

## A week in Tunisia

November 20-28, 2006

Monday: We flew into Tunis around 2 PM and paid 15 dinar (10.5 dollars) for the cab into town. Twice what we might have managed by arguing for the meter; 1/4 of what the British travel agent wanted. Reasonable hotel (Carlton) in great location town town. But with a strange smell we never identified; it might have been from outside. Dinner at Carthage restaurant was good if not great.

If this is Tuesday we must be in Carthage: Take the commuter train for less than 1 dinar each for 1/2 hour to one of the Carthage stops. We walked up the hill; the usual vague directions from Lonely Planet but we asked a school boy and he told us a short cut that almost got us lost. The top of the hill is the acropolis of both Carthage and Roman City. Much is preserved and a nice museum with mosaics. The attendants keep offering to guide and then expect a tip. They have some useful information but also don't want to spend too much time on any exhibit. This guy also wanted to exchange some euros for dinars. The dinar is a controlled currency, the tourist people get tips in euros and dollars and constantly want to sell you more dinars.

Then down the hill, again getting lost from the poor map. But we met a Swiss lady with excellent English who has lived in Tunisia for 20 years. She was out for a stroll with her grandson and directed us to the port museum. This is fantastic site though not much left. There is a pool a couple of hundred feet in diameter with an island in the middle. This was the garage for the Carthaginian fleet; held over 200 ships.

Then we walked to the Antonium baths. We stopped for a sandwich with school girls, when the Lonely Planet misplaced the only restaurant in town by 1/2 a mile. These baths are by far the largest preserved ones I've ever seen. Easily an acre and a half with three levels for the baths proper and a nice model made by a Brit. The whole site is probably 10 acres. (That's just the bath site. Carthage is spread out for 2 or 3 miles.)

We had only half a day because we had been booked for a 4PM transfer to Hammeret. Carthage would take 2 or 3 days to see properly.

In Hammeret we stayed in a beach hotel, which was good at that and awful for us in November. It would be better to stay in downtown Hammeret and better still in Sousse.

Wednesday: up at 5 to leave at 6 and pick up the other couple on the tour in Sousse at 7. Ernie and Jillian were a nice couple from Toronto, probably slightly older than us.

Cactus grew up to ten feet high in fence rows. The olive trees were often fenced off with the cactus. The land under the olives is usually ploughed bare and dirt is formed into fence-like mounds a few feet high—often topped with cactus. The cactus seemed to bear prickly pears.

A bit further south the ground got greener as we passed some areas with sage brush growing in the rainy season. The first stop was El Djem; the 3rd largest remaining Roman Coliseum; almost the entire first story remains and much up to the third floor. This was a large and prosperous town in Roman times based on exporting olives.

The rest stop was a little town that houses an annual 'plastic arts' exhibition. The best of the 'sculptures' on display were two careful selections of driftwood (well maybe it didn't drift in that climate). One really looks a man diving.

And now to an entirely different world—the troglodytes of Matamat. We visited the underground hotel where the first Star Wars picture was shot. We were only few miles north of Tatouine which gave its name to Luke Skywalker's planet. And then we visited one of the homes where the family prospers by cleaning up there stuff and inviting tourists in during the day.

Our night was in Douz. But on arriving about 4, Sharon and I rushed off for the camel ride. There is one each morning and evening for pictures of the sunrise or sunset. There were about 100- tourists so I have nice pictures of the caravan. I didn't get such a good picture of the berber on a horse who first hassled us to get a picture and then demanded either zwei or 5 dinar (sharon and I heard differently; he got the only 1.5 I had in change. But then I overtipped the camel driver. The saddle kept slipping on Sharon's camel so she had a hard ride.

Thursday: We had a short visit to the weekly market. The most interesting part being that is a real market selling clothing, canned goods, a modern washing machine, fresh food and not something laid on for tourists. The trip from Douz to Tozeuris a bit more than an hour on the causeway between two of the Salt Lakes. But they are dry, the salt lakes are just sheets of salt. And the mirage is not fevered imaginings of a

water-starved wretch crawling across the desert but an optical illusion that the salt sea actually has water. The white camels are just statues made of salt. At Tozeur we visited the Palmerie. This is the oasis; food grows on three levels; date palms at the top, bananas, lemons, oranges, pomegranates in smaller trees and vegetables on ground level. The scheme of dividing the water (each owner gets a certain time to draw water based on the size of his plot) and building the canals was laid out in the 12th century. The water is largely from springs. Some may be collected in cisterns. It is quite flat. A carriage for 4 is the usual transport; 8 dinar each person for an hour's ride. Our guide and the driver got mixed up and we got left in the middle of town to worry for a few minutes. A nice guy helped us out and then bawled out our guide for losing his herd. The old town of Tozeur is residential with only a few shops set up for tourists. The brick work is marvelous.

The evening was a real test of the 4 wheel-drive and we charged out to the 'Neck of the Camel'; a natural sandstone monument. The driver reined in his urge to go plunging over the sand dunes as his passengers turned green. He was a very nice young man in his 20's with a real future in the travel industry. We stopped to photograph a herd of camels and the driver got us to do a little circle dance. Then on to the sets of the English Patient and the second star wars set. Again there was a horde of tourists there for the sunset but the buildings are neat.

Friday: After an hour's drive we arrived at the starting place of the Red Lizard Train. The town of Matamouri is built on phosphate mining. But some one in the government tourist office had the terrific idea of reconditioning the narrow gauge train that the Bey of Tunis used and putting it on the working phosphate mine tracks up the canyon. The canyon is nothing amazing by American Standards but it is scenic enough. And there is some free water – the tailings from the phosphate cleaning barely and grayly flowing along side the train. The driver picked us up and we went on to the Niagara of Tunisia; a waterfall perhaps 15 feet high and a few feet across. There is a nice pool beneath the falls and in summer the tourists bathe. The rash of souvenir shops had the size of wooden camel we had been looking for. We were surprised to discover that the camel is covered entirely in leather.

Then on to a mountain oasis. Another small river fed a group of palm trees. But probably only a couple of hundred. There are several hundred thousand in Tozeur and twice that in Douz. The dates are exported as they have been for several thousand years.

Then back to Tozeur and at 3 the frenetic sight seeing stopped. After a bit Sharon and I walked around and had a good cup of coffee. The food at the hotels booked by the tour was not good and all european -one might even say British in the bad sense. Actually the hotel in Tozeur had breakfasts you hope for in France, croissants, etc.

Saturday: across the country quickly. The break stop was in a place with fixed prices and I got a nice camel leather belt for 9 dinar. The medinah (old town) at Kerouwain is a world historic site. I am not sure if we saw the best part; we got spooked by the tourist bazaar. The guy wanted 85 dinars for the belt that I had just bought for 9- eventually he came down to 10 but I didn't need another belt.

We got back to Hammemet about 4 and had a nice walk and even short wade along the beach. But there was absolutely nothing to do in the hotel (well, an ok piano bar).

Sunday: The next morning at 9 we joined two others for a quick trip into Tunis. We were in our hotel before 10. Sharon was desparate for a book and we found the 'Secondhand bookstore' in the Lonely Planet. They do a nice exchange business. Sharon went to French mass; so she has now had mass on 4 continents and we have lost track of the languages. (At least I have). Then we went out to Museo Bardo on the tram. One young man with a paint brush (artists) in his pocket insisted that another guy give up his seat for Sharon. We were expecting another hustle of a guided tour of the museum, when he got out at the museum stop. But he just said good bye and welcome to Tunisia. We rarely saw a woman over 30 standing on a train. On the other hand the overwhelming majority of Tunisians that you see at all are men. The museum is fantastic; hundreds of mosaics. Most of Roman, some Phoenecian, some Arab. The most amazing are the ones that you really can see only by looking down from the floor above. they range from a foot or so square to perhaps 40 by 60 feet. We stayed in the museum for more than 3 hours and were thrown out at closing time. Dinner was a reasonable couscous.

MOnday: Hotel shuttle to the airport for 10 dinars total and an easy trip to Barcelona with no hassle and an unexpected breakfast on the plane. The copy of La Press de Tunisie I got on the plane had a delightful series of problems (math and physics). They will provide one session of difficult trigonometry and geometry

problems for the Math forum for high school teachers next semester.

Tunisia is a fantastic place for the variety of sights and environments. The tour had the advantage of getting us to lots of places. But they insisted on serving European style food which wasn't very good. Maybe we can negotiate that next time. We'd like to go back. We certainly didn't see all of Carthage and the Sahara would be worth many trips.