Breathing life into the hotel, giving it a heart, always reaching for perfection, Jean-Claude Messant is leading Le Royal Mansour straight into the top rank of luxury hotels.

London, Deauville, Paris, Monte Carlo and, today, Marrakech: Jean-Claude Messant has spent over 30 years as a director among the world’s most remarkable luxury hotels. In Paris, he ran the legendary Hôtel de Crillon. In Monaco, he transformed the Hôtel Métropole into an internationally renowned palace hotel. It is this level of expertise that Mr Messant is bringing to his role at Le Royal Mansour Marrakech, which he took on in September 2014.

Mr Messant has won numerous awards, including a double accolade from Leading Hotels of the World in 2010, when the Métropole Monte-Carlo won Best Hotel in the World, and Mr Messant was recognised as Hotelier of the Year. More recently, Hotels Magazine nominated him for Independent Hotelier of the Year 2014, and Virtuoso for Hotelier of the Year 2014.

As guardian of a living heritage in an inspirational destination, Le Royal Mansour’s new MD follows a certain routine when he arrives at work in the morning. Every day, as he approaches the hotel, he really looks at it, at the effects of light and colour determined by the season. As he walks up the lane lined with olive trees, and through the monumental gateway, every day he says to himself: “This is how it feels to be a guest arriving here for the first time. How wonderful it is – yes, I am very lucky to work here.”

Mr Messant believes that managing Le Royal Mansour means understanding and taking ownership of the bigger picture, a vision that exists above and beyond everyday operations. He is strongly motivated by knowing that he is also somewhat responsible for the hotel’s future as one of the world leaders in international luxury; Le Royal Mansour is uniquely magnificent, and it must remain so. Guests might imagine that the hotel dates from 50 years ago, 75 years ago or more. In fact, it opened five years ago. Really, they say, is that all? But it’s not important: time is irrelevant at Le Royal Mansour. In any case, all the curtains, drapes and carpets are maintained and restored meticulously and frequently, so that the hotel remains as beautiful as it did on day one – a gleaming showcase for Morocco’s artistic heritage.

But, says Mr Messant, this showcase must never become a museum in which nothing is allowed to change. The hotel represents a living, evolving heritage, marrying tradition with modernity, neither fixed in time, nor following fashions. He aims to strike a perfect balance between classical and modern, between the past and the future. For example, Yannick Alléno, the three-Michelin-starred chef who oversees Le Royal Mansour’s restaurants, seeks to create new expressions of flavour without losing sight of Morocco’s culinary heritage. The hotel’s approach to art sees traditional works sharing wall space with pieces by contemporary Moroccan artist. A showcase, indeed, but one that is tilted towards the future. “Le Royal Mansour is all the more beautiful because there is such life here, such movement, emotion and a real human dimension,” says Mr Messant. “We are resolutely oriented towards the future.”

And the future looks golden for Le Royal Mansour. Among industry peers and clientele across five continents, it is considered to be among the 10 most beautiful hotels in the world. Mr Messant’s aim is not only to remain on that list, but also to rise up the list of the best hotels in the world. Ever pragmatic, he has established four yardsticks by which he measures Le Royal Mansour’s eligibility to do so.
“Best, of course, because Le Royal Mansour is beautiful! 
“Best because we offer exceptional refinements in an enchanting setting: Yannick Alléno’s superb French and Moroccan cuisine; a destination spa dedicated to relaxation and wellbeing; a welcome that means you never want to leave; and service conceived as a fine art... 
“Best because Le Royal Mansour is clearly always one step ahead of its competitors... 
“Best because the entire team make sure this is a grand luxury hotel with a heart.”

Indeed, Mr Messant ensures that every single employee of the hotel is carefully selected, and given excellent training, that they all share the values of Le Royal Mansour and understand his vision and goals, yet can think for themselves. And how does he describe his own role? “For me, it is like being the conductor of an orchestra – I beat time and try to set a rhythm.”

With his long experience and expertise in opening and repositioning grand hotels, Mr Messant ia not a typical hotel director. He is a rigorous administrator, trained in England, but also a man of projects and adventures, with plenty of Mediterranean brio. While he takes good care of his guests and his staff, he wants to let them dream, too, to broaden their horizons, and “fly them to the moon”. And why not? He relishes the moments when adrenaline surges. He enjoys building a strong relationship with his team: “a bond of friendship, a bond of trust”. The maestro of this orchestra likes to share what he calls “moments of beauty and lyricism”.

Morocco is a place where he can achieve a lot. This is a country that is all about hospitality and generosity. At Le Royal Mansour, where only the best will do, Mr Messant requires every team member not only to carry out their duties flawlessly on a practical level (all staff attend seminars on etiquette and protocol) but also to work with warmth and empathy. A standardised approach, with no soul and no smiles, is anathema to him. “My ideal is to create perfection, but to foster the human dimension, so that none of the staff, from butler to bartender, ever slips into autopilot when they are with guests. Each team member must ask themselves: “What can I do to make this guest happy today, to make her children happy, to make their stay here extraordinary?”

The symbolic language of Le Royal Mansour lies very much within these kinds of gesture, which put heart and soul into a hotel unlike any other. Words and small actions all have their part to play. “When we pick up our guests at the airport, we know exactly whom we’re expecting and how to welcome them. Their emotional response to the hotel begins as soon as they step out of the car, and continues as arrive at their riad, dine in one of the restaurants or take a hammam treatment in the spa. These are rituals, charged with feeling, that will give every guest a lasting memory.”

Even silence is part of the picture. Here we are in the heart of teeming Marrakech, where life is loud and vibrant. Back at Le Royal Mansour, you sink into the meditative quiet of the spa gardens. “All you can hear is gentle Arabic music and the sound of the fountains. It’s virtually silent, only water tinkles softly everywhere in the riads and the hotel medina. Here, water is life,” says Mr Messant, “and life is what Le Royal Mansour is all about.”

Everyone involved with Le Royal Mansour seeks perfection in the smallest details. What, for you, is that crucial detail ?

“The detail I bring is life! It’s as simple as that. I believe a great hotel is like the stage of a great opera house. My role is to direct the players, but it’s the staff and the guests who actually put on the performance.”

Each profession has its own vocabulary. What are the words you would use to describe Le Royal Mansour ?

“Leader: the person who encourages the client and the team to dream, and fosters emotions and memories that will stay with guests – and staff – for a long time.

“And manager: since the hotel is in perpetual motion, unstoppable and ever-renewing, like the continuous roll of an old-fashioned printworks, it requires a fatherly attention in order to thrive.”