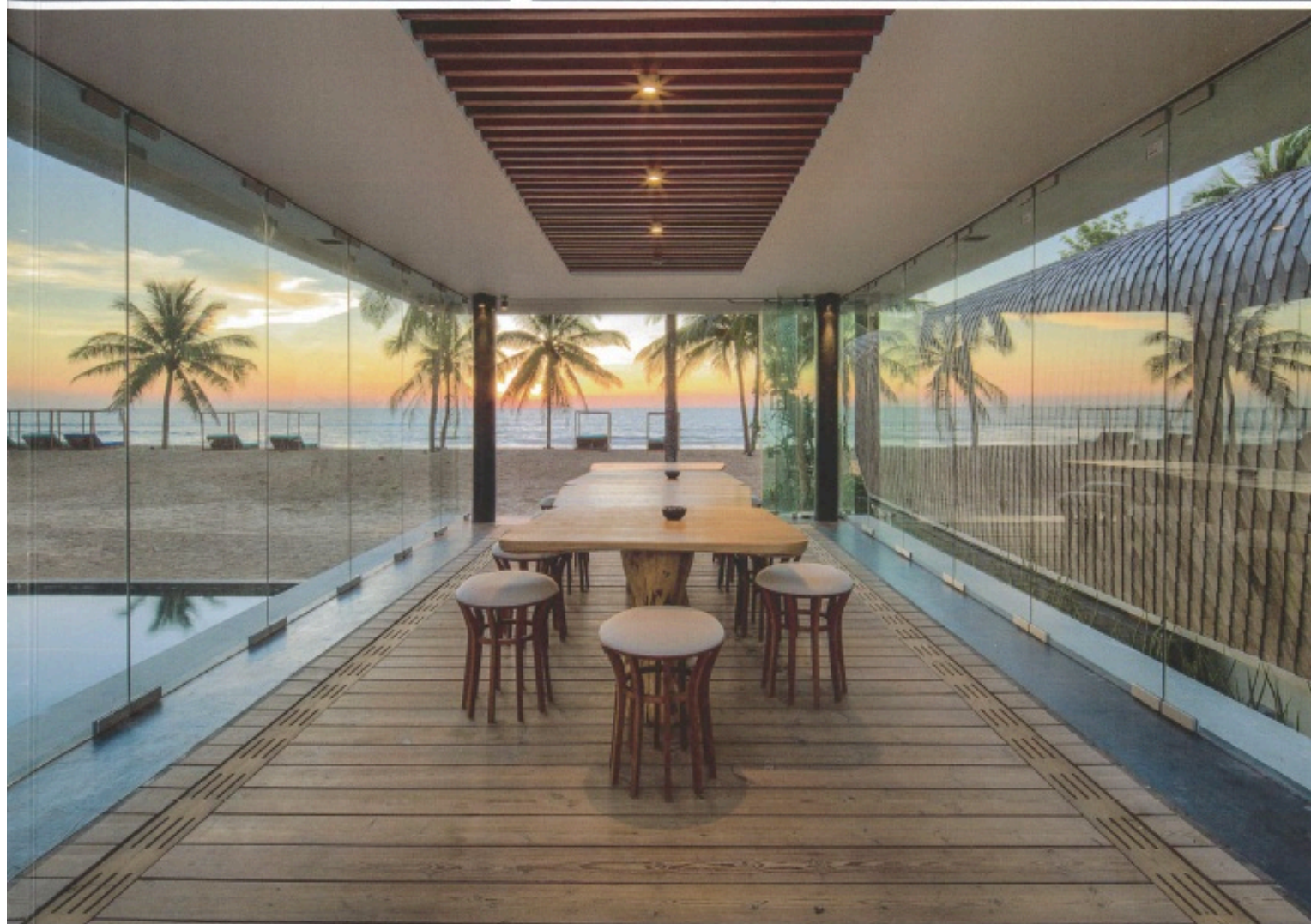


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HOTEL DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT & ARCHITECTURE

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INIALA PHUKET
AN ECLECTIC RETREAT
ON NATAI BEACH

FELLAH HOTEL
REDHA MOALI'S
MOROCCAN ENCLAVE

NERI & HU
THE SHANGHAI DUO
ON HOTEL DESIGN

W - SENTOSA ISLAND • JING AN SHANGRI-LA • MIRA MOON - HONG KONG • SIR ALBERT - AMSTERDAM

Fellah Hotel

Marrakech

Words: Guy Dittrich Photography: Courtesy of Fellah Hotel

Embracing Morocco's vibrant culture, hotelier Redha Moali has created a series of low-rise villas designed in harmony with the richly-coloured earth of the surrounding landscape.

As the roadside stalls become scarcer and the Atlas Mountains nearer, the manic intensity of Marrakech falls away in waves, giving way to the vast 14-acre estate that houses Fellah Hotel.

Here, there is an unexpected luxury. The luxury of simplicity. The luxury of the imperfect. "Ours was a risky approach," explains owner Redha Moali, the former Geneva-based stockbroker of Algerian descent, "we do not know how the market will react to Fellah."

The hotel comprises 10 large villas housing 69 rooms. Several of the villas have pools and are available for private bookings whilst others are used for the restaurant and bar, spa, and gym, complete with its own boxing ring.

There is also a cultural centre, which has been the driving force behind Moali's vision. "Culture is a tool to shape our world," he muses, lounging in the shade of a pavilion beside the hotel's main swimming pool. Recognising that governments had less money to fund culture after the global economic crisis, Moali took matters into his own hands, creating the Dar al-Ma'mûn art and culture centre around which Hotel Fellah is based. The space is aimed at providing support to emerging artists and promoting Moroccan and African values. "It is a vision sustained by tourism," explains Moali, "a virtuous relationship between the culture of Dar al-Ma'mûn and the economy of the hotel."

Fellah is Arabic for 'farm worker' and the agrarian connection is immediately apparent in

the small stockyard of donkeys, sheep, chicken and rabbits at the entrance to the walled estate. The surrounding gardens are planted with fruits, vegetables and herbs that are used in the hotel's restaurants.

Versailles-trained horticulturist, Valentine Green, planned the landscaping and delivered a 'dry' garden needing little water, which is nevertheless oasis-like. Swords of grass are limited to small carpets but mostly the plants are hardy, drought-tolerant palms, cacti and similar succulents. The lemon, orange and olive trees were all planted as mature trees because there was literally nothing in the field when Moali purchased it.

There is some aqueous relief however. Additional to the private pools of the villas and the main swimming pool, there are several ▶

BELOW: The rich, red excavated earth was integrated into the concrete mix used to cover the buildings. Furniture and decorations are a mix of bespoke elements, retro furnishings and found-items sourced from souks in Marrakech and Casablanca



► water features. Water flows continuously over the edge of black square metal forms which rise about one metre above the ground, but deceptively the actual water depth inside is only hand deep.

In a similar monumental vein are the villas, each built to the same plan. "Modernist, with gestures based on volume and straight lines," describes Moali before continuing with a lament about the difficulties of getting straight lines built in Morocco.

He was also surprised at the scale of excavation for the foundations; each villa has basement rooms with dugout terraces. To compensate, the rich, red excavated earth was integrated into the concrete mix used to cover the buildings. It was also used to create berms, overgrown with prickly pears, that provide natural privacy between the villas.

These massif structures are brutalist and free from ornamentation unlike the crenulations that top neighbouring dwellings. Slot windows with functional Crittall-like metal frames and solid shutters are deep-set in thick walls, while large overhangs provide shade. Clearly both are done in the name of moderating the region's high temperatures and yet the air-conditioning appears an afterthought with wall-mounted units. Each villa does have a small dome, the only external embellishment besides the occasional vertical strip of mosaic that marries well with the tall cacti and palms of the gardens.

And the spacious interiors? The shadow-gaps are an architect's dream while wall finishes are made from a traditional limestone plaster called *tadelakt*. Decoration is a comforting if haphazard mix of bespoke elements, retro furnishings and found-items sourced from souks in Marrakech and



► Casablanca. Conceived by Moali and his former partner, the villas wonderfully cross the ages from the arabesque and calligraphic stucco motifs surrounding bathroom mirrors, to the analogue radios and Art Deco-style wall lamps. The stunning working tables are covered in shining folded metal secured with small pins. Ingeniously, and in a somewhat rustic manner, their interiors contain a mini-bar and wireless internet router. Many rooms have both a shaded terrace and their own wood-burning fireplaces. All have large bathrooms lined with richly coloured, enamel-covered *zellige* tiles.

Supporting the duality of luxury and imperfection are a host of contradictions from this maverick hotelier. The *bibliothèque* is packed with weighty tomes but includes a children's library. The privacy of guests is set against access to that library for all locals. The gravitas of the architecture is challenged by a tree-house and 'abandoned' canary

yellow Merc in the gardens. The grand piano in the restaurant area is next to stools made from bound bales of straw. The gold and red Thai-inspired interiors of the Wat Po spa and statues of Buddha are reached through Islamic pointed-horseshoe archways. The ultra-kitsch art works of plastic figurines, cuddly children's toys and Christmas lights are juxtaposed against a tonal architectural print of the curvaceous *Inmense Liberté* (Liberty Building) by Léonard Morandi in Casablanca.

Moali wants Fellah to be judged on its positive effects and not merely its profitability. His desire to nurture the cultural element of Dar al-Ma'mûn ensures ongoing investment in Fellah. Every hotel project is a risk but the market will love Fellah's paradoxical nature. Its differences and sense of escapism driven by the grounded and imperfect experience will be remembered far longer than yet another of Marrakech's fine luxury hotels. ■

EXPRESS CHECKOUT

Fellah Hotel
Km 13 Route de l'Ouïka
Tassoultame
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Tel: +212 525 065 000
www.fellah-hotel.com

- ➔ 69 rooms across 10 villas
- 🍷 Two restaurants
- 🍹 Bar
- 🧘 Wat Po spa, gym with boxing ring
- + Library, Dar al-Ma'mûn cultural centre

Owner / Operator: Sari Merzi Deleuze
Architect: Mohamed Bachiri, DPLG
Designer: Redha Moali