



AllWays Traveller

Fes el Bali, Morocco

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## No place quite like Morocco's religious and cultural capital

**Fes is Morocco's religious capital, cultural and culinary capital and the country's third largest city.**

Fes el Bali is the oldest and walled part – or medina - of Fes and the larger of the two medinas.

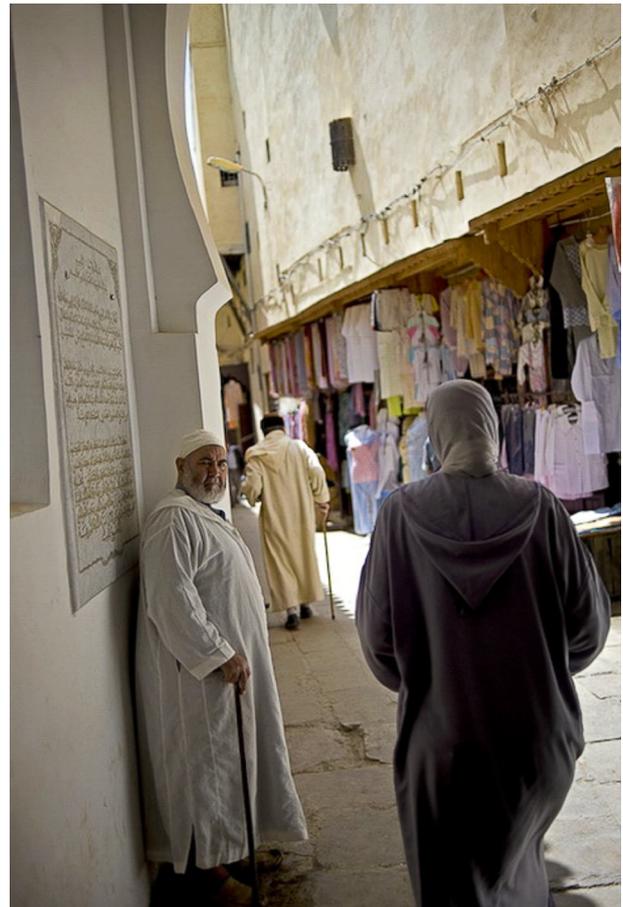
It was classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981.

Fes el Bali is a blend of nine thousand lanes or tiny streets as well as huge alleys providing residential areas, workshops and markets.

The streets can be less than a metre wide and the area is believed to be the largest car free urban area in the world by population.

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### A unique experience

Every neighbourhood within the old city includes the same five buildings: a bakery, a café, a mosque, a public bath and an Islamic school.

And unlike Marrakech, the Fes Medina's alleys are also too narrow for motorcycles and scooters and their choking fumes.

**Roderick Field takes you to Fes el Bali in words and images.**



## A personal perspective

### Fes is never still and never quiet

by Roderick Field



From the first white light of the day to the hazy thickening dusk, people with heads held straight, are moving with purpose and urgency.

Some are carried swiftly by skates or mopeds, all ages ride bicycles, and a Berber strolls along the pavement on his grand white horse.

Packs of children are manoeuvred and cajoled by djellaba clad women.



Over at the bus stop, a small boy throws cartwheels as a scooter carrying three, a toddler held firm between her windswept parents, buzzes past leaving blue smoke hanging in its wake.

The movement is swift and graceful, the sounds more gruff and violent.

### A still head is stone

They say here that a still head is a stone – dead. There is no saying for a silent head for those living here have never encountered such a thing.

At Babrcif, the medina gates, sits the transport terminus, daily awash with taxis and buses, mopeds, carts, donkeys, street vendors, cats and chaos. People are swallowed or spilt to the brim of the dusty Square, as locals drink coffee and smoke outside the cafés.

## The facts

### Morocco



Morocco is a popular tourist destination in North Africa with Rabat as its capital. The famous Casablanca is the largest city with a population of 3 million plus.

The country looks across the Strait of Gibraltar to Spain and has an Atlantic Ocean coastline reaching into the Mediterranean Sea. Morocco is bordered by Algeria to the East and Mauritania to the South.

### Fes el Bali

Fes, for a brief ten years of the twelfth century, was the world's largest city.

Straddling the banks of the Fes River, it still wears the confidence of that history; a solid physical rootedness behind the mountains that keep the Sahara at bay.

The Berber is the indigenous people, Muslims with their own language, coming down from the Atlas Mountains to settle in the valley that is Fes.

The Arabs came in the ninth century and the French in the nineteenth and Arabic and French are spoken and interwoven.

Once at the centre of 17<sup>th</sup> century Morocco, Fes was a major trading post of the Barbary Coast.

Historically Fes is a city of refugees, one of the oldest mixed cultures anywhere with tolerance, an equality and everyone is trying hard to survive here.

## This is the border between old and older



Boys are climbing gates and walking, arms spread, on precarious walltops under the blinding noonday sun.

And at midnight amongst the charcoaled gilet sellers, there are shouts of young men playing football, passing the ball between passing cars.

This is where the tarmac turns to cobbles and leaves the automotive twenty first century firmly outside the wall and its Moorish arches.

Here is truly a portal in time and space.

On the inside, it feels a lot like Dickens, dirty and dark, sinister yet compelling.

In the gloom the most vibrant colours glow, on fruit or linen, yellow slippers, hanging pastel bras and rainbows of leather, sequins and silks.

Hammered copper and tin catch the sly shafts of light in the mostly sunless maze. The walls are sad and robust, like the elders, like old oaks.

So much has happened within the weave of twisting turning paths and alleys.



All human life is here, babies are born, men and women fall in love, people and animals live and die.

## Fresh food in abundance



The mix is good for the food, abundant produce and farming feed the million or so residents of the city.

There are fresh crunchy salads and charcoaled meat or simple bread, with boiled egg, tuna, onion and chilli sauce, made fresh for fifty pence.

Food is respected and valued, little is discarded and everything has a use.

It is eaten attentively and served as to a special guest; with gilded plates and silver trays and chilli sauce, cardamom carrots and shredded radish, with humility and perhaps because good hospitality is a tenet of Islamic law.

### What to do

#### The Karaouine Mosque

The Karaouine Mosque is at the heart of the Medina. It was founded in 859 to offer education and religious safety to the constant flow of settlers.

Nowadays it is a library, university and mosque still receiving Muslims.

#### Zaouia Moulay Idriss II

Regarded as a sacred place, this shrine marks the tomb of Moroccan ruler, Moulay Idriss II, who founded the city of Fes in 810.

He is the patron saint of the city and a visit to the shrine is considered lucky for visitors and travellers.

### Guided tours

If you want to explore the city with the help of a guide, than don't worry as you will get the guides outside the hotels and that too in a reasonable price.

As far as accommodation is concerned than the city contains handful of hotels hence, you should book the hotels in advance.

## Everyone is going somewhere



Inside and outside the medina, Fes is a place where day and night, everyone is going somewhere.

Nothing that can be done standing still, can't be done better in determined forward motion.

Within the labyrinthine medina, voices warp and echo from somewhere within the nine thousand passages, haunting as the ancient ghosts of this medieval city.

In the corners and doorways, and from wooden shuttered booths like caves in the crumbling white stone of the buildings, voices chatter and swarm.

Frantic arms gesticulate, rising defiantly above the din to be heard. It is less of a market than a throbbing ants nest, an intense hum of activity.

## Hustling lads hovering like wasps

At each turn, the experienced hustling lads hover like wasps around the sweet mint tea of tourist euros offering hammam or manger or hashish, anything for a price and always negotiable.

To every stallholder you are my friend or my brudder, and this very special service or deal you are wanting, is for you and only you and one time only, right here, right now.

And a barrow passes, its wheel buzzing loudly at the mudguard as all are forced to the wall to let it pass.

Warmth that is more than just the North African climate can be felt in the narrow shady lanes that amble and twist and yet there is always a tremor of invisible menace.

Cool guys sit in twos or threes, talking sport and watching girls whilst selling cigarettes from a cardboard box.

Holy men count beads, still and absorbed on doorsteps and filthy tortoiseshell cats, all skin and ribs, forage hungrily amongst the refuse.

Women greet women and men greet men, with kisses on both cheeks. Never the genders shall kiss.

Despite the seedy Arab sexiness, these Moroccans are almost prim, almost innocent.

## Souk Dabbaghin's tanneries



Within the Medina, take a look at the sprawling, stinking tanneries turning out wildly coloured leather goods in an equally wide range of qualities.

It is a remarkable spectacle, the intensity of labour is humbling as you stand and look over the ants' nest of constant activity.

### The call to prayer

Several times daily the call to prayer reverberates throughout the city.

To the untrained ear, the hard-wired megaphones seem to sing and answer each other from east to west, across the layered rooftops.

### Staying in Fes

Accommodation options are varied.

I would recommend staying at one of the fantastic Rhiads (very reasonable rates) where you will be treated like an honoured guest.

### Guided tours

If you want to explore the city you will need a good guide to navigate through the miles of Medina passageways.

Use common sense – any of the bigger hotels will be able to recommend a safe and competent guide.

## Here women keep house and men work



Surrounded proudly by second hand shoes or primary coloured ladies outfits (sic), fluttering like newly hanged cadavers on the whitewashed walls, leathered market traders make eye contact.

Dark Arabic women look demure and don't. Children smile and say, 'bonjour', and not all of them ask for money.

The rooftops are a safe retreat, though the web continues in the sky with turnings and connections from roof terrace to roof terrace.

There are cushions and rugs and endless cloudless space above, the sun blazes harsh and fierce.

In every direction there are satellite dishes, carpets hanging, laundry and tiny ant people about their business.

From high up, the medina almost seems to make some sense.

Cockerels cry out intermittently against the rhythmic hammering of constant repair and renewal, the basin of the medina repeating each knock and tap. A dog is ever barking.

Gossip is endemic, the grapevine fast and thorough; they know you're coming before you do in an everlasting soap opera with regional variations . . . live!

## An air of perpetual transaction

The staccato give and take between sun baked people from sprawling families, familiar with God and good fresh food, hard lives and many opinions.

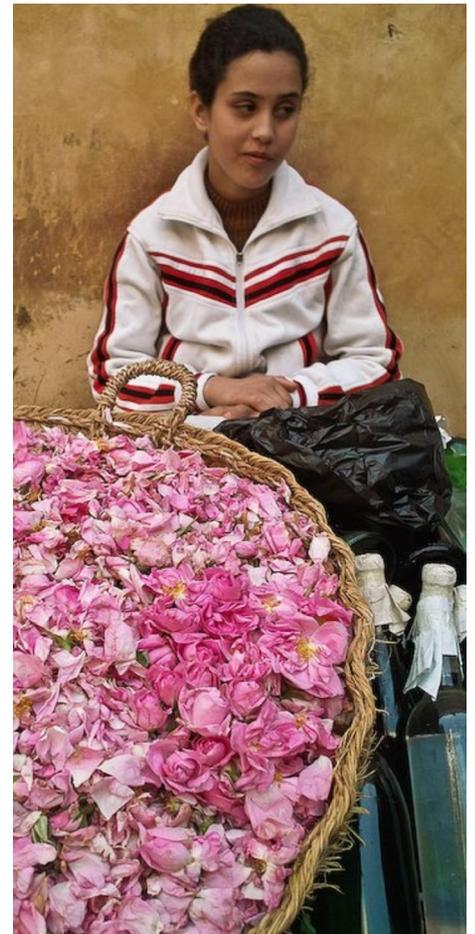
Rooted deep in the Moroccan psyche, pulses a deep and ancient calmness born from connection to each other, their common needs and a solidly pragmatic approach to survival.

The land here is wet and fertile, more mouth watering than an oasis; it's a huge larder at the top of the Sahara Desert.

## This is why Fes is here, it is needed

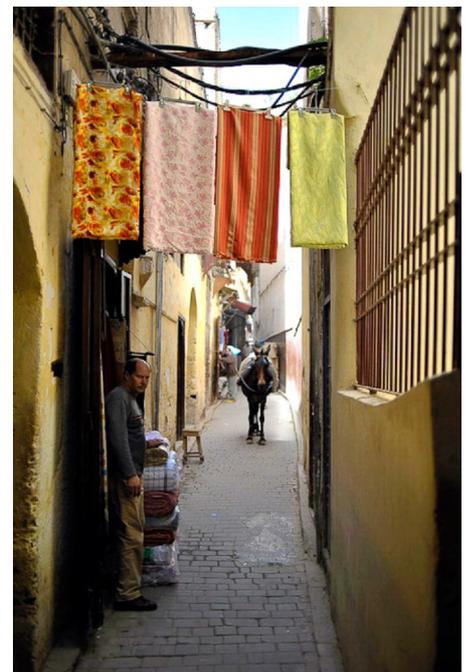
Relationship is primary here and strangers welcomed.

The way of life for communities, occupying different regions of the medina (with its sixteen miles of perimeter wall) each with its own mosque, home bakery and fountain, has not changed over the past millennium.



### Getting to Fes

Saïss Airport serves the city with some direct European flights and interconnects with Casablanca.



## Hypnotic, repellent and magnetic

People here are not so busy arguing with their place in the scheme of things; they are mostly working, sleeping, praying and reproducing.

This quiet, insistent continuity is palpable in the fabric of Fes, the structure of the medina is too tight, too set to permit much sudden change . . . and it is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Fes el Bali is a hard place to arrive in, hypnotic, repellent and magnetic. The air is finer here and warm, the atmosphere rapid and intoxicating.

It calls for alertness, and rewards with the minutiae of cameos, unfolding action and a slightly increased pulse.

There are always more surprises. It bewitches and entrances before it exhausts; there is nowhere like it.

And so it is harder still to leave behind, for in the heart and mind of any traveller, a part feels just like Fes Medina.

**More information :** [www.morocco-travel.com](http://www.morocco-travel.com)



## The International Travel Writers Alliance



### AllWays

AllWays is the consumer travel service from the International Travel Writers Alliance.



### The International Travel Writers Alliance

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Roderick Field is a photographer and writer specialising in untold stories from around the world.

He is a travelling photographer, writer and qualified psychotherapist, on a mission to capture the essence of what it is to be human – in light and form, gesture and relationship.

Roderick enjoys regular assignments for the major UK travel and food publications including Lonely Planet, Condé Nast Traveller, Olive, Sainsbury's Magazine and Food & Travel.

He currently lives in West London, slowly writing his first novel and has several works in the National Portrait Gallery.