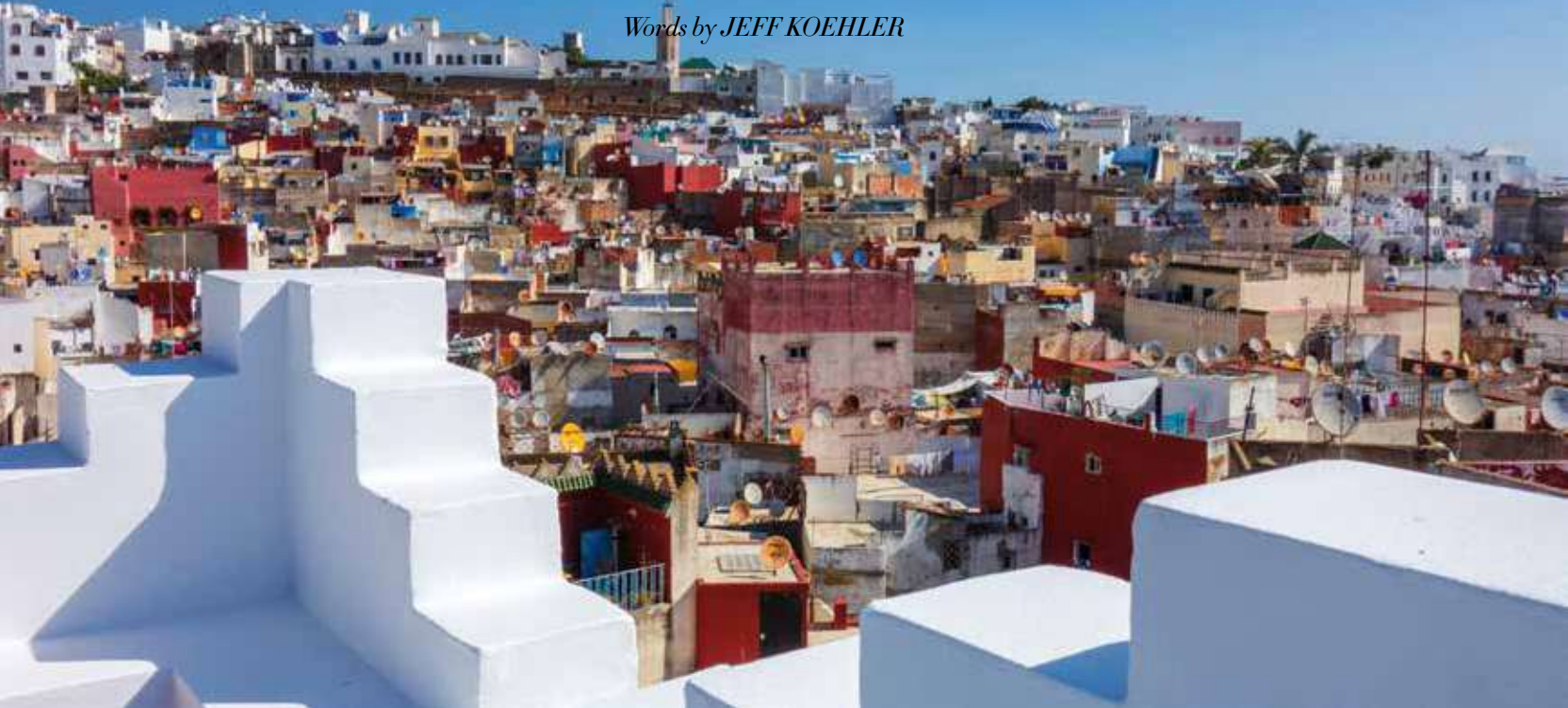


Morocco

A NEW TAKE ON TANGIER

The ancient city has had a bit of a luxe facelift and is drawing visitors looking for a relaxed and convivial getaway couched in centuries of history

Words by JEFF KOEHLER



Tangier is a crossroads. Founded in the 17th century by Phoenicians at the narrow mouth of the Mediterranean, Morocco's oldest and most international city is a meeting point of two seas, two continents, and various cultures. Its distinctive and dynamic character has long attracted travellers from around the globe.

By the end of the 20th century, though, Tangier was overtaken by Marrakech as Morocco's most popular city. Now, after a series of significant recent refurbishment projects (including a thorough restoration of the Kasbah and a new port), Tangier has emerged as the ideal counterpoint to that southern city: whites, blues, and forest greens to Marrakech's ochres, the sea and Spain across the Strait of Gibraltar to its palm groves and distant High Atlas, and, importantly, a quieter pace to the vibrant and sometimes frenetic energy of Marrakech.

For visitors, among Tangier's significant recent changes is the opening of the city's first luxury hotel, the 133-room Fairmont Tazi Palace. Initially built in the 1920s as a residence for the King's advisor, the palace sits on a hill overlooking the city and has been lovingly restored. The original structure became the main lobby area, with an added wing on each side and seven floors built straight down into the steep hillside.

For a stay in June, my room was on the first floor – that is, the bottom

floor – and had a generous private garden (rooms on other floors feature terraces). It was extremely quiet, as the hotel is 'upside-down,' with the lobby, restaurants, and pool all above and behind the rooms. Among larger pleasures like the 2,500 square metre spa (by far the best in northern Morocco) were numerous small, unexpected details, including a large vertical garden beside the main restaurant and an in-house potter with a small studio where clients (including kids) get hands-on instruction to throw their own pieces.

The hotel has injected excitement into Tangier's rather staid dining scene. Among its seven bars and restaurants is Crudo, serving creative seafood dishes by the talented Australian chef Chris Blake (formerly at La Mamounia in Marrakech). My lunch highlight was marinated seabass on a pine nut cream sauce and garnished with almonds, mandarin segments, and thin slices of fresh green chilli. At dinner in the hotel's superb Persian restaurant Parisa, I tasted a very different version of seabass: a vibrant and zesty pan-fried fillet marinated in garlicky, saffron-infused lime juice and served on a piece of flatbread.

"It's finally coming alive," says Vincent Coppée, owner of El Morocco Club. He meant Tangier but he could have also been referring more specifically to its dining scene. Now at least he has some competition. El Morocco Club remains unmissable. Ten years on, standards have not

wavered, and creative takes on Moroccan dishes like the grilled calamari with red pepper coulis or the seafood barley couscous remain as revelatory as ever. Always booked solid, it recently went to two dinner sittings and opened new terraces on the rooftop and out front – but you still need a reservation.

Also coming alive is the cultural scene. The long-running Les Insolites bookshop and art gallery has amped up its crowded agenda of cultural events, and the Fondation pour la Photographie, a private photography foundation created in 2018, expanded this spring with a couple of new rooms. Additionally to these are a trio of public art museums opened in splendidly refurbished historic buildings – Dar Niaba in the medina, the Kasbah Museum's Contemporary Art Space in the palace's former prison, and Villa Harris Museum, in the old mansion of legendary British journalist and spy in the Malabata neighbourhood.

"Before it was a city of stopovers and day trips," says Aziz Begdouri, who refurbished his family's 14th century riad into the first upmarket boutique hotel in the Kasbah back in 2015, La Maison Blanche. "Now it's a destination."

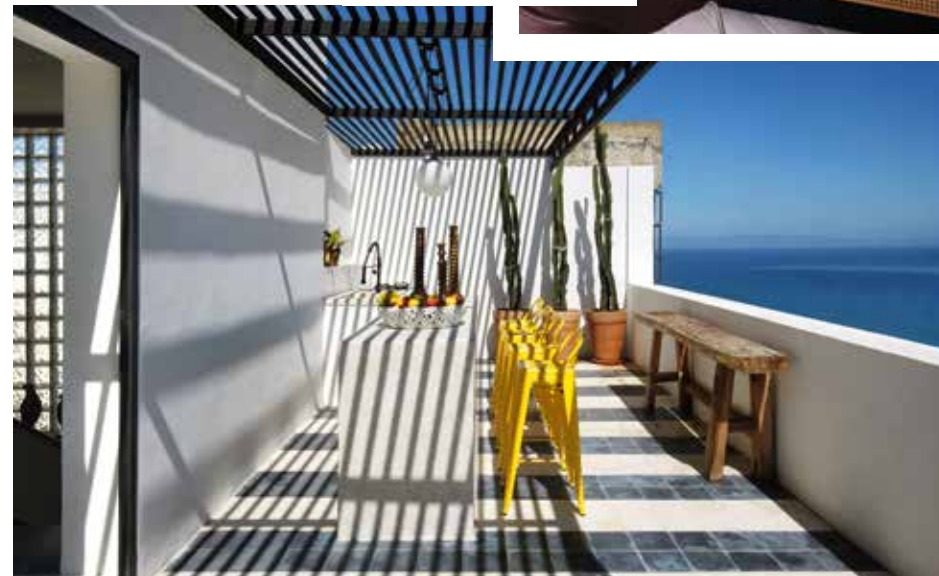
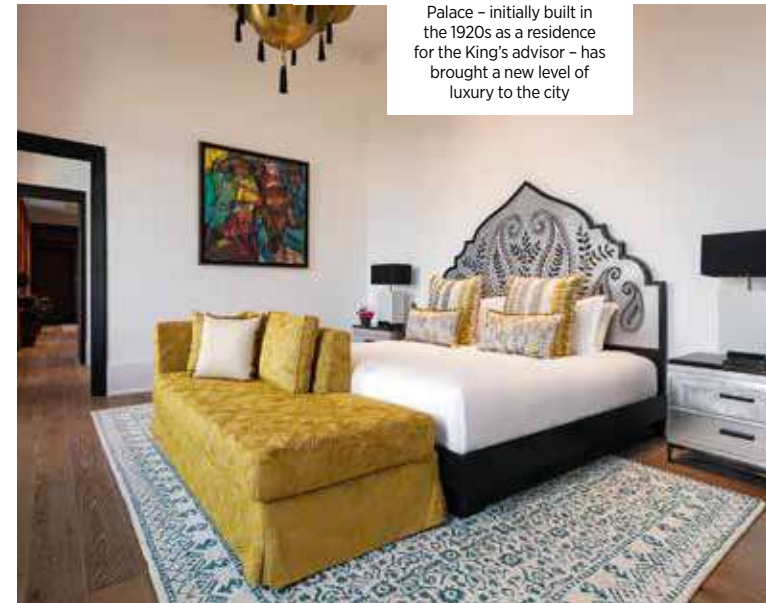
If the Fairmont offers newfound luxury on a grand scale, its intimate equivalent just opened in Villa Augustine, Dutch designer Willem Smit's deeply stylish four-room boutique guesthouse in the Marshan neighbourhood beside the King's palace. Just a five-minute walk to the

The newly opened boutique guesthouse Villa Augustine is within walking distance of the Kasbah and is the brainchild of Dutch designer Willem Smit. Not to be missed: late-afternoon aperitifs on the rooftop terrace overlooking the stunning Strait of Gibraltar

PHOTOGRAPHY: SHUTTERSTOCK AND CECILE TREAL. ADDITIONAL IMAGES: SUPPLIED



Tangier offers visitors a quieter pace to the vibrant and sometimes frenetic energy of Marrakech. That being said, the new 133-room Fairmont Tazi Palace – initially built in the 1920s as a residence for the King's advisor – has brought a new level of luxury to the city



Kasbah, the whitewashed house has been decorated with mid-century furniture (mostly sourced in Morocco), contemporary art pieces from Willem's personal collection, and jousting touches of colours, especially shades of yellows.

In the generous living room, comfy sofas facing a pair of fireplaces, stacks of interesting books, decanters of drinks, and a piano topped by framed photos of the owner's friends and family all immediately telegraph a 'make yourself at home' energy. "I wanted to create a small sanctuary where a sense of home reigns and the pace is unhurried and intimate," says Willem. "Having emerged from a global pandemic, more than ever I am keen to evoke a feeling of community." The epic breakfasts and late-afternoon aperitifs are taken on the rooftop terrace with stunning views across the Strait, and dinner on arrival night – included in the price – is served around the large oval table in the dining room with other guests.

As happened on my recent stay, the conversation inevitably turned to Tangier's recent changes and newfound popularity, and worry that its unique character will be lost at this pace. Not all seem overly concerned, though. Tangier has been consistently reinventing itself throughout its long history. In fact, Les Insolites' owner Stéphanie Gaou had told me just that afternoon that "the city will always keep its soul." ■