

May 2004

Northern Tunisia

Anzie and I spent two weeks in Tunisia in May. Why Tunisia? It was a nostalgia trip. Anzie spent two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer there 30 years ago, 1972-74. She wanted to show me her Tunisia. We saw that plus a lot more, too much to give you all at once. One of my Dad's favorite sayings was: "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." So we have 3 bites: the first bite being northern Tunisia on the Mediterranean.

I found Tunisia to be really "other". Since I'd never visited any Arab country besides Mauritania, I had never before experienced the feeling of total immersion in an Arab world. A majority of Tunisians speak French. However, the further you travel away from the major population centers in the North, the more Arab this world becomes. Eventually all the signs, menus and instructions are in Arabic; all of the music you hear is Arabic, as are the dress and the customs. It even becomes more difficult to find someone who speaks French.

It's a land of ancient history, contrasts and gentility. There's **Carthage**, a city that competed with Rome to be the capital of Roman civilization, and lost. Remember Hannibal and the elephants? There's **Djerba**, the island made famous by Ulysses as the Land of the Lotus Eaters. We find evidence of more recent history in the rusting hulks of German tanks used by Rommel's forces in WWII. They resemble the corpses of dinosaurs rotting in the relentless desert sun.

Contrasts: the contrast in geography is unforgettable. We spent our first week in Northern Tunisia along the Mediterranean coast. It was early May and a bit nippy. The occasional rains accentuated the greenery of the many vineyards, orchards and truck farms that covered the landscape. Olive trees were everywhere.

Olives --- Oh, the olives! They're very best in the world, in my humble opinion. We must have consumed a thousand during our two weeks there. So many different subtle flavorings! They must season the olives in a variety of spices. We could see ourselves becoming olive connoisseurs with the same fervor that people reserve for wine.

As we travel south we pass through the breadbasket region. Wheat and other grains are the crops of choice --- as well as olives, always more olives. We note that the climate becomes increasingly arid. Finally, the bottom third of the country is desert. It starts out like Arizona - rocky mesas and buttes with varieties of cactus and thorny acacias the only greenery. Then you enter The Great Sahara with its never-ending and seemingly identical sand dunes. On the map it shows only three outposts of civilization in 230 miles.

The contrasts in life-style are remarkable. Along the coast you have the beach resorts like **Hammamet**, **Sousse** and the island of **Djerba**: plenty of bare skin, gambling casinos, wines and good food - the good life. A local described the Tunisian coast as the place where residents of the other Arab nations go to sin. The further inland you travel the more clothes the people wear: long, flowing robes, turbans. The women are especially covered up, wearing a white cloth much like a bed sheet, called a *saf saari*, that wraps around and covers all but part of their faces. Many women keep an edge of their sheet clenched in their teeth, so they can hold their many bags and/or children's hands.

Our first 5 days we spent in the northeast in the seaside tourist town of **Hammamet**. We used a coupon from our timeshare ("if you buy today we will give you three coupons to use over the next two years") that cost us only \$149 to stay for a week in an elegant suite in a 5-star hotel. We used this as a base to explore the **Cap Bon** peninsula, rich with citrus and vineyards and great sea food restaurants on the beach. This is also the pottery center of Tunisia. One neat place we passed by and turned around to go back to see was a store that rented chairs and backdrops for weddings. A Tunisian wedding is done in great style and this store was a trip! Here we are trying out the wares!! Why don't I think this would fit in our Unitarian Church??



From there we also explored the city of **Sousse** to the south, and wandered around the Medina or old walled city. This was my first time in an Arab "souk" or market area; small cobblestone streets with no vehicles, lined with shops of all kinds. As Sousse has a beautiful beach, there were many tourist shops selling hand woven carpets of all sizes, beautiful silver jewelry, and intricately patterned brass tables and trays, in addition to a wide assortment of typical souvenirs (little olive wood carved camels, red felt fezzes (hats), and small jars of rose water). As we walked through the narrow market streets (some of which were covered), sellers would call out to us to come "look, see". The game was them trying to guess our nationality. They would start with French, Dutch, English and on and on until they were stumped. When we finally said we were Americans, the universal response was a huge smile and a thumbs-up signal. It seems there are very few American tourists in Tunisia. It might have something to do with the fact that Tunisia is located between Algeria and Libya – two countries known for

terrorism! It is a pity because not only is Tunisia a fascinating country with great food and art, but Tunisians are probably the most consistently friendly and kind people we have ever encountered. Again and again, no matter what little problem we faced, people were wonderfully helpful.

Another day trip we took was to the hillside town of **Sidi Bou Said**, perched overlooking the ocean about 20 miles west from Tunis. Sidi Bou Said was a mystic in the 13th century and settled here near the ocean. Then in the 18th century the Husseinid "beys" (or nobles) made Sidi Bou their summer resort. A beautiful Mediterranean village with white houses and walls and wonderful nail studded blue doors (see our photos). Sidi Bou has continued to attract the wealthy, who have summer homes here. Unfortunately, it also attracts bus-loads of day-tripping tourists, which in turn has spawned tacky tourist shops all along the main winding street.

Anzie and I, hoping to escape the hordes, wandered further up through little lanes towards the top of the village and discovered a lovely hotel, far from the maddening crowd. **Hotel Dar Said** is a 150 year old mansion built around a lovely courtyard with each room unique and elegant. We sat next to the pool overlooking the sea, and had a Casse Croute sandwich (the Tunisia equivalent of a Sub with tuna, veggies, olives and hot relish - yum), with birds the only sound. We contemplated spending our last night there, but at \$250 it was a little beyond our reach (Jackie Kennedy stayed there!). We finally left the calm and went down to the Café des Nattes, a typical Turkish café with straw mats and hookahs (and tourists). We were lucky enough to get an outside table overlooking the village and had mint tea with pine nuts, before returning to Hammamet.

Since the weather was erratic with cold wind and occasional rains, we decided to leave our beach hotel 2 days early to head to the sunny south. Stay tuned for Roman ruins, mountain oases, a ride on a 1912 royal train through a mountain pass, and Anzie's Tunisian family.

A la prochaine, Chuck