

# THE JEWEL OF MARRAKECH- MAJORELLE GARDEN



A brisk fifteen-minute walk east beyond the ancient ramparts surrounding Marrakech, a forested enclave beckons. Once past the cacophonous traffic replete with gasping mules and the occasional camel, the extraordinary sanctuary of Majorelle Garden comes into view. Consistent with much of Morocco's architecture, a walled courtyard functions as an intimate entranceway. Inside, visitors are surrounded in an aesthetic of desert plants, linear water features, meandering pathways, and pastels of green, orange, turquoise, and blue that seems to glow. It's the deep blue for which Majorelle may be most famous, first observed by the artist in colorful Berber clothing. Often imitated, but never fully reproduced without the collaboration of the full Moroccan sun. There is only one garden in the world where a trademark color is its most famous feature.

Having been waived from service in the French army during World War I due to heart ailments, Jacques Majorelle traveled to North Africa in search of artistic inspiration. He was raised by his well-known artist Father Louis Majorelle, a famous furniture designer who fostered the artistic leanings of his son, while he studied architecture and painting. Jacques first saw Morocco in 1917 as the guest of the colonial Resident General Hubert

Lyautey, a family friend. His fascination with Arab culture and art deepened. At the same time, he became aware of the native Berbers, often living in the snowy Atlas Mountains just east of Marrakech. After further travels, including an extended time in Egypt, Jacques moved permanently to Marrakech, purchasing a shady palm grove outside of town. It was 1923 and the artistic seeds of Majorelle Gardens were about to germinate.



Beyond his growing collection of paintings and commercial success, Majorelle was an armature botanist, fascinated by the living architecture of desert species in particular. He marveled at the adaptations to life in dry climates, so indelibly tough and bold yet graceful and sleek. His collection grew slowly as plans for a permanent house and studio took shape. The near monoculture of date palms on the property was evolving as an artist's retreat and private garden, soon to be infused by a palate of dazzling colors among the dry-land plants. The origin of one of the world's most unique pleasure gardens was set forth by a sometimes frail but determined artist with one hand in the soil and the other on the canvass. As the garden developed in the mid-twenties, so too did Marrakech. Over time the garden was surrounded by the relative urbanity we see today. With the costs of maintaining the garden, Majorelle opened it to the public in 1947 for a modest entrance fee. The last owners were Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé, who bought and refurbished the Garden in 1980. Saint Laurent has a memorial

on the site. Today Majorelle Garden is a tourist hot spot on the map of Marrakech and for good reason... it's an oasis from the city's intense hustle and an artistic wonder to behold.

Walking through the entrance door, city noises rapidly abates as moving water soothes the soul. Within a few steps, the formal square entrance courtyard gives way to numerous tall Royal Palms, their straight grey trunks reaching determinedly skyward. In the light shade of smaller Fangipanis or Plumeria trees, South African Clivias bloom brightly in orange and yellow by the trail's edge. This is a pure pleasure garden, lacking any systematic placement of the plants by family or geography. Thus, species from all over the world mix on a gravelly reddish soil, endlessly tended by gardeners in smart Majorelle Blue jumpsuits. Great care is taken to maintain a picture-perfect appearance. Trails consist of entirely raised concrete, painted a dull red to blend with the soils. Every one is neatly hemmed in by bamboo fences made from plants on the property.



Perhaps the most alluring section of the garden sits in front of the brightly colored angular-modern house. The full North African sun imparts an embracing, if not relentless, glow. Here, trees native to Madagascar's Spiny forest mix freely with cacti from the US and Mexico. Numerous species of Euphorbias native to Africa are set among large Yuccas with their perfect rosettes of spiny-margined leaves. A notable unintended botany lesson unfolds as Cactus and Euphorbias dwell together. While these plants are routinely assumed to be related they are from distinctly different families.

The Cactus family is almost entirely North American while Euphorbias are most diverse in Africa. These two families are a grand example of parallel evolution. Having

evolved separately in similar habitats; they can look similar but are wholly unrelated. At the front of this garden, a lovely formal fountain feeds a linear canal leading to tile-roofed pavilion perfect for resting in the shade.

In addition to the gardens, the house is now the Berber Museum and bookstore. The small museum pays homage to the Berbers and their artistic heritage before and after the various Arab conquest of Morocco. Jewelry, brightly colored traditional clothing including the Haik, a large Toga-like garment, and loose-fitting pants called Shalwar's are on display. In addition, several of Jacques Majorelle's Berber inspired paintings are exhibited. Across from the museum is a beautifully appointed gift shop and adjacent café. The combination of the garden, museum, and cafe makes for an easy half-day outing. The Lonely Planet Guide suggests getting there early, as it gets crowded. One is well advised to heed this suggestion as the garden is rather small.



Jacques Majorelle's combined love of art, gardening, architecture, and Moroccan culture bestowed an extraordinary gift on both tourists and residents in Marrakech. The history, artistic relevance, and botanical displays make it one of the most unique gardens in the world. Majorelle died of injuries sustained in a car accident in 1962, but his legacy lives on in every visitor who strolls into his exquisite garden. The Jewel of Marrakech, a garden bathed in the deep tones of Majorelle Blue lives on, bringing joy to thousands of visitors annually.

From the BGT Team

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