

Destination of the Month: Tangier, Morocco



*A mere eight miles across the Strait of Gibraltar from Spain, **Richard Alleman** finds an exotic new world in a legendary North African city that has everything from cool cafés and new boutique hotels to glorious beaches, a fascinating history, and the world's most famous kasbah.*

The Best Beaches

Boasting a stellar location on the Strait of Gibraltar, with the Mediterranean to the east and the Atlantic to the west, Tangier is

one of the world's great beach towns. The city itself sits on a sweeping expanse of sand that's edged with beach clubs, cafés, and discos. The town beach, favored by local youths for swimming and soccer, and with its crowds and sometimes polluted water, is not recommended for tourists, but there are glorious alternatives. This season, the *plage du jour* is **Plage de Sidi Kacem**, about 20 kilometers west of town, beyond the Cap Spartel lighthouse and the Mirage resort. Here, in a garden by the sea, local restaurateurs Rémi Tulloue and Philippe Morin have created the chic French bistrot **L'Océan** (05.3933.8137), an idyllic spot for a long leisurely lunch. For the serious surf set, on the same beach Philippe and Rémi have recently opened **Club de Plage**, with chaise longues and thatched umbrellas right on the sand. For the ultimate beach experience, however, drive down to **Asilah**, an enchanting little coastal town about an hour south of Tangier, where a few kilometers away, a rough, sandy road leads to **Paradise Beach**—a cliff-backed beauty, reminiscent of the Greek islands, with shack cafés that rent umbrellas and chaises and serve fresh grilled fish and simple tagines (stews) made with chicken and bright local veggies.



Where to Stay in Kasbah

The term *kasbah* refers to the walled fortress area that crowns the Tangier medina. Recently, the quarter has seen the birth of a number of small hotels and guesthouses created within former kasbah townhouses and palaces. Two of the oldest, least expensive, and best are **Dar Sultan** (49 rue Touila;

05.3933.6061; darsultan.com) and **Dar Nour** (20 rue Gournia; 06.6211.2724; darnour.com), each with multiple terraces, nifty small guestrooms, and mini-suites done up Moroccan-style with Berber carpets, lanterns, and throws. A more luxurious option is the four-year-old **Hotel Nord-Pinus Tanger** (11 rue Riad Sultan; 06.6122.8140; nord-pinus-tanger.com), which offers the chance to stay in a former pasha's palace, reimagined with great style and wit by Anne Igou, who also steers the acclaimed Nord-Pinus hotel in Arles in the South of France. For her six-bedroom Tangier outpost,

Igou has mixed Moroccan antiques and Indian fabrics with European modernist furnishings.



Plus . . . a Mountain Retreat

The most fashionable address in Tangier is arguably the **Vielle Montagne** (Old Mountain), which has been home to some of the city's toniest private estates and villas for more than a century. Happily, for travelers, one of these spectacular properties, built by famous *London Times* journalist Walter Harris in the 1920s, has been turned into a glamorous guesthouse with eleven posh suites that are often booked by celebrities and movie stars on location in Tangier. Room rates are steep—from 2800 MAD to 7500 MAD (\$350 to \$930) a night—but **Villa Josephine**, with its lush gardens of giant hydrangeas and a spectacular swimming pool,

offers unparalleled privacy, beauty, and peace (231 Route de la Vielle Montagne; 05.3933.4535; villajosephine-tanger.com).

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Café Society

Anyone visiting Tangier will be struck by the number of cafés that pepper the city. Some are historic spots, such as the **Café de Paris** on the Place de France in the center of town and the **Café Central** on the Petit Socco square in the medina; both were hangouts of famous former Tangier denizens like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Paul and Jane Bowles, William Burroughs, and Tennessee Williams. Today, they still draw a lively mix of locals, expats, and travelers—and besides great coffee, they offer some of the city's best people-watching. A new member of the cool-café club is the coffeehouse at the restored **Cinema Rif** cinémathèque on the Grand Socco, the square between the European part of town and the Arab medina. With its bright-colored wicker chairs and tables, excellent pastries and salads, it is especially popular with the laptop crowd thanks to free WiFi; film buffs may also want to check out what's on at the movies (cinemathequedetanger.com). And for mint tea or perhaps a game of backgammon with a view, the cliff-clutching, multi-terraced **Café Hafa**, on rue Hafa in the Marshan district, has been popular since the 1920s. Should you see anyone smoking something other than a cigarette, don't ask, don't tell.



Dining and Drinking

Unlike Marrakesh to the south, Tangier has yet to become a major international dining capital. This means that both the cuisine and prices are delightfully down to earth. Among the most popular restaurants for the insider set are: **Casa d'Italia**, which serves unpretentious Italian fare in two big dining rooms and on a vast verandah (Palais Moulay Hafid – Marshan; 05.3993.6348). **Anna e Paolo**—a tiny trattoria for simple Italian dishes and superb salads (77 avenue Prince Heritiér, Place du Koweit; 05.3994.4617). **La Fabrique**—offering both classic and innovative French cuisine by top local chef Christine Samet in a crisp modern setting (7 rue d'Angleterre; 05.3937.4057). **Hotel Nord-Pinus Tanger**—the Kasbah's most glamorous guest house has two seductive dining rooms—one in the palace's former salon, the other on a glassed-in porch that makes you feel like you're

floating on air—both open to non-hotel guests for lunch and dinner; reservations required (11 rue Riad Sultan; 06.6122.8140; nord-pinus-tanger.com). **El Minzah Hotel**—The pretty patio of Tangier’s most famous hotel stages a sumptuous buffet every lunchtime; at 300 MAD (\$38) per person, including the use of a poolside chaise, it is one of the town’s best buys (85 rue de la Liberté; 05.3933.3444). **Hôtel Continental**—Overlooking Tangier’s port, currently being turned into a glittering international yacht harbor, this colorful hotel, used as a location for Bertolucci’s film version of Paul Bowles’s North Africa–set novel *The Sheltering Sky*, has an inexpensive and dependable restaurant serving Moroccan tagines and couscous as well as excellent seafood—the fresh grilled swordfish is highly recommended; sit in the long narrow outer dining room with its sculpted ceiling and stained-glass windows (36 rue Dar Baroud; 05.3993.1024).

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Two Stops For Shopping

When international hotelier Anne Igou was furnishing her smart Nord-Pinus hotel in the Tangier Kasbah, she sourced most of her Moroccan antiques and objects from **Bazar Tindouf** (64 rue de la Liberté; 05.3993.1525), a treasure trove crammed with carpets, lanterns, ceramics, carved and studded doors, and much more, located across from **El Minzah Hotel** in downtown Tangier. Prices are correct—although some bargaining never hurts—and the selection is amazing. For the chicest couture caftans as well as exquisite custom-made bags, visit Parisian designer-decorator Laure

Welfling's eponymous shop in the Kasbah (3 Place de la Kasbah), where you'll also find unusual ceramic bowls and dishes by her husband, "Gipi" de Richefont Salvy. Note: If you go in late afternoon, have a mint tea and listen to the lute music and Andalusian chants of the musicians next door at the **Cercle de Musique Arabo-Andalouse**.

The American Connection

A little-known fact is that Morocco was the first country to recognize the fledgling United States of America back in the 1780s—and today the lovely five-building compound of our longtime consulate in the Tangier medina, known as the **American Legation**, is our country's oldest overseas diplomatic building. Today the Legation houses a foundation promoting U.S.-North African understanding as well as a fascinating museum with prints, paintings, maps, letters, and artifacts documenting Tangier and the Tangier-American connection from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Don't miss the new Paul Bowles wing—with books, manuscripts, letters, photos, and musical scores relating to the half-century that the famed American writer and composer spent in Tangier. Also on view at the museum are toy soldiers from the collection of another Tangier denizen, the late Malcolm Forbes. The Museum is also the site of frequent concerts and lectures (8 Zankat America; open Monday through Friday, 10:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.; legation.org).

Literary Tangier

Founded in 1949, the **Librairie des Colonnes** acknowledges Tangier's literary legacy with its large selection of books by Bowles and company as well as contemporary Moroccan writers like Tahar

Ben Jelloun and Driss Chraïbi—in French, Spanish, English, and Arabic. It also features frequent book signings, lectures, and art expositions (54 Boulevard Pasteur; librairie-des-colonnes.com). A few blocks away, the new **Librairie Les Insolites** adds a café to its mix of books, prints, and special events (28 rue Khalid Ibn Qualid; librairielesinsolites.com). Meanwhile, in spring, Tangier celebrates all things literary with the **Salon International de Tanger des Livres et des Arts**, a big multilingual book fair and cultural festival, headquartered in the magnificent gardens of the **Moulay Hafid Palace**, which is alone worth a visit (salontanger.org).

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Nights on the Town

To sample Tangier's eclectic nightlife, consider the following: **Morocco Palace** (11 avenue Prince Moulay Abdellah—of the main Boulevard Pasteur)—a nightclub featuring heavily reverbed Arabic crooners and all shapes and sizes of belly dancers. Nearby, down the steep streets below the **Hôtel Rembrandt** (best reached by taxi), **Tangerinn Bar** is one of the few surviving boîtes of Tangier's Beat era; today, it attracts a mostly young, multiethnic dart-playing crowd; expect loud music and lots of smoke. Down along the coast, **Beach Club 555** is one of the town's most popular discos (Avenue Mohammed VI—Plage de Tanger), and frequently brings in guest DJs from the U.K. and Paris, although the new **Husa Club Aladin** in the recently renovated and reopened **Hotel Husa**

Solazur (Avenue Mohammed VI) is picking up speed. For a more quiet evening, consider a nightcap with a view at the bar or on one of the decks of the **Hotel Nord-Pinus Tanger** (nord-pinus-tanger.com) overlooking the Kasbah.