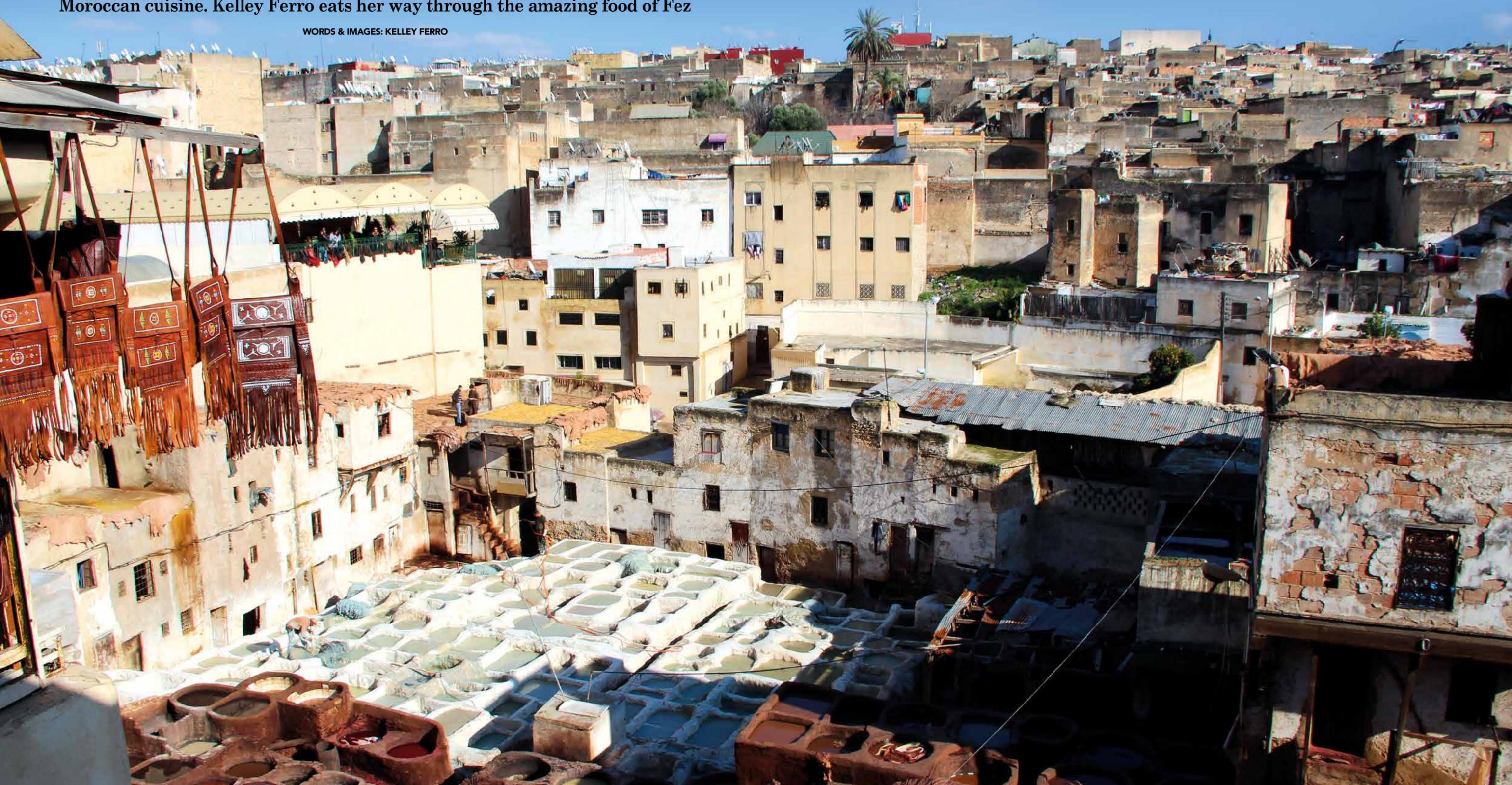


FROM STREET FOOD TO GOURMET COOKING

Whether lost in the busy, narrow alleys of souks or on the quieter streets of riads, find yourself swathed in a heady aroma of spices that heavily season Moroccan cuisine. Kelley Ferro eats her way through the amazing food of Fez

WORDS & IMAGES: KELLEY FERRO





No sense is left unassaulted in Fez. As I groggily got out of my airport transfer, I was catapulted awake by this city's sensory onslaught. Car horns blaring, hunks of meat sizzling, vendors shouting, school children giggling, street dogs barking—this was Fez and it was going to be noticed.

Fez doesn't get as much attention as its more glamorous sister city, Marrakech, but its medieval medina will transport you back in time. The maze of pedestrian-only streets snake through the oldest part of the city, and brim with a cacophony of sights, sounds and smells. What may seem like a narrow network of alleys is actually a busy thoroughfare and all of the day's business is done right there on the street. I squeezed,

duck, and tiptoed my way through the mayhem of daily life like a clumsy ballerina, chasing after my guide's deft steps.

Whenever I travel to a new destination, I seek out local markets. However in Fez, the markets came to me. Vendors sell live snails in woven baskets, casually knocking the intrepid runaway back down into the slowly moving pile. Camel heads dangle from stall windows, their goofy expression frozen on their face, while blood slowly drip drip drips onto the stones below. Piles of preserved dried meat line the street-side shop fronts, and hungry passers-by line up for a tub of this "khli" for breakfast.

Where am I? I thought as I rubbed my eyes. Had I just been transported by magic carpet to a

mythical city? It surely felt that way.

It's no surprise that this medina, called "Fes el Bali," was named a UNESCO World Heritage site.

As I struggled with my inner dialogue, my guide motioned for me to follow and stop blocking the steady morning foot traffic of the souk. Despite the smell of raw camel flesh and freshly caught fish, my stomach was grumbling after my flight from New York City, and my guide assured me he had just the place.

He expertly weaved through the crowds, around corners and disappeared into a doorway while I struggled to keep up. I paused outside, not sure if I was supposed to go inside. Out he popped, his hands holding two giant sugary donuts. Slightly pocked, steaming and impossibly fresh, he handed me

1. A meat stand specialising in camel

2. Fish & shark for sale in the medina

3. A mound of "khli"

4. The Chouara Tanneries kaleidoscope

my first bite of Fez. I was addicted. The soft doughy sfenj tasted homemade—not overly sweet inside but coated with glittering white sugar.

"Delicieux!" I exclaimed. He nodded smiling, not surprised. Sjenf is Arabic for "sweet sponge," which couldn't be a more accurate name.

We went on to explore more of the medina with our eyes, ears, nose and last but not least, our taste buds. My high school French being shaky and his English somewhat limited, we communicated through food—my favourite language.

Then there were the olives. Oh my god, the olives. If you've met me, you'd know that I don't like olives. This is true for pretty much every olive I've had except for the olives of Fez (okay, Italy had some exceptional

varieties too). Man-sized mounds of olives overflowed out of baskets, shining with every shade of deep black to verdant green. Some juicy and plump the size of a plum; others chewy and wrinkled, and so salty that my mouth puckered.

To wash it down, we nibbled on the flat disks of bread, khobz, which were handmade daily, mostly by women in community ovens. Dry, coarse but wholesome, these disks are as much food as they are flatware in Moroccan cuisine. They transport chickpeas stewed with cumin, the greenest olive oil and fluffy goat cheese, as perfect utensils—their mildness balancing the potent flavours of Morocco.

Bread is staple found at almost every meal and in a variety of shapes, textures and styles and



msemen was a particular treat. My guide brought me to his brother-in-law's stand to experience this bread treat. After they exchanged a few laughs and quick words, I was holding a square flatbread, fried in a pan until golden brown, and served with a lump of rapidly melting butter on top. No carb was left unappreciated in this city.

After we twisted around the souk for a few hours—and I swear, we were never on the same street twice—we ducked into a dimly lit restaurant for a proper meal. Lunch is the most important meal of the day in this city. Children run home from school, family and friends gather and an ample spread is laid out, complete of course, with bread. The earthy, wheat variety was my preferred vehicle for sopping up the creamy hummus and rich harira that

started our meal. Harira is a lentil and vegetable stew, often made with either chicken or lamb, and every iteration I had of it was just drool-worthy. My guide washed down his lunch with a Coca Cola, but I had to go with mint tea—a beverage the Moroccan have perfected, right down to the elaborate ritual of the long pour, meant to impress foreigners. It worked.

Though I was thoroughly satiated by the smorgasbord I had on the streets, Fez's evolving upscale food scene should not to be ignored. Le Maison Bleu, a breathtaking Riad located on one of the city's unassuming streets, housed a modern cooking school within its historic walls. Maison Cordon Bleu, the well-known culinary institution, welcomed me for a one-on-one

1. Baking daily bread in a community oven

2. Date, nuts and dried fruit vendors abound

3. Students getting a "khoubz" breakfast to go

4. A lunch feast in Fez

cooking class with local professional chef Nada. She was to teach me how to prepare three traditional Moroccan dishes: a harira as the starter, a chicken tagine and an orange blossom-scented bastilla, or cream pastry, for dessert. As an enthusiastic home cook, I was eager to learn the secrets of what goes into these pots and pans that give Moroccan food all that flavour without tasting fussy.

Nada didn't speak English, but again, we conversed through the universal language of food. There were many laughs, especially when I was squeamish while handling a whole chicken. I hate to say it, but I usually buy chicken in neat packages, breasts and legs trimmed and ready for the oven. I didn't really know where to begin with a freshly plucked whole bird.



WHERE TO SHOP

Leather Shoes

Fez is home to the famed Chouara Tanneries, a must stop on your trip. There you can see the stunning, rainbow-coloured sight of dying leather in large outdoor vats and the many shops sell handmade leather goods—and excellent Moroccan slippers!

Silk Scarves

Medina is filled with brightly hued shops selling scarves, kaftans and other sumptuous clothing. Haggling is a must as the shop vendors expect it!

Pottery

The blue and white pottery is iconic of the city and exquisitely crafted by hand. Be sure to pack it extra carefully as it is fragile but definitely worth bringing home. If you want a more in-depth experience, you can visit the Tamegroute Pottery Collective to see where the pottery is crafted to develop an appreciation for this exquisite art.

Nada expertly wielded her chef's knife through the ginger, garlic cloves, carrots and onions, all necessary ingredients in the tagine. Simultaneously, starting up the harira by adding more onions with chopped tomatoes, dry red lentils and pinches of cinnamon, turmeric and paprika.

She tasked me with the simpler job of chopping butternut squash, potatoes and zucchini for the tagine. While I chopped, she sauteed the onions until translucent, adding in large chunks of chicken when they were just right. After the chicken sizzled fragrantly, I helped her by tossing in the chickpeas, harissa, raisins, dried apricots and slivered almonds.

And now, the ultimate secret to the Moroccan chicken tagine: waiting. The stew was on low heat so that the ingredients slowly cooked, infusing the savoury flavours together in a way that only time can provide. It took around 45 minutes of stirring (and stirring and stirring) until Nada was satisfied. Patience was not listed on the ingredients but that was definitely something that I was lacking in my personal cupboard.

Nada turned her attentions to the ktefa, or "milk pastry." Also labour intensive, this delicate dessert is made by layering paper thin dough with fried almonds and creme anglaise. Working quickly, Nada fried up the thin layers, laughing at my botched attempts and politely setting my broken layers aside. She perfumed the creme anglaise with fragrant orange blossom water and the stacked ktefa was complete. With hours of hard work in the kitchen under our belt, it was time to dig into our creations!

Served in the open-air courtyard inside this ivy-clad riad, I went from chef's assistant to pampered guest. Immediately, I felt myself absorb into the spoonfuls of harira, satisfying me only just enough before I had to dip my spoon in again and again.

Next, the aromatic chicken stew hit my nostrils in an intoxicating whiff as the servers whisked off the top of the conical tagine serving dish. The transformation from raw ingredients in the kitchen to this quintessential Moroccan dish before me was astounding. I had been a



1. Cooking with a local chef, Nada

2. Orange blossom water perfumed "ktefa"

part of it but still, I was mystified at how simple chicken and vegetables could taste so good.

And finally, my sweet tooth was indulged by the crispy ktefa. Just light enough to make you feel like you can, and should, eat the whole thing, the silky creme anglaise hung onto the edges of the savoury fried dough, giving a delicious crunch to each bite. Nada's addition of the

floral notes of orange blossom elevated the entire dessert to something fit for an emperor.

Fez may be a chaos of many smells, many sights and many tastes, but this ancient city's food has achieved a calm balance of precise flavours that comes from centuries of culinary traditions. With each bite, I understood the dichotomy that is Fez.★



STREET FOOD TIPS: 🍴

Get a Local Guide
They seem to know everyone, speak the language and will help you navigate the confusing streets. They also know all the good local food stalls so you won't be led astray.

Take time for Lunch
Real, local food in Fez is not fast food. Cosy up in a restaurant, make yourself comfortable, enjoy the Moroccan hospitality and savour your mint tea as plate after plate is piled on the table in front of you.

Don't Miss Dessert
I think some of the tastiest sweet treats come from Fez's local street vendors. From French inspired macarons to nut-studded baklava to honey dipped sfenj "donuts," dessert should be celebrated when you are here.

FACT BOX ⓘ

GETTING THERE

Mohammed V International Airport located in Casablanca offers the most flight options. The most direct flights from Singapore and Kuala Lumpur are on Emirates and Etihad carriers and will include one stopover in Dubai or Abu Dhabi.

GETTING AROUND

Hire a transfer from the airport to Fez. The ride is about 3 hours but stop on the way at the archaeological site of Volubilis for a break and get a dose of history. Once in Fez, the medina is pedestrian only so bring good walking shoes and get ready to explore!

CLIMATE

Fez has a Mediterranean climate, with cold and often rainy winters and hot, dry summers (June to September). For the most comfortable time to visit, try shoulder seasons like April and May or October for cool days and minimal rainfall.

CURRENCY

Moroccan Dirham; 1 Moroccan Dirham = S\$0.15/RM\$0.45

TIME ZONE

GMT +0hr

CALLING CODE

Morocco's calling code is +212

LANGUAGE

Arabic is the most common language and you can find Berber dialects in the small towns outside of the city. French is also spoken. English is minimal among locals.

VISA

Singapore citizens do not require a visa but Malaysians do. Apply for one at the Morocco embassy in Kuala Lumpur.