

# Imperial Cities, Middle Atlas & the East



## الأطلس المتوسط والشرق رهش ى روتارپما

If you were to look for Morocco in microcosm, this region would take the title. Its diversity runs the spectrum from ancient cities and ruins to grand mountain vistas and desert oases.

The plains of the north have acted as Morocco's breadbasket for centuries, feeding the rise of cities whose culture went on to dominate the rest of the country. The Romans were the first to get in on the act, and left remains at Volubilis as testament.

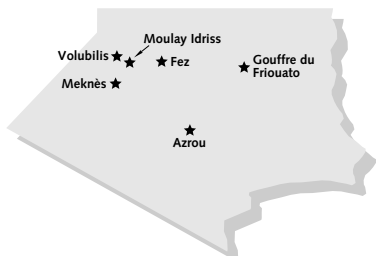
The streets of Fez's World Heritage medina rank high on the must-see list of any visitor to the country. Getting lost amid the souqs and alleys is an unforgettable (and often unavoidable) way to spend a day. Meknès, another imperial capital and near neighbour to Fez offers a more pocket-sized version of the medina experience.

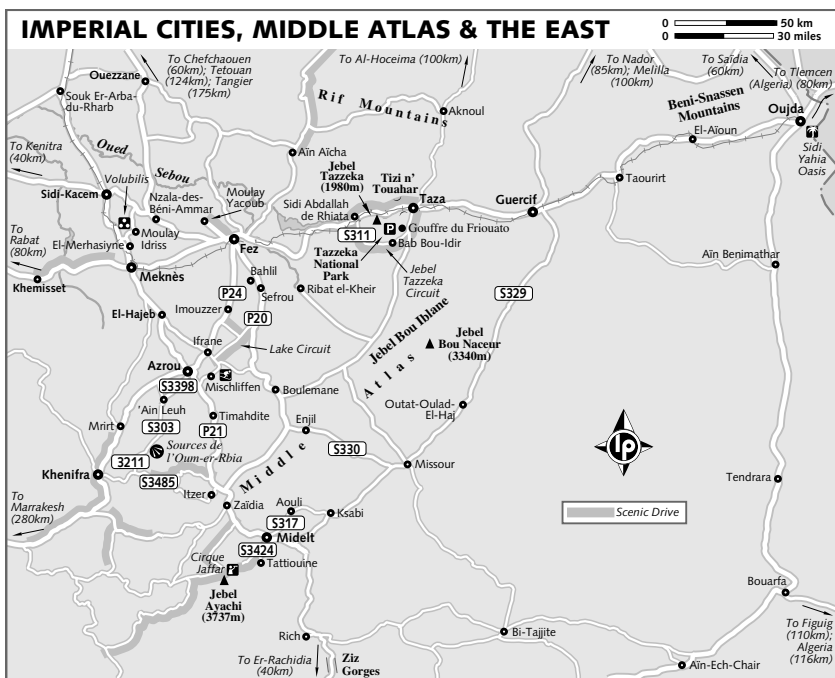
To the south, the land rises into the limestone range of the Middle Atlas, which are home to the Barbary ape, Morocco's only monkey. The area is made for hiking, and in winter the wealthy still come here to ski.

Across the mountains, towns like Midelt herald drier climes, and the distinctive kasbahs of the south begin to make an appearance. The desert isn't far away, and by the time you reach the oasis of Figuig, the olive tree has long given way to the date palm.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Dive into the warren of medina streets looking for souqs and souvenirs in historic **Fez** (p228)
- Enjoy the sounds of the sublime at the **Fes Festival of World Sacred Music** (p242)
- Travel back in time in the mosaic-strewn Roman ruins of **Volubilis** (p266)
- Explore the out-sized imperial architecture of **Meknès** (p254)
- Spend a day and night on pilgrimage in the holy town of **Moulay Idriss** (p268)
- Hike out into the green wooded slopes of the Middle Atlas around **Azrou** (p272)
- Make like a troglodyte in the weird caverns of **Gouffre du Friouato** (p282)





## CLIMATE

The climate of this region varies widely between the mountainous area to the south and the dry flatlands of the valley (formed between the Middle Atlas and Rif Mountains) to the north and east. Around Fez and Meknès and in the east, summers are scorching hot, with temperatures averaging around 30°C in July and August. Levels of rainfall in the summer are minuscule, mimicking the climate of the desert further south. During the rest of the year, the climate is not as harsh. Winter and spring are pleasantly mild, and it rains enough to keep the countryside green.

The region comprising the Middle Atlas, by contrast, exhibits a typical mountain climate. The winters are generally cold and snowy, while the summers are cool and pleasant. For this reason, the mountains provide a popular retreat for the residents of Fez and Meknès who want to escape the heat in summer, or take advantage of the snow to ski in winter. Springtime is lush with wildflowers, but cold and wet in the mountains; snow often covers the highest peaks as late as June.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

The train line connects the region's major cities to the coast, with direct links from Tangier, Rabat and Casablanca. There are also direct flights from Europe – primarily France – to Fez and Oujda. Fez and Oujda link into Royal Air Maroc's internal flight network, via Casablanca.

## GETTING AROUND

From Marrakesh and Casablanca, the train line runs east through Meknès, Fez and Taza all the way to Oujda. Travelling around the mountainous Middle Atlas, however, requires catching a bus or hiring a grand taxi.

# IMPERIAL CITIES

## FEZ

pop 1 million

In recent years Fez has boomed as a tourist destination. Money has poured into the city, from foreigners buying up riads in the medina to new parks and fountains in the ville nouvelle. If you believe the travel and

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style pages of the Western media, Fez has become the new Marrakesh.

Tell a Fassi that however, and they'll laugh in your face. Fez as the new anywhere? This is an old and supremely self-confident city that has nothing to prove to anyone. Dynasties and booms have all come and gone in the city's 1200-year existence, and Fez will be around long after the next fashion has burned itself out. Fez is the spiritual and cultural centre of the country, and the pulse of life here Morocco's symbolic heartbeat.

Founded shortly after the Arabs exploded across North Africa and Spain, Fez was shaped by each of the great dynasties and by its population's roots in Muslim Spain and the Arab east. The fertile countryside allowed the city to grow quickly, and nurture a reputation for culture and learning. Any Fassi will be quick to point out that the city created the world's first university, centuries before Oxford and Cambridge were a twinkle in anyone's eye. With learning came Islamic orthodoxy. Green – the colour of Islam – is also the colour of Fez, endlessly repeated on its tiles and doors.

Such authority means that the city's allegiance, or at least submission, has always been essential to whoever held Morocco's throne. Morocco's independence movement was born here, and when there are strikes or protests, they are always at their most vociferous in Fez.

For visitors, the medina of Fès el-Bali (Old Fez) is the city's great drawcard and it has an impressive checklist of selling points: Morocco's first World Heritage site, and both the world's largest living Islamic medieval city and the biggest car-free urban environment on the planet. But statistics count for little when you first encounter the medina up close. It's an assault on the senses, a warren of narrow lanes and covered bazaars fit to bursting with aromatic food stands, craft workshops, mosques and an endless parade of people. Old and new constantly collide – the man driving the donkeys and mules that remain the main form of transport is likely to be chatting on his mobile phone, while the ancient skyline is punctuated equally with satellite dishes and minarets.

Although much work is being done to restore or consolidate parts of the medina, swathes of it remain in poor repair, and

scaffolding is everywhere. Over 14,000 buildings are listed as being in need of rehabilitation, and for all the romance of medina life to visitors, many residents have been happy to sell up to foreigners to swap their sometimes medieval living conditions for a modern apartment in the *ville nouvelle*.

For the visitor, the trick is to dive straight in. It is initially overwhelming, but once you adjust to the pace of the city, Fez reveals its charms in most unexpected ways. Seemingly blind alleys lead to squares with exquisite fountains or filled with the rhythmic hammer-music of copper beaters, while a set of exquisite carved wooden doors might as easily lead into a *medersa* (theological school) or restored riad. Getting lost in Fez is where the fun really starts.

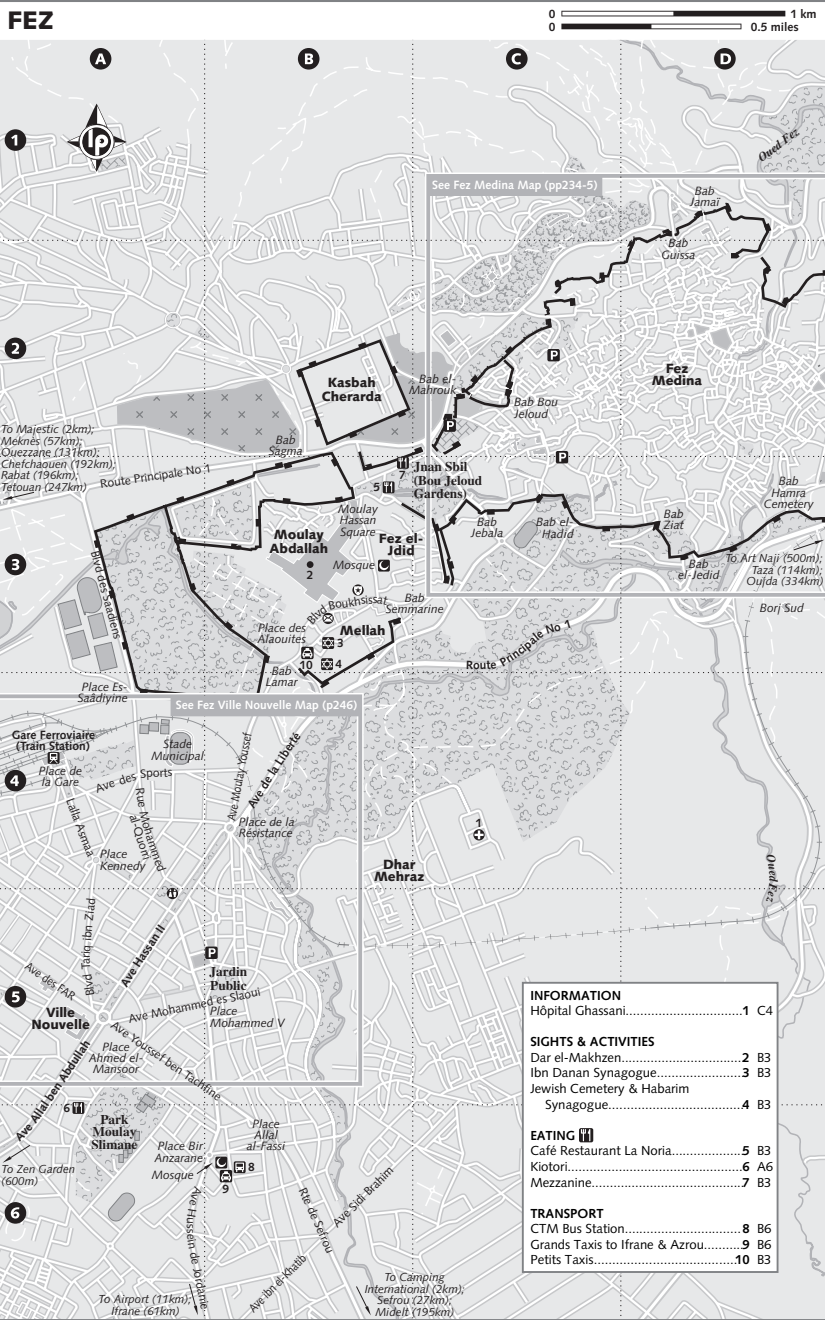
## History

In AD 789, Idriss I – who founded Morocco's first imperial dynasty – decided that Oualili (Volubilis) was too small and drew up plans for a grand new capital. He died before the plans were implemented, however, so credit for the founding of Fez is often awarded to his son, Idriss II, who carried out the will of his father. The memory of Idriss II is perpetuated in his *zawiya* (religious fraternity based around a shrine) in the heart of Fez el-Bali.

By 809, Fez was well established. Its name is believed to come from the Arabic word for axe; one tale relates that a golden pickaxe was unearthed here at the start of construction.

The city started as a modest Berber town, but then 8000 families fleeing Al-Andalus settled the east bank of the Oued Fez. They were later joined by Arab families from Kairouan (Qayrawan) in modern-day Tunisia, who took over the west bank, creating the Kairouine quarter. The heritages of these two peoples formed a solid foundation for future religious, cultural and architectural richness. Idriss II's heirs split the kingdom, but Fez continued to enjoy peace and prosperity until the 10th century.

Over the next centuries, the fortunes of Fez rose and fell with the dynasties. Civil war and famine – incited by Berber invasions – were relieved only by the rise of the Almoravids. When that dynasty fell from power around 1154, they fled Fez and



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destroyed the city walls as they went. Only when the succeeding Almohad dynasty was assured of the Fassis' loyalty were the walls replaced – large sections still date from this period.

Fez continued to be a crucial crossroads, wielding intellectual rather than political influence. With the Kairaouine Mosque and University already well established, it was *the* centre of learning and culture in an empire stretching from Spain to Senegal. It recovered its political status only much later, with the arrival of the Merenid dynasty around 1250.

The archaeological legacy of the Merenids is still evident today – from their exquisite *medersas* to the building of the self-contained Fez el-Jdid (New Fez). As the Merenids collapsed, successive battling dynasties were unable to retain power for any notable period, although sultans often resided here in their attempt to maintain control over the north.

During the 19th century, as central power crumbled and European interference increased, the distinction between Marrakesh and Fez diminished with both effectively serving as capitals of a fragmented country. Fez retained its status as the 'moral' capital. It was here, on 30 March 1912, that the treaty introducing the French and Spanish protectorates over Morocco was signed. Less than three weeks later, rioting and virtual revolt against the new masters served as a reminder of the city's volatility.

The French may have moved the political capital to Rabat, but Fez remains a constituency to be reckoned with. The Istiqlal (Independence) Party of Allal al-Fassi was established here; many of the impulses towards ejecting the French originated here; and the city was the scene of violent strikes and riots in the 1980s.

As one of Morocco's most traditional cities, Fez is generally regarded with a certain amount of awe, perhaps tinged with jealousy, by the rest of the country. Indeed, a disproportionate share of Morocco's intellectual and economic elite hail from here and it's a widely held belief (especially among Fassis) that anyone born in Fez medina is more religious, cultured, artistic and refined.

Fassi womenfolk, also considered to be the country's most elegant and its most

gifted cooks, are much sought after as wives. When the news came out that Mohammed VI's new bride was from Fez, the locals were not in the least surprised.

## Orientation

Fez can be neatly divided into three distinct parts: Fez el-Bali (the core of the medina) in the east; Fez el-Jdid (containing the Mellah – Jewish quarter – and Royal Palace) in the centre; and the Ville Nouvelle, the modern administrative area constructed by the French, to the southwest. Nowadays, the city's expanding population has filled out the ville nouvelle and has spread to the hillsides to the north and south.

Fez el-Bali is the area most interesting to visitors. The main entrances are Bab Bou Jeloud and Batha in the northwest corner. The ville nouvelle is laid out in typical French colonial style with wide, tree-lined boulevards, squares and parks. Blvd Mohammed V – interrupted by Place Mohammed V – runs north-south and bisects the main road Ave Hassan II. Most restaurants and midrange hotels, as well as the post office and banks are along these streets.

Frequent local buses connect the ville nouvelle with the medina via Ave de la Liberté, with two routes then splitting to run north and south along the old city walls, past either Bab el-Jedid or Bab el-Mahrouk. It is also possible to walk between the two – following Blvd Moulay Youssef from Ave Hassan II will take you there via the *mellah* and Royal Palace (Dar el-Makhzen). Allow about 30 minutes from Place Florence to Bab Bou Jeloud.

## MAPS

*Fez from Bab to Bab: Walks in the Medina* by Hammad Berrada is a great book of walking tours in the Fez medina. It details 11 different walks, allowing readers to discover otherwise unknown corners and courtyards amidst this labyrinth. *Fes Medina Tourist Circuits Guide* accompanies the self-guided walking tours marked throughout the medina.

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Librarie Fikr al-Moasser** (Map p246; 15 Rue du 16 Novembre) Stocks a small range of foreign-language titles, including travel guides and coffee-table books.

**CULTURAL CENTRES**

**Institut Français** (Map p246; ☎ 035 623921; www.institutfrancaisfes.com; 33 Rue Loukili) Organises a packed program of films, concerts, exhibitions and plays.

**INTERNET ACCESS**

**Cyber Batha** (Map pp234-5; Derb Douh; per hr Dh10; ☎ 9am-10pm) Has English as well as French keyboards.

**Cyber Club** (Map p246; Blvd Mohammed V; per hr Dh6; ☎ 9am-10pm)

**Téléboutique Cyber Club** (Map p246; Blvd Mohammed V; per hr Dh7; ☎ 9am-11pm) Above téléboutique on corner.

**MEDIA**

**L'Agenda** Free bimonthly listings magazine (in French) produced by the regional tourism board. Available at the tourist office and some riads and restaurants.

**The View From Fez** (<http://riadzany.blogspot.com>) Essential news and views blog for keeping up to date with what's happening in Fez.

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**Hôpital Ghassani** (Map p230; ☎ 055 622777) One of the city's biggest hospitals; located east of the ville nouvelle in the Dhar Mehraz district.

**Night Pharmacy** (Map p246; ☎ 035 623493; Blvd Moulay Youssef; ☎ 9pm-6am) Located in the north of the ville nouvelle; staffed by a doctor and a pharmacist.

**MONEY**

There are plenty of banks (with ATMs) in the ville nouvelle along Blvd Mohammed V, virtually all offering foreign exchange. There's not much happening in the medina, with these useful exceptions:

**Banque Populaire** (Map pp234-5; Ave des Français; ☎ 8.45am-noon & 2.45-6pm Mon-Thu, 8.45am-noon Sat) ATM and foreign exchange.

**Société Générale** (Map pp234-5; Ave des Français; ☎ 8.45am-noon & 2.45-6pm Mon-Thu, 8.45-11am Fri, 8.45am-noon Sat) ATM and foreign exchange.

**POST**

**Main post office** (Map p246; cnr Ave Hassan II & Blvd Mohammed V) Poste restante is at the far left; the parcels office is through a separate door.

**Post office** (Map pp234-5; Place Batha) Located in the medina, also has an ATM.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

There is no tourist information situated in the medina.

**Syndicat d'Initiative** (Tourist Information Office; Map p246; ☎ 035 623460; Place Mohammed V)

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

**Carlson Wagonlit** (Map p246; ☎ 035 622958; fax 035 624436) Behind Central Market; useful for flights and ferries.

**Dangers & Annoyances**

Although Fez is safe in comparison to Western cities of the same size, it's not really safe to walk on your own in the medina late at night, especially for women. Knife-point robberies are not unknown. Hotels and many restaurants are usually happy to provide an escort on request if you're out late.

Fez has long been notorious for its *faux guides* (unofficial guides) and carpet-shop hustlers, all after their slice of the tourist dirham. *Faux guides* tend to congregate around Bab Bou Jeloud, the main western entrance to the medina, although crack-downs by the authorities have greatly reduced their numbers and hassle.

Even many official guides will suggest visitors turn their tour into a shopping trip, and the pressure to buy can be immense. Fez's carpet sellers are masters of their game. If you really don't want to buy, it might be best not to enter the shop at all: once the parade of beautiful rugs begins, even the hardest-minded of tourists can be convinced to buy something they didn't really want (honeyed words suggesting that you could always sell the carpet later on eBay at vast profit should be treated with extreme scepticism). It's also worth remembering that, any time you enter a shop with a guide, the price of the goods immediately goes up to cover their commission. Shopping in Fez needn't be a battle – indeed it's best treated as a game – but it's worth being prepared.

The touts who used to hang about Fez train station to pick up custom have now taken to boarding trains to Fez, often at Sidi Kacem junction. Be particularly aware of overly friendly young men approaching you claiming to be students or teachers returning to Fez – they'll often have 'brothers' who have hotels, carpet shops or similar.

**Sights****THE MEDINA (FÈS EL-BALI)**

Travelling from the ville nouvelle to Fès el-Bali is like literally stepping back in time. The essential footprint of the medina hasn't

changed in nearly a millennium, as the surrounding hills have constrained expansion – the last big growth of the traditional medina was in the 13th century with the construction of Fès el-Jdid (p237). Today, around 150,000 Fassis still call this maze of twisting alleys, blind turns and hidden souqs home, while tourists call it one of the most mind-boggling places they'll visit in Morocco.

Bab Bou Jeloud in the west is the main entrance to the old city, with two main streets descending into the medina's heart. On your left as you enter is Talaa Kebira (Big Slope), with Talaa Seghira (Little Slope) on your right. Both converge near Place an-Nejjarine, continuing to the Kairaouine Mosque and Zawiya Moulay Idriss II – the heart of the city. From here, it's uphill to reach the northern gates of Bab Guissa and Bab Jamaï, or head south towards Bab R'cif – one of the few places where vehicular traffic penetrates the old city.

While we've listed the major sights below, they're really only a small part of the charm of the medina. It pays to give yourself a little random exploration, and simply follow your nose or ears to discover the most unexpected charms of Fez's nature. Following your nose will lead you to women with bundles of freshly cut herbs, children carrying trays of loaves to be baked in the local bakery or a café selling glasses of spiced Berber coffee. Around the next corner you might find a beautifully tiled fountain, a workshop making wooden hammam buckets, a cam-

el's head announcing a specialist butcher, or just a gang of kids turning their alley into a football pitch. Everywhere, listen out for the call to prayer or the mule driver's cry '*balak!*' (look out!) to warn of the approach of a heavily laden pack animal.

Navigation can be confusing and getting lost at some stage is a certainty, but look at this as part of the adventure. A handy tip is to note the 'main' streets that eventually lead to a gate or landmark – just follow the general flow of people. Ask shopkeepers for directions, or you can fall back on the eager kids happy to rescue confused foreigners for a dirham or two.

### Kairaouine Mosque & University

Both the largest mosque in Africa, and possibly the oldest university in the world, this **mosque complex** (Map pp234–5) is the spiritual heart of Fez and Morocco itself. Established in 859 by Tunisian refugees and expanded by the Almoravids in the 12th century, it can accommodate up to 20,000 people at prayer. It's so large that it can be difficult to actually see: over the centuries the streets and houses of the Kairaouine quarter have encroached on the building so much they disguise its true shape. The mosque has recently been restored, but non-Muslims are forbidden to enter and will have to be content with glimpses of its seemingly endless columns from the gates on Talaa Kebira and Place as-Seffarine. Better still is to take the view from any vantage point over the medina: the huge green

### LIFE IN THE LEATHER DISTRICT

Tanneries provide perhaps the greatest illustration of how resolutely some parts of Morocco have clung to practices developed in medieval times. Moroccan leather, and more particularly the Fassi leather produced in Fez, has for centuries been highly prized as among the finest in the world. One type of leather, a soft goatskin used mainly in bookbinding, is simply known as 'morocco'.

It's claimed that tanning leather in Morocco goes back several millennia, and little has changed since medieval times. Donkeys still labour through the narrow street carrying skins to dye pits, which are still constructed to traditional designs (with the addition of modern ceramic tiles). Tanners are organised according to ancient guild principles, with workers typically born into the job. Unfortunately, health and safety principles are similarly old-fashioned, and health problems among the workers, who are knee-deep in chemicals all day, are not uncommon.

Rank odours abound at the tanneries, and the delicate tourist who comes to view the work will often be offered a sprig of mint to hold to their nose to take the edge off the pong (rain also dampens the smell). Major components in processing the skins are pigeon poo and cow urine (for potassium) with ash; more delicate ingredients such as indigo, saffron and poppy are added later for colour.







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pyramidal roof and minaret immediately announce their presence.

### Medersa el-Attarine

Founded by Abu Said in 1325 in the heart of the medina, the **Medersa el-Attarine** (Map pp234-5; admission Dh10; 9am-6pm, closed during prayers) was designed as a separate annexe to the Kairouine Mosque. Halls for teaching and a modest masjid flank the central courtyard. Displaying the traditional patterns of Merenid artisanship, the *zellij* (tile-work) base, stuccowork and cedar wood at the top of the walls and on the ceiling are every bit as elegant as the artistry of the Medersa Bou Inania.

### Medersa Bou Inania

A short walk down Talaa Kebira from Bab Bou Jeloud, the **Medersa Bou Inania** (Map pp234-5; admission Dh10; 9am-6pm, closed during prayers) is the finest of Fez's theological colleges. It was built by the Merenid sultan Bou Inan between 1350 and 1357. The *medersa* underwent extensive restoration a few years ago, and the results are amazing: elaborate *zellij* and carved plaster, beautiful cedar *mashrabiyyas* (lattice screens) and massive brass doors.

Whereas most *medersas* just have a simple prayer hall, the Bou Inania is unusual in that it hosts a complete mosque, complete with a beautiful green-tiled minaret. The mihrab (niche facing Mecca) has a particularly fine ceiling and onyx marble columns. It's thought that the *medersa* required a larger-scale mosque because there was none other nearby at the time.

### Nejjarine Museum of Wooden Arts & Crafts

Opened in 1998, this **museum** (Map pp234-5; 035 740580; Place an-Nejjarine; admission Dh20; 10am-7pm) is in a wonderfully restored *funduq* – a caravanserai for travelling merchants who stored and sold their goods below and took lodgings on the floors above. Centred on a courtyard, the rooms are given over to displays of traditional artefacts from craftsmen's tools, chunky prayer beads and Berber locks, chests and musical instruments (compare the traditional wedding furniture with the modern glitzy chairs outside in Place an-Nejjarine). Everything is beautifully presented, although the stunning building gives the exhibits a run for their money. The rooftop café has great views over the medina. Photography is forbidden.

### Batha Museum

Housed in a wonderful 19th century summer palace, converted to a museum in 1916, the **Batha Museum** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 634116; Rue de la Musée, Batha; admission Dh10; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Wed-Mon) houses an excellent collection of traditional Moroccan arts and crafts. Historical and artistic artefacts include fine woodcarving, *zellij* and sculpted plaster, much of it from the city's ruined or decaying *medersas*. It also has some fine Fassi embroidery, colourful Berber carpets and antique instruments.

The highlight of the museum is the superb ceramic collection dating from the 14th century to the present. These are some fantastic examples of the famous blue pottery of Fez. The cobalt glaze responsible for the colour is developed from a special process discovered in the 10th century.

The museum's Andalucian-style garden offers temporary respite from the bustle and noise of the medina, and the spreading holm oaks provide a backdrop for the open-air concerts the museum hosts during the Sacred Music and Sufi Culture festivals (p242).

### Belghazi Museum

The private **Belghazi Museum** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 741178; 19 Derb Ghorba; admission Dh40; 🕒 9am-6.30pm), owned by the family of the same name, contains a collection that almost rivals that of the Batha Museum. The 17th-century palace in which it is housed provides a perfect backdrop for the exquisite carpets, jewellery, weapons and wedding chests on display. Much of this stuff is actually for sale if the price is right.

The palace also contains a shady courtyard café, and terrace with good views over the city. Though buried in the guts of the medina, the museum is well signposted from the Kairaouine Mosque and Place as-Seffarine.

### Tanneries

The Chouwara **tanneries** (Map pp234-5; Derb Chouwara, Btlda) are one of the city's most iconic sights (and smells). Head east or northeast from Place as-Seffarine and take the left fork after about 50m; you'll soon pick up the unmistakable waft of skin and dye that will guide you into the heart of the leather district (the touts offering to show you the way make it even harder to miss).

It's not possible to get in amongst the tanning pits themselves, but there are plenty of vantage points from the streets that line them, all occupied (with typical Fassi ingenuity) by leather shops. Each shop has a terrace that allows you to look over the action. Try to get here in the morning when the pits are awash with coloured dye. Salesmen will happily give an explanation of the processes involved and will expect a small tip in return or, even better, a sale. While this might feel a little commercialised, you probably won't find a better selection of leather in Morocco, and prices are as good as you'll get.

### FEZ EL-JDID (NEW FEZ)

Only in a city as old as Fez could you find a district dubbed 'New' because it's only 700 years old. The paranoid Merenid sultan Abu Youssef Yacoub (1258-86) purpose-built the quarter, packing it with his Syrian mercenary guards and seeking to isolate himself from his subjects. Even today almost half of the area is given over to the grounds of the Royal Palace, still popular with Mohammed VI. Its other main legacy is the architectural evidence of its early Jewish inhabitants.

The entrance to **Dar el-Makhzen** (Royal Palace; Map p230; Place des Alaouites) is a stunning example of modern restoration, but the 80 hectares of palace grounds are not open to the public. Visitors must suffice with viewing its imposing brass doors, surrounded by fine *zellij* and carved cedarwood. Note the lemon trees to one side – tour guides are prone to plucking the fruit to demonstrate the juice's astringent cleaning properties on the palace gates.

### Mellah

In the 14th century Fez el-Jdid became a refuge for Jews, thus creating a *mellah* (Jewish quarter). The records suggest that the move was orchestrated to offer the Jews greater protection. And they certainly did enjoy the favour of the sultan, repaying him with their loyalty during conflict. Around 200 Jews remain in Fez, but all have now left the Mellah in favour of the ville nouvelle. Their old houses remain, with their open balconies looking onto the streets a marked contrast to Muslim styles.

The southwest corner of the *mellah* is home to the fascinating **Jewish Cemetery & Habarim Synagogue** (Map p230; donations welcomed; ☎ 7am-7pm), where the sea of blindly white tombs stretches down the hill; those in dedicated enclosures are tombs of rabbis. One of the oldest, high up against the north wall, is that of Rabbi Vidal Hasserfaty, who died in 1600. On the slope below, the large tomb with green trimming is that of the martyr Solica. In 1834 this 14-year-old girl refused to convert to Islam or accept the advances of the governor of Tangier and subsequently had her throat slit.

The Habarim Synagogue, at the far end of the cemetery, now houses a museum with a whole mishmash of articles, including some poignant photos and postcards, left behind after the Jewish exodus. If the museum is locked, the gatekeeper will open it for you.

The gatekeeper can direct you to the nearby **Ibn Danan Synagogue** (Map p230; donations welcomed), which was restored with the aid of Unesco in 1999. There are no set opening times as such, but someone will usually let you in and point out the main features, including a *mikva* (ritual bath) in the basement. **Rue des Mérinides** (Map p230) is lined with houses which are distinguished by their wooden and wrought-iron balconies, as well as by their stuccowork.

### Jnan Sbil (Bou Jeloud Gardens) & Baghdadi Square

These **gardens** (Map pp234-5; Ave Moulay Hassan), also known as Jnane Sbil, have been providing welcome green space for well over a century. They're a good halfway break between the *mellah* and Bab Bou Jeloud, and were undergoing extensive renovation and replanting when we visited. Continue on from here to reach **Baghdadi Square** (Map pp234-5), an open-air market on the edge of the medina.

### NORTH OF THE MEDINA

Viewed from the surrounding hills, Fez's jumbled buildings merge into a palette of white-flecked sandstone. Only here and there do the green-tiled roofs of the mosques and *medersas* provide a hint of colour. For one of the best panoramas of the city, head up to **Borj Nord** (Map pp234-5). Like its counterpart on the southern hills (Borj Sud), Borj Nord was built by Sultan Ahmed al-Mansour in the late 16th century to monitor the potentially disloyal populace of Fez.

Further up, the **Merenid tombs** (Map pp234-5) are dramatic in their advanced state of ruin, although little remains of their fine original decoration. The views over Fez are spectacular and well worth the climb. Look for the black smoke in the southern part of the city, marking the potteries. It's best at dusk as the lights come on and the

### THE FOUNTAINS OF FEZ

It seems like you can barely turn a corner in the Fez medina without coming across a public fountain (*seqqāya*) – Fassis have historically had something of an obsession for them. It was largely the Almoravid (1061–1147) and Almohad (1147–1248) dynasties that were the great water engineers. To supply water to their cities they diverted rivers, created lakes and constructed vast canal systems. While they did this across the country, fountain construction really reached its peak in imperial Fez.

There are said to be well over 60 public fountains inside the medina. Along with the hammam, they are usually located near the neighbourhood mosque. Many were paid for by princes and wealthy merchants. Some of these fountains are simple basins against a wall. The majority are beautifully decorative structures of coloured tiles, often under a canopy of intricately carved wood. One of the finest is the an-Nejjarine fountain. Built in the 18th century, it features *zellij* (tilework) and stucco that form patterns as delicate as lacework.

Many fountains are still used for water collection and washing widely by their neighbourhoods. Those you see abandoned are likely to suffer from a broken mains pipe somewhere beneath the city; many are directly spring fed. And if you think that a love of fountains is restricted to the medina, check out the ultramodern and sparkly fountains recently installed along Ave Hassan II in the ville nouvelle.

### WHAT'S ON IN THE VILLE NOUVELLE?

Compared to the sensory assault provided by the medina, the ville nouvelle can seem boring: very modern, but with little actually going on. But for most Fassis, the ville nouvelle is the place where it's at: far more interesting and progressive than crumbling Fez el-Bali. In the last few years, huge amounts of money have been poured into the area, which can best be seen along the long boulevard of Ave Hassan II, with its manicured lawns, palm trees, flower beds and fountains. A stroll here is a favourite evening pastime, when it's packed with families with kids, trendy teenagers and courting couples. Stop for an ice cream or just sit on a bench and people-watch: this is the 'real' Morocco as much as any donkey-packed lane in the old city.

muezzins' prayer calls echo round the valley. A taxi from Bab Bou Jeloud should cost around Dh7; it's a 10-minute walk back downhill to the medina.

### Activities

#### HAMMAMS

For more opulent hammam experiences Riad Maison Bleue (p244) and Riad Laaroussa (p244) both have excellent private spas, with treatments starting from Dh300.

Convenient, foreigner-friendly and recently renovated, **Ain Azleten Hammam** (Map pp234-5; Talaa Kebira, Ain Azleten; ☎ men 6am-noon & 8.30-11pm, women noon-8.30pm) is a good option if you want to try a public hammam. A session costs around Dh40, with attendants on hand to help you slough away the dirt.

A beautiful example of traditional bathhouse architecture, **Seffarine Hammam** (Map pp234-5; Seffarine Sq; ☎ men 6am-midnight, women 8am-10pm) was recently chosen for restoration by the Venice Institute for Urban Sustainability. Sessions cost around Dh40.

#### MASSAGE

**Message Maroc** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 068 823040; www.messagemaroc.com in French; 9 Derb Moulay Ismail; ☎ by appointment) offers a variety of treatments, including Ayurvedic massage, reiki and reflexology, along with meditation and kundalini yoga.

### Walking Tour: 'Mazing Medina

This route (Map p240) takes you from Bab Bou Jeloud to the Kairouine Mosque, then north to the Sofitel Palais Jamaï. It could take a few hours or all day, depending on the number of distractions.

Unlike much of the rest of the city walls and gates, the main entry, **Bab Bou Jeloud** (1), is a recent addition, built in 1913. Pass

through it and you come upon a hive of activity. The touts and *faux guides* that used to pester visitors here have largely disappeared, but if you need to get your bearings, the street cafés here as the street turns towards Talaa Seghira are excellent places for people-watching.

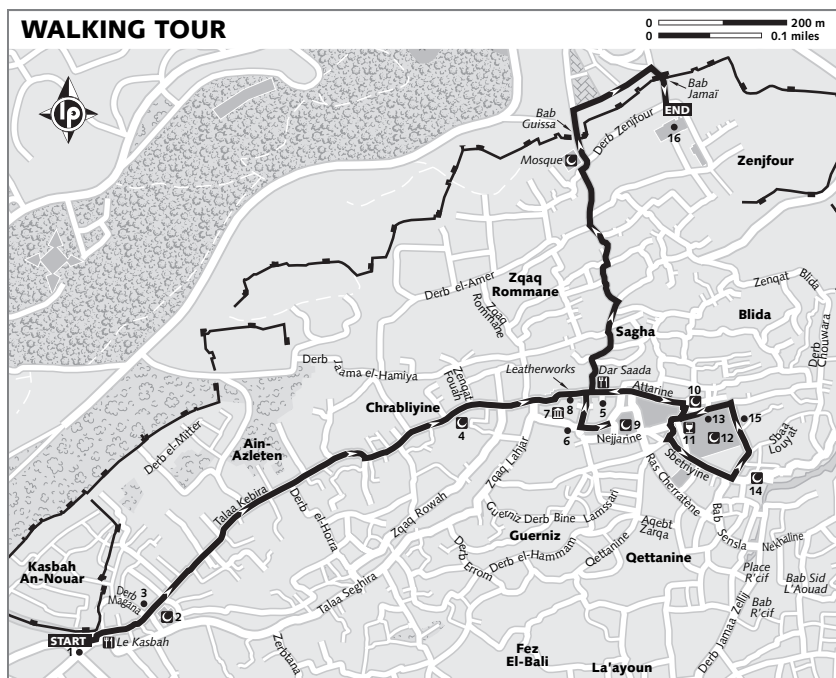
For the tour, take the first left and then right downhill along Talaa Kebira. This part of the street is a produce market – watch out for the camel butchers displaying the heads of their wares. Where the produce ends you're at the **Medersa Bou Inania** (2), which represents the Merenid building style at its most perfect.

Opposite the entrance to the *medersa* (above eye-level) is a famous 14th-century **water dock** (3) designed by a clockmaker and part-time magician. Carved beams held brass bowls with water flowing between them to mark the hours, but the secret of its mechanism apparently died with its creator.

About 400m from the Medersa Bou Inania, as you go around an unmistakable dogleg, you'll catch sight of the pretty, green-tiled minaret of the **Chrabliyyine Mosque** (4; named for the slipper-makers who can still be found working in this area) straight ahead.

Still heading downhill, past the shoe sellers and a group of leatherworkers, about 230m from the Gazleane mosque, look out for a right turn onto Derb Fkahrine and a sign indicating the entrance to a tiny tree-filled square known as the **henna souq** (5) – if you reach the Dar Saada restaurant, you've gone too far. Nowadays there are more stalls here selling blue Fez pottery than henna, which Moroccan women use to decorate their hands and feet for events such as weddings.

Exiting the henna souq the same way you entered, head south with your back to Dar Saada. After roughly 50m a right turn brings



### WALK FACTS

**Start** Bab Bou Jeloud

**End** Palais Jamai

**Distance** 3 km

**Duration** two to three hours

you into **Place an-Nejarine (7)**, a larger square dominated by one of the city's most beautiful fountains and a most impressive *funduq* (hotel) – now beautifully restored and transformed into the **Nejarine Museum of Wooden Arts & Crafts (7)**. The lanes immediately north of the museum form part of the **Souq an-Nejarine (8)**; Carpenters' Souq), where you'll see craftsmen putting finishing touches to glittering thrones used in wedding ceremonies.

From Place an-Nejarine, continue south and turn left almost immediately down a lane, ducking under the bar that prevents the passage of mules and donkeys. The lane leads between stalls piled high with candles and other offerings, to the entrance of **Zawiya Moulay Idriss II (9)**. You may peer into the bright, tiled interior, although non-Muslims may

not enter. Moulay Idriss II is highly revered – to Fassis this is the heart of their city.

Afterwards, the simplest thing is to backtrack to Dar Saada on Talaa Kebira. Follow the lane east – over a slight hummock and past haberdashers' stalls – until it ends at a T-intersection about 100m later, where you'll find the **Medersa el-Attarine (10)**.

On emerging from the *medersa*, turn left (south). After you've passed the **Pâtisserie Kortouba (11)** – a handy pit stop – the shops come to a sudden end at the walls of the great **Kairaouine Mosque & University (12)**. The university claims to be the world's oldest and is surpassed only by Al-Azhar in Cairo as a centre of Muslim learning. Among its many luminaries was the pre-eminent historian Ibn Khaldun, and you may catch sight of his successors hurrying to lessons.

As you proceed along the university walls anticlockwise, the sound of metalworkers leads you into another small and attractive square, **Place as-Seffarine (13)**; Brass-makers Square). The air rings with the sound of metalwork. Look out for the huge pans and plates that are hired out for wedding parties.

With the university walls (and the entrance to its library) still on your left, there is the small **Medersa as-Seffarine (14)**, with a studded cedar door, on the square's east side. Built in 1280, it is the oldest *medersa* in Fez, but is in an advanced state of disrepair.

Still following the mosque walls anticlockwise (now heading north) keep a lookout on the right for the 14th-century **Funduq Tastawniyine (15)**, with its rickety wooden galleries. Originally the preserve of businessmen from Tetouan, it served for centuries as a hotel and warehouse for travelling merchants.

If you continue around the Kairouine, you'll pass its ornate north door before arriving back where you started beside the *patiserie*. From here you can retrace your steps uphill to Bab Bou Jeloud. If you prefer an alternate route, turn south off Talaa Kebira at Ain Allou – this street turns into Talaa Seghira, the *medina*'s other main thoroughfare.

Otherwise, return only as far as Dar Saada, then turn north to reach Bab Guissa in the northern *medina*. Stick to the wider streets and you'll reach a little square with a disused cinema on its north side. Take the lane heading northwest and keep going up – you'll pass plenty of donkeys carrying sacks from the local cement merchant.

As you near Bab Guissa you can see the late 19th-century **Sofitel Palais Jamaï (16)**. What is now a luxury hotel was built by Sidi Mohammed ben Arib al-Jamaï, the grand vizier to Moulay al-Hassan I. Set in well-watered gardens, the former palace is a wonderful place to rest and admire the view. You can catch an onward *petit taxi* from Bab Guissa.

## Courses

### COOKERY

If you want to pick up some culinary skills on your trip, chef **Lahcen Beqqi** ([www.fescooking.com](http://www.fescooking.com)) offers a *bouquet garni* of different single- and multiple-day Moroccan cooking classes, from around Dh300 to Dh400 per person. Classes start with shopping in the souq for ingredients, and cooking your meals in a *riad* kitchen.

### LANGUAGE

**DMG Arabophon** (☎ 035 603475; [www.arabicstudy.com](http://www.arabicstudy.com); courses Dh2100-8400) runs intensive programs in Darija and modern standard Arabic, as well as shorter courses aimed at travellers: a half-

day 'Curious Explorer' (Dh325) and a one-week 'Serious Explorer' (Dh750). DMG also offers courses in Tamazight Berber.

The **Arabic Language Institute** (☎ 035 624850; [www.alif-fes.com](http://www.alif-fes.com); 3-/6-week courses Dh5200/9400) offers longer courses aimed at foreigners, and can assist in finding accommodation for students in apartments or with local families. Lessons are held at the **American Language Center** (Map p246; ☎ 035 624850; 2 Rue Ahmed Hiba).

## Tours

The Fassi authorities have woken to the difficulties tourists have in navigating the *medina*, and introduced a series of well-signed self-guided walks through the old city. There are five to choose from, each highlighting different aspects of traditional Fez:

**Dark blue** Monuments and souqs

**Green** Andalusian palaces and gardens

**Orange** Fès el-Jdid

**Pale blue** Andalusian quarter

**Purple** Artisanal crafts tour

The head-height signs are easy to follow, showing the direction of the next major landmark, and there are excellent English information boards at regular intervals.

An alternative is to hire a guide. As well as pointing out incredible architecture and clandestine corners, guides can answer cultural questions, help overcome language barriers, and – perhaps most importantly – ward off other would-be guides. A full-day tour with an official guide costs Dh250 – always ask to see identification.

The quality of guides can vary considerably, so communication is very important to ensure that you get the best out of the experience. If you're not interested in shopping, say so firmly at the outset, although be aware that the guide who won't take a tourist to a single shop probably hasn't been born yet. It may be necessary to pay an extra Dh50 to Dh100 as a 'no shopping' supplement. If possible, get a recommendation for a guide from other travellers; alternatively, arrange one through the tourist office, *Syndicat d'Initiative* or the larger hotels.

For those short of time, the tourist office offers panoramic tours of Fez, taking in all the best viewpoints of the city, including Borj Nord and Borj Sud, and the potteries. A 45-minute tour costs Dh200.

## FÈS FESTIVAL OF WORLD SACRED MUSIC

Every June the **Fès Festival of World Sacred Music** ([☎](tel) 035 740691; [www.fesfestival.com](http://www.fesfestival.com)) brings together music groups and artists from all corners of the globe, and has become one of the most successful world music festivals going. Based on the pluralism of Moroccan Sufism, the festival has attracted big international stars such as Ravi Shankar, Youssou N'Dour and Salif Keita. Concerts are held in a variety of venues, including the Batha Museum and the square outside Bab Bou Jeloud. While the big names are a draw, equally fascinating are the more intimate concerts held by Morocco's various *tariqas* (Sufi orders). Fringe events include art exhibitions, films and talks at literary cafés. In 2001 the festival was praised by the UN as a major event promoting dialogue between civilisations. Tickets can go like hot cakes and accommodation books up far in advance – so organise as far ahead as possible if you plan on attending.

## Festivals & Events

Fez has several festivals that are worth being aware of when you're planning your trip. The Fès Festival of World Sacred Music (see above) is the city's internationally famous drawcard, but there are two newer festivals that bear a visit.

The **Festival of Sufi Culture** ([www.par-chemins.org](http://www.par-chemins.org)) debuted in 2007 and hosts a series of events every April including films and lectures, and some spectacular concerts held in the garden of the Batha Museum with Sufi musicians from across the world. In July, the **National Festival of Berber Culture**, run in association with the Institut Royal de la Culture Amazigh, aims to promote and protect Amazigh (Berber) culture. Its program includes musical performances as well as lectures and workshops.

Fez's biggest religious festival is also one of the country's largest. The *moussem* (festival in honour of a saint) of the city's founder, Moulay Idriss, draws huge crowds. Local artisans create special tributes and there's a huge procession through the medina. Traditional music is played and followers dance and shower the musicians (and on-lookers) with orange- or rosewater.

Just outside Fez, Sefrou's Cherry Festival every July is worth a daytrip (see p254).

## Sleeping

Fez doesn't lack for variety in its accommodation options, with everything from simple pensions to boutique riads. Your main choice is whether to stay in the colour and chaos of the medina, or a petit taxi ride away in the ville nouvelle (where budgets tend to go further). Room rates in Fez are in the higher (city) bracket – see p450 for details. Booking in advance is advised dur-

ing high season, and especially during the World Sacred Music Festival in June, when supplements also often apply. Note that although prices here are listed in dirhams, many riads actually list (and charge) rooms in euros, so be aware of currency exchange rates when booking.

The agency **Fez Riads** ([☎](tel) 072 513357; [www.fez-riads.com](http://www.fez-riads.com)) is a good place to find accommodation in the medina, and donates a percentage of profits to local restoration projects.

## MEDINA Budget

Most of the cheapest options are in touching distance of Bab Bou Jeloud, placing you right in the middle of the action. Unless noted, rooms have shared bathrooms at this price range – and don't expect hot water at the lower prices.

**Pension Talaa** (Map pp234-5; [☎](tel) 035 633359; [pacohicham@hotmail.com](mailto:pacohicham@hotmail.com); 14 Talaa Seghira; s/d Dh90/120) A small but well-formed little pension right in the middle of things on Talaa Seghira. There are just handful of compact rooms so it's often full, but it gets good reviews from guests for the price and has friendly staff.

**Hôtel Cascade** (Map pp234-5; [☎](tel) 035 638442; 26 Rue Serrajine, Bab Bou Jeloud; r Dh160, dm Dh80, breakfast Dh20) One of the grand-daddies of the Morocco shoestring hotels, the Cascade still keeps drawing them in. You don't expect much for the price – it's all pretty basic – but if you need to stretch your budget and want to meet plenty of like-minded travellers then this might be the place for you.

**Pension Batha** (Map pp234-5; [☎](tel) 035 741150; 8 Sidi L'Khayat, Batha; r incl breakfast Dh250) Slightly downhill from the main taxi rank in Batha, this is a very likeable place to stay. It's a tall, thin building with lots of stairs leading up



to a nice terrace. Rooms are simple, but the place has a homely atmosphere. Not to be confused with the nearby Hôtel Batha.

**Pension Kawtar** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 740172; pension\_kaw@yahoo.fr; Derb Taryana, Talaa Seghira; s/d Dh200/300, d with bathroom Dh350, dm Dh60, breakfast Dh25) A relatively new player, and well-signed in an alley off Talaa Seghira, the Kawtar is a friendly Moroccan family-run concern, as much a home as a hostel. Amazingly, there are 10 rooms tucked into the place – those on the ground floor are a bit gloomy, but they get better the closer you get to the roof terrace. Great value for the price.

**Pension Campini** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 637342; pensioncampini@gmail.com; Rue Campini, Batha; s/d Dh200/300) A short walk away from the Batha Museum, this is a quieter location slightly outside the medina proper. Rooms are en suite and airy, and had just had a new lick of paint when we visited. There's a small terrace, with views just over the walls of Bou Jeloud Gardens.

**Dar Bouânania** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 637282; 21 Derb Bensalem, Talaa Kebira; s/d Dh200/500, s/d with shower Dh300/600, q Dh400, breakfast Dh30) A popular choice with backpackers, this is as close as tight budgets will get to a riad. A traditional house with courtyard, *zellij* tiles and painted woodwork, it has several well-sized rooms on several levels, although as all face inward they can be quite dark at times. Shared bathrooms are clean, and there's a roof terrace. Good value, although we've received several readers' letters about guides being let in to tout for business. There's a high-season supplement of Dh100 per person.

### Midrange

Many midrange options in the medina, especially the riads and dars, edge close to the top-end price bracket. A few places offer simpler rooms at manageable prices. Rates here include breakfast.

**Hôtel Batha** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 741077; fax 035 741078; Place Batha; s/d Dh395/520; 🚽 🚿) The great location, room capacity and pool keep the Batha perennially busy. It's a reasonably modern set-up, with fair rooms and cool quiet areas to retreat from the hustle of the medina. It's good value, although the eccentric attitude towards providing hot water – only at particular, often inconvenient hours – has been a frustration for many years now.

**Dar Iman** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 636528; www.fes-hostel.com; 6 Derb Benazahoum, Talaa Kebira; s/d/tr

Dh600/700/960; 🚽 🚿) A well-restored 400-year-old townhouse off the main drag, this is great value for the price. All the style points you'd expect are in order, from *zellij* to tall wooden doors, but it's all been put together in a laid-back manner: less is definitely more here, and the slightly creamy walls provide a more mellow backdrop than the harsh white of other places. Only the lack of views from the terrace count against this otherwise friendly, welcoming place.

**Dar El Hana** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 635854; www.moroccangetaway.com; 22 Rue Ferrance Couicha, Chrablyiyine; r from Dh800; wi-fi) If there's a cosier and more intimate guest house in Fez than this dar, we'd like to know about it. There are just three rooms (sleeping a maximum of eight altogether), all charmingly finished and presented: we fell for the 'secret' windows allowing you to spy on the street, and the open-air shower on the terrace. This is a real home from home, and it's possible to rent out the entire house so you can fully indulge your own fantasies of medina life.

**Riad Lune et Soleil** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 634523; www.riadluneetsoleil.com; 3 Derb Skalia, Batha; r Dh800-1200; 🚽 wi-fi) Hospitality is all at this riad, and the husband-and-wife owners will sweep you past the lemon trees in the courtyard to make you impossibly at home. Each room is a cornucopia, filled with the evidence of a lifetime of collecting everything from old postcards and embroidery to carvings and metalwork – and each item with a story behind it. It's not a museum though; there's plenty of comfort too, and some rooms have their own Jacuzzi. You might just make it downstairs for dinner – from one of the best kitchens in the medina.

**Dar Seffarine** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 071 113528; www.darseffarine.com; 14 Derb Sbaalouyat, Rcif; r from Dh859; 🚽 wi-fi) If you check into Dar Seffarine, ask to see the photo album of its restoration – it's the only way you'll believe that such a fabulous building was ever a complete wreck. The central courtyard is positively opulent, with pillars and painted plasterwork reaching skywards, while rooms are more understated with simple plain wood and fabrics to decorate them – only the suite with the painted domed ceiling makes a palatial exception. There's a pleasant terrace, and a more intimate side courtyard off the kitchen to relax in. The dar is a short walk from Bab Rcif.

**Dar Dmana** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035740917; [www.riadardmana.net](http://www.riadardmana.net); 21 Rue Sourmas; r/ste Dh1200/1800; 🏠) With 14 rooms, this dar successfully bridges the gap between traditional Moroccan house and hotel. The ground floor has decor that's stepped out of a palace restaurant, but the high covered courtyard (with fine carved cedar balustrade) keeps things airy. After all this, the rooms are more modern and restrained, but with enough Moroccan styling to remind you where you are.

### Top End

**Riad Mabrouka** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 636345; [www.riadmabrouka.com](http://www.riadmabrouka.com); 25 Derb el-Mitter, Ain Azleten; r Dh900-1150, ste Dh1300-1600; 🏠 📶) An old favourite and early player on the Fez riad scene, Mabrouka is a meticulously restored, Arab-Andalucian townhouse. The courtyard, with its stucco, mosaics, magnificent cedar doors and babbling fountain, opens onto a pleasant garden of flowers and trees. There are seven rooms, decked out with tiled floors and Berber fabrics. Enjoy a simple breakfast or an all-out Moroccan feast on the veranda overlooking the medina.

**our pick** **Dar Attajali** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 637728; [www.attajalli.com](http://www.attajalli.com); Derb Qettana, Zqaq Rommane; r from Dh1000-1500; 🏠 📶) A relative newcomer, Dar Attajali is a magnificent testament to the art of patient and sympathetic restoration. Everything has been done to maintain the building's integrity, using a minimum of modern techniques and chemicals, while producing a supremely comfortable guest house. Decoration is set off with gently colour-themed Fassi fabrics – colours further reflected in the planting of the terrace roof garden, and all designed to get you instantly relaxing (as if the organic, locally sourced breakfasts didn't get your day off to a good enough start).

**Dar Roumana** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035741637; [www.darroumana.com](http://www.darroumana.com); 30 Derb el-Amer, Zkak Roumane; r Dh1000-1700; 🏠 📶) Dar Roumana continues to win fans, with its beautifully restored and subtly decorated interiors, and gorgeous roof terrace that commands the finest views over the medina (perfect for taking breakfast or sampling the well-thought-out dinner menus). Management are welcoming rather than overwhelming, with close attention to detail: there are even personalised toiletries in the bathrooms.

**Riad 9** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 947610; [www.riad9.com](http://www.riad9.com); 9 Derb Lamside, Zqaq el-Maa; r Dh1200-2400; wi-fi) This

is a tiny gem of a guest house, with just three rooms, but plans to extend into the property next door to double its capacity. The decoration is idiosyncratic but lots of fun – witness the room with dentist's chairs and wall full of antique luggage. At night, the many windows looking into the courtyard are lit with candles, turning the whole into a glittering jewel box.

**Riad Maison Bleue** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 741873; [www.maisonbleue.com](http://www.maisonbleue.com); 33 Derb el Mitter, Ain-Azleten; s/d from Dh1700/1900; 🏠 📶 📶) You have to be careful not to get lost in this riad – it's four houses knocked together and even extended across the street. Start in the orange-tree-clad Andalucian-style courtyard, then find your way to any of the 13 rooms, possibly stopping en route at the private spa, bar, dining salon and fashionably dark and plush 'Blue Lounge', where there is more eating and drinking on offer. If you don't want to crash in your room, chill on the terrace with its fine views to Borj Nord.

**Riad Fès** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 947610; [www.riadfes.com](http://www.riadfes.com); Derb ibn Slimane, Zerbtana; r/ste from Dh1700/3000; 🏠 📶 wi-fi) This labyrinthine riad blends ancient and modern with impressive panache. The older section shows off the best of traditional decor, while the newer quarters wouldn't look out of place in a Parisian boutique hotel yet remain unmistakably Moroccan. It has a trendy courtyard bar, restaurant, hammam and a plethora of terraces, and an elevator makes this place uniquely convenient for disabled or elderly travellers.

**Riad Laaroussa** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 074 187639; [www.riad-laaroussa.com](http://www.riad-laaroussa.com); 3 Derb Bechara, Talaa Seghira; r Dh1800-2650; 🏠 📶) Although a garden is meant to be the defining feature of a riad, it still comes as something of a surprise to pass through the dark entrance here to meet such a large green space, with its orange trees and softly playing fountain. Instantly relaxed, you continue to fine rooms decorated with modern art and unusual furniture that makes it clear the owners haven't just stolen ideas from this month's Moroccan style magazine. Riad Laaroussa makes a point of its restaurant-quality food (dinner Dh300), but charges a hefty mark-up on drinks.

**Riad Les Oudayas** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 636303; [www.lesoudayas.com](http://www.lesoudayas.com); 4 Derb el Hamiya, Ziat; r Dh2400; 🏠 📶 wi-fi) The Moroccan owner of this riad is a Paris-based designer, and it certainly shows

in its careful blend of traditional styles and modern design aesthetic in everything from the downstairs salons to the chic but comfortable bedrooms. Steps lead down from street level into the courtyard garden, with a plunge pool and the riad's own hammam leading off it. Up top there's a large terrace, but if you crave privacy, two of the five rooms have their own private terraces.

**Sofitel Palais Jamaï** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 634331; www.sofitel.com; Bab Guissa; s/d incl breakfast from Dh1950/2600; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Once the pleasure dome of a late-19th-century vizier to the sultan, this grand hotel is set in Andalucian gardens overlooking the medina. Its rooms have had a recent makeover to keep it in line with the trendy medina guest houses, although some parts still suffer bland international decoration. Nonguests should still visit to enjoy a sunset drink on the terrace.

## VILLE NOUVELLE

In the ville-nouvelle room rates drop considerably compared to the more popular medina, so much of the time you can get midrange service at budget prices.

## Budget

**Hôtel Kairouan** (Map p246; ☎ 035 623590; 84 Ave Soudan; s/d Dh100/120, with bathroom Dh140/150) Dark corridors make this hotel feel more claustrophobic than it really is, but the English-speaking management is helpful, rooms are decent and even those with shared bathrooms get their own sink.

**Hôtel Royal** (Map p246; ☎ 035 624656; 36 Ave Soudan; s/d with bathroom Dh 120/150, with shower only Dh100/130) Well-placed near Place Florence, this is one of the more reliable and popular budget options. A few of the bathrooms are a bit clunky (hot water in mornings only), but rooms are large and many come with balconies.

**Hôtel Central** (Map p246; ☎ 035 622335; 50 Rue Brahim Roudani; s/d Dh130/160, with shower Dh150/180) A bright and airy budget option just off busy Blvd Mohammed V. All rooms have external toilets, but even those without a shower have their own sinks. It's good value and popular so there's sometimes not enough rooms to go around.

**Hôtel Olympic** (Map p246; ☎ 035 932682; fax 055 932665; cnr Blvd Mohammed V & Rue 3; s/d incl breakfast Dh275/350; 🍷) A handy choice near the central

market. Rooms are nondescript but comfortable, equipped with bathroom, TV, phone and stylish brass bedsteads. Its central location means it's often heavily booked (it's popular with tour groups), so call in advance.

**Hôtel de la Paix** (Map p246; ☎ 035 625072; www.hotellapaixfes.com in French; 44 Ave Hassan II; s/d Dh285/365; 🍷) Cast from the bland tourist-class mould, this place is nevertheless good value for the money. Rooms are solidly comfortable, with TV and bathroom; there's also a bar and a reasonable restaurant.

**Hôtel Perla** (Map p246; ☎ 035 943641; www.hotelperlamaroc.com; 15 Rue de la Jordannie; s/d Dh339/402; 🍷) A stone's throw from the train station, this is another good tourist-class hotel. Rooms are compact and modern, and the service is reliable. Reassuringly unexciting.

**Hôtel Splendid** (Map p246; ☎ 035 622148; splendid@iam.net.ma; 9 Rue Abdelkarim el-Khattabi; s/d Dh318/412; 🍷 🍷) Although in the budget category, this hotel makes a good claim for three stars. It's all modern and tidy, with good bathrooms and comfy beds, plus a pool for the heat and a bar for the evenings. There's a dining room, but breakfast is not automatically included in the price.

**Grand Hôtel de Fès** (Map p246; ☎ 035 932026; grandhotel@fesnet.net.ma; 12 Blvd Chefchaoui, cnr Blvd Mohammed V; s/d Dh360/450; 🍷) A top address during the French Protectorate (read the newspaper clipping in the lobby about its big 1920s opening), the Grand works hard to keep up its standards and holds its own against more modern rivals. The lobby is old-fashioned, leading to large rooms with high ceilings and stucco walls. They are simple, but spotless, with good bathrooms.

**Youth Hostel** (Map p246; ☎ 035 624085; 18 Rue Abdelaslam Serghini; dm Dh450; 🕒 gate open 8-10am, noon-3pm & 6-10pm) One of the better youth hostels in Morocco, the Fez branch is well looked after, and right in the centre of the ville nouvelle. Tidy rooms and facilities (including Western-style toilets) are superbly clean. If you're not a Youth Hostelling International (YHI) member, there's a Dh5 surcharge. Cold showers mean that you should look to hammams – particularly in winter.

**Hôtel Mounia** (Map p246; ☎ 035 624838; www.hotelmouniafes.ma in French; 60 Blvd Zerktouni; s/d incl breakfast from Dh399/518; 🍷) A *Zellij* lobby guides you into this modern and classy hotel that's popular with tour groups. Rooms are bright and tidy, with satellite TV. The restaurant is



fair, and there's a smoky bar with plenty of water pipes (rooms on corridors near the bar can be noisy though). Staff are helpful, and good discounts are often available.

### Midrange & Top End

**Hôtel Menzeh Zalagh** (Map p246; ☎ 035 625531; [menzeh.zalagh@fesnet.net.ma](mailto:menzeh.zalagh@fesnet.net.ma); 10 Rue Mohammed Diouri; s/d incl breakfast Dh950/1300; 🏠 🚗 🚶) This four-star hotel has a great location, stretched along a low ridge in a sinuous wave with amazing views across to Fès el-Bali, yet convenient to the centre. Rooms are full of modern comforts with a splash of traditional Moroccan decor, and many come with balconies.

**Hotel Menzeh Fes** (Map p246; ☎ 035 943849; [zeh.zalagh@fesnet.net.ma](mailto:zeh.zalagh@fesnet.net.ma); 28 Rue Abdessalam Serghini; s/d

incl breakfast Dh950/1300; 🏠 🚗 🚶) Sister hotel to the Zalagh up the road, this offers virtually identical facilities, albeit with slightly smaller rooms. Not all rooms look across the old city, so ask when checking in; otherwise you'll be left just enjoying the view from the glass elevator on the side of the building.

**Crown Palace Fes** (Map p246; ☎ 035 948000; [www.crownpalace.ma](http://www.crownpalace.ma); 85 Ave des FAR; s/d from Dh1800/2100; 🏠 🚗 🚶) Its location could be better if you're into exploring on foot, but this is the best of the bunch when it comes to hotels in the ville nouvelle. Lavish but tasteful decor, natural light and spacious interiors characterise the rooms, with several restaurants, a gym and hammam, and cocktails in the bar.

<b>INFORMATION</b>			
Carlson Wagonlit.....	1 C3	Hôtel Kairouan.....	14 B2
Cyber Club.....	2 C4	Hôtel Menzeh Fès.....	15 C3
Institut Français.....	3 C2	Hôtel Menzeh Zalagh.....	16 D3
Librarie Fikr al-Moasser.....	4 C3	Hôtel Mounia.....	17 C4
Main Post Office.....	5 C3	Hôtel Olympic.....	18 C3
Night Pharmacy.....	6 C1	Hôtel Perla.....	19 A2
Syndicat d'Initiative.....	7 C4	Hôtel Royal.....	20 B2
Telboutique Cyber Club.....	8 C4	Hôtel Splendid.....	21 B4
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<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>			
American Language Center.....	9 D3	<b>EATING</b> 🍴	
<b>SLEEPING</b> 🛏			
Crown Palace Fès.....	10 A4	Assouan.....	23 A4
Grand Hôtel de Fès.....	11 C3	Café Jawharat Fès.....	24 C2
Hôtel Central.....	12 C4	Central Market.....	25 C3
Hôtel de la Paix.....	13 C2	Cheap Eateries.....	26 C3
		Chez Vittorio.....	27 C4
		Chicken Mac.....	28 B3
		Crémierie Skali.....	29 C3
		Restaurant Marrakech.....	30 C4
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		<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b> 🎪	
		Crown Palace Fès.....	(see 10)
		Le Marocain.....	33 C4
		<b>TRANSPORT</b>	
		Grand Taxis to Meknès & Rabat.....	
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		Local Buses.....	37 C2
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## Eating RESTAURANTS

Dining in Fez is something to be taken seriously. Fassi cuisine is famed across Morocco, and there are plenty of places in the medina to take your pick from. Popular with tour groups and their guides are the so-called 'palace restaurants' – dinner and show in lavish surroundings, usually with plain set menus and hefty price tags. A more intimate experience can be had dining at a riad, many of which are open to nonguests and offer excellent fare. A good range of cheaper places can be found around Bab Bou Jeloud. The ville nouvelle has more options, including more non-Moroccan menus.

### Medina

**our pick** **Thami's** (Map pp234-5; Rue Serrajine; mains Dh30-70; ☎ 10am-11pm) Of the cluster of pavement restaurants leading from Bab Bou Jeloud to Talaa Seghira, this small corner place under a mulberry tree probably ranks as our favourite. The food is good and comes out bubbling hot, with filling *kefta* (spiced meatball) tajines, fried fish and bowls of stewed beans. Eat, then sit back and watch the medina parade pass before your eyes.

**Restaurant Bouayad** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 637464; Rue Serrajine; mains Dh40-60; ☎ 10am-11pm) Just inside Bab Bou Jeloud, this restaurant is more popular with tourists than locals, but still turns out a good range of Moroccan dishes – the fish tajine is particularly good. The interior is nicely cool in the hot summer months, although staff build up enough of a sweat, as the small kitchen can get overwhelmed when the place is packed out.

**Le Kasbah** (Map pp234-5; Rue Serrajine; mains Dh40, set menu Dh70; ☎ 8am-midnight) On several floors opposite the cheap hotels at Bab Bou Jeloud, this restaurant occupies a prime spot: the top floor looks out over the medina, making it a good place to relax over food. The menu itself isn't overly exciting – tajines, couscous and meat from the grill, but fair value. Be warned: if you only want to linger for views and a pot of mint tea – the cost of drinks is double if you're not eating.

**our pick** **Café Clock** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 637855; www.cafedclock.com; 7 Derb el-Mergana, Talaa Kebira; mains Dh55-80; ☎ 9am-10pm; wi-fi) Even we need a break from Moroccan food every now and then, and Café Clock was love at first sight. In a restored townhouse, this funky place has a refreshing menu with offerings such as falafel, grilled sandwiches, some interesting vegetarian options, a monstrously large camel burger, and delicious cakes and tarts. Better still, their 'Clock Culture' program includes calligraphy and conversation classes, a lecture program and sunset concerts every Sunday (cover charge around Dh20), attracting a good mix of locals, expats and tourists.

**Medina Café** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 633430; 6 Derb Mernissi, Bab Bou Jeloud; mains Dh70-100; ☎ 8am-10pm) Just outside Bab Bou Jeloud, this small restaurant is an oasis of serenity, decorated in a traditional yet restrained manner, with fine attention to detail. During the day it's a good place to visit for a quick bite or a fruit juice; in the evening better Moroccan fare is on offer – the lamb tajine with dried figs and apricots is a winner, while the plates of couscous are big enough for two.

**Mezzanine** (Map p230; ☎ 035 633430; 17 Kasbah Chams; tapas selection from Dh100 or per dish around

## LET'S DO LUNCH

The restaurateurs around Bab Bou Jeloud seem to spend half their day trying to catch your eye and entice you to sit down and eat. We decided to sit down with one of them – Thami Bouziani (from Thami's, p247) – and talk.

**How did you start out?** My older brother taught me how to cook and he still helps me occasionally. I've never had another job. I've always been in this corner spot here looking down Talaa Seghira for 16 years. I started out making takeaway sandwiches for the people going to the cinema next door, but that closed down recently. I didn't have any tables and chairs then. It's only in the last three or four years that I've been catering to tourists. Now I have two big tables and a small one, and I've just renovated my kitchen.

**But it's tiny! How do you manage?** I cook everything in this kitchen. I have two gas burners, a griddle for brochettes, a fridge and a small sink, and a table for preparation. When it's busy I have a woman come to help me do the preparation. She does the 'women's food', like the couscous. I start in the morning around 10am and make the tomato sauce for the *kefta* (spiced meatball) tajine, and prepare all the vegetables. I buy all my meat, fish and vegetables in the Bou Jeloud souq around the corner. I haven't got space to squeeze juice or make coffee or tea, so I order that from the cafés around me. The same goes for bottles of water or soft drinks; I don't have enough storage space to keep stock here.

**Have you noticed changes in the medina?** Yes, there are lots more tourists now. The city authorities have just put up *mamounie* (wooden trellis-work) over the street which makes for more shade, and they're renovating the walls in this street. They've had to cut back the big mulberry tree over my restaurant a bit, but it's all looking good; I like the changes. One foreigner suggested I should put up a sign with my name; I think I will.

**How do you attract customers?** I have an article in English about my restaurant, with a photo of me, that was on *The View from Fez* blog. I've laminated it and show it to all the tourists, along with my menu. I've learned a few words of English too, like 'excellent food'!

**What do the tourists want?** They're often new to Morocco so they don't know. I give them a taster of *makoda* (potato fritters), or some *loubia* (beans), and they always ask for more because it's so good. They like my food because it's nicely spiced.

**What food do they order?** They usually ask my advice so I tell them what's best today. It could be turkey brochettes, *kefta* tajine with egg, couscous, fried fish or tajine of chicken or beef. I have a *melange* (mixture) too, a bit of everything. Sometimes a tourist has eaten something fancy in a hotel and asks me for it. I tell him to come back the next day, when the woman who helps me has shown me how to do it.

**You have lots of Moroccan customers too. Do they order differently to tourists?** Oh yes. Local people are more money-conscious. They'll just order something simple like a plate of *loubia* or some fried fish and eat that with one or two loaves of bread. But the tourists usually have a full meal, salad, main course and dessert, and mint tea. Sometimes very poor people come and ask me for food. I give them bread filled with fish, *makoda*, *loubia* or egg, but I don't charge them.

Dh30; ☎ noon-1am) Opposite the entrance to the Jnane Sbil gardens slightly away from Bou Jeloud Sq, this new tapas bar is bringing a bit of city chic to the medina. With modern Moroccan furniture and *tadelakt* (smooth lime plaster) walls, the setting is consciously cool. Order as you like from a good selection of Moroccan- and Mediterranean-styled tapas, and wrap things up with a sweet dessert on the lovely roof terrace. Alcohol is served.

**Dar Anebar** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 635787; 25 Derb el-Miter, Zkak Roumane; mains from Dh120; ☎ from

7.30pm) Another good riad for dining, where you'll eat in truly fine surroundings, in the splendid courtyard, or one of the cosy salons. The menu is strictly Moroccan, but of the highest standard, and you can accompany dinner with a bottle of wine.

**Dar Roumana** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 741637; 30 Derb el Amer, Zkak Roumane; mains around Dh150; ☎ 7.30-9.30pm Tue-Sat) The menu here takes cues from the riad's name – house of pomegranates. Mediterranean with a Moroccan slant, including some interesting seafood dishes such as swordfish with pomegran-

ates. It all works fabulously, and you eat in the courtyard or in fine weather up on the wonderful terrace. Alcohol is served.

**La Maison Bleue** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 636052; 2 Place de l'Istiqlal; set menu incl wine Dh550; ☎ dinner from 7.30pm) Reservations are necessary at this elegant riad restaurant. The setting is intimate and romantic, with diners serenaded by an oud player (replaced by livelier Gnawa song and dance at the end of the evening). You'll be treated to an array of cooked salads, tajines, couscous and *bastilla* (savoury pastries), plus filo pastry desserts. Top marks for presentation and atmosphere.

### Ville Nouvelle

**Chicken Mac** (Map p246; Ave Lalla Meriem; mains around Dh30; ☎ 9am-11pm) Several eateries seem to run into each other along this strip in a continuously busy row of tables and chairs on the street. Chicken Mac is the last one away from Hassan II, and quickly serves up generous plates of rotisserie chicken, bowls of *harira* (soup) and other cheap, filling meals.

**Kiotori** (Map p230; ☎ 035 651700; 12 Rue Ahmed Chaouki; sushi Dh50-105, maki rolls Dh20-25; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎) Come to Fez and eat sushi? Why not? With a Japanese chef at the helm, and suitably minimalist surroundings, Kiotori carries off the challenge with aplomb. Choose individual sushi or tempura (battered seafood or vegetable) dishes from a wide selection or grab a mix through the set menus. Some Fassis shun it because it doesn't have a liquor licence, but that doesn't mean you should.

**Restaurant Marrakech** (Map p246; ☎ 035 930876; 11 Rue Omar el-Mokhtar; mains from Dh55; ☎) A charming restaurant that goes from strength to strength behind thick wooden doors. Red *tadelakt* walls and dark furniture, with a cushion-strewn salon at the back add ambience, while the menu's variety refreshes the palettes, with dishes like chicken tajine with apple and olive, or lamb with aubergine and peppers (there's also a set three-course menu).

**Chez Vittorio** (Map p246; ☎ 035 624730; 21 Rue Brahim Roudani; mains from Dh80, salads from Dh30, pizza or pasta from Dh56) This dependable favourite covers the rustic Italian restaurant angle well, right down to the candles and checked cloths. The food is good value, and while

the initial service can be a bit creaky your meal tends to arrive in a trice. Go for the pizzas or steak, as the pasta often disappoints. You can also enjoy a glass of wine with your meal.

**Restaurant Zagora** (Map p246; ☎ 035 940686; 5 Blvd Mohammed V; mains Dh80-100) Just off the southern end of Mohammed V, this classy restaurant is popular with tour groups and locals alike. The wine list is probably the most extensive in the ville nouvelle and the menu is equally broad, although the pleasant setting (complete with oud player) means that both food and drink attract a sizeable surcharge.

**Zen Garden** (☎ 035 932929; 26 Ave Omar Ibn Khat-tab; mains from Dh100; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎) Worth the taxi ride to get there, the Zen Garden is as pleasing as Majestic (below), and kinder on the bank balance. Deservedly popular, with a good line in continental-style dishes in refined surroundings. Alcohol is served.

**Majestic** (☎ 035 729999; Rte de Zwagha; mains Dh140-190; ☎ noon-10pm; ☎) You'll need to grab a taxi for this upscale place, although if you make a reservation the restaurant offers a pick-up and drop-off service. The stylish open-plan layout looks to London- and Parisien-style magazines for inspiration and pulls it off, while the menu is distinctly French-leaning, with some Mediterranean influences (the fish is a high point). Service is excellent, and there's a good wine list that adds to the evening out, but pack your wallet well before dining.

### QUICK EATS

In the medina, you won't have to walk far to find someone selling food – tiny cell-like places grilling brochettes or cooking up cauldrons of soup, sandwich shops or just a guy with a pushcart selling peanut cookies. Bab Bou Jeloud has quite a cluster of options, otherwise follow your nose. In the ville nouvelle, there are a few cheap eats on or just off Blvd Mohammed V, especially around the central market. You'll also find a good choice of sandwich places around Place Yacoub al-Mansour.

**B'sara stalls** (Map pp234-5; Acherbine; soup Dh4) The Fassi speciality of *b'sara* (garlic and butter bean soup) shouldn't be missed. Served from hole-in-the-wall places throughout the medina from huge cauldrons, our favourites are in the Acherbine area. Perfect

fuel for exploring the city, the soup is ladled into rough pottery bowls and served with a hunk of bread and dash of olive oil.

**our pick Snail Stand** (Map pp234-5; cnr Talaa Seghira & Derb el-Horra; snails Dh5) This permanent stand is a good place to fill up on a molluscan snack – the ultimate in pre-packaged fast food. Grab a pin to pluck the beasts out of their shells, then slurp down the aromatic broth. Delicious!

**Restaurant Pizza Mama** (Map p246; Place Florence; salads Dh20, pizzas from Dh25; ☺ lunch & dinner) Compact and cosy, this place serves good and quick pizzas from a wood-fired oven, plus salads, burgers and other fast-food options. Popular with families and young couples.

**Cheap Eateries** (Map p246; Aves Hassan Ouazzani & Abdellah Chefchaoui; meals around Dh35) The raft of clean and cheap eateries along this strip near the Jardin Public serve fresh salads, brochettes and tajines that could hold their own in many of the city's upmarket restaurants. The place closest to the garden is our favourite.

## CAFÉS, PATISSERIES & ICE-CREAM PARLOURS

It can seem as if the main occupation in the ville nouvelle is sitting in cafés nursing a coffee and croissant. Blvd Mohammed V and Ave Hassan II have the greatest concentration, but you don't have to go far to grab a table, order a drink and watch the day unfold. In the medina, many of the restaurants around Bab Bou Jeloud double as cafés, otherwise hole-in-the-wall places are often the order of the day.

**Crémérie Skali** (Map p246; Blvd Mohammed V; breakfast around Dh20; ☺ 6am-10pm) With a good corner location, this is an ideal stop for breakfast – one that's popular with office workers and families alike. As well as pastries and juice, it can rustle up some mean scrambled eggs.

**Café Restaurant La Noria** (Map p230; Fès el-Jdid; mains Dh40-60; ☺ 7am-9pm) This café is tucked away in the Bou Jeloud Gardens next to an old waterwheel – a delightful retreat from the bustle of the city. The shady courtyard is perfect to relax in, and in addition to drinks and juices, there's a good dining menu if you're peckish.

**Café Jawharat Fes** (Map p246; 16 Ave Farhat Hachad; wi-fi) Handy for students in the American Language Center, this is an extravagantly

decorated café with a good terrace and friendly atmosphere. Bring your laptop to use the free wi-fi.

**Assouan** (Map p246; 4 Ave Omar Ibnou Khattab) Come here for three things – coffee, cake and a pavement location tailor-made for people-watching. Always busy and popular.

**Crémérie La Place** (Map pp234-5; Seffarine Sq; ☺ 7.30am-8pm) Put a café in one of the most interesting spots in the medina, and you have a near-perfect combination. Over juice, tea, coffee and pastries, the parade passes before you, accompanied by the tapping of the square's coppersmiths.

## SELF-CATERING

For fresh fruit and vegies, spices, nuts, olives or a parcel of delicious dates, you can't beat the ville nouvelle's **central market** (Map p246; Blvd Mohammed V; ☺ 8.30am-2.30pm). It also has a couple of good cheese stalls and there are alcohol shops around the outside.

In the medina, fresh produce abounds – start at the fresh fruit stalls at the top of Talaa Kebira and work your way down from there (the squeamish might care to avert their eyes as they pass the butchers' stalls, with rows of sheep and cow heads). Vendors will call out at you to offer their freshest dates and olives.

## Drinking

For a drop of the hard stuff, there are more options in the ville nouvelle than the medina. As is the Moroccan norm, bars tend to be seedy, smoky places, where men and women are prostitutes – you have been warned! Places listed below offer a more congenial atmosphere; drinking up time is around 11pm.

**Hotel Batha** (Map pp234-5; Place Batha) There are a couple of options for drinks in this handily located medina hotel. Inside the hotel proper, the bar by the pool catches the overspill from the Churchill Bar, and in winter even features a log fire to warm yourself by. At the back of the hotel (side entrance), the outside Consul Bar is a more relaxed place for late-night drinks, and has its own disco until midnight (closed Monday).

**Riad Fès** (Map pp234-5; 5 Derb ibn Slimane) The classiest place for a drink in the whole city, the courtyard bar of Riad Fès is a delight. Stucco columns catch the light reflected off the central pool, and soft music plays



## FASSI POTTERY

Ceramics seem to be everywhere in Fez – from the distinctive blue pottery to the intricate mosaics decorating fountains and riads. **Art Naji** (☎ 035 669166; www.artnaji.net; Ain Nokbi; ☎ 8am–6pm) is the place to go to buy the real deal. You can see the entire production process, from pot-throwing to the painstaking hand painting and laying out of *zellij* (tilework) – it's a joy to behold. The potteries are about 500m east of Bab el-Ftouh, an easy trip in a petit taxi – look for the plumes of black smoke produced by olive pits, which burn at the right temperature for firing the clay. You can even commission a mosaic and arrange for it to be shipped home.

while you sit at the glass bar or slump into the cushions. There's a good range of beer and spirits, plus wine available by the glass. Open to the elements, it's a little cold in winter, but fashionably cool in summer.

**Mezzanine** (Map p230; ☎ 035 633430; 17 Kasbah Chams; ☎ noon–1am) Scoring highly on the fashion meter and for late-opening, this new bar is the hippest thing in the medina – more Ibiza than Moulay Idriss. The terrace overlooking Jnan Sbil gardens is a good place to chill with a beer or cocktail, and there's tapas too if you want some finger food (see p247).

**Sofitel Palais Jamaï** (Map pp234–5; Bab Guissa) A great place for a sundowner, the Palais Jamaï has a great terrace looking out across old Fez: an ideal way to finish up a day in the medina. Drinks are slightly more expensive before dinner, but you can help yourself to as many free bar snacks as you like.

## Entertainment

Live music buffs know the best time to visit Fez is festival time (see p242). Café Clock (see p247) has regular Sunday sunset concerts worth checking out.

**Les Musicales du Palais el-Mokri** (Map pp234–5; ☎ 068 601791; www.lesmusicalesdefes.com in French; Mokri Palace, Chaq Bdenjala, Ziat; admission Dh60; ☎ 4–6pm Wed & Sun) Traditional music concerts held in the salons of the Mokri Palace: feast your eyes on the spectacular surroundings and imagine yourself a pasha of old. See the website for the program of events and groups performing (except in August). The entrance fee includes tea and Moroccan pastries.

**Crown Palace Fes** (p246; 85 Ave Des FAR; ☎ from 6pm) When it comes to glam nightlife, Fez is no Marrakesh. Cashed-up locals usually end up partying in the downstairs piano bar or upstairs cigar and cocktail bar at the Crown Palace. When these bars close around 1am, the crowd sometimes relocates

to the basement nightclub – the 'VIP' – that has a DJ between midnight and 3am each night.

**Le Marocain** (Map p246; 38 Ave Mohammed Slaoui; ☎ from 9pm) The rear bar of this decidedly louche nightspot is where the city's working girls tout for trade; their male colleagues are usually found preening in the front bar. The band and resident chanteuse aren't likely to be appearing in a concert hall near you in the near future, but they're fun to listen to before you take to the dance floor. Well-priced drinks (beers Dh15) come with tapas-like snacks.

## Shopping

Fez is the artisanal capital of Morocco. The choice of crafts is wide, quality is high, and prices are competitive, so take your time to shop around. As usual, it's best to seek out the little shops off the main tourist routes (principally Talaa Kebira and Talaa Seghira in the medina). For leather, the area around the tanneries unsurprisingly has the best selection of goods.

In the medina, there are many well-restored riads and *funduqs* that have been converted into carpet showrooms. While they certainly offer a great opportunity to sit with a mint tea in spectacular surroundings and look at some fabulous rugs, the hard sell is like no other place in Morocco. You can pick up some wonderful pieces, but also pay over the odds for factory-made rubbish. See also p232 to help prepare you for the Fez carpet shopping experience.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Fez airport** (☎ 035 674712) is 15km south of the city, at Saïss. **RAM** (Map p246; ☎ 035 625516; 54 Ave Hassan II) operates daily flights to Casablanca; for international connections (mainly to France, see p479).

**CTM**

The main bus station for **CTM buses** (☎ 035 732992) is near Place Atlas in the southern ville nouvelle (Map p230). In high season buy tickets in advance, particularly to Tangier, Marrakesh and Chefchaouen.

CTM runs seven buses a day to Casablanca (Dh100, five hours) via Rabat (Dh80, 3½ hours) between 6.30am and 4.30pm, and six buses to Meknès (Dh20, one hour) between 8.30am and 8.30pm. Buses for Marrakesh (Dh160, nine hours) run twice daily (morning and evening).

Heading north and east, there are three buses for Tangier (Dh100, six hours), three for Chefchaouen (Dh70, four hours), two for Tetouan (Dh93, five hours), one for Al-Hoceima (Dh90, six hours), two for Nador (Dh74, seven hours), and a daily service for Oujda (Dh100, six hours).

International services to Spain and France with Eurolines also depart from the CTM bus station.

**Other Companies**

Non-CTM buses depart from the **main bus station** (Map pp234-5; ☎ 035 636032) outside Bab el-Mahrouk. Fares are slightly less than CTM and reservations can be made for popular routes. It has a **left-luggage facility** (per item Dh5, ☎ 6am-midnight).

At least six buses run daily to Casablanca, Chefchaouen, Er-Rachidia, Marrakesh, Meknès, Oujda, Rabat, Tangier and Tetouan. Less frequent buses go to Rissani (Dh120, 10 hours), Ouarzazate (Dh142, 14 hours) and Tinerhir (Dh108, 10 hours).

Locally, there are frequent departures to Azrou (Dh18, two hours), Ifrane (Dh16, 90 minutes), Moulay Yacoub (Dh8, 30 minutes), Sefrou (Dh8, 40 minutes), Taza (Dh34, three hours, hourly) and Ouezzane (Dh34, three hours, twice daily).

**CAR**

There are several car parks near the medina: just south of Place l'Istiqlal, on Ave des Français outside Bab Bou Jeloud, and inside the medina wall north of Talaa Kebira at Ain Azleen. In the ville nouvelle is a guarded car park in front of the central market.

**TAXI**

There are several grand taxi ranks dotted around town. Taxis for Meknès (Dh16,

one hour) and Rabat (Dh59) leave from in front of the main bus station (Map pp234-5; outside Bab el-Mahrouk) and from near the train station (Map p246). Taxis for Taza (Dh44, 2½ hours) depart from near Bab Fettouh (Map pp234-5), the medina's southeastern gate. Those going to Moulay Yacoub (Dh9, 20 minutes) leave from the open ground to the west of Bab Bou Jeloud (Map pp234-5). The rank for Sefrou (Dh12, 30 minutes) is located just below Place de la Résistance in the ville nouvelle (Map p246). Azrou (Dh30, one hour) and Ifrane (Dh21, 45 minutes) taxis wait at a parking lot to the west of the CTM bus station in the south of the ville nouvelle (Map p230).

**TRAIN**

The **train station** (Map p246; ☎ 035 930333) is in the ville nouvelle, a 10-minute walk northwest of Place Florence. To take advantage of the **left-luggage office** (per item Dh10; ☎ 6am-8pm), bags must be locked or padlocked.

Trains depart every two hours between 7am and 5pm to Casablanca (Dh103, 4¼ hours), via Rabat (Dh76, 3½ hours) and Meknès (Dh18, one hour). There are two additional overnight trains. Eight trains go to Marrakesh (Dh180, eight hours) and one goes to Tangier (Dh97, five hours) direct (four more via Sidi Kacem). Direct trains for Oujda (Dh108, six hours) via Taza (Dh39, two hours) leave three times daily.

**Getting Around****TO/FROM THE AIRPORT**

There is a regular bus service (bus 16) between the airport and the train station (Dh3, 25 minutes), with departures every half-hour or so. Grands taxis from any stand charge a set fare of Dh120.

**BUS**

Fez has a reliable local bus service. At certain times of day, however, the buses are like sardine cans and are notorious for pick-pockets. The standard fare is Dh2.50. Some useful routes:

**No 9** Place Atlas via Blvd Abdallah Chefchaoui (both in the ville nouvelle) to near the Batha Museum (Fès el-Bali); the bus returns via Place de la Résistance, Ave Hassan II and Ave des FAR.

**No 10** Train station via Bab Guissa (northern Fès el-Bali) to Bab Sidi Bou Jida (northeastern Fès el-Bali).

**No 19** Train station via Ave Hassan II (both in ville nouvelle) and Bab el-Jdid (southern Fès el-Bali) to Place Rcif (central Fès el-Bali).

**No 47** Train station to Bab Bou Jeloud (Fès el-Bali).

## TAXI

Drivers of the red petits taxis generally use their meters without any fuss. Expect to pay about Dh9 from the train or CTM station to Bab Bou Jeloud. As usual, there is a 50% surcharge after 8pm. You'll find taxi ranks outside all the gates of the medina. Only grands taxis go out to the airport (see opposite).

## AROUND FEZ

### Sefrou

صفر و

The small Berber town of Sefrou, just 30km southeast of Fez, is a picturesque place situated on the edge of the Middle Atlas. It has a small but interesting medina, which once hosted one of Morocco's largest Jewish communities (as many as 8000 people, according to some accounts), and it was here that Moulay Idriss II lived while overseeing the building of Fez. It's an easy day

trip from Fez, ideal if you need to escape the big city.

## INFORMATION

**BMCE** (Blvd Mohammed V) Has an ATM.

**Club Internet Ibn Battouta** (Off Blvd Mohammed V; per hr Dh7; ☎ 9am-midnight)

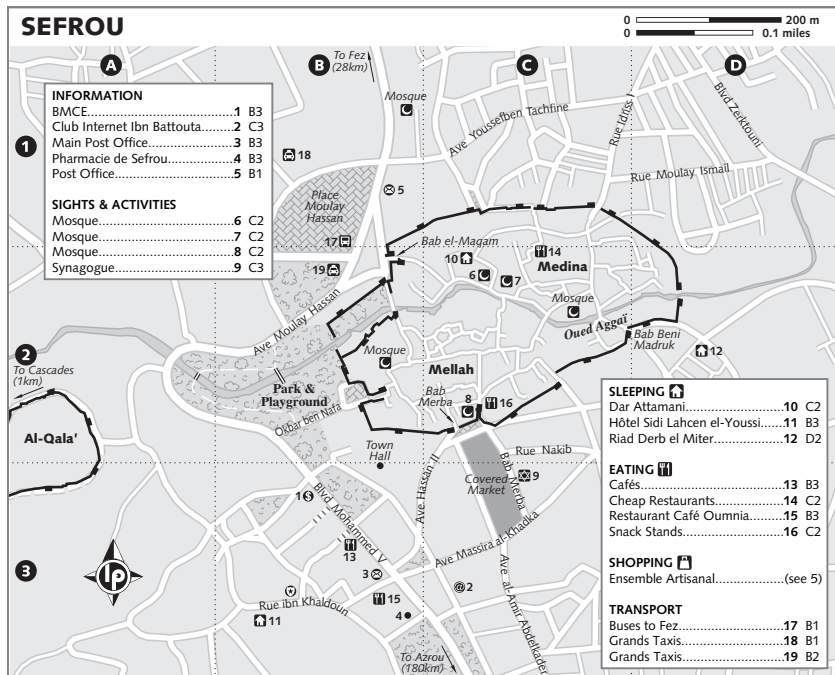
**Main post office** (Blvd Mohammed V)

**Pharmacie de Sefrou** (Blvd Mohammed V; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat)

**Post office** (Rte de Fès)

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Sefrou's medina is a manageable place to get around, especially compared to Fez. The Oued Aggai flows through its centre, opening the place up and giving it more of an airy feeling than many old medinas. The best point of entry is the northerly **Bab el-Maqam**. Follow the main flow of people downhill to the southeast and pass two mosques. Cross over the river and continue up the main shopping street to where the road splits: straight ahead takes you to Bab Merba, in the medina's southern wall, next to another mosque; the right fork brings you to the beginning of the **mellah**,



which stretches from here northwest along the river. Although its Jewish population has gone, the district still retains a few distinctive wooden-galleried houses and lanes so narrow two people can only just pass. In its heyday, the *mellah* was so dark and crowded that street lamps had to be lit even in the middle of the day. Just south of Bab Merba is a **synagogue**, which is now closed. When we visited, the king had just announced money to restore the city walls, although there were mixed feelings about a plan to pave over sections of the river in the medina.

A 1.5km walk west of town are the **Cas-cades**, a modest waterfall. Follow the signs from Ave Moulay Hassan around **Al-Qala'** (a semifortified village) and along the river's lush valley.

Sefrou is a sleepy place on the whole. However, things liven up on Thursday (market day) and in early June when the annual **Cherry Festival** fills the streets for three days of folk music, parades and sports events, culminating with the crowning of the Cherry Queen.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Dar Attamani** (☎ 035 969174; [www.darattamani.com](http://www.darattamani.com); 414 Bastna, Medina; s/d/tr from 140/240/330; wi-fi) This lovely guest house is tucked right in the heart of the medina. For the budget, the owner has taken a great deal of attention to styling, and each room has a different look, giving the place an idiosyncratic style. Some rooms are en suite, others have shared bathrooms, and for shoestrings there are beds on the roof terrace (Dh80). For such a small town, it's a gem – if this was in Fez it would cost three times as much to stay here. Meals are available on request.

**Riad Derb el Miter** (☎ 035 660602; [www.riadderbelmiter.com](http://www.riadderbelmiter.com); 304 Derb el-Miter; s/d incl breakfast Dh190/380; 🚶) Just across the bridge by the medina's Bab Beni Madruk, this Moroccan pink building with blue windows is easy to spot. Newly renovated, it has five big and airy rooms around a traditional courtyard with nice detailing, and a pleasant terrace.

**Hôtel Sidi Lahcen el-Youssi** (☎ 035 683428; Rue Sidi Ali Bousserghine; s/d Dh165/200; 🚶) Situated in a very quiet part of town, this complex has adequate rooms with attached bathrooms (and some with balcony), a restaurant and an ever-so-slightly tired air. Ask about discounts if you're visiting out of season.

**Restaurant Café Oumnia** (☎ 055 660679; Ave Massira al-Khadka; set menu Dh65; 🕒 8am–9pm) This is Sefrou's only formal restaurant, near the post office. Set on two levels, with clean and bright restaurant decor, its daily three-course set menu is good value at Dh65, and there's a licensed bar.

There's a string of cafés and a bar along Blvd Mohammed V, all fairly masculine places to drink coffee. There are a few cheap eats with soup, kebabs and the like in the medina.

### SHOPPING

You might snap up a bargain at the market held every Thursday; otherwise try **Ensemble Artisanal** (Rte de Fès), which offers the usual selection of rugs, pots, clothes and leather at fixed prices.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Regular buses (Dh8, 40 minutes) and grands taxis (Dh12, 30 minutes) run between Sefrou and Place de la Résistance in Fez. For Azrou, take a grand taxi to Im-mouzzer (Dh12) and change.

### Bhalil

This curious village is 5km from Sefrou, and worth a visit if you have your own transport. It contains a number of troglodyte houses (cave dwellings) built into the picturesque mountainside and picked out in pastel hues of pink, yellow and blue. Some go so far as to utilise caves for the primary room of the house. The result is a cool, spacious room – usually used as a salon – while bedrooms and private areas are built above. One resident is an official guide, and can easily be found for a tour – he'll almost certainly welcome you into his own cave home.

### MEKNÈS

pop 700,000




Of the four imperial cities, Meknès is the most modest by far – neither capital (Rabat), trendy tourist hub (Marrakesh) or home to a famed medina (Fez). In fact, its proximity to Fez rather overshadows Meknès, which receives fewer visitors than it really should. Quieter and smaller than its grand neighbour, it's also more laid-back, less hassle yet still has all the winding narrow medina streets and grand buildings

مكناس

بهايل





<b>INFORMATION</b>						
Cyber Bab Mansour.....	1 C3	Qissariat ad-Dahab.....	15 B3	Restaurant Riad.....	(see 18)	
Meet Net.....	2 D3	Spices,Herbs &Nuts Souq.....	16 B3	Rue Rouamzine Eateries.....	26 D3	
Pharmacy el-Fath.....	3 B3	<b>SLEEPING</b> 			Ryad Bahia.....	(see 22)
Post Office.....	4 C3	Hôtel Regina.....	17 C3	Sandwich Stands.....	27 B3	
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>			Maison d'Hôtes Riad.....	18 D3	<b>SHOPPING</b> 	
Bab el-Mansour.....	5 C4	Maroc Hôtel.....	19 D3	Centre Artisanale.....	28 B4	
Berdaine Mosque.....	6 B1	Palais Didi.....	20 C4	Pottery stalls.....	(see 23)	
Dar Jamaï Museum.....	7 B3	Riad Safir.....	21 C3	Souvenir Shops.....	29 C4	
Flea Market.....	8 A2	Ryad Bahia.....	22 B3	<b>TRANSPORT</b>		
Grande Mosquée.....	9 C3	<b>EATING</b> 			Calèches.....	30 C4
Koubbat as-Sufara'.....	10 C4	Covered Market.....	23 B4	Grands Taxis.....	31 A4	
Mausoleum of Moulay Ismail... 11 C4		Dar Sultana.....	(see 22)	Local Buses.....	32 C4	
Mausoleum of Sidi ben Aïssa... 12 A2		Restaurant Mille et Une		Main Bus Station.....	33 A4	
Medersa Bou Inania.....	13 B3	Nuits.....	24 B3	Petits Taxis.....	34 B4	
Okchen Market.....	14 B3	Restaurant Oumnia.....	25 D3	Petits Taxis.....	35 C3	

and resources to construction was partly due to his uncommon success in subduing all opposition in Morocco and keeping foreign meddlers at bay, mainly because of his notorious Black Guard (see p259).

Ismail's death in 1727 also struck the death knell for Meknès. The town resumed its role as a backwater, as his grandson Mohammed III (1757–90) moved to Marrakesh. The 1755 earthquake that devastated Lisbon also dealt Meknès a heavy blow. As so often happened in Morocco, its monuments were subsequently stripped in order to be added to buildings elsewhere. It's only been in the past few decades, as tourist potential has become obvious, that any serious restoration attempts have taken place.

In 1912 the arrival of the protectorate revived Meknès as the French made it their military headquarters. The army was accompanied by French farmers who settled on the fertile land nearby. After independence most properties were recovered by the Moroccan government and leased to local farmers.

## Orientation

The valley of the (usually dry) Oued Bou Fekrane neatly divides the old medina in the west and the French-built ville nouvelle in the east. Ave Moulay Ismail connects them, then becomes the principal route of the ville nouvelle, where its name changes to Ave Hassan II.

Moulay Ismail's tomb and imperial city are south of the medina. Train and CTM bus stations are in the ville nouvelle, as are most offices and banks, as well as the more expensive hotels. It's a 20-minute walk from

the medina to the ville nouvelle, but regular (and crowded) local buses and urban grands taxis shuttle between the two.

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Librarie Dar al-Kitab al-Watani** (Map p261; ☎ 035 521280; 10-21 Blvd Allal ben Abdallah) Mostly French books, with a few English titles.

### CULTURAL CENTRES

**Institut Français** (Map p255; ☎ 035 515851; inst.fr.mek@aïm.net.ma; Rue Ferhat Hachad; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat) The centre of Meknès' cultural life, with films, plays, concerts and exhibitions.

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Cyber Bab Mansour** (Map p256; Zankat Accra; per hr Dh6; ☎ 9am-midnight)

**Cyber de Paris** (Map p261; Rue Accra; per hr Dh8; ☎ 9am-2am)

**Meet Net** (Map p256; Rue Rouamzine; per hr Dh8; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-9.30pm Mon-Sat)

**Quick Net** (Map p261; 28 Rue Emir Abdelkader; per hr Dh6; ☎ 9am-10pm)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Hôpital Moulay Ismail** (Map p255; ☎ 035 522805; off Ave des FAR)

**Night Pharmacy** (Map p261; Rue de Paris)

**Pharmacy el-Fath** (Map p256; Place el-Hedim)

### MONEY

There are plenty of banks with ATMs both in the ville nouvelle (mainly on Ave Hassan II and Ave Mohammed V) and the medina (Rue Sekkakeine).

**BMCE** (Map p261; 98 Ave des FAR; ☎ 10am-1pm & 4-7pm) An after-hours exchange office on the southeast side of the ville nouvelle.

**POST**

**Main post office** (Map p261; Place de l'Istiqlal) The parcel office is in the same building, around the corner on Rue Tetouan.

**Post office** (Map p256; Rue Dar Smen) In the medina.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**Délégation Régionale du Tourisme** (Map p261;

☎ 055 524426; fax 055 516046; Place de l'Istiqlal;

🕒 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 3-6.30pm Fri) Limited tourist information and pamphlets.

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

**Carlson Wagonlit** (Map p261; ☎ 055 521995; 1 Rue Ghana) A source for air, ferry and coach tickets.

**RAM** (Map p261; ☎ 055 520963; 7 Ave Mohammed V) Handles tickets for all major airlines.

**Sights****MEDINA**

The heart of the Meknès medina is Place el-Hedim, the large square facing Bab el-Mansour. Built by Moulay Ismail and originally used for royal announcements and public executions, it's a good place to sit and watch the world go by – kids playing football, hawkers selling miracle cures, and promenading families. There's always something going on, and you get the sense that the city authorities would love for it to turn into the local equivalent of Marrakesh's Djemma el Fna. Things have recently been spruced up with the canopied seating areas for the food bars facing the old walls. Behind these there's an excellent produce market (see p264).

To the south, the impressive monumental gateway of Bab el-Mansour leads into Moulay Ismail's imperial city. The narrow streets of the old *mellah* are in the west of the medina – look for the old balconied houses so distinctive of the Jewish quarter.

**Dar Jamaï Museum**

Overlooking Place el-Hedim is Dar Jamaï, a palace built in 1882 by the powerful Jamaï family, two of whom were viziers to Sultan Moulay al-Hassan I. When the sultan died in 1894, the family fell foul of court politics and lost everything, including the palace, which was passed on to the powerful Al-Glaoui family. In 1912 the French commandeered the palace for a military hospital.

Since 1920 the palace has housed the Administration des Beaux Arts and one

of Morocco's best **museums** (Map p256; ☎ 055 530863; Place el-Hedim; admission Dh10; 🕒 9am-noon & 3-6.30pm Wed-Mon). Exhibits include traditional ceramics, jewellery, rugs and some fantastic textiles and embroidery. Look out for the brocaded saddles, and some exquisite examples of Meknasi needlework (including some extravagant gold and silver kaftans). The *koubba* (domed sanctuary) upstairs is furnished as a traditional salon complete with luxurious rugs and cushions. The museum also has a fine collection of antique carpets, representing various styles from different regions of Morocco.

The exhibits are well constructed; explanations are in French, Arabic and sometimes English. The museum's Andalusian garden and courtyard are shady, peaceful spots amid overgrown orange trees.

**Grande Mosquée & Medersa Bou Inania**

Opposite the Grande Mosquée, the **Medersa**

**Bou Inania** (Map p256; Rue Najjarine; admission Dh10;

🕒 9am-noon & 3-6pm) is typical of the exquisite interior design that distinguishes Merenid monuments. It was completed in 1358 by Bou Inan, after whom a more lavish *medersa* in Fez is also named. This *medersa* is a good display of the classic Moroccan decorative styles – the *zellij* base, delicate stucco midriff and carved olivewood ceiling.

Students aged eight to 10 years once lived two to a cell on the ground floor, while older students and teachers lived on the 1st floor. Anyone can climb onto the roof for views of the green-tiled roof and minaret of the Grande Mosquée nearby, but the *medersa* is otherwise closed to non-Muslims.

**IMPERIAL CITY****Bab el-Mansour**

The focus of Place el-Hedim is the huge gate of Bab el-Mansour, the grandest of all imperial Moroccan gateways. The gate is well preserved with lavish (if faded) *zellij* and inscriptions across the top. It was completed by Moulay Ismail's son, Moulay Abdallah, in 1732. You can't walk through the bab itself (although it's sometimes open to host exhibitions), but instead have to make do with a side gate to the left.

**Mausoleum of Moulay Ismail**

Diagonally opposite the Koubbat as-Sufara' is the **resting place** (Map p256; donations welcomed;



## THE ALMIGHTY MOULAY

Few men dominate the history of a country like the towering figure of Sultan Moulay Ismail (1672–1727). Originating from the sand-blown plains of the Tafilalet region, his family were sherifs (descendants of the Prophet Mohammed) – a pedigree that continues to underpin the current monarchy.

Ruthlessness as well as good breeding were essential characteristics for becoming sultan. On inheriting the throne from his brother Moulay ar-Rashid, Moulay Ismail set about diffusing the rival claims of his 83 brothers and half-brothers, celebrating his first day in power by murdering all those who refused to submit to his rule. His politics continued in this bloody vein with military campaigns in the south, the Rif Mountains and Algerian hinterland, bringing most of Morocco under his control. He even brought the Salé corsairs to heel, taxing their piracy handsomely to swell the imperial coffers.

The peace won, Moulay Ismail retired to his capital at Meknès and began building his grandiose imperial palace, plundering the country for the best materials, and building city walls, kasbahs and many new towns. This cultural flowering was Morocco's last great golden age.

Moulay Ismail also considered himself a lover. Although he sought (but failed to receive) the hand in marriage of Louis XIV of France's daughter, he still fathered literally hundreds of children. Rather foolishly however he did nothing to secure his succession. When he died the sultanate was rocked by a series of internecine power struggles, from which the Alawites never fully recovered.

Nevertheless, his legacy was to be the foundations of modern Morocco. He liberated Tangier from the British, subdued the Berber tribes and relieved the Spanish of much of their Moroccan territory. Moulay Ismail sowed the seeds of the current monarchy and beneath his strong-arm rule the coherent entity of modern Morocco was first glimpsed.

☞ 8.30am–noon & 2–6pm Sat–Thu) of the sultan who made Meknès his capital in the 17th century. Moulay Ismail's stature as one of Morocco's greatest rulers means that non-Muslim visitors are welcomed into the sanctuary. Entry is through a series of austere, peaceful courtyards meant to induce a quiet and humble attitude among visitors, an aim that's not always successful in the face of a busload of tourists. The tomb hall is a lavish contrast and showcase of the best of Moroccan craftsmanship. Photography is permitted, but non-Muslims may not approach the tomb itself.

### Koubbat as-Sufara'

South of Bab el-Mansour lies the *mechouar* (parade ground), now known as Place Lalla Aouda, where Moulay Ismail inspected his famed Black Guard. After bringing 16,000 slaves from sub-Saharan Africa, Moulay Ismail guaranteed the continued existence of his elite units by providing the soldiers with women and raising their offspring for service in the guard. By the time of his death, the Black Guard had expanded tenfold. Its successes were many, ranging from quelling internal rebellions, to chasing

European powers out of northern Morocco, to disposing of the Ottoman Turk threat from Algeria.

Following the road around to the right, you'll find an expanse of grass and a small building, the **Koubbat as-Sufara'** (Map p256; admission Dh10; ☞ 9am–noon & 3–6pm), once the reception hall for foreign ambassadors. Beside the entrance, you will notice the shafts that descend into a vast crypt. This dark and slightly spooky network of rooms was used for food storage, although tour guides will delight in recounting the (erroneous) story that it was used as a dungeon for the Christian slaves who provided labour for Moulay Ismail's building spree. Bring a torch.

### Heri es-Souani & Agdal Basin

Nearly 2km southeast of the mausoleum, Moulay Ismail's immense granaries and stables, **Heri es-Souani** (admission Dh10; ☞ 9am–noon & 3–6.30pm), were ingeniously designed. Tiny windows, massive walls and a system of underfloor water channels kept the temperatures cool and air circulating. The building provided stabling and food for an incredible 12,000 horses, and Moulay Ismail regarded it as one of his finest architectural projects.

The roof fell in long ago, but the first few vaults have been restored. They're impressive, but overly lit to rob them of much of their ambience – seek out the darker, more atmospheric corners. Those beyond stand in partial ruin, row upon row across a huge area.

Immediately north of the granaries and stables lies an enormous stone-lined lake, the **Agdal Basin**. Fed by a complex system of irrigation channels some 25km long, it served as both a reservoir for the sultan's gardens and a pleasure lake. There are plenty of benches to break your stroll around the waters, and a giant Giacometti-like statue of a traditional water seller.

In summer it's a long hot walk here from Moulay Ismail's mausoleum, so you might want to catch a taxi or calèche (horse-drawn carriage). If you do decide to walk, follow the road from the mausoleum south between the high walls, past the main entrance of the Royal Palace (no visitors) and a campsite, to find the entrance straight ahead.

### Walking Tour: Saunter through the Souqs

The walk described here is marked on the Meknès Medina map (p256). The easiest route into the souqs is through the arch to the left of the Dar Jamaï Museum on the north side of Place el-Hedim. Plunge in and head northwards, and you will quickly find yourself amid souvenir stalls and carpet shops.

As you walk, notice the *qissariat* (covered markets) off to either side. A couple of these are devoted to textiles and carpets, which are noisily auctioned off on Sunday mornings. **Okchen Market**, in the last *qissaria* on the left before you reach the T-junction with Rue Najjarine, specialises in fine embroidery.

Turning right on Rue Najjarine takes you to the Grande Mosquée and Medersa Bou Inania. For now though, turn left on Rue Najjarine, passing stalls with *babouches* (leather slippers) in multicoloured rows. Just before you hit Rue Sekkakine, look out on the left for **Qissariat ad-Dahab**, the jewellery souq.

Exit the medina via Bab Berrima and follow the lane north, hugging the outside of the city wall. You'll pass a colourful souq, selling spices, herbs and nuts, and a lively **flea market**. On the other side of the lane, work-

shops turn out gigantic bakers' 'paddles', used for scooping bread out of the ovens.

Beyond them you'll find workers busily stuffing mattresses. A left turn here takes you northwest to the newly restored **mausoleum of Sidi ben Aïssa** (closed to non-Muslims). Sidi ben Aïssa gave rise to one of the more unusual religious fraternities in Morocco, known for their self-mutilation and imperviousness to snake bites. His followers gather here in April and July from all over Morocco and further afield (see Festivals, below).

A right turn by the mattress stuffers leads back into the medina via Bab el-Jedid, the arch that shelters a couple of musical instrument shops. Turning left up Rue el-Hanaya, through a small **fruit & vegetable market**, you will eventually arrive at the **Berdaine Mosque** and, just beyond it, the city's northernmost gate, Bab Berdaine.

From here you can wend your way back down Rue Zaouia Nasseria (which becomes Rue Souika), passing tailors and the odd carpet showroom. With luck you'll emerge near the Grande Mosquée.

### Tours

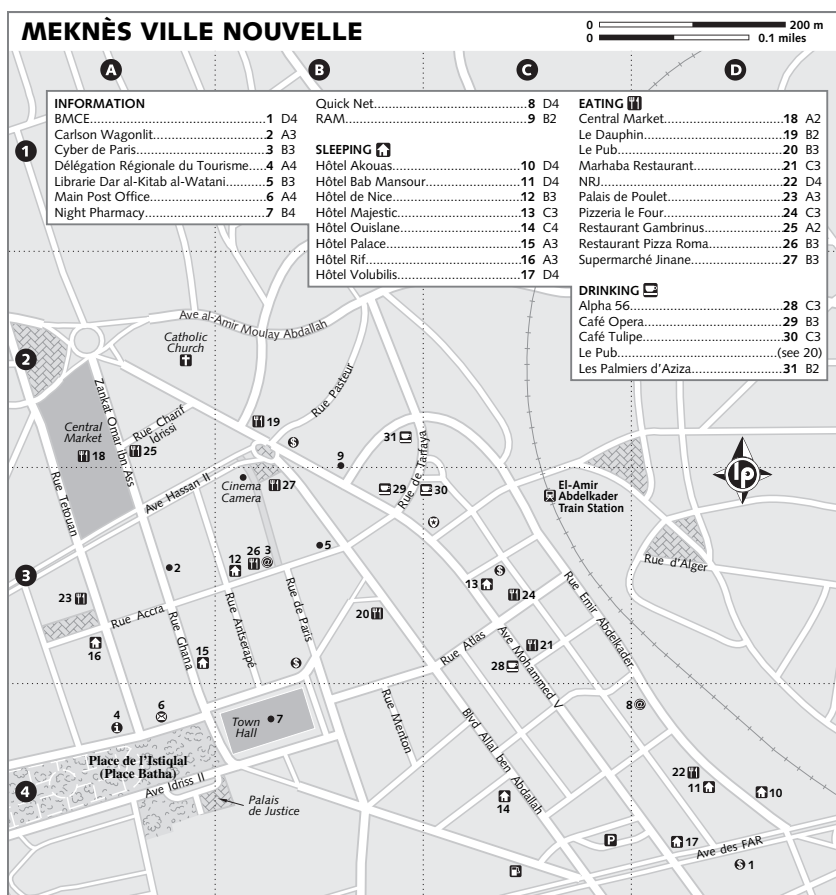
Compared to Fez and Marrakesh, the Meknès medina is fairly easy to navigate. If you are short of time, or if you wish to gain some local insight, book an official guide through the tourist office for Dh250 for a day. Calèche rides of this imperial city with a guide are easy to pick up from around the Mausoleum of Moulay Ismail – expect to pay around Dh150 for a couple of hours.

### Festivals & Events

One of the largest *moussems* (festivals) in Morocco takes place in April at the mausoleum of Sidi ben Aïssa, outside the medina walls. Members of this Sufi brotherhood are renowned for their trances that make them impervious to pain, but public displays of glass-eating, snake bites and ritual body piercing are no longer allowed (although you'll see pictures about town). But it's still a busy and popular festival with *fantasias* (musket-firing cavalry charges), fairs and the usual singing and dancing.

### Sleeping

Most of the accommodation is located in the ville nouvelle, with the exception of a



cluster of ultrabudget options and a few exquisite new riads.

### MEDINA

Most of Meknès' cheapies cluster along Rue Dar Smen and Rue Rouamzine in the old city. In the high season and during festivals, they can fill up quickly. To be on the safe side, get here early in the day or reserve a room.

### Budget

**Camping International d'Agdal** (☎ 035 551828; camping per adult/child Dh17/12, plus per tent/bicycle/car/caravan/campervan Dh10/10/17/17/20) Barely 50m from Heri es-Souani, just off the road towards Royal Palace (but poorly signed), this campsite has a great location and an

attractive shady site. Hot showers are Dh7, electricity Dh15 and water Dh20. Facilities are well maintained, and it has a small shop, café and restaurant.

**Hôtel Regina** (Map p256; ☎ 035 530280; 19 Rue Dar Smen; s/d/tr Dh70/100/130, shower Dh5) This ultra cheapie frankly feels a bit threadbare, but it's not entirely without merit. Rooms are completely no-frills, but the central courtyard opens the place up and wards off claustrophobia. Showers cost extra, and there's no guarantee of hot water.

**Maroc Hôtel** (Map p256; ☎ 035 530075; 7 Rue Rouamzine; s/d Dh90/180) A perennially popular shoestring option, the Maroc has kept its standards up over the many years we've been visiting. Friendly and quiet, rooms

(with sinks) are freshly painted, and the shared bathrooms are clean. The great terrace and courtyard filled with orange trees add to the ambience.

### Midrange & Top End

**Maison d'Hôtes Riad** (Map p256; ☎ 035 530542; [www.riadmeknes.com](http://www.riadmeknes.com); 79 Ksar ChaaCha, Dar el-Kabir; r incl breakfast Dh650-750; 🍴 📺) This riad is located amid the ruins of the Palais Ksar ChaaCha, the 17th-century imperial residence of Moulay Ismail. There are just six rooms, each tastefully decorated in traditional-meets-modern style, plus some unexpected touches like the collection of African masks and the wall of old clocks and radios. This place is noted for its food, and there are a couple of different salons where you can eat, or just relax but the chic plunge pool and cactus garden.

**ourpick Ryad Bahja** (Map p256; ☎ 035 554541; [www.ryad-bahja.com](http://www.ryad-bahja.com); Derb Sekkaya, Tiberbarine; r incl breakfast Dh670, ste Dh950-1200; wi-fi 📺) This charming little riad is just a stone's throw from Place el-Hedim. It's been in the same family since an ancestor came to work as a judge for Moulay Ismail in the 17th century, and has recently expanded across the alley (there's a walkway between properties), so you can even sleep in the room where the current owner was born, or the new Aladdin's-cave-like roof terrace room. The main entrance opens onto a courtyard (also hosting a great restaurant), and the whole has an open and airy layout compared to many riads. Rooms are pretty and carefully restored, and the owners (keen travellers themselves) are eager to swap travel stories as well as guide guests in the medina.

**Riad Safir** (Map p256; ☎ 035 534785; [www.riadsafir.com](http://www.riadsafir.com); 1 Derb Lalla Alamia; r/ste incl breakfast Dh1200/1500; wi-fi) With just three lovely rooms Safir offers a very intimate stay in Meknès. It's extremely homely, and instead of the imposing *zellij* and plaster of some places it presents a softer face with swathes of soft fabrics and carpets in creams and warm oranges and plenty of wood. There are plans to expand into the property next door, adding a plunge pool and self-contained apartment to rent.

**Palais Didi** (Map p256; ☎ 035 558590; [www.palaisdidi.com](http://www.palaisdidi.com); 7 Dar el-Kbir; r/ste Dh1200/1500; 🍴 📺 wi-fi) The Didi fancies itself as the *grande dame* of the Meknès medina accommodation op-

tions and it's the largest by far. There are five rooms and five suites, set around a sleek marble-tiled courtyard. Each is different, but they're all decked out with antique furniture in the rooms and deep tubs in the *zellij* bathrooms. It's good, but compared to the smaller options elsewhere it seems a bit overpriced. The restaurant on the roof terrace looks over the imperial city and is worth visiting even if you're not staying here (set menu Dh150).

### VILLE NOUVELLE

The ville nouvelle also has some decent budget options, as well as more expensive establishments.

### Budget

**Hôtel Majestic** (Map p261; ☎ 035 522035; 19 Ave Mohammed V; s/d Dh127/168, with shower Dh165/198, with bathroom Dh197/229, breakfast Dh22) Open for business since 1937, the Majestic is one of the best deco buildings in Meknès. There's a good mix of rooms (all have sinks), and there's plenty of character to go around from the dark-wood dado to the original deco light fittings. A quiet courtyard, roof terrace and friendly management top things off, making this a hard budget option to beat.

**Hôtel Palace** (Map p261; ☎ 035 400468; fax 055 401431; 11 Rue Ghana; s/d Dh180/230) Looking very dour from the street, this hotel turns out to be surprisingly good value: large airy rooms with attached bathrooms, many with balcony. The mezzanine sofas give an extra option for chilling out. It's frequently full, so call in advance.

**Hôtel Ouislane** (Map p261; ☎ 035 524828; 54 Rue Allal ben Abdallah; s/d Dh205/242) Another decent and clean option at the higher end of the budget bracket, the Ouislane has large airy rooms with attached bathrooms. It doesn't set the world alight, but for the prices it's reasonable value.

**Hôtel Volubilis** (Map p261; ☎ 035 525082; Ave des FAR; s/d Dh228/270) Recently spruced up, this is a decent enough option, with fair rooms, reasonably comfy beds and en suite bathrooms. Try to avoid the rooms at the front above the main road, as they can stay pretty noisy throughout the night.

### Midrange & Top End

**Hôtel Bab Mansour** (Map p261; ☎ 035 525239; fax 055 510741; 38 Rue el-Emir Abdelkader; s/d Dh324/400,

breakfast Dh40; 🍴) It's a fine line between tasteful and characterless and, while comfortable enough, the Bab Mansour never quite seems to develop much of a personality – the famous bab is depicted in tiles in the bathrooms, but it's more DIY store than Moroccan *zellij*. That said, it's well-run, with everything you'd expect in a tourist-class hotel.

**Hôtel Akouas** (Map p261; ☎ 035 515967; 27 Rue Emir Abdelkader; s/d/tr Dh341/422/543; 🍴 🚿) This friendly, family-run three-star has a little more local colour than its rivals. Rooms, while not huge, are modern, serviceable and very fairly priced. The place also has a decent restaurant and a nightclub.

**Hôtel de Nice** (Map p261; ☎ 035 520318; nice\_hotel@menara.ma; cnr Rue Accra & Rue Antserapé; s/d Dh387/482, breakfast Dh46; 🍴 🚿) This hotel continues to fly the flag for quality and service. Modern, efficient and ever-so-slightly shiny, it's a surprise that room rates aren't a good Dh100 more than they actually are. Rooms are nicely decorated and well-sized, and there's a decent bar and restaurant too. Advance booking recommended.

**Hôtel Rif** (Map p261; ☎ 035 522591; hotel\_rif@menara.ma; Rue Accra; s/d Dh402/503, breakfast Dh50; 🍴 🚿) The Rif has had quite a refit since our last visit, improving the place enormously and bringing its rooms up to a standard that better reflects the tariff. The interior still has a slightly funky modernist ambience, and we love the concrete-chocolate confection of the exterior. The courtyard pool is good for dipping toes in, but as it's overlooked by the bar, female bathers will feel enormously exposed.

**Zaki Hôtel** (Map p255; ☎ 035 514146; Blvd Al Mas-sira, Rte 21; s/d Dh1318/1486; 🍴 🚿) The poshest option in Meknès, the Zaki is a short trek from the centre of town. You're rewarded for your efforts with landscaped grounds, ornate *zellij* and stucco in the lobby, a restaurant and bar, and efficient and professional service throughout. Rooms contain all the modern comforts expected by tourist and business traveller alike, with the decor adding a twist of Moroccan flavour.

## Eating RESTAURANTS

### Medina

**Restaurant Mille et Une Nuits** (Map p256; ☎ 035 559002; off Place el-Hedim; mains Dh45-85) Easily lo-

cated off Place el-Hedim, this is another converted house, whose owners have leant towards the more showy 'palace' restaurant style of surroundings. You'll find all the Moroccan standards and classics on a reasonably priced menu.

**Restaurant Oumnia** (Map p256; ☎ 035 533938; 8 Ain Fouki Rouamzine; set menu Dh80) This is less a formal restaurant than a few rooms of a family home converted into dining salons, and the emphasis here is on warm service and hearty Moroccan fare. There's just a three-course set menu, but it's a real winner, with delicious *harira* (lentil soup), salads and a choice of several tajines of the day.

**Riad Bahia** (Map p256; ☎ 035 554541; www.riad-bahia.com; Derb Sekkaya, Tiberbarine; mains Dh80-100) Nonresidents are welcome to eat at the restaurant of this riad, and it makes a pleasant evening dining spot with its tables around the courtyard. The menu is typically Moroccan, but all tasty and served and presented nicely.

**Restaurant Riad** (Map p256; ☎ 055 530542; 79 Ksar Chaacha; set menus Dh110 & Dh160) While all the riads in the Meknès medina have lovely restaurants, this is probably the pick of the bunch. Set around a lush green courtyard, it's a great place to relax, and while the menu of salads, tajines and couscous is simple, it's all delicious and served with care and attention.

**Dar Sultana** (Map p256; ☎ 035 535720; Derb Sekkaya, Tiberbarine; mains from Dh70, three-course set menu Dh150) Also going under the name Sweet Sultana, this is a small but charming restaurant in a converted medina house. The tent canopy over the courtyard gives an intimate, even romantic, atmosphere, set off by walls painted with henna designs and bright fabrics. The spread of cooked Moroccan salads is a big highlight of the menu.

### Ville Nouvelle

**our pick Marhaba Restaurant** (Map p261; 23 Ave Mohammed V; tajines Dh25; 🕒 noon-10pm) We adore this canteen-style place – the essence of cheap and cheerful – and so does everyone else, judging by how busy it is of an evening. While you can get tajines and the like, do as everyone else does and fill up on a bowl of *harira*, a plate of *makoda* (potato fritters) with bread and hard-boiled eggs – and walk out with change from Dh15. We defy you to eat better for cheaper.

**Restaurant Gambrinus** (Map p261; ☎ 035 520258; Zankat Omar ibn Ass; mains around Dh50, set menu Dh70) A good place for Moroccan food in colourful surroundings in the ville nouvelle, which feels like something of a surprise when you discover that the original Gambrinus was a Czech immigrant in 1914. It's perennially popular with locals, who come for the good range of tajines.

**Pizzeria le Four** (Map p261; ☎ 035 520857; 1 Rue Atlas; pizzas Dh40-60, mains Dh65-85) This is as good a place as any in the ville nouvelle to load up on pizza, and the dark-wood and brick surroundings take you halfway out of Morocco towards Italy. Alcohol is served, so late at night you sometimes find local men getting sloshed among the clientele. Watch out for the steep service tax added to bills.

**Le Dauphin** (Map p261; ☎ 035 523423; 5 Ave Mohammed V; mains Dh75-120, set menu Dh150) It might have an uninspiring exterior, but the French dining room and lovely garden give this restaurant one of the nicest dining settings in town. The menu is continental, with some good meat and fish dishes. Alcohol is served.

**Le Pub** (Map p261; ☎ 035 524247; 20 Blvd Allal ben Abdallah; mains Dh75-150; ☎ 11am-midnight) The dark mirrored windows and bouncers on the door make you wonder what you're letting yourself in for, but Le Pub is a welcome change if you're feeling tajine fatigue. The menu is split in two – half offering continental dishes, the other branching into a Moroccan take on Chinese and Thai dishes. We preferred the oriental dishes over the pasta, but there are some good steaks too. As befits the name, alcohol is served.

## QUICK EATS

**Palais de Poulet** (Map p261; Rue Tetouan; mains from Dh25, salads Dh15) Looking down from the Hôtel Rif towards Ave Hassan II, this is one of several good and cheap rotisserie places where you can fill up quickly on chicken, chips, bread and salad. Although you order from the table, pay at the counter inside.

**Restaurant Pizza Roma** (Map p261; Rue Accra; mains from Dh20) Although the name suggests that pizzas are the speciality here, you could do far worse than load up on a filling plate of rotisserie chicken with rice and chips. An unassuming place, it's popular with female diners.

**NRJ** (Map p261; ☎ 035 400324; 30 Rue Amir Abdelkader; breakfast from Dh22, salads Dh20-30, pizza

Dh35-60; ☎ 24hr; wi-fi) If you're a young and fashionable Meknassi, then you're going to be hanging out at NRJ. Importing a bit of big-city laptop-friendly cool, it's all glass-topped tables, under-lit seating and funky tunes on the stereo. Perfect for a light meal any time of day, and the paninis and good range of juices are particularly good.

**Sandwich stands** (Map p256; Place el-Hedim; sandwiches around Dh30; ☎ 7am-10pm) Take your pick of any one of the stands lining Place el-Hedim, and sit at the canopied tables to watch the scene as you eat. There are larger meals like tajines, but the sandwiches are usually quick and excellent, while a few places nearer the medina walls do a good line in sardines.

**Rue Rouamzine eateries** (Map p256; Rue Rouamzine; meals Dh30-50; ☎ 11am-10pm) Particularly handy for the cheap hotels on the edge of the medina proper, this street has plenty of good eating places serving up sandwiches, kebabs, tajines, grilled chicken, fruit juices and ice cream.

## SELF-CATERING

**Covered Market** (Map p256; Place el-Hedim) This is the place in Meknès to get fresh produce, and is virtually a tourist attraction in itself, with its beautifully arranged pyramids of sugary sweet delicacies, dates and nuts, olives and preserved lemons in glistening piles. There's also good-quality fruit and veg here, as well as meat – the faint-hearted may choose to avoid the automated chicken-plucking machines at the rear of the hall.

**Central Market** (Map p261; Ave Hassan II) A good place to shop in the ville nouvelle, with a variety of fresh food stalls, alcohol shops and various imported foodstuffs.

**Supermarché Jinane** (Map p261; cnr Ave Mohammed V & Ave Hassan II; ☎ 7.30am-10pm) A large supermarket stocked with all the essentials.

## Drinking

### CAFÉS

When choosing sticky pastries in Meknès, don't overlook the *marakchia* – the local take on an éclair, full of cream and covered with gooey chocolate. The ville nouvelle is the place to go for relaxed café culture, especially on and around Ave Mohammed V and the pedestrianised area around Cinema Camera. Those following are female-friendly as far as Moroccan cafés go.

**Les Palmiers d'Aziza** (Map p261; 9 Rue de Tarfaya) With an exterior in bright Marrakesh pink, this popular café offers several options – sit in the sunny garden, hang at the tables near the mouthwatering cookie counter, or head upstairs to the covered terrace away from public view. The latter is a popular choice for boys and girls on dates. The ice cream and smoothies here are excellent.

**Alpha 56** (Map p261; Ave Mohammed V) Popular with the young and trendy, this place has a good selection of pastries. The downstairs can be a little smoky, in which case you can retreat to the salon upstairs.

**Café Tulipe** (Map p261; Rue de Tarfaya) Just off the main road, the Tulipe has a large shady terrace and modern interior, it's one of the most pleasant cafés in which to kill an hour or two.

**Café Opera** (Map p261; 7 Ave Mohammed V) Airy and old-fashioned, this grand café is a classic – among the most popular for Moroccan men to sip their mint tea. Sitting outside people-watching is a great breakfast pastime.

## BARS

It's a popular adage that Meknès has more bars than any other Moroccan city, and if all you're after is a quick bottle of Flag beer, then you won't lack for options (in the ville nouvelle at least). Many are grouped around Blvd Allal ben Abdallah, but are generally pretty seedy affairs, designed for serious drinking and smoking, with women not at all welcomed.

The hotel bars listed in the sleeping section are more amenable, as well as the restaurants listed above as licensed. Le Pub (opposite) is appropriately one of the nicer places to get a drink – slump in a comfy chair, drink at the bar itself, or head downstairs to smoke a sheesha and catch some live music on weekends.

## Shopping

While the souqs of Meknès aren't as extensive as those of Fez or Marrakesh, the lack of hassle can make them a relaxed place to potter around looking for souvenirs. For details, see the walking tour, p260.

As always, the government-run **Centre Artisanale** (Map p256; Ave Zine el-Abidine Riad; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat) is the place to go if you want to get an idea of what to look for and how much to spend. Quality is high but

prices are fixed. Other shops are located just outside the Mausoleum of Moulay Ismail. There are also some good **pottery stalls** (Map p256) set up on the western side of Place el-Hedim.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

The **CTM bus station** (Map p255; ☎ 035 522585; Ave des FAR) is about 500m east of the junction with Ave Mohammed V. The main bus station (Map p256) lies just outside Bab el-Khemis, west of the medina. It has a left-luggage office and the usual snack stands.

CTM departures include: Casablanca (Dh80, four hours, six daily) via Rabat (Dh50, 2½ hours), Fez and Marrakesh (Dh120, eight hours, daily), Tangier (Dh80, five hours, three daily), Oujda (Dh110, six hours, two daily) via Taza (Dh65, three hours), Er-Rachidia (Dh110, six hours, daily), and three buses to Nador (Dh110, six hours).

Slightly cheaper than CTM, other buses are available from the numbered windows in the main bus station:

**No 5** Rabat and Casablanca (hourly 6am to 3pm)

**No 6** Tangier (hourly 5am to 4pm), Tetouan (four daily), Chefchaouen (three daily), Ouezzane (five daily)

**No 7** Fez (hourly 5am to 6pm), Taza (four daily), Oujda (hourly 4am to 11.30pm), Nador (five daily)

**No 8** Moulay Idriss (hourly 8am to 6pm)

**No 9** Marrakesh (seven daily, mostly morning departures)

### TAXI

The principal grand taxi rank (Map p256) is a dirt lot next to the bus station at Bab el-Khemis. There are regular departures to Fez (Dh16, one hour), Ifrane (Dh24, one hour), Azrou (Dh32, one hour) and Rabat (Dh44, 90 minutes). Taxis leave less frequently for Taza (Dh70, 2½ hours). Grands taxis for Moulay Idriss (Dh12, 20 minutes) leave from opposite the Institut Français (Map p255) – this is also the place to organise round trips to Volubilis.

### TRAIN

Although Meknès has two train stations, head for the more convenient **El-Amir Abdelkader** (Map p261; ☎ 035 522763), two blocks east of Ave Mohammed V. There are nine daily trains to Fez (Dh18, one hour), three of which continue to Taza (Dh55, 3½ hours) and Oujda (Dh124, 6½ hours). Eight go to Casablanca (Dh86, 3½ hours)

via Rabat (Dh59, 2¼ hours). There are five direct services to Marrakesh (Dh162, seven hours). For Tangier, there's one daily train (Dh80, four hours), or take a westbound train and change at Sidi Kacem.

## Getting Around

### BUS

Overcrowded city buses ply the route between the medina and ville nouvelle. The most useful are bus 2 (Bab el-Mansour to Blvd Allal ben Abdallah, returning to the medina along Ave Mohammed V) and bus 7 (Bab el-Mansour to the CTM bus station). Tickets are Dh2.

### CAR

There's a handy car park just southwest of Bab el-Mansour, and another in the ville nouvelle near the intersection of Ave Idriss II and Ave des FAR.

### TAXI

Urban grands taxis (silver-coloured Mercedes Benz with black roofs) link the ville nouvelle and the medina, charging Dh2.50 per seat or Dh15 for the whole taxi. Pale-blue petits taxis use the meter: from El-Amir Abdelkader train station to the medina expect to pay around Dh8.

A more touristy way to get around the medina is by caleche, available for hire on Place el-Hedim and outside the Mausoleum of Moulay Ismail. They charge around Dh60 per hour.

## AROUND MEKNÈS

### Volubilis (Oualili)

وليلي

The Roman ruins of Volubilis sit in the midst of a fertile plain about 33km north of Meknès. The city is the best preserved archaeological site in Morocco and was declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 1997. Its most amazing features are its many beautiful mosaics preserved in situ.

Volubilis can easily be combined with nearby Moulay Idriss to make a fantastic day trip from Meknès.

### HISTORY

Excavations indicate that the site was originally settled by Carthaginian traders in the 3rd century BC. One of the Roman Empire's most remote outposts, Volubilis was annexed in about AD 40. According to some

historians, Rome imposed strict controls on what could, and could not, be produced in its North African possessions, according to the needs of the empire. One result was massive deforestation and the large-scale planting of wheat around Volubilis. At its peak, it is estimated that the city housed up to 20,000 people. The site's most impressive monuments were built in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, including the triumphal arch, capitol, baths and basilica.

As the neighbouring Berber tribes began to reassert themselves, so the Romans abandoned Volubilis around 280. Nevertheless, the city's population of Berbers, Greeks, Jews and Syrians continued to speak Latin right up until the arrival of Islam. Moulay Idriss found sanctuary here in the 8th century, before moving his capital to Fez. Volubilis continued to be inhabited until the 18th century, when its marble was plundered for Moulay Ismail's palaces in Meknès, and its buildings were finally felled by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755.

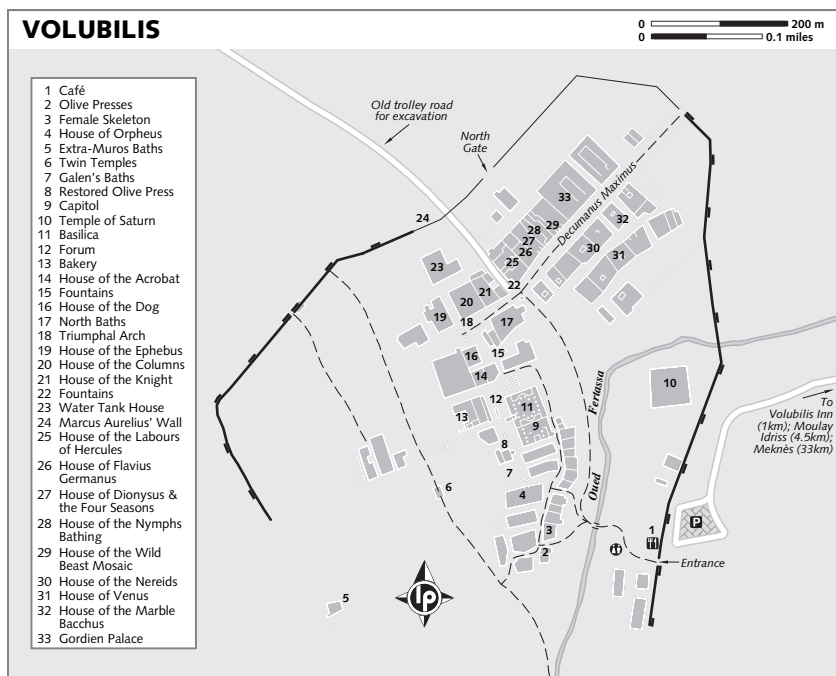
### INFORMATION

Less than half of the 40-hectare **site** (admission Dh20, parking Dh5; ☞ 8am-sunset) has been excavated, and archaeologists continue to make the occasional exciting discovery. Most are on display in the archaeology museum in Rabat (see p123), but an on-site museum is planned for Volubilis that will finally house all the finds together.

Although parts of certain buildings are roped off, you are free to wander the site at will. Bar a couple of vague signboards, there's little in the way of signposting or information on what you're actually seeing. It's well worth considering taking a guide, especially if you're pressed for time. If you prefer to wander on your own, allow at least two hours to see the essentials, up to a full day for the real enthusiast.

In the heat of a summer day, the sun can be incredibly fierce at Volubilis, so bring a hat and plenty of water. Spring is the ideal season, when wildflowers blossom amid the abandoned stones, and the surrounding fields are at their greenest. The best time to visit is either first thing in the morning or late afternoon, when you're more likely to have the place to yourself, with just the guardian's donkey grazing among the ruins. At dusk, when the last rays of the





sun light the ancient columns, Volubilis is at its most magical.

### Guides

Many official guides in Fez and Meknès are knowledgeable about this site, and most will be happy to accompany you for their normal daily rate. Better though are the guides that hang around the entrance who conduct good one-hour tours for around Dh140. Most speak decent enough English to explain the site in detail.

### SIGHTS

The better-known monuments are in the northern part of the site, although it's more convenient to start in the south. Once over the Oued Fertassa, the path leads onto the ridge and through the residential quarter. Although the least remarkable part of the site, the **olive presses** here indicate the economic basis of ancient Volubilis, much as the plentiful olive groves in the surrounding area do today. Near the presses, the remains of a **female skeleton** (thought to be Muslim as she was buried facing Mecca)

are entombed in one of the walls; she's now protected by an iron sheet.

Next to the House of Orpheus are the remains of **Galen's Baths**. Although largely broken, they clearly show the highly developed underfloor heating in this Roman hammam. Opposite the steam room are the communal toilets – where citizens could go about their business and have a chat at the same time.

The capitol, basilica and 1300-sq-metre forum are, typically, built on a high point. The **capitol**, dedicated to the Triad of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, dates back to 218; the **basilica** and **forum** lie immediately to its north. The reconstructed columns of the basilica are usually topped with storks' nests – an iconic Volubilis image if the birds are nesting at the time of your visit. Around the forum is a series of plinths carved with Latin inscriptions that would have supported statues of the great and good. Keep your eyes out for the carved stone drain-hole cover – an understated example of Roman civil engineering.

Further north again, on the left just before the triumphal arch, are a couple more

roped-off mosaics. One, in the **House of the Acrobat**, depicts an athlete being presented with a trophy for winning a desultor race, a competition in which the rider had to dismount and jump back on his horse as it raced along.

The marble **Triumphal Arch** was built in 217 in honour of Emperor Caracalla and his mother, Julia Domna. The arch, which was originally topped with a bronze chariot, was reconstructed in the 1930s, and the mistakes made then were rectified in the 1960s. The hillock to the east provides a splendid view over the entire site.

From the arch, the ceremonial road, **Decumanus Maximus**, stretches up the slope to the northeast. The houses lining it on either side contain the best mosaics on the site. The first on the far side of the arch is known as the **House of the Ephebus** and contains a fine mosaic of Bacchus in a chariot drawn by panthers.

Next along, the **House of the Columns** is so named because of the columns around the interior court – note their differing styles, which include spirals. Adjacent to this is the **House of the Knight** with its incomplete mosaic of Bacchus and Ariadne. The naked Ariadne has suffered somewhat from the attentions of admirers – or Muslim iconoclasts.

In the next couple of houses are excellent mosaics entitled the **Labours of Hercules** and **Nymphs Bathing**. The former is almost a circular comic strip, recounting the Twelve Labours. Several of Hercules' heroic feats were reputed to have occurred in Morocco, making him a popular figure at the time.

The best mosaics are saved until last. Cross the Decumanus Maximus and head for the lone cypress tree, which marks the **House of Venus**. There are two particularly fine mosaics here, appropriately with semi-romantic themes. The first is the **Abduction of Hylas by the Nymphs**, an erotic composition showing Hercules' lover Hylas being lured away from his duty by two beautiful nymphs. The second mosaic is **Diana Bathing**. The goddess was glimpsed in her bath by the hunter Acteon, who she turned into a stag as punishment. Acteon can be seen sprouting horns, about to be chased by his own pack of hounds – the fate of mythical peeping toms everywhere. A third mosaic from this house, of Venus in the waves, can be seen in the Kasbah Museum in Tangier (p177).

## SLEEPING & EATING

There's a small café restaurant behind the ticket office that's handy for light bites.

**Volubilis Inn** (☎ 035 544405; [hotelvolubilisinn@gmail.com](mailto:hotelvolubilisinn@gmail.com); Rte de Meknès; s/d from Dh 856/996, mains from Dh70; (P ♻️ ♿)) Having stood empty for more years than we care to remember, this hotel is finally back in action after a complete refit. It's a huge four-star, with rooms all having delightful views to the Volubilis remains and countryside. There are several terraces with a couple of restaurants and a funky bar – the common parts are quite grand although rooms lapse into 'airport hotel' mood at times. In a nod to antiquity, rooms are named for the ancient gods, although many rather strangely Greek (the Bacchus bar and Aphrodite dining room) rather than the expected Roman.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

The simplest and quickest way to get here from Meknès is to hire a grand taxi for the return trip. A half-day outing should cost Dh350, with a couple of hours at the site and a stop at Moulay Idriss (worth an overnight stay in itself – see below).

The cheaper alternative is to take a shared grand taxi from near Meknès' Institut Français to Moulay Idriss (Dh12) and then hire a grand taxi to take you to Volubilis (Dh40 complete hire). If the weather isn't too hot, it's a lovely 45-minute walk between Moulay Idriss and Volubilis.

There are no buses to Volubilis.

## Moulay Idriss

مولاي ادريس

The picturesque whitewashed town of Moulay Idriss sits astride two green hills in a cradle of mountains slightly less than 5km from Volubilis, and is one of the country's most important pilgrimage sites. It's named for Moulay Idriss, a great-grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, the founder of the country's first real dynasty, and Morocco's most revered saint. His tomb is at the heart of the town, and is the focus of the country's largest *mousslem* every August.

Moulay Idriss fled Mecca in the late 8th century in the face of persecution at the hands of the recently installed Abbasid caliphate, which was based in Baghdad. Idriss settled at Volubilis, where he converted the locals to Islam, and made himself their leader, establishing the Idrissid dynasty.

Moulay Idriss' holy status kept it closed to non-Muslims until the mid-20th century, and its pious reputation continues to deter some travellers. However, the embargo on non-Muslims staying overnight in the town has long disappeared, and local family-run guest houses have started to open to cater to visitors. Those that do stay are invariably charmed – it's a pretty and relaxed town with a centre free of carpet shops and traffic and a chance to see Morocco as Moroccans experience it.

The main road leading from the bus/grands taxis stand to the square (Place Mohammed VI) has a Banque Populaire ATM, and a couple of internet cafés.

### SIGHTS

Although this twin-hill town is a veritable maze of narrow lanes and dead ends, it is not hard to find the few points of interest. The first is the **Mausoleum of Moulay Idriss**, the object of veneration and the reason for the country's greatest annual *mousslem* in late August. An important pilgrimage for many, including the royals, it is accompanied by *fantasias*, markets and music. It's said locally that five pilgrimages to Moulay Idriss during the *mousslem* equals one hajj to Mecca.

From the main road (where buses and grands taxis arrive), head uphill and bear right where the road forks. You'll quickly find yourself on the wide square of Place Mohammed VI lined with cafés and cheap food stands – a great place to sit and watch the pace of life. At the top of the square is the entrance to the mausoleum via a three-arched gateway at the top of some steps, surrounded by shops selling religious goods to pilgrims. Not far inside there's a barrier, beyond which non-Muslims cannot pass. Moulay Ismail created this pilgrimage site by building the mausoleum and moving the body of Moulay Idriss, in a successful attempt to rally the support of the faithful.

From here, head left up into the maze of streets to find your way to a couple of vantage points that give good panoramic views of the mausoleum, the town and the surrounding country. Plenty of guides will offer their services – you can get an informative, entertaining tour for as little as Dh30.

If you don't feel like being guided, head back to the fork and take the road heading uphill, signposted to the Municipalité.

Near the top of the hill, just before the Agfa photo shop, take the cobbled street to the right. As you climb up you'll notice the only **cylindrical minaret** in Morocco, built in 1939. The green tiles spell out in stylised script the standard Muslim refrain: *la illah illa Allah* (there is no god but Allah). At the top of the hill ask a local for the **grande terrasse** or **petite terrasse**. These terraces provide vantage points high above the mausoleum and most of the town.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Rooms are at a premium during the *mousslem*, so book in advance.

**Maison d'Hôte Slimani** (☎ 035 544793; www.maison-dhote-slimani.tk; 39 Rue Drizat; s/d Dh100/200, breakfast dh30) Follow signs to the View Panoramique from the main shrine to find this cheap and cheerful backpacker-style place. A handful of en suite rooms on several levels cluster around a courtyard, simple but good value.

**Hotel Diyar Timnay** (☎ 035 544400; amzday@menara.ma; 7 Ain Rjal; s/d/tr incl breakfast 160/240/300; 📶) Near the grands taxis stands, this is the town's only formal hotel. It's unexpectedly large when you get inside, with plenty of bright rooms – good but unflashy. Most are en suite, although a few have separate (but still private) bathrooms. The restaurant does a roaring lunchtime trade with four groups visiting Volubilis, and has great views to the archaeological site (mains Dh50–60).

**La Colombe Blanche** (☎ 035 544596; www.maisonhote-zerhoune.ma; 21 Derb Zouak Tazgha; r incl breakfast Dh300–500) This is very much a home turned guest house – the family occupies the ground floor while guests are up above, all contributing to a very friendly atmosphere. Although it bills itself as a restaurant, home-cooked meals are really on request. In good weather eat on the terrace, with views to Volubilis. At the shrine, turn right uphill and follow the signs.

**Maison d'Hôte El Kasaba** (☎ 035 544354; senhab@hotmail.com; 32 Ou Bab Kasbah; per person incl breakfast Dh200) Another Moroccan home-from-home, with a handful of friendly rooms with a sprinkling of Moroccan chintz. The host's warm welcome extends to getting you stuck into preparing dinner: cookery lessons are encouraged.

**Buttons Inn** (☎ 035 544371; www.buttonsinna.ma; 42 Derb Zouak Tazgha; dm/s/d/tr incl breakfast Dh180/250/400/600; 📶) A new backpackers place,

that's situated to the right and uphill from the main shrine, this house has been carefully restored in traditional style. There are a variety of rooms and a couple of terraces, with a friendly welcome and good amenities throughout.

**Dar Al Andaloussiya Diyafa** (☎ 035 544749; Derb Zouak Tazgha; r Dh600-1000; 🍴) 'Dar Al Andaloussiya' is Moulay Idriss' big attempt to import a bit of big-city riad-chic to the town. For the most part it works, with good rooms and facilities and plenty of Moroccan fabrics. It's near Colombe Blanche, a big white corner building picked out in green.

**Les Trois Boules d'Or** (View Panoramique) This café-restaurant has the best views over Moulay Idriss, and is a good place to finish your walking tour, with a mint tea or cold drink. It was closed when we visited, but was reportedly due to reopen under new owners as we went to press.

The cheap food stands around the main square are all good for a quick snack. The grilled chicken with salad is something of a local speciality.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Grands taxis (Dh12, 20 minutes) to Moulay Idriss leave Meknès from outside the Institut Français, and buses (Dh6) leave from the Meknès bus station every hour from 8am to 6pm. Taxis leave Moulay Idriss from a stand at the bottom of town on the main road.

If you have your own transport, you might consider continuing to Fez via Nzala-des-Béni-Ammar, or to Meknès via the village of El-Merhasiyye. Both routes have wonderful views and eventually join back up with the main roads. As the road surfaces are very rough, these drives are really only possible in summer unless you have a 4WD.

## MIDDLE ATLAS

### الأطلس المتوسط

#### IFRANE

pop 10,000

As foreign tourists head to the medinas for a taste of the 'real' Morocco, Moroccan tourists find more favour with places like Ifrane. Tidy, ordered and modern, it feels

إفران

more like Switzerland relocated to the Middle Atlas than North Africa.

The French built Ifrane in the 1930s, deliberately trying to recreate an alpine-style resort. It has neat red-roofed houses, blooming flower-beds and lake-studded parks, all kept impeccably tidy. Many major employers (including the government) maintain apartment complexes here for their vacationing workers, and it's a popular summer day trip for picnickers. In the winter the affluent flock here to ski, and the hoi polloi come for the pure fun of throwing snowballs at each other. Outside the holiday season, Ifrane's population is boosted by the rich, trendy students of the town's prestigious Al-Akhawayn University.

#### Orientation

The main road from Meknès is called Blvd Mohammed V as it runs through Ifrane from west to east. This is where you will find the bus station, west of the centre, and the tourist office, at the intersection with Ave des Tilluels. Most of the cafés and hotels are clustered in the centre along two parallel roads a 10-minute walk to the south: Rue de la Cascade and Ave de la Poste. East of the centre, they intersect with Ave Hassan II, the main road out of town to Fez (arriving from Fez, the centre of Ifrane is just after the artificial lake).

#### Information

**BMCE** (Ave de la Marche Verte) One of several banks with ATMs on this road.

**Pharmacie Mischliffen** (Rue de la Cascade)

**Post office** (Ave de la Poste)

**Tourist office** (☎ 035 566821; fax 035 566822; Ave Prince Moulay Abdallah; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri)

#### Sights

The campus of Al-Akhawayn University is at the northern end of town, and is a squeaky-clean showcase of Moroccan education. It was founded in 1995 by Morocco's King Hassan II and King Fahd of Saudi Arabia and includes in its lofty aims the promotion of tolerance between faiths. For now, only the rich and beautiful need apply – the car parks are full of flash cars, and the air trills with the most fashionable of mobile-phone ring tones. Lessons in English are based on the American system and there

are US staff and exchange students. You can wander into the well-kept grounds – weekday afternoons are the best, as there are plenty of students who are usually willing to show you around.

Ifrane's other landmark is the **stone lion** that sits on a patch of grass near the *Hôtel Chamonix*. It was carved by a German soldier during WWII, when Ifrane was used briefly as a prisoner-of-war camp, and commemorates the last wild Atlas lion, which was shot near here in the early 1920s. Having your picture taken with the lion is something of a ritual for day-trippers.

## Sleeping

Hotel prices in Ifrane reflect the town's affluence, and its year-round popularity means demand for rooms runs high.

**Hôtel les Tilleuls** (☎ 035 566658; fax 035 566079; cnr Ave des Tilleuls & Rue de la Cascade; s/d from Dh260/320) The cheapest hotel in Ifrane is this comfortable, old institution on the corner of the main square.

**Hôtel Chamonix** (☎ 035 566028; fax 035 566826; Ave de la Marche Verte; s/d Dh359/408; 🍷) This three-star is well maintained and centrally located. Rooms are bright and clean, if a little bland, with attached bathrooms. There's a decent restaurant and bar (which turns into a nightclub on weekends), and the hotel can rent out ski equipment.

**Hôtel Perce-Neige** (☎ 035 566404; fax 035 567116; Rue des Asphodelles; s/d Dh387/459) Ifrane's prettiest accommodation option is situated about 200m southeast of the centre. The rooms could be a bit bigger, but they're very comfortable and come with satellite TV and bathrooms. The licensed restaurant is a good dining option (set menus Dh120). The shop in the lobby sells paintings by local artists

**Hôtel Miscliffen** (☎ 035 566607; 📍 🍷 🚰) Set in pine and oak forests overlooking Ifrane from the north, this oversized skilodge, owned by the king, was still closed for extensive rebuilding when we visited, and increasingly resembles a sturdy castle. With work dragging into the years, it's anyone's guess when it will finally reopen, but expect five-star rooms and prices.

If you wish to camp, the leafy **camp site** (Blvd Mohammed V; camping per person Dh7, plus per car/tent/campervan Dh8/15/30; 🚫 closed winter) is just west of the bus station.

## Eating

Several cafés and cheap eats cluster around the bus station area, where you'll also find the market for fresh produce.

**Le Croustillant** (Rue de la Cascade; ☎ 7am-9pm) On the corner facing the square, this is a good café for a drink and a sticky pastry.

**Complexe Touristique Aguelman** (Ave Hassan II, meals Dh30-50; ☎ 9am-10pm) Overlooking the artificial lake on the main road, this is a huddle of options under one roof, aimed squarely at the local tourist market. There's a more formal dining room with Moroccan dishes for the evenings, a bar, and a simple diner with pizza, pasta, omelettes and sandwiches. In fine weather, eat at the tables outside overlooking the water.

**Cookie Craque** (☎ 055 567171; Ave des Tilleuls; pizza Dh50-60, crêpes Dh24-40; ☎ 7am-midnight) This café-restaurant has a wonderful choice of sweets, savouries and ice cream to take away or eat in. The toasted sandwiches and filled crêpes are the biggest draw, although there are plenty of more substantial meals on the menu. In winter, get in quick to nab the seats by the log fire.

**Café Restaurant la Rose** (☎ 055 566215; 7 Rue de la Cascade; mains around Dh45, set menu Dh70) This small restaurant has always been popular in town for its Middle Atlas trout and traditional Moroccan fare, but was closed for renovation when we visited.

**Le Pain** (Ave de la Marche Verte; mains around Dh60; ☎ 9am-10pm) Le Pain is situated just up from the *Hôtel Chamonix*. Among its features is a wide glass frontage, with different seating areas, including some for simple café drinkers and others for snacks. Another area again is set aside for full restaurant meals, including some decent pizzas.

## Getting There & Away

The main bus and grand taxi stations are next to the market, west of the town centre.

Each morning, CTM buses leave for Marrakesh (Dh130, eight hours) via Beni Mellal (Dh60, four hours), and for Casablanca (Dh100, 4½ hours) via Meknès (Dh24, one hour) and Rabat (Dh65, 3½ hours).

Non-CTM buses are more frequent. There are hourly buses to Fez (Dh16, one hour) and Azrou (Dh7, 25 minutes). Less frequent are services to Beni Mellal (Dh55, four hours), Marrakesh (Dh105, eight hours) and Midelt (Dh42, 3½ hours).

There are plentiful grands taxis to Fez (Dh21), Meknès (Dh24) and Midelt (Dh55), as well as Azrou (Dh10).

## LAKE CIRCUIT (ROUTE DES LACS)

A pretty diversion north of Ifrane is the lake circuit around **Dayet Aoua**. Signposted off the main Fez road 17km north of Ifrane, the route winds for 60km through the lake country between the P24 and P20. If you don't have your own vehicle, hiring a grand taxi in Ifrane for a tour of a couple of hours should cost around Dh250. That said, the joy of the area is to get out and walk along the lake shore and enjoy the tranquillity of the scenery. This is an area made for hikers and mountain bikers. For longer treks and camping, try contacting local guide **Moulay Abdallah Lahrizi** (☎ 063 772687; www.tourisme-vert-ifrane.com).

Dayet Aoua is surrounded by woodlands, and the whole area is notably rich in birdlife. Keep an eye out in particular for raptors, including booted eagles, black and red kites and harriers. The lake itself attracts significant numbers of ducks and waders, including crested coot, woodpeckers, tree creepers and nuthatches, which flit among the trees around the southeastern end of the lake.

The lake is a popular picnic destination for families at the weekend, but during the week you'll get the place largely to yourself. Beyond Dayet Aoua, the road loops east and then south, skirting past Dayet Ifrah and the even smaller lake of Dayet Hachlat. The road is decent, but is liable to be snowbound in winter.

If you want to linger longer, there are two good sleeping options at Dayet Aoua. Advance reservations for both are recommended during holiday periods.

An attractive French-run chalet sitting on the northern shore of the lake, **Hôtel Restaurant Chalet du Lac** (☎ 035 663277; fax 035 663197; s/d with half-board Dh330/570) has reasonable rooms, but the restaurant (mains from Dh80 to Dh120) is the big draw, and the reason most people come here. It's a great splurge for lunch, followed by a walk around the lake to burn it off.

**Le Gîte Dayet Aoua** (☎ 035 604880; www.gite-dayetaoua.com, in French; r incl breakfast from Dh300, s/d with half-board Dh400/540) is another appealingly rustic and quiet place east of Dayet Aoua.

There are five pretty rooms with Berber decoration, and a cheerful licensed dining room (mains from Dh80 to Dh110) serving wholesome country cooking (there's also a Berber tent to eat in during warm weather). Prices vary according to occupancy and meals. The *gîte* (hostel) is also a great source of local information for hiking, and can hire out tents (Dh50), guides (Dh250) and horses (Dh300) if you're tempted to really get exploring (all prices per day).

## AZROU

pop 50,000

أزرو

The Berber town of Azrou is an important market centre sitting at the junction of the roads to Fez, Meknès, Midelt and Khenifra. Deep in the Middle Atlas it sits amid stunning scenery, with sweeping views of cedar and pine forests, and high meadows that burst into flower every spring. Thoroughly unhurried, it's a relaxing spot to wind down if you've had too much of big cities.

Azrou hosts one of the region's largest weekly souqs, and is particularly known for its Berber carpets, so timing your visit for market day (Tuesday) is a good idea. A museum of the Middle Atlas has been under construction for some years, yet its final opening seems permanently delayed. Better instead to just head out of town to enjoy the countryside; there are plenty of day walks that take in the mountain air and great views. You might even spot a few of the local Barbary apes.

## Orientation

Azrou (Great Rock) takes its name from the outcrop marking the town's western boundary. The big new Ennour mosque in front of it provides another handy landmark. The bus station and taxi stands lie to the north; beyond this is the site of the weekly souq. Other hotels, banks and eateries are southeast of here on and around Place Mohammed V.

## Information

**BMCE** (Place Mohammed V) *Bureau de change* and one of several ATMs on the square.

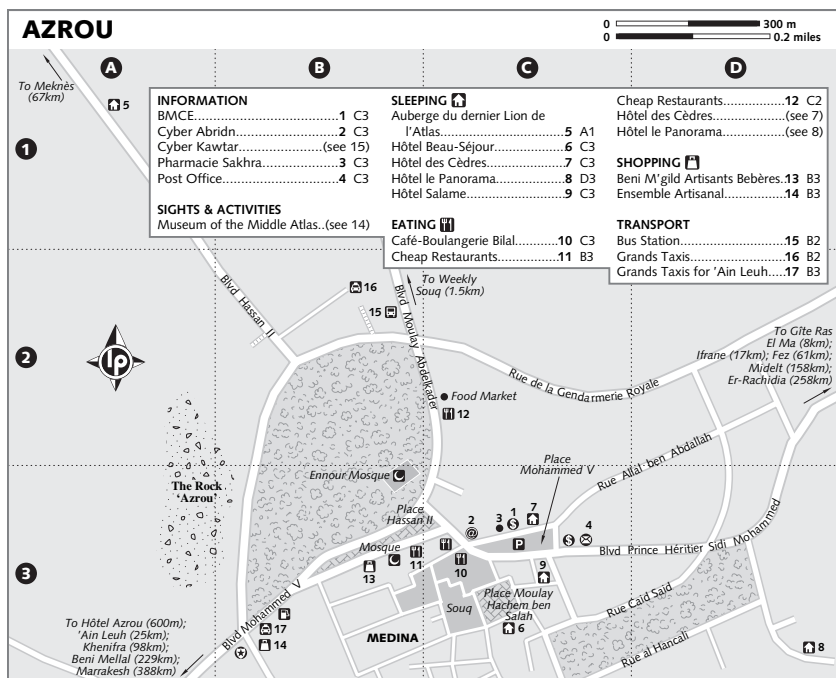
**Cyber Abridin** (Place Mohammed V; per hr Dh6;

☎ 9am-midnight)

**Cyber Kawtar** (Bus station; per hr Dh6; ☎ 9am-midnight)

**Pharmacie Sakhra** (Place Mohammed V)

**Post office** (Blvd Prince Héritier Sidi Mohammed)



## Sleeping

For its size, Azrou has a surprising number of sleeping options, with more being added out of town along the Fez road (look out for the Disneyland-esque 'castle' being built to attract Gulf Arab tourists).

**Hôtel Salame** (☎ 035 562562; [salame\\_hotel@yahoo.fr](mailto:salame_hotel@yahoo.fr); Place Moulay Hachem ben Salah; s/d Dh60/120) This small hotel is an exceedingly pleasant place to stay. Small, cute rooms are nicely presented with a smattering of traditional Berber decoration, and you will be made welcome by the friendly staff. Shared bathrooms are kept constantly clean, with 24-hour hot showers (Dh10).

**Hôtel Beau-Sejour** (☎ 035 560692; [beau-sejour-hotel@yahoo.fr](mailto:beau-sejour-hotel@yahoo.fr); 45 Place Moulay Hachem ben Salah; s/d/tr Dh70/100/180, cold/hot showers Dh5/10) Another decent budget option, rooms here are pretty simple and unaffected. The roof terrace has good views across Azrou.

**Hôtel des Cèdres** (☎ 035 562326; Place Mohammed V; s/d/tr Dh75/105/160) Built in 1925, this hotel still has plenty of interesting period features and a hint of deco styling in its fixtures. Rooms are good value – all have sinks, and

though some share showers and toilets, there are plans to make all en suite.

**Hôtel Azrou** (☎ 035 562116; Rte de Khenifra; s/d with shower Dh109/142, with shower & toilet Dh138/163) A decent midrange place on the south side of town, this is a fair choice. It has comfy rooms – plus a bar, a restaurant and an ivy-covered terrace (although the atmosphere can be a little seedy at night. If you fancy a game, the staff are the local *petanque* champions.

**Auberge du dernier Lion de l'Atlas** (☎ 035 561868; [a.elkhaldi@menara.ma](mailto:a.elkhaldi@menara.ma); Rte de Meknès; s/d incl breakfast Dh150/250) The youth hostel is about 500m east of town, set back slightly from the road. The facilities are pretty basic with cold showers (what did you expect for Dh20?), and you need a YHI membership card to check in.

**Hôtel le Panorama** (☎ 035 562010; [panorama@extra.net.ma](mailto:panorama@extra.net.ma); s/d Dh280/342) Built in a grand alpine-chalet style, Azrou's most comfortable hotel is in a quiet wooded spot a short walk northeast of town, with pleasant garden. Staff are friendly and efficient. Rooms are compact and modern, with balconies, and the restaurant is good.

## WALKS IN THE AZROU AREA

Azrou sits on the edge of some of the prettiest parts of the Middle Atlas – ideal for throwing a few things in your day pack and setting out for a hike. The area is known for its Barbary apes, and you might be lucky enough to spot a troupe foraging in the woods. Although you can just head out of Azrou by foot and into the hills, some of the best walking spots require some wheels to get yourself started.

'**Ain Leuh** is a pretty village 25km southwest of Azrou. The drive here is through thick cedar forest, so you might just be tempted to stop your vehicle anywhere and hit the trail. Instead, take in the large Wednesday weekly souq (the best day to get public transport), which attracts market-goers from around the region, particularly from the Beni M'Guild Berbers. It's a pleasant climb through the round streets of flat-roofed houses to a waterfall in the hills above.

Around 20km south of 'Ain Leuh, an even more picturesque walk leads to the waterfalls at the **Sources de l'Oum-er-Rbia**. Leave the road at **Lac Ouiuouane** and follow the path down past a number of farmhouses to a small valley, where a bridge crosses the Rbia river. From here, it's about a 15-minute walk to the gorge where several dozen springs break out of the rocks to form a series of waterfalls. There are a couple of cafés where you can take a rest.

It's possible to incorporate these walks into a much longer circuit trek of up to six days from 'Ain Leuh. Azrou-based guide **Boujemaa Boudadoud** (☎ 063 760825; boujemaatoumliline@yahoo.fr) speaks good English and can help organise logistics for short and long treks.

## Eating

The best cheap eats are in three main areas – strung along Blvd Moulay Abdelkader south of the bus station, and clustered around Place Hassan II and Place Moulay Hachem ben Salah. You can find all the trusty favourites here – rotisserie chicken, brochettes and steaming bowls of *harira*.

**Café Boulangerie Bilal** (Place Mohammed V) An always-busy café with upstairs seating, good sandwich and pastry options, plus fruit juices and the occasional ice cream for the hot weather.

**Hôtel des Cèdres** (☎ 035 562326; Place Mohammed V; mains around Dh50) A hotel restaurant with a 1920s dining room and log fire, and our favourite eating place in Azrou. The local trout is always good, plus there are some more unusual dishes like rabbit tajine.

**Hôtel le Panorama** (☎ 035 562010; set menu Dh130) Another hotel restaurant, the Panorama is better in the evenings, when you can also wash down your meal with a glass of wine or beer. Some tasty tajines, and a handful of continental dishes in pleasant surroundings.

## Shopping

The weekly souq is held on Tuesday about 1.5km northeast of town. Here you'll witness Berber women from the surrounding villages haggling with dealers over the flat-weave carpets, as well as fresh produce and other market goods. Take care if it's been

raining though, as the souq area can easily turn into a muddy quagmire. At other times, you'll find carpets and handicrafts aplenty in the stores around Place Hassan II and in the medina.

**Beni M'gild Artisans Bebères** (55 Place Hassan II; ☎ 10am-6pm) This is one of several shops along this stretch of road with a good selection of Middle Atlas goods, including those of the seminomadic Beni M'Guild Berbers.

**Ensemble Artisanal** (Blvd Mohammed V; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm) Here you'll find more Berber rugs, plus some interesting carved cedar and juniper wood. The planned Museum of the Middle Atlas will be next door.

## Getting There & Away

Azrou is a crossroads, with one axis heading northwest to southeast from Meknès to Er-Rachidia, and the other northeast to Fez and southwest to Marrakesh.

## BUS

**CTM** (☎ 035 562002) offers daily departures from the bus station on Blvd Moulay Abdelkader to Beni Mellal (Dh55, three hours), Casablanca (Dh105, six hours), Fez (Dh27, two hours), Marrakesh (Dh135, seven hours) and Meknès (Dh25, 1½ hours).

Other slightly cheaper companies have frequent daily departures to Fez (Dh18), Meknès (Dh16), Ifrane (Dh7), Midelt (Dh30) and Er-Rachidia (Dh70).



**TAXI**

The grand taxi lot is down a stepped path below the bus station. Regular taxis go to Fez (Dh30, one hour), Meknès (Dh32, one hour), Khenifra (Dh25, one hour), Ifrane (Dh10, 10 minutes) and less frequently to Midelt (Dh47, 90 minutes). Those for 'Ain Leuh (Dh14, 20 minutes) wait beside the Shell petrol station on the main road out to the southwest.

**MIDELT**

pop 35,000

ميدلت

Midelt sits in a no-man's land of north and the south, stuck between the Middle and the High Atlas. Coming from the north in particular, the landscape seems dry and barren but it offers some breathtaking views, especially of the eastern High Atlas which seem to rise out of nowhere.

Midelt is the sort of place people pass through, but it can make a handy break between Fez and the desert, and possibly for a spot of carpet-shopping. It's also a good base for some off-piste exploring, most notably Jebel Ayachi, which can be climbed without technical experience.

Midelt consists of little more than one main street (Ave Mohammed V in the north, which becomes Ave Hassan II to the south), a modest souq and a number of oversized restaurants, which cater to the tourist buses whistling through on their way south.

**Information**

**BMCI** (Ave Hassan II) One of several banks with ATMs on this street.

**Complexe Touristique Timnay Inter-Cultures**

(☎ 035 360188; <http://timnay-tourisme.com>; Rte de Zaidia) The best source of information – including trekking guides and 4WD rental – in the eastern High Atlas, about 15km north of Midelt.

**Post office** (off Ave Hassan II) South of the centre.

**Sawtcom** (Rue Ezzerqoutouni; per hr Dh6;

☎ 8am-midnight) Internet access.

**Sights****KASBAH MYRIEM**

If you're in the mood for carpets, this **workshop** (Atelier de Tissages et Borderie; ☎ 035 582443; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5.30pm Mon-Thu & Sat), about 1.5km out of town, is worth a look. Run by Franciscan nuns, it assists Berber women develop their embroidery and weaving. The

workshop provides looms and materials, as well as a simple place to work. Local girls – aged 15 or so – come here in order to learn these skills from more experienced women. Literacy lessons are also offered. Follow the signs from the main road, then enter behind the clinic.

While you are here, you may wish to peek into the **monastery** (☎ services at 7.15am daily & 10am Sun), which is home to five Franciscan monks. The grounds and chapel are a peaceful place to collect your thoughts. Ring the bell at the gate to the right of the workshop.

**KASBAH DES NOYERS**

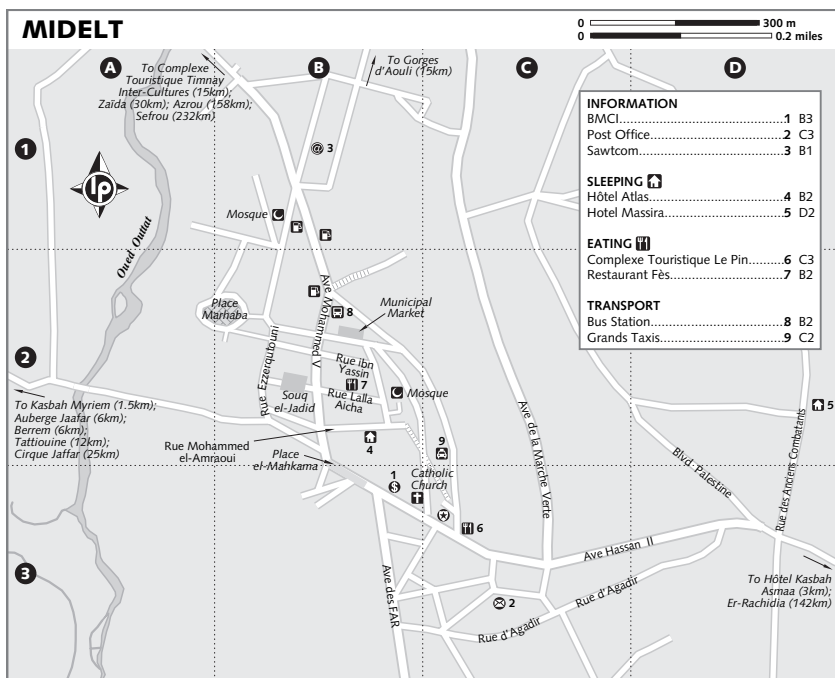
The village of **Berrem**, 6km west of Midelt, is also known as the Kasbah des Noyers for the ancient walnut trees shading its environs. There's not much going on here, but the quaint village, with its colourful mosque and ancient earthen walls, makes a good destination for a day-hike from Midelt. Follow the main path through the kasbah to the scenic overlook of the **Gorges des Berrem**. Hiring a grand taxi from Midelt costs about Dh40.

**Sleeping**

**Hôtel Atlas** (☎ 035 582938; 3 Rue Mohammed el-Amraoui; s/d Dh70/100) This tiny pension is a fair budget option, with home-cooked food on request. Rooms are predictably simple, but clean, as are the shared bathrooms with squat toilets (hot showers cost Dh10). Watch out for carpets though – we've had a couple of letters from travellers complaining of hard sell.

**Hôtel Massira** (☎ 035 361010; 11 Rue des Anciens Combatants; s/d/tr Dh50/100/200) On the Er-Rachidia side of town, this is a great new place. For the price, rooms are large and excellent, and the en suite bathrooms have gallons of hot water. There's a roof terrace with panoramic views: the perfect spot to take in the huge breakfasts (Dh20).

**Auberge Jaafar** (☎ 035 583415; fax 055 583514; Berrem; r Dh225; ☎) This kasbah-style complex is about 6km west of Midelt, just past the village of Berrem. Rooms of all shapes and sizes are set up around terraces and blooming courtyards. All facilities are shared, but everything is clean, although the service can be a bit ramshackle at times. Order during the day if you're going to eat in.



**Hôtel Kasbah Asmaa** (☎ 035 580405; s/d Dh300/350; 🚗 🚚) About 3km south of Midelt, this hotel is hard to miss – the kasbah-style exterior announces that you're on the road south. Another tour-group staple, it has fair rooms and an inviting pool at the bottom of the property, far away from the rooms so as not to be overlooked. The licensed restaurant, contained in several traditionally decorated salons, is, for nonguests, worth eating at.

**Hôtel el-Ayachi** (☎ 035 582161; [hotelayachi@caramail.com](http://hotelayachi.caramail.com); Rue d'Agadir; s/d Dh290/355) One of Midelt's older hotels, as described by its creaky 1950s styling, the Ayachi lives off the tour groups – one night only and no repeat customers. Rooms are a bit shabby, along with the slightly musty bathrooms.

**Complexe Touristique Timnay Inter-Cultures** (☎ 035 360188; <http://timnay-tourisme.com>; Rte de Zaïda; camping per person Dh20, plus per tent/car/campervan Dh15/15/25, bungalows from Dh200, Berber tents per person Dh25; 🚗 🚚) About 15km north of Midelt, this centre is a joint Moroccan-Belgian venture aimed at developing local tourism. Accommodation is simple – it works best with

your own tent or campervan – but Camping Timnay (as it's known locally) is a good base for exploring the region, as you can organise treks and guides from here. For the evenings, there's a restaurant and bar. To get here, take a grand taxi headed for Zaïdia and ask the driver to let you out at Timnay.

## Eating

As usual, cheap eats and snacks are plentiful in the area around the bus station, where there's also a produce market.

**Restaurant Fès** (☎ 062 057754; Rue Lalla Aïcha; set menu Dh70) Serving up hearty portions of traditional cooking, this place is ever-popular. The menu never seems to change – salad or soup, tajine and fruit – and is always simple but fresh.

**Complexe Touristique Le Pin** (☎ 035 583550; Ave Hassan II; mains Dh50-60, buffet Dh70; 🍷 noon-5pm year round & 7-10pm Apr-Aug) This large restaurant draws the coach groups (beware the lunchtime crush), but you can easily escape them in the garden, and the large turnover of covers ensures fresh meals, all served in generous portions. Alcohol is served.

## Getting There & Away

Midelt's bus station is off Ave Mohammed V. CTM services mostly run at night. There's an evening departure to Casablanca (Dh135, seven hours) via Rabat (Dh105, 6½ hours), and to Rissani (Dh75, five hours) via Er-Rachidia (Dh48, 2½ hours) and Erfoud (Dh59, 4½ hours). There are also night-time services for Azrou (Dh30, 90 minutes), Meknès (Dh66, four hours) and Fez (Dh77, five hours).

Other buses cover the same routes at more sociable hours for slightly less – Fez (Dh65, five hours) is serviced by six departures throughout the day.

Grands taxis run to Azrou (Dh47, 90 minutes) and Er-Rachidia (Dh55, two hours).

## AROUND MIDELET

Midelt's location on the cusp of the eastern High Atlas makes it a great base for exploring. Off the main routes, roads are rough piste, with many only really negotiable between May and October and even then only by 4WD. It's heaven for mountain bikers, as well as ideal hiking country. *Complexe Touristique Timnay Inter-Cultures* and *Safari Atlas* in Midelt will rent you a 4WD (with driver) for around Dh1000 – good value if there's a group of you.

## Cirque Jaffar

The Cirque Jaffar winds through the foothills of Jebel Ayachi, 25km southwest of Midelt. It's a rough piste, and regular cars will grumble on the route in all seasons but the height of summer. The scenery is wonderful though – the dramatic crests of the Atlas, carpeted in places with cedar forest,

and studded with tiny Berber mountain villages. From Midelt, take the Zaïdia road for about 10km and turn off at the signpost for the village of Aït Oum Gam. Then follow the signs to Matkan Tounfit. After that the route loops back through Tattiouine and on to Rte S3424 back to Midelt. Allow a day for the whole 80km circuit. The *Complexe Touristique Timnay Inter-Cultures* offers this day trip for Dh350 per person including meals.

If walking is more your thing, and you have a tent, it's possible to strike out from Timnay to the Cirque Jaffar on foot. A two-day round trip gives a good taste of the area. From Timnay you can walk to the village of Sidi Amar, which is surrounded by apple orchards and is particularly colourful during the souq each Wednesday. Camp further along at Jaffar, located in the valley in the centre of the spectacular circle. On day two, return to the Timnay complex via the impressive river gorges. A guide isn't strictly necessary, but can be organised via the *Complexe Touristique Timnay Inter-Cultures*. An equally good companion is the guidebook *Grand Atlas Traverse* by Michael Peyron.

## Gorges d'Aouli

An interesting road trip takes you 15km northeast of Midelt along the S317 road to the **Gorges d'Aouli**. A series of cliffs carved by the Moulaya, they were until recently mined extensively for lead, copper and silver. The abandoned workings can be clearly seen – many halfway up the cliff face – although the mine entrances themselves are blocked off for safety reasons. Nevertheless, the place exudes a slightly creepy ghost-

### CLIMBING JEBEL AYACHI

The highest mountain in the eastern High Atlas, Jebel Ayachi (3737m) is more a massif than a single peak, stretching along a 45km ridge southwest of Midelt. Its size offers a host of trekking opportunities, not least an ascent of Ichichi n'Boukhlil, the highest peak.

The best time to tackle Jebel Ayachi is April to May or September to November, although you should be aware that snow can persist above 3400m well into July. From Midelt, take a grand taxi to the village of Tattiouine, from where you start the climb. It's a tiring but nontechnical ascent achievable in a single day. There's a simple mountain bivouac at the summit, although you'll obviously need to bring your own supplies.

A guide is definitely a good idea. The best place to arrange one is through the *Complexe Touristique Timnay Inter-Cultures* (p275) north of Midelt. The daily rate is around Dh300. An alternative, if you're up to the arranging, is to hire a mule and driver in Tattiouine.

town feel, especially with the dipping sun at the end of the day. Further along the road, the small village of **Aouli** sits against the spectacular backdrop of the river gorge. This would be a great stretch to explore by mountain bike (the road deteriorates to rough piste at some points); a round trip by grand taxi from Midelt should cost no more than Dh250.

## THE EAST

### TAZA

تازة

pop 200,000

At first glance, Taza seems to fulfil all the criteria of a sleepy provincial capital. The rush of activity common in Moroccan towns of comparable size seems entirely absent here, while its sprawling layout gives it a slightly abandoned air. But it makes an interesting break in a journey: climb the crumbling fortifications of Taza Haute and the panoramic views of the Rif to the north and the Middle Atlas to the south are breathtaking. Taza also provides a handy base for exploring the eastern Middle Atlas, including Gouffre du Friouato (one of the most incredible open caverns in the world) and Tazzeka National Park.

### History

The fortified citadel of Taza is built on the edge of an escarpment overlooking the only feasible pass between the Rif Mountains and the Middle Atlas. It has been important throughout Morocco's history as a garrison town from which to exert control over the country's eastern extremities.

The Tizi n'Touahar, as the pass is known, was the traditional invasion route for armies moving west from Tunisia and Algeria. This is, in fact, where the Romans and the Arabs entered Morocco. The town itself was the base from which the Almohads, Merenids and Alawites swept to conquer lowland Morocco and establish their dynasties.

All Moroccan sultans had a hand in fortifying Taza. Nevertheless, their control over the area was always tenuous because the fiercely independent and rebellious local tribes continually exploited any weakness in the central power in order to overrun the city. Never was this more so than in the first years of the 20th century, when 'El-

Rogui' (Pretender to the Sultan's Throne) Bou Hamra, held sway over most of north-eastern Morocco.

The French occupied Taza in 1914 and made it the main base from which they fought the prolonged rebellion by the tribes of the Rif Mountains and Middle Atlas.

### Orientation

If you arrive by train or bus, you are likely to find yourself on the main Fez-to-Oujda road, a short taxi ride north of Place de l'Indépendance. This square is the heart of the ville nouvelle (also called Taza Bas, or Lower Taza) and the site of banks, the main post office and most hotels and restaurants, as well as the CTM bus station.

The medina, ringed by its impressive walls usually referred to as Taza Haute (Upper Taza), occupies the hill 2km to the south. Local buses (Dh2) and sky-blue pet-tis taxis (Dh6) run regularly between the ville nouvelle and Place Aharrach (opposite the post office) in the medina.

### Information

**Attajariwafa Bank** (Map p280; Ave Moulay Youseff) Has an ATM.

**BMCI** (Map p280; Place de l'Indépendance) Has an ATM.

**Cyber Attoraya** (Map p279; Rue Allal ben Abdallah; per hr Dh5; ☎ 24hr)

**Cyber Taza Net** (Map p279; Place Aharrach, Taza Haute; per hr Dh4; ☎ 8am-11pm)

**Hammam** (Map p279; Place Aharrach; Dh10; ☎ men 5am-noon & 7pm-midnight, women noon-7pm)

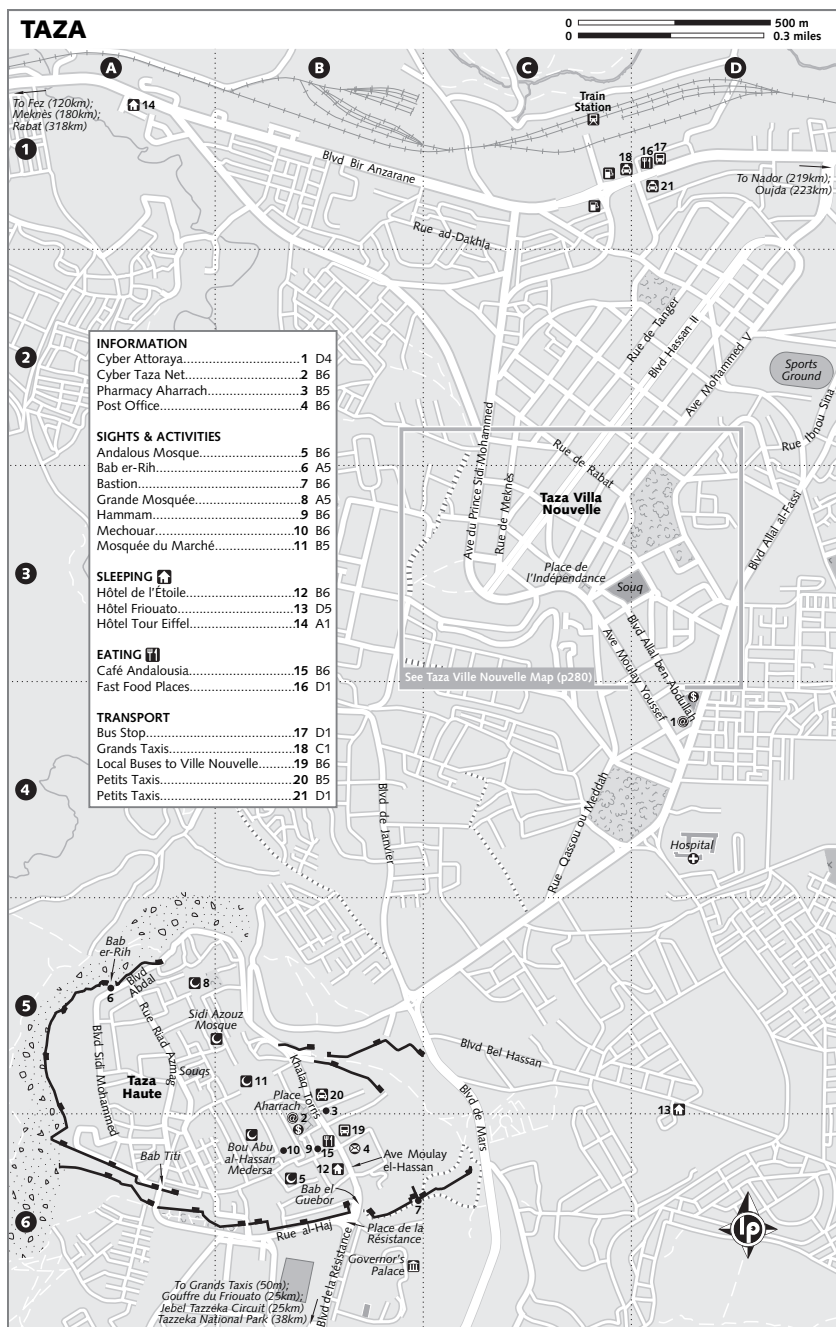
**Main post office** (Map p280; off Rue de Marché)

**Pharmacy Aharrach** (Map p279; Place Aharrach)

**Post office** (Map p279; Ave Moulay el-Hassan) Opposite the main square.

### Sights & Activities

The partially ruined **medina walls** (Map p279), around 3km in circumference, are a legacy from when Taza served briefly as the Almo-had capital in the 12th century. The **bastion** – where the walls jut out to the east of the medina – was added 400 years later by the Saadians. The most interesting section of wall is around **Bab er-Rih** (Gate of the Wind; Map p279), from where there are superb views over the surrounding countryside. Look southwest to the wooded slopes of Jebel Tazzeka in the Middle Atlas, and then to the Rif in the north, and it's easy to see the strategic significance of Taza's location.



Not far from Bab er-Rih is the **Grande Mosquée** (Map p279), which the Almohads began building in 1135; the Merenids added to it in the 13th century. Non-Muslims are not allowed to enter, and it's difficult to get much of an impression from the outside of the building. From here the main thoroughfare wriggles its way southeast to the far end of the medina. Keep your eye out for occasional examples of richly decorated doorways and windows high up in the walls, guarded by old, carved cedar screens.

The **souqs** and **qissariat** start around the **Mosquée du Marché** (Map p279), offering mats and carpets woven by the Beni Ouarain tribe in the surrounding mountains. It's a great chance to observe the workings of a Berber market. At the end of the main street, close to the **mechouar**, is the **Andalous Mosque** (Map p279) constructed in the 12th century.

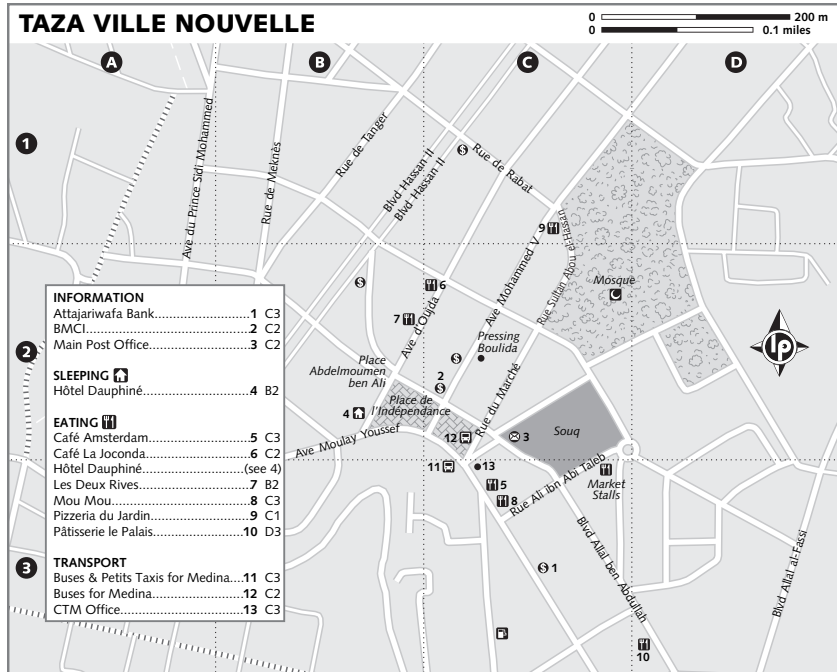
## Sleeping

Taza has only a handful of hotels, and the amount of business they do can be gauged by the general readiness to offer discounts of up to 25% if you stay more than a night.

**Hôtel de l'Étoile** (Map p279; ☎ 055 270179; 39 Ave Moulay el-Hassan; s/d Dh40/50) Spanish-owned, this cheapie next to Place Aharrach is easy to miss (the sign is hidden under the arched front), but inside the strawberry pink paint job is hard to escape. Friendly enough, it's as basic as the tariff suggests – rooms are fine for the money, with shared squat toilets. All have sinks but there's no shower: head for the nearby hammam to really clean up.

**Hôtel Dauphiné** (Map p280; ☎ 055 673567; Place de l'Indépendance; s/d Dh130/165) Ideally located on the main square, the Dauphiné is good value in the budget category. Rooms are hardly exciting, but most are generously sized, and those at the front have small balconies. There's a bar and restaurant on the ground floor.

**Hôtel Friouato** (Map p279; ☎ 055 672593; fax 055 672244; Blvd Bel Hassan; s/d Dh275/315; 🚗 (P)) Halfway between Taza Haute and Taza Bas, the Friouato is nevertheless a fair choice if you're after a bit of comfort and a pool to have a dip in, especially if you have your own transport. Some of the decor is a bit



tired, but all the three-star amenities are there, including a bar and restaurant.

**Hôtel Tour Eiffel** (Map p279; ☎ 055 671562; tour.azhar@hotmail.com; Blvd Bir Anzarane; s/d Dh316/401, breakfast Dh28; ♿) Stuck on the road out of town, the Tour Eiffel is named for its high aspirations. Past the cramped lobby, a lift swishes you up to well-sized and fairly comfy rooms, many with great views out towards the mountains. The house restaurant has good juices and is noted for its seafood.

## Eating

There aren't really any restaurants in the medina, just snack stalls selling kebabs and the like, although there is plenty of fresh produce in the souqs. In the ville nouvelle, the street souq just off Place de l'Indépendance also has produce and lots of tasty snack stands that really come to life in the evening. Ave Mohammed V is well supplied for grocer stores. If you're waiting for onward transport and are in need of sustenance, there's a whole row of fast-food places where the buses stop on the Fez-Oujda road (Blvd Bir Anzarane).

**Les Deux Rives** (Map p280; ☎ 055 671227; 20 Ave d'Oujda; mains Dh30-60) This fresh and cosy little restaurant is a good option. The menu is a mix of Moroccan and continental – some tajines, couscous and a good *pastilla* (pie), with a smattering of pizzas and grilled meat thrown in.

**Pizzeria du Jardin** (Map p280; 44 Rue Sultan Abou el-Hassan; mains Dh35-40) This is a friendly place serving a few tajines, pizzas and fast-food options, with some huge salads, all overlooked by glossy photos of Bogart and Garbo. It's busy in the evenings but dead in the afternoon.

**Hôtel Dauphiné** (Map p280; ☎ 055 673567; Place de l'Indépendance; meals Dh80) On the ground floor of the hotel, the Dauphiné serves up the usual range of Moroccan standards (with some good fish), plus a handful of continental dishes thrown in. It's pretty tasty and efficiently served, but the big dining room could use a little atmosphere.

**Mou Mou** (Map p280; Ave Moulay Youssef; pizzas from Dh30, shawarma from Dh30) If you've been lulled into thinking that Taza is a sleepy place, hit this packed-out corner place, with happy customers spilling out of the door. Tasty fast-food is the order of the day here: great shawarma, paninis, pizzas and juices.

**Café Amsterdam** (Map p280; Ave Moulay Youssef) This is a great breakfast stop with its own patisserie so you're never short of sticky pastry options. Sadly there's no outside seating, but the interior is crisply decorated.

**Café la Joconda** (Map p280; Ave d'Oujda) Another good modern café with plenty of pavement seating, and one that's not threatened by the concept of female customers.

**Pâtisserie le Palais** (Map p280; 65 Blvd Allal ben Abdullah) The pastries available here are considered by many to be the best in Taza.

**Café Andalousia** (Map p279; Place Aharrach) Join the old guys sitting here overlooking the medina square making a coffee last all afternoon.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Few buses actually originate in Taza, but plenty pass through on their way between Oujda and points west of Taza such as Fez, Tangier and Casablanca, as well as to the coast.

The **CTM office** (Map p280; ☎ 055 673037; Place de l'Indépendance) is located in the ville nouvelle. There's a morning departure for Casablanca (Dh135, eight hours), stopping at Fez (Dh45, two hours), Meknès (Dh65, 2½ hours) and Rabat (Dh105, 6½ hours). Two overnight buses leave for Tangier (Dh140, eight hours). There are also morning services for Oujda (Dh55, 3½ hours) and Nador (Dh50, 2½ hours).

Non-CTM buses servicing these same destinations stop on the Fez-Oujda road next to the grand taxi lot. It's all a bit random, so ask around the day before as to what's expected – and jump in a grand taxi if the wait seems too long.

### TAXI

Most grands taxis leave from the main Fez-Oujda road, near the train station. They depart fairly regularly for Fez (Dh44, 2½ hours). Less frequently, taxis head for Oujda (Dh75, 3½ hours) and Al-Hoceima (Dh65, 2½ hours). Grands taxis to the Gouffre du Friouato (Dh14) leave from a lot to the south of the medina.

### TRAIN

Taza's location on the train line makes rail the best transport option. Four trains run to Fez (Dh39, two hours), two of which continue to Meknès (Dh55, three hours),

Rabat (Dh109, six hours) and Casablanca (Dh134, seven hours), and there's one service to Tangier (Dh132, eight hours), although you can also change at Sidi Kacem. In the opposite direction, three trains go to Oujda (Dh73, three hours).

## AROUND TAZA

### Jebel Tazzeka Circuit

It's possible to make an interesting day trip of a circuit around Jebel Tazzeka, southwest of Taza. This takes in the Cascades de Ras el-Oued at the edge of Tazzeka National Park, the cave systems of Gouffre du Friouato and the gorges of the Oued Zireg. The scenery is grand, although the road is very narrow and twisty in parts, with plenty of blind corners from which grands taxis can unexpectedly speed out.

The road is too quiet to hitch easily. If you don't have a vehicle, expect to pay around Dh500 for a grand taxi for the day from Taza, although a few direct grands taxis to the Gouffre du Friouato can sometimes be found near the medina.

### THE FIRST LEG

The first stop is the **Cascades de Ras el-Oued**, 10km from Taza. A popular picnic site, they're at their grandest in the early spring, flushed with rain and snow melt – by the end of summer the flow is just a trickle. Just above the waterfalls is the village of **Ras el-Mar**, where there's a small café with great mountain views. The entry to **Tazzeka National Park** is also near here. With its stands of cork oak you could conceivably spend a day walking here.

Leaving the waterfalls, continue along the right fork onto the plateau and up to a small pass. On your left you'll see the strange depression of the **Daïa Chiker**, a dry lake bed. In early spring, however, a shallow lake often forms as a result of a geological curiosity associated with fault lines in the calciferous rock structure.

### GOUFFRE DU FRIOUATO

Further along, 25km from Taza, the **Gouffre du Friouato** (☎ 067 640626; admission Dh3, guide Dh100, torch Dh100; ☒ 8am–6pm) is well sign-posted, up a very steep road. The cavern is the main attraction of this circuit and it's well worth coming up here simply to look into its gaping mouth.

At over 20m wide and 230m deep, it is said to be the deepest cavern in the whole of North Africa, and the cave system is possibly the most extensive. It was first investigated in 1935 and has only been partially explored to date.

Access is via 520 precipitous steps (with handrails) that lead you all the way to the floor of the cavern (it's a quite strenuous climb back up). At the bottom, you can squeeze through a hole to start exploring the fascinating chambers that are found 200 more steps below. It's dark and dirty and eerily beautiful. The most spectacular chambers, full of extraordinary formations, are the **Salle de Lixus** and the **Salle de Draperies**. The latter are the most spectacular, and do indeed resemble thin sheets of curtains, frozen and calcified. Allow at least three hours there and back. Speleologists have explored to a depth of 300m, but they believe there are more caves another 500m below.

The admission fee allows you to enter as far as the cavern mouth. Beyond that, a guide is needed to accompany you further underground to the grandest chambers. Bank on the occasional scramble, and a couple of squeezes through narrow sections: we don't recommend this for claustrophobes. A torch (available at the site entrance), good shoes and warm clothes are also recommended.

### BACK TO TAZA

Beyond the Gouffre du Friouato, the road begins to climb again into coniferous forests past **Bab Bou-Idir**. Abandoned for much of the year, this village comes alive in summer when holiday-makers fill its camp site and tiled alpine-style houses. This is a good base if you wish to do some day hikes in the area. There's a national park information office, open in summer, and marked trails commencing in the village.

About 8km past Bab Bou-Idir, a rough track branches off to the right 9km up to **Jebel Tazzeka** (1980m). A piste goes to the summit, and it's a tough climb. At the top there's a TV relay station, and really great panoramic views out to both the Rif and the Middle Atlas.

The main road continues for another 38km to join the main Fez–Taza road at Sidi Abdallah de Rhiata. On the way you will wind around hairpin bends through some



dense woodland and then down through the pretty gorges of the **Oued Zireg**. From the intersection at Sidi Abdallah de Rhiata, you can take the main highway back east to Taza, pausing at **Tizi n'Touhar** on the way for more views.

## OUJDA

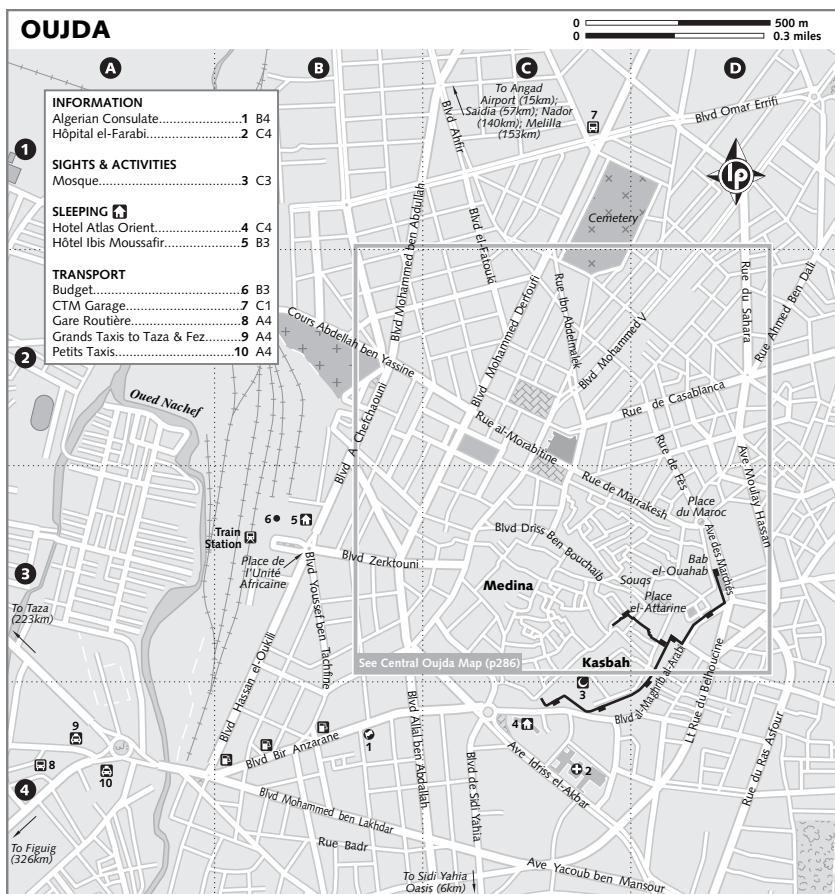
pop 880,000

Oujda is the largest city in eastern Morocco, and its modern facade belies its millennium-old age. It's a relaxed sort of a place that often seems surprised to see foreign travellers, but it wasn't always like this. A quick survey of the map and recent history gives the reason. The terminus of the train line, it has good links to the rest of the country,

وجدة

and once capitalised on its location near the busiest border-crossing with Algeria, making it a popular centre for traders and tourists alike. When the border closed in 1995 Oujda's economy took a major hit, from which it has arguably yet to recover. It's hoped that the plans to develop tourism along the nearby Mediterranean coast will have a positive knock-on effect for the city. In the meantime Oujda's important university remains a mainstay of the economy and the city's intellectual life.

Despite few genuine attractions for the traveller, it's a hassle-free place in which to catch your breath, after heading down from the Rif Mountains or taking the long look south to Figuig and the Sahara.



## History

The site of Oujda has long been important as it lies on the main axis connecting Morocco with the rest of North Africa (the Romans built a road through here). Like Taza, it occupied a key position in controlling the east and was often seen as a vital stepping stone for armies aiming to seize control of the heartland around.

The town was founded by the Meghroua tribe in the 10th century and remained independent until the Almohads overran it in the 11th century. Later, under the Merenids, Algerian rulers based in Tlemcen took the town on several occasions, and then in the 17th century it fell under the sway of the Ottoman in Algiers.

Moulay Ismail put an end to this in 1687, and Oujda remained in Moroccan hands until 1907, when French forces in Algeria crossed the frontier and occupied the town in one of a series of similar 'incidents'. The protectorate was still another five years away, but the sultan was powerless to stop it.

The French soon expanded Oujda, which has since swelled in size as a provincial capital and in its role as the main gateway for commerce with Algeria. Its industrial economy rests on mining, particularly zinc, which is found further to the south.

## Orientation

Although Oujda is quite large, only the centre is of any interest to travellers. The main street is Blvd Mohammed V, along or near which you'll find banks, offices, hotels and restaurants. The medina lies east of here, at the southern end of the street.

About a five-minute walk to the west of the medina along Blvd Zerktouni lies Oujda train station. A further 15 minutes to the southwest, across Oued Nachef, is the main *gare routière* (central bus station).

## Information

### CULTURAL CENTRES

**Institut Français** (Map p286; ☎ 036 684404; www.ambafrance-ma.org/institut/oujda; 3 Rue de Berkane; ☎ 8.45am-noon & 1.45-6.30pm Tue-Sat) Concerts, lectures and films, with occasional exhibitions by local artists.

### INTERNET ACCESS

**K@ramoss Internet** (Map p286; Blvd Mohammed V; per hr Dh5; ☎ 24hr) Upstairs above a café.

**Surfnet** (Map p286; Ave Idriss el-Akbar; per hr Dh6; ☎ 9am-11pm) In the basement.

## MEDICAL SERVICES

**Hôpital el-Farabi** (Map p283; ☎ 036 682705; Ave Idriss el-Akbar)

**Pharmacie Mouslime** (Map p286; Blvd Mohammed V)

## MONEY

Most banks with ATMs and *bureau de change* are located along Blvd Mohammed V in the medina and around Place du 16 Août near the town hall.

**Western Union** (Map p286; Blvd Mohammed V; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2.30-6.30pm Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat) Has a *bureau de change* where you can change cash outside banking hours.

## POST

**Main post office** (Map p286; Blvd Mohammed V)

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist Office** (Map p286; ☎ 036 684329; Place du 16 Août; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri)

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Carlson Wagonlit** (Map p286; ☎ 036 682520; Blvd Mohammed V) For ferry and air tickets.

**Marc Voyages** (Map p286; ☎ 036 683993; 110 Blvd Allal ben Abdallah)

## Sights

Oujda's **medina** (Map p286) isn't large but it still warrants a little exploration. The walls and several surrounding squares were all undergoing major renovation when we last visited. Enter through the eastern gate, **Bab el-Ouahab**, its gruesome name is derived from the old habit of hanging the heads of criminals here, which persisted until the French Protectorate. This area of the medina is chock-full of food stalls (Oujda olives are very well regarded) and street cafés. Bustling without being overwhelming, it's a great slice of tradition and modernity. From **Place el-Attarine** (Map p286), head north through the souqs past the 14th-century **Grande Mosquée** built by the Merenids, eventually popping out near Place du 16 Août, the centre of the *ville nouvelle*. The square is marked by a 1930s clock tower and fine sandstone **mosque**.

Although full of new buildings, the side-streets in central Oujda are frequently rich in French protectorate and deco buildings

(although often in poor condition). Walking south along Blvd Mohammed V, note the fine French neo-Moorish **Banque al-Maghrib**, before arriving at the **Cathedrale St Louis** (invariably with nesting storks on its imposing towers).

## Sleeping

While the Algerian border remains closed, Oujda's hotels suffer from being filled to over-capacity. At most hotels, rates fall quickly on asking, especially if you stay multiple nights.

## BUDGET

**Hôtel Tlemcen** (Map p286; ☎ 036 700384; 26 Rue Ramdane el-Gadhi; r per person Dh60) This friendly little place offers excellent value, and has an exceedingly grand-looking lobby for the price of the rooms. Quarters are small but bright, with bathrooms and TV.

**Hôtel al-Hanna** (Map p286; ☎ 036 686003; 132 Rue de Marrakesh; s/d Dh57/77, with bathroom Dh77/93) This place is very handy for bus connections. Rooms are airy (many with balconies). All rooms have their own sink, but it's definitely worth paying the extra for an attached bathroom.

**Hôtel Atrah** (Map p286; ☎ 036 686533; off Rue Ramdane el-Gadhi; s/d Dh113/178) The tiles and plasterwork in the lobby lend some traditional Moroccan flavour here. Self-contained rooms are a bit boxy, but otherwise this is a good budget choice.

**Hôtel Angad** (Map p286; ☎ 036 691451; Rue Ramdane el-Gadhi; s/d Dh90/140, high season Dh161/194) The top pick of the budget hotels is this affordable two-star. Rooms are just about essentially furnished, with large bathroom and TV, but you're better off getting a room at the back as street-side can be noisy. The downstairs café does breakfast and pizza.

**Hôtel la Concorde** (Map p286; ☎ 036 682328; 57 Blvd Mohammed V; s/d Dh177/206) The low-ceilinged reception – they've squeezed in a mezzanine bar upstairs – instantly makes you feel cramped in this hotel, but the rooms are better than you'd think. There's a slight impression of a good hotel fallen on hard times, but it's fine for the price and location.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hôtel Oujda** (Map p286; ☎ 036 684093; fax 036 685064; Blvd Mohammed V; s/d Dh278/352; 🍷 🍷) According to the decor, this hotel's clock stopped

in the early 1970s: there's a 'space age' lobby and funky bathroom tiles. Still, everything works, it's all comfy enough and the staff are eager to please. The restaurant offers lovely views of the nearby square and Église St Louis.

**Hotel Al Manar** (Map p286; ☎ 036 688855; hotelamanara@menara.ma; 50 Blvd Zerktouni; s/d Dh360/420; 🍷) Centrally located, the Al Manar is suitably towering for its name. Functional and practical seem to have been the bywords for the decor: rooms are fine value for the money, although avoid the darker, small-windowed interior rooms.

**Hotel Atlas Orient** (Map p283; ☎ 036 700606; www.hotelsatlas.com; Place Syrte, Ave Idriss el-Akbar; s/d Dh512/624, ste from Dh1200; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Oujda's best hotel by some distance, the Atlas is a new and professionally run business-class outfit. Plush rooms look out either to the medina or the lovely gardens, plus there are two restaurants, a nightclub and pool if you're in need of diversions.

**Hôtel Ibis Moussafir** (Map p283; ☎ 036 688202; www.ibishotel.com; Blvd Abdella Chefchaoui; s/d incl breakfast Dh539/698; 🍷 🍷) Bang in front of you as you leave the train station, the Ibis has all the up-to-the-minute facilities and comfortable rooms you'd expect from this international hotel chain. Off the peg, you could be anywhere (or nowhere) in the world.

## Eating

### RESTAURANTS

**Restaurant National** (Map p286; ☎ 036 703257; 107 Blvd Allal ben Abdallah; meals from Dh25) Unassuming from the outside, this is a real Oujda institution: people are virtually queuing for tables at lunchtime (there's a big – and packed – salon upstairs). The salads are great, and waiters rush in every direction with plates of grilled meat, fried fish and tajines. Recommended.

**Restaurant Miami Inn** (Map p286; 67 Blvd Mohammed V; meals around Dh30) Cheap, fast and popular, this is a good filler for rotisserie chicken, chips and generous plates of salad.

**Ramses Pizza** (Map p286; Blvd Mohammed V; pizzas around Dh40) Near the cathedral, Ramses serves up decent enough pizzas. It's divided in two – half serves as a café (very smoky), the other is the more usual restaurant fashion.

**Restaurant Le Comme Chez Soi** (Map p286; ☎ 036 686079; 8 Rue Sijilmassa; mains from Dh85) This licensed restaurant is as close to fancy dining



## SELF-CATERING

For those in search of picnic fodder, fresh fruit and veg is on offer in the covered market to the north of Bab el-Ouahab, while **Supermarché Angad** (Map p286; off Place Jeddah; ☎ 7.30am-noon & 3-8.30pm) is good for packaged goods.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Oujda's **Angad Airport** (off Map p283; ☎ 036 683261) is 15km north of the town off the road Saïdia. Grand taxi fares are set at Dh120, but any bus to Nador, Berkane, Saïdia etc can drop you on the main road for a few dirham.

**RAM** (Map p286; ☎ 036 683909; 45 Blvd Mohammed V) has two (sometimes three) daily flights to Casablanca. RAM also operates direct flights to France – for more see p481.

### BUS

Just off Place du 16 Août, the **CTM office** (Map p286; ☎ 036 682047; Rue Sidi Brahim) sells tickets for its two daily buses: Casablanca (Dh170, 11 hours) via Taza (Dh55, 3½ hours), Fez (Dh100, 4½ hours), Meknès (Dh110, five hours) and Rabat (Dh155, 9½ hours); and Tangier (Dh150, 12½ hours) also via Taza, Fez and Meknès. The buses leave in the evening from the CTM garage further north on Blvd Omar Errifi.

SAT and Trans Ghazala operate from the *gare routière*. Between them they run six daily services to Casablanca via Fez, Meknès and Rabat. You can buy tickets for these services at the **Trans Ghazala ticket office** (Map p286; ☎ 036 685387; Rue Sidi Brahim), opposite CTM, or at the *gare routière*.

Numerous other companies with ticket offices in the bus station offer frequent departures for Taza, Fez and Meknès as well as Berkane (Dh12, one hour) and Nador (Dh28, three hours). There are also several buses a day to Saïdia (Dh14, 1½ hours) to Al-Hoceima (Dh58, five hours). There are also two daily buses to Tangier (Dh140, 14 hours) via Chefchaouen and Tetouan. Buses leave for Bouarfa (Dh54, five hours) and Figuig (Dh80, seven hours) in the mornings.

### TAXI

Grands taxis to Taza (Dh75, 3½ hours) leave regularly from outside the main *gare routière*. You'll need to change here for

onward connections. Grands taxis heading north to Nador (Dh54, three hours), Saïdia (Dh24, one hour) and Berkane (Dh18, one hour) congregate to the north of town near the junction of Rue ibn Abdelmalek and Blvd Mohammed Derfoufi.

### CAR

If you want to rent a car, try **Budget** (Map p283; ☎ 036 681011; fax 036 681013) at the train station or **Tulipe Car** (Map p283; ☎ /fax 036 683861; Résidence Le Paris, Blvd Allal ben Abdallah).

### TRAIN

Oujda has a fine French neo-Moorish **train station** (Map p283; ☎ 036 686737), at the west end of Blvd Zerkoune. Three daily direct trains leave for Casablanca (Dh202, 10 hours) and one for Tangier (via Sidi Kacem, Dh202, 11 hours). All stop at Taza (Dh73, 3½ hours), Fez (Dh108, six hours) and Meknès (Dh125, 6½ hours). There's a **left-luggage counter** (per item per day Dh10, ☎ 6am-9pm).

### BORDER CROSSING

#### To Algeria

Few people anticipate the Algerian border reopening soon. Buses and grands taxis used to run constantly to the border, and onto the town of Tlemcen. We live in hope they will again, some day.

## AROUND OUJDA

### Sidi Yahia Oasis

واحة سيدي يحيى

The oasis of Sidi Yahia, 6km south of Oujda, is venerated by Moroccan Muslims, Jews and Christians alike as being the last resting place of Sidi Yahia Ben Younes who, according to local tradition, is none other than John the Baptist.

For most of the year it's a disappointingly scruffy place that's little more than a satellite town for Oujda. But every September (dates vary according to the lunar calendar), thousands of pilgrims flock here for a week-long *mousslem*. It is one of the bigger celebrations of this type in the country, complete with a *fantasia*, and is worth making a detour for. The trees around the shrine (closed to non-Muslims) are festooned with rags, tied to receive blessings – a throwback to pre-Islamic fertility beliefs.

To get to Sidi Yahia, take bus 1 (Dh4) from outside Bab el-Ouahab in Oujda. A petit taxi should cost around Dh18.

## BOUARFA

بوعرفة

Taking the long drive south to Bouarfa and on to Figuig can feel like a journey into limbo. The views of scrubby desert quickly fade to monotony, enlivened only by the occasional camel, and checkpoint manned by bored gendarmes (the closer you get to Figuig, the closer you are to the sensitive Algerian border).

Bouarfa is an administrative and garrison town of Bouarfa, as well as a minor transport hub for the southeastern corner of Morocco. It's a useful spot to refuel, stretch your legs and find somewhere to eat.

The **Hôtel Climat du Maroc** (☎ 036 796382; Blvd Hassan II; d/ste Dh380/500; 📶 🚰) is the best sleeping option, easily spotted with its domed entrance and desert-pink exterior. Rooms are surprisingly good for this remote location, but order food far in advance of wanting dinner. The **Hôtel Tamalt** (☎ 036 798799; Blvd Massira; d Dh60) south of the bus stand is very spartan, but bearable for the price.

The area around the bus station has the usual assortment of places offering brochettes, rotisserie chicken and the like. **Restaurant Elwafa** (Blvd Hassan II; meals Dh30), near the Hôtel Climat du Maroc, is the best seated option, with tajines and couscous. **Café Amsterdam** (cnr Blvd Mohammed V & Blvd Hassan II) has pastries for breakfast.

A handful of buses leave daily to Oujda (Dh54, five hours), mostly in the morning. There are also several buses to Figuig (Dh24, two hours). There's a daily morning bus to Er-Rachidia (Dh58, five hours), where you can pick up transport to the south.

A grand taxi to Figuig costs around Dh400 to hire outright.

## FIGUIG

pop 15,000

In the days of cross-border tourism, Figuig (*fig-eeg*) was relatively popular with travellers. Algeria is just 2km away, but it might as well be a light year away. Few people make it here now, which is a shame because it certainly has its charms: a conglomeration of seven traditional desert villages amid 200,000 date palms fed by artesian wells. Once a historic way station for pilgrims travelling to Mecca, Figuig now sleeps its days away, only labouring into action for the autumn date harvest.

فجيج

## Orientation & Information

The main road from Bouarfa runs roughly north-south through the oasis and – in theory – on to Beni Ounif, on the Algerian side of the frontier. The town's petrol station, bus station, two hotels and post office are lined up along this main road, Blvd Hassan II.

Banque Populaire, Figuig's sole bank, has an ATM and exchange facilities, while **Figuig Net** (per hr Dh10) plugs the town into the web.

Where the road passes the second of the two hotels, Figuig Hotel, it drops downhill towards what is known as the 'lower town' – the basin of palms that makes up the oldest part of Figuig. This ridge provides a handy landmark as well as good views over the *palmeraie* (oasis-like area).

## Sights & Activities

The parched landscape of Figuig is dotted with seven *ksour* that make up the town, all the same ochre colour as the earth they're made from. Each settlement controls an area of *palmeraie* and its all-important supply of water. In the past, feuding families would divert these water channels to wash around the foundations of their enemy's kasbah, hoping that the walls would eventually collapse.

The largest and most rewarding of the *ksour* is **Zenaga**, which stretches south below the ridge splitting the oasis. Numerous paths follow the irrigation channels through the palm trees and past neatly tended vegetable gardens. Then suddenly you're in among a warren of covered passages. As you tunnel between the houses, look out for some marvellous, ancient wooden doors; and watch out – sometimes you may find yourself in someone's backyard.

The crumbling state of many of the *ksour* enables you to see their clever construction: palm tree trunks plastered with pisé, and ceilings made of palm fronds. It's cool and dark and often eerily quiet. Occasionally you may meet married women swathed from head to toe in white robes, with the startling exception of one uncovered eye. It's very easy to get lost. Village children will happily guide you for a few dirham, or you can arrange a more formal half-day tour through the Figuig Hotel.

In the upper part of town, to the west of the main road, **Ksar el-Oudahir** is home to a lovely

octagonal minaret built in the 11th century. It's known, for obvious reasons, as the *saw-mann al-hajaria*, the 'tower of stone'.

There's a souq every Wednesday in the lower town, with some pretty local textiles and embroidery. There's also a very sleepy **Ensemble Artisanal** (Blvd Hassan II; ☎ 4-8pm), across the public gardens from the post office.

## Sleeping & Eating

Figuig has just two hotels, patiently waiting for better and busier days. Nights can be surprisingly cold, so ask for extra bedding if needed.

**Figuig Hotel** (☎ 036 899309; s/d Dh160/190; camping per person Dh35; 🏠) is the town's only decent hotel, with reasonable and comfy rooms. In the *palmeraie*, rooms have views towards Algeria: there's no mistaking this hotel is in the desert. There's a restaurant (meals around Dh50), but order in advance to give staff a chance to nip to the market. You can also pitch a tent in the grounds.

Figuig's eating options are equally limited. Apart from the Figuig Hotel, your best bet is the **Café des Palmeraie** (Blvd Hassan II), opposite the bus station. Staff can rustle up a basic omelette, brochettes and chips. **Café**

**Oasis** (Blvd Hassan II), in the public gardens by the post office, is a better option for coffee and a snack.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Arriving in Figuig, buses stop at the 'bus station' – little more than a junction and three ticket offices – at the north end of town. They then continue on to the lower town; if you're staying at the Figuig Hotel, ask the driver to drop you off.

Always try to check out transport options the day before travelling. There are just a couple of buses a day to Oujda (Dh80, seven hours) in the early morning, via Bouarfa (Dh24, two hours). There are more direct buses to Bouarfa itself – get the earliest possible connection if you want to transit and catch onward transport to Er-Rachidia.

## BORDER CROSSING

### To Algeria

The border with Algeria is closed, but, should it reopen, it's 3km from Figuig to Moroccan customs, another 1km to Algerian customs and a further 3km to the first Algerian town, Beni Ounif.