

Despite property prices doubling last year, Marrakech still has some great bargains. Just don't wait too long, says **Cathy Hawker**

MOROCCO'S Marrakech is one of North Africa's most vibrant and fast-expanding cities, offering a riot of colour, cool courtyard homes — known as *riads* — and markets (or *medinas*) piled high with hand-crafted treasures. Upmarket hotels are packed with budget airline tourists and British property buyers are in hot pursuit, finding the city an authentic — and still affordable — alternative to more established investor haunts.

As soon as you land at Marrakech airport you see the scale of development under way. The country's ruler, King Mohammed VI, aims to double visitor numbers to 10 million by 2010, and the current airport



The stunning Menara Park Pavilion is one of Marrakech's most lovely settings. The city, with its Atlas mountains backdrop, is proving a hit with UK investors

Love that riad rush

expansion is just one sign. New motorways are under construction, a huge range of new homes aimed at foreign buyers are being built, and plain-clothes policemen patrol the shopping areas to keep them tourist-friendly.

Celebrities have been going there since the 1970s, and heiress and hostess Hetti von Bohlen, a great friend of the King, has entertained most of them around her dinner table. Her pink-walled villa Bled Targui is five miles north-east of Marrakech, built on six acres given to her father-in-law by the monarch in 1970 and now for sale through Savills at £3.72 million.

"I had perfect times here," says von Bohlen, a charismatic Austrian countess who spends three months of the year in Marrakech. "Every night was open house, and Andy Warhol, Mick Jagger, Paul Getty — they all partied here. Life was totally decadent. After one of our dinner parties I would walk out on a Sunday morning and look under the branches of the trees to see who was still here."

Bled Targui has four large suites and a two-bedroom guest cottage, but it is the vast living area that will sell

'Every night was open house. Andy Warhol, Mick Jagger, Paul Getty — they all partied here'

this house. One reception room flows into another with large bougainvillea-clad terraces, a typical Moroccan roof garden and a tented dining area.

"It is very special," says Philip Arnott of Savills associate Moroccan Properties. "It could remain a private residence or would make a great boutique hotel."

Also to the north-east of Marrakech, the French-built La Palmeraie is an established, gated resort with smart private houses. Lynn Guinness first came to Marrakech to visit friends in 2001; she has created an elegant house based around a tree-filled courtyard.

"I moved here full-time last year," says Guinness who finally sold up in London and left Chelsea for Morocco. "I like the dry climate, the people, and the lack of jet lag when I return to London. I work in the morning and sit around the pool and read in the afternoon."

Guinness's four-bedroom house is now for sale for €1.35 million (£912,500), with an acre of well-stocked gardens, a large pool and separate staff accommodation. Decorated with a mixture of English



£3.72 million: Hetti von Bohlen's Bled Targui, five miles north-east of Marrakech. Through Savills (020 7016 3740)

fabrics and medina purchases — though the sofas and beds come from England — this is a typical Moroccan villa with a decidedly English country twist.

Guinness is selling because she has bought land in the newly sought-after Ourika Valley, 10 miles south of Marrakech heading towards the Atlas mountains. With business partner and established developer Francis Pike, she is building six *riad*-style houses of about 5,000sq ft, each with four bedrooms, and a further two houses for themselves, at Le Ferme de Saladin.

The houses will have a Moorish flavour with domes and arches, mosaic bathrooms and terracotta tiled floors. Guinness's eye for detail has introduced slashes of colour, such as French grey on ironwork and doors and good use of *tadelakt*, a polished plaster mixed with marble dust that produces glossy, smooth walls.

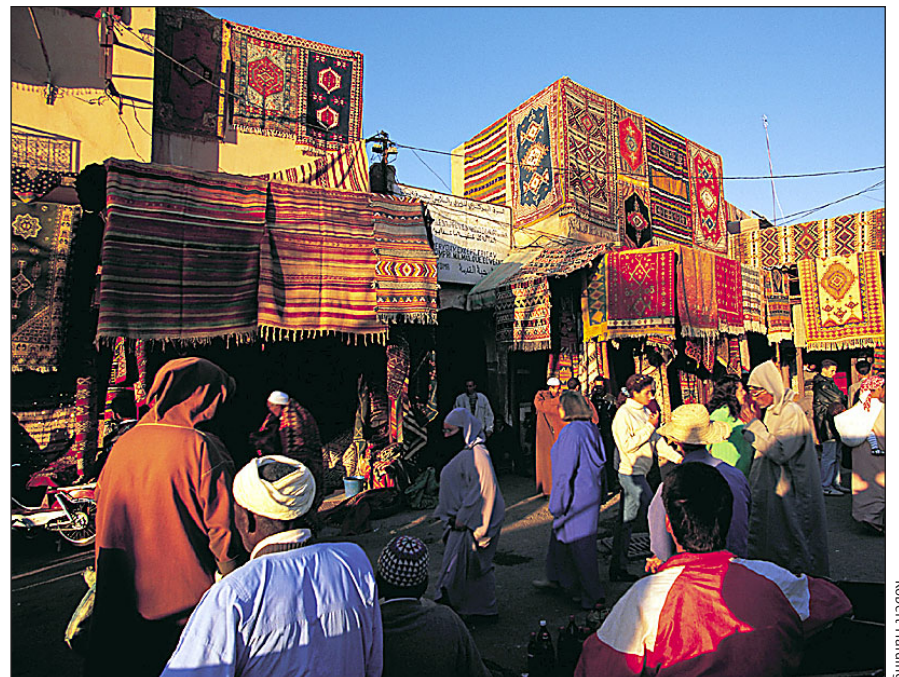
The houses are being built in a quiet olive grove with orchards of limes and lemon trees — "anything grows easily here," says Guinness — yet the buzz of Marrakech is only 20 minutes away.

Marrakech factfile: page 37

■ For **Bled Targui**, contact Moroccan Properties (www.moroccanproperties.com) or Savills (020 7016 3740; www.savills.com).

■ For **La Ferme de Saladin** and Lynn Guinness's house at **La Palmeraie**, contact Aylesford (020 7351 2383; www.aylesford.com).

£912,500: Lynn Guinness (right) is selling her courtyard home at La Palmeraie (left), near Marrakech, through Aylesford (020 7351 2328)



Morocco's traditional markets, known as medinas, are a treasure-hunter's dream. Carpets are a favourite with UK visitors, as are elaborately dyed fabrics and ornate metalwork lanterns

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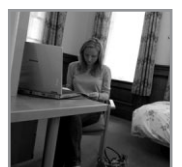
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