

The Moroccan Maze

Known as the “Athens of Africa”, the Moroccan city of Fez is a sensory delight. Giselle Whiteaker explores the city’s bustling medina.





It's 8pm and there are four of us standing by the shuttle bus sign at Fez airport in Morocco. A circle of taxi drivers are smoking and chatting nearby, patiently waiting for us to concede. The information desk is unmanned and there's no sign to say when the next shuttle will arrive. "Are you catching the bus?" the young man with a rucksack asks us in a strong British accent. "Hopefully," I answer, and raise my eyebrows at the fourth foreigner. "Yes, me too," he says. I glance at my friend Andy who was supposed to be in charge of the transfer part of our trip. "Okay, I'll check," he sighs and disappears back into the now rather quiet airport.

"The last bus goes at seven," Andy reports and the four of us form a strategic huddle. We agree to share a taxi and nominate the Brit to negotiate as he speaks the most French. I stand by his side playing the bad cop role with my few words of Arabic. After much haggling and a bit of research into where our hotel is actually located, a price is agreed and the ringleader passes us off to another driver who will deliver us to Bab Boujeloud; the blue gate and main entrance into the old city of Fez.

It's dark when we arrive. A few red "petit taxis" wait for short-distance fares on the close-to-empty street, where shadows dance in the intermittent yellow lamplight. A man in a red sweatshirt rushes over to translate for our driver. Money exchanges hands and our companions disperse. With no map, we negotiate for a young man to guide us through the warren of pedestrian alleys that make up the medina. Young Imad ducks and weaves his way confidently through the dark, narrow lanes, dragging my suitcase behind and pointing out the landmarks, as we dash along in his wake.

"Here," he says, pointing at an immense set of firmly closed wooden doors. Sure enough "Palais Amani" is painted on a sign on the wall. He uses the iron rings to knock, the sound echoing through the quiet neighbourhood, and a guard pulls the creaking doors inwards, ushering us in with a broad beaming smile.

Palais Amani is a traditional *riad*: a house with an interior courtyard. The fourteen gorgeously decorated rooms are set around a lush garden, blue and white tiles stretching to the babbling central fountain, providing a soothing soundtrack as Mehdi checks us in, a porter handing us cool facecloths and a plate of Moroccan sweet treats. The twirls of shortbread are delicious and it's all I can do to stop from licking the dusting of icing sugar from my fingertips.

Walking along the tiled corridor to our first-floor room,

huge lanterns overhead, it feels like we are royalty inside an Arabian palace. The feeling doesn't stop as we enter our sumptuous suite, which stretches along the corridor, divided into sleeping and living sections. We quickly unpack and slip up to the rooftop bar for a nightcap. By the time we return, mini tagine dishes are on our pillows, the sweet, sugary chocolate moons inside the perfect finale for our first evening in Fez.

In the morning, after a filling breakfast of fresh fruit, natural yoghurt, Moroccan soup and an omelette, we meet Khalid, who will guide us around the medina maze for the day. The medina is the largest and most enduring medieval Islamic settlement in the world – a Unesco World Heritage site and one of the largest car-free urban zones anywhere.

Khalid's knowledge of the city, its history and culture, is encyclopedic and this is paired with infinite patience as we are constantly sidetracked by the visual feast of market stalls, alley vendors, and intricate tiled doorways and fountains. We stroll by copper artisans in Seffarine Square, clanging their hammers rhythmically as they shape their wares, and past the many carved gates into the University of Al-Karaouine, reputedly the oldest university in the world. We stop to admire the architecture of the Madrassa of Al-Qarawiyyin and saunter down alleys lined with all manner of wares, stepping aside to allow laden donkeys and men pushing carts piled high with fresh vegetables to pass. It's chaotic and fascinating, and the occasional drizzle has no dampening effect on the whirl of activity.

In front of Bab Boujeloud, its blue tiles glistening in the rays of the emerging sun, we stop to warm our hands with beverages. The Moroccan tea is served in glasses, a generous pile of mint leaves mixed with a splash of hot water. It is phenomenally sweet, although at this café they have made the sweetening optional, five large sugar lumps encircling the saucer. "They must get a lot of work," quips Andy moments later as we walk past a sign for a dentist. "Here, dentists have to study for seven years," says Khalid seriously. "These ones on the street, they don't study. They just learn a few things. Okay if you want to get a tooth pulled, but ..." he trails off, shaking his head.

The final stop on our tour is undoubtedly the highlight of the medina – the Chouara Tannery. Foreigners walking alone in Fez are constantly directed here by well-meaning touts. Khalid leads us into a leather store, where an old man hands us sprigs of mint. He holds it up to his



Palais Amani's beautiful courtyard

nose at my questioning glance – in this cool weather the odour here is not significant, but on a hot day the stench can become overwhelming. From the balcony we have an unrestricted view of the clay vats filled with coloured liquids. A smattering of men are at work, some heaving bulky hides from the vats, others standing waist deep in the water, agitating the leather with their feet.

The store owner explains the process: first, the fresh hides are placed in vats filled with a mixture of limestone, water and pigeon excrement, which contains natural ammonia to make the leather soft. "He is stripping the leather," he says, pointing to a middle-aged man in a green windbreaker wielding a long, sharp knife. The leather is then hand-dyed in pots full of pigment: vibrant reds from poppies, orange from henna and yellow from pomegranate. Around the perimeter of the tannery and on the hills surrounding the old city, skins are strung up to dry.

By the time Khalid returns us to Palais Amani, we are left with a few hours to relax and freshen up before dinner at the hotel's intimate restaurant overlooking the garden. The flavours here are simple yet rich, infused with an intriguing combination of spices, starting with the entrée of a disc of creamy mashed potato, topped with tender shredded duck. The beef tagine with fennel is smooth and flavourful, while the European influence is clear in the decadent dessert of pear, poached in red wine syrup. Our senses sated, we retire to the comfort of our room, excited about our post-breakfast hammam experience in the morning.

A *hammam* is a traditional Moroccan bathhouse, and while Palais Amani retains the ritual, the treatment

is administered in luxurious privacy. Wearing swimwear and the hotel's fluffy robes, we are led into the subterranean changing area, where two attendants remove our robes and gently wash our feet and hands. In the steam room we are doused with buckets of deliciously warm water, before stretching out on warm tiles. We are soaped and left to lie in the steam, hydrated with glasses of cool lemon juice before our next soaking. Finally, we are thoroughly exfoliated, the scrubbing perfectly straddling the line between pleasure and pain, before we are led one by one into the shower room for a final wash, the women whisking our swimwear away to be rinsed and dried while we sip tea in the relaxation room.

By the time we stumble back into the sunlight, we are glowing, our skin silky smooth and our cheeks pink. Friday is the day of rest in Morocco and we have complied. The hammam has bolstered us for more exploration. Over the next three days we will visit the Jewish quarter, roam the hillsides, see the royal palace, eat camel burgers, buy leather goods and dine daily on tender tagine. The locals will smile and greet us in multiple languages wherever we go and our senses will be overwhelmed with new sights and sounds. When we reflect back on our break, we will realise that we spent half our time lost in the labyrinth of the medina – but that's the fun of Fez.

Palais Amani is the biggest authentic Riad in Fez, home to 14 luxury suites and bedrooms, as well as the gorgeous private hammam and a lovely rooftop terrace. B&B is priced from £143.00 per night based on two sharing. For more information see www.palaisamani.com.