

by Ihab Zaki (September 2018)

One of the curses of traveling frequently on too many exotic trips and seeing a vast number of alluring places is that you tend to lose track of some places you have seen long time ago and enjoyed them at some far gone eras as their memory becomes blurred out in the inner parts of your brain! That is exactly what inflicted me with regards to a small North African nation: Tunisia. My last visit there was at least 15 years ago, or was it about 20 years ago. All that reminds me of Tunisia with some vague fondness about it is a tiny salt and pepper shaker in yellow color ceramic that my wife kindly didn't toss away over the years as she tends to usually do with many of the small trinkets I collected over the decades of globetrotting!

Tunisia suffered lately with a few unfortunate terrorist attacks that resulted in a bad setback of their tourism industry but with a strong determination to bypass their hurdles since the revolution of 2011 when the masses ousted the corrupt president Zein el Abedeen Ben Ali and forced him to escape and seek exile in Saudi Arabia. During the few years that ensued with civil unrest and attempts by militant Islamic groups to destabilize this rather modern and westernized Arab nation, Tunisia was forgotten by many travelers but since 2017 it began a steady comeback and even at Spiekermann travel we began to see an increased demand to visit it by our intrepid voyagers and explorers. I thus made a rather impromptu decision to take 2 very short days to go visit Tunis and re-acquaint myself with what it offers. I wasn't sure what to expect again after all those years and hoped that the blurry memories get reignited with a jolt of excitement and a new love affair! Getting there was as smooth as I hoped for a short 7 hours flight from Detroit to Paris and a quick transit in the dreadful and confusing Charles de Gaulle airport then a short 2.30 hours flight landed me fresh and excited at Tunis-Carthage airport in the morning where my longtime partner and local organizer {and a good friend by now} Mohamed Halouani was waiting for me to start a packed day galloping from place to place. First stop is the iconic site of Carthage which of course crowns every visitor's program stirring people's imaginations towards the establishment of flourishing Phoenician colonies over 2800 years ago here and in various other places dotting the North African coast. Then comes the epic story of Hannibal and the elephants used in his Second Punic war.



I was re-surprised (as I bet you anything I was as surprised long ago when I came here the first time) to see how vast the site is and how scattered it's relics are encompassing several highlights such as the dry dock area, the temples, the port, the amphitheater and the stunning cisterns which blew my mind away with their size, their state of preservation and their beautifully-aligned 16 huge underground interconnected reservoirs. We also made a stop at the elegant American cemetery which contains the remains of over 3000 soldiers who perished here during WWII supporting the Allied forces to end the Nazi era. The weather was sublime with a completely blue sky and a joyful breeze with a mild 70 degrees F and was so tempting to just sit and absorb the place and listen to the waves hitting the walls of the port, but.. I was already over the miserable airplane food and now hunger struck.



Mohamed opted to take me to a small simple place where we sat outdoors along a street dotted with seafood restaurants to have lunch and once I saw the fresh catch of the day and chose what I wanted we shortly waited for the bass and the squid to be grilled and served with various little tapa-like salad plates and wonderful French baguette. Only missing item was a cold beer, as this was not one of those places that served alcohol, plus I knew I needed a break after all the drinks I consumed in my flights. A short stop after the stomachs were happy and content at my hotel, a small boutique restored 18th century house in the Old city (the Medina) where I freshened up and left my bag to head out of another jewel of Tunis: the town perched on a hill named Sidi Bou Said, named after an 14th century marabout (Sufi saint) who has his humble mosque and his burial place in the center of town. A tired and jet lagged me struggled a bit wobbling slowly on the steps till we reached town and I was breath taken by its beauty. an almost Santorini feeling, with whitewashed houses and beautifully painted in blue windows and doors, and guess what else: packs of tourists roaming the place, hunting for souvenirs which are galore here, from hand painted pottery to silver work, to leather products, to silk scarfs to glass artifacts, to paintings and so much more, it surely is a feast for the eyes and it can quickly leave holes in the pockets. Up and down we walked the cobblestone alleys savoring some local food, having coffee, sitting in those quaint cafes with floors (and ceilings) covered with colorful Berber carpets and Kilims. After a few stunning vistas from above overlooking the blue Mediterranean underneath us, we walked to check one of those small boutique hotels there, and sure enough it stole my heart. The problem if you stay there is that after dark, the town is dead and quiet and there isn't much to do or experience the local cuisine or watch the locals in the evenings strolling and going about their business like if you stay in a hotel in Tunis city. That afternoon, I was reminded how enjoyable it is to just have some time for yourself to wander and sample foods, to chat with locals, to sit at cafes and sip a drink amidst a colorful surrounding.. it is an integral part of the travel experience as important as listening to historic information and learn about ancient life and visit museums and ruins. That evening while thrilled with my busy day, I opted to be dropped at my hotel for a hot shower and an early sleep.



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After waking up and savoring my breakfast in the courtyard that faced my room, Mohamed came to pick me again to continue my adventure visiting the Bardo Museum. I have been seeing and writing so many times about Bardo museum in brochures and itineraries and proposals that we produced at the agency for years and years but I couldn't remember much of it, or if even I have seen it before or was it some hallucination .. Again my blurry memory was playing tricks on me. But when we arrived there, I was not ready to be so amazed by it, nor did I expect Mohamed with his witty and captivating narrative can enthrall me for 2 hours and keep my attention span alive! A humongous space filled with mosaics on every wall and every floor depicting an array of myths, legends, and scenes of daily lives of the Romans, bath floors, geometric designs, and some of the finest pieces with the most intricate workmanship that you can almost feel it just installed. The new section of the museum was an addition to the older building that was housed in the lavishly- decorated palace of the Ottoman Bey in the 19th century but to display such a wealth of pieces, an 8000 square meter extension was added in the year 2012 and it is bright and elegant. A short coffee break on the main avenue of Tunis (called Habib Bourguiba Ave, after the 1st President of The Republic of Tunisia) was needed to watch locals and the hustle and bustle of people on their free day of Saturday and was also a great opportunity to have a shoe shiner spruce up and clean my old beat shabby Sebago shoes and restore them for about 50 cents while I am sipping on my cappuccino. Wow, now my wife will never even consider ditching them anymore. Today we opted for a delicious lunch at a very small restaurant where the owners wife cooks every day some traditional dishes, so had some fish and stuffed peppers which were a bit hit with me. Then we started our walking tour of the old medina and Mohamed pointed to me so many places of interest, from old synagogues, to still functioning medieval baths (hammams) to the 12th century mosque of zeituna to the old madrassas (Koranic schools), and in between I kept meandering and shopping here and there, whenever Mohamed stopped to greet people he knows. A quick but successful hunt for souvenirs to my staff, and for my kids and some olive oil soap for my wife and some roasted hazelnuts to munch on with my single malt when I return home, and cans of red pepper paste which Tunisia is famous for (called Harrissa). All up till that moment was benign shopping and I was hoping to stick to that, until, I stumbled onto a shop that had some antiques and asked Mohamed to venture in it to find out that actually Mohamed knows the owners since decades and one of them Ali turns out to be a fascinating man who has so much pride in his collection who also decided to give me the "insider's" tour of his shop (which is an entire 3 story historic building filled with a cacophony of treasures and the climb culminated on the terrace which was a masterpiece garden filled with plants and tile work and has a stunning view over the whole city and was literary adjacent to the minaret of the Zeituna mosque. On my way down I asked him to talk to me about his rugs collection, while I knew that my wife would not forgive me if I dared even thinking to buy one more, so I was in it for the educational aspect until he showed me one piece that came into the discussion as an en passant subject and not to convince me in any way to buy it, a small



Persian silk rug with 3 million knots in the square meter and when I saw it and touched it, my heart started pounding and I knew I was on a path of no return. But, as I promised my wife, I will not buy rugs again because we don't have a single spot for one more at home, I told Ali, give me time, first to decide if I am willing to invest in such a beauty and secondly, and most importantly, to go back home and see how I can lure, or better said, convince my wife that we NEED this piece. Following this very enjoyable encounter and having had my eyes feast on so many articles of beauty, we left to have dinner at the fishermen's area and the seafood restaurants street where we had lunch yesterday, but, tonight being my farewell dinner of a very short trip, we opted to go to a more elegant place called Le Cafe Vert, and here I broke a misconception that I had all my life (that the best place on earth to eat shrimp is Egypt) ...

Tunisia deserves first place along with Egypt... we had a plate of prawns grilled to perfection and it tasted like nothing else .. It puts to shame the quasi-crustaceans that we eat in USA thinking it is real shrimp! Accompanied by two different types of fish and an array of salads again, I also had an amazing white wine produced locally and this royal feast was the perfect ending to a very heartwarming visit to a country that surely grabbed my interest and attention once again and it seduced me all over once more.

We at Spiekermann Travel offer Tunisia along our popular trip of North Africa, which we planned for October 2019 and March-April 2020 but we also promote independent tours to Tunisia that you can customize to suit your schedule and time frame and budget and length of tour.



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