

The Secret

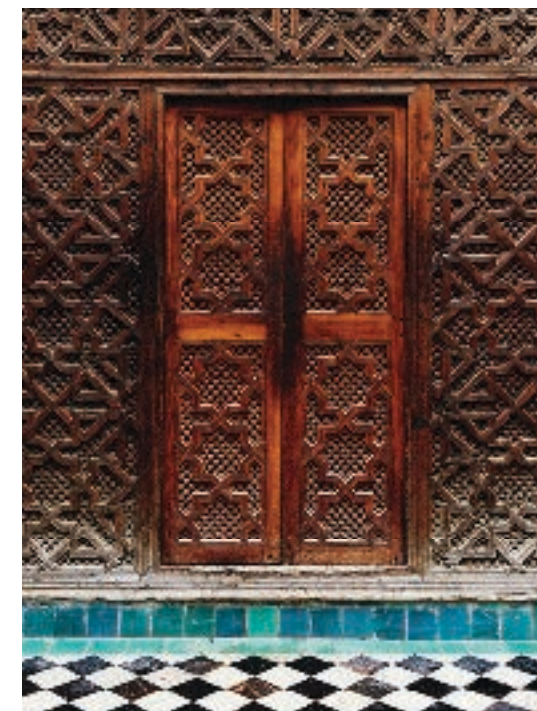
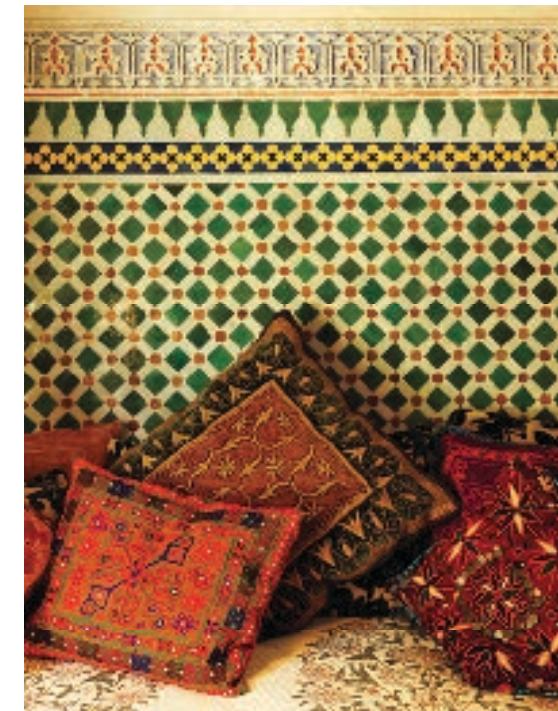
Quietly and ever so subtly, a new generation of designers, restaurateurs, and hoteliers have brought a fresh

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **FELIX ODELL**



Life of Fez

dimension to Morocco's most beguiling city—while staying true to its age-old traditions and singular spirit.



THERE ARE cities we love because they're always in flux; shape-shifters whose primary currency is the new, the innovative, the unexpected. And then there are cities we love because they never seem to change: Year after year, trip after trip, they appear as we remember them, a memory obligingly and reassuringly coming to life before us.

For many years, Fez, Morocco's ancient seat of learning, was a member of the latter group, memorable not for its new hotels or shops but for the reliable sameness of its picturesque medina, a series of threadlike streets that at every turn seem to burrow, warren-like, deeper and deeper into the earth and into the past. You went to Marrakech, 240 miles to the southwest, to shop its concept boutiques and stay in one of its many luxury properties; you went to Fez to pretend you were still visiting the Morocco of Paul Bowles, when donkeys, not motorcycles or cars, were the preferred means of conveyance. Or of Edith Wharton, whose 1920 book *In Morocco* documented her travels there. "Nothing endures in Islam, except what human inertia has left standing and its own solidity has preserved from the elements," wrote Wharton of Fez's particular palimpsestic quality, its varied but harmonious sense of aesthetics, each enriched by the city's earliest settlers: Berbers, Africans, Persians. "Or rather, nothing remains intact, and nothing wholly perishes, but the architecture, like all else, lingers on half-ruined and half-unchanged." She could have written those words last week, not last century, and they'd still be true.

But recently, something started happening here. Unlike Marrakech—always open to and even encouraging of expatriates—Fez was not given to welcoming outsiders. And yet over the past few years, a handful of intrepids, along with a small but influential band of locals, have begun to change Fez, to bring to its medieval pathways new places to shop, to eat, to stay. They aim not to transform the city—they, like us, are here because of what Fez already is, not for what they want it to become—but to remind us that no town is a museum and that every place must occasionally remake itself, even quietly, if it is to remain vital. What has emerged is a Fez that still feels as gloriously immutable, as true to itself, as it always was—with a few more flourishes and comforts. Here, on the following pages, is what defines the city now.

Previous page: Scenes of Fez, including a shop owner transporting goods in the medina (top row, second from left); Bab al Mahrouq, a twelfth-century gateway into the medina (top, second from right); the lounge at Le Jardin des Biehn guesthouse, decorated with textiles and furniture from across Asia and North Africa (bottom, third from left); and a carved wooden door at al-Attarine Madrasa, a fourteenth-century Islamic school (bottom, second from right). **Right:** Traditional *zelliges*—ceramic mosaics—ornament the front hall at the Palais el Mokri, built in 1906 by Si Tayeb El Mokri, pasha of Casablanca.





Left: Traditional Fassi pottery on display at the Souk el Henna, a picturesque market in the medina.

The Best of Fez, Now

STAY

HOTEL SAHRAI Opened last April, Fez's first contemporary boutique hotel, set on a hilltop near the Ville Nouvelle, has quickly become the city's most fashionable place to stay. No surprise: It's the creation of Anis Sefrioui, the 30-year-old scion of the family behind the renowned Riad Fez hotel. The 50 minimalist guest rooms are spacious and loft-like; public areas, with fountains and tiled pools, retain a sensuous Moroccan feel. There's also a knockout Givenchy spa—the first in North Africa (hotelsahrai.com; from \$182).

KARAWAN RIAD With seven expansive suites and a rooftop garden, this elegant newcomer occupies a seventeenth-century palace in the Andalous Quarter of the medina; it's the creation of a French trio, who spent more than a decade renovating the place. "We thought it would take two or three years," admits co-founder Valérie Mayorov. "As a foreigner in Fez, you have two fates—you can become a sage, or you can go crazy." The owners sagely installed a restaurant, tearoom, and hammam, decorating the hotel with objects from their travels: Cuban tobacco containers, a butterfly collection from France, and musical instruments from Cameroon (karawanriad.com; from \$165).

LE JARDIN DES BIEHN A former pasha's palace in the heart of the medina has been splendidly restored by French expat Michel Biehn, an antiques dealer, and his wife, Catherine. It's now a nine-suite guesthouse complete with Andalusian gardens, reflecting pools, a lively little café, and pieces from the Biehns' museum-worthy collection—a nineteenth-century Chinese opium bed here, an Henri Cartier-Bresson photograph there (jardindesbiehn.com; from \$165).

EAT

RESTAURANT NUMÉRO 7 When Stephen di Renza first came to Fez, in 1999, he arrived for an extended stay "with a fruit juicer and a suitcase of books." A few months later he bought a *riad*—"It was

the price of a London parking space!"—which he spent three years renovating on periodic visits to Fez while working in Europe. Later, he acquired the adjacent property, where he opened a restaurant, Numéro 7. Eventually, Di Renza and two friends—Tara Stevens, an expat chef and food writer, and Chez Panisse head chef Jérôme Waag—hit on an ingenious new concept: a residency program wherein celebrated chefs from around the world, including alumni of El Celler de Can Roca, are invited to helm the kitchen for two or three months (restaurantnumero7.com).

DAR ROUMANA French chef Vincent Bonnin and his Australian wife, Vanessa, are the gracious hosts of this excellent restaurant at their well-priced five-room *riad* hotel. Vincent, who trained at several Michelin-starred European restaurants, serves seasonal dishes inspired by Moroccan ingredients and techniques; recent highlights included a salad of roasted pumpkin, chilies, and baby peas with a yogurt and tahini dressing (darroumana.com).

FEZ CAFÉ AT LE JARDIN DES BIEHN A chic, cozy, and serene spot with views of Michel Biehn's wildly lush gardens (see "Stay"), it's open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, with a daily-changing menu of Moroccan and French dishes (jardindesbiehn.com/en/restaurant).

THE RUINED GARDEN Better known for its atmospheric setting and greenery than its food, this local haunt is Stephen di Renza's favorite place for an alfresco drink, with well-spaced tables and a "zen-like" vibe. It's the brainchild of British expat Robert Johnstone, a veteran of both The Ivy and The Wolseley restaurants in London (ruinedgarden.com).

CAFÉ CLOCK British expat Mike Richardson—yet another alum of London's The Ivy and The Wolseley—opened the now-iconic Café Clock; it's been jammed with locals and travelers ever since. The house special? Camel burgers (fez.cafeclock.com).

SHOP

NINA ALAMI Palestinian-American textile designer Nina Alami (née Galbert) moved to Fez from Los Angeles in 2011; she now sells her collection of handwoven scarves and blankets out of an unmarked, by-appointment-only atelier in the medina. "It's easy to get lost here," Alami says, "but the longer you stay, the more it reveals itself. The medina suits treasure hunters—and I love to be on the hunt" (artisanprojectinc.com).

ALFRED BERLIN Carmelo Tedeschi, an Italian artist and designer based in Berlin and Fez, offers sumptuous leather accessories at his showroom; open by appointment (aaalfred.de).

ALI'S ART GALLERY At this Aladdin's cave of antiques and modern treasures occupying several enormous rooms, the proprietor speaks perfect English and is extremely knowledgeable about Fez and the many objects in his gallery, especially those related to Judaica (212-535-633022).

CHEZ HAMIDOU Hidden near the Chouara Tannery, this diminutive, jam-packed shop is the locals' go-to for affordable rugs and poufs (hamidou.shop@gmail.com).

COIN BERBÈRE Mohamed Bouzidi-Idrissi's four-shop complex—bursting with antique pottery, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century wooden doors, and rare or antique textiles—is a favorite of both Nina Alami's and Stephen di Renza's. "Whenever I want to be around beautiful things, I head there," says Alami. "Mohamed has one of the finest collections of antique Fassi embroideries in Fez" (212-356-36946).

NAFIS HICHAM AT TALA KEBIRA One of the unmissable experiences in the medina: a tasting of wild honey—in unique flavors like carob—at this beloved shop in the honey souk. Says Gail Leonard of Plan-It Fez, a local travel specialist (see "Play"), "This is my happy place" (212-356-34269).



SHOP AT LE JARDIN

DES BIEHN Michel Biehn selects all the inventory at his hotel's stylish little boutique, offering a mix of antique textiles, leather slippers, jewelry, beautiful local pottery, and contemporary designs from Nina Alami and Alfred Berlin (jardindesbiehn.com/en/shop).

TAL'AA IKBIRA STREET

When Nina Alami is in search of vintage treasures, she heads for the upper, westernmost portion of Tal'aa Ikbira, one of two main retail streets in Fez-el-Bali, which is lined with small-scale antiques dealers. "I've found great things here, including vintage silk caftans and a stunning Berber necklace that now hangs in my studio," Alami says.

TAMERLANE'S DAUGHTERS

One-of-a-kind pillowcases, dresses, separates, and coats—all made from antique or rare fabrics—are created by Karina Duebner, an

investment banker turned textile collector and clothing designer. By appointment only (tamerlanesdaughters.com).

PLAY

ARTISAN PROJECT Besides leading custom shopping tours of the Fez medina, Nina Alami can organize craft tours throughout Morocco (artisanprojectinc.com).

THE COURTYARD

KITCHEN AT DAR NAMIR

Organized by Tara Stevens of Restaurant Numéro 7 (see "Eat"), this two- to three-day culinary immersion program will have you exploring food markets, meeting producers and purveyors, and cooking in Stevens's newly renovated *riad* (darnamir.com).

PALAIS EL MOKRI Built in 1906 by Si Tayeb El Mokri, pasha of Casablanca, this sprawling private residence in the medina is still owned by his heirs. With its rich

mosaics, Venetian glass, and delicate wood carvings, it's a stunning example of traditional Moroccan artisanship. Visitors can tour the Palais for a nominal fee and even book overnight stays (palaiselmokri.com).

PLAN-IT FEZ The lively Gail Leonard and Michele Reeves devise innovative tours that connect visitors with locals. They can arrange everything from street-food tours to caftan-design classes and lessons in making hand-rolled couscous in a tiny Berber village (plan-it-fez.com).

UTE SCHRADER A striking German fashion-press maven, Schrader hosts an occasional pop-up gallery in her beautifully restored *riad*. "I think contemporary art fits especially well within the context of the Old World," she says. By appointment only (uteschrader5@aol.com).
—GISELA WILLIAMS

Above: Venetian glass in the Palais el Mokri's Red Room, one of several suites available for rent in the luxe residence. **Right:** A view of the medina from outside the ancient walls.

For additional photos of Fez, download our digital edition.

