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Southern Tunisia: Living Underground and the Island of the Lotus Eaters

Our third bite will be about how people live underground in Tunisia. Yes, we lived underground, too.

But first, you need to get acclimated geographically. Tunisia lies on the coast of North Africa between Algeria and Libya. The northern two-thirds of the country is all arable land: plenty of olive trees, vineyards, vegetable crops. The further south you travel the more arid it gets until, finally, in the bottom third you reach the Sahara Desert. You can make the trip from Tunis on the North coast to Tatouine, where the Sahara begins, in about six hours on excellent roads. Correct that: the roads are excellent compared to those found in most West African countries.

The semi-arid land just north of the Sahara reminds us of Arizona: arroyos, buttes and mesas in those same warm, reddish brown hues. Anzie: "That's a beaut of a mesa!" (Yup, it was a long two weeks.) This is the area where we found the underground dwellers. The people began to live underground and in mountain side caves to escape the roving hordes of Arabs who were out to conquer and to plunder.

We found several different types of strange dwellings. The first two are categorized as "troglodyte" dwellings:

1. **Cave dwellings:** The village of **Chenini** is a perfect example. Carved out of the side of a sandstone mountain are several levels of cave dwellings. Each level consists of a path, just wide enough for two people to pass, that slants up the mountain. Fronting the path are these cave "houses". I call them houses because they often contain several rooms, sometimes one behind the other.
2. **Pit dwellings:** a hole 30 - 50 ft. in diameter and 15 to 20 ft. in depth serves as a kind of courtyard. Cave rooms are dug into the walls around the circumference of the pit. These are 7-8 ft wide by 7-8 ft. high by 10-12 feet deep. The entrances into the rooms are usually cut square. Some have wooden doors. The courtyard may have 4 to 10 rooms around it, some on different levels. Articles of furniture, such as cupboards and benches, are often carved out of the soft sandstone. These dwellings are usually very clean. The entrance to the pit dwelling is gained through a tunnel into the hill at ground level. From a distance the entrance is hidden. All you can see in the region of the pit dwellers is a landscape of many small hills.

We visited one underground hotel in the village of **Matmata**, called **Sidi Driss**. It's famous because it was the sight for the movie "Star Wars". The movie's first scene takes place on the planet Tatouine -- named after a town in southern Tunisia. Luke Skywalker returns from a ride through the desert in his flying "skimmer" to discover smoke billowing from his underground dwelling and his parents turned into crispy critters. It was fun to wander from courtyard to courtyard through the connecting tunnels.

We also stayed in an underground hotel, the **Hotel Diar el Barbar** just outside of Matmata. Matmata resembles a lunar landscape. The arid hills are pockmarked with pit dwellings. Apparently "Star Wars" placed Matmata firmly on the tourist map. But our intrepid traveler, Anzie, was there in 1973, before George Lucas ever heard of the place. We had some trouble finding our hotel until we came upon a sign, which was located on level terrain:

HOTEL ▼

Sure enough, we turned at the sign and descended a steep hill to the hotel entrance. Our room was dug out of a hillside. Not for the claustrophobic, it consisted of an entrance foyer and bathroom with windows to the courtyard outside, while the long, rather narrow bedroom really looked like the cave that it was. Although it was plastered and whitewashed, when the lights went off it was black as a coal mine.

The man who guided us to our room was the overseer of the original construction, which took seven years. It consists of 162 rooms, built upon three levels around three courtyards.

As a four star hotel it offers all the amenities: outdoor swimming pool with a lovely view of the surrounding hills, a bar and two large dining rooms with better than average quality food and service.

3. **Ghorfas** One other structure is peculiar to this region: the *ghorfa*. The *ghorfa* is a stone cell in which grain, olive oil or fodder was stored. It measures over 6 ft. high and wide by 7-12 ft. in length, rectangular with an arched roof. Units are added in a row and on top of each other up to a height of five stories, all connected around a central courtyard. Their blank outside walls were meant to deter marauders. They remind us of an ancient precursor to the U-Store-It complexes that have sprung up around the perimeters of most U.S. cities. Eventually some of these ghorfas became family dwellings.

A complex of ghorfas built around a central courtyard is called a *ksar*, which also means fortress. From the outside one can see that a ksar would be easily defensible, at least from small arms fire. Two of the most interesting ksars we visited were **Ksar Haddada** and **Ksar Ouled Soltane**.

Ksar Haddada, located north of **Tatouine**, is a large complex, with ghorfas up to three levels. Entry to the top levels is accomplished either by climbing precarious rock or wood outcroppings, or by manipulating a pulley arrangement of dubious design. This ksar was also featured in the movie "Star Wars". Remember the bar scene where denizens from around the galaxy were gathered? This is the place. Unfortunately the hotel is now closed and has been left to the ravages of nature for a number of years. However, we could see the evidence of massive renovation. Our guide explained that it will be reopened as a hotel next year.

Ksar Ouled Soltane is situated about 20 kms. South of Tatouine in the beginning of the Sahara. Proclaimed as one of the best preserved Ksars in Tunisia, it is built on a slight rise, which allows good views across the desert toward Libya.

Here we met Hallil, a handsome, well-mannered artist with a withered arm. He ran the café and sold his watercolor paintings of the ksar. He also spoke excellent English. He gave us a tour of the ksar. Since we were the only tourists in sight, he spent some time with us, explaining what we were seeing. His paintings were very good, so we bought one.

There is a saying in the Arab world about the character of the North African / Magrebian nationalities: "Moroccans are lions. Algerians are men. Tunisians are women." Although at first glance this may strike one as a putdown, I think it speaks to the gentility of the Tunisian people – some of the sweetest people we have ever met. They would rather avoid a fight. Their underground habitats, besides being comfortable year round in a harsh climate, were easy to defend when necessary.

Tataouine

After a good breakfast at our underground hotel, Diar el Barbar, we headed south and east. The countryside was pockmarked with pit dwellings until we began climbing into the mountains. Here the road turned from blacktop to "Under Construction". The hairpin turns on a narrow, loose gravel-based glorified goat path made the going a bit dicey.

We finally arrived at the top of a mesa with a beautiful panorama of a mountainside village below, Toujane, and behind it the plains spreading out to the sea. We partook of some tamarind tea with an old (probably Chuck's age), toothless man who sold crafts out of his tent on the overlook. Toujane spreads across two sides of a gorge. Anzie thought it a rather dreary place when she passed through many years ago, until she discovered the carpets. They are produced in such vibrant colors that they spoke to her of the exuberant life force that hid behind the façade of gray and beige rock.

We just missed a rockslide as we descended into the village. At the base of the gorge we turned left instead of right. We only went about 100 feet when we realized that the main road lay on the other side of the gorge. As we turned the car around, we heard a rumble. To the right of the gorge, just where we would have been had we taken the right turn, a number of huge boulders fell onto the road. The road was "Under Construction", which was probably what caused the rockslide. No one was hurt, and we were able to wind our way through and over the rubble. The village was one house wide, carved out of the mountainside.

We continued on to Medenine, a fairly substantial town. Even had an ATM machine. The ubiquity of these machines has made traveling so much easier. Gone are the days when you constantly searched for some outlet that would cash your travelers check. Plus, the charge is very minimal -- only a point or two on the exchange rate. Worth the convenience!

But I digress. At one time, Medenine was a central market town that boasted 8000 ghorfas. All we can remember it for is an ATM machine that worked and an excellent chicken sandwich. This terrace café, Ksour Meshouia, located right on the main drag, tailor-made the sandwiches to our exacting specifications. Of course this included harisa, a roasted red pepper sauce that can range from mildly piquant to singe-your-uvula.

We continued South toward Tataouine, stopping to visit ksars, ghorfa granary structures, like Ksar Hadad, a scene of the 1997 movie "Phantom Menace" - Ksar el Hencha - huge, well-preserved assemblage of ghorfas - and Chenini - a village of cave dwellings carved out of a mountain.

Our destination was the **Hotel Sangho**, located just northwest of Tataouine. This three-star hotel is surprisingly elegant. It's comprised of tasteful bungalow rooms surrounded by gardens, and full facilities, including a large pool. (see our photos) The decorations include photos from WWII, the German occupation, and artillery shell casings side by side with fossils -- an eclectic collection. The Sangho was so peaceful and relaxing that we stayed an extra night.

Tataouine is the last town of any size before you hit the Sahara. It's a market town. Vendors spread their wares out on the ground of a large square -- spices, pottery, leather goods, etc. We bought a pretty little prayer rug at Ali Baba's Carpet Boutique. This will go to friend Maggie for service above and beyond. When we went to pick up our rental car upon our arrival in Tunis, I realized that I had forgotten my driver's license. We called Maggie in Dakar, who retrieved the license from our car at our house, had it copied and faxed to the car rental agency within an hour and a half. Thank you Maggie!!!

We became friends with Ali Baba after we bought the rug. He made us some mint tea. When Anne asked him for a cadeau, a gift, he gave us a nice-sized rose de sable, or sand rose. It's a brown crystalline rock formation that really

resembles a petrified flower. The roses are formed from rising ground water, rich in salt, that crystallizes when the water evaporates. Comprised primarily of gypsum, it derives its brown color from the entrapped sand. (The Rough Guide to Tunisia 2001 Edition, p. 325)

By the way, Anzie's asking for a gift may seem a trifle cheeky to you. However, the vendors don't seem to mind it. It serves to acknowledge that we paid too much for our purchase and that we except that fact. Also, it probably gives them an opportunity to off-load some slow-moving merchandise. We selected our rose from a huge pile of them that lay in the middle of a courtyard.

Ali directed us to the Restaurant Essendabad for lunch. Located across the street from the bus station, it was packed. I can't remember what we ate, but it was good. The atmosphere was fantastic.

That afternoon we headed south into the desert. In just a few miles we reached the mountains. We were surprised to find a few little villages, complete with more cave dwellings. We passed by many ksour -- that's the plural of ksar -- those ghorfa constructions. Most of them were in varying states of decay. After 25 kms. we arrived at our destination -- Ksar Ouled Soltane. Not only is this one of the largest -- ghorfas rise four stories high -- but it is the best preserved. These ghorfas are still in use to store grain and olive oil. So, both the ghorfas and the way of life are still intact.

The Land of the Lotus Eaters

The next day we headed for the island of **Jerba**, or **Djerba**. According to legend Ulysses anchored here and sent a contingent ashore to check out the locals. The natives fed them leaves of the lotus plant, after which none of them wanted to leave. Ulysses had to send another group to drag the first contingent back to the ship, where they were placed in irons. We didn't find any lotus leaves, but the drinks were pretty fair.

On the way we passed by the Mareth Line of WWII fame. It was here that the German push into Africa under the leadership of Rommel, the "Desert Fox", was stopped by Allied forces. We found a graveyard of rusting German army tanks. We stopped to explore, and discovered a wasp nest inside an engine compartment. While I paused to relieve myself, Anzie performed the "Dance of the Stinging Wasps". Ask Anzie about it, but not while I'm around. (Now for my side of the story.... Here I am with one or more wasps trapped in my windblown hair, stinging me. I'm batting at my head trying to get rid of them, screaming for help, while Chuck stands there peeing, then zipping up, all the while looking at me and laughing. Now I know it was a delicate moment for him, but did he have to zip before helping me????)

But, I (we) digress

The island of Djerba is connected to the mainland by a 7 km-long causeway - over four miles. The story goes that in 1551, Dragut the pirate, trapped with his fleet by the flotilla of Charles V of Spain between the causeway and the fort, made his famously daring naval getaway here. To gain time, he barricaded himself in the fort and held off the Spaniards while his men, under the cover of darkness, dug through the causeway, enabling his fleet to escape into the Gulf. The causeway wasn't repaired until over 400 years later. It was reopened in 1953. (The Rough Guide to Tunisia, 2001 edition, p. 377)

The island is a beach resort paradise. Large white hotels dot the Northern and Eastern coastlines like pearls on a necklace. We stayed at the **Fiesta Beach**, an all-inclusive. It's a sprawling complex that contains four restaurants, a pool the size of a small lake, including the de rigeur swim-up bar, tennis courts, nightclub, bocce court, etc. We were back in the land of bare ta-tas!!

We spent two days here allowing our flesh to recuperate from the desert. We didn't leave the compound. Both of us were feeling sick, so we just sat, swam, read and ate.

Each night the hotel put on a different show. On our second night the theme was "Tunisian Folklore". The staff was outfitted ala "1001 Arabian Nights". Chuck finally got to wear his bou-bou that we had been dragging around for two weeks. It was a hit. Several people came up to ask if he was Muslim.

Back to Tunis

The next day we headed off to Tunis - 600 kms. We cruised through Houmt Souk, a market town that people said offered some worthwhile tourist sights. We stopped at **El Ghriba Synagogue**, supposedly the oldest synagogue in the world. In 1990 a truck parked outside the synagogue filled with explosives. The explosion killed 20 tourists, mostly Germans. The lines of tourists were long, and we had a 600 km. trip ahead of us, so we elected to bypass this tour.

We took the ferry from the island. Five hours later we arrived in Tunis, suffering only one mishap. A stone from a passing truck put a good-sized ding in our windshield. We weren't looking forward to fessing up to this one at our car rental agency. We stayed at the **Carleton Hotel**, on Avenue Bourguiba. The Avenue reminded us of the Champs Elysées, a wide boulevard bordered by toney shops, hotels and sidewalk cafés. The best thing the Carleton has going for it is location. We were tired from our trip. Chuck was coming down with a fever, so we went to bed early.

Still feeling lousy, Chuck stayed in bed the next morning. Anzie visited the **El Bardo Museum**. Housed in the palace of a bey, it is famous for its collection of ancient African/Roman mosaics. (See photos). Whereas the Romans decorated their walls with paintings and their floors with black and white mosaics, wall

paintings were never popular here. These mosaics were the Persian rugs of the ancient world.

That afternoon Chuck was able to arise and partake of light nourishment. We visited the Medina, the old town that included the huge souk. Just outside the souk a pleasant gentleman introduced himself saying that this was the last day of the special exhibit at the "carpet museum". Would we like to go? We said "Yes", and off we went from one end of the souk to the other. On the way we mentioned that Chuck was looking for a new chechia, the small round fez-like cap worn by muslims. He took us to a covered street of shops where we watched them make these caps. We learned how felt was made. Chuck bought a white one that he has worn several times since.

We continued on to the "museum", only to discover that it was a rather large carpet shop similar to the one we had visited in Kairouan. We spent about 15 minutes touring the store, then begged our leave. The best part was our tour of their rooftop terrace, which gave us a panoramic view of the Medina.

Undaunted, our "tour guide" took us back through the souk to his brother's shop, where he sold fragrances. We smelled a few, and Anzie decided upon a bottle of jasmine oil. The vendor had it wrapped and boxed in a nanosecond. Then we asked the price: \$30. for a tiny vial! Anzie was only going to buy this unnecessary as a sort of "thank-you" to the tour guide for his time, but the price was excessive. As we turned to leave the price came down to \$25. Still too much! We took our leave to a chorus of Arabic mutterings (probably obscene). Was it our imagination or were the vendors more aggressive as we walked through the souk without our guide? Still, they were absolute teddy bears compared to their counterparts in Dakar.

Before we left the souk we bought a brass plate each for Amadou and Omar, the other members of our family. The plates had the phrase "Allah Is Great" done in Arabic in raised brass letters.

That night, our last in Tunisia, we decided to splurge on a really nice meal, even though Chuck's tummy wasn't up for much. We dined at the Dar el Hadj, an exquisite former private home with walls covered with decorative tiles, located in the Medina. The food and the service were very good. Chuck drank three glasses of strawberry juice, which seemed to calm his stomach. One young apprentice waiter kept calling Chuck "Father". The older waiter explained that the young man liked Chuck very much, and hoped that Chuck would adopt him as his son. Just what Chuck needs, another son. "How come some nubile 18-year old female doesn't ask me to adopt her?", says the dirty old man.

Going Home

On our last morning we checked out and drove to the airport. We checked our bags, haggled with the car rental agency about the damaged windshield, then awaited the arrival of Insaf's parents. Insaf Dobberstein is a friend who works at the Dakar embassy. A Tunisian, she asked us to contact her parents in Tunis. We arranged to meet them at the airport to carry a package back to Dakar. We had met Insaf's mother, Lea, in Dakar; so we recognized each other. She introduced us to her husband, Moussa, then showed us the package. We were expecting something that we could carry onto the plane. This cardboard box was the size and weight of a case of apples. We explained that we had already checked our bags. Lea says, "no problem," and waves to a lady in a Tunis Air uniform, who turns out to be her niece. Five minutes later we have a baggage chit for the box, and we're on our way. First we have drinks with Lea and Moussa. Moussa retired five years ago at age 55 as Director of Tunis Air. Now we knew why we were getting all this preferential treatment. They're a delightful couple whom we expect to see in the fall when they visit their daughter.

Casablanca

Hey, it's not over yet! On our return trip we have a seven-hour layover in the Casablanca, Morocco airport. By prearrangement we are met by Lisa and Ulrich Lunt. Lisa works for Peace Corps in Rabat. They took us on a tour of Casablanca -- the beach area, the Grand Mosque (the second largest after Mecca), and Rick's Café. You remember the movie "Casablanca" with Bogie and Ingrid, Claude Rains, Peter Lorre, etc.? Well, this Rick's had just opened in March by an American lady, Kathy, who used to work at the American Consulate. She started from scratch with an old, rundown building, and, boy, did she get it right! The atmosphere is perfect -- right down to the Moroccan décor, the palms, the well-stocked bar, the man at the grand piano playing "As Time Goes By". The food was excellent, too. The price wasn't bad -- all you could eat for \$300.00! I jest. But the prices were in line with a bistro in NYC.

We bid a fond adieu to Casablanca, Morocco and North Africa, and flew home with a year's supply of dates and olives. Oh, those olives!

À la prochaine,