

## The Switzerland of Northern Africa

“Can I have a kebab?” I asked a young scruffy man at his small curbside restaurant in Tabarka, Tunisia.

“Yes, of course. Where are you from?”

“America.”

“America! Beell Cleenton, George Boosh, Las Vegas,” was the response in a thick accent.

I laughed at the three things America was known for. The young man’s co-worker made the three things into a catchy song and before long the two were dancing through “interpretive” dance, a combination of a polka and break dancing. This warm response was typical in Tunisia. As a local told me, “Tunisia is like the Switzerland of North Africa. We don’t bother anyone and they don’t bother us.” For this reason, Tunisia would be a good starter for first time travelers to Northern Africa or the Muslim world.

Although only fifteen miles from tumultuous Algeria, Tabarka is a welcoming town. There are a couple of good beaches in the town that borders the Mediterranean. Overlooking the town is the Genoese Fort, which was unfortunately closed but I did get a chance to talk to a local by the fort. He talked about the big Michael Jackson concert that occurred over ten years ago, yet was still the biggest event in Tunisia for the last ten years. He talked about Tunisia as a good place to live but it just needed more jobs. I had many people who wanted to be pen pals so they could find a job outside of Tunisia.

Apart from the beaches and the water, Tabarka is a nice strolling city. *Les Aiguilles* (The Needles) is located to the east of the town center. There is a long walkway that begins with souvenirs and eventually leads to The Needles, which are rock formations. It’s a popular place for photographers and young lovers. There are many good restaurants to visit, many with locals puffing away on their shishas. I eat several



times at Restaurant Cous Cous, largely because the owner, Sadi, was nice and it had good calamari shrimp. He always had a smile and a well-kept moustache and wore the same reddish-purple oversized suit jacket with a black tie. He was proud of his suit, his family and his restaurant. He spoke several languages, including English and we tried to converse in German as well. Sadi always gave me a

complimentary mint tea at the end of the meal. I wish he would have had more business as he was an intelligent, hard working, proud person.

A day trip from Tabarka leads to the hills of Ain Draham. The town itself has a couple places to eat and get water before hiking, but offers little more. Behind the Hotel Nour el-Ain, was a small trail that led through a forested area. There are a lot of big trees but the only animals I saw were goats that a couple herders were walking through the forests. We tried to converse but in the end I gave him some of my water and he gave me some of his food and I moved on towards the city. On the outskirts of town there were many unfinished houses and further from the city, were the big buildings that the French owned. Besides used for trekking, this area is known for wild boar hunts and has a nearby military base.

Moving further inland is Le Kef, a hilly town with a couple of attractions. It is notable to see how flat the surrounding countryside is in relation to Le Kef. The effect is intensified when standing atop the Kasbah. It's a bit difficult to get in; I snuck in with a Frenchman who was doing some UN academic development work and had arranged a guided tour. He helped translate into English which he knew well as his wife was an English teacher. We saw the gardens, prisons and walked on an unsteady bridge while inside the Kasbah. Nearby there were a couple good mosques including the Great Mosque. The Museum of Art had a fantastic look at nomadic life, Muslim art and had a welcoming staff. They gave a detailed explanation of the differences between Sunni and Shi'ah Muslims as well as explaining traditions associated with local Berber people and the importance of the barber shop. There were some descent ancient Roman ruins, including baths and cisterns, and the Independence Square that had wild weeds and a lot of trash.

Less touristy Le Kef is a good place to audition some aspects of traditional Muslim life. Included is a hot shave which I was coaxed into by a young man, Makram, whose shop was next to my hotel. It felt great. What didn't feel great was being in the city for a sand storm, whipped up by thunderstorms. Fortunately, I was in the city and the buildings knocked down much of the sand that can literally blind people. I escaped into a restaurant and had some seafood and *tastira*, fried tomatoes and eggs, seasoned with caraway seeds, accompanied the national dish cous cous, a granule. Also sampled was a Tunis Salad which consists of basil, tomatoes, cucumber, onions, drenched with olive oil and topped with tuna with lettuce and olives on the side. There is a liberal amount of French bread served with meals.

Highway 5 between Le Kef and Tunis passes by the small town of Tebersouk which is the gateway to the Roman ruins of Dougga. I was in Tebersouk on market day which made the otherwise quite city crowded. The bus station stored my backpack and I had to bargain hard to get a taxi to the ruins as there is no public transport. My taxi driver was a joker; when he



asked me where I was from and I responded with America, he tried to push me out the car (he was kidding). The ruins themselves are quite complete and many of the temples do not require imagination to see how they looked. Temples are dedicated to Mercury, Pluto and Saturn. The theater is also in good shape and entertained over 3000 people. There are baths and cisterns to see as well.

The capital of Tunisia, Tunis, has numerous places to visit within her medina but also throughout the city. The medina has a large souq and old buildings, including the Mosque of Youssef Dey, an interesting green-tiled mosque. The medina is a real labyrinth so a map would be helpful but most local will help with directions. Heading to the east is the Independence Place and the gateway to the modern city via Habib Bourguiba Avenue. There is several pleasant Paris-like cafés and less pleasant bars that admit only men, except for female bartenders, and are very smoky. Fresh air and numerous ancient mosaics can be found at the Bardo Museum. Most of the exhibits harkens back to ancient Rome and include numerous intricate mosaics of famous Romans.



The easily accessible suburbs of Tunisia include Sidi Bou Said. The suburb is a beautiful place to visit due to the traditional Berber white and light blue design on most houses highlighted by geraniums. The family house of Dar el-Annabi has a beautiful picturesque prayer room and dining area. Another old house, Dar Ennejma Ezzahra, has intricate marble work, fountains from Italy and extensive artwork. The city also overlooks the Mediterranean Sea and has a descent beach here as well as in La

Goulette, located on the Gulf of Tunis.

The other main suburb is the historically important city of Carthage. In the Punic Wars, the Romans defeated and destroyed the Carthaginians, even salting the earth after the Third Punic War. But Carthage was rebuilt under Julius Caesar and once again became an important city. Today, the city is considered the most affluent suburb of Tunis. The swanky Presidential Palace is located here, but security doesn't allow pictures of it.

There is a surprising number of ruins that remain in surprisingly good condition. Behind the Palace, is the Antonine Baths, which is noteworthy for having several huge columns still intact.



Nearby are the Roman Theater and Villas which has a central marble and mosaic floor, but the rest is being taken over by the weeds. To the west is Byrsa Hill. The hill has a Gothic church called L'Acropolium and The National Museum of Carthage, which looks at Carthage at her height and also during Roman times.

Tunisia has a western influence, especially French and Italian, but is still is a Northern African and Muslim country. It's a peaceful country and, although small, there is much to see.