

# Fascinating Fez

The bustling souks of the ancient Moroccan city guard a hidden treasure in the form of luxury riad Palais Amani – an oasis of tranquillity amid the magic and mayhem of the medina



Unwind in style: treat yourself to a relaxing outdoor massage



Relaxing: the rooftop terrace at Palais Amani overlooks a tiled courtyard filled with orange trees



Luxurious stylish rooms feature ornately tiled walls and floors

When the driver announced that we had reached our destination, we were convinced it was a mistake. The taxi was idling in the medina at a noisy square abuzz with busy cafés and hyperactive children – not the spot we'd expected to find a luxurious, five-star retreat with a reputation for peace and tranquillity.

But, after being led up a narrow stairway and through a few tight alleyways, we came to a large wooden door. A few knocks later and we were on the other side and walking through the most glorious garden decorated in mosaic tiling, flanked by pillars and bursting with orange trees. A beautiful fountain trickled away in the centre while traditional Moroccan music wafted from hidden speakers. It was suddenly clear why this is considered one of the best-kept secrets of the ancient city of Fez.

Palais Amani was a family home until the 1970s when the last generation moved away and a caretaker looked after it on their behalf. In 2006, today's owners – Brit Jemima Mann-



Chic hideaway: a floor-to-ceiling stained-glass window in the dining room and, right, the elegant salon

Baha and her Fez-born husband Adelali Baha – came across the property when they were looking for a way to invest in Morocco. The purchase was straightforward, the renovation less so – planning permission was granted within two weeks, but the condition of the building meant a prolonged period of works – and Palais Amani eventually opened in 2010.

It was, however, worth the wait. The refurbished property is set out in the traditional riad



style, with every focus turned inwards rather than towards the outside world. It now has 14 suites and bedrooms, which are made up of five junior suites, five luxury rooms, three senior suites and one grand suite. All rooms are traditionally decorated with white walls, tiled floors, wood panelling and pretty stained-glass windows.

Ground-floor rooms face into the garden, as does the restaurant and library. From here you will often see staff picking

fresh fruit from the trees. There's also a rooftop terrace with a bar that offers guests a spectacular panoramic view of Fez and the nearby mountains. During the warmer months, guests can enjoy their meals on the second-floor terrace while at night the restaurant is candlelit to provide a warm and romantic atmosphere.

The cuisine, meanwhile, is fit for royalty. The traditional Moroccan breakfast includes natural yoghurt with sultanas and fresh-fruit salad served with homemade jam and a selection of breads, cheese and vegetables – washed down with a glass of orange juice or refreshing mint tea. For lunch and dinner, guests can pick from a choice of two or three courses and can enjoy dishes including a refreshing avocado mousse with Moroccan salsa, slow-cooked leg of duck or tagine of the day.

## HIDE AND SOUK

Palais Amani presents such a peaceful ambience (you can't hear a sound from beyond the riad walls) that you can soon forget you are right in the heart



Heart of the medina: Palais Amani at nightfall

of open-air markets – the souks. A maze of narrow alleyways, the sprawling medina is bursting with shops, food stalls and cafés. Children, traders with donkeys and tourists all dash around the different quarters specialising in clothing, perfumes, food and much more. It seems there is nothing you can't buy, from exotic fruit and vegetables to beautiful handmade ceramics to live chickens. Each alleyway is an adventure, bringing you to a new and fascinating part of the medina.

On our visit we stopped at a stall serving soup made with broad beans and olive oil, served



Taste of the souk: the vibrant colours and ingredients of Moroccan cuisine

with bread and seasoned with chilli and cumin. A favourite Moroccan choice for breakfast, it's tasty, filling and cheap. And, as our seller advised us, it goes wonderfully with mint tea.

But if the hustle and bustle becomes too much, the traditional hammam at Palais Amani is the perfect place to get away from it all again. Tucked at the bottom of a set of marble steps lined with lanterns and rose petals, it is made up of a hot room, an exfoliation room and a relaxation room. The treatments will take you through traditional rituals of purification to ensure the best state of bodily wellbeing.

Friendly masseurs take good care of you and constantly check to see if the temperature is just right. We tried the Royal Hammam treatment, which ensures you are scrubbed, pampered and massaged from head to toe before being served a refreshing lemonade to cool off at the end. We left feeling truly relaxed and glowing.

Throughout our stay the staff at Palais Amani were excellent, getting the extra mile to make

every moment of our stay special. The day we were due to leave we had a 5.45am start, so they arranged a cold breakfast to be delivered to our room before we set off for the airport. As we made our way back through winding streets, we felt truly spoilt by all that the riad has to offer – and wondered if this hidden gem will be a secret for much longer.

Behiye Hassan

## FACT FILE

**Getting there** Ryanair provides the only direct flight to Fez – from Stansted on Thursdays and Sundays. Palais Amani is located about six miles from the airport and it offers transfers at £35 (£28) each way.

Or book through WEXAS Travel ([www.iad.com/traveloffers](http://www.iad.com/traveloffers)) or call 020 7838 5976.

**Accommodation** Rooms cost from £150 (based on two sharing) and include Moroccan breakfast. The Souk & Spa break is a three-night stay from £480 based on two sharing and includes daily breakfast, a shopping tour of the medina, a Royal Hammam treatment each and one three-course dinner. For other packages and breaks email [contact@palaisamani.com](mailto:contact@palaisamani.com) [www.palaisamani.com](http://www.palaisamani.com)