

The city of Fez celebrates 1200 glorious years

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Photos: Najib Khalifa

Fez, the spiritual, scholarly and cultural capital kingdom of Morocco, a jewel in the crown of the Arab-Andalusia civilization of the Muslim West, this year celebrates its 1200 birthday and the creation of Morocco as a distinguished and independent state.

Fez, a historic city and a testament to the ancestral past of the Moroccan state and its civilizational roots, was and remains the core of intellectual and spiritual creativity and a centre of dialogue between civilizations. It houses the oldest university in the world, Quaraouiyne. Its ancient medina, classified as a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1981, is the largest area in the world not open to vehicular traffic. It is

currently the third largest city in the kingdom, with nearly two million people. This peaceful and beautiful city is surrounded by forests, plantations of cereals, grapes, olive, orange, fig and pomegranate trees. It is a beautiful panorama of greenery which is pleasant to the eye and tranquil to the mind. Not far from Fez, there are excellent tourist sites, such as the beautiful city of Ifrane (famous ▶



The mausoleum of Idriss I

ضريح إدريس الأول

for its ski resorts, beautiful forests and parks) and two spas; Sidi Harazem (specialized in kidney diseases) and Moulay Jacob (for skin diseases).

The site and origin of Fez

The site on which the city of Fez was built, fertile land and abundant irrigation in the Saiss plain, is bounded to the north by the Rif hills, and to the south by the Middle Atlas. It has been the site of Amazigh settlements since antiquity. The Romans (founders of Volubilis not far away), the Vandals, and Muslims passed through it.

But this site experienced a historic turning point in the late 8th century, when Idriss Ben Abdullah Al Kamel, a descendant of Imam Ali who was fleeing the Abbasids, decided to settle on the right bank of the river Fez, and created the Idrisside State in the Far Maghreb (780-1055), independent of the Abbasid Caliphate.

The city proper, with its palaces, mosque and souk, was built by his son Idriss II, 809, and became his capital. Following the revolt of Cordoba, 818, the Andalusians came to settle there. Then, the Kairouanais from Tunisia driven by the Aghlabids (a state which ruled Tunisia and a part of Algeria and Libya between 800-909) chose it as home. Both communities brought their knowledge, professional commercial experience and their urban life style. In the 9th century, with this human potential, its strategic position on the caravan route linking Sijilmassa north of the Maghreb, and construction of the Quaraouiyyne mosque and its commercial attachments, Fez had experienced economic development and an urban boom, becoming the main cultural, religious and commercial centre of the whole Maghreb.

And even when the successors of the Idrissides, the Almoravids (1055-1147) and the Almohads (1147-1269), took Marrakech as their capital, they do not neglect Fez. Thus, the sultan Almoravid, Youssouf Ibn Tachafine unified the city by a new wall, and his son and successor, extended the facilities. Quaraouiyyine, then became one of major religious centres of the Islamic world.

The coming to power of Merinides (1269-1529) had given fresh impetus to building

the new city, "Fez Jdid", in contrast to "Fez el Bali" (old Fez), in 1276. They made it their capital. This "new city", was characterized by organisation in its construction and its lanes and by the exclusive neighbourhood for Jews, called the "Mellah, in the 14th century.

In addition, Merinides built many mosques and medersas (schools), such as the Great Mosque, Al Hamra Mosque, the Bouanania medersa, Dar El Makhzen medersa,, Sahrij

medersa and El Attarine medersa.

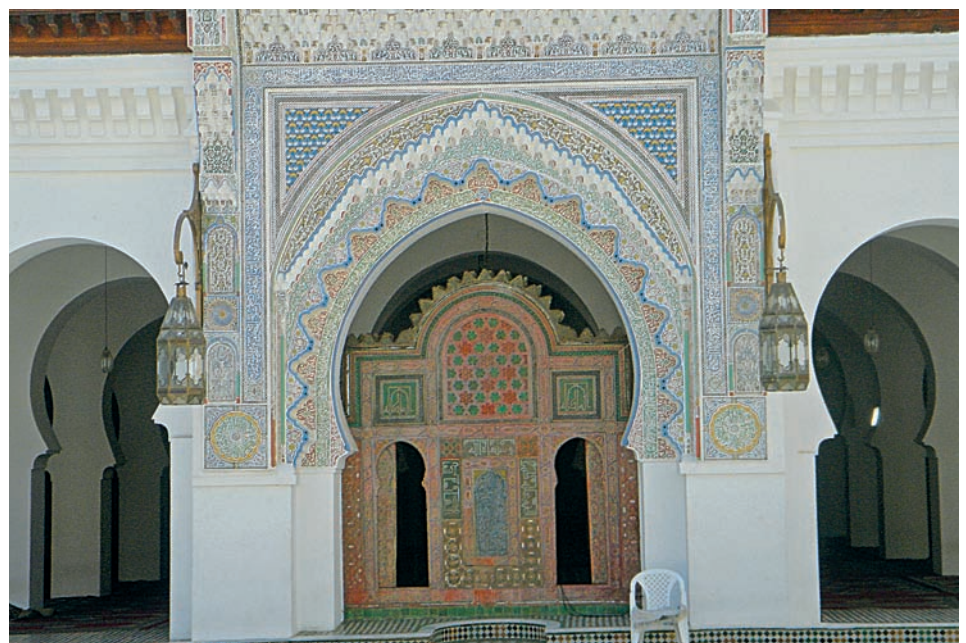
With the death of Sultan Abu Inan Merinid in 1359, the city of Fez entered a period of withdrawal, particularly when the Saadian (1529-1654) settled in Marrakech.

To end the revolt of Fassis and control the town, the Saadien Sultan, Ahmed Al Mansour Addahbi, built two fortresses on the two dominant hills and strengthened parts of its wall. And in an initiative to gain the loyalty of the inhabitants of Fez, ▶



Bouanania School

المدرسة البوعنانية



The courtyard of Idriss II's mausoleum

ساحة ضريح إدريس الثاني



The courtyard of Idriss II's mausoleum

ساحة ضريح إدريس الثاني



Al-Quaraouiyyne

جامعة القرويين

he endeavoured to restore and beautify the Quaraouiyyne mosque by adding two richly decorated basins on both sides of the esplanade.

The struggle of the son of Saadien Sultan Al Mansour and division of people, led Fez into anarchy. Only with the entrance of the Alawite Sultan Rashid, in 1666, did Fez regain its calm and stability. He built the bridge of Sebou to the east of the city, restored the bridge Arrasif over the wadi of Fez, and built two fortresses to the west of the city and the Cherratine medersa.

His successor, Sultan Ismail (1672-1727), took Meknes as a capital. Fez had to wait for the reign of Mohamed Ben Abdallah (1757-1790) and his successors, to resume its position as capital of the kingdom and to witness important urban developments such the construction of mosques (Arrasif, Bab Guissa and Siyaje), medersas and Dar El Makina (a weapons factory). With the imposition of the French Protectorate on Morocco in 1912, Rabat became the capital, but Fez remained the city of learning, religion and culture, and the beacon of Arab-Andalusian Muslim civilization in the West of the Muslim World.

Heritage sites

Fez retains many monuments reflecting the

different Muslim civilizations founded there, such as the wall with its twelve doors (Bab Mahrouk, Bab Dekkakine, Bab Makina, Baba Boujloud, Bab Barja, Bab Semmarine, Bab Jbala, Bab Guissa, Bab Sidi Boujida, Bab Khoukha, Bab Ziyat and Bab Lahdid), built in the Merinide period. These doors have arches with beautiful ornaments.

There are also some 10,000 old buildings with Andalusian architecture proudly defying time, with two floors, covered with beautiful arabesque tiles, with finely decorated doors, gardens along canals, fountains and splendid basins.

The city was also known for its psychiatric centres, the most famous is "Faraj" centre, referring to Doctor Faraj El Khazraji, who introduced music as a means of treatment.

Fez is also home to many Medersas where numerous famous scholars were trained, among them the Saffarine medersa, built by Abu Al-Youssof Al-Merini in 1280, the Merinid medersa, built by Sultan Abu Inan Al Merini in 1355 and the Misbahia medersa built by Abu Al Hassan in 1343.

The Quaraouiyyne

Fez is home to 222 old mosques evidence of the successive Muslim civilizations. The most famous are the Quaraouiyyne, Al Andalouss, Al Hamra and Arrasif.

The Quaraouiyyne was founded by Fatema Bent Mohamed El Fihri in 859, or 51 years after the building of the city of Fez. It has been a mosque and a university for over 1000 years making it the oldest university in the world; a university that has contributed to the formation of the personality and Muslim identity and to the preservation of the Arabic language through its methodology, which involved religious science and other sciences. Thus, its influence touched the Arab world and even parts of Europe.

Many famous scientists in the Arab and the Western world studied there among them Gilbert d'Aurillac, who was pope from 999 to 1003, under the name Sylvester II, who added the zero to mathematics and transferred this knowledge to Europe; Ibn Khaldoun, the historian and founder of sociology; the physician and philosopher Maimonides who went to the East and became a doctor of Saladin al-Ayyoubi; Lissane eddine Ben Al-Khatib, the Andalusians poet and man of letters. It has also been documented that Sharif El Idrissi and Ibnou Zohr studied there.

The city has a reputation among citizens of West Africa: the holy mausoleum of Ahmed Attijani (12th century), the founder of the Tijania Brotherhood, annually attracts thousands of pilgrims from these lands. ▶



The mausoleum of Idriss I ضريح إدريس الأول

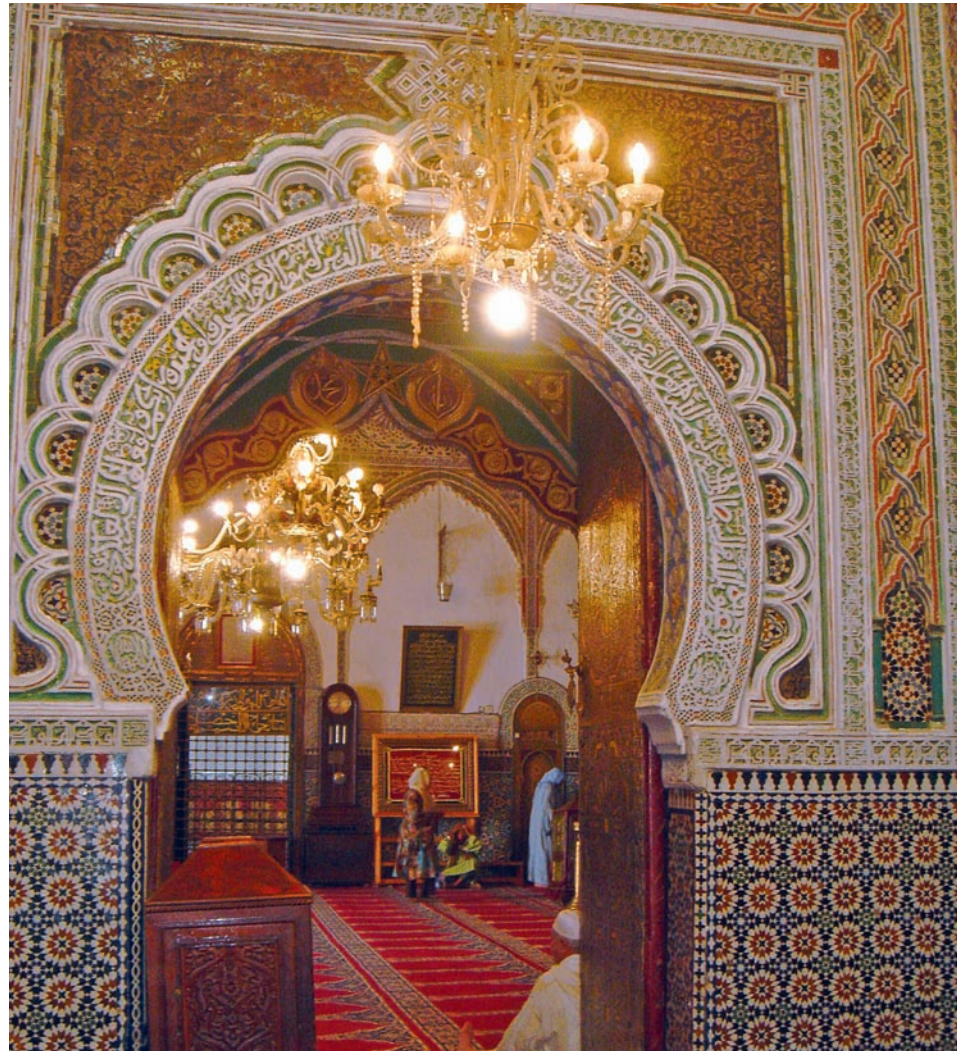
Festivities

The festivities commemorating the 1200th anniversary of the founding of Fez began on Saturday, April the 5th 2008 with a ceremony at Bab Boujloud, and presented a spectacle combining choreography and images summarizing the main historical milestones of Morocco's rich glories, to which many ethnic groups contributed – the Amazighs, Arabs, Muslims, Andalusians, and Saharan Africans.

This was followed by multiple events, including “Women of Morocco” in May, - a tribute to Moroccan women, through an international conference on their history; and a fashion show, recounting the history of Moroccan women's world renowned costumes.

In July, the “Caravan of history” was launched. It will travel through the 16 regions of the kingdom. It is a kind of a “portable” Al Quaraouiyine which will spend a week in each of the major cities of the kingdom, providing the opportunity for citizens to reclaim their glorious history, rich in politics, culture, art, science and sport.

Through the celebration of 1200 years of the founding of the city of Fez, Morocco aims to remember a story that was a model of coexistence and harmony of communities with different cultures and religions living in peace and cooperation. ■



The mausoleum of Idriss II ضريح إدريس الثاني



The mausoleum of Ahmed Attijani ضريح أحمد النيجاني