

## FEZ – day 2

Fez (also spelled Fes) is the medieval capital of Morocco, and was a great city of high Islamic civilization. Fez has the best-preserved old city (Medina) in the Arab world, with a sprawling, labyrinthine medina (Fes el-Bali) which is the largest car-free urban zone in the world. However, it was full of donkeys.

We arrived in Fes after dark and found ourselves driving down a crowded, narrow street filled with carts cooking kebabs with the wonderful smell, but knowing we could not eat it. It turns out our Riad Reda (Riad is really a house with a garden, but many have been turned into guest houses) was in the middle of the Souk (which is how they spell it and pronounce it in Morocco, not shuk). It was a Friday night and the Souk was crowded with wall-to-wall people. Abriham could not find a place to park the car and had to park blocks away. The hotel said they would send a man with a cart for the luggage, but we started walking with our bags through the crowd. We did finally catch up with the cart, and they took our bags and we followed them through the souk. It was filled mostly with men everywhere crowding around us. I must admit it was a bit scary.



But once we turned into the Riad Reda, it was like entering a different world. Typically Arabic in style, with beautiful tile everywhere, a huge courtyard with tables set for dinner. The courtyard was surrounded by the terraces of the rooms. Our room was on the second floor and was beautifully decorated. We were to be upgraded to a Junior suite, but ).

Once we got settled in, we went down to dinner. I haven't talked about the food yet, and it seemed

that almost every meal we had, lunch or dinner, was a choice between couscous or tagines. Each can be had with vegetables, chicken, or beef. It was delicious the first time. It was good the second time. But by the third time we were tagined out.



So we just had soup and dessert. And local, Moroccan wine, which was quite good. The soup was delicious, so I was told since it was full of cilantro. Those of you that know me, know I hate cilantro. But the truth was I was not very hungry after the large lunch we had in Meknes.

We slept well that night, although the call to prayer did wake us at 5:30 in the morning. Breakfast in the Riad was lovely, and before we knew it, it was time to begin our tour of Fes.



Let's talk about breakfast first. While likely not the typical Moroccan breakfast, the breakfast in this Riad, and in some variation, in all our other Riad's, was fresh squeezed orange juice, often served in a crystal decanter, individual containers of yogurt, local honey, fresh jams and traditional breads. Moroccan bread (called khobz) is a flattish, round loaf with lots of crust. It is cut into four pieces, sort of the way you would cut a pizza. They also serve Harcha which are pan-fried semolina flatbreads, square crepe, Krachel which are sweet rolls made from anise seeds, sesame seeds and orange flower water, and Beghrir which are tender Moroccan pancakes made from semolina flour, and are typically served with syrup made from melted

butter and honey. The unique texture and appearance of the Beghrir comes from the addition of yeast to the batter, which causes hundreds of bubbles to form and break on the surface of each pancake as it cooks.

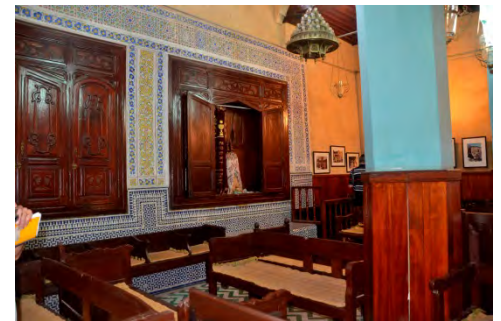
So, after breakfast we met with our guide, Mohammed Bouftila, known as a Momo to his friends. He told us he was well-known, having been written up in Condé Nast travel, and having served as a guide for Hilary and Chelsea, Yo-Yo Ma, and Robin Williams. He told us a funny story about Robin Williams, who in the middle of a tour of an old school, said. "Momo, no more history. I don't care about history. I just want to shop till I drop." And he did.



We began our tour through the old Jewish quarter, the Mellah (named after the Arabic word for salt, which is "melh" and refers to the Jews being salt traders).

Momo told us that Jews were the master silversmiths. They had come from Andalucia in 1492 at the start of the Inquisition. So all the houses were built with the balconies on the outside, facing the street, in the Spanish way, not in the Moroccan way where the windows all face into the interior courtyard. And thus began the new trend.

Momo took us to an old synagogue, Ibn Danan Synagogue, dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. We walked down a narrow street (of course in this area, all the streets are narrow), with green painted walls. At the end of the street was a small door and a small sign with the name of the synagogue. We entered and found ourselves in a small room. This was once only one of many synagogues in Fes, so there was no need for a large one. Today there are only 200 Jewish families as most emigrated to Israel, France or the United States. The ceiling



was wood with beams and painted. Small windows, high on the walls, lit the room. The walls were covered with blue Moroccan tiles. The Ark was covered with an elaborately carved wooden screen, and there was one old Torah in it. The wall above was decorated with intricately carved plaster work. There was a long, narrow staircase leading down to a mikva and of course, the women's section was upstairs. There was a covered hole in the floor where the rabbitzin and the bride's mother could peek down into the mikva to make sure everything was being done correctly. The seats

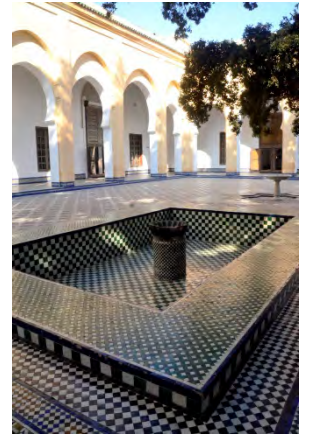
surrounded the bimah in the Sephardic way and the wooden bimah was topped by a wrought iron canopy of Islamic-style arches and floral forms, culminating in a crown. It was easy to imagine it full of Sephardic Jews praying and singing.



Our next stop was the Royal Palace of Fez (Dar el Makhzen), built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. When the King is in Fez, this is his residence (there is a palace in every major city for the King). The Palace compound includes beautiful gardens, mosques and also an ancient Madrassa or a school for the study of the Koran. However, it is closed to the public so we only got to see the outside beautiful tile, mosaic and bronze doors. Andy knocked, but no one answered.



We kept going, stopping next to visit the Batha Museum, housed in a wonderful 19th century Moroccan-Andalucian style summer palace, converted to a museum in 1916. The Batha Museum has beautiful gardens and its rooms had magnificent mosaic tiles. Half of the rooms are now the museum part, housing traditional Moroccan arts and crafts and historical and artistic artifacts include woodcarving, zellij and sculpted plaster, much of it from the city's ruined or decaying old schools and homes, Fassi embroidery, colorful Berber carpets and antique instruments. Pictures were only allowed on the outside.



Abriham then drove us through the city up to the top of one of the hills to the Merenid Tombs, at the north end of the city. There is not much left from the Merenid tombs, but the view of Fez is spectacular. You could see the walls of the Medina, the roof tops covered in satellite dishes, the green park areas and mountains across the way. It was really beautiful.



From there we drove to see what Momo described as the best artisan in mosaic tile in all of Fez. He introduced us to one of the sons (of course it is family operated) who took us on a "tour" of how the mosaic tiles are made, how they are placed, etc etc. And lo and behold, we ended up in a showroom. I must admit they do make beautiful tile tables and fountains and everything else you can think of. And they had great prices. In fact, Phyllis and Ben bought a table for their kitchen.



And then it was time for the souk. The souk in Fez is very similar to the shuk in Jerusalem, except now you no longer see the Jews walking and living there. We walked through the jungle of tiny streets (it is said that there are 9000 alleyways), past shops of bronze workers, bakers, tailors (all the tailors are men!), women doing hand embroidery, spices, meat (including camel), fish, vegetables, olives, chickens (live) and every so often, we would hear the yell of "Belek! Belek!" which meant a



donkey, often laden with packages, was coming down the path and it would be best to get out of the way – fast. You see everything type of person in the souk too. Besides the tourists, there are men in their djellabas, women with their heads covered, some also veiled, as well as local men and women in western wear. Someone described it as a constant swarm of humanity. In a good way.

We passed a restaurant called Café Clock which is quite famous for its food and views. It was closed for renovations, but we were not there to eat. On the side of the building, in a narrow alleyway called Derb Margana, just off Talaa Kebira (the mainstreet of the souk), is a small marble plaque that states that this was Maimonides' house. Our great Jewish philosopher, teacher, physician, lived in Fez in the 12<sup>th</sup> century – right on this spot.



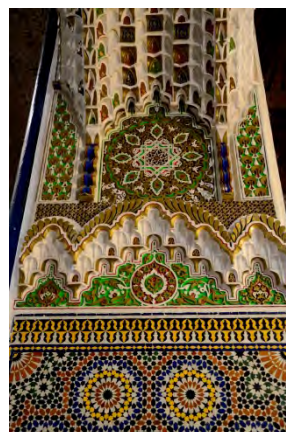
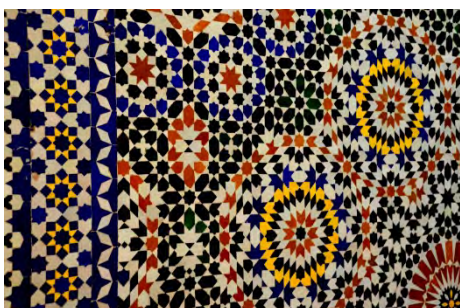
We passed a shop full in instruments, and Momo stopped to shake the hand of the man there. His friend makes musical instruments, and we stopped to make some music together.



We passed an area where they had bolts and bolts of cloth. And the largest scale I have ever seen. I started taking a picture, but the man there instead insisted I step on the scale. Good thing I have no idea how much each of those weights weighed.



Our next stop was an old palace (or at least it looked like a palace – in all honesty I can't remember what it once was). It is now a restaurant downstairs and upstairs – carpets! The downstairs had a large center room with a tiled fountain in the center. On either side was a spectacular, fully tiled from floor to ceiling, including the ceiling. Many years ago, they had a contest between the Andalusians and the Berbers to see who could design and build a more beautiful room. Momo told us that the owner would offer us lunch, but we were to decline as he had another restaurant in mind for us. We got the tour of the rooms, and then climbed up to the terrace for a view of Fez.



There was a beautiful flower garden on the terrace, and there were butterflies swarming all over the flowers.



After a few minutes, we were escorted down to a lower level that was covered, from floor to ceiling, in carpets. We were served mint tea and the show began. Each carpet had a story. Most were old Berber carpets, handmade. We learned about the different styles – embroidered, hand knotted, woven. Berber carpets only have fringe on one end as everything has a beginning and an end. The fringe on are the end. Negotiations and bargaining began. Phyllis and Ben and Andy and I had each bought our first Berber carpet.



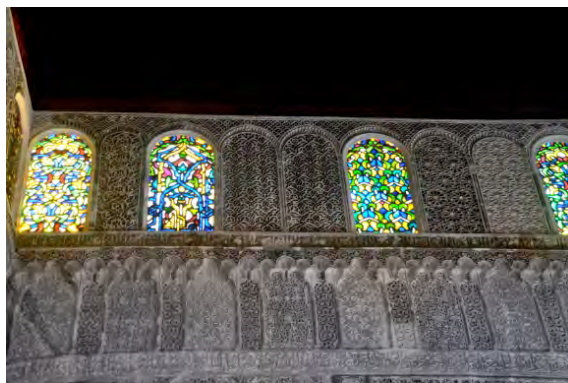
They took us and the carpets upstairs, where we paid and watched them wrap the carpet into a neat, tiny package that was soon closed. Interestingly, the person in charge of the money was a woman.



Satiated with carpets, it was finally time for food. We went to La Patio Blue, owned by the Cohen family. This was a Berber family who sometime in past generations inter-married with a Jewish family. This happened quite a bit between the Berbers and the Jews. I joked with him that since I am a bat-Cohen, we must be related. Once again we had all the wonderful Moroccan salads, but this time I had pastila (filo dough filled with shredded chicken with spices, covered with sugar and cinnamon. Yummy!



Now satiated with carpets and food, the next stop in the souk was the Bou Inania madrasa: a breathtaking 14th-century religious college. We were told that it is the best example of Islamic architecture a non-Muslim can see in Fez, since we are not allowed in any of the mosques. It had wooden walls elaborately carved with geometric patterns and Arabic calligraphy, fabulous mosaics, geometric cupolas crafted from cedarwood, and tiles carved with couplets from the Qur'an. By the way, it was in this spot that Robin Williams said – “No more history!”





We then went to a leather shop to climb up, up, up to the top balcony to see the tannery. When you first walk in, they give you a few sprigs of mint. And believe me, we kept them close to our noses. The tanneries in the medina still use the same techniques for making leather as those used in the Middle Ages. Men walk the narrow paths between huge vats of lye and colorful dyes, and trample the hides, up to their thighs in the acrid-smelling dye and turning their legs the color of burnt Saffron, Scarlet and canary yellow. The cow and goat hides are rinsed with creaking water wheels, the leather pieces are hung or placed on the roofs surrounding the vats to dry. And the stench? Even many stories up, the smell was horrible.

The main ingredients used to dye the leather are pigeon poo, sulphuric acid and cows urine!



We learned some interesting tidbits along the way. The doors to the houses are all double, that is a smaller door within a larger door. In the summer, the larger door would be opened to let air in. In the winter, the smaller door would be used to keep the warmth in. The hinges in the door tell a story about the family. For the Jews, when the door was opened, the hinge formed a hamsa. We saw windows up high that were covered with lattice, once used by the women so they could peek out without being seen by those in the street. We saw women buying fresh bread, and one baker gave us some to taste. We saw the "famous" cat lady.





Unesco regards Fes as a world heritage center. It is indeed a quite a city, full of history, full of beauty, full of color. Momo took us to people he said with the best craftsmen in town, and perhaps they were, but often it seemed like just another place to shop. Along the way though, we did learn about how carpets are made, we saw silver work, lace work, the tannery, bronze work, woodworking, bakeries, and basically just had a lot of fun.