

كاهل رباله . م . كرزوف . كرتا



بنطق بلم

tunisia

AND SO...

I have made a number of attempts to visit Tunisia. I first started thinking about this country, when I met the Ambassador of Tunisia to Poland when I was at the university. I met his Excellency at the International Tourism Fair in Poznan, Poland. I learnt about a few interesting facts about this intriguing Northern African state. I was impressed with its somewhat secular attitude towards tourism and the clever way Tunisia decided to cash on visitors.

Then, rather strangely, Tunisia dropped down my priority list very dramatically. A few of my friends, and members of my family, who had visited the country, were not necessarily raving about it. So, I buried Tunisia under the pile of much sexier destinations, which I wanted to visit first. For almost a decade, the country stayed at the bottom of the pile.

Only in 2006, did I start to plan to re-visit my priorities and give Tunisia a go. I even had a flight booked but the thick fog of Christmas 2006 closed down Heathrow Airport of London. So, I ended up not going after all. Yet, at that time, I sketched a number of possible routes, mainly focusing on the UNESCO and the Star Wars sites.

Since then, I think I tried to go Tunisia about three or four times. Once or twice at Christmas and once for Easter. But it never worked out. For a number of reasons. Last time, it was work that kept me in London over Christmas 2009. It turned out well for me though, as one of my good friends visited me in London and we had great time.

Anyway, around mid February 2010, I warmed up again to the idea that I perhaps should try to eventually visit Tunisia. I looked up the calendar and the available flights, and it turned out that Easter 2010 looked like one of the most convenient opportunities.

The trick was to think of a suitable plan. Again. Since the last time I looked at the guidebooks on Tunisia, I noticed that the country rail network improved considerably. I also found the national rail official website, which provided information about the services, including timetables and ticket prices. (www.sncft.com.tn). In addition to the regular bus/coach services, the trains offered a great alternative to renting a car.

ITINERARY

Allocating almost two weeks for the holiday, allowed covering the majority of Tunisia's

best places to visit. It is not a very large country, and many attractions are about an hour or two between one other. I opted for five UNESCO World Heritage Sites, mainly the historical Roman and Arabic places.

The highlights were going to be:

- the surprisingly large and incredible ancient colosseum of El Jem (only the Colosseum of Rome is larger);
- the ancient site of Carthage near the capital of Tunis;
- a few medinas of the cities along the coast and one in the interior; and
- about four former film sets used by George Lucas for the cult Star Wars films.

My flight was going to land in Tunis forty minutes after midnight, so it only made sense to start the holiday in the capital city and the ancient Carthage, right next to it.

From there, I had a few route options. In my first itinerary, I plotted a train trip to Sousse followed by a bus ride to Kairouan, El Jem and Sfax. But I changed it eventually and added Mahdia. Apart from seeing the medieval medinas and the ancient ruins, I



thought I should try the oases full of date palms and the fringes of the Sahara, and even a couple of beaches, perhaps.

To fit everything in the itinerary, I could only afford to stay maximum one night in all those places, except Tataouine (used as a base for the ksour - granaries) and Tozeur at the gateway to the Sahara.

There were three places, where I decided not to stay overnight at all. They were Sousse, El Jem and Matmata. All small enough to just pass through them. Sousse might have deserved a longer stay, for its UNESCO-listed medina. Yet, I had seen a few medinas, including the medina of medinas of Fes (Morocco) before, so my plan was to explore other places, unique to Tunisia. It was not going to be easy. After all, I had been to Mediterranean Africa before, including Libya and Morocco. Both of which had spectacular sights.

A lot more could be fit in the route, if I opted for a car rental. Yet, driving in Africa is no fun. By any means! And of course it was a much more expensive option, compared with the very reasonably priced public transport. Unless I was travelling in a group. Then, the cost of renting a car, combined with the flexibility and freedom of covering any route, works out more favourably.

Apart from booking a hotel in Tunis for the first night, as I was arriving after midnight, I allowed myself full flexibility. This way, I could change my route any day. Hammamet, 30 kilometres south of Tunis, famous for its relaxed attitude to nightlife, kept growing on me every time I picked up my guidebook.

Sidi Bou Said, just north of Carthage, was an upmarket place, raved about in my guidebook as a picture perfect place dominated by whitewashed villas and offering the best seafood in the country. Although I originally did not plan to venture there, its proximity to the UNESCO-listed Carthage, popped a thought in my head 'and why not?'. Particularly, as Carthage's state of preservation was apparently somewhat underwhelming. Meaning that I might have planned too much time to visit it.

Now, that was how the plan looked about two weeks before departure. Later, I ended up travelling in a rental car, so I added a few other sites to the route, which would otherwise be harder to reach on public transport. They were: the ancient Roman sites of Dougga, Bulla Regia and Sbeitla, and an intriguing mountainous town of Le Kef, close to the Algerian border.

Now, what happened during the holiday, changed the itinerary very dramatically. For

a number of reasons, one of the was that the holiday had to be cut short by a week, and the other was that I became completely non-self-sufficient. I could not even tie my boots, and that was tricky before the incident. Details later in the story.

ARRIVAL

Arriving at night in at any place in the world for the first time is never optimal. Particularly when one travels solo. I have done that a number of times in the last 15 years. Not only in Africa (not always safe to do so), but also Central America (definitely not safe to do so), Asia and Europe. Depending on actual location, it is best to arrange transportation with the pre-booked accommodation.

The Carthage International Airport (TUN) was only 5 minutes drive from the centre by night. Taxi drivers, like almost everywhere in the world, would try various tricks to at least take a gullible tourist for a ride, twice the price! At night, it should not be more than TND10 (€5), and half that during the day. Fortunately, my Hotel Salamambo had sent me an email telling me about a few tricks that the drivers would try, so I landed prepared and I could haggle confidently without actually offending anyone. The





advice was also not to let the taxi driver use the meter, as the meters were very often rigged as well.

TUNIS

The capital, with its medina inscribed as the World's Cultural Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1979 because "under the Almohads and the Hafsids, from the 12th to the 16th century, Tunis was considered one of the greatest and wealthiest cities in the Islamic world; some 700 monuments, including palaces, mosques, mausoleums, madrasas and fountains, testify to this remarkable past."



I could not sleep the first night. Actually, I could not sleep a few nights before the holiday. I was tossing and turning. I read about Tunis a little from my guidebook - trying to fall asleep.

So, I rolled off the bed much later than I had planned. But my first day's itinerary was relatively relaxed and flexible as I waited for

my friends to join me. I started with the Avenue Habib Bourguiba and Rue de France. My hotel was just 100 yards from them. They were lined with a combination of facades ranging from classic colonial to weird Art Deco and modernist. They housed hotels, shops, businesses, and places of worship. And the flamboyant theatre was a culmination of an architect's extravagant taste sporting a triple-alcove balcony.

The Place 7 November, the centre of the capital, basically a roundabout, had a strange clock tower in the middle built of metal, which looked like it had been allowed to rust. But the clock worked fine! And at night it was nicely lit.

Then, I walked into the UNESCO-inscribed medina through the Place de la Victoire. I wandered around the souks, stepped into a couple of very pleasant and traditionally decorated cafes and cozy tea houses, and exited the old town by the Kasbah.

I relaxed a little at that side of town, took a few pictures of the large square and a monument with national flags, and went back in to check if there was more about this somewhat small medina that I could see.

I found my way back to the Place de la Victoire and sat down at the famous Bab el Bahr, at the Cafe Dinar. Then, my friends arrived and we took off to see Carthage and Sidi Bou Saïd.

I did not plan to see all of Tunis at the beginning of the holiday, as my itinerary was going to take me back to the capital for more exploring. However, when plotting my route for Tunisia, little did I know that my plans would have to change faster than I could say: Lawrence of Arabia! But a broken arm, following a camel rage, took me back to the UK, before I could complete my route. So, I did not see everything I wanted to see in Tunis.

At the western end of the medina, there was the Place du Gouvernement, lined with carefully trimmed trees and with magnificent Moorish (?) mansions, and it was complete with cascading fountain. The white mansions housed the Ministry of Finance and offices of the Prime Minister. I liked it very much!

I was sheepish with my camera at the beginning, but soon relaxed and snapped happily. There were many police officers and guards everywhere and no-one even blinked

on the sight of my fat camera and me snapping like a mad camel.

Across Boulevard Bab Benat was the somewhat intimidating Place de la Kasbah with a giant, very Arabic, monument. As it was a small hill, the view of the Kasbah and its square minaret, and parts of the medina was great. The intricate minarets of Jamaa Zitouna and Youssef Dey stood out. A police guard was roaming the square, as the local government building stood at one of its ends. Still, nobody questioned me taking photos.

I think the collection of all those various, and dramatically distant from one another, architectural styles impressed me the most about Tunis. The city had it all - ancient Punic, ancient Roman, medieval Berber, medieval Islamic, a range of French colonial, Mediterranean, art nouveau, Art Deco, modern Islamic, modern 21st century glass and steel. They were all in clusters scattered around the city.

The medina was a big group of medieval buildings and the side streets in the centre had the Art Deco, and the stretch between the centre and the airport had the modern styles.

Apart from the medina and the architecture, there was also one of world's (probably) best endowed museum - The Bardo Museum. It was located out of the centre, in the Bardo district. It had a massive collection of historical items relating to life on the Tunisian soil and one would not imagine it was possible to fit everything into a single building. Its layout could be a little confusing, but everything about almost everywhere and that happened 'everywhen' with regard to Tunisia could be found at the Bardo.

There were two approaches that came recommended regarding the museum. One - visit it at the beginning of your trip to Tunisia, and then follow to some of the more interesting sights in the country. Two - go and see everything you want to see in the country, and then come to Bardo to see the rest and what has been taken off site from the places around the country. Be it statues or mosaics!

It also felt safe to walk around alone, also at night. Although occasional advances, even from single men, were a bit annoying. I know that I have very pretty eyes, but I was not prepared to deflect flirting of this sort, when I planned my visit to Tunisia. It will

however remain as a memorable experience from this trip. One of a few!

Tunis did not suffer from a shortage of places to sit down, relax and catch up with friends. The plentitude of cafes, including those pavement cafes along the main avenue running from the Place 7 Novembre to Place de la Victoire, seemed all very popular with locals sipping coffees and teas, mainly the green teas with mint, and impossible quantity of sugar.

In the medina, I loved the Cafe Mesour along the main medina route from Place de Victoire to Grand Mosque. It had superb decor and professional service. A similar but more rustic Cafe Ezzitouna right by the Grand Mosque in the souk, shisha, was male dominated.

Cafe Dinar on the Place de la Victoire had very pleasant outdoor tables overlooking the fountain and the Bab el Bahr. The exceptionally friendly and eager waiters seemed to speak every language of the world. It was a perfect place for people watching and listening to the splash of the fountain. Their mint tea was not too sticky and they served decent kebab sandwiches with chips.



The cafe adjacent to the old theatre was very pleasant and seemed to be open later than many other spots on the same avenue. If one did not mind an early night, it was a good spot to sit down at one of the tables on the pavement, mingle with the locals, have a few drinks and watch people disappearing from the streets into the night. The cafe also served decent food. It was very popular with well suited locals.

Tunis's nightlife was short. The cafes shut down at about 11pm, and those at the medina soon after sunset. Anything else was so low key, that bypassers would not have a clue where to go party. I thought it was strange, as Tunis, national capital after all, seemed very switched on and looked rather promising.

The capital's nightclubs were located mainly at large hotels and had such a poor ventilation that could double for hammams. Not a good place to be if one wanted to boogie rather than swim in their own sweat. Seriously, there was nothing worth writing home about.

Accommodation in Tunis was easy to find. Many options were available online, directly with the hotels and through travel agents. There were two locations to consider: the city centre with varying quality; and the outskirts near the city beaches with more upscale selection. I went for the city centre, a small and inexpensive hotel near the medina,. It was called Hotel Salamambo. It was delightfully basic, but clean.

I arrived late. About 1 a.m. The front door was locked. I pushed the ring. It was silent. Suddenly a young, good-looking guy shouts down to me from a balcony above:

- Bon soir! Oui?

- J'ai un reservation! I shouted back, rolling my 'r' like a true Parisian.

- Ah, reservation! D'accord. He said and buzzed me in.

When I climbed to the first floor, where the reception was, there he was standing behind the desk. An older Tunisian guy was sitting. He was briefly chatting to a third, older, man. I approached the desk.

- Do you speak English? I asked.

- No. Responded the young guy, shaking his head.

- Monsieur Dudek? Asked the older guy, turning to me.

- Oui, c'est moi! I said, smiling like a Cheshire cat. I knew I was in the right place.

I was put to room #9. En suite, with an excellently firm double bed. Romantic colonial decor. But very simple. Small table, tiny dresser. Very cozy.

It was adequate for its price. The main quality was its proximity to the centre, allowing for most of the attractions to be reached on foot. Yet, its simplicity may not appeal to everyone as it was indeed a no frills venue.

عق صطامغ

Just a few miles from Tunis centre was the site of the ancient Carthage, the legendary, or rather famous, Punic capital. The Romans had done a very thorough job to level the place, and





very little remains nowadays. Few sights were excavated and reconstructed. But one should not expect anything particularly spectacular. Although the theatre was pleasant, when I visited.

Perhaps one of the most famous ancient cities on our planet and sadly, its preservation, given the history of this place, is not great. UNESCO listed it as the World Cultural Heritage Site in 1979 mainly for its importance in the history of mankind, and not for its beauty. I had seen a few disappointing places like that, for example Leon Viejo in Nicaragua, where despite their status, there was actually very little to see.

Carthage's description on the UNESCO site is: "Carthage was founded in the 9th century B.C. on the Gulf of Tunis. From the 6th century onwards, it developed into a great trading empire covering much of the Mediterranean and was home to a brilliant civilization. In the course of the long Punic wars, Carthage occupied territories belonging to Rome, which finally destroyed its rival in 146 B.C. A second – Roman – Carthage was then established on the ruins of the first."

Anyway, once already in Tunis, visiting Carthage does not hurt. It is still relaxing.

لندي بوظ لذي

The little white and blue town just north-east of Tunis claims a title of the prettiest little town in the country. And I have to say that it is not that far off. It is located dramatically on the hill and the overall ambiance of the place was truly relaxing. The architecture and the layout were eye pleasing, too.

If it were possible, my nose should be writing this report! And since it is not feasible, I will try to express what my nose might have written by typing this travel story with my right hand. And only with my right hand. My left arm is still in plaster following a nasty break, after having fallen a victim of vicious camel rage in central Tunisia. Well, but this report should not be only about the smells.

Sidi Bou Saïd was on my itinerary almost from the very beginning of the holiday's planning stage. This was based on the place's description in a number of guidebooks, which I flipped through at a Waterstone's store in the City; an elegant spot almost as if it were specifically designed for artists, rebels, loungers, or simply posh

people with plenty of free time. Hmm..., sounded as an interesting spot to check. Yet, I really did not know what to expect.

The town was not necessarily split into old and new in an obvious way, however the older part, which was characterised by narrow alleys, galleries, small boutiques, cafes, and pastry shops, stood out from the rest. It was also the part of Sidi Bou Saïd, which was the most visited by tourists, who seemed just wandering about without a cause or method. Simply browsing through the souvenir stands, the galleries and the mansions. Or just wandering, full stop. This most picturesque part was located on a slope of a cliff overlooking the Gulf of Tunis. And on a good day, one could see all the way across the water to the capital on the other side, and even the mountains beyond. Mountains, where quite drinkable and quaffable local wines were being produced.

The rest of the town was not particularly grabbing. However those, who'd like to come to Sidi Bou Saïd from central Tunis by the metropolitan rail, would need to pass though it, as the station was based in the newer part of the town. The train took only about 25 minutes from the capital and cost less than €1. And it was all uphill from there to the galleries and mansions.

Sidi Bou Saïd had a few very cosy corners, which turned my head. Those narrow alleys, giant doors and fantastic shade of blue were magical. But there was one spot, which I liked most. It was about two thirds from the start of the main pedestrianised avenue uphill, in the north-easterly direction. It was probably the highest point of the avenue, from where the Bay of Tunis was nicely visible, and the superb Cafe Sidi Chebaane was located right below the point. It was a slightly open area, compared with the rest of the neighbourhood, as the route was flanked by mansions. This little spot felt suddenly different. And the Cafe Sidi Chebaane was not a bad place in its own right. It had great sitting areas, was rather photogenic and the little harbour below was a fine observation subject.

The most fascinating quality of Sidi Bou Saïd was its scent. It was almost hypnotising. And I had not seen, or rather smelled, that combination before. It was the jasmine, which was growing on the orange and mandarine trees planted in the alleys of the older part of the town that was wafting through the air, tingling the nose and stimulating imagination. First, I did not spot

the jasmine at all, and could not figure the fragrance. I would not expect the flowery plant to grow on citrus trees. What a receptory sensation. It was really strong!

This was making Sidi Bou Saïd simply unforgettable, and very special, too. Almost like a 'signature feature' of the place. And this was in addition to the superb ambiance and the beauty of the white and blue architecture!

I visited the town twice. At the beginning of my holiday and at the end, and being welcomed by this familiar scent for the second time was incredibly seductive and magnetising. Almost as if saying 'why did you ever leave me?'

The town had a number of lovely Tunisian mansions preserved in their original character by wealthy colonialist and other foreigners. Some of the houses could be visited. One of the best was Dar Ennejma Ezzahra, built in the Moorish style at the beginning of last century. Incidentally, the guy, who built it, Baron Rodolphe d'Erlanger (French painter), influenced local authorities to introduce a special law or regulations in

order to make sure that all structures of Sidi Bou Saïd be white and blue. Another great mansion open to visitors was Dar el Annabi, once house of a religious leader (mufti), whose grandson (a cardiologist - quite ironically, it seems to me) still occupied 55 of the rooms inside.

The entire town was like a great hangout. Walking along the alleys lined with white houses with wooden blue window shutters and giant studded blue doors, some of which were so big that the 'word' gate would not begin to describe their size, was superb. General traffic was not allowed along the central lane, which helped the walking feel relaxed.

Sidi Bou Saïd boasted a number of lovely galleries. For the place has been artists' favourite spot for centuries. The likes of Odysseus, Cervantes, and Simone de Beauvoir loved it. If they were still around, they would also be able to relax or seek inspiration at one of a few cafes, at least a couple of which overlooked the sea.

If shopping was one's thing to kill time, then Sidi Bou Saïd could cater for this as well.





The vast majority of the shops and stalls were geared for tourists, obviously, and offered mainly handicraft and local sweets. The goods ranged from ceramic work to scarves, to rugs, to soft camel toys.

I did not notice anything too obvious with regard to nightlife in Sidi Bou Saïd. I was not quite sure how long the cafes and the tea houses stayed open. But when I was leaving about three hours after sunset, the vendors were still setting up their store stands offering incredible collections of sweets and dates, ranging from caramelised nuts, various types of nugat (the lemon was matchless), and Turkish delight. So, there must have been some night action going on in the cafes and tea houses later in the night. Having said that, I think that if there was a night-time action in Sidi Bou Saïd, then there must have been an activity gap between 9 pm and the time the nightlife kicked off. During this gap, the number of people in the streets declined dramatically, and if the tradespeople were not still propping their stands, I would have believed that the town had no nightlife to speak of. And since, I have not checked the night action myself, I cannot say for sure anyway...

Restaurant du Chargui promised nice seaview terrace, but it was not so. Well, one could see the sea, but the view was not spectacular and the terrace was... hmm... not very special. It was relatively an inexpensive place, and their lemon juice was fantastic! Even the mint tea was strong and well balanced between bitter and sweet.

The restaurant Au Bon Vieux Temps (eng. Good Old Times) at the other hand, which had served celebrities and heads of state, had a nice terrace and giant windows, which offered views of the Gulf of Tunis. It was not cheap. Mains ranged from TND20 (€10) to TND38 (€19), and starters were TND10 (€5) on average. It also had Tunisian wines, which were nicely quaffable. I had prawn bisque TND8 (€4), and couscous with garoupa TND28 (€14). Both were superbly yummy! The service was very professional and friendly and had a jolly nice sense of humour.

Sidi Bou Saïd was just 2 kilometres north-east from Carthage. It was linked with Tunis by the metropolitan train, TGM, which took approximately 25 minutes to reach the centre of the capital city. The station in Sidi Bou Saïd was in the new part of the town,

south of the Place 7 Novembre, which in turn was a bit south of the most picturesque part of town, and the grand mansions.

It was not easy to park a car for free in Sidi Bou Saïd, as the majority of the side lanes and main roads leading to the town were tow-away no parking zones. However, just before the main market, there was a paid carpark, charging TND2 per vehicle, no time limit. Very convenient indeed, but not very big - it might have had room for about 200 cars.

حقوق بامله

The ancient ruins in Dugga (Thugga) are one of the Tunisia's three UNESCO-listed sites of ancient cities. This is how UNESCO describes the site:



"Before the Roman annexation of Numidia, the town of Thugga, built on an elevated site overlooking a fertile plain, was the capital of an important Libyco-Punic state. It flourished under Roman and Byzantine rule, but

declined in the Islamic period. The impressive ruins that are visible today give some idea of the resources of a small Roman town on the fringes of the empire."

And the justification for the inscription was: "Dougga is the best preserved Roman small town in North Africa and as such provides an exceptional picture of everyday life in antiquity."

Literature about Tunisia suggests that those visitors, who do not have much time, but would like to visit an ancient Roman city in the country, should pick Dougga. Out of over ten different sites! Well, it is a fair suggestion, but I have my own view on this, obviously. Anyway, the ancient city of Dougga (also known as Thugga) is undoubtedly a significant spot, and UNESCO inscribed it as a World Heritage Site in 1997. The site was located between two small towns of Tabarsuq (8 km) and Nouvelle Dougga (4 km), along a narrow mountainous road. When I visited in March 2010, there was no public transport to the ruins. If one did not have own vehicle, then amongst the best options to reach Dougga was an inexpensive taxi from Teboursoq or Nouvelle Dougga, both of which, in turn, were connected with the rest of the country by buses and louages (minibuses). Otherwise, one had to sign up for a tour with a local travel agent operating from a larger town in the region, Tabarka, Tunis or one of the places of the Sahel's coast.

The ruins were extensive. Much larger than I expected. I would say that, according to my calculations, the site extended some 500 meters west-east and about 1,200 meters north-south. And there was really plenty to see. A guide would come handy but a good map of the city was sufficient. Dougga must have become famous for the remarkable condition of ordinary citizen's households. Plus there were original Roman roads, 3 groups of cisterns, 8 large temples, baths, forum, theatre, etc.

I was thinking why Dougga was said to be the best preserved ancient Roman city in North Africa. I would contest this, and argue that Leptis Magna in Libya was better preserved. I would agree that Dougga might be the best preserved Roman site in Tunisia, though. Also, if I had to choose only one out of all ancient Roman ruins in Tunisia to see, then I would rather pick Bulla Regia - see below. Fortunately they were relatively near each other and could be done together in one day.

From all the great sights my definite favourite was the Temple of Juno Caelestis (number 2 on the satellite photo above). I was not sure if I had seen a semi-circular ancient Roman temple before and perhaps



this was why it made such an impact on me. The temple was erected in AD 235 on an elevated platform or podium. The columns surrounding the main hall of the temple proper, created a temenos in a shape of a crescent moon (apparently the symbol of Juno Caelestis), and this really amazed me. I tried to capture this awesome elegance on a photograph, but I could not capture the magnificent ambiance and inexplicable magnetism that kept me standing there bewitched, immobilised, wide-eyed, astonished.

The state of preservation was truly remarkable and it was so easy to admire this incredible temple. Thank you Gabinius Rufus Felix for commissioning and paying for this magnificent temple! Unlike in most ancient sites in Europe, one could wander absolutely anywhere in Dougga, touch and climb all the monuments, walk on the mosaics. Rightly or wrongly, I am not entirely sure. There were a few guards around, but their job was just to protect the site from graffiti and direct devastation. Visitors were free to hug the columns and hike on the walls. This way one could develop a very intimate connection with the site and soak the atmosphere to the max, free from chains and ropes prohibiting any close encounters.

Dougga was my first ancient Roman site in Tunisia, and I was a little sheepish about this closeness that was allowed there. And I felt terribly guilty when stepped on the 1,800 years old mosaics. I actually tried to avoid stepping on them.

Later, I discovered that all ancient sites I visited in Tunisia were like this - no ropes, no chains, no 'no entry' signs. I loved it. But I do believe this freedom should be enjoyed responsibly. As more people travel to Tunisia, this approach may change.

The main sights of Dougga included:

- The theatre built in AD 168, with room for 3,500 spectators or 70% of total population of the city overlooked the plains below. What a backdrop for the scene!
- The fantastically well preserved Lycinian Baths (AD 260), also known as the Winter Baths, had several levels and a large palaestra, which could double as a gymnasium as well, was subsequently used as an olive oil production facility - but there were three other baths in the city; the partially excavated Ain Doura Baths (AD 295) were even larger.

- The second largest Capitol building in the ancient Roman Empire (AD 166) dominated the skyline of the city; the small forum (AD 14) nearby had an extension built in the form of the Square of the Winds (AD 190) with inscriptions of the 12 Roman winds.

More prominent temples (of): Minerva; Saturn; Neptune; Caelestis; Concordia; Frugifer and Liber Pater; Pluto; Tellus and Mercury; Massinissa; August Pieti.

It came as a no surprise that the city's most popular spot to hang out was the top of the theatre. The view from the top of the tribunes extended not only all the way across the ancient city's south and west, exposing the remarkably preserved Lycinian Baths, the magnificent Capitol and the somewhat delicate Arch of Alexander Severus, but all the way across the plains, green fields and olive groves to Nouvelle Dougga, and beyond - to the surrounding mountains. It was great to sit there imagining what sort of plays would the Douggans enjoy watching there some 1,700 years ago.

I also liked to linger at the House of el-Achab (Dar el-Achab, aka Dar Lacheb)





dating back to AD 164, which stood right below the forum and offered fabulous perspective for the Capitol building. It might have been a temple before it was converted into a house by the el-Achab family.

Alternatively, one could relax under the trees of a small grove adjacent to a booth offering snacks and drinks. One could sit down on a small wall surrounding the grove and admire a view of the unique Libyo-Punic Mausoleum standing right below. This tomb, an exceptionally rare instance of royal Numidian architecture, was the other reason why Dougga was such an outstanding site. The mausoleum was erected probably by an ancient Libyan tribe, the Numidians, ancestors of the Amazigh back in 148 BC, who were the Carthaginians' allies against the Romans. But only initially! Later they switched sides. This might have meant why this tomb was never destroyed by the Romans, who took over Dougga.

Anyway, the little cafe was great and the owner offered green tea without sugar! It was not cheap - TND1.500 (€0.80), but was indeed refreshing and lacked all that stickiness. The range of snacks included sweets, chocolate bars, kiosk-like items.

Dougga was not fenced off and I could imagine it should be relatively easy to enter the site any time of day and night.

منقوع من رباط

Although there are many footprints of the Ancient Rome in Tunisia, in the form of ruins of complete cities, I selected just a couple to see up and close. Bulla Regia was one of them. It is famous for its intricate mosaics, a good number of which have been left in situ.

If I had to choose only one site to visit, out of all ancient ruins in Tunisia, I would have picked Bulla Regia. Available travel literature about Tunisia opts for Dougga, which is also magnificent, but the uniqueness of Bulla Regia was simply matchless. This is how. The site might have been occupied first by the Berber tribes and then by the Punic, who arrived in the area in the 4th century BC. It was the Berbers, who brought the idea of building houses under the surface of the semi-desert to escape the African heat. After the Second Punic War, around 203 BC, the Romans occupied the city, but it was then inhabited by the Numidians, who in 156

BC declared Bulla Regia their capital. Hence the epithet Regia (Royal).

Massinissa, the first King of Numidia, was a Roman ally and subsequently Julius Caesar granted Bulla Regia a status of a free city despite creating the Roman province of Africa Nova. The Romans, who resided in Bulla Regia adopted the the troglodyte style of subterranean houses and developed it further building lavish underground villas. The villas had underground patios with gardens and fountains, spacious rooms complete with colonnades, and all were meticulously decorated with intricate mosaics.

On top of the subterranean level, a regular ground level house stood as well. This architecture was not found anywhere else in the entire Roman Empire! And unlike many ancient Roman and Byzantine sites around the country were stripped from the mosaics, which were placed in the Bardo Museum in Tunis, Bulla Regia got to keep many of its own in situ. As the site had been buried under layers of sand, many of the tiny colourful tiles survived in superb condition. The fact that they were laid on the floors of the underground villas also helped.

Bulla Regia was a large city, and although the excavation had been halted in 1990 after some 90 years of work, there was a fair bit to see when I visited (March 2010). And hopefully the digging will resume again soon.

The underground villa known as the House of Amphitrite was by far my favourite spot in the city. There was a single reason for it. The villa had the most beautiful mosaic I had ever seen in situ anywhere in the world! This house was an example of one of the types of the underground villas, the so-called 'second level standard'. It had a staircase connecting upper part of the villa with the underground rooms. It had a hallway connecting three doorless rooms, complete with columns. Some rooms had large windows. The intricate mosaic in the hallway (photo below) depicted a head and torso of a young man wearing a laurel wreath. Its detail and colours were incredible.

The other mosaic, depicting naked Venus, the goddess of fertility, surrounded by Tritons, messengers of the sea, was the villa's main quality. On the bottom of the mosaic, there were two angels riding dolphins, one holding a box, the other a mirror. This is why the mosaic was initially mistaken for Amphitrite, Neptune's wife.

Unlike in most ancient sites in Europe, one could wander absolutely anywhere in Bulla Regia, touch and climb all the monuments, and, what so hard to believe, walk on the mosaics! There were absolutely no guards around. Visitors were free to explore the villas and the monuments by walking anywhere without being stopped. This way one could develop a very intimate connection with the site and soak the atmosphere to the max, free from chains and ropes prohibiting any close encounters. Bulla Regia was my second ancient Roman site in Tunisia, after Dougga, and I was still impressed with this closeness that was allowed on the site. But I did feel terribly guilty when walking on the 1,800 years old mosaics. I actually tried to avoid stepping on them. Later, I discovered that all ancient sites I visited in Tunisia were like this - no ropes, no chains, no 'no entry' signs. I loved it. But I do believe this freedom should be enjoyed responsibly.

The main sights of Bulla Regia included: The well preserved theatre (no.1 on the satellite photo above) was a remarkable sight in its own right. Its orchestra had a large mosaic depicting a bear. It was very intriguing since there were no bears in Tunisia! Under the audience seats, there were rooms where small horses were being

kept. Holes to tie the horses to the walls and columns still existed when I visited. It was fascinating to see this. The theatre was built at the time of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus around AD 160.

Four thermal buildings, including the Memmian Baths (no.2), Grand Southern Baths, Theatre Baths, Venantii Baths. But there were many private baths in the city, facilitated by the plentitude of available water nearby.

The mosaics left in situ at the following houses: the House of Hunting (no.3); the House of Fisheries; the House of Amphitrite (no.4); the House of Treasure.

There were also: a forum, market, the Temple of Apollo, the Capitol, and a couple of churches.

In the past, it must have been either the public park or one of the three baths's site, where the ancients had spent their time relaxing and catching up on their gossip. When I visited, I thought that the baths, particularly the relatively well preserved Memmian Baths (AD 190), named after Julia Memmia, the wife of an emperor, were still a pretty fabulous place to wander around. The unique set of arches near the palaestra and



the gymnasium was a neat spot to let the imagination go wild and picture how the Romans kept fit. Palaestra was a room or a set of small rooms within the baths, which were used for wrestling, boxing or playing games with a ball. It was often adjacent to a gymnasium, used for sports and exercising required more room. Whilst palaestra could exist without a gymnasium, the latter could not exist without the former. It was because, a palaestra was the place to change clothes.

Alternatively, one could relax under the parasols of a small restaurant across the main road leading to Jendouba or Bulla Regia, across the Southern Baths, opposite the ticket office. They served teas and coffees (good and bad, respectively) and a range of simple meals for very reasonable prices. Their vegetable salads and the tuna salad were the best! They were made fresh and in very good sizes. I am not sure about the tuna, though. I suspect it was a tinned tuna, since I could not imagine fresh fish being delivered there from the coast. The service was slow, as there was only one waiter/cook, who did not speak much English, but it was worth waiting for. The sugary mint tea was less sticky than in most places around the country.

An adjacent kiosk, literally next door to the restaurant, served simple snacks and also served teas. It was in direct competition with the restaurant and it was funny how the lads tried to convince clients that the other's tea was worse, much worse...

The ruins were closing down about an hour before sunset (1 April to 15 September at 7 p.m.; 16 September to 31 March at 5:30 p.m.), and therefore there was no nightlife available in the city. However, Bulla Regia seemed accessible at any time of day and night, and there were no guards. Yet, one would be completely on their own securing night time activities amongst the ruins. The nearby Jendouba (9 kilometres south) had cafes and tearooms, but offered nothing obvious in terms of night activities. It was rather a conservative little place.

Bulla Regia was relatively easily accessible, compared to some other ancient Roman cities, yet it did not receive many visitors at all. According to the local guide at the site, about 30 people a day visited the ruins.

The railway station in Jendouba, 9 kilometres south of the ruins, had six daily trains to Tunis taking up to 3 hours. The first train departed Jendouba at 05:43, then there were trains at: 11:29; 12:48; 14:10; 14:57; and 17:23. The last train from Jendouba arrived in the capital at 20:21. The 14:10 express train, which took 2.5 hours cost TND10.100 (€5.50) and the last train was the cheapest costing TND7.000. Trains





from Tunis for Jendouba departed at: 6:30 (the express train); 07:00; 11:00; 13:00; 15:00; and 17:00.

Taxis from Jendouba should not cost more than TND8 (€4.30) one way, but it was always better to arrange for one to wait for the return journey.

Entry fee to the site was TND5 plus TND1 for a camera. I recommend to take a guide, as the mosaics were well hidden.

Le Kef

The city of Le Kef, in the mountains on one of the main trading routes between Tunisia and Algeria...

Le Kef was the last stop on my second day in Tunisia, after wandering about the extensive Roman ruins in Dougga and Bulla Regia. I was not quite sure why I selected Le Kef for the itinerary, but it seemed like a very logical place to stay overnight, relatively close to the ruins. It was big enough, and had good facilities. And it had an interesting history. Still, even on the day, I had a few doubts, unsure what I was going to do in the town.

On approach from Tunis, the town looked modern, built up with new blocks of flats. Not particularly attractive at all. But a couple of kilometres into the centre, it became obvious that there was definitely more to Le Kef that it initially might have seemed. Large brown Kasbah on the top of the hill dominated the skyline made of white old buildings, packed close one to another, clinging to the slopes. My doubts about coming to Le Kef dispersed quickly.

The centre of the town was a busy square. Not a very traditional square at all. It was not free from traffic and not geometrically square at all. The main road, linking the town with Tunis and the Algerian border, ran right in the middle of it. The main bus/coach stop was based there too - a simple bus stand, really. The only pedestrianised area was a path running along the edge of the medina, leading to the small Roman ruins (still being excavated), the fruit-and-vegetable market, and a large modern mosque on a hill.

The medina of Le Kef was not easy to navigate, and despite its relatively small size, it was not difficult to lose direction. One of the larger streets leading (and weaving) uphill to the presidential residence, the local museum, and eventually the Kasbah was the longest routes to the top of the town. The

only shortcuts were inconspicuous stepped alleys, which were not signposted, but also led to the Kasbah and a small square, which was my favourite spot.

Little mosque also known as the Basilique at Place Bou Makhlouf, at the foot of the Kasbah, was my favourite place in Le Kef. It was not terribly easy to find it, even with a map. One route led through a relatively uninteresting weaving road, the other through a combination of narrow streets and stepped alleys. The mosque's little dome was perfectly proportioned to a relatively short minaret. It seemed to me that the minaret was erected not too tall on purpose, since the overall altitude of the temple was doing the rest, adding significant potency to it. So, the calls for prayer executed from the top of the town were going to be heard everywhere.

I reached the spot rather late in the day, and I could not enjoy the outdoor cafe right by it. It would have been even better. But it was so cute. And the massive Kasbah looming in the background with boys kicking a ball at its walls was a great picture to remember.

In fact, the kids and their smiles were Le Kef's main quality! They smiled so affectionately and infectiously. Perhaps they

had not seen many foreign visitors around in their town, and their curiosity and affection to strangers were so unexpected and so remarkable. They were friendly, relaxed and approachable, and keen to engage in conversation (what a pity my French was not good enough). Some were just running around and shouted 'bon jour'. Some played games on laptops and kindly invited to join them. This created an amazing and unforgettable atmosphere of Le Kef, a welcoming and an exceptionally friendly little town in the mountains.

There was not that much to see in Le Kef. It was a small town built on a hill, whose history was more significant than its sights. In a nutshell, the town once withstood an Algerian invasion, which in those times was a mission impossible, apparently. Anyway, one of the main sights of the modern Le Kef was the Kasbah. It definitely dominated the skyline. The stronghold was significant in size and in a remarkable condition! Its walls were massive and complete.

The museum of local art, not far from the castle, was another place of interest. It had collection of handicraft from northern Tunisia, traditional costumes, jewellery, ceramics, textiles, from various periods, and beduins tents.

The town was also in the process of excavating small Roman ruins. They were really small, and did not seem very significant. At least not yet. But when the job is completed this little ancient piazza with small arches and other structures may look quite nice, actually.

Countless barber shops were places to be seen and spend the time. It was so obvious! Nowhere else in Tunisia did I see so many! It was very interesting to see how much attention the local men gave to their appearance. I would have exaggerated if I said the grooming salons occupied every second building, but that was not far off, actually. It surely felt so special about Le Kef. In comparison, Tunis was dominated by cafes and tea houses, and shops! Le Kef had few of those, and its hangout spots therefore must have been the hairdressers and barber shops!

There were cafes in Le Kef, obviously! And just like the barber shops, they were so male-dominated. And therefore Le Kef's cafe scene was not much different than in any other town of Tunisia.

Restaurant Venus with 'spoken' menu was superb. It belonged to the same management, who ran the Hotel Les Pins.

'Spoken' menu means that there was no written menu, and the waiter just recited what they had available that day. In a way, that made sense. One could count on it that whatever was being served must have been fresh.

The waiter spoke French, but seemed to understand English a little. It was a very funny conversation, but fortunately my understanding of French was at least as good as his understanding of English, and there were no surprises on my plate. Uh, and it was amusing to order wine, too. The gist of it was:

"About wine... Well, we have three types: white, rose and red. From red, we have two: Magon and Vieux Magon." I went for the Vieux Magon.

The place was not cheap though! A soup, a salad, le brique, two grilled doradas, two bottles of local wine, three mint teas, and one apple tart were TND112 (€59). Everything, including wine was excellent. The fish was exquisite.

Unfortunately, there was nothing particularly obvious about Le Kef's nightlife. The town seemed rather conservative, and if there were places to boogie and throw hands in





the air, they must have been very well hidden. Almost as soon as the sun lowered its disc behind the mountains, the town seemed to come to a stop, tools had been being dropped and people appeared to have disappeared behind their household doors. I did not detect much action otherwise, I'm afraid.

I initially wanted to stay at the reasonable but no frills Residence Venus, not far from the Kasbah, however it was not available. Apparently. Or the management simply wanted me to stay in their more expensive hotel - the Hotel Les Pins. It was located just out of town, some 2-3 kilometres from the centre on the main road to Tunis in the east and Sbeitla in the south.

They charged TND25 (€13) per twin room. The rooms were very comfortable and of good size, and had tiled floors. The bathrooms were modern and squeaky clean, however had no toiletries, and I had to claim towels from the reception.

The hotel had a small central open-air swimming pool within the hotel's walls. And there was wifi available in the reception area. It was not free and it was not entirely reliable.

The room rate included buffet breakfast containing coffee, milk, sugar, boiled eggs, French baguette, butter, preserves, Danish pastries, and watery fruit drink.

SBEITLA

I got up at 7 a.m. (not an hour one wants to set on their alarm clock during a holiday) as I wanted to be in Tozeur at about 2:30 p.m. And there were 360 kilometres to do from Le Kef. Not in one go, though. I was stopping at Sbeitla (Sufetula) to see another site of Roman ruins.

The roads were in very good conditions and the traffic was low. From Le Kef, it only took just over an hour to reach the ruins. Sbeitla was considerably smaller than Dougga and Bulla Regia, yet firmly positioned as a must see sight for all those, who come to Tunisia to see the ancient cities. It was set on a plain at a river, right by the road between Le Kef in the north to Tozeur in the south.

Also known as Sufetula, Sbeitla is the largest Roman site in Tunisia. It is situated in the middle of the country. The size of the site can impress, yet there is not that much that

remains from the ancient Roman times. It is evident that the city must have been a large one, due to the area. Sadly, between the forum, the theatre and a couple of other sights, there little to admire.

Anyway, apparently (as suggested by a number of inscriptions found on the site) the city enjoyed its greatest prosperity period around the second century thanks to the production of olive oil.

It eventually fell to the Vandals, evidence of which was found by a number of temples erected to worship the barbarian gods and deities.

It must have been in a very bad state when discovered as relatively little remained except the restored theatre (right by the river), baths' mosaics, and the capitol. The city had boasted also a small amphitheatre, but nothing could be seen when I visited. Perhaps it was not yet excavated.

And yet, Sbeitla received approximately 300 visitors a day, much, much more than Bulla Regia, though Bulla Regia was (in my opinion) more interesting, larger, more diverse, and carried more significance for its unique underground villas.



It is strange how these sites get considered, rated, catalogued, publicised, appreciated, inscribed, etc. Uh, but of course this is just my own impression. From history's perspective, the significance of these sites could be much different indeed.

When I visited, I thought that Sbeitla required a very close look to appreciate its quality. The authorities claimed, for example, that the city's forum was amongst the best preserved in the world. Although I have seen much better preserved fora in northern Africa and Europe.

Do not get me wrong, some of the monuments did impress and the surroundings were positively lovely. The Triumphal Arch of the Tetrarchy was built in the name of four emperors, who ruled Rome in 300. And even these days, centuries after their construction, it looks great. Arches were only erected in ancient cities with great importance to the empire. This is the very evidence of Sbeitla's status.



I also liked the well preserved gate that stood at the entrance to the forum (reportedly dating back to 150 AD or so), the Gate of Antoninus, whose inscriptions mentioned Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, Antoninus's two adopted sons, somewhat inaccurately depicted in the Oscar-winning film 'The Gladiator' starring Russell Crowe.

The archaeological site also included the temples of Jupiter, Minerva and Juno, Rome's most important gods, who normally had a single temple dedicated to them jointly. Sbeitla had one for each of the gods, which was extremely rare. There are apparently only two known ancient cities, which decided for a similar combination.

There were also remains of public baths, a number of noblemen houses, all of which boasted incredible and intricate mosaics.

A bit less obvious, there were a few sites dating back to the Byzantine era. Mainly churches.



Across the road from the ruins, there was a small museum (where the ticket office and a car park were located), a cafe and a number of shops selling souvenirs and jewellery. Whether one wanted to see the ruins or not, it was a jolly good spot to have some tea or a snack, while breaking the trip from the mountain to the north down to the desert in the south of the country.

The road to Tozeur beyond Sbeitla kept going through increasingly more arid scenery. It was still in very good state, and it took just 2 hours to reach Tozeur from the ancient Roman city.



توزر

Tozeur is famous for its massive oasis, built in the 13th century by a clever mathematician, who used his genius to construct an excellent irrigation system.

I had heard so much buzz about Tozeur for a number of years that inevitably my expectations had built up. I am not sure that the town lived up to them when I visited late in March 2010.

Tozeur is located on the Sahara desert and, more specifically, at one of the desert's largest oases. The oasis allegedly contains over 400,000 palm trees, most of which are date palm trees. The town is famous for its date production, and some of the world's best dates come from Tozeur. Their flesh is translucent. The town, as many of Tunisia's places geared towards tourism, was split in two. The new town, comprising of upscale hotels, restaurants and bars, was called 'zone touristique', and was located in the southern part of the town. The older, original (and authentic!) district was located right on the western edge of the main oasis. The link between the older district and zone touristique was relatively attractive. The distance between the two was not great,

and the structures built along the way had been kept close to Tozeur's traditional and artistic brickwork. Fine brick patterns decorated the facades and the walls, guaranteeing a pleasant walk.

Similarly to other places around the country, Avenue Bourguiba, was Tozeur's centre of activity. It boasted shops, a few places to eat, tourism information office and banks. It was running just south of the oldest part of town called Ouled el-Hadef.

Tozeur was smaller than it appeared on the map, which meant that when looking for Ouled el-Hadef, I ventured too far north. Much too far. Actually, it should take only about 10-15 minutes to walk from zone touristique to Avenue Bourguiba. There were a number of signs around Tozeur, but they were misleading, stating much shorter distances than they really were.

Being branded as one of Tunisia's most important destinations for visitors and equipped with an airport, I'd expected a bustling, maybe glamorous, place full of great sights. Well, one day was sufficient to see everything there was to see.

The brand new (it had opened only three months before my arrival) Eden Palm - Les Trésors de l'Oasis was my favourite spot in

Tozeur. It was a very nicely done exposition about the date palm trees and offered a number of tours around the palmerai. The shortest was 45 minutes, cost TND6 (€3) and included an explanation of the irrigation system, the method of measuring time for watering the palm trees without a watch, and a workshop of objects made from the palm tree. The latter showed the ways to make chairs, armchairs, 'wooden' planks (the palm is not a tree but a grass), woven bags and similar objects. The culmination of the tour was a showcase of date products, most of which were preserves; butter made of white dates; date sirup mixed with hazelnut masse; and date jam mixed with lemon were all divine! I got a jar of each!

On the top of the building, there was an open-air and very pleasant tearoom. The service was very professional and they could do any type of tea, also without sugar!

Weather at the end of March was perhaps the greatest thing about Tozeur. It was about 32C during the day with a gentle breeze, and about 20C at night, so not too chilly. Very pleasant indeed. And this, of course, was in addition to the extraordinary brickwork. For centuries, the Tozeurians erected their houses from bricks laying them in decorative patterns. This way, they did not need to paint or decorate the facades and

walls. Some of the patterns looked stupendous, and the structures looked splendid. Tozeur became very well known for the intricate brickwork, so even these days, new developments have been built in a similar way. That consistency was indeed great. It reminded me of Bukhara in Uzbekistan, which also boasted artistic brickwork.

At night, Tozeur looked fine as well. The night sky was superb. The lack of light pollution provided an incredible clarity and visibility of all the star constellations.

The 14th century Ouled el-Hadef district, which boasted the original exquisite brickwork, was Tozeur's main sight. It was very compact and relatively easy to navigate. Sadly, it was not in the best of conditions. Many houses were crumbling, and the fantastic brickwork was becoming less and less prominent. The district had a number of very interesting tower-like structures which stood above, or rather looked like being suspended above, passages between courtyards and alleys. A very intriguing feature, which I had not seen that often in places around the world. By the way, the bricks' geometric patterns in relief of Tozeur were not unique to Tunisia. Similar

style was also utilised in the town of Nefta, not far from Tozeur.

The vast oasis, also known as the palmeraie, was Tozeur's main sight! It was a fascinating place, dense and had this special calmness about it. The best way to visit the oasis was on foot. Inside, one could visit ancient Thuzuros and a tomb of a famous local holy man.

At the oasis, there were at least two large public parks, which were centres of social life, tea drinking, and scoffing pastries, but also for puffing shisha. One of them was the Centre Loisir Niffer, where a cafe at a pool with disturbingly green water was serving fabulous cakes for TND0.900 a piece (pistachio was superb, but the chocolate one was angelic), great Turkish coffee for TND0.600 and very sticky mint tea for TND0.600. Tables were scattered among the palms, banana trees, fig trees and morus (mulberry) trees. The table service was professional and relatively efficient, considering the area they had to cover.

The other park, The Elberka Parc, closer to town centre, but still within the oasis, was gaining popularity after sunset. Mainly with locals, who drank their teas by the

hectolitres. Perhaps that was the Tozeur's nightlife that I was wondering about. It was very lively and exceptionally sociable spot indeed.

Restaurant de la Republique, just off the Avenue Bourghiba was relatively popular, but their table cloths were not very clean. It seemed that the patrons did not really know how to keep them tidy. The menu was sufficiently short, but contained a couple of couscous varieties (TND9), fried rice with meat and sauce (TND7.500), roast chicken, and kefta served with salad and chips (TND8). For the quality of the setting and the dishes, I would have to say that the place was overpriced. Their non alcoholic beer (TND3.500) was however nicely cold! The service was almost efficient and polite.

Another popular place was Petit Prince specialising in more adventurous dishes based on camel meat. It was a more upmarket place with a lovely setting on the way to the oasis. It looked really attractive at night. I did not eat there, though.

The Disco Ali Baba, near the zone touristique, was the only obvious night spot I noticed in Tozeur. At 10pm, it was still empty and the massive bouncer had his tout





hat on trying to lure people to the venue rather than selecting and filtering the clientele. I was visiting the town out of season and I did not see many tourists, local or foreign, around. Not even in restaurants or taking the caleche - a horse or donkey drawn cart, sending the cart owners into a disarray of desperation to find customers. So, perhaps it would not be reasonable to expect crowds in the nightclub as early as 10pm. Yet, I was under the impression that nightlife started rather early in Tunisia, given that the sun was setting early. Still, having a giant bouncer at the door in the first place, would normally denounce anticipation of crowd wanting to enter that might be problematic. And those normally invade popular night spots. Anyway, I did not wait to verify whether the club was any good.

I stayed at the Residence el Arich. It was relatively modern with nice decor inspired by Tunisian traditional houses, and tiles floors. Rooms were en suite (double/twin TND40, single TND25, credit cards accepted) and good size. They came with air-con, small TV sets and a phone, but also with a few colonies of tiny ants. Completely harmless, but annoying. The roof terrace was great for lounging, and this was where breakfast was served (incl. in room rate). Staff spoke some

English, were friendly and helpful. But there was no bar, although the rooftop would have been an incredibly good venue for it.

So, for the bar, I ventured to the 5* Dar Cherait. The hotel was very plush and its architecture was magnificent. A bottle of Tunisia's red Vieux Magon was TND35 and was very palatable. It was served with peanuts, pistachios and small canapés. I checked the room prices and was surprised that a single was just TND155, which seemed very reasonable considering the setting.

Just outside Tozeur, there were a few sites, where a number of well known films were shot, including Star Wars and The English Patient. The Tozeur surroundings mainly catered for landscape backdrops like canyons, mountains and the stone desert, also those posing for alien worlds. It was difficult to get to the film spots without own transport. However, a few local travel agents were happy to organise escapades.

Tozeur had an airport on both domestic (flights to Tunis) and international (charter) routes. There was also a newly re-opened railway station from where overnight trains went to Tunis via Sfax.

حبة

The drive through the lake Chott el Jerid was quick. The scenery was slightly less spectacular than I thought, although the salt was clearly visible. Small parts of the lake along the road had some water, which was incredibly pink. There was also a plant for salt extraction, which was nothing special, except for the pyramidal heaps of salt around it, which drew attention. En route, locals set up a few shops selling souvenirs, mainly desert roses. And I think it was them, who had built a few large salt sculptures in the lake representing camels.

Douz is considered the gateway to the Sahara. There was not that much to see in the town, actually. The 'old town' was small and chaotic, but I did like the central market, which proportionally appeared quite large for such a small community. The two large palmerai did not enjoy great reputation for safety. Although the one close to the 'zone touristique', where all the upscale and mid-scale hotels were located - right by the dunes of the Sahara, looked as it was well maintained. During the day, it offered plenty of soothing shade.

Then, it was time to just sit down by the pool of the hotel and relax. I had until 6pm, before the camel trek was to start. My cyclist friends arrived right on time for the trek. It was good to see them after 2 years.

And then, maybe just two minutes on the camel, the other one, tied to one I was riding on, knocked me off. I fell and broke my left arm. It looked very strange. It did not hurt actually, but the feeling of frustration for not being able to use it was, for the lack of a better word, considerable.

Relatively quickly, after a few minutes of somewhat unnecessary deliberation, I was put in a car belonging to the camel station and brought to Douz's emergency room. They took an x-ray and I learnt that my arm was broken. They said that they could not fix me there and the car (as I resigned from taking an ambulance) took me to Kebili., a larger oasis town, when they were supposed to fix me. They didn't. I needed an operation to make sure the bone is properly aligned. They couldn't do that there. I was informed they would put my arm in plaster to just immobilise it and then I could take a decision whether I should take the operation in Tunisia (and then where was the other

question) or in Europe. They gave me a name of apparently a very good clinic in Gabes, which was on the way to Sfax, my next destination. My plan was to go there and find out a little bit more about my options.

The morning formalities with the tourist police, the tour operator whose camel broke my arm, and my travel insurance took until noon. The insurance emergency call centre kept giving me contradicting instructions what to do. First they insisted on providing them with evidence why the operation on my elbow could not take place in the UK (i.e. free on the National Health Scheme). Then, probably after realising that I would need to fly back home early thus incurring additional costs, wanted me to undergo an operation in Tunisia, but would not want me to stay in a hospital over night. That was going to be unrealistic of course.

I agreed that if they found an English speaking orthopaedic surgeon (my French is not good enough, and my Arabic is not existent), who'd operate me in a modern and hygienic facility, I'd allow for the operation. However, they neglected me since then (never called me back) and I had to

make a decision. Travelling alone and being unable to tie my boots, dress or undress myself was no fun at all! At the beginning, it was really hard, actually. Including taking a shower. Dark clouds gathered over the remaining week of my holiday.

I said goodbye to my cyclist friends, and set off to Gabes, to visit that clinic that was recommended to me.

MATMATA

On the way, I passed through the Star Wars country near Matmata, but missed a few opportunities to take photos of the troglodyte households. Too bad! Good examples of them were located right by the main highway, so I should have stopped for those few seconds to snap those.

Matmata is very famous for the troglodyte households or dwellings, typical for Northern Africa, which made it to the Star Wars and represented households of the people from the home planet of Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader) and his son Luke Skywalker, and a few unsavoury characters of this cult saga.





سfax

So, in Gabes, I found that office of this famous orthopaedic specialist doctor, with a surprising ease. While still in Douz, I had made an appointment over the phone, so I hoped that I would be expected. But, the doctor was not in his office. With some some miracle of Frenglish (French-English) we managed to establish that the doctor was at a clinic, so I had to make my way there.

It cost me £15 to see the guy. He told me that I should go back to England to have this operation done there, as it was going to be a complex one. I would require a couple of titanium plates and screws inserted into my body. It was safe for me to fly and the operation should be done within a few days.

When I said that I needed a letter to my insurer to state what he said (that I'd better went back to the UK to have this operation there), his eyes glistened for brief moment, as if he saw a chest filled with golden coins. He then said that he could perform that operation in the clinic in Gabes. I would then

need to stay in the clinic for a couple of nights, but it also meant that I might not have been able to fly for a number of weeks following the operation. He knew that the insurer would need to pay for whatever much he would billed them.

I had a look around the place, which did not look terribly sanitary, and opted for abandoning the rest of my holiday, and go back to England to have me fixed.

The Tunisian doctor gave me a better tool to immobilise my arm and a nice £20 sleeve to make it more comfortable.

Gabes is an interesting urban formation. It is a coastal town, yet the majority of it is concentrated on the palm oasis about 1 kilometre away from the harbour. It is Tunisia's most polluted industrial city and serves mainly as a stop over point for those who travel either to the Sahara or to the tourist island of Jerba.

I needed to get myself organised with flights back home and with the insurer. It was better to do this from Sfax, which was much larger and more 'civilised' than Gabes.

سfax

The city of Sfax was not far from Gabes. It only took about an hour to get there. I booked myself into the hotel and made a few phone calls to the insurer again, who chose to ignore me for over 24 hours. Obviously, they did not feel that it was actually an emergency for me at all.

I took things in my own hands. I found an internet cafe, found out the availability of flights around this Easter time, what the cost was and booked my ticket for a British Airways Tunis to London flight due to leave within three days.

With a slightly less weight on my shoulders, and a better clarity how much time I had left in Tunisia, I was in a better mood to see that the city of Sfax had to offer.

Continuing along the eastern coast, Sfax is yet another medina-dominated port town, whose exceptional magnetism is hard to describe. It has the best preserved medina of all Tunisia's towns with complete city walls

and a fortress (kasbah) on one of the corners, and yet it did not make it onto the UNESCO World Heritage List. Whilst those in Tunis, Kairouan and Sousse have been given this accolade.

The city of Sfax, in the middle of the Sahel's coast, was on my list of places to visit only because of its near perfect medina. The city had a great history. It once was an independent state, which was so attractive that the Europeans kept fighting for the dominance over it. It was the Sicilians, Spaniards, Venetians, and the French.

I was staying in Sfax only for a short while. I found the city surprisingly really well organised. Better organised than Tunis. In Sfax tourists could find that their hotels were signposted on almost all major roundabouts. The city felt like a big place, but it was easy to walk about.

The main attraction, the completely walled over medina, was located in the centre of the city, near the harbour and the cargo train station. Routes leading to the medina were easy to navigate and had a few cafes and shops providing refreshments and

snacks. There were also a few internet cafes as well, which came particularly handy for me, as I needed to cancel hotel reservations for that part of my holiday, which I needed to curtail.

But before I travelled farther north to Mahdia and Sousse, I had a look at the the Sfax medina, visited a castle and a museum and took a short refuge in a cafe sipping rather interesting coffee.

The Kasbah of Sfax, otherwise known as a castle, and its vicinity, including the little Place de la Kasbah, was definitely my favourite place in the city. In tandem, the Kasbah itself and the square in front of its entrance could not be more dramatically different from one another. The square was leafy with plenty of shade and places to sit down and chill, while the Kasbah and its courtyard was basking in the sun with no shade anywhere. It was also barren, but built from a warm-coloured stone, which created a spectacular contrast to what one could find just outside the main gate.

The Kasbah was a very interesting piece of architecture in its own right, and in addition

it was hosting the Tunisian Architecture Museum, displaying building patterns found across the country spanning several centuries. One could wander around freely on the ramparts, although the views from the upper walls were less spectacular than in other cities.

Sfax's main quality was its medina. It was built in a perfect compliance with the Islamic urban rules. The result was incredible. The satellite picture opposite illustrates the rules. The main (great) mosque, according to the covenants should be placed in the centre of the city, so everyone living on the four corners of the wall would have almost equal distance to the temple, regardless whether they lived in the eastern, northern, western or southern ends. The baths and markets (souks) were built nearby as well for the same reason. The castles were built usually on one of the corners, the highest and preferably on a hill. Other corners were built in a form of mighty towers. There were four main streets leading from the four main gates to the main mosque. This type of Arab architecture emerged around 9th century, when the cities were laid out on a grid pattern.



The medina in Sfax was considerably less crowded than other medinas I had seen in Tunisia to that date. It was more relaxed, quieter, and everyone was exceptionally friendly.

A few Tunisians I met en route to Sfax had warned me that there was not going to be much to see in the city. Well, I am not sure why they had said that, as I found that Sfax offered a fair number of places to explore.

The main sights were: the giant main gate of the medina - Bab Diwan; the mighty Tower of Fire, whose nickname indicates the fact that it was used as a signal tower - Borj Ennar; the Great Mosque - started in 849 and rebuilt several times to resemble the grand mosque of Kairouan (closed for non-Muslims); the Kasbah and its museum; Dar Jellouli Museum occupying a 17th century mansion; and the Town Hall - boasting three-colour facade. There were also a few other interesting pieces of architecture in the new town.

For those, who wanted to explore the streets of the medina, the best avenues to stroll along were: Rue Borj Ennar, Rue de la Grande Mosque, Rue Sidi Ali Karray, Rue Bab Ejjedide, and the few souks near the Bab Jebli, the northern gate.

I would have picked two spots for lounging and relaxing. One would be the Place de la Kasbah, very leafy and full of inquisitive school children, which would get breathless asking for their photo to be taken by my big camera. The other would be the park-like avenue between the Bab Diwan and Place de la Republique. But there were also some interesting and comparably laid back souks, which were great for browsing. Many of those were just local markets offering fascinating items and tools, so no tourist hand grabbing and touting there.

Sfax had a whole range of cafes and patisseries scattered around. Many could be found in the immediate vicinity of the medina and the main routes leading towards it. There was even one on the top of the Kasbah, but unfortunately it was closed when I visited. With cafes in Tunisia, the trick was that most of them were reserved for men and for women it was better to stay out. Unless the cafe was open-air. Otherwise, the gals could go to patisseries.

Nightlife was not one of Sfax's strengths. I heard only about two clubs adjacent to hotels, which were relatively safe to go to. One was the Club Le Rameau at the Hotel Mercure (Avenue Bourguiba), and the other at the Hotel Sfax Centre. At the Songho

Syphax hotel they told me that there were also nice bars, which served alcohol (wine and beer) at the hotels Alexander, Andalusi and Colisee. Other, regular bars, scattered around the city did not normally serve alcohol, and those, which did were sleazy and seedy, and male-dominated.

The best way to spend a night in Sfax was at one of the cafes and bars on the Boulevard de la Republique and south of Avenue Bourguiba, mingling with the locals puffing shisha. French and Arabic came handy for having a conversation, but many locals, particularly younger ones, could manage basic chat in English.

I stayed at the Songho Syphax Hotel, a former Sfax Novotel, near the city's stadium and gardens. It was a large hotel with predictable amenities and comforts typical to a 1970s Novotel hotel. Rooms were being upgraded, and all featured spotless bathrooms, large comfortable beds, TV sets and telephones. The carpets were also clean. Bathrooms had tiles ceiling to floor, and toiletries were provided. Hot water was the norm and the towels were fresh, fluffy and clean.

The reception was not particularly helpful, and liked to take things lightly. They offered





money exchange services, but did not carry too much cash, so not always prepared to change large sums. Yet, the guys were easily convinced to assist in sending overseas taxes, book restaurant tables, and allowing for a car to stay at the hotel's carpark after check-out.

I booked the hotel via <http://www.booking.com> who charged €50 per single room, which in fact was a double room. This was not too far off what the hotel charged directly.

I ate at the hotel restaurant at the Songho Syphax. I normally do not do that, as I always want to explore what cities have to offer in their catering landscape. However, my late arrival to Sfax and other logistic challenges related to my physical condition prevented me from running about the city trying to pick a place to have a grab to eat. The restaurant was not too bad. I had a feeling it was more geared towards business travellers. But that also meant that the service was very professional and swift. The menu was of a good size and offered a fair selection of local, Mediterranean and somewhat interesting dishes. Their cheese

board was fantastic with an incredible quality of the produce. Another quality was the fruit platter, which featured berries and fruits one would not normally expect to see in Tunisia. Strawberries were the best.

El Jem

El Jem, sounding almost as 'gem' has a gem within its limits. It is the second largest ancient colosseum in the world! Only the one in Rome is larger. And therefore there is no surprise that it deserves its place on the UNESCO World Heritage List. It was inscribed in 1979, on the third meeting of the Committee, which was the second meeting at which UNESCO decided on specific inscriptions.

The Committee described the El Jem's colosseum as: "The impressive ruins of the largest colosseum in North Africa, a huge amphitheatre which could hold up to 35,000 spectators, are found in the small village of El Jem. This 3rd-century monument

illustrates the grandeur and extent of Imperial Rome."

When I saw the satellite image of El Jem, with the giant amphitheatre in the middle, I thought it must have been wrong. The colosseum looked too big to be true. Or the town surrounding the arena seemed too small. The amphitheatre looked incredible indeed. Avoiding it during any visit to Tunisia would be utterly unreasonable! A major oversight, a mistake!

So, I placed it firmly in my itinerary, and with a determination stuck with the plan. It was relatively easy with a hired vehicle. But, as the colosseum is one of Tunisia's major tourist sights and a very important historic monument, public transport and local tour operators provide many options to get there.

I timed my visit to coincide with the sunset, as the travel literature suggested, promising the best impression of the amphitheatre. It was spectacular indeed.

The structure stood out amongst the modest and very uninspiring architecture of this little town. It was very easy to find it. Nothing



else from the ancient Roman times remained, when I visited. It was obvious that the modern town had been built over the ancient city, clearly without realising it. Or, should I say, without much care that there might be something of significance still buried in the sands. As if the quite remarkable colosseum would not give it away. But is there still anything significant still under the surface of the desert? Well, according to certain records, the ancient Thysdrus was not big enough to fill all the colosseum's seats. So, spectators from other, nearby cities must have travelled for the bloody shows held in the arena. Well, it must have been worth it. I wonder how much the tickets for the shows cost then. When I visited, the entry to the colosseum was TND8 (£4), plus TND1 for a camera - and there was no show on display; no gladiators, no lions eating the Christians, no chariots chasing the unfortunate criminals and slaves.

My favourite spot in El Jem was most certainly the amphitheatre. Well, there were no other spots to speak of, really.

It took approximately eight years to construct the colosseum. It happened some

time between AD 230 and AD 238. The timing suggests that it might have been ordered by the Imperial official called Gordian.

The city was rather wealthy at that time, and it has been speculated the city merchants paid for the arena themselves to impress visitors. This might have been the reason why the structure was not richly decorated, as it would have cost much more money. However, certain local scholars claim that fine decorations and sculptures could not have been made as the stone used to built the colosseum was too soft. It has been estimated that the amphitheatre could sit about 45,000. This in the town of Thysdrus with only 30,000 inhabitants. At the size of 65 metres long and 39 metres wide, it was large enough to host more than one show at a time.

The truly great characteristic, apart from the size, was the colosseum's state of preservation. However, any inscriptions that once must have decorated the arena, however subtle or unlikely, were gone.

Yet, as I found, the design, the concept and the construction process were even more

impressive, considering that the stones were quarried some 30 km away at the place called Salakta. In fact, the building project of the arena was never fully completed, like the one in Rome, as a matter of fact. In AD 238, when the alleged concessionaire of the building, Gordian, killed himself, the construction of the amphitheatre ended. This, of course, did not prevent the object to be fully utilised.

The colosseum would have been in a better shape, had one of its sides not been blown out in 1695 to allow the Ottoman's access to rebels hiding inside. Still, it seemed to me that it was in a better shape than its larger cousin in the empire's capital city.

The top of the amphitheatre was one of the best spots to kill time. And look down to the oval arena, imagining what sort of bloody spectacles might have taken place there. Underneath the arena ran two dark passageways. These were the routes through which wild animals, unlucky prisoners and muscled and armed gladiators were led just until the moment when they were brought up into the arena to perform what was, in most cases, the last show of their lives. What a feat of the civilised Rome,





breaking skulls and bones, ripping off limbs and flesh - all for the pleasure of the crowds!

Walking the colonnades of the amphitheatre was really impressive, too. But thinking about it, much of the colonnade could not serve as seats, sitting areas or even standing tribunes, but were built so high only to impress visitors.

Apart from the Roman colosseum, the sights of El Jem, if there were any, must have been still covered by the desert. And perhaps there are some, for the ancient town was prosperous. They might have had temples, arches, maybe even baths and a theatre. For sure, they must have had grand villas with flamboyant decorations, belonging to the rich merchants. The amphitheatre, as the archaeological find, seats presently in a dent, which might mean that other sights could really be buried.

El Jem, as a town in its own rights, was a very characterless place. The architecture was dull and there seemed to be no action

whatsoever. Apart from the 'gem', there was also a museum (entry included in the price of the visit to the amphitheatre). It had a small exposition of mosaics.

El Jem did not boast sophisticated dining. There were no venues to speak of, apart from the restaurant at the only hotel in town, the Julius Hotel near the train station. A couple of restaurants/cafes sitting right at the front of the colosseum, of them called strangely the Scandinavia Corner, offered basic dishes of kebabs, shawarmas, kefta, chips (fries), salads and grilled fish for about TND8 (€4), which was not cheap compared with other places around the country, but the location could not be beaten, of course. There was also Restaurant du Bonheur near the hotel. It was basic. I did not end up eating there after all, and decided to go all the way to Mahdia for dinner, instead.

El Jem did not offer reasonable places to stay. There was only one hotel in town, called the Julius Hotel. It was near the train station, and was rather basic. Apparently, they have a room or two with a limited view

of the colosseum. But I did not check what that meant.

Apart from the male-dominated, extremely smokey, very basic and primitively stocked cafes, one should not expect spectacular night life in El Jem. And none of them served alcohol. The only bar in town, which offered beer and wine was the hotel bar at the Julius Hotel. Even if it there was some night time action elsewhere in the town, I would not bet it would have been free from sleaziness and seediness. A couple of cafes in the immediate vicinity of the amphitheatre with open-air seating areas looked promising for mingling, but I was not sure how long into the evening their remained open, as I left El Jem before nightfall.

mahdia

I added Mahdia to my itinerary after more careful study of the map of the country, and my second efficiency review of the plans. It was supposed to be less touristy and equally

photogenic as Monastir, a tourist centre some 30 kilometres north.

When I came to Mahdia, its first impression on me was not great. It did not look special at all. I was driving from El Jem through the new part of town, which appeared chaotic and unorganised to me, busy new town, full of traffic, looking like any regular Tunisian town.

As soon as I found myself on the northern coast of the peninsula, I immediately liked the seafront corniche. I gradually began changing my mind, when I took a stroll along the seafront promenade towards the Cap d'Afrique, after having checked into my hotel.

The sun was setting and it got dark really quickly. I spotted a few incredibly decorated doorways and pretty houses. But when I entered the little medina, during the hours of darkness, the conversion of my opinion about Mahdia was complete. Little lights on the intricate facades created an unforgettable mood. It was almost mysterious, but calm with inexplicable magnetism. I would not normally enter dark

alleys of an unknown medina anywhere in the world, but in Mahdia it simply felt right and safe to do so. I wandered for a couple of hours and I had to force myself to stop, as I had plans for the next day.

In the morning, I knew that it was a perfect decision to stay in the town for two nights! The old town looked equally romantic in the daylight.

Mahdia was split in two, or even three parts, like many Tunisian town in the Sahel region. First part, the original, historical district complete with medina and fortifications. The second part was the new town, where the locals lived, normally in the immediate vicinity of the medina. And the third part was the zone touristique, where the hotels and resorts were erected to cater for the foreign visitors.

In Mahdia's case, the old town covered the entire, albeit small peninsula. The new town was located west of the medina's main gate, and the resorts were based farther west, along the northern coast, about 2 kilometres north-west of the central part of the new town.

The little square, Place Kadhi en Noamine, by the Grand Mosque and at the Cafe Medina, surrounded by perfectly trimmed trees was definitely my favourite spot in town. This was because of the fort-like Grand Mosque, and I always liked forts, and because of the tables under the blue (or starry) sky, and under those fantastic trees!

The square looked incredible in the morning, when the sunrays were still low. And even better in the evening, just after the lights came on, and the Ottoman-style minaret of the Slimen Hamza Mosque was illuminated in a bright white light.

Even lovelier and much, much livelier was Place du Caire, a little square tucked between medina's two alleys, which was shaded by densely planted trees and covered entirely with tables and chairs. It was most definitely the medina's centre for socialising. The service was professional and the range of teas to choose - astonishing.

Medina's main gate, Skifa el-Kahla, was the other spot of Mahdia that I admired the most. It was several yards deep and looked incredibly solid!





Strolling in the medina and along the corniche after sunset was one of the best activities in Mahdia. Most streets were lit at night, and street lighting added the ingredient of mystery to the place. However, the greatest advantage of strolling at night was that the streets were calm. People instead of pestering you about their shops, were greeting by saying 'bon soir' or 'bon nuit'. Or even 'hello' or 'ciao'. Even those, who were whizzing on their mopeds like crazy. One would need to go way off beaten track in Europe to be met with such a curtesy and friendliness these days. The amiability of the population was truly overwhelming. This was undeniably Mahdia's main quality.

Mahdia, given its compact size, had a good number of sights. The main places to visit included:

- The Borj el-Kebir Fort, built by the Ottomans in the 16th century, was eventually rebuilt in 200 years later and boasted great bastions and attractive courtyard. Right below the fort, there was an old Muslim cemetery with thousands of white graves facing the direction of Mecca.

- The intriguing ruins of the ancient Fatimid Port with fortifications sticking out right by the water's edge, reportedly built on the site of an earlier Punic harbour, were right next door. The size of the walls protecting the port looked massive and definitely stimulated imagination.

- The fort-like Grand Mosque dating back to AD 921, in the middle of the medina was very interesting. It did not have a minaret, and one would not guess it was a mosque at all.

- Medina's giant castle-like gate, the Skifa el-Kahla, next to the municipal museum, was vast. It was at least 50 meters deep! Sight in its own right, indeed!

The northern shore corniche planted with palm trees, benches and paved with large flat stone blocks, right by the sea was a very pleasant place to walk and take the breeze in the hair. Whether one had broken limbs (like me - well one limb, in fact) or not. The promenade was still being improved when I visited, and when completed it is going to be a great place to sit down and relax by the sea.

The southern seafront was slightly different, but it was equally pleasant for wandering and looking into the Mediterranean, all the way to the horizon. Plus the Borj el-Kebir Fort looked great from there.

On the rocks, just on the edge of the old cemetery, some 150 meters west from the fort, there was a small cafe/restaurant, which looked like a perfect spot to chill out. It had a terrace overlooking the sea, and comfortable chairs. Its name was given only in Arabic, so I cannot report what it was called.

My condition prevented me from going boogie in Mahdia, but as I was wandering about the town at night, I noticed how the locals enjoyed their nightlife. Most of them sat at cafes drinking tea and played cards. Well, I have to say that the cafes were almost (or even exclusively) dominated by guys. This was consistent with the rest of the country - cafes were venues for the men. Ladies did not seem to hang out at the cafes at night. I did spot women strolling in the town, holding hands, but they did not frequent any night venues. But the night cafe scene was lively, if noisy. The lads were very vocal about the stories they were



sharing. And the card games appeared to require loud narration or very frequent declarations.

The Phenix de Mahdia was a relatively well appointed hotel that paid attention to detail with regard to the decor. Rooms were clean, and the double rooms had giant super king size beds. The bathrooms were modern and clean. The toiletries were provided. There were phones, small refrigerators, tv sets, and spacious wardrobes. The beds were comfortable, had two bedside cabinets, and the sheets were crispy clean. Single rooms were TND70 (€35) and the doubles were twice that.

The rooftop bar with a small swimming pool was disused. The water in the pool was green and the pool was infested by seagulls, which were very reluctant to leave.

The downstairs bar and lobby were terrible! The hotel seemed to allow locals to use the venue for business meetings. And they smoked thousands of cigarettes! The air in the lobby was positively grey. Such a shame, because the lobby boasted nicely comfortable armchairs and sofas.

El Hamra at the Phenix de Mahdia served simple but tasty food. Couscous soup was

slightly (e.g. nicely) spicy. Their brik (Tunisia's traditional dish - thin, deep fried pastry filled with fish, vegetables or meat and egg) was fantastic, particularly the one with tuna when sprinkled with lemon juice, and the egg yolk did not run! One of the tasty items was also breaded chicken escalope served with sweet potatoes and some vegetables. The service was swift and professional. The restaurant did not serve coffee, but they were happy to fetch espresso from the hotel bar. Unfortunately, their wine was seriously overpriced! They charged TND25 (€13) for a bottle of Magon (TND30 for Vieux Magon), while other hotels in the same category across the country got it for TND14!

Mahdia had a number of really decent looking restaurants. Some at the medina and a couple along the corniche. The Restaurant Neptune, along the corniche, looked really good and sophisticated.

MONASTIR

I was actually trying to avoid Monastir due to its reputation of being overrun with bus-loads of group tours. And its hyper artificial zone touristique! However, since I was lucky

enough to be travelling by own mode of transport, I had one day spare in my itinerary. So, I booked a hotel for one night, and decided to give it a go. And in the end, I could not stay in Monastir overnight, due to a camel rage, broken arm and curtailed holiday. The blessing of own transportation however meant that I could still drop for a short visit to the town and have a look around, as part of my way up north to the capital, the airport and eventually to an operation theatre.

Monastir had been built on the top of the ruins of Ruspina, an ancient Punic-Roman city. Nothing of significance remained from that ancient period at the time of my visit in April 2010, though. Monastir is not even famous for it and it might have been elevated to the first pages of travel magazines by the utterly British and exceptionally funny Monty Pythons, who used the town's well preserved Ribat as a Roman castle in their outrageous comedy 'The Life of Brian'.

I found the core of Monastir to be very tidy. Later, I learned that it was because of the large and flamboyant mausoleum of Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's first president, who fought against the French for the country's independence. Just a few yards from the

Ribat and the small medina, and the central seafront corniche. It had to be clean then.

The Ribat of Harthema, right at the seafront, stood out from the crowd of other attractions of Monastir. Its state of preservation was remarkable. From the distance, the fortress looked almost new. And up close one could spot the parts of the structure that might have been recently restored, otherwise the clean-up work, which could have been done instead was extremely successful.

On good, sunny weather, the light brown, thick walls stood austere and solid. Almost mesmerising! And the little park across the street, with benches and palmtrees could not be positioned any better at all. It gave great perspective or a foreground for interesting photo compositions.

The Ribat was the first in the country to allow female students and professors. Its constructions must have started in the 8th century, but as the complex had been remodelled over the centuries, it was hard to establish its exact age. Entry to the Ribat (museum of ancient Islamic writing, fabric and pottery) was TND3 plus TND1 for the camera.

I liked how Monastir seemed so clean. African countries do not always care about cleanliness in the streets, with an exception of Namibia, I guess. But it would have looked really disrespectful if rubbish, plastic bottles and bags, cigarette ends and papers lied around the mausoleum of Habib Bourguiba and the Tomb of an Unknown Soldier (both pictured opposite - the mausoleum in the background). The town felt very civilised and pleasant.

Weather was also great, there was plenty of sunshine, almost no clouds at all, and the temperature climbed to the very comfortable 26C. And the aura pleased me like that although March/April have typically been Tunisia's wettest months. Lucky me?

Despite its popularity, there was not that much to see in Monastir. The sights only included the Ribat and its museum inside, of course; the Habib Bourguiba Mausoleum; the Tomb of an Unknown Soldier; the Grande Mosque; the Habib Bourguiba Mosque; the Museum of Traditional Costume; and that was pretty much it.

There was also a medina full of souvenir shops obviously, but it was not as attractive as many other medinas in the country.

Fortunately, Monastir had a little square called Place du Gouvernorat, flanked by local government buildings, the congress hall, the theatre, and the Artisanat. The latter was a handicraft centre. It was unlike many other centres I had spotted before in Tunisia, as items sold here had a certificate issued by the Tunisian government stating the authenticity of the goods. And the certificate was issued only for items of reasonable quality.

There was no shortage cafes serving teas, coffees and shisha in the centre of Monastir. They were good places to relax, provided that one did not mind a male-dominated, if not male-exclusive, environment and loads and loads of smoke in those cafes, which did not have outside tables. At least near the Ribat!

Further south and along the coast, and yet still in the very centre of the town, the situation was slightly better. Cafes were more women-friendly and had large windows opening to the sea, which provided better ventilation.

For walking and hanging out in the outdoors, the seafront corniche was not too bad with a few palmtrees and very blue water. And the





little park in front of the Grande Mosque and the Ribat was also cool. It had benches and plenty of shade.

Monastir also boasted horse-drawn carts, which could be an option to kill time and relax - in motion. But that depends if one likes the smell of horse dung, of course. The drivers were slightly pushy but not persistent, and the carts did look comfortable.

There was a good selection of places to eat in Monastir, but one had to be careful, as not all of them were any good. Places around and inside the medina were... hmm... not sophisticated enough. Their unimaginative menus clearly discriminated against the tourists but offering few dishes, like pizza, lamb couscous, and fried fish. Normally as a set menu for about TND7 (€3.50). Restaurant du Bonheur just outside the medina looked more decent than others. For better food and definitely better service one had to venture either to the zone touristique or south of the medina along the coast or the marina. The Restaurant La Plage at the marina was very popular specialising in fish dishes, including fish pate and spicy fish couscous. It was not cheap, as the set

menus were going for about TND30 (€15), excluding drinks.

I am not sure what Monastir's nightlife looked like, as I did not have an opportunity to check it. What I heard was the night action in Monastir, both the old part of the town and the zone touristique, was rather low key. Not unlike in most Tunisian towns, but in contrast with the other very popular coastal towns of Hammamet or Tabarka, both very far from Monastir. The only so called reasonable hotel clubs in the zone touristique, The Sahara Club and The L'Aquarius did not enjoy good press. Not good at all! Sadly, nightlife in Monastir sounded as exciting as walking in a cemetery after sunset.

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Sousse was yet another Tunisian mark on the UNESCO World Heritage List with its magnificent medina.

The organisation used the following description and justification of Sousse's medina for the

inclusion on the list in 1988: "Sousse was an important commercial and military port during the Aghlabid period (800–909) and is a typical example of a town dating from the first centuries of Islam. With its kasbah, ramparts, medina (with the Great Mosque), Bu Ftata Mosque and typical ribat (both a fort and a religious building), Sousse was part of a coastal defence system."

Sousse's medina is UNESCO listed, and its walls are spectacular, but there are virtually no gates. Just gaps in the ramparts! Satellite dishes dominate the rooftops and massive blocks of flats are erected just yards away...

It was not cool to see that. I would never deny people access to satellite tv, but it would have been diametrically better to install cable tv in the medina and preserve its original character, I believe.

I am not sure how to report on my visit to Sousse exactly. I did not stay too long in the city, given my broken arm and the necessity to depart to the UK. The decision to come to Sousse was made too easily. I scanned the UNESCO World Heritage List on their website, which indicated that Sousse's medina was a Cultural Heritage Site.



Although, disappointingly, there were absolutely no images of Sousse in the gallery tab. Overall, it was a good visit and a few sights I found rather impressive, and the mood of the medina - friendly.

It was around 1:30 p.m. when my car parked about 200 yards from the train line, and about 150 yards from the south-eastern walls of the medina. Very convenient indeed! The day was sunny and warm. It was excellent for walking.

The medina of Sousse was located near the large harbour, with the Grande Mosque and the Ribat being the closest to the seafront. The large Kasbah with a tall tower occupied the highest point of the medina at the opposite end. A perfect observation point! The entire medina was roughly rectangular about 400 meters by 700 meters, with the longer side parallel to the harbour. The Kasbah was located at the south-west corner, and the Grande Mosque and the Ribat at the north-east corner. It was very easy to navigate and taking a guide was not necessary. A print out of a satellite picture available on the internet was sufficient to find a way. The northern-most end of the medina, between Dar Essid gate in the west

and the Ribat in the east was the 'red light' district and it was considered unsafe for women travellers. The busiest part of the old town were the souks located in the exact centre of the medina.

The train station and the bus terminal were just yards from northern medina wall.

The Ribat and the square called Place de la Grande Mosque, complete with a small fountain, were my favourite parts. The square was clean and spacious, had some shade from the several palm trees planted here and there, and was flanked by elegant facades. A few shops and boutiques displayed their colourful merchandise on the pavement adding abstract patterns to the overall picture.

The 8th century Ribat had very solid-looking walls and round ramparts in its corners. It was complete with a round tower offering superb outlook for the entire medina, all the way to the Kasbah, and a bird's view of the lovely Grande Mosque, which was inaccessible for non-Muslims. The authorities charged TND5 (€2.50) to enter the Ribat plus TND1 (€0.50) for the camera. It was worth it.

I noticed that the structure was being used as a meeting spot for local visitors, who would relax on the walls and ramparts catching up on their gossip out of sight from others. The Ribat was in an excellent state of preservation, the best of all monastic fortresses in Tunisia that I have seen on this trip.

The shop keepers seemed less pestering than in other places in Tunisia. How they managed to develop self-discipline, I did not know. It was sufficient to say 'no, merci' and they did not insist and did not try to drag you into their shop. In fact, I tried to avoid the main souks in the centre of the medina (I had seen many Tunisian souks by that stage of my trip), but those boutiques along the picturesque Rue el-Aghlaba were sufficiently colourful and interesting.

I also liked that the medina was so easy to navigate. Most Tunisian medinas did not require a guide to find the sights, entries and exits, but the medina of Sousse felt very straightforward. It was despite the fact that its Grande Mosque was not located in the centre of the old town, an odd and confusing non-compliance with the Islamic architecture rules.



In the nutshell, Sousse main sights included:

- Dar Essid private museum located in a beautiful 10th century house decorated in 19th century Arab style and displaying jewellery, costume and household items;
- the Khalaout el-Koubba museum of popular arts and traditions, inside the central souks, with a distinctive zig-zag dome;
- the Kasbah with its tower;
- the Ribat with its ramparts, tower and walls;
- the Grande Mosque;
- the Zaouia Zakkak mosque, mausoleum and medersah with an unusual octagonal minaret;
- the medina walls, its ramparts and a number of interesting houses, squares and alleys;
- the central souks as a sight in their own right; and
- the very extensive Christian Catacombs dating back to the 3rd century, some 2 kilometres from the medina, only small part of which was open to visitors.

The 12th century Kasbah, a rather late addition to the 8th century medina, was closed until September 2010, so I could not visit it, but it looked impressive from the outside, and apparently housed an excellent Archaeological Museum with an excellent collection of Roman and Byzantine mosaics.

The restaurant by the Kasbah with a terrace overlooking the southern medina was quite lovely. The personnel was very friendly and their freshly squeezed orange'n'strawberry juice (a perfect detox) was divine. The view was dominated by the satellite dishes, but one could see the harbour in the distance and the Kasbah's walls towered up close. The restaurant had three levels. The terrace on the top level had a few tables and comfortable benches, and was covered with a roof providing shade.

The intriguingly named Restaurant Marmite, just off Avenue Habib Bourguiba, in a small parallel alley, Rue Remada, was a somewhat upscale place. It looked as though it catered mainly for local businessmen. The three tourists of us were a bit of a sensation there, it felt. The service was very professional, but excruciatingly slow. I think we waited over five quarters of an hour for our main dish. When it came, it was a shock! The very strong, cheese tasting fish in couscous put me off considerably. I have never ever

tasted fish like that. I really struggled to consume it. I had to leave a fair bit of it on my plate, unfortunately. Yet their garlic appetiser and the lemon sorbet, both on the house, were superb and unexpected! I would highly recommend the place for everyone, who has plenty of time, does not eat fish, and appreciates yummy freebies. There, I tried the very drinkable Chateau Mornag 2006, another local wine, which was reasonably priced at TND15.

Avenue Hedi Chaker, at the end of the commercial, banks-lined, Avenue Habib Bourguiba, right along the not-too-shabby beach, 500 meters north of the Ribat and medina's walls, had a splendid one kilometre-long seafront promenade. It was excellent for strolls in slow motion and to take the sea breeze in the hair. The beach was about three times as long there, if one wanted to walk a bit farther.

Having to skip staying in Sousse for the night, I do not have a information how the nightlife might have looked like. However, what I heard was that this Tunisia's third largest city boasted a number of decent and safe places to party. Unlike many coastal towns of this Sahel region. Both Avenue Habib Bourguiba and Hedi Chaker had places to sit down late in the evening and start the night action.



المناسبة

My premature flight back to England was leaving in the evening, so I had an entire day to drive from the Sousse area back to the capital. That was easy, as there was a pretty good motorway all the way. In fact there was sufficient time to go back to Sidi Bou Said for dinner.

British Airways had a pity for me and my broken arm, so they allowed me in the business class cabin. That was really kind of them. They even offered me the entire business class service with all the nice wine served with a smile.

التونسيين

The Tunisians, whom I met during this trip were very friendly. That included taxi drivers, hotel staff, waiters, shop owners... and completely random strangers on the streets, in cafes. They greeted me, offered smiles, invited to hang out with them. It was truly welcoming and overwhelming.

Interestingly, for a secular Muslim state, the Tunisians found enough gaps in the rules to

enjoy rather good wine. Perhaps it was a bit naughty. Or, as once the good Moroccans told me, if they drank with their eyes closed, then drinking booze was not a sin. I like that explanation!

رحلة شتى

This was a good trip. And it was definitely unforgettable! Never mind the naughty camel.

The parts of the country that I was lucky to visit could feature in a book titled "New Perfect Holiday Destination". The ancient Punic and Roman sites, some of which at the state of incredible preservation, the Berber traditional architecture, the classic Islamic medinas, the French colonial architecture from the early 20th century, the rugged mountains, the red canyons on the verge of the desert, the sea of dunes, the golden beaches, the crystal clear emerald waters of the Mediterranean, the incredible pink salts of the desert lakes, they all contribute.

Now, about that arm operation. It was a challenging job. As soon as the consultant saw the x-ray, she ordered a detailed CT scan, and would not let me go. She summoned the entire orthopaedic team of

the hospital and said that she would accept this challenge.

Six and a half hours of procedure to insert a true piece of engineering into my body, I ended up with 20 screws and pins in my bones. The doctor was really pleased with herself, as she did not really believe that she could actually fix me. Before the operation, she warned me that I might never regain full range of movement of my arm. After the operation, she said all went well (she damaged one of my nerves a bit during the procedure to make sure she could put all the bones together, but not beyond repair). But warned me again that there was a good deal of rehabilitation ahead of me.

Then, three months later, when she saw me at the end of the treatment, almost fully repaired, she summoned half of the orthopaedic department again to show what sort of medical miracle I was. And two of her registrars kept asking me: "How did you do it?"

النهاية

All names in this report are true and the story should be entirely accurate. All photographs were taken by the author during the trip. All rights reserved.

