

A Fortnight in Tunisia

The original travel plans had me cutting across the southern tip of Africa, a safari to Zanzibar and then a hop to Tunisia, then a skip to Spain before a jump across the straight of Gibraltar to Morocco for this camel festival back in January. Obviously the much heralded “triple jump” of north Africa didn’t really happen the way I planned, but Tunisia remained on the schedule.

When hearing that I’m a traveler, the locals will ask how many countries I’ve been to, which is a fair enough question, but I’m of the opinion that it’s becoming about collecting “cultures”. I had a class in college called “cultures of the world” where we’d watch these grainy films of native people from all over the globe. It always struck me that these films were so dated, they could have been narrated by Lowell Thomas and shown between “talkies” at the movie theater..but the reality of being out here is obviously something different

The “culture” of Tunisia is similar to Morocco. There are souks, medinas and mosques. Ramadan was still in effect when I landed, so most commerce was kept to a minimum during daylight hours. There are definitely less “westernized” tourists here, with Russians making up the bulk of “others”. Whereas Morocco seemed atuned towards accommodating the fickle needs of European tourists, house them here, get them to buy this; here in Tunisia that’s not so obvious.

I landed in Tunis, the capital, with a sixteen day route covering most major cities, built around what I could find on the internet. That all changed within a few hours of landing.

The plane touches down, you gather your bags and head out into the newness of another country. Sadly one aspect of travel seems to be universal; getting fleeced by the taxi drivers at the airport. In Morocco it was the Dirham, and in Tunisia the Dinar – they sound similar but they are not.

As soon as the beard hits the open air of Tunis, I’ve got touts, tuk-tuks, and carnival barkers all vying for my attention. The Arabic strain of aggressive taxi driver is formidable, but I’ve been to India, so I’ve seen worse. Since I actually DO need a taxi, I let the most aggressive win. I know it’s about 5kms to my room in the medina, so there’s no haggling about where we’re going...the guy even helps with my bag...along the path to the cab, I ask for the fair. He says, “8”....now in Moroccan Dirham, that would be about \$9, not horrible...but this is Tunisia, that would be a bit over \$3. I ask again...now it’s “80” ...\$32...wait. It took a bit of effort to halt the march to the cab, but the cabbie was unrepentant, “we use meter”...but it struck me as odd that he wouldn’t know exactly how much it would be, since he drives the roads every day.

I reclaim my bag from his shoulder and say it’s too much...then the cabbie gives up the game, “OK, how much you wanna pay?” So the game was on. I ended up getting only partially fleeced for 30 (\$12) but I considered it a small victory for a guy with heavy bags.

Tunisia had been a European travel destination for several years prior to the terrorist bombing in 2015. Since then tourism is slowly coming back, but the slow-down in the economy is evident.

Your Louage Awaits

All my planning hours spent humped over this small laptop, finding busses, trains and the “perfect” route went right out the window once I got here. I checked into the hostel and asked “Mo” the counter-man, for directions to the bus...this simple request changed my whole Tunisian Plan. I use this “Rome2Rio” site to plan most connection, as it gives me different travel options and their costs...but for Tunisia, the main mode of transportation is the “louage” and this is not covered by technical sites.

“Louage” is French for broken-down mini-van with sketchy brakes, iffy transmission and horrendous seats...it’s a national treasure here. Sure there ARE official busses and trains, but what’s the fun in that? Imagine a wooden roller-coaster who’s cars can run on pavement..THAT’s the feeling of a louage...Oh and the car can only leave once it’s completely packed with people...no spare seats allowed...I think it’s because no one wants to rattle around in an empty louage; you use those around you as human padding.

The louage has no schedule. You show, you go, but again, only when the “can” is full. Rates are ridiculously cheap, about \$2 an hour, so you put up with a lot. The presence of a louage stop in the greater Saharan region is a badge of honor. Like many places I’ve been, the humans are moving towards the bigger cities, so traveling to remote spots is getting tougher. And if there’s no louage, they could be impossible to reach as very few Tunisians have cars.

So you’re rattling around, from place to place and you need gas. Sure there are those “official” gas stations with names like “Shell” but what’s the fun in that? Nope, when possible, the professional louage driver goes to “gas towns”...here’s where the fun begins. I’m always on the lookout for the odd, and a ‘gas town’ fills that bill. You smell it before you see it. I thought our van had punctured his gas tank, but looking out the window I saw a most curious site. All the store-fronts had 5-gallon “jerrycans” lined up on the curbs, and each shop had these manual contraptions; a bucket elevated about 4-feet off the ground with a cheese-cloth secured over the open end. From the bottom was a glorified garden hose with a cork stuffed in the end.. The smell told you the product, but not the why.

In Cambodia I had seen roadside stops like this, but only a few at a time, not 25 in a row...there, they sold gas in liquor bottles, a fifth at a time...but not jerry-cans...we filled up quickly and were on our way, but my Arabic is admittedly spotty, so it would take a few hours to get an explanation.

There is actually OiLibya gas stations here in Tunisia, but their relationship with the neighbor to the east is not great. But their gas is the best, apparently. So these “black tankers” drive across the border from Tripoli, and park at the end of these “gas towns”. The locals come over with their jerry cans and fill up for resale to guys like my louage driver. Word on the Tunisian street is that the “Libya stuff” gets you about 3kms more per liter than the regular stuff sold at the pump. Again, Tunisians making a market for themselves.

Star Wars

If you Google Tunisia, will see beaches, palm trees and Roman ruins...but this is also the place for Star Wars fans...George Lucas liked the desolate vistas found here and did a fair amount of shooting around southern Tunisia. I'm not one to pay this sort of thing much heed, but I did find myself in many of these locations while on tour and the camera did come out.

Hotel Sidi Idriss in Matmata, where the daytime temps can melt glass. The locals for over two centuries have dug homes underground..a main central hole with cave bedrooms dug horizontally from it. This was the setting for Luke Skywalker's home

Slave quarters, near Tatouine. Yes, Tatouine really exists, and there are "ksars" here, grain storage buildings that were used in a few of the movies...they are really cool to see. One set was literally in the middle of a bustling community...no longer used for grain storage, they now actually house equally ancient peoples.

Star Wars Set – Sometimes you just pay for the tour.. I was on the last day of my Tunisian romp and took a tour to see the Sahara, and Star Wars set...made completely of wood and painted canvas, the "town" is now over-run with touts pushing all sorts of tourist chatch....but it was still pretty cool.

Food and Other Stuff

The grub is a level better than in Morocco. Here they not only sell spices, but actually use them. There is hot food here; and Shwarma...lots of shwarma... prices here are definitely cheaper than in Morocco, but they are geared more towards the cruise-ship tourist market. Whereas Morocco was sprayed with hostels in every town, Tunisia has relatively few, and even those are probably mislabeled hotels. I never shared a room during my two weeks, and the rooms always had a key. What you save on cheaper food and transportation will be spent on accommodation, but that which was \$9 in Morocco is probably \$13 here, so we're not talking about a big difference.

Road-Side Construction

Looking out all the windows of all the louages I took while looping around in the desert, I was struck by how many buildings were still under construction. Back in Morocco the buildings were finished, but abandoned, as the residents moved on. In Tunisia it was as if there was a premium paid on starting a new building, but not in completing it. I had initially thought that this lack of progress was attributed to the terrorist attacks back in 2015, and that's only a part of it...Seems that getting construction loans here is complicated and time consuming, so just like the louage, the citizens do things for themselves. The reason for all the unfinished buildings is that there are no loans taken on construction, everyone just builds on their own. They are literally building towns one brick at a time; and this method takes time..perhaps generations.

Ancient Rome

There are lots of Roman ruins here, Carthage, El Jem and Dougga. The camera was impressed with Dougga and El Jem, Carthage received only a "meh".

Carthage has an official "site" for the ruins, but they themselves have been "ruined" ... just a collection of rubble to these aging eyes.

El Jem has an amphitheater still standing...and you can go (and I did) underneath to see the pens where the lions and slaves were kept before the big "show"...

Dougga has it all, a lesser amphitheater, but also a bigger settlement, with mosaic floors walls and aquaducts...but after my visit I found that there was no available return louage, so I got soaked for a private taxi...but it was still awesome.

As the bags need packing, I should sign off for now. Tunisia is a great place to get your tan working. Lots of direct sunlight and plenty of barren rock and sand here, with a side of Star Wars. Take the louage, it's the only way to travel...literally...