

MOROCCO



Lost in the Arabian Nights

Exploring the mud-brick alleys of the famous Fes medina is a trip back in time, writes Paul Ewart

WHILE squeezing myself through a mud-brick alleyway – one that would prove impassable for anyone carrying a few extra kilos – my guide tells me a story about a Canadian tourist who got lost in the medina.

“Yes, seven years and seven children later, she’s still here!” he says, laughing. I can well believe it.

Only five minutes have passed since we entered the famous medina and already my sense of direction is shot.

Multiple identical streets blend into one amid a frenzy of activity. The whine from the knife-sharpener’s stone wheel combines with a steady “ting” as a neighbouring coppersmith painstakingly beats out intricate designs; old women dodge playing children as they carry their home-kneaded dough to bake in communal backstreet bakeries; stallholders decked out in colourful hooded djellabas lazily sip mint tea as donkeys loaded with produce amble slowly up the narrow lanes. This assault on the senses is *Arabian Nights* made real.

Situated just north of the Middle Atlas Mountains and dating back to the ninth century, Fes was Morocco’s capital for more than 400 years and is still considered its religious and cultural centre. It’s also home to the mother of all medinas – the most complete medieval city in the Arab world.

A UNESCO World Heritage site, the medina is comprised of 13km of sandstone walls housing some 10,000 alleys, making it the largest car-free urban area in the world. Here the past

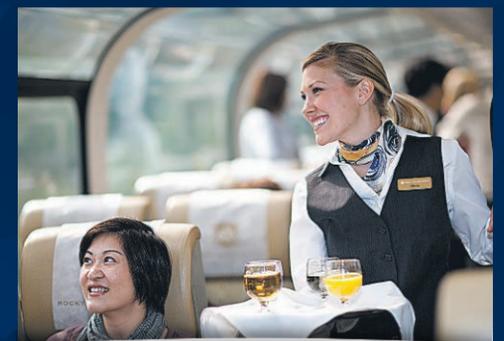
TASTE SENSATION: (from above) There’s always a bargain to be found in the laneways and maze-like streets of Fes, Morocco, with multiple and varied delicacies for sale; assorted Moroccan plates with intricate designs, in a souk; and some medina alleys are barely wide enough for two people to pass. **Pictures:** Paul Ewart, iStock

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ESCAPE ROUTE

FES

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STAY

Deep inside the medina, former mansion-turned luxury 5-star hotel, Palais Amani offers an indulgent respite from the chaos outside. Inside, the airy, ornately tiled courtyard garden is all lush greenery. Come sunset, its spacious roof terrace is the perfect spot for cocktails or mint tea. **See palaisamani.com**

EAT

Romantic, scenic and at the pinnacle of the city's culinary scene, the Ruined Garden is a must-try for lunch or dinner. Set within the remains of a merchant's riad, diners can enjoy a contemporary take on Moroccan cuisine within a picturesque garden. The house speciality of seven-hour grilled lamb, served with homegrown salad, is a definite winner. **See ruinedgarden.com**

and present coexist almost seamlessly. While Fes has been sidelined by Marrakech in modern times, its historical importance cannot be denied.

Undoubtedly, one of the biggest attractions here is shopping. This is heaven for souk and market aficionados, even those of a less retail-inclined persuasion will find hunting for bargains infectious.

From brightly coloured woven textiles and ornately glazed ceramics, to handmade "zellige" tiles and silver, Fes is where the country's master craftsmen make their wares and there's a souk for everything. Perfumes, incense and spices abound at the Souk

el Attarine. In Souk el Henna, traditional Moroccan cosmetics and beauty products – including the famous Argan oil – entice locals and visitors alike.

No matter what you're after, bargaining is essential and if you're keen to cover multiple souks then hiring a guide is advisable.

Retail therapy aside, the medina is also the perfect place to explore the country's culinary heritage. For breakfast, grab a cup of milky Moroccan coffee and join the tightly-packed benches of local men for a steaming bowl of bessara – a fava bean soup, flavoured with communal bowls of cumin, chilli and salt.

For lunch, the boho melting pot of locals, expats and tourists that is Cafe Clock (cafeclock.com) is a good option. Its outdoor terrace is the perfect spot from which to people watch and the house special of camel burger is a firm favourite with diners. And for dinner, you really can't leave without trying at least several tagine dishes.

After a hot and exhausting, sweaty day spent pounding the pavement, I end my time indulging in one of Morocco's best traditions: the hammam. The splashes from the hot water being poured over my body echo around the marble-clad chamber. Candlelight illuminates the ornate

tiling and soon I'm lying on my front, my muscles being expertly pummelled into submission.

"Ca va?" asks my smiling attendant. "Oui ca va," I answer – and I meant it. This should be a mandatory post-medina experience for any visitor. Thankfully, there are plenty of public hammams.

Magical, unique and enchanting, Fes truly needs to be seen to be believed. But believe me, two days spent getting lost in the medina is enough. After 48 hours in the claustrophobic labyrinth, you'll definitely need to come up for air.

The writer was a guest of Tempo holidays.

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