



souk style

There are myriad attractions in Fez, but none more fascinating than the World Heritage-listed medina. Wander down its narrow lanes to discover secret gardens and Moroccan markets brimming with culinary delights.

Words STEPHANIE CLIFFORD-SMITH Photography ALAN KEOHANE





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The contrast between the old and new parts of Fez couldn't be more stark. The Ville Nouvelle area is home to insurance companies, supermarkets, French patisserie franchises and not much else. Unless commerce is on your agenda, there's little reason to visit. Travellers in search of a medieval immersion experience, good food and shopping push on to the Medina of Fez — the UNESCO World Heritage-listed 'old town' — a vast labyrinth that's both residential and commercial, grindingly poor and a pinnacle of luxury.

Alcohol is served in licensed premises but there are no bottle shops. There are also no cars (the paths are too narrow), so donkeys and men dragging carts remain the main method of transportation. The medina is home to more than 250,000 residents and is one of the largest urban car-free zones in the world.

There are two main thoroughfares running across the walled complex and countless paths and passages branching throughout. Navigating at first seems impossible, but those with a bit of time and a cool head will get the hang of the main routes.

The lower reaches of the medina are where much of the fresh food is traded. Agribusiness may have reached Morocco, but not this little pocket of it, simply because of logistics — there's nowhere to park a semitrailer and no loading docks here.

Early in the morning, farmers from small holdings nearby arrive with vans or carts and deal with stallholders in the Rcif area, where the market is rather picturesque and the food is fresh. Much of the produce is organic as fertilisers are beyond the farmers' budgets. Generally the fruit and vegies aren't intensively irrigated and everything tastes like a concentrated version of itself.

Further in, where it's darker and cooler, the vegetable souk gives way to meat and fish, overseen by resident cats in search of scraps. Elderly women sit on their cages of live chickens waiting for a customer to choose one for dispatch.

There's offal galore, lamb of every cut and large pieces of meat that look like pork. But that's not likely in this strictly Muslim country and even less so here in Morocco's most conservative city. The meat turns out to be turkey, a relatively recent and hugely popular addition to the range of affordable protein available. Chopped and mixed with herbs, it finds its way on to hot grill plates and into sandwiches at nearby street-food vendors.

Dotted among the fresh-food stalls are shops piled with syrupy pastries, and coffee and spice merchants who will combine these commodities for customers' bespoke blends, and women — always women — sweating over hot metal domes as they cook translucent sheets of *warqa* pastry. Mountains of olives glisten with harissa and tubs are filled with bright preserved lemons, which, at about \$1 a kilo, come without the gourmet price tag.

Tiny dairy stalls have a range of commercial yoghurts as well as bottled drinks, but handmade yoghurt, available for a couple of dirham (25 cents) for a small tumbler, is the stuff to try. With a junket-like texture, it's vaguely sweet and subtly tangy — a gentler, more comforting food unlikely to be found souk-side. Another snack on-the-go is *svenge*, a light doughnut-like treat



PREVIOUS PAGE Modern Moroccan at The Ruined Garden; a room at Riad Idrissy. **ABOVE** The Ruined Garden. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** A souk stallholder frying *svenge*; and the doughnut-like treats; copper cookware; a local woman baking *khobz*; a fresh fruit stall; tempting pastries; Le Jardin chef Hicham Moufid; a stunning door. **NEXT PAGE** Local street food; Le Jardin des Biehn's interior.

deep-fried to order until the dough puffs and becomes pleasantly chewy. It's then liberally doused with sugar and wrapped in brown paper while still hot.

The bread here in Fez is *khobz*, a round semolina-dusted loaf with a fluffy interior that's eaten with everything. A side plate-sized loaf from a bakery costs a dirham, about 13 cents, placing it out of reach for many locals. Only the more well-off households have ovens, so people running trays of unbaked loaves to the communal bakery is a common sight. Each household will make a distinguishing mark on top of their homemade dough to ensure there's no confusion at pick-up time.

In the Ville Nouvelle, bread is mass produced and shops look like they do ➤



BEST BUYS

Morocco has an old bargaining culture and shopping around will reveal identical items at different prices. If your luggage can accommodate it, **copper cookware** is a brilliant buy. Some shops on Seffarine Square will tin-line your pan on the spot at no extra cost. **Patterned ceramics**, from tiny cups to enormous platters, are everywhere and can be good value. You'll also find shops selling nothing but famed **terracotta tagines**. The leather slippers known as **babouche** go from cheap to cheaper depending on the level of work involved. Hand-carved **lemonwood kitchen utensils** are beautiful to look at, lovely to use and so cheap that it would be undignified to haggle. **Berber antiques**, from chunky silver jewellery to handmade textiles, may be bigger ticket items in Moroccan terms, but they'll seem like bargains once you get them home.

DETAILS

Le Jardin des Biehn
13 Akbat Sbaa,
Douh; www.jardin-desbiehn.com.

The Ruined Garden and Riad Idrissy
13 Derb Idrissy, Sijaj,
Sidi Ahmed Chaoui;
+212 6491 91410;
www.riadidrissy.com.

in any modern city — large, glass-fronted and colourfully branded. But in the medina, a vendor could trade from nothing more than a wheelbarrow. A farmer might arrive pulling a wooden cart filled just with mint, which sells quite quickly as it is consumed by the bale in tea, salads and tagines. Others sell fish from a bucket or plastic sheet spread on the ground. Some shops have electricity, while others make the most of natural light filtering in from courtyards or the open-weave cane mesh that provides some protection from the elements.

URBAN OASIS

If an aimless wander doesn't land you at Seffarine Square, a pretty tree-shaded precinct located in the centre of the medina, it's worth seeking out. Cooks' knees will buckle at the copper pans of all shapes and sizes, still being beaten from vast sheets of metal as they have for centuries. The pieces hand-worked by men squatting on the pavement are beautifully rustic — the hammer marks on every surface evidence of their labour. Some are old French pieces that have found their way to the market when their colonial owners returned home, and these display craftsmanship of a more refined kind.

The densest parts of the medina can be noisy and congested, but respite is never far away as cool, quiet laneways thread through commercial areas. And although there are plenty of street-food options, sometimes a garden and a trickling fountain beckon.

Le Jardin des Biehn certainly fits that brief. This Andalusian-inspired garden and hotel is compact but endlessly distracting,

having been created with a great eye for colour. Low fences contain lush garden beds and there is a unifying chalkiness to the palette, reflecting its place at the heart of the ancient city. Each room is themed and there's a gallery, shop and cafe with a smart Mediterranean and Moroccan menu serving fresh produce from the property's kitchen garden and nearby souks.

A two-minute walk downhill from here is the Riad Idrissy hotel and adjoining restaurant The Ruined Garden, another good spot to rest and recharge. The garden hideaway was once part of a merchant's house which was abandoned and became a rubbish dump until entrepreneur John Twomey bought the property in 2006 and began working on its restoration. Things really started taking shape when his business partner Robert Johnstone — a gardener/chef/designer — arrived in 2010. Today the garden eatery serves modern Moroccan food from brunch to dinner and distils its own orange-blossom water. Try the svenge for brunch, with house-smoked salmon and eggs. And then it will be time to get lost again in the medina. 🌿

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