fact that meals are never taken in the same place. Breakfast may be served next to the pool, while lunch will be in another secluded corner under an olive tree or on one of the kasbah's upper terraces, where brightly coloured rugs and cushions will have been set out. When it is warm enough, massage tents are put up in the garden so you can be pampered en plein air, lulled by bubbling fountains and soothing birdsong. In contrast, during the colder months a massage or hammam will take place in the spa, to the accompaniment of a crackling fire.

If you feel the need to tear yourself away from the massage table or sun-lounger, the hotel organises tailor-made excursions to explore the dramatic landscapes that surround it – a picnic on the edge of Ouarzazate Lake, a sunset camel ride, or a trip to the Dades Valley, famous for its almonds, dates and roses. There is also the chance to sleep in luxurious, colonial-style tents in the hotel's desert encampment at the foot of the Saharan sand dunes.

Whatever your agenda, a stay at Dar Ahlam is the perfect antidote to the mayhem of modern life – all you have to do is put your worries to one side, relax into it and allow yourself to be thoroughly spoilt. For anyone with an ounce of romanticism, the house of dreams certainly lives up to its name □ *Clare Foster's ground arrangements were organised by Travel Link Morocco (www.travel-link.ma), which specialises in upmarket tours throughout Morocco. Suites at Dar Ahlam (www.maisonsdesreves.com/dar-ahlam-en.html) cost from €850 per night, and villas from €1,050 per night. Prices include all meals, plus some drinks and spa treatments*



OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

The beds in this inner courtyard surround a bubbling fountain. Banks of *pennisetum coccineum* border the salon terrace. A narrow irrigation channel winds its way round the garden, bordered here by clipped greenery and flamboyant flowers. A display of Moroccan clay pots on a terrace. THIS PAGE Surrounded by a shady olive grove is a working vegetable plot, gardened in the traditional Moroccan way with raised edges to conserve water