

THE WORLD'S BIGGEST MAZE

STEP INSIDE MOROCCO'S MAGICAL FEZ EL BALI

By Rachel Perry

There are few destinations in the world as beguiling as Morocco's Fez. For even the most experienced world travelers, exploring this ancient walled medina is a mindboggling experience. It's a labyrinth of congested chaos: 9,000 streets, 200 mosques, more than a thousand handicraft shops, and dozens of souks beckon visitors to venture inside.

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Right: The structures of Al-Qarawiyyin University are covered in green tiles, the most important color in Islam.



City of Fez



Created by Jim Carroll, 6-time traveler from Chapel Hill, NC

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What lies within the medina is both enchanting and may leave you shocked: Ceramic shops and spice stalls exist alongside tombs, tanneries, and butcheries proudly presenting camel heads. The streets buzz with the sounds of locals bartering for the best prices in Arabic and Berber, vendors hollering at passersby, or children passing around a football in dusty, dead end alleyways. You'll notice the Islam muezzin (call to prayer) bellowing from the multitude of mosques five times a day.



Right: Men outside of a mosque wash themselves in a purification ritual known as *Wudu* before one of their five daily prayers.

Amidst this chaos of sights and sounds, it may be difficult to get your bearings at first—but what is confusing about the medina is also what makes for the most unexpected discoveries. You never truly know what lies around the corner. A narrow alley could open up to colorfully-tiled fountain or a bakery selling traditional almond *briouat* pastries. It takes years to learn the secrets of this labyrinth. Tourists who attempt to navigate the medina alone may never discover its true magic—it's best to follow a well-versed guide into its depths.

ENTERING THE MEDINA

The most distinctive portals into the medina is an ornate blue entryway known as *Bab Bou Jeloud* (The Blue Gate). This horseshoe archway was built in 1912 and is often considered the front door of the medina. Once you cross its threshold, the 21st century fades away and a world suspended between the Middle Ages and the modern age emerges. From here, you'll come across two main thoroughfares: *Tala'a Kbira* and *Tala'a Sghira*. Both lead to bustling *souks* and the city's most important monuments and institutions.

As you wander deeper into the medina, the sound of traffic fades away. Among its

many superlatives, Fez el Bali is considered the largest car-free urban area in the world. With no motorized vehicles permitted, the only way to haul goods is by cart or mule. You'll hear the muffled sound of the pack-laden animal's hoofs on the cobblestone streets and the warning call of a mule driver's approach.

Unlike other old towns around the world where locals have been pushed out by growing tourism, Fez el Bali's residents have lived here for generation upon generation. It's these locals that make it feel so raw and real. The medina is where they live, work, and play. Many have spent their entire lives within the confines of the five miles of fortified walls.

THE ATHENS OF AFRICA

Since its inception more than a millennium ago, Fez el Bali has cemented itself as the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual center of Morocco. Designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981, it maintains its status as a living museum to the country's history and heritage.

In the early Middle Ages—while Europe was in an intellectual lull following the fall of the Western Roman Empire—Fez el Bali was a place of booming innovation, education, and culture. After its founding by the Idrisid dynasty in 789, Fez el Bali attracted scholars, astronomers, mathematicians, and more, while merchants sold exotic wares and ornate textiles from all over the Arab world. Its exchange of goods and ideas during the Middle Ages has earned it the nickname of “the Athens of Africa.”

At the center of all of it was Al-Qarawiyyin University (also known as Al-Karaouine) which holds the record as the world's oldest continually operating educational institution. And perhaps even more impressive, the institution was also the first university to be founded by a woman.

In 859 AD, Tunisian-born Fatima al-Fihri used her inheritance from her merchant father's wealth to found the *madrasa* (Koranic schools for Islamic education). It quickly grew to become the leading spiritual and educational center in the Arab world, with courses not only



The Bab Bou Jeloud is a grand entrance featuring the traditional Moorish architectural forms with a horseshoe arch.



Left: At the medina's tanneries, workers use an ancient system of treating leather, including hanging the colorful hides to dry in the sun..

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Right: Women handmake pastillas, a traditional pie of tender chicken wrapped in layers of pastry.



The Desert Experience



Created by Jim Carroll, 6-time traveler from Chapel Hill, NC

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on religious instruction but also medicine, linguistics, grammar, music, logic, and more.

Al-Fihri's vision for a social space of intellectual exchange came to life as students and scholars flocked to the university. Sultans endowed the school with thousands of valuable texts and manuscripts from the Middle Ages. As other Arab nations sadly lost their libraries in centuries of war, the Al-Qarawiyyin library was able to maintain its rare texts. It now contains some of the oldest preserved manuscripts in Islamic and Arab history.

Fez el Bali is home to many other magnificent *madrasas*. These serene centers for students studying Islam are a welcoming relief from the frenetic energy of the medina. They are also architectural gems boasting beautiful Islamic details such as filigreed plaster, painted wood inlaid with gold leaf, and hand-cut mosaic tilework known as *zellige*. Several *madrasas* which are no longer in use are open to the public, providing fascinating insight into the lives of the former residents. One is the 14th-century Bou Inania Madrasa which has a grand marble courtyard and tilework in varying shades of green. Its adjoining mosque and green minaret is visible from all across the medina.

TRADES & TREASURES

Today, what leads many into the medina is the promise of its authentic traditions and exquisite crafts. Artisans employ skills that have been handed down for generations. Whether you're looking for a cherished souvenir or a gift to take home to friends and family, you'll find them here. Everything from silk caftans to chandeliers and musical instruments are all produced by hand—just be prepared to barter.

Morocco's rich carpet-making custom is one such craft that has endured the test of time. Since the medina's golden age, beautiful carpets and rugs—known locally as *zerbiya*—were created. Today, the tradition lives on with hand-embroidered carpets in an array of colorful patterns and textures. Similarly, pottery production has been a major industry in Fez for hundreds of years—and the city continues to create about 80% of Morocco's pottery. Rich clay from the surrounding area is hand-spun into spice and tagine pots, bowls, vases, and more.

Fez el Bali is also home to some of the oldest and largest leather tanneries in the world. They produce beautiful leather creations—from traditional Moroccan leather slippers

to stylish bags, coats, ottomans, and other leather furnishings. The oldest is Chouara Tannery. From rooftop terraces, you can see its iconic scene of a mosaic of round stone vessels filled with colorful dyes and liquids. Workers mill about, soaking and stirring animal hides in the vats. While the sight is something to behold, the smell is one that is unfortunately not easily forgotten: a pungent odor of urine and animal flesh. Employees may offer sprigs of mint to hold under your nose to combat the uneasy stench.

Since the medina's earliest days, the tannery has operated in the same fashion. Here, hides from cows, sheep, goats, and camels are transformed into buttery soft leathers in vibrant colors, many of which are exported around the world. They are soaked and softened for two to three days in a mixture of cow urine, pigeon feces, quicklime, and salt, and before being transferred into a tub of dyeing solutions. The dye in these pits typically come from natural ingredients: the blue coloring is created from indigo plants, red from poppies and paprika, and yellow from saffron and turmeric.

If you're looking for a change in scent and scenery, Souk al-Attarine, the spice and perfume market, is a bouquet of delicious



aromas like jasmine and rosewater. The streets of this *souk* contains stall after stall of baskets piled high with colorful spices. Essential oils, dried fruits, bundles of freshly cut herbs, and spiced Berber coffee are also for sale. Or visit the Place R'Clif market for fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, sweets, and traditional snacks.

No matter which path you take, ancient history comes to life within the walls of this wonderfully chaotic maze. Simply follow your senses to unlock discoveries a thousand years in age, and meet the people who have kept this history alive.



Left: Stalls sell piles of every spice imaginable—from cumin to paprika, cardamom, and saffron.

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Left: Artisans hand embroider intricate designs into the locally produced leathers.

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