

The Atlas mountains provide a backdrop to the central courtyard of Dar al Hossoun. The long rectangular pool is inspired by the Moorish gardens of Andalusia.

In brief

Name Dar al Hossoun.
What Contemporary oasis garden that forms part of a Moroccan hotel and spa.
Where Near Taroudant, southern Morocco.
Size 6,500 square metres.
Soil Silty loam.
Climate Semi-desert, summer temperatures up to 50°C, 200mm average annual rainfall.
Features Enclosed garden, sunken garden, rare and unusual plants from arid situations.

*One thousand
and one delights*

A hotel garden near the ancient town of Taroudant, southern Morocco, is filled with such a stunning array of palms, agaves, succulents and cacti that every turn fills the eye with exotic delight

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS / LE SCANFF-MAYER
OPENING IMAGE PHILIPPE GROMELLE

“I finally understand that each day in a garden there is something new to experience. Every day this garden offers new delights”

In this garden, unlike in any other, I can be an egotistical gardener. Here plants grow so well and so quickly that we are not planting for future generations, we are planting for the here and now.” I am at Dar al Hosoun in southern Morocco and the garden’s owner, energetic Frenchman Ollivier Verra, is excitedly showing me around the lush plantings that shade and cool the garden’s maze of courtyards.

The gardens were originally the home of French design duo Arnaud Maurières and Éric Ossart, who created the garden as a trial ground for desert plants they had collected in remote parts of Yemen, Mexico, North Africa and other arid regions. Some of the plants are rare in cultivation and many are only ever seen in botanic gardens. They built the house with rammed-earth bricks, inspired by a traditional Moroccan *riad*, with the buildings enclosing a secret garden. The formal pools and graphic geometry evoke Moorish gardens, such as the Generalife in Grenada, but the design is soothed by the exuberant planting and the softness of the earth walls,

which create the sense of a garden deeply anchored in the landscape. It is hard to believe it is only ten years old.

Four years ago Ollivier bought the house together with business partner Thierry Valat, to run as a hotel. “It felt like a heavy responsibility to be taking on such an important collection of plants and such a beautiful garden,” he says. “Arnaud and Éric held my hand all the way and continue to support my gardening. I’m finally beginning to feel like the garden is mine.”

The last area that Arnaud and Éric developed was a sunken garden. “Four years ago this was a deep, dark hole,” explains Ollivier. “It looked like a swimming pool that had been too expensive to finish.” In fact, the area had been used to dig the soil for the rammed-earth buildings. It is now the centrepiece of the *riad*’s garden.

The path that edges the sunken garden is enclosed by a low, rammed-earth wall, 1.5m tall and a narrow, barely visible, iron safety rail, draped with morning glory, that surrounds the top of the garden. From this



The airy panicles of *Pennisetum setaceum* are used throughout the garden to soften the spiky forms of cacti and succulents.



BOTTOM ROW
Right Groups of *Pennisetum setaceum* are planted among the glaucous leaves of large specimens of *Agave tequilana*.
Middle Roofs act as terraces that provide views down on to the gardens. The central courtyard is dominated by date palms, *Phoenix dactylifera*.
Far right The 3m stems of *Agave parryi* appear every ten years or so but reach their full height within a few weeks.

The designers

Arnaud Maurières and Éric Ossart are two designers whose dynamism and creativity continues to have a significant impact on garden and landscape designers, particularly in France. In the late 1980s and early 1990s their loose, informal planting schemes for the town of Blois transformed municipal planting in France. During the 1990s Ossart expanded this work as head of horticulture at the garden design festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire, while Maurières influenced young designers as art director of the exhibition 'L'Art du Jardin' and at his own landscape school on the French Riviera.

The pair have designed important gardens in the west and south of France that show the influence of their interest in Moorish art and architecture. Their planting schemes favour local plants or those from regions with similar soils and climates. Regional construction techniques and materials are used both for aesthetic reasons and for environmental sustainability. The formal geometry of their gardens is always allied with exuberant planting.

They cite the colourful, “emotional architecture” of Mexican architect Luis Barragán as an important influence. They are currently involved in projects throughout the world.

- For more examples of the designers’ work, visit www.maurieres-ossart.com

▷ vantage point you look out over a canopy of banana trees, date palms, and papaya trees, with pale-blue, tissue-paper flowers of *Solanum wrightii* floating by, and there is the sensation of being in a hot-air balloon.

The interior of the garden is reached down shallow steps through narrow stone terraces, planted with domes of succulents and cacti – agaves, *Ferocactus* and *Coryphantha* – some with gaudy flowers on top of their unwelcoming spikes. Among the most beautiful of the agaves is *Agave victoriae-reginae*, with a distinctive white edging on the leaf keels, seed of which was collected in the Chihuahuan Desert in Mexico. Towering above the domes are spires of even spikier cacti. These are plants unfamiliar to me but the discrete labels tell me that they are species of *Pilosocereus* and of *Isolatocereus*.

Finally, you reach the cool shady floor of the garden, a narrow path leading around, pushing through curtains of the racemes of *Buddleja asiaticum* or past the huge leaves of bananas, the atmosphere jungle-like and exotic. Look up through

the silhouette of palm leaves and mimosas and you see a patchwork of the deep-blue Moroccan sky; look down and there are flashes of colour from *Clivia* and *Crinum* and you hear the soft murmur of leaves disturbed by foraging tortoises. All other sound is dulled by the 3m-deep soil walls that also serve to keep the garden cool. It is a place in which to linger.

Ollivier is rightly besotted with his tranquil paradise. “As I child I would watch with pity as my grandmother would wander around her garden,” he says. “Now I do the same. I finally understand that each day in a garden there is something new to experience. Every day this garden offers new delights. And every day I appreciate the magic and beauty of this place.” □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address Dar al Hossoun Garden Lodge and Spa, BP 1157, Taroudant 83000, Morocco.
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Website alhossoun.com

BOTTOM ROW

Right The shallow terraces that lead to the floor of the sunken garden are planted with aloes, agaves and the spires of *Pilosocereus* cacti species.

Middle Stone for the walls that retain the terraces was collected locally while the walls that form the terrace overlooking the sunken garden are made with rammed earth from the garden itself.

Far right The leaves of bananas and papaya trees shade the floor of the sunken garden and provide cool areas for crinums and clivias to grow.

