

Finding Fez

STEP INTO THE ANCIENT MEDINA AT THE CENTRE OF MOROCCO'S SECOND-LARGEST CITY, WHERE EVERY DAY IS MARKET DAY AND OLD-SCHOOL HOME COOKING IS IN DEMAND

Words CLAIRE NELSON



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Turn any corner or open any door and discover pops of colour and beautiful decorative tiles; the Fez medina is one of the largest pedestrianised areas in the world, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

If you're in need of some winter sun, Morocco is a reliable go-to, its baking North-African temperatures at their most pleasant just as we're wrapping up against the British chill. But while crowds flock to vibrant Marrakech, it's worth losing yourself in its sister city, Fez. And you really will get lost. The heart and soul of this ancient city is the medina, a bona fide labyrinth of some 9,000 streets and alleyways. Within its fortified walls is a hive of markets and makers, artisans sewing bright fabrics or hammering elaborate silverware. Women in hijabs pluck the choicest figs from a well-stocked cart, and wide-eyed cats wait for scraps as a butcher deftly cleaves a sheep's head in two. Locals weave in and out, sampling, delivering, greeting. Life in the medina is chaotic, yet it works with a synchronicity that has been honed over centuries. "It's fascinating," says Jemima Mann-Baha, owner-proprietor of **Palais Amani** (palaisamani.com), a boutique riad on the northern edge of the medina. "If you take out the electricity and the mobile phones, you're back into what life must have been like in the Middle Ages. It's like an open-air theatre."

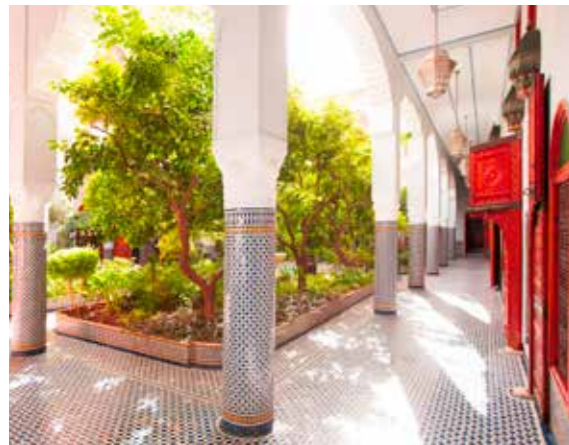
Tucked away in the wings, then, Palais Amani offers respite from the bustle.

Once the home of a merchant's family, the building was bought by Jemima and her husband, Abdel Ali, and transformed into a charming 15-room riad, with a rooftop bar and spacious terrace, where sun-loungers beckon for soaking up the sunshine. Walls

and floors are lined with 'zellij', mosaics of Moroccan tiles in dazzling yellows, blues and greens. Tables are set in the central courtyard, where guests can dine beneath a canopy of orange trees. The menu offers traditional dishes, such as chicken and olive tagine, as well as a tapas-style selection and a 'market menu', celebrating the abundance of produce in the medina - "something lighter, if people can't face another tagine," laughs Jemima. Most tourist places offer the same few dishes, giving the impression that Moroccan food is limited. "But if you scratch a bit, you can see how diverse it is. And the best cuisine is very often in people's houses."

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Photography: Claire Nelson; 123RF.com



A wonderful way to experience home-cooking is a Palais Amani cookery class, which begins with a trip to the medina to gather ingredients – plump lemons, cuts of chicken, spices from a tiny shop stacked with fragrant jars. Shopping like a local is surely the best way to understand the workings of the medina. Then it's back to the calm of the riad to help the chef prepare lunch; sumptuous saffron chicken with a smoky, charred aubergine salad.

While a guide in the medina is helpful, it's worth exploring independently, too. Fez doesn't rely on tourism as much as some other cities, which means far less pitching and pestering. Finding your way around, on the other hand... "Everybody gets lost, and everybody finds their way," assures Jemima. You can simply follow your nose to find the **Chouara Tannery** (chouaratannery.com). Here, the methods of treating leather have remained unchanged for hundreds of years – incredible to see; less so to smell. Hides are prepared using a pungent mixture of pigeon droppings and cow urine. It's an assault on the nose, but sprigs of fresh mint are, mercifully, handed out at the door. Further into the medina is the ancient theological college Medersa Bou Inania, built in the 1300s, and one of the only religious buildings here non-Muslims can enter. It's a must-see for its intricate carved plasterwork and elaborate zellij mosaics, which Fez is famous for. Take a 10-dirham (80p) taxi ride from the medina to **Art Naji** (artnaji.com), the factory where mosaics are produced by hand; here you can witness every stage, from the clay being worked to the shaping of each tiny coloured piece.

Fez's other signature is the 'bastilla' – a parcel of delicate 'warka' pastry stuffed with pigeon meat, flavoured with cinnamon and spices, and dusted with sugar. It's a remarkable balance of savoury and sweet, and was traditionally reserved for celebrations or esteemed guests. These days it's more commonplace, but usually made with chicken or fish. For those keen on trying bastilla à la pigeon, head for The Ruined Garden restaurant at **Riad Idrissy** (riadidrissy.com). This leafy little hideaway is nestled amid the crumbled walls of a former house, and

EAT Tuck into classic Moroccan dishes at **The Ruined Garden** (riadidrissy.com), served in the garden of a small intimate riad. **Café Clock** (fez.cafeclock.com) is famous for its camel burgers – head to the roof terrace for sunset views while you tuck into dinner. **STAY** **Palais Amani** (palaisamani.com) is an idyllic place to unwind, have a hammam, and enjoy true Moroccan hospitality. Rooms are elegant and comfortable and mint tea is regularly brought right to your door. **DO** Shop in the medina and do a **cooking class** with Palais Amani. Join a **music or calligraphy workshop** at Café Clock. Shop for leather goods at **Chouara Tannery** (chouaratannery.com). See tiles being made by hand at **Art Naji** (artnaji.com).



OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The chef at Palais Amani will take you shopping for groceries in the medina before your cookery class; breakfasts at Palais Amani begin with a platter of breads, jams, honey, fruit and nuts; leather being dyed at the Chouara Tannery; the beautiful tiled courtyard of Palais Amani is a place for peaceful repose. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A warm evening on the roof terrace at Café Clock; handmade leather slippers at Chouara Tannery pâtisserie; homemade tagine at The Ruined Garden.

provides a taste of the city's old food culture. "A lot of it is hard to access," explains its friendly co-founder, Robert Johnstone. "There isn't really a culture of eating out, so you have to say, 'I want to eat your food, as you would eat it'. Home cooking is what everybody wants – but home cooking is often what people don't get." Thankfully, you can come close in the Ruined Garden: dine on warm chickpea cake with roasted tomatoes, generous helpings of chicken tagine, or pre-order the traditional slow-cooked specials: as well as pigeon bastilla there's a seven-hour lamb shoulder, or Sephardic chicken – a traditional Jewish dish of chicken stuffed with minced beef and cooked in a saffron broth. On Fridays you can even stop in to watch the cook, Najia, making couscous by hand.

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Moroccans may not typically go out for dinner in Fez, but with so many people working in the medina, you'll discover plenty of street food. Ask anyone for directions to Achabine, a popular concentration of stalls serving sizzling 'brochettes' (kebabs), cavernous vats of broad-bean soup and flat 'khobz' loaves. Locals stop here for lunch and to catch up on news from their neighbours. The community vibe is also kept alive and kicking at **Café Clock** (fez.cafeclock.com), a popular hang-out for tourists and locals alike. Revive an age-old skill at one of its workshops: learn to play the oud – one of the oldest stringed instruments – or master the art of calligraphy. Alternatively, stop by for a casual dinner and live storytelling. Up on the roof terrace, a young, hip Moroccan couple share earphones and listen to music as they sip mint lemonade, while across the terrace an old man in a tassled hat performs tales to the tables of diners munching on camel burgers, potatoes seasoned with ras-el-hanout and leafy salads laden with figs and blue cheese. That's the thing about Fez – you'll definitely get lost, but you'll never go hungry. □