

Where Europe, Africa and the Mideast Meet in Tunisia

By ERIC LIPTON as reported in the New York Times - May 25, 2008

THE night air was cold and damp on the narrow, walled streets of Tunis's medina, and the markets and stores all dark and locked up tight for the night. But all it took was a single rap of the iron knocker on the wooden door at 5, rue Dar El Jeld and in that instant a mystical world opened up.

From inside, a man pulled back the arched door decorated with metal studs, and we were escorted through the lobby and into what looked like an Arabian palace. In an enclosed marble courtyard, my fiancée, Elham, and I could see riotously colorful tiled walls, archways covered with arabesque stucco and, at one end, a seated man playing an antique sitar for the patrons who sat around small dinner tables.

Yes, this was only a restaurant — named after the elegant 18th-century private mansion where it is housed, Dar El Jeld. But it happens to be one of Tunis's finest, with a menu featuring such tangy delights as kabkabou, a tender dorade, with capers, stewed tomatoes and olives, in a delicious lemon, onion and tomato sauce.

But the surprise upon entering Dar El Jeld expresses something you will find more than a few times when visiting this ancient capital city of Tunisia: it is a captivating adventure that exceeds expectations — somehow successfully mixing Mediterranean flavors, Arabic and North African history and a modernist European touch.

Tunis, just inland from the Mediterranean, is known quite well by Europeans — particularly the British and the French, who take cheap flights south so they can be on the nearby beaches in just a few hours. But for most Americans, it is off the beaten path, as Morocco is the much more conventional destination for those who venture to North Africa.

But the Tunis area has an extraordinary amount to offer — and in a way it features more variety and even history, you could argue, than Fez or Marrakesh. The list includes its unrivaled medina, whose alleys and covered passageways go on for miles, filled with markets, mosques and cafes; the nearby ruins of the ancient Phoenician port city of Carthage; the bustling beach town of La Marsa; and the charming hillside village of Sidi Bou Said, where the blue-and-white painted homes have views reaching out for miles over the gentle waters of the Gulf of Tunis.

It is not a place, obviously, that has anywhere near the range of luxury accommodations found on the European side of the Mediterranean. But it has an increasing number of upscale places to stay and eat, not only in Tunis's center, but also in the beachside villages and resorts just outside the city.

The highlight of a visit to Tunis is the ancient core of the city itself: the seventh-century medina, which, beyond the most intensely touristy spots surrounding Jemaa Ez Zitouna (the Great Mosque), has a more genuine feeling than its counterparts in Morocco.

Yes, it is true that during peak tourist times in the summer, the number of foreigners at the central souks packed into the covered corridors that surround the Great Mosque can easily outnumber the locals. And the merchants invite you into their stores, trying to guess what country you come from by greeting you in French, English, Spanish or German.

But venture out beyond this area, losing your way through the alternating shadows and sunlight of the

twisting streets, and you are overtaken by a sensual assault: the smells of the burning incense and spice stores; the undulating chant of the prayer calls; the blue, beige and orange doors that decorate certain homes; and the local Tunisians, pushing carts or carrying overstuffed bags of goods.

WHAT makes the medina so special is that there is a great deal of real commerce that still goes on there, as at Mourad Bouali's closet-sized silversmith workshop on Rue Sidi Ben Arous, where he and his brother-in-law make custom-ordered silver lamps using hammers, a hot, blue flame and rolls of fine silver. Take a break at Café Ez Zitouna or Café Essour, both on Rue Jemaa Ez Zitouna, for a coffee or tea and snack.

The Halfaouine neighborhood, which starts just outside the medina's northern walls, also offers scenes that are entirely varnish free, as thousands of residents mill about buying up the endless supply of fresh meats, vegetables, fish and other essentials. A man, at the foot of the main square, holds six live chickens in his hands, bargaining a fair price for his game with particular gusto. It makes New York's Union Square farmers' market look like a minimart.

Exit the medina from the eastern side and it is like passing through a time machine, as you cross through the appropriately named Porte de France and emerge somehow in Belle Époque Paris. This is the start of the colonial city the French built during their occupation of Tunisia, which began in 1881.

There on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, Elham and I found bustling sidewalk spots like Café de Paris, and the grand National Theater, whose Art Nouveau facade is so overdone with flowing sculptures it almost resembles the icing on a wedding cake. Perhaps most out of place is the Cathedral of St. Vincent de Paul — with its two Moorish/Gothic bell towers — which the French built in 1882 as a clear symbol of their intention to stay.

The various layers of cultures that define — and in many ways elevate — Tunisia are most on display along the avenue. There are all these French-style cafes — only some of which serve wine — in what of course is a Muslim country. The street is often described as the Champs Élysées of Tunis, but it is named after the former Tunisian president who wrestled its independence from France in 1956.

Down toward the base of Avenue Habib Bourguiba is another remnant of the French rule: a train station built by the French that quickly (and cheaply) links the city center to the string of seaside towns that are an essential part of any Tunis itinerary.

Eight quick stops down the line and you are again sent through a time warp: you step out in Carthage, the one-time playground of Dido and Hannibal.

The Romans, when they arrived in this Phoenician city in 146 B.C., did a pretty good job of demolishing the main sites — what is left today really are ruins, surrounded by the well-kept homes of this now-affluent suburb.

But the spirit of Dido, who founded Carthage, and Hannibal, the military commander who used it as a base to invade Italy, still survives, in the rolling seaside hills that lead down to the remains of the Punic port. A morning stroll through the different sites and gardens — the Roman baths, and the Sanctuary of Tophet, where hundreds of small stone markers designate the spot where children sacrificed to gods were buried — is a haunting and memorable one.

Atop a hill overlooking the ancient port city is Villa Didon, an über-modern hotel designed by the French architect Philippe Boisselier. There is nothing else like it in Tunisia. Everything inside is sleek and white. The doors to suites slide open like some kind of spaceship hatch. An oversized marble

bath tub sits right in the middle of the bedroom, not far from the oversized flat-screen TV.

Downstairs is a hip bar, which is popular among rich Tunisians as well as tourists. And while the restaurant that Alain Ducasse opened there in 2004 is no longer run by the French master, *Le Rest'ô* — as it is now called — still offers a pretty tasty, although pricey, fare. Staying there will cost you dearly — at least by Tunisian standards — as the smallest of the 10 rooms start at 370 dinars a night, about \$308 at 1.2 dinars to the dollar.

Just outside Carthage lies the whitewashed hilltop town of Sidi Bou Saïd. During the day, its cobblestone streets can be almost overwhelmingly crowded with tourists. But in the evening, the crowds recede, the tourists depart and the charms of this postcard-perfect town known for its trademark blue-and-white buildings emerge. And within the confines of the Dar Saïd hotel, you are in a private sanctuary, with wide-open Mediterranean views and an Old World feel.

There is a tiled courtyard with a pool and bar, where, upon your arrival, a man arrives in an instant, laying out towels on a lounge chair and offering up beverages and snacks. Adjacent to the pool is a small, perfectly manicured garden, where breakfast is served, amid the jasmine and pink bougainvillea. Only five of the rooms have sea views, which are worth the extra price.

On the last night of our stay in Tunisia, after a day trip to the beach at La Marsa, Elham and I had dinner at the restaurant across the street from the Dar Saïd, which is built just at the edge of a ravine that faces the Mediterranean. Entering the restaurant, Dar Zarrouk, you almost lose your breath, the blue expanse reaches out, both from the sky and the sea, for miles without end.

We were escorted to a table near the middle of the glass-walled room. A blur of French and Arabic filled the room — no English, except at our table for two.

As the sun went down and the first stars of the night started to come out, and we sipped a crisp Tunisian muscat, I could not help but think that this was another revelation — another spot of extraordinary charm and beauty. For us, at least, it was a fitting final face of Tunis.

LAYERS OF CULTURE, IN OLD ALLEYS AND MODERN VILLAS

HOW TO GET THERE

There are no direct flights from New York to Tunis. You can fly British Airways (www.britishairways.com) to London Heathrow, and then from Gatwick to Tunis; recently, mid-June round trips started around \$1,240. Taking Air France (www.airfrance.com) through Paris eliminates the airport switch, starting around \$1,470 in June.

A cab into the city costs about \$10.

WHERE TO STAY

In Tunis, Dar el Médina (64, rue Sidi Ben Arous; 216-71-56-30-22; www.darelmedina.com) is by far the first choice. It is a former private home that has been turned into a gorgeous and comfortable 12-room inn, still run by the same family that built the house 183 years ago. A double room is \$180.

Outside the medina, the 49-room Tunisia Palace Hotel (13, avenue de France; 216-71-24-27-00; www.goldenyasmin.com) is an impeccably renovated bank building, with doubles starting at 185

dinars a night, \$154 at 1.2 dinars to the dollar.

A more budget-oriented option is the plain but decent 80-room Carlton Hotel (31, avenue Habib Bourguiba; 216-71-33-06-44; www.hotelcarlontunis.com), which has double rooms for 96 dinars, including breakfast.

In Sidi Bou Said, the Dar Saïd (Rue Toumi; 216-71-72-96-66; www.darsaid.com.tn) is beautiful and luxurious. Its 24 rooms go for 275 to 480 dinars.

It is best to avoid two spots near Tunis: Hammamet, which is Tunisia's Cancún, filled with downmarket, all-inclusive hotels; and Gammarth, a more upscale, just-built, American-style hotel-golf course-resort area that lacks any real Tunisian flavor.

WHERE TO EAT

Dar El Jeld occupies an old mansion in the heart of the medina in Tunis (5-10, rue Dar El Jeld; 216-71-56-09-16; www.dareljeld.tourism.tn). Prix-fixe dinners run 45 to 80 dinars, without wine.

Le Rest'ô at Villa Didon in Carthage (Rue Mendès; 216-71-73-34-33; www.villadidon.com) will cost you about 50 dinars for dinner, without wine.

Neptune (3, rue Ibn Chabbat; 216-71-731-456) offers open-air dining on the waterfront in Carthage. Tasty grilled dorade and dessert is about 25 dinars.

GETTING AROUND

The Tunis-Goulette-Marsa, or T.G.M., train goes from the city to Carthage, Sidi Bou Said and La Marsa. The trip is also not too expensive a cab ride.

A rental car is only necessary if you want to go out to the end of Cap Bon, the nearby peninsula.

WHEN TO GO

In the late spring and fall, it is still warm enough to go to the beach, but not so hot as to make the city insufferable.