

ALGERIA: TRAJAN'S LEGION, BRITISH TREACHERY and the ONE-EYED GHOSTS of the SAHARA

By Francis B. Randall

I love to travel, and have been fortunate enough to indulge my desire. (My daughter has suggested a design for a tombstone for me: an engraved globe above the inscription, "He traveled the globe and was shaped like one.") One of my life's ambitions has been to see all the twenty four countries in and around the Sacred Mediterranean (sacred to Civilization). It turned out that the country that resisted me longest was Algeria, because of its three long wars in my time, and the general insecurity between them.

In the cool of February, 1978, I was in a small group that flew to Algiers, and the next day flew on to Tamanrasset, the southernmost Algerian town in the very center of the Sahara Desert, farther south from Algiers than Paris is north. There we undertook a more than two weeks trip on camels, on a more than 200 mile circuit through the many Saharan landscapes: sand, pebbles, rocks, mountains and oases. There, after jolting agonizingly on camel-back for half the day, or on foot, leading the camels up and down steep rock slopes the other half of the day, we would reach a tiny oasis or at least a well in the sand, where if we were lucky there would be some strong-tasting water that year. There we would drop our aching legs on our sleeping bags on the sand, and look up at the preternaturally brilliant stars. That was an adventure of our lives (and one of us lost the group and almost lost her life).

But that was the Sahara, another story, not Algeria proper, which is the Tell, the northernmost 100,000 square miles (10% of the modern state of Algeria, where almost 90% of Algerians live), where green mountain ranges run parallel to the coast, drawing down the rainwater for flocks of sheep and goats, for slopes of olives and valleys of grain, for villages, towns and cities. That Mediterranean Algeria we couldn't see in 1978; it was all "insecure."

But we had one vision of it, a phantasmagorical visit to the city of Algiers, the city that curved round its beautiful bay, the white city, the city the French loved so much that they willingly died and killed for it. At that time, Anwar as-Sadat, the dictator of Egypt, had recently astonished the world by flying to Jerusalem and beginning to make peace with Israel, for which total betrayal of Arabdom and Islam he was presently, inevitably, murdered. In outraged response, the Arab Socialist government of Algeria under its then military dictator, Houari Boumediene, invited and put up as many Arabs as could come from all non-Egyptian Arab countries, from the Crown Prince of Saudi-Arabia on down, to a "Rejectionist Summit" in Algiers. Tens of thousands of Arabs from the more than twenty Arab countries, dressed in European clothes and every local and tribal costume in the Middle East, stamped through the streets, the beautiful French avenues, waving hate-spewing banners furiously and shouting in one thunderous, murderous, guttural Arabic roar, "HATE PEACE! REJECT PEACE! KILL THE JEWS! - HATE PEACE! REJECT PEACE! KILL THE JEWS! - HATE PEACE! REJECT PEACE! KILL THE JEWS! - HATE PEACE! REJECT PEACE! KILL THE JEWS!..." all that day, all that night, all the next day, all the next night - as long as the Rejectionist Summit lasted.

Houari Boumediene died later that year. His successor military dictator, Chedli Bendjedid, relaxed his predecessor's nothing-works socialist policies, under which "the production of everything declined, even dates." Floods of oil and gas from the Algerian Sahara then enriched the state. Roads, airports, housing, schools, monuments, etc. and graft were constructed in massive quantities. Algeria became another Middle Eastern paradox, another oil-rich, third world Arab country. An oil-rich government can provide widespread material benefits, but an oil economy cannot by itself provide widespread employment. The population, eight million at independence in 1962, rose to its present thirty three million, but five million Algerians, the majority young men, had to go to France to seek jobs. Governmental

corruption became ever more huge, blatant and hated. And as the foreign god of Socialism sickened unto death all over the world in the 1980s, including Algeria, the ancient god of Islam enjoyed a religious and political revival.

Bendjedid arranged another reelection as the only candidate for the presidency in 1989 with 81% of the "votes" But he was willing- he dared - to experiment with Algeria's first ever free election in June, 1990, for municipal and regional offices. 65% of the Algerian people responded enthusiastically. They chose among a dozen parties and 136,000 candidates. They gave a whopping victory to the Islamic Salvation Front, a chaotic coalition of traditionally religious Muslims, of nationalist Berbers in the Kabyle and Aurs mountains, and of many other sorts of voters disillusioned with the socialist military government's strangling of the (non-hydrocarbon) economy, wholly centralized rule with little local responsibility, corruption, petty tyrannies and unbroken grip on power since independence in 1962. It won office in 45 of the 48 regions of Algeria.

Bendjedid was willing to risk another free national election, for seats in the national assembly, now to have real power. But his fellow socialist generals were confirmed in their distrust of popular government, and alarmed by the Islamic leaders' boasting that when they had won and taken over power from the too secular generals, they would establish Islamic law, abolish alcohol, chop off the hands of thieves and stone unchaste women to death, as God wanted, and that there would never be another vile, Western-style, free election. The generals kicked Bendjedid out, arrested the Islamic leaders, dismissed the newly elected local office holders and canceled the recent and all future elections. In this they had the open support of France, the covert support of the senior Bush's administration in Washington, and the regretful, heartsick approval of secular, liberal, feminist, modernizing democrats everywhere.

Political unrest intensified. Marches and riots in the cities spread and hardened into urban warfare in the slum redoubts. Rural violence coalesced into a widespread guerrilla war in the mountains and interior plains of northern Algeria, especially in the Arab-speaking "Triangle of Death," not far south of Algiers, and in the Berber-speaking Kabylie east of the capital. "Like almost every civil war it has borne forth a hideous catalogue of indiscriminate massacre as government militia and guerrilla bands fought for control of hamlet, villages, districts and suburbs. Reports of throat-slitting, decapitation with axes, rape and inquisitorial torture have become routine and only the most outrageous crimes, execution by chainsaw, burning with petrol and the burning of children in ovens, have managed to capture the attention of the world's press." (Barnaby Rogerson, "A Traveler's History of North Africa," pp. 331-32) The world's press was effectively inhibited in its reporting as Islamic guerrillas systematically murdered every reporter they could find. For a number of years the death toll rose to over 10,000 a year. Fifteen years later, the Algerian government admitted that more than 100,000 people had been killed. (In the War of Independence, 1954-62, the canonical figure is that over a million people died)

Mohammed Boudiaf, an aged independence hero, was brought back by the generals to be president, in 1991. He dared investigate the corruptions and crimes of some generals, so he was murdered by a pious Muslim who was allowed to reach him by those same generals. All Kafi was a more pliant puppet president, 1992-94. Police General Lamine Zeroual ruled from 1994 to 1999. Since the guerrillas could never penetrate the government's great oil and gas fields in the easily defensible deep Sahara, they could never cripple its finances or weaponry. Zeroual therefore managed to crush the urban rebellions and break the backs of the guerrilla rebellions in the countryside, by firepower, torture and blood. (After Vietnam and Iraq, every American Democrat and every other American Republican think that guerrilla wars are unstoppable from the word go, and that we can only surrender to them and withdraw. In fact, the great majority of guerrilla wars have been crushed in blood; we remember only the rare, successful ones.)

In 1999, Zeroual and his fellow generals were confident enough arrange a semi-free election for the next president, and to risk presenting a government candidate who was not a general but a civilian -a diplomat -Alxlel-Aziz Bouteflika, who looks very Nordic in his political posters, which means that he has

much Berber ancestry. Popular hostility to any government candidate was still strong enough so that the generals had to cheat a little at the polls to get him elected. Bouteflika has so far proven very skillful at soothing the generals while conciliating the rebels and the bulk of the people -a tortuous dance on a knife edge during his first term. His overwhelming act toward peace was to allow -invite -persuade -perhaps 85% of the guerillas -weary of a bloody, losing war -to turn themselves and their arms in, for an amnesty which Bouteflika has kept - excluding only those guilty of "blood crimes," murder and rape.

Bouteflika also decreed that the Tamazight -a lingua franca Berber dialect, which Berbers in rebellion or not have long pushed as the second official language along with God's holy Arabic -be made "a national language" though not yet an "official language." The Berber 20% of Algeria's population [in Morocco it's 40% was somewhat satisfied, and even the redoubtable mountain strongholds of rebellion in the Kabylie accepted pacification. They can now print newspapers, conduct governmental and legal business, and teach, in the various Berber dialects/languages, unofficially but without repression.

Bouteflika moved diplomatically to lessen governmental and even military corruption. He distributed more oil and gas money largesse than ever before for roads, schools, hospitals and especially popular housing. In 2002 a serious earthquake shook and damaged Algiers and much of the north coast, but Boutellika, unlike most other Middle Eastern governments, moved swiftly, effectively and visibly to bring relief. Consequently he won reelection in 2002 by an honest landslide. The civil war is still going on, but on a much reduced scale and in a much reduced area, chiefly the Triangle of Death. The government figure that there are now only 50-60 deaths a month, way down from the thousands in the worst years of the 1990s, is widely believed. Although our State Department still discourages Americans from travel in Algeria, the much reduced violence made it possible for the Algerian government to allow - to encourage - foreign tourism not only in the never violent Saharan oases so beloved of French and other European seekers after the sun and exoticism, but in the north, in the Tell, in the heartland of Algeria's population, culture and tourist sites. That is why our group was just now able to go there.

Our group landed at the Houari Boumediene Airport, east of Algiers, just at midnight, so some of us wrote on our immigration forms that we'd entered Algeria on October 16, 2005, some on October 17. We had been attracted to and organized into this group by the Spiekermann Travel Service, of Eastpointe, MI, which runs an excellent program of journeys to the Middle East, including Libya and Iran, and hopes, at the earliest possible moment, to go to Iraq. So far as we knew, no other American group had traveled in Algerian Tell for fifteen years, but it should become a popular destination soon. Late in our trip, we did meet a small group of Christian pilgrims from Texas (?) - And a Greek group, and a Japanese group, but oddly, no French group, although French tourists have been returning to Algeria in the last few years. We were accompanied by Spiekermann's own Michelle Gervais, who did so many things for us, in front of us and behind the scenes, with efficiency and a bubbling good humor. And Spiekermann had selected as our leader, lecturer and, indeed, guru, Barbara A. Porter, an Arabic speaker from her early years in the Lebanon, an archaeological scholar of the Ancient Near East, a veteran of the staff of the Metropolitan Museum, who is about to take up the post of Director of the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman, Jordan. She was as delighted to get to Algeria at last as we were, and was equally adept at getting us the right kind of rooms in the hotels she'd never been to before, and lecturing to us in the moving bus on such subjects as Roman mosaics, Roman baths and Roman feasts and games, scenes with which she was fully familiar.

Our Algerian facilitator was an agency called Voyages Mili, in effect a nice old gentleman who looked in on us from time to time to see that things were going well with our pioneer tourist group, so that we would have successors. It must have been pretty slim pickings to run a tourist agency in Algeria in the last fifteen years. He, or someone, gilled us with our guide and Figaro-does-all, named Azedine Aitaba, a vigorous man in the prime of life, son of a Kabyle Berber father and an Algiers Arab mother. He had traveled abroad, including much of the United States. His English, French, Italian, Spanish, German and Japanese was fluent and his knowledge of Algeria and its sites, especially in the Sahara where the tourists

have all gone in recent years, was extensive and precise. He went more than the last mile to help almost all of us in the course of the trip. He was certainly a patriotic Algerian, but not a boaster or a concealer, and anything but hostile in tone, either to the imperial French of the past or to us importunate Americans. He was somewhat guarded in speaking of Algerian governments, past and present, but not uncritical, or unteasing. He referred to the civil war as "our tragedy," often modified by "unnecessary." Delightfully, he usually underestimated the times it might take our bus or our tired feet to reach our goals — out of benevolent encouragement, I'm convinced. And he was delighted that most of us delighted in his beloved Algerian dates.

Even the northern 10% of Algeria is a sizeable country, more than 500 miles from Morocco to Tunisia. Our seventeen days' route took us on a flattened oval from the city of Algiers west almost to Morocco, then dipping for a full week east through the northern Sahara Desert, up into the eastern mountains almost to Tunisia, and back west by the great Roman ruins and the mountains of the Kabylie to Algiers. All this steered clear of the remaining civil war in the Triangle of Death, in Blida and neighboring areas due south of Algiers city. Our almost 2,000 miles were a much longer route than those taken by most tourists in Morocco or Tunisia, or indeed in Greece or Italy, to places with strange names unknown even to veteran travelers in the Mediterranean. The necessary long bus drives, in spectacular mountain scenery or across immense flattish plateau and deserts, were precisely what gave us the feel and the flavor of the vast Algerian countryside, cross-sections of the great land, now almost unknown to foreigners. Every day save one we were safeguarded by four well-armed National Guardsmen in two official cars, just in case.... (Azidine called the mostly pleasant young men "the kids.") Any diary-like progression here along that route would be intolerable. Instead, I shall try to cut a slice through time of the multiple-layered palimpsest of Algerian cultures.

Thanks to the Romantic French imperialist explorer after World War II, Henri Lhote, the cultivated world came to know of the extensive spreads of superb prehistoric paintings and engravings on the now desert cliffs of the southeastern Algerian Sahara, especially in the jumbled wilderness called the Tassili-an-Najjer. (See his "The Search for the Tassili Frescoes.") They were what I chiefly endured the tortures of camel-riding to see, a generation ago.

In northern Algeria we were vouchsafed only one rock art site, near the oasis and village of Tiout, not far from Morocco, in a high (3,600 ft.) semi-desert valley just north of the Saharan Atlas range (there 7,000 ft.) beyond which the Sahara proper extended forever. Orange sand dunes sixty to a hundred feet high were slapped up against the mountains' feet. The unusual summer rains made the valley as semi-green as it ever gets these millennia, to the joy of munching flocks of sheep and their well-wrapped shepherds. At intervals an endemic tree of restricted range popped up like a lollipop, the Pistachio atlantium. Up a low cliff-wall on the north side of the valley was a flattish rock-face about ten feet high and over sixty feet long, a splendid canvas for prehistoric artists. In their day, 6000 BC - 2500 BC, this valley and the whole Sahara were well-watered savannahs and forests, like the plateau of East Africa today, and as filled with thundering herds of now tropical African animals. There were rivers and lakes full of fish and menacing with hippos and crocodiles. A perhaps white, northern, hunting people pursued the game and engraved them on the rocks. A probably black, African people fished in the rivers and painted and engraved their prey and themselves on other rocks.

Our rock face was covered with several dozen engraved animals, overlapping each other, of different species and scales - presumably done over a period of time. An almost life-size lion strode in front of a disparate herd of bovids among antelope. The bovid was the great-horned Bubal, a wild Saharan ox now extinct, not domestic cattle from Asia, which were brought west much later. A few small humans (race undetectable) prayed with outstretched arms. Cutest of all was a small elephant, with budding tusks, a tapering trunk and long, swelling legs, which we had to interpret as a baby. This was not one of the greatest displays of Saharan rock engravings, but it whetted our group's appetite for more, and sharpened my memories oldie deep Sahara, "the greatest art gallery in the world."

The light of history was switched on, no, lit in its oil lamp, in what is now Algeria, by Greek and Roman historians recording their peoples' 400 years of wars against Carthage, in the northeast of what is now Tunisia West of Carthage, all across North Africa and into the Atlantic to the Canary Isles, lived a number of barbarian tribes speaking (we now know) a related group of barbarian = Berber languages. To the three civilized powers, the most important were the Numidians, who lived in what is now western Tunisia and eastern Algeria, and beyond them the Mauri (yes, Moors!) in western Algeria and eastern Morocco. If the Romans could detach them and their formidable cavalry from their alliances with Carthage, they might indeed have a chance to defeat Hannibal in his homeland. They did, thanks to a Numidian chief named Massinissa, who came to power and the aid of Rome in 203 BC. After Carthage was crushed at the Battle of Zama the next year, the grateful Romans helped him unify all the Numidian and many of the Maurish tribes in a locally powerful kingdom. He lived till the age of 92, always loyal to Rome, always trying to civilize his people (said the Romans), dying in 148 BC.

But where was the king buried? Ancient Romans and modern French alike thought it was in a remarkable tomb 3,500 feet up in a high, now empty, treeless, interior valley in eastern Algeria, the Medracen (Arabic: the Maghassem). It was built solid, save for the empty tomb chamber, of large, golden-orange ashlar blocks. It is a flattish cone on a cylinder, fifty nine meters in diameter, thirty meters high. Time has battered it, but it is ruggedly well preserved. It can be seen for miles away under the big sky. Modern archaeologists wonder if it was really built by and for Massinissa. Perhaps his grandfather? Perhaps his son? It doesn't say.

The other such tomb in Algeria is located on a hilltop 400 feet above the Mediterranean, in the country miles west of Algiers, ludicrously called "The Tomb of the Christian Woman." It is a few meters taller and a few meters wider than the Medracen, but more battered and therefore judged to have been not so well built. And centuries later, it was thought to have been built by Juba II, a royal heir put on the Numidian/Maurish throne by Augustus in 20 BC. Augustus threw in a wife, Cleopatra Selene, the daughter of Antony-and-Cleopatra. He reigned for forty four pro-Roman years, still trying to civilize his people. But now archaeologists wonder here, too. Wasn't it built for his father? Or grandfather? It doesn't say, either.

Massinissa's Numidian capital was Cirta, one of the astonishing fortresses on a rock of the ancient world. High in the interior of eastern Algeria, the end of a ridge was split off -from its matrix by an earthquake, and the crack was deepened by the Rhurnel River. This left what would be called a mesa in our Southwest, about one and a half miles long, and shaped like a knobbly potato. Little construction was needed to perfect this impregnable natural fortress, which served Massinissa, Romans, Byzantines and Arabs/Berbers well for 2,000 years. Nothing Numidian is left in the city, save in the old-fashioned, excellent French imperialist museum. The French replaced the once so picturesque Arab/Berber city with their own grand colonial buildings, now faded, and gave it back its Late Roman name, Constantine. Their triumph was a suspension bridge built in 1912, 550 feet across the slot gorge and 575 feet above it.

The Algerians have built their own gleaming white buildings on the rock and in the suburbs spreading around it. Most spectacular is the Mosque of Alxlel Hamid ben Badis, a pious philosopher and resistance fighter. It's great, brilliant, white walls are broken-patterned with interesting corrugations, and its two super-pencil-thin minarets shoot up to improbable heights. It was built since 1970 by private contributions, not by the state, Azedine was glad to tell us. It is one of the great, undiscovered masterpieces of modern architecture. - Constantine's sensational site above its cliffs, the downtown of a city of now two million people, in an oil-rich country where millions have automobiles, guarantees the worst and longest traffic jams in Algeria. Completely stuck, we were sensibly told to de-bus and walk a few hundred feet, and climb a hundred steps, to the Museum, saving a precious hour.

By AD 40 the whole green Tell of northern Algeria was in the Roman provinces of Numidia (east) and Mauretania Caesarea (center and west). There the Romans left some of their grandest ruined colonial cities. On the beautiful, Southern Italy-like coast sixty miles west of Algiers Juba II built his capital,

diplomatically named Caesarea (now Cherchel), and the Romans used and embellished it as their capital of Mauretania Caesarea. Its ruined theater, amphitheater, baths, etc. are scattered in the modern French and French-style town. Its French imperialist place, on a cliff overlooking the harbor and the islet where the Phoenicians had a trading post, boasts a line of fully worshipable six-foot-thick trees, and capitals, columns and a fountain of Roman remains. On it, the splendid French museum preserves some major Roman sculptures and mosaics. That one, I thought, is a masterpiece! (Barbara Porter later deflated me by saying it is rather well known and often reproduced.) This was a large floor mosaic of the 4th Century AD, with four registers of "country activities" — peasants working on an estate. The top two, taller registers show muscular, straining peasants driving muscular, straining bulls (not oxen) at plowing uphill. The bottom two, shorter registers show smaller scale peasants seated on the ground and working, less strainedly, on leafless grapevines. All in appropriately muted colors, it is all beautifully done, but aesthetically it is powerful rather than beautiful.

Fifteen miles east of Cherchel is perhaps the most charming spot in Algeria, the ruined Roman port of Tipaza. A rounded 2,500 foot mountain looms over two coves, round which the ruins curl. In places there are more ruins than trees, in others more trees than ruins. Small flocks of sheep are guided by their shepherds through the ancient city. The blue waves of the Sacred Mediterranean splash gently on the rocks. There are docks and warehouses, houses and fountains, a theater and an amphitheater, and even a Christian basilica with a mosaic floor to study. But the point in Tipaza is to relax under the trees, drink in the idyllic beauty of nature, and enjoy the inescapable melancholy of a field of ruins.

There was harder work to be done in the two grand, ruined, Roman cities of Algeria's eastern highlands. When I was ten, my father gave me the four volumes of an archaeological text-and-picture book, "Wonders of the Past," edited in 1923 -24 by J. A. Hammerton. The first wonder covered was "Timgad: Grandest Ruin of Colonial Rome," with a dozen now old-fashioned black and white photographs, then very evocative and thrilling to a ten year old. I swore that I would see Timgad! It took me sixty four years, but I have just fulfilled my oath.

For almost 300 years, one Roman legion, the Third Augustan Legion, was sufficient to guard Roman Africa against the Berber barbarians within and beyond the frontier. In AD 100 the great and generous-hearted Emperor Trajan (AD 98 - 117) allowed the whole Legion to retire to rich grain-lands he granted them in a broad, high (3,700 feet), cool valley in Numidia, now eastern Algeria, beneath the highest (8,000 foot) mountains of the eastern Atlas. They marched with their arms in disciplined Roman order, with well-equipped baggage trains (ox-carts then, not yet camels), and their women, whom they could now, as discharged veterans, marry, up into the highlands to their allotted home, with which they were well pleased. Every Roman legion built a complete walled camp for protection every night, if it had marched that day. Now, at the site with the barbarous name of Thamugadi, the ex-Third Augustan Legion built (in more than a night) a complete stone city just like a Roman military camp. Twelve blocks (insulae) north to south, twelve blocks east to west, 144 blocks in all. With every urban amenity: water, baths, markets, a theater, a library with a stone city wall around it under the big sky.

The small city flourished. Housing and monuments were built outside the walls: a capitolium to the Roman gods, other temples, two large baths north and south, an amphitheater, whatever was desired. Presently Christian churches. Rome declined and fell. The Vandals ravaged the city in AD 533. The Arabs finally destroyed it. The high valley was depopulated. Sand blew over the ruins. After more than 1200 years, amazed French imperialists found the ruins of Timgad and dug them out. "The North African Pompeii!" there is grander ruins of colonial Rome - Leptis Magna in modern Libya, first of all. But in the whole vast Roman Empire, where every kind of structure was built in the same way, in a dozen climates, from Scotland to Syria, there is no more magnificent - more perfect - expression and embodiment of the Roman ideal of ordered, disciplined, military regularity and severity - their way to master the world and to last forever - than the ruins of Thamugadi/Timgad, 3,700 feet up in that broad, empty valley in eastern Algeria - under the big sky.

We were serendipitously lucky. We were scheduled to visit Timgad after too long a day's drive, and seemed likely to have too little or no time there. Barbara Porter consulted with Azedine, who obligingly shifted things so as to go both late that afternoon and the next morning. Barbara was charming as she danced back down the aisle of the moving bus, almost singing, and "Two visits to Timgad!"

I strained to spot the ruins from afar as our bus approached, but they lay too flat on the ground. Unlike the pictures in my book of 1923, a small town now lies just northeast of the archaeological park, with a row of jarring, new, five storey housing blocks painted bright blue ached to call in an air strike. But Timgad itself seemed to be as the French imperialist archaeologists left it. We rushed past the (shut) site museum and the great, bricky North Baths and through the North Gate into the golden-orange limestone square city of Trajan's legion. The whole square sloped slightly up as I went south on the beautifully intact flagstone paving of the *Cardo*, the axial north-south street, to its crossing of the *Decumanus*, the axial east-west street, just as well paved.

There are specific buildings to study: The library - with that of Ephesos one of the two to survive (partially) from the Roman world. The Forum with its small temples, the Midtown Markets, where tourists always wish the preserved shops were still open - and the adjoining latrines, always a supreme sight in any ruined Roman city, the Midtown Theater, where of course I strode onto the stage and recited hammily from Euripides (This time, Phaedra's great agonized soliloquy from "Hippolytos") to my properly derisory companions, The West Gate - the Arch of Trajan, whose triple, French-restored magnificence is the logo of Timgad. (It's actually late rd Century AD.) Outside the West Gate and the square city, the Capitolium, whose fallen column drums and capitals are as tall as I am. Outside the South Gate and the square city, the sizeable, bricky South Baths, a later violation of the legion's rectilinear discipline by being built diagonally to its scheme

But it is not the individual sites in Timgad that are most remarkable, but the enormously impressive overall effect: 144 square city blocks - endless when you are among them - of flagstone-paved streets, dug out half-height walls of varied but ultimately uniform texture and ground plan, hundreds of surviving or French-restored modest columns almost like a petrified field of grain. - In the broad, still mostly empty high valley, below rounded Mt. Chelia (Algeria's highest at 7,980 feet), glowing ever more orange as the sun approached the western horizon that afternoon, glowing golden in the next morning's sun. Commanding what the French called UN horizon immense. Under the big sky

A hundred miles northeast of 'finigad, in a more forested part of the highlands of eastern Algeria, are the ruins at Guelma, chiefly the best-preserved Roman theater in the country, with a stage structure perhaps too thoroughly restored by the French. There I of course strode onto the stage and hammily recited more Euripides: Poseidon's menacing speech at the beginning of "Trojan Women." What are ruined theaters far?

Perhaps 150 miles west northwest of Guelma in the highlands of eastern Algeria is Algeria's second really major resurrected Roman city, ancient Cuicul, modern Djemila (Arabic for the Beautiful). It stretches for about a mile along a modest north-south ridge, at the bottom of a much huger gorge-valley with a modern town amid its fields, olive groves and pastures. Some point on that ridge must be at the announced elevation, 3,000 feet. The Emperor Nerva (Al) 96 - 98) granted the lands to one of his legions, but we know fewer details. On the end of a narrow ridge, the Nervan city could not be square, nor all its streets parallel, but it was a most impressive stone-built Roman city nonetheless. Its *Cardo*, all along the ridge, is properly endless. Its Forum is in the center of a full complement of basilica, curia, capitolium, temples, triumphal arches, and the lavishly marbled Markets of Cosinius. The last really great Roman Emperor, Septimius Severus (AD 193-211), built a larger Severan Forum at the south end of the city, with larger and more preserved civic buildings, temples and arches (at odd angles to each other, beloved of photographers), and south of that he built a Severan city as large as the Nervan one, which slightly fans

out up the ridge. Cuicul/Djemila was/is thus narrower than Timgad, but longer, and much more complicated on the map and as we trudged up and down through it. (I never got to the outlying Theater, so I couldn't recite hammily from Seneca's "Thyestes.")

My sentimental favorite is Timgad. I think most of my companions preferred Djemila's varied complications and less severe, more pleasing aspect. The two cities are dialectical opposites and equals. (We paid Djemila afternoon and morning visits, too.) Cuicul shows the great Roman adaptability to local geographical accidents, among which Romans could ably forge all the key components of a Roman city, albeit on an irregular, unsevere ground.

Djemila's site museum, unlike Timgad's, was open. (Score two points for Djemila.) The walls of its four connected, two-storey halls are completely covered with mostly large mosaics, cheek by jowl, with no spaces in between at all - an overpowering impression, more so than the spaced mosaics on the walls and floors of the much richer Bardo Museum in Tunis. The great majority are epiphanies of the gods and hunting scenes. I felt miniaturized inside a huge net for catching Lions and tigers. Barbara Porter, in her presentation on Roman mosaics, and their structures, showed an abstract design that has become my favorite, a twirling of black and white shapes called a "shield of imbrications."

The mighty Roman Empire at last fell to Christianity. Every ruined city in Algeria has a mosaic-floored Christian basilica somewhere at the edge. But Christianity in Algeria means Saint Augustine. He was born in AD 354 to a Berber (not black!) mother, Saint Monnica, in the city of Thagaste, whose ruins are now near the border with Tunisia. In AD 396 he became Bishop of Hippo Regius, now in north eastern most Algeria, where after thirty six years he died during the Vandal siege of his city. Hippo was a port city on a small plain at the east end of a long, spectacular, mountainous, still roadless, Mediterranean coast. A.k.a. Bona, a.k.a. Bone and now a.k.a Annaba, Algeria's fourth largest city with 600,000 people, where we were not allowed to leave the hotel at night save in a group, with guards.

The ruins are south of the modern city. They are not Timgad or Djemila, but they are very pleasant, being both lushly parked and exuberantly grown up in wild vegetation - briars, reeds, etc. - at which a crew was hacking away (an aesthetic mistake) while we were there. There's a forum, a theater, etc., but the great sight is the ruins of Saint Augustine's episcopal basilica, not huge, but with a graceful apse, floor mosaics that have been covered up for protection since the civil war began, and many outbuildings. A detached baptistery with a surviving stone basin, an elegant, detached, trefoil chapel, many monks' cells and the Episcopal quarter, too modest to have been a palace, but at least a mansion. Somewhere in those now ruined, grassy-floored rooms with autumn wildflowers, Saint Augustine sat on a vanished wooden bench by a vanished wooden desk, and wrote his "Confessions" (ca. AD 400), his "City of God" (ca. AD 412, plus, plus) and his "On the Trinity" (ca. AD 424) - which have never vanished. This was holy ground, for Christianity and philosophy alike.

Atop a steep hill just south is the much larger French imperialist Basilica of Saint Augustine, in a rich (or horrible?) late 19 Century Neo-Moorish Romanesque style. It still belongs to the Catholics, but it was deserted, locked and somewhat window-smashed. There is a Maltese caretaker who was supposed to let us in, but he'd been in Malta for some months.

Muslim Arabs, enthusiastically joined by many ex-Christian Berbers, conquered what are now (northern, green) Tunisia, Algeria and most of Morocco in the last half of the 7th Century AD. The area has been overwhelmingly Muslim ever since, and 100% so, save for the Jews, since the Spaniards retreated from the coastal ports they had conquered in the 16th Century with the last native Christians. Unstable, bloody, Muslim, mostly Berber, dynasties ruled different parts of the Tell till the French conquest, but the only abiding Muslim capital in present-day Algeria that could compete in power and artistic achievement with Kairouan and Tunis, Fez and Marrakesh, Seville and Granada was Tlemcen, only 1,650 feet up on an interior plateau near the Moroccan border.

Tlemcen was founded about AD 1075 as one of his capitals by the formidable Yusuf bin Tashlin, the Berber emir of the puritan Muslim Almoravid brotherhood, which during his long rule, (1061 to 1106, when he died in his nineties) conquered everything from the Senegal northeast and east to the borders of modern Tunisia, and north to crush both the Moors and Christians of Spain. Its palmist days were under the Berber Zianid dynasty (1236 - 1527), after which our spacious hotel was named. The maze-like old city, the medina, has far more recent crummy houses than medieval ones. The fortress with its preserved high walls was well outside the medina, and is still a military post. The splendid mosques, which rival those of Fez and Kairouan, but which, being in Algeria, are much less well known, were also built outside the medina, so they are in the now decayed and peeling French-built quarters of the city.

The Grand Mosque, on a fine French park, is 12th 13th, and 17th Centuries. "This is one of the few important mosques in the Maghreb where visitors are allowed in the prayer hall," says the guidebook. Well, not when we were there, of course. It's a large, low building with thirteen naves and six aisles. Its long walls are whitewashed to gleam, and its green tiles on the zigzagging rooves glow. Its big square minaret sports tile decorations, and several domed tomb chambers of the Zianid emirs and other rulers add to the asymmetry. We could peek through some doors at the interior, decorated with virtuoso carved stucco panels. Oh, for the Hobbit's Ring of Invisibility to enter!

East of town is the Tomb-Mosque and Madrasa of Sidi Boumediene, a 14th Century mystic, the holiest site in Tlemcen. Its 14th Century stucco panels inside, contemporary with the finest stucco panels in the Alhambra and in the mosques of Fez, are said to be worthy of them. But we'll never be sure; it is much too holy a place to admit infidels. Happier for us was the Mosque of Sidi Be! Hassan right on the French park, for it has been deconsecrated as a mosque and is now a crowded bookstore, jammed with tables piled with mostly Arabic and some French books. It was a modest, one-room, almost cubic mosque. Built in the late 13th Century, it was decorated with delicate onyx columns between its three narrow aisles and onyx panels about the mihrab, and with exquisitely virtuoso carved stucco panels all around the upper walls, especially the mihrab wall. "The peak of Zianid art" An absolute jewel of refined Muslim religious decoration, deep in unknown Algeria.

West of town is the Mansourah, a small, rectangular, fortress city built by the Zianids' contemporaries and enemies, the Merinid emirs of Fez, during the three occasions when they besieged Tlemcen in the 13th and 14th Centuries. The sieges must have been leisurely, for the Merinids built a full Moroccan mosque of stone there. The walls of the fortress are broken into, the town within has vanished, and most of the mosque. But half of the big, square minaret remains, not the bottom half but the outer facing half, which preserves the frill sweep of four tall decorated stories of brick and tile inlay, worthy of the great Moroccan minarets in Rabat, Marrakesh and Seville. We needed more time, and a 'Farnhelm of Invisibility, to study the other unknown artistic monuments of Tlemcen.

The French imperialist achievements in Algeria are in every city and town, like those of the British in India. All the agrarian countryside, too, is scattered with formerly prosperous French semi-fortified farms - granges - with telltale sloping rooves, half of them taken over, half of them burnt. The most French area of Algeria was the western province and port of Oran, from which over 200,000 pied-noir peasants and petit-bourgeoisie fled at independence in 1962. A few risked staying. Their throats were all cut.

The city of Oran, now with three million people, began around a fine bay-harbor, beneath a mountain crowned with a 16th Century Spanish fort. Its cliff-crowded downtown was a rational French grid-city, and still is. Its places and once famous harbor-viewing esplanade of palms are still there, and are kept up. But its many avenues and streets of fine French buildings from the 1890s through 1945-55, are all in semi-advanced decay. Plaster peels to reveal brick. Brick crumbles to reveal girders. Theaters, the opera, are open but run-down. Churches have been turned into decrepit libraries, schools and hospitals. The rich

but decayed museum is only half open. Oran is a Havana on the Mediterranean and the pathos of vanished empire

There are no visible traces of Albert Cann's, who was born in the eastern highlands of Algeria but was brought up in Oran, where he set his greatest works, "The Stranger" (1942) and "The Plague" (1947). No one in the streets looked like Mersault, the anti-hero of "The Stranger," completely disconnected from his fellow humans and from himself. I longed to hear him speak the novel's first lines, "My mother died today. Or was it yesterday?" I longed to see the beach where Mersault "had to kill an Arab." I longed to be present in the courtroom where Mersault was convicted of murder, not because he'd killed a mere Arab, but because he told the court he'd gone to bed with his mistress the day his mother died. I longed to be in the death chamber where Mersault simply could not develop any interest in his own execution, but I couldn't.

We were driven (with a few wrong turns) most of the way up that mountain beneath the Spanish fortress, for the logo view of the city. Around that mountain we looked down at the next fine Imrhor just west. This was Mers-el-Kebir, a reverberating historic name from my childhood:

The French surrendered to the Germans on June 25th, 1940. France then possessed the fourth largest fleet in the world (after Great Britain, America and Japan, before Italy). Its admirals sent a number of its best ships from the main French naval base at Toulon to their main base in North Africa - Mers-el-Kebir - to avoid their being seized by the Germans. They swore they'd scuttle their fleet if the Germans violated the armistice agreement and tried to grab the ships. But could Winston Churchill trust them?

In Mers-el-Kebir, Admiral Gensoult commanded a very strong squadron: the battleship "Bretagne," two new, advanced heavy cruisers: his flagship the "Dunkirk" and the "Strasbourg," and a fleet of destroyers and submarines. By the beginning of July, Churchill had the British Mediterranean squadron stationed miles off Mers-el-Kebir. Its commanding officer demanded, as ordered from London, that Gensoult and his ships join the British, or sail out to the French West Indies safe from the Germans, or scuttle their ships. Negotiations and miscommunications followed between the British, Admiral Gensoult and his chief, Admiral Dalian in Paris. On July 1st, Gensoult refused all three alternatives as stated, and had his ships work up steam so as to be able to move out. He later claimed that he thought negotiations would continue.

They didn't. Britain and France had recently been allies in battle, and they were still at peace with each other. But at dawn on July 3rd, 1940, the British attacked the French fleet in Mers-el-Kebir with powerful naval gunfire and with a fairly new weapon, naval aircraft built specially to bomb ships. The same hour another British squadron attacked and damaged France's mightiest battleship the "Richelieu," in the harbor of Dakar. The battleship "Bretagne" was blown up by a bomb and sank in the harbor of Mers-el-Kebir with all 1279 men aboard. (At Pearl Harbor, the Japanese blew up and sank the "Arizona" with all 1177 men aboard.) The heavy cruiser "Dunkirk" was seriously damaged, and couldn't be repaired during the War. The heavy cruiser "Strasbourg" escaped - to Toulon. Some of the French destroyers and submarines were sunk, some were damaged, and some escaped. No British ship or plane was touched.

In those days before innocence and honor were wholly destroyed, a massive attack without a declaration of war was absolutely perfidious, atrocious, treachery. That was what Hitler had done repeatedly. The Japanese naval mission studied this attack on Mers-el-Kebir and the later British naval and air attack in December 1940 on the Italian fleet in Taranto. A year later, the Japanese improved on the British example at a naval base called Pearl Harbor. We Americans were furious beyond our current capability to revolt at attack and injury, but we could fight back. The French couldn't. It could only rankle, deeper and deeper. The French hated the Germans, but for months many said they hated the treacherous British more. The wound to the French Navy and the deeper wound to the French ego have not yet been wholly healed. Neutral sentiment, most crucially in America, was against the British in this. Roosevelt

groaned. The supremely fair British, especially men in the Navy, were unhappy, some really sick at heart. - Churchill wrote that he was more agonized to have to make this decision than by any other decision in the War. But Hitler was loose in Europe, and he must not have been given any chance to take any great part of the French fleet, and dominate the seas, and invade Great Britain, and win the War! Are we sure Churchill was wrong - or right?

These were the historic memories that suddenly flooded in on me as I stood on that cliff overlooking the crowded city of Oran to the east, and, hundreds of feet below me, the deep Mediterranean blue harbor of Mers-el-Kebir.

The city of Algiers itself, of course, was the French capital and stronghold and object of their ideals and affections in Africa. As I wrote at the beginning of this piece, "the city that curved round its beautiful bay, the white city, the city the French loved so much that they willingly died and killed for it." But now it is the political and emotional core of the Algerian state and of the Arab 80%, at least, of its population. Only at the end of our trip did we have only a day and a half to see Algiers itself it is still the vital Mediterranean port, the white city that curls around its beautiful bay. We weren't there long enough to love it, but we could see why the French did.

We were taken first to the "Casbah." As every guidebook says, it is really the medina, the old Arab city, the extensive jumble of small white houses climbing up from the sea to the top of the north-jutting ridge that is the west side of the bay. A casbah is a fort, in this case the old Turkish fort at the top of the ridge. But ever since the movie, "Algiers" (1938), in which the Romantic criminal chief Pepe le Moko/Charles Boyer cafes happily with the civilized French/Arab police lieutenant Joseph Calleia, and lures Hedy Lamarr to fulfill her desire with, "*Weell you come weez me eento zee Cahz-bah?*" the movie world has called the medina of Algiers the Casbah.

Azedine, a veteran tour guide, knew that we should be driven to the top of the casbah and led on a walk down through it to the sea., although that early November day was so brilliantly cool and clear that we could well have walked up it. No less than six policemen guarded us on our descent. In spite of all temptations and compulsions to be spoiled, the casbah of Algiers is still a mostly authentic, centuries-old architectural assemblage of picturesque little white houses, though partly collapsing from disuse and the earthquake of 2002 — but 66,000 people are said to live there still. Yes, we were indeed led past the Kissing Balconies, which meet each other across a very narrow alley, but no Pepe le Moko.

And we were shown the magnificent French imperialist buildings in the downtown at the turn of the bay. Unlike those in Constantine and Oran, these were all kept up, smooth and sparkling white, for they were the central show buildings of an oil-rich government, or the mansions of the well-connected rich. And we were driven through the wealthy and embassy districts way up the slope, which shone amid steel fences and barbed wire. And taken to the Martyrs' Monument, a bizarre, 300 foot high concrete assemblage of three "palm fronds," but for "security reasons" the soldiers wouldn't let us enter it. And most charming, to Algiers' Bardo Palace Museum (not the much more famous one in Tunis), an 18th Century Arab/Turkish palace, which is itself the chief "ethnographical" display, along with the beguiling collections from knives to textiles exhibited in its tile-walled rooms. But we cannot claim to "know" Algiers.

I must state here a banal but tremendously important thing: The people we met in Algiers and in all Algeria were uncommonly friendly to us. There are still guerrillas loose, but we saw nothing and sensed nothing to justify those police "kids" who drove with us everywhere, or the six policemen who climbed with us down the Casbah. The Algerian government has been consistently and vocally anti-American since independence in 1962, though less now than earlier. The Algerian people are quite capable of hostility. Ask any Frenchman. I saw it myself at the Rejectionist Summit in 1978. But the result of all of this on the Algerian people seems to be zilch so far as we were concerned. There was no open hostility - but that's not very common against tourists anywhere. Usually 99.99% of a country's population pays us no attention

and goes about its business. But Algerians in every city, town and village, even lone shepherds in the countryside, came up to greet us, to find out who we were, to chat with us across language barriers when they did. Not most, but a strikingly large minority. In next door Morocco, to go no farther, thousands do descend on foreign tourists and talk to them - but almost always to sell us some tourist junk. There was almost no hard sell in Algeria - where there have been virtually no tourists for fifteen years. If the Algerians don't love our President Bush's policies (and most of us didn't either) they politely kept it to themselves. In today's world, and after Algeria's history, this is extraordinary!

And a second banal but tremendously important thing: After all of Algeria's age old miseries and 20th Century catastrophes, right up to this not yet ended civil war, the country and its people, however unevenly, have been brought up to a modest level of prosperity and welfare, health and education, which could not have been dreamed of at independence, or when I was in Algiers in 1978. Algerians in France seem to be much more frustrated now than Algerians at home. I don't have sufficient scientific and statistical evidence to prove this impression, but I - and we - were indeed impressed.

Interconnected with these two great banal judgments is a third: Algerians are 100% Muslims, and the civil war over revived traditional and political Islam is not yet over. We were in Algeria during the month of Ramadan, when tempers of the hungry run short in the afternoons.

But I don't believe any of us encountered any irritation. No, we couldn't go into mosques. But that was tradition, not the venom of those we met. We had no discussions about Israel. The Algerians had no impulse to introduce that or anything that might divide us. Traditional Islam is very fierce. From the Prophet on down, Muslims are directed to self-segregate, scorn, insult, spit upon, fight, crush, massacre and conquer the world. There is currently a major revival of this traditional Islamic core ethic all over the Muslim world, including those in Algeria who started the civil war. But we met absolutely no one who expressed any such religious sentiments to us. — This is a division and a paradox in all Islamic societies, including Iran, where people interrupt their massed march to the death-to-America rally to greet and felicitate the rare busful of American tourists. This a passing strange. And passing important

So, at bottom, what were the Algerian people like? A snobbish, imperialist, Orientalist response: The less modern Berber 20% of the Algerians were more interesting than the more modernized (=Westernized) Arab 80%. To start with the most external thing about the people: their dress. Most Arab men, even the old, wear informal Mediterranean Western clothes, or is it proletarian and crummy Western clothes? A few gowns and turbans can still be seen. Far more women wear moderately traditional clothes: an overall dull-colored gown and a head scarf, not often a veil. But a large minority of Arab women, and a majority of Arab girls, are bare headed and in Western dress. This significantly Westernized Arab majority is the future of Algeria.

But oh! The Berbers! Once all of North Africa and the Sahara west of Egypt spoke Berber languages and shared many basic cultural traits from kinship to religion, in spite of quite varied habitats and ways of earning a living, from Mediterranean port cities to camel nomading in the deepest Sahara. But in the 1400 years since a few thousand Arabs brought Islam, many complex social processes (explained convincingly in Brett and Fentress, "The Berbers") have converted most Berbers into speaking only Arabic and into dropping many Berber customs in favor of Arab ones. There are perhaps 24,000,000 Berber speakers left, in twelve North African and Saharan countries, divided by dozens of languages and dialects. Only four Berber peoples have populations of three million or more: the Kabyles in Algeria and the Riffians, Zennata and Chleuch in Morocco, and therefore some chance of long term survival. If Berbers move to cities, if they modernize to some degree, if they intermarry with Arabs, they must learn Arabic (Few or no Arabs learn a Berber language) and to some degree or all, in their generation or the next, become Arabs. This one is more tragic march of doom for the lesser peoples of the world. Their only hope of postponing that doom is to stay in their cantonments in the mountains and deserts, to resist change, especially progress, to stay "primitive." Can we really urge this on anyone?

One day our bus climbed up from the Saharan oasis of Biskra (once a prime French homosexual cruising ground, where Oscar Wilde and Andre Gide sought Berber boys who climbed date palms in thin robes but no underwear) almost 6,000 feet into the Auras Mountains, Algeria's highest, and over the Ain Tinne Pass. This was the land of the Auras Berbers, who number about a million. At about 4,000 feet on the still treeless, Saharan side of the range, we threaded the Gorge of Tighanimine, where a few Auras villages rose against the French on November 1, 1954. This was the Algerian Lexington and Concord, where their War of Independence began. The French could destroy the villages, but they could never again pacify the whole of the Auras mountain region. Auras villages were small clusters of low, stone-built houses connected by stone walls, scattered in hollows all over the mountains and gorges, defensible against enemies and against the deep mountain snows. Auras women wore (some still do) brilliant scarlet gowns and deep blue head scarves. Auras men wear, well, mostly crummy Western clothes. The Auras are among the most recalcitrant and traditional of all the Berber tribes of Algeria. We passed through the spectacular highlands of the heroic (and in war brutal) Aures people in two hours, without making any real personal contact.

Some days later we spent much of two days going through the lands of the Kabyles. Their lands are some thousands of square miles of quite different but equally spectacular but very green (and in winter snowy) mountains, up to 6,500 feet, on or not far from the coast, fifty to 150 miles east of Algiers. Their kinship system is Berber, their religion is traditional Islam, but they are in a unique position among Berbers. They number about four million out of Algeria's nearly seven million Berbers, the group that must be taken most seriously. And being on the coast and near the capital, their men have taken to commerce both in their Kabylie and in Algerian cities. And in the last century both Kabyle men and women have taken to education. "The Kabyles learn Berber first, then French and only then Arabic." Among Berbers, then, they have money and education, and now a native press and political organization. In the War of Independence the French could terrorize and massacre the Kabyles, but not pacify them. In the civil war, the government could terrorize and massacre the Kabyles, but only Bouteflika's amnesty could induce them to lay down their arms. Azedine told us in the middle of their mountains, his father's mountains, "Two years ago you wouldn't have dared to drive on this highway!"

The mountains of the Kabylie are wet enough to support cattle rather than sheep and goats. Their crops in the intensely cultivated valleys are market vegetables for Algiers rather than semi-arid wheat. Their traditional, small, stone-built villages are scattered all over their mountains, even the summits, which meant long climbs down to their crops in the valleys, but shorter ones to their herds and their cork oak and olive groves. Because the Kabyles have accepted much progress, many of their houses and some whole villages are now built of crummy modern concrete blocks (as are most Arab villages and towns all over the Tell), but some villages, especially in their western range, called Little Kabylie, are still photo-perfect picturesque. The Kabyles have plenty of cars and trucks to clog their narrow (but paved) mountain roads.

Kabyle men may be in robes and caps, or may be in Western dress. But the women! Their dress was varied but all eye dazzling, brilliant skirts, a plurality of vertical yellow and scarlet stripes, with broad hems of embroidery and sparkles. (I was glad that Barbara Porter smiled and bought one.) They also wore floral print skirts with sparkles, and full floral print dresses. Some wore strong monocolored robes. One huge turquoise jewel progressed down the street. Their head scarves were of duller monocolors, and I saw no veils in the Kabylie. Almost all of this was from manufactured and bought cloth, not woven in the homes. If this clothing had been a modern innovation, it would have been hideously garish. But as it was authentically Kabyle, it was spectacularly beautiful.

The literate Kabyles were the Algerian leaders in the drive to formalize, write and print the Tamazight, the lingua franca Berber script and language. Their participation in the civil war was in part motivated by their demand for rights for their language. This battle has now been won, de facto, thanks to

Etouteffica's diplomacy. I saw men reading Tamazight newspapers in village cafes. I didn't of course hear those speaking Kabyle in schools and courts, but this is now the rule. Down in a broader valley toward Algiers is the Kabyle capital, the crummy modern city of Tizi Ouzou. (The name strikes Arabs and foreigners alike as ridiculous, but it innocently means Pass of the Broom Plants.) There it was interesting to see not the omnipresent Algerian bilingual signs in Arabic and French, but trilingual signs, with the Tamazight Berber inserted between the other two, spelled out in striking, blocky letters, looking remarkably like the charts in my history books of ancient Numidian letters from stone inscriptions.

But the most astonishing Berbers we encountered live far to the south of the Kabylie, in the northern Sahara Desert. They are called in French and therefore English the Mozabites, because they live in an eight mile long, northwest to southeast oasis called the M'zab, where they number about 100,000. They are called "puritan Muslim sectarians," but they are of a very peculiar sort. We are taught that the pristine unity of Islam split into the minority Shiites who believe the Caliph who Commands the Faithful should be of the family of Mohammed's daughter Fatima and her husband Ali, and the majority Sunni who believe that the Caliph must be of the Qureish tribe of Meccan Arabs to which Mohammed belonged. But there was and is an even smaller group, the Kharijites or Ibadites, who held many almost democratic beliefs, including their conviction that the Caliph may be any holy Muslim, "even a black slave." They were also the first Islamic terrorists. A Kharijite murdered the Caliph Ali in AD 660, as he prayed in his mosque at Kufa in Iraq (the holy Shiite city that has been in the news these years). They were stamped out in blood, but some of their preachers escaped to North Africa and secured a following. These too were stamped out in blood by the Shiite Fatimid dynasty of Tunisia in the 10th Century AD, but a few fled south into the Sahara and found refuge in the M'zab, which shields them to this day.

The Sahara is actually very rich in underground water in several places. The eight mile long oasis of the M'zab supports 3,000 wells, which support 270,000 date palms. (This is known from tax records.) A mature date palm in the M'zab may yield 200 pounds of high quality dates a year, the basis of the Mozabite economy. But the Mozabites have for centuries taken to literacy and commerce. Without a Caliph, they have no formal government at all, but a rich network of families and brotherhoods, which pool capital and mutually assist. Mozabites have settled two other, smaller oases not far from the M'zab, and many of the men leave on business for years at a time, during which they continue and expand the substantial Mozabite share of the food and textile businesses, and of extra-legal Islamic banking, in the northern Algerian cities, and, recently among the five million Algerians in French cities.

The Mozabites dress in their own way, live in their own five towns in the M'zab or in self-segregated districts outside it as far as Paris, and marry only among other Mozabites, preferably first cousins. Other Muslims think them "clannish." They are as a group quite successful in business and banking. Other Muslims think them grasping. Intermarriage has produced some genetic defects, notably nearsightedness, so most Mozabite men wear thick glasses. Other Muslims think they use their glasses to count their money secretly at night. And of course they are all guilty of murdering Ali in AD 660. When northern Algerians worked themselves up into killing the hated Mozabites (a habit stopped by the French imperialists) they would scream as they advanced on the Mozabite enclaves, "Ali killers! Ali killers!" — It must be obvious by now that the Mozabites have evolved over time into the social structure and the precariousness of traditional Orthodox Jews. They are a kind of Muslim Jew. They are Jews *marque*.

In the M'zab the Mozabites live in five probably thousand year old walled towns on hills in the oasis valley, from northwest to southeast: Ghardaia, Melika, Bou Noura, Beni Isguen (the holy town) and El Ateuf. Each is topped by one mosque, with a tall, tapering square, mud minaret, quite unlike the square stone minarets of North Africa. Each town is a wonderful jumble of wholly traditional stone and adobe houses with upper stories resting on palm log floors (though surely not all a thousand years old) squeezing the alleys into which ways. We explored Melika (the Queen) and more thoroughly El Ateuf, said to be the oldest of the towns. We walked some blocks into Beni Isguen the holy town, where no non-Mozabite may spend the night (as in all five towns) or even the mid-day hours of prayer. Extremely pious

and strongly commercial, the men lining the tourist route into the holy town were among the few who pressed us with anything like a hard sell of their goods, in all Algeria. Their merchants I spoke to all had better French than mine, and many had some English. They bargained, but I believe they were honest.

Each town possessed an extensive palmeraie, a date palm grove, cut up by mud walls into many separate gardens, but the palms overtopped the walls and seemed from a ways off to be an unbroken forest. Men had little houses in their gardens to use during the date season and during the (terrible!) heat of the Saharan summer - 40, 50 and sometime 60 degrees centigrade = 104, 122 and sometimes 140 degrees Fahrenheit.

Mozabite men tend to be short and stocky (to the contempt of other Muslims) and indeed often wear thick glasses. They wear white-embroidered white caps and short beards, earth-colored shirts and baggy trousers. On formal occasions, such as services in the mosque, they all wear close-fitting white gowns. The minority of non-Mozabites in the oasis almost all wore traditional costumes, too, including some sub-Saharan blacks with turbans. They had to live in new areas outside the five Mozabite towns, as we did in our faded hotel.

The Mozabite men enshroud their women from crown to foot in spotless, white-embroidered, white woolens, which were wrapped and held over the face to reveal only one, arresting, eye! The left eye, if the right-handed woman was holding her veil with her right hand over her right eye. Turning a corner in a town and almost bumping into an enshrouded eye - with mascara eyelashes - staring at me, gave me quite a start. They move quietly and apparently without body motion, just the feet. No one is supposed to look at a Mozabite woman. "To photograph one would be death." I wonder. But forewarned, none of us did, from nearby, anyway. I found no photos or postcards of them. Inside their walled towns, some unveiled and revealed their whole faces. Young girls were not yet enshrouded. Yet Mozabite women were traditionally taught to read, as few Arab women were. If I had to select just two memories from this remarkable trip to Algeria, they would be of the austere, square Roman city of Timgad on its height, and of those eerie, unearthly, white-enshrouded, one-eyed ghosts of the Sahara!