

Imagine this. On your South, South-Eastern border, you have an international pariah, who until the very recent past was ostracized by the (political) west, your Western borders aren't that peaceful either, with a civil war raging on those borders, your only other borders are beaches. You are geographically sealed. Politically you are a part of one of the most volatile regions in the world. Can you still attract people? Can you think of tourism as your main industry? If you are a Tunisian, you would still smile at the above description, shrug it off as another case of hysteria, take your cab, go to the airport to receive the next tourist arriving from Europe. Sounds interesting, is it.

Yours truly was on one of these flights. We reached Tunisia flying in to Monastir, a port city on the Mediterranean Sea, along the gulf of Hammamet. While we were approaching the airport, it was quite evident that the country, Tunisia, bordering Libya and Algeria, looks and has everything but a desert. Where was it? I thought I was going to North Africa, the desert. There were a lot of trees, a lot of shrub-like trees, a mountain range, good strips of water, everything that you don't associate with a desert.

Anyway, whatever it was, I thought, it is a desert, and landed in Monastir. The airport looked very much like a domestic airport in India. As soon as we got off, and walked the few meters to the immigration hall, we were greeted to a fine, undistinguishable, echo (of something that sounded like music or an announcement in the midst of music), pleasing dare I say, far from it. Very few of the immigration officers wore real uniform, most of them were in the civilian clothes, and when we were due at the counter, they spent quite a time, manually writing everything, typing (well, thumbing every letter in the computer), and finally stamping our passports and handing it to us. In all this process took just 45 minutes.

Tunisia, geographically is 163,610 sq km long, with around 8,250 sq km of water (see, whatever I saw, it is still a desert), borders Algeria, Libya, has a temperate north, with mild, rainy winters and hot dry summers, and a desert in the south. There are mountains in the north and a semi-arid south that merges with the Sahara. It is an Arab state, paradoxically a republic (you don't find that many in that region), bilingual (Arabic and French), with a population around 10 million¹.

Tunisia, does not allow the export and import of foreign exchange. This makes it impossible to get Tunisian Dinars before entering the country. Just opposite to the baggage claim, there are a few counters from some banks, where we did exchange Euros for Dinars. There is no point in scurrying around for better rates, these rates are usually fixed by the central bank².

Our tour operator had arranged busses for us to be transported to Hammamet, a sea side resort about 80 kms from Monastir. The first thing one notices, is the roads. Roads are of good quality, but the lane width is what surprises you. They are on an average much smaller than the ones we are used to. Along the way, the other thing we noted, was the unusual amount of roundabouts. It in general looked like roundabouts have replaced traffic signals in Tunisia. I was even surprised to see roundabouts in roads with speed limits of even 70 kmph. We passed through the outskirts of Monastir, and it was very difficult not to notice the similarity that the houses had with the ones in India. We entered the Sfax-Tunis highway, towards Tunis. Again, one can't miss the fact that the lanes were small, and of course driving on the highway was quite interesting with these lanes, and distances marked in meters (not Kilometers, so a distance is 70,000m or 700,000m). It at least looks like busses were measured and the lanes were designed to fit them. The highways, barring the width, were of good quality, speeds were around 110 kmph. And most vehicles maintained this speed. The

¹CIA The World Fact Book

²On the day 1EUR = 1.52 TND

roads were toll roads, and these check points had a lane reserved for vehicles with automatic cash registering cards (magnetic cards).

We reached Hammamet after about an hour. We passed through small bylanes, and reached Yasmine Hammamet. We were put up at Ibrostar Averroes, a spanish chain of hotels. The hotel was given four stars, and appropriately so. It had the right ambiance, and was well equiped with two swimming pools, two restaurants, a snack bar, more interestingly access to the beach right out of the pool. As soon as we reached the hotel we were provided with juices. Our room, unfortunately was not on the pool side, but on the other hand we had a good view of the numerous hotels in Yasmine Hammamet.

Yasmine Hammamet, is a small bay at the other end of the gulf of Hammamet in the Cap Bon Peninsula. It is an exclusive resort area. There are numerous hotels around, and Hammamet is very popular with European, and more specifically German tourists. 500,000 tourists a year, and you can imagine what a place it would be. Yasmine Hammamet consists of a main street, and a Bulevard (Bulevard November 17), and there are resorts and hotels on either side of this street. Enough hotel to accommodate the half-a-million odd tourists. It is rather hard to imagine that availability of rooms is scarce during the summer months, justifying the numerous construction projects around the bay area. But there is sanity here. Any place around the world with a wonderful beach and sunshine all year round would be a concrete jungle, but there is a method in madness here. The people around have exhibited wisdom by ensuring the hotels are not more than 4 floors high.

After settling down, and getting used to the room, the hotel and the surroundings, we ventured out to another resort, where we were briefed by our tour guides about Tunisia in general, and a few trips in particular. We booked ourselves for the next days tour of Hammamet and Nabuel. We spent the evening walking around the beach area, visiting shops, and getting an impression and feel of life, the universe and everything around Yasmine Hammamet.

Hammamet, is a small town along Cap Bon. It has a reasonable population, driven entirely by tourism. i couldnt see anything of great importance there, other than its own "pocket sized" madina. Madina is a small muslim township, something like a small mosque square with narrow walls, and shops, houses and eatiries (not exactly a restaurant) around it. Madinas are the place

where people found faith and food. The interesting thing is the culture around the madina. The whole medina has a "grand" entrance, with a high wall surrounding it. Of special interest are the door of the houses in the medina. Many of them have very intericate patterns and designs. Some of the houses (may be the one with deep pockets and big camels) have a large door and a small door. During the old times, when feasts were held, people came in with their camels, and hence the big door, the small door was for people. One usually had to crouch down and enter the house. This provided the owner with the chance to see who the person is, before the person is fully composed, enemies of the house beware, guess what i meant. Other than the medina, there is a small monument close to the islamic cemenry, for the allied troups who laid their lives during the second world war. Hammamet, seems to be the favourite place for exciled leaders. Bettino Craxi, the Italian Socialist prime minister, and President Habib Bourguiba (of Tunisia), both lived their final years of excile and seclusion here.

We drove to Nabuel, another town along the gulf. Nabuel, as the locals said, hadis the pottery capital of Tunisia. It is famous for its nice ceramics, wonderful painting (on china). You find them on the street, you find them even on squares, and more interestingly, you find them even on the round-about on the street encasing the trees. We visited a fair price shop, approved by the government. This is just the only place where prices are fixed. We walked through the market street there. Souvenirs, can and should be bargined. The display price is usually 5 to 7 times the selling price. A ceramic pottery for say 20 TND, means you pay 2 atmost 5.

"The Medittarian is calm", that was what i felt for the first few days of our stay there. Calm or not, the beach was very clean. Inspite of the massive influx of tourists, the beach is neat, the streets surrounding the beach was neat. There werent that many people on the beach though, probably, it was cold during this time of the year. It was spring, and people around still clung on to their over coats. The outdoor pool was quite cold, the sea was cold, and so people just used it for a stroll, the sun bathed the sand not the souls on it. i heard it is altogether a different proposition during winter, - there is not enough sun to bathe the souls!

Food can be tricky, for vegetarians like me. The Italians rescued us. Pizzas, Spegatti, apart from good vegetables from the weekly market at Hammamet were our tummy companions. With its french influence, crépés

were found in plenty. Apart from all that, we survived on juices from the supermarket (Magasane Generale - apparently every town should have one). Food is generally cheap, but good quality suvoniers aren't, at least not until you bargain.

Tunisia, as a country and civilization is quite old. Today it is the smallest country in North Africa. It occupied a strategic position in the Mediterranean, which ensured that it had its fair place in Roman, European and World history. The Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans, and finally the French all of them decided to have a piece of this part, and have invariably left a mark on its history, society and more importantly its people.

The Phoenicians first set shop in Tunisia at Utica in 1100 BC, using it as a staging post from their home port in Tyre (in modern day Lebanon) to Spain. The established many ports along this route, most important of which are Sousse and Bizerte. The port that definitely left a mark in history is Carthage, that became the arch enemy of Rome. Carthage established itself as the leader of the western Phoenician world in the 7th century and was the dominant power in the Western Mediterranean in the early 5th century. The city's dominance lasted till the Punic wars between Rome and Carthage that lasted nearly 120 years from 263 BC to 146 BC. The aftermath of long years of war left Carthage utterly razed and its people eventually slaves.

Tunisia became Roman property after the war. A new look Carthage, under emperor Augustus became the capital of Africa Proconsularis (Rome's African holdings) in 44 BC. By 1st century AD, agriculture became important, and Tunisia ending up supplying over 60% of Rome's requirements. Romans, on the other hand went on establishing cities along Tunisia's plains and coastline.

By the beginning of the 5th century, the Vandals, sensing Rome's declining power, gained control of the area. Carthage was vandalised. Their exploitative policies alienated them from the native Berber population. The locals, formed small kingdoms and started raiding the Vandal settlements. The Byzantines of Constantinople, took control of the place in 533 and called it their's for the next 150 years.

In the 7th century, the Arab armies from Arabia, conquered Egypt, and by the start of the 8th century,

the whole of North Africa was Arabised. Islam was introduced. Kaiouran became the capital of the fast-expanding Islamic empire controlled by the caliphs of Damascus.

The locals (Berbers) adopted Islam, but they riled under the harsh treatment by the Arabs. A groups of Berber Shiites, the Fatimids, together with the disaffected Berber tribes took North Africa back from the Arabs. But as is usually the case, their unity was short lived, and chaos slowly returned.

Conflicts arose again when North Africa was caught in the middle of the rivalry between Spain and the Ottoman Empire in the mid 16th century. Tunis, by now the capital, changed hands half a dozen time before the turks took it in in 1574, and it became an Ottoman territory. They ruled them till the 19th century, when France became the new power in the Western Mediterranean and till 1956 France ruled them. Habib Bourguiba, who led the Independence movement, became the first Tunisian president, and stayed in power till a palace coup replaced him with Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in 1997³. This happened sometime in the night of November 17th, and hence both the first president and the date of his ouster have got edged to their history and to the numerous avenues and boulevards named after them in every city, town and village.

We left early in the morning for Tunis, the capital, small easy and compact. We went around the medina. Along the medina, there are small shops, where you could buy every suvonier. Again the standard rule is bargain, and bargain a lot. A suvonier camel, as big as a feet could be yours for just over 5 TND, if you put your skills to the fullest use, else you would be poorer by say 50 TND. This medina is fabulous, and was added to the UN's World Heritage List in 1981. Also worth visiting, need i say, not worth missing is the Bardo Museum. It is presently housed in the Bardo Museum, and has a wonderful collection of the finest collection of Roman mosaics and statues. The museum is about 4km west of the city centre.

We then visited Antoine Baths at Carthage. They are right down on the water front, and are impressive for the size and planning.

Sidi Bou Saïd, is another pretty little village on the high cliff above the Gulf of Tunis. It is located around 10km northwest of the capital. What is unique is the

³Tunisian History from Lonely Planet: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/africa/tunisia/history.htm>

pretty and white washed houses, with gleaming walls, dotted with the ornate, curved window grills, all painted the same deep blue, and colourful arched doorways that open onto courtyards. Sidi Bou Saïd is lined with cafés, sweet stalls and souvenir shops. In my opinion the place is more a picture postcard village, belonging to my fairy-tale world more rather than the world I belonged.

On the way back, we saw a lot of shrubby trees, and were told they are olives, lots of them. Olives, more olives and lot more olives. But where is the desert?

Did we miss it, or was it there. Down a few hundred kilometers down is the Sahara. The desert of Africa. It is where the sand dunes were, it is where the camels

where. Along with the desert we missed El-Jem, famous for a very well preserved Roman colosseum. This colosseum is believed to have a seating capacity of around 30,000, arguably more than the population of the town, making it one of the finest Roman monuments in North Africa. We missed Matmata, a place where the Berbers went underground more than a 1000 years ago to escape the heat. The homes are all identical, with a courtyard dug deep and rooms tunnelled out from the sides. Well, for all the Star Wars fans, this should not be of surprise, as the famous "cantina" was filmed here. Naturally, a week is not enough to see all this.

What is

on water is a monthly at the end of the day, we could say, I wish I had this, I wish I had that.... but then looking back, many times, we wished and got what we wished, just that we didn't know and it remains unfulfilled, because we forgot to realize that our ever growing wish list sometimes does shrink. but for many, such wishes are still a luxury..... on water is a monthly at the end of the day, we could say, I wish I had this, I wish I had that.... but then looking back, many times, we wished and got what we wished, just that we didn't know and it remains unfulfilled, because we forgot to realize that our ever growing wish list sometimes does shrink. but for many, such wishes are still a luxury.....