

A novel time in Marrakech

Lovers of literature are heading to Morocco to visit one of the world's most exotic literary salons. Caroline Phillips reports

MY FAMILY grew up with a really big secret," says the broadcaster and author Aminatta Forna. "My father had been killed and nobody told us what had happened." An aid worker, a Bloomsbury publisher and a classics scholar sit transfixed as this powerful woman explains that her father was hanged. Aminatta is addressing the Jnane Tamsna Literary Salon in the eponymous hotel in the Palmerie, the oasis outside Marrakech that has become a playground for London's artistic *belle monde*.

Candles flicker in hurricane lamps and the air is heady with the scent of jasmine. The sound of the call to prayer drifts over us, punctuated by the chime of crickets. "We knew only," she adds, "that he had set up an opposition party in Sierra Leone and had been hanged on charges of treason in 1975." Aminatta has fire in her eyes.

There has been a growth in intelligent travel. Instead of going on Venetian canals, you go on a tour of the Toronto waterworks with Booker-prize winning author Michael Ondaatje. Forget about getting bronzed: Zeitgeist holidays are now about glistening grey matter.

The Jnane Tamsna is a modern Moorish-style hotel (Brad Pitt, David Bowie and Giorgio Armani have stayed) set in six hectares of organic gardens stuffed with pungent herbs, vegetables, wild flowers and tortoises. Set up by American ethnobotanist Gary Martin and his Senegalese wife Meryanne, this is their seventh salon. Previous authors include Esther Freud, Barbara Trapido and the travel writer William Dalrymple.

For two days, Aminatta talks about her memoir, *The Devil That Danced on the Water*, and reads from her first novel, *Ancestor Stones*. She also runs writers' workshops over fresh orange juice and



freshly-picked melons in an outdoor room with a fireplace and tent ceiling.

At the start of the weekend, my heart sinks. One attendee — a Parisian bookshop owner — reads a book a day "Have you read Noughts and Crosses?" Aminatta asks Thais, the delightful 13-year-old daughter of our hosts. "Oh, yes," she replies, "that's the one about inverse racism, isn't it?"

But it soon relaxes into a house party. After one dinner, Aminatta reads book blurbs aloud with a thespian flourish and we write down first sentences for these books. The real line is included and all are read out. We have to guess the real one. When we're not playing parlour games we do writing exercises — we write about a house that means a lot to us or someone very different from us.

There are plenty to choose from. There's the guest with a mono-eyebrow who is a dead ringer for Frida Kahlo and there's Daniel, a charming student with dreadlocks. There's a Harvard graduate doing Berber research, a PR, two lawyers, a furniture maker, Alexandra Pringle, editor-in-chief of Bloomsbury, and a chap called Chip. When it

Haunting tale:
Aminatta Forna

Book in:
a room at the Jnane Tamsna hotel, now hosting its seventh literary salon. Above, carpets for sale at the legendary Djemaa el Fna



comes to the ladies, it becomes a question of Chips with everything.

In the evening, we have dinner on the roof with musicians and a white linen tablecloth spilling white roses. Our hosts donate the food and accommodation and all money raised goes to Rogbonko Village School, founded by Aminatta in Sierra Leone in 2002. We also visit an organic garden at the foot of the Atlas mountains, where we learn to bake bread and have footbaths in warm water and oils.

One day, Aminatta asks us to compose a letter: "It begins, 'And here's the thing I never told you'," she says. The lawyer pens an emotional acceptance, through a child's eyes, of her father's affair. Our hostess cries. A young woman — who lost touch with her father for 15 years and often sleeps overnight in his bookshop — writes of the day they were reacquainted: "I introduced myself, you denied having had a daughter."

Now those are books I'd like to read.

WAY TO GO

The next salon is from 23-26 November and will feature Jason Elliot. See www.jnaneatamsna.com. It costs €1,500 per couple, €900 for singles all-inclusive. Thomsonfly (www.thomsonfly.com) starts flying in November, from £19.99 one-way.

● *Ancestor Stones*, by Aminatta Forna, is a novel about 20th century Africa seen through the lives of four women. It is published by Bloomsbury, price £14.99.

WRITE-ON HOLIDAYS

Penzance Arts Club hosts writing holidays with author Phil Bowen, which include guest readings and a writing surgery for each visitor. From £100 B&B pp per night. www.penzanceartsclub.co.uk

The Word Travels specialises in literary tours which combine walks, discussion and good food — sample tours include Lorca and Granada in Spain (can be arranged any time for small groups) A five-day walking tour from £529pp B&B. Flights extra. www.thewordtravels.com

HF Holidays runs a variety of

literature holidays including Jane Austen and the Regency, which considers her life and works through trips and evening talks and videos. Stay in a country-house hotel in Sussex with visits including Winchester, Chawton and Steventon. Three nights from £234pp full-board. The next trip departs 11 October. www.hfholidays.co.uk

The Savoy's Writer-in-Residence programme showcases a different author each season with a series of literary dinners — the next one features Michael Morpurgo, in January. www.fairmont.com
JO FERNANDEZ

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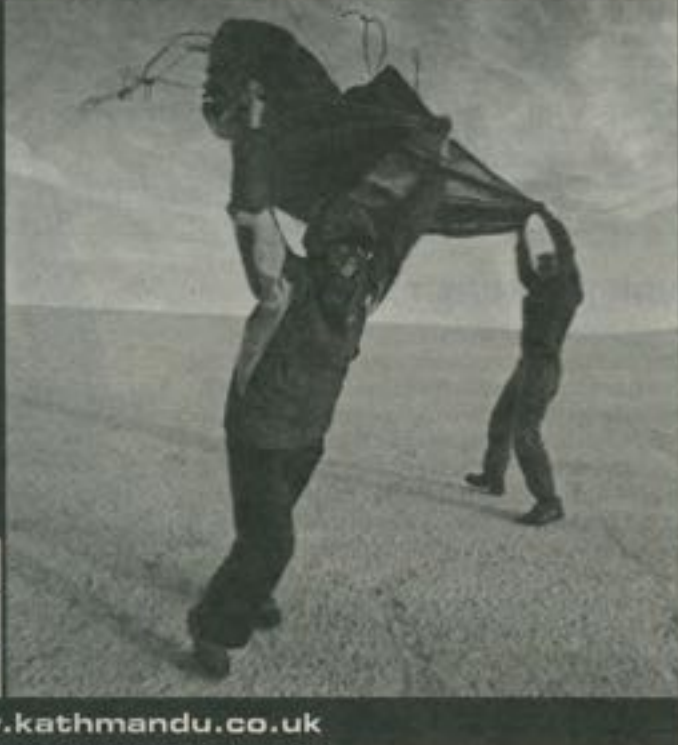
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