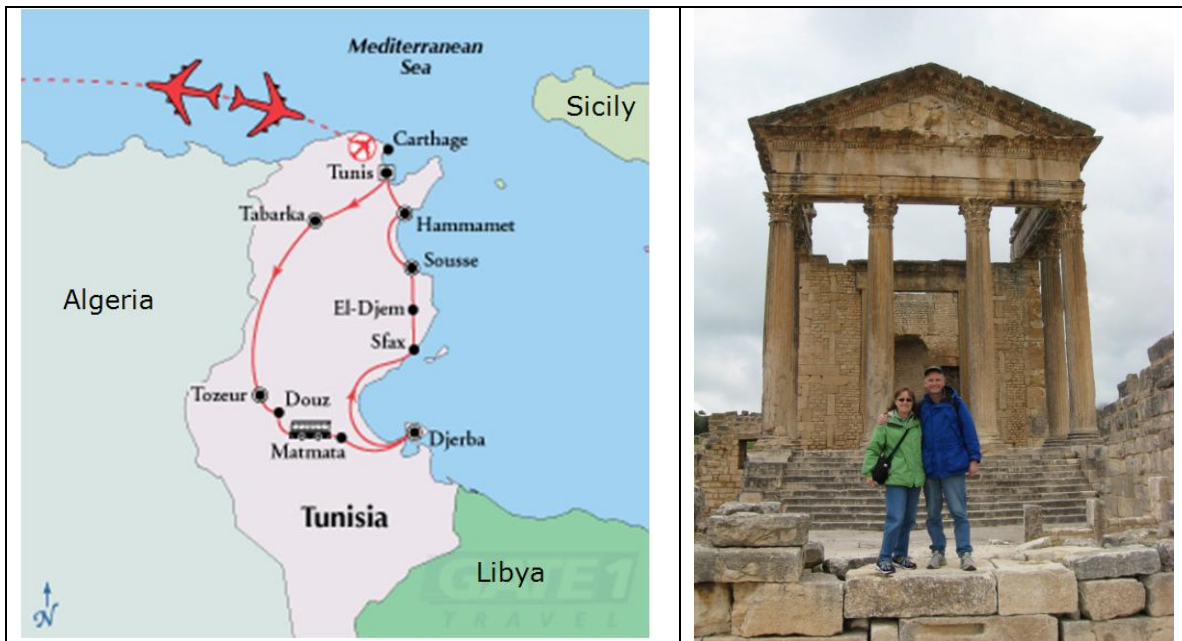


“Tunisia? Why would you want to go to Tunisia?”

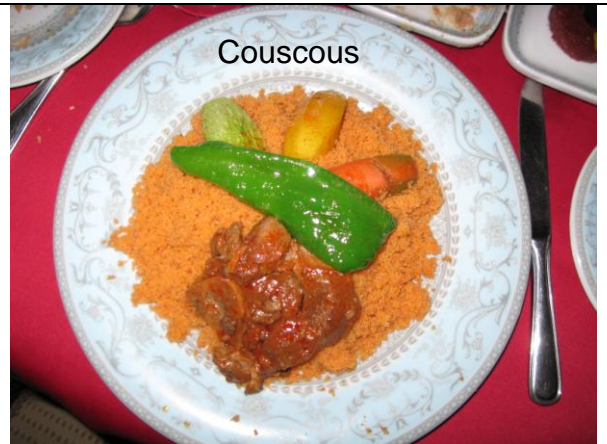
April, 2009

Many of you have seen Tunisia acting as a stand-in for Israel in Monty Python’s “Life of Brian.” Tunisian locations also appeared in “The English Patient” and “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” It’s very popular with Europeans on pre-packaged summer beach vacations, but few Americans journey there. We joined 11 other veteran American travelers for a nine-day bus tour offered by Gate 1 Travel (<http://www.gate1travel.com/>). Tunisia is pretty far down most people’s list and everyone in our group had visited at least 30 countries. We prefer independent travel, but public transportation is difficult in North Africa. We saw much more with a guided group tour than we could have accomplished on our own.



Tunisia was a French colony until 1956, and Tunis/Carthage Airport is a two-hour flight from Paris. The weather was sunny most days with spring temperatures in the 60’s and 70’s. The fields in the fertile north were alive with wildflowers and shepherds watching over their flocks. English was the fifth most likely language to be spoken behind Arabic, French, Italian and German. The country is poor but rapidly developing. Camels and donkeys are being rendered obsolete by French mopeds. It’s the only country we’ve found in Africa where the tap water is reputed to be safe to drink. We didn’t test this claim.

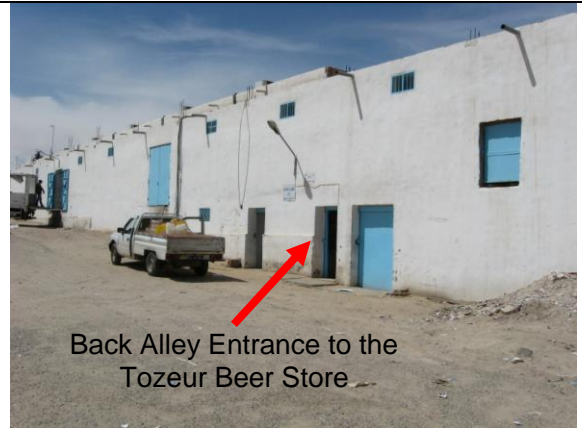
The national dish is couscous. Couscous is a Berber dish made by making semolina wheat into small spherical granules. It tastes like bland pasta and is usually served under some sort of stew or mystery meat. Pizza and spaghetti seemed much more popular. The French bestowed upon Tunisia an important legacy of education and cuisine. We savored wonderful warm bread and world-class pastry at breakfast each day. The countryside is dotted with olive and fruit trees. The plethora of languages makes it difficult for butchers to communicate just what kind of meat they are selling. We can't tell the difference between goat meat and lamb after it's been cut to pieces, so they've invented a unique, but highly effective method to communicate what's for sale. They cut off the head of what they've just slaughtered and post it in front of the shop. We passed on smoking Camels, riding camels and the camel steaks. Such wimps.



<i>Nos entrées chaudes</i>	
<i>Our hot entrees</i>	
Brik au thon	
Brik with tuna	4 DT
Brik aux fruits de mer	
Brik with seafood	5.5 DT
Chevrettes sautées à l'ail	12 DT
Kids sauteed in garlic	
Calamars dorés	10 DT
Golden squid	
Calamars grillés	10 DT
Grilled squid	
Seiche grillée	9.5 DT
Grilled cuttlefish	
Boulettes grillées	12 DT

Children better behave!

Unemployment is relatively high and many men spent much of the day hanging out in cafes; drinking mint tea, smoking the hookah, and fixing the world's problems. Women supposedly have equal rights, but this appears to exclude the right to sit in cafes. Cheryl discussed crashing one with the other women in the group, but never got up the nerve. Outside of the café, Tunisians are remarkably tolerant of Western lifestyles. It was not unusual to see a Muslim woman covered from head to toe cleaning the hotel pool while a French tourist wearing nothing more than a thong suns herself nearby. Islam may forbid alcohol but it was available surreptitiously in a few stores. At the major grocery store in Tozeur, we were directed to a door opening to the alley behind the store. A faded sign next to the loading dock read "Boissons Alcoolisée." Buying beer made us feel like seedy criminals.



In the southern part of the country we reached the edge of the great Sahara Desert. Sahara sand is finer than anywhere else and gets into everything; including teeth. We hiked across the dunes to an oasis of fresh date palms until we were chased away by three dogs.





We've been on similar trips before, but digital photography has changed tourist behavior for the worse. In the olden days of film, it cost money every time you pressed the shutter and most people kept it down to about a roll a day. Do you remember single use flash bulbs? Now digital cameras with large memory cards and rechargeable batteries make picture taking basically free after the initial investment. Many members of our group were just snap, snap, snapping like mad; five shots of every viewpoint; one-handed shots through dirty windows while the bus was moving. We used to try to be polite and stand clear when someone was shooting, but it was impossible with the rapid fire from every direction. I talked to one snapaholic who says she'll take 3000 pictures in a week and then post them on a website if we want to view them and make copies. Yeah, right. Rich's math suggests that it would take eight hours to look at 3000 pictures for ten seconds each. No thank you. If such a person invites you to a slide show of their vacation, do not walk away. Run. Run fast.

Tunisia has some of the best Phoenician and Roman ruins outside Italy. Rich climbed the stage of an ancient theater and performed a very dramatic rendition of "Impossible Dream" with a small but enthusiastic group of local children. In Matmata we visited the Troglodyte cave dwelling that George Lucas borrowed for Luke Skywalker's house in "Star Wars." Most of the cities had houses painted white and blue, similar to Greece, but with Maltese style balconies.





Tunisia is theoretically a democracy, but democracy and freedom are not synonymous. The internet is censored to rid it of pornography and information critical of the government. The press is tightly controlled. The weekly English language newspaper reads like a series of government press releases. There are billboards everywhere featuring portraits of President Ben Ali with his hand over his heart. But nobody seems to mind. Just to the west, Algeria has endured a series of bloody civil wars and Islamic insurgencies. To the east, Libya has spent 27 years on the US State Sponsored Terrorism list. A benevolent, autocratic government may be the best thing going in this part of the world; even at the expense of freedom. We felt very safe walking the streets.



The major cites each had a medina; a walled ancient city center with a tangled maze of alleys and streets. Countless shops sold food, souvenirs and clothing. Prices were reasonable, but we didn't find much to buy. Cheryll said that she would have been embarrassed to donate to Goodwill many of the piles of tattered clothes for sale. This was definitely not Somerset Mall.



Our last day was spent in Hammamet, a huge tourist area, near the beach south of Tunis. There were large four and five star hotels suffering from one-star maintenance. Each of our hotel rooms had an assortment of broken and inoperative fixtures and systems. The French may have taught the Tunisians how to bake, but the mechanical skills leave much to be desired. The center of this tourist area had a multi-million dollar full-size reproduction of a medina, complete with plastic camels and elephants. It was just like Disneyworld, except this was called "Carthage Land." It baffles us to understand why this would attract someone when there was a real medina a few miles down the road.



So here's the answer to the question "Why would you want to go to Tunisia?" It has no Parthenon or pyramids. You'll see neither the Trevi Fountain nor the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but the blue Mediterranean Sea is the same as Greece and Turkey. The beaches are better than France or Spain, and the prices are far lower. It's safer than Algeria or Libya, and Americans don't have to apply for a visa in advance. You don't

have to avoid the Israelis fighting the Palestinians. The shopkeepers aren't as obnoxious as the Egyptians. Tunisian equipment may not be reliable, but it's far more likely to work than in Morocco where anything electrical is regarded as purely decorative. The Roman ruins are very lightly touristed and you can still walk on original 2000-year-old mosaics. The government restrictions have resulted in a remarkable level of stability, tolerance and relative prosperity compared to the rest of Africa. Tunisia is a toned-down, sanitized microcosm the Mediterranean region. We'll remember Tunisia as "Mediterranean Lite." Too bad that Cheryll's camera seemed to jam near the French tourists on the beach.

We have no current plans, but future reports will be posted at <http://www.odendahls.com/>.

