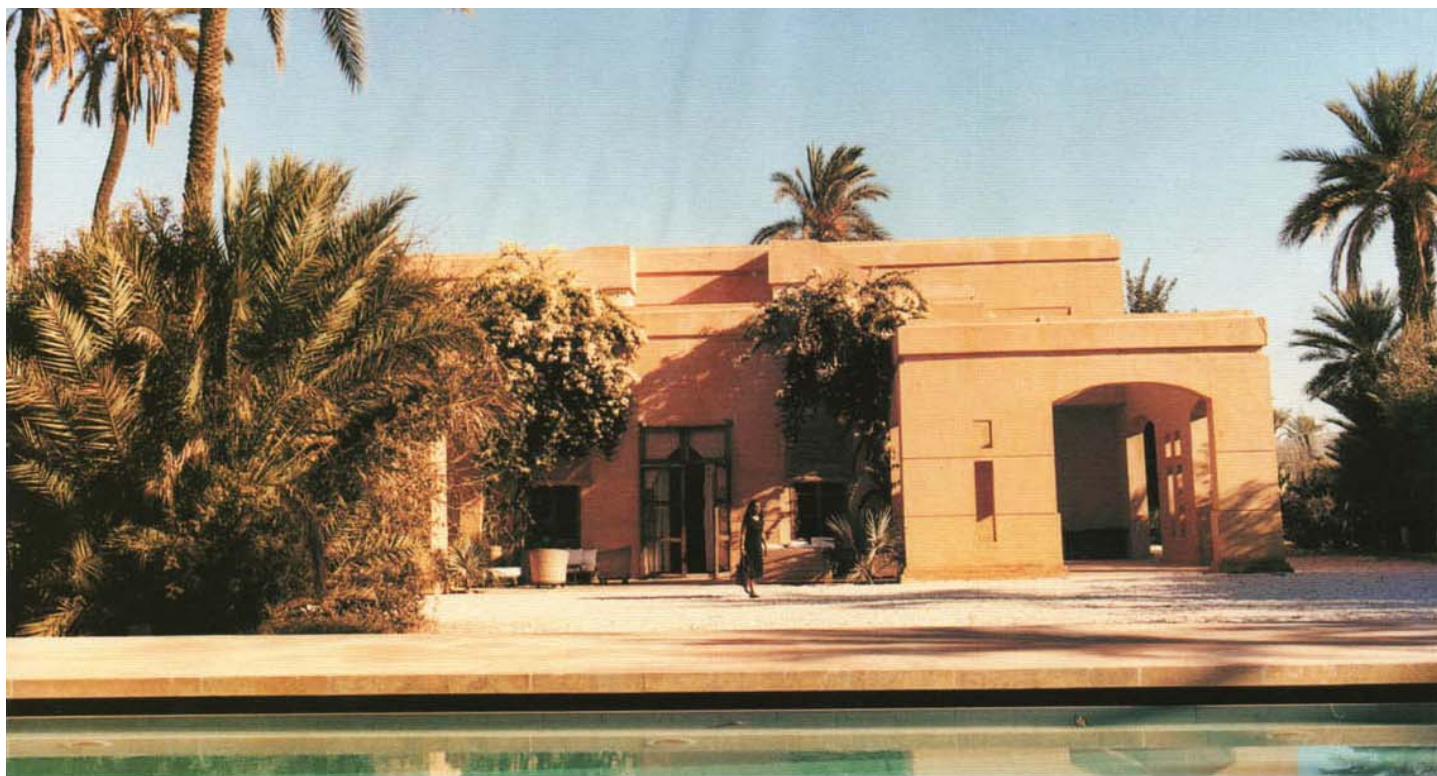


Lifestyle | Designer | Specialist

people



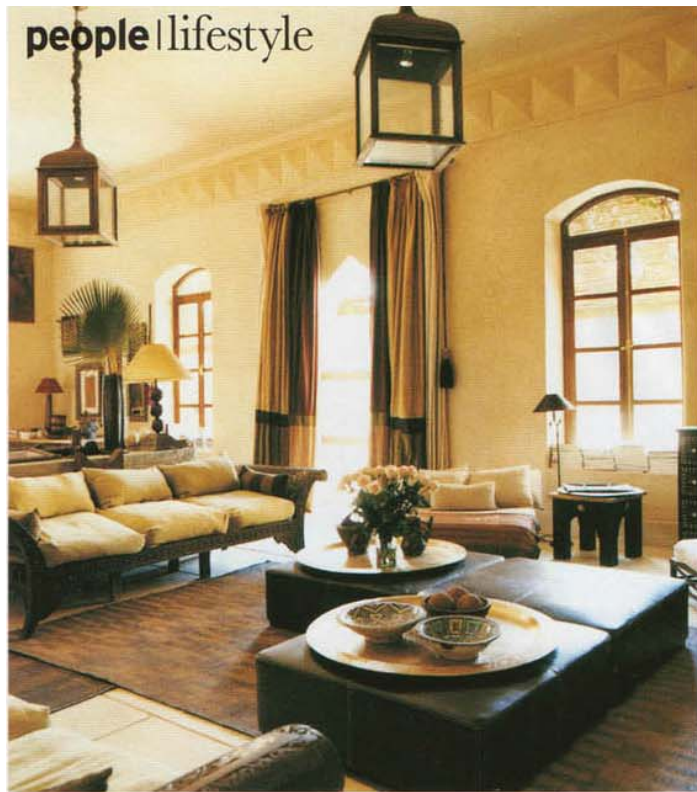
Meryanne Loum-Martin is the force behind Jnane Tamsna, a country hotel outside Marrakech. It is made up of several villas - she is seen here in the courtyard of one - including the house (opposite above) she shares with her husband, Gary Martin. The pair inspect the regeneration of palm groves in the surrounding area (opposite below)



LIFESTYLE

Hatta Byng meets hotelier Meryanne Loum-Martin and her ethnobotanist husband, Gary Martin, who are launching an ambitious project in Morocco, hoping to prove that successful development does not have to conflict with local traditions





people | lifestyle



Against a backdrop of cranes, vast hotel developments, a massively expanding Marrakech airport and acres of land disappearing under golf courses, hotelier Meryanne Loum-Martin and her ethnobotanist husband, Gary Martin, are a remarkable couple striving to do things very differently and set a much-needed example by doing so.

Meryanne grew up in Paris, born of a Senegalese father and a West Indian mother, and worked as a barrister before coming to Morocco 20 years ago to decorate a house for her parents. 'I pulled out of an architectural degree as I hated the maths part, but my passion had always lain with architecture,' she admits. She loved the 'proximity' to craftsmen in Morocco – 'It's a direct thing, I do a sketch and the next day my coppersmith or carpenter comes with a sample' – and quickly her interests developed to include a series of sought-after villas (well before the current 'riad' trend), a gallery and various other ventures, each one as chic and sophisticated as the last.

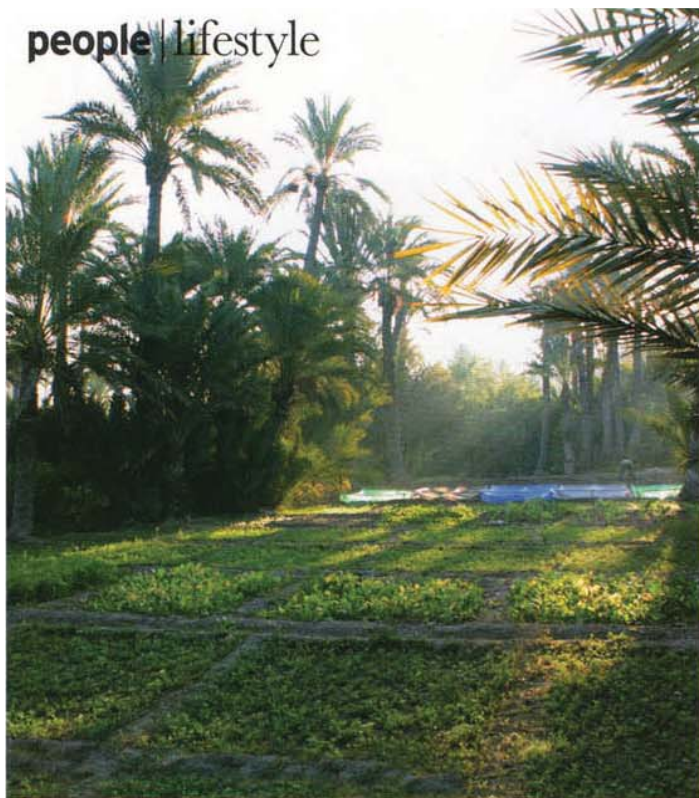
Meryanne's style is eclectic and confidently her own. 'I like mixing things – a pair of curtains can include fabric from my friend in Senegal with pieces picked up on my travels in Egypt or Asia,' she says. 'I customise, buying pieces in the souk and, with my craftsmen, adapting them to create something different and modern.' She points out that her taste is 'edited' and that the Moroccan element to her interiors comes from 'feeling so at home here', rather than slavish copying. 'Morocco is at the crossroads of Africa and Europe, and, I suppose, all things that I am myself,' she surmises.

Gary hails from Michigan, with a degree in botany and a doctorate in anthropology. He travels the world teaching at universities and is the founder and director of the Global Diversity Foundation (GDF), which works 'to maintain the knowledge, customs and resources that connect a group of people with their environment and each other'. Projects range from helping the Chinantec people to establish community >



Meryanne's sitting room (top left) gives an idea of her eclectic style. She discusses plans with landscape architect David Michael in her office (top right). Many of the paintings in the hotel are by Belgian painter Philippe Deltour (centre left). Meryanne uses local craftsmen for her designs: customising glass vases with copper (centre right), and choosing curtain fabrics for the hotel (bottom)

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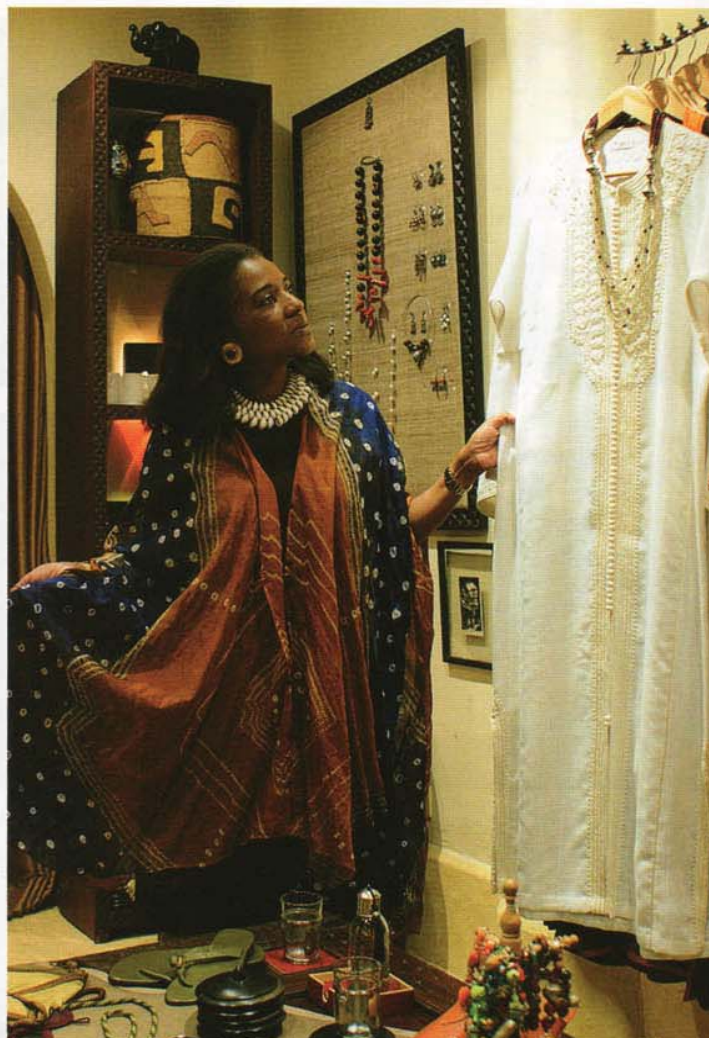
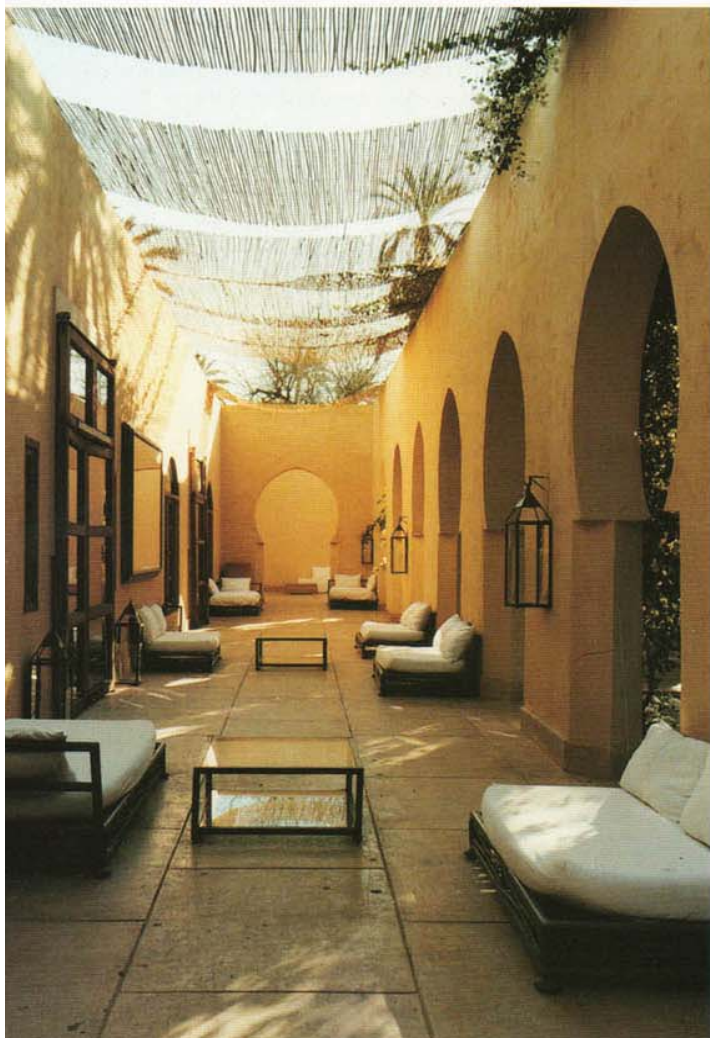
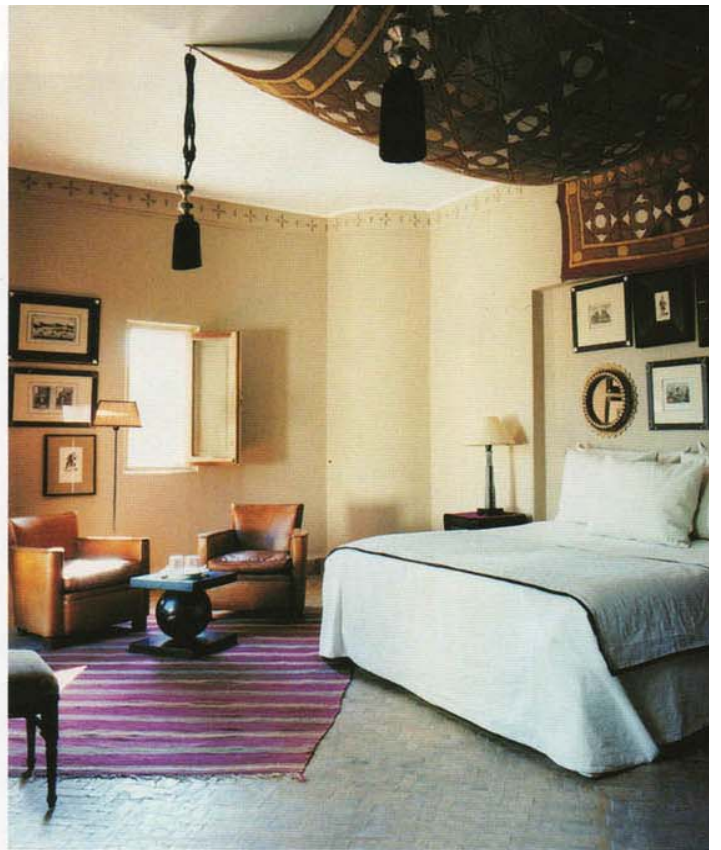
conservation areas in the cloud forest of Oaxaca, Mexico, to creating a vegetable garden for a boarding house of a school in the Atlas Mountains, Morocco. 'We take a long-term approach,' Gary explains. Rather than swooping in from on high and setting up something from scratch, 'the GDF chooses projects that have been started well by local NGOs but which need a boost.' He adds, 'Our work is not about documenting the past, but creating a situation where traditions can continue and evolve, helping people to cope with new realities.'

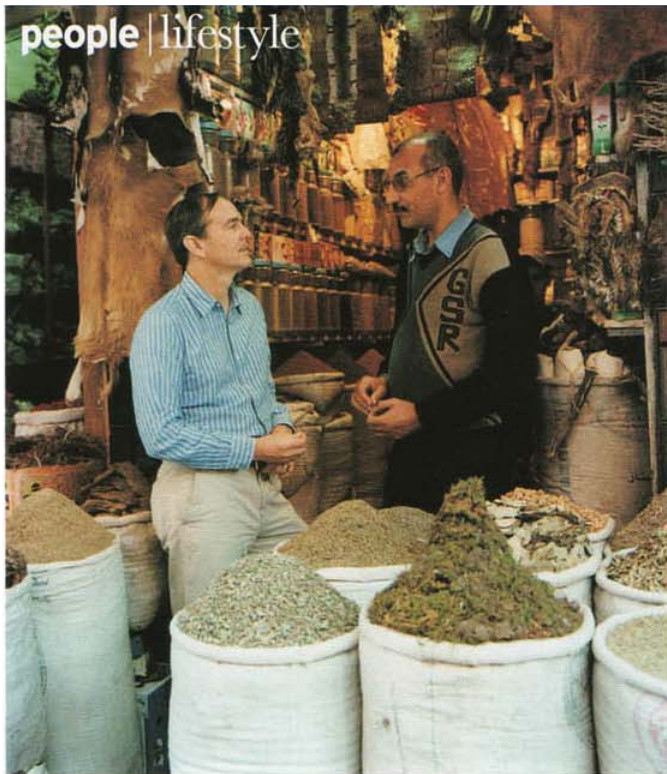
As Gary puts it, 'Meryanne is interiors and profit, and I'm exteriors and non-profit.' They are hardly the most obvious couple – they met in Mexico while she was recuperating after her New York Bar exams and he was based there conducting field research – but with a shared drive and clear respect for each other's interests and ideals, they are remarkably complementary.

Jnane Tamsna, their home (shared with their teenage children Thaïs and Edward) and Meryanne's hotel, is one such product of this combined creativity. Built in 2001 in the Palmeraie, an oasis area just outside Marrakech, it is a series of five houses set within a walled garden. The hotel was entirely Meryanne's vision and each villa bears her distinctive stamp: kilim-strewn floors, ironwork furniture that she designed, heavy wooden daybeds and tadelakt (plaster) walls hung with evocative old photographs and interesting art. The largest villa sleeps 20 and is based on the idea of a 'Moorish hacienda' with a series of courtyards, vast horseshoe arches and wonderfully proportioned rooms.

Gary's hand is in the remarkable garden, or 'edible landscape', which he created from scratch. There is no lawn – 'I don't do grass at all,' he says – but instead several acres of organic herb and vegetable gardens, citrus >

THIS PAGE Gary, with head gardener Hassan Nafari (centre), has transformed the hotel grounds from a barren wasteland into an 'edible landscape' (top left), surrounded by palms and olive groves (top right). Elsewhere, the conservation of palm groves continues (left). OPPOSITE Meryanne designed the interiors of the hotel: natural materials and strong colours work well in one of the villas (top left and right). This pared-down approach to Moorish splendour can be seen best on the south veranda of the main villa (bottom left). Meryanne's style extends to her wardrobe; she is seen here in Aya's, her favourite shop (bottom right)





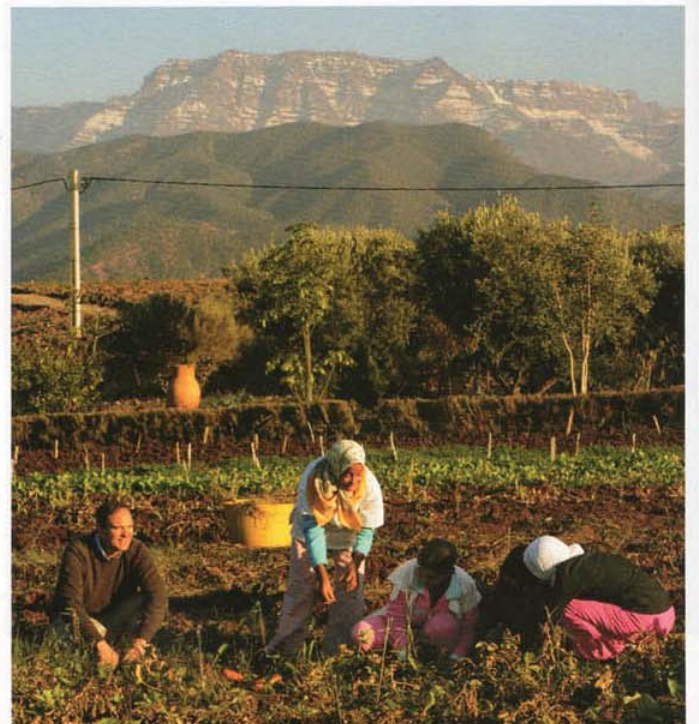
and olive trees (producing their own oil), beneath a canopy of date palms. Gary believes firmly that you should not impose a foreign or suburban way of gardening here, and his garden is similar to the 'arsa', the agroecosystem that would have once dominated this area. There is no hotel garden quite like it in Marrakech: it has the feeling of farmland, dotted with swimming pools. Yet it is undeniably appealing, with herb-scented paths, buildings hidden behind 'natural vegetation barriers', dramatic vistas created by olive trees and gardeners picking vegetables for dinner.

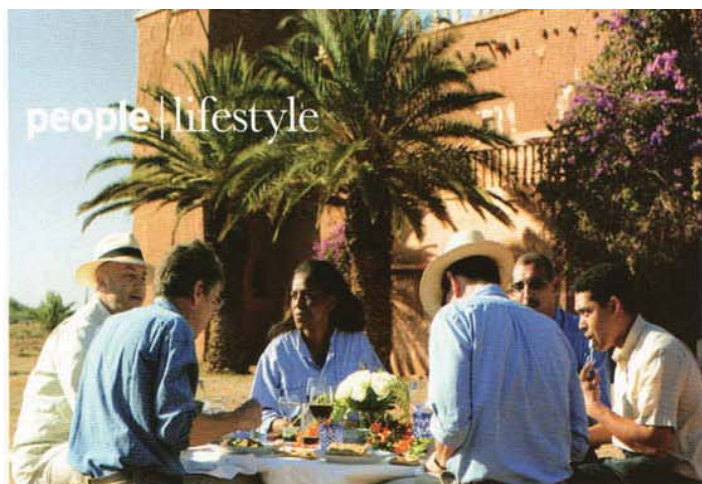
It is clearly appreciated, too: the hotel's visitors' book reads like a who's who of Hollywood and British high society alike. Meryanne and Gary are effervescent hosts (Meryanne oversees all reservations and greets guests personally) and clearly know anybody there is to know in Marrakech – the gravel area in front of their own house is there because, according to Gary, Meryanne had to have 'a place for her parties'. They are a couple with seemingly limitless ideas, devoted to sharing their passion for the 'creativity, history and cultural wealth' found here. Through Diversity Excursions, an income-generating arm of the GDF, they have put together trips for groups such as Harvard University Alumni and the Eden Project. They run cookery courses and have hosted 'literary salons', attracting the likes of William Dalrymple and Esther Freud.

And now Meryanne, clearly inspired by her husband, is on to her biggest project yet. Her aim is to create 'a new ecological model of development', rooted in and respectful of local traditions and the land upon which it is built. 'I hope that its identity is so positive that people will feel that it is the only way to go,' says Meryanne passionately. 'My concern is to show that modern things – hospitality and development – can intertwine with what is already there without conflict, that it doesn't have to be about golf courses and concrete.'

Of the 150-acre site, Meryanne will develop only five per cent of the land, creating 12 hamlets of five houses set within an organic, edible landscape. She has pulled together a talented team of advisers, and Ethnobotanica, a new company created with Gary – which includes >

FROM TOP Gary, founder of the Global Diversity Foundation (GDF), is seen here with the local director of projects, Mohamed El Haouzi; one of GDF's current ventures is to survey, sustain and eventually certify herbalism in the souk. Herbs and garden produce are vital ingredients in the hotel's cooking courses. Another GDF project is based in a school in the Atlas Mountains; here the children mount herbarium specimens, and play outside. The aim of the organisation is to retain and develop local knowledge and traditions





Hassan Nafari, Jnane Tamsna's head gardener, landscape architect David Michael, and Gary's colleagues and students at Marrakech University – will work 'on everything to do with nature'. This involves talking to local farmers to make it clear that they can continue to farm the land.

Jnane Ylane is an ambitious plan that will include a boutique hotel and a spa with its own products – created by Ethnobotanica using only plants found on the land. A ruined kasbah, restored with advice from a conservation architect, will house Meryanne's gallery selling 'smart Moroccan pieces', designed by a team of Europeans and made by local craftsmen (thereby 'offering these craftsmen an education and a market'). There are plans for a farmers' market, 'encouraging people to grow food in the right way', and cultural events on a far larger scale than before – 'more like global diversity forums looking at social issues and human rights, as well as literature and the arts', says Gary. And there will be no cars, only mules.

Meryanne admits she is pursuing an ideal. She has resisted advances from powerful developers, explaining, 'I felt it would be a constant struggle to bring my philosophy to fruition.' Gary, too, says of Ethnobotanica, 'it is a proselytising company rather than a profit-making one: we want people to change the way they garden.' But, he concedes, 'there is no use doing the right thing and being the only ones doing it.' Likewise, Meryanne emphasises that the project must be a financial success to set an example. Her friend in Mexico, Rodolfo Ogarrío of Cimatela's ecological department, has done something similar that has worked, and you sense that this will too: Meryanne launches it this month with a succession of events including a fitting exhibition of photographs of the Marsh Arabs, whose way of life was destroyed when their land was drained □

FROM TOP Meryanne's latest project is an ecological development on a 150-acre site, with a ruined kasbah at its centre. She visits the site with Parisian architect Frédéric Lebard and David Michael, who is an expert on the traditional local landscape. Despite the size of the plot, only five per cent is to be developed; farmers will continue to be able to use the rest, overseen by Ethnobotanica, a company set up by Meryanne and Gary to maintain the landscape ecologically. The pair have dinner with friends

ADDRESSES

Architecture Frédéric Lebard (tel: 00-33-156 20 16 00; www.f-lebard.com)

Aya's (tel: 00-212-24 38 34 28; www.ayasmarrakech.com)

Global Diversity Foundation (www.globaldiversity.org.uk)

Jnane Tamsna (tel: 00-212-24 32 94 23; www.jnanetamsna.com)