
The Washington Times

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Cosmopolitan Tunisia

By Frederica Dunn

SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Published January 29, 2005

SIDI BOU SAID, Tunisia -- Tunisia is a Mediterranean jewel, a small country with a 3,000-year history that includes ancient Carthage, the Romans and the Muslim world. It is a diverse and westernized Arab democracy that is cosmopolitan, multiethnic and peaceful.

A former French colony, Tunisia lies between Algeria and Libya and a ferry ride to Sicily. It is a best-kept secret except among Europeans, who come by the plane. Its varied landscape includes scenic beach resorts, forest-covered mountains in the north, the Sahara in the south, historical ruins, oases and interesting cities. George Lucas saw the country's visual potential two decades ago when he filmed the "Star Wars" trilogy here.

My journey began with a flight from Washington Dulles International Airport to Paris' Charles de Gaulle Airport, with a connecting flight to Tunis. I had no idea what to expect, but I was fascinated and captivated with the charm of the country and people.

It is something of a shock to see a name so full of historical resonance as Carthage adorning an international airport and a seaside suburb of Tunis. Carthage was founded around 800 B.C. by the Phoenicians, who had established a trading empire with a wide scattering of bases throughout the Mediterranean world. What is left of the ruins from antiquity are near the town of Sidi Bou Said, a beautiful suburb of Tunis.

Our first stop was Tunis, the bustling seaside capital renowned for its medina, or old town. The medina contains alluring souks, the traditional markets where goldsmiths and metal and fabrics workers ply their trades in colorful clothes, jewelry, handmade pottery and rugs. I bought a lovely handmade velvet vest in the souk for an excellent price after a bargaining session and mint tea. Shopping was always a challenging and cultural learning experience in getting to know the people.

From Tunis we drove to the picturesque seaside suburb of Sidi Bou Said. Set high on a cliff, the village is made up of distinctive white houses with curved blue window shutters. As you stroll along the narrow streets, beautiful views open up over the fierce blue of the Gulf of Tunis.

Flaming-red geraniums and shocking-pink bougainvillea pour over the walls and fill courtyards. Well-to-do families who live here have ensured that buildings have retained the character and charm so appealing to the casual visitor.

Sidi Bou Said has attracted numerous painters and writers over the years. The center of activity is the small, cobbled main square lined with cafes and shops selling pastries and souvenirs.

My favorite stroll included a stop at the Cafe Sidi Chabanne for a bambaloni, a light and crispy Tunisian doughnut, with some mint tea and a superb view of the Gulf of Tunis.

Or try Celtia, an excellent local beer. Our hotel (Dar Said) was a converted old palace

overlooking the Mediterranean with cobblestone alleys, bright flowering trees and, best of all, closed to traffic.

PromoTunisia, based in Atlanta, made the arrangements for our tour group of 10, which included a knowledgeable guide fluent in six languages. We toured the countryside in three sport utility vehicles with delightful native drivers in bright yellow turbans and with a great sense of humor. PromoTunisia markets to individuals specifically interested in archaeology and culture, with themes built around festivals, arts, music, cuisine and traditions.

One of the highlights of Tunis is the Bardo Museum, considered one of the richest museums in the world and home to one of the most impressive archaeological collections. The Bardo's most celebrated exhibits are the Roman and Byzantine mosaics taken from sites all over Tunisia. A particular highlight is the third-century mosaic of Virgil writing "The Aeneid," attended by two muses.

It occupies the former official residence of the Husseinite beys, or kings, and contains endless treasures of Tunisian history.

A two-hour drive from Tunis is the impressive Roman site of Dougga, a hillside Roman city on a wind-swept plateau at the foot of the Atlas Mountains. Nearly 2,000 years old, it contains intact remnants of an amphitheater, marketplace, mosaics and the capitol building.

From the theater, the panoramic view is breathtaking. This unique monument has been renovated extensively and is a superb setting for classical drama during the Dougga Festival in July and August.

Proceeding southward, we come to Kairouan, which is one of the seven holy cities of Islam; its mosque is said to be the oldest in North Africa. It is the religious center of Tunisia and remains relatively unscathed by the invasion of tourists on packages.

Of all the sounds that haunt the ears of the visitor to Tunisia, it's the call to prayer that leaves the most lasting impression. You will hear the call to prayer five times a day, starting very early in the morning.

Kairouan is well-known for its classical Persian-style knotted carpets and rugs. Bargaining is the rule of the day and a great introduction to interacting with the people. A visit would not be complete without a tour of the Great Mosque, where the courtyard can accommodate 200,000 people. It also acts as a vast funnel for rainwater, which comes rarely but suddenly in Kairouan and needs to be controlled and conserved. Non-Muslims are not allowed into the beautiful prayer hall but can peer in from the doors.

There can be few more remarkable sights in Tunisia than the first glimpse of El Djem, the ancient colosseum built in the second century A.D. It is one of the most imposing structures in Africa.

The best time to see the colosseum is at sunset, when the sun bathes the amphitheater's interior in golden light.

Heading to the beach area in our SUVs with delightful Tunisian folk music, we arrived at Djerba, a Polynesian-like island with palm trees -- a perfect resort destination.

Besides its miles of beaches and luxury hotels, Djerba has Roman sites and the ancient Ghriba Synagogue, said to be the oldest in Africa. The synagogue, which holds one of the world's most ancient Torahs, hosts annual pilgrimages of Jews from all over the world.

Afternoons included beach and water activities or shopping in the colorful marketplace of Houmt Souk and bargaining for Djerba's famous handmade pottery.

A major highlight of the trip was an overnight stay at a tent camp in La Pansea, which developed in harmony with its surrounding environment and local traditions. The silence and vastness of the desert made a magical and unforgettable night.

A camel ride at dusk into the magnificent red-tinged dunes of Ksar Ghilane was a special thrill.

When the camel kneels down, get on quickly and remember to tilt forward and then backward as the animal rises. Otherwise, you could pull a hamstring and experience some

discomfort later.

My roommate had an addiction to burning incense that she lighted just before we left for our camel ride. Upon our return two hours later, the tent had caught fire, and everything we owned was about to go up in smoke ... passports, tickets, cash, clothes, etc. Fortunately, we returned in time to put out the fire but had to relocate to another tent. I assured my roommate that she need not go to such extremes to get my attention in the future. I also took away the matches for the remainder of the trip.

Dinner under Berber tents around a large fire gave us all a special appreciation of the delicious local cuisine and good wines. Meals included fresh fruits, vegetables, salads, tender lamb, couscous and seafood, ending with mouthwatering pastries and mint tea or Turkish coffee.

Another highlight was the ride on the Red Lizard train to visit the famous Selja gorges. The luxury train belonged to a bey as part of the colonial spirit. A photo frenzy occurred when the train stopped in the middle of a rocky desert, a short walk from the spectacular gorge carved out by the Selja river. The hourlong train ride through the gorges and waterfalls was magnificent.

The last four days were spent in Tozeur, an oasis city rising from the sands of the Sahara. The lovely green oases (my favorite spots) were a stark contrast to the desert with all the palm trees, fruit and date orchards. They generally included a tented camp or charming hotel with a large swimming pool, which was a treat after camel-riding or hiking in the desert.

The mountain oases of Tamerza and Chebika were especially lovely, with natural water cascades to irrigate the date palms. Tamerza is a charming oasis overlooking a drop of hundreds of yards to the Qued el Khanga ravine and a superb waterfall.

The last jewel of an oasis was Nefta, named "Kairouan of the Sahara" for its numerous minarets, mosques and marabouts -- tombs or shrines of holy men. The oases were favorite destinations with our group, as the visits included picnics in tents, sitting on rugs at small tables full of delicious food and listening to Moorish music played on a harp.

Proceeding northward, we visited the Berber villages, settlements of the indigenous people of Tunisia. One of our stops was the famous village of Matmata, which was founded 700 years ago.

The Berbers protected themselves from the nomads living in the plains by dwelling in troglodytes, high-perched cave homes built into the mountain. By merging into the mountainside, the homes brought coolness as well as security.

Matmata, with its pitted lunar landscapes, was used by both George Lucas and Steven Spielberg in the production of the "Star Wars" and "Raiders of the Lost Ark" films. Discovering the traditional lifestyle of these indigenous people and being invited into their cave homes for tea was a memorable experience.

Conditions for women in Tunisia are better than just about anywhere in the Islamic world. Women have full voting rights and are active in all professions. Fourteen percent of the legislature is made up of women.

Sixty-five percent of the population of 10 million is younger than 25.

Tunisia serves as a model for other countries for its family programs. The decline in the birthrate in Tunisia has been especially successful, and the improvement in living standards for the country has been more successful than in most developing countries.

Former President Habib Bourguiba launched the family campaign in the 1950s, with a focus on birth control. Mobile clinics educate men, women and schoolchildren on birth control. School attendance is mandatory for everyone age 6 to 16.

Tunisia is a country that works, often a rarity in the Middle East and Africa. One reason Tunisia works is that the country's architect and first president, Mr. Bourguiba, mixed Arabism and Islam with French and European influences.

Tunisia was the only country in the region to make a successful transition from

colonialism to a sovereign nation, from traditionalism to reasonable modernism. Mr. Bourguiba was followed by his prime minister, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, who has successfully continued his philosophy.

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