

# Tunisia Part 3: Tozeur to Douz

## Tunisia

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February 16, 2007

Dateline: Douz, Southern Tunisia

Latitude 33.46 N, Longitude 11.00 E

This morning we left Tozeur for Douz (pronounced "Do's", as in do's and don'ts), but we stopped en route to visit Degueche (pronounced duh-get-chee with the accent on "get"), another desert oasis which lies 10 kilometers southeast of Tozeur. This region is called Bled el Jerid (Bled is pronounced just as it would be in English, "el" the same as in Spanish, but "Jerid" is pronounced "Jah-reed" with the accent on "reed" which translates as country of palm trees. In Degueche we embarked on another horse-drawn carriage ride, in a 4 passenger caleche, with two passengers facing forward and two facing backward. The horses here are amazingly frisky and trot everywhere which seems remarkable considering they're in the desert, but maybe



Gassing Up in  
Degueche

in the heat of summer they slow down. Mopeds are widely used

here and many of the stores have a mobile (not Mobil, but mobile) gas station which consists of a tank about the size of an office-type water cooler resting on a frame on wheels that enables the proprietor of the store to roll the whole device inside every night. It would take several visits to several stores for an automobile of any size, but these are just about right for a dozen or so mopeds a day. One of my favorite sites from the heart of Degueche's medina was a guy in his traditional dress – a loose robe-like garment called a djellaba (pronounced gel-ah-bah with the accent on "ah"). He had two baguettes (unwrapped) tucked under one arm, one hand on the throttle and he was talking away on his cell phone (not the hands-free type) and scooting down the road faster than a trotting horse. I could only speculate as to how he was steering the moped. I assumed he was using his knees, but with his djellaba flapping in the wind, it was hard to tell. We stopped at a garden and were met by gentleman whose name sounded like Mr. "Kre-uhm" (my phonetic spelling – I'll just call him Mr. K for simplicity.), who takes care of the groves of date palms in the oasis, which are mostly privately owned by a large corporation which exports dates. Mr. K gave us a very informative talk about his "charges" – the thousands of date palms that have to be harvested by hand every year. Mr. K explained that at harvest time, (October-November) each tree is climbed by 5 or 6 men with the one at the top cutting the dates, which are then handed down the human chain so they don't bruise. The cutter makes 15



Mr. K and the  
Date Harvest

## Demo

dinars per day, and each man on the human chain makes 10. Mr. K then proceeded to demonstrate how it's done, as he scurried barefoot up a date palm like a small primate, minus the prehensile tail and further entertained us with a series of mock theatrical clowning gyrations that amused all present. What was really amazing is that Mr. K is 63 years old. We also learned from Mr. K that this particular tree is a female date palm and only the females bear fruit. And like so many forms of life, they require a male of the species to do the honor of fertilization. The female date palms are quite tall and graceful, like the ones you always see on the postcards, but their male counterparts are short and squatty with lots of long thorn-like branches which flower once a year and then releases its pollen. The male date palm pollinates its whole life (just like a man), but the poor female date palms go into menopause of sorts at around 150 years old. Considering the female tree bears 100 to 120 kilos of dates per year and starts around age 7, it's no wonder the old girl wears out before her pollen donor. Among the things growing under the date palms (the same type of under stories as seen in Tozeur) were large patches of clover which is grown for the horses. I had a brilliant idea for some fun (particularly since the horse behind us had really been tailgating all day) and so I



Horse Drawn  
Carriage at  
Degueche

picked some clover when Gary wasn't looking and slipped it in

my pocket. On the ride back to the coach, he sat facing forward in the caleche, and I sat across from him. I very stealthily placed the few springs of clover on each of his shoulders as close to his neck as I dared. We took off and sure enough the tailgating horse was right there behind him and I just about wet my pants laughing when he spied the little snack and broke into a gallop, already drooling, trying to reach it. I was just visualizing those big slobbery-wet horse lips slurping that clover off Gary's shirt. Unfortunately, the driver of the drooling horse reined him in just when his lips were within inches of the prize. Needless to say, I thought this was a lot more humorous than Gary did. While he tipped the driver a few dinar, I gave our horse a tip in clover.



A Tourist's  
Marabout  
Chott-El-Jarid

From Degueche, we drove across a huge lake bed called Chott El Jerid – the translation is roughly “salt lake with palm trees” – on a 40 mile long causeway that is built on what is for all intents and purposes a levy. That is it would be a levy on those rare occasions when there is water in the lake bed. The salt lake we saw is more of a series of saltwater canals that parallel the road – sort of drainage ditches that don't drain since much of the “lake” is dry most of the year. When it rains the lake “fills” to a few inches deep because the salt pan is so dense, water doesn't seep in. Along the edges of the water that remains are shimmering layers of salt that has formed as the water evaporated with the sun glinting off of

it. This is an area well know for mirages and we saw several which seemed to be mountains on the horizon. Some say they see ships or trains – camel and/or diesel type, and of course the most common mirage is thinking you see water. The real water, such as it is, reflects all sorts of unusual colors including pink, yellow and green. Salt is mined here (for use on roads, not dinner tables) and Chott-el-Jerid is the largest salt lake bed in North Africa, covering over 19,000 square miles. As in Death Valley in the USA, the elevation here is well below sea level. The causeway we are on was formerly just a track across the salt bed that would not support the weight of trucks or buses, so the army had a major mission here to fix that with the causeway we are traveling. We did stop about half-way across the lake bed at a café/souk/town hall which is called Chez Hamma, a rather ramshackle establishment perched by the causeway above a small canal of water the color of celery. The proprietor bills himself as the mayor of Chott el Jerid (sort of Foxy meets Judge Roy Bean character). He is a clever marketer, flying the national flag of whatever tourists he expects to see next. The Greek flag was actually flying when we arrived, but by the



The “Confort”  
Station at  
Chott-el-Jerid

time he figured out that we were Americans, it was too late to haul Old Glory up the flagpole. His bathrooms – a 5 chamber outhouse painted yellow and green and labeled “Confort” “Toilettes” “Normale”. The “confort” toilet (a bastardization of the word “comfort” , I think, was billed as

the premium offering in that had a toilet with a seat – no flushing you understand, but still a seat.. The “toilettes” were the “stand on these bricks and hope you don’t get your feet wet” variety, and as best I could understand the “Normale” toilet was said to be Turkish. Although we have been to Turkey, I still wasn’t sure what that meant. I wasn’t helped by the fact that it also had the word “home” written on the door. Home to some creatures I don’t care to see in a toilet I’m sure. Needless to say, all 5 chambers remained unpatronized by me, but Gary visited and pronounced them ghastly. And speaking of ghastly, the mayor also had an art garden with “sculpted” figures made out of pillars of salt (like the one Lot’s wife in the Bible turned into no doubt). One was supposed to be a camel and rider, the other, well, if he’d had a carrot or a nose, I would have said snowman, but I can’t really say with any certainty. They are not quite life size and. I think I good driving rain and hurricane force winds might improve the sculpture garden significantly. The sculpture garden also had a marabout, which you may recall from Part 1 is a tomb of a prominent religious figure. The mayor told us no religious figures are buried there, and that this is just for tourists (I assumed he meant to see as an attraction and not to be buried there). We bought an incense burner from the mayor’s souk made of clay. I suspect it has not been fired and thus may succumb if any incense is burned in it – so like the marabout – it will be just for show. The highway as we travel eastward is lined with “sand fences”, like silt fences or snow fences in the US, to keep the roads clear of blowing sand. They actually have “white-outs” here (or I guess they should be called “beige-outs”) when there are strong winds where the roads can get totally obscured and visibility is reduced to zero. After leaving the salt lake, we begin to see sparse vegetation, sort of sagebrush-like stuff, as well as hundreds of greenhouses. Cisterns are widely used, but rainfall is too undependable and so the Tunisians have dug deep wells, some as much as 6,000 feet to tap into an underground aquifer. Unfortunately when the water comes out of

the ground it is scalding hot (about 300 to 350 degrees F) and has to be run through a cooling tower which functions sort of like a car's radiator, before it is cool enough to touch. It further cools in modern day aqueducts (thankfully these don't have to be elevated as the Romans were forced to do since they use pumps) and it is channeled into the various irrigation systems. They also have to bring soil into the greenhouses because the soil in this region is too poor to sustain anything edible – for us humans anyway – the camels and goats seem to thrive on it. And lastly, they use the greenhouses to keep the plants from getting too dried out by the sun and wind on the desert during the day and too cold at night. Now you have to admit, this is one tough climate in which to try to farm, but farm they do.



Habib the  
Falcon Trainer

Once again the landscape changed as we drove south and east. We entered an area of sandstone pillars, worn down by the wind, but so soft you could easily brush off a layer or two of sand simply by passing your hand over the surface. It reminded me of how brown sugar hardens into a block, but can be broken down into grains. We ran into a young boy there who made his living by posing tourists with a falcon he had tamed, with a leash-like cord tied to one of its legs. It perched on Gary without digging his claws in while I snapped a few pictures and gave the boy a few dinar. Of course everyone on our bus had to have one too so this kid raked in a small fortune in a matter of 30 minutes. We also passed through the village of Kebili where a lively slave market had thrived for centuries,

mostly unfortunate souls captured in Sudan, Mali, Niger and Senegal. Slavery here wasn't a black vs. white issue – it was more a question of nationality and the unfortunate circumstance of being abducted. Blacks have held prominent places here throughout the centuries. In fact one of Mohammed's companions, the first muezzin (the person who calls the faithful to prayer) was black. As far as "companion" you should think in terms of a disciple, rather than a life partner in an alternative lifestyle. An interesting note on Islam and slavery – it is forbidden by the Koran to have slaves, but was apparently okay to sell slaves (kind of like they do with liquor today), but in 1847 slavery was abolished in Tunisia (well before it was in the US). It is also interesting to note that there were no religious squabbles in this area with Christians, Jews and Muslims living and worshiping here peacefully for years. We arrived in the village of Douz, also at a desert oasis, shortly after noon, after driving through Fathassa (famous for its sand dunes) and through a series of oases that served as markets along the ancient camel caravan trade routes. Douz is literally the end of the road in Southern Tunisia. It is the last oasis on the northern edge of the Sahara for several hundred miles. In fact it is one of the last stops before reaching Timbuktu (now in the country of Mali), the perpetual poster city for "end of the earth" which is on the southern edge of the Sahara, with miles of nothing in between. This is big motocross country and we have seen several groups getting ready to head off into the desert – not to Timbuktu, but just out far enough to claim conquest of the vast Sahara and then it's back to Douz to slip into a shower and a clean bed to rest up. This is not nearly as grueling as the Paris to Dakar rally – these folks are more comparable to city slickers at the dude ranch, pretending they're on the Chisholm Trail. We checked into a beautiful hotel called the El Mouradi with a view of the Sahara, replete with camel parking lot (yes, we did make the Camelot pun) in the background. We were able to grab a delightful power nap by the pool with doves cooing in the background; however, in a

matter of minutes, the GenArt people (the Italians making a documentary in their 40 or so 4X4 vehicles) showed up, and thus ended all opportunities for a peaceful nap. At 5:00 p.m. we had to report



Fatima Rides  
Again

to a shop downstairs to get the appropriate camel-riding apparel. Once costumed, I looked every inch like Fatima, (here it's pronounced Fah-teem-ah, accent on "teem", although Europeans tend to pronounce it as "Fat e mah" with the accent on Fat). I wore a "sifsari" which is a headdress that is wrapped tightly around the head and draped loosely at the throat (not to be confused with a hajib which covers the whole face) – in a turquoise blue to match my djellaba, complete with sequins and gold dangly things. The hajib is rare in Tunisia these days. Most women just cover their head or in metro Tunis go bareheaded (except to enter a mosque of course). And of course, Gary resumed his role as Habib. His outfit was a striped djellaba – a bold black and white tent-like thing topped by a black sifsari.



Habib and his

## Ride

Camels (a.k.a. dromedaries) were introduced here in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century A.D. from the Arab Peninsula, playing a major role in the economy in the Sahara, and there are over 100 different words to describe camels in Arabic. The camels found here are much easier to domesticate than the 2 hump model found in Asia. Camels also are extremely self sufficient. They can forage for their own food and can go for days without eating. And of course they can go for weeks without drinking, up to 6 weeks in winter and 2 in summer. Since a camel can drink up to 28 gallons of water at one time, the hump comes in handy for storing it. The hump also serves as the camel's cooling system where the camel can release heat. In case you want to get one for use at home, you need to plan to spend between 1,200 and 1,400 dinars to purchase one, plus freight charges. Their feet are broad and flat, just right for walking in sand, and it is said that nomads can identify the footprints of their camels, even when mixed with a number of others. We also learned that all camels are not created equal. White camels are smaller and faster with longer legs (they use these for racing stock) while the brown models (any where from mocha to coffee) are bigger and stronger and are the heavy duty freight haulers. They are extremely useful animals in any number of ways, such as: Food (the meat is cholesterol free and supposedly tastes like buffalo) Camel milk is extremely rich (like whipping cream, only somewhat salty so we are told) A mother with young (only 1) will produce between 5 and 10 liters of milk per day, This milk also has certain laxative properties and is not sold in stores or consumed by the Average Joe (or Average Habib either for that matter), but the Bedouin often indulge. Agriculture – Camels are admirable beasts of burden, performing functions such as turning a mill wheel, (no hydro power here) and hauling stuff on their backs. But of course due to their height and long legs, you never see plowing and cart pulling on their resumes. Transportation – Camels can

cover 80 km. per day although they do not gallop. (unless they are taught to do so to race, but even then it's more like race-walking when they go around 35 km per hour) But then the Sahara does not lend itself to doing anything fast except getting back to the oasis for a beer. Camel Caravans have been used extensively in Tunisia in the olden days, traveling what was called the Salt Route. Clothing, Shelter and Household goods – Camel hide is very durable and can be used to make anything you could make with leather and camel wool can be woven just like fleece. As far as household goods, they use camel hides for everything from water flasks to drums. War – Camels have played the same role as horses in war over the centuries, but they are much more effective in the desert dunes with their big dinner-plate sized feet. Camels are still used by the military to patrol the borders. There's not much illegal immigration happening here, so this seems quite adequate Water finders – Camels can detect water sources from miles away and were (and are) often relied upon by the nomads to lead the way to the next oasis. Tourist attraction – Tourist camels are almost always male since a female has one baby every 2 years, with a 1 year gestation period so she's always either pregnant or nursing while her "camel husband" is at work. Camels we have seen out roaming around are almost always female. The males around here have to report for work everyday at the Camelot. Before we mounted up, we learned a few camel basics, such as the Big 3 Camel Commands (you readers will find this very useful I'm sure). However, I noticed a 4<sup>th</sup> "Big" Command was missing and that would be "let me down") The Big Three are: Go = sar (pronounced ssshharrrr – we are to drag the syllable out – camels apparently like that sort of thing) Stop (also known as "whoa camel") = suss (rhymes with fuss, but again we were to drag out the "s") Get up = Ich, (this is very guttural pronounced like "Icchhhh" – and we say it like we'd imagine we would speak German, if we spoke German We mounted up, one camel per person, but each camel was tied to one other in a pair so

we could travel with spouses, significant others, etc. and each pair was led by a camel driver, who gave the commands and led them. Camels in training actually had rings through one nostril attached to the lead to make sure the camel driver had their attention at all times. I am pleased to report that these camels had been freshly bathed (or else newly squirted with Febreze) and were not the least smelly or cantankerous.



Obaida with  
the Tourists

My camel, the traditional tan camel color was named Obaida. Gary's was a darker chocolate one, a heavy duty freight-hauler type named Aboud. Both were males –and were quite fluffy with their winter coats. Our camel driver was Fawzi – a young Berber man who asked if we were English, and I said no American and he gave me a grin and a big thumbs-up. He didn't speak much English, but I used a well-mangled combination of a dab of French and dose of Spanish to ask him to take out picture. He had a few issues with framing the photo (i.e. we were headless or off center, but he finally got the hang of it.) A corporation owns the camels – it's a business and what a business it is – tourists go crazy over this camel riding thing, present company included. What an adventure this was – an hour camel ride into the Sahara, sort of a mini "mahari" (rhymes with safari). A real mahari, as explained to us, entails an extended expedition into the desert, traveling all day by camel, eating cous cous, sleeping in Bedouin tents, and so forth. Maybe we will do this next time or maybe not.



## Caravan Shadows on the Sahara

The camels make a rumbling noise (sort of like African elephants) and do this Bronx cheer sort of thing where they stick their considerable tongues out to make a blubbering noise. They actually look like they are inflating their tongues – sort of like blowing a bubble without the bubble gum. Aboud was tied to Obaida and Fawzi led them both on foot. Aboud was quite friendly and seemed to enjoy wiping his drooling mouth on my pants leg and having me scratch his head between his ears- very dog like in what I interpreted as affection for me. (I would hate to think he was just using me like a Handi-Wipe and moving on to someone else tomorrow). Although he was quite a nice riding camel, Obaida tended to back-fire a lot and since Gary was riding so close behind, he found that to be rather, unpleasant and somewhat unsettling. A lesson was learned here – which was ride the lead camel whenever possible. We rode across the desert just before sunset with the sun casting long shadows on the dunes. These saddles had us positioned just behind the hump which was much more comfortable than the time we rode 2 per camel in Egypt where one of us had to sit on the hump (that particular hump-sitter happened to be me). Of our tour group 29 out of 39 took the camel ride including several octogenarians, who have become our role models. In fact, our 84 year old friend Katie, who we just met on this trip, asked for a fast one. Those less adventurous souls who didn't want to ride took horse drawn caleches.



## Campfire Dancing with the Bedouins

We ended our journey just before sunset at a Bedouin “camp” – set up for travelers who want to spend the night in the desert with music, a bonfire and cocktails. Of course we all had to dance – well those who would and could did. I tried to imitate the local dancers, but I noticed Gary was using the same dance moves he uses to dance to “You Sexy Thing”, which are the same moves he uses to dance to “Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog”, but if anyone noticed they were far too polite to comment. The sunset over the dunes was really magical, creating one of those defining moments we always remember. At dinner we were joined by a zillion Spanish moto-cross riders and of course the Gen Art film crew from Italy who was at the Ras El Ain Hotel in Tozeur with us last night. There was quite a mob at dinner, and again the ubiquitous buffet was served, leading us to speculate that each hotel packs up uneaten food from the buffet and ships it in the cargo hold of the bus to our next destination, just in time to set it up and smooth over the salads and mushy vegetables to make them look like new. I was contemplating placing a small piece of tape across one, like detectives do – just to see if it shows up at the next hotel buffet.



## Last Night on the Desert

After dinner just the two of us walked out to the edge of the desert to see the stars in the night sky which were spectacular – no air pollution, no clouds, no humidity, no lights. It was a very spiritual experience and that moment alone would have made the journey worthwhile. **February 17,**

**2007 Dateline: Djerba, Tunisia Latitude at Djerba: 33.48 Degrees North, 10.50 Degrees East**

Today we leave the Sahara region to drive to the island of Djerba, an island oasis in the region called the Sahel (which means coast). The Sahara is the largest desert in the world, at just under 3.5 Million square miles with many areas getting less than one inch of rain per year. The oases are the only things that have made living here possible. In the olden days it was very important to avoid being outcast from the oasis – it was practically a death sentence unless you banded together with other outcasts to survive. It's similar to the concept of the knight errant – He's someone who has been banned from the kingdom because he erred (i.e. got crossways with the king), versus going out on an errand (or mission) which, as a child, is what I always assumed it to be. These rogues ejected from the oasis would band together to form a clan-like tribe called a Kabila and would circle their tents for mutual protection. Another option for the outcasts of course was the French foreign legion, which also took in convicted criminals, (sometimes the judge would offer service as an alternative to prison time). There were also the clichéd, but true cases of young boys running away from home or men with permanently broken hearts from relationships gone bad joining the Foreign

Legion. The policy was "No Questions Asked" and enlistees had to sign a document whose name translates as "Paper of Faithfulness" and usually served for life. The name Douz comes from the French word for 12 and the oasis got its name from being the outpost where the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the French foreign legion was based. France and Spain are the only countries that still have foreign legions today with bases in French Guiana, Djibouti, Chad, Mali and New Caledonia. In today's Foreign Legion, there are still criminals, but most are simply mercenaries. Nowadays, when necessary, the Legion issues a new name and a new passport, sort of like the Witness Protection Program, and they now even have a retirement plan. I was okay with the new identity part, but somehow the idea of a legionnaire with a 401K just takes the romance right out of the whole thing. Since we've passed a number of marabouts, this may be a good place to share a note on Islamic culture on the subject of death. There is very little hoopla associated with the death of a run-of-the mill Muslim. They believe the deceased should be buried within 24 hours of their demise. No embalming, no headstones, no family plots and no cremation. The body is buried as is, facing Mecca and around 20 years after the dust-to-dust thing has taken place, they'll bury someone else in that same grave. The elite of the religion of course have their marabouts, and if the person is of stature, he will have a mausoleum. Or in the case of the truly exalted – the George Washington of Tunisia, a gentleman named Habib Bourgiba, has an extremely lavish and over the top mausoleum along the lines of the Taj Mahal which we are to visit later.

Djerba is our final destination today, but of course we had an action packed itinerary en route. As we approached the coast, we left the desert and crossed the Jebel Dahar (Dahar Mountains) that start in Tunisia and extend into Libya. As we transited the Sahel Region, the landscape changed back to olive groves, brush covered hills and an unexpected delight, meadows covered in springtime wildflowers. Our first stop was the village set in the heart of the Jebel Dahar called

Tamezret. (Pronounced like it looks – Tah-mez-ret, with the accent on “mez”. We stopped at a local café called the Café Gamar which had the most delicious little pastries made with honey and almond called gazelle horns. There were men out front at a table playing dominoes, which seems to be a pretty universal game. Our guide, Kamel, and our driver, Munir went inside the Café Gamar to have a short chicha break, which involves a community smoke on a water pipe which burns apple wood or other aromatic woods reduced to charcoal (as opposed to opium which would most certainly cause some alarm among the travelers.) The big attraction here was an orphaned baby camel being raised by a local man. He gave me a bottle of milk to feed her and she was about the cutest thing you can imagine, with a fluffy coat (felt just like a big poodle pompom) and big liquid brown eyes with impossibly long lashes. I was just getting ready to negotiate the purchase and scheming on how I could get around Gainesville zoning laws when I was forced to either get back to the bus or take up residence in Temezrat.



Schoolboys in  
Tamerzet

Vantage, our tour operator, has adopted a local school here –comprised of a single teacher wearing a lab coat teaching 23 kids from 6 to 12, boys and girls together, in what is essentially a one-room school house. School is mandatory for all children throughout Tunisia, but this school is quite a contrast from those in Tunis which are so crowded, they have 2 shifts of classes 6 days a week. Although Friday is the Muslim holy day, Tunisians take Sunday as their day off – a leftover from French Colonial days, but it helps them function more

effectively in the global economy.



Schoolgirls in  
Tamezret

The kids in the school are children of the Berbers in the area since most of the other people who may have lived there at one time moved to Tunis to find jobs and the town is now largely deserted. The kids were adorable, smart and fluent in French and Arabic and learning English. They sang some songs for us and showed us their books. They were also very well dressed, well groomed and well-behaved. The teacher had each of them tell us what they wanted to be when they grew up – lots of doctors, engineers and teachers – no lawyers no politicians and most impressively no famous rock stars or actors. It was quite refreshing to see this trend – I just hope the Internet and cable TV don't turn them into aspiring Paris Hiltons and Justin Timberlakes. I am also wondering who they're going to get to sue all those doctors for malpractice – maybe they'll import some lawyers from the US. The teacher of the school was trying to raise money for a small copier for the school so Gary and I decided to donate the money to buy one. It is amazing that the cost is so small to us and so huge for them. Many of the Vantage travelers made donations to buy things for the school, but the best ideas from the kids' perspective came from a dentist from St. Louis who had brought the kids a soccer ball, which was a huge hit. From Tamezrat we drove to a town named Matmata, perhaps most famous in the Western World as a *Star Wars* film location created by the close to 700 troglodyte dwellings in the area. The word "troglodyte" is of Latin origin and was their word for cave dwellers or people

who live in holes. (In Latin *troglo* = hole, *dyein* = enter). In Turkey in the Capadoccia region, people carved houses out of limestone formations. Here in the clay hills of the Dahar Mountains, they are carved into the hillsides, now carpeted with yellow and purple wildflowers in the most picturesque landscape imaginable. We had an appointment with an enterprising lady of 87 named Fatima to tour her home. Fatima wasn't feeling well, but her daughter-in-law welcomed us warmly. Approaching the house from the road, we saw a door set into the hillside in a setting that could pass for the House of Snow White and the 7 Dwarves – only the door was little higher –but not by much. These Berbers are definitely fairly small in stature. There were handprints representing the Hand of Fatima in blue, painted on a white exterior which the locals believe brings good luck. Fatima was the name of one of Mohammed's daughters and is believed to have protective powers (sort of an Islamic version of St. Christopher). There was also the tail of a largish fish above the door which also brings good fortune, or so they say. We entered through a spacious tunnel and emerged into a circular courtyard open to the sky, (It's called a "houch" and is pronounced "hooch"). Each of the rooms – kitchen, sleeping rooms, food pantry



The Daily  
Grind at the  
Troglodyte –  
Semolina  
Becomes  
Couscous

– radiated off this courtyard and were dug into the hillside.

The daughter-in-law showed us how she ground semolina into couscous – manually with two millstones. She invited me to give it a spin and I must say it was pretty hard work with very little couscous being produced by my labors. We did a drive-by shooting (with cameras only – no firearms) of the only troglodyte hotel in Tunisia called the Hotel Sidi Driss which was used as Luke Skywalker’s home in filming one of the *Star War* movies. We stopped for lunch in Gabes (pronounced Gah-bess with the accent on “bess”) which is located in a seaside oasis at a local restaurant called the Parc Loisir. Again the meat was somewhat overdone – say on the charcoal briquette side and the vegetables were mushy. We figured any leather that is not good enough for purses and shoes is sold to restaurants to feed to tourists. Another disconcerting experience is fishing through whatever is served to you looking for bone and cartilage. We think they just cut it up in equal size pieces, seeing no need for all that deboning, trimming and slicing. We did have some good soup, great tangerines and baguettes. We took a stroll around town and saw a local vendor with half a dozen rotisserie chickens on a spit that looked just about done to us, but if the food we have been served is any indication, they’ll be cooking those suckers another week or two.



The Spice  
Market at  
Gabes

After lunch we also spent a little time in the local spice market which was really fascinating with mounds of every spice available as well as all shades of henna (the better to tattoo

you with) on display. Most henna tattoos are worn by Berber women who put them mostly on their faces, especially their chins as a form protection (reportedly keeps the bogeyman at bay) and have been doing so for centuries. The beauty part of a henna tattoo is that it goes away in a few days. I'll bet Angelina wishes she and Billy Bob Thornton had used henna now that she's with Brad and had to have Billy Bob's name surgically removed from her arm. We also had a few minutes to stroll around a more tourist oriented souk called Jara, built around a square where we saw more SSDD (same stuff, different day). Many of the residents of Gabes are black (unusual in most of Tunisia, but common along the coast) and are the descendants of former slaves. We departed to drive south to Djerba passing through an historical area called Mareth where General Montgomery's troops fought the Afrika Korps in World War II, eventually causing their retreat. There are bunkers along the road still intact from that battle which took place in February and March of 1943. The Mareth line was originally built by the French in 1938 to prevent an invasion by Libyans who had gotten cozy with Mussolini, but like the Siegfried Line and the Maginot Line, it wasn't very effective in keeping armies from going where they wanted in modern wars. Nowadays, Libya and Tunisia mostly get along which is a good thing since Tripoli, their capital is only 205 kilometers from the border. In fact Tunisia, Libya, Morocco and Algeria have formed the Mahgreb Alliance, which when originated, was intended to be something like the European Union (EU), but they still have too many squabbles to make it effective. It didn't help matters when the wife of their first president, Mrs. Bourgiba, was caught working on a deal with Muammar Ghaddafi with plans to make Tunisia and Libya one big happy dictatorship. This and other issues forced Mr. Bourgiba to give up the presidency (he like so many before him, designated himself President for Life, but unlike Castro, his didn't stick, especially after Mrs. B's escapade with Colonel Ghaddafi). The Mahgreb Alliance sounded like a good idea, but some parts were especially sticky - like the requirement that the country be a full

democracy, have equal rights for women, have no death penalty and not sell stuff to the enemy, whomever that might turn out to be – so each country sort of picks and chooses which rules they chose to observe and essentially does whatever they want to. Once we left Gabes, we were traveling on the main road leading to Libya which had a fascinating assortment of roadside shopping. Libyans travel to Tunisia to buy food, medical supplies and luxuries. Merchandise on display ranged from everything from western-style toilets to dates. They often barter these items in exchange for cheap Libyan gasoline. (roughly \$1. per gallon, only here they use liters).The Tunisians in turn set up black market gas stations and undersell the local Shell and BP, plus they don't charge tax (nor pay tax ) for it. This is done right out in the open and the Tunisian government just turns a blind eye. The rationale is that it keeps people gainfully employed. There are literally hundred of these "stations.", using the word loosely which typically consist of the big distributors who have the 55 gallon drums and a siphon, and the "mom and pops" who have 2-3 liter plastic bottles lined up on a board resting on two saw horses. And without exception, every gas "attendant", again using the word loosely, had a lit cigarette dangling from his lips, throughout the whole purchase transaction, so we were always on the lookout for a big boom and the flash of an explosion. Speaking of "lookout" we didn't notice until we got on the open stretches of the Sahel that there were 2 men following us, stopping when we stopped, speeding up when we did and so forth. One of our fellow travelers was about to call the Al Qaeda Whistleblower Hotline when our guides informed him that those suspicious characters were our police escort and we have had one since the first day – just taking care of the tourist so they say. They haven't had any attacks on foreigners and they want to keep it that way.



A Ksar near  
Metameur

Our next stop was the village of Metameur where we visited a ksar (the ks is pronounced like “x” which is a special type of granary. Then you have two or more you have ksour, (pronounced x-sour) These granaries were built by the Berbers, who later used them for housing and protection. They are made of clay mud and are comprised of a series of chambers or rooms called ghorfas, (pronounced gore-fah with the accent on “gore”) built around a courtyard. When under attack, everyone scrambled inside bringing their livestock with them and scooted into the various ghorfas. All entrances and windows are on the



Teatime at the  
Ksar

courtyard and the only entrance to the courtyard is through a heavily fortified gate. Of course the bad news is, you could get trapped in there because the gate is the only way out as well. There are hundreds of ksour throughout this area, some dating back to the Middle Ages. The ksar we visited is now a hotel – a primitive hotel, to say the least but the rates are good. There were also Star Wars episodes filmed, not here, but in a ksar down the road a piece at Ksar Ghilane – accessible

only by 4x4 or camel (We assume Steven Spielberg and company used the former). We drove another 64 kilometers from Metameur to the island of Djerba, again entering the vast wetlands, which stretch from Gabes all the way south to the Libyan border, where millions of migratory birds from Europe spend their winters. Just as the sun was setting, we were treated to the sight of hundreds of flamingos who hang around the salty marsh areas year round. They favor a particular delicacy – tiny crustaceans and algae found only in shallow brackish water which are rich in carotenes, which in turn causes their feathers to turn pink. The flamingoes made wonderful silhouettes against the horizon with their long curved necks and swan-like bodies on stalk-like legs. The photos we took didn't do them justice, which once again confirms the vast superiority of the human eye over the camera lens. We crossed a bridge just at dark to arrive in Djerba and checked into our hotel for the night.