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Fez: Inside The Medina Walls

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"We have old things to see. And then we have very old things and even older things to see." Thus speaks the man who has asked me to call him 'Sammy', claiming that he looks like Sammy Davis Junior. His real name is Abdullah Sussi. He's my guide here in Fez, by the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. As Fez is a place with a medina with 10,000 labyrinthine alleyways, a guide is essential.

We're taking a rest in a café after a hot morning of walking in the medina. I look into my glass containing something that looks like a small forest. "We call it Moroccan whisky. It's good for everything," explains the proprietor, translated by Sammy Davis Junior. Apparently it's tea made of absinthe, mint, sage and various other herbs with medicinal qualities.



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Fez is Morocco's oldest imperial city, and one of its holiest too. It boasts the largest medieval medina in the world (housing 270,000 people), gets the UNESCO seal of approval and is the largest car-free zone in the world. Instead of cars, imagine eight mighty gates, ten miles of 11th century sandstone walls and eight madrassas (14th century Koranic schools). Plus trains of donkeys burdened with barrels of olives to sacks of cement in alleys that are sometimes so narrow that I have to walk sideways to pass someone. Above this scene, swifts swoop past minarets in an apricot sky, and storks nest on city walls. I feel as if I'm travelling back in time, over 1000 years.

I spend all morning with 'Sammy' (he's guided Muhammad Ali through to Colin Powell) in the grandmother of all medinas with its mosques, riads, palace and madrassas; and Al Quaraouiyyine, a university (now a humungous mosque accommodating 22,000), founded 859 AD. *"It is the oldest university in the world, even if Oxford say they're older,"* says Sammy. Fez is also a place that's a melting pot of Andalusian Arabs, Kairouan from Tunisia, Jews and Berbers. A place where old men at café tables snooze in djellabas. And where we stop for street food: bessara, the worker's fava bean soup, followed by the sweetest of prickly pears.



A highlight is our visit to the Chouara tannery (the largest of five tanneries) with its giant's 'inkwells' for dyeing animal skins and vats of pigeon poop for softening the hides. *"Sniff a sprig of fresh mint to hide the stench,"* Sammy instructs. *"They use indigo, saffron, henna and mint vegetable dyes."* The shop assistant in the leather shop collars us on the way down from the rooftop terrace overlooking the tannery. *"Just look, no buy. We sell number one lamb, camel and goat leather,"* he says. *"In the tourist market jackets is donkey."*

But the real highlight of my trip comes next morning: the Palais Amani souk and cookery experience. Zakia, the size zero chef, takes me to the medina to buy items to cook for my lunch. We stop at a butcher's selling live chickens. *Just look, no buy. "She already bought one of these for your lunch,"* says my interpreter. *"She plucked it and put it in salty water to clean it."*



Then we go to a spice shop that flogs everything from saffron to snake oil and live turtles. Past the shop selling camel meat...it's easy to spot: there's the decapitated head of a camel outside. A quick stop at the snail shop, where several escapees are slivering up the walls, and on to peek into the public bakery where townswomen take their dough to be made into loaves by a man with a naked torso. Then we return to the hotel with laden straw baskets and there cook a chicken tagine under the citrus trees in the courtyard – Zakia wearing her headscarf and me in an apron.

It's good to escape the souk to the oasis that is the art deco Palais Amani – with its mosaic courtyard with decorative pool and fountain, and friendly staff. Later I get scrubbed and rubbed until I gleam silkily in the candlelit hammam – leaving behind the dust of the medina and several layers of my skin. Afterwards I eat cardoons with preserved lemons under a lemon tree threaded prettily with filigree lamps, birdsong surrounding me. Then I chill on the roof terrace sipping mint tea while overlooking minarets and mountains, the call to prayer in the air – before retiring to my rose petal-strewn suite with king size bed, fluffiest of towels and the softest of soft pillows.



Next day I set off on a shopping spree. Fez is a centre for artisans. The souk has the usual baskets, babouche slippers, zillions of Chanel-ish jackets, hair mud and black soap on sale. “Balak” (“watch out”) men yell, pushing past with laden donkeys while I’m ‘window’ shopping. Plus there’s tip-top metalwork like filigree lamps and copper trays with intricate patterns that sell for £20,000 (seriously; but they take two years’ work) at L’Art du Bronze – where Hillary Clinton and almost-Queen Camilla shopped. There’s a co-operative (in 14th century historian Ibn Khaldoun’s erstwhile house) selling at least 13,000 rugs made by women. “The most expensive is 70,000 dirhams (£5,599). Here, just look, only look, no buy,” says the assistant.

But there’s a new kind of shop in Fez too. The travel writer and Brit, Tara Stevens, has reinvented herself – as a curator of all things Moroccan, artisan and beautiful. You mustn’t miss her Ananjam Home outlet (conveniently near the airport). She sells everything from contemporary artisan cactus silk and cotton tablecloths (naturally stain repellent) to cool bedspreads with pompoms, in the colour of your choice. From cous cous platters in cherry and apricot wood to art deco-inspired leather boxes containing candles. Forget look, no buy; I want to buy, no look. Medin’ Art is another shop, one that gets the funky vote: it is a mini concept store selling items like Mali mudcloth cushions, kaftans and quirky recycled inner tube handbags to cork espadrilles and ones imprinted with images of um, Mexican artist, Frida Khala.



Eating takes up the remainder of my time in Fez. My favourite restaurant is The Ruined Garden, an erstwhile abandoned garden that took five men and five donkeys five months to clear. It’s now *shaggy* chic (in the words of the British owner, Robert Johnstone, ex Wolseley and J Sheekey) and diners eat in a charming jungle courtyard beside his Riad Idrissy. He serves filleted fried sardines (great for a sandwich) and popcorn makuda (the lightest of deep fried potato cakes served with fresh tomato sauce) plus melt-in-your-mouth seven-hour-cooked lamb Mechwi. All washed down with date and orange blossom juice.

Then there’s the Clock Café. It has a hippy vibe (it’s owned by former Ivy maître d’, Mike Richardson) and is a place where ex pats, Moroccans and tourists collide. It’s a must for Issawa (Sufi) drummer eves, calligraphy lessons and camel burgers. Additionally Dar Roumana is a restaurant in an erstwhile 18th century family home. The chef there (classically trained in France) has nailed Franco-Fassi cuisine and serves pretty-as-a-mosaic dishes. My favourite is the rabbit with grain mustard.



On my last day, I return to that medina café to have another glass of tea containing a mini forest of absinthe, mint and sage. "It's good for flu, headache and wrinkles," claims Abdullah, the proprietor. Good, in other words, for mind, body and spirit. And that sums up the magic of Fez.

The Details

Palais Amani, 12 Derb el Miter, Oued Zhoune, Fes Medina, 30000, Morocco

Tel: +212 535633209

Website: <http://palaisamani.com>

Email: reservations@palaisamani.com

Located at one of the most significant entrances to the medina is Palais Amani, one of Fez's top independent hotels. Home to 15 suites and bedrooms, this art deco building was partly rebuilt in the 1930s and is today one of the main destinations in Fez with its restaurant, roof top bar, cookery lessons and basement hammam – which is also open to non-residents. Palais Amani showcases the finest authentic and traditional Moroccan decoration. A large garden of 600m² is at the centre of the palace filled with orange trees where birds are permanent residents here, providing the birdsong in this tranquil haven.

Type of Hotel: 5-Star Hotel

Number of Rooms: 15 rooms and suites including complimentary Wi-Fi

Insider Tip:

Enjoy a Cookery Break at Palais Amani with the hotel chef where you are invited to seek out traditional ingredients in the soul, which will later be used in your cookery class. Fez is full of history and still maintains an authentic Moroccan feel. Throughout a morning tour of the souks gathering ingredients with the head chef, you will also encounter some hidden foodie spots that tourists may not always find. With all the ingredients in a basket it is back to Palais Amani for a two-hour cookery demonstration with the chef, which you then get to eat of course!

Cookery classes include lunch and last around 3 hours. Tajine and side dishes cost €97 for a private class or €77 as part of a group.

A full day medina walking tour with a guide costs €60, whilst a half day is €40.

Price Band: Medium

Author Bio:

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist based in London.

Photos courtesy of Palais Amani and Dar Roumana