

For a dinner at the Amanjena resort, designer Bryan Rafanelli collaborated with local firm Delight Event Management to create tablescapes surrounded by 10,000 votive candles.



## The More the Merrier

On a lavish trip to Morocco, today's top event planners and designers plot your next over-the-top destination fête.

by Dan Rubinstein. Photographs by Matthieu Salvaing

**CHRISTINE TRAULICH** is a New Hampshire-based designer who specializes in custom invites that go way beyond the calligraphed note card. When a client wanted to throw a party for her husband's 60th, she wanted something special. His birthday falls on Halloween, and she wanted to bring 50 close friends to Disney World for a three-day extravaganza. She turned to Traulich's firm, Red Bliss Design ([redbliss.com](http://redbliss.com)), which she had used before, to create a showstopping invitation that would use the image of the skull that was her husband's birthday symbol. Traulich traveled to New York to meet with famed chocolatier Jacques Torres and commissioned him to create a skull-shaped container entirely out of chocolate. With it came a mallet tagged

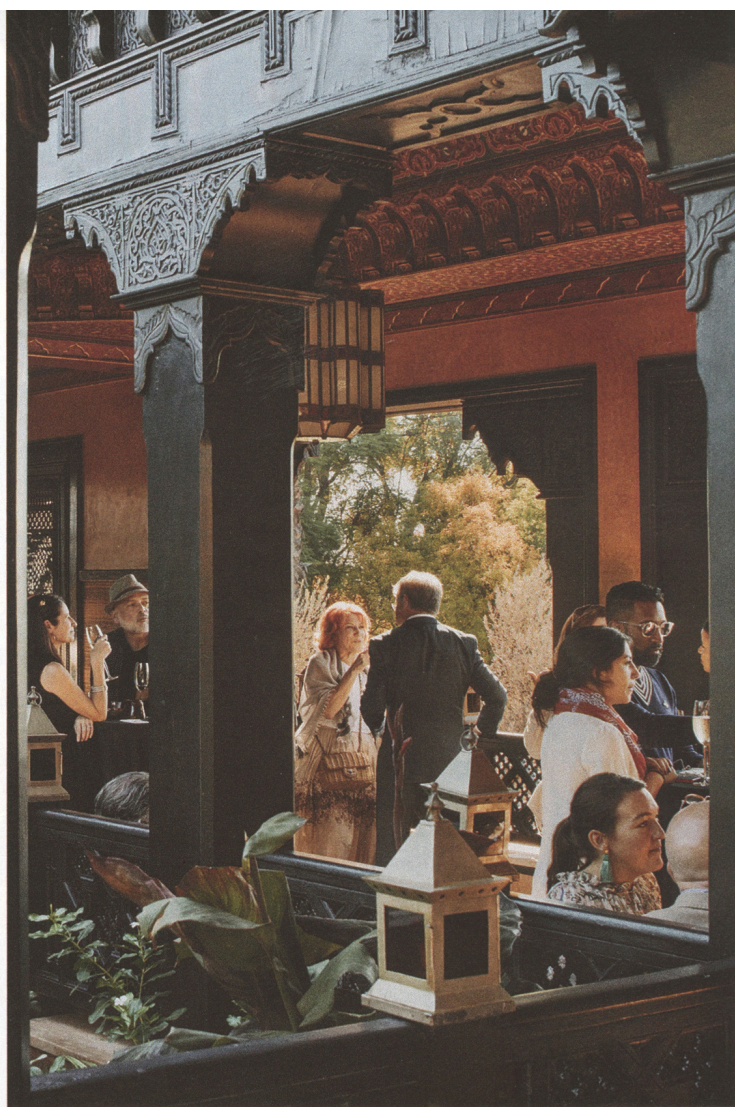
with the phrase *BUST OPEN THE FUN*. Guests were asked to record a video of themselves smashing open the chocolate container as their RSVP, and some shared their clips via Instagram. Inside they found an acrylic invitation lying on a bed of red Sixlets candy. And because it was August, each of the boxes was hand-delivered in a customized refrigerated package. The guests convened at the Four Seasons Resort Orlando at Walt Disney World, then attended over-the-top private events at the park. For Traulich, today's special occasions are "less driven by tradition," she says, and more by declaring, "This is who we are as a couple."

Welcome to the age of the destination celebration. In a group trip to Morocco last fall co-organized by travel advisors Embark ([embarkbeyond.com](http://embarkbeyond.com)), Traulich was one of more than 30 American planners and designers who came to see whether the country could cater to their clients' ambitious needs. The attendees got a rapid-fire sampling of some of the best venues, experiences, and hotels. (The local hospitality industry is known for delivering royalty-level service.)

The itinerary included the Amanjena, where the group was greeted by traditional Moroccan singers and musicians; the Royal Mansour, which gave each guest a palatial private *riad*; a private tour of the Yves Saint-Laurent villa at the Jardin Majorelle and the Yves Saint-Laurent Museum; a lunch held outdoors in the center of the gardens at the hotel La Mamounia amid lemon trees and olive groves that included vegetables that were picked from the garden on the property; a choreographed-to-music nighttime show of Arabian horse dancing at the Hotel Selman Marrakech (overheard: "Madonna ate in the stables here!"—this was rumored to have been part of her 60th-birthday celebration in the city last year); as well as a few nights at Richard Branson's Kasbah Tamadot, a more secluded hotel in the Atlas Mountains.



Clockwise from top left: A lunch in the gardens of La Mamounia; a cocktail party on the hotel's rooftop terrace; during a picnic in the Agafay Desert, a local falconer gives a demonstration to guests.



Planner Michelle Rago (*michellerago destinations.com*), one of the people on the trip—who recently organized celebrity DJ Diplo's 40th birthday in Jamaica with a bevy of models flown in—sees a shift in tone when it comes to what clients want. She described an event she threw where guests had a “late, late” lunch at a woman's farm in Sicily. “It was the most you-can't-find-this experience. The host cooked. Bread was baked in a stone oven. For all the money in the world it was something they could never have again.”

Producing events at that level is as much about small details as it is about big ideas. Norma Cohen (*normacohen productions.com*) spent about “four or five hours” a day on her own during the trip, she says, “getting into the nitty-gritty” of each hotel to see whether it was up to snuff. With a largely Orthodox Jewish clientele, Cohen knows about special requirements. For a birthday in London, she chartered 60 rickshaws to ferry roughly 180 guests around town during the sabbath. “No one could do anything

without planners these days,” Cohen says. “We make it easy for clients, save them money, and protect them.”

One of the cohosts of the tour, Bryan Rafanelli (*rafanellievents.com*), has offices in both New York and Boston, with about 25 employees in each. With a design team of 12 people, he produces 75 or so events per year with clients like the Clintons (he did Chelsea's wedding) and Matt Damon (he put together a vow-renewal ceremony for the actor and his wife). Why Marrakech? For Rafanelli, it was about upping the ante, sparking new ways of collaborating with venues and each other. “People want to buy experiences,” he says. On all levels, these happenings are becoming longer and more complex, and require more legwork than a weekend wedding in the Caribbean. It's more like working with a couturier—who knows you inside and out—than a glorified travel agent. “From the day you meet us until probably three months after the celebration, we're going to have this amazing time together,” he says.