

April 8, 2007

## The Soul of Morocco

By SETH SHERWOOD

A STRANGE device, ornate and arcane, looms over the passing mule carts and djellaba-robed masses that daily throng Talaa Kebira, the Broadway of [Fez](#), the 1,200-year-old Moroccan city. Built into the high wall of the 14th-century Bou Inania mosque, just across from a halal butcher and his hanging rows of skinned lambs, 12 finely sculptured windows hover over 13 carved wooden blocks, on which long ago rested 13 brass bowls.

At first glance, the ensemble might be another of the architectural flourishes that adorn Fez's many stunningly decorated medieval religious institutions. But things in Fez are rarely as simple as they seem. The windows, blocks and bowls are thought to have formed an elaborate clock, powered by running water, that sounded the hours of prayer — though no one knows this for certain.

The mechanism, if there was one, has been lost to time. Its operating principle cannot be fathomed. According to local legend, the enigmatic machine was designed by a magician.

The device is an apt symbol for Fez, a city whose cracked and dusty streets hide all manner of beautiful and forlorn relics. Like the water clock, Fez seems to have stopped marking time several centuries ago (cellphones and occasional soccer jerseys aside). And like the water clock, this mazelike city of minarets, shrouded figures and forgotten passages can seem impossible to decipher — yet tinged with a deep enchantment.

"It's a mysterious place," said Abdelfettah Seffar, a craftsman and cultural entrepreneur, as he stood on the roof of a beautiful but dilapidated 18th-century Moorish estate that he is restoring into a vast guesthouse and arts center. "It's even a mystical place."

Around us, crowing roosters and shouts in Arabic and French reverberated through the tangled streets — wholly bereft of automobiles and all but the simplest machines — as black smoke billowed in the distance from the city's old ceramic workshops. Farther off, beyond the ramparts, a late-afternoon glow illuminated the hillside tombs of the Merenid sultans, who presided over Fez's Golden Age in the 14th century.

"Fez is really just the medieval city that it was," Mr. Seffar went on, contrasting his hometown with its fast-developing jet-set sister and rival, [Marrakesh](#). "We are a little scared of what Marrakesh has become. Fez is the soul of [Morocco](#). It's the last bastion of what Morocco really is."

Faded but stately, crumbling but proud, the walled city of Fez might well be the largest and most enduring medieval Islamic settlement in the world. It is indisputably Morocco's spiritual and cultural heart.

You need only watch the daily procession of candle-toting mourners entering the tomb of the city's

founder, Moulay Idriss II — believed to be a great-great grandson of the prophet Mohammed — to feel the city's connection to its past. A glance at the ninth-century Karaouine University, widely considered the world's oldest operating institution of higher learning, reaffirms the impression.

As Marrakesh has opened to Tropezian swimming-pool clubs and branches of [Ibiza](#) night spots, Fez has turned ever deeper to its history, renovating architectural masterpieces and creating new festivals devoted to the city's rich culinary and musical traditions.

Yet even as it opens, Fez remains a hidden city. High windowless walls hem narrow passageways adorned with flowing Arabic scripts, impenetrable to the outsider. Many men are hooded, many women veiled. In its hundreds of mosques, barred to non-Muslims, worship proceeds beyond public view. Talismans protect from the unseen world of djinns.

An “enchanted labyrinth sheltered from time,” was the reverent assessment of the writer Paul Bowles, who lived in Tangier.

Fez speaks in symbols. Few places on Earth seem so imbued with buried meanings: in the patterns of hand-knotted carpets; in the tattooed faces of Berber peasant women; in the cosmic swirls of carved plaster in its [architecture](#); in the voices of traditional Sufi and Gnawa singers; in the techniques of expert craftsmen; in the ingredients of its cuisine.

Like a giant ancient text, Fez requires exegesis. To the casual observer, it might appear a frustrating jumble of bodies, animals, indecipherable voices, strange designs.

To the person who has learned its codes and its lore, the crowded confusion begins to make sense. Patterns form. Colors radiate with significance. Geometric shapes convey ideas. Every number contains a charm. Every flavor enfolds a bit of history.

“PEOPLE find Fez very confusing,” said Ali Alami, a curly-haired, black-robed guide, as he shepherded me through the ever-forking paths of the medina — the old city — one radiant blue day in February. (Fez also has a modern city, built by French colonials in the early 20th century, though it barely warrants a glance.)

Enfolding more than 9,000 streets and a million residents within its timeworn ramparts, the labyrinthine medina would inspire even a minotaur to contemplate a career change. A guide, both to its streets and its hidden layers, is de rigueur.

The first secret to figuring out Fez, Mr. Alami said, was what might be called the rule of five.

Geographically, “there are actually five concentric rings,” he said. “At the center are the religious places. After those are the working places, like the souks. Then come the residential areas. Then come the walls of the city. Beyond those are the [gardens](#) and the cemeteries.”

Gifted in English (from having studied Anglophone literature), Mr. Alami explained that this sacred number threads through much of daily life. Five calls to prayer structure each day. There are five pillars of Islam to observe. Each neighborhood has five obligatory institutions — a mosque, a school, a shared fountain, a communal bread oven and a hammam. Five types of design — marble, mosaics, carved cedar

wood, chiseled plaster and calligraphic inscriptions — typically adorn religious buildings.

In the 14th-century Sahrij medersa, one of Fez's many artfully constructed Koranic schools, Mr. Alami approached the dazzling mosaics on the walls and ran his finger along the design like a literary scholar reading poetry. Each of the five tile colors, he said, was purposely chosen: "Blue is the sky, white is purity, black is depth, yellow is wealth, green is Islam."

The sprawling colorful motif, he noted, radiated from a central eight-pointed star. The figure represents Allah, "because paradise is said to have eight doors" in the Koran, he said. "One design, repeated many times, stands for the unity of God."

All day I followed his flowing black robe, absorbing wise nuggets about bargaining ("never bargain with a woman; you will always lose") and the novels of Thomas Hardy ("destiny plays a large role"). Strolling through the spice and produce souks — where severed camels' heads on hooks announced one shop's daily special — Mr. Alami revealed the latent properties of orange-blossom water ("good for headaches"), walnut bark ("with saliva, it keeps your teeth white and strengthens the gums") and myriad other substances.

He admitted that even he gets lost sometimes.

"But the more you get lost, the more you discover," he said. "That's the beauty of Fez. There's a new smell, a new sound, a new thing around every corner."

From almost every corner, I soon noticed the sounds of handwork — the sawing of wood, the chiseling of stone, the loud click-clack of two-pedal looms. Some 30,000 craftsmen ply their trades in small stores and back-alley workshops.

Their skills are renowned. When the Muslims of [Paris](#) built the Paris Mosque, they used artisans from Fez. When [Mick Jagger](#) wanted a Moroccan bathroom, he did the same. (In fact, he hired Abdelfettah Seffar.) It's no wonder that Fez's two main museums, the Nejjarine Museum and the Dar Batha Museum, are devoted to the region's remarkable handicrafts.

Perhaps Fez's most impressive creations are made along the Fez River. All day long, trains of mules piled with fetid, slaughterhouse-fresh animal hides — goat, sheep, cow, camel — deposit their loads in a riverside complex of buildings. Out of the same structures stride customers in gorgeous and fragrant leather handbags and jackets. Such transformations are nothing new in the Fez tanneries, where men in dye-stained shorts pass days and years washing, treating, smoothing and coloring the skins in huge, ancient vats.

Distinguishable from blocks away, the foul smell of this age-old alchemy could almost fell a horse. And therein lies the magic. The stench, explained Abdelmalek el-Machour, a salesman in a leather shop overlooking the tanneries, came from a secret ingredient.

Before the skins are soaked in natural pigments — "red from poppies, orange from henna, brown from cedar wood, white from mint" — they must first be placed in vats "filled with limestone, water and pigeon excrement."

This last substance, he said, is delivered daily from pigeon coops all over the medina. (Some pigeons undergo a similarly extravagant metamorphosis, winding up in the delicious pastillas — savory-sweet pastry-like concoctions — served in medina restaurants.)

“It contains ammoniac,” he explained with the gravitas of a professor elaborating Newton’s Laws. “It makes the leather soft.”

For my indoctrination into Fez cuisine, I turned to Lahcen Beqqi. Barely 30 years old, this diminutive, ever-smiling chef has been at the helm of the kitchens of some of the top restaurants in Fez’s expanding dining scene and now fills a niche as a culinary guide and guru to outsiders. He teaches them how to buy produce in the souks, explains the interplay of Moroccan ingredients and helps them puzzle together a bona fide Fassi feast.

The bulk of his gastronomic know-how, he explained, was imparted by his mother, who organizes an annual festival of couscous in southeastern Morocco, near the small mountain village where Mr. Beqqi and his nine siblings grew up. “She’s the queen of couscous,” Mr. Beqqi said.

But his lessons teach much more than chopping and heating. While other cooks might look at a Moroccan tagine and see a conical clay vessel stewing with lamb, candied lemons, nuts and spices, Mr. Beqqi sees the multiethnic history of his homeland. Laying out a hot tagine one afternoon, Mr. Beqqi explained the dish’s diverse ancestry.

“First of all, there’s a Berber influence,” he said, referring to the indigenous people of North Africa — of which he is one — who predated the Arab arrival in the seventh century. “Tagine and couscous are both originally Berber dishes. There’s also a Roman influence, notably in the use of ceramic for cooking.”

The Arabs, he said, brought many of the spices from the East — ginger, turmeric, cinnamon, nutmeg. Morocco’s very good red wine, he said, is produced mostly in nearby Meknes and owes its existence largely to the French.

“There’s also a lot of influence in the methods of preparing ingredients that are of Jewish origin, especially in the use of preserved vegetables and fruit,” Mr. Beqqi said.

Such moments are glimpses into forgotten corners of Fez, which for centuries had a vibrant Jewish community. Even in the early 20th century, it was robust enough that [Edith Wharton](#) could chance across a Jewish wedding parade and admire the “long file of women with uncovered faces and bejeweled necks, balancing on their heads the dishes the guests have sent to the feast — kouskous, sweet creams and syrups, ‘gazelles’ horns’ of sugar and almond — in delicately woven baskets.”

Nearly all of Fez’s Jewish population subsequently emigrated to [France](#), [Israel](#) and beyond. Only a lone cemetery and a synagogue endure in the old Jewish quarter.

But Jews’ contribution to the city’s culinary culture is at last starting to be officially recognized. At last year’s Fès Festival of Culinary Arts — a four-year-old annual event that celebrates the city’s culinary traditions — the conferences included a seminar called “Jewish Cuisine in Fez.”

AS a twinkling blackness settled over the dark, blocky forms of the medina one evening, the muezzin's nightly cry gave way to other holy [music](#). From a house deep in the zigzagging streets, joyous voices rose into the rafters, paced by rhythmic clapping. Brahim Tidjani, a descendant of the prophet Muhammad and the leader of one of North Africa's most revered Sufi orders, was leading his long-robed brethren in ritual song.

For the Sufis, Islam's most mystical followers, Fez has long been a hallowed land. The nooks of the medina are filled with Sufi sanctuaries known as zaouias, where brotherhoods meet, worship and sing. Their musical chants are the soundtracks of Fez, the sonic analog of the city's deep spirituality.

During such gatherings, "People suddenly get up and dance as if on a wind or in a kind of spiritual intoxication," Dr. Faouzi Skali, a world-renowned Sufi scholar, told me over mint tea in the lobby of the neo-sultanic Jnane Palace hotel. "It feels like you're in a great expansion of consciousness, in a clear and intense light, and in a proximity to God."

In the early 1990s, in response to the Gulf War, Dr. Skali founded the city's Festival of World Sacred Music as a means of celebrating the world's diverse cultures and restoring some global harmony. Held every June, the event has mushroomed into a sort of sacro-palooza, drawing the likes of Turkish dervishes, Japanese drummers, the Indian sitar master Ravi Shankar and the Senegalese pop star Youssou N'Dour (a member of the Tidjani Sufi order). This year, it will celebrate the 800th birthday of the Persian mystic poet Rumi.

This month will also see the launch of another ambitious festival devised by Dr. Skali. The new event is even closer to his own heart, and that of his beloved city: The first annual Festival of Sufi Culture, from April 27 to May 2.

"This is a form of Islam that is very open to other cultures," he said, explaining his hope to invigorate Sufi faith in Fez and to introduce the movement's oft-shrouded traditions to an international audience.

"If people can visit a medersa and listen in several languages to discussions of Sufi poetry, calligraphy and music, they will have understood something about the soul of Islam," Dr. Skali said as his tea steamed fragrantly into the air. "And the soul of Fez."

*SETH SHERWOOD, based in Paris, is a frequent contributor to the Travel section.*

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)