The mix that is modern Tunisia

PHOENICIANS, ROMANS, ARABS AND THE FRENCH

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



BAB EL BHAR	ZITOUNA MOSQUE	ROMAN CARTHAGE	SIDI BOU SAID
The Sea Gate	*Built in 703*	*The amphitheatre*	*Blue and white village*

NOT JUST SUN AND SEA

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the Mediterranean as seen from Sidi Bou Said

With a vast coastline across the Mediterranean Sea, Tunisia is located at the head of the African continent. It is the smallest country in the region yet its culture and tradition is rooted in antiquity. The country enjoys mountainous regions with mild weather and green fields of olive and almond trees in the north and dry lands throughout the Sahara desert in the south. The eastern part of the Atlas Mountains in the north act as lungs for the country.

Tunisia has one of the best sandy coasts in the world with many luxury hotel resorts along the Mediterranean, but what makes this country an interesting place to visit is not just sun and sea.

When I arrived in Tunis for the second time and walked in the leafy and blooming boulevard of Avenue Habib Bourguiba, I had mixed feelings. As I passed Théâtre municipal de Tunis, a centre featuring opera, ballet, concerts and dramas and looked at cafes, boutiques and shops, I sensed a modern city similar to Paris and London in an urban environment filled with layers of cultural figures and Islamic traditions.

I

PLACE DE L'INDÉPENDANCE



the statue of Ibn Khaldoun in Place de l'Indépendance

As I reached the Place de l'Indépendance at the end of the Boulevard, I noticed the Cathedral of St. Vincent de Paul. Built in 1897 following the French conquest of Tunisia in 1881, it is located exactly opposite the French Embassy in the left hand side of the square. A country that proudly sought its independence from France in 1956 is still culturally under its influence, but its past heritage is deeply rooted from antiquity to the Islamic era.

Ibn Khaldoon is an example of that rich heritage. His statue, in the middle of the square, is one of the most famous scholars in the Islamic world. Born in Tunis in 1332, he is considered to be one of the founding fathers of modern sociology and historiography. His works influenced philosophers such as Hegel, Marx and Durkheim.

I crossed under the huge stone gate of Bab El Bhar (Sea Gate or the gate towards the sea) in the east of the old town to enter the Medina. The huge arched gate, built originally by the Aghlabides dynasty around the 9th and 11th century and rebuilt in the 19th century used to be surrounded by the city walls and shops.

The time was getting closer to sunset and shops were starting to close as I strolled through narrow cobbled pathways in Medina which were filled with handmade crafts and souvenir shops throughout the wealthy ancient souk.

II

MEDINA



narrow cobbled pathways in Medina which were filled with handmade crafts and souvenir shops

You can find everything from traditional outfits to ceramic mosaics, copper plates, jewellery and carpets. Men sit by the tiny shops inviting onlookers to come in to buy their commodities. As I zigzag under arched narrow tunnels below houses, I go deeper into the Medina and find myself in more secluded alleys yet the exits are similar – studded decorative, wooden doors.

As night falls, I hear the call to prayer from the 8th century Zitouna mosque. Men were rushing to get there on time for congregational prayer. Zitouna is the oldest mosque in Tunisia, built in 703 after the Arab conquest of North Africa in 698. The great mosque covering 5,000 square metres stands with 160 columns made of marble, decorated with authentic, reddish coloured stone. Not only is this a place of prayer, it is also one of the first universities in the history of Islam and the world, hosting many famous scholars who graduated over centuries.

Medina, which has grown around the mosque, is certainly a magical place to visit with many historical mansions and small courtyards. There is a different feeling walking in narrow alleys under the moonlight, but it is best to avoid dark alleys with low or no lights at night.

III

IN SEARCH OF ROMAN RUINS



the amphitheatre

I began my second day in Tunisia by driving towards Carthage in search of Roman ruins. The archeological sites in Carthage (it goes back 3,200 years) reflect many layers of ancient history, which extends across a vast area in the north of Tunisia. Phoenicians were one of the first settlers in the region so that by the sixth century BC, Carthage was a Mediterranean power. Romans built their magnificent architecture and glorious palaces over the remains of Phoenician civilisation after a series of Punic wars, which ended in a final battle in 146 BC with Hannibal's forces destroying Carthage.

Another layer of history is when Carthage became the centre of Christianity during Roman rule. Carthage was rebuilt again by the Romans and became a major city once again in the Mediterranean and an important access route to Africa until the Muslim conquest in 698 AD. The city was ruined again and power was shifted to the Medina in Tunis.

As we drove by the farm lands and around newly developed neighbourhoods in the suburb of Tunis, I could see the remains of Roman stone buildings everywhere. Eventually I reached the Roman Carthage Theatre which dates back to the second century AD and is built to the west of Byrsa hill. This amphitheatre, an arena with a capacity of 15,000 spectators was a popular place of entertainment, and provided gladiatorial games for people gathering from all different classes of the society. Today, surrounded by palm trees, it is a stimulating setting for international music festivals in July and August. Other significant monuments in the area are the ruins of the Antonine baths and Villa de la Voliere. The Carthage National Museum holds a wide range of archaeological objects and artifacts from these ancient sites.

IV

THE BLUE AND WHITE BUILDINGS OF SIDI BOU SAID



the blue and white buildings of Sidi Bou Said

The ruins in Carthage have been the source of stone building materials in Tunis over centuries and so there are many layers awaiting discovery. For example, there are no signs of Christian churches from ancient times. And the Acropolium (or Saint Louis Cathedral) built by the French Protectorate around 1890 at the top of Byrsa Hill was constructed over the ruins of an ancient temple of Aesculapius and in very close proximity to the Punic acropolis. This is a revival of past Christian history in the region. The church is no longer used as a place of regular worship, but hosts events, exhibitions and concerts.

A trip to Tunis won't be complete without a visit to the nearby town of Sidi Bou Said just 20 kilometres north of the capital. It is midday and I am sitting in Ayam O Zamana restaurant overlooking the small harbour and having lunch. The view is slightly surreal.

The white and blue theme of the old village of Sidi Bou Said at the top of a sheer cliff seems to place this beautiful hamlet in the sky. The village seen from a distance looks just like a massively decorated mosaic which has been painted with blue and white and then filled with red flowers and leafy green trees. Exploring it from within, it is a fairytale film set in a maze of zigzagging pathways, arches and secret corridors. The steep curved stairs lead to hidden courtyards where more studded curved wooden doors can be seen opening out to private, flowered gardens. The white and blue colours were applied and imposed throughout the village in the nineteenth century under a decree by the municipality to protect the village, one of the first preservation areas in the world.

V

A GREAT SENSE OF CALM AND PEACEFULNESS



Holy man Sidi Bou Saeed mausoleum

The village is named after a holy man, Abou Saïd Khalaf Ibn Yahya el-Tamini el-Béji, nicknamed Sidi Bou Said. He was a spiritual man who taught Sufism and mysticism in his sanctuary in the village which used to be called Jabal el-Menar before being renamed after he died in 1231 AD.

A humble tomb made of wood enclosing the mausoleum of this 13th-century spiritual man has been a place of pilgrimage for centuries. He was buried in his Zouaïa (school) next to the small El Ghofrane mosque with its white minaret and this is the highest construction in the village.

I stroll through winding blue and white streets filled with sour orange trees, shrubs with red flowers twisting over the houses with their unique windows (moucharabieh), passing art galleries, cafes and souvenir shops in the zouk as I go. There was a fragrant smell of jasmine mixed with that of the oranges which filled the air. There is a feeling that the spirit of this holy man is still alive throughout the village and provides a great sense of calm and peacefulness.

One attracted by its lure was Rodolphe d'Erlanger, a famous French painter and musicologist from a wealthy family who built his villa, Ennejma Ezzahra (it means the stars of Zahra) here. His palace, built in 1921 with magnificent Moorish style architecture and indoor fountains, is now a museum and includes original furniture, his musical instruments as well as collections of his own paintings. His room with his painting tools and stands overlooking the sea is preserved. The legacy of this Frenchman, forever seduced by the village, is that now his home is the Center of Arab and Mediterranean Music.

Tunisia has undergone tragedies in the last few years but when visitors return to the resorts of Hammamet and Sousse, they should take time out to visit Tunis and Sidi Bou Said and then they will understand how this modern state is one layered with history and the influences of many peoples.

Is it any wonder that this has inspired many artists, painters, poets and writers?



the view from Sidi Bou Said

PLAN YOUR JOURNEY

Getting there: At present Tunisair flies from London (Heathrow and Gatwick) to Tunis 6 days a week.

For more images of Tunisia, go to www.purevisionjourneys.com/tunisia.

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