



## Riad Fes and Hotel Sahrai review: luxury in the Moroccan culture capital

APR 16, 2019

TRAVEL



Is it even remotely possible for a man of a certain age to write about hotels in the fascinating Moroccan city of Fez and not mention Tommy Cooper? Well, apparently not. Mind you, it's good to get that out of the way because this piece is going to offer a couple of travel tips for anyone considering a trip to Fez and, with that Cooper connection made, I can now refer to those as "not like that, like this..." And if you don't get the reference, ask your parents or, better, watch as much of this master comedian as you can on YouTube.

The first "NLTLT" moment is your choice of airline. We'd booked to Fez via Lisbon, with Portuguese airline TAP. I wouldn't recommend it. Somehow, our nicely timed transfer lost a couple of hours necessitating a night in a somewhat functional Portuguese hotel rather than the planned night of luxury in an impeccable example of Moroccan architecture.

And as frustrating as it was to miss a night in Morocco, the Lisbon hotel was three doors down from a decent bakery and, more crucially, pastéis de nata. Trust me. There is *no* travel problem that can't be improved, however briefly, with a box of custard tarts.

It's also easy to forget any hassles the minute you (finally) set foot in Riad Fes. Its location - on the edge of the frenetic (but wonderful, must visit) Fez medina - might suggest more than a hint of chaos but it really couldn't be calmer. That sense of "oasis" is a travel-writing cliché but I can't think of a more apt expression. One step through the doors and the in-your-face energy of the city has faded, to be replaced by a beautifully scented, exquisitely decorated serenity.



It's simply jaw-dropping, from the carvings and columns to the water features, the (cavernously) high ceilings to the intricate tile work. It's a warren of corridors – the hotel is actually a clever combination of five now-interlinked traditional houses with a little bit of new build – and there's a sense that you could spend a week here and still be discovering new areas. It's quite an achievement, both in terms of architecture and luxury travel, a hugely successful marriage of the very traditional and sublime five star facilities – pool and spa included – and all staffed by people who are attentive and on hand when you need them to be, yet slip artfully into the background when you don't.

It's the hint of new build that brings me to the second “NLTLT” point: if you can, ask to stay in the older parts of the hotel. It's not that the modern bit is bad, far from it. It's just that the traditional rooms have so much character the modern rooms, however lovely they are, look decidedly plain in comparison.

It's particularly evident when, say, you're a journalist travelling with a few other journalists and, as part of the research, you do a hotel tour and see everybody else's room, with their chaise longues and period furniture and antique mirrors and carpets and tiling... and your room, while very pleasant and comfortable could be in any nice hotel anywhere in the world. Even acknowledging it's perhaps the ultimate of First World problems, it brings to mind the sort of gameshow where losing contestants get a pat on the back and are told “let's have a look at what you could have won...”



Like I say though, a First World problem, so let's get back to the positives, and the food and drink at Riad Fes. We'll start literally at the top, because the rooftop bar is an absolute joy. As the sun sets over the medina, and the distant hills, it's a beautiful spot to take the air and soak up the atmosphere, particularly as a precursor to dinner at l'Ambre where the food serves a metaphor to the whole building and the Riad Fes experience: classically Moroccan but with a twist of the new.

Those distant hills are the setting for our next hotel stop, at the Riad Fes' sister property, Hotel Sahrai. In terms of service and that instantly relaxing atmosphere, the connection is obvious. In terms of design though, they couldn't be further apart.

There are echoes, to be sure, in the curve of the arches, the water features and the carved columns, but Hotel Sahrai's stunning "contemporary Moroccan" style would be equally, if not more, at home in, say, the Hollywood Hills. It's a supremely stylish building, that flows from reception to the terrace, past the Givenchy Spa, and beyond to the panoramic infinity pool.

Remarkably, given the location - only slightly removed from a busy part of the city, and overlooking an enormous Carrefour supermarket - it's remarkably quiet, and very easy to forget where you are. The supermarket will, shortly I'm told, be blocked by natural vegetation, leaving just the view across Fez, and those stunning red-tinged hills, either from the afore-mentioned pool or the bar on the level above.



The rooms are terrific too, a clever combination of modern facility and nods to Moroccan culture and architecture. The marble bathrooms, in particular, are spectacular: a fantastically decadent, glass-encased space, with sunken baths and Acqua di Parma toiletries. All the other expected facilities are present, correct and thoughtfully laid out, although on such a whistlestop visit, it's the bed - the very comfortable bed - that impresses the most. As bases to explore Fez, there can be few better places than Riad Fes and Hotel Sahrai. As bases to understand Fez - a city that straddles ancient tradition and the 21st century - that probably goes double.

*Rooms at Hotel Sahrai start from 180 euros (£159), [hotelsahrai.com](http://hotelsahrai.com).*

*Rooms at Riad Fès start from 210 euros (£185), [riadfes.com](http://riadfes.com).*

*The Moroccan National Tourist Office advises that there are direct flights to Fez from London Gatwick with Air Arabia twice a week and from Stansted with Ryanair twice a week. Or there's TAP if you're feeling lucky.*

HOME › RIAD FES AND HOTEL SAHRAI REVIEW: LUXURY IN THE MOROCCAN CULTURE CAPITAL

**READ MORE:** TRAVEL / HOTEL REVIEW