

# Ramadan with an Algerian taste

## All night festivities in houses and public places

**Algiers - Mounir El-Fishawy**

Moslems have unique ways of celebrating the month of Ramadan. Government officials are eager to publicise their celebrations and encourage the media to tell the world about the festivities. This is what Abdul-Ali Tayr, General Manager of the National Office of Algerian Tourism, did when he strongly insisted that a delegation from Islamic Tourism visit his country in Ramadan so we could see how the Algerian people celebrate this holy month.

The choice of timing was excellent. My companion, Yassa Abdul-Nasser and I, journalists who were observing the fast, started our day before six in the morning and finished after midnight. Our aim was to visit six Algerian Wilayas (districts) very distant from each other in one week. The highlight of the tour were two Iftars (sumptuous meals at the end of the fast) with Algerian families in Biskra and Tlemcen.

### Strangest Iftar

Can you imagine enjoying an officially sanctioned iftar when you can still see the sun? It happened to our delegation.

We left Cairo for Algiers, on Algerian Airlines at the moment when the people of Cairo were on the point of breaking their fast at 5.15pm. Around 6pm our hostess mentioned iftar and said that the captain would announce it. We jokingly asked her to intervene with the captain in our favour, because for us Egyptians, iftar was an hour ago. She asked astonished 'how?' adding 'wait for the captain's announcement.' Half an hour later, iftar was announced even though we could see the sun. We were furious: "How can we break our fast when the sun is still bright and shining in our eyes?" He answered: "You must remember that we are flying at an altitude of 10,000 feet. The sun, which we now see on this level, is in another place very far

away from us, and below us, the sun has already set". One of us asked: "Are you taking responsibility for this?" He replied smiling: "It is not me, it is the captain who takes responsibility". After a moment's hesitation, we took it on the good authority of the captain that we could break our fast even though the sun was still shining. But, ten minutes later, to our great surprise, the sun disappeared completely and darkness fell suddenly. We were not sure if the captain was right but we consoled ourselves that he was responsible.

### Iftar stories

Algerians break their fast in a specific way. They always start by eating dates and drinking milk and a little water. Then, they say Maghrib (sunset) prayer and break their fast. They start with soup, which varies according to the area. In Biskra –southern Algeria - people take soup known as "frigua"; and in Tlemcen - close to the Moroccan border - they make spiced "hrira", with small pieces of meat. After that come the main dishes: meat with sauce, or chicken with couscous and varieties of salads. Lastly, cakes, coffee and sweetened green tea, "Tay", is poured from the teapot approximately half a meter above the glass so that it covers up to two thirds and the remaining third is filled with froth.



One evening in Zaatcha, in the Wilaya of Biskra, our host, Moaqi Bennani Abdul-Rahman, told us that some of his close relatives settled in Saudi Arabia in 1950, following a pilgrimage to Mecca. This was badly received by the remainder of the family, who like other Algerian families, are very strongly attached to their land. They sent someone to find out why they remained in Saudi Arabia and accepted the ➤



الرئيس الجزائري الأسبق بن بيلا يرحب بمراسلنا الفيشاوي.

The former Algerian president Ben Bella welcomes our correspondent El-Fishawy.



following answer: "We say our prayers in the Holy Mosque, we eat meat and we cook using coal". Several family members subsequently emigrated.

After Iftar, Algerian houses are transformed into places of life, warmth, love and gaiety. This happened when we broke our fast with a member of the Algerian resistance, Abdul-Aziz Mahdad and his formidable wife, Khadija Mahdad, heroes of the Algerian revolution. Our visit coincided with the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the revolution. We observed a tradition common among all Algerians: covering one wall with a giant Algerian flag, and decorating the others with traditional clothes some dating back more than 200 years. Certificates of recognition and medals for activities in the resistance, also decorate the walls. Mrs. Mahdad shared her memories of the liberation struggle with us. On leaving those two great heroes of the resistance we said to ourselves: "Congratulations to Algeria that has people like Khadija and Abdulaziz", wishing that our Arab-Islamic

community is blessed with many like them.

### Festivities in mosques and streets

Ramadan the month of fasting, benefits and redemption, gives Algerians the chance to confirm their observation of religious rites. Those who have lapsed in their religious duties can make amends, hoping to profit from God's mercy. These two groups are found in the mosques, forming a unified community, saying their prayers, competing in the invocations and readings of the Quran, and listening with enthusiasm to religious preaching all day. People fit the religious obligations around their work schedules, until the moment of Iftar. They then eat dates, drink milk in the mosque, and say their Maghrib prayers collectively. Some stay while others go home to break the fast with their families.

Ramadan festivities are evident in the streets after iftar. People flock to the main boulevards, especially after evening prayers (al-ichaa) and tarawih (optional prayers). When the mosques

are full the pious have to pray in the street. The large mosque of the Wilaya of Constantine accommodates 27,000 people inside and 13,000 outside. The imam confirmed it is always crowded on Friday, and on the two great festivals (Fitr and Adha) and the last ten days of Ramadan.

### Coffee shops and BenBella

Our excursions in the nights of Ramadan through different Wilayas took us to Algerian coffee shops where men, adults and young people, play dominos and games of chance - this is a male preserve from which women are excluded. Hubble bubble has invaded the houses and coffee shops in neighbouring Morocco and Tunisia but is absent from Algeria. I learned that the Algerian people take a real pleasure in sitting at the table in coffee shops, especially during the month of Ramadan. The best illustration of this came from the leader of the liberation war and first president of the independent republic, Ahmed BenBella, when he honoured me with a meeting on the fringe of a conference in Cairo. He shared some of his memories from Cairo's famous El-Fishawy coffee shop, where he met Algerian revolutionaries during the 1950s to discuss and plan the struggle against the French occupation. Ben Bella wrote about his experiences in his memoirs.

### Other activities in the open air theatres

In the Wilaya of Constantine, we noted the Algerians' refined taste for authentic art when we went to a performance by the famous Iraqi flutist Nacir Shammah.

In the Wilaya of Oran, in 1st November Square in the town centre, with a statue of resistance leader Emir Abdulkader Al-Jazairi, we saw a choreographic spectacle where actors fought with sticks, instead of swords. The competition proceeded between an old man and a young person. And the old man won!

When we returned to Cairo, we were happy that the captain announced Iftar one and half hours earlier than in Algeria. We watched the sun set progressively as we accelerated our travel towards the east. The captain returned to us the hour and half that we lost when we arrived in Algeria. Happy Ramadan and Happy New Year. ■