

By Barri Rind  
March'2020

In March 2020, I eagerly anticipated my upcoming trip to Algeria, the country that finally allowed foreigners to trickle in. And then Covid happened.

Disappointed and disheartened, I hunkered in like everyone else, watching country after country closing their borders, wondering if Algeria would ever happen.

**\*\*\*"Why Algeria?" My friends asked.**

**BECAUSE** I still remember many years ago in Jerusalem, watching my Algerian neighbor, a 30-year-old young, beautiful woman with short black silky hair and sparkling brown eyes, washing the stone tile floor in front of her house while playing over and over again the French song "Adieu mon pays" by the Jewish singer Enrico Masias. While singing with him, she had a sad, nostalgic look, telling me that Macias was forced to leave Algeria and exile in France (where he became a superstar) after his father-in-law was assassinated in 1962 by revolutionaries. Later, I learned that the song became a hymn for the one million exiled French Algerians.

**BECAUSE** I can't even remember when I first read Albert Camus.

This Algerian-born giant of French literature, whose two most famous novels, "The Stranger and The Plague," set in Algeria, exploring existentialism and joyful sensuality combined with man's loneliness in an indifferent world," stayed with me. But in his essays like "The Seas Close by," Camus transported me to sensual landscapes by the Mediterranean I always wanted to see.

Missing his hometown, in one of his essays, he wrote:"My town is on the shores of the Mediterranean. .the summer evenings that I love so much, so gentle in the green light and full of young and beautiful women."

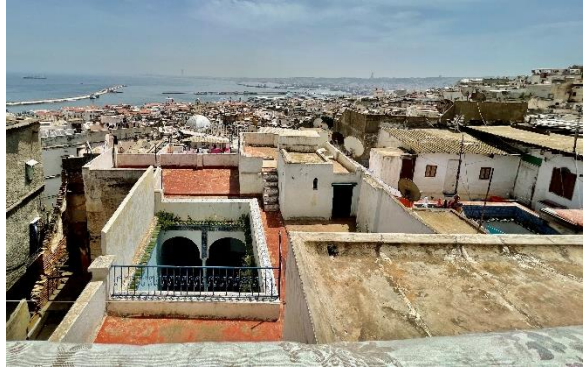


**BECAUSE** as an underdeveloped nation closed off for so long. I wanted to see it while it's still authentic.

With Enrico Macias's songs in my head, with Camus' romantic notion of a beloved country on the Mediterranean Sea, I finally made it to Algiers.

### **\*\*\*SEARCHING FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN**

Tucked away from the busy center of Algiers, my hotel, nestled in an old authentic neighborhood, gives me a first modest glimpse. But up in my sixth-floor room, behind the low, flat rooftops and random proud palm trees, Camu's magnificent view of the Mediterranean is staring at me, glinting in the mid-morning sunny glow, calling me.



I ask the hotel's receptionist for the general direction to the sea, and she immediately replies:

"I'll order you a taxi."

"No, thank you, I prefer to walk."

"But it's too far." She protests.

"It's okay. I can walk for hours."

She is shocked.

I stroll through quiet, charming, meandering streets on a balmy day. No tall high risers but two-story apartment buildings from the 1960s or picturesque homes surrounded by adorned mosaic walls. The large green wrought iron gate and a canopy of lush trees flowing over the wall hint at a luxuriant paradise I wish I could enter.



I'm an anomaly here. An unusual curiosity. A Western woman walking alone, attracting attention. Private cars and taxis drive by, slow down, honk lightly, or say something, but don't harass. Last night, as I walked up the well-lit street from my hotel to check the restaurants and observe local pedestrians, a bus full of passengers slowed down. The driver opened the door, and the three men beside him said something in French, smiling. I waved to them and said in my poor French, which I don't really speak:

"Je ne parle pas français, seulement anglais."

They laughed, and one shouted in English, "Welcome to Algeria."

The people I encounter on my stroll are lovely and friendly. They speak Maghreb Arabic, like in Morocco and Tunisia. I can distinctly recognize the harsh sound, which differs from the classical Arabic in Egypt. Of course, most of them speak French also, but very little English, except in the hotel.

Intermittently I can see the Mediterranean to my right between buildings and palm trees, wondering exactly how to get there or how long it would take. Google Maps does not work here. But it doesn't matter. I have a full free day, and getting lost in new cities on purpose is what I do best.

It's Friday, the day of prayer, and the streets are pretty empty except for a few men on the road I greet with a nod and hello. They nod back kindly. Some are curious and try to converse, and we understand each other with a few Arabic and French words. One puzzling thing is they ask for my WhatsApp number, and I'm trying to figure out why.

I say, "No, we can't really converse"

They laugh as if I've revealed something difficult and say, "ah oui, bien, sava sava."

And as I'm telling the two men sitting on a bench in a shady area that I'm an American tourist, suddenly, one of them gets up and says:

"Pardon, Alla Akbar," indicating he has to pray as the muezzin's voice vibrates from a loudspeaker in the near distance.

Curious, I continue toward the loudspeaker and stumble upon a crowd of men of all ages; some are sitting on white plastic chairs, while others, young, sit cross-legged on the stone tile floor of the mosque's sizeable sunny courtyard. On the adjacent sidewalk and under trees and stone benches, more men dressed in shorts, jeans, or long Abaya listen intently to the important Friday sermon of the Mulla.

They glance at me, and I try to be respectful and take a few pictures discreetly to avoid disturbing them.

I feel like I'm not supposed to be here as there is not even one woman on site. But I don't sense any hostility. Later, I learn that the women are either at home cooking or inside the mosque, not integrating with the men. After the prayers, some grocery stores and restaurants will open again, and some women will emerge.

It's getting hotter. The few feathery clouds from the morning disperse, and the 72 degrees sun glares at my exposed shoulders. I can see the distant azure waters behind the freeway and hope I am walking in the right direction. Why does the Mediterranean in different cities lure me? As if the shore looks different, enveloping itself in the architecture of the city, its culture, and ancient history. This land bears tales of Phoenicians, Berbers, Romans, Arabs, Ottomans, and French. What adventures await me?

The sea is within reach, yet I cannot get there. The freeway is between us with Arabic and French signs only. No English sign of giving me a clue.

I'm all alone and lost. There is no one to ask. I turn back, finding myself in a shabby neighborhood with many young men hanging out. I try to ask for the direction of the sea, saying:

"Mediterranee?"

They look at me, saying something in Arabic.

I try again,

"La Mer, la Mer?" The sea, the sea.

I turn on google translate, but they need to figure out what to do with it or perhaps don't want to bother.

Now, they speak French again, pointing straight toward where I came from, and I presume they say to go on the second freeway. They are super friendly and eager to help. I walk back to the highway, cross



the street toward the second one, and see a pedestrian path. I follow it, still unsure, and then as it curves to the right, I know I am finally going in the right direction as I'm suddenly staring at the Algerian coastline with all its vast glory. At the end of the path, I walk straight to a gravel beach flowing into a lagune. The clouds are back, and the beach filled with swimmers two weeks prior is now tranquil and deserted except for two young teenage boys at the water's edge. I take a picture of one of them.

I leave the lagune and walk up to the wave breaker, a high elevation of huge rocks. I climb up to get a better view skipping carefully from one rock to the other to get close to the water. One middle-aged man wearing navy blue shorts and a t-shirt strolls on the cement path, glancing at me occasionally. A young man sitting on a high rock casts a fishing pole into the calm water. He turns his head to look at me. Thinking I may have disturbed his solitude and concentration, I smile. He smiles back and seems forgiving.



The sea breeze feels good as I watch the red and blue freighters docked in the distance like images of a nostalgic sea postcard, reminding me that Algiers is one of the country's main ports connecting Eastern Europe and the Middle East. I'm alone except for the man from the path now joining me, sitting not too far from me. He points to a diver in the dark water near the rocks, almost camouflaged with his dark wetsuit. I take a picture, and the diver disappears.

I raise my head to the heavens, let the wind waft my hair, and caress my face while I breathe the fresh sea air of the Algerian Mediterranean.

**\*\*\*Day by day, Algeria**, the country that closed its borders from its neighbors and the world for decades, begins to reveal a long, fascinating, painful history of people searching for self-identity, self-determination, and a sense of nationhood.

Deeply interested in history, people, and cultures, I seek to explore the old and ancient to understand how and why any country got from there to now, and the Casbah (citadel) of Algiers gives the first glimpse.

### **The Casbah- A UNESCO World Heritage site.**

The Casbah of Algiers, built in the 10th century over a Berber/Roman city, once a bustling center and "the heart of Algiers," leads you through meandering narrow stone alleys used only by pedestrians and donkeys. No cars. You hear stories of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) told with pride when Algerians fought the French in these alleys and became martyrs. There is something romantic in this centuries-old place that used to be the epicenter of culture and history. I try to imagine streets full of colorful, boisterous merchants and artisans in a place where hundreds of years ago flourished with fountains, hammams, large mosques, and prayer halls, one for almost every street. But now, the twisting alleys that wind between the mudbrick and stucco houses are subdued where shopkeepers sit on small stools near their



doorsteps, and old men rest next to each other on a bench, welcoming the few tourists that go by and watch the cats scurrying around, and small kids kicking a soccer ball.

While the architecture is still the same, the years of neglect are evident. Built on a slope where houses are attached to each other, you can see some that collapsed and are in ruins. But don't let that fool you. Some homes here stayed with the same family for hundreds of years. Enchanting dwellings you cannot imagine from the quiet alley, but when you enter, they give you an insight into a glorious past.

Behind the old facade hide some beautiful three-story houses built around an open sky central courtyard with a fountain ringed by a loggia and a terrace on the roof. Several generations live here together. You can see the generational differences in household appliances. While the current generation uses electric stoves and washing machines, the ninety-year-old grandmother still prefers to sit on a small wooden stool and cook over a small gas stove on the floor, wash her clothes by hand, and hang them on the clothesline on the sunny roof terrace. We find her sitting there, basking in the sun behind her colorful clotheslines. Her twelve-year-old grandson, Muhamad, joins us and affectionally kisses her on the cheek. The family is educated, and they try to preserve their home and keep it in good condition.



Still, this UNESCO site needs a lot of funding to restore the Casbah.

As you keep walking, you arrive at the busy, bustling market; like most markets in Algeria, you can find anything from fruit and vegetable, spices, seafood, clothes, shoes, various sweet treats, and souvenirs. In the ancient markets, the alleys are so narrow and intimate that you cannot avoid brushing against other shoppers on a busy shopping day. It's not intimidating but makes you feel like you are part of old culture and included in local life.

#### \*\*\*\*\*What the Roman Empire left in Algeria

Along the northeast coast of Algeria, on a strategic mountain ridge, in towns like Djemila, TIMGAD, and Tiddis, intact and intricate mosaic floors and columns take me back to 1-4th century AD Romans times.

I walk through the stunning hilly landscape of Djemila, hearing the birds chirping in the greenish mountains' silence, feeling a light autumn breeze caressing my face, not knowing what to expect. After all, I've seen many Roman ruins elsewhere. Then, I see a magnificent Roman city, like non-other, a whole town with corridors, markets, temples, shops, bath houses, homes, and tall reddish columns. I close my eyes and imagine a bustling city of military men, aristocracy, women in flowing chiffon dresses, half-naked slaves running through the market, and merchants in the doorways cajoling customers to buy the best of anything from faraway lands. I see the maidens wearing white walking up the wide stone stairs to the temple of Jupiter.



I'm always amazed at how sophisticated the Romans were in planning excellent Roman towns with unique grid systems, a square enclosure and orthogonal design based on the cardo and decumanus, the

two perpendicular routes running through the city, and solving problems of sewers, general hygiene in crowded cities, and efficient main roads and corridors that made sense. Precise stone scales in the market, and always a great amphitheater, emphasizing the importance of the performing arts, engineering, and architectural solutions to fit the environment, combined with a deep sense of aesthetics.

Each site is strategically located for its own purposes, Be it a military town in the mountains with stunning views of the surroundings in case of an enemy attack or a resort for the aristocracy above the Mediterranean Sea. You can use your imagination everywhere to see these places' beauty and past glory. These sites are enhanced by unique, giant, intricate mosaic floors ( The best I've ever seen) depicting animals, nature, and life, all well-preserved by the French in the early 1900s. They are exquisite and not to be missed.

You will be transformed into another place and time.

#### \*\*\*\*\*Stunning Ghardaia sustainability

I enter Ghardaïa, the gate to the Sahara, and I know I am in an ancient world that stood still for 1200 years.

I stroll in the narrow, meandering, quiet alleys of distinctive white, pink, and red houses made of sand, clay, and gypsum, attached to each other, rising in terraces and arcades.

It's eerily silent and empty in mid-morning, except occasionally, two Mozabite women emerge like ghosts from an invisible corner, wearing a white tent-like cloth from head to toe, their faces fully covered, except for one eye, indicating they are married.

They turn their backs and shuffle quickly, without a sound, when they see us. Then disappear into the hidden alleys they know so well in the blink of an eye from the undesirable cameras of the curious tourists.

The architecture is unique. The mosque, which served as a watch tower to warn of invaders approaching the city, was built first at the top of the hill. The labyrinthine alleyways and houses were built below it, and then a large market center at the walled town's entrance where traders and shoppers met.

French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir described Ghardaïa as "a Cubist painting beautifully constructed."

It's a rare day of rain that comes down suddenly for a short time in this Oasis of the Sahara, creating deep puddles in a minute. Not expecting it, I take off my light sweater and cover my head. The locals are happy and may celebrate tomorrow in a dance in the water, as water is rare and precious here. My guide and I now walk in the colorful market square, bustling with locals. Souvenirs of rugs and paintings are



displayed everywhere, and we walk up hidden stairs to a second-floor store with a small window overlooking the square.

We continue toward the mosque at the top of the hill. In between the houses in labyrinthine alleyways, very thin children run in and out with a soccer ball, stop to look at us, smile or make faces, and hide. The rule is for tourists to stay on one side of the alley to avoid disturbing the locals' movement. And as we walk through these well-preserved medieval towns, I'm amazed by the thought given to the architecture and design, considering security and safety from intruders and harsh weather conditions. I listen intently, asking questions until, at one point, I'm asked to be interviewed by a famous Algerian YouTuber about my impressions. I agree.



What stood out to me the most is unlike any group in Algeria, where everything runs by the state, The Mozabites, an Ibadi sect of the Amazigh Muslims, not Sunni nor Shia, and not Arabs, act as an autonomous city-state. They run their affairs efficiently, making wise decisions for sustainability and safety. Councils lead the clan in arbitrating domestic and legal issues. In addition, being an oasis in the Sahara, with little water (sometimes no rain for seven or eight years) and floods that can devastate the towns, they have designed systems of dams and wells to stop the floods and conserve the water, enough water for ten years. Date palm trees, their primary industry, grow everywhere, producing the most delicious dates for export. water is transferred to each house through pipes depending on how many palm trees they have. They understood the value of sustainability before the modern world started talking about it and have been recycling for years; anything from date pits they ground for animal food and sewer water recycled as fertilizers. The streets are clear, and you don't see plastic like in other parts of Algeria.

They don't mix with others and have arranged marriages where the husband and wife meet on the wedding night. They have distinct clothing for men, wide pleated pants, and a white cap, the same for rich and poor. They emphasize a strong sense of equal justice for all and a communal bond and responsibility for each other.

If someone needs financial help, the Mulla will tell the congregation without revealing the person's name to not shame them and collect the necessary funds.

Regarding dates, they grow different kinds claiming they have medicinal properties that cure ills like anemia, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Does modern medicine know about it?

I can attest to one thing. The dates are deliciously soft and melt in your mouth like honey. I ate six at one dinner, forcing myself to stop at one point.

The vast dry, desolate Sahara desert is south of this oasis— A desert I crossed before while visiting North Sudan, Egypt, and Morocco.

There is more to Algeria, like the capital Algiers and El Jardin, Constantine, the city of bridges, and the charming Phoenician town, Cherrchell, on the Mediterranean Coast.

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