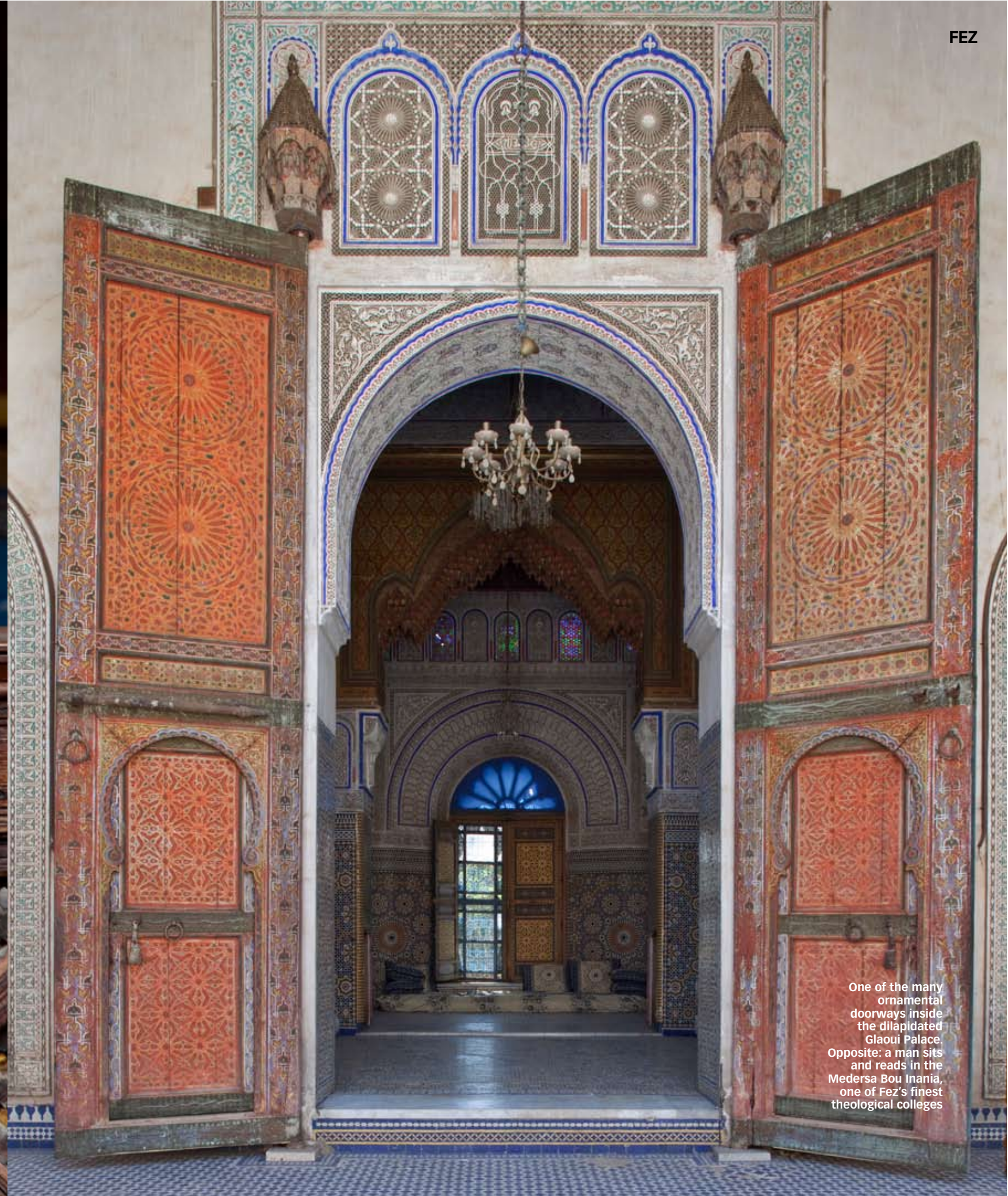
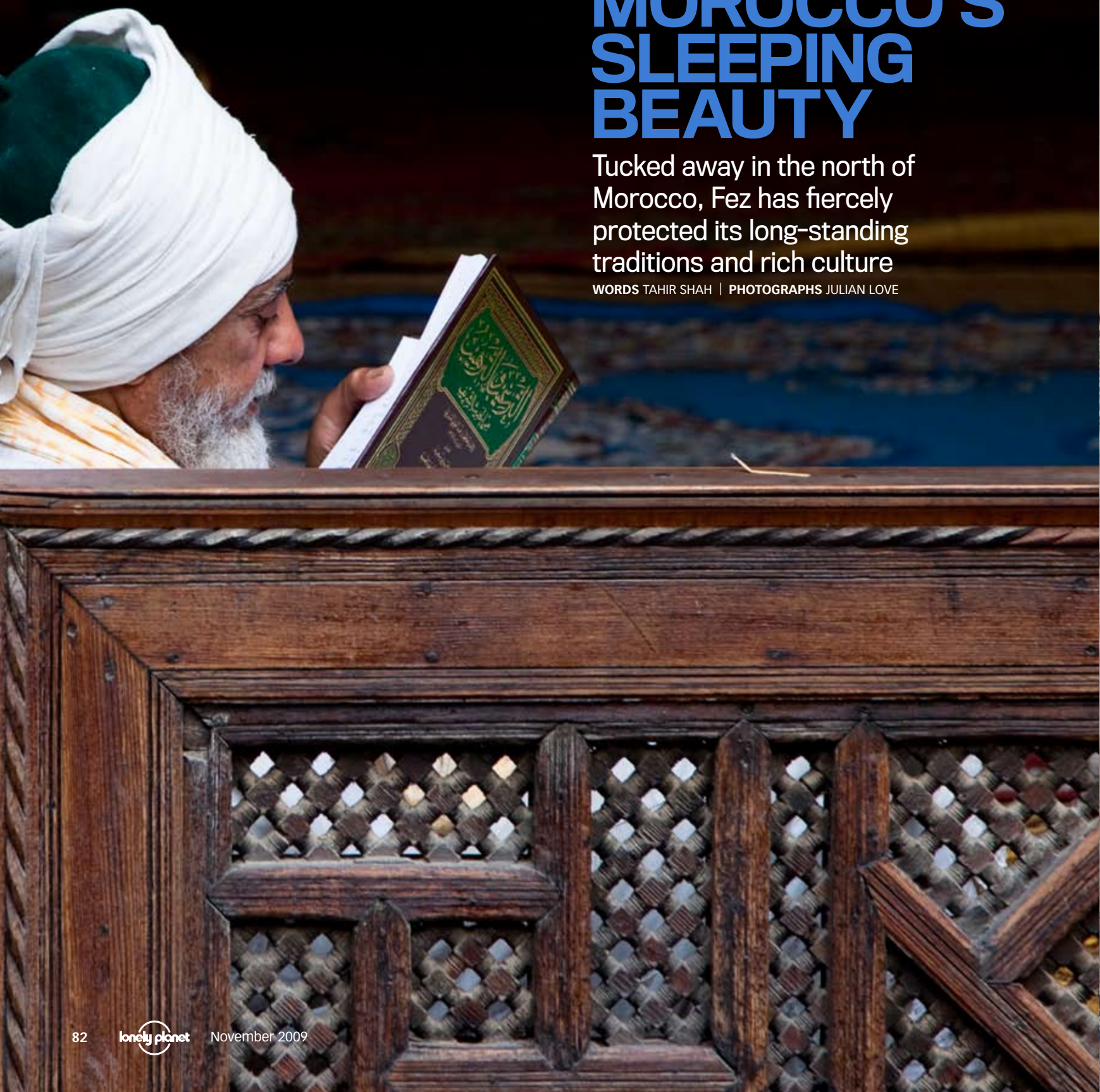


# FEZ

## MOROCCO'S SLEEPING BEAUTY

Tucked away in the north of Morocco, Fez has fiercely protected its long-standing traditions and rich culture

WORDS TAHIR SHAH | PHOTOGRAPHS JULIAN LOVE



One of the many ornamental doorways inside the dilapidated Glaoui Palace. Opposite: a man sits and reads in the Medersa Bou Inania, one of Fez's finest theological colleges





## 'FEZ IS WITHOUT DOUBT THE GREATEST MEDIEVAL ARAB CITY STILL INTACT ANYWHERE ON EARTH'

Above: Abdou, the guardian of Glaoui Palace, has lived there for as long as he can remember. The palace, like Fez, is so full of atmosphere and mystery that it doesn't take much effort to imagine yourself back in a land of storytellers and treasures. Opposite left: richly scented, brightly coloured spices line the Talaa Kebira, one of the city's main streets. Opposite right: turn a corner and you might stumble on such a traditional riad doorway decorated by skilled craftsmen. Opposite bottom: banisters, columns and ceilings have been painstakingly adorned with mosaics and hand-painted motifs in the harem of the Glaoui Palace

Lying behind a steel door on a dusty lane in Fez stands one of the most unexpected treasures of North Africa – Glaoui Palace. To cross the threshold is to enter a medieval twilight zone, one touched by the fantasy of the *Arabian Nights*. It's a place where simple questions posed by the Western mind go unanswered, and where visitors find themselves altered by the experience. A vast sprawling labyrinth of courtyards, the Glaoui is a jewel of the faded grandeur at Morocco's secret heart. Perched on a broken chair in the shade of an immense galleried courtyard is Abdou, the guardian. He's cloaked in a sky-blue Touareg desert robe and is drowsy, having just stirred from a mid-morning siesta. He smiles, his lips framing a clutch of infirm teeth, as he struggles to stand. Abdou has

lived at the Glaoui for as long as he can recall. If you ask him whether he was born there, or if he actually owns the palace, he looks away, stares across the heat haze and widens his eyes. He gives the same response when asked what its future might bring. After visiting Abdou, as I have done over the years, I've come to learn that the best way to appreciate his home is to forget the questions that an Occidental education teaches us to ask, and to listen to the pearls of wisdom that tumble from his lips. 'Fez is the heart of this kingdom,' he says in a voice moulded by a fondness for Turkish tobacco, 'and this is one of the hearts of Fez. It's a place of secrets and of mystery, a home that has known love and betrayal, poverty and wealth.' A single drop of perspiration wells up on Abdou's brow and rolls down his dark

cheek, evaporating before reaching his chin. The afternoon is swelteringly hot – the high 30s. The geese and ducks in the courtyard are flapping about because their basin of filthy water has dried up, turning into sludge. Abdou doesn't seem to care. He lurches forward in slow motion and leads the way down a dark, dank corridor that runs off the central courtyard. A moment later we find ourselves in a kitchen that's like something out of Henry VIII's Hampton Court. A colossal chimney stands at the far end of the room; beneath it there's a clutter of cauldrons, ladles the size of spades, old kettles and a mountain range of empty tin cans. Abdou flicks his fingers towards the inch-thick dust as if to excuse his disapproval for housework. 'Come this way,' he says in a whisper. Another twist to the right and one to the ►







left, and we're in another courtyard. It's smaller than the first and the walls are covered in black and white zellij mosaics. Above these mosaics and the towering colonnades, an upper terrace is heavily adorned with painted wood, and looks as if it's about to collapse from rot. 'This is the harem,' says Abdou with a smirk. 'Beautiful ladies guarded by eunuchs. Close your eyes, breathe in deep and you can almost smell them!'

A little imagination goes a long way in Fez. If you do as Abdou suggests, you find yourself catapulted back through time, with the clatter of mules clip-clopping up the narrow alleyways, the scent of lamb roasting on spits and the muffled sounds of bustle from the souq.

Fez is without doubt the greatest medieval Arab city still intact anywhere on earth. To wander its streets is to be part of a way of life that has become fragmented or has disappeared entirely elsewhere across the East. Describing it to someone who's not been there is like trying to describe a computer circuit to a blind man. However hard you try, you just don't know where to start.

ONE of my earliest memories is of arriving at the great city walls of Fez at dusk. I was only five or six, but I can remember it vividly. It was the time of stoned-out hippies and VW campervans, tie-dye miniskirts and cheap hashish. We'd driven from London and on reaching Fez, it felt as if we'd arrived at a citadel poised at the very end of the world. As we slowed in traffic, we spotted some old men huddled near the great Bab Bou Jeloud gate. I asked my mother who they were. 'They're gamblers,' she snapped disapprovingly. 'Actually, they're not,' my father corrected. 'They are part of an ancient tradition that stretches back a thousand years. They are the storytellers.'

That first journey was like stepping into a magical realm, where the senses came to life, touched by a frenzy of colour. The vibrant sights, intoxicating sounds, tantalising tastes and smells changed me, right deep down.

Everyone who journeys to Fez is affected in a similar way. Whereas Marrakech has become a Disneyland version of the *Arabian Nights*, Fez is the real thing. Some visitors find it uncomfortable, even a little sinister. And in a way it is. The city is a religious centre, a place that's content to have tourists but that's quite nonchalant at the same time. You can't escape the dark heart, or the city's bewitching soul. You feel it everywhere – in the rambling labyrinth of streets, where pack-mules stumble forward, laden with



FEZ

## 'WITH EVERY STEP YOU HEAR THE SOUND OF ARTISANS AT WORK IN THE MAZE OF WORKSHOPS'

Opposite: water has always been highly valued in Fez, which has more than 60 public fountains in its medina, including the 18th-century Nejjarine Fountain with its intricate zellij tilework and hand-carved arch. Above: local craftsmen gather in workshops tucked away in backstreets to produce artwork, which can be seen on buildings and ornaments throughout the city

freshly dyed skins from the tanneries, and in the ancient madrassas, the palaces and simple courtyard homes.

Talaa Kebira, the main thoroughfare that runs from Bab Bou Jeloud has more life on it than entire cities I have seen. There are a few emporia touting the usual tourist kitsch, but what's so wonderful is that most of the shops are selling stuff for the locals – rip-off Nike sneakers, David Beckham football strips, flour sieves, camel heads to be used in soup, and blue fluorescent bras.

And with every step you hear the sound of artisans at work, hidden deep in the maze of workshops that back on to the main street. Some are carving appliqué designs from burnished brass, while others are sculpting cedar wood, blowing glass, or weaving cloth on enormous looms.

Many of the wares on sale across Morocco are made in Fez, where craftsmen have passed on closely guarded techniques from father to son for generations. Besides goods for the tourist trade, mosaics and ceramic tiles are made near the city, too, and the kilns on the outskirts of town are well worth a visit. Fired with burning olive pips, the kilns are stacked by young apprentices in a system that's endured since Roman times.

While Europe languished in its Dark Ages, Fez was already a teeming centre of

intellect and commerce. Linked to the great cities of the emerging Islamic world via ever-expanding pilgrimage routes, it found itself connected to Seville and Cordoba, to Cairo, Baghdad, Delhi and Samarkand.

The immense Hajj pilgrimage caravans that crossed North Africa and Asia formed a kind of medieval internet, and brought some of the most celebrated scholars of the age to Fez. Among them were men such as the Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabi, Ibn Khaldun, the scientific polymath, and the Jewish scholar Maimonides. Their work led to important breakthroughs in science and urban planning and directly influenced the city that became their home. It boasted a state-of-the-art sewage system, schools and universities, community hospitals, fountains, and even public water clocks.

Exploring Fez today, it's quite a challenge to imagine when the city was at the cutting edge of technology – a time when the mosaic fountains ran with water and were not just used as communal rubbish bins, and when the delicate wooden shop facades weren't all rotten and worn, as they often are today.

Even for die-hard lovers of the city, people like me, there's a resonating sadness in the medina. The wealthy merchants departed for the new town ►



## 'THE LOVE AFFAIR WITH FEZ TOUCHES A GREAT MANY MOROCCANS AND FOREIGNERS AS WELL'

Right: Fez is a maze of twisting alleys, such as this one near the Souq El Attarine. As you wander around, trying to get your bearings, your senses will be overwhelmed by the sounds of bustle, calls to prayer and clip-clopping mules and the heady scents of spiced coffee, fresh herbs and spices for sale, and the smoke from shish kebabs being grilled on an open barbecue

and Casablanca decades ago, while anyone still to be found in the labyrinth today has been left behind. Many locals dream the same dream – to sell their home and shop to rich foreigners, then buy an apartment with all mod cons in the ville nouvelle.

Thankfully, the love affair with Fez touches a great many Moroccans and foreigners as well. It's something that can't really be explained. When we meet, we mumble about details of ornament and fragments of the city's soul in conversations that must mystify those who don't share the same obsession.

ONE man bitten deeply by the Fez bug is American-born scholar David Amster. He moved to the medina more than a decade ago, and knows the twists and turns of the 9,000 streets as well as any young child playing marbles in the shadows of the Kairaouine Mosque.

With a passion for the handmade nails and hinges that once adorned every Fassi door, David is a connoisseur of the kind of detail that often goes unnoticed by the untrained eye. He waxes lyrical about the traditional medluk, a lime rendering, which allows the ancient buildings to breathe; and he speaks of his dream with a glint in his eye – a time when all renovation is done with obsessive care and age-old skills.

Each month, David's small team of master craftsmen, known as moualems, restore a stretch of neglected street or a rubbish-filled fountain. It's a kind of guerrilla restoration on a micro scale, which is often done at night when everyone else is tucked up in bed. David pays for it all himself by renting out a small riad he owns to foreigners.

Even visitors who stay in the medina sometimes complain how hard it is to get under the skin of the city. Once you stray off the main streets, the arteries, you can find that the ever-narrowing web of alleyways are dark and even a little imposing. You quickly get the feeling that all kinds of life is going on behind the battered old doors, but as an outsider, you aren't able to peer in to what is secret world.

A good way of getting instant access is to hint that you want to buy a little house, or

even a palace, a dream home conjured from the pages of *A Thousand and One Nights*. The immobiliers, estate agents, are only too happy to take you round as many homes as you want to see. In my experience, there's no better way of witnessing a cross section of medina life – kitchens with grandmothers toiling away at the stove, laundry drying in the sun, children scampering about on their trikes, families gripped in front of interminable Egyptian soap operas, and caged chickens up on the roof waiting to become lunch.

A few months ago, I was shown a palace for sale, with magnificent cedar ceilings painted in fabulous geometric designs. An elderly craftsman lived in its great salon with a dozen white doves and a ferocious-looking cat. He spent his days cutting leather sandals from animal hides, and told me that he'd been born in the corner room eight decades before. He looked at me and grinned. 'Some of my ancestors are buried in the basement,' he said.

Nearby, I was taken to a home at Bab Er Rsif, the most historic area of the medina. Its owner showed me the title document, a scroll 20-feet long. He said his family had lived there for many generations, and that the foundations had been laid at least 500 years ago. When I sighed loudly, exclaiming that I simply didn't have the funds to buy it, the owner smiled. It was the wry, toothless smile of an old man with a plan.

'Do not worry about money because there is a secret, and I will tell it to you,' he said. 'Under the floor, there is a treasure. It is vast and worth many times the price I am asking for the house.'

I thought for a moment, and then asked, 'If there is indeed a treasure under this floor, why have you not dug it up yourself?' The owner wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his jellaba. 'Do you have any idea,' he said slowly, 'what problems a treasure like that would give to an old man like me?'

In the end I didn't buy the house, even though the lure of treasure was strong. But plenty of foreigners have snapped up properties – treasure or no treasure – most often as second homes. There's a small Anglophone community living in ►







## 'WHEREAS MARRAKECH HAS BECOME A DISNEYLAND VERSION OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS, FEZ IS THE REAL THING'

Opposite, clockwise from top left: a tanner mixes cerise into a dye pit ready to apply to the leather hides; handmade hats are stacked ready for sale in a local shop; a shop owner rests by his leather slippers in his workshop; a cockerel roams around freely as it awaits its fate at one of the many butchers at the start of the Talaa Kebira. Right: green, the colour of Islam, is also the colour of Fez and it can be seen in abundance around the city in tiles, such as on this minaret, on doors, and on the hills beyond

the Fez medina. Of them all, the most indefatigable is certainly Mike Richardson.

Mike was maître d' at London's swish The Ivy restaurant and at The Wolseley on Piccadilly before that. 'One day, I was at a party and I overheard someone talking about Fez,' he says. 'It sounded glorious and before I knew it, I'd moved out here, bought a little house with my savings, and opened Café Clock.'

Lodged in a narrow alley opposite the medieval Madrassa Bouanania, the Clock, as it's known to all, is spread out over several levels and is immensely popular. Clambering up and down to all the terraces became such a strain on the legs that Mike eventually hired a waiter with a penchant for mountain climbing.

In a back room off the staircase, the chef's assistant is adding a pinch of dried damask rose petals and a handful of secret ingredients to a fresh batch of minced camel meat. After searching his entire culinary career for the perfect hamburger meat, Mike found it in Fez. As he says, 'Camel meat sits so nicely on the bun.'

**A**NOTHER European to have realised his dream in Morocco's secret heart is Fred Sola, a Frenchman, who was born in Casablanca.

A few years ago he bought Riad Laaroussa, a run-down 17th-century palace once owned by the Moroccan minister for war, and which required extensive renovation.

Fred had intended to have it as a private home, but when the work was done and he moved in, Fred felt lonely in the palace,




so he often invited people to stay. Today, Riad Laaroussa is an exclusive riad hotel with eight sumptuous suites.

There's a serenity about the place that soothes you on entering through the doors. As you sit in the shade of the central courtyard you're lulled by birdsong, and running water gently cascading from a marble fountain. The air is still, scented by orange blossom, the sky above indigo blue.

'The secret of Fez is not to be in a hurry' says Fred, lounging on a chaise longue. 'If you hurry, obstacles appear as if by magic. We had about 50 craftsmen working with us for 18 months. They were so skilled, doing work that relies on pure expertise, not on power tools. When the work finished on Riad Laaroussa, I didn't want to lose the craftsmen – so we now renovate homes for other people who, like me, have

been bewitched by the spell of Fez.'

A few streets away, back at the Glaoui Palace, Abdou is lowering his eyelids for a second siesta of the day. A tiny tabby kitten has nestled on his chest and is purring softly. The only sound is the honking of the geese in the background and the muffled call to prayer far away.

One day, Abdou's home will surely be transformed into a name-brand chain hotel, and the rot, the old tin cans and the geese will be gone. There'll be bellboys in smart uniforms, piped Muzak and plumbing that actually works. My own dream is that Fez – Morocco's Sleeping Beauty – dozes off again like Abdou, and that the future waits a while longer to arrive. 

**Tahir Shah's** latest book, *In Arabian Nights* (Bantam; £8.99) is out now. Tahir lives in Casablanca, Morocco.





MAKE IT HAPPEN

FEZ



Wandering around the medina's lanes and souqs is a highlight of a trip to Fez – use our guide to find beautiful palaces, antique-filled stores and tea and tagine pitstops



ESSENTIALS

Getting there

Royal Air Maroc flies to Fez from London Heathrow from £136 (royalairmaroc.com). The airport is in Saïss, six miles from the city, and a £10 taxi ride away.

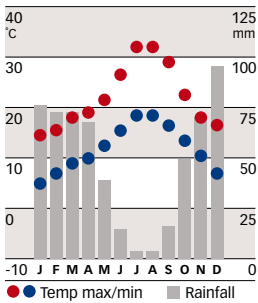
Getting around

It's pedestrians only in the medina. Taxis sit by the main gates in the city walls, such as at Bab Er Rsif.

Further reading

Lonely Planet's *Fez Encounter* (£6.99) has all you'll need for a break in the city. If you're travelling on from Fez, read *Morocco* (£15.99).

Climate



THE FINAL WORD

'Gradually [in Fez], one falls under the spell of another influence – the influence of the Atlas and the desert.'  
Edith Wharton,  
*On Morocco*

3 WAYS TO DO IT...

	 The stylish Dar Iman	 Cooperative Artisanale	 The garden at Riad Laaroussa
	Budget	Midrange	Luxury
SLEEP	<b>BARGAIN!</b> A well-restored 400-year-old townhouse, <b>DAR IMAN</b> is great value. All the style points are in order here: from zellij tile work to tall wooden doors (£54; fes-hostel.com).	<b>BARGAIN!</b> With a stunning courtyard, rooftop terrace, beautiful rooms and charming hosts, there's no finer place to stay in Fez for this price than <b>DAR SEFFARINE</b> (£63; darseffarine.com).	From the garden with orange trees and fountain to rooms full of art and unusual furniture, <b>RIAD LAAROUSSA</b> is an impeccably stylish place to base yourself (suite £163; riad-laaroussa.com).
EAT	<b>BARGAIN!</b> Be sure to try some of the cheap <b>STREET FOOD</b> in the medina. Specialities include snails in a spicy broth (right) and many types of nougat.	 Stop for tea (or a camel burger) on the roof terrace of <b>CAFÉ CLOCK</b> , with its view of Bou Inania Medersa minaret (camel burger £7.40; cafeclock.com).	After a drink in the lamp-lit courtyard, feast on tagine and pastries in one of the sumptuous dining salons at <b>DAR ANEBAR</b> (four-course set menu £32; 00 212 535 635 785; daranebar.com).
SHOP	A short taxi ride from the medina, the family-run ceramics factory of <b>ART NAJI</b> produces good-quality tabletops and mirrors encrusted with zellij tiles as well as plates and tajines (20 Quartier Industriel, Ain Nokbi; artnaji.net).	<b>BARGAIN!</b> Just about everything that can be fashioned from leather (except clothing) is made at the <b>COOPERATIVE ARTISANALE</b> in the heart of the medina. Expect to pay around £20 for an embroidered pouffe (42 Talaa Kebira).	<b>ANTIQUITÉ NEJJARINE</b> bulges with antiques – large pieces of furniture, doors and even whole painted ceilings, as well as smaller items such as wooden writing boards (writing boards, from £70; 3 Nejjarine Square).
SEE	One of Fez's most impressive residences, <b>GLAUI PALACE</b> comprises 17 houses, stables and a mausoleum. Knock on the door in Ziat to arrange a visit with guardian Abdou.	The <b>BOU INANIA MEDERSA</b> educational institute is a 14th-century wonder of brass doors, marble floors and zellij tiles (79p; Talaa Kebira).	 For a treat, the <b>RIAD MAISON BLEUE SPA</b> uses Moroccan products such as orange-flower water (massage from £32; maisonbleue.com).

PHOTOGRAPHS: JULIAN LOVE, CORBIS. ILLUSTRATION: BISH