

Dear Friends and Family,

July, 2014

A first ever visit to Tunisia. Originally was to do a highlights tour of Tunisia operated by Marmara – specializing in French tourism to Greece, Turkey and North Africa. About 2 weeks prior I was informed there were not enough participants so the trip was cancelled. I could do the same tour three days later, apply my payment to another Marmara tour or resort or receive a full refund. Since I was locked into my dates due to other plans I searched for another offering. Marmara had a Tunisia Portes to the Desert on my dates so I opted for that. It was less fatiguing because we were based three nights in a Marmara resort on Djerba – an island just off the southeast coast on the Mediterranean, then three nights in Tozeur, a huge oasis town known for dates and as a historic trading post.

To begin with Djerba, in addition to enjoying the sandy Mediterranean beach and



resort swimming pools, which are tourist destinations all year around due to the splendid climate, I took one excursion on the island.

Djerba has status as a semi-autonomous province. Its capital, Houmt Souk, is a giant market place with the normal products, a fish auction and the largest used clothing souk I have ever



seen (easily the size of a football field). Many women were wearing the traditional white garb of Djerba.



Historically Djerba has been a melting pot of races and religions and its residents remain proud of their mosques serving different branches of Islam as well as the El-Ghriba synagogue serving the remaining Jewish community.



Olives are the main agricultural product with hundreds of wells on the island as well as an aqueduct from the mainland to serve the tourist facilities. According to my guide Tunisia is the fourth largest olive producer in the world. The constant refrain throughout the week was the elaborate efforts to conserve and augment water supplies including a new desalinization plant using Israeli technology.

Menzels were a traditional form of agricultural smallholdings housing several families. The internal yard contains a water cistern, granary and accommodations for animals and people, surrounded by a wall or planted earthen berm. The one I visited showed the evolution of the building styles from very simple and unadorned Berber interiors to more elaborate use of curvilinear archways, applied decoration and painted ceilings associated with the Ottomans.



The pottery in many ways is reminiscent of Moroccan styles but the tiles are quite different as they are representational creating beautiful landscapes, etc more like the mosaics I saw in Jordan.



We visited a cooperative in a former caravanserie where many artisan activities were occurring.



The use of domes on all types of buildings was the major difference I found from Moroccan architecture. Interestingly, the minarets of the mosques were architecturally very varied, not like the pencil-point ones I have seen in so many other former Ottoman-occupied areas. It became very windy in the afternoon but I returned to the beach to enjoy the wind and waves and by chance enjoyed seeing some horseback riders.



Next day we departed at 6:30 am, a group of 8, headed to Tozeur. We took a small ferry from Djerba to the mainland. Coming the other direction were truckloads of watermelons (we ate watermelon at every meal), onions, meat and building materials.



En route to Tozeur from Djerba were two very interesting areas. Set in a barren lunar-like landscape, Matmata is a Berber town of “pit dwellings” known as Troglodyte caves. Most have an excavated circular pit about 30’ in diameter with vertical walls about 20’ high. Large caves are dug into the sandstone around this central courtyard to serve as rooms for people and animals. Some may have additional caves dug above like a second storey for storage. A small covered passage leads from ground level down to the central courtyard. The rooms maintain a

comfortable temperature all year long. Some have been inhabited for more than 700 years.



From Matmata to Douz we are traveling on Hamada (stony desert)



and at Douz we are on the edge of the Erg – sand dune Sahara. My fellow travelers opted for a short camel ride into the desert but I declined. It was very hot plus I wanted to preserve my

memories of a visit to a much more remote part of the Sahara in Merzouga (Morocco). Further along en route to Tozeur we traversed the largest (dry) salt (lake) in North Africa, Chott El Jerid on an 80 km causeway. Formerly a major camel caravan route the “lake” is heavily mined for salt and excavated for the gypsum desert rose formation found a few meters below lake



bottom.



Tozeur was a major trading post for slaves brought from West Africa, gold, wool, and dates. It might have peaked in the 9thC when chronicles speak of up to 1000 camels departing per day laden with dates.

Now its vast oasis covers ten square kilometers, is planted with 200,000 palms and fed by 200 springs. The primary date of Tozeur is the ‘deglat en nour’ or ‘finger of gold’, so-called because of the translucent quality of its ripened fruit. The palms are artificially pollinated in April and June each year and the fruit is hand harvested at the beginning of winter. Each tree is expected to yield 15-20 clusters of dates each weighing about 10 kg. The system of managing the distribution of spring water to all parts of the oasis is very interesting. Invented in the 13th C, normally hollowed-out palm trunks are used to convey the water with holes drilled to release water along the way. A clay pot with a hole in the bottom, called a kadouss, is used to determine for how long the water is directed towards each plot. A kadouss takes an hour to empty and each property is allotted a certain number of hours. When time is up the holes in the pipe are plugged.

“The houses in the old quarters of Nefta and Tozeur are unique in Tunisia. They are constructed of yellowish handmade bricks which protrude in ornate geometrical or floral designs on the building wall. These shapes and motifs are often repeated in the local carpets and shawls. The decorative technique was first used in Syria and Iraq during the 8th C and was carried west by Arab invaders in the 10thC. The only other place it is practiced today is in Iran”.



We watched the sunset from a bizarre park known as Belvedere. Part amusement park, part sculpture park, with a spring-fed pool where animals are watered and children swim, poetry in

Arabic and French on tiles, and a rocky pinnacle from which the views are impressive.



Just 25 km from Tozeur is Nefta. Known also for its oasis and its corbeille with a hand dug pool and site of numerous springs. As seen often elsewhere the steep hillsides above are terraced using palm staves. This is to prevent erosion, but not to support agriculture. Beyond the oasis, containing ~400,000 palm trees one can also see another chott in the distance to the east.



In Nefta I took a lot of pictures of doors with their nail stud designs and sometimes multiple door knockers used by head of household, children and woman, respectively. The stone

passageways with wooden supported roofs were very interesting. The walk was very pleasant



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there were virtually no other tourists and we felt as if we could observe a normal day in a normal Tunisian town. Our group is only four people today plus our guide. This was historically a center for Sufiism, supports 24 mosques and over 125 shrines to “saints” who might have originated as Roman or animist deities and subsequently took on Islamic identities. It is still an



important religious center in Tunisia. In the afternoon we had a chance to walk in the Tozeur oasis, tour a date plantation, learn the process of date production in detail and sample many of their gourmet products.



The next day was four wheel drive day for visits to three mountain oases and their abandoned ancient villages (due to floods in 1969. All three oasis towns were military forts during Roman times where sentry posts communicated with one another using mirrors. Chebika's picturesque spring and small palm grove are its highlights.





Tamerza's abandoned town is visible in its entirety from the hills above across a dry riverbed. Only the marabouts (tombs of "saints") are still maintained in the town.



Mides is essentially on the Algerian border (by mistake I took a picture of the border post, not knowing what I was looking at). This abandoned Berber village is perched on the edge of a



deep gorge. The new villages of each of these oases produce pomegranates, citrus fruit and, of course, dates.



After visiting the oasis villages we took a 4x4 romp in the sand dunes, and visited Ong Jemel, a rock eroded in the shape of a camel head where the set for some scenes of the first and second Star Wars sequels still exists.



The final day was a 350 km push back to Djerba, this time by way of Gabes on the Gulf of Gabes and the causeway that connects the mainland to Djerba. We had lunch at the 5* Hotel Jougartha near Gabes. Lavishly decorated with all sorts of Tunisian artisanat, it was probably 5*



when opened in 2005, but now suffers from deferred maintenance.

As mentioned, we returned to Djerba via the causeway and were able to see participants in many wind-powered sports and dune buggy races.



Some final pool and beach time rounded out the week before returning home to Paris.

