

Life & Leisure

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MOROCCAN BLEND

Luxurious isolation and a taste of traditional Berber life



TRAVEL MOROCCO

World view

Intermix the solitude and endless ocean with a taste of life on the Barbary Coast, writes **John Borthwick**.

“Immensity is at hand,” is how Italian-Moroccan hotelier Yasmina Antonia Filali describes the grandeur of this stretch of Moroccan Atlantic coastline. It’s an understatement.

As co-owner of the extraordinary La Fiermontina Ocean resort overlooking that coast, you’d expect her to be enthusiastic, but the conjunction here of Sahel dunes, the sea and sky, truly is immense. The resort, which Filali and her brother, Fouad-Giacomo Filali, opened in June 2023, forms part of La Fiermontina Family Collection, which includes two stylish properties in Italy and one in France.

The 150-hectare coastal estate sits just north of historic Larache, a one-hour drive south of Tangier, or two hours from Morocco’s capital, Rabat. The final kilometres of your journey there wind through backwoods and olive groves before cresting a ridge from where this resort stretches down to the sea.

At first glance, the 11 suites and two villas clad in honey-toned sandstone and basalt might seem deceptively simple. Their rectangular, flat-roof design suggests Frank Lloyd Wright gone to the Maghreb. Step through an imposing timber front door and the view smacks you between the eyes. You’re looking seawards though the villa, past a glass

curtain-wall to an ocean shoreline that, although half a kilometre away, almost leaps indoors.

My two-bedroom pool suite is huge. The furnishings are understated, contemporary art deco, while the king-size beds face the mesmerising view. There’s a work desk, comfortable seating and – no complaints – no television. The bathrooms, stocked with own-brand toiletries, are more than roomy but, curiously, neither has a bathtub.

The suites and villas are scattered, well separated by extensive shrubbery, beds of fragrant lavender and stepping-stone paths. The privacy is such that you can skinny-dip in your heated, outdoor pool with only random seagulls passing comment. There’s also a 12th, wheelchair-accessible suite with a private garden and ocean views.

Annachiara Pellegrino, the resort’s ebullient marketing expert, shows me around the estate aboard an electric voiturette, a sort of limo quad bike, which is the preferred shuttle vehicle on this sustainability-minded property. Well away from the ocean-view villas is a collection of four substantial, self-contained houses. With Andalusian-style stone architecture and interiors, including full kitchens, they overlook hillsides and olive groves.



Top and above: La Fiermontina Ocean is on a 150-hectare coastal estate; a two-bedroom pool villa. Right: the resort has its own hammam; the city wall of Asilah on the north coast.

“This one is probably 350 years old,” says a gardener showing me an olive tree that was already old when this Moroccan shore was fabled as the Barbary Coast.

On the resort itself is a mini village, which includes Café Maure and a hammam. I put my hand up to sample the latter and soon find myself flat on a slab being steamed, soaped and sluiced by an energetic masseuse. The sequence is repeated but I lose count after about the third round. An hour later I emerge, scrubbed and scoured spotless and, I suspect, resembling a steamed lobster.

Along with spa and wellness rituals, La Fiermontina Ocean offers guest activities ranging from hill treks and horse riding

to taking Moroccan or Italian cooking classes. This coast, once home to the notorious Barbary pirates, provides fascinating half- and full-day excursions to places like the Roman ruins of Lixus, madly photogenic Asilah town (the “kasbah on the ocean”) and intriguing, storied Tangier.

The resort comes with its own creation tale. Having leased this remote tract from the government, Fouad-Giacomo Filali began constructing a villa with a swimming pool. During the work, he saw a local Berber girl carrying heavy buckets of water. When asked, she explained that this was her daily task, to bring water to her family home in the nearby village.

Fouad-Giacomo promptly put aside any thoughts of a pool until a proper water supply was constructed to service the village, along with much improved road access. The Filali family’s existing charitable organisation, Fondation Orient-Occident, soon brought the projects to completion and assuaged the villagers’ anxiety about the resort encroaching on traditional land.

“The villagers remain on the land



of their ancestors and live a dignified existence,” says Yasmina Antonia. Along with farming, many locals now also work at maintenance, housekeeping and other duties in the resort. “Our project includes the entire community. We listen to their voices, asking them their needs, rather than us telling them what to focus on.”

To sample one of those initiatives, I head to nearby Dchier village where families offer guests traditional Berber home breakfasts. Seated on the porch of a whitewashed stone house, I work my way through a spread of msemen (pancakes), bissara (fava bean) soup, olives, dates, the freshest cream cheese and strawberries.

The hills surrounding the resort are upholstered with orchards, strawberry fields and 7500 olive trees. It’s no surprise that any meal here is supercharged with “just-picked” flavour.

Lunch on the restaurant’s elevated deck is rivalled only by the immense sea and skyscape, which, between courses of tuna tataki, Moroccan and Italian dishes, tugs my attention away into daydreams. A pool swim, siesta, emails and reading take care of the afternoon. Sunset approaches. Time for a Casablanca beer on the restaurant deck – is that what Bogart drank? – while the sun sinks towards the Canary Islands.

L&L

The writer was a guest of By Prior Arrangement.



Need to know

Getting there

Fly to Tangier (65 km), Rabat (180 km) or Casablanca (270 km) and transfer by road to the resort.

When to go

This is a year-round destination but the best time is June to September.

Rates

From \$550 a night in a one-bedroom pool suite, including breakfast for two.

Best suites

One-bedroom Dune or two-bedroom Sirine; also the Akhazane family villa and Safir village house.

For more

Call +212 661 155733, visit lafiermontinaocean.com or contact Sydney-based Morocco specialists By Prior Arrangement.



Need to know

Getting there

Flights on Air Canada throughout March from Sydney start at \$CA1538. Tourism Whistler offers 10 per cent off Air Canada when you book your stay through them. **VIP Whistler** Private transfers

from Vancouver Airport cost \$CA550 for an SUV one way. **Four Seasons Resort Whistler** rates start at approximately \$CA655 a night during spring for a Deluxe room. The Summit Suite rates start at \$CA1800 a night for midweek stays.

The Epic Australia Pass

includes access to Whistler Blackcomb for up to 10 days. Advance purchase is the best deal. Excluding peak dates, a 5-day adult pass is \$US525, while a child pass (5-12 years) is \$US274. (Valid across Vail Resorts mountains).

to prepare for another epic day exploring the mountain.

Even if skiing and exercising is not your thing – or you want a day off –there are plenty of options in Whistler, such as the Audain Art Museum. Founded by billionaire philanthropist and property developer Michael Audain and his wife Yoshiko Karasawa, the museum houses their private art collection of nearly 200 pieces of British Columbia art. The glass-facade building itself is an artwork designed by Patkau Architects.

You can also ride the Peak 2 Peak Gondola. It travels 436 metres above the valley floor connecting the summits of Whistler and Blackcomb mountains.

At the top of the Blackcomb gondola is Christine’s, a full-service restaurant where we request a table next to the windows and tuck into a menu including mimosas, spicy Bloody Marys with Hokkaido scallop ceviche, and Wagyu beef burgers. Even though it’s snowing and somewhat cloudy, up here at 1860 metres, the view is still spectacular.

Whistler in spring may not have given me the full winter wonderland experience, but with fewer crowds, bluebird days and time to explore other offerings in the valley, it’s been a perfect time to visit. **L&L**

The writer travelled as a guest of Air Canada and the Four Seasons Resort Whistler.

It’s early April and spring has well and truly sprung in British Columbia. There is zero snow on the ground on the three-hour drive from Vancouver to Whistler; in fact, cherry blossoms are in full bloom. The only sign of white stuff is on the peaks of the Coast Mountain Range off in the distance. I’m thinking, why have I made this long trek to snowboard at Whistler at this time of year?

But when I check into the Four Seasons Resort, the temperature is hovering just above freezing. A fire rages in a large stone fireplace in the lobby, and I’m served hot apple cider. The hotel, tucked away in the northern end of Blackcomb Village, is just a five-minute walk from the bottom of Blackcomb Mountain. Designed as a modern twist on a traditional mountain lodge, it feels more boutique than big chain.

On my first day on the mountain, I head straight up to the Blackcomb Showcase T-Bar, hike a short way past an ‘Experts Only’ sign and find myself on top of the Blackcomb Glacier – just below the peak at 2440 metres. My guide Nick Voutour leads me past a few rocks, and then we drop into the bowl. Cold air sweeps my face – this is why you come to Whistler in April.

A big plus about spring skiing anywhere is there are fewer crowds and barely any waiting in lift lines. Given Whistler-Blackcomb is a dual mountain resort and



TRAVEL CANADA

Snow drift

Carrie LaFrenz finds hidden advantages to a ski holiday in the northern springtime.

the largest in North America, you will never be short of terrain. There are three glaciers, and over 200 marked runs, with plenty of challenging areas including Peak Chair and Harmony Bowl.

Handing my gear to the Four Seasons

The Four Seasons Resort Whistler.

ski concierge at the end of the day is a real luxury because I’m keen to treat my weary body to the hotel’s newly revamped spa. Its menu of treatments incorporates traditional Native American practices and products made by Leigh Joseph

of the Squamish Nation. Joseph is an ethnobotanist and Indigenous founder of Skwalwen Botanicals. I opt for the Sacred Space Massage, an 80-minute full-body massage created in consultation with the Squamish Lil’wat Cultural Centre, a First Nations museum and art gallery in Whistler. It’s wonderfully indulgent after a day on the slopes, soothing my jelly-like snowboard legs.

It’s then time to explore the rest of the hotel. My room has a wood-panelled fireplace in the living room and a small balcony, lovely Grown Alchemist products, and mini robes and slippers for the kids.

For an elevated experience, you could choose to stay in the Private Residences, which owners can rent out or keep for personal use. In March, a 3 ½-bedroom, four-bathroom residence sold for \$CA9.3 million (\$10 million). You’ll have your own private ski concierge, pool and gym.

Dinner in house at Sidecut Steakhouse is just the thing after such an active first day. Sure, the A5 olive-fed Wagyu, sourced from Shodoshima Island, Japan, will set you back \$CA357 for just 4 ounces, but here’s another reason to come in spring: many restaurants, Sidecut included, offer a four-course spring prix fixe menu for just \$CA69 a head.

After a solid sleep, I head to Braidwood Tavern downstairs for a hot buffet feast



Sidecut Steakhouse at the Four Seasons, left, and the Audain Art Museum, above. PHOTO: JUSTA JESKOVA