



**M**arrakesh gently seduces you and holds you tight – an earthy place of heat, dust and secretive alleyways but also an increasingly sophisticated epicentre of culture and design, with discoveries to be made around every corner and behind every wall. It's not surprising, then, that Caitlin and Samuel Dowe-Sandes were drawn into living in the Moroccan city soon after their first visit.

'We didn't know Morocco at all, but had heard a lot about it from friends,' Caitlin says. 'We decided to take a sabbatical year and go travelling.' At the time they had been living in Los Angeles for years, Caitlin working in public relations for architecture and design firms, Samuel as a film producer, who had moved into writing and directing. 'The plan was to start off in Morocco and if we liked it then we'd stay, if not we'd move on.'

At first the couple started looking for a house to rent in

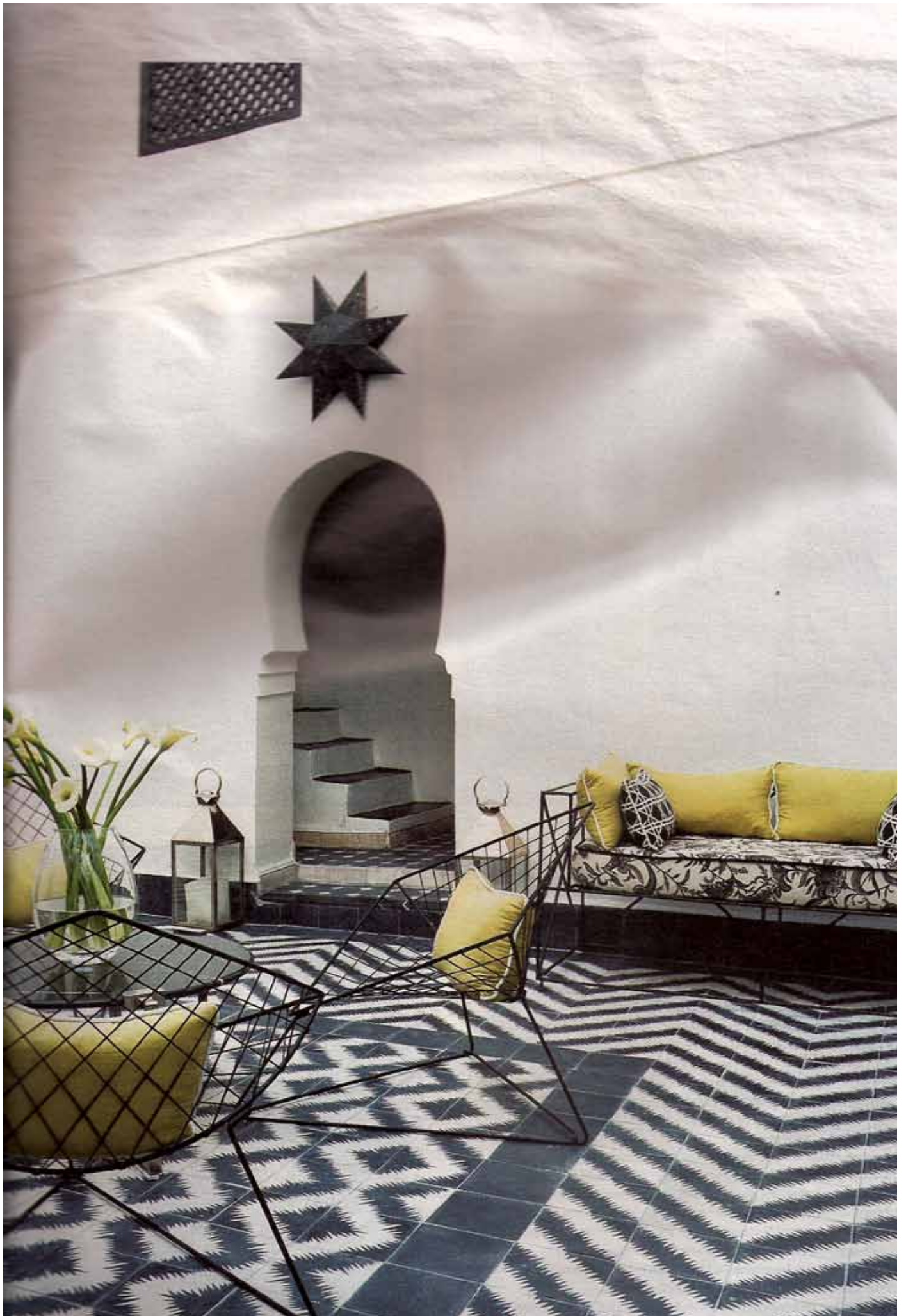
the old section of Marrakesh, the medina, but couldn't find anything they liked. So they went looking for something to buy, discovering a crumbling dar – or traditional house – arranged around a central courtyard. It was next door to the mosque of Sidi Ben Slimane, one of the 'seven saints' of Marrakesh, and belonged to a Casablanca businessman who was hoping to turn the house into a pied-à-terre, but never got around to it. It fell to the Dowe-Sandeses to reinvent the house, and in doing so they collaborated with a number of local craftsmen and artisans. Inspired by the experience, they founded their tile company Popham Design, named after a favourite beach in Maine.

'The house shares an alleyway with the mosque,' Caitlin says. 'For weeks after we bought the house we were being stopped by people in the neighbourhood and told, "You can't go in there", because non-Muslims aren't allowed into

## Morocco bound

A couple captivated by Marrakesh not only made it their home, they also collaborated with local craftsmen to found a tile-making and exporting business. By **Dominic Bradbury**. Photographs by **Mark Luscombe-Whyte**

**Right** most of the ground-floor living spaces of the three-bedroom house open directly on to this central courtyard. The tiles are by the Dowe-Sandeses company, Popham Design; the table was made locally to their specification; the Harry Bertola-style chairs and the metal framed sofa were bought at a flea market in Marrakesh. **Above** a staircase with a painted black stripe leads to the roof terrace



the mosque. We'd say, "But it's our house." The phrase *dar dialna*, or "our house", was one of the first we learnt in Arabic.'

Thinking they might be in the country only a year or so, the Dowe-Sandeses wanted to move on quickly with the renovation – not always an easy proposition in Marrakesh. They were fortunate to find an efficient local project manager and a trusty team of builders. From crumbling wreck to moving in took only three months in the summer of 2006. 'We have friends whose projects here have stretched on for months and months,' Caitlin says.

'We were here every day pushing it forward. We wanted to get into the house swiftly and really enjoy it, so we tried to keep things quite simple and to keep a lot of the original architecture.'

Most of the ground-floor living spaces of the modest three-bedroom house open directly on to the central courtyard. Everything needed doing, from rewiring to new plumbing and bathrooms. For a couple whose only other experience was some tinkering with their bungalow in L.A., this was a major leap of scale. 'There were problems just about every day. When we arrived we hardly

spoke any of the language and to dealing with the traditional here. Not a single power tool working in the house, or a spirit level and nothing is straight. Coming was a big thing for us to embracing. You just have to find the tools for each and every task.'

Solar water heaters on the roof, the energy bills and radiant heat. Having left all their old furniture in the States, the Dowe-Sandeses also



### Home truths

**The best thing about the house** is the doughnut hole: our courtyard. It is our sun-drenched outdoor living-room and provides unobstructed views of the stars, even on a freezing winter night.

**When we bought it** in mid-July, when temperatures were regularly 100F and above, we thought it was clever to remove all of the doors to every room – 'open the place up', we thought. Now we curse our cleverness when winter temperatures drop to 50F and we're sleeping with hats on.

**We're inveterate treasure hunters** and tweekers, so there are always future projects. Right now, a terrace renovation is most pressing – new tiles, new lights and comfortable seating. I wish I could say it will be a space abloom with plants, but we tend to kill anything but our olive tree.

**We love the Danish designers**, especially Arne Jacobsen, whose vintage Egg chair we covet. Clean-lined functionality with a bit of luxe is always appealing.

**Everything looks better in a series**, from photographs to chairs to African tribal masks hung like a group of friends on a wall. We learnt the trick early on and are impressed with how this notion stands the test.

**Our biggest investment** was in a piece of art, a painting by a Frenchwoman, Martina Bigot, that hangs in our living-room. That and the camel-bone dresser we bought at Mustafa Blaoui's.

**Beggars can't be choosers.** As long as we're filling our house with flea market and antique finds, we're not loyal to any one period. We mix mid-century with contemporary as well as sophisticated older pieces.



...our finds in the city flea markets and  
 ...them customised. They also designed and  
 ...a series of pieces along the way,  
 ...to tables. But it was designing their  
 ...for the house that really caught the cou-  
 ...agination. They found that they could eas-  
 ...cement tiles made to their own designs in  
 ...factories, so began experimenting with pat-  
 ...and colours for the house.  
 ...soon realised that it was possible to get a lot  
 ...things custom-made for us and that there are  
 ...on every corner,' Caitlin says. 'With the

tiles, especially, we felt that we had this opportunity  
 to personalise the house and add our own aesthetic  
 to a traditional technique.'  
 Needless to say, the Dowe-Sandeses are still in  
 Marrakesh, enjoying both their renovated dar and  
 their growing business, which now exports tiles to  
 the US, Europe and other parts of the world.  
 Without a formal showroom, the house itself is  
 the main showcase for the company. It is also testa-  
 ment to a determination to get things done in  
 a city where deadlines are a vague concept.  
 pophamsdesign.com

**Clockwise from far left** looking into  
 Sandeses' bedroom, with paintings above  
 Samuel's father, Roger Sandes, in camel  
 and locally made lanterns (tiles througho  
 Popham Design); in the red room the Tul  
 by Eero Saarinen, while the table has a t  
 at a flea market with a bespoke timber t  
 living-room the sofa and chairs are all re-  
 market finds, and the sculpture is by the  
 artist Martina Bigot; a bathroom tiled in r  
 coral tiles decorate a guest bedroom; Ci  
 Samuel Dowe-Sandes relaxing in their o



**Get the look** Arizona zebra hide (170x240cm), £800, Heal's (024 0780; heals.co.uk). Marrakesh floor lamp £185, Graham & Green (0845-130 6622; grahamandgreen.co.uk). Droog Red Revisited £240, Nest (0114-243 3000; nest.co.uk). Bertioia Diamond chair Knoll International (020-7236 6655; knoll-int.com). Two-sided citrus/light, from £25, Toast (0844-557 5200; toast.co.uk). Moroccan rug £552, Baker (020-7823 3612; bakerfurniture.com). Embroidered