

Starting from Bab Boujeloud, the Tala Kebira on the left hand side goes downhill, giving direct access to the souk (market) and exists at the other end of the medina. On the other hand starts Tala Saghira, near the beginning of which was a line of tightly knit small outdoor restaurants. They are so close to each other that it is hard to distinguish until you notice the different colours of the tablecloths for each. As everyone is busy with their duties, don't expect formalities, and you will share your table with other travellers, leading to interesting conversation. And this is where we had tagines (meat and vegetables slow cooked in a conical clay cookware) and cous-cous of the same quality as some indoor restaurants for half the price at Café Rachid. With that, some warm mint tea in the cold weather, a few conversations with travelling couples, a few pictures at Bab Bajeloud and getting lost on our way back; we could call our first evening in Fes quite entertaining.

The following morning, after a breakfast of bread, jam, eggs, and more mint tea, our first task was to get bus tickets to Chefchaouen, a town north of Fes. By then, our friend flew in from Marrakesh and joined us. The two main bus lines that tourists take are CTM and Suprator. A failed attempt to get CTM bus tickets from their counter at Nouvelle Ville pushed us to try other options at the bus stand near the medina. It was a 10-minute walk from Bab Boujeloud through the original medieval gate out into the outer section of the fort wall. On a bright sunny day, with petit red taxis running along the road, the world outside the fort wall seemed like another world. These taxis are shared taxis which run only within city limits and are

hailed from the roadside. Each city has a distinct colour of its petit taxis and it is different from that of grand taxis (also shared taxis but bigger and can run inter-city). A petit taxi, despite having four seats for passengers, is only allowed to take three. The drivers will pick you up only if it is on the same direction of the existing passenger. Think Uber Pool or Lyft Line, but much cheaper.

After getting our tickets to Chefchaouen for the next day from Abdou Voyage bus line, we hailed a taxi to Borj Sud (South Tower), which itself was quite the hurdle what with my broken French and the driver's Arabic, a middleman and a translation app. Morocco was a French colony. The official language is Arabic, but most educated people know French, and English is spoken infrequently, but enough for tourists to get by. The main reason to get to Borj Sud on the southern hills of Fes was to enjoy the panoramic view of the city. The tower, along with its northern counterpart (Borj Nord), was built to monitor and protect the city. What now stands on Borj Sud are parts of the tower structure. On one side is the view of Fes el Bali. On the other side, against the backdrop of rising hills and clear, blue sky, is a meadow of grazing sheep as it overlooks the Muslim cemetery downhill. You can easily pass half a day here lying on the grass with a book.

Having seen the medina from the top, we went back to Bab Boujeloud to explore the inside. The medina is home to residences, souks (shops), madrasas, mosques, and tanneries. While the souks in Marrakech are organised in sections by products sold, in Fes, it seemed much less organised, or so it seemed, given its maze like structure. You

may compare the souks in Fes to our new market, albeit on narrower streets. Djellabas (long attires made of camel wool), leather shoes, metal lanterns, painted ceramic plates and carpets hang on the walls and from the ceilings. The shops are small and filled to the brim. You can easily get distracted on your way to the next madrasa. Don't be afraid to bargain.

Talking about madrasas, the first major one you find just two minutes into the medina from Bab Boujeloud is Boulmania madrasa on Tala Saghira. You are greeted by a huge arabesque door. Inside the madrasa, the walls were adorned with detailed woodwork, calligraphy, and colourful tiles.

Another ten minutes further down on Tala Kebira is the world's continuously running university, the University of Al-Karaouine. It was founded by a woman named Fatima-al-Fihri who had come to Fes from a city name Kairouan in Tunisia. It was not until 1947 that the madrasa was integrated with the state education system and became a university. The outer part of the madrasa leads to the largest mosque in Africa. The courtyard, where men do their ablutions for prayers, is simple and peaceful in green roof tiles and white arches. Resting in the women's section, I almost fell asleep in the tranquillity of the afternoon.

Al-Karaouine, as I understood it, opens during prayer times. If you do not arrive at the proper time and have to wait, don't worry as the neighbouring small restaurant Fassi Medina Delci serves delicious skewers. Each skewer plate came with five types of side dishes!

A typical check mark on the tourist itiner-

ary in Fez is visiting Chouara, an 11th century leather tannery, which is the largest of the three tanneries inside the medina. Best seen in the morning, the tanneries have to be viewed from the balconies of one of the leather shops that circle it. You will be greeted by a strong smell of raw leather being tanned in hues. And to subdue it, you will be presented with a mint leaf to smell. The workers bear the heat to dye the hides of cow, sheep, goat and camel to perfection in stone vessels. The finished sun-dried leather is sold to craftsmen who, among many other leather products, make the famous Moroccan slippers called Babouches.

Old Fez really takes you back in time. It is intense; and yet manageable compared to the sprawling grandeur of Marrakesh. The food is definitely the best we had during our travels through the north to southeast Morocco. There are many other points of interest in Fez that you may want to explore i.e. Al-Attarine Madrasa (near Al-Karaouine), Nejjarine Museum of Wooden Arts and Crafts, Dar Batha (a former palace turned museum), Ibn Danad Synagogue (simple Orthodox Jewish synagogue), Andalusian mosque, and the Royal Palace to name a few. In hindsight, I wish we had stayed longer in Fez. I wish we had a chance to explore the city beyond the fortified walls. I wish we had an evening of listening to Arabian storytelling with the city as the backdrop.

By Kayenat Kabir

Photo courtesy: Kayenat Kabir

This is the first of a 5-part series of a journey through seven towns in Morocco.

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