Escape: Budget break

Fez for under £100 a night

LESSER-KNOWN than its famous sibling Marrakech, Fez is home to the world's largest car-free urban area and the mother of all medinas with few trapping of the modern world except electricity. Prepare to get lost in its 9,500 tiny streets, but make sure you take it all in — from bin men guiding donkeys laden with rubbish to elderly men holding hands in woollen robes as they respond to the call to prayer. Tourists are still a minority in this medieval city — yet it's just a three-hour flight from the UK.

Illustration: PHIL ARGENT

Pictures: GETTY

Where to stay

■ Dar Roumana

HIGH ceilings, mosaic tiled floors, four-poster beds, stained glass windows and berber rugs are on offer at this boutique hotel. You'll find homemade shampoo, conditioner and body lotion in the pretty ensuite bathrooms and will quickly become part of the family (the hotel even has its own resident tortoise called Eddy). For a private balcony with impressive views over the medina, go for the Yasima room. *Doubles from £75 (darroumana.com)*

■ Riad Laaroussa

THE peace of this central 17th-century former palace is in complete contrast to the mayhem of the medina outside its lofty walls. Colour-themed stately rooms surround an impressive three-storey courtyard filled with blossoming orange trees. The riad offers one of the city's best hammams (Moroccan bathing ritual) and has a chic outdoor pool, rooftop restaurant and open fireplaces if the temperature dips. *Doubles from £97 (riad-laaroussa.com)*

■ Dar Seffarine

ONE of the first boutique hotels to open in the medina, the rooms of this restored 15th-century former home feature mosaic floors, cedar wood ceilings and original features. Owners Adil and Kate are on hand to offer tips, and communal dining ensures guests quickly get to know one another. *Doubles from £66 (darseffarine.com)*

What to see and do

■ Get lost and shop in the medina

START at the Blue Gate that marks the entrance to the 9th-century labyrinthine medina and make your way down the hill which leads to the Chouara Tannery.

Go off track and explore the tiny streets bursting with an amazing array of leather, rugs and aromatic food stalls that branch off the main road. Of course buy a rug, but avoid the famous, but overpriced, Coin Berbere.

Instead, head to the no-pressure Rainbow Street Art Fez selling rugs, local art and leather goods. The alley itself, with wildly painted floors and walls, is truly a work of art.

■ Tour the Chouara Tanneries

THERE are three leather tanneries in and around Fez but the largest and best-known is the 11th-century Chouara Tannery at the foot of the medina.

Follow your nose and watch workers drying out saffron-dyed leather and using their body weight to mix the brightly coloured liquid around the tannery pits in the searing heat.

Make sure you pick up some free sprigs of mint to hold under your nostrils as you walk out onto one of the many terraces to view the pungent pits below.

The world-class leather shops that surround the tannery form a cooperative with those workers below.

■ Sunset at Riad Fes

WATCH the sky turn pink over the medina and on to the Atlas Mountains with a cocktail or surprisingly tasty Moroccan wine on Riad Fes's famous roof terrace.

Though rooms are on the pricey side, drinks aren't and the barmen will ensure you get involved in the festivities as local musicians strum their guitars and sing in Arabic. *riadfes.com*

■ Have a hammam

A TRIP to Morocco is not complete without a traditional hammam. The bathing ritual at Yuba Cyn Spa involves being scrubbed and then washed with black soap made from olive oil before settling down for a massage with argan oil. From £32 (*yubacynspa.com*).

■ Sip sugary mint tea

AFTER admiring the ornate Blue Gate's architecture — named after its blue Fassi tiles — have a seat in one of the cafes or restaurants set up inside the gate and order a cup of impossibly sweet mint tea.

Nagham Cafe is right across from the Blue Gate and also serves delicious local dishes.

Where to eat

■ The Ruined Garden

SITUATED in a former rubbish tip with no roof, The Ruined Garden serves some of the best food in the city. Dreadlocked waiters bring pots of spices and crushed green chilli to go with crusty bread and olive oil. The garden is mainly shaded by large foliage. Tapas include eggplant roasted in tomato and garlic and spiced chickpeas from £1.60. *ruinedgarden.com*

■ Dar Roumana

START with a drink on the roof terrace with views of the medina before dining in the hotel's restaurant decorated with colourful mosaic tiling and carved cedar wood. The menu offers mains such as smoked octopus on paprika avocado, lamp kefta and broad bean and artichoke salad (from £5.50). Staff can collect you from your riad. *darroumana.com*

■ Cafe Clock

LANTERNS hang from the ceiling of this quirky restaurant set on a series of shaded terraces. Walls are decorated with Arabic scripture and hipster paintings. Try the delicious Fez platter of roasted egg plant, olives, spiced beetroot, green beans and dates (£4.90, enough for two) — and the famous camel burger (£7.70). *cafeclock.com*

■ Dar Hatim

THIS authentic, welcoming restaurant with ornate painted ceiling is set in the ground floor of the Bouaa family home. It serves several three-course set menus (from £18) including juicy lamb tagine, chicken pastilla and seasonal salads. *19, Derb Ezaouia Fandak*

How to get there

AIR ARABIA flies Gatwick to Fez return from £176 (*airarabia.com*)

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