

# The Charlotte Observer

## Morocco's capital of handicrafts

In the city of Fez, goods such as carpet have been made in the same way for ages.

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By John Bordsen

Saida, 40, is a native of Fez, Morocco. She speaks Arabic, English and French and is a travel guide there for Classic Journeys ([www.classicjourneys.com](http://www.classicjourneys.com)) an adventure-travel company based in California.

### Q. Is Fez a large city? Is it an old one?

The entire city has a population of 1.5 million. It is one of Morocco's four imperial cities: It was three times the capital of Morocco, in the 9th, 14th and 19th centuries.

It is also one of the oldest, and it has the largest "medina" – "old town" – of any city in Morocco. It's an active and vivid medina and it's not just for tourists. People live there and there are souks, or markets. The medina of Fez is considered our country's capital of handicrafts: You find the best examples of crafts, with the people who make them using the same methods from a long time ago.

The medina has 350,000 people living there, and it contains 187 neighborhoods. Each neighborhood has five things: a mosque, a communal oven for bakery, a hammam – which means a public steam bath – a fountain of running water for neighborhood use, and a Koranic school.

The medina is kind of a labyrinth, with more than 9,000 streets. It's easy to get lost in it.

### Q. Where in Fez do you live?

My family and I still live in the medina.

It's an old house, not an apartment. Where I live, most houses are from the 14th century, a time when Fez was the capital and the city was at its apogee, especially for architecture.

I live in what's called a "riad" – a big house with big courtyard and a fountain in its middle. We also have a small garden. The courtyard opens to the sky. A riad can be one or two floors high.



Also in the medina you'll find a smaller type of house called a "dar" which has a courtyard but no garden.

Visitors don't expect to find beautiful houses in the medina, but the houses can be very surprising inside, with carpets, carved wood and carved plaster. Go inside one and you'll be amazed by its beauty, especially the windows that open onto the courtyard.

When you find apartment buildings in the medina, they're of recent construction. They were built to handle the immigration coming to Fez from the countryside. They were the site of slums before; the government razed them and reconstructed them as apartment houses.

**Q. The gardens in the courtyards – what do people grow?**

Usually a banana tree, an orange tree or a lemon tree; jasmine and some roses. That's about it. Sometimes, if it's a big enough garden, they'll grow mint.

**Q. What's the weather like in Fez?**

Fez is in the center of Morocco, on the hills of the middle Atlas Mountains. In winter, it's very cold. In summer, extremely hot – except in the medina. The medina is cooler because the old system of building created buildings with thick walls. The streets are narrow, so there's also a lot of shade. The hot sun doesn't come through a lot, except in the courtyards.

**Q. What exactly are Berbers, and how common are they in Morocco?**

More than 50 percent of Moroccans are Berbers. Maybe 60 percent. A Berber is an indigenous inhabitant; the people lived here a long time ago, before Islamization. The country became Moslem at the end of the 7th century.

They speak their own language and have their own civilization.

Some Berbers look European, and have light skin and blue eyes. Others look relatively Asiatic, and are short of stature and have different eyes, especially in the south of Morocco, in the desert. Some Berbers look black.

"Berber" is not a polite name to call them. Usually, they like to be called "Tamazirt" – which means "free man." The word "Berber" comes from the same word that "barbarian" does.

**Q. You mentioned crafts. What do tourists buy?**

They love to buy carpet. Also, fabric that is made on the looms. Fez is very famous for this.

It's not easy to carry, but the mosaics are beautiful, and there's a co-operative in Fez that's the best. People love to buy mosaics there and have them shipped home, with their safety guaranteed.

For something you can carry with you, a piece of carpet. We have Berber carpet, royal carpet, Fassi carpet ... all different kinds. Also Jewish carpets. Jews played an important role in Moroccan history. The Arab Jews had a big influence on Berbers, and they coexisted for centuries.

**Q. Morocco is on the edge of the Sahara; is global warming a problem?**

Yes. There has been drought. For a long time it was dry and hot. It's a problem for people, especially those who depend on rain for irrigation; that is why they keep moving to the big cities. There is a lot of rain right now, and all the rivers and wells are full, thanks to God.

**Q. Your work involves taking tourists outside Fez. What are some key spots people should see?**

I think the best thing is to go out around the mountains in the countryside and visit Berber homes, to show them the contrast. In big cities like Fez or Casablanca, the lifestyle is modern but very traditional in Fez and other cities. So I take people to the mountains to get in touch with the Berbers.

Some Berbers are semi-nomadic and they are still living in tents and moving from place to place with their sheep and goats, looking for fertile places. I love that. I love to take people to a Berber home or tent, where they're invited to share tea. It's usually a highlight of the trip.

And the desert! To get out and ride a camel, feed a camel and visit Berbers and their tents is something important.

**Q. When is the best season to visit?**

March through May and September through November. It's when the weather is neither hot nor cold. In spring, it's green and flowers are everywhere, and Morocco is known for flowers. Fall is a little dry but nice. This year's an exception. As I said, it's been raining in Morocco.

Summers get very hot. In Fez, it can reach 40 Celsius (104 Fahrenheit). In the desert, 55 Celsius (131 Fahrenheit).

**Q. Just how far are you from the desert?**

In Fez, you drive seven hours to a city called Erfoud. From there, you usually take a four-wheeler to Mezouga. The drive in the four-wheeler is over sand and rocks. After half an hour, you find yourself in sand dunes. It's dune after dune, and looks quite beautiful.

The closest campsites are usually 45 minutes to an hour from Mezouga, and there are many campsites. The best ones are private, where you're largely by yourself, so you can enjoy the quiet of the desert.

Usually, you'll go for a ride to see the sunset; the color of the dunes changes from pink to yellow. It's beautiful. Then you go to the campsite, and usually there'll be a group there to provide local music. You make a fire and sit by it.

This is important: You go to bed early. You turn off the solar lights and you look up and see all the stars in the sky. It's amazing.

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For more information on Classic Journeys' Cultural Walking Adventure in Morocco, please call 800-200-3887 or visit [www.classicjourneys.com/morocco](http://www.classicjourneys.com/morocco).