

Why to Visit Fez in 2015

by Richard Alleman December 11, 2014



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For more than a decade, Marrakesh has been the Moroccan destination on everyone’s list, with its ever-more-luxurious hotels, nightclubs, and attainable whiff of the exotic. Fez, about 240 miles northeast of Marrakesh, was often an afterthought. Those who went there raved about the medieval medina—still totally inaccessible to cars, still genuinely Moroccan. But with few upscale places to stay, conservative Fez was never more than a quick stopover.

Times are changing. Slowly, quietly, a sophisticated scene is taking root in Fez, much as it did in Marrakesh 15 years ago. It started with expats and locals restoring *riads*, and continues as hotels, restaurants, and galleries pop up. So far, overdevelopment isn’t an issue. Whether this will last—especially with this year’s debut of an upgraded airport, set to accommodate 2.5 million passengers, five times the current volume—is anyone’s guess. Don’t wait to find out. For those who fell in love with Marrakesh *before* it became an international party hub, this is the moment to see Fez.

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The biggest news is [Hotel Sahrai](#). Opened by Fez-born businessman Anis Sefrioui six months ago, it’s perched on a hillside between the medina and the French-built *ville nouvelle*. Christophe Pillet designed the 50 contemporary guest rooms, many of which overlook an L-shaped infinity pool. The rooftop bar has quickly become the hippest place in town, while the Givenchy Spa is filled with light and intricate *mashrabiya* latticework.

It’s also worth spending a night or two in the medina to soak in its intense, lost-in-time ambience. [Karawan Riad](#)—a lavish renovation of a 17th-century house in the Andalous quarter—is the place to stay. The seven spacious suites offer a modern alternative to more traditional *riad* hotels, favoring sandstone walls and a neutral palette over the usual tile and bright *tadelakt* plaster.

Outside the southern wall, at the Bab Ziat gate, [Palais Faraj](#) is the bold vision of local entrepreneur Driss Faceh. Recognizing that Fez was on the cusp of becoming a hot spot, Faceh hired architect Jean-Baptiste Barian, a favorite of the Moroccan royal family, to transform the abandoned 19th-century palace. The spacious rooms echo Marrakesh’s legendary La Mamounia, with their intricate *zellij* mosaics and painted cedar ceilings.

Thanks to a handful of expats, the new Fez is characterized by experimentation—often on a delightfully small and idiosyncratic scale. Ute Schrader, a German-born, longtime Paris-based fashion publicist, closed down her agency two years ago and bought a house in Fez, steps from the ninth-century Kairaouine Mosque. She uses the beautifully restored home as a gallery (*by appointment only; 33-6/8695-3743*) to showcase emerging Moroccan and international artists. Her first exhibition, done in collaboration with Marrakesh’s Galerie 127, focused on contemporary North African photography. “I wanted to embrace young talent, and bring the same energy that Marrakesh has to Fez,” Schrader says.

On the culinary front, [Restaurant No. 7](#) is making waves with a rotating series of acclaimed guest chefs, a novel concept for Fez. Set in striking black- and-white-tiled rooms, it is the brainchild of British food writer Tara Stevens and American Stephen Di Renza, who swings between Fez and Marrakesh, where he is the creative director of Yves Saint Laurent’s Jardin Majorelle. The prix fixe menu is Moroccan-inspired, but this is not a place for *tagines* and couscous. Analiese Gregory, formerly of San Sebastián’s Mugaritz, recently dropped in and served dishes like olive-oil-poached salmon with green *harissa* broth. Paris Popup founders and former Frenchie chefs Harry Cummins and Laura Vidal are in the kitchen through January 31.

Stevens credits Mike Richardson with kicking off Fez’s revival. A former maître d’ at London’s Wolseley, Richardson opened [Café Clock](#) in Fez in 2007 and created “a spot where locals, expats, and tourists could all be together,” Stevens says. The café started off serving simple salads and camel burgers, but has become a social center, hosting readings and screenings as well as classes in Arabic and calligraphy.

“Fez is multilayered, multifaceted,” Stevens adds. “Every time I go out the front door, I discover something. This is a city on the cusp of change—and it’s exciting to be a part of that.”