

Tunisia – May 2004

Southern Tunisia: Rugs, Roman ruins, Oases and Anzie's Peace Corps Family

Our second bite was to head south and meet the Chebbi family. They're part of the reason we decided to visit Tunisia in the first place. You see, Anzie was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Tunisia way back in '72-'74. For two years she taught English in a high school in the small town of Gafsa, an oasis in southern Tunisia. During that time she lived in an apartment which was part of the Chebbi family home, and became very close with the 4 sisters. Ours was partially a nostalgia trip. Anzie wanted to re-visit places that she hadn't seen in 30 years. I wanted to see Tunisia through her eyes.

Kairouan

The road to Gafsa led through the holy city of Kairouan. Founded in the 7th century, it was the first base for the conquering Arab armies from the East. Many legends surround Kairouan. The most famous is that of Okba ibn Nafi, a companion of Mohamed, who arrived in the year 671 upon this barren flat plain. His horse tripped over a golden goblet that had been lost in Mecca (the holy city of Islam). When Okba picked up the cup, water flowed from it directly from the sacred spring of Zemzem in Mecca, or so he claimed. Hence the beginning of Kairouan's religious fame, making it the fourth most holy city in Islam. It is also Tunisia's most famous carpet-making city, which leads to how we came to stop there.

About 10 miles outside of the city we came upon a man standing next to a stopped car waving wildly to us to stop. Since he was standing in the middle of the road, we had no choice. He explained that he was with his cousin whose car had broken down. They pleaded with us to take him into Kairouan so he could get help. He was a friendly, chatty young man who said that his family was one of the larger carpet manufacturers in the city. He guided us to his father's store, and insisted we come in to partake in a glass of tea as a thank you. So we were escorted into a large room with hundreds of hand woven carpets ranging from 2' x 3' to 15' by 24'. The aim, we surmised, was to sell us something. Anzie maintained a remarkable and surprising constraint (as you who have seen the many Tunisian carpets in our house will understand), and we got away with only an interesting lecture on the many different types and designs of rugs.

The two main types are the hand knotted carpets (a specialty of Kairouan) and the flat woven Mergoums. The latter are woven and embroidered simultaneously, and are a common site in Tunisian homes. The knotted carpets are classified by the number of knots per square meter, the higher the number the finer and more expensive the rug. Originally, the Tunisian carpet did not exceed 40,000 knots per square meter (20x20 texture). Today however, some Tunisian carpets reach 250,000 knots (50x50 texture) with the most frequent textures being "30x30" or "40x40". There are also knotted rugs made from silk - beautiful, but incredibly expensive due to the high number of knots per rug. Initial price quoted on a 2.5 x 3.5 ft. silk model ran \$3000.00. Though a commercial site, you can find more info about Tunisian rugs [here](#). The carpets are woven by young

women and girls, often in their homes. This store had 120 women working for them! There was a woman working in the store who tried to teach Anzie how to do the knots, without much success!

Sufetula

We finally extracted ourselves from the rug store and continued on the route that took us through the town of Sbeitla, the site of the ancient Roman city of Sufetula. Though the farthest major site from Carthage, it is one of the best preserved, as no modern city was ever built over it. Founded in 3rd century BC and located in what was once a rich olive and grain area, it was a prosperous city until overrun by the Arabs in 647 AD. We found temples to the Roman gods as well as the remains of a Christian church. Though neither of us is really into ruins, Sbeitla had so many buildings and mosaics in good shape it doesn't take much to imagine what it must have been like in ancient times.

<http://romeartlover.tripod.com/Sufetula.html>

Gafsa

Arrived in Gafsa, the small town where Anzie's history with the Peace Corps began over 30 years ago. Lo and behold, it's no longer a small town but a thriving city (pop.70,000). Anzie taught in the town's only high school. The town now has 14 high schools! Tough to find a good hotel here. We stopped at the Hotel Gafsa (2 stars) and looked at a couple of rooms. Forgedaboutit!! It's the kind of place where you expect to find plastic sheets and hot pillows. We finally ended up at the Hotel Maamoun located right smack in the center of town. Our room was adequate -- clean with adjoining bath. The air conditioner worked -- sort of. At least it made enough noise to drown out most of the noise blasting from the nightclub (only male customers with a Tunisian woman belly dancer) located one floor below.

The personnel were all very friendly and helpful, especially the bellman. Mahmoud was a giant of a man and a deaf mute. We nicknamed him Mr. Clean because of his bald head and giant biceps. He could carry five heavy suitcases up three flights of stairs without breathing hard. He was always there to help us. We must have looked funny doing sign language, but he always seemed to understand. We parked our car along the busy street outside the hotel. Every morning we found our car freshly washed.

After checking in we drove around town searching for the house that Anzie lived in, a difficult task since the town had mushroomed. Amazingly we found it after only a half-hour's search. The man who ran the small shop next door told us that the Chebbi family still lived there. Since no one was home we left a note with the grocery man saying that we would return later on that evening. When we did return we discovered that the youngest of the four sisters still lived in the house with her children. Within 15 minutes the rest of the family gathered, including two other sisters, their children and even a grandchild. Note: no husbands attended this reunion.

On a sad note, Anzie discovered that the fourth sister, Fadilla, who was her best friend when she lived there, had died the previous year in a very freak accident. She was standing on a chair cleaning a light fixture when she fell, and suffered internal injuries that proved fatal. Fadilla was the second oldest sister. The oldest was allowed to go to school and became a primary school teacher. She is now principal of the same school. But Fadilla had to leave school after 6th grade to stay home and help her mother take care of the younger children. She was very bright and filled with laughter, and maintained her French by reading magazines - an amazing feat for a 6th grade educated woman in an arabic language environment. Anzie always believed that Fadilla was born at the right time in the wrong place, or the wrong time in the right place.

We spent about two hours catching up and reminiscing. We were invited back for dinner the following night.

Le Lezard Rouge

The next day we took the "Lezard Rouge", or Red Lizard, train out of Metlaoui into the mountains. This experience grew out of another lucky happenstance. One of the managers at the Hotel Mehari, where we stayed in Hammamet, had an uncle who managed the train. He called his uncle, and got us two free tickets for the two-hour trip. Talk about a small world, when we arrived at the train, the uncle informed us that we had neglected to pay for a dinner that we had charged to our room in Hammamet. We paid the uncle so that he could mail the cash to his nephew. Bear in mind that the train is about 200 miles from Hammamet.

Originally used by the "bey" - Turkish ruler - the train consists of original 19th century carriages, including the bey's private car, which is restored in red leather and velvet. Metlaoui is the center of Tunisia's phosphate-mining industry. We took the two-hour trip on the track that led up to a large, isolated, working mine. The train wound through the Seldja gorge and climbed steadily until we were 7000 ft. higher than our starting point. The train was packed with tourists, primarily French, who seemed to be all based in the town of Tozeur, located on the edge of the Sahara. I remember wondering why anyone would ever vacation in such a desolate spot.

Mountain Oases

We arrived back in Metlaoui just in time for lunch. We stopped at a restaurant and ate a "cassecroite", a sub filled with "salade nicoise" , olives and hot sauce. Our stomachs pleasantly full and our mouths burning, we headed off to the mountains. Every town we passed through Anzie would exclaim, "I think I had a student from here!" Our first stop was Mides, a working oasis village surrounded on three sides by a 200 feet deep gorge - a location that was easily defensible against marauding Arabs. Mides lies only two kms. from the Algerian border, which was as close as we wanted to get. You can walk the gorge for 10 kms to the next oasis, Tamerza. Anzie and I elected to get back into

our air-conditioned car to make the trip. Since time was fleeting, we chose to drive slowly through this large mountainside oasis, known for its waterfalls.

Our real destination was Chebika. Approaching this site over the mountains we saw our first *chott*, or salt flats. These are the remains of what was once an inland sea. The Mediterranean lies 400 kms. to the east. We stopped the car to walk over the flats for a bit. The ground was covered with salt crystals that crunched under our sandals. Not a place to walk barefoot.

Chebika rests in a cleft between two mountainsides. This picturesque oasis remained isolated from "modern civilization" until midway into the 20th Century. The book, "Change at Chebika", written by social anthropologist Jean Duvignaud, documents what happened as "modernity" entered this traditional society.

Throughout the day we passed many whitewashed, domed structures that dotted the landscape. Though I mistook them for small houses, my know-it-all traveling companion informed me that they are actually the burial places of marabouts, or religious leaders. Many towns are named after famous marabouts, and all bore the prefix Sidi.

Tozeur

We decided to see why so many French tourists were attracted to Tozeur. We journeyed across barren wastes and salt flats, spotting an occasional small oasis marked by a few palm trees, until we reached the oasis town of Tozeur. The most distinctive characteristic of the town is thousands of date palms. The town's importance stems from its huge harvest of the famous and delicious Degla dates. The government has spent a lot of dinars to make it a tourist center with an international airport, for travelers heading past Tozeur to the southern Algerian desert. We passed, or were passed, by countless 4 x 4's carrying various day-trippers on tours of the area. As it was close to the end of a long day, and we had a dinner date with the Chebbi family, we only spent about 30 minutes there, touring the town center. The town is known for its patterned brickwork buildings, and beautiful patterned rugs. The women are covered head to foot in black. We found a great pastry shop, where we stopped to buy traditional sweets for dessert for that night's dinner chez Chebbi. The shop owner was very welcoming. He allowed us to try several free samples before we made a purchase. We bought several manouds -- diamond-shaped pastries filled with nuts and honey.

After a wonderful typical Tunisian dinner, we returned to our hotel. Fortunately there was no music, so we had a good night's sleep before our trip farther south.

A la prochaine

Chuck