

Morocco, the Movies and La Mamounia

Morocco has a rich cinematic history stretching back over half a century and the wealth of experts and technicians there still appeals to modern-day filmmakers. For the illustrious stars that visit, there is only one address to rest at after a long day on set, reports **Rebecca Wicks**.



SITTING PRETTY BEHIND the giant walls of the Medina like Charlie's mysterious chocolate factory, the La Mamounia pumps out rumours of sweet perfection to those who can only hope for the chance to step foot inside. Winston Churchill was perhaps the greatest ambassador for La Mamounia in its previous heyday, calling it "the most lovely spot in the whole world". He

even invited Franklin Roosevelt to visit after strategic talks during World War II, calling it the perfect place in which to relax. From his balcony, Churchill covered canvas after canvas with depictions of the Atlas Mountains and The Churchill Bar, now open in his honour, displays black and white photos of his time at the hotel, as well as nightly live jazz, reassuringly expensive cocktails and a décor of plush red velvet and leopard

print... if you like that sort of thing.

Many a celebrity has found anonymity within these walls, and it's the hope of every member of staff that with the rise of Morocco's status as the perfect movie location, many more will follow. A recent £100 million refurbishment has not gone unnoticed, with guests from all over the world jetting in to take a look. Our guide gestures enthusiastically as we're given a tour: "Even the staff who worked here



In 1934 the hotel served as a film set for Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.

before the refurbishment have all come back! They couldn't wait to start work again, we operate as one big family."

It's a family home that stretches beyond extravagance. The visitor's book from years-gone-by already serves as a glamorous roll-call of 20th-century stars, including Charlie Chaplin, Omar Sharif, Nelson Mandela and the Rolling Stones. Jake Gyllenhaal more recently brought his toned torso to town for the upcoming movie, *The Prince of Persia*, and Sarah Jessica Parker is just one of our more modern heroines to make La Mamounia her preferred location when in town.



The recent refurbishment leaves lots of open plan space and floods of natural light.



La Pavillon de la Piscine is just one of four excellent restaurants at the hotel. A charming spot for a Mediterranean lunch by the pool.

EXCLUSIVITY IS the key, says Jacques Garcia, the French designer brave enough to take on the mass overhaul. He studied numerous old photographs in order to recreate the feel of the hotel back in the 1920s. "Some guests who've returned think it looks just the same, only a lot more open plan," says our guide as she waves her arms about the salubrious reception area, brimming with high-profile guests all being treated like celebrities. "It's hard to pick them out," she tells us with a smile. "They come here to be seen, to tell others this is where they're staying, but at the same time, they keep

themselves to themselves".

Garcia has created a symmetrical masterpiece. At La Mamounia, your eye rarely meets a dead end; the place is a glamorous open invitation from the start, brimming with colourful rugs, sparkling marble and mosaics, and fountains trickling into peaceful pools of water. The hotel was a film set itself in 1934, when Alfred Hitchcock chose to film scenes from *The Man Who Knew Too Much* in the lobby.

Indeed, Morocco is no stranger to celebrity. Icons in the industry have been filming here since 1897, when



All the rooms feature a combination of wood, leather and stucco which create a refined and comfortable ambiance.



The film *Syriana* is just one of many recent films that have benefitted from Morocco's enchanting scenery.



Set within lush gardens La Mamounia is a haven of tranquility away from the hustle and bustle of Marrakech.

French director, Louis Luminere shot *Le Chevalier Marocain* (The Moroccan Knight) in Marrakech. Following this, in 1952, Orson Welles chose various locations in the country to film *Othello*.

But aside from glamorous hotels and attentive locals, what exactly makes Morocco the perfect location? The landscape is number one, with its breathtaking beaches, mountains and expansive deserts a suitable match for those in many other countries. *Lawrence of Arabia* used Morocco as Saudi Arabia, whereas *The Man Who Would Be King* passed it off as India.

Luckily, filmmakers are given a warm

welcome in Morocco, as evidenced by the crowds awaiting Sarah Jessica Parker's arrival. Filming inevitably gives tourism a huge boost, if not an added element of confusion to bemused locals. Also in Morocco's favour is its lack of annoying, time-wasting custom clearance procedures and official requirements for cast and crew. And when it comes to economical cutbacks, there's no need. Professional technicians, crew and actors are widely available here and charge less than their western equals. Along with cheaper living costs (in most places) a movie budget can go a lot further in Morocco than in many other countries.

ANOTHER REASON of course, is the glorious weather. With an average eight hours of daylight, Marrakech, Casablanca, Essaouira, Erfoud, and Merzouga are all increasingly popular locations for shooting without interruption from Mother Nature.

Throughout the 1970's, 80's and 90's, film making in Morocco hit an all time high, with scenes from *The Pink Panther*, James Bond and Jackie Chan movies all being filmed on location. In 2004, Oliver Stone chose Ouarzazate and Marrakech to film his epic *Alexander*, with Colin Farrell in the lead role. Ridley Scott was also suitably impressed – visiting twice to shoot scenes for *Gladiator* and *Kingdom of Heaven* – and the list goes on. *Syriana*, *Sahara*, *Babel* and *Rendition* have all made the most of Morocco's bustling cities, diverse and expansive landscapes, historic architecture and staggering coastline.

If you're looking for a cultural city break with a side order of star spotting, Marrakech could also be your perfect location. And if you can get beyond the walls of La Mamounia and into the realm of the rich and famous, you might even find yourself mingling with Hollywood's finest as Winston Churchill looks on approvingly, from his well-earned place on the wall. ■