

City Tourism

Algeria:

Islamic tourism in every corner

Algiers - Mounir El Fishawy



Al Bacha mosque

مسجد الباشا

Towards the end of the 19th century, after a half century of French colonization of Algeria, France feeling its strength, suddenly decided to undertake a challenging educational experiment. It wanted to show that it was possible to impose another culture on the indigenous culture and beliefs of the natives through education and with the temptation of money. What did the French colonizers do? They chose ten Algerian families from different social classes and offered to provide a complete education (from kindergarten to university) in France, so the girls could verse themselves in French culture and traditions, far from their own religious beliefs and Islamic influence. The girls received their education and graduated after ten long years.

Once the education and cultural experience was over France had to publicise what it had tried to achieve. A big feast was organized for high officials, journalists and many foreign guests to show off the ten girls who have been franchised. The French thought they had erased their Algerian identity and Islamic religion. The officials and the guests who filled the big room, waited in eager anticipation to see the ten girls, heroines of the French experience: a solemn silence engulfed the room when the ten girls were called to come forward to the

accompaniment of music. But the French were in for a shock. When under the spotlights, the audience discovered to their great astonishment the ten girls clothed in traditional Algerian Moslem costumes: long jellabas with scarves on their heads. So the French victory turned into a vivid Algerian and Islamic victory.

Then, the journalists overwhelmed the French governor of Algeria with questions, asking him for comments and explanations. He answered with great bitterness: "What can we do if Islam is stronger than France?"

A beautiful nation where nothing is impossible

Needless to say the Algerians were overjoyed. They taught the colonizer a lesson that he would never forget. Algerians are proud to remember this historic event. It reflected and continues to reflect, the authenticity, the dignity and the roots of the Islamic belief within the Islamic nation of Algeria. During the different phase of the war of liberation, that cost more than a million martyrs, the Algerians didn't stop repeating: "We don't accept the naturalization... we ➤

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On the road to Biskra

منظر طبيعي بطريق بيسكرة

won't wear French dresses... and we will fight those how want to distort our culture as if they were demons. "

In spite of the pleasure that I had to hear these popular verses at the time of my visit of the region of Tizi Ouzou in Algeria, my tongue preceded my courtesy when I commented on these verses: "So you say: "We don't accept naturalization... we won't wear the French dresses"... but you speak French?"

At this moment my mate in this mission Soulaïmane Kannaoui pinched me, but fortunately for us our listeners didn't pay attention to this remark because they know of my love for the country in spite of my short stay. I am very sorry because the speaking of French is more prevalent and dominating at the cost of the Arabic language. But there are currently in Algeria people who want to make the Arabic language prevail over French. My companion Yassa Abdennasser is a living example. Since our meeting with him, he replied when we thanked him by saying "No thanks for a duty". He also used English expressions such as "I hit two birds with one stone". But after our meeting, he rectified his expressions and his Arabic became quite correct. This contributed to the success of our mission in Algeria. We left bidding him farewell in French.

We were full of appreciation for the Algerian

people and their obvious Islamic authenticity. The Algerians are people who love their country and are proud of it: They have a strong will and a strong measure of goodness. Our visit to the tourist sites of Algeria, revealed the background of these people's authenticity and their attachment to the Islamic belief, whose roots are strong and entrenched in history.

Mosques and Mausoleums of the Wilaya of Biskra

The cities of the west (Maghreb) of the Arab world had distinguished themselves in relation to those of the east (Mashrek) as they have not been built on the ruins of other civilizations but on the basis of the contribution of the Arab conquerors and specificities of the local amazighs. Even though most cities of the east and west were based on a religious dimension and centered around mausoleums and mosques, numerous cities of the west distinguished themselves by making reference to their founder or to the no one for whom they were founded: the agglomerations from the Maghreb whose name begins with "sidi" are numerous. This does not happen in the Mashrek.

The village Sidi Okba to the north of the Algerian Sahara, part of the Wilaya of Biskra,

is an example, since one finds one of the most important shrines of Islam in this Wilaya. It is the Mosque of the Fatih Okba Ibn Nafea Al Fihri where he is buried. The imam of this mosque told us that this Mosque and the region are considered the fourth holiest place in the Islamic world after Masjid Al Haram, Masjid Al Aksa and the Haram Anabaoui Asharif according to the description of Ibn Khaldoun. Besides the graves of Okba, one finds in this region the graves of 300 Moslem martyrs of his army who were sent towards Kairaouane at the time of his conquest of North Africa, which was integrated into the Arab-Islamic Empire. The conquests of Okba Ibn Nafea were distinguished by the fact that they touched the interior zones of the Maghreb that the other conquerors had not reached. They were confronted by big fortresses that the Amazighses (Berber) rennovated and cared for after the departure of the Romans and Byzantines.

Okba Ibn Nafea arrived in Algeria in 63 A. H. where he conquered the city of Tolka and transformed the church into a mosque. The mosque still carries the name of "Al Masjid Al-Atiq" (the old mosque) in reference to its history. The imam of this small mosque told us that it has been established historically that Okba Ibn Nafea said at least three ➤



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The Imam of Okba Ibn Nafea Mosque with our representative at Okba's tomb

إمام مسجد عقبة بن نافع ومندوب المجلة في زيارة لضريح سيدي عقبة



Learning Koran at the Ottoman Zouia

تحفيظ القرآن بالزاوية العثمانية

Friday prayers there. It is considered one of Algeria's oldest mosques. However, the "Zaouia Othomane" founded by Sheik Ali Ibn Omar Al Othmani is considered one of the most important Zaouias of the Wilaya of Biskra that teach the Koran to children aged eight to 18, with full financial support. We noted that the study halls were crammed with pupils and with the call to prayer they all headed towards the adjoining mosque in the Zouia. One of the sheiks of this zaouia told us that it is also famous for its library that contains rare Islamic documents and important manuscripts dating back to the 9 century A. D.

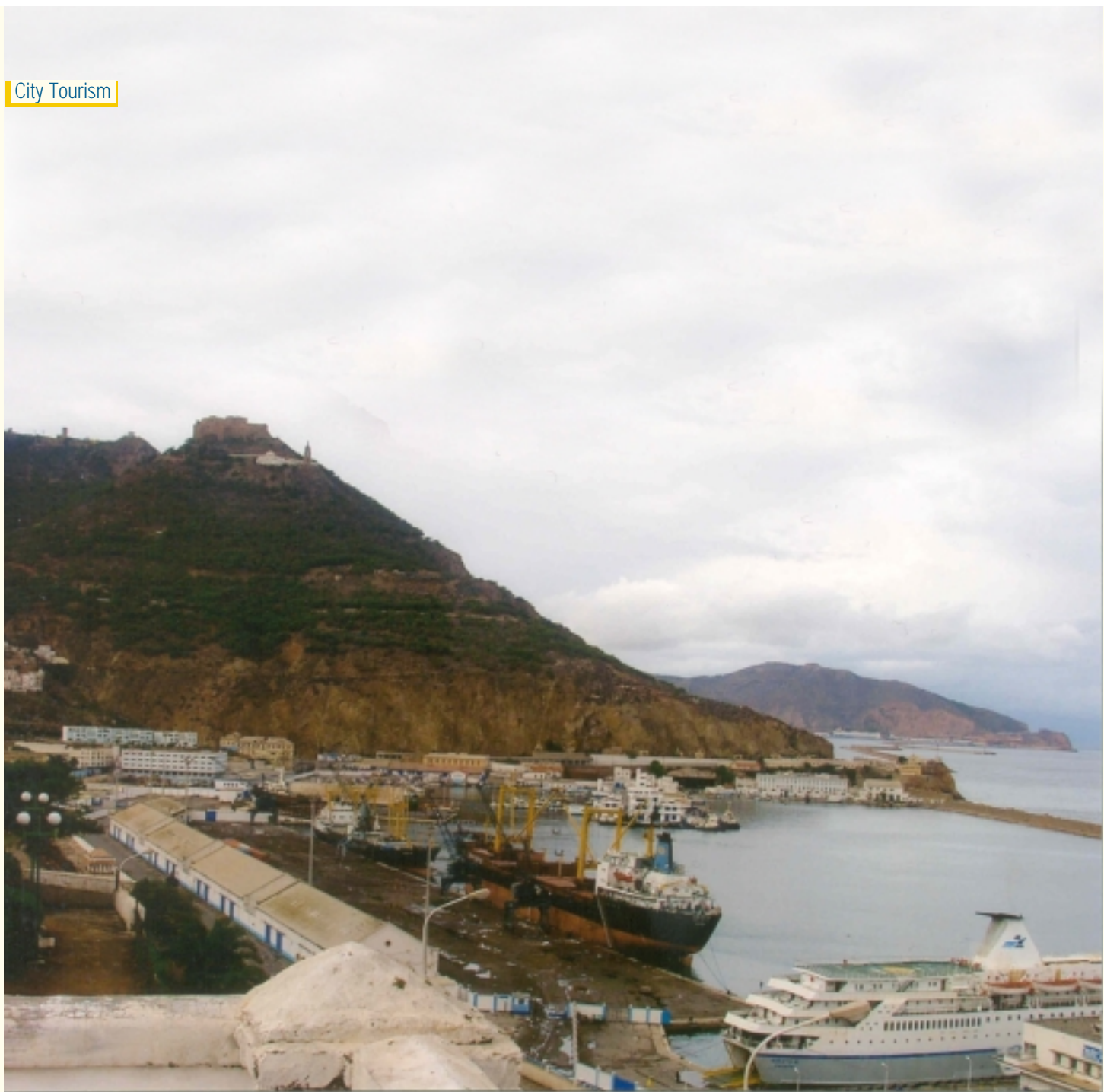
Mrs Sabrina Hrirech Bach, director of Tourism of the Wilaya of Biskra told us that in this wilaya there are many sites and places of Islamic importance, including Sidi Khaled Ibn Sannan Al Abssi, 100 km to the southwest of the seat of the Wilaya. In Oasis Sidi Khaled we find the mosque of Sidi Al Moubarak, known as "the Big Mosque" or the "Friday Mosque". It is considered one of the most important scientific centers of the region of Khanka Sidi Naji, situated 100 km to the East of the seat of the Wilaya. This mosque is considered one of the most important historical monuments in the East of Algeria. It is decorated with marble and

splendid Islamic engravings. This mosque and its scholarly center have been constructed in 1734 (1147 A. H.). The name of Khanka refers to a geographical term meaning a passageway or passes between mountains. Sidi Naji is the grandfather of Sidi Al Moubarak Ibn Kacem who gave his name to this region as a blessing. Mrs. Sabrina added that the Wilaya of Biskra also has other mosques and mausoleums, such as the mausoleums of Sidi Zarzour, Sidi Abderrezak, the Zaouias of Ouled Jalal and the mosque of Abderrahman Al Akhdari...

Islamic monuments of Constantine

In the Wilaya of Constantine, well-known for its splendid bridges, which are considered architectural miracles linking the mountains, we visited "Dar Al Imam", a former school that has been restored. Its main function was to educate mosque imams. The late Algerian ex-president Houari Boumedien studied there. We also visited the mosque of Abdelkrim Aljazairi in this wilaya, one of Algeria's major mosques with a capacity of 10,000 men and 3,000 women. The esplanade can accommodate 27,000 persons. The young imam of this mosque told us that most Friday prayers and prayers on the two Eids are attended by 40,000 people. One great Egyptian architect made the plan of this mosque as well as its ➤

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The port of Oran

ميناء وهران

decorations after having studied the Islamic history of Algeria. He depicted the different Islamic historical periods in the decorations. The construction of the mosque, which was inaugurated in 1992, took 17 years because of the added idea of creating an adjoining Islamic university on the model of Cairo's Al Azhar.

Thousands of mosques in the Amazigh zone

During our visit to the Wilaya of Tizi Ouzou, in the Berber zone, we were astonished to discover that the inhabitants are white-skinned. This region is famous for its local language "the Amazigh", even though its

inhabitants also speak Arabic and French. The director of tourism in Tizi Ouzou, indicated that the name of this wilaya is made up of two terms: the first Tizi meaning tray and the second Ouzou designating the name of a yellow plant with a very widespread thorn: Tizi Ouzou means the tray of this plant. He added that this wilaya consists of 1400 villages each endowed with one to five mosques - more than 5,000 mosques in total.

At the time of our visit to the mosque of Sidi Baloua, on the summit of one of the mountains of this wilaya, the imam told us that the name is a distortion of the word "Abou Allwi" in reference in its founder Sidi Abou Allwi Ahmed Ben Othmane Ben Mouhamed Ajjilali

and that the name Abou Allwi, was bestowed by his father who saw him raising his right arm just after he was born and predicted that he would carry the flag (Allwi) of Islam. His father's prediction was realized as Abou Allwi mediated in disputes between tribes.

We also visited the Zaouia of Abdellah Ben Hassan whose village Ayat Bou Yahia was nicknamed Zaouiat Sidi Hassan. It includes a mosque and the mausoleum of Sidi Hassan as well as a center for recitation of the Koran and religious studies.

The mosques in Oran and Tlemcen

The visit of our delegation to the ➤

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Wilayas of Oran and Tlemcen, allowed us to note the large number of mosques, Zaouias and mausoleums such as: The Mosque and the Mausoleum of Sidi Houari, as well as the Islamic architectural jewel of the Al Bacha mosque, in Oran. In the Wilaya of Tlemcen, we went up on one of the hills named the hill of Lalla Sitti in reference to a noble Iraqi lady called Lalla who had settled there. The Algerian women of Tlemcen and its region, went up the mountain to pay a visit to her in order to learn the science and to receive her blessing. At the time of our visit to Lalla Sitti we had not noticed any building that could have housed this blessed lady.

On the way down from this spot, we passed by the village of Al Manssoura, where we saw the minaret of the Al Manssoura mosque, that looks like the Giralda of Seville in Andalusia. This minaret is square and is called the Hassan Tower. It looks effectively like a 38 meter high tower with an entry with successive motifs of boards engraved with quotes. Above there is a splendid frame covered with some plates decorating its four faces. We also visited in the city of Al Mansouria, founded by the Sultan Merini Abou Yacoub in 1299, some parts of its great wall that surrounded it at the time of its construction.

Then, we went to see the Museum of Sidi Abou Hassan (or Belhassan) At-Tensi of Tlemcen that contains beautiful artifacts, as well as the big mosque of this city where we appreciated its Mihrab, pleasantly decorated with original Islamic engravings, its dome in multiple angles, its fountain of ablution and its minaret.

Our visit to Tlemcen ended with a night view of the dome of Sidi Abi Madine, his mausoleum and the squared esplanade of the mosque with its marble columns with crowns brought from Al Mansouria mosque.

Algerian Tourism in good hands

Algeria is currently witnessing a tourist renaissance supported by the state and all its departments. The visit of the "Islamic Tourism" delegation to Algeria came after an invitation from the Minister of the Tourism Mohamed Saghir Karah, who since his appointment, didn't stop participating in



The Minaret of the Ottoman Zouia- Biskra

مئذنة مسجد الزاوية العثمانية في بيسكرة

international exhibitions and organizing meetings about tourism in Algeria. Besides these activities, he also has a special interest in the infrastructure (hotels, restaurants etc) in all cities and encourages local, Arab and foreign investment in the tourism sector.

The choosing of Abdel Ali Tayr as General manager of the National office of Tourism, to coincide with the end of our visit to Algeria during the month of Ramadan, was a good

choice. He provided us with all the material that allowed us to write this report. We have also been able to see how the Algerian people celebrate the month of Ramadan, as well as the state of tourism in six Wilayas of Algeria that we visited and where we held scores of meetings and interviews with responsible persons and citizens. These matters will be discussed in future articles on other aspects of Algerian tourism. ■