



# Watercolor Box

By Amal Alameer, MPSA, BPSA



The city of Fez, founded in 789, is an ancient city in the Kingdom of Morocco. It is famous for many of the handicrafts that craftsmen practice to this day. The leather tanning profession is considered one of the most important of these, as it has the oldest leather tanneries in the world, which still use the same manual method based on dyes.

Leather tanning is practiced in what is called the “tanning house,” which resembles an old factory. There are now three houses practicing this profession, the most famous of which is Dar Shawara, whose construction dates back to the eleventh century and which is the largest of the tanneries, as it extends over an area of

Tanners use the skins of animals such as cows, sheep, goats, and camels. The tanning process goes through several stages, starting with placing the skins in white liquids for several days to prepare these skins to receive the dyes. After the skin takes on the appropriate color, it is dried under the sun and then it is ready to be made into high-quality products.

What distinguishes this tanning house is the presence of many stone-filled vats filled with the liquids and dyes used in tanning. These colored vats form a special charm for photographers and tourists alike, as they resemble the watercolor box that we used in school when we were children. The circular basins



Second Stage

approximately 7,200 square meters. It includes 4,000 square meters covered and 193 workshops in which more than 600 traditional craftsmen work. The work in it was passed down from father to son, as it has become a family profession that the children cling to, and their source of livelihood. They have learned its secrets over time. This house produces between 3,000 and 5,000 ready-made leathers daily. It is often exported abroad to manufacture the finest high-end leather products.

appear in many colors depending on the color of the dyes in them, which change according to the seasons of the year and the type of flowers that are used to dye. They use the red color extracted from the poppy flower, the blue color from the desert indigo flower, and the orange color from henna. Therefore, the photos will differ from one photographer to another depending on the time of year he or she chooses to visit.







Dyeing Stages

If you have enough time to visit the three tanning houses, do so. But if you want to focus on the best and most organized ones, you should start with photographing in and around Dar Shawara.

You can start by entering the tanning house itself and photographing while they are working. It is open to everyone. The workers will continue their work and not pay attention to you. They are not bothered by the photography. You are expected to pay a small sum of money, which is not obligatory, but is seen as an encouragement to some workers who are elderly and still working.

The house is also attached to several buildings consisting of more than one floor, allowing you to photograph from different heights. If you feel that you need different angles, you can then choose one of the buildings surrounding the house. They will all welcome you because they all sell products.

When you are inside the tanning house among the workers and moving between the narrow corridors, know that walking around with the camera will not be easy, as you must be careful not to fall into the vats that contain concentrated materials. We photographers

forget ourselves when we are photographing. As you would expect, walking between the ponds is not devoid of annoying odors, which are a mixture of fresh skins after slaughter, the smell of old skin, the smells of various herbs, and other things.

One of the things that helped me tolerate spending more time walking around the place, despite the strong, unpleasant smell, was using a mask over my nose. However, if you limit yourself to photographing from the distant balconies of the neighboring buildings, these smells will not reach you.

What are the best times of the year for photography?

Many prefer to visit Fez between March and May because the temperatures are moderate. During this period, the ponds will have a red color in the dyes, and the smells emanating from the ponds will be less disturbing due to the cold weather. But this is the peak season for tourism, so the cost of travel is higher and there is more congestion. July and August are considered the hottest months of the year, with temperatures approximately 38 degrees Celsius (104°F). It is also school vacation time with family tourism. The blue color will dominate the dyeing ponds in the summer.



Shawara Tanning House



*All images by  
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Tanning in Fass

The Shuwara tanning house is also a tourist destination and not just a tanning house, so it is preferable to go for photography early, before the waves of tourists leave and spread around the place, and you will be able to avoid the reflections of sunlight and unwanted shadows on the ponds.

You can choose the beginning of the working time, as the employees are spread out in parts here and there to see all the stages of work from its beginning. The old city opens its doors around eight in the morning. You can walk around the city and get to know the path to the house in the morning until the house actually starts working, which is a little later than eight. The workers all appear at the same time, which allows you to begin photographing the workers present in a quieter and less noisy atmosphere. At around ten o'clock, the work movement increases and you can then move around to document more angles and different topics.

What photography equipment do we carry with us? You can use wide lenses if you will be photographing near the docks, as you will be very close in narrow

places. The wide lens will also serve you while wandering around the narrow streets of Fez, which you will not be able to resist photographing while going to the tanning house. You also need a suitable zoom lens if you will be using the balconies overlooking the house, as the house is large and you may want to follow the work of one of the workers somewhere located a long distance from you.

I do not think that you need a tripod as the work will be done during the day unless you want to enter and photograph in some of the rooms where work is sometimes done indoors. However, the most beautiful shots will be outdoors.

It is worth noting that ancient Fez has many handicrafts that deserve to be documented, such as making soap, perfumes, or pressing oils; there are also many old shops and traditional clothes worn by local people. You will return from the Fez tour with hundreds of distinctive pictures.

## Amal Alameer, MPSA, BPSA

Amal Alameer from Makkah city in Saudi Arabia, is a photographer who has been passionate about photography since her childhood. She taught high school biology for 25 years, then retired and devoted herself entirely to her hobby of photography. She is the founder of the New View Photography

Club, runs many photography competitions patronage by FIAP and PSA, and loves competing in photographic competitions around the world. She has won hundreds of awards and holds many international classifications, and is now one of the translator members of the PSA Arabic magazine.

