

Tunisia

The land of Diversity

> By: Derick McGroarty

Derick McGroarty looks at exotic and exhilarating Northern Tunisia

After some delay through extra security my British Airways flight was less than three hours from London with good cabin service

With millions of visitors a year, Tunisia has great diversity. Within an hour of relaxing by the hotel pool I could be in the midst of the site of Carthage.

There are hotels to suit all budgets. I stayed at the Corinthia Khamsa Hotel at Gammarth. En-suite, air conditioned bedrooms are spacious and well equipped with balcony, TV; large bath, power shower and toiletries. Leisure facilities include a private beach, large swimming pools with sun loungers, a health club and children's area. Buffet meals offer a wide variety of choice. There is also an a la carte restaurant and bistro. All share coolness, quality and pristine appearance. Although primarily a business and conference hotel the general manager, Med Guttouni told me he seeks to ensure holiday makers are in a relaxed informal atmosphere and receive the full attention of staff. A courtesy bus serves the centre of Tunis, 15 km. away. It was a peaceful place to relax after a day of shopping and sightseeing in the bustle of the souks

The capital, Tunis, successfully combines ancient and modern. The great Ez-Zitouna Mosque is one of the oldest and prestigious in the Magharb (7th cent). Although the Kasbah quarter retains the name of the Royal Citadel which no longer exists, many attractive buildings exist including Almohad Mosque. The souks are a magnet for visitors. Some areas specialise in jewellery, carpets and cloth. I noticed many quilted baskets which I discovered are for presents from a fiancé to his future bride! Just outside the centre the Bardo Museum founded in 1888 in a restored palace ▶



Sousse Walls

أسوار في سوسة



Sousse

سوسة



Sidi Bou Said

سيدي بوسعيد



Sidi Bou Said

سيدي بوسعيد



Mosaic – Bardo Museum

موزائيك في متحف باردو



Hotel Corinthia Khamsa

فندق كورنثيا

has a splendid Roman collection. I was most impressed with the displays of mosaics. Whole floors and walls are preserved, many virtually intact from the 2nd century BC to 7th century AD. Fishermen, soldiers, domestic and hunting scenes, fish, birds and animals vividly illustrate contemporary life two millennium ago.

At first sight Carthage was disappointing. Little of the original is to be seen, however realising that early cultures had been systematically destroyed by subsequent dynasties it is amazing that anything remains. Existing since at least the 9th century BC, the Romans razed it to the ground in 159 BC but much later Julius Caesar built his own great city in 44 AD with villas, theatres and baths as a capital centre for Africa. Prominent at the top of Mount Byrsa is the Catholic Cathedral built at the end of the 19th century and now a cultural centre. To really understand the long history, visit the museum. The collection of artefacts gives real meaning to the ruins over a vast time scale

High on a hill with fine views of the surrounding countryside Sidi Bou Said is an attractive small town. Originally the site of a still existing shrine to Sidi who prayed there, the town has grown around it. Its streets are lined with white houses with bright blue painted doors and shutters, matching the sky, reminding me of the Greek

island of Mykonos, but a Mosque determines the town's Islamic roots. At ground level busy little shops spill out on to the cobbled streets, offering antiques, handicrafts and works of both Tunisian and international artists. I could not resist purchase of a print showing the street with a view of the mosque.

Tunisia's third largest city Sousse attracts the greatest number of tourists. The bustling medina is more compact than Tunis within high, rather enclosing walls dating from the 8th century. Beyond, in contrast, are olive groves and a thriving port where oil, wool and salt are exported. The long promenade and fine sandy beaches were thronged with families on holiday. Modern shops, hotels and restaurants line the sea front.

At Monastir, in the centre of a vast Muslim cemetery near the city walls and the sea, the mausoleum of Habib Bourghiba, President of Tunisia for 31 years, is well worth a visit. I walked the extensive marble concourse to visit the multi million dinar edifice expanded and embellished constantly during his last years as president. Even from a distance the twin towers and dome are outstanding. Closer, the details of the architecture can be appreciated. I entered the chamber at both levels to view the white sarcophagus

with its distinctive Arabic script.

Hammamet has grown from a once quiet sea side fishing town to a rapidly growing tourist centre. Attractive are the fine sandy beaches, backed by the walls of the old fortified town, now complimented by boutique shops and modern hotels. Vivid memories when I visited 35 years ago of camel dealers in the market in Nabuel could not be recaptured. However the old quarter retains the charm of houses with doors framed in sculpted stone.

Of course there is much more; Kairouan with its splendid mosque and a centre of Muslim pilgrimage; Dougga's extensive Roman ruins and the deep South where the true desert begins. Maybe next year!

Take a high numbered sun block, a wide brimmed hat, insect repellent, (I use Chefaro), and a good guide book (Insight Pocket Guide was helpful and pocketable.) In all towns and cities, away from the designer label shopping centres, craft skills have been preserved. Carpets, rugs, pottery, gold, brass and leather goods are popular in the souks. Bargaining is a way of life – start below a third of the asking price and hope you will end up paying less than half. I travelled with Saga which included insurance, excursions, and a number of extras within the quoted price. ■