

Tunisia

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SIDI BOU SAID, Tunisia--This country has never been a household word for North American tourists. Many people aren't sure where it is (Europe? Asia?) and some don't even know what it is (An island? A lost continent?).



Berber ruins

Of course, the recent uprising because unfortunately sometimes didn't help—or maybe it did bad publicity is better than no

publicity. So when things settle down, as they most surely will, this tiny nation may finally make it into the second tier of tourist destinations at the very least

Officials claim that more than 5-million tourists visit Tunisia each year, a paltry figure and one that is also probably inflated. North Americans barely make the list. I met only two during my recent 10-day stay before the uprising.

Situated in the middle of the North African coast on the Mediterranean Sea, a scant 50 miles from Sicily, Tunisia is a small country with about 10 million

residents, roughly the size of Florida. Consequently, you can see a great deal of this country in a week or so.

On the map, it looks like it's being squeezed off the African coast into the Mediterranean. But as a bonus, Tunisia is blessed with some of the finest beaches in this part of the world on its north and east coasts. To the south lies the mysterious and vast Sahara Desert.

Toss in some 3,000-year-old Roman ruins, including the lost city of Carthage and the remains of a 35,000-seat Coliseum that

Camel racing



Relaxing moment



could pass for the one in Rome, sprinkle in a unique blend of African, Islamic, Arabic and European influences, and you have a destination practically begging to be discovered.

After arriving in the capital of Tunis, our tour began in the city of Tozeur midway down the country near the Algerian border. Tozeur boasts a massive grove that is said to contain 1.6-million palm trees. This is where Tunisian's best dates come from, called «deklet nour» which translates

roughly to «fingers of light.»

More than 200 springs gush from beneath the surrounding desert, and several of them are said to be therapeutic. We drove through the desert on roads that were straight as a clothesline. An occasional illustrated sign depicted the warning that it was a favorite camel crossing area.

The vast open desert often gave way to a salt-water oasis and this created the sensation of driving down the middle of an ocean.

From Tozeur we headed for the central village of Douz where an annual festival was taking place including camel and horse races and replicas of a Bedouin tent community. We took the customary camel «walks» onto the desert and had lunch in a mock Bedouin setting.

Then it was time for the colorful camel and horse races. This was obviously the event of the year for people living in the nearby desert villages, and we saw many of them walking to and from the festival grounds.

We continued east to the coastal island of Djerba, connected to the mainland by both a ferry and an old Roman road. Legend has it

that Ulysses discovered Djerba. Right or wrong, German, French and British tourists made their own discovery many years ago and flock to the beaches each summer.

It was too cold for swimming while I was there, but I will remember Djerba for a delicious barbecued fish dinner at a restaurant called Haroun.

From Djerba we headed further south to the city of Tataouine. It wasn't on our agenda, but a bonus tossed in by the tour operator. He

wanted to show us a community where Berbers still lived in cave-like dwellings hollowed out from the limestone mountains.

We visited one such family of six, a couple and their four children. The interior was modest, but clean and much larger than we expected. Cooking was over an open fire and water was drawn from a nearby spring.

It was a long ride north now to the central city of Kairouan, site of the second largest Casbah or

Ruins



Sisi Bou Said view



Medina in Tunisia. Besides being a historic and religious center, Kairouan is also known for its crafts.

Some of the finest carpets in the world are made here. And also some of the shabbiest. So beware when you enter the numerous shops of the Casbah. Better still, bring along someone who can spot the rip-offs.

There is a world of difference between central Tunisia, with its cave dwellers and old world customs, and the coast, with its avant-garde European look. We made that

transition an hour's drive from Kairouan at the east coast resort of Sousse, a modern city with an unmistakable Mediterranean look. The area includes Port El Kantaoui, Tunisia's first planned tourism center, and a 300-yacht marina.

Heading further north to the seaside resort of Hammamet was even more of a transition. Hammamet has exploded with construction of luxury hotels and condos. This area, known as Cape Bon, is Tunisia's No. 1 tourist destination for Europeans.

We concluded our tour where it began in the capital city of Tunis,

by visiting the nearby ruins of Carthage, a city the ancient Romans feared so much that they ordered it to be destroyed. Its soil was even made sterile with salt.

Our final spot was the medieval village of Sidi Bou Said, truly a little paradise that looked almost

too good to be true.

Sidi Bou Said is an artists' village perched on a hill with a breathtaking view of the Gulf of Tunis. Everything is blue and white here, by law, and the tiny narrow streets seem like they're swept every hour or so.

Yet despite its resemblance to a movie set, there is a warmth and charm that somehow manages to emerge through the glitter.

The lady receptionist at my small hotel was a bit like Sidi Bou Said, always smiling, neat as a pin, always friendly, and I often wondered if she were real, too.

I may never know, but she was wearing that same smile when I left. A little mystery never hurt anyone.

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Woman at cave entrance

