

Moorish arches and richly decorated walls distinguish the Mahkama du Pacha (Courthouse of the Pasha), which dates to the 1950s and today is a venue for official functions.

YOU MUST REMEMBER THIS

*Casablanca's romantic past
inspires a trip to Morocco—but its
current buzz is the real surprise*

BY
OLIVIA STREN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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I HAVE LANDED IN THE PAGES OF AN F. SCOTT FITZGERALD NOVEL.

That thought hits me as we pull up to our hotel in Casablanca. One of this Moroccan city's newest lodgings, the Hôtel and Spa Le Doge occupies a 1930s mansion. Each of its suites is named and individually designed to honor a leading figure of the art deco epoch—Fitzgerald, Colette, Coco Chanel, Jean Cocteau. The bellhop escorts my mother and me up a winding, crimson-carpeted staircase and leads us to the Fritz Lang room, named for the director of the 1927 movie *Metropolis* and aptly adorned with cinema-style tripod floor lamps and walls painted a smart, filmstrip gray. The bellhop deposits our luggage, then turns toward my mother and, apropos of nothing, says: “*Vous avez le ciel et la lumière du Maroc dans les yeux, madame*—You have the sky and the light of Morocco in your eyes, madam.” My mother, her sky-and-light eyes now tearful, brings her hand to her chest and responds: “*Je suis Casablancaise. Et j’ai le Maroc dans mon cœur, monsieur*—I am from Casablanca, and I have Morocco in my heart, sir.”

Claude Stren, née Schétrit—my mother—was born in a taxicab in Casablanca in 1941, a year before the classic film *Casablanca* was released. To me, her early life seemed like a movie: glamorous in its

tumult. If Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman’s *Casablanca*—filmed in studios in Burbank, California—was about longing and loss, my mother’s Casablanca was too. Her Morocco, a country she was forced to abandon for political and religious reasons more than 50 years ago and has longed for ever since, instilled in me a yearning for a grander, more operatic life.

I was born the boring way, in a hospital, and grew up in safe, comfortable Toronto, with its grumpy, overcast skies, hearing about my mother’s native city—its slicing light, its Ajax white buildings, its temperamental, wind-tousled Atlantic shores. For as long as I can remember, my mother and I talked about an idyllic someday when we would visit Casablanca. But she feared she would be returning to an unrecognizable city. So we let Casablanca flourish in the haze of fantasy—until my mom celebrated her big 70th birthday in 2011, and we finally booked the airline tickets.

“I am afraid of confronting the work of time,” she admits to me somewhere above the Atlantic Ocean on the plane flight over. I do not tell her this, but I am feeling nervous too, that our high expectations will lead only to a letdown.



Place du 16 Novembre’s 1930s art deco architecture (above) reflects France’s design influence on Casablanca. An allée of palms (right) runs through Parc ISESCO, restored by and named for the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.





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1. Tea, poured with precision, is a treat at the Hôtel and Spa Le Doge. 2. Tiles artistically frame a doorway along the Rue du Parc. 3. Bazaar vendors chat in the Quartier des Habous. 4. Colorful tile details in Casablanca's Hassan II Mosque complex hint at the lavish decorations that embellish Morocco's largest religious structure. 5. Silver-trimmed, hand-painted tagine vessels are used to serve Morocco's traditional stews. 6. A woman rounds a corner in the Quartier des Habous, an area that was designed by French architects in 1917 to resemble a medina. 7. Savory Berber-style chicken tagine with olives is a popular menu item at Restaurant Zayna. 8. Grand doors at the Mahkama du Pacha lead to its courtly interior.



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STANDING ON OUR HOTEL'S ROOFTOP TERRACE, we see Casablanca spread before us: 1930s-style town houses crowned with tropical gardens filled with lemon trees and trees that locals call *filles de l'air* (girls of the air), minarets pointing up to preposterously blue Moroccan skies the likes of which inspired Henri Matisse. But we also see grime-veiled apartment blocks with Berber rugs dangling over rust-scabbled balconies.

When the French established a protectorate in Morocco in 1912, they saw an opportunity for Casablanca to become the pinnacle of colonial achievement: a brand-new seaside fantasia of art deco and neo-Moorish architecture. Paris with palm trees. But the colonial government gave way to independence in 1956, and today Casablanca has a determinedly different character. Redolent of Havana or Buenos Aires, Morocco's most populous city has a splendor of bygone days.

Travelers in search of a mystical, snake-charming Morocco tend to relegate Casablanca to a night on the itinerary—a stopover en route to the imperial cities of Marrakech and Fès. Locals also sometimes deride Casa, as it's nicknamed, as a traffic-choked financial center.

But Casablanca native and Hôtel Le Doge owner Mounir Kouhen is one of a growing number of Moroccans who are committed to rehabilitating the city's reputation and architecture. He joins us on the rooftop, immaculately outfitted in a charcoal gray suit and pink tie. "We wanted to bring back Casablanca's artistic universe, its golden age," he says. "We took three years to renovate this building and quickly found its soul, its heart. Now it's ours to protect." He then adds, "Casa is different from other Moroccan cities. It spills over with energy." The sounds of horns interrupt him as if on cue. "This is the New York City of Morocco. But something that people may not know is that Casa is also a city beloved of Jacques Brel, of Édith Piaf."

"That is my Casa," my mother says. "That's the only one I know." In search of Brel's and Piaf's Casa, we head to Villa Zévaco, in the city's chic Anfa district. Designed circa 1950 by the French-Moroccan architect Jean-François Zévaco, the villa gleams with white curving balconies and opens to a garden. Though it now houses Paul, a French pastry chain, the building seems the kind of glamorous retreat Piaf might have been drawn to during the times she spent in Casablanca to be with the love of her life, Algerian prizefighter Marcel Cerdan. Cerdan died in a plane crash in October 1949. About their love, Piaf composed the lyrics to her great warhorse song, "Hymne à l'Amour."

We ask for a coveted seat on the vast outdoor patio—the city's bourgeois brunch hub—which is decorated with wild palms and succulents. Morning sunshine filters through a tangle of silvery olive trees. Next to us, women with oversize sunglasses, designer purses, and French manicures compulsively check their BlackBerrys, while men in Adidas tracksuits and slicked hair sip mint tea and fidget with their iPads. I take a peek inside: Waiters in white caps glide along black marble floors ferrying trays of toasted baguettes, olive oil, and honey. Inspired by the beauty of the modernist Zévaco building, I suggest a visit to the city's so-called art deco district.

"I have never heard of such a place," my mother comments, poorly concealing her irritation—as though its unfamiliarity, much like the women and their giant eyewear, was an act of betrayal, another way the city and its people have gotten along just fine without her. "I'd be happy to explore that area," she says, "but first I need to find my apartment building. My neighborhood. If I don't find that building, I won't function."

So we hail a taxi to her old neighborhood. Or at least we attempt to hail one. After about 15 minutes of strategizing, staking out different street corners—Kouhen's Manhattan analogy is apt—we

are triumphant and are taken on a harrowing ride to the city's core.

If this is my mother's childhood stomping ground and the former center of *la nouvelle ville*, it's also, we quickly learn, the art deco district. "I lived in the heart of the art deco district without even knowing it!" my mother says, cheered by the discovery.

"I guess it wasn't called that when you lived here," I say, stating the obvious.

"No. It was just my neighborhood. It was beautiful, but I didn't think it was special; I thought the whole world looked like this," she answers as we pass Au Petit Poucet, a café where the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry came for coffee. An aviator as well as a writer, Saint-Exupéry stopped regularly in Casablanca in the 1920s between flights across the Sahara to Dakar, Senegal.

The café reminds my mom of one of her favorite Saint-Exupéry quotes: *Je suis de mon enfance comme d'un pays*—I am from my childhood as from a country.

"He also said something like 'Childhood is a place, a republic,'" she adds. Then she says, "To me, not finding the country of your childhood is, in some ways, not finding your home or yourself."

"We'll find it," I reassure her.

The capital of her childhood country is the Boulevard de Paris, where she lived. "It was an address of 'grand standing,'" my mother tells me, becoming the proud little girl. However, her family was far from wealthy (as a child, she suffered from rickets, a result of malnutrition), so she and her parents and sister made do in a tiny apartment in the back of a fashionable apartment building. On this Boulevard de Paris—once trimmed with café terraces and markets selling *jambon-et-saucisson* (ham and sausages)—young Claude dreamed of visiting the real Paris.

"I imagined it would be like Casablanca—sunny and beautiful—but with lovers sitting on benches and children sending paper boats to float in the Tuileries Garden." When she finally did visit Paris, with its iron skies and stubborn drizzle, she was disappointed. "I thought Paris would be paradise! Instead, in many ways, in Casablanca I had paradise under my nose."

Soon we come upon the Boulevard de Paris, hoping to discover at least one corner of that paradise. But it is grand only in recollection. "This cannot be the boulevard!" my mother exclaims to me, almost angrily. "It's so small. The street is so narrow. It looks as if it was made for elves. And it used to be so immaculate!"

Buildings once painted in sharp blues and whites now are dirty, peeling, some in a state of literal collapse. We walk up and down the block three times. My mother seems disoriented, unable to find any signposts of her former life. I begin to wonder if this trip was a mistake—recover-the-past rarely makes for a winning travel plan.

Then she looks up and gasps "Pharmacie Minuit!" This pharmacy was just steps from where she lived.

"The apartment must be here. I know it's here." She's right. A few steps away stands her building, but renumbered, scruffy, the color of car exhaust. We step into this tiny province of her childhood.

"Do you recognize it?" I ask her. "Yes, but it used to be cared for," she says. The building's inner courtyard, once lush with ivy, is bare, and flower beds, once tidy green quilts, are covered in concrete, making them look like children's tombstones.

"I remember standing in that corner of the courtyard," she tells me, pointing, "with my sister and parents during the war," referring to World War II. "We were afraid that if we stayed in our apartment the ceilings would collapse, so we huddled together trying to find safety from the bombardments. The sound of the breeze in the ivy scared me, but I pretended it didn't. I wanted to be brave." My mother was three, and if she barely knew her name, the Nazi-leaning Vichy

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*A movie set comes to life at
Rick's Café, inspired by
the 1942 film Casablanca.*

government, she recalls, knew it, putting hers (along with the rest of her family's) on the lists of those bound for Nazi concentration camps. Then, the Americans docked in Casablanca.

"I still recall the sound of Champagne popping," she says of that happy night. "Uniformed soldiers, tall and handsome, gave us toy tanks and bars of Hershey's chocolate." She pauses, then adds, "And Lewis from Chicago, a soldier who was billeted with us, fell madly in love with my mother. Everybody did. She was beautiful."

In that night's delirium of relief and jubilation, my mother says, Lewis swept her up in his arms so she might touch the ceiling with her dimpled hand. In that little moment she felt joy was boundless. But today, we hear only the hollow sound of pigeons flapping overhead.

"All I see now is what I do not see," she says sadly, of Lewis, of her mother and father, of the neighbor she called Tata (for aunt), who taught her how to cook the fluffy couscous that made its way to our dinner table in Toronto.

Later that afternoon, her mood lifts as we play tourist and visit the spectacular Hassan II Mosque. Built on a promontory in homage to a Koranic verse stating that Allah's throne was built upon water, the mosque was commissioned by the late King Hassan II and inaugurated in 1993. Its 689-foot-high minaret is the tallest in the world and is bejeweled in tiles the colors of emeralds, sapphires, and tourmalines. We wander past fountains and under marble arches, then spot the El Hank lighthouse, just to the west along the shore. It is as plain in looks as the minaret is magnificent, but its ordinariness emanates a grandeur—of one that has witnessed and survived. It is the lighthouse that guided the Allies to Casablanca's shores.

"Unlike me, it hasn't changed. Not a wrinkle," my mother says as we sit atop the seawall, the waves below tossing themselves against rocky outcrops. "That lighthouse saved my life."

WE RETURN THE FOLLOWING DAY for a deeper look at the art deco district, on a tour led by Florence Michel-Guilluy, an art historian who has lived in Casablanca for the past five years and now works

with Casamémoire, a nonprofit heritage-preservation association. "Casa is an architectural laboratory set under an open sky," she says. "The remarkable thing is not only the diversity of the building styles but their coherence. Casablanca is a city that one must explore *le nez en l'air*"—nose in the air, looking up.

So, nez en l'air, we wander past the Cathédrale du Sacré Coeur, a confection white as whipped cream that was built in the 1930s. "What made Casablanca modern was the way it celebrated tradition," says Michel-Guilluy, noting the minaret-inspired steeples.

As we walk onto broad Place Mohammed V, Michel-Guilluy notes, "The best examples of Casablanca's golden age are found here." We stroll over to the adjacent Parc de la Ligue Arabe, lined with towering date palms, where my mother and her mother walked. Hemming the park are the city's main post office, built in 1918, with all the arches and vibrant mosaics of a Moorish palace, and the imposing Banque al-Maghrib, with its elaborately carved front. More arresting to me, however, are the details that dress ordinary apartment buildings here: seashells carved into stone facades, Italianate balconies, green-and-gilt peacocks decorating wrought iron doors.

Anita Leurent, who recently moved from France to Casablanca, has joined our tour.

"In Casa, beauty is not served up to you as it is in other places. You must seek it out. Here, you are a treasure hunter, a *chercheur d'or*—gold seeker. That is what is thrilling!"

We pause at a 1930s town house, windows framed with plasterwork as delicate as lace.

"There is always a detail, a secret to discover here," says Leurent.

In the meantime, I am also discovering family lore. As we walk down Boulevard Mohammed V, my mother remarks that the street's monarchical namesake was fond of my grandmother.

"What do you mean? King Mohammed knew her?"

"Oh, yes. She was his manicurist in the 1930s. And she was very attractive, so he was naturally quite taken with her. He asked her to marry him."

"And she said no? To the king's proposal of marriage?" I exclaim.

"Well, would you want to live in a harem?" she replies. Fair enough.

After my grandmother's stint as the king's manicurist, she worked as a ticket seller at the old Cinéma Triomphe, one of numerous movie theaters in Casablanca. Hollywood had its golden age at the same time Casablanca did—they both were optimistic, hedonistic towns that turned on sea, sunshine, and cinema. In a place so entwined with its Hollywood incarnation, it is fitting that movie theaters should serve as landmarks. We decide to visit the best preserved and most striking example: the Cinéma Rialto, where Josephine Baker once sang her big hit, *J'ai Deux Amours*. Recently repainted and renovated, the Rialto hints at a Casablanca comeback.

We curl onto a side street near the theater and stop for a mint tea at an outdoor café, where locals—some in jeans and Nikes, some in djellabas and the slipper-like shoes called babouches—sit on cane-back

chairs under ceiling fans whirling with the languor of dissipating smoke rings, and tuck into chicken and lamb tagines and frosty local beer. In establishments such as these, my mother tells me, people used to lunch on grilled locusts—a delicacy during locust invasions—and Orangina.

By the café, I notice vendors ladling steaming bowlfuls of snails from massive cauldrons alongside bookstores selling folio editions of French classics. In these contrasts, I recognize my mother. Like her city, she is made up of Occident and Orient, of mismatched parts and various lives. I came to Casablanca to discover her haunts; I didn't expect to find her so vividly reflected in them. She is more like her Casablanca than I'd imagined. Maybe it's ancestral, but I, too, feel a visceral affinity to and intimacy with the country—its colors, its flavors (everything spiked with mint and coriander and orange water), even its pace, which tends to be at once lively and languid. In this, Morocco's Manhattan, locals rush to cafés—only to while away the afternoon there sipping tea.

ON OUR LAST NIGHT IN CASABLANCA we stumble into—of all the gin joints in all the world—Rick's Café. Housed in an old mansion and built into the walls of Casablanca's old medina neighborhood, which overlooks the port, Rick's is a universe of Arab arches, tasselfringed brass lamps, and potted palms. Dangling Moroccan lanterns spend their night sending shivering shadows onto white walls, while a bartender in a burgundy fez mixes cocktails behind a bar. Visiting European ambassadors sip Champagne and dig into golden hillocks of couscous. Here, Rick is Kathy Kriger, who opened this saloon in 2004. (Like the movie Rick, she lives upstairs.)

"I wanted to bring the screen legend to life in Casablanca," she

tells us. Kriger moved to the city in 1998 to serve as the commercial counselor at the U.S. Consulate. "I fell in love with the architecture here," she says. "Then, a day after September 11, 2001, I decided to quit my government job and open Rick's. It was the gamble of a lifetime. I put everything I had into this place. I like to say that my budget exceeded that of the film's by about \$50,000."

My mother and I order a pair of pastis aperitifs as a four-piece band begins to play Charles Trénet's 1940s tune "*Que Reste-t-il de Nos Amours?*" ("What Remains of Our Loves?"). The nostalgic chanson—about lost youth and young love—could serve as both Casablanca's anthem and the theme song to my mother's journey.

"Are you happy we finally came?" I ask her, risking hearing an honest answer.

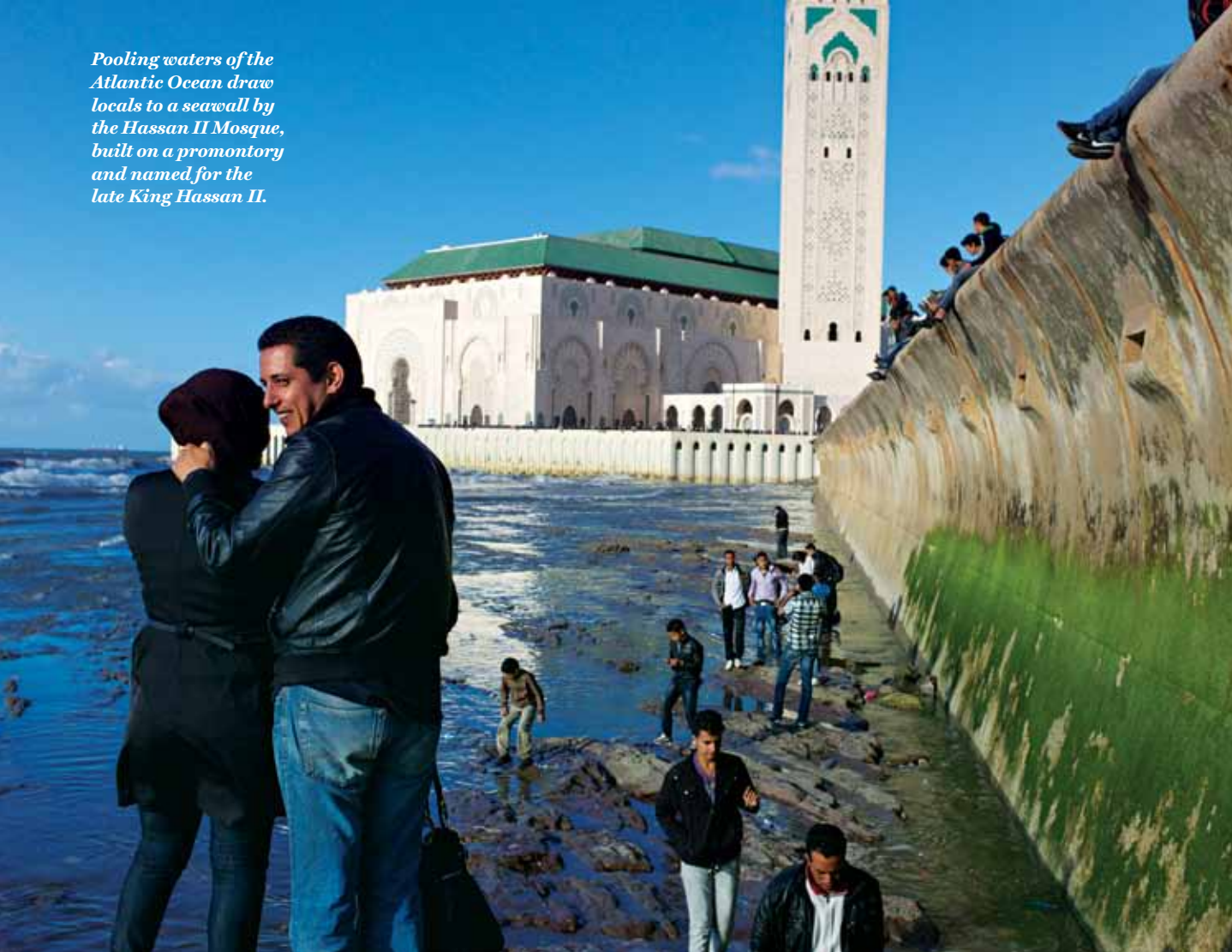
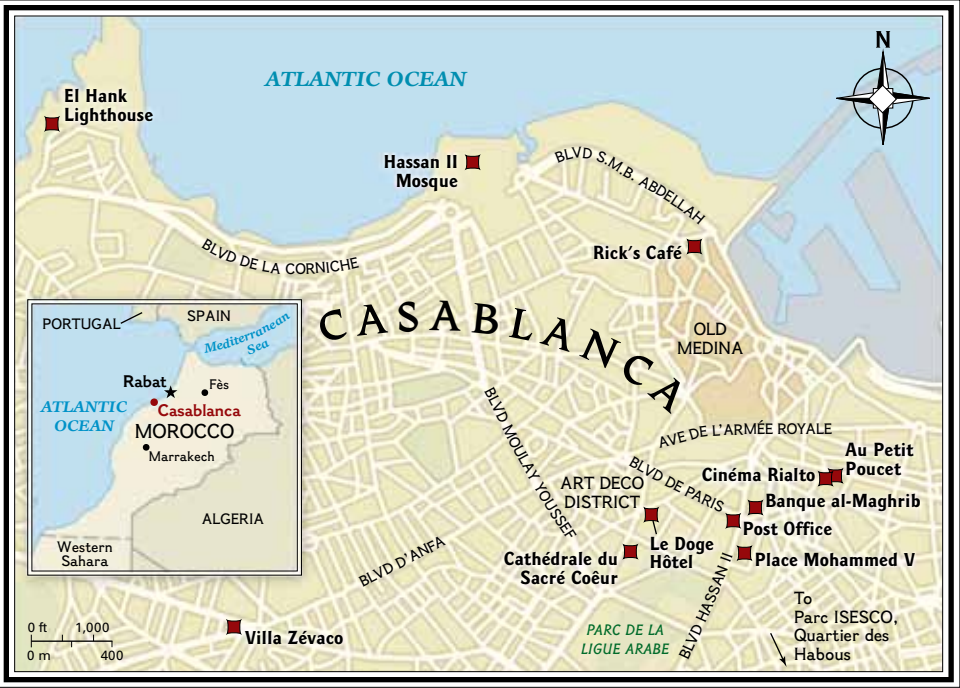
"Yes," she replies. "Casa is more decrepit, sadder, but also more beautiful than I remember." She stops to listen to the snowy-haired saxophonist who, I later find out, accompanied Édith Piaf at her last concert at Paris's Olympia music hall.

It's almost midnight when we leave Rick's, knowing we're flying home early the next morning.

"I wish I could pack a little corner of Casa to bring back with me to Toronto," my mother says, already nostalgic for the city that knew her when life unspooled freshly ahead—at a moment when her life stretches largely behind her.

"Who needs luggage?" I reply. "You're already storing the sky and light in your eyes."

Toronto-based **OLIVIA STREN** has written for *Elle* and the *Globe and Mail*. Copenhagen-based photographers **SISSE BRIMBERG** and **COTTON COULSON** shot "*From Russia With Love*" (October 2012).



Pooling waters of the Atlantic Ocean draw locals to a seawall by the Hassan II Mosque, built on a promontory and named for the late King Hassan II.

INTERNATIONAL MAPING