

# THE NEW TANGIER

BOHO EATS  
AND BEATNIK  
BEATS IN  
THE MEDINA



MAY 2010

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## THE BIG BLUE

FREE-DIVE  
TENERIFE'S  
PRISTINE  
WATERS

## REEL-LIFE SOPRANOS

EUROPEAN  
CINEMAS BRING  
OPERA TO  
THE MASSES





ONCE A MECCA  
FOR BEATNIKS  
AND BOHEMIANS,  
TANGIER IS IN  
THE MIDDLE OF  
A CULTURAL  
RESURGENCE  
AS A NEW  
GENERATION  
SEEKS TO RELIVE  
THE PAST

# THE BEAT GOES ON

GARETH RUBIN  
ZACARIAS GARCIA

## MOHAMMED'S FINGERS PLUCK

at the strings of his guitar as the sun sets in front of us, adding an orange shimmer to the turquoise waters of the Bay of Tangier. Forty years ago, the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan sat on the same stone seats and Mohammed, my impromptu guide for the evening, seems to think that if he sits here too, he will be inspired by the spirit of that time. This is Café Hafa (*Avenue Hadi Mohammed Taxi*), the most famous – and notorious – nightspot in Tangier; and as the candles illuminate the scene, you can feel the history hanging heavy in the air.

Few cities have a past as seedy, artistic, seductive, brassy, sordid and vibrant as this Moroccan port. In the middle of the 19th century, it was French painters who discovered Tangier, claiming it for the bohemians. A hundred years later, it would be conquered by the poets, novelists and musicians of the Beat Generation. And now, after decades of dilapidation, Tangier is seeing a resurgence of writers and artists relocating from Marrakech, which they feel has become too commercial.

**IT WAS THE SOFT** African afternoon light that inspired painter Eugène Delacroix to set up his easel. He produced scenes of the Medina, the warren of tiny lanes that is the Old Town, which then drew other artists to the city. Henri Matisse followed in the 1900s, commenting: "I have found landscapes in Morocco exactly as they are described in Delacroix's paintings." The light in Tangier had a huge influence on Matisse's artistic style, allowing his hyper-vibrant use of colours to emerge. The two painters stayed at the Hotel Villa de France, an imposing building just off the Grand Socco. Soon travellers will be able to follow in their footsteps as the hotel is being reopened after standing empty for many years. Right now its white frontage looks uninviting, the windows dark and empty, but new life is around the corner.

Caid's Piano Bar (*85 Rue de la Liberté*) has also played a special role in the city's history, as the inspiration for Rick's Café in *Casablanca*. In the 30s and 40s it was not artists, but spies who populated Tangier, a free port and crossroads between Europe and Africa. Stepping

into the circular bar, the piano in the middle, I realised it had lost little of its charm and undertone of danger. The house pianist was playing, and it seemed to be karaoke night because the singer beside him was clearly a customer. But no average punter – he looked like a gangster: expensive suit, questionable manners, and a blonde girlfriend 20 years his junior clapping too enthusiastically at his performance of *Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps*. But to give him his dues, he could hold a tune. When the room filled up, I had to remind myself I was in the present day, as it felt like a step back in time to the era when Winston Churchill, Rock Hudson and Aristotle Onassis drank here. Statesmen and gangsters side-by-side. There was clearly money in the room, but it was best not to ask where it came from.

**THE NEXT MORNING** it was time to see Tangier by day. If you want to watch the whole of Morocco pass by, sit at Café Central (*tel: +212 (0)53 993 6523*), in the Medina's Petit Socco. In the 50s and 60s, this was where the beat writers hung out and William S Burroughs wrote *Naked Lunch*. The novel is set in "Interzone", a reference to Tangier, which was an International Zone and duty-free port until 1956 when it reverted to >



Top: Eugène Delacroix's immortal images of Tangier inspired a generation of bohemians to flock to the old port city; above: Burroughs and friends on the beatnik trail



## TANGIER'S BOHEMIAN HANGOUTS

### DAR NOUR (PICTURED)

The terrace is the place to be when the weather is fine. You can sample the house's signature quince tagine, which goes well with the delicate fruity pastries. *20 Rue Gourna, tel: +212 (0)662 112 724*

### PÂTISSERIE LA ESPANOLA

French pâtisseries in Tangier are of the highest quality and this is one of the most famous. Near Caid's Bar, it's where wealthy travellers and local couples rub shoulders. *97 Rue de la Liberté*

### GRAN CAFE DE PARIS

This café is by a busy roundabout, and its atmosphere is rowdy, but you can savour the fact that the floor probably hasn't been cleaned since Burroughs walked it. Good, affordable fare. *Place de France*

### RIAD TANJA

At this secret spot, you're unlikely to walk past the dingy entrance unless you know that on the top floor the tablecloths are brilliant white and the views over the Medina are excellent. One of the most expensive places to eat in town, though. *Rue de Portugal, tel: +212 (0)39 333 538*

### CAFE BABA

The Stones composed here and a new generation are reclaiming the café as a hip joint. Romantic Moorish columns support the ceiling and it's the perfect quiet place to get away from the anarchy of the souk. *Sidi Hosni*



Moroccan control. Burroughs, Joe Orton, Truman Capote, Francis Bacon and others, such as Paul Bowles, the American writer who lived here for decades, were attracted in part by the fact that the International Zone allowed homosexuality. This café was their cruising ground. The places where they would meet – Café Central, and the nearby Gran Café De Paris (*Place de France*), which was recently used as a set in *The Bourne Ultimatum* – are now stuck in time warps when it comes to décor. The 1950s chrome is faded and the seats uncomfortable, but delightfully so. And God help anyone who tries to introduce a smoking ban in Tangier, a town where your waiter puffs merrily away while serving your meal.



*Clockwise from here, "shake it again, Sam" – cocktail hour at Caid's Bar, inspiration for Rick's Café in Casablanca; a step back in time at Café Hafa; Cinéma Rif*

FEW CITIES HAVE A PAST AS SEEDY, ARTISTIC, SEDUCTIVE, BRASSY, SORDID AND VIBRANT AS TANGIER

Café Central serves excellent sweet mint tea and as I sipped mine and looked to the café opposite, I was reminded of how Tangier really is an incongruous mix and cultural crossroads. On the terrace of the famous Pension Fuentes a group of local girls giggled in traditional headscarves and not so traditional stilettos. The adjacent café housed a horde of Moroccan men in *djellabas* (traditional hooded robes) cheering on Inter Milan on television, while at a nearby table several Western intellectuals huddled over literary works

by Arab writers, rendered into English. Somehow it all seemed gloriously normal. As the bohemians return, so do the jet-setters, bringing with them spas and fine dining. Opposite the Jewish cemetery, Riad Tanja (*Portugal Escalier Americain, tel: +212 (0)39 333 538*) looks like a run-down youth hostel, but upstairs there is a swish new restaurant owned by famous chef Moha Fedal. From there, I found Dar Nour (*20 Rue Gourna, Kasbah, tel: +212 (0)662 112 724*), another chic riad-restaurant owned by a charming French couple.



Here, sunset and views of the Socco at Dar Nour; above, a new generation on the road in Tangier

The cultural hub of new Tangier is without doubt the Cinéma Rif (*Place du 9 Avril, Grand Socco*), an art-house cinema and performance venue that dominates the Grand Socco. It's run by Yto Barrada, the new queen of the Moroccan art scene, and her husband, Sean Gullette, who wrote and starred in *Pi* and is now making a film simply entitled *Tangier*. That night one of the screening rooms had been turned into a gig space and a trio of Americans who lived in Tangier played "acoustic folk punk" inspired by the city. "It's like *Nirvana Unplugged*, without Nirvana," commented someone beside me.

It was there that I got talking to my guitar-playing guide Mohammed; he was wearing a Blues Brothers black trilby hat,

his instrument strapped to his back à la Bob Dylan. He insisted on showing me the way along the cliffs to the iconic Café Hafa.

As the sun disappeared on the horizon and we sat on the stone steps, there was a background buzz of excitement all around us. The café's owner brought us drinks by candlelight. We stared out at the sea and Mohammed played a tune I didn't recognise, but which seemed to include the wild mix of European notes and Arab rhythms that I had witnessed breathing new life into this fascinating city.

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## WHERE TO STAY IN TANGIER



### UNDER €50

#### HOTEL CHELLAH

Budget-friendly and centrally located, this three-star makes a perfect base for exploring the cafés along Boulevard Pasteur. *Doubles from €48, book at [hotels.easyJet.com](http://hotels.easyJet.com)*



### UNDER €100

#### HOTEL OUMNIA

Take a stroll to Tangier Bay, return for some relaxation in the health spa, then finish with a Moroccan meal at the hotel restaurant. *Doubles from €99, book at [hotels.easyJet.com](http://hotels.easyJet.com)*



### UNDER €150

#### HOTEL RIF & SPA

Sample the best of old and new Tangier in this striking modernist hotel, close to the ancient Medina's maze of bars and restaurants. *Doubles from €126, book at [hotels.easyJet.com](http://hotels.easyJet.com)*