

Travel



by Sarah Gilbert

3 days

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Explore the souks, palaces, mosques and monuments of Fez el Bali – the world's largest living medieval medina



A general view of the Medina in Fez, Morocco. (Photo: Getty)

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When to go

Exploring the souks, palaces, mosques and monuments of Fez el Bali – the world's largest living medieval medina – is best done in spring and autumn, when skies are blue and days are warm. The temperature soars in July and August, and while winter days are usually mild, nights can be very cold.

Some shops and restaurants close during Ramadan (around 4 May to 5 June this year) but it's worth going for the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music from 22-30 June. The 2019 line-up has yet to be confirmed, but everything from rock to African jazz and sufi chanting will ring out across the medina and many concerts are free.



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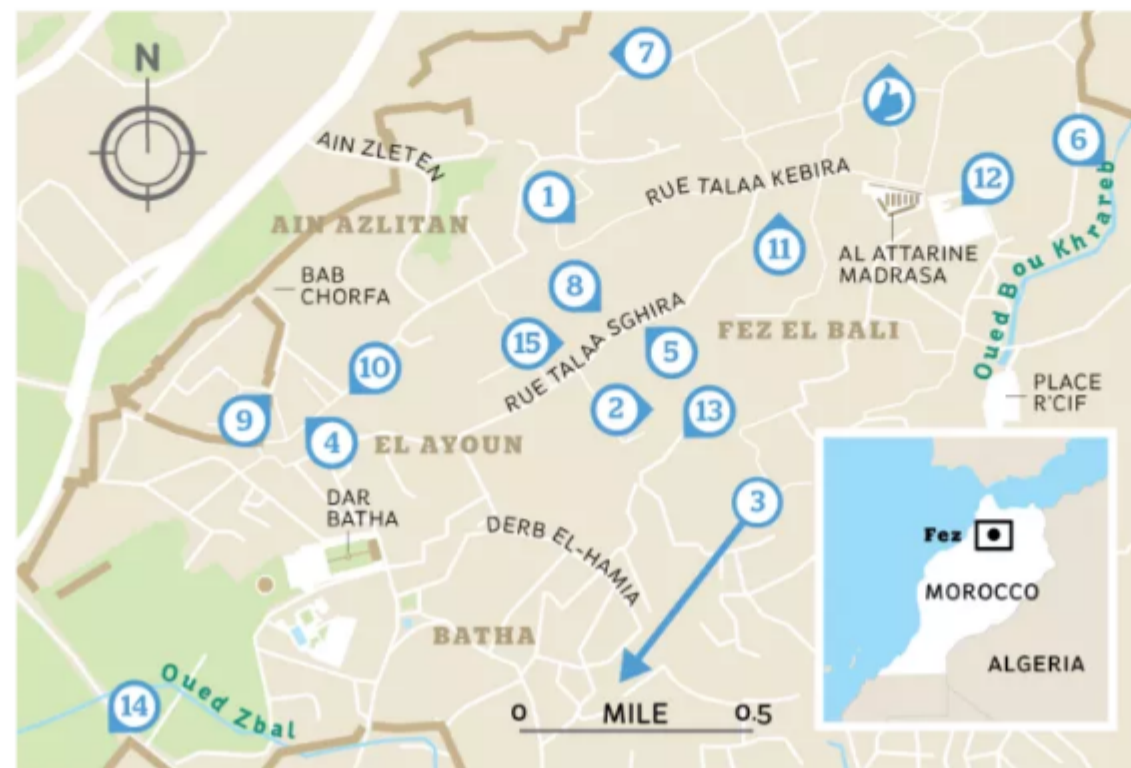
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Where to stay

Dar Malika (1) is a renovated 300-year-old house with four rooms around a central courtyard and a lovely roof terrace, perfect for breakfast with a view. It's easy to find, tucked down a quiet street in the heart of the medina. Doubles from €65 (£57), B&B.



Riad Idrissy's (2) triple-height patio showcases the finest Moroccan crafts, while its five spacious rooms are furnished with Moroccan antiques.

Start the day with breakfast in the adjoining Ruined Garden restaurant. Doubles from €90 (£79), B&B.

Hotel Sahrai (inset above) (3) on the edge of the Ville Nouvelle is a boldly designed boutique hotel. Contemporary rooms are decorated with local stone, metal and glass, there's a Givenchy spa, and the infinity pool and rooftop bar overlook the medina. Doubles from MAD1,600 (£128), B&B.



Hotel Sahrai, Fez

How to get around

Fès-Saïss Airport is 13km south of the city centre; it takes around 30 minutes and about £12 to reach the medina by grand taxi, or arrange a private transfer through your hotel for around £16. The number 16 bus runs from the airport roughly every hour until the evening and costs MAD4 (30p).

The medieval medina is a car-free zone, but to explore outside its walls hail a red petit taxi and ask them to use the meter. A journey should cost no more than MAD12 (£1).

Saturday

Start the day

Fez institution, Café Clock (4) serves all-day breakfasts, from Berber eggs to banana pancakes, for around £3.50. Otherwise opt for their legendary camel burger, washed down with a mint tea, spiced coffee, smoothie or fresh juice.

Hit the shops

Go souk shopping for butter soft leather coats, babouche slippers, beaten metal lampshades, shaggy Berber rugs and more. Be sure to haggle – but only if you're serious about buying.



A general view shows workers working at the tanneries in Fes. (Photo: Getty)

The medina's first concept store, Médin'Art (5) is a showcase for Moroccan and Morocco-based designers giving traditional crafts a contemporary take. Look out for T-shirts from Mawj and cactus-silk bags from Cecile. Fixed prices take the hassle out of haggling.

Don't miss

The medieval Chouara tanneries (6) are one of the medina's must-see sights – and smells. Press some mint to your nose and peer down on to stone vats filled with colourful dyes (inset top right) spread out like a painter's palette, as men strip, treat, dye and dry the animal skins in a process that's barely changed since the 11th century.

Time for a drink

Watch the sun set over the medina from Dar Roumana's (7) rooftop bar. There are plenty of sofas to lounge on while you sip on a Roumana Breeze – vodka, pink grapefruit juice and pomegranate – or a Fassi G&T, made with lemon verbena-infused gin. If it's too chilly up top, this beautifully restored riad also has a cosy courtyard bar.

Dinner reservation

Moroccan chef Najat Kaanache honed her culinary skills at top restaurants around the world before moving to Fez and opening NUR (8) in a stylish riad-cum-restaurant in the medina. Her daily-changing tasting menu (around MAD750/£60) is based around fresh market finds and creative flavour combinations, including Moroccan-meets-Mexican in the chicken with mole sauce. Pair it with a fine local wine from Meknes.

Sunday

Go for a stroll

Start at the Bab Boujeloud (9), the blue gate and head down the Talaa Sghira – one of the medina's two main arteries – in search of the Medersa Bou Inania (10), a school for the study of the Koran covered with dazzling zellij tiles, elaborate stucco and carved cedarwood (entry MAD20 /£1.60). Follow the road down, stopping off in the Place an-Nejjarine, with its tiled fountain and restored fondouk – an ancient inn – now the Nejjarine Museum of Wood Arts and Crafts (11). Look through the doorway of the ornate Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque (12) – it's closed to non-Muslims – before dipping into the spice-scented souks.

It's said that the medina is a jumble of more than 9,000 alleyways, and a tour with Plan It Morocco (plan-it-morocco.com) will get you off the beaten track without getting lost. Half-day tours from €40pp (£35), minimum two people.





Hotel Sahrai, Fez

Lunch break

Feast alfresco in The Ruined Garden (13) set in the romantic remains of a crumbling riad, complete with mosaic floors, a tinkling fountain and lots of greenery. Along with daily specials like Friday couscous, there are tapas-style sharing dishes, such as bessara, a blend of puréed broad beans, garlic and olive oil (four tapas MAD85/£6.80).

Time to relax

Just outside the walls of Fez el Bali, the Jardin Jnan Sbil Gardens (14) are the perfect escape from the medina's hubbub. Donated to the city in the 19th century by Sultan Moulay Hassan, they have recently been given a facelift.

Stroll along the shady pathways, taking time to admire the towering palm trees, fragrant rose gardens and fountains.

Have a treat

After running around the medina, there's no better place to unwind than a hammam. Check in to be steamed, soaped and scrubbed in Riad Laaroussa's (15) 17th-century bathhouse and you'll emerge utterly relaxed. From MAD350 (£28).

Ask a local

Jess Stephens, Artist

"In the heart of the medina, trading at the Da'lala is an age-old ritual where you can watch tanners haggling with leather workers over animal skins. Rundown riads are home to workshops and people selling weaving and carpet-making materials."

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