

by Ihab Zaki (Nov 2012)

Prior to my attending a conference in London, I made the executive decision to extend my travel plans to include Algeria. This vast country is filled with history, incredible scenery, warm and friendly people and a little bit of mystery tossed in for good measure! I spent three and a half days on a fast paced, non-stop tour concentrating mostly on the coastal region but I have to confess that I was probably lured by the Roman history more than anything else.



I was briefed on new hotels, restaurants and road conditions and I met a wonderful guide, Abdel Kader Ben Salah. This capital city is home to some of the most elegant (yet in need of attention) art deco architecture anywhere in the world. The boulevards of this “Paris of the Mediterranean” are also lined with mosques and minarets, most notably the 17<sup>th</sup> century Fishermen's Mosque, as well as neo-Moorish delights such as the Grande Poste, more French palace than post office. The Kasbah, “a masterpiece of architecture and town planning” according to Le Corbusier, remains one of the world's most alluring labyrinths, its huddled houses tumbling down the hillside before seemingly spilling over into the sea.

I thoroughly relished my visit to Constantine (ancient Cirta), the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest city in Algeria. Named after Emperor Constantine (son of Queen Helena) it is the epitome of a picturesque town perched high atop a mountain surrounded by steep gorges that are battered by gushing rivers. Known as the “city of bridges”, one sees a series of these structures, some natural and others manmade crossing over the deep ravines. Constantine boasts an excellent museum (noted in particular for its Roman mosaics) as well as the delightful Ottoman Palace of Ahmed Bey and a handful of undiscovered mosques. Though we were on a tight schedule, we were able to make time to visit all of these places and to snap a picture or two. I am looking forward to returning next fall with a group when we can explore the area at a more leisurely pace to savor its charms. I also paid a brief visit to the WWI memorial and the magnificent Opera House built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. So much to see and so little time...for now.



A stop in Tiddis en route to Constantine enabled me to begin to quench my thirst for “everything Roman”. We traveled through a tableau of red-colored soil in perfect juxtaposition with green and yellow fields demarking the different farms and their vast expanse of wheat, cereal and rice crops. In ancient times this region was considered to be the breadbasket of the Roman Empire. Seldom visited, Tiddis is comprised of terraces that cling to the side of an ochre mountain. Since it was “on the way” I took the time to explore the remains of this ancient hilltop scene. In spite of its miniature size, the site boasts all the trappings of a Roman town: paved streets, a temple to the goddess Mithras, a wonderful arch, cisterns and a minute forum.

Continuing with my ultra-packed expedition, we stopped at the ancient Roman ruins of Lambaesis, an amazing site situated not far from Batna, our stepping off point for many of these areas of interest. This was one of the largest Roman cities of North Africa and it boasts the Temple of Aesculapius, a fine Capitolium, a set of baths, the Arch of Severus and the highlight, the praetorium or headquarters of the Third Augustan Legion.

Ready for the Algerian “*piece de resistance*”, we headed to Timgad, the ***Pompeii of Africa***. This without a doubt was the highlight of my journey. It was constructed under Trajan as a bulwark against the unruly Berbers. With its immense library, colonnaded streets, myriad temples and imposing arch of Trajan, Timgad is the embodiment of Roman urban planning. Standing in the midst of these ruins it is easy to envision the city in its entire ancient splendor at the height of its glory. The presence of a monumental arch, multiple baths, temples dedicated to their Pantheon of deities, a forum, cemeteries, a *cardo*, and villas of the Roman “rich and famous” contribute to its reputation of one of the finest examples of a typical Roman town. Timgad truly deserves its recognition as one of UNESCO’s World Heritage sites.



Beyond the many splendid Roman ruins one finds in Algeria there are also vestiges of other civilizations. The mausoleums of ancient Numidian kings are historical landmarks that I was curious to see and fortunately we were able to make a stop as we made our way towards Constantine. The most impressive is Medracen, a massive conical structure set on top of a 20-meter-high drum that is nearly 60 meters in diameter with an entry corridor that leads to the mortuary chamber. This is the final resting place of a Numidian king and his royal family. There are six such mausolea of this type preserved in Algeria the most famous among them is at the World Heritage site of Tipasa. It bears resemblance to a small pyramid and to this day, young Berbers (currently Berbers in Algeria number over 8 million) visit these memorials to pay homage to their ancestors and seek their blessings on upcoming nuptials. Touching how some traditions actually survive despite their detachment from our modern world.



I have long been interested in the mystique of the Berbers inhabiting the region called Kabila with its rugged mountains and ethnically separate villages and enclaves. Kader, as he prefers to be called and I, took the daylong drive out of Algiers to explore a cornucopia of ancient and medieval sites

that included historic attractions and visitor-friendly towns. Together we wandered through narrow alleys, stopped at local shops and shared tea and conversation.

As I have mentioned the Berber population a couple of times I thought I should probably include a brief synopsis about these fascinating people of the Kabila area of Algeria. The next three informational paragraphs is a brief description of a rather complex and enigmatic culture that spreads not only in Algeria, but throughout the entire Maghreb (From Siwa Oasis in Egypt to the Atlas Mountains of Morocco)!

The Berbers are the indigenous inhabitants of the North African littoral, isolated from the rest of Africa by the Sahara desert. They are the descendants of the Capsian culture of prehistoric North Africa but have been subject to much racial admixture over centuries of invasion. From the mid seventh century waves of Arab migration into the region brought cultural changes and introduced Islam, which the Berbers willingly accepted, although the character of North Africa remained Berber.

Although rural Berber life remained largely unchanged by Arab influence those living in the cities found their language, tribal law and oral literary traditions being replaced by Arabic traditions. Forced back into the mountain regions by the city-based sultanates, the Berbers refused to recognize central authority or to pay taxes.

The French, who occupied North Africa from 1839 when they took Algeria, recognized the differences between the Arabs and the largely mountain-dwelling Berbers and subjected the two sectors to different regimes of administration, encouraging the expression of Berber culture and using Berber recruits in the French army. In the major Berber areas Berber-speakers constituted between 60% and 100% of the population. The Berbers reacted to the distinction made by the French by rapidly adopting Arabic language and customs, although they also took advantage of their new economic and commercial opportunities, and many migrated annually to work for French farmers or moved into the cities and formed urban enclaves.



Some other observations about the country and what it has to offer the traveler are following.

Let's start with a delectable cuisine. Seafood is quite abundant along the coast and I indulged myself in at least one meal a day that included fish or shrimp. I could not get enough fruit in my diet and fortunately there was an abundance of melons, figs, pomegranates, grapes and peaches to keep me well supplied. It's true what they say about the difference in fruit from the fields as opposed to fruit from a supermarket. I'm afraid I have been spoiled by the availability of the former. To complement their great cuisine, I have enjoyed the world-renown wines from several of the regions of Algeria; we may not hear about their wines in the USA, but surely they are growing their presence in the European markets.





Early on, I made mention of the roads. Our capable driver Yassin piloted our VW Golf covering more than 1000 miles in the few days that I had allowed myself for this visit. Some of the travel was on the newly opened ultra-modern highway that links Algeria with Tunisia in the east and Morocco in the west. We also ventured onto smaller roads and winding, mountain passes as we traveled from small town to small town in some of the more remote areas of the country. I have to say that while I do appreciate the convenience of a highway to get you where you want to go quickly, there is something to be said for the road that takes you off the beaten path to discover the true country and its inhabitants.

People that I met along the way were always friendly and helpful. However, I was constantly amazed by their bewilderment that I had left “paradise” (the United States) to come to visit Algeria. I can only conclude that they must be watching too many Hollywood films.

Sadly, it appears that the government just doesn't care much about tourism. In some respects this is good for the tourist as many of the sites are empty. Imagine Timgad without the crowds! You can immerse yourself in the splendid past without the annoyance of modern invaders. But it also means that the tourist infrastructure is not up to the standards of other countries that recognize the value of their ruins and take care of them accordingly. This is slowly changing as the business community steps up and builds new hotels and opens restaurants to cater to visitors. The government may not realize what it has but there is a culture of entrepreneurship that is attempting to change that.



Just a fun fact that I would like to share...in my travels around the coastal region I noticed numerous stork nests perched high atop electric transmission towers. The occupants were beginning to arrive to spend the winter months and will migrate back to Europe after the season is over.

Earlier on I mentioned that I had visited Algeria once before in 2006. At that time I concentrated on the Sahara and the Oases towns. The exotic region of Ghardaia, one of the Pentapolis towns of the Saharan M'Zab Valley and one of Algeria's UNESCO World Heritage sites, was one of my favorites. In the walled settlement of Beni Isguen, normally closed to foreigners, the local women, clad entirely in white, reveal only one eye to the outside world. Besides Ghardaia in the M'Zab Valley, Algeria has six other sites inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage list, most of which will be visited on our tours: Beni Hammad, Djemila, the Tassili, Timgad, Tipasa and the Kasbah of Algiers. As I stated above, most of these sites don't see many tourists.

I'd like to encourage you to come with us and explore the myriad of treasures and architectural marvels that Algeria has to offer. It's not only seeing all the Roman marvels, but also exploring the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest city of Algeria named Oran, a very French-influenced colonial metropolis with majestic buildings, museums, churches and Train Station, plus the city of Tlemcen which was named the Cultural Capital of the Islamic World a few years ago and is very Moorish in its style and character and has a magnificent Jewish heritage that is well preserved.. You'll almost feel you are in Morocco or Southern Spain in that stunning city. Then of course you'll savor the desert life as well as the lush palm tree-filled oases and troglodyte ancient towns. The eclectic mix of all these wonders in Algeria makes it a truly hidden gem.

A pre or post Tunisia extension can be added.