

An audience with Marisa Berenson

Model and Hollywood icon, **Marisa Berenson**, moves away from the cameras in pursuit of bringing wellness to discerning travellers

Interview: Rebecca Haddad

It was while accidentally joining the The Beatles' ashram in India that Marisa Berenson cemented her determination to embark on a life quest for wellness. "I don't know how I ended up on that ashram in Rishikesh — I went to India searching for the light and I found The Beatles," she laughs. "We used to have these vegetarian meals while looking out over the Ganges, and we would meditate all day long and George Harrison would come and play the guitar for us. It was so joyful and wonderful."

Wellness is the very reason I am meeting with the model and Hollywood actress turned health and beauty guru. We're sitting in a softly lit suite at Sofitel The Grand Amsterdam, the latest Sofitel property to introduce Berenson's eponymous premium range of skincare to a selection of its spa's treatments. Having just come from road-testing the products in the So Spa, I find myself under Berenson's careful eye as she extends a hand, weighed down by an eclectic-yet-chic array of bangles and rings. She gives me a once-over before offering a serene smile that extends to her famous doe eyes. "The treatment was good, wasn't it? Everything in the products is 100 per cent natural — they are supposed to make you feel good, because they are good for the skin."

Wearing a pair of chic black slacks, an embroidered vest and a billowy white blouse weighed down by necklaces, her make-up immaculate, Berenson exudes a grace that can only come from someone who's spent much of her life in front of a camera lens. Berenson's first appearance in *Vogue* was as a newly christened baby in the arms of designer grandmother, Elsa Schiaparelli. It wasn't until she returned to her birthplace of

New York City at the age of 16 that she continued her modelling career, which endures to this day (Berenson walked for Alberta Ferretti and Tom Ford during their Spring 2011 catwalk shows). Running parallel to her modelling pursuits was a long and successful career in Hollywood. Berenson's most notable cinematic works include parts in *Cabaret* (1972) and *Barry Lyndon* (1975). It's no wonder Yves Saint Laurent dubbed her 'the girl of the 1970s'.

"I have always travelled a lot," she explains, speaking carefully as she habitually flits between French and English. "I travelled a lot with modelling and my movie career, and also with my father who worked as a diplomat. During my childhood I was brought up in Paris, where I lived with my grandmother. Italy is also part of my inheritance — I was brought up for a time in Venice, I went to school in Florence, and did my first movie in Rome, so that is very significant to me." She pauses, running her manicured fingers through her curly mane before offering a small smirk. "And I also did the end of the 1960s in England. That was so great. I spread my wings, even though I was living with Lady Jellicoe at the time, and she was supposed to keep an eye on me."

Berenson's jet-setting lifestyle is perhaps the reason why she felt a great need to pursue an optimum path to wellness — affirmed, of course, by that fateful ashram of the late 1960s. "When I first went to India, I became a vegetarian and started meditating and doing yoga, and it was an introduction to a world of feeling well, doing those things that were good for my soul, my spirit and my mind."

Berenson's collaboration with Sofitel Hotels and Resorts officially began in 2013, when she





Timeless beauty (left to right) lady in red in 1992 and again in 1986; walking for Kenzo's Fall 2005/2006 runway show

was invited by her now-partner “in life and in crime,” Jean-Paul, was working on Sofitel Marrakech’s new spa at the time. “He came to me when Sofitel came to him asking him to redo their spa in Marrakech, as they were looking for a line of skincare, so I developed 15 products for hair, body and face,” she explains. It marked the perfect opportunity to bring her wealth of holistic knowledge to the masses via a range of premium products that thus far include face and body creams as well as the signature Fabulous Oil. All products start with a base of prickly pear seed oil, a beauty secret Berenson credits her grandmother for.

“When I was growing up, my grandmother used to bring back prickly pear raw oil back from her trips to Tunisia. It is an amazing elixir or life, youth, regeneration and of healing, and because I discovered this early on, I wanted to do a line based on this.” With Sofitel The Grand Amsterdam the latest hotel to stock the range, outposts in the likes of Macau and Dubai are being eyed next.

It was this serendipitous meeting with Jean-Paul that also led to her staying in Marrakech. “I have been there for three years now. I think it’s such a

nice place to be based. The lifestyle is wonderful, you are surrounded by nature and the people are nice. It’s wonderful,” she says. Although Berenson regularly travels between Morocco and Paris, all the while keeping “a toe in New York”, the Moroccan city will hold her attention for the near future as she is currently at work on her own wellness retreat, giving guests a chance to experience Berenson’s vision of providing a multi-sensory sanctuary.

“I love to decorate, so I am going to town on this house. I want it to be a place where people can meditate, eat wonderful food and meet wonderful people,” she says with a fresh enthusiasm that certainly belies her 67 years. “For me, luxury is in the little things. It’s in the beautiful things to look at, it’s in the peace, it’s in the silence and in the nice feel of something.”

Ironically, in Berenson’s quest to create these little sanctuaries around the world — be they hotel spas or country retreats — she finds herself jet-setting around the world without rest. Not that she minds. “When you travel, you learn about the world, about cultures and about people and it makes you richer. It is important to be a citizen of the world.” ■