

Sidi Bou Said

The Quintessential Mediterranean Community

By Ian Stalker

The coastal Tunisian community of Sidi Bou Said has been charming visitors for well over 1001 Arabian nights, with those visiting the cliff-side towns discovering a world of blue-and-white buildings in a setting also highlighted by orange and palm trees, collectively creating what to many may seem like the quintessential Mediterranean community.



Sidi Bou Said for centuries was a quiet retreat that attracted writers, artists and poets, only to be later discovered by the world's globetrotters, who now flock to it during the busy summer tourism season, drawn by an ambience that seems distinctively Mediterranean with some obvious North African influences.

Municipal regulations require those owning property in Sidi Bou Said - named after a saint and found by the Tunisian capital of Tunis and a stone's throw from the archeological site of Carthage - to keep the exterior walls of their homes or businesses white, while window trim and doors are blue, trademark town colours that quickly prompt visitors to compare the destination to another part of the Mediterranean famed for whitewashed architecture.

"Many times tourists say that Sidi Bou Said looks like the Greek villages of Corfu or Mykonos," guide Karim Tlemceni said of the spotlessly clean Tunisian community. Even streetlights are painted in telltale blue, with additional colour added by the varied vegetation found throughout the community.

Domed roofs can be seen on some buildings, and nail-studded patterns are found on doors, traits of the local architectural style that Tlemceni labels, "Hispanic-Moorish. You get influences from all over the world here. We feel so close to Italy and Spain," he said.

Mosaic tiles line some doorways, and visitors will also spot balconies and iron grilles over windows, all painted in the distinctive blue. A mosque underscores Sidi Bou Said being in an Arab country.

Much of Sidi Bou Said - which Tlemceni believes is home to around 8,000 to 10,000 people but which may be wall-to-wall with people during summer, Tunisia's busiest

tourism season -- is off-limits to cars because of its often narrow, cobblestone streets that are lined with shops selling carpets, brassware and other Tunisian handicrafts, and restaurants, including the famed Café des Nattes, a popular gathering spot where locals and tourists alike sip mint tea and smoke tobacco from a water pipe. A vantage

point allows tourists to look down on the Mediterranean and a marina that lures yachters and also has hotels and restaurants.

Sidi Bou Said will also produce the occasional surprise, with Tlemceni during a recent walking tour pointing out a door painted yellow, a stark contrast to the blue-coated doors found on other structures. "That I can't explain," he shrugged.

Nor does Sidi Bou Said have any of the Roman ruins that lure many to North Africa. But what it does have is an alluring landscape with a distinctively Mediterranean feel that quickly enchants those visiting it. "It's like a postcard here," Tlemceni said. ■