

VIRTUOSO

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TRAILS LESS TAKEN

HEART & SOUL

Fez opens doors to the real Morocco.

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At ease in the medina and
(opposite) Fez Arts Palace.







A section of the medina viewed from Palais Faraj's restaurant and (opposite) the start of the Hamadcha brotherhood ceremony.

WE WERE SOMEWHERE around 90 minutes into a Sufi Muslim ceremony on the edge of the medina when the ants began to take hold. Figuratively, thankfully. But for the Hamadcha brotherhood chanting and swaying in front of us, they seemed very real.

“At this part of the evening,” one of the brothers explained, “we typically will have been singing and playing excitedly for hours, and we need to get up and dance – like we have ants in our pants that need to get out.”

Official ceremonies held at the brotherhood's lodge in Fez stretch from dusk till dawn, unlike this abbreviated

private predinner spectacle at a restored riad, where swallows swooped into the open courtyard for their day's last snacks. Sitting atop pillows on a marble floor, as impassioned incantations and a cacophony of drums, polyrhythmic handclaps, a *gembri* (three-stringed lute), and blaring *pungis* (reed pipes) reverberated off the walls, I could easily imagine how intense and trancelike faithfuls' nights get.

The evening was an exclusive peek into Morocco's spiritual side, arranged by Karim Fehry Fassy for art director Korena Bolding and me. The co-founder of Alizés Private works with Virtuoso travel advisors to open the country's ornately carved cedar doors

to what would often go unnoticed or remain inaccessible to outsiders. Fehry Fassy's connections run deep: The taproot of his ancient family tree draws from the heart of the medina in Fez, Morocco's first imperial city; a direct ancestor founded the world's oldest existing university, al-Qarawiyyin, here in AD 859. More recently, his father served as a director of protocol for the late King Hassan II, who oversaw the construction of Casablanca's landmark Hassan II Mosque in the 1980s. Hassan's son, King Mohammed VI, added the adjacent Academy of Traditional Arts, in part to help save the country's craft traditions – many of which originated in Fez – for

the next generation of carvers, tilers, leathersmiths, and other artisans.

“Everybody knows Marrakech. Marrakech, Marrakech, Marrakech – they all want to go there,” Fehry Fassy had told me a few months earlier. “They should – it’s a beautiful city, with great restaurants and nightlife and shopping. I love it. I live there.” For a relaxed, under-the-radar surf town and to escape summer’s heat, Essaouira is his spot. The High Atlas is an adventure-travel playground. Casablanca is all business and traffic, the desert is for playing out *Lawrence of Arabia* fantasies, while the capital, Rabat, is an immaculately landscaped and manicured vision of the country to be. “But if you want to discover the soul of Morocco,” Fehry Fassy said, “I’ll take you to Fez.”

FROM THE rooftop-restaurant terrace of the Palais Faraj hotel, Fez’s medina

is more gritty than pretty, but inside the warren of alleys below – some not much more than a shoulder’s width across – there’s splendor rivaled by few other cities. Of all the places I’ve visited, it’s also the one I couldn’t imagine taking on without a guide. Five, ten minutes tops wandering the souks, and you’d be hopelessly lost; Google Maps has a way to go before conquering medieval labyrinths.

The other reason guides are a necessity is that there’s so much in the medina you *don’t* need to see – stalls hawking trinkets and knockoff designer bags, still-standing residential wards awaiting spruce-ups after a millennium. You could spend a whole day in the world’s largest urban car-free zone and miss its gems: the dyeing alley where workers spread fabrics in the middle of the lane, saturate them with color, and then

FIVE, TEN MINUTES TOPS WANDERING THE SOUKS, AND YOU’D BE HOPELESSLY LOST.

stamp it in with bare feet as others pull skeins of yarn and silk threads from bubbling pots; the leather and silver souks; the mind-boggling *zellige* tiling and carvings of al-Attarine Madrasa’s fourteenth-century courtyard; the tannery.

OK, Chouara tannery I likely could have found by scent alone, a one-of-a-kind malodorous blend of raw cow, sheep, and camel hides and hot-tub-size

The Chouara tannery has operated since the eleventh century.





Rolling out the welcome carpet at Palais Quaraouiyne.

vats of diluted pigeon poop and cow urine (among other things) mingling beneath the Moroccan sun. For more than 1,000 years, workers have toiled in the tubs of all-natural dyes, which use the likes of indigo for blue, saffron for yellow, and poppies for red. Viewed from a terrace above, a sprig of fresh mint in hand from a leather shop's doorman to crush under your nose, it's like gazing down on a giant watercolor palette – a vision that far overpowers the smell.

“MISS! WATCH OUT! Watch out!” someone shouted as people pressed up against an alley wall and a donkey rounded a corner thrashing its head and pulling a rattly wooden cart that barely squeaked by. We'd just left al-Attarine, and the heat, crowds, and sensory overload were getting to be *a lot*. “Step over here,” our guide said as we turned into a dead-end, shaded alley with seemingly little to offer other than, if we were in an any other country, the potential to get jumped.

Yet a little ways down, an open door revealed one of the trip's most unexpected sights: Palais Quaraouiyne, a beautifully restored riad that houses the city's top rug dealer, with meticulous tilework covering the walls and columns up to the ceiling. “I like to bring people here to learn about Moroccan rugs – and for a break from the hecticness,” Fehry Fassy said. (For VIPs and serious buyers, he gets owner Chakib Lahkim Bennani to close the shop for private viewings.)

Mint tea in hand, tourist crowds and annoyed donkey-cart drivers out of mind, we settled into this most opulent of settings as “rug doctors” in white lab coats unfurled carpet after carpet from a more than 5,000-strong inventory. Bennani's son explained the weaving processes and how Arabic rugs strictly adhere to one of three patterns (Palais Quaraouiyne's are woven by a local women's collective), while Berber rugs (many here are vintage) have artistically freer designs, employing the symbols and motifs of various Saharan families and tribes.



Wildflower-speckled wheat fields in the Middle Atlas foothills and a roadside juice stand.

The shop and Bennani's Fez Arts Palace – an equally stunning, multifloor emporium of antiquities, antique jewelry, and filigreed copper lanterns, hidden behind a windowless brown wall in another forlorn alley nearby – stand as exemplars for the city and its residents over the centuries. “Traditionally, people in the old medina lived in harmony with one another, and it was important not to offend those who were less fortunate,” Fehry Fassy had mentioned earlier in the day. “Riads’ facades are quite simple, but once inside, you often discover true marvels.”

IF THE MEDINA holds much of its beauty close to the vest, a half hour outside the city, the countryside puts

its allure on showy display. You can get the best of Fez – the medina and the historic Jewish quarter and the Royal Palace grounds outside its walls – in a day, but you’d be remiss to skip town without venturing into the Middle Atlas foothills. In spring, wildflowers blanket the landscape, swaths of poppies stripe the rolling wheat fields in vivid brushstrokes of red, and shepherds tend to flocks of goats and sheep tidying up meadows and the ever-present olive groves, while roadside markets offer woven baskets and crafts, squeezed-to-order orange juice, and more. It’s 180 degrees from the barren, red-dirt Moroccan landscape you might expect.

Volubilis, a second-century BC Roman ruin that, in its heyday, had a popula-

tion of 20,000, is a main draw. “The Romans introduced olives and grapes to Morocco, along with architectural advances,” our guide explained as we explored medieval oil presses, bakeries, the aqueduct, baths, and patrician homesites with impressively intact mosaic floors. “Even these trees,” he added. Gazing past the Tuscan cypress and the Temple of Saturn to the hill town of Moulay Idriss Zerhoun, birthplace of the founder of Fez, I swear that if you dropped me here blindfolded, you couldn’t convince me we weren’t in central Italy.

Afterward, we settled in for the afternoon at Domaine Villa Volubilia, one of the country’s premier wineries (Moroccan wines, who knew?). The nearly



L'Agrumiste farm manager Julien Ganteil picks citrus for a tasting.

MOST OF THE TOUR INVOLVED PULLING OVER SO GANTEIL COULD PEEL A CITRUS TO SEE IF WE COULD IDENTIFY IT LIKE A DELICIOUS NAME THAT TUNE CONTEST.

three-hour visit started with a barrel tasting of syrahs and amphora-aged cabernets before moving on to another in a garden and a third in the cellar, followed by a white-linen lunch of traditional salads, tagines, and *kefta* (seasoned minced beef skewers) grilled over grapevines beneath an aging fig tree. There may have been naps during the ride back to the city.

The winery lunch and progressive tasting was another Alizés-only experience, which was one-upped the next day by a visit to L'Agrumiste, a citrus farm that grows more than 250 kinds of heirloom fruits, sold to Michelin-starred chefs and specialty markets in Morocco, the EU, and Canada, and has developed another 100-plus varieties yet to come to market. Agritourism can be a physically and mentally dusty deep dive into epicurean nerd-dom, but charismatic farm manager and plant scientist Julien Ganteil knows how to bring orchards to life.

We *did* delve into flower sex, have a hands-on grafting session, and learn that white blossoms yield sweet fruit and pink produce sour, along with how sugar concentrations vary depending on where fruit hangs on a tree. But most of the four-wheel-drive golf-cart tour involved pulling over so Ganteil could whip out his pocketknife and peel a citrus fresh off the tree to see if we



MAKE THE MOST OF MOROCCO

STAY The city's preeminent hotel, **Palais Faraj Suites and Spa's** 31 suites and public spaces are a study in *zellige* tiling, Moroccan woodwork, and carved plaster on the medina's edge. Its rooftop Restaurant L'Amandier has a commanding view of the Old City, and the property's palatial Royal Suite is one of the most resplendent I've seen.

GO **Alizés Private** works with Virtuoso travel advisors to create custom itineraries throughout Morocco. The company specializes in exclusive-to-them experiences: a tour of Casablanca's Hassan II Mosque with the head docent

that's capped by an elevator ride to the top of the minaret, dinners in family homes, the Fez experiences mentioned in this story, hot-air balloon rides with breakfast, hammam sessions in a private riad, and more.

Travelers on **Abercrombie & Kent's** private eight-day tour of Morocco make the Casablanca-Fez-Rabat-Marrakech circuit, with excursions to the ruins of Volubilis and an outing into the Atlas Mountains for a mule ride to break bread with a Berber family in their home. *Departures: Any day through 2025.*

Explore Fez, Rabat, and Marrakech on **Artisans of Leisure's** seven-day

Moroccan overview. Travelers spend two nights in Fez, followed by four more in Marrakech, with privately guided tours of both cities, as well as a tour of Rabat and a day excursion to the Atlas Mountains. *Departures: Any day through 2025.*

Collette's 15-day small-group immersion spends two days in Rabat, three each in Fez and Marrakech, and two in Casablanca. Along with market and mosque tours, activities include cooking classes, camel rides, and luxe camping in the desert. *Departures: Multiple dates, September 12, 2024, through December 4, 2025.*

Flower delivery at a roadside stand and (opposite) the dyeing alley in Fez.



could ID it – caviar lemon? limequat? yuzu? tangelolo (a grapefruit-tangelo hybrid)? – like a delicious *Name That Tune* contest. The visit wrapped up with what proved to be the week’s best meal, prepared by the farm’s grandmother-age chef: house-cured olives, freshly baked bread, grilled quince, chicken and beef tagines, two delicious takes on lemon tarts, and a basket of both familiar and bizarre citrus to casually graze on like a never-ending cheese plate. Paired with the winery visit, it was a relaxed breath of fresh air after the buzzing medina.

I haven’t been to the High Atlas Mountains or the Sahara dunes, yet, but I’ve seen Casablanca and its grand mosque, taken a spin through Rabat, and loved every minute of my time in European-packed Marrakech. And as Fehry Fassy had predicted, none convey Morocco’s mystique more than Fez. Ants or no ants, that’s reason to get up and sing praises. 📍

📍 Fethiye - Muğla



TURKAEGEAN

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