

Travel with the experts

Fez without the fuss

Get more than you bargained for in Morocco's oldest imperial city, says Natalie Paris



The short hop to Morocco is a cultural exchange like no other – just over three hours' flight time in return for sunshine and a vivid shot of Arabian exoticism. Fez is the country's oldest imperial city, a time-worn centre for culture and learning, with colourful tiled palaces and centuries-old souks.

The medina is a World Heritage Site riddled with passages that see far fewer tourists than those of Marrakesh. Its alleyways are narrower, making it impossible not to get caught up in the ebb and flow of life passing through. Prepare to lose yourself in the mêlée, while doing your best to take it all in – from the sight of women carrying dough to the communal bakery, to the butcher shaving the fur from a cow's head with a razor.

In spring, days are warm. The city's international Festival of World Sacred Music runs June 8 to 16.

Getting there

Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies from London Stansted to Fez on Thursdays

and Saturdays. The airport is six miles from the centre – agree a fare with the taxi driver before the drive.

Where to stay

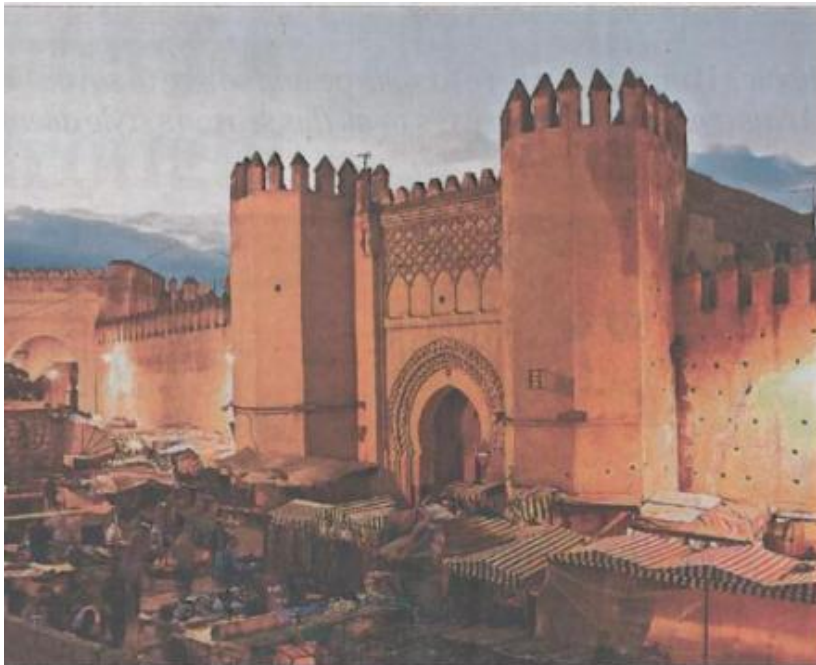
For luxurious sleeping quarters, try Riad Fès (00 212 535 947610; riadfes.com) or Maison Bleue (00 212 535 741843; maisonbleue.com). Riad Fès, a Relais & Châteaux hotel, stylishly blends an atmospheric, restored Andalusian courtyard with a baroque one; doubles from £125.

Maison Bleue consists of a palace and riad with spas attached, and offers contemporary rooms from £142. Both Riad Fès and Maison Bleue are close to the Blue Gate, the monumental medina entrance.

For intimacy and medina views, try Riad Arabesque (00 212 535 635321; arabesquehotelfez.com), near the Sofitel Palais Jamais (see right); from £83 for a junior suite.

Days out

Here are two themed itineraries with suggestions for how to explore the city and its maze-like medina.



The real deal: Bab el Chorfa gate looms over the medina

Souks and handicrafts

Morning Flag down a *petit taxi*, the tiny, inexpensive cabs that ply the streets of Fez (ask to run the meter) and drive to Bab (gate) Guissa, north of the medina. It's a short walk south to handbag shops overlooking the famous Chouwara tanneries, which date back to the Middle Ages. Delicately hold a sprig of mint to your nose and look out on to the honeycomb of vats that ferment and treat the leather. Then return to Bab Guissa, stopping for expensive Moroccan tea and an incredible view of the rooftops from the Sofitel Palais Jamais (sofitel.com/fez).

Lunch Take another short taxi ride to the Blue Gate (Bab Boujloud), its brilliant cobalt tiles the traditional colour of Fez. The friendly Café Clock (7 Derb el Magana; cafeclock.com) is a couple of turnings away. This British-run former townhouse has relaxed seating on different levels and sandwiches, camel burgers, couscous and salads for 40 to 95 dirhams (£3 to £7).

Afternoon Two main thoroughfares begin at the Blue Gate: Talaa Khira and Talaa Sghira, both clustered with stalls, mosques and artisan workshops that spill out into tiny squares. Follow Talaa Khira east as it narrows, and try your hand at

bartering for handicrafts, from silks to slippers and lanterns. Be sure to seek out the Nejjarine merchants' complex, with one of the city's best tiled public fountains, and the Nejjarine Museum of Wooden Arts and Crafts, which includes examples of carved wood friezes, musical instruments and ornate coffins.

Catch your breath at Cremerie la Place, a tiny, wooden-panelled juice and coffee bar among the copper workers in Sefarine Square. Find the henna souk nearby and then follow Talaa Sghira back out of the medina and to the Blue Gate. Look out for L'Art du Bronze, a treasure trove with an upstairs workshop

Telegraph tips

1 It is easy to get lost in the medina so start your days early and head for the hotel before dark, when landmarks are even easier to miss.

2 Avoid shopping on Fridays, when many of the stalls are closed.

3 Get a grip on how much your dirhams are worth. Barter with a smile and only for something you're sure you want.

4 Slippers costing less than £5 are likely to come from Talwan.

The Telegraph

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where metal is beaten into chests, teapots and daggers.
Evening Review your purchases over early evening drinks at Mezzanine (restaurantfez.com), a modern rooftop bar just outside the medina and opposite the tranquil Juan Sbil gardens. Afterwards, dine at Riad Fès: Moroccan dishes with a twist cost 90 dirhams (£7) for starters and 190 dirhams (£14) for mains.

Palaces and colleges

Morning Immerse yourself in history at the summer palace and large gardens housing the Batha ethnological museum, with artefacts including traditional costumes, astrological clocks, Berber jewellery and carpets (10 dirhams/75p, closed Tuesdays). Follow this with a stroll through a quieter, more open part of the medina to early 20th-century Riad Mokri. The pavilions and rooms have fine wooden alcoves.

Lunch Enjoy the peace and quiet in the garden terrace at Najmat Soufiane. Light lunches include fish *pastilla* (a filo pastry parcel) and, for something different, a Thai green curry for 70 dirhams (£5).

Afternoon Rejoin the throngs on Talaa Sghira and walk east. Peer inside the mausoleum of Fez's founder Moulay Idriss (only Muslims can enter) in a candlelit nook on the way to the spice souk.

Once there, you will find the Medersa el-Attarine theological students' lodgings. The *medersa* (an educational institution) dates back to 1323 and its beautiful courtyard has carved wooden arches and mosaics. The elegant Medersa Sefarine is nearby. Return west along Talaa Sghira in the direction of the Blue Gate, stopping to look at the cedar friezes of Medersa Bou Inania and a 14th-century water clock.

Evening End a day of architectural wonders in the candlelit courtyard of Maison Bleue. A traditional banquet of salads, tagines and couscous, plus soundtrack by local musicians, costs 550 dirhams (£41), including wine.